

## DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

### Redefining Political Theatre in Post-Cold War Britain (1990-2005): An Analysis of Contemporary British Political Plays

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Redefining Political Theatre in  
Post-Cold War Britain (1990-2005):  
An Analysis of Contemporary  
British Political Plays

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## **Abstract**

After the end of the Cold War had signalled for many the demise of political theatre, a re-emergence of British political plays since the turn of the century has become an acknowledged phenomenon. Customary definitions of this cultural practice, however, have become historically and theoretically obsolete. An alternative philosophical framework is needed which breaks with both the unrealistic expectations of the traditional Left and the defeatist limitations of postmodernist positions.

This thesis aims to provide a revised definition of political theatre based on the ideas of Jürgen Habermas. The development of his philosophical project is described together with its refinement as the result of interjections by other thinkers from within the neo-Marxist tradition of Critical Theory, in particular feminist contributors. In addition to exploring key concepts such as the reconstruction of historical materialism, the paradigm of discourse ethics and the model of post avant-garde political art, greater focus is placed on the notion of the public sphere, which has special relevance when examining the contemporary dynamics of political theatre.

The second part of the thesis comprises case studies of plays written since the fall of the Berlin Wall, with emphasis on those performed from 2000 onwards, illustrating how the theoretical framework can be employed to interpret these works. The plays are representative of different strands of current political theatre, including (reconstructed) epic theatre, verbatim and tribunal forms, and feminist writing that deals with public/private and local/global dichotomies. The proposed redefinition offers an emancipatory framework for a productive understanding of political theatre in the changing world of the new century.

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## Introduction

After the collapse of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the Malta summit between Mikhail Gorbachev and George Bush (Senior) declared an official end to the Cold War. Even though Soviet communism had not been a viable model for many on the Left since the grim days of Stalin, the final obliteration of the only existing alternative to the capitalist system would bring seismic consequences in politics and culture. The West, it was claimed, entered the “age of apathy”, when “radicalism and the utopian spirit that sustains it [...] ceased to be major political or even intellectual forces” (Jacoby 7). Within this context, political theatre, a significant presence on the British stage at least since the 1960s, was compelled to justify itself. In the realm of cultural policy, a decade of Thatcherism had already changed the landscape, with subsidy cuts creating increased dependency on box office revenue and corporate sponsorship to finance theatrical production. In the realm of theory, the relentless suspicion spread by postmodernist discourses threatened to confine the notion of political theatre to the grand-narrative history book.

A 1992 essay entitled “Aporia or Euphoria: British Political Theatre at the Dawn of the 90s”, by Elizabeth Sakellaridou, dismissed the rebuilding of this practice by dramatists such as David Edgar and Edward Bond as too loyal “to an old Marxist ideology”. In contrast, Sakellaridou celebrated the “new theatrical idiom” of feminist playwrights and Howard Barker’s “postmodernist tragedy of conflicts” as possible avenues for a revitalisation of political theatre (65-68). She insisted on this view eight years later, urging the academy to “revise the definitions and prescriptions of politically oriented theatre [...] and modify [...] expectations, according to the new cultural ethics of postmodernity regarding the production and reception of the arts” (“New Faces for British Political Theatre” 46). As a result of such revision, Sakellaridou found that the label ‘political theatre’

would only be suitable for dramatic pieces not obviously or deliberately 'political'. Baz Kershaw came to an even stronger conclusion in *The Radical in Performance: Between Brecht and Baudrillard* (1999):

For some time now the idea of 'political theatre' has been in crisis. Post-modernism and related theories have profoundly upset established notions of the 'political' in theatre, which were usually defined in relation to left-wing or socialist/Marxist ideologies. [...] The problem is now compounded because Left-progressive ideologies appear to be in decline, but more importantly also because of the new promiscuity of the political. Since the personal became political, in the 1960s, the political has found its way into almost every nook and cranny of culture. Identity politics, the politics of camp, body politics, sexual politics – the political is now ubiquitous and can be identified in all theatre and performance.

(16)

Kershaw's solution to this impasse was an abandonment of the concept of political theatre in favour of what he called "radical performance", where radical means "transgressive, even transcendent, of ideology" and performance implies "beyond theatre", that is, beyond a building-based institution (18, 16). However, even the possibility of "transgression" had already been called into question in America by Phillip Auslander, for whom the sole political response available in performance was "resistance". In other words, performance could address postmodern culture "not by claiming to stand aside from it, to present an alternative to it, or to place the spectator in a privileged position with respect to it but, rather, deconstructively, resistantly, from *within*" (*Presence and Resistance* 51, original emphasis).



Albeit with a much lower profile, political plays continued to be staged in Britain in the 1990s. Known political playwrights – those who had emerged from the so-called alternative movement of 1968-1978 – understandably turned their eyes to events in Eastern Europe, but a handful of satires about the rise of New Labour were also produced. Meanwhile, the new generation of dramatists who led a revival of new writing in the second half of the decade tended to be political only in the more oblique sense described by Sakellaridou (still, later reassessments of their work have underlined some continuities with the past tradition of political theatre).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, a resurgence of a more recognisable British political theatre was underway. Even before the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in America catastrophically proved that the end of the Cold War was not ‘the end of history’,<sup>1</sup> critic Michael Billington detected that on the British stage it was “almost like the old days”, with political theatre “popping up everywhere” (“Theatre of War”). The playwright Carl Miller was nearly convinced of such a phenomenon in May 2002: “After more than a decade in which the death of political drama was loudly mourned or celebrated, depending on your point of view, the body has started twitching. Could it be heading for resurrection?” Soon, the war in Iraq, the attempts to justify it and the deadly consequences of the conflict would dominate the British agenda, triggering massive street demonstrations and a surge of plays. By 2004, Billington’s and Miller’s timid diagnoses had become a truism amongst theatre journalists. “It is a remarkable moment for political theatre”, wrote Kate Kellaway in the *Observer*. “Not only have 9/11, the Iraq war and the Bush administration energised playwrights, the acoustic has never been so good”. The epitaphs for political theatre had proven premature. Yet, as Billington himself put it, it was only *almost*

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<sup>1</sup> This phrase, coined by Francis Fukuyama in 1989, came to epitomise the post-Cold War triumphalism of the Right.

like the old days. New political plays were indeed multiplying, but customary meanings of 'political theatre' had been historically and theoretically destabilised.

The aim of this thesis is to provide a revised definition of political theatre appropriate for post-Cold War Britain and to illustrate it with an analysis of recent British political plays. Acknowledging the questions posed from a postmodernist perspective by scholars such as Sakellaridou, Kershaw and Auslander, this study takes an alternative theoretical route. The framework proposed here is based on the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas, the leading figure of the Frankfurt School's second generation and a known challenger of postmodernism. Habermas has elaborated a critique of modernity that retains those aspects of the modern project still offering a qualified promise of emancipation. This approach, which can be termed 'reconstructionist', leads to a better understanding of the residual potential of contemporary political theatre where deconstructive strategies have shown their limits. A redefinition of political theatre along Habermasian lines will account for the undeniable re-emergence of this cultural practice in the present decade without falling into the trap of the 'new promiscuity of the political' highlighted by Kershaw. It will face the tensions imposed by identity politics on the overall notion of the 'political' without surrendering this category altogether. Against Sakellaridou, it will recast rather than discard the Marxian legacy and against Auslander, it will defend the possibility of critical distance implicit in the structures of communication within which theatre performance operates.

The thesis is organised in two parts: Theory and Analysis. Theory comprises three chapters which explore in great detail the Habermasian philosophical framework, including critiques, debates and contributions by other thinkers. As a theoretical corpus which emphasises above all the possibilities of genuine communication, one of the strengths of Habermas' philosophy is that it has itself been built and developed in dialogical praxis. Chapter 1 outlines the Habermasian project within the neo-Marxist tradition of the Frankfurt School and surveys aspects of his version of Critical Theory that can illuminate a

contemporary redefinition of political theatre. Amongst these elements are the reconstruction of historical materialism (which envisages the potential for progress without subscribing to a teleological understanding of history), the model of discourse ethics (which preserves universalism in pluralistic societies by grounding it on intersubjectivity) and the idea of 'post avant-garde political art', which synthesises the positions of Adorno and Benjamin by suggesting that cognitive, moral and expressive ingredients could interplay within an artistic whole. Chapter 2 focuses on the most significant of Habermas' concepts for the purposes of this study, namely, the public sphere. Depicted historically as the locus where private people come together to discuss matters of common concern and normatively as a site for critical debate, the public sphere offers a realistic interpretation of the scope and limits of political theatre. Both the Habermasian paradigm of the public sphere and some competing historiographies – which underline theatrical aspects – are examined here. Chapter 3 concentrates on feminist corrections and expansions of Habermasian theory, involving not only the public sphere but also related questions about ethics, subjectivity and universalism. The contribution of scholars grouped under the umbrella of 'feminist critical theory' is fundamental for a contemporary political philosophy which is able both to respond to the challenges of identity politics and at the same time transcend them.

In Part 1, the application of theory to the redefinition of political theatre is pursued only at a conceptual level, that is, as a speculative exercise on the residual functions and operation of this cultural practice in 'late' (or 'global') capitalist societies. Part 2 moves the spotlight to theatre itself, focusing on examples of plays which illustrate the theory and can be better understood through it. As an introduction to the textual analysis, Chapter 4 gives a brief overview of British political theatre in Britain, highlighting the historical discontinuity and hybridity of political theatre forms in order to qualify both political and theatrical orthodoxies. This chapter also attempts a contextualised

definition of 'post avant-garde political theatre' and reviews current trends of British political theatre as identified by recent scholarship. The three final chapters deal specifically with case studies, which have been arranged in three categories judged representative of contemporary British political theatre. 'British Epic Theatre Reconstructed' (Chapter 5) comprises analyses of David Edgar's *Playing with Fire* and Howard Brenton *In Extremis*; 'Documentary Forms: Verbatim and Tribunal' (Chapter 6) includes Out of Joint Theatre's *The Permanent Way* and *Talking to Terrorists*, and Tricycle Theatre's *Justifying War* and *Bloody Sunday*, and 'Feminist/Global Departures' (Chapter 7) covers Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*.

Although the whole philosophical framework outlined in Part 1 is generally applicable to any of the selected plays as examples of contemporary British political theatre, the analysis carried out in these final chapters corresponds generally to the areas explored in the three opening chapters. In other words: Edgar's and Brenton's 'reconstruction' of epic forms for the contemporary stage (Chapter 5) is suitably contained within the parameters of the Habermasian project (Chapter 1), yet the argument also touches on the viability of a national public sphere and the dilemmas of identity politics (Chapters 2 and 3). The documentary forms discussed in Chapter 6 are the most straightforward illustration of theatre's intervention in the public sphere (Chapter 2), even though the theory of the public sphere can also explain the purchase of entirely or partly fictional political plays like those included in Chapters 5 and 7. Finally, both Kane's and Churchill's dramatised intersections of public/private and local/global (Chapter 7) clearly benefit from an analysis based on feminist critical theory (Chapter 3), but the notion of a reconstructed historical materialism (Chapter 1) helps to understand the dystopian structure of *Far Away*.

Some clarifications are in order regarding methodology, timeframe and selection of plays. The basic methodology in Chapters 5 and 7 is a close textual analysis of each play, complemented with an exploration of its performance

context. In keeping with the theoretical focus on the public sphere, particular importance is given to the critical reception of the plays in performance. In the case of Edgar, Brenton and Churchill, attention is also paid to their past dramaturgy, in order to detect new approaches in the contemporary plays. Chapter 6 is slightly different, as the emphasis is less on individual texts and more on the overall operation of documentary forms in the current public sphere. The timeframe 1990-2005 should be read as a pointer to the post-Cold War zeitgeist rather than as a historical focus for the research. Whilst all the plays analysed fall within this fifteen-year period,<sup>2</sup> the stress is certainly on works written and/or premiered from 2000 onwards, during the time associated with a revival of political theatre in Britain. The earlier *Blasted* (1995) is the only exception to this rule, and the reasons for its inclusion are twofold. On the one hand, this play is considered emblematic of 1990s theatre in terms of themes, approach, political sensibilities and limitations. On the other, it is a significant work of both continuation and departure: aesthetically, its modernist style looks back to the avant-garde; ethically, its global aspirations, even if not entirely accomplished, point to the future.

Apart from Kane's *Blasted*, Robin Soan's *Talking to Terrorists* and the tribunal plays edited by journalist Richard Norton-Taylor, the texts considered in this thesis have been written by dramatists whose roots are in the overtly political period of 1968-1978: David Edgar, Howard Brenton, David Hare and Caryl Churchill. The bias is deliberate, inasmuch as it reflects the reconstructive spirit mentioned above. The revised definition of political theatre which will be proposed in this study is not intended for this kind of drama alone, but a political theatre that has been forced to reconstruct itself is certainly a fertile test ground for a theory built on the resilience of emancipation.

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Brenton's *In Extremis* was produced in London slightly after this period, in 2006, but its first performance (in America) dates from 1997. Although *Fallujah*, from 2007, is mentioned as an example of verbatim theatre in Chapter 6, it is not central to the analysis.

## PART 1: THEORY

### Chapter 1: The Habermasian Project

#### 1.1 Habermas and the Frankfurt School

Critical Theory<sup>3</sup> refers to the ideas developed originally at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, which was founded in 1923.<sup>4</sup> The so-called Frankfurt School inaugurated a tradition of thought that continues through to the present day. Prominent Critical Theorists of the first generation were Max Horkheimer (director of the Institute from 1931 until his retirement in 1958), Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse. Habermas is the central figure of the second generation and, while the presence of a third generation is not obvious, “authors such as Honneth, Offe, Wellmer, and Eder in Germany, not to mention a number of North American and British authors, such as Benhabib, Kellner, Agger, McCarthy, Bernstein and Ray, represent distinct contemporary voices working broadly within the tradition” (How, *Critical Theory* 58).

Generally speaking, the Frankfurt School’s approach can be characterised as neo-Marxist. According to Thompson and Held, the first generation of Critical Theorists appreciated “the significance of Marx’s political economy for social and political theory”, but “they also agreed that the ideas elaborated in Marx’s mature work were an insufficient basis for the comprehension of contemporary society”. Consequently, Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse eschewed economic reductionism in favour of an interdisciplinary framework that could combine political economy with cultural criticism and psychoanalysis (3). Of course, as Richard J. Bernstein observes, the move away from orthodox Marxism was partly “due to a growing skepticism about the historical possibility of anything resembling the proletarian

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<sup>3</sup> The capital letters are normally used to distinguish this philosophical tradition from ‘critical theory’ as a general denomination.

<sup>4</sup> The work continued in exile from Nazi Germany – mainly in the US – between 1933 and 1951, when the Institute reopened in Frankfurt.

revolution that Marx envisioned" (7). The development of Critical Theory was therefore particularly concerned with understanding what did occur in the twentieth century: "the effects of the First World War, the defeat of left-wing working-class movements, the rise of fascism and Nazism, and the degeneration of the Russian revolution into Stalinism" (Thompson and Held 2).

In order to combat 'economism', the early Frankfurt School thinkers tended to subscribe to a Hegelian version of Marxian theory, emphasising dialectics: "Their more philosophical, more sophisticated view of history ruled out a scientific, deterministic model thereof, and stressed instead complex, contradictory sets of social relations and struggles in a specific historical era, whose trajectory could not be determined with certainty in advance" (Kellner 11). Critical Theorists also borrowed from Hegel the idea of *Vernunft* or emancipatory reason. However, the concept started losing its appeal as terrible events in Europe developed. Eventually, the first generation succumbed to what How terms the 'Nietzschean streak', that is, "a bleakly critical view, not just of what was happening in particular areas of life, but of the whole tradition of western reason" (27). Even though this pessimism was not absolute, it would become the key feature separating Habermas' philosophy and social theory from those of his predecessors.

Two divergent interpretations of modernity make up the core of the distinction between Habermas and Adorno's generation. A suitable starting point to address this debate is the work of Max Weber, in which modernisation is famously related to 'the disenchantment of the world' that comes about when myth and religion lose their hold on human behaviour and social organisation. Bernstein summarises Weber's 'tragic' account of the modern processes of rationalisation thus:

Weber argued that the hope and expectation of the Enlightenment was a bitter and ironic illusion. [...] When unmasked and

understood, the legacy of the Enlightenment was the triumph of *Zweckrationalität* – purposive-instrumental rationality. [...] The growth of *Zweckrationalität* does not lead to the concrete realization of universal freedom but to the creation of an “iron cage” of bureaucratic rationality from which there is no escape. (5)

Although Adorno and Horkheimer allegedly opposed this rationalisation thesis, they ended up appropriating and even generalising it, adding a sense of “historical inevitability” which was absent from Weber’s scheme (Bernstein 6). Their most influential collaboration, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944/1973), describes the trajectory of Western thought across history in order to discover “why mankind, instead of entering into a truly human condition, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism” (Horkheimer and Adorno xi). The answer lies in instrumental reason: “What men [*sic*] want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim. Ruthlessly, in despite of itself, the Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self-consciousness” (4). The ubiquity of instrumental reason assumed by Adorno and Horkheimer implies that “we are being led, not towards a more rational world, but back to an irrational one”. Hence the paradox engulfing these theorists: “They want to make the world a more rational place through critique, but reason, the normative tool they would employ, has become an instrument of repression” (How 48).

It is against this background that Habermas’ contribution would emerge, offering a critique of the modern project which, unlike that of the Frankfurt School’s first generation, could rescue modernity’s emancipatory potential. In Bernstein’s words, it is as if Habermas had been “writing a *new* Dialectic of Enlightenment – one which does full justice to the dark side of the Enlightenment legacy, explains its causes but nevertheless redeems and justifies the hope of freedom, justice and happiness which still stubbornly speaks to us” (31).



## Habermas' Critical Theory

Habermas undertook a gigantic mission: "to break out of the theoretical cul-de-sac that, as he saw it, had stifled his predecessors' efforts to such an extent that in the end they could perceive no positive virtues in modernity at all" (How 41). Such a task required, in the first place, a radical questioning of the rationalisation thesis. In contrast to Weber, for whom rationalisation entailed the harmful expansion of purposive-rational action alone, Habermas makes a distinction between this and 'communicative action', or action "oriented towards reaching understanding" ("A Reply to My Critics" 234). The concept of communicative action becomes the bedrock of an alternative reading of modernity. Because human beings are language users – Habermas contends – communicative action is built into our everyday practice and, therefore, part of a wider definition of rationality. From this viewpoint it is possible to understand the modern processes of rationalisation in a much more nuanced manner, as Brand explains:

Habermas makes a distinction between the *logic* and the *dynamics* of development. This distinction [...] allows him to speak of *selective rationalisation* and to compare the actual course of events critically with the possible one. The logic of development concerns the possible unfolding of all aspects of rationality. However, the dynamics of development can lead to emphasis on one aspect rather than another. Habermas' main argument against Weber is that the latter identified the actual course of Western rationalisation with (the possibilities of) rationalisation as such and therefore arrived, as did indeed the early Frankfurters [...], at unwarranted

pessimistic conclusions about the *necessary* outcome of rationalisation. (xi-xii, original emphasis)<sup>5</sup>

A crucial ingredient of Habermas' change in perspective was his desire to depart from the 'philosophy of consciousness' in which, he believed, even Adorno and Horkheimer were still entrapped. Such an outlook "sees the world as fundamentally made up of subjects facing a world of external objects" and "once this (ontological) assumption is made, then invariably the (epistemological) relation between subject and object becomes an instrumental one" (How 47). Habermas, on the contrary, aimed at shifting "from cognitive-instrumental rationality to communicative rationality", making clear that "what is paradigmatic for the latter is not the relation of a solitary subject to something in the objective world that can be represented and manipulated, but the intersubjective relation that speaking and acting subjects take up when they come to an understanding with one another about something" (*The Theory of Communicative Action* 1: 392). This notion of intersubjectivity, which implies that truth and meaning are constructed in human interaction, is tied to Habermas' paradigm of the public sphere [see 2.1] and is perhaps the one persistent element in a body of work that, otherwise, has changed its focus over time.

Initially, Habermas' attention was turned to epistemology, following in Critical Theory's long-standing dispute with positivism. Critical Theorists always assumed that "facts had to be understood, not as 'given', but in terms of the circumstances that produced them" (How 9). In *Knowledge and Human Interest* (1968/1972), Habermas aimed to challenge the positivist belief that the only valid knowledge is that of a scientific kind. He also questioned the idea of a disinterested knowledge, identifying three types of human interest corresponding to the three categories of knowledge: the technical interest, driving the empirical-

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<sup>5</sup> According to Brand, reason for Habermas is "a human disposition for rationality which is inherent in the use of speech", while rationalisation indicates the process in which "the scope for communicative rationality widens over time with the unfolding of the linguistic possibilities for reason" (ix).

analytical sciences; the practical interest, in which the historical-hermeneutic sciences are based, and the 'emancipatory' interest, which allows 'critical sciences' to combine and at the same time surpass the other two approaches. Bernstein describes how this scheme, despite being later abandoned, incorporates a strand of thought that still informs Habermasian philosophy: "If [through the so-called emancipatory interest] we reflect upon the forms of knowledge and the disciplines guided by the technical and practical interests, we realize that they contain an internal demand for open, free, non-coercive communication" (10).

In his polemic against positivism, Habermas established an alliance with modern hermeneutics, a field concerned with the nature of understanding and best represented by Hans Georg Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960/1975). As Holub points out, "what Habermas finds especially useful in Gadamer is the notion of the always already situated nature of the interpreter" (62). Accordingly, "meaning is conceived as a sedimentation of significations that continually emerge and change in the course of tradition" (63). However, Habermas and Gadamer also engaged in a significant debate, which has been widely documented. Two aspects of this controversy are relevant here. First, unlike Gadamer, Habermas does not reject the scientific 'method' as the enemy of 'truth'. Notwithstanding his critique of positivism, Habermas values the contribution of technical knowledge and even accepts that "our relationship to nature is now inevitably instrumental" (How 51). Second and more important, Habermas opposes Gadamer's idealisation of language and his embracing of prejudice, authority and tradition, emphasising instead that "language is also a medium of domination and social power" (qtd. in Holub 67). For Habermas, "understanding the other [...] may be achieved by hermeneutic insights, but reaching agreement demands an active and free participation that can reject and modify, as well as accept, tradition and authority" (Holub 75).

In the 1970s, Habermas moved from ideology critique to universal pragmatics, or the study of the "universal conditions of possible mutual

understanding" (Habermas, "What is Universal Pragmatics?" 21). This later shift, known as his 'linguistic turn', not only coincided with the general direction taken by philosophical inquiry at the time, but also provided him with a basis to break effectively with the 'philosophy of consciousness'. On this new foundation Habermas would be able to build his theory of communicative action.

[The theory of communicative action's] primary source of inspiration is the philosophy of language, specifically speech-act theory (which Habermas significantly modifies and refines). Habermas fully realizes that the range of communicative interactions is broader than that of explicit speech acts. Nevertheless, by approaching communication from the perspective of speech we can gain an understanding of the distinctive features of communication. One primary reason – perhaps *the* primary reason – for "the linguistic turn" is that it no longer entraps us in the *monological* perspective of the philosophy of the subject. Communicative action is intrinsically *dialogical*. (Bernstein 18, original emphasis)

Defined as "that form of social interaction in which the plans of action of different actors are co-ordinated through an exchange of communicative acts, that is, through a use of language (or corresponding non-verbal expressions) oriented towards reaching understanding" (Habermas, *Theory* 234), communicative action can be distinguished from *strategic* action, in which success is achieved not through dialogue but through "the efficiency of influencing the decisions of rational opponents" (264). Unlike this strategic counterpart, which employs "sanctions or gratifications, force or money" (269), communicative action operates via criticisable 'validity claims' in the domains of truth (the cognitive realm, linked to the 'objective world'), rightness (the moral realm, linked to the 'social world') and expressiveness (the aesthetic realm, linked to the

'subjective world'). Communicative action also "takes place against the background of an enormous fund of non-explicit, taken-for granted notions", which Habermas – borrowing from phenomenology – calls the 'lifeworld' (Brand 34) and which also echoes the Gadamerian idea of an *horizon* of understanding. When the given consensus breaks down, however, participants can switch to the level of 'discourse', where validity claims are explicitly redeemed through argumentation. Such a level presupposes equal chances of participation and that only the better argument could carry the day. This is, needless to say, a counterfactual statement. The point is not to pretend that these conditions are likely to be realised in empirical contexts. Rather, that "there is in language an inbuilt thrust for the achievement of what Habermas calls the 'ideal speech situation', in which discourse can fully unfold its potential for rationality" (11).

### **A 'reconstructive' approach**

One of the criticisms that Habermas answered in his later work was the charge that he had confounded two different types of reflection: reflection in the theoretical (or Kantian) sense, which refers to the capacity of reason to analyse its own operation, and reflection in the emancipatory sense, which "aims at freeing the subject from dependence on hypostatized powers" (Bernstein 12). To solve this problem he introduced the concept of 'rational reconstruction', a method set to explain the "presumably universal" grounds of rationality (Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* 16). The 'reconstructive sciences' – such as developmental psychology, the philosophy of language and Habermas' own theory of communicative action – investigate competences that are common for the whole species, but they are not burdened with transcendental claims as in the Kantian paradigm. On the contrary, "all they can fairly be expected to furnish [...] is reconstructive hypotheses for use in empirical settings" (16). Although How sees rational reconstruction as theoretical

in intent, highlighting the moment in which “Habermas started to veer away from the consciousness-raising or emancipationist model” (“Habermas, History and Social Evolution” 180), the two forms of reflection are connected:

The reconstructive science of a universal pragmatics enables us to understand the foundation or ground for emancipatory critique (the second concept of self-reflection). For it shows that emancipatory critique does not rest upon arbitrary norms which we “choose;” rather it is grounded in the very structures of intersubjective communicative competences. (Bernstein 17)

As a methodological tool, the idea of reconstruction offered Habermas the possibility of critical distance without breaking the hermeneutic circle. In a more general sense, however, this notion can encompass the whole of the Habermasian project, which How perceptively describes as a “reconstruction of Critical Theory” (*Critical Theory* 43). In the same vein, Thomas McCarthy uses the term – in opposition to ‘deconstruction’ – to scrutinise the debate between Habermas and postmodernist thinkers [see 6.1] and it would not be mistaken to speak of a Habermasian reconstruction of modernity. Habermas himself employed the same word to clarify his relationship to Marx in “Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism” (1976/1979). Holub summarises the importance of the expression in this context: “In contrast to a restoration, which would designate the return to something that has developed and become corrupted, or a renaissance, which signifies a rebirth or renewal, reconstruction is defined as the redesigning of a project retaining the original goal” (102). The terms of engagement between Habermas’ philosophy and Marxism are of great relevance for this study, as the ultimate failure of a Marxist interpretation of history brought about by the end of the Cold War played a crucial part in the alleged demise of political theatre in the West. Moreover, a redefinition of political theatre for the present age also amounts to a ‘reconstruction’ in Habermasian terms.

In his "Reply to My Critics", Habermas describes his endeavour as an "effort to carry on the Marxian tradition under considerably changed historical conditions" (220), even though some of those critics would argue that "Habermas's work is far too revisionist to appeal to most others who would call themselves 'Marxists'" (Giddens 95). Habermas shared with the forerunners of the Frankfurt School their desire to correct Marx's economic determinism without abandoning Marxism altogether, although when they turned from "a critical *social science* to a 'negative dialectics' [...] Habermas clearly saw the need to return to the *spirit* of what Marx sought to achieve" (Bernstein 7-8, original emphasis). In Habermas' reading of historical materialism, however, progress is not reliant on changes of the economic base but on social evolution. "Habermas's point is that the human species may learn not only in the instrumental sphere of technically usable knowledge, but also in the communicative sphere of moral-practical knowledge" (How, "Habermas" 183).

Taking his cues from the psychological theories of Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg,<sup>6</sup> Habermas "sketches a flexible, yet progressive view of human history that closely parallels individual development" (Holub 103). The dangers of this position are of course fairly obvious, from oversimplification to ethnocentrism, but Habermas has shown awareness of them in numerous debates with his critics. Indeed, Habermas' work on social evolution is far from supporting an outdated and unqualified confidence in humanity's linear progress. It simply argues that some forms of integration are more rational than others. Furthermore, it "is not a theory of philosophy of history at all, but a theory of historical potential, a potential that may or may not be realised" (How, "Habermas" 185). Following Bernstein, it can be said that Habermasian thought avoids both 'utopianism' and 'defeatism':

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<sup>6</sup> Both theories – Piaget's on cognitive development and Kohlberg's on moral development – describe different 'stages' of learning. According to Habermas, they "explain the acquisition of presumably universal competences in terms of patterns of development that are invariant across cultures, these patterns being determined by what is conceived as an internal logic to the corresponding learning processes" (*Moral Consciousness* 36).

Habermas categorically rejects a utopianism that tempts us to think there is a dialectical necessity which inevitably leads to the “good society.” He also rejects the mirror image of this conception which calls for a total break from history, or which “places” utopian aspirations in a Never Never Land of fantasy. The utopian aspirations of Marxism and critical theory are transformed. There are rational grounds for social hope. This has nothing to do with either optimism or pessimism about future prospects. There is no guarantee that what is still possible will be actualized. (24)

Habermas’ position between utopianism and defeatism corresponds precisely with the situation political theatre finds itself in the twenty-first century. Playwrights like Brenton and Churchill in particular may still employ utopian (or dystopian) strategies as a way of imagining the future, but this future always appears with ‘no guarantees’.

### **Late or global capitalism?**

There is still another relevant distinction between Marxism and Critical Theory in its first and second generation: their respective outlook on capitalism. For Kellner, “Critical Theory articulates the transition from the stage of market, entrepreneurial capitalism (best described by Marx) to the stage of organized, or state, capitalism” (5). But whereas the Frankfurt School’s first generation replaced the Marxist account of revolution with the stasis of a ‘totally administered society’, the second generation – in the work of Habermas and Klaus Offe – presents “a model of a disorganized capitalism governed by a strange dialectic of irrationality and rationality” that “points to openings for a repoliticization of Critical Theory in the present age” (201-02). In Habermas’ case, the first step in this direction was *Legitimation Crisis* (1973/1975), in which he analyses how the emergence of the welfare state made Marxist claims of



imminent crises in the economy obsolete, but it created new tensions in the cultural realm. According to Kellner, in this work "Habermas attempted to show that contemporary capitalist societies continued to be sites of crisis, contestation and potential transformation" (197). Kellner objects to Habermas' and Offe's adoption of the phrase 'late capitalism' because, in his view, it is "imprecise (how late is it?)" and embodies "a degree of wish-fulfillment (that capital is about to pass away)" (261, n.48). It could be argued that the latter connotation does not necessarily apply, especially if a comparison is made with more unfortunate denominations such as 'post-capitalism'. Yet whatever the term used to describe the present stage (Kellner prefers 'techno-capitalism'), Critical Theory does provide a framework in which to address capitalism as an ongoing arrangement. As Postone suggests, it could well be that pluralism and globalisation have triggered another capitalist phase (175-76).<sup>7</sup>

In *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981/1984) Habermas further develops an approach to state capitalism using his dual blueprint of system and lifeworld. If the lifeworld is the given environment in which communicative action takes place, the process of social evolution that Habermas sketches in his reconstruction of historical materialism can thus be described as a course of increasing *rationalisation* of the lifeworld and its three components (society, culture and personality). This process of clarification and differentiation achieves progressive results, namely, "an enhanced criticisability of the cultural tradition" and the fact that "the reproduction of the lifeworld becomes more and more a matter of the conscious achievements of the agents themselves" (Brand 44). However, as complexity grows, the pressure on the interpretive capacities of agents generates paradoxical consequences:

the more the 'primeval consensus' in the sphere of the sacred  
disappears into the background, the more the coordination of

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<sup>7</sup> Recent analyses of political theatre have placed emphasis on this transformation. For example, Rebellato's work [see 5.1].

action takes place via language, the greater also the necessity for non-linguistic steering media of action such as money and power which induce an empirical rather than, as language does, a rational motivation of action. (45)

The system, comprising the market and the state with their respective steering mechanisms (money and power), emerges because of the rationalisation of the lifeworld, yet it eventually returns to the latter as a 'colonising' force, threatening to destroy its communicative form of interaction. However, "there is no logical, conceptual, or historical *necessity* that systemic imperatives must destroy the lifeworld" (Bernstein 23, original emphasis). As it has already been stressed, Habermas' thesis is one of 'selective rationalisation', therefore implying "that there are alternative possibilities" (23). Habermas concurs with Marx in allowing the potential for progressive change, but diverts from him in attempting to elucidate "what, from an orthodox Marxist point of view, cannot be explained: the pacification of class conflict via the interventionism of the welfare state" (Brand 62). In Habermas' account, late capitalism is characterised by a colonisation process since not only the market but also the state – with required compensatory measures – interfere in the lifeworld. The result could be conceptualised as a displacement of class politics by 'identity politics',<sup>8</sup> without denying that "capitalism remains a system of unequal exchange" (47).

## 1.2 Ethical dimensions

On the basis of his concept of communicative action, Habermas has developed a paradigm of 'discourse ethics' that allows for a defence of a universalistic moral theory within the context of modern pluralist societies. Like the Kantian model, discourse ethics is a 'cognitive' approach, in the sense of

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<sup>8</sup> Habermas' complex position on identity politics is discussed in Chapter 3.

acknowledging that “we do debate moral issues with reasons” and, therefore, “normative claims to validity are *analogous to truth claims*” (Habermas, *Moral Consciousness* 55, 56, original emphasis). The difference between these two types of assertions is that “while there is an unequivocal relation between existing states of affairs and true propositions about them, the ‘existence’ or social currency of norms says nothing about whether the norms are valid” (61). In other words, and against relativistic positions, a socially accepted norm can be deemed *right* or *wrong*. However, the criterion for evaluating normative propositions does not emerge, as in Kantian ethics, from “a hypothetical process of argumentation occurring in the individual mind” (68). Consistently with his move from the philosophy of consciousness to intersubjectivity, Habermas “replaces Kant’s categorical imperative with a procedure of moral argumentation” (McCarthy, “Introduction” viii), according to which

rather than ascribing as valid to all others any maxim that I can will to be a universal law, I must submit my maxim to all others for purposes of discursively testing its claim to universality. The emphasis shifts from what each can will without contradiction to be a general law, to what all can will in agreement to be a universal norm. (Habermas, *Moral Consciousness* 67)

Two principles make such an agreement possible: the principle of universalisation (U) and the principle of discourse (D). (U) stipulates that “All affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its *general* observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone’s* interest (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation)”. (D) adds that “Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity *as participants in a practical discourse*” (65, 66, original emphasis). Because it does not provide a substantive definition of the moral viewpoint but only a set of presuppositions

under which this can be reached in actual dialogue (openness, equality, publicity), discourse ethics can be described as a 'formal' or 'procedural' stance. "It is this proceduralism that sets discourse ethics apart from *other* cognitivist, universalist and formalist ethical theories", writes Habermas. "(D) makes us aware that (U) merely expresses the normative content of a procedure of discursive will formation and must thus be strictly distinguished from the substantive content of argumentation" (122, original emphasis). As Cohen and Arato point out, there is nonetheless a "dimension of content" in (U), namely, the request that "norms of action upon which we agree must express a generalizable interest" (350).<sup>9</sup> Yet Habermas stresses that (U)'s universal validity, that is, its extension across cultures, works at the level of a reconstructive hypothesis to be confirmed by empirical data: "Discourse ethics advances universalistic and thus very strong theses, but the status it claims for those theses is relatively weak. [...] We may no longer burden these arguments with the status of an a priori transcendental deduction along the lines of Kant's critique of reason" (*Moral Consciousness* 116).

The universalism of discourse ethics is not at odds with respecting cultural differences inasmuch as Habermas keeps a distinction between 'moral' and 'evaluative' (or ethical) questions. While the former, concerned with what is right, "can in principle be decided rationally, i.e., in terms of *justice* or the generalizability of interests", the latter "present themselves [...] as issues of the *good life* (or of self-realization)", which "are accessible to rational discussion only within the unproblematic horizon of a concrete historical form of life or the conduct of an individual life" (108, original emphasis). As McCarthy emphasises, "this is not to say that ethical deliberation is irrational [...]. But it is to say that the disappearance of value-imbued cosmologies and the disintegration of sacred canopies have opened the question 'How should I (or one, or we) live?' to the irreducible pluralism of modern life" ("Introduction" vii). In fact, the separation of

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<sup>9</sup> To avoid charges of authoritarianism [see below], Cohen and Arato propose to "replace 'generalizable interests' with 'rational collective identity' as the legitimate substantive referent of formal discursive procedures" (347).

moral and evaluative matters occurs not before but *within* practical discourse, which – despite its formal character - “is dependent upon contingent content being fed into it from the outside” (Habermas, *Moral Consciousness* 103).<sup>10</sup> The procedure rests, however, in an unequivocal differentiation between ‘norms’ and ‘cultural values’:

The universalization principle acts like a knife that makes razor-sharp cuts between evaluative statements and strictly normative ones, between the good and the just. While cultural values may imply a claim to intersubjective acceptance, they are so inextricably intertwined with the totality of a particular form of life that they cannot be said to claim normative validity in the strict sense. By their very nature, cultural values are at best *candidates* for embodiment in norms that are designed to express a general interest. (104, original emphasis)

As before, Habermas draws here from Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, which describes a pattern of three ‘levels’ (preconventional / conventional / postconventional and principled), each comprised of two ‘stages’, from ‘punishment and obedience’ (stage 1) to ‘universal ethical principles’ (stage 6). This scheme appropriately explains, for Habermas, the learning processes and change of attitude required for individuals to engage in argumentation, where “claims to validity that heretofore served actors as unquestioned points of orientation in their everyday communication are thematized and made problematic” (125). Developmental psychology also gives Habermas ammunition against the relativists’ charge that morality is different in different cultures. He contends that Kohlberg’s theory “offers the possibility of (a) reducing the empirical diversity of existing moral views to variation in the *contents*, in contrast

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<sup>10</sup> Cohen and Arato express this point clearly: “While the boundary line between basic autonomy rights and democratic decision making cannot be drawn in advance of a discussion of content, it nevertheless has to be drawn in principle” (402).

to the universal *forms*, of moral judgment and (b) explaining the remaining structural differences between moralities as differences in the stage of development of the capacity for moral judgment" (117, original emphasis).

Habermas and his sympathetic critics<sup>11</sup> – those who accept the premises of discourse ethics even though they tend to interpret them less strongly – have dealt with a number of objections. The most obvious opposition comes from moral scepticism in its different guises. To the sceptic's observation that an individual could simply withdraw from argumentation, Habermas responds that ultimately it is not possible to remove oneself from the communicative practice of everyday life, in which we are often compelled to take 'yes' or 'no' positions. Moreover,

the possibility of *choosing* between communicative and strategic action exists only abstractly [...]. From the perspective of the lifeworld to which the actor belongs, these modes of action are not matters of free choice. [...] They [individuals] do not have the option of a long-term absence from contexts of action oriented towards reaching an understanding. That would mean regressing to the monadic isolation of strategic action, or schizophrenia and suicide.<sup>12</sup> (102, original emphasis)

On the other hand, the fact that actors are inevitably brought into communicative contexts does not imply that discourse ethics is the prevailing form of making collective decisions. Rather, as Wellmer suggests, force is always on the horizon: "practical discourses resemble islands threatened with inundation

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<sup>11</sup> With different emphases and degrees the list would include Thomas McCarthy, Albrecht Wellmer, Seyla Benhabib, Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato. Differences between Benhabib and Cohen are addressed in Chapter 3.

<sup>12</sup> Habermas does concede however that there is a dialectic between communicative and strategic action: "Argumentation can exploit the conflict between success-oriented competitors for the purpose of achieving consensus so long as the arguments are not reduced to mere means of influencing one another" (*Moral Consciousness* 160).

in a sea of practice where the pattern of consensual conflict resolution is by no means the dominant one" (qtd. in *Moral Consciousness* 106). Yet Habermas insists that these limitations, which only "testify to the power history has over the transcending claims and interests of reason", do not override discourse ethics – as the sceptic would maintain (106). Wellmer himself is, however, more ambivalent about what he calls "the false antithesis between absolutism and relativism". He proposes "a *fallibilistic* interpretation" of discourse ethics and believes that "rationalism can absorb scepticism and convert it into a catalyst of the enlightenment process" (*The Persistence of Modernity* 116-18).

### **From ethics to politics**

Summarising the criticism aimed at discourse ethics, Cohen and Arato trace "two apparently contradictory charges", formalism and authoritarianism. "Either discourse ethics is so formalistic as to have no institutional consequences, or, if it has, they inevitably have authoritarian implications" (360). The latter assertion is linked in the first instance to an important question: "How [...] can we tell when an empirical consensus is rational?" (361). Cohen and Arato answer by building on an insight from Wellmer: "The content of a rational consensus is not necessarily true – we consider it to be rational because of procedural norms, true because of good grounds that we offer in the discussion and that are accepted as such. But we could be mistaken or, to put it better, the kinds of reasons we are willing to accept can change over time" (362). This fallibilistic reading of rational consensus exonerates discourse ethics from the allegation of hinging on absolute truths, yet the charge of authoritarianism is also related to the constraints of Habermas' universalisation principle. Cohen and Arato resolve this matter by sidelining Habermas' concept of 'generalizable interests' – which they claim could only be applied from the third-person perspective of an observer (363) – in

favour of the notion of 'common identity', which stems directly from the understanding of the participants in argumentation (368).

We focus on actual processes of public discourse that can, if rationalized and democratized, constitute or reaffirm a rational, democratic collective identity or political culture. In such contexts, discourse ethics provides the standards with which to select those aspects of our tradition, collective identity, and political culture that we wish to maintain and develop and that can provide the content of legitimate norms.<sup>13</sup> (370)

Cohen and Arato emphasise that their approach "does not take us from one authoritarianism to another, from that of objectively conceived general interests to that of a hermeneutically accessible tradition that is treated as sacred", because the collective identity they describe is "rooted in traditions that have become self-reflective and self-critical" (373). There is, nevertheless, another problem. Cohen and Arato concede that they may be accused of violating the procedural character of discourse ethics by introducing issues of identity, yet they see Habermas' universalisation principle itself as "bringing into consideration the need-interpretations of all those who might be affected by a norm" (374). This leads once again to the paradox outlined above between the charges of formalism and authoritarianism: "Are not the critics right in claiming that [...] without the integration of substantive concerns into discourse ethics, it becomes formalistic, empty [...]? Yet, if discourse ethics does imply a specific way of life, [...] how can it claim to be either universal or neutral with respect to competing models of the good life?" (375).

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<sup>13</sup> In Cohen and Arato's model, the idea of 'general interests' gives way to that of 'common identity' but does not need to be discarded entirely: "once a common identity is established or reaffirmed, it is then possible to arrive at an understanding of what constitutes the general interests of a community. [...] Here the social-scientific standpoint has a place" (371).



Habermas has participated in the debate on 'morality' and 'ethical life' by defending Kohlberg's theory against criticisms by Carol Gilligan, a feminist psychologist who has suggested the existence of a "postconventional contextual stage" beyond "the abstractions of a strict deontological morality of justice along Kantian lines".<sup>14</sup> Gilligan's "relativistic ethics of responsibility" is supposed to tackle real (not hypothetical) dilemmas, to combine justice with care and to assume a situated subject (*Moral Consciousness* 176). By contrast, Habermas maintains that abstraction from the lifeworld and the consequent separation between norms and values is the "price" to pay in order to reach the level of postconventional morality (178). Yet, at the same time, because moral issues are not raised in a void but rather as "a guide for action", "the *demotivated solutions that postconventional morality finds for decontextualized issues must be reinserted into practical life*" (179, original emphasis). Habermas thus censures Gilligan for, among other counts, failing to distinguish between the justification of universal norms and their "context-specific application", which indeed "requires the additional competence of hermeneutic prudence, or in Kantian terminology, reflective judgment" (179, 180).

In Cohen and Arato's interpretation, discourse ethics should not be understood as a moral theory but rather as a political one, a "*theory of democratic legitimacy and basic rights*" (351, original emphasis). Conceptualised in this way, they claim, discourse ethics appears as the foundation of "a minimal or 'weak' collective political identity [that] can be shared by a plurality of groups, each with its own particular version of the 'good life'" (373).

Habermas' most direct intervention in the debate about contemporary democracy can be found in *Between Facts and Norms* (1992/1996), his analysis of law and the constitutional state. Legal norms for Habermas exist in a tension between facticity (their actual power to restrain and punish) and validity (their claim to legitimacy). They thus enable "associations of free and equal legal

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<sup>14</sup> The feminist debate around Gilligan's position is explored in Chapter 3.

persons whose integration is based simultaneously on the threat of external sanctions and the supposition of a rationally motivated agreement" (8). Following from Habermas' dual perspective on system (the view available to the observer) and lifeworld (the participant's understanding), this "account of modern law is to be neither sociologically empty nor normatively blind" (Rehg xxiii).

The central question is whether one can still meaningfully speak of constitutional democracies in light of rather disheartening empirical studies of power and complexity. [...] Habermas's [...] new 'proceduralist concept of democracy' acknowledges how the constitutional state is subject to social forces and functional demands most evident to the sociological observer. At the same time, it insists on the empirical relevance of deliberative democratic ideals accepted by the citizens themselves as engaged participants.

(xxx)

From the normative viewpoint, Habermas' political theory sits between two apparently opposed normative traditions, namely, liberalism and communitarianism (or 'civil republicanism'). His work in this area revisits a question already addressed by Cohen and Arato, who believe that these two paradigms can meet if considered from the angle of discourse ethics. As they explain, "liberal theorists see the respect for individual rights and the principle of political neutrality as the standard for legitimacy in constitutional democracies" (8). Conversely, "the communitarian critique of the rights thesis focuses on its individualistic presuppositions and universalist claims". Communitarians maintain that the individual is "situated within a historical and social context", which takes priority and imposes "communal duties and virtues" (9). For Cohen and Arato, however, a universal approach is not incompatible with these insights; liberalism and communitarianism can be seen as "mutually reinforcing and partly overlapping" (20) because participation in discourse – as has been stressed –

“does not require that one abstracts from one’s concrete situation” (21). In Habermas’ formula, “discourse theory invests the democratic process with normative connotations stronger than those found in the liberal model but weaker than those found in the republican model” (*Facts and Norms* 298). This means that “politics must involve more than the minimal government of liberalism, [...] restricted to preserving an unencumbered market economy under the rule of law”, but “less than the collective action of a homogeneous political society – the community envisioned by classical republicanism” (Rehg xxxi). The result is a political blueprint suitable for the realities of post-Cold War times and yet not devoid of a radical impulse.

On the liberal view, democratic will-formation has the exclusive function of *legitimizing* the exercise of political power. [...] On the republican view, democratic will-formation has the significantly stronger function of *constituting* society as a political community [...]. Of course, these two views exhaust the alternatives only if one dubiously conceives state and society in terms of the whole and its parts, where the whole is constituted either by a sovereign citizenry or by a constitution. By contrast, the discourse theory of democracy corresponds to the image of a decentered society [...] Read in procedural terms, the idea of popular sovereignty refers to social-boundary conditions that, although enabling the self-organization of a legal community, are not immediately at the disposition of the citizens’ will. (Habermas, *Facts and Norms* 299-301, original emphasis)

Key to this scheme is a concept “rediscovered today in wholly new historical constellations” (366), a concept embraced by Habermas and which is Cohen and Arato’s fundamental concern: the concept of ‘civil society’. Defined as “a normative model of a societal realm different from the state and the

economy", civil society encompasses four components: plurality (families, groups and associations), publicity (culture and communication), privacy (individual self-development and moral choice) and legality (a framework of general laws and basic rights) (Cohen and Arato 346). As Habermas highlights, the contemporary notion of civil society is "different from that of the 'bourgeois society' of the liberal tradition" and, "in contrast to its usage in the Marxist tradition, no longer includes the economy as constituted by private law and steered through markets in labor, capital, and commodities" (366).

In fact, according to Cohen and Arato, this construct provides a way out from the liberalism versus communitarianism dilemma inasmuch as "it has public and associational components as well as individual, private ones", allowing for an "idea of moral autonomy [which] does not presuppose possessive individualism" (22). Rights are thus conceived not only as negative liberties but also as "*positive freedom* within which agents can collectively debate issues of common concern, act in concert, assert new rights, and exercise influence on political (and potentially economic) society" (23, original emphasis). The revitalisation of civil society in political theory and practice is indeed a post-Cold War phenomenon, taking its cues from the transitions to democracy experienced by both Eastern Europe and Latin America in the late 1980s and early 1990s (15). One of the fundamental lessons from these contexts is what Cohen and Arato call 'self-limitation'.

The postrevolutionary or self-limiting "revolutions" of the East are no longer motivated by fundamentalist projects of suppressing bureaucracy, economic rationality or social division. Movements rooted in civil society have learned from the revolutionary tradition that these fundamentalist projects lead to the breakdown of societal steering and productivity and the suppression of social

plurality, all of which are then reconstituted by the forces of order only by dramatically authoritarian means. (16)

The paradox of civil society, as expressed by Cohen and Arato, is that revolution within it eventually leads to its collapse, while self-limitation permits the continuation of its influence. Nevertheless, the message is not about conformism: "The idea of the democratization of civil society, unlike that of its mere revival, is extremely pertinent to existing Western societies" (17). The concept of self-limitation has become central to Habermas' updated notion of the public sphere [see 2.1] and, as I argue in Chapter 6, also to the practice of political theatre.

### **1.3 Aesthetic dimensions**

If one of the recognised strengths of Critical Theorists is their ability to relate social theory to cultural expression, then Habermas, who has written little specifically about aesthetics, may be thought of as an exception to this rule. However, as Martin Jay proves in his influential essay "Habermas and Modernism" (1985), "although Habermas must still be accounted as a far less aesthetically inclined writer than his mentors in the Frankfurt School, it will no longer do to claim that he gives no weight at all to the role of art in the process of emancipation" (133). Jay rightly maintains that "art has found a modest place in [Habermas'] elaborate theoretical system", particularly vis-à-vis his considerations on modernity, which "led him not only to reflect on modernization, understood in sociological terms, but on aesthetic modernism as well" (126). Habermas concedes that his remarks on the subject are "scattered" and have arisen "only in the context of other themes" ("Questions and Counterquestions" 199), yet - as this section demonstrates - they point in a productive direction towards a contemporary conceptualisation of political art.

