

Re-envisioning the Theatre of the Absurd: The Lacanian Spectator and the Work  
of Fernando Arrabal, Arthur Adamov and Eugène Ionesco

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### **Abstract**

This thesis considers the interface between the theatre of the absurd and Lacanian cultural criticism. It conceptualises a 'theoretical spectator' produced by the play texts and examines its implications for a politics of spectatorship in a postmodern age. This methodology seeks to escape the trap of existentialist criticism that has dominated ideas on the theatre of the absurd since Martin Esslin's coining of the term in 1961. I posit the modern-day relevance of absurd theatre, by putting the plays under examination into dialogue with Lacanian and current post-Lacanian cultural and political thought. The chapters theorise various 'spectatorial positions' produced by three prominent playwrights of the theatre of the absurd: Eugène Ionesco, Arthur Adamov and Fernando Arrabal. I seek to confirm and bolster my theoretical arguments by turning to contemporary empirical reaction to modern-day performances of two other absurdist playwrights, Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet. One of the key postulates is that the theatre of these playwrights chimes with Lacan's notion of the split subject. Etymologically, the word 'absurd' refers to division; thematically and aesthetically, absurd theatre bears witness to the erosion of subjective stability. The conceptual parity between Lacanian theory and absurd theatre permits me to stake out a new critical pathway with regard to this body of theatre that paves the way for its re-politicisation in a postmodern world.

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## **Introduction**

### **Re-envisioning the Theatre of the Absurd: The Lacanian Spectator and the Work of Fernando Arrabal, Arthur Adamov and Eugène Ionesco**

This Introduction will be split into three overall parts. Part I addresses the critical reception of the œuvre of Arrabal, Ionesco and Adamov under the rubric of ‘the theatre of the absurd’.<sup>1</sup> As shall become clear, the gaps and elisions made in the criticism of this body of theatre revolve mainly around the existentialist and modernist benchmarks by which it has been judged. Owing largely to these strands of criticism, considerations of absurd theatre have been left to ossify with little or no recent research done on this past theatrical movement. Aiming to counteract this, Part II takes as its premise Martin Esslin’s contention that his neologism, ‘the theatre of the absurd’, was meant as a ‘working hypothesis’. It is argued that a Lacanian methodology allows for a reinvigoration of debate by enabling a conceptual isomorphism to be drawn out between the theatre and the theory, a manoeuvre that paves the way for a political reassessment of absurd theatre in a postmodern era. Part III concludes this Introduction with an outline of the chapters.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis, I refer to the theatre of the absurd (without quotation marks) and ‘the theatre of the absurd’ (within quotation marks). While the former refers to both the theatrical movement and the body of theatre and playwrights generally accepted as coming under this category, the latter alludes to critics’ (including Esslin’s) use of the term as a label.



## Part I: The Playwrights: Arrabal, Ionesco, Adamov

It has often been argued that the avant-garde playwrights of the 1950s in Paris provoked a seismic shift in the history of French theatre. Martin Esslin, in 1961, famously coined the phrase 'the theatre of the absurd' to classify this new avant-garde. In this nomenclature, Esslin connected it with the existentialist school of philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus and their conceptualisation of the 'absurd' condition of human life. Many commentators rejected Esslin's neologism, preferring instead labels such as 'new theatre', 'metaphysical theatre', 'theatre of derision', 'meta-theatre' and 'the school of Paris'.<sup>2</sup> Terminological quibbles aside, one thing remains certain: from the early 1950s onwards, the experimental theatre emerging in Paris jettisoned prevailing notions of both the formal and thematic components of theatre. Aristotelian notions of drama – the unity of time, space, plot and character – were thoroughly debunked. Esslin summarises the salient features of the absurd and the reasons for which it was determined as falling outside of the prevailing conventions of the theatrical medium in the following:

If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings.<sup>3</sup>

In 1991, more than forty years after the beginning of absurd theatre, Deborah Gaensbauer remarks that the 'theatre of the absurd is an enduring challenge to the eye, the ear and the mind' for its 'poetry of the text' and its 'invitation to

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance: Emmanuel Jacquart, *Le Théâtre de dérision: Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974); Jacques Guicharnaud, *Modern French Theatre: From Giraudoux to Genet*, 4th edn. (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1975); Arnold P. Hinchliffe, *The Absurd, The Critical Idiom*, 5 (London: Methuen & Co., 1969).

<sup>3</sup> Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd edn. (London: Penguin, 1980 [1961]), pp. 21-22.

revolutionary staging'.<sup>4</sup> Gaensbauer is not the only contemporary critic to note that this body of theatre retains an element of subversion for a modern-day audience. In 2005, Michel Pruner called the theatre of the absurd 'un théâtre véritablement libre'.<sup>5</sup>

With these allusive references to the absurd's perennial capacity for subversion in mind, I will explore the concrete ways in which this body of theatre retains political import for contemporary society, mainly with reference to the œuvres of three playwrights who have been connected with the movement: the Spanish Fernando Arrabal (1932-), the Romanian Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994) and the Russian Arthur Adamov (1908-1970). In terms of the critical reception, each playwright has been discussed on his own merits as well as in terms of his connection to the theatre of the absurd. Eugène Ionesco, as one of the chief proponents of the absurd aesthetic for Esslin, has been taken to task repeatedly for forming the 'new establishment'. Many felt that his accession to the conservative Académie Française in 1970 marked the end of his plays' value as part of the vanguard. His plays range from the abstract and plotless (*La Cantatrice chauve* (1950), *La Leçon* (1951) and *Les Chaises* (1952), for instance) to more narrative plays (*Rhinocéros* (1959), *Tueur sans gages* (1957) and *Le Roi se meurt* (1962)). Arthur Adamov has been marked out as the playwright who added a clear political, Marxist dimension to absurd theatre. His early plays (such as *La Parodie* (1950) and *L'Invasion* (1950)) depict worlds in which the (always male) protagonist finds himself the victim of the selfish will of others. His middle-career plays such as *Paolo Paoli* (1957) and *Off limits* (1969) deal with concrete historical events such as the war in Vietnam and French colonialism of the Belle Époque. His last play, *Si l'été revenait* (1970), returns to the abstract premise of his first plays, since it is composed entirely of a dream sequence. Fernando Arrabal has frequently been construed as either a latter-day 'proselyte' of the absurd or a member of the 'nouvelle vague' that was to follow the absurd.<sup>6</sup> He is considerably more prolific than either Adamov or Ionesco. His theatrical oeuvre, to date, consists of eighteen volumes. His plays are heavily

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<sup>4</sup> Deborah B. Gaensbauer, *The French Theater of the Absurd* (Boston: Twayne, 1991), p. 106.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Pruner, *Les Théâtres de l'absurde* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2005 [2003]), p. 148.

<sup>6</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, pp. 285-92; Rosette C. Lamont, 'The Nouvelle Vague in French Theatre', *The Massachusetts Review*, 5 (1964), 381-96.

influenced by his Spanish heritage: Catholicism, Franco and the Baroque style figure in his work. Too numerous to list in full here, his plays include *Pique-nique en campagne* (1960), *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs* (1969) and *La Tour de Babel* (1976). Arrabal is reputed for testing the limits of theatrical convention through his continual recourse to a sexually transgressive aesthetic in scenes of bestiality and necrophilia, among others. A notable example of this is *Fando et Lis* (1957) which contains sequences of sadomasochism which culminate in murderous violence between the two protagonists Fando and Lis. The shock value of his theatre has divided critics: some declare him to be a revolutionary, a suitable successor to or continuation of the spirit of absurd theatre;<sup>7</sup> others lament the development of the absurd theatre into a lowbrow and crude theatrical aesthetic.<sup>8</sup> In recent years, Arrabal has moved away from the theatre. His recent output includes the novel *Champagne pour tous!* (2002), the poem 'Clitoris' (2008) and numerous essays and newspaper articles (such as *Houellebecq!* (2005) and 'Defensa de Kundera' (2009)).

Although it is difficult to speak of the legacy of these playwrights and their theatre in general terms, the 'theatre of the absurd' does provide an umbrella term for the purposes of comparing the œuvre of all three. This, together with the conceptual potential of the word 'absurd' (described below), constitutes the reason for the retention of the label here. Whilst my main focus in subsequent chapters will be on the theatre of Arrabal, Ionesco and Adamov, it is instructive, first of all, to give a general outline of the absurd movement that unites them in this Introduction, in order to show the reasons why a new methodological framework is required for the recuperation of a politics of absurd theatre. Whilst it is my conviction that Martin Esslin's identification of this theatrical movement contributed to its all-too-rapid consignment to a particular historical moment, it is fruitful to concentrate on the history, the prevailing perceptions and the legacy of the theatre of the absurd in order to make the case for a reinvigoration of the critical debate on its constituent plays.

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<sup>7</sup> For instance: Jacquart, *Le Théâtre de dérision*, pp. 281-82.

<sup>8</sup> For instance: John Fletcher, 'Conclusion: Towards a New Concept of Theatre: Adamov, Beckett and Arrabal', in *Forces in Modern French Drama* (London: University of London Press, 1972), pp. 188-210 (p. 205).

### The Theatre of the Absurd: The History

By the time that the body of theatre that Esslin describes as 'absurd' came to fruition in the 1950s, the French theatrical establishment had already witnessed sizeable changes. Indeed, the beginnings of this theatrical revolution could be said to have begun half a century earlier.<sup>9</sup> In the years immediately preceding 1890, French theatre found itself in a crisis. Reserved for the upper echelons of society, French drama tended toward the naturalistic. Stylistically, 'reality' was conceived as an objectively determined certainty in this type of theatre. Poets, philosophers, critics and novelists (among them Comte, Mallarmé and d'Aurevilly) decried the theatre as a tired art form. Paul Fort, in response to this crisis, pioneered the anti-naturalistic 'théâtre d'art,' which first opened in 1890 in Paris.<sup>10</sup> Impresario and theatre practitioner Jacques Copeau went one step further by stripping the stage bare and depriving characters of psychological depth – in short, shifting away from the naturalistic theatre of previous centuries.<sup>11</sup> Many other luminaries populate the shifting terrain of the theatre at the start of the twentieth century: Gordon Craig and his marionette theatre; Jean Cocteau and his adaptations of classic tragedies and myths in an anti-naturalist and modernist aesthetic mode; the so-called 'Cartel des Quatre' (Louis Jouvet, Charles Dullin, Gaston Baty and Georges Pitoëff) who stressed the unreal nature of the theatrical medium and decentralised the theatre scene, promoting its presence in locations away from Paris; Alfred Jarry and his anti-realist play on a power-hungry, Polish tyrant *Ubu Roi* (premiering in 1896). In addition, the theatre was influenced by the emerging philosophies, artistic movements and dramatic theory of the turn of the century: the Symbolist theatre of Maurice Maeterlinck; Surrealism and its exploration of the Freudian unconscious; the Burlesque cinema of Charlie Chaplin; and the search for a 'théâtre de la cruauté'

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<sup>9</sup> There is a compelling case, in fact, for pinpointing the first throes of the anti-realist turn in French theatre even before 1890. French theatre had witnessed revolutionary changes to its aesthetic before this point. One famous example of this is Victor Hugo's play *Hernani*, which opened in 1830. The play, establishing the paradigms of romanticism, dealt a blow to the preceding theatre aesthetic of classicism that dominated French theatrical circles prior to this point. Indeed, Hugo's drama provoked such uproar among audiences that the scandal was dubbed 'la bataille d'*Hernani*'.

<sup>10</sup> Guicharnaud, *Modern French Theatre*, pp. 2-4.

<sup>11</sup> For an informative summary of this period, see: Dorothy Knowles, 'Introduction: Principles of Staging', in *Forces in Modern French Drama* (London: University of London Press, 1972), pp. 11-32.

– a dramatic mode that would affect the theatre spectator viscerally – carried out by Antonin Artaud in his seminal *Le Théâtre et son double* (1938). Early twentieth-century theatre, therefore, began to explore anti-rational, anti-naturalistic and anti-realistic scenarios. In the same measure, it underwent popularisation. No longer confined to the Italianate stages of the Parisian Right-Bank, its reach extended to the more politically sensitive Parisian Left-Bank and beyond to the provinces.

Naming one historical cause of the birth of absurd theatre in the 1950s would thus be an impossible task. Added to the anti-naturalistic turn of French playwrights and theatre practitioners at the start of the twentieth century, the theatre of the absurd arose in the aftermath of World War II and the Nietzschean proclamation of the annihilation of God. This gave rise, according to Adolphe Wegener, to an acute form of ‘solitude’ at the ‘heart of the human condition’ in the cultural imaginary.<sup>12</sup> Notwithstanding the rich and complex genealogy of absurd theatre that I have sketched out, Esslin aligns this body of theatre almost exclusively with the existentialist school of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Indeed, his choice of the word ‘absurd’ to describe this body of theatre made its connection with existentialism explicit, as this philosophical school began to explore the ‘absurdity’ of the human condition. In 1942, Camus published *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, in which he takes the Greek mythological figure of Sisyphus, who continually pushes a rock up a hill to find that all his efforts have been wasted since gravity’s sway causes it to fall back down. Camus uses this myth as a parable for the absurdity of life: why, if life is as repetitious and banal as it is for Sisyphus, does the human being not commit suicide?<sup>13</sup> In describing the theatre of the absurd, Esslin maps Camus’s paradigm onto the experimental theatre emerging in the 1950s.

In his efforts to pin the Parisian theatrical avant-garde of the 1950s to the philosophical school of existentialism, Esslin took the œuvre of the Romanian Eugène Ionesco, Russian Arthur Adamov and Irishman Samuel Beckett as his three main case studies. Their theatre, he argued, explored similar terrain to

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<sup>12</sup> Adolphe H. Wegener, ‘The Absurd in Modern Literature’, *Books Abroad*, 41 (1967), 150-56 (p. 150).

<sup>13</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe: essai sur l'absurde*, Collection Folio/Essais, 11 (Paris: Gallimard, 1985 [1942]).

that of the philosophical absurd. However, what was truly revolutionary about this theatre, for Esslin, was that it went one step further than the philosophical *théâtre à thèse* of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus (such as *Huis Clos* (1944), *Les Mouches* (1943) and *Caligula* (1944)). According to Esslin, Beckett's, Adamov's and Ionesco's œuvre conveyed the existential crisis in a highly visual form, thereby subverting the very *form* of traditional theatre. This heightened visuality was coupled with the erosion of the sovereignty of Aristotelian precepts, of what critic of post-dramatic theatre Hans-Thies Lehmann dubs the 'trinity of drama, imitation and action'.<sup>14</sup> Although failing to follow through in his own theatre, Sartre (1973) identified the subversive spirit of the absurd theatrical avant-garde – he named it the much more philosophically ambiguous 'nouveau théâtre' – as a three-fold refusal: 'le refus de la psychologie, le refus de l'intrigue, le refus de tout réalisme'.<sup>15</sup> More so than any other form of theatre that had developed in the preceding decades of the twentieth century in France, absurd theatre challenged realism, naturalism and Aristotelian unity by attacking the traditional formalisms of the medium. Among Esslin's founding examples of the theatrical absurd are Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve* (1950) (analysed in Chapter Three), in which two couples, the Smiths and the Martins, converse pointlessly on insignificant and senseless matters; Beckett's *En Attendant Godot* (1952), in which the characters Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky wait in vain for 'Godot' whose appearance, they believe, would grant them liberation from the daily grind of life; and Adamov's *La Parodie* (1947), in which 'l'employé' fruitlessly pursues the fickle Lili, while the character 'N' lies annihilated on the side of a street.

Absurd theatre, as Marie-Claude Hubert (1987) opines, conveyed an acute level of social anxiety arising from modernity and the mass genocide of World War II legitimated in the name of modernisation. According to Hubert, the lack of plot and characterisation, coupled with the visuality of this body of theatre, suggested a loss of faith in both rationalist discourse and the instrumentality of language. As such, as Hubert argues, it exposed: 'la forme la plus profonde

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<sup>14</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London; New York: Routledge, 2006 [1999]), p. 36.

<sup>15</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Mythe et réalité du théâtre,' in *Un théâtre de situations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992 [1973]), pp. 183-210 (p. 206).

d'aliénation, celle de l'être au langage, celle qui constitue la structure même de la psyché'.<sup>16</sup> Her contention points to an association between the concerns of absurd theatre and those of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. The individual or 'subject' according to Lacan is divided and alienated by language in a manner redolent of its theatricalisation in the absurd as Hubert discusses. This isomorphism will be explored in greater detail in the second part of this Introduction. For now though, it suffices to state that the multi-faceted history of the inception of absurd theatre (adumbrated above) would suggest that its association with the existentialist paradigm of absurdity is not inevitable, unquestionable or even desirable. Indeed, it falls to the next section to illustrate this by pointing out the common critical (mis)perceptions of this body of theatre that have been cultivated as a result of Esslin's label. This will permit me to stake out the traps that must be avoided in the establishment of a new critical pathway needed to re-energise debate on the subject.

### **Critical (Mis)perceptions of Absurd Theatre**

Whilst the generic classification 'the theatre of the absurd' has enabled critics to draw out the similarities and distinctions between Arrabal's, Ionesco's and Adamov's œuvre, inevitably any categorisation of an artistic movement limits the range of interpretations of the works within the movement to fit the paradigm. Esslin's 'theatre of the absurd' is no exception. Absurd theatre now occupies a sedimented place in the theatrical canon and has not received much critical attention in recent times. This must be attributed, at least in part, to Esslin's characterisation of it. By 1969, a few short years after Esslin's seminal publication, Arnold Hinchliffe declared that 'absurd fiction' was moribund.<sup>17</sup> Existential anguish – brought on by the unemployment of the 1930s, the two world wars and the surveillance society of France under the Vichy regime – was on the wane. Few publications on this body of theatre have emerged in recent years that offer new perspectives. Two rare exceptions to this are Michel Pruner's *Les Théâtres de l'absurde* (2005) and Michael Y. Bennett's *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter* (2011). The

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<sup>16</sup> Marie-Claude Hubert, *Langage et corps fantasmé dans le théâtre des années cinquante : Ionesco, Beckett, Adamov* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1987), p. 183.

<sup>17</sup> Arnold P. Hinchliffe, *The Absurd*, p. 99.

former constitutes mostly an informative summary of long-standing critical views, established principally between the 1960s and the 1980s.<sup>18</sup> The latter provides a re-reading of this body of theatre by arguing that Esslin's definition of the theatre of the absurd rested upon a misapprehension of Albert Camus's philosophy as existentialist. Bennett proposes that Esslin misunderstood Camus's philosophy as excessively and unjustifiably bleak since, in actuality, 'the absurd was a *situation*, but not a life sentence of destined meaninglessness'.<sup>19</sup> Bennett posits that the paradoxical aesthetic of the theatre of the absurd must be reframed as an 'ethical parable' that 'orients, disorients, and reorients the audience'.<sup>20</sup> Whilst, on the one hand, Bennett's account is unique insofar as it re-reads Esslin's paradigm, on the other, it falls into line with a profusion of critiques that do little to challenge the bond between the theatre of the absurd and the philosophies contemporaneous with this movement, even if they propose to re-read the latter. Such accounts continually complain of the ossification of this body of theatre legitimised in the name of Esslin's neologism.<sup>21</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to describe these critiques in full, it is possible to outline, in a fair amount of detail, two such limitations of Esslin's label that have stymied subsequent interpretations of this body of theatre. In this way, I shall make the case for a more thoroughgoing severance from the outdated philosophies that typically frame interpretations of absurd theatre. Firstly, critics have tended towards universalist assumptions in explaining the lessons of the theatre of the absurd; secondly, this theatre's putative exploration of the absurdity of the human condition has frequently been deemed apolitical or amoral. Common epithets attached to the theatre of the absurd include 'nihilistic' and 'anti-humanist'. As shall become abundantly clear, such critical patterns are illustrative of how a paradigm such as the 'theatre of the absurd' can restrict rather than expand interest in a body of work.

Regarding the first problematic, in almost every critical account of the theatre of the absurd, there are allusions to its resonance with 'Everyman' and its

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<sup>18</sup> Pruner, *Les Théâtres de l'absurde*.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Y. Bennett, *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 10.

<sup>20</sup> Bennett, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> See: Jacquart, *Le Théâtre de dérision*; Sartre, 'Mythe et réalité du théâtre'; Pruner, *Les Théâtres de l'absurde*.



capacity to encapsulate the 'metaphysical condition'. These are terms that have issued from the existentialist premise of Martin Esslin's œuvre and a philosophy of the 'human condition' undergirding this work. Just as Esslin writes repeatedly of the 'sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition' experienced by absurdist playwrights, many critics came to the conclusion that this body of theatre was able to express, in its lack of detailed plotline, transcendental truths about the crisis of 'man'.<sup>22</sup> In this vein, Rosette Lamont (1964) praises the 'new theatre' for having 'divested itself of all particulars in order to reach concrete essences'. For this critic, this body of theatre 'seeks a universal reality'.<sup>23</sup> Yet, the ontological crisis conveyed by the theatre of the absurd and described by these critics in universalist terms is, inevitably, historically and culturally specific to Western Europe of the 1950s and 1960s, which was then in the process of rebuilding itself in the aftermath of World War II and undergoing rapid modernisation. Moreover, the neutrality of the category 'man', so readily vaunted by these humanist critics of the absurd, has become increasingly untenable in the wake of the major political movements that have occurred in the last half of the twentieth century (May 1968, the Stonewall riots, women's liberation, the sexual revolution, the civil rights' movement). 'Man' inevitably privileges certain identitarian qualifiers over others (usually white, male, heterosexual and middle-class qualifiers). Despite this, even the most up-to-date criticisms perpetuate a mythology of the universal significance of the theatre of the absurd. Pruner (2005), for instance, claims that 'les auteurs de l'absurde nous livrent des vérités inouïes, ou inaudibles, rappelant seulement la part d'inhumanité qui est en chacun de nous, l'absurdité de notre condition'.<sup>24</sup> Despite his gesturing towards a female-authored absurd that deals with 'specific, *local* female bodies and interests', Bennett also alludes to the canonical '*male* Theatre of the absurd [a]s concerned with philosophically ethical positions of universal bodies'.<sup>25</sup> The universalising gesture of Lamont, Pruner, Bennett *et al.* effectively eradicates the differences between individual spectators and readers

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<sup>22</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, pp. 23-24. See also: Guicharnaud, *Modern French Theatre*, pp. 194-95.

<sup>23</sup> Lamont, 'The Nouvelle Vague in French Theatre', *The Massachusetts Review*, 5 (1964), 381-96 (p. 385).

<sup>24</sup> Pruner, p. 148.

<sup>25</sup> Bennett, p. 25.

of this body of theatre. The theatre audience, to a greater or lesser extent, functions as a microcosm of any given heterogeneous social order (a concept explored in greater detail in Chapter Four with reference to Jacques Rancière's idea of *dissensus*). Yet, critics who persist in praising the universalism of the theatrical absurd disregard the historical, gendered, racial, age-based, sexualised, class-related or other specificities that condition the spectator's apprehensions of the theatre of the absurd.