Drawing on Kant and Weber, Habermas understands modernity as encompassing three autonomous cultural value spheres, corresponding respectively to the cognitive, moral and aesthetic domains:

Weber describes the rationalization of world-views as a process of decomposition and differentiation. On the one hand, the basic substantial concepts with which the world-orders of "salvation history" and cosmology were constructed have been dissolved; with this dissolution, ontic, moral and expressive aspects are no longer fused into one and the same concept. [...] On the other hand, alongside a subjectivized "faith," there arose profane forms of "knowledge" which are relatively independent of one another. [...] As documented in the division of Kant's three *Critiques*, questions of truth are differentiated from questions of justice, and these in turn from questions of taste. [...] Art emerges with its own proper claim, *along with* science and technology, law and morality. (199, original emphasis)

The autonomy of modern art and its alleged loss in late capitalism have been at the centre of Critical Theory's aesthetic concerns. Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of mass culture as an instrument of domination (encapsulated in their concept of 'culture industry') has become paradigmatic of the work of the Frankfurt School's first generation, but so too has the earlier dispute between the former and Walter Benjamin on 'avant-garde' versus 'commercial' art. As Livingstone et al. point out with reference to this famous argument, "the contradiction between 'high' and 'low' genres – the one subjectively progressive and objectively elitist, the other objectively popular and subjectively regressive – has never been durably overcome, despite a complex, crippled dialectic between the two" (66). Moreover, they state that "no aesthetic field has been exempt from the rending pressures of the two recurrent poles of all

culture still subject to capital, autistically advanced or collusively popular”, and therefore “Adorno’s basic dictum in this respect still holds true: ‘Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up’” (109).

Habermas’ intervention in the Adorno-Benjamin debate is included in his early article “Walter Benjamin: Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique” (1972/1983). This piece, considered “Habermas’s most substantive essay on aesthetics” (Duvenage 28), is worth revisiting in detail. It offers not only an insightful summary of Benjamin’s aesthetic position in relation to both Adorno and Marcuse, but also the possibility of a ‘third way’ between Adorno and Benjamin. As documented in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* [see 2.1], the severance of culture from the state and the economy (and the ensuing specialisation of the three cultural areas) was prompted by the rise of civil society and, indeed, capitalism. Habermas reiterates this point in the essay on Benjamin, underlining that “art owes to its commodity character its liberation for the private enjoyment of the bourgeois reading, theater-going, exhibition-going, and concert-going public that was coming into being in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries”. Yet the same process eventually takes autonomous art “to its liquidation” (139). Benjamin describes the final stage of this trajectory as the ‘loss of aura’, meaning the disappearance – by way of ‘mechanical reproduction’ – of the aesthetic power which art had inherited from its initial association with magic and religion and then kept in the ‘religions of art’ characteristic of movements such as Romanticism or Art-for-art’s-sake (Kellner 124). It is on the assessment of this transformation where the views of Benjamin and Adorno drastically differ.

According to Habermas, Adorno’s damning analysis of ‘mass art’ focuses on the paradox that the “market that first made possible the autonomy of bourgeois art permitted the rise of a culture industry that penetrates the pores of the work of art itself and, along with art’s commodity character, imposes on the spectator the attitudes of a consumer”. Adorno thus concludes that “after the

destruction of the aura, only the formalist work of art, inaccessible to the masses, resists the pressures toward assimilation" ("Walter Benjamin" 139, 142).

Benjamin, in contrast, regards the loss of aura ambivalently.<sup>15</sup> On the positive side, post-auratic art "withdraws its [...] claim to superior authenticity and inviolability" and is set not for individual pleasure but for collective reception. Unlike Adorno, Benjamin appreciates in this reception by the masses "an enjoyment of art that is at once instructive and critical", epitomised by the attitude of a "relaxed, and yet mentally alert, film-viewing public" (132-33). On the negative side, "the deritualization of art conceals the risk that the work of art also sacrifices the experiential content along with its aura and becomes trivial". In other words, there is for Benjamin a semantic potential in myth (and then in art) that needs to be freed but not lost. Mechanical reproduction emancipates art from ritual, yet the historical experience contained in the aura could vanish with it as well. In order to overcome this danger, Benjamin's aspiration is "a condition in which the esoteric experiences of happiness have become public and universal". He speaks of a "secular illumination" in which "the experience of aura has burst the protective auratic shell and become exoteric" (144-46).

Habermas adopts a middle stance between Adorno and Benjamin by embarking on a qualified defence of the latter. He accuses Adorno of following "a strategy of hibernation, the obvious weakness of which lies in its defensive character". He claims that Adorno's thesis only applies to "examples from literature and music [...] that prescribe isolated reading and contemplative listening". In collectively received arts like architecture, painting and theatre, as well as in popular literature and music, Habermas sees instead "indications of a development that points beyond mere culture industry and does not *a fortiori* invalidate Benjamin's hope for a generalized secular illumination" (142). Habermas also sides with Benjamin against Marcuse on the question of

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<sup>15</sup> This was recognised by Habermas but not by Adorno, who tended to reduce Benjamin's position to a one-sided salutation of post-auratic art (Jay 128-129).



'consciousness-raising' versus 'rescuing critique'. This is again related to the issue of cultural differentiation described above, as Habermas explains apropos Marcuse's perspective on the autonomy of classical bourgeois art:

This autonomy is illusory because art permits the claims to happiness by individuals to hold good only in the realm of fiction and casts a veil over the unhappiness of day-to-day reality. At the same time there is something true about the autonomy of art because the ideal of the beautiful also brings to expression the longing for a happier life [...]. In relation to this art, Marcuse makes good the claim of ideology critique to take at its word the truth that is articulated in bourgeois ideals but has been reserved to the sphere of beautiful illusion – that is, to overcome art as a sphere split off from reality. (131)

For Marcuse, ideology critique is needed to distinguish "between the ideal and the real". Benjamin, on the contrary, concentrates on art that has already left the realm of the ideal, that is, post-auratic art (functionally transformed by mechanical reproduction) and also earlier 'non affirmative forms' such as baroque tragic drama and Baudelaire's avant-garde poetry. Contrasting with Marcuse, who focuses on symbolism (as present in the novel and bourgeois tragic drama), Benjamin favours allegory, "which expresses the experience of the passionate, the oppressed, the unreconciled, and the failed (that is, the negative)" (134).<sup>16</sup> This is why Benjamin's critique is not about reflection ('consciousness-raising'), but about 'rescuing' that experience: "Whereas Marcuse (by analytically disintegrating an objective illusion) would like to prepare the way for a transformation [...], Benjamin cannot see his task to be an attack on an art that is

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<sup>16</sup> Habermas compares here Marcuse's early essay "The Affirmative Character of Culture" (1937) to Benjamin's treatise *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936). As seen below, Marcuse changed his focus in later work.

already caught up in a process of dissolution. His art criticism [therefore] behaves conservatively toward its objects" (136).

Benjamin's rescuing critique is based on a mimetic linguistic theory, in which "what is actually expressed in language is not merely the subjective interiority of the speaker, but also an imitation of surrounding nature" (Jay 130). Habermas has been generally suspicious of such claims for a reconciliation with nature, but here "he demonstrates a certain cautious approbation of the goal insofar as it is represented by art" (130). This means, for Jay, that Habermas accepts that "communicative rationality is not enough to insure true emancipation; the experiential memories still contained, faintly, in art are necessary to give humankind a motivational stimulus to the search for happiness" (131).<sup>17</sup>

### **Towards a new political art**

Adorno, Marcuse and Benjamin would have agreed that a link between art and life was desirable, but their thoughts on how to make this possible diverge widely. For Adorno, "harmonization and reconciliation with the existing world [...] could not legitimately take place [...] until the world was radically changed" (Kellner 129). His defence of "the hermetic dimension of modernity", epitomised by artists like Kafka, Beckett and Schönberg, was thus a response to his assessment of the culture industry as a "false overcoming of autonomous art" (Habermas, "Walter Benjamin" 142). 'Committed' art did not fare any better in Adorno's view: "It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world [...]. Kafka's prose and Beckett's plays [...]"

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<sup>17</sup> Jay inscribes Habermas' position on aesthetics within a "subterranean [...] tension" in the Frankfurt School detected by Shierry Weber (who has translated a number of books by Habermas): "she singled out two impulses in Critical Theory that have been subtly at odds through much of its history: aesthetic experience as a prefigurative cipher of redemption and rational self-reflection as a critical tool in the struggle to achieve that utopian state" (125). While the first generation of Critical Theory concentrated on the former and Habermas on the latter, his reflections on Benjamin demonstrate that Habermas grants aesthetics a more important role than his critics would credit [see below].

have an effect by comparison with which officially committed works look like pantomimes" (qtd in Kellner 129).<sup>18</sup>

Even though Marcuse's analysis also centred initially on so-called high culture, three decades later his aspiration to a new art tied to reality "seemed to assume concrete shape for a moment in the flower-garlanded barricades of the Paris students". Marcuse interpreted "the surrealist praxis of the youth revolt [of 1968] as the overcoming of art with which art passes over into life" (Habermas, "Walter Benjamin" 132).<sup>19</sup> Back in the 1920s, Benjamin supported surrealism as well, where "the separation between poetic and political action had been overcome". However, ultimately he was not convinced by the surrealist idea of "politics as show" and substituted these first sympathies for the 'commitment' – so despised by Adorno – to Communism and the instrumentalisation of art: "Encouraged by his contact with Brecht, [...] [Benjamin] then regarded the relationship of art and political praxis primarily from the viewpoint of the organizational and propagandistic utility of art for the class struggle". Habermas nonetheless argues that because Benjamin declined to follow the course of consciousness-raising critique, "the resolute politicizing of art [...] did not have a systematic relation to his own theory of art and history" (154-55).

With the benefit of hindsight, it seems clear that "where Benjamin manifestly overestimated the progressive destiny of the commercial-popular art of his time, Adorno no less clearly over-estimated that of the avant-garde of the period" (Livingstone et al. 107). The break of artistic autonomy, as Habermas suggests in *Legitimation Crisis*, "can just as easily signify the degeneration of art into propagandistic mass art or into commercialized mass culture as [...] transform itself into a subversive counterculture" (86). Conversely, autonomous art might resist the pressures of the market only at the price of elitism and

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<sup>18</sup> Or, as Duvenage explains, "[committed art fails] to change fundamental political conceptions. Autonomous art [...] which does not specifically aim to change political attitudes, often succeeds in doing so" (41).

<sup>19</sup> Habermas' reference here is Marcuse's *Essay on Liberation* (1969).

individualism. Thus, Habermas is right in refusing to “unambiguously decide between Adorno and Benjamin” and finding “some truth in both positions” (“Questions” 202). Habermas’ ambivalence towards the autonomy of art originates in his allegiance to ‘the project of modernity’, within which aesthetic modernism developed. In Jay’s helpful synthesis, Habermas wishes “to redeem those semantic potentials that Benjamin had located in auratic art [...] without aiming at the complete reversal of the process of differentiation which he identifies with the modern” (133). When, according to the Weberian paradigm, substantive reason divides itself into the three spheres of science, morality and art, cultures of experts appear in each case which become increasingly divorced from the larger public, impoverishing the lifeworld (Habermas, “Modernity versus Postmodernity” 8-9). Yet this was not modernity’s intended outcome:

The project of modernity formulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains to set them free from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life, that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life. [...] The 20<sup>th</sup> century has shattered this optimism. (9)

In the history of art, a gradual movement towards autonomy can be seen in the Renaissance’s constitution of a separate “domain of beautiful objects”, in the eighteenth century’s institutionalisation of artistic activities as “independent from sacred and courtly life” and, finally, in the mid-nineteenth century’s promotion of “art for art’s sake”, where representation was abandoned and “the media of expression and the techniques of production themselves became the

aesthetic object" (9-10). Meanwhile, art's "promise of happiness", of reconnection with society, remained outstanding, eventually prompting "the surrealist attempt to blow up the autarkical sphere of art and to force a reconciliation of art and life" (10). Although Habermas is sympathetic to this goal, he claims that Surrealism failed because such intention "cannot be realized [...] through the liquidation of appearance as the medium of artistic representation".<sup>20</sup> What remains possible, however, is "a correct mediation of art with the life-world" ("Questions" 202). Habermas admits that the prospects of replacing the colonisation of the lifeworld with this constructive interchange between the three value spheres are slim (Jay 133), but he identifies the potential of two developments: audience reception and post avant-garde 'engaged' art. In the first instance, he notes the difference between the reception of art by the expert and by members of the general public. While the professional critic must remain in the specialist realm of aesthetics, the layperson would draw the aesthetic experience into ordinary life, opening up connections between questions of truth, justice and taste:

The aesthetic experience then not only renews the interpretation of our needs in whose light we perceive the world. It permeates as well our cognitive significations and our normative expectations and changes the manner in which all these moments refer to one another. [...] In [...] the reappropriation of the expert's culture from the standpoint of the life-world, we can discern an element which does justice to the intentions of the hopeless surrealist revolts, perhaps even more to Brecht's and Benjamin's interests in how art works, which lost their aura, could yet be received in illuminating ways. In sum, the project of modernity has not yet been fulfilled. ("Modernity" 12).

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<sup>20</sup> As David Ingram explains, "the surrealist revolt was directed against both the quasi-sacral transcendence of high culture from everyday life and the assimilation of popular culture to the market. In Habermas's opinion it failed to deliver in either account" (71).

From this position it is feasible to think of a new type of 'engaged' or 'politically committed' art, hostile to the propagandistic instrumentalisation that Benjamin forced himself to accept and protective of the artistic independence celebrated by Adorno. Drawing on the work of Peter Bürger, Habermas claims that "post-avant-garde art is characterized by the coexistence of tendencies toward realism and engagement with those authentic continuations of classical modern art that distilled out the independent logic of the aesthetic". In this context, committed art allows "moments of the cognitive and of the moral-practical [to] come into play again in art itself, and at the level of the wealth of forms that the avant-garde set free" (*The Theory of Communicative Action 2*: 398). Habermas' conception of contemporary political art can illuminate the path that 'engaged' drama needs to trail once the old certainties have been removed, that is, when both agit-prop's politicisation of art and the counterculture's aestheticisation of politics appear equally discredited, but theatre *as theatre* can still have an impact as a mediating force in the public sphere. On the other hand, Habermas' emphasis on reception is particularly relevant for theatre as a collective artistic form, acting as a suitable antidote to the Adornian temptation of hermetism.

### **Aesthetics and reason**

As has been shown, the crux of Habermas' proposed continuation of the modern project rests in the possibility of communication between the three (already split) spheres of rationality, in order to avoid reductionist solutions such as objectivism, moralism or aestheticism. This communication must take place without "violating the inner logic of the dominant form of argumentation" in each case ("Questions" 209). However, the problem that has preoccupied a number of critics is whether it is appropriate to speak of a sphere of 'aesthetic rationality' and, if so, how to define it. Jay, for example, warns that "there may be even a

contradictory relationship between increased artistic rationalization and [art's] redemptive function" (138).

Habermas addresses this issue by making another distinction, this time between art criticism – where an aesthetic rationality operates similarly to the other areas of argumentation, through validity claims<sup>21</sup> – and the “learning processes” associated with “the works of art themselves, and not the discourses about them”. In the latter, far from argumentative procedures, aesthetics’ inner logic is to do with “a special sort of experience [...] of which only a decentered, unbound subjectivity is capable”. Here, what Jay calls rationalisation and redemption do not exclude each other: after the aesthetic realm has been distilled “from admixtures of the cognitive, the useful, and the moral”, the avant-garde transforms aesthetic experience “in the direction of the decentering and unbounding of subjectivity” and opens the door “to the expurgated elements of the unconscious, the fantastic, and the mad, the material and the bodily [...] one can think here of the incorporation of the ugly, of the negative as such” (“Questions” 201).

Despite these significant qualifications, advocates of postmodernism have repeatedly accused Habermas of subordinating aesthetics “to the imperialism of rationality” (Dumm 213). The extended debate between Habermasian and postmodern theory is well beyond the scope of this study,<sup>22</sup> but some elements of the dispute are worth considering in this section in order to clarify Habermas’

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<sup>21</sup> In this respect, Habermas retains Kant’s distinction between personal judgements of pleasure and universal judgements of taste: “As distinct from merely subjective preference, the fact that we link judgements of taste to a criticizable claim presupposes non-arbitrary standards for the judgment of art” (“Questions” 201). According to Ingram, this retention is problematic (83).

<sup>22</sup> A comprehensive discussion can be found in Best and Kellner. These authors also offer a useful definition of postmodern theory as a set of “perspectivist” and “relativist” positions: “Some postmodern theory accordingly rejects the totalising macroperspectives on society and history favoured by modern theory in favour of microtheory and micropolitics [...]. Postmodern theory also rejects modern assumptions of social coherence and notions of causality in favour of multiplicity, plurality, fragmentation, and indeterminacy. In addition, post-modern theory abandons the rational and unified subject postulated by much modern theory in favour of a socially and linguistically decentred and fragmented subject” (4-5). It is important to note that extreme and moderate versions of postmodernism differ significantly, some of the latter being not wholly incompatible with Critical Theory. Best and Kellner in fact promote an integration of postmodernist insights into the Frankfurt School tradition of thought. More consideration of postmodernist arguments (around the notion of truth) is given in Chapter 6.

aesthetic model. Lyotard, one of the most vocal representatives of aesthetic postmodernism, famously framed the argument within the Kantian categories of 'beautiful' versus 'sublime'. As David Ingram explains,

Whereas judgements of beauty reflect the imagination's success in discovering symbols of rational Ideas that attest to the unity of cognitive and moral faculties and positively instantiate the disinterestedness and purposiveness of morality in general, judgments of the sublime articulate just the opposite – the incommensurability of imagination and understanding. [...] the sublime testifies to an idea of totality, but one that explodes conventions of form, frustrates the sense of harmony, escapes our capacity for representation, and issues in a painful pleasure that is more suited to the striving of moral desire than to the quiescence of material satisfaction. (99)

Modernist art (particularly the kind championed by Adorno) is of course characteristic of an aesthetic of the sublime. Yet postmodernism, according to Lyotard, goes one step further, embracing this aesthetic principle "without 'regret' and without any 'nostalgia for presence'" (qtd. in Wellmer 43). By contrast, Habermasian philosophy is charged with restricting heterogeneity and upholding the obsolete ideal of beauty, even though these allegations – as Ingram points out – clearly ignore the Benjaminian side of Habermas' aesthetics (100). Ingram argues that Habermas manages to accommodate both "the reconciliatory positivity of romantic idealism [and] the explosive negativity of modern realism [...] without doing violence to either" (68).<sup>23</sup> While Ingram is not entirely satisfied with Habermas' account of aesthetic rationality [see below], he applauds the

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<sup>23</sup> Such a conclusion is possible when 'affirmative' and 'negative' culture are seen as two sides of the same coin: "If [Habermas'] aesthetics ultimately hews more closely to the redemptive criticism worked out by Walter Benjamin than his critics have acknowledged, it is because the utopian fulfillment vouchsafed by idealism is just the reverse side of a secular illumination disruptive of false harmony" (Ingram 68).



move away from a vague notion of 'truthfulness' in Habermas' early work, to a full acknowledgment of 'poetic language' as distinct from everyday speech. This important shift takes place in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985/1990), Habermas' major polemic with postmodernist philosophy.

Generally, Habermas' defence of modernity has been pursued mainly on two fronts: against 'neoconservative' thinkers, who embrace (capitalist) modernisation while rejecting (aesthetic) modernism, and against the postmodernist camp, which is seen, conversely, as retreating into modernist aesthetics to "step aside of the modern world" ("Modernity" 13). Habermas criticises postmodernism – a philosophical line he traces back to Nietzsche, Heidegger and Bataille, and identifies contemporarily with Foucault and Derrida – for adopting "a totalizing critique" in which reason and its other "stand not in opposition pointing to a dialectical *Aufhebung* [dissolution], but in a relationship of tension characterized by mutual repugnance and exclusion" (*Philosophical Discourse* 102-103). For Habermas, this stance inevitably directs postmodernists towards both aestheticism and anti-modernism:

They remove into the sphere of the far away and the archaic the spontaneous powers of imagination, of self-experience and of emotionality. To instrumental reason, they juxtapose in manichean fashion a principle only accessible through evocation, be it the will to power [Nietzsche] or sovereignty [Bataille], Being [Heidegger] or the dionysiac force of the poetical. ("Modernity" 13)

In contrast to the postmodernist blurring of boundaries, particularly Derrida's conflation of philosophy and literature, Habermas distinguishes clearly between the 'world-disclosive' function of poetic language,<sup>24</sup> on the one hand, and the 'problem-solving' capacities of science/technology and morality/law, on the

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<sup>24</sup> Habermas bases this distinction on the findings of linguistic theory. However, the 'world-disclosive' or 'poetic' function pertains, by extension, to all artistic expressions, even purely visual ones.

other. Between these two specialised realms lies the 'normal' language of everyday practice (or of what he elsewhere calls the lifeworld), "in which all linguistic functions and aspects of validity are intermeshed". Habermas is far from suggesting that these particular fields do not filter through each other. He accepts that "even the normal language of everyday life is ineradicably rhetorical" and also that the languages specialised in problem-solving rely on "the illuminating power of metaphorical tropes". Yet the difference here is that, "the rhetorical elements, which are by no means expunged, are tamed, as it were, and enlisted for special purposes" (*Philosophical Discourse* 209).

In the specific case of art criticism and philosophy, whose functions are to mediate between their respective expert cultures and everyday life, the rhetorical dimension plays a more crucial role. This is why both these types of discourse "have a family resemblance to literature". Yet Habermas – against Derrida – maintains that "their family relationship stops right there, for in each of these enterprises the tools of rhetoric are subordinated to the discipline of a *distinct* form of argumentation" (209-10, original emphasis). By preserving 'world-disclosure' as a primarily aesthetic feature, Habermas attempts to give a special relevance to art. He claims that being released "from the pressure to decide proper to everyday communicative practice", poetic discourses are empowered "for the playful creation of new worlds" (201). However, this leaves his scheme open to a different kind of critique.

In *Habermas and Aesthetics* (2003), the most extensive study available on this elusive subject, Pieter Duvenage maintains that whilst Habermas' socio-historical early work – particularly *Structural Transformation* – granted art and cultural institutions an important role "in contributing to the rational exchange of ideas in the public sphere" (18), after the Habermasian linguistic turn "aesthetics finds only a reduced and specified position within communicative reason" (29). Duvenage stresses this phenomenon, which he names 'the fate of aesthetics', in Habermas' *Theory of Communicative Action*, where the aesthetic dimension is

confined to the speaker's inner world and its correspondent claims to 'truthfulness' (unlike those to 'truth' or 'rightness') are not "discursively redeemable" (53). According to Duvenage, this restricts the possibilities of aesthetic discourse to the subjective sphere and to particular contexts (60), conflicting with the Habermasian emphasis on intersubjectivity (97). The more elaborated notion of 'poetic language' that Habermas offers in *Philosophical Discourse* is also criticised by Duvenage, inasmuch as it is based on an excessively formal understanding of communication, where "too strong a conceptual boundary [is drawn] between the capacity for disclosure as manifested in art and literature, on the one hand, and the capacity for argumentative learning processes of science, law and morality, on the other" (130). This in turn translates for Duvenage in a limited view of democracy and the public sphere (133).

Even though Duvenage admits that Habermas' intersubjective paradigm "provides an alternative to the post-Nietzschean and postmodern positions, where the singular, particular, 'exceptional' and 'other' take precedence" (95), he judges it necessary to complement Habermas' aesthetics with the more holistic perspective found in Heidegger. Duvenage's balanced approach is similar to that of Ingram, yet the latter believes that there is enough development in Habermas' philosophy itself as to offer an appropriate aesthetic model. To prove this point, Ingram builds on the work of Martin Seel,<sup>25</sup> which explores "precisely those polarities between felt experience and reasoned critique, rational specialization and rational harmonization, expression and cognition, that comprise the very core of Habermas's own aesthetics" (89).

Seel detects two contradictory positions in aesthetic theory. "The one extreme identifies the aesthetic with an immediate experience or subjective reaction to 'sensed' properties that resist conceptual or discursive articulation". In

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<sup>25</sup> The book in question is: *Die Kunst der Entzweiung: Zum Begriff der Ästhetischen Rationalität* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1985).

this case there is a drastic separation between the aesthetic and the cognitive, which forbids a notion of aesthetic rationality. "The other extreme commits the opposite error of building too much into the aesthetic", which "takes on the meaning of a higher 'truth'". In this case the aesthetic is assimilated into the cognitive and so, again, divorced from rationality (Ingram 89-90). Seel resolves this paradox by acknowledging that in aesthetic experience a subjective reaction, objective properties and a critical synthesis relate to one another in a circular fashion. Ingram agrees with Seel (and Duvenage) in criticising Habermas for drawing too firm a line between the three distinctive modes of argumentation, when in fact they can never be entirely 'purified' from extraneous elements.<sup>26</sup> This is particularly accurate for aesthetic discourses, which represent in themselves a more holistic form of rationality:

What distinguishes aesthetic criticism and its peculiar type of *experiential rationality* from other forms of integrated reasoning is that it alone involves a "presentative" reflection on the basic attitudes and "ways of seeing" that globally encompass and define the possibilities and limits of our cognitions, moral evaluations, and aesthetic sensibilities. (91, my emphasis)

Ingram concludes that "despite its uncertain vacillation between the two polarities [...], Habermas's aesthetics seem to aspire to the sort of 'presentative' reflection, or secular illumination, articulated by Seel" (91). Habermas reaches this point when he comes to accept that the 'truth-potential' of art is not related to "just one of the three validity claims constitutive for communicative action" ("Questions" 203). This entails, for Ingram, the recognition of "a notion of rationality that is in some sense intuitive and experiential – compelling in a

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<sup>26</sup> Basically, Ingram objects to Habermas' drastic differentiation between art reception by the expert and by the layperson, claiming that the interplay of cognitive, normative and aesthetic elements that Habermas describes in relation to the latter also occur in specialised criticism, "a form of discourse that mediates (metaphorically) cognitive, moral, and expressive validity claims" (87).

metaphorical-rhetorical rather than in a purely discursive, i.e., logical and transparent, way" (88). In the history of aesthetic theory, it was Friedrich Schiller who achieved a successful integration between the sensual and the rational. Thus, as Habermas follows Schiller (in *Philosophical Discourse*), "the concept of communicative rationality – now universalized to encompass even the poetic and metaphorical function of art – loses its pragmatic, discursive rigidity" (Ingram 96).

As a body of work developed through decades and covering many different areas of experience, Habermas' Critical Theory offers important insights into the complex relationship between politics and culture. One of the key notions of Habermasian philosophy that has the utmost relation with the arts, and theatre in particular, is that of the public sphere. This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

## Chapter 2: The Public Sphere

### 2.1 The Habermasian model

The seminal notion of the public sphere is developed in Habermas' first key book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962/1989), where he defines the term as follows:

The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason. (27)

The public sphere can thus be identified as an achievement of the modern era. It emerged in Europe in the late seventeenth century, when civil society became separated from the state. Habermas makes clear in the preface of *Structural Transformation* that his investigation refers to a particular historical category, "the *liberal* model of the bourgeois public sphere" (xviii).<sup>27</sup> There is, however, another dimension to this endeavour. Even though Habermas' early study has been praised for being historically ingrained – a rare feature in his highly abstract intellectual production – it does embrace a theoretical aim. He was not only trying to describe the actual trajectory of the public sphere but also to

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<sup>27</sup> Here he explicitly leaves aside "the *plebeian* public sphere [represented, for instance, in the Chartist Movement] as a variant that in a sense was suppressed in the historical process" and that, ultimately, "remains oriented toward the intentions of the bourgeois public sphere" (xviii, original emphasis). This exclusion prompted an influential strand of criticism of Habermas' theory of the public sphere.

position it as an ideal case, showing “the element of truth and emancipatory potential that it contained despite its ideological misrepresentation and contradictions” (Calhoun 2). Understanding this aim, as Hohendahl reminds us, is a suitable way to put into context those criticisms of Habermas that accuse him of idealising the Enlightenment public sphere:

Habermas does indeed construct a model that has never existed in pure form. Such an ideal model is necessary for describing diachronic changes. [...] Habermas’ model of public sphere has a double function. It provides a paradigm for analyzing historical change, while also serving as a normative category for political critique. In order to prevent decline to a merely descriptive concept of public opinion, Habermas insists on its emphatic use, although he admits the irreversibility of the historical processes involved.

(92)

This normative dimension is indeed what makes the public sphere such a fruitful category for contemporary approaches to politics and culture. Before engaging with its specific appropriateness for a revised definition of political theatre, however, it is necessary to review Habermas’ description of this concept and the subsequent critical developments it has generated.

*Structural Transformation* traces the notion of the public sphere to its origins in ancient Greece, where the realm of the *polis* (city) was clearly separated from that of the *oikos* (home). Even though Habermas acknowledges that this Hellenic model has exerted great influence in Western culture since the Renaissance, he is adamant to point out its shortcomings, namely, the “absolute distinction” it made between “the men who exercised their citizenship rights by speaking in the city square and women and the slave population who were denied participation” (McGuigan 23-24). In Habermas’ words,

The political order [...] rested on a patrimonial slave economy. The citizens were thus set free from productive labor; it was, however, their private autonomy as masters of households on which their participation on public life depended. [...] Status in the *polis* was therefore based upon status as the unlimited master of an *oikos*. [...] Just as the wants of life and the procurements of its necessities were shamefully hidden inside the *oikos*, so the *polis* provided an open field for honorable distinction. (*Structural Transformation* 3-4)

In the Middle Ages, a different kind of publicity that Habermas calls "publicness of representation" supplanted the public sphere. Representation in this sense was an attribute of the lord, who "displayed himself, presented himself as an embodiment of 'higher' power". The lord and his estates did not represent the country in the modern meaning of acting on behalf of its population; they "'were' the country" and therefore "represented their lordship not for but 'before' the people" (7-8). As the feudal rights started to fade away, this *representative publicness* was progressively concentrated at the court, but increased in its importance nonetheless. Habermas exemplifies this period of transition through the baroque festival, in which even though the people still participated in the streets, "joust, dance and theatre retreated from the public places into the enclosures of the park, from the streets into the rooms of the palace" (9-10). It was at this historical moment when the bourgeois public sphere began to take shape: "The final form of representative publicness, reduced to the monarch's court and at the same time receiving greater emphasis, was already an enclave within a society separating itself from the state. Now for the first time private and public spheres became separate in a specifically modern sense" (11).

By the end of the eighteenth century, Habermas claims, a process of polarization between public and private domains had occurred, affecting the former feudal powers of church, prince and nobility. After the Reformation,



religion became a matter of private discernment as the church was transformed into "a corporate body among others under public law". Bureaucratic, military and judicial organs turned into public institutions separated from the (now private) court. The political and occupational ambits of the estates were, in turn, transferred to public administration and civil society respectively (11-12). According to Habermas, the capitalist system was crucial in the genesis of the modern public sphere. Even though early capitalism was conservative both economically and politically, it fostered the two factors that would finally destroy the old order: the traffic in commodities and in news (15). When the press became a site for critical reasoning (gradually from the end of the seventeenth century), it represented a fatal threat to the traditional publicity of representation. Similarly, the new – mercantilist – phase of capitalism brought about a distinctive relationship between a maturing nation-state that relied on strong taxation and a growing bourgeois stratum that was affected by its policies. In this context, "the state authorities evoked a resonance leading the *publicum*, the abstract counterpart of public authority, into an awareness of itself as the latter's opponent, that is, as the public of the now emerging *public sphere of civil society*" (23, original emphasis).

Habermas presents a blueprint of the bourgeois model where the public sphere mediates between public authority – comprising the state and the court – and the private domain, which includes civil society (defined as the realm of commodity exchange and social labour) and the bourgeois family's private space (30). Before it assumed political functions, the public sphere was a cultural phenomenon. It belonged to what Habermas identifies as "the world of letters" and was constituted in coffee houses (Great Britain), *salons* (France) and table societies (Germany). These meeting places shared three institutional traits. First, they disregarded status, temporarily suspending the laws of the state and the market in favour of rational argumentation alone. Second, they delineated an area of "common concern" which before could only be addressed by church and

state authorities. Third, they defined a public that was inclusive in principle (36-37). As Calhoun puts it, "anyone with access to cultural products – books, plays, journals – had at least a potential claim on the attention of the culture-debating public" (13). In reality, however, the bourgeois public sphere, especially in its later political form, restricted itself to educated male proprietors.

Women and dependents were factually and legally excluded from the political public sphere, whereas female readers as well as apprentices and servants often took a more active part in the literary public sphere than the owners of private property and family heads themselves. Yet in the educated classes the one form of public sphere was considered to be identical with the other [...]. *The fully developed bourgeois public sphere was based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals that came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple.* (Habermas, *Structural Transformation* 56, original emphasis)

The earliest and most accomplished political public sphere, in Habermas' account, appeared in Great Britain at the turn of the eighteenth century, encouraged by three previous events: the birth of the Bank of England (a sign of capitalist development), the first cabinet government (the initial step towards the parliamentarisation of state authority) and the elimination of print censorship (58). The process was later advanced by the founding of journals that turned the press into "a genuinely critical organ of a public engaged in critical political debate" (60). Other important changes were the progressive subjection of the British government to the rule of law, which made unlikely a bourgeois revolution in continental style, and the significance that Parliament assigned to *public opinion*, demonstrated by the introduction of this very term in a House of Commons speech from 1792 (62, 65). Still, Habermas sustains that it was not

until the nineteenth century, when the mercantilist economy gave way to the liberal phase of capitalism, that civil society became sufficiently emancipated from authority for the public sphere to “attain its full development in the bourgeois constitutional state” (78-79).

As has already been stressed, Habermas is not blind to the contradictions of the liberal public sphere, especially concerning the ideological identification of ‘property owner’ with ‘human being’. On the other hand – and in line with the normative dimension of his project – he recognises that what the bourgeois public believed “was ideology and simultaneously more than mere ideology”.

On the basis of the continuing domination of one class over another, the dominant class nevertheless developed political institutions which credibly embodied as their objective meaning the idea of their own abolition: *veritas non auctoritas facit legem* [truth not authority makes law], the idea of the dissolution of domination into that easygoing constraint that prevailed on no other ground than the compelling insight of public opinion. (88)

In the next section of *Structural Transformation* (‘Idea and Ideology’) Habermas tracks down the philosophical formulation of the public sphere, which finds its classical embodiment in Kantian theory. Kant followed the line of argument initiated by Rousseau and his *volonté générale* but introduced a significant variation: “the principle of popular sovereignty could be realized only under the precondition of a public use of reason” (107). Through what Kant calls *publicity* (which in this case can be equated to *public opinion*),<sup>28</sup> “domination as a law of nature was replaced by the rule of legal norms – politics could be in principle transformed into morality” (108). The empirical possibility of this ideal relied however on a questionable natural order – the same that allowed the

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<sup>28</sup> Habermas devotes the last chapter of *Structural Transformation* (236-250) to explore the meaning of *public opinion*, which is not an exact synonym of *publicity* but its addressee.

fictional identity between *bourgeois* and *homme* – which Hegel would, in turn, denounce as ideology (116-17). As Hegel's solution consisted of a return to political force, it was left to Marx to elaborate an emancipatory critique of the bourgeois public sphere. In Marx's view, the latter amounted to "a mask of bourgeois interests" that could only fulfil its potential – the subordination of power to reason – in a classless society (124, 128).

From the dialectic immanent in the bourgeois public sphere Marx derived the socialist consequences of a counter-model in which the classical relationship between the public sphere and the private was peculiarly reversed. In this counter-model, criticism and control by the public were extended to that portion of the private sphere of civil society which had been granted to private persons by virtue of their power of control over the means of production – to the domain of socially necessary labor. According to this new model, autonomy was no longer based on private property; it could in principle no longer be granted in the private sphere but had to have its foundation in the public sphere itself. (128)

Although Habermas praises the insightfulness of the Marxist critique, he also accepts the unreliability of its prognosis, as the socialist counter-model never succeeded in practice. By contrast, the subsequent liberal critique of the public sphere, represented by Mill and Tocqueville, had the advantage of being "realistic" (131). Discarding the essentialism that informed both the bourgeois version and its socialist antithesis, these liberal theorists believed in a system that could offer "protections and ameliorations, relative not perfect freedom" (Calhoun 20). Yet their interpretation was highly conservative: they rejected a broadened sphere where the public had been "subverted by the propertyless and uneducated masses" (Habermas, *Structural Transformation* 136) and where public opinion became "a compulsion towards conformity more than critical

discourse" (Calhoun 20). Habermas considers that the dialectic between the tendencies represented in these two models – liberal and socialist – precipitated the "transformation" of the public sphere he depicts in the second part of the book.

While it penetrated more *spheres* of society, it simultaneously lost its political *function*, namely: that of subjecting the affairs that it had made public to the control of a critical public. [...] The *principle* of the public sphere, that is, critical publicity, seemed to lose its strength in the measure that it expanded as a *sphere* and even undermined the private realm. (*Structural Transformation* 140, original emphasis)

In the second half of the nineteenth century, according to Habermas, the separation between state and society – which had provided the basis for the public sphere – began to disappear. The pressures from the new phase of *organised* capitalism triggered the intervention of the state, as certain conflicts of interests "could no longer be settled within the private sphere alone". At the same time, there was a "transfer of public functions to private corporate bodies" (142). Even though state interventionism tended to favour the vulnerable – establishing, for example, protection, compensation and subsidies for workers and employees – it was guided "by the interest of maintaining the equilibrium of the system which could no longer be secured by way of the free market" (142). Wider sectors of the population succeeded in acquiring access to the public sphere, turning economic conflicts into political ones, but the long-term consequences were paradoxical in both respects. Economically, the alterations to the system allowed for capitalism to survive its internal pressures. Politically, they undermined the public sphere by replacing the rational quest for an undistorted general interest with the negotiation for particular gains. Here, for Habermas, the Marxist dream turned sour: "the occupation of the political public sphere by the unpropertied

masses led to an interlocking of state and society which removed from the public sphere its former basis without supplying a new one" (177).

Concurrently with the blurring of boundaries between state and society, the bourgeois family and the literary public were also transformed. As these shifts impacted directly on the cultural realm, they will be analysed in the next section. With regard to the political public sphere itself, Habermas portrays a gradual disintegration that occurs as its usual functions are taken away from the public to be performed by other institutions: associations defending organised private interests and parties that no longer serve the people directly. The public is left to participate only sporadically and by "acclamation", supporting or rejecting politicians through the vote (176).<sup>29</sup> The very meaning of *publicity* changes from its "critical" bourgeois roots to the more contemporary "manipulative" sense (178). The ultimate manifestation of the latter is the practice of public relations, which is even more damaging than advertising in that rather than openly addressing private individuals as customers, it "lays claim to the public sphere as one that plays a role in the political realm" (178). The final result, in Habermas' bleak outlook, is a *refeudalisation* of the public sphere:

Publicity once meant the exposure of political domination before the public use of reason; publicity now adds up the reactions of an uncommitted friendly disposition. In the measure that is shaped by public relations, the public sphere of civil society again takes on feudal features. The "suppliers" display a showy pomp before customers ready to follow. Publicity imitates the kind of aura proper to the personal prestige and supernatural authority once bestowed by the kind of publicity involved in representation. (195)

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<sup>29</sup> Habermas develops these ideas in *Legitimation Crisis*.

In this environment, the authorities themselves have to compete for publicity, approaching its citizens as consumers and borrowing from public relations strategies (195-96). Publicity today “earns public prestige for a person or issue and thereby renders it ready for acclamatory assent in a climate of nonpublic opinion” (201). Meanwhile, representation through parliament gets distorted, as delegates become mere functionaries who follow the party line and their debates are converted into a show for the mass media (204-06). Only when elections are near the attention turns to the voters, but politics is *marketed* to them “in an unpolitical way” and targeting the less informed “undecided” groups (215-16).

Even though Habermas’ extreme assumptions in the second part of *Structural Transformation* – which is usually regarded as “the least satisfactory half” (McGuigan 26) – need to be received with caution, their insight must also be acknowledged. As Thompson emphasises, “in developing this rather pessimistic argument, Habermas was no doubt overstating his case [...] but he should also be given credit for anticipating, with remarkable prescience, the glittering media campaigns that were to become such a pervasive feature of presidential and general elections in the age of television” (178). More importantly, Habermas avoids turning his negative assessment of the contemporary situation into reactionary nostalgia for a lost golden era: “Any attempt at restoring the liberal public sphere through the reduction of its plebiscitarily expanded form will only serve to weaken even more the residual functions genuinely remaining with it” (208). Put more bluntly by Calhoun, “no attempt to go back to the old bourgeois public sphere can be progressive, for social change has made its contradictory foundations manifest” (27). Yet, as Habermas does not abandon his normative pursuit, “the struggle [...] must be to find a form of democratic public discourse that can salvage critical reason in an age of large-scale institutions and fuzzy boundaries between state and society” (28). Habermas would only provide a full

answer to this question in his subsequent work. *Structural Transformation* suggests, however, a potential line of action, namely, to subject those institutions that deal with publicity in the contemporary sense of *manipulation* – parties, mass media and special-interest associations – to publicity in the classical sense of *critical discussion*, democratising their internal structure and making them truly accountable to the public (208-09).

In spite of the irreversibility of the structural transformation of the public sphere, Habermas' concluding remarks about contemporary politics are far from gloomy. Even with all the paradoxes outlined above, he recognises the necessity of the welfare state to actualise in a *positive* manner those rights that were only *negatively* granted by the classical legal system, shifting from "liberal guarantees of freedom" to "democratic guarantees of participation" (223). When history decisively uncovered the fictions of the bourgeois constitutional order, state intervention was required to "draw upon a positive directive notion as to how 'justice' was to be realized" (224). Among their drawbacks, the current circumstances do offer an opportunity:

The two conditions for a public sphere to be effective in the political realm – the objectively possible minimizing of bureaucratic decisions and a relativizing of structural conflicts of interest according to the standard of a universal interest everyone can acknowledge – can today no longer be disqualified as simply utopian. [...] The outcome of the struggle between a critical publicity and one that is merely staged for manipulative purposes remains open. (235)



## Theatre as a public sphere

In addition to its awareness of history, the distinctiveness of Habermas' study of the public sphere resides in the relevance it assigns to culture. As Duvenage indicates, *Structural Transformation* can be considered "a provocative formulation of the communicative role of art in society from a socio-historical perspective" (3). It has been highlighted earlier that in Habermas' scheme the critical public originated in the cultural domain and "remained rooted in the world of letters even as it assumed political functions" (85). The intimate space created by the bourgeois conjugal family promoted the development of subjectivity. Self-reflective individuals then engaged in a critical debate "sparked by the products of culture that had become publicly accessible: in the reading room and the theater, in museums and at concerts" (29). As society's centre moved from the noble *court* to the bourgeois *town* with its coffee houses, *salons* and table societies, the practice of cultural (and later political) discussion flourished.

It is not by chance that Habermas mentions the theatre as a prominent cultural site within the bourgeois milieu. He also uses the theatre as a significant example at the beginning of *Structural Transformation*, in an excursus based on Goethe's second version of *Wilhelm Meister*. Here, the acting profession offers the perfect illustration of the transition between the old *publicity of representation* and the new *public sphere*.<sup>30</sup> Longing for a fading nobility, the character of Wilhelm "renounces the world of bourgeois activity [...] for the stage" (13) only to encounter the impossibility of his regressive attempt:

Wilhelm came before his public as Hamlet, successfully at first. The public, however, was already the carrier of a different public sphere, one that no longer had anything in common with that of representation. In this sense Wilhelm Meister's theatrical mission

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<sup>30</sup> It is noteworthy that the meaning of *representation* on the stage interplays with both the traditional and the modern sense of this word. This is an aspect that becomes highly problematic in contemporary forms of documentary theatre [see Chapter 6].

had to fail. It was out of step, as it were, with *the bourgeois public sphere whose platform the theater had meanwhile become*. Beaumarchais's *Figaro* had already entered the stage and along with him, according to Napoleon's famous words, the revolution. (14, my emphasis)

Habermas presents yet a second literary example of the centrality of the theatre for the bourgeois public sphere in Abbé Galiani's *Dialogues on the Grain Trade*, which depicts the *salons* as places where "conversation and discussion were elegantly intertwined". In this type of discourse, "the unimportant (where one had travelled and how one was doing) was treated as much with solemnity as the important (theater and politics) was treated *en passant*" (34). As well as being recognised as a legitimate topic for critical debate, the theatre typifies the evolution of the bourgeois public in Britain, France and Germany (although, in Habermas' opinion, not as clearly as concerts). Whilst in Germany the *public* in the modern sense of the word only emerged when the theatres of courts and palaces opened in town in the second half of the eighteenth century, in Britain and France "the populace [...] had been admitted even as far back as the seventeenth century to the Globe Theatre and the *Comédie*". However, "they were all still part of a different type of publicity in which the 'ranks' (preserved still as a dysfunctional architectural relic in our theatre buildings) paraded themselves, and the people applauded" (38). Eventually, the stalls would reflect the social dominance of the commercial class:

The main floor became [in Paris] the place where gradually the people congregated who were later counted among the cultural classes without, however, already belonging to the upper stratum of the upper bourgeoisie who moved into the salons. In Great Britain the change was more abrupt. The popular theatre did not survive. (38-39)

With the birth of a new public, seemingly *inclusive*, came an appropriation of art through discussion. Anybody with access to a book, a play, a concert or an exhibition could lay judgment on it, not only members of the court or the church. At the same time, the noble connoisseur gave way to the professional critic, who wrote about literature, theatre, music or painting in the modern periodicals and was regarded as the voice of the enlightened public (40-42). As has been noted, the other – indispensable – side of this coin was the patriarchal conjugal family, the heart of the private sphere. Here, as in the public realm, the underlying principles of freedom, love and cultivation contrasted with the real functions of the bourgeois family: accumulation of capital, internalisation of authority, patriarchal domination (47). Yet Habermas maintains once again that the aforementioned values were “more than just ideology” and that they created the conditions for a public sphere to exist:

In the intimate sphere of the conjugal family privatised individuals viewed themselves as independent even from the private sphere of their economic activity – as persons capable of entering into “purely human” relations with one another. The literary form of these at the time was the letter. [...] Subjectivity, as the innermost core of the private, was always already oriented to an audience (*Publikum*). The opposite of the intimateness whose vehicle was the written word was indiscretion and not publicity as such. Letters by strangers were not only borrowed and copied, some correspondences were intended from the outset for publication. (48-49)

For Habermas, subjectivity provides the explanation for the success of the domestic novel, Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740) being the most influential example of this genre and “a model [...] for novels written in letters”. Literature, focused in what was contemplated as *human*, became known as *fiction*, not implying

something *fictitious* but “reality as illusion”. The same happened in drama with the introduction of the fourth wall (49-50). The so-called literary public sphere – which, in fact, embraced the arts in general – supplied the nascent political public sphere with two key factors: institutions (not only coffee houses, *salons* and table societies but also the theatre and the museum) and an authentic sense of human subjectivity, cultivated within the conjugal family. It is the latter, according to Habermas, that differentiates the bourgeois public sphere from the original Greek model, where “the private status of the master of the household, upon which depended his political status as a citizen, rested on domination without any illusion of freedom evoked by human intimacy” (52).

When the structural transformation occurred, it affected both ends of the scheme. On the one hand, as was discussed earlier, public authority began to permeate the private sphere through its intervention in the economy. On the other, the private sphere itself was polarised: the intimate domain (family) split from the area of commodity exchange and social labour (civil society), which was eventually *deprivatised*. Private business and public bureaucracy became almost indistinguishable, whilst “the ‘world of work’ was established as a sphere in its own right between the private and public realms – in the consciousness of the employees and workers and also of those whose powers were more extensive” (152). As the intimate sphere shrank and paternal authority eroded in favour of society’s direct impact on the internalisation of norms, the family was also stripped from its productive functions (protection and education were now mostly provided by the welfare state) and concentrated on consumption (155-56). Following Habermas’ model of the public sphere, the logical effect of these changes was a shift “from a culture-debating [...] to a culture consuming public” (159).

As many commentators have stressed, Habermas’ account of the transformation of the public sphere in this regard follows closely Adorno and Horkheimer’s notion of the ‘culture industry’. While this could be regarded as a

positive feature in terms of continuing and expanding what Hohendahl considers "one of the essential achievements of Critical Theory", which is "to make visible the link [between culture and politics]" (89), it has also been criticised for its cultural elitism. Habermas' view of the mass media in *Structural Transformation* is, indeed, markedly unsympathetic. He describes how the movement outwards – from the human subjectivity created in the bourgeois intimate space towards the public sphere – was somewhat reversed by the mass media, which he holds responsible for 'hollowing out' a now "deprivatized province of interiority" and creating "a pseudo-public sphere... a sort of superfamilial zone of familiarity" (162). This altered scenario, as Habermas sees it, was mainly triggered by a structural change in the relationship between culture and the market. In Hohendahl's summary,

for the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century the contents of culture, if not their form of distribution, are clearly separate from the market. As objects of discussion in a public sphere of responsible private citizens, they prepare the way for human self-determination and political emancipation. In contrast, the production and reception of culture since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century are not defined just formally by the capitalist market: culture has become a commodity and is consumed accordingly as leisure-time entertainment. (90)

Catering to the lowest common denominator, "culture became a commodity not only in form but also in content, it was emptied of elements whose appreciation required a certain amount of training" (Habermas, *Structural Transformation* 166). To illustrate this assertion Habermas draws, unsurprisingly, from Adorno's remarks on music reception, but also from transformations in the book market and the depoliticisation of the press. The final picture is of a public "split apart into minorities of specialists who put their reason to use nonpublicly and the great mass of consumers whose receptiveness is public but uncritical"

(175). The link between the old literary and political public spheres vanished inasmuch as contemporary *leisure behaviour* belongs to the market and thus is not capable of constituting “a world emancipated from the immediate constraints of survival needs” (160). Moreover, even when leisure needs are satisfied “in a public fashion, namely, in the company of many others”, they remain individual and do not amount to a public sphere (161). Habermas exemplifies this latter phenomenon with television, cinema and radio, the reception of which – in his view – does not involve further discussion, unless in the cases when the debate itself becomes staged as a consumer item (163-64). Whether this criticism applies to theatre (especially to its political form) requires further examination, yet there are more general points still to be clarified regarding Habermas’ interpretation of the so-called culture industry.