Indeed, critics' stress on the metaphysical anguish of absurd theatre feeds into the second limitation of Esslin's terminology: its political potential. Patrick O'Connor (1964), declaring himself a 'Christian humanist,' rejects this theatre – specifically the theatre of the three main playwrights under consideration here – on moral grounds, deeming it 'nihilistic'.<sup>26</sup> Those critics who have sought to politicise absurd theatre have done so at the expense of its aesthetic specificities. Where the charge of nihilism has been accepted, critics insist that the political value of these plays lies in their ability to overcome the plight of the absurd. Esslin was perhaps the first to extrapolate this from his paradigm; he argues that 'the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness'.<sup>27</sup> A modernist belief in historical progress implicitly undergirds and informs Esslin's argument. Similarly, Sartre speculated that in order for the *nouveau théâtre* to be used in the service of an anthropocentric goal, its contradictions must be brought into a new dialectic. Sartre hopes that the quandaries brought to the fore in this theatre will spur on a 'unité future' of humanity.<sup>28</sup> While the solutions propounded by Sartre and Esslin to the nihilistic quandary of the absurd are optimistic and not summarily dismissive of this body of theatre, they tend to overlook the aesthetic regimes of the absurd and their specificities at the same time as unconsciously privileging a philosophical emphasis on modernist linearity. In this vein, critical focus on the politics of the absurd falls on the side of a *solution to* – as opposed to the concept *per se* of – this body of theatre. Hinchliffe orchestrates this discursive eradication of absurd theatre. With regard to the theatrical absurd, he posits that 'the theatre of Nothing, if it is to develop at all, will have to move to something – whether the conventions and

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<sup>26</sup> Patrick O'Connor, 'Theatre', *The Furrow*, 15 (1964), 588-90 (p. 589).

<sup>27</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 429.

<sup>28</sup> Sartre, 'Mythe et réalité du théâtre,' p. 206.

subjects are artistic, political, social or religious'.<sup>29</sup> The need to surmount the quandaries presented by absurd theatre provides a partial explanation of the dwindling critical interest in this body of theatre after its heyday.

### **The Legacy of the Theatre of the Absurd**

It may be argued that, in promoting the theatre of the absurd as universally applicable yet politically limited in and of itself, the discursive practices that have shaped the critical literature on this body of theatre have (albeit inadvertently) precipitated its moribund status in the theatrical canon. This is particularly lamentable when considering that absurd theatre occupies a very different role in the development of theatre praxis over the half-century since its birth. The influence of this body of theatre is both historically and geographically extensive. The aesthetic shifts produced by absurd theatre broadened the experiential possibilities of the medium, both in terms of production and spectatorship. Radical theatre troupes of the late 1970s and 1980s, such as the Living Theatre and the Bread and Puppet Company, cited the theatre of the absurd as part of their genealogy. Inspired by the challenges posed by the theatre of the absurd to notions of space, they went one step further to politicise the theatre by, for instance, removing their plays from the theatre setting and bringing them onto the streets.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the allusive nature of the absurd aesthetic of Western Europe influenced and inspired the playwrights of Eastern Europe such as the late Václav Havel in Hungary, Sławomir Mrożek in Poland and Dominik Smole in Slovenia, and provided them with a codified aesthetic that enabled the transmission of subversive material under censorship during the Soviet era.<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere, the theatre emerging from the Japanese counterculture of the 1960s, such as that of Minoru Betsuyaku, bore a resemblance to the Absurdist movement occurring in Western Europe. Some critics even pinpoint a 'Neo-Theatre of the Absurd' occurring in the theatres of Tokyo today in the work of playwrights such as Shiro Maeda and Shu Matsui.<sup>32</sup> Back in France, theatre actor

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<sup>29</sup> Hinchliffe, p. 81.

<sup>30</sup> Gaensbauer, p. 104.

<sup>31</sup> *Absurde et dérision dans le théâtre est-européen*, ed. by Maria Delaperrière (Paris: Harmattan, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> See: Takahashi Yasunari, 'Alternative Japanese Drama', in *Alternative Japanese Drama*, ed. by Robert T. Rold and John K. Gillespie (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992); Author

Georges Bilbille considered the influence of the theatre of the absurd on experimentalism in the medium at one of France's biggest theatre festivals, the Avignon festival, in 2005. He recalled the daring feats posed by absurd theatre, in particular that of Arrabal's plays at previous festivals.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, the theatre of the absurd revolutionised the scope of theatre to such an extent that French studies scholar Tom Bishop (2007) laments that there has not been a theatrical avant-garde since the middle of the last century.<sup>34</sup>

Subsequent and current theatre practitioners have openly acknowledged their debt of gratitude to what they term 'the theatre of the absurd'. Since they lay stress on its subversive and politically suggestive practices, it is productive to maintain Esslin's term in a politically inflected analysis of the three main playwrights studied here, Ionesco, Arrabal and Adamov. However, in so doing, it is clear that a reinvigoration of what defines the 'absurd' is required in this endeavour, in order to separate the category 'absurd theatre' from critical perceptions that risk de-politicising this body of theatre through a rhetoric of universalism and nihilism. Esslin himself did not welcome the overdetermination of this body of work legitimated in the name of his invention. He lamented the indiscriminate nature of its critical application:

Having, to coin a phrase, "coined a phrase," I am in two minds about whether I should feel a thrill of pride every time I read a reference to the Theatre of the Absurd in a newspaper or book, or whether I should not rather hide my head in shame; for what I intended as a generic concept, a working hypothesis for the understanding of a large number of extremely varied and elusive phenomena, has assumed for many people, including some drama critics, a reality as concrete and specific as a branded product of the detergent industry.<sup>35</sup>

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unknown, 'Japanese Neo-Theatre of the Absurd'

<<http://tokyostages.wordpress.com/2009/11/28/japanese-neo-theatre-of-the-absurd/>> [accessed 1 June 2011].

<sup>33</sup> *Le Cas Avignon 2005: regards critiques*, ed. by Georges Banu and Bruno Tackels (Vic la Gardiole: L'Entretemps, 2005), p. 32.

<sup>34</sup> Tom Bishop, 'Whatever Happened to the Avant-Garde?', *Yale French Studies*, 112 (2007), 7-13.

<sup>35</sup> Esslin, 'The Theatre of the Absurd Reconsidered', in *Reflections: Essays on Modern Theatre* (New York: Anchor Books, 1971), pp. 179-86 (p. 179).

Taking this critic at his word ('extremely varied and elusive phenomena'), I examine a wide range of plays that both fall into and out of the conventional historical delineation of the theatre of the absurd – which Michael Bennett's re-reading (2011) fails to challenge – between 1950 and 1961 when Esslin first published his canonical text.<sup>36</sup>

Based on Esslin's premise, I have chosen to study three playwrights who are considered very differently in relation to the term 'the theatre of the absurd'. Ionesco's œuvre remains canonical within the category of absurd theatre. Referring to the heralding of the Romanian playwright as a beacon of this avant-garde, Ethan Mordenn (1988) argues that 'as the 1950s wore on, Ionesco and absurdism became, if not the rule, the chic exception'.<sup>37</sup> Arrabal's work is often considered an offshoot of the movement or of lesser importance in relation to Esslin's label, because his main body of plays flourished after the publication of the first edition of *The Theatre of the Absurd*. As David Whitton (1987) writes, '*Panique*, named after the buffoonish god Pan, was the name adopted by Arrabal to distinguish his brand of theatre from that of the Absurdists'.<sup>38</sup> Yet such nomenclature risks overstating Arrabal's separate status from his contemporaries. Esslin had never intended his paradigm to create such schisms in critical reception, as the following indicates:

We have had Theatres of Revolt, Cruelty, Paradox, Fact, etc. Authors have been asked in interviews whether they adhered to the doctrines of the Theatre of the Absurd. In fact the term, coined to describe certain features of certain plays in order to bring out certain underlying similarities, has been treated as though it corresponded to an organized movement, like a political party or a hockey team, which made its members carry badges and banners. One might as well have asked a paleolithic potter whether he agreed that he practised the Magdelian style. The artists of an epoch have certain traits in common, but they are not necessarily conscious of them. Nor does the fact that they have these traits in common preclude them from being widely different in other respects. Both a

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<sup>36</sup> Bennett, p. 23.

<sup>37</sup> *The Fireside Companion to the Theatre* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), p. 156.

<sup>38</sup> *Stage Directors in Modern France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 181.

mouse and an elephant can be classified as mammals, but that does not mean that they are identical in size or habits of life.<sup>39</sup>

It is unproductive to consider Arrabal's work as structurally separate from the theatre of the absurd when Esslin had never intended a dogmatic definition of his label or the body of theatre that may come under it. This is why I recuperate the playwright's œuvre in terms of the absurd paradigm. I draw out new readings of his theatre by means of his recuperation within the genre and my philosophically reinvigorated definition of the concept of the absurd (described below).

My corpus also comprises Adamov's œuvre, which has not, by any stretch of the imagination, been as successful as either Ionesco's or Arrabal's theatre among audiences, critics or academic scholars. The Russian-born playwright has tended to be occluded altogether from analyses of the theatre of absurd that followed on from Esslin's canonical work. This is exemplified only too well by Michael Bennett's 2011 study *Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter*. This occlusion is perhaps surprising given the fact that Esslin dedicated a central chapter to the playwright, entitled 'Arthur Adamov: The Curable and Incurable' in *The Theatre of the Absurd*.<sup>40</sup> André Tissier argues that the playwright was only ever perceived as 'un auteur marginal' owing to limited success with both audiences and critics, the two elements often reinforcing one another and dictating the success of a writer's work.<sup>41</sup>

I therefore take three very different playwrights of the theatre of the absurd: Ionesco, whose work became the hallmark of the movement for critics; Arrabal, whose relationship to the movement remains underexplored because of critics' haste to associate his name with subsequent theatrical movements such as 'panic theatre'; and Adamov, whose work has virtually been forgotten today in critical commentary. The broad ranging nature of this corpus of absurd theatre

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<sup>39</sup> *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 92-127.

<sup>41</sup> 'Le public français face au renouveau théâtral après la seconde guerre mondiale', *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France*, 6 (1977), 957-970 (p. 962).

constitutes a primary way in which I return to Esslin's contention that the theatre of the absurd is a body of 'varied and extremely elusive phenomena'.

The plays that I have chosen to analyse in the chapters that follow reflect both dominant critical perceptions of each respective playwright and capture something more elusive by turning to the under-researched, lesser-known and unfortunately under-performed works within my range. This is why I have chosen *Tueur sans gages* (analysed in Chapter Two) and *La Cantatrice chauve* (Chapter Three) from Ionesco's œuvre. Whilst the former has received little attention from contemporary critics or practitioners, the latter has come to be known in canonical terms within the theatre of the absurd. I re-read the playwright's exemplary status in Esslin's genre in my analysis of *La Cantatrice chauve* (Chapter Three) and probe the conceptual depths and possibilities of his under-researched and under-performed play *Tueur sans gages* (Chapter Two).

My choice of Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel* (Chapter One) and *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs* (Chapter Five) aims to reflect the critically acclaimed political intentionality of his œuvre at the same time as recapturing and politicising, particularly in my analysis of the latter play, the frequently condemned erotically charged nature of his theatre (through scenes of sacrilegious sexual parody, Baroque eroticism, and so on).<sup>42</sup> *La Tour de Babel* was written in the aftermath of the end of Spain's forty-year dictatorship. It aims, in the onstage construction of a new Tower of Babel, at a revolutionary politics and a utopian form of social cohesion. *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs*, written before the fall of Franco (in 1969), depicts four political prisoners and their struggle to overturn an unnamed dictatorship that has left them incarcerated.

Finally, my selection of Adamov's play on the Vietnam war *Off limits* (Chapter Four) aims to reflect the commonly-held view that the playwright's aesthetic constitutes a mixture of Marxist politics and personal neuroses. Martin Esslin distinguishes Adamov's work from the rest of the absurd canon in its

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<sup>42</sup> Esslin, for instance, deems Arrabal's latter-day works to be 'wildly self-indulgent and deliberately perverse' (p. 292), while Thomas Donahue argues that the playwright 'frequently shocks his audience rather than moving it to explore its own thought and feelings' in his deployment of 'erotica'. Thomas John Donahue, *The Theater of Fernando Arrabal: A Garden of Earthly Delights* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), pp. 87-88.

grappling with both ‘curable and incurable’ evils, the political and the psychical.<sup>43</sup> Reviewers have criticised this aesthetic duality when it is at its most pronounced, since they assume that the depiction of the individual’s unconscious afflictions detracts from a politics of theatre based on didacticism. By choosing *Off limits*, where Marxism and madness are arguably so pronounced that they are interlinked, I have aimed to re-capture the political potential of this dualism.

My choice of plays is, furthermore, guided by my interest in Lacanian theory and the theoretical concepts that my primary corpus reflects. This theoretical interest has allowed me to reflect on those plays that are infrequently performed in the current age, as I describe below in my description of the concept of the ‘Lacanian spectator’. However, owing to the undeniably broader purview of playwrights that have been identified as coming under Esslin’s label the ‘theatre of the absurd’, I bolster my analyses by establishing conceptual parallels with the œuvre of two other figureheads of the movement: Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet (1910-1986).

In order to reinvent and re-envision the theatre of the absurd it is instructive to return to the principle of the ‘absurd’ as a ‘working hypothesis’, as Esslin describes above. What can the ‘absurd’ mean to us today? What contemporary philosophical and political import does this term carry? In order to respond to these questions, I develop a critical methodology that deploys insights from both postmodern and Lacanian theory, the details of which I broach in the second part of this Introduction.

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<sup>43</sup> Adamov, *Ici et maintenant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 45; Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, pp. 92-127.



## Part II: Re-envisioning the Theatre of the Absurd

It is not scientifically incorrect to talk of tragedies, comedies, dramas, romances, pictures of everyday life, battle-pieces, landscapes, seascapes, poems, versicles, lyrics, and the like, if it be only with a view to be understood, and to draw attention to certain groups of works, in general and approximately, to which, for one reason or another, it is desired to draw attention. To employ *words* and *phrases* is not to establish *laws* and *definitions*. The mistake only arises when the weight of a scientific definition is given to a word, when we ingenuously let ourselves be caught in the meshes of that phraseology.<sup>44</sup>

Any conceptualisation of the contemporary resonance of the theatre of the absurd must rigorously take account of the shifts in social and cultural attitudes and expectations since the heyday of this theatrical movement. The first step in this task is to turn to that body of theory which holds that the present-day age is 'postmodern'.<sup>45</sup> Critics have sought to define contemporary postmodern society as one in which (amongst other things): the universal category of 'Man' has been disrupted; individualism and individualisation have taken precedence in shaping prevailing social attitudes; the grand ideological narratives of the past (Stalinism, Nazism, Humanism, and so on) have become discredited; and, neoliberal or late capitalist ideologies have assumed a hegemonic presence.<sup>46</sup> In terms that now seem prescient of the postmodern destabilisation of the grand narratives of ideology, Esslin posited that the 'attitude' of absurdist playwrights consisted of a 'sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away [...] the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism,

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<sup>44</sup> Benedetto Croce, 'Criticism of the Theory of Artistic and Literary Kinds' (1902), in *Modern Genre Theory* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2000), pp. 25-28 (p. 28).

<sup>45</sup> However, it should be noted that some critics disagree with the accuracy of the term 'postmodern' to describe the current age. Gilles Lipovetsky, taking issue with the prefix 'post' as spuriously implying that modernity has passed, prefers 'hyper-modernity' to denote 'modernity raised to the *n*th power' (p. 30). See: Lipovetsky, *Hypermodern Times* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005). Also: Paul Virilio, *From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond*, ed. by John Armitage (London: Sage Publications, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Prominent theorists of postmodernism include: Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981); Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 2nd edn. (Oxon: Routledge, 2002 [1989]); Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993).

and various totalitarian fallacies [...] [were] shattered by the war'.<sup>47</sup> While it would be a fruitless exercise to attempt to reclaim the theatre of the absurd as 'postmodern' in formalist terms, it befits this thesis – which aims to re-envision the theatre of the absurd – to establish the thematic and aesthetic crossovers between postmodernism and this body of theatre.<sup>48</sup> Tangential to this, Lehmann (1999) compares contemporary 'postdramatic theatre' (his own invention) to absurd theatre, pointing out that both betray 'motifs of discontinuity, collage and montage, decomposition of narrative, speechlessness and withdrawal of meaning'. According to Lehmann, while 'the disintegration of ideological certainties' staged by absurd theatre invoked a 'metaphysical anguish of the human condition' – as described by Esslin with the aid of existentialist philosophy – the same ideological floundering becomes 'a cultural given' in postdramatic theatre.<sup>49</sup> This difference must, at least in part, owe its cause to a shift from modernity to postmodernity, which, as described above, was a process that laid waste to grand ideological narratives of the past. By extension, the same 'disintegration of ideological certainties' staged by absurd theatre that once evoked modernist anguish now approximates a 'cultural given' for spectators of the postmodern era. As such, each chapter that follows is informed by the ways in which absurd theatre intersects with the 'cultural givens' that define the postmodern age (the cult of the individual, the hegemony of capitalist ideology, and so on).

Marking out the various intersections between this body of theatre and postmodern givens feeds into the main locus of study of this thesis: the Lacanian spectator of absurd theatre. Bennett (2011) gestures towards, but resists thoroughly examining, the spectatorial locus in his recent re-reading of the theatre of the absurd when he states that the job of ethical reorientation precipitated by the latter is 'left up to the audience'.<sup>50</sup> As Colette Conroy notes (2010), spectatorship is a socially sanctioned activity. Although there is still an element of unpredictability in each spectator's reaction to the theatre text,

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<sup>47</sup> Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 23.

<sup>48</sup> For an investigation of a similar nature, see: *Postmodernism Across the Ages*, ed. by Bill Readings and Bennet Schaber (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1993).

<sup>49</sup> Lehmann, p. 54.

<sup>50</sup> Bennett, p. 22.

Conroy argues that 'our thoughts are not unmotivated flashes of lone brilliance but a considered and social response to a shared cultural text'.<sup>51</sup> Staking out the postmodern cultural givens within absurd theatre is, therefore, pivotal to an analysis of contemporary spectatorship with regard to this body of theatre. While it must be conceded that the notion of the theoretical spectator carries conceptual limitations and may only ever be thought of in approximate terms, the fact is that the main body of plays under examination have inconsistent performance records (with the exception of Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve*), and some have not been produced for over forty years.<sup>52</sup> This precludes the possibility of thorough empirical research into the present-day spectatorship of my chosen primary corpus.

Where possible, I have added details about performances and actual spectator reaction to contemporary *mises en scène* of the main plays under analysis in order to bolster and defend the theoretical concepts that I broach in each chapter. However, since empirical research of this kind is necessarily restricted in scope by the variable and in some cases limited performance histories of the plays in question, the spectator of this thesis is primarily a theoretical one or a 'hypothetical viewing subject', as Linda Williams (1995) terms it with reference to study of this phenomenon in film (described in greater detail below).<sup>53</sup> It is a product of the discourses that inform it. Critical focus on the theoretical spectator permits me to stake out the historical, cultural and social specificities that bear upon both the spectator's response and, concomitantly, the subversive potential of absurd theatre today. I give a more thoroughgoing defence of the possibilities permitted by the notion of the theoretical spectator below, after having explained the Lacanian approach that I adopt.

Establishing the crossovers between postmodern attitudes and absurd theatre and the ways in which this commonality bears upon the reactions of the theatrical spectator helps to recast this body of theatre as still relevant for

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<sup>51</sup> Colette Conroy, *Theatre and the Body* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 41.

<sup>52</sup> For an idea of the last productions of the absurd theatre considered in this thesis, see *L'Archive du Spectacle*. Amateur or more minor performances may have been omitted: <<http://www.lesarchivesduspectacle.net/>> [accessed 31 May 2011].

<sup>53</sup> Linda Williams, 'Introduction', in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film* (New Brunswick; New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp. 1-20 (p. 4).

contemporary society. However, something else is needed in order to pinpoint the political valences of this common ground. A turn to the conceptual potential of the term 'absurd' helps in this endeavour. The word 'absurd' denotes something 'out of harmony' as Hinchliffe points out (as does Esslin, briefly).<sup>54</sup> Etymologically, it derives from the Latin 'absurdum' which refers to something 'dissonant' or 'discordant', as Pruner posits.<sup>55</sup> Patrice Pavis, who traces elements of the absurd throughout the history of theatre from Aristophanes to Apollinaire, defines the absurd as 'déraisonnable, comme manquant totalement de sens ou de lien logique avec le reste du texte ou de la scène'.<sup>56</sup> Pavis's, Hinchliffe's and Pruner's definitions all concur inasmuch as the literal meaning of the 'absurd' denotes something outside of ordered logic, something that disturbs unity and linearity. The discordance of the absurd detailed in these critics' accounts gives an indication of the subversive thrust intrinsic to this body of theatre, and is thus useful in a re-politicisation of the theatre of the absurd in a postmodern world. Moreover, the disharmony of the absurd evoked by these critics recalls the argument made by Marie-Claude Hubert (cited above) that absurd theatre exposes 'la forme la plus profonde d'aliénation, celle de l'être au langage'. In a rare break from existentialist critiques of the theatre of the absurd, Hubert's comments serve as a linguistic framing of absurd discordance and a fledgling example of the conceptual alignment of this body of theatre with something other than existentialist philosophy. Indeed, Hubert's contention allows us to approximate the structuralist philosophy of Jacques Lacan and, in particular, a central tenet of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the divided or split 'subject' of language. Taking Hubert's commentary one step further, I draw out a conceptual isomorphism between absurd theatre and Lacanian theory. As I shall discuss, this enables the extraction of a politics of absurd theatre in the postmodern era. First, however, it is necessary to explain in fuller detail the discordance that abounds in Lacan's theory of the subject, which will serve as a conceptual point of connection with absurd theatre.

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<sup>54</sup> Hinchliffe, p. 1; Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 23.

<sup>55</sup> Pruner, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> Patrice Pavis, *Dictionnaire du théâtre* (Paris: Messidor, 1987), p. 21.

## Jacques Lacan: A Politics of Discordance and Dialectics

Il n'y a rien dans l'inconscient s'il est fait tel que je vous l'énonce qui au corps fasse accord. *L'inconscient est discordant*. L'inconscient est ce qui, de parler, détermine le sujet en tant qu'être, mais être à rayer de cette métonymie, dont « je » supporte le désir, en tant qu'à tout jamais impossible à dire comme tel.<sup>57</sup>

Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), self-styled apostle of the 'Freudian revolution', originally trained in psychiatry. However, even from his 1932 doctoral thesis, later published in 1975 under the title *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité*, the first traces of psychoanalytic thought on the unconscious can be detected in his work. In his thesis, Lacan cast doubt upon the biological causes of psychosis. His biographer Elisabeth Roudinesco (1993) pinpoints a discordant element in the Lacanian conceptualisation of the psyche from this earliest work. The psychotic affect ruptures the so-called 'normal' personality.<sup>58</sup> Psychosis is consubstantial with its 'normal' counterpart. This is not the only instance in which the subject of Lacanian theory finds itself divided either. As Roudinesco further observes, discordance is fundamental to a more general Lacanian theory of the subject. With recourse to Spinoza and Freud, Lacan conceptualised an irrevocably split subject. Freud's notion of *Ichspaltung* (ego splitting) would heavily influence Lacan's musings on the defining formative moment in subjectivity, *le stade du miroir* (translated as the 'mirror stage'). Breaking away from the ego psychologists of his time, most notable of whom was Freud's daughter Anna, Lacan resolutely refuted the notion that a psychical cure could be found in the shoring up of the individual's ego. According to Lacan, the ego contained within it a propensity to shatter at any moment. This is because it is formed at the founding moment of subjectivity, the mirror stage, when the infant is between six and eighteen months old. The first infantile identification of the self in the mirror is heavily inflected with narcissistic affection and delight. This moment continues to impact upon the subject's later relationship to reality, which becomes construed as an extension of the self.

<sup>57</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire XXI: RSI* (unpublished seminar, 1974-75), p. 63.

<sup>58</sup> Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan: esquisse d'une vie, histoire d'un système de pensée* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1993), p. 85.

Throughout life, the ego only identifies with the external world through a lens of narcissism. However, this mode of identification is prone to collapse at any moment, when the subject glimpses the radical alterity of the surrounding world. The ego, the psychical agency that performs this narcissistic identification, is therefore susceptible to rupturing at any point in the subject's life. The subject is cursed with this specular 'déchirement originel'.<sup>59</sup>

According to Lacan, psychical division occurs again upon the subject's acquisition of language.<sup>60</sup> Heavily influenced by the contemporary anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté* (1949) and the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, Lacan departed from Freudian biologism and reconfigured the Oedipus complex as a product of language learning. Positioning himself alongside structuralist thinkers, Lacan conceives language as a normative and restrictive structure, which is nonetheless pivotal to the construction of subjectivity. Language effects a 'castration' on the subject's unconscious. The unconscious intercedes in momentary slippages of language – which Freud determined in *lapsus linguae*, dreams, and psychical malady – but language can never convey or capture the unconscious in full articulation. This led Lacan to formulate perhaps his most famous dictum: 'l'inconscient est structuré comme un langage'. Language is not transparent or purely instrumental. The subject is ruptured; he or she is at the mercy of language, unable to experience a permanent stable self, since the unconscious intervenes in language and opposes such stability. Implicitly connected with the divisive machinations of language in the Lacanian schema is the subject's desire, which Lacan considered to be the 'vérité' of the subject. In 'Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir dans l'inconscient freudien' (1960), Lacan links Hegel's concept of 'Begierde' – desire – to truth and knowledge.<sup>61</sup> Desire expresses itself through and is a product of the proscriptive rule of language. Consequently, it is always the desire of the 'Other'. The latter, for Lacan, does not refer to another subject (this would be denoted by 'other') but to the locus of language. It is capitalised to underscore its radical incommensurability with the subject. Desire

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<sup>59</sup> Lacan, *Le Mythe individuel du névrosé* (Paris: Seuil, 2007 [1956]), p. 46.

<sup>60</sup> Roudinesco, p. 356.

<sup>61</sup> Lacan, 'Subversion du sujet et dialectique du désir dans l'inconscient freudien', in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 793-828.

underpins the subject's dialectical relationship with language, overturning the notion that subjectivity is a closed totality.

Lacan's version of subjectivity is thus shot through with discordance and division, as is evidenced by his theories of psychosis, the mirror stage and the Other. In this way, Lacanian theory lends itself to an analysis of the absurd aesthetic in theatre as unharmonious and discordant (recalling the etymological and definitional resonances of 'absurdity'). It is my contention that the 'discordance' that underpins absurd theatre also functions as an index of – that is to say an indicator of – the Lacanian (non-Cartesian) split subject. Whilst I am by no means suggesting that the two are equivalent – it is important to avoid repeating the mistake of philosophical overdetermination made by past critics – the conceptual isomorphism of absurd theatre and Lacanian theory proves fruitful for the development of a renewed politics of this body of theatre in the age of postmodernity. Indeed, Eli Zaretsky (1996) argues that Lacan's disruption of a stable sense of selfhood and identity intersects with the 'antifoundationalism, the dissolution of truth into "language games," [and] the emphasis on contingency and indeterminacy' that underpin theories of postmodernism.<sup>62</sup> As such, this body of thought offers a fruitful conceptual toolkit for the development of a contemporary politics of absurd theatre.

The potential for a radical form of politics, according to the logic of Lacanian theory, inheres within the divided or discordant subject. According to Kenneth Mackendrick (2001), contemporary Lacanian theorists – particularly those of the 'Slovene School', such as Slavoj Žižek, Alenka Zupančič, Mladen Dolar and Renata Salecl – deploy this form of psychoanalytic theory to conceive a politics that counters triumphant or cynical claims made by some that the postmodern age is 'post-ideological' or 'post-political'.<sup>63</sup> Lacan's theory of the interrelationality of the subject and the linguistic Other which constructs it helps

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<sup>62</sup> Eli Zaretsky, 'Psychoanalysis and Postmodernism', *American Literary History*, 8 (1996), 154-69 (p. 165).

<sup>63</sup> Kenneth G. Mackendrick, 'Slovene Lacanian School', in *Encyclopedia of Postmodernism*, ed. by Victor E. Taylor & Charles E. Winqvist (London; New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 371-72. In terms of post-ideological triumphalism, see: Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993). In terms of post-ideological cynicism, see Peter Sloterdijk who argues that modern society is plagued by cynicism or an 'enlightened false consciousness' cultivated in the wake of 'the technical horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from Verdun to the Gulag, from Auschwitz to Hiroshima'. Sloterdijk, 'Cynicism: The Twilight of False Consciousness', *New German Critique*, 33 (1984), 190-206 (p. 198).

to discredit these claims. In its function as the locus of language, the Other operates as a normalising force on subjectivity. It is the site of dominant ideologies. However, the subject's desire, that serves to contest authority, is contingent upon the Other (as discussed above).

The politics of the Lacanian subject is implicitly ambivalent and non-utopian, but it is always potentiated by this paradox. The individual is subjected to the perpetual stranglehold and possibilities of the Other. Malcolm Bowie describes the subject's relationship with the Other:

The Other propels, where nature, instinct and nervous excitation do not. It is that which always insinuates itself between the individual and the objects of 'his' desire; which traverses those objects and makes them unstable; and which makes desire insatiable by continuously moving its target. [...] The Other takes language as its field of action. Where 'natural' analogies, and symbolism based upon them, offer the promise of completion, fullness, symmetry and repose at the end of the signifying process, the Other keeps the signifier perpetually on the move.<sup>64</sup>

The subject is reliant upon the Other and its dominant ideologies in order to keep desiring. However, the Other's very function in sustaining the subject's desire by constantly moving the target opens it up to questions about its own legitimacy, to questions about its capacity to fulfil the subject. The subject is left in an ambivalent position of being encouraged to contest the dominant ideologies of the Other and being dependent on them for desire. According to political theorist Yannis Stavrakakis (1999), this Lacanian ambivalence resonates with contemporary theorists such as Jacques Rancière (discussed in Chapter Four), William Connolly and Chantal Mouffe who define democratic politics as a perpetual process functioning at the intersection of power and sites of its contestation (according to Stavrakakis, 'the moment of the political should be understood as emerging at the intersection of [...] political articulation and dislocation, order and disorder, politics and the political').<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 83-84.

<sup>65</sup> Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London; New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 75.



The split between the subject and the Other is potentially political. Each chapter that follows centres on a politics of discordance that absurd theatre evokes for the subject-spectator (defined in Lacanian terms) of postmodernity. This is with the exception of the first chapter which posits the opposite to make the same point about the discordant politics of absurd theatre: that Fernando Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel* forges a unifying mirror stage for the spectator, which can only be de-politicising in the present age despite the playwright's deeply-held political and utopian convictions in his writing of the play. Each subsequent chapter takes up the divided positions of subjectivity formulated by Lacanian psychoanalysis. Since this body of theory tends to focus on the notion of the individual subject, each chapter conceptualises an individuated mode of politics in contradistinction to the collective possibilities for resistance of the theatre audience. As such, all of the chapters implicitly challenge prevailing assumptions of a theatrical politics based on Bertolt Brecht's modernist theory of *Verfremdungseffekt*; the second and fourth chapters explicitly grapple with the limitations of the Brechtian schema in relation to the absurd aesthetic. Brecht stressed the necessity of the spectator's distance or 'alienation' from the dramatic action in order to precipitate the galvanisation of the audience in a collective politics outside of the theatre.<sup>66</sup> Whilst the fourth chapter gestures towards a post-theatrical politics in the spectator's post-psychotic dialectics with reality, the remaining chapters concentrate on the theatre space itself as a locus for a possible politics of spectatorship. In each chapter I theorise that the spectator is cajoled into a 'position' within dominant discourse or vis-à-vis the Other: in the first chapter, the spectator is coerced into a de-politicised 'mirror stage'; in the second, he or she perceives the dramatic action from the point of view of Lacanian 'misrecognition'; in the third, the spectator's position is one of perversion; in the fourth, it becomes one of psychosis; in the fifth and final chapter, I argue that a 'feminine' discursive positionality is cultivated by Fernando Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs* and this bears the potential to foment a feminist politics of spectatorship with regard to absurd theatre. Excluding the play considered in Chapter One, I argue that the divisive

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<sup>66</sup> Bertolt Brecht, 'Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting', *A Twentieth-Century Literature Reader: Texts and Debates* (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 130-40 (p. 139).

workings of each absurd piece pave the way for the spectator's rehearsal of a mode of subjective contestation of dominant ideologies.

While each chapter deploys a Lacanian focus for the theorisation of the spectator's reactions to absurd theatre, the insights and ideas offered by this body of theory are constantly interrogated. Lacanian psychoanalysis, as a discourse, has frequently been taken to task for the universalising nature of its claims, from Judith Butler's denunciation of the ahistorical Other in *Gender Trouble* (1990) to Luce Irigaray's damning indictment of the masculinist pomposity of psychoanalysis in 'La misère de la psychanalyse' (1977).<sup>67</sup> Such blindspots clearly have implications for the application of psychoanalysis to literature and for the development of an effective politics of spectatorship vis-à-vis the absurd discussed in this project. In addition to acknowledging the exclusionary practices of psychoanalytic discourse, I attempt to nuance the contentions of each chapter by looking to other contemporary cultural theorists in an assessment of the resistant and transformative possibilities of absurd theatre: from the theory of a radical catharsis based on Lisa Downing's assessment of the Lacanian death drive (2009) in the first chapter; to the sexual politics of phantasy informed by queer theorist Tim Dean (2000) in the second; to the contestatory nature of perversion posited by Joel Whitebook (1995) in the third; to Jacques Rancière's (2008) political thought on *dissensus* in the fourth; and finally to the feminist theories of, among others, Parveen Adams (1996), Luce Irigaray (1985) and Rosi Braidotti (2006) in the fifth chapter.

Each chapter considers the function of absurd theatre in the espousal or denigration of dominant ideologies for spectators. A final note is required on my analysis of the plays of Arrabal, Ionesco and Adamov before I proceed to an explanation and defence of the concept of the 'Lacanian spectator' and a subsequent summary of each chapter. Since theatre is both a product of the playwright's vision and a collaborative endeavour when it comes to its staging, I have developed a three-fold mode of analysing the main body of plays and their

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<sup>67</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999 [1990]); Luce Irigaray 'La Misère de la psychanalyse', in *Parler n'est jamais neutre* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), pp. 253-81.

aesthetic regimes:<sup>68</sup> firstly, through textual analyses; secondly, with recourse to archival descriptions of past *mises en scène* of the plays; thirdly, not wanting to overlook the visibility of theatre, by means of photographic material taken from this body of archival material.

### **In Defence of the Theoretical Spectator**

The central locus of this thesis, the theoretical spectator produced by the theatre of the absurd, takes inspiration from a wide body of criticism consisting of Lacanian views of spectatorship in film and theatre studies. As Linda Williams explains, these 'gaze' theorists were the first to suggest 'that spectatorship mattered in an era of both visual narrative and visual attractions'.<sup>69</sup> Rather than being taken for a passive endeavour, spectatorship was interrogated and its possibilities – particularly the political possibilities – were re-examined with the aid of theoretical enquiry.

Theoretical spectatorship is an apposite methodology for my chosen primary corpus. With the exception of *La Cantatrice chauve*, the main plays that come under analysis here have not been performed for decades. A primarily empirical investigation into spectatorship would risk limiting itself to historical accounts of response and reception. As Slavoj Žižek argues, a historical methodology often precludes a thoroughgoing investigation into a text's theoretical and political possibilities. Historical analysis risks engaging a purely 'relativizing' lens:

An ahistorical kernel of the Real is present also in history/hysteria: the ultimate mistake of *historicism* in which all historical content is "relativized", made dependent on "historical circumstances," – that is to say, of historicism as opposed to *historicity* – is that it evades the encounter with the Real.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> See: Dwight Conquergood, 'Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research', *TDR*, 46 (2002), 145-56; Jean-Pierre Sarrazac and Virginie Magnat, 'The Invention of "Theatricality": Rereading Bernard Dort and Roland Barthes', *SubStance*, 31 (2002), 57-72.

<sup>69</sup> Linda Williams, 'Introduction', in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film* (New Brunswick; New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp. 1-20 (p. 19).

<sup>70</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *For they know not what they do: enjoyment as a political factor* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 101.

Žižek – whose prolific body of work persistently deploys Lacanian theory to conceptualise politics in the age of postmodernity – argues that historical analysis excludes the possibility of researching the political potential of a text. This potential, he continues, lies in a theoretical realm of the Lacanian ‘Real’, which escapes empirical existence and bears the potential to undermine the ideologies of the social order. Based on the same premise, Joan Copjec insists that historical analyses are ‘Real-tight’.<sup>71</sup> Empirical accounts of response to my chosen corpus of plays of Arrabal, Adamov and Ionesco would necessarily entail enquiry into a historical body of spectatorial accounts, and this risks the politically limited outcome laid out by Copjec and Žižek. While I will go on to explain the importance of empirical insight into the phenomenon of theatre spectatorship owing to the live and precarious nature of the theatrical medium, an exclusively empirical approach would be incompatible with my aim to examine the postmodern political potential of this body of theatre.

However, my choice is not made out of necessity alone, and a little context is required in order to delineate the full benefits of this methodology. The notion of the Lacanian spectator was first formulated by the films scholars Jean-Louis Baudry (1970), Laura Mulvey (1975) and Christian Metz (1977). Combining semiotic enquiry into the social and cultural codes that language produces and psychoanalytic insight into the notion of desire, these theorists conceived filmic spectatorship of mainstream cinema as a site of interpellation into dominant ideologies. In particular, they were each inspired by the Lacanian mirror stage and misrecognition (described above) as re-read by Louis Althusser as a tool for interpellation into dominant ideologies. Metz argues that the ontology of film is marked by presence and absence, by the immediacy of the film image and the disappearance of the real object that the onscreen image denotes. This paradoxical constitution, according to Metz, emulates the logic of an individual’s phantasy and the formation of his or her ego. The latter is a key tool for the securing of the subject’s position in a dominant ideological framework. The cinema, for Metz, is a ‘chain of many mirrors [...] a weak and robust mechanism

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<sup>71</sup> Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1994).

[...] like a social institution'.<sup>72</sup> For Baudry, similarly, 'the arrangement of the different elements – projector, darkened hall, screen – [...] reconstructs the situation necessary to the release of the mirror stage discovered by Lacan'.<sup>73</sup> This, in turn, renders the cinema 'an apparatus destined to obtain a precise ideological effect necessary to dominant ideology'.<sup>74</sup> For Mulvey (1975), Hollywood narrative cinema and its female stars instigate the spectator's experience of the mirror stage, and this encourages the 'masculine gaze' and the subsequent fetishisation of the female actress on the screen. According to Mulvey, 'playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire'.<sup>75</sup>

For Mulvey, theoretical spectatorship formulated with the aid of Lacanian and Freudian theory constitutes 'a political weapon' because these discourses 'demonstrat[e] the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form'.<sup>76</sup> Psychoanalysis acts as a springboard for techniques that deconstruct the ideologically-bound space of the cinema. In particular, Mulvey uses her theorisation of the Lacanian spectator's tendency to experience the mirror stage as an impetus to develop techniques that would overturn this structure of desire. Estrangement techniques instigated by the film text, she claims, would alienate the spectator from the screen. This would disrupt the power exchange that holds the male viewer dominant over the female actress:

The first blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already undertaken by radical film-makers) is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics and passionate detachment.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 51.

<sup>73</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', *Film Quarterly*, 28 (1974), 39-47 (p. 45).

<sup>74</sup> Baudry, p. 46.

<sup>75</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd edn. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009 [1975]), pp. 14-27 (p. 26).

<sup>76</sup> 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p. 14.

<sup>77</sup> Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure', p. 27.

Mulvey asserts that the theoretical gaze and the Lacanian spectator are specific to the medium of cinema. Yet, she borrows a theoretical touchstone from theatre studies, Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* (described above).

Equally, dramatic theorists have borrowed Mulvey's concept of the Lacanian male gaze and applied it to the theoretical formulations of spectatorship in the theatre. Elin Diamond, who formulates a Brechtian mode of theatre praxis to interrupt the male gaze in the theatre, admits to being inspired by Laura Mulvey and other feminist film theorists of the male gaze. Referring to Brechtian feminist film practice, Diamond states that 'feminist film theorists, fellow-travelling with psychoanalysis and semiotics, have given us a lot to think about but we, through Brechtian theory, have something to give them: a female body in representation that resists fetishization and a viable position for the female spectator'.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, Jill Dolan, who again supports the Brechtian mode of deconstructing the male gaze in the theatre, describes that 'although these theories have been worked out most fully in feminist film criticism, they have distinct and important applications for materialist feminist performance criticism'.<sup>79</sup> Mulvey's concept of the Lacanian spectator who bears the male gaze still informs theatre criticism today. On the subject of feminist cancer narratives in the theatre, Mary K. Deshazer (2003) deploys the male gaze to conceptualise a mode of performance that 'challenge[s] the capacity of a spectatorial, consuming "male gaze" to appropriate, fetishize or otherwise sexualize women's bodies'.<sup>80</sup>

The two media of film and theatre are not mutually exclusive but borrow from and inflect one another's theoretical insight into spectatorship and concomitant development of radical praxis to combat the male gaze. My concept of the Lacanian spectator of the theatre of the absurd derives insight from this inter-dialogue between film and the theatre. Although it does not follow the Brechtian solution that these feminist film and theatre critics promote, my

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<sup>78</sup> Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 44.

<sup>79</sup> Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 12.

<sup>80</sup> 'Fractured Bodies: Women's Cancer and Feminist Theatre', *NWSA Journal*, 15 (2003), 1-26 (p. 4).

methodology takes inspiration from the political possibilities brought to light by the Lacanian enquiry into spectatorship in both media.

Critical formulations of the Lacanian spectator in this thesis do not exclusively follow in the vein of Mulvey, Baudry and Metz. My analyses take inspiration from recent reinvigorations of the concept of the Lacanian spectator, as I shall signal below. However, it is instructive at this point to establish more firmly the position of my research within theatre studies. My concept of the Lacanian spectator of the theatre of the absurd follows in a long tradition within this discipline of theoretical insight into spectatorship, a point that Willmar Sauter articulates succinctly in the following:

Aristotle has, of course, written about the impact a tragedy should have on an audience, and the term *catharsis* which he used to describe the effect has been discussed ever since. But Aristotle described what spectators should feel, not what they actually experienced.

Many of the theoretical writings during the history of Western theatre concern possible or desirable spectator responses. There was never any agreement about the outcome of a theatrical event. Augustine repelled theatre as morally reprehensible. Schiller claimed that the theatre was a moral institution. Jesuits as well as socialists considered theatre as a means for propagating ideas, whereas Roman and later emperors used theatre to keep the masses calm. Who was right? We do not know, since interest in empirical investigation of the actual perception of theatrical audiences is of a much later date.<sup>81</sup>

As his tone indicates, Sauter critiques this dominant trend in theatre studies. I will return to his empirical research into audience response and his justification of this mode of methodology later to illustrate how I intend to take account of empirical critiques of theoretical spectatorship and the importance of doing so, but for now it suffices to point out that the Lacanian spectator conceptualised here fits into the two thousand years of theatre history that he delineates.

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<sup>81</sup> Willmar Sauter, 'Who Reacts When, How and Upon What: From Audience Surveys to the Theatrical Event', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 12 (2002), 115-29 (p. 115-16).

Two cornerstones of a twentieth-century history of theoretical spectatorship in the theatre are Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht. For Artaud, the most compelling theatre acts like a plague ('la peste') on the spectator:

Le théâtre comme la peste est une crise qui se dénoue par la mort et la guérison. [...] Il invite l'esprit à un délire qui exalte ses énergies ; et l'on peut voir pour finir que du point de vue humain, l'action du théâtre comme celle de la peste, est bienfaisante, car poussant les hommes à se voir tels qu'ils sont, elle fait tomber le masque, elle découvre le mensonge, la veulerie, la bassesse, la tartuferie ; elle secoue l'inertie asphyxiante de la matière qui gagne jusqu'aux données les plus claires des sens ; et révélant à des collectivités leur puissance sombre, leur force cachée, elle les invite à prendre en face du destin une attitude héroïque et supérieure qu'elles n'auraient jamais eue sans cela.<sup>82</sup>

Artaud effectively provides a seminal account of the theoretical spectator in his description. Theatre, when it acts with the same compelling force as a plague on a collective, empowers the spectator. It precipitates the viewer's expiation of all that is inauthentic in social life. Brecht, similarly, theorises the spectator in his concept of 'alienation effects' that instigate critical distance between the spectator and the stage (described above).

In recent times, there have been revisionist accounts of the theoretical spectator of the theatre on the part of two main critical theorists: Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou. Their research shows that theorisations of theatrical spectatorship are far from politically moribund – even in an age in which digital media dominates – and demonstrates the timeliness of my own project in terms of the field of critical theory. Simon Bayly outlines one possible reason for this contemporary theoretical or philosophical focus on the theatre:

The theatre has always carried a special and contested significance for thinking about the ways in which the polis, collective or community might symbolically grasp its elusive self-actualization [...] [and] [it] is still perhaps one of the

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<sup>82</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 45.



cultural venues to which the philosophically inclined might turn for a thought-provoking encounter.<sup>83</sup>

Rancière, whose ideas we will explore in greater detail in Chapter Four, conceptualises a politicised response of the spectator by means of ‘dissensus’, aesthetic breaks from social consensus that a theatrical forum might foster. This rupture is, he claims, necessary to destabilise the consensual logic of modern-day neoliberal ideology. Artaud and Brecht, according to Rancière both provide insufficient accounts of the theoretical spectator of the theatre because their models enforce an undemocratic power dynamic that leaves the spectator in thrall to the stage just before the crucial moment of spectatorial politics:

[La scène et la performance théâtrales] se proposent d’enseigner à leurs spectateurs les moyens de cesser d’être spectateurs et de devenir agents d’une pratique collective. Selon le paradigme brechtien, la médiation théâtrale les rend conscients de la situation sociale qui lui donne lieu et désireux d’agir pour la transformer. Selon la logique d’Artaud, elle les fait sortir de leur position de spectateurs : au lieu d’être en face d’un spectacle, ils sont environnés par la performance, entraînés dans le cercle de l’action qui leur rend leur énergie collective.<sup>84</sup>

Whilst Rancière conceptualises a model of spectatorship that would put the spectator on a democratic footing with the theatre stage, Badiou theorises that it is the unpredictable and heterogeneous nature of each performance of a theatre text that potentially throws the political into relief. Central to Badiou’s musings is the concept of ‘theatre-ideas’ (*l’idée-théâtre*) produced from the precarious and singular nature of each theatre performance.<sup>85</sup> Each performance remains irreducible to and incommensurable with its accompanying text. This, Badiou continues, theoretically allows for dialogue with an equally pluralistic theatre audience:

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<sup>83</sup> Simon Bayly, ‘Theatre and the Public: Badiou, Rancière, Virno’, *Radical Philosophy* (September/October 2009), 20-29 (p. 20).