Firstly, as Duvenage maintains and the fairly hopeful overall conclusion of *Structural Transformation* demonstrates, Habermas’ portrayal of the decline of the public sphere is “indebted to some extent to Adorno and Horkheimer” but “executed in a less pessimistic fashion” (12). Rather than supporting his predecessors’ vision of inescapable commodification, “he sketches a more complex picture of the relationship between emancipation and consumption” (17). Secondly, as McGuigan highlights, even though the broad critique of mass-culture that was prevalent when Habermas wrote *Structural Transformation* has been qualified by recent studies of media reception, “the claim that the distance between ordinary social and cultural experience, on the one hand, and the processes of public decision-making, on the other hand, has widened rather than narrowed during the twentieth century is not negligible, nor is it without support amongst ‘postmodernist’ commentators” (26-27). McGuigan’s argument from 1996 finds an updated resonance in Roberts and Crossley’s *After Habermas* (2004), a compilation of essays about the public sphere. In their comprehensive introduction they observe:

Reading *Structural Transformation* one has to constantly remind oneself that it was written in the 1960s. It could so easily have been written in and for the present day. Contemporary debates about 'dumbing down' and 'spin', which echo many of Habermas' concerns, suggest that his arguments are as relevant as they ever were. (10)

The amount of criticism that the Habermasian public sphere has generated in the social sciences in the last forty-five years can only be matched, ironically, by the widespread recognition of its theoretical currency. Summarising crudely, Habermas's scheme has been faulted for historical imprecision (romanticizing the bourgeois model and failing to recognize simultaneous 'counterpublics'), gender blindness (neglecting the masculinist origin of the public sphere), cultural elitism (rejecting the possibilities offered by the mass media after the so-called structural transformation) and over-rationalization (favouring an abstract rather than an 'embodied' mode of discourse).<sup>31</sup> In "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere" (1990/1992), Habermas acknowledges historiographical errors and the underplaying of both class and gender issues. Refining his unitary and over-stylized earlier version of the public sphere, he concedes that "a different picture emerges if *from the very beginning* one admits the coexistence of competing public spheres and takes account of the dynamics of those processes of communication that are excluded from the dominant public sphere" (425). Nevertheless, he stands by the basic premises of his theory and refuses to accept a Foucaultian reading of exclusion, in which communication between the hegemonic discourse and its *other* would be impossible. On the contrary, Habermas writes, "from the very beginning, the universalistic discourses of the bourgeois public sphere were based on self-referential premises; they did not

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<sup>31</sup> For a seminal Marxist critique, see Negt and Kluge (1972/1993). More recent approaches can be found in Calhoun (1992), Hill and Montag (2000), and Roberts and Crossley (2004). The feminist critique is examined in section 2.2 and Chapter 3.

remain unaffected by a criticism from within because they differ from Foucaultian discourses by virtue of their potential for self-transformation" (429).

In *Between Facts and Norms* (1992/1996), Habermas redefines the public sphere more generally as "a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes)" and specifies that "every encounter in which actors do not just observe each other but take a second-person attitude, reciprocally attributing communicative freedom to each other, unfolds in a linguistically constituted public space". He also reaffirms one of his key original suggestions, namely, that "the 'literary' public sphere in the broader sense, which is specialized for the articulation of values and world disclosure, is intertwined with the political public sphere" (360, 361, 365). This strong link between culture and politics has increased its relevance within the Habermasian scheme since he shed the Adorno-influenced implications of a deadly shift from a "culture-debating to a culture-consuming public" ("Further Reflections" 438). In its revised conception, which is full of stage metaphors of 'actors' and 'audiences', the public sphere occurs in multifarious cultural levels that are nonetheless able to connect,

from the *episodic* publics found in taverns, coffee houses, or on the streets; through the *occasional* or "arranged" publics of particular presentations and events, such as theater performances, rock concerts, party assemblies, or church congresses; up to the *abstract* public sphere of isolated readers, listeners and viewers scattered across large geographic areas, or even around the globe, and brought together only through the mass media. (*Facts and Norms* 374, original emphasis)



Habermas is under no illusion about equality of access. In complex societies, he notes, "a differentiation sets in among organizers, speakers, and hearers; arenas and galleries; stage and viewing space', and the '*actors' roles* [...]' are, of course, furnished with unequal opportunities for exerting influence". Yet whatever influence those standing on the stage attain depends ultimately on those sitting in the galleries: "There can be no public sphere without a public" (363-64).

Although it is true that Habermas has modified his original scheme on the public sphere to incorporate contemporary critiques and empirical developments, the so-called normative dimension runs throughout his intellectual production. Moreover, it is undoubtedly this feature that makes his version of Critical Theory so compelling. A closer examination of Habermas' aesthetics [see 1.3] shows that *expressiveness*, *rightness* and *truth* are not mutually exclusive but all legitimate elements within a wide-ranging definition of rationality. Giving this due consideration it is possible to look at Habermas' theatrical examples in a new light. As has been demonstrated, both drama as a cultural artefact and the theatre as a meeting point were already at the core of the bourgeois public sphere. The question is to what extent their potential has been damaged by the structural changes described by Habermas in the second half of *Structural Transformation*. This is a particularly significant issue for political theatre, as one of the main reasons for its alleged demise in the last decades of the twentieth century was the idea of it being utterly commodified (see Kershaw, *The Radical in Performance*).

Certainly, even though theatregoing partakes in the domain of *leisure* and does not escape the omnipresent influence of market forces, the theatre is intrinsically a live art that requires not only the physical presence but also the active engagement of actors and audience. Whilst political drama specifically sets out to stimulate that after-discussion so precious for a renewal of the public sphere, the characteristics of theatre in general make it better equipped than

other cultural expressions to resist the conformist trends of late capitalism. As American political dramatist Tony Kushner optimistically declares, “what actually lives on stage – the dialectic between actor and audience – is uncommodifiable. Live performance has this quality of giving us direct lived experience, reminding us that we are not objects, we are not commodities” (qtd. in Miller). In addition, taking into consideration that “the greatest contribution of the literary public sphere to the political sphere lay in the development of institutional bases [...] from meeting places to journals to webs of social relationships” (Calhoun 12), the Habermasian model provides a consistent defence of theatre institutions against the customary accusation of them being culturally bankrupt.

As a framework, Habermas’ refined notion of the public sphere opens the door to a renewed understanding of political theatre. It encourages a realistic interpretation of both the potential and the shortcomings of such a cultural endeavour in late capitalist societies. Such interpretation is equally removed from the old certainties of the Left and from the resignation of strong postmodernist stances. Whilst the vitality of autonomous public spheres is essential in maintaining and extending democracy’s normative content, it does not automatically translate into social change. As Habermas claims, “within the boundaries of the public sphere [...] actors can acquire only influence, not political power”. On the one hand, “democratic movements emerging from civil society must give up holistic aspirations to a self-organizing society, aspirations that also undergirded Marxist ideas of social revolution”. On the other, “the self-limitation of civil society should not be understood as incapacitation” (371-72).

## **2.2 Historiographical critiques**

Perhaps the most influential historiographical critique of Habermas’ account of the public sphere is Joan Landes’ *Women and the Public Sphere in the*

*Age of the French Revolution* (1988). Landes draws strongly on *Structural Transformation* whilst at the same time disputing its bases from a feminist perspective. Contrary to Habermas, who ascribes normative value to the European public sphere of the Enlightenment despite its empirical shortcomings, Landes contends that this bourgeois paradigm was “essentially, not just contingently, masculinist” (7) and that “the [French] Republic was constructed against women, not just without them” (171). Examining Gallic history from 1750 to 1850, Landes makes a stark contrast between women’s position within the “absolutist public sphere” of the Old Regime, on the one hand, and the “bourgeois public sphere” of the Revolution, on the other. Her conclusion is that while the former allowed women some degree of public participation through the *salons* and the court itself, the latter – following Rousseau’s philosophical lead – purposefully barred them from the public sphere. Landes claims that Republicans rejected salon culture with a gendered political vocabulary that associated women with a *feminised* Old Regime.

Landes’ feminist reassessment of Habermas’ historical conjectures about France has been replicated with regard to other locations. Mary Ryan documents the case in nineteenth-century North America, underlining how women were excluded from the official public sphere but created alternative paths into public action. Eyal Rabinovitch revisits this topic in “Gender and the Public Sphere: Alternative Forms of Integration in Nineteenth-Century America” (2001). Drawing on earlier work by the historian Barbara Welter, Rabinovitch examines the construct of the “true woman”, dominant in North American culture around 1800-1860 and typified by “piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (353). Then he considers the paradoxical effects this notion produced in practice:

The irony of nineteenth-century gender history is that it was the same pacifying ideal of womanhood that would eventually usher women into public life as reformers and activists. [...] Since women

were the untainted possessors of virtue, it would be their duty to ensure that American society would remain as pure as women were. (354)

A similar insight can be found in the collection *Radical Femininity: Women's Self-Representation in the Public Sphere* (1998), which takes explicit inspiration from Landes' study but turns the historical spotlight back to England, the archetypical Habermasian example. Eileen Janes Yeo opens this volume with a powerful contention: "Public space has been a dangerous territory for women. In nineteenth-century Britain, while a public man was a citizen, a 'public woman' meant a prostitute" (1). If in France, as Landes argues, it was revolutionary republicanism itself that expelled women out of public life, in Britain – says Yeo – it was the counter-revolutionary forces that, alarmed at the news from across the channel, strove to "put the 'lower' world back in place" (2). The 'lower' world in this account included both "common people" and women, but the latter, just like their contemporaries in North America, "subverted the dominant ideas and most resonant rhetorics and representations of their day [...] and changed them in the process" (6). Among these double-edged discourses were Christianity, citizenship and especially motherhood, which "could be stretched in many directions to allow for women's public participation" (15).<sup>32</sup>

Feminist historical revisions of the public sphere in England have even been extended to a much earlier period. As David Norbrook recollects in "Women, the Republic of Letters, and the Public Sphere in the Mid-Seventeenth Century" (2004), "it has been argued that a renewed emphasis on republican valorization of the public, and identification of the world of the court with the private and feminized, gave a distinctively masculinist character to the republican theory that became current in the 1640s and 1650s" (224). Norbrook, however, distrusts the accuracy of circular historiographies that portray women as being successively

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<sup>32</sup> Translated into the contemporary arena, however, the discourse of motherhood is a dangerous one to 'stretch' into the public sphere [see Chapter 3].

banished into domesticity. He claims that “insofar as attempts were made to push women into a private realm, many women resisted the process” (224).<sup>33</sup> Moreover, he agrees with Habermas’ universalistic claims concerning the bourgeois version of publicity:

As idealized as this picture may appear, Habermas’s universalizing and comparative approach can serve as a useful counter to the excessive concentration in recent work on questions of identity, whether national or gendered. Some women in the seventeenth century did indeed assume that certain spheres of discourse were universal, rather than specifically masculine, and hence vigorously claimed inclusion. (224)

The counterproductive side of identity politics is also highlighted by Mary Dietz in her review of Landes’ book, when she comments on Landes’ contention that “the women’s movement cannot ‘take possession’ of a public sphere that has been enduringly reconstructed along masculinist lines” (202):

The problem with this claim is that it understands and fixes the public sphere in essentialist terms as defined by masculine categories, rather than as a historically changing, culturally constituted, arena of speech, action, and political engagement. Under the former account, politics itself becomes a second-order activity that feminists must eschew until the first-order activity of transforming discursivity is complete. But that is certainly not the way Landes’s feminist revolutionaries addressed the public sphere when they seized the moment, made a space for action, and defended the rights of citizens. Nor should it be ours. (895)

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<sup>33</sup> Norbrook’s account centres on two very different examples of women who accessed the European “republic of letters”, Margaret Cavendish and Anna Maria von Schurman.

## Reassessing the Enlightenment

Debates on the history of the public sphere have an inevitable philosophical side, pertaining to current evaluations of Enlightenment ideas. Carole Pateman, for instance, provides a critique of liberalism by exploring in detail a set of linked dichotomies, in particular nature/culture, morality/power, personal/political.<sup>34</sup> Firstly, in her examination of “nature and culture”, Pateman admits that this binary has played a key part in both anthropological and radical feminist “attempts to explain the apparently universal subordination of women” (110), which have proved counterproductive.<sup>35</sup> Secondly, as part of her discussion on “morality and power”, Pateman reassesses the suffrage movement and concludes that even though its demands remained within the framework of liberalism (which in her view is structurally linked with patriarchy), they nonetheless revealed liberalism’s contradictions, making the separation of the public and private spheres a political problem (114). Finally, rejecting too literal versions of “the personal is political”, Pateman adopts a subtle stance:

Feminism looks toward a differentiated social order within which the various dimensions are distinct but not separate or opposed, and which rests on a social conception of individuality, which includes both men and women as biologically differentiated but not unequal creatures. Nevertheless, women and men, and the private and the public, are not necessarily in harmony. (122)

Pateman insists that the liberal concept of the ‘individual’ is constructed on women’s exclusion and, therefore, universalising liberalism could never be part of the answer.

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<sup>34</sup> She also identifies a larger “series (or circle) of liberal separations and oppositions: female, or – nature, personal, emotional, love, private, intuition, morality, ascription, particular, subjection; male, or – culture, political, reason, justice, public, philosophy, power, achievement, universal, freedom” (109).

<sup>35</sup> The anthropological version considers the nature/culture division itself as cultural, but its general acceptance becomes the cause of women’s devaluation. Radical feminists go one step further by implying that the female body itself, in its capacity to bear children, is the cause of the oppression of women (110-112).

Sylvana Tomaselli, on the other hand, sets to neutralise “the assumption that Western civilization simply *does* regard woman as part of nature, not culture”, which she sees running “through much of the literature on women from Simone de Beauvoir onwards” (104). In order to achieve her aim, Tomaselli offers a different reading of liberalism, “a re-interpretation of what eighteenth-century thinkers argued the positions of women to be” (102). According to liberalism’s four-stages theory, which Tomaselli traces back to both Scottish and French Enlightenment, “it is man who is nature, if one must insist on seeing the matter in this light, and woman culture. History, in this view, is the history of feminisation, of effeminacy, as the battle of the sexes seems to be won by the weaker sex” (122). The four stages – hunting and gathering, pastoral, agricultural and commercial – describe society’s trajectory from a primitive condition in which men subjugate women to a civilised phase characterised by manners and politeness, understood (even by Rousseau, who deplored them) as women’s input. It is to Tomaselli’s credit that she presents a more comprehensive appraisal of Enlightenment narratives: “In fact, the view that woman civilises, that she cultivates, refines, perhaps even adulterates and corrupts is as recurrent as the view that she is nature’s most dutiful and untouched daughter” (105).

A similar claim was put forward in the 1990s by Daniel Gordon, as part of a wide-ranging discussion that engaged directly with both Habermas and Landes.<sup>36</sup> Gordon criticises Habermas for misreading the Enlightenment as “a single philosophical structure”, instead of appreciating that it entailed “a variety of ideals” and even “a variety of ideals of public opinion” (885). To illustrate his point Gordon focuses on the Scottish philosopher David Hume, whose conception of public opinion differed considerably from that of the French thinkers who match Habermas’ description.

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<sup>36</sup> The discussion, published in *French Historical Studies* 17.4 (1992): 882-956, contains articles by Daniel Gordon and David Bell, a response from Sarah Maza and short replies to Maza from Gordon and Bell.

Public opinion, not only for Hume but for other theorists of the British constitution, was defined not as a rational entity that replaces power but as a set of potentially irrational wishes that must be appeased if any system of power is to remain stable. The idea of public opinion was thus inscribed in a theory that defined politics not as a forum for the production of *consensus* about public affairs but a set of institutions that satisfy diverse private *interests*. (885, original emphasis)

Extending his case to the problem of gender, Gordon contends that Landes is as mistaken as Habermas in privileging one version of modern philosophy – Rousseauian republicanism in this instance – as representative of the whole. Furthermore, in Gordon’s eyes, Rousseau (and the French revolutionaries who, inspired by his project, also diminished women) may be better placed *against* the Enlightenment.

Landes does not distinguish the political thought of the Enlightenment from the political thought of the Revolution. She treats Rousseau as the spokesman of the Enlightenment, when he is better seen as a great critic of the Enlightenment, especially of Enlightenment ideas on the value of private communication (for example, salon conversation, commerce) and the status of women in society. (900)

Gordon also disagrees with Landes in her alignment of the *salons* with absolutism, even when Habermas had clearly linked them “to the new public sphere” (901).<sup>37</sup> Here Gordon’s inquiry comes very close to Tomaselli’s, as he addresses the French concept of *sociabilité* through which women were not only

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<sup>37</sup> Sarah Maza argues that this is a misreading of Landes, who (like Habermas to some extent) is “aware of the hybrid nature of the salons”. Furthermore, Maza considers that “to force the eighteenth-century salons into either an absolutist *or* a modernist mold is to do violence to their fundamental and enduring ambiguity as a cultural institution” (948, original emphasis).



empirically included in the culture of the *salons* but also ideologically conceived as social agents: "In this Enlightenment vision of progress, the mingling of the sexes functions as a motor of improvement. And 'commerce' between the sexes does not merely change the tone of society. It creates society itself" (902). Gordon's effort, as Tomaselli's before, strives towards a depiction of Enlightenment philosophy as not necessarily or essentially 'masculinist'. Yet Gordon himself acknowledges that even within the notion of women as a civilising force, their inclusion in the public sphere was spuriously based on a valuable *function* rather than an inherent *right* to participate (904). Moreover, because the *salonnières* actually performed a moderating function (an authoritative but limiting role, as it remained external to the debate itself) during the Old Regime, the breakdown of consensus after the Revolution explains for Gordon the prompt acceptance of republicanism's exclusion of women. This is also why he ultimately favours Hume's political theory:

To assume that political actors behave on the basis of selfishness [...] relieves women of the special responsibility to create unity within a heterogeneous polity. It thus precludes a false idealization of the contribution of women to society, and so it precludes an easy disenchantment with the concrete effects of including women in the public sphere. (910)

There is another critique of Landes, however, that finds within Enlightenment a root for women's participation that is not merely *functional* but built on reason and rights. In "Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France: Variations on a Theme by Habermas", Keith Michael Baker reclaims the ideas of Condorcet and Mary Wollstonecraft – treated with suspicion by Landes<sup>38</sup>–

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<sup>38</sup> Although Landes regards Condorcet as a "liberal defender of women", she portrays him as worried that "once emancipated, women will neglect their (feminine) duties". Wollstonecraft, in turn, is depicted as delivering a "feminist version of the ideology of republican motherhood" (qtd. in Baker

as a competing discourse that, despite not being chosen by 1789 revolutionaries, did become “the basis for the ‘liberty of the moderns’” (207). According to Baker, Landes is right in identifying Rousseauian republicanism as ‘essentially masculinist’, but this is not true of “the entire eighteenth-century notion of the public sphere, and with it the entire philosophy of the French Revolution” (201). Landes’ error, in Baker’s view, is failing to distinguish between ‘republican’ and ‘rationalist’ conceptions of the public sphere:

Rousseau’s reworking of the discourse of classical republicanism [...] was couched in quite different terms than the rational discourse of the social, grounded on notions of the rights of man, the division of labor, and the apolitical rule of reason. This latter conception of the public sphere was contingently masculinist to the extent that it admitted contingent grounds for denying women (and others) full and immediate participation in the exercise of universal individual rights, but it was not essentially masculinist in the sense that women were excluded from the exercise of such rights by definition of their very nature. (202)

In her qualified defence of Landes, Sarah Maza addresses both Baker and Gordon. She accepts that Baker’s emphasis on the difference between ‘contingent’ and ‘essential’ masculinism in Landes tackles the core of the matter<sup>39</sup> and summarises both positions accordingly: “Both Gordon and Baker see in the Revolution the accidental distortion or destruction of a liberal ideology (Baker) and intellectual culture (Gordon) which contained the possibility of greater sexual

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201). Baker revisits the writings of Condorcet and Wollstonecraft to offer a detailed challenge to Landes’ interpretation.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon explicitly follows Baker in his response to Maza: “An ideology is contingently masculinist when agents are able to deploy it selectively so as to deny women equal status. An ideology is essentially masculinist when the categories of which it is composed could not possibly be used to defend equality between the sexes. Landes sees the Enlightenment as essentially masculinist. But is it possible to imagine equality between the sexes if one sets aside the concepts of sociability, self-interest, consent, rights, and utility which were injected into modern political culture by the Enlightenment?” (952)

equality" (944). Nevertheless, she believes that the disagreements between Landes and her critics are not easily resolved because "each depends heavily on the interpretation of highly ambiguous material" (945).

In Maza's opinion, Landes – unlike Habermas – does recognise multiple discourses within the eighteenth-century public sphere and is also aware of the actual presence of intellectual women inside it. Yet her focus on Rousseau is justified, Maza believes, given the extent of this philosopher's influence (even on intellectual women) and the fact that the sharp distinction between male and female spheres he endorsed dictated the way of life in the following century. "While one might wish that Landes had presented a fuller picture of writings about women in the latter Enlightenment", Maza claims, "it is difficult to imagine formulating an argument about gender and politics in this period in which Rousseau would *not* be the central figure" (945-46, original emphasis). Conscious that Landes' historiography can lead to distortions, Maza maintains however that Gordon's Habermasian stance is "equally problematic" (946). She prefers to side with Pateman in warning that "basing access to the public sphere on rationality begs troubling questions about how and by whom political rationality is defined" (Maza 947). All told, Maza's conclusion remains in Landes' camp:

It seems to me difficult to deny the validity of Landes's overall argument concerning the gendered nature and implications of a crucial transformation in French political culture: from a system to which the monarch, his family and mistresses, and his court-household were still central [...] to an all male contractual polity from which women were (whether "essentially" or "contingently") entirely absent. [...] While Landes's thesis is far from immune to criticism [...], her work has had the enormous merit, at a very early stage, of bringing issues of gender and politics to the forefront of the field. (950)

In spite of their differences, Baker, Gordon and Maza all subscribe to an interpretation of Habermas that has been explored by another of Landes' critics, Dena Goodman, shedding new light on the public/private controversy. Goodman encounters a "false opposition" between public sphere theory – paradigmatically represented by Habermas – and the history of private life advanced by the work of cultural historian Roger Chartier. She proposes to dissolve such dichotomy "by focusing on the simple realization that the public sphere articulated by Habermas is *a dimension of the private sphere* delineated by Chartier and his collaborators" (1-2, my emphasis). Habermas does, indeed, define the public sphere as "the sphere of private people come together as a public" [see 2.1] and his blueprint, which Goodman analyses in detail, situates the authentic public sphere within the "private realm", in contrast to the "sphere of public authority" (5-6). Habermas' model – Goodman argues – does not therefore contradict Chartier's implication that the public sphere of the Revolution actually depended on the private sphere of the Old Regime (13):

We need to get away from rigidly oppositional thinking that assumes two spheres or two discourses, one public and the other private. If these are indeed mutually exclusive categories of experience in today's world, they were not in the eighteenth century, when the monarchy was predicated on secrecy and a new form of publicity developed within – and precisely because it was within – the private sphere. (14)

Applying this insight to her assessment of Landes, Goodman asserts that it is feminist theory, not Habermas', that constructs a firm division between both realms. Furthermore, she suggests that,

seen in its more ambiguous relationship to the private sphere, Habermas's conception of the authentic public sphere is an

extremely useful tool for understanding the role of the most visible women in the Old Regime and may even provide a new direction for a feminist historiography that is not trapped within the public/private opposition. (15)

Goodman supports Landes' historical thesis in terms of the exclusion of women from the public sphere of the French Revolution,<sup>40</sup> but she objects to Landes' amalgamation of a very dissimilar group of women during the Old Regime – *salonnières*, courtiers, royal mistresses and prostitutes – under the banner of 'public women' (18). For Goodman, Landes' mistake is twofold and can be corrected by an appropriate use of Habermas' framework. The first problem is Landes' assumption that "court and salon were within the same public sphere"; the second, her perception of that sphere as "fully public and opposed to a domestic public sphere". On the one hand Landes overlooks Habermas' distinction between "the public sphere of the state", characterised by secrecy and deception, and "that of the private realm", where critical debate occurred. On the other hand, Goodman concludes, "there was no such a thing as a 'public' woman in eighteenth-century France. Most women, like most men, functioned within a private realm that had a public face" (19).

The challenge to Habermas' historiography from a feminist perspective has been crucial in highlighting the gaps in the original account he developed in *Structural Transformation*. Conversely, as the work of Goodman and others prove, it has prompted a rediscovery of the merits of the Habermasian public sphere for historical and theoretical analyses, including those of feminism. Whilst Landes' radical interpretation of history can sometimes lead to "painfully ahistorical judgments" (Nathans 635), Habermas can be praised – even by his feminist critics – for his "cognizance of the historical malleability of the border

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<sup>40</sup> After 1793, according to Goodman, "the men of the French Revolution drew the line between a male political sphere and a female domestic one" (16).

between private and public as well as his recognition of the patriarchal caste of the bourgeois family" (Ryan, "Gender and Public Access" 262).

As the short summary included in this section demonstrates, feminist historiographies of the public sphere have allowed the emergence of women's histories formerly hidden from sight in both Europe, where the narrative of *Structural Transformation* takes place, and North America, the other site of modern enlightenment. Accounts such as those of Ryan and Yeo contribute greatly to an appreciation of the ambivalence of cultural discourses about women – which can be (and have been, historically) appropriated against male domination – although they also run the risk of overemphasising identity, as Norbrook points out. Landes' work, as shown by Goodman, suffers from this limitation: in putting the accent on the category of *woman* ('public woman' in this case), she misses historical distinctions and misreads Habermas' theory. At the same time, however, Landes – like Ryan and Yeo – illuminates that which some feminist commentators read as a dialectic relationship between equality and difference. Dietz, for instance, values this aspect in her review of Landes' groundbreaking book, suggesting that she works through a dialectic between nature and consciousness (694).

On the other hand, "the claims of nature" are not the only Enlightenment set of ideas regarding women, as Tomaselli forcefully reveals, anticipating the historical/philosophical debate that would later spring from Landes' view of the public sphere as 'essentially' and not just 'contingently' masculinist. In "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere", Habermas himself concedes that women's exclusion "has been constitutive for the political public sphere not merely in that the latter has been dominated by men as a matter of contingency [...]. Unlike the exclusion of underprivileged men, the exclusion of women had structuring significance" (428). Here Habermas quotes Pateman's scepticism towards contractual theory to illustrate the pervasiveness of patriarchy, but he insists that even Pateman's consideration "does not dismiss rights to unrestricted inclusion

and equality, which are an integral part of the liberal public sphere's self-interpretation, but rather appeals to them". Ultimately, and against Foucaultian pessimism about the possibility of common ground, Habermas still believes in the public sphere's capacity for transforming itself by the inclusion of the 'other'.

The idea of reclaiming the Enlightenment, even if with necessary qualifications, is at the heart of Habermas' philosophy [see Chapter 1]. From a liberal outlook, Baker and Gordon make a convincing case in this direction, although they criticise Habermas for failing to appreciate competing, and therefore irreconcilable, discourses within this philosophical tradition.<sup>41</sup> A recent attempt of recovery, more political and explicitly identified with the Left – Stephen Eric Bronner's "Interpreting the Enlightenment" – warns however against multiplicity:

The general trend of scholarship has tended to insist upon eliminating its [the Enlightenment's] unifying cosmopolitan spirit – its ethos – in favor of treating diverse national, religious, gender, generational, and regional "enlightenments". There is indeed always a danger of reifying the "Enlightenment" and ignoring the unique and particular moments of its expression. [...] Nevertheless, what unified them made the cumulative impact of individual thinkers and national intellectual trends far greater than the sum of the parts. (17)

In its defence of "autonomy, tolerance, and reason" and its attack on "received traditions, popular prejudices, and religious superstitions", Bronner sees the Enlightenment as "the foundation for any kind of progressive politics" (10). Moreover, he advises that one should consider the *philosophes'* reactionary

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<sup>41</sup> Baker is subtler than Gordon in this criticism, acknowledging that Habermas, who dedicates two chapters of *Structural Transformation* to explore various philosophical formulations of the public sphere [see 2.1], "certainly recognizes the existence of different inflections upon [notions such as 'the public' and 'public opinion']". However, Baker adds, "he also tends to assimilate their different meanings" (192).

assumptions – including those about women – in their historical context, to avoid “reducing ideas to the prejudices of their usually white, male, and western authors” (19). Bronner seems to echo Habermas in suggesting that it is the Enlightenment itself that provides the standpoint required to confront its own biases (19) and in recommending not “to confuse a reactionary pseudo-universalism with the genuinely democratic universalism that underpins the liberal rule of law, the constraint of arbitrary power, and the free exercise of subjectivity” (21).

### **Embodiment and theatricality**

In 2001, Joan Landes continued her inquiry on women and the French Revolution with a book focused not on written discourse but on visual imagery. Her *Visualizing the Nation: Gender, Representation and Revolution in Eighteenth Century France* analyses popular prints of the period and holds that “images can be said to have played a central role in the formation of revolutionary publics and in the articulation of political arguments” (54). This perspectival shift, which also considers the influence of eroticism, is characteristic of another strand of the feminist critique of Habermas. Landes herself articulates it in her 1992 article “The Public and the Private Sphere: A Feminist Reconsideration”.

In place of a language-centered model of representation, I will emphasize the multiplicity of representation in human communication. Likewise, I will ask whether Habermas’s normative subject is sufficiently multidimensional, embodied, or gendered to account for the organization of power in different cultural settings.

(92)

Here, Landes recognises the status of *Structural Transformation* “as a classic” (91) and praises Habermas’ theory of the public sphere for its “alertness to a zone of democratic participation – neither state, economy, nor family – [that]



is as pertinent to today's circumstances as to those of the late eighteenth century" (110). Nevertheless, she reiterates her concerns with the intrinsic masculinism of the model, which in her view is inseparable from its universalistic claims:

Habermas overlooks the strong association of women's discourse and their interests with "particularity", and conversely the alignment of masculine speech with truth, objectivity and reason. Thus, he misses the masquerade through which the (male) particular was able to posture behind the veil of the universal. [...] In this context, the goals of generalizability and appeals to the common good may conceal rather than expose forms of domination, suppress rather than release concrete differences among persons or groups. (98-99)

Landes' remedy for Habermas' omissions is found in the theatre. Drawing from Hannah Arendt's attention to "the performative dimension of human action and human speech" plus her regard for the theatre as "the political art *par excellence*", Landes explores these insights in relation to various French Revolution historiographies. She is particularly interested in "the spectatorial function of the always already theatricalized public sphere" that detects similarities between spectatorship in tribunals and in the arts.<sup>42</sup> Finally, and consistently with the approach she would take in her later research on imagery, Landes judges Habermas' emphasis on language as misleading, even though it does reflect "the historical emergence of textuality as the dominant form of representation in the modern bourgeois public sphere, in contrast to visuality or theatricality in the 're-presentative' public sphere of the Old Regime" (107). It is only with awareness of "the gendered construction of an embodied subjectivity and the body politic" plus "the intersecting and multiple media of representation"

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<sup>42</sup> See 6.2 for a detailed investigation of this link.

– Landes concludes – that the aspiration of a democratic public sphere could become possible (109-10).

In *Women and the Public Sphere* Landes had already stressed the connection between theatricality, absolutism and women in the Old Regime, which would become the target for Rousseau's republican ideology. The theatre, and actresses especially, were dangerous in Rousseau's eyes, but here again his opinion does not encompass the Enlightenment as a whole, least of all the views of his contemporary Voltaire, who was himself a successful playwright. Landes' emphasis on embodiment and theatricality does however reveal a dimension of the public sphere that is worth inspecting more closely. Sarah Maza's and Lynn Voskuil's work, which is examined in Chapter 6, is very important in this area.

The critique of a "mass" subject has also been developed from the perspective of political 'communitarianism' [see 1.2]. Michael Warner, a representative of this position, condemns the abstractness of the public sphere in the following terms:

In the bourgeois public sphere [...] a principle of negativity was axiomatic: the validity of what you say in public bears a negative relation to your person. What you say will carry force not because of who you are but despite who you are. Implicit in this principle is a utopian universality that would allow people to transcend the given realities of their bodies and their status. But the rhetorical strategy of personal abstraction is both the utopian moment of the public sphere and a major source of domination. (382)

According to Warner, not everybody has the same "ability to abstract oneself in public discussions", hence the exclusionary nature of the public sphere (382). This imbalance results in what Landes describes above as "the masquerade through which the (male) particular was able to posture behind the veil of the universal". Or, in Warner's words, "a logic of abstraction that provides a privilege

for unmarked identities: the male, the white, the middle class, the normal" (383). Warner's peculiar solution to this problem is consumer culture, with its *counterutopia* of "mass-subjectivity". What Voskuil sees in sensation theatre as a dialectics of authenticity and theatricality, Warner observes in the current "mass-cultural public sphere" as a paradox of negativity (self-abstraction) and embodiment.

Where consumer capitalism makes available an endlessly differentiable subject, the subject of the public sphere proper cannot be differentiated. [...] Where printed public discourse formerly relied on a rhetoric of disembodiment, visual media, including print, now display bodies for a range of purposes: admiration, identification, appropriation, scandal, etc. (385)

The consequences of this shift, says Warner, are mixed. On the one hand, mass subjectivity is especially appealing "to those minoritized by the public sphere's rhetoric of normative disembodiment". On the other, it "can result just as easily in new forms of tyranny of the majority as it can in the claims of rival collectivities" (396). Ultimately, Warner believes that even though identity politics has developed against the background of the bourgeois public sphere, "an assertion of the full equality of minoritized statuses would require abandoning the structure of self-abstraction in publicity" (399-400).

Equally suspicious of the bourgeois model is Mah, whose conclusion is very similar to Warner's despite a slight variation in their respective definition of 'mass-subjectivity'. For Mah, mass-subjectivity is not a trait of current consumer culture but part of the original public sphere, the necessary effect of the self-abstraction it demands and what distinguishes it from the pre-modern 'representative publicness'. In line with this account, Mah considers as illusory recent attempts at reconceptualising the public sphere to allow for multiple publics and multiple forms of expression. He is convinced that "to produce the

effect of universal access, the bourgeois public sphere requires that people appear in a certain form, one that is incompatible with the aspirations of current historical writing and identity politics" (164). By going back to the initial formulation of the public sphere, Mah's postmodern cynicism turns Habermas not only against himself but also against some of his moderate critics. The overall issue Mah wants to underline is "the disquieting character of the discourse of modernity: how in the name of rational autonomy it produces untenable phantasies that vitiate that ideal of autonomy precisely as they seek to realize it". (182)

Warner and Mah represent radical positions within the communitarian critique of the public sphere, which, in more moderate versions, has been adopted by feminist scholarship (see below). Within feminism, the notion of the public sphere has generated multiple responses. While some theorists have opposed it as exclusionary, others have developed and adjusted it, making it sensitive to gender issues. This latter strand of feminism will be explored in the next chapter.

## Chapter 3: Feminist Critical Theory

Apart from asking crucial historical questions about the origins of the public sphere, feminist scholars have offered insightful applications of Habermas' notion to contemporary ethical and political debates. The extensive and ongoing interaction between Habermasian and feminist theories is also a fertile ground in which to discuss subjectivity and identity, which inevitably come into play when theatre engages with social issues. Feminist critiques of Habermas tend to be rigorous and therefore useful to identify crucial limitations, yet it is not accurate to suggest that there are always irreconcilable differences on controversial philosophical points such as reason and universality. This chapter focuses on the work of Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib and other feminist philosophers who value the theoretical currency of the public sphere but aim to correct the limitations of the Habermasian model. Margot Canaday has termed Fraser and Benhabib's philosophical position 'critical feminist theory', emphasising their ability to combine "the universal ideals and normative judgements of modernism, and the contextualism, particularity and skepticism of postmodernism".<sup>43</sup> Canaday's label is useful to designate a whole strand of feminism – explicitly or implicitly sympathetic to the Frankfurt School – which has productively moved beyond the old polarities of *equality* versus *difference*. 'Critical feminist theory', however, tends not to figure in feminist analysis of political theatre; a detailed consideration of its contribution will provide the basis to redress this oversight.

The public/private dichotomy associated with the theory of the public sphere is a highly contested issue in feminist discourses. Carol Pateman claims that its critique "is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about" (103). The most

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<sup>43</sup> Canaday claims to use this phrase in order to highlight not so much these theorists' affinity with the Frankfurt School tradition – which both Fraser and Benhabib recognise – but rather their eclectic approach, akin to the unorthodox and interdisciplinary ethos of Critical Theory (65-66).

influential incarnation of this critique, encapsulated in the slogan 'the personal is political', was developed within second-wave feminism, and Pateman's formulation summarises the core of the problem as most feminist scholars would have seen it then. However, recent approaches put the emphasis on the complexity and multiplicity of perspectives included in this ongoing debate. For example, whilst Wischermann (2004) acknowledges a "programmatic relevance" (186) in previous efforts to politicise the private sphere (for instance with regards to housework, childbearing and violence or rape in marriage), Scott and Keates (2005) reflect on the lack of a feminist consensus about difficult practical issues. They also interrogate the matter from a theoretical viewpoint, highlighting some unavoidable questions: "Is public/private an ever-moving boundary and in force no matter what its different meanings? Can we develop new analytic concepts that would, instead of redrawing the boundary once again, dissolve it entirely?" (ix). Fraser and Benhabib provide significant answers to these questions.

### **Drawing a new line: Nancy Fraser**

Fraser has engaged in a long-term critical dialogue with Habermas. Generally, she recognises the strengths of Habermasian theory whilst trying to rectify its alleged gender-blindness. Her early article "What's Critical about Critical Theory? The Case of Habermas and Gender" (1985) argues that Habermas' system-lifeworld scheme [see 1.1] ignores the fact that the roles coordinating the interrelation between the two are gendered. That is, in the lifeworld (family and public sphere) the role of *consumer* is feminine but the role of *citizen* is masculine, whilst in the system (economy and state), the role of *worker* is masculine but the role of *client* is feminine. Only a transformation of both the institutions and the roles, Fraser asserts, could effect "an emancipatory transformation of male-dominated capitalist societies, early and late" (118).

Fraser's direct critique of the public sphere is contained in two essays, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy" (1992) and "Politics, Culture and the Public Sphere: Toward a Postmodern Conception" (1995),<sup>44</sup> both of which – in the spirit of Habermas' theory – call for a 'reconstruction' of his version of the public sphere. In the former, Fraser praises Habermas' idea of the public sphere as a site "conceptually distinct" from both the state and the official economy and thus "indispensable to critical social theory and democratic political practice" (110-11). She adds, however, that Habermas "never explicitly problematizes some dubious assumptions that underlie the bourgeois model" and that "he stops short of developing a new, post-bourgeois model of the public sphere" (111). Drawing from revisionist historiography on this topic, Fraser concentrates on refuting four assumptions of the Habermasian paradigm: the possibility of 'bracketing' inequalities, the notion of a single public sphere, the exclusion of private interests and a sharp separation of civil society and the state. When she revisits the subject in "Politics", her project of a 'post-bourgeois' public sphere is renamed as 'postmodern', but developed on the same bases:

- (1) a postmodern conception of the public sphere must acknowledge that participatory parity requires not merely the bracketing, but rather the elimination, of systemic social inequalities,
- (2) where such inequality persists, however, a postmodern multiplicity of mutually contestatory publics is preferable to a single modern public sphere oriented to deliberation; and
- (3) a postmodern conception of the public sphere must countenance not the exclusion, but the inclusion, of interests

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<sup>44</sup> In another article, "Sex, Lies, and the Public Sphere: Some Reflections on the Confirmation of Clarence Thomas" (1992), she pursues a contemporary application of the concept.

and issues that bourgeois masculinist ideology labels “private” and treats as inadmissible. (295)

As has been noted, Fraser’s ‘postmodernism’ is not incompatible with Critical Theory. On the contrary, as she clarifies, it should be perfectly possible to overcome “the false antithesis between Critical Theory and poststructuralism by integrating the best insights of each” (“False Antitheses” 62). This is clearly what she attempts to do with reference to the public sphere, and the result is a dramatic revision of the enduring feminist struggle with the public/private dichotomy.

It is not the case now, and never was, that women are simply excluded from public life; nor that men are public and women are private; nor that the private sphere is women’s sphere and the public sphere is men’s; nor that the feminist project is to collapse the boundaries between public and private. Rather, feminist analysis shows the political, ideological nature of these categories. And the feminist project aims in part to overcome the gender hierarchy that gives men more power than women to draw the line between public and private. (“Politics” 305)

Fraser’s metaphor of ‘drawing a line’ between public and private is highly significant, as it avoids both extremes of a fixed boundary (a line already drawn) and a blurred boundary (no line at all). It thus describes the process by which matters formerly considered private can be brought into the public domain. The portrayal of domestic violence as a political issue in feminist theatre is a classical example, one forcefully reiterated by Sarah Kane in *Blasted* [see 7.1].

A more comprehensive analysis of the relationship between feminism and politics can be found in Fraser’s book *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the “Postsocialist” Condition* (1997). Here Fraser uses the trajectory of second-



wave feminism in the US to illustrate the problems surrounding identity politics in general. She divides the recent history of the feminist movement into three phases: the first, from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, focused on "gender difference"; the second, from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s, on "differences among women", and the third, from the 1990s onwards, on "multiple intersecting differences" (175). At the core of the first phase was the equality-difference dilemma:

The egalitarian insight was that no adequate account of sexism could overlook women's social marginalization and unequal share of resources; hence, no persuasive vision of gender equity could omit the goals of equal participation and fair distribution. The difference insight was that no adequate account of sexism could overlook the problem of androcentrism in the construction of cultural standards of value; hence, no persuasive vision of gender equity could omit the need to overcome such androcentrism. (177)

Fraser believes that the impasse "was never definitively settled", partly because "each side had convincing criticisms of the other" (177). Moreover, this unresolved dilemma is indicative of the difficulties of our "postsocialist" times, when cultural claims – the struggle for "recognition" that arises from identity politics – tend to eclipse social claims for redistribution. She asserts that "justice today requires *both* redistribution *and* recognition" (12, original emphasis), thus "the moral" for feminism should have been "to develop a perspective that opposed social inequality and cultural androcentricism simultaneously" (177). However, the lesson was not learnt and the next stage in Fraser's history saw a changed debate about "differences among women", championed mainly by lesbian and African-American feminists. At this point both difference and equality feminisms were rightly accused of obscuring distinctions of "class, 'race', ethnicity, nationality and sexuality" (179), the former by promoting "culturally

specific stereotypical idealizations of middle-class, heterosexual, white-European femininity"; the latter by "assuming that all women were subordinated to all men in the same way" (178).

To correct these biases, identity politics proliferated into a "political scene [...] crowded with 'new social movements,' each politicizing a different 'difference'" (179), until a crucial shift came towards "multiple intersecting differences" in the 1990s (180). Central to this shift has been the concept of radical democracy recommended, among others, by Laclau and Mouffe [see below]. Fraser appreciates that this notion "seems to correct the balkanizing tendencies of identity politics" while at the same time contesting "hegemonic conservative understandings of democracy". Yet she claims that its meaning "remains underdeveloped" and locked in a purely cultural debate between extreme versions of "antiessentialism" and "multiculturalism" (181).<sup>45</sup>

One problem is that both discussions rely on one-sided views of identity and difference. The antiessentialist view is sceptical and negative; it sees all identities as inherently repressive and all differences as inherently exclusionary. The multiculturalist view, in contrast, is celebratory and positive; it sees all identities as deserving recognition and all differences as meriting affirmation. Thus, neither approach is sufficiently differentiated. Neither provides a basis for distinguishing democratic from antidemocratic identity claims, just from unjust differences. (181-82)

Despite the advantages of moving from "gender difference" to "differences among women" and then to "multiple intersecting differences", Fraser considers that the current debate still reproduces the old dilemma of equality versus difference. By neglecting the social in favour of the cultural, she argues, both

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<sup>45</sup> Fraser distinguishes these extreme versions (which she terms "deconstructive antiessentialism" and "pluralist multiculturalism" respectively) from the positive gains that both viewpoints – if read moderately – bring to politics.

antiessentialism and multiculturalism remain on the side of difference feminism, “repress[ing] the insights of equality feminism concerning the need for equal participation and fair distribution” (186). In her project of radical democracy, by contrast, the motto is “no recognition without redistribution” (187).<sup>46</sup>

Fraser’s hypotheses are relevant both in the search for a definition of politics fitting for the present age and in assessing Habermas’ contribution towards such a definition. On the one hand, Fraser’s endorsement of “multiple intersecting differences” seems at odds with the Habermasian focus on universal values. In this respect, Habermas’ theory can be seen as too hostile to identity politics. On the other hand, Habermas’ interpretation of the ‘new social movements’ appears too committed to cultural claims to accommodate the material concerns highlighted by Fraser. In this respect, his theory looks almost overly close to identity politics. It is possible to sort out this puzzle by examining the work of two other theorists – Gemma Edwards and Jean Cohen – who have engaged with Habermas on the question of social movements.

Like Fraser, Edwards supports a definition of contemporary politics able to encompass both cultural and economic struggles. She therefore rejects Habermas’ suggestion that “the central conflicts of advanced capitalist societies have shifted away from the ‘capital-labour’ struggles of the Labour Movement (now seen as ‘old’ politics), and towards grievances surrounding the ‘colonization of the lifeworld’” (Edwards 113). While valuing the explanatory power of Habermas’ system-lifeworld distinction, Edwards contends that far from *replacing* capital versus labour battles, this format *encompasses* them, demonstrating that there is nothing really ‘new’ about what Habermas calls ‘new social movements’. Edwards draws on the anti-corporate movement and the 2002-03 British firefighters’ dispute to put capitalism back into the picture, not to abandon

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<sup>46</sup> In the first chapter of *Justice Interruptus*, Fraser elaborates on the “redistribution-recognition dilemma” (16) and proposes a combination of “socialism in the economy plus deconstruction in the culture” (31) as the best formula to resolve it.

Habermas' framework but, on the contrary, to play to its "untapped strengths" (127).<sup>47</sup>

Habermas' weakness [...] is not in pointing to the conflicts that generate movements in terms of the seam between system and lifeworld. It lies instead in failing to see the wider applicability of his analysis to movements beyond his own historical specificity. He does so by failing to underline the essence of that analysis in terms of a state-economy-lifeworld dynamic. Returning then, to our initial question of what is 'new' in Habermas' theory, we can posit the answer, 'nothing much at all'. Ironically, it is in this conclusion that we discover Habermas' overlooked novelty: a highly useful framework for the analysis of contemporary protests as reactions against the negative (and colonizing) effects that capitalist modernization has on everyday life. (121-22)

A different problem does however emerge precisely from Habermas' view of 'new social movements' as merely *reacting* against colonisation, whether in the restrictive original sense or in the wider understanding that Edwards proposes. This difficulty, which relates to Habermas' defence of universality, is at the heart of Cohen's revision in "Critical Social Theory and Feminist Critiques":

Although they [social movements] signify the continued capacity of the lifeworld to resist reification, and thus take on a positive meaning, Habermas is sceptical of their "emancipatory potential" and suspicious of their apparently anti-institutional, defensive, antireformist nature. In short, he does not see the new movements

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<sup>47</sup> Both cases illustrate a combination of 'old' (economic) and 'new' (cultural) politics. On the second example Edwards writes: "The protest of firefighters was therefore a dual affair shifting over the course of the dispute: *for* wage increases on the one hand and *against* a governmental agenda of modernization on the other. [...] Using a Habermasian approach helps us to see beyond the distributive aspect of conflict, represented by the 40 per cent demand, and to the kind of struggles over lifestyles and identity typical of 'new' movements" (124-125, original emphasis).

as carriers of new (rational) social identities but as mired in particularism. (61)

Even though the feminist movement counts for Habermas as an exception in its 'dual logic' (comprising "an offensive universalist side concerned with political inclusion and equal rights [...], along with a defensive particularist side focusing on identity"<sup>48</sup>), Cohen complains that in Habermas' scheme "the emancipatory dimension of feminism therefore involves nothing new, while the new dimension of feminism suffers from the same drawbacks as the other new movements" (61-62). Cohen blames the rigidity of Habermas' separation of system and lifeworld for this blind spot, offering a reconstruction of this distinction within her theory of civil society [see 1.2], which "enables us to see that movements operate on both sides of the system/lifeworld divide" (63). Such a dualistic approach, she argues, allows for an alternative reading of feminist activism:

To construe the defensive politics of feminism simply as a reaction to colonization, aimed only at stemming the tide of the formally organized systems of action, is quite misleading. So, too, is the pejorative tone of the label "particularist" for the concern with identities, conceptions of gender, new need-interpretations, and the like. These ought not to be taken as a sign of withdrawal into communities organized around naturalistic categories of biology and sex. Quite the contrary. [...] Such projects are universalist insofar as they challenge restrictions and inequalities in the communicative processes (in public and in private) that generate norms, interpret traditions, and construct identities. (75)

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<sup>48</sup> This characterisation coincides with Fraser's view of "equality" and "difference" feminism.

Furthermore, Cohen insists that despite the fact that identities are always particular, it is possible to distinguish between more and less self-reflective gender identities. Conversely, the "offensive" or "universalist" side of feminism can only achieve its egalitarian goals in the public realm if it disputes "the male standards behind the allegedly neutral structures of these domains" (76). Like Fraser, Cohen uses the history of the feminist movement to demonstrate her argument. Her emphasis is on how the "offensive politics of reform and inclusion" (feminism's 'older branch') could only succeed through a development of a "politics of identity" (feminism's 'younger branch'), the latter epitomised by the slogan 'the personal is political'. Cohen's narrative, unlike Fraser's, depicts a harmonious balance in which "by the end of the 1960s, the two branches of the movement started moving closer together" (77).

#### **Justice and care: Seyla Benhabib**

Fraser's effort to reconstruct the public sphere is complementary to that of Benhabib in "Models of Public Space" (1992). She uses Habermas' later work on practical discourse to explore the democratic potential of contemporary public spheres. Like Fraser, Benhabib criticises Habermas' gender-blindness, but at the same time recognises the "radical indeterminacy and openness" of his "discourse model of the public space" (85). Thus she proposes that feminists enter into a "dialectical alliance" with Habermas' social theory, which can then offer "the *critical model of public space and public discourse*" that feminism has so far lacked (94, original emphasis):

A critical model of the public sphere is necessary to enable us to draw the line between "juridification" [...] on the one hand and making public, in the sense of making accessible to debate, reflection, action and moral-political transformation, on the other. To make issues of common concern public in this second sense

means making them increasingly accessible to discursive will formation; it means to democratize them; it means bringing them under standards of moral reflection compatible with autonomous postconventional identities. (94)

Benhabib's viewpoint stems from a sympathetic critique of discourse ethics. In this respect Benhabib is also close to Cohen, demonstrating that the discourse paradigm can provide a fruitful approach to ethics and politics from a feminist perspective. However, Benhabib – unlike Cohen – also incorporates the dissenting view of psychologist Carol Gilligan, who has articulated one of the most influential attacks on universalistic moral theories from a feminist perspective [see also 1.2].

Based on empirical studies, Gilligan concluded that women's moral development tended to follow a different course from that depicted in universalist theories: "In this conception, the moral problem arises from conflicting responsibilities rather than from competing rights and requires for its resolution a mode of thinking that is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract" (19). This notion can be described as an *ethics of care*, underpinned by "a psychological logic of relationships, which contrasts with the formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach" (73). In the 1980s, feminist political theorist Jean B. Elshtain built on Gilligan's ideas to suggest that "women have a distinct moral language" and therefore "we must take care to preserve the sphere that makes such a morality of responsibility possible and extend its imperatives to men as well" (*Public Man, Private Woman* 335-36). Elshtain attacked radical feminism's "erosion of any distinction between the personal and the political" (217) on the basis that "if all conceptual boundaries are blurred and all distinctions between public and private are eliminated, no politics can exist by definition" (201). She proposed instead a model of "ethical polity", a balance that would "allow men and women alike to partake in the good of the public sphere on an equal basis of participatory dignity and equality" (351). In the end, however,

her solution to the public/private conundrum amounted to reforming the public sphere by flooding it with private virtues (335-36).