<sup>84</sup> *Le Spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2008), p. 14.

<sup>85</sup> Alain Badiou, ‘Dix thèses sur le théâtre’, *Les Cahiers – Comédie Française*, 15 (1995), 5-8.

[Le public] doit lui-même être aussi hasardeux que possible. Il faut s'élever contre toute conception du public qui y verrait une communauté, une substance publique, un ensemble consistant. Le public représente l'Humanité dans son inconsistance même, dans sa variété infinie.<sup>86</sup>

The precariousness of the spectatorial event brings about the potential to interrupt prevailing distributions of power, allowing for the unfolding *production* of meaning that overturns dominant systems of thought ('[le public] n'en sort pas cultivé, mais étourdi, fatigué (penser fatigue), songeur [...]. Il a rencontré des idées dont il ne soupçonnait pas l'existence').<sup>87</sup> Rancière's and Badiou's theorisations illustrate that there is an energy in current critical thinking to question and probe the possibilities offered up by the theoretical spectator of the theatre. My research speaks to this current trend in critical theory.

Within the field of Lacanian spectatorship studies more specifically, my research falls into a recent body of work that engages primarily revisionist methods to reassess the spectator's gaze as formulated by Mulvey, Baudry and Metz. Whilst the Lacanian spectator may have allowed the gaze theorists of the 1970s to politicise the act of spectatorship, Judith Mayne (1993) notes that the problem with the arguments of these apparatus theorists is that 'by describing an institution that is defined monolithically in its effects and domination by the white, male subject of "Western civilization", you end up giving that institution more stability than it ever had in the first place'. Mayne argues that 'the problem, in other words, is in, if not celebrating, then at the very least reifying the monolithic quality you set out to critique'.<sup>88</sup> Setting my argument apart from the potentially self-defeating logic of Mulvey's, Baudry's and Metz's Lacanian spectator outlined by Mayne, I turn to a more rigorous account of the intricacies of Lacanian discourse than that given by these apparatus theorists. This follows in the vein of Todd McGowan (2007) and Jennifer Friedlander (2008), who have developed heavily politicised accounts of the Lacanian spectator.

McGowan argues that Mulvey *et. al* assumed that the Lacanian gaze worked in the service of the mirror stage. Consequently, this assumption

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<sup>86</sup> Badiou, p. 7.

<sup>87</sup> Badiou, p. 8.

<sup>88</sup> Judith Mayne, *Cinema & Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 63.

propped up a film spectator's subject position in dominant ideology. Lacanian theory offered little hope for the development of a subversive mode of film spectatorship as a result of this assumption. Yet, McGowan rightly argues that Lacan never mentioned his concept of the gaze ('le regard') in his article on the mirror stage. The gaze was rather an '*objet petit a*' (I explain this concept in Chapter Three) and it propels a subject's flow of desire in the visual field. Ultimately, the *objet a* is a remainder of the unknowable and political Real, not of the mirror stage. It belongs to the "unsignifiable" realm of subjectivity – that is, the domain that cannot be rendered in discourse – that holds the potential to undermine dominant ideology. McGowan argues that early film theorists missed the potential of the Lacanian gaze, because they misconstrued it. By focusing on the gaze as related to an encounter with the Real, the critic rescues Lacanian theory from its potential demise in film studies. He shows how a theorization of the gaze, by turning back to Lacan's seminars, offers film spectatorship a radical edge. He argues that:

A genuine psychoanalytic film theory advocates fully immersing oneself in cinematic fascination and focusing on the points of rupture where the gaze emerges. These are the points where film disturbs the spectator, but at the same time they are the points where the spectator enjoys. To be a psychoanalytically informed spectator is to allow oneself to enjoy and to pay attention to the moments of one's enjoyment.<sup>89</sup>

Similarly, Jennifer Friedlander (whom I reference in greater detail in Chapter Five) takes issue with the 'selective and oversimplified interpretation of psychoanalytic theory' by theorists of the Lacanian spectator of the 1970s.<sup>90</sup> Friedlander formulates a radical Lacanian spectator of photography. She explores the Lacanian concept of sexuation, which Mulvey *et al.* had resisted doing in their notion of the Lacanian spectator, in order to argue that 'the viewing position of Woman [...] carries radical potential in that it undermines the

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<sup>89</sup> Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory After Lacan* (Albany: SUNY, 2007), p. 15.

<sup>90</sup> Jennifer Friedlander, *Feminine Look: Sexuation, Spectatorship, Subversion* (Albany: SUNY, 2008), p. 111.

system's coherence, by inhabiting, rather than concealing, its point of lack and excess'.<sup>91</sup>

Friedlander and McGowan develop a radical politics of spectatorship by revisiting and revising the notion of the Lacanian spectator. Friedlander's extension of the Lacanian spectator to photography indicates that its application to media other than film is both viable and fruitful. I propose to take inspiration from these critics in my own investigations. By borrowing from film and photography as dramatic theorists have done in the past, my analyses of theoretical spectatorship are inflected with radical Lacanian formulations of desire and psychical structures. My analysis, following on from McGowan and Friedlander, engages the complexities of Lacanian theory in order to devise new and original formulations of radical theoretical spectatorship in relation to the theatre of the absurd.

I have outlined numerous ways in which my methodology both falls into a wide body of accepted research into theoretical spectatorship in the theatre and contributes a new and original perspective within this scholarship. My notion of the Lacanian spectator of absurd theatre takes its cue from those such as Diamond, Dolan and Deshazer who have imported the filmic gaze (of Mulvey *et al.*) into the realm of the theatre; it follows on from a two-millennia long engagement with the notion of theoretical theatrical spectatorship from Aristotle, to Augustine, Schiller, Artaud and Brecht; it takes inspiration from a recent revival of research into the political possibilities of theoretical theatrical spectatorship within critical theory as demonstrated by Rancière and Badiou; and finally, it deploys, in the vein of McGowan and Friedlander, thoroughgoing investigations into the nuances, complexities and issues of Lacanian theory in order to apprehend what this critical discourse can offer for a specifically theatrical model of spectatorship. In this way, my project has implications not only for scholarship on the theatre of the absurd but also for a body of theory within theatre studies, critical theory and recent enquiry into radical forms of Lacanian spectatorship.

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<sup>91</sup> Friedlander, p. 113.

While I have pinpointed here the advantages of a theoretical approach to spectatorship, the following will indicate that it is also vital to consult empirical critiques, as theatre spectatorship is a live and precarious act. This liveness can affect and even undermine theoretical contentions about spectatorial response. I outline my turn to empirical accounts of the theatre of the absurd in the chapters that follow. Taken together, theoretical and empirical insights offer a more comprehensive and original approach – since I effectively bridge a perennial gap between these two stances in theatre criticism – than could be achieved by using either method alone.

### **Negotiating the ‘Liveness’ of the Theatre: Empirical Insight**

Critic of performance cultures Joanne Robinson notes that ‘it is axiomatic to any definition of performance that it requires the presence of an audience: theatrical meaning is created in the interaction between performer and audience, between stage and auditorium’.<sup>92</sup> I do not claim that my theoretical analysis of spectator response provides the definitive account of a viewing experience of these plays. Indeed, since spectatorship is so elusive and particular to the individual, no type of analysis could claim, with any legitimacy, that a definitive account of the theatrical spectator is possible. However, it is important to tackle the issue of the live interaction inherent within performance as laid out by Robinson. I engage with this issue in two ways: the first way is theoretical and the second, empirical.

There is a body of theoretical scholarship on theatre’s ‘liveness’ which guides and inflects my readings of the plays. As Anne Friedberg (1995) argues, the theatre ‘still retains an aura of performance and the real’ while the ‘cinema offers a less aura-endowed, more uniformly repeated experience’, and this distinction influences the specificities of spectatorship in each medium.<sup>93</sup> The ‘aura’ of which Friedberg speaks can be likened to what performance studies and theatre studies critics name ‘presence’.<sup>94</sup> Theatre is characterised not merely by

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<sup>92</sup> Joanne Robinson, ‘Mapping performance culture: locating the spectator in theatre history’, *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 31, 3-17 (p. 3).

<sup>93</sup> Anne Friedberg, ‘Cinema and the Postmodern Condition’, in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film* (New Brunswick; New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1995), pp. 59-83 (p. 71).

<sup>94</sup> See: Noël Carroll, ‘Philosophy and Drama: Performance, Interpretation and Intentionality’, in *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance and Philosophy*, ed. by David Krasner and David Z. Saltz (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), pp. 104-21 (p. 112); Peggy

representation – that is to say, the dramatic content of the play – but also by the ‘liveness’ that renders each performance of the play *unrepeatable*. In similar terms, Josette Féral (2002), who conceptualises moments of ‘theatricality’ in everyday life, explains that a quotidian occurrence can be transfigured into something akin to theatre by the creation of an event that draws spectators. A dispute on the underground, for instance, theatricalises and ‘re-semiotiz[es]’ the space in which it occurs. Such theatricality, according to Féral, redefines space as liminal, as situated somewhere between fiction and reality.<sup>95</sup> The theatrical gaze clearly differs from that of film. The moving images on the cinema screen are confined to the past, helping to encase the spectator within a hermetically sealed space of the cinema auditorium. Theatre, on the other hand, is shot through with *presence*, as the liveness of the actor’s body contrasts itself with the representational function of theatre that references the playwright’s past writing of the theatre text. This dualistic setup subtending the spectatorial regime of the theatre informs my theorisations of the theoretical spectator throughout.

Turning to the second way in which I address the live nature of the theatrical medium in my investigations into spectatorship, a number of critics have conducted empirical research into audience response in order to account for the live nature of theatre and the concomitant unpredictability of spectator response. Although this form of enquiry is not the primary focus in my analysis, I take inspiration from their accounts. These range from: surveys conducted at the end of the theatre performance which ask the audience their demographic details and their impressions of the performance;<sup>96</sup> to studies that record the heartbeat, sweat levels, eye movement and so on to gauge the physical responses of audience members to a production;<sup>97</sup> to critics’ own impressionistic

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Phelan, ‘Theatre and its Mother: Tom Stoppard’s *Hapgood*’, in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 112-29.

<sup>95</sup> Josette Féral, ‘Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language’, *SubStance*, 31 (2002), 94-108 (p. 96). See Samuel Weber’s *Theatricality a Medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004) for a full volume exegesis on the concept of theatricality in multifarious walks of life from psychoanalysis to the military operation.

<sup>96</sup> Such as: Anne-Marie Gourdon, *Théâtre, Public, Perception* (Paris: Centre National de Recherches Scientifiques, 1982); *New Directions in Audience Research*, ed. by Willmar Sauter, *Advances in the Reception and Audience Research* 2. (Utrecht: Instituut voor Theaterwetenschap, 1988); Maria Shevtsova, *Theatre and Cultural Interaction* (Sydney: University of Sydney, 1993).

<sup>97</sup> Heribert Schälzky, *Empirisch-quantitative Methoden in der Theaterwissenschaft* (München: Munchner Beiträge zur Theaterwissenschaft, 1980); Tim Fitzpatrick, ‘Models of visual

observations and experiences of live performances and anecdotal evidence.<sup>98</sup> As Sauter notes, a significant benefit of carrying out this type of research into spectatorship is that it ‘contribute[s] considerably to the development of theatre theory [...] ask[ing] questions that theatre theory had not yet answered [and] challenging the ambitions of theorists’.<sup>99</sup>

Following Sauter, I include, at the end of each chapter, empirical analyses of more frequently performed plays of the absurd canon, to test both the viability of my conceptualisations of the Lacanian spectator of the plays of Ionesco, Arrabal and Adamov, and to answer questions that the theory fails to answer. In Chapter One, I compare audience response to Jean Genet’s *Le Balcon* to the concept of the spectatorial mirror stage developed in relation to Arrabal’s *La Tour de Babel*; in Chapter Two, audience response to Genet’s *Les Bonnes* serves to give empirical insight into the concept of misrecognition developed in relation to Ionesco’s *Tueur sans gages*; in Chapter Three, I analyse performances of two productions of *La Cantatrice chauve* and compare them to the politics of perversion theorised in the chapter in relation to the same play; in Chapter Four, my analyses of empirical responses to Beckett’s *Pas moi* and *Oh les beaux jours* bring to light the precarious nature of instigating a psychotic mode of spectatorship developed conceptually throughout the rest of the chapter in relation to Adamov’s *Off limits*; finally, in Chapter Five, I compare Genet’s *Les Nègres* to Arrabal’s *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs*.

Kenneth Krauss’s approach is particularly insightful for my own enquiry into spectatorship. He constructs a ‘rhetorical audience’ from his textual analyses of certain plays. He devises this method ‘not to restrict readers but to extend their abilities to read playscripts, to – in the academese of the late 1980s – empower them’.<sup>100</sup> However, Krauss also takes account of empirical audience response in his analyses in order to ‘test the validity’ of the concepts that he

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and auditory interaction in performance’, *Gestos*, 5 (1990), 27-40.

<sup>98</sup> Such as to be found in: Bruce McConachie, *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the theatre* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Bruce McConachie, ‘Using Cognitive Science to Understand Spatiality and Community in the Theater’, *Contemporary Theater Review*, 12 (2002), 97-114; Rachel Fensham, *To Watch Theatre: Essays on Genre and Corporeality* (Brussels: Peter Lang, 2009).

<sup>99</sup> Sauter, ‘Who Reacts When, How and Upon What’, p. 126.

<sup>100</sup> Kenneth Krauss, *Private Readings/Public Texts: Playreaders’ Constructs of Theatre Audiences* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1993), p. 128.

advances with the aid of the concept of the rhetorical audience.<sup>101</sup> Like Krauss, my theoretical accounts of spectator response permit me to formulate new ways in which viewers and readers might be empowered. This is why each chapter focuses on the import of the Lacanian spectator of the absurd play for a politics of spectatorship. However, following Krauss's cue, I do not wish in the same gesture to dismiss the precarious, frequently unpredictable effects of a live play on its audience.

I use a variety of resources in my empirical bolstering of the theoretical concepts discussed in the chapters: I consult online reviews, blogs and spectator response studies, and I also speak, in Chapter Three, as a theatregoer, commenting on two productions of Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve*. These resources allow me to reflect on the credibility of the theoretical concepts that I develop in each chapter. In the same gesture, I also provide a link between the better-known works of absurd theatre and those that have been lost to canonical definitions of Esslin's genre. Such parallels provide another way of recuperating the latter body of texts in the critical reception of absurd theatre.

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<sup>101</sup> Krauss, p. 113.



### Part III: The Chapters

Chapter One, 'The Mirror Stage and Missed Utopia: Catharsis in Fernando Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel* (1976)', argues, against the grain of past critical consensus, that Arrabal's use of catharsis may inhibit a politics of spectatorship. By re-viewing the specificity of the playwright's theatrical invocations of catharsis, I argue that the play may act as a springboard for the transformation of the theatre space into the Lacanian mirror stage. Potentially fomenting an atmosphere in which the spectator is completely subsumed under the ideologies of the stage and denied individual autonomy, this play may stymie the possibility of a politics of spectatorship. Despite the discordance that I have suggested lies at the heart of the conceptualisation of the theatre of the absurd, I demonstrate how *La Tour de Babel* offers the spectator a *unified* Cartesian version of subjectivity. I end my analysis of Arrabal's play by turning away from Lacan's monolithic pronouncements on catharsis and the mirror stage. I consider the ways in which other forms of theatrical catharsis may assume ethical proportions in the theatre, with reference to contemporary theorists Augusto Boal (1985), Hans-Thies Lehmann (1999) and Lisa Downing (2009).

The second chapter, 'Misrecognition and the Mirror Stage in Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages* (1957)', moves on to consider the divisive underside of the Lacanian mirror stage: 'misrecognition'. I argue that Ionesco's illusionistic deployment of lighting in this play may bring to the fore moments when the spectator's ego is undermined. I map Lacan's 'bouquet renversé' and 'vase renversé' experiments, which provide an analogy for misrecognition, on to the spectator's position with regard to this play. In undermining the mirror stage and creating a space for the spectator's phantasy to play itself out, Ionesco's play may acquire a political valence that Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel* perhaps lacks. However, since critics (notably Louis Althusser and Slavoj Žižek) have connected phantasy and misrecognition to the interpellation of individuals as subjects of ideology, *Tueur sans gages* may be deemed to be politically ambivalent. I end my analysis of Ionesco's play by exploring the possibilities of a politics of phantasy and misrecognition by turning to queer theorist Tim Dean in addition to two recent commentators upon the mirror stage in performance: German studies

scholar Elizabeth Wright (1989) and performance studies critic Rebecca Schneider (1997).

The third chapter, 'Comedy in Unexpected Places: Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* (1950) and the Perverse Mode of Spectatorship', provides a critical commentary of Ionesco's most commercially successful play. I argue that the play, which has functioned as a comedy for audiences since the time of its first stagings, conjures up a 'perverse mode of spectatorship'. This theory allows me to do two things: firstly, by concentrating on Lacan's theory of perversion, it allows me to explain the play's commodification as a 'false comedy' potentially divested of politics at the Huchette theatre in Paris where the play has been staged since 1957; and, secondly, with reference to Joel Whitebook (1995), Tim Dean (2000) and Jonathan Dollimore (1991) who conceptualise a recalcitrant edge to perversion, it enables me to identify the play's future transformative potential as a 'true comedy'.

Chapter Four, '*Dissensus* and Dialectics in Arthur Adamov's *Off limits* (1969): The Psychotic Mode of Spectatorship', conceptualises a politics of psychosis in the spectatorship of absurd theatre. Chapter Five, 'A Feminist Spectator of the Theatre of the Absurd? The Public and the Private in Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs* (1969)', broaches the feminist possibilities within the structure of spectatorship evoked by a male-dominated, often explicitly misogynistic absurd aesthetic. Owing to the more speculative and perhaps counterintuitive approach of these final two chapters, they have required greater theoretical disquisition and are extended in length. Regarding the fourth chapter, psychosis, according to Lacan, occurs when the subject experiences a deep mistrust of the linguistic Other, a position that becomes politically suggestive when mapped on to the phenomenon of theatre spectatorship. While not wishing to draw too strong a link between psychotic pathology in the clinic and an analogous functioning of the unconscious in theatre spectatorship, I argue that the 'psychotic mode of spectatorship' potentially fostered by the senseless plot of *Off limits* aligns itself with a democratic politics of *dissensus* as defined by Jacques Rancière (2008). This helps to re-politicise a play that was condemned by Brechtian zealots at the time of its publication.

The fifth and final chapter conceptualises an unconscious mode of feminist spectatorship with regard to a body of theatre that, as Erich Segal (2001) describes, blurs ‘the line between genders’.<sup>102</sup> In *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs* (1969), spectators sit alone and are invited to interact with and break free of the guidance of the stage. It is my contention that these modifications to conventional forms of theatre spectatorship may rehearse what Lacan called a feminine ‘*jouissance* beyond the phallus’ in subjectivity. In a bid to interrogate the masculinism of Lacan’s theory at the same time as discussing the feminist possibilities potentiated by this modality of *jouissance* in spectatorship, I take contemporary feminist theorists such as Joan Copjec, Luce Irigaray, Parveen Adams and Alenka Zupančič. While this form of feminist politics with regard to absurd theatre could only ever be defined in deeply ambivalent terms, my analysis demonstrates how a masculinist play such as Arrabal’s can be recuperated by feminist theory.

Taken together, the five chapters consider, to differing degrees, the discordant spectatorial positions that are evoked primarily by the absurd theatre of Arrabal, Ionesco and Adamov, and secondarily by the theatre of Beckett and Genet. In this way, I hope to have recuperated that which is really ‘absurd’ about this body of theatre, that which is dissonant and subversive in the contemporary age.

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<sup>102</sup> Erich Segal, *The Death of Comedy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 425.

## Chapter 1

### **The Mirror Stage and Missed Utopia: Catharsis in Fernando Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel* (1976)**

Qu'ai-je essayé de faire comprendre avec le stade du miroir? Que ce qu'il y a en l'homme de dénoué, de morcelé, d'anarchique, établit son rapport à ses perceptions sur le plan d'une tension tout à fait originale. C'est l'image de son corps qui est le principe de toute unité qu'il perçoit dans les objets. Or, de cette image même, il ne perçoit l'unité qu'au-dehors, et d'une façon anticipée. Du fait de cette relation double qu'il a avec lui-même, c'est toujours autour de l'ombre errante de son propre moi que se structureront tous les objets de son inonde [sic].<sup>103</sup>

As indicated in the Introduction, the 'mirror stage' is the founding moment of subjectivity for Lacan; it allowed him to explain that perception, far from being a transparent process, is heavily imbued with a sense of the self. Perception becomes 'proprioception'. The moment in which the child recognises its mirror image as such is also the moment in which it relates to the outside world and thereby makes its first forays into subjectivity. The mirror stage is spatial as well as temporal, occurring throughout psychical life. Such moments reveal the anarchy and precariousness of subject formation. The mirror stage instigates and re-stages the birth and re-birth of the ego, the mediating force between the subject and the outside world. However, the ego develops as a narcissistic defence mechanism, designed to buttress a sense of identity against the impending threat of invasive forces that would destroy the subject's belief in its autonomy. The Lacanian mirror stage tells us that sense experiences, connecting us as embodied beings to the outside world, are coloured by the narcissism of the ego.

Over the course of the next two chapters, I argue that the specular shapes the spectatorial (that is, the mirror stage potentially inflects the spectator's way of viewing the plays in question). The double-edged nature of the Lacanian mirror stage may play itself out in the theatre of the absurd. I read two plays,

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<sup>103</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire II: Le moi* (unpublished seminar, 1954-55), p. 198.

Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel* and Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages*, alongside Lacan's theory of the specular constitution of the subject. I argue that the textual logic of *La Tour de Babel* hypothetically strikes up a relationship with the spectator based on fulfilling synthesis, replicating the infant's feelings of plenitude when it apprehends its whole body image. By contrast, I argue that the textual logic of *Tueur sans gages* hypothetically disrupts specular synthesis. 'Misrecognition', as the moment in which narcissism flounders, is a concept that I broach in the second chapter with regard to the spectator's response.

I conclude this chapter with a reading of empirical response to performances of Jean Genet's *Le Balcon*, as this text's play of fantasy, mirrors and revolutionary politics both bears a resemblance to and departs from the dramatic action of *La Tour de Babel*. The very different effect on spectatorship borne out by this aesthetic divergence will be used to bolster my theoretical argument that Arrabal's play is potentially de-politicising.