Elstain's critics soon pointed out that "by assigning virtues, or rationality, or radicalism to the actions of 'privatized' women the explanatory paradigm that defines women's experiences as privatized is not challenged" (Siltanen and Stanworth 199-200). Anticipating the position of Fraser and Benhabib, Siltanen and Stanworth also complained that Elstain's project advocated a fixed meaning of politics, which conceals the fact that "the determination of the political, within the public sphere, is itself a fundamentally political issue" (204). They thus called for a redefinition of the political not tied either to specific institutions, gender or the public sphere, and open to 'moral', 'social' or 'economic' issues which had been excluded from the political realm. Mary Dietz also strongly refuted Elstain's argument, launching an attack on 'maternal thinking'<sup>49</sup> on the conviction that "love and intimacy [...] must not be made the basis of political action and discourse" ("Citizenship and Maternal Thinking" 32). A brief account of this dispute is necessary here to highlight the risks involved in 'essentialising' the public/private dichotomy.

Dietz undertakes a comprehensive critique of 'social' or 'pro-family' feminism, according to which "the family is the most elevated and primary realm of human life" and "has existential priority, and moral superiority, to the public realm of politics" (21). The difficulties with Elstain's approach, she argues, are serious:

Social feminism reinforces an abstract split between the public and private realms that cannot or should not be maintained; and no theoretical connection is provided for linking maternal thinking and the social practice of mothering with the kind of "ethical polity"

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<sup>49</sup> This denomination includes the work of Elstain and also of Sara Ruddick, whose article entitled "Maternal Thinking" was published in 1980.



Elshtain envisions, namely one informed by democratic thinking and the political practices of citizenship. (25)

Dietz rehearses her differences with Elshtain through an example taken from drama. She maintains that Elshtain's essay "Antigone's Daughters" (1982) presents "Sophocles' heroine as an archetype for a 'female identity' and a 'feminist perspective'" (27) and the tension between Antigone and Creon "as one of public (male) versus private (female), as one between the vices of public power and the virtues of private familial love" (28). By contrast, Dietz reads Antigone "not simply as a 'sister' whose familial loyalties pit her against her king, but as a citizen of Thebes whose defense of her brother is rooted in a devotion to the gods and to the ways and laws of her city", which are in jeopardy by Creon's authoritarianism. Viewed in this way, Antigone becomes "a political person" (that is, neither a "private woman" nor a "public man"). Dietz concludes that "Antigone transcends the public/private split because she embodies *the personal made political*. Through her speech and her action, she transforms a matter of private concern into a public issue" (29, my emphasis).

Dietz contributes a balanced conception of the relationship between the public and the private, which corrects Elshtain's essentialist desire to reform the (male) public sphere with (female) private virtues. Like Elshtain, Dietz rightly emphasises the role of 'citizen' as signalling the specifically *political* within the *public* domain, but Dietz also gives it a clear content. Antigone acts as a citizen when she 'makes' the personal political by demonstrating that Creon's prohibition of the burial of one of her brothers is not a family matter but a collective issue, one that forces the king's authoritarian will over the laws of the city. On the other hand, Dietz certainly shares Siltanen and Stanworth's anxiety about limiting the meaning of politics. She stresses that "family life and privacy, as well as social practices and economic issues, are matters of political decision making" and that "even the decision to allow them to remain 'private' [...] is ultimately a political

one" (27). Yet her position on what constitutes political action, feminism included, is unambiguous:

The need to challenge "arrogant public power" and an "amoral political order" – to use Elshtain's words – remains a crucial feminist task. But the only effective challenge to a corrupt or unjust state is one that is itself expressly political. [...] Accordingly, what feminist political consciousness must draw upon is the potentiality of women-as-citizens and their historical reality as a collective and democratic power, not upon the "robust" demands of motherhood. (34-35)

Like Elshtain, Benhabib also draws on Gilligan's ethics of care, yet she manages to sever this discourse from the trap of maternal thinking. In "The Generalized and the Concrete Other" (1987), she takes a middle position between Habermas and Gilligan. Her central point is a rebuttal of the differentiation between justice and the good life,<sup>50</sup> which she traces back to contractual theories – an analysis similar to Pateman's – and relates to "the split between the public and the domestic" (83). In Benhabib's view, the problem with universalist moral theories is that they consider the moral self "as a *disembedded* and *disembodied* being", an assumption that reflects male (public) experience and is thus "incompatible with the very criteria of reversibility and universalizability advocated by defenders of universalism" (81, original emphasis). Her solution is to replace this concept with a revised version of universalism, which she names "interactive":

Interactive universalism acknowledges the plurality of modes of being human, and differences among humans, without endorsing

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<sup>50</sup> In this article Benhabib tackles this distinction – which separates what is normatively required for everyone ('the right') from what is valued within a particular subculture ('the good') – in Kohlberg's moral theory, but Habermas (drawing on Kohlberg) also upholds it [see 1.2].

all these pluralities and differences as morally and politically valid. While agreeing that normative disputes can be settled rationally, [...] interactive universalism regards difference as a starting point for reflection and action. [...] Universality is not the ideal consensus of fictitiously defined selves, but the concrete process in politics and morals of the struggle of concrete, embodied selves, striving for autonomy. (81)

Using Gilligan's theory, Benhabib wants to complement the standpoint of the "generalized other", characteristic of universalist moral theories, with that of the "concrete other". The former "requires us to view each and every individual as a rational being entitled to the same rights and duties we would want to ascribe to ourselves", a task that involves abstracting "from the individuality and concrete identity of the other". The latter, on the contrary, "requires us to view each and every rational being as an individual with a concrete history, identity and affective-emotional constitution", therefore abstracting "from what constitutes our commonality". In the first case the norms are "primarily public and institutional", accompanied by moral categories of "right, obligation and entitlement". The second case, in contrast, is governed by "usually private, noninstitutional" norms of "friendship, love and care", accompanied by moral categories of "responsibility, bonding and sharing" (87). According to Benhabib, only a "communicative ethic of need interpretations" can provide the space for a "dialogic, interactive generation of universality" where moral and political questions can be "analyzed, renegotiated and redefined" (93). In "Models of Public Space", she finds the paradigm for such interaction in Habermas' discourse theory, which – in spite of its commitment to the distinction between the 'just' and the 'good' – possesses a quality of "radical indeterminacy and openness" that "neither restricts access to public space nor sets the agenda for public debate" (84).

Benhabib returns to the controversy about universalism in her article "The Debate over Women and Moral Theory Revisited" (1995). At this point she clarifies her middle position between Habermas and Gilligan. Against the 'ethics of care', she contends that "discourse ethics is a deontological and universalist moral theory where conceptions of the right do constrain the good" (189). Against "impartialism" (184), she argues that "questions of care are moral issues and can also be dealt from within a universalist standpoint" (189). Moreover, Benhabib reads in Habermas' 1989 article "Justice and Solidarity" a likeness to Gilligan's formula of "equality and attachment" (192). Yet despite her appreciation for Gilligan's contribution to moral theory, Benhabib does acknowledge that strong criticisms of the "different voice" hypothesis have come from feminism itself.

Is a "different" voice really the women's voice? Can there be a "woman's voice" independent of race and class differences, and abstracted from social and historical context? What is the origin of the difference in moral reasoning among men and women which Gilligan has identified? Does not Gilligan's analysis of women's tendency to reason from the "care and responsibility" approach merely repeat established stereotypes of femininity? (193)

This is, of course, a replay of the equality-difference dilemma, which Benhabib tackles by discriminating "between the methodological, the reductionist, and the postmodernist approaches to the question of women's difference in moral theory" (193). Firstly, in terms of methodology, Benhabib believes that Gilligan's research does not imply an essentialist perspective<sup>51</sup> but a psychosexual model, which needs however to be complemented with historically grounded social

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<sup>51</sup> She quotes Gilligan herself emphasising that "a different voice" is not necessarily "a women's voice" (193).

theory (196). Secondly, by “reductionist objections” Benhabib means feminist views which, influenced by Nietzsche and Marx, accused Gilligan’s ethics of care of being oppressive (196) but that can be discarded because they relegate “normative problems of justice and morality to simple patterns of interest and power camouflaging” (197). Finally, she addresses the postmodern challenge to Gilligan’s “relational self” with an argument that echoes Fraser’s position on identity: “Not all difference is empowering; not all heterogeneity can be celebrated; not all opacity leads to a sense of self-flourishing” (199).

There is, Benhabib insists, the possibility of “coherence as a narrative unity”<sup>52</sup> (199) and “a coherent sense of self is attained with the successful integration of autonomy and solidarity, or with the right mix of justice and care” (200). As the next section will demonstrate, Benhabib is not alone in attempting to bring together the apparently incompatible discourses of Gilligan and Habermas,<sup>53</sup> nor in criticising the latter’s distinction between moral questions (about ‘justice’) and evaluative questions (about ‘the good life’).

### **Subjectivity / intersubjectivity**

The critique of an abstract subjectivity, associated with communitarianism [see 2.2], is also at the core of feminist philosophical interventions. In the introduction to their edited volume *Feminism as Critique*, Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell find common ground with communitarian political theory, but only up to a point:

Feminist theorists argue that the vision of the atomic, “unencumbered self,” criticized by communitarians, is a male one,

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<sup>52</sup> Here she converges with Weir [see below].

<sup>53</sup> Jodi Dean’s “Discourse in Different Voices”, in the same volume as Benhabib’s “Debate”, is another example of using Gilligan’s theory – in the revised form of her later work – as a correction for Habermas’ ethics.

since the degree of separateness and independence it postulates among individuals has never been the case for women. [...] however [...] whereas communitarians emphasise the situatedness of the disembodied self in a network of relations and narratives, feminists also begin with the situated self but view the *renegotiation* of our psychosexual identities, and their *autonomous reconstitution* by individuals as essential to women's and human liberation. (12-13, original emphasis)

For feminist theory then, at least in Benhabib and Cornell's version, the modern 'ideal of autonomy' that Mah and the communitarians abandon is not totally discarded, but placed in a dialectical relationship with the acknowledged reality of a 'situated self'. It is indeed this tension that lies behind the equality-difference dilemma or, as Benhabib and Cornell call it, the "dilemma of feminine/feminist identity", which they formulate as follows: "how can feminist theory base itself upon the uniqueness of the female experience without reifying thereby one single definition of femaleness as the paradigmatic one – without succumbing, that is, to an essentialist discourse on gender?" (13). Amongst the provisional answers given to this question in *Feminism as Critique*, the most relevant to the present discussion can be found in Cornell and Thurschwell's essay, which builds a path between 'the feminine' as *negativity* and an *intersubjective* understanding of gender.

Cornell and Thurschwell criticise the rigidity of the masculine/feminine dichotomy and aim to demonstrate that "the division of political camps into universalist and gynocentric feminisms fails to appreciate the reciprocal constitution of sameness and difference that marks the constitution of the subject through gender categories" (145). Cornell and Thurschwell's starting point is Julia

Kristeva's reworking of Lacanian psychoanalysis,<sup>54</sup> which "rejects the representation of the feminine mirrored in the eyes of the masculine subject" while at the same time accepting "Lacan's insight into the feminine as the excluded Other of masculine discourse" (147-48).

The feminist appropriation of Lacan's theory, according to Cornell and Thurshwell, gives negativity a subversive power: "In Kristeva, as in other Lacanian-influenced accounts of the feminine, the elusive, undefinable notion of the feminine is tied to a political potential for rejection and disruption of the given state of society" (149). Yet despite this potential, the authors warn of the hurdles involved in a philosophical reliance on the negative: on the one hand, an essentialisation of femininity; on the other, "abstractness" (152).<sup>55</sup> To avoid the latter, Kristeva gives an affirmative content to feminine negativity in highlighting "the decisive role that women play in the reproduction of the species" (qtd. in Cornell and Thurshwell 153). With this gesture, however, she verges into essentialism, coming "dangerously close to a mistaken attempt to identify 'Woman' with women". Still, Cornell and Thurschwell declare that Kristeva achieves the right balance between negativity and intersubjectivity:

In her speculations on an ethic of negativity, one finds in Kristeva traces of an affirmative relationship to the other that a pure ethic of negativity would deny. Her constantly recurring themes of dialogue, of polyvocality, indicate a desire for genuine intersubjective relation that skirts the defensive reaction underlying the reliance on pure negativity. [...] Kristeva recognizes the inevitability of the positive

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<sup>54</sup> It is important however to consider the political drawbacks of Kristeva's attempt to balance structuralism and pragmatics, as Nancy Fraser underlines in *Justice Interruptus*. Kristeva's subject is split into the (Lacanian) *symbolic*, which "reproduce the social order by imposing linguistic conventions on anarchic desires", and the *semiotic*, which "expresses a material, bodily source of revolutionary negativity" (162). However, according to Fraser, neither of these two halves "is a potential political agent" (164)

<sup>55</sup> Cornell and Thurschwell draw this criticism from Bernstein, who is sympathetic to both German Critical Theory and French poststructuralism.

constructive moment in the constitution of the subject of linguistic convention. (153-54)

Cornell and Thurschwell's detailed analysis of Kristeva's position on identity as compared with Lacan is well beyond the scope of this section. Nevertheless, their insistence on a theoretical model that incorporates the intersubjective component available in "linguistic convention" strongly echoes the Habermasian project. For Cornell and Thurschwell, such intersubjectivity needs to operate as much at the level of individuality – where otherwise "gender differentiation [...] denies access to the 'other' in each one of us" (157) – as in relationships between the sexes, where "the rigid separation of genders represents an ideological obfuscation of what we share" (158). In concluding that "genuine difference is inseparable from a notion of relationality", Cornell and Thurschwell recall both Hegel's and Adorno's warnings that "absolute alterity is absolute identity" and hope "to evoke the entwining dance of difference and sameness" with the help of Jacques Derrida (161). I maintain that Jürgen Habermas would also be a suitable choreographer, and feminist theorist Allison Weir has already tested the productivity of his vision alongside Kristeva's.

Although Cornell and Thurschwell are much closer to the poststructuralist paradigm than Weir, their concerns are not far from each other, as Weir's objective is to discover a middle point within the equality-difference dilemma. Introducing Weir's work, Johanna Meehan underlines that she seeks to bridge the gap between relational feminism – which emphasises "connection, attachment and dependence" – and difference (or postmodern) feminism, which "views identity as produced by exclusions of difference by systems of power".

Weir proposes a model of self that defines identity in terms of the ability to participate in a social world through interactions with others; these interactions are in turn constitutive of the formation of self-identity. Contradicting the views of many feminists who hold



identity and difference to be exclusive, Weir contends that the most central feature of modern self-identity is the capacity to reconcile often conflictual multiple identities and to understand, criticize, and to live with conflicting interpretations of identity. (17-18)

Weir's concept of self-identity encompasses both reflexivity (identity mediated through language) and intersubjectivity (identity mediated through interaction with others). Reflexivity is what relational feminists leave out of the equation when "they see the identity of the self and identification with others as locked in eternal opposition or merged into one". Intersubjectivity is lacking in poststructuralism, which conceives "the identity of the self and the identity of meaning in language as united in a logic or structure of totalizing repressive identity" (Weir 267). By contrast, Weir claims that "identity formation is always both a socially and symbolically mediated process" (Meehan 18). Within this two-fold understanding of identity, Habermas' and Kristeva's schemes complement each other:

Habermas's model of the development of self-identity as the development of a capacity for critique will serve feminism better than models of the self which reject *resolution and abstraction*, and hence, participation and critique. I shall supplement Habermas's model with Julia Kristeva's model of the development of self-identity through practices of affective identification and expression. [...] For Habermas, what is internalized is not simply authority but an experience of mutuality and a capacity for critique. For Kristeva, internalization is not simply a response to threat (as it is, still, for Habermas), but a source of pleasure. (Weir 268-69, my emphasis)

Using Kristeva's version of psychoanalysis in conjunction with Habermas' theory, Weir is able to address the blind spots that have long preoccupied

feminists – namely, embodiment and affectivity – without stripping the Habermasian model of its strengths: intersubjectivity and critical distance. Furthermore, Weir employs Habermas to rehabilitate notions that had been discredited by feminism, such as “resolution and abstraction”. On the former, she defies the persistent argument that “the attempt to resolve contradictions is an act of domination” with the idea that self-identity “requires the cognitive capacity to reflect on who I am and what matters to me, and to organize diverse identities and identity-attributes, into some sort of meaningful narrative or constellation” (265-66). On the latter, she asserts that “it is crucially important that feminist theorists reconsider a common tendency to see abstraction as the enemy” (267), a tendency shared by relational and postmodern feminism despite their discrepancies. While Weir values the critique of abstraction, she also sees a danger of “sliding into absurdity”.

In rejecting abstraction, feminist theorists forget that the capacity to abstract from particular relationships, from linguistic systems and social norms, is essential to a capacity to *criticize* those relationships, systems and norms. The challenge, then, is not to reject abstraction for embeddedness, but to theorize a capacity for abstraction for detachment, for critique, which is not opposed to but continuous with, and in fact constitutive of, participation. (267-68, original emphasis)

Conceptions of subjectivity and their affiliation with modern/postmodern allegiances have a great impact on how politics is defined in relation to identity, which is the focus of the next section.

## Identity or universalism?

As has been noted, feminism's interrelationship with the Habermasian model can further illuminate a definition of politics suitable for the contemporary era. Philosophers like Fraser, Linda Nicholson and Chantal Mouffe are included within what Best and Kellner term the "dialectical" wing of postmodernism, as they "adopt postmodern positions while stressing continuities between the present age and modernity" (181). They also develop valuable conceptualisations of the political that transcend debates around identity politics and feminism's equality-difference dilemma.

Linda Nicholson has been highly influential in promoting a moderate version of postmodern theory that allows for political agency and social change. She does so with Fraser in their programmatic scheme for feminist research ("Social Criticism without Philosophy", 1988) and again in 1999 as a joint editor of *Social Postmodernism: Beyond Identity Politics*, where she writes:

A postmodern politics suggests less an abandonment of modern values (e.g., liberty, equality, citizenship, autonomy, public participation) than an effort to preserve these values by rethinking the premises of modern culture and politics. Nor in these versions of postmodern politics is there a refusal to articulate common grounds or unifying points in politics. Rather, these proposals criticize efforts to deduce such commonality from some general principle or to ground them in a quasi-transcendental foundational philosophy or a philosophical anthropology. (32)

Chantal Mouffe provides one of the most illustrative essays in Nicholson and Seidman's volume: "Feminism, Citizenship and Radical Democratic Politics". Since her 1980's collaborations with Ernesto Laclau, Mouffe has aimed towards a vision of post-Marxist radical democracy that sits *between* the modern and the postmodern. As Best and Kellner put it,

Laclau and Mouffe work towards a reconstruction of modern political values. Their project can be compared to Habermas in that they see modernity as 'an unfinished project' which carries many positive developments and values that need to be salvaged and extended. But they are far more critical of Enlightenment universalism and rationalism than Habermas, and far more positive toward poststructuralist and postmodern theory, which they employ to reconstruct modern politics. (193)

In other words, for Laclau and Mouffe "rationality and Enlightenment values remain important aspects of radical politics, but only if shorn of their universalist and essentialist cast" (Best and Kellner 200).<sup>56</sup> Mouffe reinforces this stance in her contribution to Nicholson and Seidman's collection. Here she declares that "there is no such a thing as 'postmodernism' understood as a coherent theoretical approach" (315) and focuses instead on anti-essentialism as the key for "the elaboration of a feminist politics which is also informed by a radical democratic project" (316).

According to Mouffe, the dilemma between equality and difference is false and can be dissolved by abandoning essentialist standpoints that persist – albeit in different measures – in postures as diverse as Elshtain's "maternal thinking" (320) and Pateman's "sexually differentiated" individuality (322). Within a notion of "the social agent as constituted by an ensemble of 'subject positions' that can never be fixed" (318) but can, however, be contingently articulated through "nodal points" (319), Mouffe proposes a redefinition of citizenship where "sexual difference should not be a pertinent distinction" (323). Mouffe makes clear that she does not advocate gender-neutrality and that she shares Pateman's criticisms

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<sup>56</sup> Overall, Best and Kellner regard Laclau and Mouffe's work as "an instructive example of the relevance postmodernism and deconstructionism can have for social and political theory [...] while avoiding the nihilism, apoliticism, and anarchism commonly associated with postmodern theories" (200). However, Best and Kellner also claim that Laclau and Mouffe misread the Marxist tradition, neglect the non-discursive aspects of society (such as economic structures) and underestimate the difficulties of alliance politics (201-104).

of modern citizenship. Nevertheless, she believes that "the problems with the liberal construction of the public/private distinction would not be solved by discarding it, but only by reformulating it in a more adequate way" (324). Such reformulation, in Mouffe's view, breaks with both liberalism – where citizenship is "just one identity among others" – and civic republicanism, where citizenship is "the dominant identity that overrides all others" (325). If citizenship is understood as "the articulating principle that affects the different subject positions of the social agent while allowing for a plurality of specific allegiances", then

the public/private distinction [...] does not correspond to discrete, separate spheres; every situation is an encounter between "private" and "public" because every enterprise is private while never immune from the public conditions prescribed by the principles of citizenship. Wants, choices and decisions are private because they are the responsibility of each individual, but performances are public because they have to subscribe to the conditions specified by a specific understanding of the ethico-political principles of the regime which provide the "grammar" of the citizen's conduct. (325)

Even though this "grammar" is based on the Enlightenment values of "liberty and equality for all", Mouffe seems closer to Foucault than Habermas in suggesting that "all forms of consensus are by necessity based on acts of exclusion" (326). Furthermore, she disagrees with a Habermasian emphasis on argumentation and publicity because "convergence can only result from a political process of hegemonic articulation, and not simply of free and undistorted communication" (328). Ultimately, Mouffe's attempt to go beyond identity politics rests with her notion of "equivalence", a pursuit for a collective political identity that "does not eliminate *difference*" (325, original emphasis).

The troubles created by identity politics for current definitions of democratic practices tend to converge towards one aspect, which has also been a major source of disagreement between Habermas and feminist theorists: the question of universality. Even though the usual feminist stance had been a straightforward rejection of it, contemporary schemes that aim to correct the impasses of recent debates strive to find a fair balance between equality and difference. Mouffe does so through her notion of "equivalence"; Fraser through her combination of "redistribution" and "recognition". In the same vein, Moishe Postone asserts that the criticisms of "many contemporary social movements [including feminism] [...] are of a determinate form of universality rather than universality per se".

They suggest that the values of the Enlightenment should be grasped within the framework of an opposition between an abstract universalist position that seeks to avoid hierarchy by negating difference, and positions that recognize difference but grasp it hierarchically. The new social movements have raised the issue of whether it is possible to get beyond this Enlightenment antinomy itself. Rather than seeking to realize the form of abstract universality that is one pole of this antinomy, they point toward a newer form of universality that can encompass difference. In so doing, they have implicitly shown the Enlightenment antinomy to be historically determinate and socially constituted. (168)

A strong representative of these efforts within feminist scholarship is Marie Fleming, whose objections to Habermas, far from being pitched against universalism, come from the conviction that "Habermas's theory is not universalistic enough" (1). Refusing to separate modernity from postmodernity, Fleming suggests that

we regard universalism as a discursive space, unstable and necessarily open, in which genealogical and deconstructionist claims can be taken up and addressed and in which new understandings of a universalist consciousness can be developed. We need to take seriously the universalist values of equality and inclusiveness, and we need to give expression inside universalist discourse to those interests not well represented in the classical interpretations of modernity. (35)

There are similarities with Benhabib, but Fleming goes even further: "Habermas's arguments for the primacy of rationality over culture (in philosophy and social theory) and for the primacy of morality over ethical life (in moral theory) do not hold up, but the question is why, even within the assumptions of his model, he inevitably assigns gender to the level of culture and ethical life" (220). Fleming effectively confronts not only Habermas' undertheorisation of gender but also feminism's habitual distrust of rationality and universalism. "It is not that feminists should not be giving attention to cultural matters", she writes, "[but] we have been too readily persuaded that a concern with reason is itself somehow implicated in male values and perspectives" (218).

As the work of Fraser and Benhabib proves, feminism and the Habermasian public sphere – or, at least, a reconstructed version of it – are not mutually exclusive. Far from it, Habermas' theory can contribute in testing how democratically the process of 'drawing a line' (Fraser) or 'making public' (Benhabib) is conducted. It is not simply a question of the personal *being* political; the personal has to be *made* political when "issues of common concern" are at stake.

## PART 2: ANALYSIS

### Chapter 4

#### Political Theatre in Britain: Routes and Debates

##### 4.1 'Moments' from the past

Although elements of political theatre in Britain can be traced back to the Elizabethan stage,<sup>57</sup> Raphael Samuel (who made an important contribution documenting the history of left-wing theatre in Britain) found that there is no continuous tradition of British political theatre, “only a series of moments” (“Preface” xi). He locates the earliest of these ‘moments’ in 1841, when the stone-masons who were building the new House of Commons dramatised their case for strike action at the Victoria theatre in London (“Workers Theatre” 213). Looking at the disjointed but vital trajectory of British political theatre, two characteristics become clear. First, the so-called *bourgeois* and *proletarian* elements are interwoven from the very beginning and across the decades, despite mutual suspicions. Second – and beyond passing dogmatisms – a variety of forms have proven fruitful at different times to convey political meaning in performance.

The early socialist movement (1890-1914) is paradigmatic in this respect, as activism on the ground was developing in synergy with ‘Ibsenism’ and the Shavian ‘problem play’ in the theatre. From the intellectual end of the socialist spectrum, Fabians like Shaw and Harley Granville Barker – who championed this kind of drama at the Royal Court Theatre between 1903 and 1907 – gave a strong public voice to the new progressive values.

In general, it is difficult to overestimate the influence of socialist ideas on English theatre practice in this period. By any account it

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<sup>57</sup> Theatre Workshop’s co-founder Howard Goorney describes Elizabethan theatre as both “political” and “popular” (204). Shakespeare, of course, also provides a model for Brecht’s ‘epic theatre’.



was vast, and quite out of proportion to the influence of socialist ideas in the country as a whole. [...] The socialist and trade-union agitations of the period found an immediate and sympathetic repercussion on the stage [...]. At second or third removed, translated into the language of social guilt and moral choice, the socialist propaganda of the time, and in particular the questioning of bourgeois morality – the sanctity of private property, the hypocrisies of organized religion, the ‘bad faith’ of bourgeois marriage – can be seen as providing the whole agenda of Edwardian ‘ethical drama’ [...] as also, in a lighter vein, for the ‘regional’ playwrights of Dublin, Glasgow and Manchester. (Samuel, “Theatre and Socialism in Britain” 10)

On the activist front, left-wing politics and art formed an almost natural alliance, “particularly strong (though sometime unacknowledged) in the more revolutionary wings of the socialist movement” (3). However, the cultural ethos of socialism at this point was still one of admiration for ‘high culture’<sup>58</sup> and contempt for the instrumentalisation of art (“Introduction” xvi), and Shaw tended to be the playwright of choice when numerous drama groups affiliated to the Labour movement formed after the First World War. Even in the climate of “increasing class polarization” of the 1920s, their performances served mainly to disseminate the same liberal principles that had fuelled the emergence of realism in European theatre: “What had been, in the time of Ibsen, of the Stage Society and the Royal Court, ‘unconventional’ attitudes, confined to a minority of the liberal intelligentsia, were now diffused as the ‘new idea’ of which Labour was the apostle”. Propaganda in this drama was thus “for the most part ethical rather than directly political in character” (“Theatre and Socialism” 27-28).

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<sup>58</sup> This was truer in theory than practice: “Often of course performances were staged rather as a form of ‘light relief’ or ‘to introduce a little colour’ into politics rather than as a form of spiritual uplift, and of the published playlets of the period it seems to have been the comic ones which took on best” (30).

'Class struggle' entered the stage only with the Workers Theatre Movement (WTM, 1926-1935), which "belonged to the Communist rather than the Labour wing" of socialism and "was concerned with agitation rather than moral uplift or entertainment" (33). A sharp aesthetic turn from naturalism to agitprop (in sketches, cabarets and revues) followed, yet Samuel claimed that the book *Workers' Theatre* (1930) – a sort of WTM manifesto – while dismissing "every species of legitimate theatre", still found praise for Ibsen and Shaw. Theirs was considered "'radical social drama'", even if not the right model for the new workers' theatre, which "must present problems in class rather than personal terms" (36). This is how Ewan MacColl related the transition of his Manchester group from (Labour) 'Clarion Players' to (WTM) 'Red Megaphones' in the aftermath of their first unconventional piece, *Still Talking*:

The group was now almost evenly divided between those who believed that *Still Talking* was a signpost pointing to the group's future and those who felt that such approach would result in a theatre where there would be no room for writers other than those who could draft political speeches and pamphlets. The actors would become political orators and all those with genuine love of theatre would be alienated. To create such a theatre would, they argued, imply the repudiation of all that had been created in the past by Shakespeare, Ibsen, Shaw and so on. The political faction countered by saying that by pursuing a strong political line, the theatre would be returning to its origins. [...] In the end, the inevitable happened; the theatre-first people abandoned the group leaving the political faction to run things as best they could. (MacColl xx-xxi)

Unlike the Labour tradition from which it developed, the WTM did not attempt to bring 'high culture' to the proletariat, or emancipate them from their condition. On the contrary, "it looked forward to a universal 'Workers' World' of

which the Russian Revolution was the harbinger" (Samuel, "Theatre and Socialism" 40). Many of its techniques also came from Russia: symbolism in place of realism, physicality in place of the written word, audience participation in place of the fourth wall (42-43). However, there was as well a combination of disparate influences, from indigenous popular entertainment (in particular the music-hall, which would remain a crucial reference point in British theatre after the Second World War) to the European avant-garde, in the form of German expressionism. The fact that the latter was both "the movement to which Brecht owed his artistic formation" and "the cradle of German agit-prop", and that it was adopted by the British workers' theatre even though it landed through experimental venues in London (43-44), underscores the difficulty of drawing clear lines between *bourgeois* theatre and its adversaries. Samuel's account of the fate of the WTM corroborates this impression:

The term 'Workers' Theatre Movement' – like the term 'people's theatre' frequently invoked in these years [...] – represents an aspiration rather than an achievement. The first Workers Theatre Movement (1926-8), certainly did stick closely to what were regarded as 'working-class' subjects (principally strikes), and it helped to encourage one interesting worker-dramatist, Joe Corrie. But the presiding spirits of the movement [...] seem to have been a kind of upper-middle class Bohemians, passionate advocates of modernism in the arts – and 'advanced' ways of living – as well as of revolutionary Socialism. [...] The second WTM (1928-1935) was altogether more plebeian. [...] But [...] seems to have been almost equally distanced from the organized working class. (50-52)

With regards to form, "despite the proclaimed attachment to street theatre, the majority of WTM productions [...] were in fact *indoor* performances" and audience participation "seems to have been more akin to the venerable

tradition of melodrama [...] than to the revolutionary theatre in Russia" (53, original emphasis). By the time Unity Theatre was founded in 1936, not only had the political climate moved away from the revolutionary impulse in favour of a non-sectarian approach, but dramatic practice itself had shifted towards "professional standards" and "legitimate, conventional theatre". Unity's work was mainly naturalistic and its relationship to "the entire paraphernalia of the theatre", against which the WTM had defined itself, remained ambiguous (59-61).<sup>59</sup> With the threat of Fascism looming, political theatre needed to reach a wider spectrum. Thus, "the direct, simple sketches of street agit-prop had to give way to indoor theatre, full-length plays and, consequently, the need to improve the artistic and technical levels of performance" (Gorney 200).

Even Theatre Workshop, considered as one of the most inspirational left-wing dramatic ventures of the twentieth century, developed from a rather eclectic approach,<sup>60</sup> far from agitational orthodoxy:

As for acting proper, we would combine Stanislavski's method of 'living the role' with the improvisational techniques of the Italian Comedy. And for a repertoire – we would create a tailor-made one for ourselves, a repertory consisting of plays which would match at every stage the talents of the company and would extend those talents with each new production. We would, at the same time, carry the lessons learned in [Theatre of Action's] *Newsboy*, *Last Edition* and the agit-prop theatre to new heights. (McColl xvii)

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<sup>59</sup> Samuel warned however that "one should not exaggerate the rupture", particularly in light of Unity's most famous production – American playwright Clifford Odet's *Waiting for Lefty* – which "breathes a revolutionary spirit, and dates from an earlier period" (61).

<sup>60</sup> After the arrival in 1934 of Joan Littlewood (then a young repertory actress who felt passionately that "the theatre was sick in all its parts"), Ewan MacColl's Red Megaphones changed its name to Theatre of Action. A year later, MacColl and Littlewood "left in disgust" when severe frictions about organisational matters arose (xxii), but in 1936 they returned to Manchester to form Theatre Union, which continued to be active until the war. Reassembling in 1945, they created Theatre Workshop.

Needless to say, following their touring years (1945-1952), Theatre Workshop also *went indoors* at Stratford East and their most successful productions transferred to the West End (and even Broadway, in the case of *Oh What a Lovely War!*), testifying once again to the inevitable hybridisation of the theatrical scene. Their radical impetus nevertheless had a great influence on the next big political 'moment' in British theatre, the so-called alternative movement of 1968-1978, "not least in their appreciation of the need to develop the physical skills of the actors, the value of the use of common speech in the theatre and the advantages resulting from group work" (Goorney 201). Yet the new political theatre would prove even more of a hybrid in terms of origin and development.

### **The counterculture years**

Whilst the 'new wave' of playwriting post 1956 produced some important political dramatists such as John Arden and Edward Bond, it was not until the late 1960s that anything resembling a movement would emerge. The period between 1968 and 1978 has been widely acknowledged as the most significant era in British political theatre, even though the label *alternative* – with which it used to be identified – now needs careful consideration [see 4.2]. Just like the WTM beforehand, the writers and theatre practitioners involved in this (less structured) movement wished to promote revolutionary change. In Catherine Itzin's words, "they were not, for the most part, just socially committed, but committed to a socialist society" (*Stages in the Revolution* x). According to John Bull, "their political ideas were well left of the Labour Party and indeed quite outside the terms of reference of conventional Parliamentary 'democracy'" (*Political Dramatists* 2). Goorney even implied a common "springboard" for 1928 and 1968: "a rejection of orthodox Labour politics and the need to seek out a more radical solution to the injustices of Capitalism" (200), but the circumstances were quite different:

1928 was a time of depression, high unemployment and poverty, and the Workers' Theatre Movement, born out of discontent and struggle, was an integral part of the political movement of the working class. 1968, on the other hand, was a time of comparative prosperity, unemployment was low and the recession had not yet hit the Consumer Society. Nevertheless, the Labour government that had come to power in 1964 had failed to effect any of the expected radical changes. From the resulting disillusionment and the political awareness of students, intellectuals and young theatre workers, some of whom were from the working class, sprang the theatre of protest. (200-01)

The *événements* of Paris 1968 were certainly a powerful political catalyst. Related demonstrations in colleges and universities in Britain continued until 1970, yet it is important to note – as cultural historian Robert Hewison emphasises – that “the student revolts were of the privileged rather than the oppressed and could be contained [...] once the limits of official tolerance were reached”. Moreover, in contrast to the industrial struggle of workers in the past, the 1968 insurrections were a symptom of late capitalism's shift from production to consumption (150). Economic expansion created the myth of “a swinging meritocracy”,<sup>61</sup> even though “the classlessness of what was in fact a narrow metropolitan élite was questionable”. Hewison attributes the birth of the ‘counterculture’ to consumption, which “produced a curious parody of itself, a perverse inversion of its commodity values, a mirror image signalled by the prepositions and prefixes ‘under’, ‘anti’, ‘counter’” (143). The turmoil was therefore at the cultural – not the political – level: “In spite of a willingness to wear the icon of the Left's hero and martyr Che Guevara on their teeshirts, members of the underground eschewed conventional politics” and consumed “the offerings of commercial culture [...] with glee” (144-45).

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<sup>61</sup> Hewison takes this phrase from ‘London: The Swinging City’, a flattering article about the British capital published by *Time* magazine in 1966.

In political terms, the mood was indeed one of disillusionment with a Labour government that brought 'Wilsonism' rather than socialism and did not oppose the US continued military intervention in Vietnam.<sup>62</sup>

The truth was that while the progressive consensus of the sixties had replaced its conservative predecessor with a more expansive and liberal cultural regime, it was undermined by, on the one hand, the forces calling for more radical change than it was willing to grant<sup>63</sup> and, on the other, by reaction against the changes that had been achieved. More profoundly, the British economy was proving less and less able to meet the demands for consumption that had been unleashed. (157)

Paraphrasing Goorney, recession soon hit the Consumer Society, with an international monetary crisis and the initial signs of the resultant trade union unrest which would become customary in the next decade.<sup>64</sup> As early as 1970, there was not only the return of a Conservative government but also "a sense [...] that whatever had been thought was going to happen in 1968 was not going to happen after all" (158).

For political theatre, this meant another significant divergence from the WTM path. Rather than insisting on "a 'positive' message" that would encourage confidence in the final victory of the proletariat (Samuel, "Theatre and Socialism" 54-55), the playwrights of the 1968-1978 movement – despite their strong commitment to social change – "seemed fascinated by political failure" (Hewison

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<sup>62</sup> However, Wilson refused to allow British troops to become involved in the conflict.

<sup>63</sup> Two groups splintered from the Labour Party: the International Marxist Group (1964) and the International Socialists, which in 1969 became the Socialist Workers' Party (Hewison 145).

<sup>64</sup> As Hewison remarks, the 'cultural revolution' was shadowed by economic retreat, in which "the trades unions, which had been brought into the management of the economy in 1940, began to be excluded (by a Labour government) because their demands and their power were perceived to be a threat" (157).

178).<sup>65</sup> Their work involved “a presentation of public life as a spectacle of corruption producing cynicism and despair in the individual who attempts to confront it” (Bull 7-8). For Bull, it was such despair – and not the ‘unprecedented political consciousness and activism’ described by Itzin – that triggered the new movement (10).<sup>66</sup>

### **Agitprop and avant-garde**

Within the overall distinction illustrated above, it is still possible to discern two strands in the ‘alternative’ scene, in relation to how closely they identified, at least in theory, with the earlier tradition of workers’ theatre. The first companies to appear in the 1960s – CAST (Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre) and Red Ladder (originally called Agit Prop Street Players) – as well as the later 7:84, positioned themselves alongside the working-class. Conversely, most of the major dramatists of this generation came from the radical intelligentsia as depicted by Hewison. This has led to a separation, in the historiography of the period, between two camps, metonymically called ‘avant-garde’ and ‘agitprop’ by Bull. The former, best represented by Hare and Brenton’s Portable Theatre,<sup>67</sup> “occupied the territory of a counter-culture intent on bypassing the discourse of orthodox political debate, whilst the agit-prop groups remained essentially a part of activist class struggle” (Bull 25). According to Maria DiCenzo, the “anarchic and iconoclastic work” on the avant-garde side was created by practitioners who tended to be university-educated and theatre-trained. The agitprop groups, on the other hand, matched their commitment to the Labour movement with “more varied” socioeconomic and educational backgrounds (21-22).

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<sup>65</sup> Hewison’s examples are clear: “in 1972 David Hare’s *The Great Exhibition* explored the disillusion of a Labour MP; Brenton’s *Magnificence* of 1973 charted the failure of the Angry Brigade, and in the same year Trevor Griffiths’s *The Party* conducted a post-mortem on the dreams of 1968” (178).

<sup>66</sup> To be fair, Itzin’s diagnosis is not that different from Bull’s, as she recognises that the extraordinary “political consciousness and activism” sparked by 1968 (1) actually translated into “disillusionment, despair, pessimism – and anger”, even though it was still “appealing (however confusedly) to Marx as a symbol of the revolutionary transformation of society” (3).

<sup>67</sup> The People Show and the Pip Simmons Group have also been seen as emblematic of this trend.



From an aesthetic point of view, however, both trends were not mutually exclusive but rather 'symbiotically' related, "the *avant-garde* being increasingly infused with a didactic seriousness as the seventies advanced, and the agit-prop groupings readily borrowing techniques from fringe and alternative theatre" (Bull 25). This symbiosis, as has been stressed, is actually prevalent in the whole history of left-wing theatre in Britain. Samuel observed that at the turn of the twentieth century the Fabian-led Stage Society constituted "the sounding board of the theatrical avant-garde" ("Theatre and Socialism" 9-10), and yet it was the later "workerist turn in socialist politics [which] led to, or at least was accompanied by, a remarkable openness to experimentalism". There was in fact "an alliance between communism and the *avant-garde*", in which "communists and socialists took up, or were taken up by, modernist movements" ("Introduction" xx). At the same time – just as would happen in 1970s agitprop – the instrumental aims limited the artistic ones: "the restriction either to audiences of the converted or else to a heterogeneous mass of passers-by, does not seem to have been a fruitful context for genuine experiment" ("Theatre and Socialism" 58).

Politically, the friction between the two camps originated in two different interpretations of Marxism, the orthodox one considered more 'authentic' for those who were suspicious of revisionism. Sandy Craig, co-founder of 7:84, exemplifies this apprehension in his defence of the agitprop strand:

Rejecting the inverted glamour and cult syndrome of the underground, CAST and Red Ladder developed a more authentic Marxist theatre. They showed that the primary focus of capitalist oppression is at the point of production. In this they opposed the influential analysis of the time derived from the International Situationists – and, in a different way, from the emerging Women's

Liberation Movement – which saw the primary focus of oppression as operating at the point of consumption. (33)

The influence of Situationism on the counterculture, and particularly on British alternative theatre, is well documented. Peacock even traces it back a generation to the appeal that Anarchism – as an anti-authoritarian form of socialism – had for the New Left in the 1950s and for political dramatists like John Arden and Edward Bond in the early 1960s. The Situationist International, an “offshoot of the Anarchist movement” (Peacock 66), formed in 1957 with members coming from different groupings in the European avant-garde, but its two manifestos – Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* and Raoul Vaneigem’s *The Revolution of Everyday Life* – appeared in 1967, providing inspiration for the ensuing student revolts. A significant source of neo-Marxist thought at the time, Situationism is crucial to understand the direction taken by an important section of the alternative movement.

As Megson argues, “Debord’s primary contention is that direct, lived experience in contemporary society has been obliterated by its abstraction, its ‘representation’” (“The Spectacle is Everywhere” 21). The term ‘spectacle’ thus refers to “an all-pervasive form of commodification in which human interaction is dominated by images”. This indeed implies not only a shift of focus from production to consumption, but also a step further in Marx’s concept of alienation: after ‘being’ has been displaced by ‘having’, ‘having’ is substituted by ‘appearing’ (White, “The Drama of Everyday Life” 35). In this context, if art is not to become compromised – as the Situationists believed had happened in other Modernist avant-gardes – it must be able to somehow ‘disrupt the spectacle’. One tactic to advance this disruption was Debord’s concept of *détournement*, or “the ‘turning around’ of perceptions of a phenomenon through the strategic, but often playfully irreverent, reconstitution of its familiar elements” (Megson 22). Another method,

the one advocated by Vaneigem, was 'subjective refusal', that is, "a celebration of moments of 'transcendent' love and violence" (White 39).

The early plays of Hare, Brenton and Edgar have been linked, even by the dramatists themselves, to Situationism, judged by Edgar "a genuine (if politically misguided) revolutionary culture" (*The Second Time as Farce* 43). In a 1975 interview – appropriately named "Petrol Bombs through the Proscenium Arch" – Brenton typified the difference between his work and that on the proselytistic side when he confessed: "When it comes to agit-prop, I like the agit, the prop I'm very bad at" (20). Hare, in turn, acknowledged that Portable Theatre's aim was simply to take "anarchist plays around the country in order to shock people by putting plays on in places where they weren't expected" (qtd. in Peacock 64). That these plays can be described as "a series of assault courses in which the audience was frequently as much the target as the ostensible subject-matter" (Bull 16-17), indicates another substantial divergence between the two camps identified above, namely, their intended publics. Edgar offers a suitable explanation: "The style and content of the Portable plays did not attract a working-class audience. Nor was it likely to: the theory of the capitalist spectacle was developed precisely to explain the lack of proletarian consciousness in the post-war western countries" (25-26).

DiCenzo argues that while the aim of the counterculture was often to shock its (predominantly middle-class) spectators, agitprop groups were interested in "building a positive, communicative relationship with their audiences" in order to promote collective action within the working-class (23). This led – in her view – to the engagement with popular forms of entertainment, which tended to be participatory, and to the growth of community-based theatre in which "playing 'at' people" was replaced by "playing 'with' and 'for' them" (51). Brenton recognised these two approaches in his involvement with the Brighton Combination in the 1960s, attributing them to a conflict between political and artistic priorities: "There was the idea that theatre should be communicative

work, socially and politically active. There was the idea of very aggressive theatrical experiment. And there was always the tension in the Combination [...] between theatre and community work. They really are a socially active group now, not a theatre. I went the theatre way" ("Petrol Bombs" 7). If Brenton's words help to understand how "[he] could finish up writing for a National Theatre that John McGrath [...] said he 'would run about twenty-five miles from'" (Bull 17), they also earned him a fair amount of criticism. DiCenzo, for instance, finds it "striking that a writer emerging from a radical fringe movement could define 'theatre' as narrowly as he seemed to at that point". Yet she admits that "writers like Brenton, Hare and Edgar did not abandon political plays, they just came to argue for the importance of producing those plays within mainstream institutions" (21).

The validity (or otherwise) for the move into the mainstream has been one of the most contested points in discussions about political theatre in the last three decades, so much so that – in a review of DiCenzo's book – Reinelt claims that the "fairly typical division of alternative theatre into 'avant-garde' and 'popular/community' categories [...] unfortunately contributes, through reinscription, to a not-very-productive residue about who was really politically committed and who was only interested in achieving an artistic career" (157-58). In a different context, Kershaw also rejects the idea of a split between avant-garde and agitprop, declaring that groups like The People Show and CAST "represent the ends of a single spectrum" and that "there was no contradiction [...] between membership of the counter-culture and class-based activism" (*The Politics of Performance* 68, 86). While Reinelt's warning is important and Kershaw's analysis underlines the hybridity of this theatre, the avant-garde / agitprop distinction – even if conceived as part of a continuum – allows for an examination of ideological differences within the alternative movement and their projection into the contemporary scene.

## 4.2 Arguments for the present

The label 'alternative' has been widely used as an umbrella term to identify the (aesthetically) innovative and (politically) subversive theatre which emerged from the mid 1960s. The 'alternativeness' invoked here refers simultaneously to a number of features: economics, structures, venues, audiences, content, form (Itzin, "Alternative Theatre in the Mainstream"), and thus "it is by no means always easy to distinguish between groups that were 'alternative' in the sense of being simply theatrically different [...] and those that were 'alternative' because they pursued an ideologically oppositional policy" (Kershaw, *Politics* 47). Craig considers the alternative theatre movement as a second 'rejection of tradition' after the establishment of subsidised theatre. Its alternativeness is therefore constructed not just against the commercial sector but also against the previous 'bourgeois' revolution begun in the mid 1950s, whose twin shortcomings were evident for Craig: an aesthetic preference for naturalism coupled with an institutional commitment to theatre buildings (10-14). Institutionalisation and its obsession with 'bricks and mortar' seemed the great enemies of alternative theatre, as Simon Trussler's cautionary note in 1975 reveals.

We must surely now see the dangers of institutionalizing the National Theatre and the RSC. Who, ten years ago, would have dreamt that we would actually be opposing bright new buildings for them? (Opposing them? We were campaigning for them!) And how far is our opposition now a genuine recognition that theatre is not made of concrete, how far a matter of economic sour grapes? [...] By building alternative theatre into a structure, however fluid, you create yet another vested interest in inertia – so that in ten years time we would need to find ways of removing the 'alternative' oligarchs from power, just as we now wish to find ways of limiting

the fund-absorbing power of the permanent companies for whose better funding we were all fighting in the 'sixties. (12)

If 1975 was a moment of deep introspection for the alternative movement, then Brenton's "Petrol Bombs" interview typifies the desperate solutions available at that point. Brenton's unambiguous diagnosis is of a failure of "the whole dream of an 'alternative culture' – the notion that within society you can grow another way of life" (10). Yet his proposed strategies point to diametrically opposite routes. On the one hand, he contends that "[if] you're going to change the world, well, there's only one set of tools, and they're bloody and stained but realistic. I mean communist tools" (11). On the other, he justifies his decision of writing for the subsidised sector. "I want to get into bigger theatres, because they are, in a sense, more public", he declares, acknowledging at the same time that "the theatre is a bourgeois institution: you have to live and work against that" (10).

In a recent study about theatre associated with the organised labour movement, Filewod and Watt read Brenton's allusion to 'communist tools' as a recognition by the then flawed counterculture that the only way forward was to forge links with the working class (20). They argue that these worker-student alliances became the seed for 'strategic ventures' which are still operating today, despite subsequent crises in unionism and the destabilisation of class politics.<sup>68</sup> At the start, however, these partnerships were fraught with difficulties, particularly when the routine of "collective bargaining" and "pragmatic reformism" – rather than "revolutionary change" – hit the theatre activists. As they "discovered that most union activism happened around a table, rather than on the picket line, many dropped by the wayside; those who didn't learn how to accommodate the realities of union work and to work within labour culture" (38-39).

Despite his rhetoric and some attempts at agitprop during the 1980s, Brenton in effect took the second path, his most recent work being produced by

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<sup>68</sup> Their example in Britain is Banner Theatre.

the National and Globe theatres. It is Edgar nonetheless who has most vigorously defended the incursion of his generation in the mainstream, particularly in this controversial proclamation from 1978: "It seems to me demonstrably if paradoxically true that the most potent, rich, and in many ways politically acute theatrical statements of the past ten years have been made in custom-based buildings patronised almost exclusively by the middle-class" (rpt. in *Second Time* 41). Edgar's call has been to accept that if political theatre created an audience, it was not a working-class crowd but rather one "which was now employed, by and large, in the social and educational sectors of the public sectors of the public service, in political pressure groups or in the media" (164).

In Edgar's version of events, worker-student alliances did appear as a result of a resurgence of class activism after Heath's victory in 1970, but as such they did not survive the decline in proletarian militancy that followed the defeat of the Conservative government in 1974. He claims that "as the libertarians in the squats became progressively distanced from the Leninists outside the factory gates, so the performance artists (in particular) grew increasingly remote from the more didactically political groups with whom they had previously collaborated" (229). By 1975 there was, in Edgar's assessment, a loss of "innocence" and a realisation that "anybody seriously attempting to represent the times that followed was inevitably going to be dealing with complexity, contradiction, and even just plain doubt" (230).