### **A Politics of Catharsis and *La Tour de Babel***

Arrabal published *La Tour de Babel* in 1976. His play was a theatrical remaking of the Biblical myth of the Tower of Babel, in which a united people with one common language strive to construct a tower that would mark the pinnacle of humanitarian solidarity. As the myth goes, the tower never reaches completion, as humanity proves too divided. As punishment, God dispersed people throughout the world and tore apart the common tongue into various languages, rendering communication between different communities impossible. Arrabal reverses the Biblical myth in his theatrical adaptation; the play starts with a cast of characters who wish to see one another's demise and ends with the construction of Babel. The playwright's intention was to demonstrate that the world, in 1976, could 'trouver un pur' (one pure being). *La Tour de Babel*, according to the playwright, 'nous dit qu'un seul pur peut purifier le monde'.<sup>104</sup> It could reach a utopian state of being. Society, after a century of totalitarianism and wars, was perfectible. The writing of the play is contemporaneous with the death of General Franco and the collapse of the Spanish dictatorship that had

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<sup>104</sup> Arrabal interviewed by Luc Honorez, 'Arrabal va créer « La Tour de Babel » au Poche...et ses fleurs n'ont plus des menottes', *Le Soir*, 3 November 1976.

driven Arrabal into exile. The play reflects the optimism of these years for the playwright.

*La Tour de Babel* depicts the life of Latidia, who is the Duchess of the fictitious Teran. Whilst Arrabal is clear that this piece should be strictly set ‘de nos jours’, the play charts the literary, historical and cultural trajectory of Spain from the Middle Ages to the 1970s. Latidia, as a result of bankruptcy, is forced out of her castle by the usurpers the Count and Countess of Ecija. The Duchess obstinately refuses to leave her domain, putting herself in the position of martyr. In her revolutionary fervour, Latidia suffers from delusions, as she proceeds to convert the characters around her into many of the great Hispanic maverick figures of history, including the revolutionaries Che Guevara (1928-1967) and Emiliano Zapata (1879-1919). Latidia’s fantasising reaches its peak when she believes that the vagabonds who wander in from outside of the castle are the Lothario and libertine Don Juan, the Spanish nobleman El Cid (c. 1040-1099) and Che Guevara. The audience cannot help but laugh as she misunderstands the hitman, who had been hired to shoot her, when he declares that he arrived in his Jaguar. She declaims: ‘toi, tu dis que tu es arrivé sur un jaguar, quelle belle image guerrière, Zapata’.<sup>105</sup> The reference to the popular brand of car signals the rapid modernisation taking place in the 1970s when the play was written. Latidia naively assumes the jaguar to be an animal. This sharply distinguishes her world – populated by legendary, literary and revolutionary figures and more akin to a fairytale – from the rest of the characters’ modernised world.

The play continues for some time in this vein, playing on the sharp division between the metaphorically and literally blind Latidia, and all of those around her. The actions of these characters when Latidia is not present on the stage stand in marked contrast to their actions when she is in the scene. For instance, Mareda, Latidia’s polite and submissive servant, turns into a dominatrix when Latidia is absent from the scene; she whips the Marquis, the latter being the agent for the Count and Countess. Her interactions with the Marquis reveal not only Arrabal’s tendency towards a sexually explicit and transgressive theatre

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<sup>105</sup> Fernando Arrabal, *Théâtre XI: La Tour de Babel* (Paris: Bourgois, 1976), p. 31. Subsequent references to *La Tour de Babel*, unless otherwise stated, will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.

aesthetic; they also expose the ironic critique of Catholicism within the playwright's theatre:

MAREDA : Salaud, vieux beau.

MARQUIS : Une femme de chambre... et c'est ainsi que tu traites la pauvre petite orpheline d'un marquis ?

MAREDA : Finissons-en au plus vite. Lève tes jupes que je te donne une bonne frottée. (*Elle brandit un fouet.*)

MARQUIS : Pas de hâte, je suis un être si tendre et si innocent.

MAREDA : Je veux aller me coucher.

MARQUIS : Non, Mareda ; tu m'apprends le catéchisme de Père Riquelme et tu ne me battras que si je ne sais pas les réponses par cœur.<sup>106</sup>

Latidia, blissfully unaware of this interaction between Mareda and the Marquis, also remains ignorant of: the drunken and bawdy revelry of the three vagabonds that she had invited in to protect her castle against a siege ('aujourd'hui, buvons, baisons et demain nous jeûnerons');<sup>107</sup> the Count's and Countess's designs to kill her despite her enlisting of these characters in her revolutionary game (LA COMPTESSE [...] : Jusqu'à quand allez-vous laisser cette folle se promener dans notre château [...] ?');<sup>108</sup> and the pestilential odour that infiltrates the castle when she demands that the other characters exhume the corpses of her forefathers from the castle's crypt so that they may figure as part of the revolution that she wishes to stage (*'l'odeur pestilentielle les fait vomir. Latidia, absente, très digne, ne perçoit pas ces détails quotidiens dans l'exaltation et la grandeur du moment'*).<sup>109</sup>

Throughout the main body of the play, termites eat away gradually at Latidia's much prized castle. This subplot comes to a head in the end scene, as these creatures succeed in making the structure collapse. At this point, a new 'Tower of Babel' is hastily constructed in its wake. Simultaneously, the Martian donkey with whom Latidia had become obsessed in previous scenes

<sup>106</sup> Fernando Arrabal, *La Tour de Babel, La Guerre de mille ans, Sur le fil ou le balade du train fantôme, Jeunes barbares d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Bourgois, 1979), pp. 57-58.

<sup>107</sup> *La Tour de Babel* (1979), p. 52.

<sup>108</sup> *La Tour de Babel* (1979), p. 42.

<sup>109</sup> *La Tour de Babel* (1979), p. 40.

transmogrifies into a sort of 'Prince Charming'. This bizarre final scene thus unites the biblical and the fantastical.

Despite her ignorance and the mocking tone in which she is initially depicted, Latidia, for Arrabal, represented the sole revolutionary character in this play:

*La Tour de Babel* montre comment une duchesse (aveugle comme la foi) se sert de son château comme d'un rempart spirituel pour, grâce à son quichottisme et aux lumières spirituelles qui la guident, élever les êtres les plus dépravés jusqu'aux âmes. Divinement anarchiste...HOMBRE !<sup>110</sup>

The story of Don Quijote by Miguel de Cervantes, frequently argued to be Spain's greatest literary work, is played with for a political end in Arrabal's play.

Latidia's idiocy, recalling that of Don Quijote, becomes the blind faith that drives the utopian construction of Babel at the end of the play. Latidia's desire is to defend her castle against the tyrannical forces of the Count and Countess that threaten her and to convert her domain into 'une plate-forme pour l'opprimé, un lieu inexpugnable en ces temps de persécution'.<sup>111</sup> She enlists the anarchist forerunners of history (such as Zapata, Che Guevara, and so on) to help her. Arrabal, taking matters into his own hands, reverses the culturally ensconced myth of Babel – which plays on society's division – and the story of Don Quijote, which emphasises the protagonist's stupidity and idiocy in thinking himself a hero and a warrior.

The fact that Arrabal intended Latidia as an authentic revolutionary figure in this play, in contrast to Don Quijote, suggests that the playwright did not ultimately wish for her actions to be interpreted in an ironic light by spectators. As my description thus far has shown, the irony of Latidia's disjunction with her surrounding characters abounds in this play. However, this is cancelled out by the progressive portrayal of the protagonist's dream as the ideal form of revolutionary politics. The playwright's ironic critique of the Catholic Church in the end scene, it will be argued, is overshadowed by the depiction of Latidia's

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<sup>110</sup> Fernando Arrabal, 'Artifice devant *La Tour de Babel*', *Libération*, 27 December 1979.

<sup>111</sup> *La Tour de Babel* (1979), p. 46.



Babel as this ideal. Arrabal directs the spectator to invest, with full conviction, in Latidia and her utopia.

Indeed, scholarly criticism of the play indicates that the spectator is progressively woven into this revolutionary narrative, into believing in it and perhaps even unconsciously participating in it, by means of Arrabal's use of catharsis. For Peter Podol, the strength of the play lay in its capacity for moral didacticism via spectatorial catharsis. The stage reflects the chequered nature of Spanish history, from the Spanish Inquisition to Franco's dictatorship. The transformative politics on the stage – through Latidia's obstinate dedication to revolution and the trajectory from depravity to Babel – radicalises the play's spectators according to this critic:

In *The Tower of Babel*, Arrabal takes the spectator on an artistic journey through the depths of Spanish hypocrisy and internal strife to effect a catharsis making the drama's conclusion artistically and thematically justifiable. [...] Arrabal's dramatic production is characterized by a new didactic thrust, a concern for socio-political ills throughout the world, but especially in Spain and a search for new techniques for making a performance of one of his dramas a genuinely visceral experience.<sup>112</sup>

*La Tour de Babel* aims for a 'visceral' connection with the audience through catharsis. This visceral-cathartic didacticism may become political through the sublime transcendence that the spectator achieves in his or her liberation from past atrocities ('the resolution of destructive forces which leads to fulfilment through transcendence').<sup>113</sup>

However, the problem with this may be that the playwright transforms his spectators' viewpoint from one of ironic disdain for the protagonist to full belief in her dream. Latidia's vision of the world may be *anarchistic*, as Arrabal points out, but it can also be argued that it is profoundly *narcissistic* (which my textual analysis will demonstrate). Following Podol's view of the visceral charm of the play, the spectator is potentially assimilated into this narcissistic

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<sup>112</sup> Peter L. Podol, *Fernando Arrabal*, Twayne World Author Series, 499, (Boston: Twayne, 1978), p. 122.

<sup>113</sup> Podol, p. 120.

viewpoint. In Greek mythology, Narcissus became so enveloped in and spellbound by the sight of his mirror image that he drowned in the water that reflected it. An analogous logic subtending the spectator's response to *La Tour de Babel* hardly connotes the political valence hinted at by Podol in his observation that the play works to forge the spectator's visceral bond with its 'concern for socio-political ills'. The critic's view on a spectatorial politics of catharsis may be put into contention by the narcissism that potentially sutures the spectator to the stage. The didacticism of the play, pointed out by this critic, becomes totalising in this logic.

In the following, I turn to critical commentary on performances of *La Tour de Babel* to demonstrate how this spectator response of being held spellbound may be borne out in empirical evidence. These accounts will be used as a point of departure for my theoretical hypothesis that a mirror stage may be conjured up for the spectator.

### **Performances of *La Tour de Babel***

*La Tour de Babel* was first staged in 1976 at the Théâtre de Poche in Brussels. Arrabal himself directed the production. Arts reviewer Luc Honorez enumerated the play's lyricism, its recourse to fantasy and its cinematic qualities as its most entertaining features. This critic's expressive tone and hyperbolic language suggests a high degree of excitement stirred up by the staging of this play:

Et le lyrisme ! Comme un navire qui cède enfin sans retenue au courant, Arrabal gonfla avec volupté les voiles de son lyrisme personnel. Il plonge et replonge dans le bric-à-brac de ses fantasmes. [...] Passé par la catalyse de la mise en scène cinématographique, Arrabal donne à son texte et à sa réalisation une clarté issue de théâtre [...] des moments grandiloquents [...], des citations visuelles [...], des citations verbales [...], des projections d'images [...], etc. [...] Le message d'Arrabal passe directement au cœur sans nécessairement l'intermédiaire de la tête.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Luc Honorez, 'La Tour de Babel au Poche : Arrabal parle à tous', *Le Soir*, 23 November 1976.

This critic's comments point towards the play's visually seductive aesthetic. The onstage visual delights, as Honorez's comments would suggest, inhibit the spectator's capacity for detached critical judgement ('directement au cœur sans nécessairement l'intermédiaire de la tête'). This is perhaps why the critic goes on to state that: '*La Tour de Babel* est la pièce qui divisera le plus les critiques. *La Tour de Babel* est sa pièce qui plaira le plus au public'.

Honorez's remarks on the play's popularity with the general public proved to be prescient, as the play was reprised three years later in 1979 by the Théâtre de l'Odéon which is associated with the prestigious Comédie-Française in Paris. Directed by Argentine director Jorge Lavelli (1932-), the production was perceived by many critics as the culmination of the exiled playwright's career in France, as he followed in the footsteps of French classicists such as Molière, Racine and Corneille at the Comédie-Française.<sup>115</sup>

However, the 1979 production exacerbated the divergence in reaction pointed out by Honorez three years earlier. Certain critics considered that this *mise en scène* marked the end of the playwright's tendency towards radical, boundary-defying theatre. Susan Heller Anderson notes that the play caused consternation even for certain members of the general (non-critics') audience. Ardent supporters of a revolutionary, avant-garde theatre were scandalised by the 1979 performance:

Many of the members of the audience were visibly outraged. [...] The overall reaction was puzzlement. The twentieth-century, avant-garde Mr. Arrabal at the Comédie-Française?<sup>116</sup>

Gérard Mannoni declared, in a disbelieving tone, that the production of *La Tour de Babel* by one of the 'auteurs les plus contestés' at the Odéon constituted an 'événement'.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> See: Thomas Quinn Curtiss, 'Arrabal's 'Babel': The Success of Excess', *International Herald Tribune*, 27 December 1979, p. 4.

<sup>116</sup> Susan Heller Anderson, 'Comédie-Française Rustling Dusty Bustle', *The New York Times*, 26 December 1979.

<sup>117</sup> Gérard Mannoni, '*La Tour de Babel* d'Arrabal à l'Odéon: Panique chez Molière', *Le Quotidien de Paris*, 11 December 1979.

Meanwhile, Honorez's comments that *La Tour de Babel* would, on the whole, please the general public proved true three years on. His observations in 1976 on the *mise en scène* of the play suggest an aesthetically dazzling piece that would charm the public. Three years later, Pierre Marcabru wrote that the production contained within it an enchanting 'somptuosité' that elicits from its audiences 'des "oh" et des "ah"'. This suggests a passivity on the part of spectators not unlike, we might argue, the process of being under hypnosis: 'c'est avant tout une mise en scène qu'on ira saluer. Tout est ici pour l'œil'.<sup>118</sup>

From these commentaries, it is possible to state that the politics of spectatorial catharsis might have dissolved into a form of audience hypnosis. Although some critics still believed that *La Tour de Babel* retained the subversive edge that characterises much of Arrabal's œuvre ('ce cérémonial somptueux et insolent est déconcertant pour les habitudes d'un public cartésien'), evidence of audiences' visual seduction and enchantment by the piece suggests that the more challenging, politicised aspects of Arrabal's theatre may have been stymied in the viewing process.<sup>119</sup>

The empirical spectator's seduction by the play may be conceptually extracted from close textual analysis of *La Tour de Babel*. A mirror stage, I argue in the following, may be created for the spectator. This would be antithetical to a postmodern politics of spectatorship that constitutes the focus of this thesis. As Christopher Nash observes, 'for some four decades coinciding remarkably with the dates normally given for the establishment of postmodernism, numerous psychologists (along with many social historians and journalists) have been writing that 'narcissism' is the new 'mental malaise' of our time'.<sup>120</sup> Nash describes narcissism as one of the culturally ingrained attitudes of the current age of postmodern individualism. Society's over-investment in the primacy of the Self is, as Nash's comment that narcissism constitutes a 'mental malaise' indicates, potentially de-politicising. It is possible to surmise that the mirror stage conjured up by *La Tour de Babel* would be highly resonant, but apolitical,

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<sup>118</sup> Pierre Marcabru, 'La tour de Babel', *Le Point*, 31 December 1979.

<sup>119</sup> Gérard Loyez, 'La Tour de Babel : Un délire baroque aux couleurs de sabbat', *France Catholique*, 1 February 1980.

<sup>120</sup> Christopher Nash, *The Unravelling of the Postmodern Mind* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 56. See, for instance: Christopher Lasch, *Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979).

for the present-day spectator as a result. At the end of my analysis, I turn to Freud's observations on the analysand's catharsis to support this contention. I argue that a form of catharsis shot through with narcissistic idealisation is counterproductive to a spectatorial politics.

### **The Mirror Stage Confined to the Stage**

Latidia's principal character trait is her narcissism. The spectator of *La Tour de Babel* learns early on that she is physically blind. In addition, the protagonist is figuratively blind. She betrays an incapacity for perspicacious observation of her surroundings and of the other characters of the play, failing to understand that the other *dramatis personae* are not the famous revolutionaries that she wants them to be. Rather, they are playing these parts in order to keep her amused. Latidia's narrow narcissistic viewpoint shapes her apprehension of the world, recalling, it might be argued, the proprioception of the subject in the mirror stage.

Latidia makes an effort to render her surrounding world the mirror image of herself, albeit not very successfully. Near the beginning of *La Tour de Babel*, she asks her maid to confirm her beauty, in a manner that is redolent of the queen from the fairytale *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*:

LATIDIA : Dites-moi que je suis jolie (*avec une grande impatience*)

MAREDA, *comme si elle récitait une leçon par cœur* – Vous êtes jolie !

LATIDIA : Très jolie !

MAREDA, *d'un air d'ennui* : « Très jolie »

LATIDIA : Vous êtes à mon service, ne l'oubliez pas. (p. 18)

This scene, more or less explicitly, recalls Lacan's *stade du miroir*. Latidia, like the Lacanian subject entering into his or her relationship with external entities, demands that Mareda confirm her idealised image of her beauty and perfection. Moments that recall the mirror stage, according to Lacan, include: 'toute la gamme des réactions de prestance et de parade [...] [l']esclave identifié au

despote, [l']acteur au spectateur, [le] séduit au séducteur'.<sup>121</sup> Spectators' accounts of *La Tour de Babel* may signal the spectator's position of '[le] séduit au séducteur', and in due course, it will be revealed how the mirror stage links the 'acteur au spectateur' in this play. Focusing on the operations of the stage for now, the relationship that Latidia forges with Mareda is clearly reminiscent of '[l]'esclave identifié au despote', a Hegelian Master-slave dialectic. As Hegel laid out in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, an individual's consciousness believes that it exists in and for itself; the presence of other individuals threatens to contradict this. A confrontation between two individuals' consciousnesses initiates a power struggle. A resultant 'master-slave dialectic' ensues. The Master demands recognition from the slave, not unlike that which Latidia solicits from her servant Mareda in this passage. Like the slave, Mareda is pivotal to Latidia's self-confirmation of autonomy and authority. However, by imploring the slave to attest to the master's ontological consistency, the latter ends up undermining the very notion of his or her sovereignty. He or she *needs* the slave. The two subjectivities are mutually constitutive in this sense.<sup>122</sup> The Duchess requires her maid to parrot her own thoughts and professions of self-love, something which is emphasised by Latidia's statement that Mareda is her property. The only element missing from this scene is the mirror of *Snow White*, but Latidia clearly asks Mareda to stand in for the mirror.

The play may further invoke the mirror stage through the fairytale-like tone of the scene. Like the Master-slave dialectic, children's stories constitute a tool by which the mirror stage confirms the subject's illusions of self-consistency. Lacan describes the infant when it first encounters other subjects. He lists the 'conte de fées' as one of the means by which the infant gains 'ce sentiment de l'autre'. In addition to the fairytale, myths, legends and stories all enable the infant to experience a 'façon de se laisser littéralement envahir' by the adult world.<sup>123</sup> The adult reads fairytales to the infant. Fairytales constitute

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<sup>121</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'L'Aggressivité en psychanalyse', in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 101-24 (p. 113).

<sup>122</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, 'Independence and Dependence of Self-consciousness: Lordship and Bondage', in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A. V. Miller (New Delhi: Jainendra Press, 1998), pp. 111-18.

<sup>123</sup> Lacan, *Séminaire I: Écrits Techniques* (unpublished seminar, 1953-54), p. 93.

instructive narratives that usher the child into the adult world.<sup>124</sup> The scene in *La Tour de Babel* may resonate with the Lacanian mirror stage, not only because of the specular dynamic struck up by Latidia and Mareda's discourse but also because of Arrabal's hinting at the fairytale *Snow White*.

Moreover, the particularities of the *mise en scène* of *La Tour de Babel* at the Odéon in 1979 may be argued to corroborate my theoretical uncovering of the mirror stage in the text. Director Jorge Lavelli and scenographer Max Bignens aimed to stress the fantastical dimension of the play. According to Lavelli:

Avec mon décorateur Max Bignens, nous avons décidé de présenter une aire de jeu qui permet toutes les fantaisies. Le rideau se lèvera sur un palais de cristal à deux étages, uniquement meublé des chaises. Des miroirs. Lieu de synthèse, lieu de rêve. La Tour de Babel ? Figurée par une colonne de lumière.<sup>125</sup>

The brilliance of the crystal and the tower may resonate with the uplifting nature of the mirror stage. As Lacan puts it, the mirror stage bears a 'caractère exaltant et manifestement stimulant, transportant'.<sup>126</sup> The illusion of bodily wholeness exalts the infant. Lavelli's mirrors may create a similarly uplifting illusion of grandiosity, this time of Latidia's revolution, for the spectator. The stage, as a 'lieu de synthèse', may chime with Lacan's description of the mirror stage as 'les fonctions de synthèse du moi', the synthesising operations by which the subject's ego imposes itself onto the outside world.<sup>127</sup>

In short, it may be argued that the spectator is granted a window onto the mirror stage through Latidia's discourse, the fairytale tone and the *mise en scène*. While there is no direct commingling of the spectator's space and the stage (which I will argue to be the case later on), he or she is encouraged to view Latidia's narcissism ironically. This becomes particularly clear from Mareda's indifference to her mistress's instructions ('*d'un air d'ennui*') in the scene above.

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<sup>124</sup> Karen Coats argues the parallels between the fairytale and the Lacanian mirror stage. Karen Coats, *Looking Glasses and Neverlands: Lacan, Desire and Subjectivity in Children's Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press: 2004), p. 6.

<sup>125</sup> Marion Thébaud, 'Arrabal à la Comédie Française : un cocktail au vitriol', *Le Figaro*, 5 December 1979.

<sup>126</sup> Lacan, *SI*, p. 279.

<sup>127</sup> *SI*, p. 185.

However, whilst I pointed out a number of ways in which her surrounding characters were quietly mocking Latidia, they all eventually become convinced of the revolutionary roles that she has selected for them. The hitman hired by the Count and Countess starts to question his bosses and sides with Latidia's dreams of equality ('Une question, à qui reviendra le château si nous vous aidons ?').<sup>128</sup> The three vagabonds invited in from the outside, while initially mocking Latidia for her naivety, equally start to become convinced of the revolutionary role assigned to them. La Pocharde states that: 'cette maison me plaît de plus en plus. Je me sens devenir Don Juan de jour en jour'.<sup>129</sup> The Cul-de-Jatte declares: '(avec gravité [...]) Je suis le Cid ! Le Cid Campeador'.<sup>130</sup> The Borgne cries out: 'Ici, l'unique menace vient de l'extérieur, écoutez-moi, je suis le Commandant Che Guevara'.<sup>131</sup> Moments later, all of the characters unite against the outside world in aid of Latidia's narcissistic dream:

*Tous les occupants du château vocifèrent comme un seul homme « le château est à nous ». Ils saisissent leurs armes, apparaissent aux fenêtres, sur les créneaux, se mettent des vêtements rappelant encore plus le personnage que Latidia leur a attribué et, d'un air très belliqueux, ils poussent des cris hostiles aux gens de l'extérieur.*<sup>132</sup>

These characters start to fulfil Latidia's fantasy of revolution. They submit themselves completely to her wishes, reflecting Arrabal's efforts to convey Latidia's dreams of revolution with full, non-ironic conviction. It may also be argued that, in this move, the mirror stage – that I had argued was conjured up by Latidia's behaviour – gradually succeeds in drawing the other characters into the protagonist's narcissistic world. These actions may figure as part of the gradual expansion of this unconscious specular logic within the space of the theatre auditorium. These actions constitute a precursor to the potential encroachment of Latidia's mirror stage onto the space of the spectator, which I shall discuss in the following.