DiCenzo accuses Edgar of being "quite unselfconscious about his own bias as a viewer" and thus unaware of the impact that theatre for working-class audiences – "which might not be accessible to him" – can make. She also offers strong arguments for the concern with "incorporation or absorption of interventionist works by the dominant institutions" (33, 34). It is expected that such arguments would surface in DiCenzo's study, primarily dedicated to the work of John McGrath. McGrath's public response to Edgar in the pages of *Theatre Quarterly* was perhaps the most eloquent illustration of the growing ideological

gap within political theatre at the end of the 1970s. 'Saddened' by Edgar's assessment of a failure of touring theatre, his alleged "indifference to the development of working class culture", the pretext he gives theatre makers for "deserting the working class [...] for the cosmopolitan cultural elite" and his reduction of theatre to "a presentation of texts, leading to an acceptance of the most reactionary structures", McGrath accused Edgar of both ignorance and confusion ("The Theory and Practice of Political Theatre" 54). He sought to clarify the situation by identifying three areas of political theatre:

first, the struggle within the institutions of theatre against the hegemony of the 'bourgeois' ideology within those institutions; secondly, the making of a theatre that is *interventionist* on a political level, usually outside those institutions; and thirdly and most importantly, the creation of a counter-culture based on the working class, which will grow in richness and confidence until it eventually displaces the dominant bourgeois culture of late capitalism. (44, original emphasis)

McGrath did not condemn the first strategy ("we are not in a position to throw any weapon away"), but complained that "as good as these works may be, the process is not contributing to the creation of new, genuinely oppositional theatre". Socialist plays in the subsidised sector, he argued, "are in constant danger of being appropriated in production by the very ideology they set out to oppose" (46). McGrath's commitment remained firmly on the non-institutional side. Like Edgar, he appreciated the limits of what he named 'interventionist' theatre (the second strand in his model), inasmuch as "the single-issue agitprop piece very rarely actually persuades anybody intellectually" (49). Yet his recipe to deal with complexity – expressed in the third and most important part of his paradigm – was very different from Edgar's: a genuinely alternative theatre for



the working class, embedded in working-class forms and values but able to tackle broad ideological questions.

Like Joan Littlewood's before him, McGrath's legacy in the search for an authentic popular theatre is indisputable. However, his analysis was clearly attached to an orthodox version of Marxism in which, at the very least, working-class culture would – as stated above – 'eventually displace the dominant bourgeois culture'. Even though McGrath denied seeing socialism as "the creation of a utopia or the end of the dialectic of history" (43) and subscribed to Raymond Williams' questioning of the "determining nature" of the relation between economic 'base' and cultural 'superstructure' (44), his confidence in the axioms of historical materialism seemed extraordinarily unscathed in 1978. Not only was he convinced that "the contribution of political theatre to the struggle of the labour movement for the emancipation of the whole of society from capitalism can only mean anything if seen in class terms", but also that "capitalism [...] creates a working class whose interests are opposed to it and who will overthrow it" (46). Translating this linear blueprint into the cultural arena – and borrowing Williams' categories from *Marxism and Literature* (1977) – McGrath saw the commercial theatre as the *residual* part, the "subsidized establishment" as *dominant*, and the political fringe (in the way he envisaged it) as the *emergent* element that would in due course come to the fore (44-45).

McGrath developed the principles sketched in the aforesaid article in his first book *A Good Night Out* (1981). Nadine Holdsworth observes with regret that almost at the same time as he was writing this work in 1979, "the society he presumed as its *raison d'être* was disappearing – a situation which McGrath tried to make retrospective sense of a decade later in [his second book] *The Bone Won't Break*" (30). Whilst providing evidence that 7:84 (England) did have "a radical impact in attracting a regular working-class audience in certain locations"

(35),<sup>69</sup> Holdsworth laments that the conditions which enabled the company to thrive were “displaced by the promotion of individualism initiated by Thatcherism, continued under Majorism, and embraced by New Labour” (38).

In an interview conducted in 2004, two years after the death of John McGrath, Edgar had the opportunity to reflect back on their old debate:

There was a period in the 1970s [...] when it appeared that it was possible to build a mass popular audience, a working class audience. That project did not succeed, but John continued heroically pursuing it, and did have considerable successes, particularly in Scotland, but not exclusively there. You could see him as either an exception or a reproach. But I don't believe, if I'd carried on working with agitprop [...] or any number of the people who started out in that realm and moved into the so-called conventional mainstream theatre, I don't think that would have worked. (“Politics, Playwriting, Postmodernism” 45)

Edgar has recently proposed a triangular ‘geometry’ of culture which, unlike McGrath’s linear one, accounts for the dynamic interaction that exists between different conceptions of artistic practice. Rather than emphasising theatre sectors – commercial, subsidised and alternative – Edgar’s description focuses on the cultural models behind them, named ‘popular’, ‘patrician’ and ‘provocative’ respectively. According to this scheme, “the 1940s high-art-as-civilizer model [the ‘patrician’] had enabled the 1960s art-as-subverter model [the ‘provocative’] to grow and flourish”. Thatcher’s strategy in the 1980s was thus to use the ‘popular’ model in order to destroy this alliance: “Under the discipline of the market-place, the producers of art would be forced to provide what its consumers wanted, which was that which would be least likely to disrupt

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<sup>69</sup> The English branch of the company folded in 1985, after losing its grant from the Arts Council. The Scottish company continued until 2008 (although McGrath left in 1988, following disagreements with the Scottish Arts Council).

and disturb" ("Provocative Acts" 14). When the provocative angle is taken out of the equation, "the patrician biodegrades into the conventional [...] and the popular into the plebeian and the philistine" (17).<sup>70</sup> However, Edgar believes that the transformations brought about by writers, directors and actors from the alternative movement into the patrician theatre's rehearsal room were so profound that they even survived the 'counter-intervention' that affected funding, structure and programme in the subsidised sector under Thatcherism. And, later, the 'provocative' was welcomed again into these venues alongside the new wave of dramatists that emerged in the mid-1990s ("Politics" 46).

Bull suggests that whether the "intrusion" of political drama "into the repertoires of the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the provincial theatres, and even to some extent the West End", can be interpreted as a subversion of the mainstream by the alternative or as a take over of the alternative by the mainstream depends on "your point of view" (4). Yet even a scholar as hostile to theatre institutions as Kershaw recognises that, at least in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a "dialectic between successful opposition and debilitating incorporation" (*Politics* 8). The obvious line separating 'mainstream' and 'alternative' has since turned fuzzy, as both Bull and Kershaw acknowledge when revisiting the subject for *The Cambridge History of British Theatre* (2004). In this volume, Bull notes how the mainstream is "a constant that is always changing in response to its changing context" (327), while Kershaw asserts that, from the 1990s, "the brave new world of post-modern culture productively undermined the distinctions that had sustained a sense of alternative theatre as a movement or fringe theatre as a sector during the previous three decades" (371).

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<sup>70</sup> He illustrates: "It is an exaggeration to say that the counter-culture set out to replace *Hamlet*, Keats and Beethoven with Dario Fo, Bob Dylan and Velvet Underground but ended up giving a progressive imprimatur to Casualty, Jeffrey Archer and the Spice Girls. But it's not *too* far from the truth" (17).

## Post avant-garde political theatre

Kershaw's engagement with postmodern theory in *The Radical in Performance* (1999) led him to argue that the 'disciplinary system' inscribed in the conventions of theatre as a building-based activity rules out any actual oppositional effect. These intrinsic limitations would have been exacerbated from the mid-1980s, when the theatre was forced to "succumb to a commodification that stifles radicalism in the moment of its birth" (23). In such circumstances, 'political theatre' becomes no more than an historical category, to be replaced by Kershaw's formula of 'radical performance', only viable outside the institutional environment. This deep-seated distrust of conventional venues comes also from an important insight spelled out by Kershaw in his earlier work, that "*the context of performance directly affects its perceived ideological meaning*" (*Politics* 33, original emphasis).<sup>71</sup> Still, to dismiss the political relevance of *any* production in the established subsidised sector is to rely on context alone, whilst the construction of meaning in performance most certainly arises from an interplay of content, form *and* context.

For all of Kershaw's recent emphasis on the destabilisation of binaries, he creates a very rigid and value-laden dichotomy of performance inside/outside institutions. Edgar's conceptualisation, on the contrary, by detaching institutional arrangements from the ideological models with which they have been historically associated, provides a more appropriate framework to identify political significance in a contemporary theatre where the division between mainstream and alternative is no longer clear.<sup>72</sup> There is, however, a productive distinction to draw akin to Kershaw's idea of 'political theatre' versus 'radical performance', namely that involved in the concept of 'applied' drama/theatre. As Helen

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<sup>71</sup> Here, Kershaw seems theoretically closer to John McGrath and his remark that "it is through its structures as much as through its product that theatre expresses the dominant bourgeois ideology" ("Theory and Practice" 44). Kershaw quotes from McGrath to support his argument about context, but framing McGrath's contribution within the discipline of performance theory (*Politics* 23).

<sup>72</sup> Edgar's response to Kershaw's position is rather blunt: "The idea that great drama is independent of institutions is nonsense" ("Politics" 47).

Nicholson explains, the term has been in use since the 1990s and is “a kind of shorthand to describe forms of dramatic activity that primarily exist outside conventional mainstream theatre institutions, and which are specifically intended to benefit individuals, communities and societies” (2). Nicholson locates the roots of these forms in drama education, community and alternative/political theatres, indicating that “there is both radicalism and an instrumentalism about applied drama” (6). Whilst Nicholson is justifiably worried about overlooking the aesthetic elements of this theatre in favour of its utilitarian goals, on the one hand, and falling into old exclusionary conventions of *pure* aesthetics, on the other (6-7), the definition of applied drama as a distinctive practice helps us to understand at least two different ways in which the terms ‘political’ and ‘theatre’ currently intersect.

Generally speaking, it can be said that what was once the ‘alternative theatre movement’ branched off in two directions. One of them, which tends to occur outside institutions and falls into the concept of applied drama, is concerned – in DiCenzo’s words – with playing *with* and *for* people rather than *at* them. The other is what Brenton perhaps rather clumsily called ‘the theatre way’. In the context of this research, an appropriate denomination for the latter, which brings radical politics back into conventional spaces,<sup>73</sup> would be that of *post avant-garde political theatre* [see 1.3]. Aesthetic considerations are important in both types of practice, yet the priorities are different: whereas applied drama focuses on ‘process’ rather than ‘product’, political theatre operates within the routines of professional theatre making (although, as Edgar insists, these were significantly transformed by the arrival of ‘alternative’ practitioners in the mainstream). The participation of the audience is also critical in both instances, but it takes diverse shapes in each case. Within applied drama, Nicholson identifies three avenues for the public to get involved: “as reflexive participants in different forms of drama

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<sup>73</sup> Nicholson considers the Royal Court productions of *Saved*, *Blasted* and *Far Away* as “radical theatre, but none the less [in] a conventional performance space” (8).

workshops, as thinking members of theatre audiences, or as informed and creative participants in different forms of performance or theatre practices" (10). Clearly, only the second conduct is available for text-based political theatre in institutional stages,<sup>74</sup> but its impact should not be underestimated. In a way, applied drama approaches the surrealist dream of unifying art and life, inasmuch as it is "primarily concerned with developing new possibilities for everyday living rather than segregating theatre-going from other aspects of life" (4). Nevertheless, the price for the potential of direct intervention is a dose of instrumentalism, as mentioned above. Post avant-garde political theatre, by contrast, accepts its limits *as* theatre and *within* an institutional framework. Its political effect is therefore always indirect, but vital in the preservation and extension of a democratic public sphere.

Edgar recalls that, in the beginning, his generation and its audience shared a consensus about the state of British society and the necessity for radical change. Still, inspired by Situationism, political playwrights saw the public in adversarial terms. With the "privatisation of concern" brought about by Thatcherism, "the attitude of the play-going middle class to the new radical theatre [altered] from one of nervous acquiescence to one of impatient rejection". Thus, in the 1980s, "the audience really was an enemy, and we had to face up to the problem of finding ways of telling them things they almost certainly didn't want to hear" (*Second Time* 162, 166). Whatever arrogance was left in the dramatists' discourse, however, did not survive the seismic changes of the post-Cold War period, when a new dialogic ethos had to emerge. David Hare had already anticipated this in 1978. Reproaching the paradigmatic "Marxist playwright" for declaring "his [*sic*] allegiance", he commented: "To me this approach is rubbish, it insults the audience's intelligence [...] it is also a

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<sup>74</sup> Major subsidised companies and regional theatres do engage with their respective communities through 'open days' and workshops, particularly aimed at young people, but these activities are separate from the possibilities of interaction within a particular professional production, which is the focus here.

fundamental misunderstanding of what a play is. A play is [...] what happens between the stage and the audience" (Lecture 118). Edgar retrospectively acknowledges the same turn: "[In the 1970s and the 1980s] I think we confidently expressed: 'this is the way you should look at the world'. [...] Now, we are challenged to validate our political work because political theatre is on the defensive" ("Politics" 48).

As has been argued, contemporary political theatre thrives on the possibilities of open communication. This marks a fundamental difference between avant-garde and post avant-garde political drama. The latter adopts the 'communicative relationship' which had been characteristic of theatre aimed at working-class audiences [see above], even though it combines it with the aesthetic challenges inherited from the modernist tradition. A concrete example of this is the current use, in established venues, of two methods that originated in touring and community circuits: interviews as a source of dramaturgy [see 6.1] and post-show discussions as standard practice. Unlike applied drama, however, post avant-garde political theatre does not depend on an *actual* dialogue between performers and spectators, even less on a dedifferentiation of functions between these roles. As examined in Chapter 2, despite the fact that the contemporary public sphere offers unequal opportunities for participation, 'there can be no public sphere without a public'.

### **Current trends**

Recently, it has become accepted to acknowledge a revival of political plays in the United Kingdom. Even though reassessments of the generation of playwrights that emerged in the mid 1990s have unveiled previously overlooked political dimensions of the so-called in-yer-face drama, a decisive return towards politically driven theatre became apparent only at the beginning of the new millennium. In part as a reaction to the terrorist attacks of September 2001 in

America and the subsequent US/UK led invasion of Iraq, a constant stream of purposefully political work has indeed flooded British stages big and small. While this phenomenon has put the post-Cold War announcements of a supposed 'death of political theatre' definitely to rest, the question of how to classify this drama has generated multiple responses. New taxonomies of political drama have been proposed by Reinelt and Hewitt, who offer definitions applicable both in Britain and the US; Megson, who has assessed immediate theatrical responses to the Iraq War, and Edgar, who has attempted to identify the most prevalent styles within present British political plays.

Acknowledging the current ambiguities surrounding the concept of 'political theatre' on both sides of the Atlantic, Reinelt and Hewitt propose a model that groups contemporary work "under four main headings, recognizing [however] that few plays fall entirely into only one of these categories" ("Principles and Pragmatism" 4). The headings are *conventional-political*, *implicit-political*, *philosophical-political* and *activist-political*. Conventional-political means "plays whose central characters or events are political in the most ordinary sense of the term – government officials or rulers, engaged in decision-making, elections, international negotiations, war, and large or small scale institutional matters" (4). Reinelt and Hewitt's most recent British example of this kind is Michael Frayn's *Democracy* – a portrait of West Germany's Chancellor Billy Brandt and his (secret East Germany spy) assistant Günter Guillaume during the Cold War - but David Hare's *Stuff Happens* (2004), a partly quoted / partly imagined depiction of the events leading to the Iraq War, must be added. Performances characterised as implicit-political, on the other hand, "are not usually overtly or 'governmentally' political" but display an "ability to bring to life the complex facets of otherwise abstract principles [justice v. injustice, freedom v. equality, individual interests v. the common good] and to use apparently non-political materials to reference and investigate political topics" (4). Theatre that deals with identity politics is included



here, with Joe Penhall's *Blue Orange* (2000) and Judy Upton's *Sliding with Suzanne* (2001) as British illustrations of this trend.

The third grouping, philosophical-political, is reserved for those works that "represent head-on the broadest, most fundamental political questions", where "the general and abstract principles [...] are the subject matter" (5, original emphasis). David Edgar's *Continental Divide* (2004) represents for Reinelt and Hewitt a successful transition from the conventional to the philosophical.<sup>75</sup> Finally, the category of activist-political is another name for agitprop (5), which according to the authors is currently in decline. Their only quoted contemporary example in Britain is Brenton and Ali's *Ugly Rumours* (1998), a satire on New Labour. However, a consideration of performances linked to the UK anti-war movement may augment this file.

The abundant response to the conflict in Iraq is indeed the core of Megson's classification of British contemporary political theatre. Within a narrower focus, he also distinguishes four strands:

straightforward political satire, revivals or adaptations of canonical plays that have used the Iraq War as a presiding intertext, small-scale theatre presentations that have been staged as part of anti-war protests, and forensic documentary performances that have, to a greater or lesser degree, drawn on transcribed verbatim testimony in order to track the political and diplomatic momentum towards war. ("This is All Theatre" 369)

In Megson's scheme, the first type can be represented by Justin Butcher's *The Dubya Trilogy* (2003-04), Alistair Beaton's *Follow My Leader* (2004) and *Embedded* (2004), directed by Tim Robbins, all of them using "the staple techniques of satire – caricature, grotesque comic inversion, and set-piece visual

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<sup>75</sup> Reinelt and Hewitt's article centres on the analysis of *Continental Divide*, two plays about a fictional election for state governor in the US.

metaphors" (369). The second component, interpretations and adaptations of classics, brings in a long list, from Shakespeare productions at the National Theatre (*Henry V* in 2003, *Measure for Measure* in 2004) to new versions of Greek tragedy (Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* and Frank McGuinness' *Hecuba*, both in 2004). An example of the third kind – a category equivalent to Reinelt and Hewitt's 'activist-political' – is Meeting Ground's project 'War Stories', which presented a series of short pieces on Iraq in 2003. And then there is verbatim theatre, in Megson's words, "the most striking feature of political theatre practice in Britain over the past decade" (370).<sup>76</sup>

Two of the strands Megson identifies – satire and verbatim – also figure in Edgar's own taxonomy of political theatre,<sup>77</sup> which, unlike Reinelt and Hewitt's, emphasises form over content. For Edgar, satire is a personal (and cynical) view of political processes, but it "does need to have some relationship with truth, otherwise it doesn't work". In verbatim theatre, by contrast, this relationship can be as forceful as if the authors were saying to the audience "we're going to do everything we can not to present a case to you, or not to be seen to be doing that" ("Politics" 48-49). The third form, which Edgar calls 'faction' (or a fictionalisation of facts), places the authorial voice in a middle position between these two poles:

What does a Faction form allow you to do? To present an entire thesis to be judged as a whole against your observation of reality, as opposed to constantly being tripped up by 'I wonder if that really happened'? [...] So a Faction [...] would have the advantage, because it wouldn't be saying 'this actually happened'; it would be saying 'what do you think of this thesis'? ("Politics" 49)

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<sup>76</sup> See Chapter 6 for a detailed analysis of this trend.

<sup>77</sup> Edgar presented this classification in a debate on 'Theatre and Politics' held at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in March 2004, coinciding with the British premiere of his *Continental Divide*. He also discusses it with Reinelt in "Politics, Playwriting, Postmodernism".

Edgar describes much of his current work as ‘faction’, as well as earlier plays like Hare’s *The Absence of War* (1993), a fictionalised account of Labour’s electoral defeat in 1992. What differentiates them clearly from the method used by Frayn in *Copenhagen* (1998) or *Democracy* is that the latter plays are peopled by factual characters, however much of the dramatist’s imagination has been invested in them. Edgar prefers to label these pieces “historical drama” (53), which, coincidentally, matches Hare’s portrayal of his own *Stuff Happens*.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, though, Edgar suggests that a certain type of history play – the Brechtian type (“plays set in foreign countries and/or the past, as a way of looking at the present”) – does not suit the contemporary stage: “That connection no longer works, not because people are stupid or unconscious, but because the architecture that made that connection [Marxism] is now discredited” (“Politics” 48). Despite the aptness of Edgar’s diagnosis, I will argue that Howard Brenton’s new drama is successfully drawing on ancient history to tackle urgent contemporary questions [see 5.2].

Edgar does acknowledge that his threefold categorisation only covers “techniques that are prominent in the post 9/11 world”, without accounting for innovative contributions to political drama, nor for old-fashioned but still moderately successful trends like ‘state of the nation’ or even ‘problem’ plays (“Politics” 52-53).<sup>79</sup> He also predicts that his taxonomy “will probably continue to develop” (“Politics” 53) and in a more recent article he already asserts that “one further expression of the New Political Theatre is theatre by and for Britain’s minority communities” (“Unsteady States” 308). Edgar’s example here is Birmingham Repertory Theatre’s engagement with black and Asian plays – and audiences – which has continued to grow notwithstanding the *Bezhti* affair in

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<sup>78</sup> The first line in Hare’s ‘Authors Note’ to the published version of this work is: “*Stuff Happens* is a history play” (vi).

<sup>79</sup> Edgar considers his *Continental Divide* as a ‘state of the nation’ play, “an attempt to set contemporary America in the context of its immediate past” (“Politics” 52). In Chapter 5 I argue that the later *Playing with Fire* (2005) clearly belongs to this category but it also subverts the form.

December 2004.<sup>80</sup> This later addition to Edgar's overview of current political drama, which departs from his earlier focus on form, can surely be absorbed within Reinelt and Hewitt's trend of 'identity plays'.

However provisional any classification of dramaturgy that has only emerged within the last decade must be, the aforementioned attempts at mapping contemporary political theatre are important in many respects. Firstly, they represent a critical step forward, beyond the simple grasp of a resurgence of this kind of drama and towards an interrogation of the ways in which it currently operates. Secondly, they recognise that the 'activist', 'agit-prop' or 'protest' strand of performance is not the most significant strand at present. This is not to dismiss the value of immediate theatrical responses to political events or the power of performance in street demonstrations, but to underline the presence of what Reinelt and Hewitt term the 'philosophical-political' as a key feature of many recent influential plays. Thirdly, and in direct relation to the second point, all the efforts to summarise the current scene in the UK that have been discussed above, reflect the richness and variety of this theatre. Edgar's commentary is especially interesting in this respect, as it provides a current picture where certain subgenres – satire, verbatim and faction – are foregrounded as dominant while others – history, 'state of the nation' and 'problem' plays – still exist, albeit more problematically than before.

### **Content, Form, Context**

David Greig, who considers himself a political playwright, famously declared:

I would like to draw a distinction between writing about politics and political theatre. I think it's possible for writing about politics not to be political and I think it's possible for writing that is not about

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<sup>80</sup> Gurpreet Kaur Batti's play at the Birmingham Rep was closed after violent protests and threats made by Sikh militants outside the theatre.

politics to be intensely political. What I would call political theatre makes interventions into ideology. [...] It poses questions about society to which it does not already know the answer. And perhaps most importantly, political theatre has at its very heart the possibility of change. ("Plays on Politics" 66)

The scheme developed by Reinelt and Hewitt is flexible enough to accept that a play does not necessarily belong to just one category. Moreover, their differentiation between the 'conventional' – theatre *about politics* – and the 'philosophical' – *political* theatre – puts the finger on the paradox highlighted here by Greig. Nevertheless, the either/or terms of this particular distinction are not productive.

In praise of *Continental Divide*, Reinelt and Hewitt stress that Edgar transforms two "plays that might pass as conventional-political to this more philosophical and basic consideration of politics through his generational and historical mapping of ideology and commitment, as well as his ability to illumine the substantive in the procedural" (5). Something very similar (minus the generational conflict) can be said about Frayn's *Democracy*, which is much more than either an investigation of Cold War minutia or political allegiance against personal loyalty. Yet neither *Democracy* nor *Antigone*, which is also named as an example of the 'conventional', oversteps the boundaries of Reinelt and Hewitt's first category. Whilst they do describe conventional-political drama as "often demonstrating how apparently minor or routine matters of practice (procedural, legal and official) can entail major issues of justice, liberty, loyalty or (the abuse) of power" (4), they reserve the label of 'philosophical' for plays that tackle these latter issues directly. This difference however appears inconsequential, as their comparison confounds two parallel axes. In terms of *subject matter*, both *Democracy* and *Continental Divide* – as much as *Antigone* – can be considered equally 'conventional': they are plays about politics populated by politicians (plus

their families, at least in the latter two). At the same time, there are strong grounds for ascribing philosophical-political *meanings* to each of these three examples. In other words, *Continental Divide* does not become less conventional in subject matter for being more philosophical in meaning, and the opposite is true for *Democracy*.

Reinelt and Hewitt's categories could be better employed if reorganised in pairs at the opposite ends of two parallel lines. The first continuum would indicate subject matter, with the *explicit* (a more exact and less value-laden denomination than 'conventional') at one end, and the *implicit* at the other. Addressing a deeper dimension, which may be called 'meaning' for want of a better word, the second continuum would have the *philosophical* and the *activist* at the extremes. If, as Greig argues, political theatre does both, "poses questions about society to which it does not already know the answer" and "has at its very heart the possibility of change", placing philosophy away from activism would appear misguided. But the agitprop tradition, too aware of Marx's warning ("the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it") has always preferred tactical simplification of answers *already known*. Philosophical-political plays, on the contrary, are defined by their complexity, and the Scottish dramatist's work itself is much closer to this end of the spectrum. As Dan Rebellato points out, "when David Greig claims that 'political theatre has at its very heart the possibility of change', the emphasis is precisely on *possibility* more than change as such" ("And I Will Reach Out..." 76, original emphasis).

As has been suggested, Reinelt and Hewitt's classification is concerned mainly with content, while Edgar's draws attention to form. Edgar's three main categories are already placed in a continuum, which he establishes in terms of the distance between 'reality' and the authorial voice.<sup>81</sup> This is a very useful device,

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<sup>81</sup> In his contribution to the aforesaid 'Theatre and Politics' debate at the Birmingham Rep, theatre critic Michael Billington proposed to add a fourth category to this range: purely imaginative political plays. He illustrated this trend with the work of Harold Pinter. However, I would contend that even the

because it allows not only degrees of separation between satire, faction and verbatim theatre but also within the latter type itself. For instance, Edgar notes a difference in the work of the Tricycle Theatre between *Half the Picture* (1994) and *Guantanamo* (2004), on the one hand, and the rest of the 'tribunal plays' on the other. The latter seem to avoid "a dramatic structure" and to limit as much as possible the intervention of the writer (Edgar, "Politics" 48), something that Megson examines as a move from an 'interventionist' to an 'observational' paradigm, and away from theatricality [see 6.1].

Megson's discussion in this respect revisits a long controversy about political theatre and form. Marked by Brecht's well-known distinction between *dramatic* and *epic* theatre, there has been a strong assumption amongst political writers and practitioners that identifies the 'interventionist paradigm' – as Megson calls it – as the only valid way of making audiences aware of political problems (this is in spite of a respectable tradition of political drama that employs realism as its preferred strategy).<sup>82</sup> Jon Erickson offers a persuasive and comprehensive solution to the old illusionism/theatricality debate by relating these two styles to the wider context of two competing philosophical perspectives, Habermas' theory of communicative action and Foucault's critique of the power/knowledge system respectively. Recognising the impossibility of a total separation of these two strands of performance (even the most naturalistic play, he stresses, entails some kind of theatricality), Erickson suggests, however, a series of dichotomies to clarify the connection – and the interdependence – between both trends. On the one hand there is "realist dialogical drama"; on the other, "avant-garde deconstructive monologism" (158). Where the former promotes dialectics, the latter uses rhetoric (159); while politics for the former means collective action, for

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most fantastic plots – for example, Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* [see 7.1] – need a connection with 'reality' in order to function as political theatre.

<sup>82</sup> In a recent exploration of post- Second World War political theatre in Britain, Michael Patterson divides his material using the same vocabulary. He distinguishes between 'reflectionist' or 'realist' plays and an opposite strand he calls 'interventionist', 'modernist' or 'Brechtian'.

the latter it equals individual 'resistance' (163). Erickson's starting point is, again, political theatre's customary rejection of illusionism:

The "realism" that political-theatre theorists dismiss or complain about can be called "dramatic realism," insofar as it tries to conceal and efface the apparatus of presentation – that is, theatricality – in an attempt to enhance the illusion of reality of its subject-matter. And we can call the other "theatrical realism". It is applied in all uses of self-conscious ideology-unmasking theatre – insofar as it either concentrates on showing the reality of the apparatus of illusion (or at least refusing to conceal it), but in the best instances attempting to create a self-conscious dialectical relation between the form of presentation and the content, the matter that is represented. [...] I will refer to "theatrical realism" as "theatricalism." (160)

'Theatricalism' according to Erickson (and despite its modernist, Brechtian undertones) exists today in direct relation to the Foucault-inspired postmodern politics of resistance. Foucault's suspicions about the inherently exclusionary mechanisms of what he called the power-knowledge system lead, in Erickson's view, to a rejection of "dialogue as a necessary mode of understanding" (165). On stage, this is illustrated by "much contemporary avant-garde performance [where] the dialogical has been either eliminated or reduced to monologue, even if distributed between performers" (164). Erickson also locates historical cases of 'monologism' in radical forms of identity politics such as 'Black Power' (171) and "in all sorts of guerrilla and agitprop theatre, for example, Bread and Puppet Theatre, San Francisco Mime Troupe, Teatro Campesino, and Welfare State International", where the tendency is "toward melodrama, toward a clear demarcation between good and evil forces" (181). By contrast, the Habermasian



belief in communicative rationality connects for Erickson with the tradition of dramatic realism.

Dialogue in the theatre does not have the same ideal ethical sense it has in political terms. Dialogue in the theatre is most often both site and cause of conflict itself. It is not the site of understanding, but the site of *mis*understanding; it does not point to justice, but reveals injustice. [...] But it would not have its power, its applicability to human situations, if it did not imply the possibility of the political ideal of dialogue, *true* dialogue, and the ideal of understanding, which itself depends upon a notion of the truth of any situation. (175)

Erickson's choice of an example of dialogical drama is (again) *Antigone*, which in his opinion encourages the audience "to understand the source of misunderstanding" (175). He also considers Shaw's 'problem plays', but finds them wanting, using an argument that echoes Greig's concern with political theatre's duty of presenting questions, not answers. Erickson believes that Shaw, unfortunately, provides both. In the end, Erickson favours something like Mamet's *Oleanna*, less "explicitly" political and "where the issue of sexual harassment plays but a catalytic role in what is really conceptually at stake in the play" (179). In Erickson's overall conclusion, theatricalism and dramatic realism are as complementary as the philosophies they represent. He values Foucault's micropolitics in its possible contribution "to the opening up of political space to formerly excluded constituencies and silenced voices". However, Erickson adds, "this is only the first step toward dialogical participation in the development of more just political institutions and the enculturation of more just social norms" (183-84).

Erickson's account certainly illuminates the relationship between politics and theatrical presentation. Even though his argument is with Foucault, Erickson

also provides a healthy corrective to the neo-Adornian view that political theatre is essentially a matter of form. Nevertheless, in identifying Habermasian dialogical position too squarely with realism, Erickson ignores the necessary interaction between form and content implied in Habermas' notion of post avant-garde political art [see 1.3].

There is a zone where most maps of contemporary political theatre converge. Reinelt and Hewitt value *philosophical* plays that boldly tackle the 'most fundamental political questions', while Greig insists on the importance of not knowing the answers to these questions in advance. Edgar hopes to present his audience with a thesis upon which they can exercise their judgment and Megson reports a move away from interventionist strategies. Is it simply that, as Edgar himself puts it, political theatre is now 'on the defensive'? Or has political theatre also found a new voice in what Erickson describes as a 'dialogical' mode of presentation? In fact, both these implications are accurate.

## Chapter 5: British Epic Theatre Reconstructed

Apart from *England's Ireland* (1972), a Portable Theatre project comprising seven writers, Edgar and Brenton have collaborated only once, on a topical satire about Britain joining the European Economic Community in 1973.<sup>83</sup> The play, *A Fart for Europe*, prompted an interesting comment from Jonathan Hammond: "[it] combined perfectly the respective talents of its authors, Edgar's solid factual and statistical research and Brenton's weird, original theatrical imagination" (qtd. in Boon 290). This statement captures in a nutshell the differences between Edgar, a former journalist, and Brenton, who wanted to be a painter and only at the last minute "dropped the art school and decided to get into Cambridge" ("Petrol Bombs" 5). It is not that Edgar's skills don't include a mastery of dramatic images, or that Brenton's visual devices are not "always predicated by something verbal" (12). Rather, that the former, even at his most instinctively theatrical, strives to achieve audience understanding, while the latter has gained a reputation for dealing "with uncomfortable and sometimes disturbing subject matter" and doing so "in ways specifically designed occasionally to shock and always to challenge his audiences" (Boon 4).

In terms of method, it is telling that Edgar founded Britain's first postgraduate course in playwriting at Birmingham University and has even collected his reflections on dramatic 'patterns' in a book (*How Plays Work*, 2009). Brenton, on the other hand, once amusingly declared, "I have never come across any general theory that is of any practical use to those of us who actually make plays and shows" ("Preface" to *Plays One* xii). As discussed in Chapter 4, their artistic differences also reflect their political trajectories: whilst Edgar learnt his trade in the didacticism of agitprop, Brenton did so from the fringe's anarchic energy. Both playwrights then converged on the subsidised stage, becoming authors of influential state-of-the-nation plays, yet their current work offers two

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<sup>83</sup> Brenton has more famously collaborated with David Hare in *Brassneck* (1973) and *Pravda* (1985).

divergent models of post-Cold War political theatre. Edgar's dramaturgy has evolved from a position of ideology critique into one of genuinely open communication. Brenton, in turn, has reconciled himself with the humanism he so derided in his younger years, albeit preserving a captivating tension between rational ideas and extreme passions.

## 5.1 David Edgar's *Playing with Fire*

When David Edgar's *Playing with Fire* opened at the National Theatre in September 2005, reviewers were quick to describe it with a label borrowed from British political theatre in the 1970s and 1980s, namely, as a state-of-the-nation play.<sup>84</sup> Paul Taylor in the *Independent* also perceptively noted that it was the first time since 1987 that Edgar had chosen to set a play in Britain (1174). Indeed, like many of his contemporaries, Edgar spent the immediate post-Cold War period preoccupied with the 'state' of Europe and the world beyond, which he addressed in a celebrated trilogy comprising *The Shape of the Table* (1990), *Pentecost* (1994) and *The Prisoner's Dilemma* (2001), and then turned to American politics in the double bill *Continental Divide* (2003/2004). *Playing with Fire*, by contrast, drastically narrows the lens focusing on the fictional town of Wyverdale, in West Yorkshire.

The Wyverdale Labour Council has failed to achieve government targets and so a Westminster official, Alex Clifton, has been sent to intervene with a recovery plan, leading to disastrous consequences. As racial tensions intensify and the far-right party 'Britannia' appears on the scene, comparisons with Edgar's first state-of-the-nation play, *Destiny* (1976), are inevitable. In a recent study, Peter Billingham suggests that *Playing with Fire* should be considered part of another Edgar trilogy with *Destiny* and *Maydays* (1983): "The three plays

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<sup>84</sup> The concept was invoked by at least five critics: Paul Taylor in the *Independent*, Kate Basset in the *Independent on Sunday*, Susannah Clapp in the *Observer*, Charles Spencer in the *Daily Telegraph*, and Roger Foss in *What's On* (1173-1177).

together take us through a comprehensive dramatised history from the end of Empire beginning in 1947" to the current "re-emergence of the British National Party" (68). *Playing with Fire* begins "during an early term of a current British Government" (5). Edgar's acknowledged intention was to create a 'faction' based on the riots that occurred in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford during the summer of 2001, thus it is safe to assume that the play's timeframe is 2000-2001, at the end of Tony Blair's first period in office.<sup>85</sup>

*Playing with Fire* tackles two crucial political themes at once: the limits of multiculturalism and the conflict between 'Old' and 'New' Labour, expressed here also as a clash between local and central government. The differences between Southern/Metropolitan/New and Northern/Provincial/Old are kept within a light-hearted satirical style in the first part, during which Alex, a white woman in her late thirties, deals with an all-male Labour Council (with only two non-white members) using both rational argument and manipulative schemes to push the 'modernisation' agenda forward. The tone changes some months later in the last scene of act one, when a Holocaust remembrance ceremony turns nasty. The audience learns that a young white man has been killed in an incident involving Asian youths – a cause exploited by 'Britannia' – and Councillor Frank Wilkins resigns publicly from the Labour Party in protest against the new policies, in particular the grants given to ethnic organisations and the diversion of key funds to set up a 'translation unit'. Act 2 has only two long scenes. The first shows an inquiry into a riot that broke out several weeks later (during what was supposed to be a 'Festival of Faiths');<sup>86</sup> the second flashbacks to the evening of the riot,

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<sup>85</sup> Although his Labour government was returned to power with only a slightly smaller majority than that gained in 1997, the 2001 general election delivered an increase of votes for the British National Party leader Nick Griffin in Oldham after the riots. In the recent European election (June 2009) Griffin went on to win one of the first two MEP seats for the BNP for the North West region – the other was won in Yorkshire and Humber. The party obtained slightly less votes than in the previous election, yet its success was attributed to the comparative loss of Labour support.

<sup>86</sup> The inquiry scene, as instructed by Edgar, should follow the "feel, structure and groundrules" of the Tricycle's tribunal plays (83), but it also has a precedent in Edgar's own dramaturgy (see Bull, "Left in Front").

finishing with Alex confronting Frank's political move to the right and deciding to stay in Wyverdale as a community worker.

### **Beyond the nation-state?**

The question of whether *Playing with Fire* belongs to the state-of-the-nation tradition is more than a simple taxonomical matter. According to Dan Rebellato, political theatre as such still tends to be identified with this model, which he defines as: "(a) large-cast plays, with (b) a panoramic range of public (and sometimes private) settings, employing (c) epic time-spans (years rather than hours or days), and (d) usually performed in large theatres, preferably theatres with a national profile" ("From the State of the Nation to Globalization" 246). Presented at the Olivier – the biggest stage at the National Theatre – with a cast of 23 actors playing more than 40 characters, and set mainly in large meeting rooms, *Playing with Fire* fits three of these four categories to perfection. Compared to its predecessors, however, it lacks the "epic time-span". While its plot of just over a year could not be ranked as short, it does contrast sharply with the ambition of *Destiny*, covering the period from 1947 to 1976, and *Maydays*, from 1945 to the early 1980s. These previous plays are of course 'epic' not only in the literal sense (scale), but also dramaturgically, displaying Brechtian episodic techniques and a commitment to historicisation. As described by John Bull in 1984,

[Edgar's] general model is a variant of the epic, with frequent changes of location, and a series of jumps through history before eventually concentrating on a brief period in contemporary England. The effect is to show the way in which a current political reality is the product both of previous history and of the particular interventions and interrelations of individuals acting within that history. (*Political Dramatists* 170)

Both this earlier analysis and Bull's recent article "Left in Front: David Edgar's Political Theatre" (2006) chart the playwright's evolution from agitprop to an increasingly more sophisticated drama, as reflecting a growing awareness of the individual's role within collective history. Comparing *Destiny* and *Maydays* with each other, Bull concludes that whilst the latter's "political landmarks are still public", Edgar is here "far more concerned with the thinking behind individual choices and actions" ("Left in Front" 446). This change can also be understood as a move away from an orthodox version of Marxist history to one in which causality is still present but in a less deterministic fashion. As Richard Palmer points out in his survey of the British history play, "later Marxists emphasized that choices made by individuals or groups advance or retard the historical process, an assumption shared by Brecht" (14-15). Viewed in this context, is Edgar's refusal to dramatise past history in *Playing with Fire* (the only feature this play does not share with the state-of-the-nation model) a total break with Marxism, or even historical causality altogether? Edgar himself has candidly declared that Marxism has become 'discredited' [see 4.2]. Nevertheless, his own relationship with the Marxian legacy is more nuanced:

I always hesitate now when people ask me, 'Are you still a Marxist?' Well, no, I'm not a Marxist in that it's not serious to say [...] 'Workers of the world unite, you have nothing to lose but your chains'. [...] Am I Marxist in terms of do I think that Marx is right and that he gets righter and righter and righter in terms of his analysis of capitalism, imperialism and globalisation? In that sense I still am, but thinking that there remain severe and dramatic limitations. (Qtd. in Billingham 38-39)

I would argue that *Playing with Fire* is a fascinating example of the possibilities and limitations of the state-of-the-nation play in the post-Cold War era. Together with the rest of Edgar's current dramatic production, it can also be

interpreted as opening a path to Habermas' neo-Marxist reconstruction of historical materialism, his emphasis on dialogical praxis and his notion of a post avant-garde political art.

For Rebellato, the state-of-the-nation play is disappearing. He stresses however that its demise should not be lamented because contemporary political theatre has found more appropriate forms to address the globalised world in which we now live. In his redefinition of political theatre, realism, politics and 'messages first'<sup>87</sup> are out, replaced by non-realism, ethics and aesthetic experiment ("State of the Nation" 259). Rebellato, like Bull, recognises that state-of-the nation plays were constructed on the "coordination of private and public", but he also links these two aspects respectively with nation and state (249). He then contends that this coordination no longer works, insofar as the nation-state has been broken by globalisation, that is, nations have become increasingly fragmented and states (even when forming larger entities such as the EU) have lost power vis-a-vis the dominance of transnational capital. Translated into dramatic language, Rebellato argues, this problem destroys the coherence of state-of-the-nation plays: "their analysis of the state is hamstrung by trying to couple it to nation – because patterns of power and injustice extend well beyond the boundaries of nation – while the focus on nation is improperly widened to state level, and the particularity is lost" (254).

Rebellato is right to point to the problematic position of the nation-state, "the basic building block of a system of geopolitical organization dating back to the Peace of Westphalia of 1648" (248), under new global conditions. Within debates about the public sphere, this concern has been similarly articulated by Nancy Fraser, who criticises Habermas for conceiving the public sphere as a "Westphalian-national" phenomenon. In her view, this outdated paradigm implies a national citizenry capable of generating public opinion and a national state that

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<sup>87</sup> The phrase is borrowed from a 1973 interview with Howard Brenton.



can be taken to account, both of which have been undermined by globalisation.<sup>88</sup> Rebellato makes the same point when describing the present age as one “in which the national political institutions are being overpowered by global capital, and the international institutions that might give contingent force to our developing cosmopolitan sense have not yet been built” (259). The importance and urgency of developing what Fraser calls a “transnational public sphere” cannot be emphasised enough. Nonetheless, civil society at a national level is still a significant locus for the public sphere, despite the ever growing pressures imposed by global capitalism.<sup>89</sup> Habermas’ current theorisation of the public sphere as a set of overlapping meeting points across different chronological and geographical lines [see 2.1] indeed accommodates *both* national and transnational possibilities of communication.

The strength of Rebellato’s critique is to draw attention to contemporary political plays that extend beyond the borders of the nation-state in order to face ethical questions, which are always – in the Kantian formulation he follows – both universal and particular (256).<sup>90</sup> Yet he proposes no less than a renunciation of politics in favour of ethics: political theatre can survive in a globalised era as long as it does not deal directly with politics and it does not operate within the (supposedly obsolete) national public sphere. Political ‘content’ becomes redundant, displaced by pure ‘aesthetic experimentation’. As “it is harder and harder for the nation-state to be an adequate means of realizing our ethical commitments”, Rebellato writes, contemporary political dramatists “are offering a vision of ethical judgement and responsibility in a state where politics has failed us” (257). I believe this conclusion is somewhat defeatist, relying on an Adornian interpretation of political art in which ‘form alone’ is the only kind of resistance

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<sup>88</sup> This is the most recent development in Fraser’s reconstruction of the Habermasian public sphere, which she discusses in “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere” (2007).

<sup>89</sup> That the latest global economic crisis could only be tackled by state intervention, especially in the so-called ‘Anglo-Saxon economies’, has thrown into relief (at least temporarily) the limits of global *laissez faire*. At the same time, the crisis has underlined the urgency of effective economic regulation at a supranational level.

<sup>90</sup> Two of these plays, Kane’s *Blasted* and Churchill’s *Far Away*, are examined in Chapter 7.

available [see 1.3]. Whilst it is indisputable that the state-of-the-nation play is no longer the dominant model for political theatre, and that its twin focus on nation and state is an arduous balancing act, Edgar's work in particular still provides a viable version of post avant-garde political theatre as envisaged by Habermas. In other words, Edgar's plays show how the aesthetic realm (form) can interplay – sometimes more successfully than others – both with the moral realm (ethical deliberation) and the cognitive one (political content).

### **Structure versus character**

As Edgar's first state-of-the-nation play of the twenty-first century, *Playing with Fire* offers new directions for this genre within the contemporary zeitgeist. It is, however, a rather flawed piece of drama, precisely because it fails to deliver the symmetry between the personal and the political already achieved in *Destiny*. The received wisdom about the latter, recognised by Edgar himself, was that it attached complex three-dimensional characters onto a schematic agitprop structure. As a result, even Turner, the ex-sergeant turned candidate for the fascist 'Nation Forward' party, was "presented as a 'human being'" (Billingham 28). Two years later, in his theatrical adaptations of *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* and *Mary Barnes* (both from 1978), Edgar had further perfected this technique: "Audiences almost always become aware that characters represent different political positions, in a manner not systematically attempted on the British stage since Shaw, but [...] human individuality is not lost to political symbolism" (Bull, "Left in Front" 445).

By contrast, the predominantly negative critical reception of *Playing with Fire* in 2005 tells a different story. Almost reversing Bull's parallel, the *Daily Telegraph's* Charles Spencer claimed that with "ideas in abundance, so much clever talk, Edgar makes George Bernard Shaw seem downright taciturn. But of real human drama, and characters you genuinely come to care for, there is little evidence" (1174). Similar responses appeared in dissimilarly oriented

newspapers. "There's a nod to the notion that everyone's living up to a stereotype [...] but a nod isn't enough to convert caricatures into characters", said Susannah Clapp in the *Observer* (1175), as Mark Shenton from the *Sunday Express* complained, "most of the characters seem to be mere mouthpieces for particular attitudes rather than convincing as 'real' people" (1176). Paradoxically, it is the very attempt to leave behind any vestiges of agitprop that makes *Playing with Fire* less 'realistic' than *Destiny*. As Edgar tries to loosen the structure in order to represent all sides in the intricate themes the play tackles there is not enough room left to create convincing characters. As Billingham puts it, occasionally "the play struggles to support its ambitious aims [...] with a dramatic strategy and structure that necessitate a disproportionate amount of either direct address to audience narrative or versions of such". Therefore, despite Edgar's effort "to sketch in human detail and smudge, the characters sometimes feel like symptoms of old or new politics, white working-class or white bourgeois attitudes or British Asian [...] ethnic community politics" (69).

Even more of a paradox for a veteran left-wing writer like Edgar was perhaps being accused by the *Mail on Sunday* not of propaganda but of a lack of political conviction: "I wanted fingers to be pointed, but Edgar remains scrupulously – maddeningly – non-committal", stated Georgina Brown (1176). Again, this was a standard reaction to *Playing with Fire*, whether the play was deemed "intelligent, balanced and fair" (Nightingale 1173), or whether Edgar was criticised for offering no solutions (Spencer 1174, Marmion 1176) or being "like the judge at his own tribunal, impressive but distant" (Morley 1174). On the other hand, those who thought the play had a 'message' did not interpret it as a progressive one. Toby Young in the *Spectator* was pleased to report that there was "a great deal here that Tories will find sympathy with" (1172), while Michael Billington in the *Guardian* found Edgar's explanations for the failure of multiculturalism simplistic and mistaken: "He appears to suggest that New Labour, by diverting public money into politically correct gestures [...] has

somehow exacerbated racial tension [...]. But this seems to me a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't argument" (1173). Furthermore, the main character's final decision to withdraw from party politics – "apparently to lead a multiracial fitness class" – was read by *Evening Standard's* Nick Curtis as "a dramatic cop-out" (1174). In a similar vein, Aleks Sierz concluded that because "the issue of personal responsibility dominates the closing minutes [...] the personal shouts down the political" (1173).

Curtis' and Sierz' reservations are prompted by Alex Clifton's final speech, in which she faces up to Frank Wilkins' bid to stand as an independent and appeal to white voters (then, as it had already transpired in the inquiry scene, he wins the mayoral election). Frank, whose attempt to build an alliance with Alex backfired for both of them when he was dismissed from the cabinet to make room for an Asian representative – Councillor Rafique – blames her directly for the exacerbation of racial tension, while other Labour members blame her for Frank's defection. "I don't think we're to blame but I do think we're responsible", she tells Frank (138), and starts making a circle of upended chairs as a metaphor for the new ethos she has adopted:

And it's actually pretty simple. You go into a different room. And you turn yourself the other way up. And you stand inside the circle, and you put yourself in range.

*Slight pause.*

And therefore you give yourself the right to say there must be – there must always be – an alternative to going back home to your people.

*She stands, holding the last chair, looking at FRANK. [...]*

And you're right. I can hear me in you. And I can't have that. So if you stand, I'll stay. In fact, I'll stay as long as you do. Way beyond a week next Tuesday. Yes. That's what I have to do. (139)

Even though Alex does announce her intention to teach “white kids Asian dance” (139) and she is abandoning her original position of power for a lost battle (we already know that Frank will win the next election), her final gesture is not merely a retreat from politics in favour of personal responsibility. Rather, it signals the hope, however slight, for a different type of politics, in which real communication could be established beyond ideological and cultural differences. Unlike the Labour candidate in *Destiny* – also named Clifton – who withdraws his support to an Asian-led workers’ strike as a futile tactic to gain votes, Alex is allowed the opportunity to learn from her mistakes. It is also interesting that Edgar, who regretted giving Bob Clifton a private life in *Destiny* because this made him more sympathetic to the audience (“Towards a Theatre of Dynamic Ambiguities” 16-17), purposefully introduces a romantic subplot in *Playing with Fire*, namely, the doomed affair between Alex and Riaz Rafique.

As a moderniser of Bangladeshi origin, Riaz becomes the perfect New Labour candidate for the post of elected mayor, but he eventually decides not to stand, after his now radicalised constituency accuses him of betrayal, of being “in the pocket of the infidel” (113). Moreover, he finally chooses not to pursue his relationship with Alex for similar reasons. “Obviously. You need to be ‘back home with your people’”, she acknowledges in anger and sadness (114). Because the play never invests enough in the private life of its characters, the romance feels contrived and also too much of a convenient device to highlight Alex’s weakened position against Frank: “It was your decision to enter into an affair with the man who you promoted to my job”, he says, threatening to sabotage her involvement in the election campaign with this potential scandal (136). Nevertheless, Alex’s simultaneous private and public defeat also creates an effective parallel to demonstrate how the lack of dialogue across cultural differences affects both the personal and the political.