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<sup>128</sup> *La Tour de Babel*, (1979), p. 55.

<sup>129</sup> *La Tour de Babel*, (1979), p. 78.

<sup>130</sup> *La Tour de Babel* (1979), p. 78.

<sup>131</sup> *La Tour de Babel* (1979), p. 79.

<sup>132</sup> *La Tour de Babel* (1979), p. 79.



### The Spectator's Mirror Stage

At the same time as the characters fall prey to Latidia's revolutionary dream, the mirror stage breaks out, it may be posited, from the parameters of the stage. The spectator's critical remove from Latidia and the action of the stage may be gradually eroded throughout the course of the play by the disintegration of the theatrical 'fourth wall' (the imaginary barrier between the stage and the spectator). Taking inspiration from the characters who become part of Latidia's dream, the audience may be encouraged in their own submission to the protagonist's vision. This would theoretically account for Honorez's comments (cited above) on the lack of spectatorial critical remove from the stage: 'le message d'Arrabal passe directement au cœur sans nécessairement l'intermédiaire de la tête'.<sup>133</sup>

Arrabal's use of lighting, sound, gestures and space may all theoretically result in the spectator's envelopment in Latidia's narcissistic world and the disintegration of the fourth wall. Whilst initially the spectator may laugh at Latidia's musings, the first moment in which such envelopment occurs is at the end of the second scene. Suddenly, Latidia is able to see. Momentarily, she is able to glimpse the words 'sérénité' and 'amour' in the eyes of her beloved ass. She promptly returns to her state of blindness. Previously, Arrabal urged the spectator to laugh at Latidia's narcissism; Mareda's 'air ennuyé' of the previous scene encourages the spectator to dismiss Latidia as vain. But, in this scene, the spectator cannot, it might be hypothesised, deride Latidia's behaviour, because he or she is also plunged into her state of blindness by the complete darkness that puts an end to the scene:

LATIDIA : Dans l'obscurité de ma cécité, je ne vois que les yeux de l'âne. Ils sont immobiles et me regardent, et je les regarde aussi. Soudain dans l'un d'eux, je vois écrit le mot « sérénité » et dans l'autre le mot « amour ». Mais bien vite, l'âne ferme les paupières et je ne vois plus...que l'obscurité.

*A ce moment précis : obscurité totale. (p. 30)*

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<sup>133</sup> Honorez, 'La Tour de Babel au Poche'.

Through the sudden darkness in the auditorium, the spectator may be co-opted into experiencing Latidia's blindness albeit fleetingly.

The spectator is equally privy to experiencing Latidia's selective hearing – she hears what she wants to from the other characters – as a result of the use of sound in this play. At the end of a number of scenes, the sound of the termites devouring the castle is deafening. Spectators, for instance, are subjected to a '*bruit assourdissant des termites rongéant une poutre : celle-ci tombe avec fracas* (p. 50)'. Equally, they cannot smell, just as Latidia cannot, the pungent odour of rotting corpses as the characters exhume them from the crypt, whether this was due to Arrabal's concern with the practical limitations of creating this sense experience or a deliberate holding back on his part to conjure it up (as will be shown in Chapter Five, the playwright instructed producers to fill the auditorium with smells in other, earlier plays that he wrote).

As the castle disappears bit by bit (to be replaced by Babel), viewers may be progressively included in the space of the dramatic characters by means of a destroyed fourth wall. As stage manager Larry Fazio notes, 'actors break the illusion of the fourth wall when they look at people in the audience, acknowledging their presence, or speak directly to them'.<sup>134</sup> We have a moment of this towards the end of the play, when the one-eyed vagabond who had wandered in from the street directly addresses the audience as part of the dramatic action. He attempts to auction off the castle and its contents (including its inhabitants) and makes the spectator part of the crowd of auction-goers:

*Le Borgne, avec des gestes de commissaire-priseur, dirige la vente aux enchères publiques. Il se trouve dans une tour du château et s'adresse aux acheteurs et aux curieux du dehors (censés être assemblés dans la salle où sont assis les spectateurs).*<sup>135</sup>

This scene refers, with a high degree of irony, to the spreading grip of mass-market capitalism which threatened to envelop Spain following Franco's death in the 1970s ('que personne ne l'ignore : tout sera vendu au plus offrant, nous

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<sup>134</sup> Larry Fazio, *Stage Manager: The Professional Experience* (Woburn: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2000), p. 297.

<sup>135</sup> *La Tour de Babel* (1979), p. 70.

sommes en Espagne'; 'Nous avons un tel choix de personnages à vous proposer ! Un comte pédéraste, une pocharde vagabonde, un gangster tatoué à Tanger, une femme de chambre capricieuse et terrifiante. Tout est à vous !').<sup>136</sup> However, this irony may be counteracted immediately following this scene as the tone of the play changes abruptly to prioritise Latidia's utopian dream as a real possibility. In the next scene, a distant voice that is exterior to the space of the auditorium ('voix de l'extérieur, *haut-parleur*') informs the characters of the imminent collapse of the castle and orders evacuation:

Nous avons des techniciens américains qui nous aideront grâce à leurs machines des plus perfectionnées. Nous éviterons l'écroulement. Je répète, première chose à faire : sortez immédiatement.<sup>137</sup>

The voice represents the threat of market capitalism as it reveals plans for a Hilton hotel to be built on the plot of land of the collapsed castle ('la chaîne Hilton veut construire un magnifique motel cinq étoiles').<sup>138</sup>

The spectator, already theoretically invited into the space of the stage by virtue of the auction scene, may find him or herself prioritising belief in Latidia's ideal. He or she may experience the voice-over as exterior to the space of the auditorium (recalling that it is 'voix de l'extérieur'), as a threat to the theatrical space. This may be emphasised by the onstage promotion of Spanish national ideals that rebuff this threat (LA POCHARDE : 'L'Espagne aux Espagnols. COMTE ET COMPTESSSE : La Patrie ou la mort !); and by the characters who are transformed, in front of the viewers' eyes, into the very revolutionary figures of Latidia's vision that they had only loosely and mockingly represented before:<sup>139</sup>

*Soudain, sous un océan de décombres, surgissent les huit personnages. Ils sont tous couverts de la tête aux pieds d'une poussière blanche médiévale. On dirait qu'ils sortent d'un cratère millénaire [r]empli de poussière d'ossements. Mais chacun d'eux à présent incarne réellement le personnage que Latidia lui a assigné.*

<sup>136</sup> *La Tour de Babel* (1979), p. 71, p. 73.

<sup>137</sup> *La Tour de Babel* (1979), p. 79.

<sup>138</sup> *La Tour de Babel* (1979), p. 83.

<sup>139</sup> *La Tour de Babel* (1979), p. 79.

*Entre Latidia : très blanche, éthérée.*

*Tous l'entourent, solennels. (p. 72)*

As I mentioned at the start of the chapter, Arrabal wrote *La Tour de Babel* with a sense that the course of history could be changed. This scene constitutes a direct intervention by the playwright to create this sense that 'reality' can be modified. The transformation of the dramatic characters holds, it is clear, political currency as they '*incarne[nt] réellement*' their revolutionary and politicised counterparts and they reject the voice of American capitalism.<sup>140</sup> However, the playwright risks undermining his political intention by transporting the spectator to the time and space of Latidia's dreams, which are, it may be argued, narcissistic in their constitution. He may direct spectators to believe in Latidia's revolution by the characters' transformations into the anarchistic figures of history that they only ironically represented before.

While the previous space of the castle may have invited the spectator's critical distance (recalling the mirror scene between Latidia and Mareda), its progressive disintegration (as the termites eat away at it) implies an increased degree of unification between the stage and the spectator, from indirectly involving the audience in the auction scene to the pernicious, exteriorised voice of the loudspeaker that threatens the entirety of the auditorium. By the time that the Tower of Babel is constructed, spectators may be made to feel part of the stage space. They view the construction of the new Tower of Babel without a curtain-break:

*Tous se mettent à l'ouvrage.*

*Rapidement sous le regard du spectateur, le château devient une véritable Tour de Babel fait de pan de murs crénelés du Moyen Age, de ferrailles de voitures calcinées, de superbes pierres. Tous travaillent.*<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> However, it might be questioned just how exactly this change is effected in the *mise en scène* of this play. Perhaps the dramatic characters' costumes and make-up change to signify their transformations into revolutionary figures. In fact, Arrabal is not clear on these details, and this rhetorical stage direction illustrates the often highly literary tone of his theatre.

<sup>141</sup> *La Tour de Babel* (1979), p. 85.

It might be argued that the lack of curtain-break between the characters' defence against the capitalist siege and the construction of the Tower cements the unity of the stage and auditorium. As theatre semiotician Susan Bennett notes, 'when curtain calls are overdone, the audience can feel impatient and the pleasure of the theatrical event may be diminished by the virtual imprisonment of the audience in their seats'.<sup>142</sup> The lack of curtain break in the scene would suggest that the pleasure that audiences derive from the stage remains undiminished. Spectators may not be made to feel impatient or like prisoners in an auditorium but, instead, potentially like participants in the construction of Babel. The unbroken spectator-stage unity may draw the viewer into experiencing Latidia's ideal as a mirror stage.

These visual and acoustic tricks hypothetically unsettle the demarcating line between Latidia's and the spectator's respective worlds. The entire theatre may become, in this theoretical logic, the privileged locus of the mirror stage. As I stated in the Introduction, liveness and presence inhere within theatre performance. *La Tour de Babel*, it may be argued, is a play that is shot through with liveness, from the spectator's experience of Latidia's selective seeing, hearing and smell by means of lighting and sound; to his or her witnessing of the real-time transformation of the stage into Babel; to the exteriorised voice-over that denotes the external threat of mass-market capitalism. Liveness contributes to the spectator's experience of the immediacy of theatre performance and these devices may hold a powerful sway on the spectator as a result. Jill Dolan notes the powers of persuasion of liveness on the spectator's mind. She suggests that the elements of theatre, including light, sound and the actor's body, can have a profound effect on the spectator. Liveness may suture, according to Dolan's description, the spectator to the stage in a moment of 'perfect communication':

Anyone who considers herself a theater person knows when something "works" – it's when the magic of theater appears, when the pace, the expression, the gesture, the emotion, *the light, the sound*, the relationship between [...] actors

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<sup>142</sup> Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), p. 164.

and spectators all meld into something alchemical, something nearly perfect in how it communicates in that instance.<sup>143</sup>

Although Dolan designates this moment of symbiosis as a quality of theatre, it could equally be argued that the moments that she describes cancel out the spectator's agency. The lighting, sound and visual tricks of *La Tour de Babel* may cajole the spectator into experiencing the same narcissistic apprehension of his or her surroundings as Latidia, if theatrical liveness succeeds in doing its job. Pierre Marcabru's comments (cited earlier) that the play managed to extract 'ohs' and 'ahs' from the audience would suggest that this moment of perfect union with the stage is possible. This 'alchemical' union described by Dolan could potentially refer, in the context of my analysis, to a moment of the Lacanian mirror stage when the spectator becomes assimilated into the dramatic action in a totalising and de-politicising way.

Podol pinpoints the end scene as the moment of politico-cathartic culmination for the spectator ('a catharsis making the drama's conclusion artistically and thematically justifiable'). The scenes preceding this final one, it has been argued, may be predicated on a forging of a theatrical mirror stage with the spectator. The next part of this chapter will consider how the spectator's view of the end scene and concomitant experience of catharsis might be shaped by this mirror stage.

### **The Final Scene of *La Tour de Babel***

I have argued that the spectator may be sutured to the stage by virtue of the erosion of the fourth wall and the live devices deployed in the play. The final scene, I will argue, incarnates the idealised spirit of the mirror stage and Lacanian *jubilation*, thereby potentially bolstering the specular unity that the viewer feels with the stage.

The newly erected Tower of Babel stands proud, and all of the characters gesture upwards to a celestial dimension. National unity (recalling 'La Patrie ou

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<sup>143</sup> My emphasis. Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 40.

la mort !') and social harmony are stressed for the spectator in this scene, as Latidia's discourse, addressed to her beloved, indicates:

Et alors nous nous sommes *enlacés nus et bientôt nous avons commencé à nous éloigner de la terre et à voler, doucement*. Dans la nuque, je portais incrustée la perle de mon enfance. La brise nous emportait de-ci, de-là, et parfois nous tournoyions, *toujours unis, enlacés vertigineusement*. Et de la sorte, nous avons parcouru en un instant toutes les contrées, mes jambes entre ses jambes, ma joue contre sa joue, nos deux cœurs se touchant. « Ah ! Mon bourricot adoré ! » (p. 74)

In this scene, Latidia is handed back the pearl that was ripped from her skin by her mother in her childhood. It is restored to its former position at the nape of her neck by the newly transformed Prince Charming-cum-donkey figure, or the *pèlerin* as Arrabal names him. The playwright persists with the fairytale-themed narrative by drawing upon the motif of the transformation of a bestial creature into the hero, a tone that I argued earlier risks becoming inflected with the mirror stage.<sup>144</sup>

The following image, taken from Lavelli's production, also illustrates the potential powers of unification that the Babel endeavour holds over both the dramatic characters and audiences. The luminous quality of the protagonist's dress and the elevated position of Latidia and her lover connote the purity that Arrabal aimed to depict in his writing of the play (recalling his words cited at the start of this chapter that the world could 'trouver un pur'). The onstage semi-circle, created by the other characters' flanking of the two central figures, potentially emulates the space of the audience if spectators are made to sit in a curved configuration of a conventional proscenium theatre. This would imply that the characters of *La Tour de Babel* complete a circle together with spectators, lending further credence to the idea that spectators are figuratively

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<sup>144</sup> This moment between Latidia and her *pèlerin* could be an intertextual reference to Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (c. 1594) and, in particular, the moment when Titania falls in love with Nick Bottom, whose head has been transformed into that a donkey's.

and psychically drawn into experiencing a specular unity with the utopian stage space:

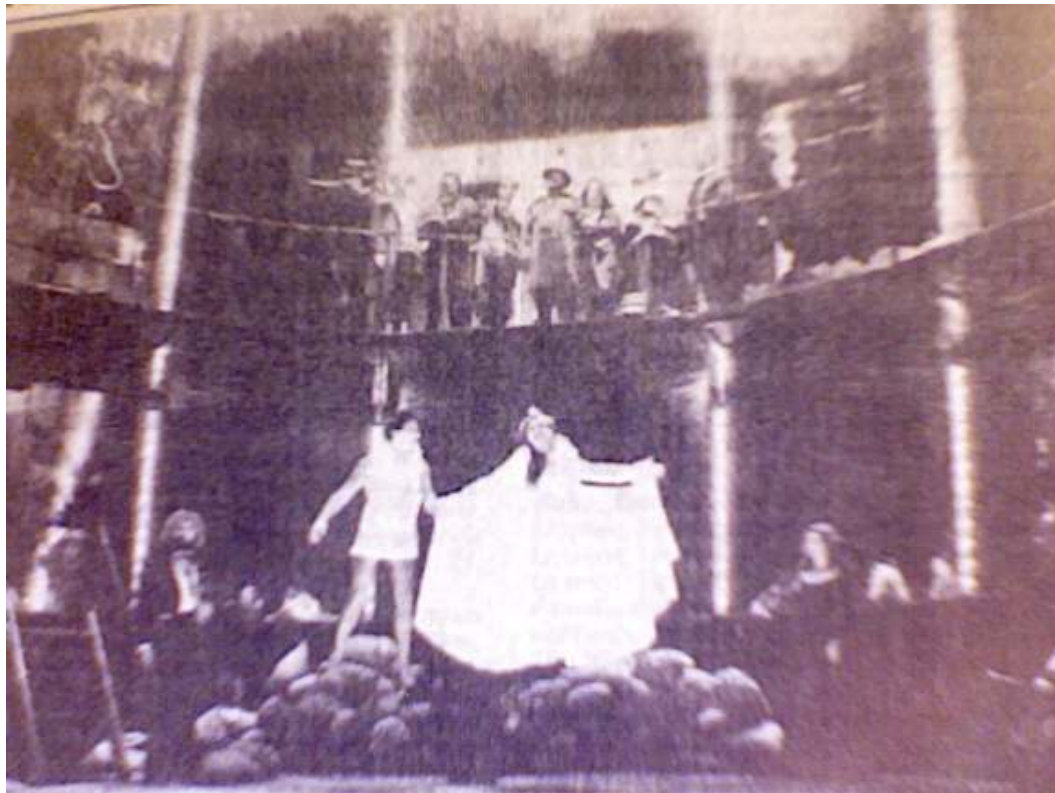


Image by *Pariscopes*, 26 December 1979.

The scene also carries religious undertones, as Latidia and the *pèlerin* end in an embrace while she cries out, with religious exultation, 'MAGNIFICAT!'. The latter constitutes a canticle dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

These aspects of the final scene – the creation of the Tower of Babel, Latidia's address to her beloved, the 'MAGNIFICAT !' and the characters' gestures towards Heaven – may emphasise unity and idealisation and may embody the spirit of the mirror stage for the spectator. More specifically, the 'MAGNIFICAT !' may cause the spectator to experience the *jubilation* described by Lacan as part of the infant's experience of the mirror stage. Upon seeing the entirety of its image in the mirror, the child rejoices in attaining 'Gestalt', privileging the whole rather than the component parts of the body. The *jubilation* that surrounds the infant's first discovery of the Self through an exteriorised mirror image belies its inner chaos and immaturity.<sup>145</sup> In his seminars, Lacan often confers upon this

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<sup>145</sup> Elizabeth Grosz explains that this tension *propels* the subject towards its fascination with his or her body image. She cites psychologists Henri Wallon (who originally coined the term 'mirror stage'), René Spitz and Paul Guillaume in order to corroborate Lacan's point about corporeal



specular *jubilation* an almost spiritual quality, as he terms this moment 'l'assomption jubilatoire de maîtrise'.<sup>146</sup> In Christian theology, the Assumption refers to the ascent of the Virgin Mary into Heaven. The concept of specular *jubilation* may be brought to bear on my reading of the end scene of Arrabal's play. The 'MAGNIFICAT!' that Latidia cries out imbues the scene with a heavy sense of religiosity, potentially paralleling the 'assumption' of *jubilation*. The fact that the characters gesture towards Heaven visually suggests Lacanian *assomption*, lending theoretical credence to the postulation that this play may replicate a synthesising *stade du miroir* for the spectator.

Although Arrabal most likely designed the canticle to be an ironic critique of Catholicism, my hypothesis that Lacanian *jubilation* occurs for the spectator would play a role in undermining this element of parody. Any ironic distance that the spectator may feel may be put under strain given the numerous ways in which he or she is increasingly led to become an object of Latidia's narcissistic fantasy, particularly those ways which exploit the live nature of theatre to suture the spectator to the stage. Latidia's final proclamations of love and union, directed to the *pèlerin*, may further shore up this suturing through liveness, because in the stage directions, Arrabal specifies that Latidia's voice must be disembodied as she is positioned off-stage ('voix de Latidia, à l'extérieur, elle décrit au fur et à mesure tout de qui se produit').<sup>147</sup> The disembodied voice might envelop the spectator, prompting him or her to become caught up in the same entwinement with the *pèlerin* that Latidia experiences, if we follow performance studies critic Steven Connor's suggestions on the compelling nature of the live voice in the theatre. He conceptualises the potency of the disembodied voice in the theatre, which issues from the unconscious and reverberates around the auditorium with a 'capacity to charge, to vivify, to relay and amplify energy'.<sup>148</sup> Although Connor points out the potentially terrifying effects of the disembodied voice ('the bad voice'), we might argue that it has equal energy to push the spectator into experiencing the mirror stage.

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fascination and *jubilation*. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 42-43, p. 214 (note 12).

<sup>146</sup> Lacan, *SI*, p. 281.

<sup>147</sup> *La Tour de Babel* (1979), p. 86.

<sup>148</sup> Connor, 'Violence, Ventriloquism and the Vocalic Body', in *Psychoanalysis and performance*, ed. by Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 75-93 (p. 82).

From beginning to end, *La Tour de Babel* could be argued theoretically to evince the mirror stage for the spectator. The cathartic process is, in this hypothetical logic, conditioned by the spectator's specular engagement with the stage in this play. I stated earlier that this limits the political charge of *La Tour de Babel*. The question now arises, why does a replicated mirror stage fail to be political? I will endeavour to answer this by turning briefly to a reading of catharsis in psychoanalytic theory that is akin to the idealisation occurring in the mirror stage.

### **The Mirror Stage and Catharsis**

The theoretical implementation of the mirror stage in *La Tour de Babel* bears a striking resemblance to the idealised form of catharsis that Freud dismissed early on in his psychoanalytic career. The shortcomings of catharsis in psychoanalysis can potentially reveal much about its potential limitations in *La Tour de Babel*. When he began his search for a therapeutic method, Freud was heavily influenced by Jean-Marie Charcot, who practised hypnosis on his patients at the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris. Taking inspiration from Charcot, Freud and fellow Austrian Josef Breuer set about trying to cure patients via hypnosis, which would bring about a catharsis or purgation of psychical afflictions. Their most (in)famous case under this form of treatment was Anna O., whose real name was Bertha Pappenheim. Whilst this means of therapy was found to work initially, it came under severe scrutiny by Freud a few years later:

It was true that the disappearance of the symptoms went hand-in-hand with the catharsis, but total success turned out to be entirely dependent upon the patient's relation to the physician and thus resembled the effect of 'suggestion'. If that relation was disturbed, all the symptoms reappeared, just as though they had never been cleared up.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Two Encyclopaedia Articles', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953-1974), XVIII, pp. 235-55 (p.237).

Catharsis forged a precarious dynamic between the analyst and analysand, one that was predicated on the analysand's idealisation of the analyst and his advice in 'suggestion'.

Whilst catharsis in the theatre and catharsis in hypnosis are not identical in nature, their relationship may be thought of as analogous. This analogy is particularly fruitful in relation to my analysis of *La Tour de Babel*, because both forms of catharses – that is, the psychoanalytic kind and the play's – seem to direct their object, the analysand or the spectator, towards an idealisation of the analyst or the stage. A more general analogous relationship between catharses of the theatre and psychoanalysis may be confirmed by turning to scholarship in performance studies. Alan Read (2001) draws parallels between psychoanalytic catharsis, especially in its formative years in which hypnosis dominated therapeutic proceedings, and its theatrical counterpart. Read argues that psychoanalytic and theatrical catharses share a performative trait, particularly when recalling the histrionics of Charcot's hypnotic sessions performed in front of whole auditoria of people at the Salpêtrière. Read postulates a double allure of theatrical and psychoanalytic catharses due to the 'placebo effects' that they induce.<sup>150</sup>

The spectator of *La Tour de Babel* is not under hypnosis, but it is possible, using Read, to map this hypnotic and essentially empty ('placebo') modality of catharsis onto theatrical catharsis in this play, particularly when recalling critics' comments cited at the start of the chapter about spectators' enchantment by the fantastical imagery of the play (eliciting, we recall from Marcabru, 'des "ohs" et des "ahs"'). The conceptual recreation of the mirror stage throughout this play – especially in the moments when the spectator is forced into the same sensorial experiences as Latidia – has, it might be argued, a similarly spellbinding allure as hypnotic suggestion. Just as Freud found the analysand at the mercy of 'suggestion', we might argue that the spectator of *La Tour de Babel* is put under the spell of Latidia's musings.

The intersection of psychoanalytic theory and Arrabalian catharsis helps to show that, regardless of the political intentionality of *La Tour de Babel*, the

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<sup>150</sup> Alan Read, 'The Placebo of Performance: Psychoanalysis in its Place', *Psychoanalysis and performance*, ed. by Patrick Campbell and Adrian Kear (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 147-66.

play may strike up a dynamic with the spectator that risks intrinsically depriving him or her of agency. Any revolutionary politics communicated to the viewer by means of *La Tour de Babel* may hinge upon the spectator's assimilation into Latidia's revolutionary but nonetheless highly narcissistic dream of liberation. It may not open up the spectator to political questions as a result. It may eliminate the possibility of such questions arising, showing the world as already 'cured' of political ills and fomenting the spectator's impression of his or her central place in this perfect world.

### **Assessing A Politics of Catharsis**

Catharsis, in this chapter, has been theoretically shown to negate the political value of Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel*. This is because Arrabal's modality of catharsis may encourage the spectator to relive the mirror stage. Despite the political failings of Arrabal's model, there is every possibility that other deployments of catharsis in the theatre can be effective in changing the spectator's perspective on the surrounding world. Catharsis, even today, remains a politically ambivalent concept in theatre scholarship. Whilst Brecht (referred to in the Introduction) denounced catharsis as a tool to *épater la bourgeoisie*, Marxist Brazilian theatre practitioner and politician Augusto Boal stressed the value of release via catharsis. For Boal, 'the goal is not to create calm, equilibrium, but rather to create disequilibrium which prepares the way for action'. Theatre is a testing-ground that grants spectators a mode of liberation from dominant ideologies. The theatrical microcosm allows, by way of catharsis, a form of rehearsing the process of fighting oppression in non-theatrical settings.<sup>151</sup> Meanwhile, Hans-Thies Lehmann suggests an 'ethics of catharsis' in postdramatic theatre theory. By depriving the spectator of his or her 'splendid isolation', catharsis invokes 'uncontrollable affective reactions (fear, disgust, fright)'. This, for Lehmann, must have implications for the spectator's ethical engagement with the stage and what is represented on it.<sup>152</sup> With these critics' views in mind, I move from discussing the specificities of catharsis in

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<sup>151</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, trans. by Charles A. & Maria-Odilia Leal McBride (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), p. 72.

<sup>152</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London; New York: Routledge, 2006 [1999]), p. 138.

Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel* to a Lacanian insight into an *ethics* of catharsis and how this may inform future *mises en scène* of the play that wish to avoid the text's potentially de-politicising gesture.

Lacan's musings on the topic of catharsis intersect with his formulations on ethics. Lacanian ethics are predicated upon the subject's mutating desire rather than the promotion of absolute moral ideals. As Lisa Downing observes, the Lacanian system propounds 'an ethics of the self, not of the other'.<sup>153</sup> Lacan privileges desire as the key to this ethics of the self. As noted in the Introduction, desire constantly mutates and shifts. Ethics, according to Lacan, must promote the errant and eternal plot of the subject's desire. He connects this ethical journey with Freud's death drive and the cathartic value that the latter holds.<sup>154</sup> Freud conceptualised that individuals are as much guided by a will to self-destruction – through the psychical principle of Thanatos – as a will to forging libidinal bonds with others under the direction of Eros. Downing argues that Lacan's appropriation of the Freudian death drive for a system of ethics is nuanced by the perpetual vicissitudes of desire, so that it is not absolute death that the subject seeks but 'death drive as productive of creativity and potentiality'.<sup>155</sup> Lacan emphasises this himself:

Si la pulsion de mort se présente bien, comme il est en effet exigible, en ce point de la pensée de Freud qu'elle soit articulée comme pulsion de destruction pour autant qu'elle met en cause tout ce qui existe comme tel, ce qu'elle est en somme, c'est également volonté de création à partir de rien.<sup>156</sup>

This 'volonté de création à partir de rien' bears an affinity to the logic of catharsis. Cathartic purgation potentiates the subject's creative interaction with his or her desire and this would have the potential effect of testing and challenging moral norms. What might limit the execution of an ethics of catharsis in *La Tour de Babel* is the specular straightjacket that potentially limits

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<sup>153</sup> Lisa Downing, 'The Cinematic Ethics of Psychoanalysis: Futurity, Death Drive, Desire', in *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters*, by Lisa Downing and Libby Saxton (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 134-46 (p. 137).

<sup>154</sup> For more on this, see: Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real* (London: Verso, 2000).

<sup>155</sup> Downing, p. 138.

<sup>156</sup> Lacan, *Séminaire VII: L'Éthique de la psychanalyse* (unpublished seminar, 1959-1960), p. 356.

the spectator's desire in favour of the promotion of the play's idealised world of Babel. This creative, radical and boundary-defying form of desire may be cancelled out by the play's promotion of an ideal world and the spectator's place in it.

Could Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel* pave the way for an *ethical* guise of catharsis that would leave the spectator free to desire? Since both a politics and an ethics of catharsis are found wanting in Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel*, might a reinvigorated ethical catharsis in this play open up new political possibilities for it? The synthesising logic implicit in *La Tour de Babel* that enlists the spectator in Latidia's narcissistic machinations would need to be disrupted for this to occur. However, as my analysis has demonstrated, a large proportion of the actions potentially fomenting the fusion of the spectator and the stage lie in the play's performative aspects. We have seen that it is at the point when the lights go out and a deafening noise erupts in the auditorium that the spectator hypothetically starts to be cajoled into experiencing the mirror stage for him- or herself. The spectator's absorption is further potentially encouraged by disembodied voices and spatial imbrication of the spectator and the stage, as my analysis has suggested. Were these performative aspects to be prevented, perhaps the spectator would retain the degree of ironic distance from Latidia's narcissism that the playwright clearly imposes on spectators at the start of the play. In this case, Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel* would have the capacity to subvert the postmodern cult of narcissism, making this play highly relevant for contemporary politics.

Such a contention remains speculative, but what is certain – following a Lacanian logic at least – is that any ethical capacities of catharsis hinge upon a theatrical aesthetic that stimulates the particularities of the spectator's individual desire; in short, one that constantly reminds the spectator of his or her internally riven subjectivity, of his or her radical separation from desire. Subjective division is a concept that I associated with the 'absurd' in the Introduction, but it may be at odds with the synthesising aesthetic of *La Tour de Babel*. The political implications of this play, when read *au pied de la lettre*, may be limited as a result.

### **Concluding Remarks: Parallels with and Differences from Jean Genet's *Le Balcon***

Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel* shares aesthetic common ground with Jean Genet's *Le Balcon* (1956), as both plays put the mirror and its allure at the forefront of the stage. In my textual analysis of *La Tour de Babel*, I have argued that this mirror is of a metaphorical constitution. Latidia's blindness, deafness and her vision of the world as populated by the radical figures of history eventually become the spectator's own, and I have suggested that this – with a range of live theatre techniques to bolster it – sutures the spectator to the stage. In *Le Balcon*, the mirror assumes an imposing, *literal* presence on the stage, becoming almost like a member of the cast as the characters constantly talk to it for reassurance. Its grandeur ('le cadre est doré et sculpté') visually emulates the narcissistic self-importance of the characters when they directly address it.<sup>157</sup>

Just as *La Tour de Babel* dealt with the aftermath of Franco's Spain, Genet's *Le Balcon* was inspired by the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) and the curbing of Republican forces which led to the country's forty-year dictatorship. While Arrabal's play envisions a form of revolutionary politics in the form of Latidia's Tower of Babel, *Le Balcon* charts the rise of fascist forces and the suppression of Republican revolution. The mirror plays a key part in this process, as it marries the dramatic characters' fantasies of power and authority to their eventual roles in obliterating revolution.

The action of Genet's play takes place in a brothel ('un bordel de luxe') run by the character Irma. The patrons stage their sexual fantasies and play the counter-revolutionary figures of a Bishop, a Judge and a General. Meanwhile, an unspecified uprising occurs outside on the streets. While Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel* brings revolution onto the stage in Latidia's struggle to build Babel, revolutionary politics in Genet's *Le Balcon* occurs off-stage. Nevertheless, just as Latidia projects her narcissism onto the other dramatic characters and begins to succeed after a while in enlisting them in building her vision of utopia, the characters of *Le Balcon* use the prostitutes as objects of their narcissistic phantasies: one client plays a judge in order to act out a phantasy of punishing

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<sup>157</sup> Jean Genet, *Le Balcon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), p. 19. Subsequent references to *Le Balcon* will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.

and being punished by a *voleuse*; another plays a general who demands that his prostitute submits to him. These patrons rely heavily on the mirrors in the brothel to reinforce their phantasy. The Judge declares: 'Miroir qui me glorifie ! Image que je peux toucher, je t'aime' (p. 37). The General, looking into the mirror, boasts of his status as 'un homme de guerre et de parade' (p. 49), recalling Lacan's descriptions of a mirror stage dynamic in 'toute la gamme de prestance et de parade' (cited above). The Bishop turns to the mirror, after his prostitute and Irma leave the room, and engages in a conversation with the mirror that betrays the latter's function in shoring up his sense of self-importance and in fulfilling his fantasies:

La majesté, la dignité, illuminant ma personne, n'ont pas leur source dans les attributions de ma fonction. – Non plus, ciel ! que dans mes mérites personnels. – La majesté, la dignité qui m'illuminent, viennent d'un éclat plus mystérieux : c'est que l'évêque me précède. Te l'ai-je bien dit, miroir, image dorée, ornée comme une boîte de cigares mexicains ? Et je veux être évêque dans la solitude, pour la seule apparence...Et pour détruire toute fonction, je veux apporter le scandale et te trousseur, putain, putasse, pétasse et pouffiasse... (p. 27)

For each client, the mirrors of Irma's *maison d'illusions* invoke a sexual pleasure and bolster an idealised identity.

The illusions of grandeur that the mirror helps to conjure up are deployed to suppress the revolutionary forces stirring outside of the brothel. This is evident not only in the creation of the illusion of the Judge, Bishop and General and a sense of their authority in the outside world; the Envoy and Chief of Police consult and refer to the mirror in a bid to create a sense of imperious authority in order to quell the masses as well:

*Il [L'Envoyé] va à un miroir. De sa poche, il sort toute une collection de décorations et les accroche sur sa tunique. (p. 113)*

LE CHEF DE LA POLICE : Non le cent millième reflet d'un miroir qui se répète, je serai l'Unique, en qui cent mille veulent se confondre. Sans moi vous étiez tous foutus. (p. 131)



In a similar way to Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel*, there is theoretical potential for the spectator to become assimilated into the dramatic action via a specular dynamic. Genet's mirrors are partially directed to reflect the auditorium: '*Sur la paroi de droit un miroir [...] reflète un lit défait qui, si la pièce est disposée logiquement, se trouverait dans la salle, aux premiers fauteuils d'orchestre*' (p. 19). However, an important difference from Arrabal's play is that narcissistic interaction between the spectator and the stage is not naturalised and made invisible in Genet's play. The presence of a literal mirror could be argued to impugn the narcissistic dynamic between the stage and the spectator, as David H. Walker notes: 'the spectator cannot be sure of his or her perspective vis-à-vis the stage [...] [this] overturns the mechanism of recognition or positioning by which ideology constructs the subject, according to Althusser'.<sup>158</sup> We will explore the links between Althusserian misrecognition and the Lacanian mirror stage in the following chapter, but for now it suffices to note that Walker considers that the spectator's potential reflection in the dramatic action initiates a process by which his or her place in the ideologies of the stage is called into question. I would add that it reminds spectators of their roles in watching the theatre, in watching fiction, thereby potentially invoking a metatheatrical moment (the concept of metatheatre will be explored in greater detail in Chapter Four).

There are further ways in which Genet's *Le Balcon* calls into question any potential mirror dynamic between the spectator and the dramatic action. Its role in bolstering the characters' egos notwithstanding, the mirror is often referred to with a great degree of irony by the characters. Its function as the creator of illusions is frequently noted:

IRMA : Plus on tue dans les faubourgs, plus les hommes se coulent dans mes salons...

CARMEN : Les hommes ?

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<sup>158</sup> David H. Walker, 'Revolution and Revisions in Genet's *Le Balcon*', *The Modern Language Review*, 79 (1984), 817-30 (p. 829).

IRMA, *après un silence* : Certains. Appelés par mes miroirs et mes lustres, toujours les mêmes. (p. 58)

LE CHEF DE LA POLICE : [...] Chaque mur, chaque miroir est truqué. Ici on écoute les soupirs, là-bas l'écho des plaintes. Ce n'est pas moi qui t'apprendrai que les jeux du bordel sont d'abord jeux de glace. (p. 82)

There are therefore important conceptual differences between *Le Balcon* and *La Tour de Babel* and its deployment of the mirror stage, despite the fact that both plays deal with revolution, are heavily influenced by Franco's dictatorship and invoke an atmosphere of narcissism. Whereas Arrabal brings revolutionary politics onto the stage in his characters' construction of Babel, Genet forecloses the uprising from the scene; whereas Arrabal mixes narcissism with revolution in the character of Latidia, Genet separates the two elements spatially (narcissism within the *bordel de luxe*, revolution outside); whereas Arrabal makes the mirror dynamics between the stage and the spectator invisible (there is no physical mirror and the spectator is subjected to experiencing Latidia's blindness and deafness without forewarning), Genet brings them into sharp relief by assigning the mirror a central location in the dramatic action and making it clear that the characters use it as a locus for narcissism and self-importance.

These conceptual differences are borne out in the divergent nature of empirical audience response to the plays. On the one hand, we recall that reviewers indicated that Arrabal's play charmed its audiences, eliciting (quasi-somnolent) "ohs" and "ahs" (as Pierre Marcabru puts it). On the other hand, as Genet wrote himself in the *avertissement* to the play, *Le Balcon* was designed to invoke disquiet for the spectator:

Voilà ce qu'une conscience conciliante ne cesse de souffler aux spectateurs. Or aucun problème exposé ne devrait être résolu dans l'imaginaire surtout que la solution dramatique s'empresse vers un ordre social achevé. Au contraire, que le mal sur la scène explose, nous montre nus, nous laisse hagards s'il se peut et n'ayant de recours qu'en nous. (p. 15)

Genet's hopes are borne out in empirical spectators' accounts, as viewers have clearly discerned the play of illusion and false identity in *Le Balcon*. In Theatre Rhinoceros's 1989 version of *Le Balcon* in San Francisco, Irma was played by drag queen Doris Fish. One reviewer reflects that this added level of theatricality and performativity ('there is the question of whether Irma herself is a woman, a transvestite, a woman playing a man playing a transvestite, or what. That's all up to the viewer') in a play already concerned with falsity and illusion leads to an emphasis on the 'sometimes quite heady problem of identity that lies at the core of *The Balcony*'.<sup>159</sup> A blogger, in response to Medicine Show Theatre's production of the play in New York in 2007, likewise describes 'a claustrophobic acting-out of the interchangeability of illusion and reality'.<sup>160</sup>

On the same production, another blogger Loria Parker notes that the director Barbara Vann and her cast did little to Genet's text when putting it on the stage: 'evidently, not an original word or thought is left out of the over 3 hour production'. While this spectator felt that this admirable intention was at times misplaced ('Ms. Vann and her talented ensemble could easily have gotten the point across in a bit less time'), she also noted that:

Genet's warning not to take a fictionalized evil and believe it to be abolished when resolved on the stage rings loud and clear in today's world. He certainly knew even fifty years ago the people would rather deal with make believe than what's real in their lives. In these times, it certainly is not difficult to understand why a little escape now and then might be helpful to ones [*sic.*] sanity. And for sure, the line between what's real and true or lies and spin is obvious to anyone who reads the news. For its honesty and relevance, *The Balcony* proves that theatre on a shoestring can still make quite an impact.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>159</sup>Wendell Ricketts, 'Identity and Illusion: Jean Genet's *The Balcony*' <<http://ricketts-portfolio.blogspot.com/1989/04/identity-and-illusion-jean-genets.html>> [accessed 17 October 2011].

<sup>160</sup> Jon Sobel, 'Theater Review: Jean Genet's *The Balcony* in New York City', <<http://blogcritics.org/culture/article/theater-review-jean-genets-the-balcony/>> [accessed 28 October 2011].

<sup>161</sup> Loria Parker, 'The Balcony', <<http://www.theaterscene.net/ts/articles.nsf/OBP/026A5CB15F16A687852572C00076D3F8>> [accessed 28 October 2011].

This spectator found the playwright's efforts to show reality as illusion politically relevant to the contemporary age. Her comments suggest that this play holds back on the spectator's resolution of 'evil' just before returning to the outside world. These comments serve to place the play in contradistinction to Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel* which resolves the dramatic action through catharsis and may leave the spectator feeling spellbound as discussed above. This blogger's comments on the application to the outside world suggest a political import to *Le Balcon* in its ironic exposure of illusion which *La Tour de Babel* perhaps lacks.

However, what these empirical accounts also reveal is that there are drawbacks to the creation of this sense of ironic distance between the spectator and the stage by a broken mirror dynamic. Ed Huyck observes on Nimbus Theater's production that flat acting and poor voice projection can detract from the alluring elements of this play:

This isn't an easy play to produce or to watch. Director Josh Cragun and the company reward audience with a production that feels both playful and insightful. But sometimes the acting loses the first element, as moments full of absurdity fall flat. The actors also seem to be unsure of the acoustics of the brand-new space, which can make it hard to understand all of their dialogue sometimes.<sup>162</sup>

These complaints are in direct contrast to the liveness of voice and visuality that potentially abounds in *La Tour de Babel* as discussed above. This difference may empirically corroborate my theoretical argument that such live tricks are compelling for the spectator of *La Tour de Babel* and that they may be linked to the transformation of the theatre space into a mirror stage. Similarly, Jon Sobel complains that the 2007 production of *The Balcony* in New York:

The early role-playing scenes contain most of the S&M elements that scandalized audiences and authorities of the 1950s. By today's standards, they are so tame as to be barely noticeable. What a difference a half-century makes. For the homoerotic elements, one must wait till very near the end, by which time one

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<sup>162</sup> Ed Huyck, 'Nimbus Opens Space with *The Balcony*', [http://blogs.citypages.com/dressingroom/2011/02/nimbus\\_opens\\_sp.php#Comments](http://blogs.citypages.com/dressingroom/2011/02/nimbus_opens_sp.php#Comments) [accessed 17 October 2011].

has grown too impatient to care. After the too-long scene that makes up the second half of Act I, and the interminable political grandstanding of Act II, broken only by occasional flashes of humor and clarity, we just want to escape the prison with Genet and get out into the world, even if the streets are running with blood.<sup>163</sup>

Genet's *Le Balcon* may, in short, imbue the spectator with a heightened sense of political awareness through his play of illusions as these accounts demonstrate, but this does at the same time detract from the ease of viewing theatre that would not seem to be evident in accounts of the spellbound audience of the lyrical *La Tour de Babel*. This complexifies the conceptual view put forward in this chapter that the deployment of the mirror stage stymies a politics of spectatorship, because the effect of breaking the specular spectator-stage dynamic in *Le Balcon* would seem to encourage boredom among audiences. The comparison between *La Tour de Babel* and *Le Balcon* points to a politics of spectatorship based on specular dynamics that would lie somewhere between leaving the spectator mystified and rupturing the narcissistic bond between the view and the stage.

In Chapter Two, I move on to a mode of spectatorship that potentiates the political by means of referencing and departing from the apolitical mirror stage. I will argue that Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages* allows the spectator to break the specular stranglehold of *le stade du miroir*. As we will see, this potentially provokes a very different reaction to that which I have argued has been encouraged by Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel*, one that may be inflected by the pleasures and allure of a Lacanian phantasy of the 'fragmented body' which would deconstruct the tightly-bound normative forces and discourses that form the basis of subjectivity.

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<sup>163</sup>Sobel, 'Theater Review: Jean Genet's *The Balcony* in New York City'.

## Chapter 2

### Misrecognition and the Mirror Stage in Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages* (1957)

Linked to my analysis of Genet's *Le Balcon* in the conclusion of Chapter One, this chapter explores in greater theoretical detail the effects that a ruptured mirror stage may have for the theoretical and empirical spectator of Eugène Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages* (1957). In contrast to Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel*, Ionesco's play thoroughly demystifies the notion of utopia. It is this difference that allows me to look to the reverse side of the mirror stage here. Whilst the spectator's idealisation of the stage and the self may theoretically prevail in response to Arrabal's play, Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages* may speak to the underside of identity formation in the mirror stage, in which misrecognition and the fear and phantasy of *le corps morcelé* dominate.

Ionesco published *Tueur sans gages* in 1957, but it was not until two years later that the piece was first staged (José Quaglio directed the play in Paris's Théâtre Recamier).<sup>164</sup> Based on the playwright's own fleeting but transcendental experience of a world that was 'infiniment plus lumineux', the play charts the protagonist Bérenger's journey into and out of the utopian 'Cité radieuse'.<sup>165</sup> A nameless architect guides Bérenger, explaining to the disbelieving and dumbfounded protagonist that the existence of this magical land is common knowledge. Making his way through this paradisiacal space, Bérenger experiences a sense of psychical fulfilment. The 'Cité radieuse' recalls a soubriquet for Paris: 'la Ville-lumière' or the 'City of light'. Ionesco makes it clear that this space is in geographic proximity to the mundane and dismal Paris where Bérenger lives and works. The nomenclature of this utopia and its closeness to Paris would suggest that Ionesco is, in fact, referring to the French capital itself. Symbolically, it could be argued that the playwright envisages

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<sup>164</sup>The play has been produced on the stage several times: it was performed in London in 1961, an event that meant that, as Rosette Lamont notes, 'Ionesco's reputation began to reach the English-speaking world'; Jean-Loup Temporal produced a marionette version of *Tueur sans gages* in 1970 at the Théâtre de France; Jacques Mauclair directed his version of the play in 1967 at the Hôtel Sully and at the Rive Gauche Theatre in 1972. Rosette Lamont, *Ionesco's Imperatives: The Politics of Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 126.