Alex’s resilience in an impossible situation recalls two previous characters in Edgar plays: Amanda in *Maydays* and Floss in *The Prisoner’s Dilemma*. The first

challenges Martin, who has defected to the right (like Frank), with the enduring if peripheral activism of the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp. The second, an aid worker in a warzone, learns about the limits of idealism in the bleakest possible manner when she refuses to 'choose' between two innocent victims only to see them both being shot. However, as Reinelt and Hewitt observe, Floss gets "the last word": returning more than two years later to lead workshops with young people, she finds a way to teach even when surrounded by soldiers. "She is an individual, and arguably what she is doing will have slight impact. Yet it seems significant that Edgar leaves us with this image of Floss finding a way to make a 'comeback'" (Reinelt and Hewitt, "*The Prisoner's Dilemma*" 52). Under less extreme circumstances, *Playing with Fire's* last image of Alex and her circle of chairs conveys a similar meaning, but Alex is perhaps a more complex character than either Amanda or Floss inasmuch as her idealism has already been compromised.

There is a well-kept secret, only revealed in the last scene, as to why Alex's political career had not progressed according to her talents. She was pushed aside by the party after confronting the elected Leader of a London Council, a Sikh, with a charge of sexual harassment that had been expediently silenced. Yet she accepted the rules of the game and continued fostering her ambition in this second assignment, until her final insight. This is why, unlike Amanda with Martin, Alex can 'hear herself' in the self-interested Frank and, unlike Floss, she is partly responsible for the current state of affairs. In a Radio 4 interview conducted while *Playing with Fire* was in rehearsals, Edgar said that the play intended to show that "New Labour's problem is that they set out to challenge the authoritarian and paternalistic tradition of Old Labour but have done so in an authoritarian and paternalistic way". That the main agent of this mistaken approach is a woman – and a feminist – makes the meaning more poignant. From a Habermasian perspective, the fact that the play does not entirely support either side is an effective demonstration of the ambivalent

relation between system and lifeworld. On the one hand, New Labour's 'modernising' agenda attempts to impose the language of capitalism – targets, competition, etc. – on the provincial life of Wyverdale. On the other, Wyverdale Council is in desperate need of a 'modern' approach in order to address the problems of its plural constituency.

### **Learning from history**

As has been stressed, *Playing with Fire* is not constructed on an epic scale made of historical landmarks. However, there is a running 'joke' that serves this function metaphorically. Its importance is underlined from the very opening speech, which – within the zigzagging timeline of the play – is delivered with hindsight:

ALEX. OK. We had this joke about our tactics with the Council. We said, we'd try the Polish Strategy and if that didn't work we'd have to go for the Czechoslovak Option even if that risked the Indochina Syndrome, if not worse. But of course in all those cases we were talking about them – the Council – as a plucky little country, standing up for what they saw as right against the threat of having what another country wanted dumped on them from a great high. So what did that make us? (7)

The implication is no joke for a playwright who anatomised the failure of the Soviet path to socialism and its effects on the West in *Maydays*, and the troubled emergence of a 'new Europe' in his post-Cold War trilogy. In the context of *Playing with Fire*, the 'Polish Strategy' is making the Council do what central government wants under the threat of taking them over (the 'Czechoslovak Option'), while the 'Indochina Syndrome' is what Alex believes is happening when the plans start going wrong: "It's when you do what you think is the right thing, and you get sucked in and it turns on you and everything you do to try to

extricate yourself just makes it worse" (80). But it turns out that the most accurate comparison is NATO in Kosovo, offered to Alex by the Leader of the Council George Aldred just before he resigns: "You do the right thing, from the best of motives. But you do it from a height of fifteen thousand feet. Which means you hit a lot of things you didn't mean to, and you store us up all kinds of trouble for the future. And why do you do that? Simple. If you're that far up, we can't fire back at you" (133). Alex's answer comes in her last speech, where, having finally understood the consequences of New Labour's authoritarian streak, she wants to bring herself 'in range'.

If the earlier state-of-the-nation plays were underpinned by a less deterministic version of Marxist history in which individuals could affect the historical process (but there was such a process nonetheless), I contend that the new way in which history features in *Playing with Fire* can be read as dramatising the Habermasian reconstruction of historical materialism. As discussed in Chapter 1, Habermas' historical materialism is not a philosophy of history with an inexorable linear progression; rather, "a theory of historical potential" (How, "Habermas" 185). The prospect of actualising that potential, which is by no means certain, depends on the possibilities of collective moral development, in other words, on the possibilities of *learning* from the past. Aptly, history in *Playing with Fire* ceases to appear as an epic scaffold supporting a sequence of events and becomes instead a metaphor, available to those willing to learn from previous grave errors. Social evolution conceived in these terms is intrinsically linked to Habermas' emphasis on dialogue, which distinguishes between strategic action, oriented to persuade for individual gains, and communicative action, oriented to reach genuine understanding. This is exactly the difference between Alex's methods in the first act – when she could easily forge a *strategic* alliance with Frank – and Alex's determination at the end of the play, when she is prepared to turn herself 'the other way up' and put herself 'in range', which implies an open attitude to listening to others as equals.



Edgar's circle of chairs is a fitting image for Habermas' ideal speech situation, yet it is important to remember that both the notion and its illustration are counterfactual. Neither Habermas nor Edgar is a blind idealist who fails to recognise the difficulties of achieving such communicative conditions in the real world. Thus, Alex delivers her speech from a newly acquired marginal political position, a similar place from which both Amanda and Floss operate at the end of *Maydays* and *The Prisoner's Dilemma* respectively. Writing about the latter, a text whose actual focus is on dialogue – both strategic and communicative – as a tool for conflict resolution, Reinelt and Hewitt comment that even though the play mostly dramatises the failure of international diplomatic negotiations, "their centrality is predicated on the possibility that it might be otherwise" ("*The Prisoner's Dilemma*" 43). Such possibility is also hinted in *Playing with Fire* within a national, albeit multicultural, context. Edgar's vision on this matter, which he discusses in an afterword to the published text, is based on the prospect of open communication:

What the current debate is not addressing is [...] the idea that a successfully plural multiculturalism is a two-way street. [...] If multiculturalism is to fulfil its promise as a conversation between cultures, then the majority culture has to listen to Islam's emphasis on social compassion, and Islam should listen to the host culture's (relatively recent) commitment to sexual tolerance. (150)

*Playing with Fire* dramatises the problems of multiculturalism at the two levels identified by Fraser [see Chapter 3]. Firstly, the fact that the multicultural discourse celebrates all identities, without distinguishing between democratic and antidemocratic identity claims. As a woman, Alex suffers and also learns from New Labour's misguided policy of supporting ethnic 'differences' over gender 'equalities'. Secondly, the multicultural tendency of displacing social issues in

favour of cultural ones, what Fraser calls recognition over redistribution. In the play, as in the real 2001 riots, the conflict is not only caused by cultural differences between communities – even though it tends to be expressed that way – but also by economic deprivation. Edgar is conscious of this: “A Pakistani man still earns £300,000 less in his life than a similarly educated white man. However, it is clear that the ways in which Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities are choosing to address that is through a very different language from the way they chose to in the 1970s” (qtd. in Billingham 34). An incisive analysis of the riots in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford by Ash Amin laments that, in the aftermath of this unrest, government emphasis has been put on “community cohesion” (463).<sup>91</sup> Implicitly adopting Fraser’s theory of the public sphere, Amin claims that actually “the rampant of the Asian youths should be seen in terms of a counter-public making a citizenship claim that cannot be reduced to complaints of ethnic and religious mooring and passing youth masculinity” (462).

The complexity of *Playing with Fire* accommodates two of the most pressing concerns of modern politics, the struggle for redistribution and recognition and the pressure of systemic imperatives – money and power – over the lifeworld. It is perhaps expected that the play does not always succeed in turning intricate political ideas into absorbing drama. Nevertheless, Edgar’s insistence “on the need for dialogue” (Bull, *Political Dramatists* 194) is now more compelling than ever.

## 5.2 Howard Brenton’s *In Extremis*

First performed at the University of California, Davis, in 1997, Howard Brenton’s *In Extremis: The Story of Abelard and Heloise* was produced in a

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<sup>91</sup> One of the measures eventually adopted by the government was the introduction of a citizenship test and an oath of allegiance in order for foreigners to achieve full British naturalisation. Edgar would address this issue, with plenty of humour, in his later play *Testing the Echo* (2008).

revised version at the Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in September 2006 and revived at the same venue in May 2007. British critics compared it favourably with the last account of this twelfth-century love story seen in London, a 1970 play by Ronald Millar (one of Margaret Thatcher's speech writers) famous only for "the legendary nude scene by Diana Rigg and Keith Mitchell" (Taylor 958). If some reviewers were expecting even more controversy from the author of *The Romans in Britain*, this is not what they found: "'In Extremis' [...] is itself not without a certain shock factor: there's vomiting, masturbation and a lusty bit of genital mutilation", wrote Robert Shore in *Time Out*, "but it is still pretty tame by comparison with the Globe's current production of 'Titus Andronicus'" (958). What Brenton offered instead, according to *Evening Standard's* Fiona Mountford, was "an admirable equilibrium [of] the elements of sexual desire, non-conformism and philosophical ideology that fuelled the couple's relationship" (957). Michael Billington in the *Guardian* also saw balance in the presentation of Abelard and his nemesis, the ascetic but influential monk Bernard of Clairvaux, who "supposedly representing everything Brenton's deplors [...] emerges not only as the most gripping figure but also the real revolutionary" (957).

*In Extremis* is organised in three acts. The first shows the rise of Peter Abelard as a philosopher in Paris and the beginning of the passionate relationship with his pupil Heloise, then only seventeen years old but his intellectual equal. Abelard becomes a dangerous figure because he preaches the application of Aristotelian logic to theology and the lovers cause scandal with their sexual encounters out in the countryside. Abelard is convinced that understanding faith will make it stronger, but Bernard (with the Church's hierarchy) thinks his teachings "will only weaken belief" (35). Eventually, Abelard's enemies inform Heloise's uncle, Fulbert, about the affair and the couple exile themselves in Abelard's family farm in Brittany, where their son Astralabe is born and looked after by Abelard's sister, Denise. Heloise, who feels strongly against marriage, tells Denise: "Peter and I aren't a family. [...] We're warriors. Philosophical

warriors. We're fighting in a war of ideas" (46). In Act 2 Abelard attempts – unsuccessfully – to reconcile with Fulbert by marrying Heloise in secret (marriage, although allowed, would spoil Abelard's prospects as a cleric). Threatened by Fulbert's cousins, the couple seek refuge in the convent of Ste Marie Argenteuil and even make love on the altar, but when Abelard returns to his lodgings he is castrated by the Fulbert gang. Abelard then takes the vows and asks Heloise to do the same. The third act begins twenty years later, with Bernard planning to accept a public disputation with Abelard only to manipulate it (by getting the bishops drunk before the meeting). Abbot Abelard and Abbess Heloise, who now very rarely see each other, are excited by the prospect of the debate. When the day comes, however, Bernard accuses Abelard of heresy and the latter remains silent on realising that the Council has been fixed. Abelard is excommunicated and then pardoned, but he falls ill. He finally gets the opportunity to debate with Bernard, in private, and in the next scene he is brought to die (offstage) in Heloise's arms. After his death, Heloise defiantly tells Bernard "You've lost, you know" and shows him a Penguin copy of hers and Abelard's letters "eight hundred and fifty years from now" (89).

Putting a play on at the Globe represented an exciting opportunity for Brenton. He considers it the perfect venue for the 'public theatre' he has always strived to create. Furthermore, he believes the Globe's "democratic space" could herald a renewal of a theatre of collective concerns: "It may encourage playwrights to turn from the solipsism of individual alienation that has dominated the best new writing of the past decade. If we follow Globe rules in playmaking, we can rediscover public optimism" ("Playing to the Crowd"). Brenton's dramatic world as a whole seems to oscillate precisely between collective dreams and individual needs, but 'public optimism', which is certainly a feature of *In Extremis* form and content, has been only found later in his playwriting career.

## Brenton's 'epic' journey

Like Edgar's *Destiny*, Brenton's first 'mainstream' play, *Magnificence* (1973), was considered a transitional work. Boon describes it as "a hybrid piece, half of the Fringe and half of the established theatre" (80). One of Brenton's main concerns at this point was to break with what he identified as the 'humanist' tradition on the stage and in life. "Humanists have to believe that people basically love each other and an anarchist doesn't", he announced. "I'm not saying that one shouldn't be loving but that humanist ideas have become totally corrupt and their value has been wrecked by the people who run things" ("Disrupting the Spectacle" 23). In the theatre, the humanist tradition as Brenton saw it was "always conservative [...] always with an attitude of dignified suffering", and implying that the hero's position is the right one. Consequently, in *Magnificence* he wanted to create a protagonist who "was manifestly wrong [...] his passion is right, but his actions are ill-judged and romantic" ("Petrol Bombs" 18). The character in question is Jed, who attempts to assassinate a Tory politician with a bomb that in the end goes off by accident killing both of them. Jed embodies Brenton's own disillusionment with the Situationist movement.<sup>92</sup> His friend Cliff, who laments the "waste" of Jed's anger (*Plays One* 106), represents the more rational – if orthodox – Marxism the playwright embraced in the mid-1970s. However, as Boon points out, "Cliff's relative silence gives the stage to Jed, and the play becomes simply his tragedy, its 'humanist structure' intact" (80).

In order to subvert mainstream narrative, the dominance of the individual character had to be avoided, something Brenton accomplished in later pieces such as *The Churchill Play* (1974), *Weapons of Happiness* (1976) and *The Romans in Britain* (1980). Brenton was highly conscious that with the state-of-

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<sup>92</sup> Brenton fully articulated these thoughts after attending an exhibition about the Situationist International in Paris in 1989: "When the May '68 dream of mass revolt, of a popular, celebratory transformation of society proved to be merely that, a dream, it decayed into the nightmare of handfuls of 'urban terrorists', the Angry Brigade and the Red Army Faction. A perverted reading of Debord's book inspired them and they destroyed themselves, turning many away from the sunlit, great, democratic idea behind the May '68 revolt" (rpt. in *Hot Irons* 42-43).

the-nation plays, he and his contemporaries had created a new form, the 'British epic theatre', which he linked not so much with Brecht as with the home-grown Jacobean tradition. According to his blueprint – only retrospectively elaborated in 1986 – the episodic structure<sup>93</sup> was a crucial ingredient: "Each scene is written and should be played as a little play, in its own right, with its own style [...] differences should be emphasised, not smoothed over". Yet equally important was the transformative nature of the plot: "The characters [...] go from innocence to experience. The stories are journeys of discovery" ("Preface" xi). As a political playwright, Brenton had embarked on a journey of his own, and with *The Romans in Britain* he thought he had reached the limits of the epic style (qtd. in Boon 212). By 1992 he was convinced that this form had "died on us", but he did not mourn: "We need new ways of dramatising what people are thinking and feeling out there. Ironically, we could become rebels against the official orthodoxy we ourselves helped to make" (rpt. in *Hot Irons* 89-90).

Key to Brenton's evolution as a dramatist, as to Edgar's, was his reengagement with personal dilemmas. In the difficult decade of the 1980s his plays became "more localised in content and form" (Boon 213), allowing space for individual development. Rather surprisingly in the light of the desperate political climate – to which he had immediately reacted with *A Short Sharp Shock!* (a vicious satire on the Thatcher government written with Tony Howard in 1980) – Brenton's final artistic response was the production of 'Three Plays for Utopia' at the Royal Court (1988). The season included *Sore Throats* (originally staged in 1979), *Bloody Poetry* (originally staged in 1984) and *Greenland*, a project on which he had been working for seven years. Taken as a whole, the plays describe a movement from the individual to the collective, from "a Utopian state of mind" in *Sore Throats* (Brenton, qtd. in Boon 172), to a group's utopian experiment in

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<sup>93</sup> This is undoubtedly one of Brecht's legacies, but initially Brenton was reluctant to recognise his influence [see below].

*Bloody Poetry*, to a fully-fleshed futuristic utopian society in *Greenland*. According to Boon, they indicate a clear departure in Brenton's dramaturgy:

If the Court's 'utopian' season sought both to acknowledge leftist despair and to attempt to articulate a way forward, then its frame of reference was concerned less with specific political issues than with a more profound debate about the human basis on which social change must ultimately be predicated. [...] And this is the sense in which much of Brenton's work in the eighties deals in a private drama: the more public debates of history and politics are not rejected, but are pushed into the background in favour of a closer examination of the interface between private and public life. (255-56)

The trilogy also punctuates another, more obvious, change. Brenton's early work had already shifted from a nihilistic political stance to a more affirmative one (Bull, *Political Dramatists* 46). Now he was decisively turning from dystopia – the mould used in *The Churchill Play* and *Thirteenth Night* (1981) – to utopia,<sup>94</sup> facing the decisive task of articulating a clear political vision in *Greenland*. Boon claims that this play "in some ways represents a point of summary in Brenton's career", as it tackles most of his previous concerns (277). Yet for all its imaginative and political courage, *Greenland* suffers from the lack of historicity which almost inevitably comes with the utopian genre.<sup>95</sup> Michael Evenden reads *Greenland* and other British plays from this period as a direct answer to the right-wing triumphalism that would lead to Fukuyama's 1989 proclamation of the 'end of history'. He shows that left-wing playwrights were trying to counter this discourse by means of theatrical experimentation,

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<sup>94</sup> The power of the dystopian narrative as a form of political theatre is examined in Chapter 7 with reference to Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*.

<sup>95</sup> Brenton is aware of this. His character Severan-Severan self-harms because the utopian world of *Greenland* does not lend itself to dialectical thinking.

particularly with time, but he argues that *Greenland* only replaces one “stasis” with another:

In recuperating the naive utopian tradition, complete with its rejection of historical contingency, fragility, and mutability in favor of a fantasy of a fixed plenitude, Brenton foregrounds the not-so-secret contradiction of classical Marxist eschatology – that the goal, or end, of dialectical materialism is the cessation of the dialectic in the worker’s state. Fukuyama is not the only one who dreamed the end of history. (106)

Strangely, by highlighting the limitations of orthodox historical materialism *Greenland* pointed to the renewed necessity of searching for more appropriate forms of contemporary political theatre. Brenton’s ‘Greenlanders’ may have reached a state of final contentment, but the playwright certainly hadn’t. Turning to Eastern Europe as most of his generation did after the fall of the Berlin Wall, he took inspiration from Meyerhold for *Moscow Gold* (1990, written with Tariq Ali) and, in *Berlin Bertie* (1992), even employed “psychological, character-driven” strategies (*Hot Irons* 89). Towards the end of the millennium, however, Brenton reverted back to satire as a critical response to the rise of New Labour in *Ugly Rumours* (1998), again with Tariq Ali, and *Snogging Ken* (2000), with Ali and Andy de la Tour.<sup>96</sup> Reinelt suggests that Brenton’s temporary absence from the stage after this period and his redirection to television (as a scriptwriter for the BBC spy series *Spooks*) was partly motivated by harsh reviews. “It seems that taking on the new Labour government early in its first term was considered to be in bad taste, and satire [...] was now considered terrible writing” (Reinelt, “The

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<sup>96</sup> The three authors also produced *Collateral Damage* (1999), which establishes a bizarre juxtaposition between NATO’s intervention in Kosovo and a marriage breakdown.



'Rehabilitation' of Howard Brenton" 168).<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, Brenton had already produced the first version of *In Extremis*, which – together with *Paul* (2005) – would mark his successful return to the big, public theatres.

### **Abelard, Heloise... and Galileo**

Despite Brenton's atheism, it is not surprising that he chose religion as a subject for these two plays. After all, religion has strongly re-entered the contemporary political arena. However, as John Baker explains (264), there is also a biographical connection: Brenton's father was a Methodist minister and the dramatist had already offered a sympathetic portrayal of a cleric in his 1970 play *Wesley*. Talking about this work in 1975, Brenton revealed an aspect that remains a constant in his otherwise diverse output: "I'm very interested in people who could be called saints, perverse saints, who try to drive a straight line through very complex situations, and usually become honed down to the point of death. [...] Many of my characters are like that" ("Petrol Bombs" 12). Some of these characters are fictional embodiments of particular ideas, like Jed in *Magnificence*, yet most of them are actual historical figures. Apart from John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement, the eclectic list includes the serial killer John Christie (*Christie in Love*, 1969), Captain Scott (*Scott of the Antarctic*, 1971), Violette Szabo (*Hitler Dances*, 1972) and Shelley (*Bloody Poetry*).<sup>98</sup> Saint Paul – simply 'Paul' in Brenton's secularised play – definitely belongs to this group; Abelard and Heloise though, not entirely. Their intense passion for each other is matched by a paradoxical *passion for reason*, which ultimately prevents them from becoming 'perverse saints'.

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<sup>97</sup> The reaction of the press proves the current unpopularity of overtly propagandistic strategies. However, the later outrage provoked by the war in Iraq generated a brief revival of crude satire [see Chapter 4].

<sup>98</sup> Needless to say, Gorky, Tolstoy, Lenin, Churchill and Stalin also appear in Brenton's plays, but they don't correspond to the description given above.

Brenton's re-ignited fascination with historical figures is highly significant. While his first shake-up of political theatre forms, *Greenland*, took him to the future, now he is returning to the past, giving a fresh lease of life to the 'Brechtian history play'. Set in the past in order to look at the present, this type of drama is precisely the model that Edgar thought would no longer work. Edgar's warning justifies itself if linked with the didacticism of Brecht's parables, but Brenton's blueprint is, I would argue, *Life of Galileo*. The stubborn relevance of this play hardly requires mentioning. It has been revived twice in the last five years, in a translation by Edgar himself at the Birmingham Rep (2005) and adapted by David Hare at the National Theatre (2006).<sup>99</sup> Brenton was the first of his generation to offer a new translation of the play in 1980, also for the National Theatre, which radically altered his views on Brecht: "I used to say something fatuous like 'I'm a Left anti-Brechtian',<sup>100</sup> to avoid having to think about his influence. With others, I was trying to write an epic theatre which was contemporary, not parable-like" (*Hot Irons* 63). After seeing his own *Galileo* performed, however, Brenton came to the conclusion that Brecht was "the great playwright of our century" (64). It is only fitting that Reinelt, in turn, considers Brenton the British dramatist who more than anyone "epitomizes the Brechtian legacy" (*After Brecht* 17).

The structural similarities between *Galileo* and *In Extremis* are easy to perceive. Both plays start with the main characters as teachers. Galileo teaches Andrea as a boy about the Copernican solar system in Brecht's first scene; Abelard, after a philosophical argument with William of Champeaux, decides to set his own school in Brenton's first scene and then becomes Heloise's tutor (and lover at once). There are warnings about the dangerous nature of Galileo's discoveries (scene 3) and Abelard's relationship with Heloise (scene 1:4), which both protagonists dismiss: his friend Sagredo tells Galileo not to go to Florence,

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<sup>99</sup> Edgar based the text on a literal translation by Deborah Gearing. Hare's version was first produced at the Almeida in 1994. He only introduced slight changes for the 2006 revival at the Olivier.

<sup>100</sup> He said exactly that in "Petrol Bombs" 14.

where he is seeking the support of the court, but Galileo thinks the danger is over now he can offer proof of his theories using the telescope; his sister Denise tells Abelard to come home to Brittany “before it’s too late”, but he is confident because he has the King’s support and “there is a liberty of thought here in Paris” (17, 18). In scene 7 in both plays, Galileo and Abelard have become celebrities, but the conspiracies have already started, against Galileo by the Inquisitor and against Abelard by Bernard. In scene 9 Galileo is asked by Ludovico, his daughter’s fiancé, to stop “this earth-round-the-sun business” (77). He refuses, encouraged by the ascendance of a new pope (who is a mathematician), and so Ludovico breaks his engagement with Virginia. Abelard is requested by Bernard to abandon his teachings in scene 8; he also refuses.

Galileo’s recantation at the sole sight of the instruments of torture (scene 13) has an all too physical resonance in Abelard’s castration (scene 2:4), which is carried out even after he and Heloise have tried to compromise by getting married. Abelard has his own moment of recantation twenty years later (scene 3:3), when he does not defend himself against Bernard’s accusations at the Council of Sense. Unlike Galileo’s public renunciation however, which was borne by fear and “wasn’t planned” (107), Abelard’s silence “was a tactic” in the face of Bernard’s rigging of the Council (83). Still, the most significant parallel between the plays is their last optimistic scenes, both of which happen in the absence of the protagonists (Galileo is now ill and broken; Abelard has died) and involve a book crossing a border. Galileo’s *Discorsi* is smuggled into Holland by Andrea, promising a continuation of scientific inquiry despite the Church’s prohibition, and Heloise shows Bernard the future compilation of the couple’s letters. In the latter case, Abelard and Heloise’s story has crossed the ‘borders’ of time despite the defeat they suffered in their own lifetime.

Brenton regards *Galileo* as unique within Brecht’s corpus, because it represents “the only time he achieved dialectical tension in a character’s progression through a play” (*Hot Irons* 67). While this judgment seems perhaps

too definite, Brenton is not alone in singling out this play as Brecht's most accomplished piece, and his most contemporary. In a recent study, Graley Herren analyses how *Galileo* "suggests ways in which Brecht subtly but significantly diverges from a rigid Marxist project in his promotion of audience dialectical exchange", privileging "*inquiry over solution*" (206, 208, original emphasis). The dialectical nature of the play surfaces not only in Galileo's own contradictions as a character – the element admired by Brenton – but also in his approach to science and education. As Cathy Turner points out, "Galileo's mode of teaching is Brecht's own [...] the invitation to think for oneself" (153).

*Galileo* can be interpreted as 'communicative' along Habermasian lines: it employs dialectics not to confirm a philosophy of history but as a method of open argumentation, both within the play itself and between the play and its public. In his ardent defence of (neo) Marxist thinking against postmodernist anti-Enlightenment philosophies, David Savran explicitly connects Brecht to Habermas, inasmuch as Galileo expresses the Habermasian insight that "knowledge [...] aims to turn us all into doubters" (Brecht, qtd. in Savran 280). An earlier reading of the play by Wolfgang Sohlich makes the same point very eloquently: "Galileo's belief in the gentle forces of reason [...] conveys the sense of using reason to think against the inherently determined power of reason, against the sacrificial violence of reason that takes itself for an absolute" (53). Although Sohlich does not mention Habermas, he is accurately describing what the latter terms the 'self-transforming' qualities of modernity: "After a century that, more than any other, has taught us the horror of existing unreason, the last remains of an essentialist trust in reason have been destroyed. Yet modernity, now aware of its contingencies, depends all the more on a procedural reason, that is, on a reason that puts itself on trial" (*Facts and Norms* xii).

By Brenton's own admission, *In Extremis* is "an Enlightenment play" ("The Brilliant Couple" 9). He wrote it in America to address the rise of Christian fundamentalism years before the religious right entered the White House. By the

time the play was produced in London, after 9/11 and half a decade of so-called war on terror, the ancient battles between faith and reason fought by Abelard and Heloise (and Galileo, five centuries later) had gained a frightful topicality. Looking at *In Extremis* as *Galileo's* prequel opens an interesting 'dialectical' reading: In the twelfth century, Abelard uses Aristotelian philosophical realism to challenge the Church's Platonic doctrine of universals. However, Christianity ends up incorporating Aristotelian philosophy, and Aristotle's cosmology becomes the sclerotic orthodoxy Galileo has to dispute in the seventeenth century. Because we know that Galileo would be eventually rehabilitated by the Church,<sup>101</sup> the overall narrative is certainly one of human progress by trial and error, albeit impossibly slow and plagued by struggle and co-option. On the other hand, because present history has seen a destructive re-emergence of fundamentalism both in Christian and Islamic religions, this progress is always – as Habermas suggests – a question of potential, not of linear development.

### **The return of humanism**

A sense of history is central to the meaning of *In Extremis*. In an audio interview for the *Guardian* website, Brenton said that what attracted him to Abelard and Heloise was that they were "way ahead of their time". He believes the twelfth century witnessed a kind of Renaissance "200 years before it all actually began" and that Abelard, in his quest for understanding God through reason and the knowledge of nature, was a precursor of the Enlightenment six centuries in advance. In terms of sexual politics, Heloise, who (unlike Abelard) wished to continue their relationship outside marriage, appears for Brenton almost as our contemporary. Nevertheless, the short-lived historical moment of possibilities the couple experienced was soon suppressed by the Church: "The world changed and Christianity became uglier in many ways" (Howard Brenton

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<sup>101</sup> The programme notes for the 2006 NT production informs that this happened in 1741, when Pope Benedict XIV authorised the publication of Galileo's work, yet it was not until 1992 that John Paul II apologised for Galileo's treatment by the Catholic Church.

Interview). If parallels with the present are clear, *In Extremis* does not underline them in a parabolic manner. In fact, the *Daily Telegraph* critic Dominic Cavendish thought the conflict between Abelard and Bernard was presented with “a blessed even-handedness” (959). Although reviewers did scrutinise the play’s historical purchase, *The Times*’ Benedict Nightingale summarised Brenton’s moderate approach well: “mainly, the play sticks to the facts, but it does take liberties” (958).<sup>102</sup>

One of these ‘liberties’ was, according to the critics, the anachronistic representation of Heloise, as a Simone de Beauvoir to Abelard’s “Jean-Paul Sartre of his day” (Hart, 959) or “as a 1960s hippy with strong views on female empowerment and free will” (Allfree 958). Kate Bassett in the *Independent on Sunday* was particularly troubled by this aspect: “As for historical accuracy, you would never guess [...] that Heloise had on occasion resisted sex and been threatened with blows by Abelard (as his missives record). Perhaps the accusation of mythologising – directed at Fulbert and Bernard by Heloise – should be applied to Brenton’s own playwriting processes” (959).<sup>103</sup> Actually, the passage from Abelard’s letter that Bassett quotes is available on the 2006 production programme, together with excerpts from Heloise’s letters that justify Brenton’s treatment of the character as extraordinarily unconventional for her time. In a section paraphrased in the play, Heloise wrote: “the name of wife may seem more sacred or more binding, but sweeter for me will always be the word mistress, or, if you will permit me, that of concubine or whore” (qtd. in “Partners in Guilt and Grace?” 2). The effects of Brenton’s characterisation of Heloise in terms of gender will be examined below, but here it is important to point out that *In Extremis* deliberately combines history with the conventions of the literary love

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<sup>102</sup> Nightingale’s own objections were the treatment of Bernard as a “devious politician” and “the curious suggestion that Aristotle was anathema to the Church [...] rather than a pillar of its teaching from well before St Thomas Aquinas” (958). Yet Brenton’s version is supported by evidence even from after both Abelard’s and Aquinas’ deaths. For instance, Aristotle’s books were banned by the Church in Paris in 1209, a decision only reversed by mediation of Pope Gregory IX in 1231, and in 1274 (three years after the death of Aquinas), Pope John I again condemned some Aristotelian principles.

<sup>103</sup> *Mail on Sunday*’s Patrick Marmion makes the same complaint (960).

story, in particular Tristan and Iseult.<sup>104</sup> Brenton accepts, therefore, the charge of mythologisation, but only to a certain extent: “I know I am, to a degree, mythologising their lives. But this is a process they encouraged in the way they wrote about themselves. They wanted to turn their lives into a song we would not forget” (“Howard Brenton’s Passion for Abelard and Heloise”).

Historical accuracy in general is of course a contested matter and clearly not an essential requirement for historical drama, yet the point must be stressed that Brenton has always based his history plays on thorough research. Even *The Romans in Britain*, his most ambitious and controversial, was underpinned by rigorous investigation. Boon points out that Brenton was “over-modest” in describing this play’s version of British history as “highly speculative and academically suspect”. In fact, as Philip Roberts reveals, “Brenton’s account [...] is verified by the standard works on the period and [...] his selection of detail for dramatic purposes neither distorts history nor manufactures it” (qtd. in Boon 182). What separates *In Extremis* from the earlier plays is not Brenton’s methodological approach to history – cautious and meticulous in both cases – but rather his emphasis.

Curiously, Brenton seemed more suspicious about history in 1980 than in 1997: whilst in *The Romans in Britain* he aimed to demythologise the received wisdom about British history, unmasking imperialistic assumptions, he was himself prepared to mythologise slightly in *In Extremis*, by portraying the story of Abelard and Heloise within a romantic artistic frame. This can be understood as a move from pure ideology critique to a reconstructive standpoint, in which Abelard and Heloise’s ‘war of ideas’ is allowed to take centre stage. If *Romans* – as most of Brenton’s earlier output – dismissed humanism as a cover-up (or a symptom of false consciousness in Marxist terms), *In Extremis* takes humanism seriously as the basis for imagining a better future. As has been argued from a Habermasian

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<sup>104</sup> The connection becomes explicit towards the end of the play. In the last scene Abelard and Heloise are shown together, she is reading Thomas’ *Tristan*. Abelard comments: “A trashy love story? [...] Though I must admit the brothers in my care have a copy” (76).

viewpoint, this does not represent a withdrawal into some sort of transcendental idealism, but a version of materialism rooted in the intersubjective structures of rationality. Abelard's last exchange with Bernard recalls in the field of theology Galileo's concern with science's ultimate goal as "to lighten the burden of human existence" (Brecht 108), the aspiration to connect human inquiry to both moral and material needs:

ABELARD. Cannot you see your cruelty? This staring at trees and stones, and letting your men starve and crawl round the fields of Clairvaux eating grass, stripping the white from their teeth... what way to God is that? Is your faith a living death?

BERNARD. And impregnating young women in locked rooms while teaching them holy scripture, and fornicating upon holy altars, is that a way to faith?

ABELARD (*suddenly desperately sick*). We must find Him within us. With all our senses. Body and mind.

BERNARD. God is dead in you, Peter.

ABELARD. Humanity is dead in you, Bernard. (86)

The humanism of *In Extremis* is a return to *Galileo* after *The Genius* (1983), a play purposefully written as a contemporary version of Brecht's classic. In *The Genius*, the ambiguous relationship between science and progress with which Brecht struggled through the three versions of his play<sup>105</sup> is given a negative turn. The equation that the two geniuses of the title have discovered could be used to create even more powerful nuclear weapons. Thus, put in a simplified way, whilst Galileo's dilemma was how to continue scientific inquiry despite the Church's prohibition, in *The Genius* the ethical call is almost to stop

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<sup>105</sup> The original version (1938-1943), called *The Earth Moves*, presented an optimistic view of science. The second (1944-1947), more negative, was greatly affected by the explosion of the atom bomb in 1945. The definitive text (1953-1956) is a synthesis of the other two, on which Brecht was still working at the time of his death.



scientific inquiry despite the *encouragement* of the state. That *The Genius* is not an 'Enlightenment play' like *In Extremis* can be easily explained by its Cold War context (the play actually ends, like Edgar's *Maydays*, in Greenham Common). Yet there is a device that both of Brenton's 'Galilean' plays share: the sole male protagonist turns into a couple. In *The Genius*, the main characters are Leo Lehrer, a cynical American professor, and Gilly Brown, a naive undergraduate student.<sup>106</sup> The addition of Gilly – who will turn to political activism together with the other women in the play – not only corrects the masculine bias of *Galileo*, in which "women mostly express reactionary sentiments and have little direct knowledge of science" (Reinelt, *After Brecht* 26), but is also consistent with another shift in Brenton's dramaturgy from the 1980s onwards. The women in *The Genius*, like those in *Thirteenth Night* and *Bloody Poetry*, are represented as survivors and provide a hopeful if not fully defined political opening (Boon 266).

Heloise is, of course, another survivor, and it makes perfect sense that Brenton chooses to portray her relationship with Abelard as one of equal partners, even if the historical evidence is slightly more ambivalent in this respect. The mature Heloise of the last scene, with her book from the future, embodies the public optimism that Brenton has searched so hard to find.

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<sup>106</sup> Boon points out that the names 'Gilly' and 'Leo' are a partial anagram of Galileo and the characters represent both sides of Brecht's troubled scientist (236).

## Chapter 6

### Documentary Forms: Verbatim and Tribunal

#### 6.1 Verbatim theatre: Out of Joint

In May 2007, three years after the siege of Fallujah, a homonymous verbatim production opened in London's East End. The text was based on interviews with residents and other witnesses of the American attacks on the Iraqi city, including also the words of soldiers, politicians and diplomats. Writer and director Jonathan Holmes's expressed intention was to offer "the most multivocal representation possible of a largely unreported event in the war in Iraq". At the same time, though, he hoped to avoid moral ambiguity: "My responsibility is not only to tell you what happened but that it is bad. Fallujah is not postmodern".<sup>107</sup> Trying to circumvent both the suspect didacticism of old agitprop and the discouraging relativism of post-Thatcher, post-Cold War disengagement, British political theatre appears to have found a new assertiveness in verbatim forms. Plays like *Fallujah*, composed using direct quotations from testimonies or documents (with more or less intervention of the dramatist/editor) have proliferated during the present decade. And whereas their reliance on an alleged authenticity ought to be problematised, their pervasiveness tests the dominance of postmodern theory in theatre scholarship.

In the early 1990s, when the demise of political theatre was a truism, American academic Philip Auslander contended that performance could address postmodern culture only "deconstructively, resistantly, from *within*" [see Introduction]. I would argue that this conclusion has been proven premature, even without discarding the partial effectiveness of Foucaultian resistance and

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<sup>107</sup> Holmes's first quotation is taken from the programme of the symposium 'Verbatim Practices in Contemporary Theatre' (Central School of Speech and Drama, 13-14 July 2006). The second comes from his intervention in the symposium. When he claims that 'Fallujah is not postmodern' he refers to the siege of the city as a historical reality, not to his play's style.

Derridean deconstruction for theatre theory and practice. Habermas' work becomes a theoretical asset at a time when the deconstructive routines of postmodernism have revealed their limits. As Thomas McCarthy maintains, "social life cannot be organized solely around the dismantling of graven images. Deconstructive practices seem [...] to be necessarily complementary to practices of constructing and reconstructing the ideals, norms, principles, laws, and institutions we live by" (*Ideals and Illusions*, 107).

In political theatre as in Habermasian philosophy, the road to reconstruction starts with the possibilities of communication, "the only real alternative to exerting influence [...] in more or less coercive ways" (*Moral Consciousness* 19). Is it plausible, however, for theatre to offer 'multivocal representation' and unambiguous judgement simultaneously, as Holmes would have it? This question can be tackled through the notion of the public sphere, which will be applied to recent verbatim examples by Out of Joint Theatre Company and the Tricycle Theatre.<sup>108</sup> I aim to demonstrate how this current incarnation of political drama, like Habermas's theory, surpasses the postmodernist zeitgeist.

The present attraction of documentary forms, for both practitioners and spectators, can be read as a translation into political drama of the 'self-limitation' of the public sphere [see 2.1]. This mixture of capability and restraint is perhaps most evident in verbatim drama's performance style, which 'chooses to tell rather than show' (Waters, "The Truth behind the Facts") and has thus been regarded as un-theatrical. This is a criticism shared with Habermasian philosophy. According to John Durham Peters, the public sphere is built on a 'distrust of representation', a charge echoed by feminist and postmodernist commentators concerned with a

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<sup>108</sup> Out of Joint is a touring theatre company dedicated to the development and performance of new writing, frequently co-produced with major London venues such as the Royal Court and the National Theatre. The Tricycle is a theatre based in Kilburn, North London, whose work usually reflects not only the cultural diversity of its local community (Irish, African-Caribbean, Jewish and Asian) but also general political concerns. Both companies have been at the forefront of the recent growth of verbatim theatre in Britain.

supposed promotion of a disembodied subjectivity [see Chapter 3]. Ken Hirschkop describes these common perceptions eloquently when addressing Habermas's references to theatre performances and rock concerts. "Rock concerts? Habermas? I'm sure many people's first reaction, however trivial or foolish, was to wonder whether Professor Habermas had ever *been* to a rock concert" (49, original emphasis). There is certainly more than prejudice in these remarks, as the Habermasian public sphere indicates a historical break with the personalised, spectacular and antidemocratic 'representative publicness' of the Middle Ages. Furthermore, he sees a threat of 'refeudalisation' in the era of the mass media, when political status is awarded through public relations [see 2.1]. In Peters' interpretation, this makes Habermas a Protestant iconoclast, keen on "conversation, reading and plain speech" and "hostile to theatre, courtly forms, ceremony, the visual, and to rhetoric more generally" ("Distrust of Representation" 562). While Peters is right to assert that "'communication' for Habermas is an Apollonian principle, one of unity, light, clarity, sunshine, reason" (563), an Apollonian aesthetics is not necessarily un-theatrical.

In their recent edited book on theatricality, Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait discriminate the historical "polarity between the natural (or the real) and the theatrical (or the artificial)" from the modernist opposition of realism versus theatricality, whose underlying question is "does dramatic performance refer beyond itself to the world or does it serve to make explicit the theatrical aspects of presentation?" (17, 13).<sup>109</sup> As discussed in Chapter 4, Jon Erickson uses the latter dichotomy to relate political theatre to the philosophies of Habermas and Foucault, distinguishing (Habermasian) "realist dialogical drama" from (Foucaultian) "avant-garde deconstructive monologism". Crucially, however, Erickson qualifies the binary by stating that "dramatic realism and theatricalism inhabit each other's domain in varying degrees: one could even say that neither

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<sup>109</sup> Also in this volume, Davis' "Theatricality and Civil Society" offers a view on theatricality in the historical public sphere.

could exist without the other" (158, 161). As noted in Chapter 1, Habermas's own position within the aesthetic dispute about the autonomy of art is fairly nuanced. Along Weberian lines, he portrays modernity as characterised by a separation between the domains of truth (the cognitive realm), rightness (the moral realm) and expressiveness (the aesthetic realm). Habermas believes nonetheless that, after the modernist revolt, politically committed art incorporates elements of the cognitive and the moral-practical into forms inherited from the avant-garde. It is within this interchange between informative, deliberative and artistic elements that the predominantly Apollonian theatricality of contemporary documentary drama can be better understood.

### **Verbatim and its publics**

When Derek Paget coined the term 'verbatim theatre' in the 1980s, tracing it back to broadcasting documentary techniques and the more immediate tradition at the Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent, he made a relevant distinction. Within a broad definition of "theatre firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with 'ordinary' people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things" ("Verbatim Theatre" 317), Paget differentiated between the original 'celebratory' shows and the later 'controversy' plays. The former are described as entertainment, although meticulously based on the experiences of a community and played back to it as a political means to promote self-validation. The latter instead are meant to "cater for a metropolitan audience with its sense of presiding over issues of 'national' importance", their style relying almost entirely on direct address (322). This second form, which according to Paget used to provoke customary hostile reviews in the Thatcher years, has now become not only ubiquitous but also critically applauded. The success of companies such as Out of Joint and the Tricycle Theatre, whose work tends to be national and even

international in scope, has unquestionably eclipsed verbatim drama's roots in local communities. Yet it can also be interpreted as a serious effort to reclaim the public sphere, in the sense of making available private testimonies with political significance to a wider audience. As Habermas declares, "problems voiced in the public sphere first become visible when they are mirrored in personal life experiences" (*Facts and Norms* 365).

*The Permanent Way* (2003), written by David Hare from interviews conducted by him and members of Out of Joint Theatre, is a case in point. Just as in old-fashioned political drama, the play has a thesis: there was a causal link between the privatisation of the railways – effected by John Major and not reversed by Tony Blair despite his dissent while in opposition – and the four fatal train crashes that occurred between 1997 and 2002. The weight of the case, however, is placed on the compelling testimonies from bereaved relatives and survivors of these accidents, which contrast sharply with the elusiveness of business operators and the platitudes of a John Prescott character carved in satirical mode.

*The Permanent Way* is not what Paget would call 'puritan' verbatim; parts of the text are direct quotations, other parts are just based on interviews (most of which were not taped) and the prologue was wholly created by Hare. Still, in its collective method of research and its responsibility towards the victims, who approved the edited material before it went on stage, the production did follow the ethos of the documentary tradition. Interviewees from the rail industry, in contrast, were not consulted about the way their words would be finally employed. Their complaints of misrepresentation paradoxically catapulted the play onto the news pages, raising its public profile further. There was a certain unease among theatre critics too, yet their overall response was positive. The *Guardian's* Lyn Gardner, for example, admitted: "As with much documentary-style theatre, you feel emotionally manipulated by the way the material has been edited [...] But Max Stafford-Clark delivers a great production". Alastair Macaulay

summarised in *The Financial Times*: “You can find a great many faults with *The Permanent Way* – and still be grateful for it” (56).<sup>110</sup> But can you? Coming back to the challenge presented by *Fallujah*, is it feasible for a play to inform and persuade at the same time? Some clarifications made by Habermas would help here.

In its contemporary version, the Habermasian public sphere is a site of a struggle for influence among different actors, a few with an established platform (political leaders, recognised parties and organisations) and others emerging with more difficulty ‘from the public’ itself. There are also ‘experts’ (religious leaders, artists, scientists and celebrities), with different degrees of authority, and ‘members of the press’ who collect and select information (*Facts and Norms* 359-79). Beyond these functional divisions, however, lies a more substantial one.

The institutions and legal guarantees of free and open opinion-formation rest on the unsteady ground of the political communication of actors who, in making use of them, at the same time interpret, defend, and radicalize their normative content. Actors who know they are involved in the *common* enterprise of reconstituting and maintaining structures of the public sphere as they contest opinions and strive for influence differ from actors who merely use forums that already exist. (369-70)

Verbatim theatre practitioners are ‘experts’ who can utilise their visibility and craft to expand the public sphere. In this sense, *controversy* plays, unlike the earlier *celebratory* ones, exceed the remit of identity politics towards a “universalist stand against the open or concealed exclusion of minorities or marginal groups” (376). As attempts of radicalisation of public space, these

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<sup>110</sup> Hare’s next play *Stuff Happens* (National Theatre, 2004), about the negotiations in the run-up to the war in Iraq, was certainly a more problematic mixture of quotations and invention. Donna Soto-Morettini argues that while this work cannot even partially be considered ‘verbatim’, because of the amount of mediation involved, it is not a ‘history play’ either (as Hare himself describes it), offering a Romantic narrative that fails to engage with the complexity of history.

theatrical practices are not bound to the constraint of balance required of the so-called 'members of the press': intersubjectivity is obviously not the same as objectivity. The playwright/editor has a legitimate (and unavoidable) entitlement to add his/her own artistic voice to the verbatim chorus, either explicitly or implicitly, as long as the most marginal sources are not just exploited to support an overall message. This is where the old standards of community documentary theatre must not be forgotten and this is also why, I believe, Out of Joint Theatre's next verbatim project, *Talking to Terrorists* (2005), failed to deliver.

*Talking to Terrorists* became unwittingly topical when its London run coincided with the bombings in that city on 7 July 2005. The production was the result of a long research process in which writer Robin Soans and the company interviewed individuals who had perpetrated acts of terrorism in heterogeneous contexts (from Ireland to Uganda), plus victims, negotiators and politicians. Like *The Permanent Way*, the play was driven by a central proposal, spelled out in the first scene by an 'ex-secretary of state' (undisguisedly the late Mo Mowlam): "Talking to terrorists is the only way to beat them" (25).<sup>111</sup> Despite the timeliness of this insight, the integrity of the numerous voices collected – some of them from public figures who had been already heard at length – got lost in the amalgamation of very different conflicts under the sole common trait of violence. As Aleks Sierz detected in *Tribune*: "By treating all extremists as the same, Soans throws politics out of the window" (919). In the end, and in stark contrast to the project's explicit purpose to investigate "what makes ordinary people do extreme things" (back cover), the structure of the play repeatedly juxtaposed a misguided 'terrorist' – identified only by the initials of the extremist movement to which s/he used to belong – and an articulate 'ordinary person' – a psychologist, a relief worker, a colonel – who could frame the former's behaviour. There was, in addition, gratuitous national and gender stereotyping in the second act, which

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<sup>111</sup> Soans has authored two other verbatim plays: *A State Affair* (also for Out of Joint Theatre Company, 2000) and *The Arab Israeli Cookbook* (Gate Theatre, 2004).



opened with the public/private counterpoint of an experienced British ex-ambassador (talking about human rights) and his young Uzbek partner, a belly dancer (talking about their life story).

Both *The Permanent Way* and *Talking to Terrorists* advance at least two of the paradigmatic principles of the Habermasian public sphere: inclusiveness, by bringing to the fore the words of private people who otherwise would not have access to public arenas, and common concern, by articulating discourses of public interest which are independent – and critical – of state or market powers and their interpretations (of privatisation and terrorism, respectively). The other principle, bracketing of status in favour of rational argumentation is, however, more difficult to grant, as it leans heavily on the selection of the material. *Talking to Terrorists* does not derive its argument from the interviews but superimposes it as a blanket on a diverse mix of difficult private experiences. Moreover, the insertion of influential voices renders impracticable the temporary disregard of authority that is desirable in the Habermasian model. I am not suggesting that ridiculing public figures or taking their words out of context, as Hare seems to have done, is necessarily the best solution, although at least in this case it generated a healthy debate that spilled out from the theatre into the press, invigorating the public sphere. Such strategies (actually reminiscent of the agitprop milieu) can hardly be considered ‘rational argumentation’ though, begging a question frequently asked in relation to Habermas’s theory: is the prominence it gives to rationality defensible? I will explore this matter further by looking at the most restrained manifestation of British contemporary documentary theatre, namely, the Tricycle Theatre’s tribunal plays.

Avoiding the pitfalls of mosaic techniques, the Tricycle Theatre has nurtured a tradition of verbatim drama based on texts compiled from transcripts of high-profile national and international inquiries. Apart from *Srebrenica* (put together by artistic director Nicolas Kent himself), all plays have been edited not by a dramatist but by *Guardian* journalist Richard Norton-Taylor, and rather than

making public politically relevant private experiences, these productions act as a sort of amplifier of events already in the public domain. The credibility achieved by this company is remarkable, suggesting once again that an awareness of the editing process in verbatim theatre does not annul its power. The Tricycle has built on its reputation to take a further step in their 'tribunal plays without a tribunal', such as *Guantanamo: Honour Bound to Defend Freedom* (2004), which exposed the situation of the British detainees in Guantanamo Bay using interviews, letters and statements, and the flamboyantly named *Called to Account: The Indictment of Anthony Charles Lynton Blair for the Crime of Aggression against Iraq – A Hearing* (2007), which is based on a contrived 'trial' organised by the theatre itself.<sup>112</sup>

Despite the boldness of these later projects, the Tricycle's tribunal plays exhibit a self-imposed austerity on stage (scarce movement, functional design, no curtain calls). The problem here, as David Edgar points out, is that the theatre makers purposefully try not to appear to be making a case. This explains, in his view, the difference between the first tribunal play, *Half the Picture*, and those that followed [see 4.2]. Chris Megson examines the same phenomenon in comparing *Half the Picture* with *Justifying War* (both about Iraq). While the first combined Norton-Taylor's edited transcripts with non-naturalistic devices created by John McGrath, the latter was "more ambivalent in effect", with "no interruption of the play's seamless illusionism" ("The State We're In" 116). Megson's warning that "the visual registers of documentary performance need to rupture illusionism if the aims of Tribunal theatre are to be realized more effectively" (121) is symptomatic of a necessary impulse to question verbatim drama's general claims to authenticity. Yet the theatricality/realism dichotomy falls short of capturing the intricacies of verbatim performance. One of Megson's central objections against

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<sup>112</sup> The list of tribunal plays includes *Half the Picture: The Scott Arms to Iraq Inquiry* (1994), *Nuremberg: 1946 War Crimes Trial* (1996), *Srebrenica: UN War Crimes Tribunal* (1996), *The Colour of Justice: The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* (1999), *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Inquiry* (2003), and *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry* (2005).

illusionism in tribunal plays is the danger posed by the realistic representation of charismatic politicians, that is, the same return to 'representative publicness' feared by Habermas, which can be read as 'theatrical' (from a historical perspective) or 'un-theatrical' (from a modernist, particularly Brechtian, viewpoint). To be sure, the Apollonian style of the Tricycle Theatre does not rely on tri-dimensional naturalism as much as it does on words. As actor Thomas Wheatley states, "you have to inhabit the language the person is using. [...] It's all about getting inside the language, not about getting into a character".<sup>113</sup> This refusal to characterise can be an advantage for the depiction of certain sensitive subjects such as torture.<sup>114</sup> The unresolved issue, however, is whether practitioners and audiences are investing excessively or naively in the truth-value of selected words, especially when they have been sanctioned by legal procedures.

### **A reconstructed truth**

It is highly significant that the name 'verbatim' has become the metonymical denomination for all contemporary documentary theatre in Britain. On the one hand, in Habermasian fashion, this signals a shift towards language as the only basis from which to rehabilitate notions of shared understanding. On the other, it involves a risk of placing too much trust on the spoken word as a carrier of truth. In a special issue of *The Drama Review* dedicated to the interrogation of current documentary theatre internationally, Carol Martin asks whether this genre amounts to "just another form of propaganda", obscured (in the UK at least) by a denomination that "infers great authority to moments of utterance unmitigated by an ex post facto mode of maturing memory" (11, 14). Stephen

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<sup>113</sup> From Thomas Wheatley's intervention in the symposium 'Verbatim Practices in Contemporary Theatre'.

<sup>114</sup> Wendy Hesford makes this point in relation to *Guantanamo*, whose "straightforward exposition is a departure from the reproduction of spectacular victim narratives that dominate popular discourse" (35).

Bottoms argues further that “the term ‘verbatim theatre’ tends to fetishize the notion that we are getting things ‘word for word’”. Using Hare’s and Soan’s work as illustration, Bottoms states that “the current [...] trend in London has tended to lionize plays that are both manipulative and worryingly unreflexive regarding the ‘realities’ they purport to discuss”. An advocate of Derridean deconstruction, he calls for performances to “foreground their own processes of representation” (59, 67, 61). In the same vein, Thomas Irmer compares the Piscator-Weiss tradition in Germany, described as “one-sided, left-leaning agitprop”, to a contemporary generation of German directors whose techniques highlight “multiple perspectives”, creating a documentary theatre more “informed”, “reflective” and “deconstructed” (24, 26).<sup>115</sup> Whilst these concerns are justified and a greater degree of reflexivity might improve verbatim drama’s ethical/political aspirations, I would contend that the strength of this form lies precisely in its power to exceed postmodernism’s infinite itch for deconstruction. As Erickson observes, “theatrical self-consciousness of form and dramatic absorption of content are as necessary an interchange as is awareness of rhetorical practice, yet willingness to understand the other through dialogue” (158).

Writing alongside Martin, Bottoms and Irmer, Reinelt adopts a reconstructive critical outlook. She draws on the impact of *The Colour of Justice* to reflect on how “the notion that narrative and ‘facts’ are inseparably bound together in documentary form does not, however, discount the authority of the appeal to documentary evidence inherent in the form. [...] And although it might seem that postmodernism would gradually empty documentary of its authority if not its appeal, that is not what has happened” (83). Habermas’ stress on intersubjectivity can explain this conundrum by demonstrating that it is possible to critique a representational version of truth without surrendering the idea of

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<sup>115</sup> Irmer is aware of the limits of deconstructive perspectives though. Analysing Hans-Werner Kroesinger’s 1996 piece on the interrogations of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann, he declares: “It could have been politically inflammatory and even irresponsible for Kroesinger to use the Eichmann trial for a demonstration of theatrical deconstruction” ( 21).

truth itself. The philosopher agrees with his postmodernist colleagues in that cognitive representations are historically and linguistically mediated. "Gone [...] is the emphasis on the representational function of language and the visual metaphor of the 'mirror of nature'" (*Moral Consciousness* 10), he warns, but this is not followed by a renunciation of validity claims in the three dimensions of truth, rightness and expressiveness. On the contrary, such claims – which together constitute a widened definition of rationality – are built into everyday communicative practice and so are inescapable even for the most trenchant sceptic. In other words, truth can still be asserted as long as it is intersubjectively grasped: "Ultimately, there is only one criterion by which beliefs can be judged valid, and that is that they are based on agreement reached by argumentation" (14, original emphasis).

According to Habermas, modernity has compartmentalised the aforementioned three domains without return. Nevertheless, the importance of political theatre as a mediating factor is particularly heightened by the verbatim form, which, in shaping and amplifying multiple voices in the public sphere, can convey both information and deliberation without relinquishing its artistic character. In the complexities of documentary performance and reception, however, a desire for expressiveness may eclipse rightness (as in *The Permanent Way*), an urge for rightness overshadow truth (as in *Talking to Terrorists*) or an anxiety about truth outdo expressiveness (as in *Justifying War*). Whatever the case, investing publicly in validity claims is necessary even for their eventual dismissal. As McCarthy notes,

We can and typically do make contextually conditioned and fallible claims to unconditional truth (as I have just done). It is this moment of unconditionality that opens us up to criticism from other points of view. [...] It is precisely this context-transcendent [...] surplus of meaning in our notion of truth that keeps us from being

locked into what we happen to agree on at any particular time and place, that opens us up to the alternative possibilities lodged in otherness and difference that have been so effectively invoked by postmodernist thinkers. (33-34)

This is how a reconstructive approach turns the postmodernist perspective against itself. This is also how verbatim theatre, with its imperfect set of interventions in the public sphere and its persistent search for intersubjective truth, succeeds in taking political drama beyond postmodernism.

## **6.2 Tribunal plays: *Bloody Sunday***

As noted in Chapter 2, drama as cultural production and the theatre as place of encounter were already at the centre of the historical public sphere. This section concentrates on the link between the theatre and the tribunal, using John Durham Peter's concept of 'witnessing' to explain how current tribunal plays operate in the public realm to promote collective responsibility. The tribunal plays produced by the Tricycle Theatre have been based scrupulously on transcripts from high-profile inquiries – national and international – and are set in a faithful reproduction of the courtroom environment. They recreate a public occasion that 'happened' and was purposefully fashioned to find the 'truth' about controversial events. This endorses their accounts with a factual import that places them apart from verbatim texts assembled from a collection of interviews (such as *The Permanent Way* and *Talking to Terrorist*) or a compilation of diaries or personal letters (for example, *Guantanamo* and *My Name is Rachel Corrie*).

What makes it to the stage is in all cases heavily selected, but the claims of multiple voices in the tribunal need not be juxtaposed by the craft of playwriting; they offer themselves in the already dramatised process of cross-

examination.<sup>116</sup> Tricycle artistic director Nicolas Kent and journalist Richard Norton-Taylor take the medium extremely seriously: “words are not changed from the source documents, the chronology is maintained and answers to one question are not put against another” (Wroe). Focusing on *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry* (2005), it will be argued that their method of making live performance effectively transforms spectators into conscious witnesses, extending the scope of the public sphere.

The Tricycle’s *Bloody Sunday* was a highly successful production. Critically applauded in London, it also played in Belfast, Derry and Dublin,<sup>117</sup> and won an Olivier Award for ‘Outstanding Achievement’. At the same time, it constitutes one of the company’s most complex projects. The events examined by Saville – the deaths of thirteen civilians shot by the British Army during a civil rights demonstration in Derry, Northern Ireland<sup>118</sup> – occurred in 1972, but were obscured by a very partial original inquiry. This first tribunal, conducted by Lord Widgery, exonerated the soldiers, declaring that even though “none of the deceased or wounded is proved to have been shot whilst handling a firearm or bomb [...] there is a strong suspicion that some others had been firing weapons or handling bombs in the course of the afternoon and that yet others had been closely supporting them”. Whilst the report, published less than three months after the shootings, acknowledged that in some cases “firing bordered on the reckless”, it shifted the blame away from the army. Its first conclusion reads: “There would have been no deaths in Londonderry on 30 January if those who organised the illegal march had not thereby created a highly dangerous situation

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<sup>116</sup> “Since cross-examination follows direct examination and the rules of evidence prohibit the introduction of new material by means of this type of questioning, it is often the goal of the cross-examiner either to subvert the testimony which the witness has previously given or to offer an alternative interpretation of that testimony [...] or both” (Harris 70).

<sup>117</sup> In a recent article, Carole-Anne Upton examines the reception of the play in Northern Ireland, concluding that there was minimal impact. This underlines in my opinion the irreducible differences between ‘national’ public spheres.

<sup>118</sup> Another fourteen civilians were wounded, one of them died months later. No soldiers were injured. Derry’s official name is Londonderry, “but the addition of the prefix “London” in 1613 has never been accepted by the majority nationalist population of the city” (Hegarty 209, n.37).

in which a clash between demonstrators and the security forces was almost inevitable" (Widgery Report).

While Widgery's pronouncement has long been discredited,<sup>119</sup> it remained the official version until former British Prime Minister Tony Blair announced a second inquiry in January 1998 (the 26<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the killings) on the basis of 'new evidence'. It would take seven more years until the last witness was heard, making Saville the longest and most expensive judicial process in Britain. Around 2500 people provided statements; 922 of them were called to give oral evidence, including 245 from the military and 505 civilians (The Bloody Sunday Inquiry). First predicted for 2005, the outcome of Saville is still awaited at the time of writing.

Bloody Sunday is considered "a watershed in the collective memory of 'The Troubles', the 30-year campaign of violence and murder carried out by loyalist and republican paramilitary organizations and the state over competing claims to the territory of Northern Ireland" (Conway 120, n.3). In the decades between the incident and its reassessment, several books, fictional plays and films have tackled the subject.<sup>120</sup> After so many years and so many layers of representation – two inquiries, media coverage, artistic interventions – the restraint of the Tricycle's approach, limited to the portrayal of Saville's oral evidence, offered an opportunity to look at the events anew. Writing from the Irish Republic in anticipation of the production's visit to the Dublin Festival, Patrick Lonergan reflected on how *Bloody Sunday*, "designed with a British rather than an Irish

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<sup>119</sup> For instance, a memorandum made public in 1997 revealed that the then British Prime Minister Edward Heath had instructed Widgery to "never forget it is a propaganda war we are fighting" (qtd. in Hegarty 214). In a letter sent to former Derry MP John Hume in 1993, former Prime Minister John Major refused to hold a second inquiry but stressed: "The government made clear in 1974 that those who were killed on Bloody Sunday should be regarded as innocent" (qtd. in Bew 115).

<sup>120</sup> White ("Quite a Profound Day" 185, n.3) provides a comprehensive list of works produced prior to the closing of Saville. Most recently, another play, *Heroes with their Hands in the Air* (2007) gave a verbatim account by survivors and relatives of the inquiry itself. It was based on Eamonn McCann's book of interviews *The Bloody Sunday Inquiry: The Families Speak Out* (2005).



audience in mind" (32), achieved something that had eluded previous plays about Ireland: British engagement with the Troubles.<sup>121</sup>

What makes *Bloody Sunday* stand out is that it does not attempt to explain Ireland [...] Nor does it use exoticised language or rural settings to mark out Irish characters as different from the English audience. Rather, the play argues forcefully that Bloody Sunday is not just about Ireland, but that it also goes to the heart of British society: its army, its legal system, its government. (31)

This is realised by keeping a narrow, almost surgical focus on the incidents of that Sunday in 1972, a strategy that permits to step back from partisan sympathies into the consideration of issues of justice and the accountability of the state. Yet objectivity, as in all political theatre, is not the right measurement to use. In the play's selection of "five civilians and five soldiers" Lonergan perceived "a clear 'for' and 'against' argument" (30). However, as activist Eamonn McCann (2005) noted after seeing the production in Derry: "None of the five soldiers whose evidence is covered [...] emerges with [his] reputation intact. All of the civilians depicted [...] came across as credible". McCann also reported the reaction of John Kelly, whose brother was shot on Bloody Sunday: "It was completely balanced, completely objective. [...] Anybody watching that play can see we were right."<sup>122</sup> Although this latter statement may seem contradictory, a

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<sup>121</sup> By comparison, when Brian Friel's play *The Freedom of the City* opened in London in 1973, "there were bomb scares at the theatre, accusations that the play was IRA propaganda, and many other difficulties" (Lonergan 30). According to Tom Maguire, "the first production of *The Freedom of the City* [...] was panned by the critics as an exercise in propaganda both in London and New York. [...] Arguably the reviews were a complete misreading of the complex dramaturgical structures within the play which with the passing of time have become more generally recognised" (48-49). The play was revived in London in December 2005.

<sup>122</sup> McCann's article calls attention to the fact that the BBC (which has broadcasted all the other Tricycle tribunal plays and contributed funds to the development of this one) has not televised *Bloody Sunday*: "To many in the audience it seemed obvious that here was another example of the media glancing at Bloody Sunday and then averting its eyes from the clear truth emerging, and that the appropriate reaction was to fetch out the placards".

detailed analysis of how both the tribunal and the theatre operate in the public sphere can illuminate the matter.

### **The theatre and the tribunal**

Habermas' acknowledgment of the complexity of the contemporary public sphere points to the current potential of political theatre. Because opportunities to participate in the public sphere are unequal, actors who simply use its structure are different from those who aim to radicalise it. It is within this latter function that political theatre retains its agency, both by offering alternative interpretations to public events and – in the specific case of verbatim forms – by providing marginal voices with access to the public realm. Thus, it can be said that the Tricycle's reputation is based not on a pretence of balance but on its ability to extend the public reach of certain demands for justice. In this sense, the tribunal plays continue a strong historical tradition that has connected the law courts and the theatre since the birth of the public sphere.

As an institution, the judiciary is a branch of state power and its decisions (except in the case of trial by jury) are self-determining. Nevertheless, the introduction of modern court proceedings – and their later publication – created a space for public interaction in legal matters. Historian David Bell highlights that the idea of a tribunal was the most common metaphor among French eighteenth-century authors to describe the then budding notion of “the public” (913) and that the court system in this pre-revolutionary phase constituted “the principal arena for legally expressing social and political claims” (919).<sup>123</sup> In addition, the publication of *mémoires judiciaires* established a strong association between legal, literary and theatrical discourses. According to Sarah Maza, these trial briefs had a crucial political function: they were “the main bridge between the courtroom and the street” at a time when trials were secret (1253). They were

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<sup>123</sup> Bell draws on the work of Keith Michael Baker.

built, however, not on rational debate but on “emotional persuasion” (1256) and “written like fiction” (1257). In the popular story of Count de Sanois, published in 1786 by defence lawyer Pierre-Louis de Lacretelle – who would later take to playwriting – Maza identifies the conventions of melodrama,<sup>124</sup> a form that created a reciprocal influence between the courtroom and the theatre:

If trial briefs borrowed from the new “bourgeois” drama its tears and tirades, dramatists, in turn, began to consider the courtroom an important source of inspiration for their plays. The playwright Mercier suggested in his treatise *Du Théâtre* (1773) that great judicial cases be replayed on stage and that spectators confirm the verdict of the law by cheering the resolution of the case in detail. (1258)

As has been stressed, the already dramatised dealings of the court are an obvious attraction to the theatre. But more importantly, the link with the tribunal can supply theatre audiences with an opportunity for considering issues of common concern (even if not as directly as Mercier envisaged). Although such consideration always requires reflection, it is never purely rational.

In the nineteenth century, Dublin-born dramatist Dion Boucicault impressed the public with *The Trial of Effie Deans; Or, The Heart of Midlothian* (1863), a fictional play that nonetheless included a convincing representation of the protagonist’s court case. Regarding this show as a prime example of sensation theatre (the type of melodrama that dominated the British stage in the 1860s), Lynn Voskuil maintains that “in their shared, somatic responses to sensation plays, Victorians envisioned a kind of affective adhesive that massed them to each other in an inchoate but tenacious nineteenth-century incarnation of

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<sup>124</sup> The melodramatic conflict between good and evil is used in this story to portray Sanois’ wife in a negative light, underlining for Maza “the association between ‘bad’ femininity and corrupt despotism [which] was also one of the commonplaces of polemical literature in the 1780s” (1260).

the English public sphere" (245).<sup>125</sup> Like Maza, Voskuil emphasises emotional and bodily aspects of public life that Habermas tends to ignore. She also draws attention to the paradoxical "blend of apparent authenticity and self-conscious theatricality" upon which sensation theatre depended (250). These tensions – between the rational and the affective; between the authentic and the theatrical – are certainly still at work in contemporary tribunal theatre. Moreover, as Gregory Mason indicates, they are the root of the two lines of development taken by documentary drama since Brecht and Piscator:

Brecht differed from Piscator in wanting above all to maintain an aesthetic distance between the stage and the audience; he strove to provoke the audience to rational reflection, rather than to draw it into emotional involvement. Piscator, however, sought to further a theatre of involvement through documents, a goal which resulted in the evolution of a clear distinction between these two elements: on the one hand there is theatre as revolution, which proposes to spill into direct action; and on the other there is theatre as theatre, with less immediate agitational goals. (267)

Mason argues that Brecht saw in the tribunal form a chance "for a systematic presentation of evidence" and that "the public nature of the trial also enhanced the alienation effect [because] the tendency to see characters as 'cases' rather than private individuals lessened identification" (269). In Mason's terms, the redefinition of political theatre being proposed here follows the sobering view of 'theatre as theatre', a theatre that recognises its limitations in the world beyond the stage and values rational debate over emotional propaganda. Yet, as the historical origins of the tribunal genre reveal, its affective component should not be disregarded. Brecht's intentions notwithstanding, a

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<sup>125</sup> Sensation theatre – as opposed to the early (popular) melodrama – arrived with consumer culture, a development linked in Habermas' original account to the historical decline of the public sphere. Voskuil nonetheless defends this theatre's power to produce a revitalised public.

duality of rational reflection *and* emotional involvement seems to be inherent in audiences' responses to trials, whether in the courtroom or in the theatre.

Graham White, who has explored the performative aspects of *Bloody Sunday* both as an inquiry and as a play, cautions against "the affective impact of courtroom testimony" ("Quite a Profound Day" 174), particularly when – as in this case – material evidence is scarce and immunity from prosecution not guaranteed.<sup>126</sup> "In such circumstances the witnesses who testify to protect themselves against serious accusations may be engaged in a performed enactment of truth [...] which achieves an effect of veracity that the law then fixes as the truth it seeks" (177). According to White, the same risk of deception is then replicated by the realistic style of the Tricycle's production, which, to "confirm its mimetic accuracy and convince of the verisimilitude of its project", offers "a – however revealing, stringent and powerful – necessarily mythologizing narrative distillation of the event" ("Compelled to Appear" 84).

White's analysis is insightful but partial. It is indeed ironic that, coming from what Mason accurately portrays as the Brechtian side of documentary drama, best represented by non-naturalistic efforts such as Peter Weiss' *The Investigation* (1964),<sup>127</sup> contemporary tribunal theatre would exhibit "a general tendency towards hardcore illusionism" (Megson, "The State" 11). However, this is automatically tempered by the constraining task of representing the trial situation itself. In this respect, Mason's description is still valid for the current tribunal form, which relies "at times excessively on the spoken word" and suffers "a restriction to the telling rather than the showing of events in a defined, confined setting" (273). The paradox of the tribunal play in its latest incarnation is well captured in Lonergan's comments about *Bloody Sunday*: "the aesthetic at work here is that there are no aesthetics – the production's creators do all they

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<sup>126</sup> Even though the Saville Inquiry is "not a trial," it "does not rule out the possibility of future criminal proceedings." The witnesses' own evidence cannot be used against them, but could incriminate third parties (The Bloody Sunday Inquiry).

<sup>127</sup> Despite their different emphases, Mason, Megson and White employ Weiss as a reference point.

can to maintain the illusion that we're not in a theatre. Which is of course highly theatrical" (30). And, perhaps, dangerous. In Carol Martin's words, "documentary theatre is an imperfect answer that needs our obsessive analytical attention especially since, in ways unlike any other form of theatre, it claims to have bodies of evidence" (15). While White's and Martin's warnings are not without justification, they overlook the resources that both the law and the stage possess to counter excessive claims of veracity.

### **The question of authenticity**

White derives his conception of testimony as the 'performance of memory' from Philip Auslander's influential piece *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (1999). Auslander's argument is relevant to the present analysis on two counts. First, in terms of the relationship between 'liveness' and the law; second, in its attempt to blur ontological distinctions between live and mediated events. By demonstrating that "live performance is [...] essential to legal procedure" (113), Auslander productively questions the political claim advanced by performance theorists such as Peggy Phelan that "performance's disappearance and subsequent persistence only in memory makes performance a privileged site of resistance to forces of regulation and control" (112). At the same time, Auslander insists that in law as well as in performance theory, "this respect for liveness is ideological and [...] rooted in an unexamined belief that live confrontation can somehow give rise to the truth in ways that recorded representations cannot" (128-29). In his view, the live and the mediated are embedded in the same cultural economy and mirror each other to the point of dedifferentiation (39).

Auslander's case against the customary mystification of the live event is a healthy reminder that an assessment of the political value of performance cannot rely on liveness per se, disregarding "intentions and contexts" (47). However, he

shares with Phelan and other performance theorists a Foucaultian prejudice about legal discourses, in which an indeterminate notion of resistance is advocated in response. As Best and Kellner emphasise (69), “[Habermas] has correctly observed that Foucault describes all aspects of modernity as disciplinary and ignores the progressive aspects of modern social and political forms in terms of advances in liberty, law, and equality”. In this particular context, a Foucaultian approach neglects both the historical contribution of the courts towards the creation of an independent public sphere (as discussed in the previous section) and the democratic potential still present in the link between the theatre and the tribunal. The complex conception of law developed by Habermas is more fruitful in order to understand the collective importance of public inquiries such as Saville, despite the inevitable shortcomings rightly identified by White. For Habermas, the law exists in a tension between *facticity* and *validity*, with legal norms allowing a type of social integration “based simultaneously on the threat of external sanctions and the supposition of a rationally motivated agreement” [see 1.2]. This tension is especially acute in a divided society like Northern Ireland’s, where the authority of British law has been historically contested.

The legitimacy issues surrounding the Derry march on 30 January 1972 are intricate to say the least. On the one hand, the demonstration was an *illegal* protest against the *legal* introduction of internment, even though both detention without trial and the banning of demonstrations (despite their lamentable prevalence) are now almost impossible to defend.<sup>128</sup> On the other hand, the Widgery Inquiry’s ludicrous failure to restore confidence in the rule of law supplied a recruiting ground for the IRA. Still, as legal scholar Angela Hegarty emphasises, the bereaved families’ lengthy campaign for a second inquiry epitomises the conflicting qualities of law: “Law may be capable of delivering the accountability and truth sought by victims of human right violations, but it is also

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<sup>128</sup> Submissions to the Saville Inquiry on behalf of NICRA suggest that there is sufficient ground for the tribunal to declare both measures retrospectively unlawful (see Blom-Cooper).

often the tool employed by states to avoid or deny responsibility" (200). In the case of Bloody Sunday, "the victims are both suspicious of the legal process and yet also demand from it an outcome that validates their experience" (203). Whilst Hegarty is sceptical about whether the outcome of Saville will effectively challenge the state's 'official denial', she values the artistic interventions in the public sphere created during its progress.

As the Saville Inquiry continued its hearings, two new films dramatising the events of Bloody Sunday were made. The production of these two films has driven the debate about what happened about Bloody Sunday back onto the mainstream agenda in Britain in a way that the Inquiry's proceedings, reported sporadically in the British media, has not. Arguably these two films – and the poems, songs and plays about the events – have had a far greater impact upon public consciousness than the Inquiry's proceedings. (220)

Although Tricycle's *Bloody Sunday* was produced after the publication of Hegarty's essay, the play shares with the films the fact that their political gravity does not come from a position of resistance to the law as represented by the second tribunal. On the contrary, these works rely on Saville's copious release of information and create awareness of the need for a just conclusion.<sup>129</sup> Their version of events is, however, independent from the still awaited tribunal's report, typifying the position of the public sphere as a site that is distinct, and potentially critical, from both state and market. Contrasting with the earlier plays about

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<sup>129</sup> Both films were shown on British television in 1992, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the event. Jimmy McGovern's *Sunday* is based on his own interviews with eye-witnesses (including soldiers) and the bereaved families, plus material from the Inquiry. Paul Greengrass' *Bloody Sunday* relies entirely on the latter. Greengrass writes: "There was no need to go out and interview people. It was just a matter of patiently reading the thousands of statements and documents gathered by the Saville inquiry, both military and civilian". He also observes that after the screening of his film in Derry, the spirit was "a cautious sense that perhaps at last the Saville inquiry may yet redeem the stain on our judicial system of Lord Widgery's dishonourable conclusions".



Bloody Sunday, the Tricycle's belongs, like the films, to the genre of 'documentary drama,' yet its strategies of construction are widely divergent. Martin complains that "documentary theatre's blurring of the real and the represented is just as problematic as television's ambiguous 'reenactments,' 'docudramas,' and 'reality' shows" (13). I believe tribunal plays at least escape this accusation. Using similar source material in a dissimilar medium, the two films on Bloody Sunday had to 'reenact' the day itself, while the Tricycle offered instead a live 'distillation'<sup>130</sup> of the court proceedings that was as dramatic and, judging from its reception, much more credible. Significantly, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Telegraph*, two British newspapers that had been hostile to the inquiry and particularly negative about the films,<sup>131</sup> joined in the general acclamation of the play. Writing for the former, Quentin Letts confessed: "For any patriot it is painful to hear the ropery evidence of senior Army officers. Yet this is not a one-sided account" (470).

The production's credibility is of course a result of its claim to authenticity, to its scrupulous closeness to the actual inquiry in both Norton-Taylor's editing and Kent's staging. Yet the effect is not a blurring of reality and representation. Quite the reverse: the strength of tribunal theatre comes from a respect to the real as ontologically different, albeit linguistically mediated. The words of the tribunal refer back to the painful and unspoken truth of those who died in 1972. The play's author admits to this: "'If you look carefully / You will see the impression / Of a body in the concrete,'" wrote Zephaniah in his poem *Derry Sunday*. Listening to the evidence and reading the words of the Saville Inquiry is a reminder that we are still haunted by the ghosts of the people who were killed that day" (Norton-Taylor, "Fourteen Million"). In other words, while the tribunal is

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<sup>130</sup> Norton-Taylor uses this term himself ("Fourteen Million Words Later").

<sup>131</sup> This is a summary offered by Christopher Dunkley in the *Financial Times*: "*Daily Mail* headlines over articles about [Greengrass'] *Bloody Sunday* included 'Bloody fantasy' and 'Just a pack of lies', and the *Daily Telegraph*'s account of both programmes said 'Shocking depictions that do nothing to help 30-year search for the truth'".

a kind of reality susceptible to be distilled and represented in detail, Bloody Sunday's *bodies of evidence* – to paraphrase Martin – are elsewhere.

However important it is for academics to treat verbatim theatre with vigilance, its impact cannot be attributable to simple deception or a *post*-postmodern desire to reconnect with 'reality'. Chris Megson perceptively explains audiences' investment in this type of drama as a consequence of its power to facilitate "a collective act of bearing witness" ("The State" 22-23).<sup>132</sup> I will build on this insight to suggest – *pace* Auslander – that tribunal theatre gains its vigour from being experienced as live performance. An appropriate definition of witnessing can be found in the work of Peters,<sup>133</sup> in which the witness is acknowledged as "the paradigm case of a *medium*: the means by which experience is supplied to others who lack the original" ("Witnessing" 709). Peters distinguishes four basic modes relating to an event, of which the first three correspond – in different degrees – to the idea of witnessing:

To be there, present at the event in space and time is the paradigmatic case. To be present in time but removed in space is the condition of liveness, simultaneity across space. To be present in space but removed in time is the condition of historical representation: here is the possibility of a simultaneity across time, a witness that laps the ages. To be absent in both space and time but still have access to an event via its traces is the condition of recording: the profane zone in which the attitude of witnessing is hardest to sustain. (720)

In this scheme, 'being there' covers theatre, concerts and sport; live transmission in radio, television or the web constitutes the second mode and museums, memorials and shrines, the third. Finally, books, video and CDs are

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<sup>132</sup> A similar claim is advanced by Hesford (35).

<sup>133</sup> Peters' differences with Habermas are discussed above [6.1].

examples of the fourth type. The tribunal plays could be characterised as a valuable hybrid. As theatre performances they belong to the first order, but they bring to this realm words from the inquiries (once also public live performances) which, because *recorded*, would not otherwise grant a witnessing experience.

Like Auslander, Peters avoids presenting the live and the mediatised in a binary opposition. Yet unlike Auslander, Peters recognises that witnessing, in any of its forms, “actually carries weighty baggage, if not ontological, at least historical”. Furthermore, “this baggage is not only a burden, but also a potential treasure, at least since it makes explicit the pervasive link between witnessing and suffering” (708). The historical sources of the bulky heritage of witnessing are, according to Peters, law (the witness as a core for judicial decisions), theology (the witness as a martyr) and atrocity (the witness as a survivor of the Holocaust). Indeed, as Peter Buse observes in a different context, the recently developed field of ‘trauma theory’ – where the concepts of witnessing and testimony have been researched for the most part – did arise from the larger area of Holocaust studies (175).<sup>134</sup>

A thorough consideration of trauma would certainly exceed the scope of this section, but certain key elements are relevant to the present discussion of tribunal theatre, which can be said to focus, like trauma theory, on “the complex and often painful and distorted ways in which the past continues to haunt and affect the present” (Buse 176). Peters stresses this point by noting that, because witnesses “are elected after the fact [...] testifying has the structure of repentance: retroactively caring about what we were once careless of” (722). In trauma, however, the process of recalling the past is extremely difficult, and so trauma theory is as much about witnessing as it is about its crisis (Buse 181-183). It would be fair to say that witnessing is always – as White has rightly pointed out with respect to the Bloody Sunday tribunal – riddled with uncertainty.

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<sup>134</sup> There is also a connection to be made here with tribunal theatre in Germany in the 1960s (Hochhuth, Weiss) and to the Tricycle’s second tribunal play, *Nuremberg*.

"The whole apparatus of trying to assure truthfulness, from torture to martyrdom to courtroom procedure, only testifies to the strange lack at its core" insists Peters (713), who attributes this lack to the epistemological gap between private experience and its articulation in public discourse (710). Nevertheless, trauma theory demonstrates that the precariousness of the private-to-public trajectory involved in witnessing must not deter from its importance.<sup>135</sup> In the words of Barbie Zelizer,

The act of bearing witness helps individuals to cement their association with the collective as a post hoc response to the trauma of public events that, however temporarily, shatter the collective. By assuming responsibility for the events that occurred and reinstating a shared post hoc order, bearing witness thus becomes a mark of the collective's willingness to move toward recovery. (699)

Drawing on Peters and Zelizer among others, Carrie Rentschler regards witnessing as a political act: "Witnessing constitutes a form of selective attention to victims – and sometimes identification with victims – in ways that often make invisible citizen's own participation in state violence against others" (296). Writing in the US, Rentschler is concerned in particular with the way in which the memory of the victims of 9/11 has been used as justification for the so-called war on terror, but she could have been talking about Northern Ireland's Bloody Sunday, where "British military authorities have always maintained [...] that firing by the army was in response to a sustained attack upon them by the IRA" (Hegarty

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<sup>135</sup> Writing on the theatre of Northern Ireland – including Friel's play *The Freedom of the City*, which, although fictional, can be said to employ documentary conventions – Maguire uses the idea of witnessing to advocate a different notion of authenticity that depends not on the factual but on the authority of the tellers (54-59).

210). The success of the Tricycle's production lies in inviting the audience to understand that even in such a climate, state violence is inexcusable.

What convinced the *Daily Mail* critic about the neutrality of the play was the testimony placed right at the end, in which Official IRA's quartermaster Reg Tester says that he could not deny that shots were fired from his side on Bloody Sunday. His words, however, are preceded by Counsel to the Inquiry Christopher Clark QC acknowledging Tester's argument that to have admitted this in 1972 "was thought to distract attention from what it is said really to have happened, that the soldiers had killed and wounded a number of civilians without justification" (96). This is a reverberation of one of Bernadette McAliskey's<sup>136</sup> eloquent speeches earlier in the play:

I actually do not care, and I do not think that it matters if the entire Brigade of the Provisional IRA, aided and abetted by the Official IRA and anybody else that they could gather up for the occasion were conspiring to take on the British Army on that day, even if that – which I do not believe – even if any of it and all of it were true, it did not justify the Army opening fire on the civilian population on that demonstration. (30-31)

Although McAliskey is a recognised figure in the republican camp, her words here are emblematic of the play's focus on the claim of the innocent victims against the state, a justice claim that does not depend on anybody's position on the Irish conflict and that could even find echo within supporters of the establishment's case. The Tricycle's productions do not explicitly take sides but neither do they operate under a false pretence of objectivity. As Norton-

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<sup>136</sup> McAliskey (née Devlin) had become the youngest woman to be elected MP in 1969 and was one of the speakers in the Bloody Sunday march. Lonergan comments that the choice of McAliskey as the voice of republicanism allows *Bloody Sunday* to undermine and transform stage stereotypes of republicans as "barbarous psychopaths" (32).

Taylor implies in the statement quoted above, the company's ethos is to support those who have suffered. To be "on the right side", as Peters bluntly puts it (714), is part and parcel of witnessing.

In conclusion, tribunal theatre contributes to the public sphere by making available a collective experience that, because it occurs as live performance, corresponds to the first order of witnessing. As a new breed of political theatre (although with deep historical roots), the work of the Tricycle permits its audience *to be there*, offering the simultaneity in space and time that encourages public responsibility. Certainly, what spectators see and hear is not the 'real' inquiry, not even a copy; rather, a highly edited version of it. Yet if one accepts, with Peters, that witnessing is always already a case of mediation, there is no reason to disqualify Norton-Taylor and Kent as legitimate witnesses (to the tribunal) who have taken enormous care in transmitting the words of witnesses (to the event) as uttered in the courtroom. By allowing the grieving voices from the past to be heard again, tribunal theatre makes them part of our present and incorporates them into a more radical public sphere.

## Chapter 7: Feminist/Global Departures

### 7.1 Sarah Kane's *Blasted*

That Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) cannot be easily categorised either as 'political' or as 'feminist' theatre is symptomatic of the difficulties both these labels encountered in the last decade of the twentieth century. Tellingly, scholars seem less troubled to hail its first production as "a landmark" (Rebellato, "Sarah Kane" 280) or to draw tempting parallels with that other Royal Court *event*, the premiere of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956. As Helen Iball suggests, these remarks – which she justly regards as dangerous – can be explained because "theatre history finds it difficult to resist according landmark status" (321). There is, however, certain justification: some borrow from Raymond Williams to declare that Kane presents a different 'structure of feeling' (Aston 89; Carney 277). Aleks Sierz puts it more simply: "*Blasted* is a typically nineties play: it doesn't state a case but imposes its point of view" (*In-Yer-Face Theatre* 103). For Anthony Nielson, another 'nineties playwright', *Blasted* "spoke for a generation which has a dulled, numb feeling – not apathy, but a feeling that nothing you do will make any difference". Thus, "horror coming into your living room is the only way you can feel something and get yourself motivated" (qtd. in Sierz, 121).

Whether the work of the young dramatists who emerged in this period should be considered 'political theatre' has been the subject of intense debate. Sarah Kane's position within this group is also complex. On the one hand, she is the emblematic figure of what Sierz named the 'in-yer-face' sensibility. On the other, her plays are quite dissimilar to those of her contemporaries in several counts, not least in terms of gender representation (an angle of Kane's work that only recently has gathered scholarly interest). Revisiting *Blasted* after more than

a decade of assessments and reassessments,<sup>137</sup> I will argue that the play's political character does not rest in its depiction of war but rather in its contribution to the feminist struggle to connect the public and the private. At the same time, however, an interpretation of *Blasted* in this light reveals its political shortcomings, namely, a rather essentialist view of gender and a narrow ethical stance. The problematic reception of *Blasted* as a political play and the emerging feminist readings of it will be reviewed as a first step in this analysis. Then, using feminist critical theory [see Chapter 3] I will contend that the play's final withdrawal into the personal realm curtails its potential as a feminist/political performance text. Steve Waters claims that the significance of *Blasted* – especially now, in post-9/11 times – lies in its “terror aesthetic” (“Sarah Kane” 374), which ended the dominance of “feminist humanism” at the Royal Court (380-81). The present analysis however is informed by a sort of feminist humanism, inasmuch as the “post-humanist, experiential, non-consensual” paradigm that Waters celebrates (381) cannot provide a viable political basis.

By literally planting a bomb onstage in the middle of her first full-length play, Kane successfully managed to establish a direct connection between the private (a couple in a Leeds hotel room) and the public (an unidentified war zone). The intentionally dislocated storyline of *Blasted* unravels within a carefully built five-scene structure. Scene one shows the abusive relationship between Ian, a racist 45 year-old tabloid journalist/agent who is dying of cancer; and Cate, a candid unemployed 21 year-old with learning difficulties. In scene two, the next morning, it transpires that Ian has raped Cate overnight. Suddenly, an anonymous foreign Soldier comes in with a rifle, Cate escapes through the bathroom window and a mortar bomb blasts the hotel. Scene three hears the Soldier recount the atrocities of war he had witnessed (which included the rape and murder of his girlfriend) and those he later committed. He then rapes and

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<sup>137</sup> ‘Sarah Kane: Reassessments’ was the title of a one-day conference held at Cambridge University in February 2008, which aimed at re-examining critical approaches to Kane’s work. Both political and gender dimensions were predominant in the readings of *Blasted*.



blinds Ian, eating his eyes. At the start of scene four the Soldier has shot himself and Cate comes back from the war-torn city with a baby, who soon dies. She refuses to help Ian to kill himself because "God wouldn't like it" (55). In the final scene Cate buries the baby under a cross and leaves again to get food (by the only means possible, prostituting herself), while Ian is reduced to the most basic bodily functions in a series of tableaux-like images which culminate with him relieving his hunger by eating the baby and then dying "with relief" (60), only to discover that he is still alive. Cate comes back and shares food with Ian. In the last line of the play, he says "Thank you" (61).

This is certainly "not a classic issue play that weighs up pros and cons" (Sierz 103), yet it has a clear "premise", as described by David Greig in the introduction of Kane's collected works: "that there was a connection between a rape in a Leeds hotel room and the hellish devastation of civil war" (x). Sarah Kane spelled it out herself soon after the controversial premiere of *Blasted*: "The logical conclusion of the attitude that produces an isolated rape in England is the rape camps in Bosnia. And the logical conclusion to the way society expects *men* to behave is war" (qtd. in Bayley, my emphasis). Rape, historically central to the feminist struggle of making the personal political, is one of the core images repeated throughout the play. The other one, full of domestic connotations, is food: Ian and Cate have sandwiches in scene one, when we learn she is a vegetarian; breakfast arrives in scene two (Ian snacks, Cate declines, the Soldier devours the rest); the Soldier eats Ian's eyes in scene three; Ian eats the baby's body in scene five, at the end of which Cate shares with Ian bread and a sausage (she cannot afford to be vegetarian anymore). The fact that the last moment of reconciliation occurs over Ian being fed by Cate is problematic in terms of gender, as further analysis will show, but initially I shall concentrate on how the play's form and content were generally interpreted in political terms.

## Political readings

*Blasted's* 'explosion' not only violently removes the boundaries between private and public, but also between local and global – a particular concern of post-Cold War British political theatre – and, most crucially for Kane, between form and content. The playwright was acutely aware of this triple effect:

The form and content attempt to be one – the form is the meaning. [...] In terms of Aristotle's Unities, the time and action are disrupted while the unity of place is retained. Which cause a great deal of offence because it implied a direct link between domestic violence in Britain and civil war in the former Yugoslavia. [...] The unity of place suggests a paper-thin wall between the safety and civilisation of peacetime Britain and the chaotic violence of civil war. A wall that can be torn down at any time, without warning. (Qtd. in Stephenson and Langridge 130-31)

As Graham Saunders argues in his book *"Love Me or Kill Me": Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (48-49), the play's initial stage direction, "A very expensive hotel room in Leeds – the kind that is so expensive it could be anywhere in the world" (3), is a lucid anticipation of the author's intent in this respect, as well as the fitting Cate experiences "like I'm away for minutes or months sometimes" (10). After the bomb detonates, the stage direction reads: "There is a large hole in one of the walls, and everything is covered in dust which is still falling" (39). The image is again twofold; there is also a hole in the 'fourth wall' of realism,<sup>138</sup> which Kane sets to dismantle in the second half. According to the dramatist, what upset the critics so much in January 1995 was not the graphic violence but the non-naturalistic elements in the play. While this impression is accurate (and some of those reviewers ended up offering

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<sup>138</sup> Kim Solga points out that the fourth wall is not actually blasted away because the play never uses direct address. Still, the bomb "blasts [...] the limits of realism's visual control" (358).

posthumous apologies by the time of the revival in 2001), it does overlook a genuine critique of *Blasted*'s political treatment of war.

Kane famously related that it was a television report about the siege of Srebrenica that made her change her focus from "two people in a hotel room" to a much wider and devastating subject (qtd. in Sierz 100). However, unlike the overt reference to Leeds at the beginning of her text, the origin of the civil war that ensues in the second part of *Blasted* remains unspecified, underlining the playwright's demythologising intention: "There was a widespread attitude in this country that what was happening in central Europe could never happen here. In *Blasted*, it happened here" (98). Saunders reveals that the first two drafts of the play, used in its partial staging at the University of Birmingham, were more explicit in this respect than the final version. The Soldier is called "Vladek" and says to Ian: "This is a Serbian town now. And you are English shit" (*Love Me* 53). Whilst those references did not find their way into the published script, there were pointers to the Yugoslavian war in the Royal Court original production, and most critics – despite their predominantly negative reactions to the play – acknowledged the connection.

In one of the few positive 1995 reviews, Louise Doughty of the *Mail on Sunday* wrote: "to dismiss *Blasted* as the work of a kiddie playing mud pies would be deeply naïve. The soldier is on the run from a terrible civil war and the horrors he describes may seem over the top to us, though a Bosnian refugee might beg to differ" (42). As she expected, many critics did indeed short-sightedly dismiss *Blasted*'s powerful correlation between private and public, local and global, but in some cases there was more at stake in the critique. One extreme example is Sheridan Morley in *The Spectator*: "The real scandal is that it is a truly terrible little play, which starts out lethargically in Leeds and ends up bugged in Bosnia without any indication that the author has thought through how to get from one location to the other, or whether she really has anything worth saying in either" (42). Condemning Kane for not having "thought through how to get from one

location to the other" amounts to a spectacular misunderstanding of her play's main device, but asking whether she has anything to say is a legitimate question, which worried Nick Curtis of the *Evening Standard* as well: "Is Kane talking about Ireland? Bosnia? Leeds? Try as you may to contextualise it, her catalogue of inhumanity ultimately provokes revulsion rather than thought" (40). Lack of 'context' was also a major problem for *Guardian's* Michael Billington, who stated: "The reason the play falls apart is that there is no sense of external reality – who exactly is meant to be fighting whom out on the streets?" (39). Billington publicly retracted from his first review after the Royal Court revival in 2001,<sup>139</sup> yet he was still uncomfortable with the writer's avoidance of contextualisation: "Even now, I think she overstates her case and ignores the specific tribal, territorial motives of the Balkan conflict".

In spite of Kane's canonical standing within theatre scholarship,<sup>140</sup> some academic voices have questioned her work's political credentials in a similar way. The late Vera Gottlieb recognised in *Blasted* the dramatist's "real moral outrage *and* the courage to face those realities", but maintained that her play lacked "political focus" (9, original emphasis). Croatian scholar Sanja Nikcevic has gone even further, criticising British reviewers for being too lenient on *Blasted*:

Ah, Bosnia, say the critics, obediently following the author's tip. But after you see the play you will know exactly the same about the Bosnian war as you did before. *You will have no need to do something about it*, to change the situation in Bosnia, or even Britain, because violence has merely been shown to be an intrinsic part of human nature. (264, my emphasis)

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<sup>139</sup> He writes: "Initially I was stunned by the play's excesses. Now it is easier to see their dramatic purpose. Kane is trying to shock us into an awareness of the emotional continuum between domestic brutality and the rape camps of Bosnia, and to dispel the notion of the remote otherness of civil war".

<sup>140</sup> For dissenting views see Iball and Luckhurst.

On the opposite side of the debate, Elizabeth Sakellaridou has argued that Kane's non-explicitness in *Blasted* "is precisely the strength of her piece":

Instead of drawing a clear line between the 'here' and the 'there' [...] Kane chooses to blur the location of war atrocities. By deliberately collapsing the geographical barrier between a safe English town (Leeds) and a real Bosnian battlefield, she devises an effective non-realistic strategy which disarms her British audience *removing any rational argument for non-involvement*. ("New Faces" 47, my emphasis)

So, is *Blasted's* lack of specificity an obstacle or a facilitator for political engagement? Nikcevic believes the former, because in her view political theatre must offer a certain level of understanding in order to affect its audience. Sakellaridou, an admirer of Howard Barker's rejection of clarity,<sup>141</sup> praises instead "Kane's elusive strategies of moral implication" as representative of "the new style of writing of socially and politically motivated theatre". Such style, she insists, "proves to be much more effective than [...] self-complacent, openly moralistic rhetoric" (47). Both Nikcevic's and Sakellaridou's arguments are related to dilemmas about reason and ethics, which will be discussed below. Yet here it is important to point out that despite the fact that comparisons have been made between the opening night of *Blasted* in 1995 and that of *Look Back in Anger* four decades earlier,<sup>142</sup> a crucial parallel has passed unnoticed.

Consider Osborne's famous statement – "I want to make people feel. [...] They can think afterwards" (65) – alongside Sierz's reaction after first seeing *Blasted*: "On the train home, I wrote: 'Kane's play makes you feel but it doesn't make you think.' This turned out to be wrong: *it does make you think, but only*

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<sup>141</sup> Barker has been almost unanimously recognised as one of Kane's main influences.

<sup>142</sup> The differences between the two plays have been effectively underlined by Saunders, who places *Blasted* "firmly in a European milieu of non-realism, away from the socio-realism that had come to dominate much post-war British drama" (*Love Me or Kill Me* 69).

after you've got over the shock of seeing it" (99, my emphasis).<sup>143</sup> The comparison is worth drawing because of its political implications. Facing the well-known ideological inconsistencies of *Look Back in Anger's* Jimmy Porter,<sup>144</sup> defenders of Osborne justified them with phrases such as "a play is about people, not necessarily about ideas" (Taylor 43), while critics dismissed the playwright's avoidance of politics in favour of 'feeling'. Kenneth Allsop, for example, identified Osborne as an "emotionalist" writer, part of "a new leftism [which is] essentially naïve [because] it shies away from the tough, tangled problems [...] that democratic socialism must solve, and gets its kicks from emotional utopian generalities" (43-44).

As Rebellato indicates in his iconoclastic study of the 1950s, Osborne's plays can be seen as representative of the then emergent New Left, whose disappointment with the Soviet model led to an "abstention from questions of economy and the state" and a redirection towards culture (*1956 and All That* 20). Still, when it comes to Kane, Rebellato praises her concentration on emotion: "The critics focused exclusively on the violence of the play [*Blasted*]. And while this theme undeniably haunts and shapes her work [...] what Kane was writing about was love" ("Sarah Kane" 280). It seems that after the end of the Cold War and the crumbling of 'democratic socialism', attitudes concerning political drama have changed irrevocably. The question must also be raised as to whether attitudes about gender haven't (is writing about 'emotion' still expected and valued when it comes from female rather than male dramatists?).

On balance, it would be fair to say that Kane shares with Osborne a desire to stir the audience's 'feelings'. Unlike the latter, however, Kane tends to achieve this aim through physicality rather than verbosity, creating a theatre that has

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<sup>143</sup> Ken Urban describes his experience at the Royal Court revival of *Blasted* in 2001 with almost the same words: "During Macdonald's production, first comes the emotion, the thinking, afterwards" ("An Ethics of Catastrophe" 46).

<sup>144</sup> The character was supposed to be an embodiment of post-war working class anger, yet his sympathy for his upper class father-in-law, Colonel Redfern, displays a strong nostalgia for the Edwardian past, imperialistic connotations included.

been characterised as “experiential”.<sup>145</sup> This is not to imply, as some commentators have (for instance, Morris), that text is not important in her plays. On the contrary, her celebrated visual metaphors spring from a fundamentally literary style of writing, but one where verbal economy contrasts with the extravagant stage imagery it creates. For Saunders, “her drama is only partly experiential”, as there is a “tension” between “the experiential and textual” (“Just a Word” 100-01). Likewise, Sean Carney considers *Blasted*’s achievement to be “to bring together ‘text’ and ‘performance,’ signs and experience, and to render the two, however fleetingly, identical”, showing “a meaning that is simultaneously a feeling” (280). Nevertheless, Kane herself was highly suspicious of ‘speculation’ in the theatre:

I’ve chosen to represent it [despair and brutality] because sometimes we have to descend into hell imaginatively in order to avoid going there in reality. If we can experience something through art, then we might be able to change our future, because experience engraves lessons on our hearts through suffering, whereas speculation leaves us untouched. (Qtd. in Stephenson and Langridge 133)

While a theatre that fails to communicate through experience would indeed be unable to stir change, it is also the case that political change in particular cannot be encouraged by evacuating rationality from the stage. Feelings are private by nature and, as feminist political theorist Mary Dietz contends, “not the language of love and compassion, but only the language of freedom and equality, citizenship and justice, will challenge nondemocratic and oppressive political institutions” (34). I will build on this insight to suggest that

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<sup>145</sup> Sierz uses this adjective to describe the aesthetic of ‘in-yer-face’ drama in general (239), of which Kane is, in his view, “the quintessential [...] writer” (121).

*Blasted* falls short of such a challenge, but first it is necessary to examine current feminist interpretations of the play.

### **Feminist readings**

In a book on British women's drama published as recently as 2005, Kathleen Starck asserts: "Kane is not concerned with issues of gender" (216). This has been a generally accepted assumption, challenged however by Saunders, who recognises that "in fact the so-called 'crisis of masculinity' and the interplay of power between men and women dominate all her work" (*Love Me* 30). In *Feminist Views in the English Stage* (2003), Elaine Aston also strongly reclaims this dimension of Kane's plays, even though previously she had interpreted them as more 'political' than 'feminist':

Sarah Kane was [...] another example of someone who did not easily fit categories. She was a woman, but the extreme violence and brutal representations of her plays *Blasted*, *Cleansed*, and [...] *Crave* aligned her more with the political writing of Edward Bond than with any of the established political women writers of the senior generation such as Caryl Churchill or Timberlake Wertenbaker. (Aston and Reinelt 214-15)

Kane's legitimate aversion to being categorised is partly to blame for this critical reluctance to appreciate her plays' strong feminist resonance. In a much-quoted interview she said: "An over-emphasis on sexual politics (or racial or class politics) is a diversion from our main problem. [...] My only responsibility as a writer is to the truth, however unpleasant that truth may be. I have no responsibility as a woman writer because I don't believe there's such a thing" (qtd. in Stephenson and Langridge 134). Here Kane seems fully aware of the risks of extreme identity politics, and her commitment to what she calls 'the truth'



is a reminder of her greater affinity with the modernist avant-garde rather than the postmodernist aesthetics displayed by contemporaries such as Mark Ravenhill. In Saunders' words, "Kane's drama is informed and influenced far more closely by classical and modern European theatre than 'rave culture'" (*Love Me* 7).<sup>146</sup> It is worth noting as well that *Blasted* does not simply voice a one-sided proclamation of 'the personal is political', because the play also inverts the critique. Ian learns the lesson, in the hardest possible way, that the 'political' is as important as what he and his tabloid readers consider 'personal'. Soon after he refuses the Soldier's invitation to "tell" his story, with complaints such as "I don't cover foreign affairs" and "It has to be... personal" (3:48), the Soldier decides to rape and blind him. Now that he has lost his eyes, Ian, the 'myopic' journalist, can finally 'see' the Soldier's point.

Saunders includes Kane as exploring the same theme as most 'in-her-face' writers – namely, masculinity in crisis – but he observes that, unlike the rest, she offers a way out, "even if that alternative is bleak and uncomfortable" (*Love Me* 34). Her male characters are usually violent, particularly against women,<sup>147</sup> yet "they have an underlying fragility, a desire to be loved and an almost pathetic tenderness that often lurks beneath their cruelty" (32). Agreeing with this analysis, Aston rightly emphasises Kane's insistence on the tie between private dysfunction and public brutality: "it is her vision of a violent contemporary world and the underlying causal relationship this has to gender generally and to a 'diseased male identity' specifically that is significant" (*Feminist Views* 80). For Aston, the anti-feminist climate of the 1990s is liable for the critical invisibility of this crucial aspect of Kane's work:

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<sup>146</sup> Specifically in relation to *Blasted*, Saunders discusses influences of Beckett, Pinter, Shakespeare's *King Lear* and romantic literature (54-70).

<sup>147</sup> This is the case in most plays, even though Kane denied the implication: "I don't think of the world as being divided up into men and women, victims and perpetrators. I don't think those are constructive divisions to make, and they make for very poor writing" (qtd. in Stephenson and Langridge 133).

If women playwrights were frequently represented as marginal to a revival of all things masculine in the 1990s [...], Kane, exceptionally, was presented as included in, not excluded from, the male-dominated circles of the young and the angry. [...] One of the ways of dealing with Kane's youth (she was twenty-three when *Blasted* was staged) and gender (apparently women are not supposed to write such violent plays) was to represent her as an honorary male. (79)

It is surprising that despite the general acknowledgement of *Blasted's* forceful connection between one rape in Leeds and the rape camps in Bosnia, Aston's study in 2003 was the first one to offer a feminist reading of the play. The temptation of placing Kane in a neat historical line that included a second generation of 'angry young men' at the Royal Court – also highlighted by Iball – is certainly a factor. Aston finds another explanation for critical misunderstandings in Kane's aforementioned 'experiential' approach: "Although concerned with private and public worlds, the intimate and the epic, Kane departed from the recognisable style of a Brechtian-inflected dramaturgy, formerly used in feminist stagings of the personal as an epic and political concern" (89). Between two modernist models offered by Brecht and Artaud, Kane's aesthetics certainly follows the latter, which – according to Ilka Saal – "in shattering conventional thought, can jump-start our capacity to conceive of alternatives to war" (80).

Destabilising realism to offer a theatrical experience that is not possible to abstract from physicality can itself be read as an enactment of the feminist critique of the 'disembodied' subject. The problem with this critique, however, is that it may easily turn into an indiscriminate rejection of reason and lead to gender essentialism (see, for example, Choi). As it has been shown, some feminist theorists have questioned this tendency. Marie Fleming, for example,

asks: "Why should we give up on reason just because the ideals of reason have been formulated in the male image?" (218). A more productive feminist approach to *Blasted*'s attack on the conventions of realism is that of Kim Solga, who places Cate's offstage rape centre stage in her analysis, as "the ghost of what realist representations must garrison away in order to instantiate their truth claims" (346). Solga constructs a persuasive argument for understanding *Blasted* as a rebuttal of early modern realism's misogynistic portrayal of the 'sick woman', yet she admits to be "dreaming an ideal spectator" and wonders whether her analysis can "have a life in performance" (367).

Aston, in turn, chooses Helen Cixous' "gender binarism" as a lens through which to examine the play, since "interrogation of the masculine/feminine hierarchy is one that [...] underpins the oppositional, gendered power play in *Blasted*, and begins an interrogation of the symbolic that haunts all of her subsequent work" (83). Cate is construed as "marked by the duality of resistance and conservatism; of refusing the masculine even while oppressed by it". However, when she leaves and the soldier comes, it is Ian who "finds himself in the position of the 'feminine' previously occupied by Cate" (84) and, through his coming "into contact with the semiotic 'feminine'", a "glimmer of hope" is offered at the end of the play (95). Aston emphasises that Cixous' binarism is only "a starting point for transformation" (83), yet I would argue that this transformation does not occur in *Blasted*. The fact that the feminine=victim role becomes interchangeable does not sever its link with *femaleness* per se.<sup>148</sup> The gender binaries that run through the play are re-inscribed because, despite the violent irruption of the public into the private, the 'virtues' associated with the latter remain essentially attached to the female role.

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<sup>148</sup> Moreover, even though Ian turns from victimiser to victim, all the other victims are female: Cate, Col (the Soldier's girlfriend) and the baby (before burying it Cate says: "I don't know her name" 57).

## Ethical dilemmas

In his introduction, Greig notes the anxiety that *Blasted* provokes even long before the bomb explodes. Not only are Ian's behaviour and language "repulsive", but also, more worryingly, "nothing in the writing is condemning him. No authorial voice is leading us to safety" (ix). Obviously, this ambiguity is deliberate. Kane may have been disappointed with the *Daily Mail's* critic Jack Tinker when he wrote that her play "appears to know no bounds of decency" (42),<sup>149</sup> yet she also intentionally undermined those who thought the opposite. "I find the discussion about the morality of the play as inappropriate as the accusations of immorality", she declared. "I've never felt that *Blasted* was moral" (qtd. in Sierz 104-05). Nevertheless, that discussion continues. Aston sustains that "Kane's theatre is highly moral" from a phenomenological viewpoint, because it forces the audience to perceive "the horror of the world and its violence" (82). American dramatist and academic Ken Urban, in turn, has elaborated a complex argument to defend Kane's work as illustrative of an "ethics of catastrophe", a phrase that combines Howard Barker's position on theatre with the philosophical separation between 'morality' and 'ethics' made by postmodernist thinker Gilles Deleuze:

Rather than distinguishing right from wrong, the core of all moralistic enterprises, or conversely, flirting with a cynical amorality, where anything goes, Kane dramatizes the quest for ethics. Morality is made up of "constraining rules" which judge people according to "transcendent values," such as Good or Evil (Deleuze). Ethics, on the other hand, are subject to change, even optional, emerging from specific moments and certain modes of being. An ethics does not forsake the difference between good and bad, but views such distinctions as evaluations rooted in one's

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<sup>149</sup> She even named the chief torturer of her second play, *Cleansed*, after Tinker.

specific existence, not as judgements based on universal principles.

(“An Ethics of Catastrophe” 37)

Like Sakellaridou, Urban rejects the previous political theatre of “rational discussion” in favour of the nihilism<sup>150</sup> of the 1990’s generation (Kane, Ravenhill, Penhall, Butterworth, McDonagh), which he believes was inspired by older innovative playwrights such as Barker and Churchill (39-40). Within the younger group he signals Kane as “the most far-reaching experimentalist” (40) and *Blasted* as “the most radical vision of an ‘ethics of catastrophe’” (44). After the catastrophe, Urban argues, “Kane leaves us with an image of good (though *not* of the Good) which emerges out of such devastation”. In other words, when Ian finally says ‘Thank you’, “it is not a moment of moral redemption, but, instead, a call for an ethical means of being in the world”. For Urban, the possibility of change is also connected to the breakdown of binaries: “woman/man, victim/victimizer; native/foreigner, self/other” which he sees occurring in the closing segment (46, original emphasis).

Despite her different theoretical underpinnings, Aston arrives at a very similar conclusion, prompted by the theological conversation that Ian and Cate have in the previous scene:

CATE. It’s wrong to kill yourself.

IAN. No it’s not.

CATE. God wouldn’t like it.

IAN. There isn’t one.

CATE. How do you know?

IAN. No God. No Father Christmas. No fairies. No Narnia.

No fucking nothing.

CATE. Got to be something.

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<sup>150</sup> In a more recent article, “Towards a Theory of Cruel Britannia” (2005), Urban reclaims nihilism’s ethical power by tracing its definition back to Nietzsche.

IAN. Why?

CATE. It doesn't make sense otherwise.

IAN. Don't be fucking stupid, doesn't make sense anyway. No reason for there to be a God just because it would be better if there was. (54-55)

Against this backdrop, Aston reads Ian's final gesture of gratitude as one of recognition, an ethical response "in the absence of a spiritual world to make sense of living". Ian "does not speak of repentance, remorse or regret, but he is made to feel, to live the pain and damage of his actions, through which, finally, he is able to recognise Cate" (85).

As summarised by Urban, Deleuze's distinction between 'morality' as derived from universal principles and 'ethics' as discerned in the realm of the particular, is equivalent to Habermas' distinction between 'justice' and the 'good life'. However, while Deleuze rejects the former, discourse ethics renders it indispensable. Moreover, justice – grounded in intersubjective discourse – is precisely what makes an ethical response possible at a post-conventional level, that is, where tradition and religious beliefs cease to rule human behaviour ('No God. No Father Christmas. No fairies'). When, as Saunders puts it, "Cate [...] returns like a latter-day Jane Eyre to feed and care for the blinded, traumatised Ian" (*Love Me* 31), and he finally says 'Thank you',<sup>151</sup> what occurs is not a collapse of the masculine/feminine binary – as Urban and Aston imply – but its reinforcement. This may well appear as enacting an ethics of catastrophe, but it is first and foremost a triumph of a pure ethics of care, or even maternal thinking. Cate and Ian's relationship has only shifted from victim/victimiser to carer/cared for; the gender dynamic is left intact. According to Benhabib, the 'concrete other' is the necessary counterpart of the 'generalised other', but not its replacement.

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<sup>151</sup> In a recent article which focuses on the intertextuality between *Blasted* and *Jane Eyre*, Rainer Emig claims that *Blasted*'s ending "promises more" because it is not dependent on "romantic or bourgeois notions of love". However, Emig describes this ethical promise as one based on "care and responsibility" (403).

Yet Ian's recognition of Cate, as poignant a theatrical moment as it is, leaves no room for justice beyond the confines of the hotel room (however 'blasted' its walls are by now). Even though Kane strived to avoid a one-sided acceptance of identity politics, *Blasted's* ending could be taken as an example of Fraser's "recognition without redistribution", because the final encounter between Ian and Cate is based on an acknowledgment that the world outside cannot change.

Urban maintains that, in the play, "the personal struggle between a xenophobic and homophobic journalist and a naïve young woman gives way to an epic exploration of the social structures of violence" ("Ethics" 44). His appreciation is inaccurate: there is a trajectory from the personal to the epic, but the personal ultimately prevails. The 'social structures of violence' are never explored because, as Kane herself expressed, speculation is not welcome onstage. "Acts of violence simply happen in life", she said. "Once you have perceived that life is very cruel, the only response is to live with as much humanity, humour and freedom as you can" (qtd. in Bayley). Like Rebellato, Aston concludes that Kane "focuses on the possibilities [...] of finding love in a loveless and violent world" (79). Even though it would be hard to disagree with such sentiment, it signifies the personal *without* the political. Gottlieb's remarks are illustrative here:

Today's young playwrights rely (and it may not be enough) on the hope that love offers some salvation. *This* is the inheritance of 'the death of ideology', the three decades since Thatcher's New Right came to power in 1979, and from 1997, New Labour's failure to create new *political* solutions except – with fragility – in Northern Ireland. (9, original emphasis)

Kane's most influential play is much less about Bosnia than about the connection between (private) domestic violence and (public) disregard for human

rights. It is not this lack of particularity that conspires against its political consistency, but the fact that the play ultimately reverts to an individualistic ethics of care, rooted in sexual difference. The paradox of *Blasted* is that its political strength, a feminist attention to the link between the private and the public, becomes a weakness when the action finally retreats into intimacy.

## 7.2 Caryl Churchill's *Far Away*

*Far Away*, which premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in November 2000 and transferred to the West End in January 2001, was Caryl Churchill's first play after three years of silence. Written before 9/11 and the subsequent military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, and before climate change became a mainstream political issue, its twin vision of global and environmental warfare now seems darkly prophetic of two of the major concerns of the early twenty-first century. As if to stress from the outset the ironic undertones of the play's title, Stephen Daldry's production opened with "a picture-book front cloth [...] much too close to our expectant eyes for comfort" (Marlowe 1574). The story was thus not 'far away' and even less a fairytale. In the words of another critic, "when that curtain, with those lush, rolling hills, drops back down, the view no longer has the pleasing associations it had an hour ago" (Nathan 1575).

The action develops in three short acts organised – rather unlikely for Churchill – in strict chronological order, snapping three significant moments in the life of Joan, the main character. As she transforms herself from an inquisitive child into a conformist young woman and then an adult soldier, the world around her turns from localised atrocities into a global conflict in which countries, professions, animals and even the elements are at war with each other for no apparent reason. The dystopic narrative unfolds metaphorically like a nightmare in reverse: Joan wakes up to live through the nightmare rather than escape from



it, as the plot – spanning a number of years – moves from ‘night’ (9) to ‘daytime’ (34). Acts 1 and 3 take place in the country home of Harper, Joan’s aunt. In the first sequence, Joan is sent back to sleep after waking up to a brutal reality she was not supposed to witness. In the last, she emerges from her sleep, this time as an active participant in the now unavoidable horror of perpetual violence and environmental devastation.

According to Amelia Howe Kritzer, the play’s trajectory is one of stylistic shifts “from realism to expressionism to absurdism” (*Political Theatre* 72). Indeed, despite the bleakness of the secrets revealed in the first segment, there is no departure from a naturalistic mode here. Joan – who was unusually played by a young girl rather than an adult actor at the Royal Court – gradually exposes the disturbing scenes she has seen in her uncle’s shed, whilst Harper tries to convince her that everything is normal. Joan eventually manages to refute each of Harper’s explanations (that what she heard or saw was a bird, a party, a dog being run over), until the latter is forced to admit their involvement in some sort of trafficking of refugees. Harper, however, twists the truth one more time, and Joan finally accepts her account:

JOAN	Why was uncle hitting them?
HARPER	Hitting who?
JOAN	He was hitting a man with a stick. I think the stick was metal. He hit one of the children.
HARPER	One of the people in the lorry was a traitor. He wasn’t really one of them, he was pretending, he was going to betray them, they found out and told your uncle. Then he attacked your uncle, he attacked the other people, your uncle had to fight him.
JOAN	That’s why there was so much blood.
HARPER	Yes, it had to be done to save the others.

JOAN                    He hit one of the children.

HARPER                That would have been the child of the traitor. Or  
                              sometimes you get bad children who even betray  
                              their parents. (19-20)

Coming after Harper's series of lies and with such a callous justification for the use of violence against children, this is obviously yet another false version of events, but Harper persuades Joan that "You're part of a big movement now to make things better. You can be proud of that". Joan becomes complicit by agreeing to go back to bed and help "clean up in the morning" (20-21). In the second act, several years have passed and Joan is starting her job at a hat makers, where she meets her colleague and future husband Todd. The naturalism of the first part is immediately broken by the revelation that they both have a "degree" in hats (23). Brief scenes show Joan and Todd at work for four days in a row, as the hats become "*more brightly decorated*" (24), "*very big and extravagant*" (26) and then "*enormous and preposterous*" (28). On the fifth day of this expressionist crescendo the ominous purpose of the hats is disclosed. The stage direction reads, "*[a] procession of ragged, beaten, chained prisoners, each wearing a hat, on their way to execution*" (30). Churchill suggests that as many people as possible should be used to stage this parade: "five is too few and twenty better than ten. A hundred?" (8). In Daldry's production there were about thirty, including children. Yet the following scene skips to a new week in which Joan and Todd are impassively working on new creations. Joan only laments that most of the hats are "burn[ed] [...] with the bodies" (31), then they talk about possibly exposing the "corrupt financial basis" of the hat industry (32) – which now appears as a rather petty cause – but mainly they are too busy falling in love with one another.

By the next act, again several years later, it is too late to change anything. Harper and Todd are discussing a perplexing war in which not only countries but

insects, animals, different occupations and even “children under five” (36) form unstable and dangerous alliances. Todd tries to prove his trustworthiness to Harper by recalling that he had “shot cattle and children in Ethiopia”, “gassed mixed troops of Spanish, computer programmers and dogs” and “torn sterling apart with my bare hands” (40). Joan, who has killed “two cats and a child under five” on her way, is resting after a hazardous journey in order to spend at least one day with her husband. When she comes in, her speech (the last in the play) relates how everything in the environment has become an enemy or a weapon. The weather is “on the side of the Japanese”, “the Bolivians are working with gravity” and she could not tell “whose side the river was on” (43-44).

Unsurprisingly, this last leap into what Kritzer accurately describes as absurdism found a mixed response with the critics. While John Nathan believed that “much more than absurd fantasy – this [...] is prophecy” (1575), Nicholas de Jongh complained of “surreal and melodramatic excesses” at the end of the play (1574) and Charles Spencer of ridiculousness: “Churchill’s vision of a world brought to catastrophe by war, ecological disaster and scientific perversion seems merely silly rather than terrifying. When we learn that the ‘elephants have gone over to the Dutch’, it proves impossible to stifle the giggles” (1576). This underlying hostility towards a sudden stylistic break recalls the critical reception of *Blasted*, and in fact Michael Billington (who by this time had not yet changed his mind about Kane’s play) made the comparison explicit: “[In *Far Away*] the journey from the reality of the first scene to the cosmic chaos of the last is too swift to be dramatically convincing: it reminds me, if anything, of Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* which I know Churchill admired but which strikes me as a questionable prototype” (1578). Even though in *Far Away* all the violence happens offstage, the two texts have much in common, particularly in terms of their structure – as “Churchill travels from a cosy domestic interior to the end of mankind in 60 minutes flat” (Wardle 1575) – and their refusal to explain themselves. This prompted comments about *Far Away* reminiscent of those encountered by

*Blasted*, such as “Is this a play about totalitarianism or ecology and, if so, what is it saying about them?” (Koenig 1576) or “But it doesn’t argue the case, it states it: it doesn’t develop, but jumps from one state to another” (Clapp 1576). In the context of this study, however, I will contend that Churchill’s is more successful as a political play than Kane’s, specifically considering how the former navigates the postmodernist zeitgeist and its position within feminist debates.

### **A socialist-feminist playwright?**

When Caryl Churchill turned seventy in September 2008, Mark Ravenhill wrote that it was “her ability to continually reinvent the form that most writers would identify as her genius”. Churchill’s relentless experimentation has produced a dramaturgy constantly transforming itself, where almost nothing could be taken for granted. Nevertheless, there is a distinct ethos underpinning her work. As Aston puts it, “Churchill is someone whose playwriting career and political outlook have consciously been shaped by a continuing commitment to feminism and to socialism” (*Feminist Views* 18). Reinelt goes even further, asserting that “Churchill is arguably the most successful and best-known socialist-feminist playwright to have emerged from Second Wave feminism” (“Caryl Churchill” 174). This assumption, however, has been challenged by Jane Thomas and, more recently, by Daniel Jernigan, who build on Churchill’s explicit association with Foucault in *Softcops* (1978)<sup>152</sup> to question interpretations of her work in terms of a socialist-feminist agenda. Thomas claims that these readings “are often unable to account for certain gaps and contradictions in the texts other than as oversights, aberrations or, in some cases, betrayals of the political paradigm” (160). In contrast, she argues, examining Churchill’s plays along Foucaultian lines provides a more nuanced image where the core is not “social reform” but rather

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<sup>152</sup> In the Introduction to her *Plays Two*, Churchill writes: “*Softcops* was written in 1978 after reading Foucault’s *Surveiller et Punir*. It fitted so well with what I was thinking about that I abandoned the play I was groping towards and quickly wrote something that used Foucault’s examples as well as his ideas” (ix).

“various analyses of power” (162). Jernigan agrees: “I see all of this ambivalence regarding where Churchill’s political sympathies lie as a sign of her understanding of the way in which ideological paradoxes disrupt the potentiality of change”. In his view, this makes Churchill (after *Softcops*) a postmodernist artist, both implicated and resistant at once (142).

Foucault’s questioning of truth is crucial in Thomas’ and Jernigan’s explorations. They maintain that Churchill’s work can be illuminated by Foucault’s assertion that “‘truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it” (qtd. in Jernigan 34). According to Thomas, Churchill’s plays “challenge the notion of truth itself, and the power-relations which construct it in the modern age [...]. They do so by privileging and articulating deviant or subversive knowledges which have been silenced or disqualified in the interest of social control and normalisation” (162). Jernigan believes that Foucault offered Churchill “the theoretical apparatus” which she would later use in *Cloud Nine* (1978) and *Top Girls* (1982), “balancing a desire to inspire audiences into recognizing the oppressive nature of knowledge against a desire to do so in such self-consciously, ironic manner that the playwright avoids collusion with power/knowledge” (38). Focusing particularly on Churchill’s short plays,<sup>153</sup> such as her double bill *Blue Heart* (1997), Jernigan suggests that she creates epistemological and ontological disruptions which are typically postmodernist (25). Even though Jernigan acknowledges that “these non-realistic disruptions raise not simply epistemological/ontological questions but ideological ones as well” (26), he insists that, since the late 1970s, emancipation does not have a role in Churchill’s playwriting.

The idea that Churchill has gradually moved from ‘activism’ to ‘deconstruction’ is a pervasive one. As expressed by Kritzer, “her latest plays give

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<sup>153</sup> Lasting less than an hour, *Far Away* would also count as a short play, but it was produced after the publication of Jernigan’s article. Churchill’s recent work tends to follow this short format. Her latest political piece, *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* (2009), is only about ten minutes long.

theatrical power to the shock, dismay, and disillusionment which have been widely shared responses to recent events" ("Political Currents" 57). However, this outlook tends to underestimate the political energy of these works, which remains a key feature. While it is evident that Churchill has shifted from a predominantly "Brechtian-feminist dramaturgy" to a variety of styles, including drama "cross-fertilised [...] with dance and music" (Aston, *Feminist Views* 19),<sup>154</sup> to depict this transition in Jernigan's or Kritzer's terms seems reductive. Churchill's work has always been informed by complexity. Even in her earlier plays, the activist or emancipatory impulse, striving for a better world, and the deconstructive one, dismantling easy political solutions, tended to go hand in hand. Moreover, although her plays in the 1990s used strategies that can be described as postmodernist, many of Churchill's 'disruptions' – and most certainly the absurdist turn in *Far Away* – are at home within the modernist paradigm. If this turn-of-the-century text is placed alongside continuities and discontinuities in Churchill's career, it can be argued that her theatre has not yet relinquished the socialist-feminist *grand narrative*.

In *The Plays of Caryl Churchill: Theatre of Empowerment* (1991), Kritzer herself links Churchill with a "conscious feminist/socialist position" (194) and recognises a continuum in which *Far Away* could actually be included without effort:

The wide range of subjects and styles in Churchill's plays converge upon a consistent and coherent thematic emphasis on the societal division between the powerful and powerless. A key to this division throughout the plays is the word *frighten* – the most significant

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<sup>154</sup> Reinelt's account is similar: "Beginning in 1986 with *A Mouthful of Birds*, Churchill began a series of formal experiments which seems to take her in new directions. [...] *A Mouthful of Birds* was her first collaboration with Ian Spink, the choreographer with whom she has since worked on *Lives of the Great Poisoners* [1991], *The Skriker* [1994], and *Hotel* [1997]. [...] These experiments have produced a flexible dramaturgy which is not trapped in linguistic modes of textuality" ("Caryl Churchill" 186-187).

single word in Churchill's lexicon and one used to identify the motivation of a major character in nearly every one of her plays, beginning with the first one-act produced during her student years at Oxford, *You've No Need to Be Frightened* (1959). (193)

Aston also underlines the 'frightening' motif, most famously presented in Angie's last line in *Top Girls*, and connects it to Joan, the other child who cannot sleep (almost two decades later). For Aston, "*Far Away* provides a kind of 'bookend' to *Top Girls*: shows how the failure to care differently, less oppressively, for future generations of children, leads to global destruction" (*Feminist Views* 35). Bridging these two instances, chronologically and thematically, is *The Skriker* (1994), a highly experimental piece where two teenage mothers – Josie, who had killed her baby, and Lily, who will involuntarily abandon it – are hounded by the shape-shifting and tongue-twisting character who gives the play its name. Here, "mother and child are constantly separated, torn apart. This [...] aims to show the economic, social and familial relations that stand in the way of an alternative, arguably more hopeful, set of mother-child relations" (31). After *Mad Forest* (1990), in which Churchill – like many other political playwrights – widened her focus from Britain to Europe, *The Skriker* has been seen as even broader in scope, showing a concern with globalisation (Diamond, Amich). In this regard too *The Skriker* anticipates *Far Away*, although the two plays concentrate on different aspects of the global; economic and political respectively, with the environment as a common anxiety.

*The Skriker* is perhaps the most postmodernist of Churchill's works. Amich suggests that the title character "commands space and time in a manner that recalls the fluidity of multinational capital" and that through it "Churchill examines the relationship between time-space compression and the fragmented subjectivities of two young women" (394). Amich's analysis, like Jernigan's, draws attention to Churchill's political ambiguity: "by concentrating her critique of

late-twentieth century capitalism in the Skriker, a figure at once seductive and repellent, Churchill denies us the expected blanket condemnation of the murderous greed of multinational corporations and of the national governments that determine policy on their behalf" (398). Yet, intriguingly, Amich invokes Adorno – the champion of modernist art – to explicate this ambivalence.<sup>155</sup> Furthermore, because "Churchill's words do not simply reflect the 'schizophrenic' forces of global capital in an endless loop of self-referential linguistic play", postmodernist structures are employed in this play to criticise the so-called postmodern condition, reflecting the Marxist thought of Fredric Jameson: "Churchill foregrounds the terror associated with the loss of historicity that accompanies time-space compression, thus attempting to stir her audience from its lethargic state" (396).

As in *Far Away*, this attempt to recapture historicity is delivered through dystopia, the 'frightening' future encountered by Lily. Lily's offer of company is abused by the Skriker; she is returned from the underworld only a century later to meet her granddaughter, an Old Woman, and her great-great-granddaughter, a Deformed Girl. The latter's body – like all the damaged creatures in *Far Away* – "represents the amassed poisoning of the planet" (410).

## Utopia and dystopia

Churchill's use of dystopia in *Far Away* is both a continuation and a departure: a continuation because – as has been stressed – a warning about the welfare of future generations has been a persistent theme since *Top Girls*; a departure because, despite the abruptness of its leaps in time, *Far Away* is structured in a linear progression. As reviewer Irving Wardle noticed, the play "proceeds logically, almost by joining the dots, to an ending where the whole of

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<sup>155</sup> Adorno writes: "Art is not a matter of pointing up alternatives but rather of resisting, solely through artistic form, the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the head of human beings" (qtd. in Amich 395). The Adorno-Benjamin debate on aesthetics is discussed in 1.3.



creation has been drawn into the war" (1575). This anomaly (for a dramatist whose trademark is playing with space and time) can be understood within the logic of the dystopian genre, where the relation between cause and effect is vital.

One of the lessons of both the classical and the critical dystopia [...] is that the world is capable of going from bad to worse, not only in a punctual moment but more often in a complex series of steps arising from the existing social order and the choices people make within it. [...] Another lesson is that whatever bad times are upon us have been produced by systemic conditions and human choices that preceded the present moment – but also that such conditions can be changed only by remembering that process and then organizing against it. (Baccolini and Moylan 241)

As a dystopia, Churchill's first play of the new millennium at least throws into question the idea that she creates "ontological upheaval" in order to investigate "those institutions that deny even the slightest possibility of achieving social justice" (Jernigan 33). A pertinent distinction made in the field of utopian studies is that between dystopia and anti-utopia. The former consists of "a non-existent society [...] that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived"; the latter involves "a non-existent society [...] that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as a criticism of utopianism or of some particular eutopia" (Sargent 9).<sup>156</sup> Within its general definition as "social dreaming", the "utopianism" criticised by anti-utopians includes both eutopia and dystopia, that is, both

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<sup>156</sup> Sargent points to the difference between *utopia*, which means *no place*, and *eutopia* or *good place*, a pun intended by Thomas More when coining the word in his 1516 homonymous book (5). However, Sargent rejects the anti-utopian charge that "the utopian society must be perfect and *therefore* unrealizable. [...] People do not "live happily ever after" even in More's *Utopia*. [...] perfection has never been a characteristic of utopian fiction" (6). Moylan introduces the adjective 'critical' to describe more recent works that are conscious of the limits of both utopian and dystopian visions. While Sargent accepts that 'critical utopias' are identifiable, he questions the second denomination: "Is a 'critical dystopia' plausible? Is it simply an oxymoron because all dystopias are 'critical' in Moylan's sense?" (9).

"dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society than the one in which the dreamers live" (3). Moreover, in a recent article, Raffaella Baccolini claims that "our times need utopia more than ever, but they seem to be able to recover utopia mostly through dystopia" (3). For Baccolini, the dystopian genre is especially suitable for feminist writers, for whom the "patriarchal tradition [of classical utopias] was no big loss" (2).

There is a significant ideological divide between dystopia and anti-utopia. As Darko Suvin maintains, "the intertext of anti-utopia has historically been anti-socialism", whilst that of 'simple' dystopia "has been and remains more or less radical anti-capitalism" (189).<sup>157</sup> Ronald Creagh underlines the paradox that Marxism, born as an antidote to the utopian socialism of Fourier and Owen (which Marx deemed naive and unscientific), became the embodiment of modern utopia and the favourite target of neo-liberal philosophers such as Frederick Hayek, for whom "human destiny depends on the free market" (66). Following on, "the new form of capitalist globalization has been accompanied by a choir of anti-utopian thinkers. [...] The fall of the Berlin wall offered a new occasion to identify utopia with the communist state. Thus Marxism was accused of being utopian and therefore messianic and apocalyptic" (67).

It would be fair to say that Kritzer interprets *Far Away* as anti-utopian, as she sees in it "a kind of parable indicting the Left for its failures in the twentieth century" ("Political Currents" 64). In this scheme, the first part of the play becomes a metaphor for Stalinism, "under which those supposedly being helped were often harmed, while its apologists defended the system through constantly shifting lies". The second segment "points to the narrow perspective of trade unionism" and the third, to "the factionalism that characterizes the contemporary

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<sup>157</sup> In a slight variation from Sargent, Suvin considers dystopia as a general term including the separate genres of 'anti-utopia' and 'simple dystopia', the latter being "a straightforward dystopia, that is, one that is not also anti-utopia" (189). Suvin locates these genres within science-fiction, one of the most important areas of development for utopian studies, but his ideological distinction is certainly valid for other fictional worlds.

Left, along with the chaotic proliferation of intense but indecipherable conflicts around the globe" (65). However fascinating this reading may be, it is far from consistent and it also overlooks core features of the play.

Suggesting that the first act conjures up the Soviet Union, rather than "an English beauty-spot" (Wardle 1575), would certainly remove from sight Churchill's main strategy: the implication that the world depicted here is *not* 'far away'. The choice of hats – "beyond the craziest fantasies of Ascot" (1575) – as the key image in the second part is also indicative of such an approach, which brings 'home' horrors thought only possible elsewhere. Jane and Todd's petty grievances in this section may well be a critique of trade unionism, although not of the traditional left-wing type. As Richard Hyman clarifies, so-called 'business unionism' has been "the dominant tradition in the USA and Britain" (x), but "for much of the European Left in the twentieth century, the tasks of socialists (and social reformers more generally) was to transcend purely economic objectives and imbue trade unionism with social and political aims" (9). Perhaps it would be more accurate to take the play's middle section as highlighting the dangers of 'economism' and 'art for art's sake', both of which are not shortcomings associated with a socialist milieu.<sup>158</sup> Finally, the "proliferation of intense but indecipherable conflicts around the globe" that Kritzer identifies is surely the focus of the third act, yet in the post-Cold War era this cannot be related to the current "factionalism" of the Left.

Kritzer's anti-utopian assimilation of *Far Away* is confirmed in her latest book *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain* (2008), where the play is said to trace "the breakdown of idealism" (73). The parallel with Kane's *Blasted* then becomes much clearer. Like Cate returning to look after Ian, Joan also comes back from a war zone because she cares about Todd. In a world that has lost "traditional values" (74), all that is left is (private) love. Joan's homecoming is thus "a sign of hope", but one "based on personal desire and commitment rather

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<sup>158</sup> Economic reductionism is of course a limitation of Marxism, but only in its most orthodox versions.

than abstract ideals". Kritzer's conclusion reiterates this and emphasises – as Jernigan did before – the inescapable postmodern condition: "Acknowledging the limits of idealism, the instability of narrative, and the unknowability of reality, Churchill allies her viewpoint with that of Sarah Kane in suggesting that loving another creates the basis for meaning even in the extremes of chaos and threat" (75).

A dystopian reading of *Far Away* challenges Kritzer's assertions. In a plot that snowballs from a single lie into worldwide destruction, the warning is against the lack of ideals, not their excess. Harper deceives Joan while comforting her in her arms like a surrogate mother (as the children of others are being hurt under Harper's watch); Joan and Todd neglect the hideous consequences of their art in the midst of their romantic engagement and their awfully short-sighted plans to better their own working conditions. If privileging the expression of love in private relationships over the love for mankind (and nature) is the cause of the unspeakable future portrayed in the play, it can hardly offer the glimmer of hope implied by Kritzer. Here Churchill is revisiting a dilemma which has also been tackled by Edgar:

One of the sharpest accusations Conservatives fire at the Left concerns the supposed contradiction between love for all humanity and caring for people you actually know (as Burke puts it, the apparent mutual exclusiveness of love of 'kind' and 'kindred'). [...] It seems to me clear that both forms of love are limited and insufficient. The first has blighted the socialist experiment, the second challenges the moral pretensions of the enterprise culture. (Edgar, qtd. in Painter 119).

In *Far Away's* post-socialist dystopian future, the pendulum has swung towards the 'love of kindred' up to the total neglect of those beyond a close circle. Hence, as Aston declares, the play advocates "that social, not just personal,

responsibility for others must come into view if global catastrophe is to be avoided" (*Caryl Churchill* 116-17). From a feminist perspective, this constitutes a radical shift: "Where a 1970s style of feminism argued the need for an understanding of the personal as political, Churchill's late twentieth-century feminism is arguing [...] for the need to close the gap between the personal and the political" (*Feminist Views* 36). The fact that Aston includes *Far Away* within Churchill's feminist output is important, not only because it rebuts the notion that "gender is taking an appropriate back seat" in this play (Reinelt, "Navigating Postfeminism" 24) but also because it puts the personal versus political debate centre stage. In this light, the kind/kindred dichotomy is a replay of Seyla Benhabib's call for a Habermasian 'ethics of justice' to complement Carol Gilligan's 'ethics of care' [see Chapter 3]. It is here that the main difference between *Blasted* and *Far Away* lies. I have contended, against Aston, that Kane's play ends on a retreat into 'maternal thinking', or the personal *without* the political. Churchill's materialist feminism paints a totally different picture in *Far Away*, which reminds its audience that caring for others, not just one's own, is paramount.

### Truths and lies

If the last section demonstrated that *Far Away* – in its contemporary feminist content and its atypical linear structure – is not, as Kritzer states, a play about 'the limits of idealism' or 'the instability of narrative', now is the time to deal with Kritzer's third claim, concerning 'the unknowability of reality'. This recalls Thomas' and Jernigan's argument that Churchill's plays echo a Foucaultian view of truth as an effect not of 'reality' but 'power'. Yet the fact that the dystopian chain in *Far Away* is unleashed by a lie presupposes, *pace* Foucault, the possibility of a true version of events which has been hidden. As Aston points out, "Churchill depicts Joan not as an innocent, but as insistent on truth-telling – even

when truth means exposing her aunt's home, a place in which she is supposed to be looked after and cared for, as a place in which people, including children, are in danger" (*Caryl Churchill* 117-18). However, in the end "she acquiesces to adult lies" (118). Joan giving up on truth is the first step in a downward spiral that will take her to becoming insensitive to the suffering of others (in the second act) and, finally, using violence herself (in the third). As with 'idealism', it is not truth itself but rather its travesty that the play denounces.

Another affinity between Foucault and Churchill highlighted by Thomas is "an antipathy to *any* notion of historical progress" (183, my emphasis). This also needs qualification. While Churchill's dramaturgy – excepting *Far Away* – tends to rely on discontinuity, Foucaultian theory is not the only possible kinship to be found here. In a persuasive essay, Peter Buse recognises Churchill's admiration for Foucault but proposes to link her approach to history to that of Walter Benjamin. Like Benjamin, Churchill is seen as suspicious of 'historicism' (the primacy of historical context for interpreting history) and her play *Top Girls*, in its use of anachronism and its reverse chronology, shows for Buse "what a non-historicist historical practice might look like" (113). Benjamin's theses on history are clearly beyond the scope of this study, yet the connection between Churchill and the Frankfurt School is worth pursuing. Benjamin – like the other Critical Theorists – was indeed against the orthodox Marxist position which understood history as a continuous evolution towards progress. In his view, this perspective enabled "the oppressive ruling classes to present their violent acts as predetermined by faith" (Ivancheva 97). However, he subscribed to a version of historical materialism that would allow for a rehabilitation of utopia. Through a "project of collection and recollection of ruined artefacts and instances", Benjamin believed "in the possibility of reconstruction of the moments when history might have taken a different, alternative direction" (99). For Benjamin – as for Churchill – "what mattered was the history of the losers" (Creagh 65).

Following Benjamin's well-known association with Brecht, Buse suggests that "the discontinuities of *Top Girls* [...] can be accounted for in terms of Brecht's recommendations for an epic theatre as well as Benjamin's model of historical materialism" (124). In both cases, Churchill's non-historicism is conceived as enabling the opportunity to learn from history, a purpose that is maintained in her later work despite its continuous formal experimentation. As has been discussed, even a rather postmodernist play such as *The Skriker* can be read as a call not to surrender to 'ahistoricity'. In this sense, the linearity of *Far Away* serves a similar purpose by different means. If the reverse chronology of *Top Girls* proves that "we cannot appreciate the significance of the past [...] until we have seen into its future" (Buse 123), the dystopian chronology of *Far Away* carries the same message.

Without denying Churchill's acknowledged debt to Foucault in plays like *Softcops* or her recourse to postmodernist techniques in the 1990s, a neo-Marxist interpretation proves more fruitful inasmuch as it is consistent with the playwright's socialist-feminist commitment, which remains a major characteristic of her work in the twenty-first century. The 'gaps and contradictions' that preoccupied Thomas do not need to be accounted for as 'oversights', 'aberrations' or 'betrayals'. They are rather the mark of a dramatist who has never been afraid to question received assumptions (of both socialism and feminism) but whose plays still envisage the possibility of change.

## Conclusions and Future Research

As the theoretical discussion (Part 1) and the contextual and textual analysis (Part 2) demonstrate, Habermasian philosophy provides a solid foundation for a redefinition of political theatre suitable for post-Cold War Britain. Such a definition is underpinned by specific political, ethical and aesthetic considerations. First of all, it understands politics as encompassing economic and social demands as well as cultural ones. While the correction placed by identity politics on reductionist class-based analyses is welcome, it should not mean an abandonment of material concerns in a globalised capitalist world where inequalities are possibly more pervasive than ever. The first and second generations of the Frankfurt School fought hard to overcome the economicist partiality of orthodox Marxism. Contemporary Critical Theorists such as Nancy Fraser have needed to battle through the opposite bias, namely, versions of politics built exclusively on either 'identity' or 'difference'. Fraser's motto of 'no recognition without redistribution' is an appropriate one to express the twin political challenges of the present age, which are being vigorously addressed by current British political theatre. If the obsolescence of agitprop forms had already shown the constraints of 'redistribution' politics alone, the limits of pure 'recognition' are typically present in the drama of the 1990s. As argued in Chapter 7, even Kane's *Blasted*, for all its artistic ambition, does not surmount this political problem.

Perhaps the most important element for a viable redefinition of political theatre lies in explaining its residual function after the great ideological battles of the twentieth century. Here, Habermas' conceptualisation of the public sphere is a theoretical asset. It permits a renewal of confidence in the contribution that theatre, an inherently public art, can make within the realm of civil society, without overestimating its political efficacy. Only accepting the impossibility of the



revolutionary dream of uniting art and life makes the possibilities of the 'self-limited' public sphere come sharply into focus. From a Habermasian perspective, political theatre's aim is to expand and radicalise the public sphere, actualising its communicative promise. Expanding the public sphere entails the rectification of previous exclusions (a potential underlined by Habermas against Foucault). This is a task that contemporary verbatim theatre has made its own, bringing marginalised voices to the public arena, albeit transfigured into more or less successful artistic forms. Radicalising the public sphere, on the other hand, implies an opening of contents formerly ignored. In this respect, drama in performance can fulfil the mission of 'making public' emphasised by Benhabib, a strength traditionally associated with feminist theatre. *Far Away* is an example of this kind, forcefully drawing attention to global war and global warming with the same imaginative stroke (and before both issues became dangerously prominent). At the same time, Churchill's play turns the old feminist slogan 'the personal is political' upside down, dragging the idea of collective responsibility out from the public subconscious.

The conditions of existence of political theatre coincide with those of the public sphere: firstly, the idea of private people coming together to discuss matters of common concern and, secondly, the prospect of articulating discourses which are independent from those of the state and the market. In the theatre, however, the element of 'discussion' is rather figurative. Political theatre practitioners would hope to generate further debate and can even encourage it with post-show question and answer sessions, yet they cannot guarantee it. The only given communication is the performance itself and, as it has been noted, a dialogical ethos is a striking feature of current political theatre in comparison with past incarnations. The recent work of Edgar and Brenton in particular testifies to this, shifting the emphasis from ideology critique (unmasking myths, as they did in the 1970s and 1980s) to a genuine attempt to encourage what Habermas calls 'communicative action' within the dramatic world and without, between stage and

audience. It is not about relinquishing political ideals – their plays are still full of them – but rather of offering them for intersubjective exchange. The sense of a fallibilistic search for justice, as in Wellmer's interpretation of discourse ethics, comes to mind.

In aesthetic terms, the proposed redefinition of political theatre subscribes to Habermas' notion of post avant-garde art, based on the interplay between the domains of experience that have been separated by modernity: cognitive, moral and expressive. As cognitive and moral elements are 'allowed' to enter the aesthetic realm, it follows that political theatre invariably involves an element of rationality. This does not indicate, as some critics of Habermas have suggested, that there is no room for the 'negative', the 'ugly' or the 'sublime' in his scheme. Whilst an Apollonian aesthetics such as that of the tribunal plays may be more easily identifiable with the Habermasian stress on communication, the concept of post avant-garde art involves an engagement with the Dionysian forms of the avant-garde (for example, Artaudian theatre). Nevertheless, the political character of a work of art cannot rest solely on form, as Adorno believed. The intermediate stance of post avant-garde art between two extremes, the solipsism of art-for-art's-sake and the instrumentalisation of propagandistic art, accurately describes political theatre's position *as* theatre but at the same time closely engaged *with* the world beyond. There is also of course an inevitable aesthetic excess even in the most restrained theatrical experiences, as feminist historiographies of the public sphere point out and the tradition of tribunal theatre proves.

Finally, a redefinition of political theatre along Habermasian lines is reconstructive in the meaning underlined by Holub of redesigning a project while preserving the original goal. From this point of view, most of these plays show that history is at the core of the continuities between old and new political dramaturgies. This continuous effort to historicise may take the form of a swift dystopian narrative (*Far Away*), the reclaiming of an old story (*In Extremis*), the

use of history as a metaphor (*Playing with Fire*) or the telling of contemporary history from a different angle (*The Permanent Way*). Yet in all cases the two characteristics of Habermas' reconstruction of historical materialism can be perceived: the materialism includes a humanist sense of moral development in terms of learning from the past, and the history is of possibility rather than certainty.

As the analyses in this thesis have illustrated, the Habermasian framework is particularly suited to explore the process of reinvention that political theatre has undergone in recent years. As a general account of the new ways in which political theatre operates in the post-Cold War period, however, the scope of this redefinition is not only limited to the types of examples analysed nor to the playwrights whose work has been covered. The success of a theory is in its capacity to improve understanding across a broader horizon of cases. In order to point to further directions where the research could be extended, a brief consideration of two other plays can be offered, one by a committed feminist dramatist, Timberlake Wertenbaker, the other by perhaps the most original political playwright of a younger generation, David Greig. An American raised in Basque France, who lived in Greece before settling in the UK, and a Scot who grew up in Nigeria and went to University in England, Wertenbaker and Greig share a reputation for questioning issues of identity from the vantage point of the 'outsider'. They both have offered complex post-Cold War continental pictures, Wertenbaker in *The Break of Day* (1995) and Greig in *Europe* (1995) and *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman he Once Loved in the Former Soviet Union* (1998). Their work is also characterized by a relentless exploration of language and the possibilities/impossibilities of communication, which is particularly the case in *Credible Witness* (2001) and *The American Pilot* (2005).

Referring partly to the drama of Wertenbaker, Susan Bassnett comments that "a new phenomenon is increasingly apparent in contemporary British women's theatre: from relatively parochial origins, there is an increased

internationalism, that reflects major changes in the culture of the British Isles" (73). In fact, the cosmopolitan drive also reflects feminist developments worldwide and so it is not surprising that calls for a transnational public sphere have come from feminist scholars. *Credible Witness* follows Macedonian illegal traveller Petra, who painfully discovers that her nationalistic identity must be transcended in order to enter an interactive universalism as advocated by Benhabib. Her quest involves the desperate search for her son Alexander, her later disowning of him and their final reconciliation. In the meantime, Petra shares life in a detention centre with a heterogeneous group of fellow asylum seekers. In the most expressive moment of the play, Petra transmits the lesson she learnt on cosmopolitanism to the immigration official attending her case, surnamed 'Le Britten' to leave no doubt as to where the message is directed: "I've been walled, like you. History shifts, we can't hold it. Simon, when we turn to you, don't cover your eyes and think of the kings and queens of England. Look at us: we are your history now" (236). Petra's initial oppressive maternal love emphasises the limits of a particularistic ethics of care – Petra's motherly relationship towards both her son and her nation – that must be surpassed in order to reach the universal moral standards of internationalism, which the play unmistakably promotes.

Wertenbaker's is a significant example of playwriting that exceeds the postmodern paradigm. Even those who clearly place the dramatist within discourses of flux and destabilisation, accept her emphasis on intersubjectivity. While she can be described in a Foucaultian manner as "calling upon us to consider the ways in which power relations have been shaped by the language imposed by the dominant power" (Bassnett 79), language in her work is the core not only of "our oppressions" but also of "our liberties" (Carlson 139). Wertenbaker herself has strongly endorsed this Habermasian standpoint: "I think art is redemptive and the theatre is particularly important because it's a public space. [...] If you can speak, you can at least make your claims, listen to the

other side. Without that, yes. I think there will be nothing but violence" (qtd. in Stephenson and Langridge 141-43).

A similar point can be made about David Greig. As Rebellato stresses in relation to *The Cosmonaut*, despite the multiplicity of characters, narratives and locations, the play is far from "a postmodern pick'n'mix from the Baudrillardian hypermarket" (xx). On the contrary, Rebellato adds, in Greig's work as a whole "there's a tremendous affirmation, an evocation of a better world, even a sense of utopia" (xxii). By the playwright's own admission, his theatre is political in intent, but his alleged preference for images rather than arguments has relieved him from the usual charges against this kind of drama. The difference emerges eloquently in comparing the reviews of *Credible Witness* with those of *The American Pilot*. While Wertenbaker is considered to be delivering "a treatise", speaking "didactically" through her character, having an "overstated, over-worthy approach" or, worse still, enacting "a debate which is one-sided from the start" (180-84); Greig is seen as "not taking sides", not presenting "a fierce battery of left-wing uppercuts" or "thankfully" dealing with the subject "even-handedly" (587-89). Greig's strength, as Michael Billington highlights, is offering "a political allegory that goes beyond ritual anti-Americanism to explore the complex relationship between the one global superpower and the rest of the world". Yet – thankfully, to paraphrase – neutral the play is not.

In discussing what to do with this American pilot who "fell" from the sky into their remote and civil war-ridden village, the romantic Captain and the down-to-earth Translator weigh their options against American power: "TRANSLATOR. America never negotiates. They don't make bargains. CAPTAIN. Everybody makes bargains. It's rational to make bargains. TRANSLATOR. It's not rational for an elephant to bargain with an ant" (32-33). I would argue that this is not an indictment of rationality per se, nor a denial of the human possibilities of negotiation and agreement. On the contrary, it reinforces them as an ideal against the distortions of a current world order hideously unbalanced. In the last

scene, a Hollywood-like rescue episode that underlines American military and cultural colonisation at once, the 'elephant' finally crushes the 'ants'.

In 1986, Theatre Workshop's Howard Goorney wrote, "though all theatre is, in a broad sense, 'political', the term 'political theatre' has been accepted as defining a left wing theatre, critical of the capitalist system and expressing in its work the need for radical change" (199). By 1999 the climate had altered to such an extent that Lizbeth Goodman could only offer a deliberately cautious and subjective description of 'politics and performance' (not even political theatre): "I tend to admire and respect theatre and performance work which attempts to reach out to inspire ideas as well as feelings, and which affects its audience in some way and urges social change. That's what I mean by 'politics and performance'. But that's only my interpretation..." (5) *Credible Witness* and *The American Pilot* are probably somewhere in between. This is the kind of drama which a reconstructed definition of political theatre, inspired by Habermas, should help understand.

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