<sup>165</sup> Claude Bonnefoy and Eugène Ionesco, *Entretiens avec Eugène Ionesco* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1966), p. 36.

another side of Paris. Eventually, the *Cité radieuse* dissolves into its dystopian obverse. The stage gives way to darkness when it is discovered that a mass murderer roams the land. This nameless killer lures his victims into a lake (*bassin*) by showing them a hypnotic image of an unnamed Colonel.<sup>166</sup> Bérenger vows to put a stop to the atrocities. Like so many of Ionesco's latter-day 'Bérenger' figures though, the protagonist cannot make the killer reform. This is concretised by the final image in which the killer towers over the hero with a knife.<sup>167</sup>

It is instructive, at this point, to turn to both the performance details of *Tueur sans gages* and past audience response, in order to establish the empirical bases for my theoretical contention that this play may induce a scene of misrecognition for the spectator.

### **Performances of *Tueur sans gages***

Lighting is a central feature of the *mise en scène* of Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages*. Jean Vilar's open-air production (1967) of the play at the Palais de Papes in Avignon relied upon lighting to create the stage effects, something which critic J. H. McCormick notes 'seems to be what *Tueur sans gages* demands'.<sup>168</sup> Four decades later, the theatre group Compagnie l'Informel, who staged a production of the play in 2006 in Allauch, declared that 'il ne s'agit pas de produire un théâtre dogmatique mais plutôt des images qui cherchent non seulement à dire mais à faire sentir ce qu'est devenue la condition humaine'. The theatre company chose to depict the protagonist's journey from utopia to dystopia via different forms of lighting (declaring, at the same time, that 'le "héros" chemine de la

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<sup>166</sup>A few years later in 1962, Ionesco wrote the short story *La Photo du colonel*. The story references intertextually Ionesco's earlier play *Tueur sans gages* not only with the allusion to the photograph of the colonel, but also the presence of a killer who interrupts what seems to be societal harmony. The story is, as Gemma M. Galli describes, a failed detective plot; it ends with the implication that there is no killer, because the narrator of the story untenably claims to be one of the killer's victims. Ionesco's play *Tueur sans gages* and short story *La Photo du colonel* share the trait of an unsatisfactory *dénouement*, because they do not – like most murder plots – end with the arrest, capture and reformation of the murderer figure. See: Gemma M. Galli, 'Edifying the Reader: Ionesco's "The Colonel's Photograph"', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 31 (1985), 645-57.

<sup>167</sup>Other 'Bérenger' plays include: *Rhinocéros* (1959), *Le Roi se meurt* (1962), *Le Piéton de l'air* (1962).

<sup>168</sup>J. H. McCormick, 'Introduction', in *Tueur sans gages* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pp. 9-36 (p. 36).

lumière à l'ombre').<sup>169</sup> As the dramatic action proceeds and the protagonist's anguish increases, the spectator is presented with an image of Béranger's body that becomes increasingly unclear; the red lighting in the right-hand image below nearly eliminates the sight of his body.



Images from Compagnie l'Informel 2006

Finally, the protagonist's barely discernible body is replaced by the black outline of the killer's body (the third image shown here). Changes in lighting chart the gradual disintegration of the protagonist and his body.

The darkness, particularly as evidenced by the last image, invokes the sense of a sinister presence on the stage. Indeed, Compagnie l'Informel hoped to induce a sense of anguish in the spectator:

<sup>169</sup> <<http://www.ateliercln.net/Animations/0612Theatre.html>> [accessed 27 October 2011].



Dans notre contexte actuel, économique, politique et social, cette pièce résonne profondément et peut se faire l'écho de nos convictions. Elle dénonce, entre autres, la perte de sens et de repère, les totalitarismes, la déshumanisation et interroge nos angoisses face au déclin de ce début de XXI<sup>ème</sup> siècle.<sup>170</sup>

Although there is, to my knowledge, no documentation of spectator response to this production, this theatre company's intention to activate a sense of disquiet in its audiences and their strategic use of lighting to depict the destroyed body (*la déshumanisation*) inform my theoretical argument that misrecognition and the fantasy of the fragmented body are privileged for the viewer.

While there is a dearth of material on contemporary spectator response to this play, it is instructive to compare reviewers' comments on two productions (in 1959 and 1972) of the play in order to get a sense of how reaction has mutated over the decades since the play's inception. Although the 1972 accounts could not be defined as contemporary, we could situate them in the very beginnings of a postmodern cultural attitude (recalling that Lyotard's *La Condition Postmoderne*, one of the first publications to use the term 'postmodern' in a detailed analysis of society, was published later that decade in 1979). Reviewers of the 1959 production of *Tueur sans gages* emphasised Ionesco's struggle with the absurdity of the human condition, the triumph of humanism and a return to theatrical tradition ('Ionesco engage la lutte en corps à corps avec l'absurde', 'le ton [...] est presque totalement nouveau', '[la pièce] se rapproche du théâtre traditionnel et renoue avec l'humanisme').<sup>171</sup> These critics felt that the play marked Ionesco's theatrical turn to a hero who overcomes the absurdity of the human condition, who triumphs over adversity. However, by 1972, the play's capacity to convey a buoyed-up form of humanism after World War II had apparently disappeared. Reviewers of Jacques Mauclair's production at the Théâtre Rive-Gauche recount a sense of unease and disquiet that had been absent from the triumphant accounts of 1959:

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<sup>170</sup> <<http://www.ateliercln.net/Animations/0612Theatre.html>> [accessed 27 October 2011].

<sup>171</sup> *Tueur sans gages*, L'Avant-scène: Théâtre, 510 (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 33.

*Tueur sans gages*, pour moi, cela demeure la première franche interrogation de l'homme ; la première approche de l'angoisse à visage presque découverte. C'est la première fois, à ce qu'il m'apparaît, qu'au théâtre la voix de l'homme Ionesco rend ce son déchirant. La première fois que, dans une lumière de rêve, la créature avoue sa déroute. [...] La première fois qu'il explique comment le jour se refroidit [...] ; comment les couleurs de la vie se décomposent. [...] Déjà les serrures ne servent plus à rien. [...] Tout devient gris et terne.<sup>172</sup>

Nous sommes au lever du rideau dans la cité radieuse, une ville bâtie avec goût, et qui a tout pour rendre ses habitants heureux. L'environnement y est réussi. Hélas ! Un tueur fait des ravages dans la cité, il tue des innocents et personne ne s'en soucie. [...] On rit au début et on frémit à la fin.<sup>173</sup>

The 1972 reviews reveal a more pronounced feeling of disquiet among viewers than their 1959 counterparts. Jean-Jacques Gautier equates light and a misguided sense of subjective stability ('une lumière de rêve, la créature avoue sa déroute'), and darkness and a sense of something more unstable ('déjà les serrures ne servent plus à rien [...] tout devient gris et terne').

These performance details reveal: firstly, that Compagnie l'Informel hoped to instil anguish in the contemporary spectator; secondly, that the latter deployed lighting (or its lack) for the creation of a sinister atmosphere and for the destruction of the actor's body; thirdly, that 1972 audiences felt more uneasy in viewing the play than their 1959 predecessors; and finally, that light in this play precipitates an illusory sense of elation while darkness conjures up an opposite sense of instability (Gauthier). These details inform my theoretical argument in this chapter that a disquieting misrecognition may be created for the theoretical spectator of the play. They guide my contention that the phantasy of the fragmented body may be conjured up in the viewing experience of this play. Finally, they constitute an empirical point of departure for my contention that changes in lighting may be the key way in which the anguish of misrecognition is induced.

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<sup>172</sup> Jean-Jacques Gautier cited in *Tueur sans gages* (1973), p. 33.

<sup>173</sup> Nicolas de Rabaudy cited in *Tueur sans gages*, (1973), p. 34.

My analysis of the psychical effects of lighting in *Tueur sans gages* stems from research in theatrical scenography. Lighting is a highly significant visual element for theatre practitioners. Willard F. Bellman, author of *Scene Design, Stage Lighting, Sound, Costume and Make-up: A Scenographic Approach* (1983), argues that ‘of all the visual elements of theatre, including the actor, light is the most mobile’ and that the director of a production:

Has several ways to control focus of attention, but the most powerful is lighting. Lighting will determine not only where the audience is looking but also how they are seeing. It can make facial expression highly visible, giving prominence to those expressions that denote strong emotion, or it can reduce faces and figures to two dimensions.<sup>174</sup>

The images of Compagnie l’Informel’s production of *Tueur sans gages* attest to this ability to alter the perspective on the actor’s body by means of lighting, as the strong red lighting in the second image reduces our view of Bérenger to a mere outline. Bellman’s observation that light can alter, with relative ease, the way that we see in theatre informs my textual analysis and argument that the spectator’s perspective on Ionesco’s Bérenger is manipulated into a scene of misrecognition by means of the playwright’s sweeping changes to lighting, from a bright, overwhelming luminosity in the first act to a darkened space in the second act to a near-complete darkness in the final act.

### **The Theoretical Framework**

Lacanian misrecognition and the phantasy of ‘le corps morcelé’ that it entails guide my theoretical analysis of *Tueur sans gages*. The fragmented body dominates the infant’s life before the first sight of the whole body in the mirror. As Lacan outlined, the infant’s corporeal disarray precipitates the formation of the unified body of the subject in the mirror. However, as was addressed in the last chapter, the mirror stage secures the subject’s mere *illusion* of autonomy. Just as the subject relives the narcissistic glory of the mirror stage repeatedly,

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<sup>174</sup> Bellman, *Scene Design, Stage Lighting, Sound, Costume and Make-up: A Scenographic Approach* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983), p. 285.

the spectre of the *corps morcelé* returns at certain disconcerting moments in the subject's life. It is a phantasy that hinges upon 'une image essentiellement démembrable de son corps'.<sup>175</sup>

From the mirror stage onwards, the subject is caught in a double-bind between an exteriorised whole body-image (*Umwelt*) and an interiorised, fragmented body-image (*Innenwelt*). The founding logic of the ego is based on the subject's 'misrecognition' (*méconnaissance*) of itself. The subject must perform this misrecognition in order for the ego to develop. However, besides shoring up the ego, the mirror stage paves the way for moments in which the feeling of misrecognition comes to the fore and confounds the subject's corporeal self-assuredness. In this chapter, I use the term 'misrecognition' to denote those moments in which *le corps morcelé* overturns the mirage of bodily perfection created by the mirror stage. I look at how this other disruptive side of the mirror stage may be brought to the fore for the viewer of the theatre of the absurd. Ionesco's insertion of the wasteland and the killer in *Tueur sans gages*, as I shall show, serve to incarnate theatrically the Lacanian *corps morcelé* on the stage. In contrast to Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel*, the spectatorial mirror stage may be said to *fail* in this play. This, as I will elaborate, may produce a markedly different spectatorial response, one that could speak to phantasy as opposed to narcissism.

In Part I of my analysis, following Bérenger's journey into and out of the paradisiacal space, I argue that the lighting may act to secure the spectator's experience of the ecstasy of the mirror stage. However, I also posit that this spectatorial self-delight may be undermined through the indications in the text that luminosity dissolves into a disconcerting weightlessness. This changed use of lighting may subsequently jettison the spectator's belief in a whole and stable specular identity. In Part II of my analysis, I analyse how the utopian space is discredited by the progressive darkening of the stage and argue that this may induce full-blown misrecognition for the viewer. In this part, I also identify other potential images and theatrical realisations of the *corps morcelé* that may encourage the spectator's experience of a broken mirror stage. It is the

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<sup>175</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire I: Écrits techniques* (unpublished seminar, 1953-54), p. 255.

combined use of lighting and other devices that may help to conjure up a space in which the spectator's *phantasy* – the *corps morcelé* is essentially a de-subjectivising phantasy – is given free reign. Ionesco's potential move to open up a space of phantasy for his spectators will be considered, in the concluding part of my analysis of the play, in terms of its political valence.

I conclude the chapter by turning to an analysis of spectatorial accounts of Jean Genet's *Les Bonnes* (1947). This is a play that, similarly to Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages*, may bring to the forefront of the stage a form of interaction between two maids that echoes the workings of a broken mirror stage. A turn to contemporary spectatorial accounts of one of Genet's most performed plays permits me to reflect on the credibility of the affects that I argue are created for the theoretical spectator of *Tueur sans gages*. It also allows me to identify the concrete form that a politics of spectatorial misrecognition can assume, following on from the theoretical insights into the radical effects of this Lacanian concept developed in the main body of the chapter.

### Part I: The *Cité radieuse* and Luminosity

Gisèle Féal (2001) considers that the *Cité radieuse* of *Tueur sans gages* ('inondée de lumière') 'symbolise la conscience'.<sup>176</sup> The role of light threads itself through Ionesco's work, according to Féal, including his earlier *Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser* (1954). In this play, the eponymous hero flees his tyrannical wife Madeleine with the aid of a floating corpse. Light engenders the protagonist's source of knowledge and self-enlightenment:

À la conclusion d'*Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser*, Amédée s'envolait dans une atmosphère où se combinaient les lumières éclatantes et les exclamations admiratives des témoins. Où était parti Amédée ? [...] On le retrouve, à l'ouverture de *Tueur sans gages*, dans la Cité radieuse. Il a changé d'identité et s'appelle maintenant Bérenger. Mais le monde léger et lumineux qu'il découvre, ce quartier merveilleux de sa propre ville [...] est celui dont rêvait Amédée.<sup>177</sup>

The headiness of light relates to Ionesco's experience of transcendental bliss in his late teens (outlined above). Féal's postulation that Bérenger in *Tueur sans gages* recaptures Amédée's dream, however, does not give the full picture. While the *Cité radieuse* may represent and bolster Bérenger's feelings of lucid consciousness, Ionesco also stresses another dimension of this space: its illusoriness.

Turning to the first act of the play, the utopian depiction of the *Cité radieuse* corroborates Féal's postulation, as Bérenger betrays a belief that this luminous world offers the opportunity of self-enlightenment. The protagonist outlines his hopes for a consistency between his interior world and the space that surrounds him:

...le jaillissement, le prolongement de l'univers du dedans. Seulement, pour qu'il puisse jaillir, cet univers du dedans, il faut le secours extérieur d'une certaine lumière existante, physique, d'un monde objectivement nouveau. Des jardins, du ciel bleu, un printemps qui correspondent à l'univers intérieur, dans lequel celui-

<sup>176</sup>Gisèle Féal, *Ionesco: un théâtre onirique* (Paris: Imago, 2001), p. 63.

<sup>177</sup>Féal, p. 59.

ci puisse se reconnaître, qui soit comme sa traduction ou comme son anticipation, ou ses miroirs dans lesquels son propre sourire pourrait se réfléchir...dans lesquels il puisse se reconnaître, dire : voilà ce que je suis en vérité et que j'avais oublié, un être souriant...En somme, monde intérieur, monde extérieur, ce sont des expressions impropres, il n'y a pas de véritables frontières, pourtant, entre ces deux mondes ; il y a une impulsion première, évidemment, qui vient de nous, et lorsqu'elle ne peut se réaliser objectivement, lorsqu'il n'y a pas un accord total entre moi du dedans et moi du dehors, c'est la catastrophe universelle, la cassure.<sup>178</sup>

The bright colourful space of the *Cité radieuse* and Bérenger's inner psychical space are consubstantial, as if engaged in a specular relationship. They are mutually reinforcing. This bears a striking resemblance to Lacan's theory of the Imaginary, purely narcissistic, dynamic between the subject and his or her surrounding environment discussed in detail in the last chapter. The child projects an image of its unified body in its first encounter with the mirror; later in life, the subject seeks out complementary elements in his or her surroundings to cement the ego. Like Bérenger's linking of a 'moi du dedans' and a 'moi du dehors', the Lacanian subject *requires* the exterior space to form his or her ego.

The spectator may be provided with an image of Bérenger caught up in narcissistic plenitude with his surroundings. Significantly, Bérenger alludes to a past time when plenitude was experienced as dizzying luminosity:

Voilà. Voilà : il y avait, autrefois, en moi, ce foyer puissant de chaleur intérieure, contre laquelle le froid ne pouvait rien, une jeunesse, un printemps que les automnes ne pouvaient entamer ; une lumière rayonnante, des sources lumineuses de joie que je croyais inépuisables. (p. 34)

Bérenger describes on several other occasions the relationship between luminosity and his psychical wellbeing. He remembers a time when light shone

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<sup>178</sup>Eugène Ionesco, *Tueur sans gages* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), pp. 31-32. Subsequent references to *Tueur sans gages*, unless otherwise stated, will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.

on him and 'l'indicible euphorie m'envahit' (p. 38). He reflects on a past moment when 'ma propre lumière s'épanchaient dans le monde' (pp. 39-40).

From the textual logic of the play, it may be argued that Ionesco's luminous world of the *Cité radieuse* engenders Bérenger's external confirmation of psychical stability and consistency. In this manoeuvre, the playwright draws upon a long genealogy that privileges light as the embodiment of knowledge, clarity and intellectual lucidity. Phrases as banal as 'to throw light on the matter' or the French 'avoir quelque lumière sur quelque chose' illustrate the implicit connection between light and knowledge. The Enlightenment - 'le siècle des lumières' – played a key role in the sedimentation of this association. Rolf Reichardt surveys the importance and omnipresence of light in the iconography of the Enlightenment in seventeenth-century France. He traces this stress on light back to Roman civilisation and its veneration of the sun god, as well as the metaphysics of Christianity and the promise of Divine light in the ascension to Heaven. Iconography and propaganda of the Enlightenment continued to use light as the embodiment of hope, but it was secularised. Descartes and Voltaire were prominent in debunking the spiritual belief that light signalled an external Divine promise; instead, they placed emphasis on the '*lumières naturelles*' and the individual's powers of cognition. In this sense, light took a distinctly psychological turn. The French Revolution of the eighteenth century cemented the secularisation of light, as the figure of *Liberté*, in the trinity of *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité*, bore the quality of luminosity. Light, through this iconography, was internalised. It became confined to the individual and his or her capacities of knowledge, consciousness and reason. Reichardt lists numerous examples that demonstrate the Enlightenment ideology of light, including the Freemasons' initiation rite – in which the initiated, at first blindfolded, are led by a procession of torches – and the self-proclaimed battle against the 'obscurantists' on the part of philosophers such as Voltaire.<sup>179</sup>

The *Cité radieuse* may incarnate this self-knowledge for Bérenger, drawing upon the Cartesian epistemology that I have just described. It is not only an all-embracing light in which the protagonist rejoices. Vivid colours of

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<sup>179</sup> Rolf Reichardt, 'Light Against Darkness: The Visual Representations of a Central Enlightenment Concept', *Representations*, 61 (1998) 95-148 (pp. 109-10).



this world are brought into relief by light, again bolstering Béranger's sense of self:

Comme c'est beau, quel magnifique gazon, ce parterre fleuri...Ah ! ces fleurs appétissantes comme des légumes, ces légumes parfumés comme des fleurs...et quel ciel bleu, quel extraordinaire ciel bleu...Comme il fait bon ! (p. 15)

However, the spectator can see none of the colours that Béranger sees. The spectator must call upon his or her imagination to recreate this paradise in the mind's eye. All the spectator can see, in reality, is a luminous space:

*Ainsi, après la grisaille, l'éclairage doit jouer sur ce blanc et ce bleu, constituant les seuls éléments de ce décor de lumière. Les bruits du tramway, du vent ou de la pluie auront cessé à l'instant même où se produit le changement d'éclairage. Le bleu, le blanc, le silence, la scène vide doivent créer une impression de calme étrange. (p. 13)*

Where light envelops Béranger in self-delight and security, the spectator experiences the *Cité radieuse* as a luminous artifice.

We might posit that this slippage between the spectator's and Béranger's perceptual experiences of the *Cité radieuse* encourages a sense of irony and the former's distrust in the utopia. However, it is necessary here to consider fully the potential unconscious workings that might inflect theatre spectatorship and, more generally, vision as laid out by Lacan in his theory of the subject. It was noted earlier, with reference to Bellman, that light effects, as the most mobile of all theatrical tools, retain a high degree of power in shaping spectators' perceptions in the medium. Laurent Mannoni's *The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema* demonstrates the persuasive powers of light in live, pre-cinematic media. Practitioners have deployed lighting in the creation of a whole gamut of optical tricks which bank on the spectator's fascination with illusion and the eye's capacity for self-deception: the camera obscura, magic lanterns, magic mirrors, *pantomimes lumineuses*, and so on. Mannoni's research

demonstrates that light has a rich history of co-opting spectators – in the live, pre-cinematic arts – into believing in the veracity of what they see.<sup>180</sup>

While it must be acknowledged that Mannoni's pre-cinematic spectator differs from the contemporary spectator, Alain Badiou notes, naming lighting as one of the vital components of the medium, that theatre relies on simplicity – particularly in today's digitised, technology-immersed society – for its powers of persuasion: 'cette simplicité est elle-même prise dans l'éclaircie de l'enchevêtrement vital'.<sup>181</sup> The image presented before the spectator of *Tueur sans gages*, that of a bright and starkly lit stage, might persuade the viewer to believe in the illusion, in the ideal, through its very simplicity. Ionesco, in fact, does not present his spectators with anything more than an empty, luminous stage in the first act of the play ( '*Au premier acte, l'ambiance sera donnée, uniquement, par la lumière*' [...] '*l'éclairage doit jouer sur ce blanc et ce bleu, constituant les seuls éléments de ce décor de lumière*').<sup>182</sup> Viewers are not exposed to the cluttered, 'real' spaces of the second two acts in which the illusion is shattered, more of which later. This suggests a textual logic that strives, consciously or not, to immerse the spectator in the illusion from the very start, to make him or her believe in it since the playwright resists setting up a divide that signals what is 'real' and what is 'fake' beforehand. Moreover, Ionesco set out to create an uneasy feeling among the audience by leaving the stage empty before the dramatic action starts. It might be argued that the playwright hastens the spectator into believing in the illusion in this manoeuvre:

*Le bleu, le blanc, le silence, la scène vide doivent créer une impression de calme étrange. Pour cela il faut que l'on donne le temps aux spectateurs de le ressentir. Ce n'est qu'au bout d'une bonne minute que les personnages doivent surgir sur la scène.*<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Laurent Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema*, trans. by Richard Crangle (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000).

<sup>181</sup> Alain Badiou, 'Dix thèses sur le théâtre', *Les Cahiers – Comédie Française*, 15 (1995), 5-8 (p. 5).

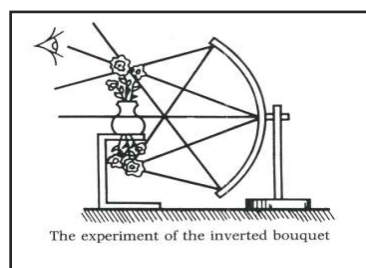
<sup>182</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Tueur sans gages*, L'Avant-scène: Théâtre, 510 (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 10.

<sup>183</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Tueur sans gages*, L'Avant-scène: Théâtre, 510 (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 10.

The *Cité radieuse* might act to dispel this sense of disquiet, potentially providing an impetus for the full spectator's conviction in the reality of what they see. Following Badiou, the bright lighting of this first act may be a technique that, in a contemporary model of spectatorship, mobilises theatrical simplicity to convince and compel.

In his theory of the mirror stage, Lacan argues that the subject's vision has an unconscious propensity to deceive itself in a similar way to that which I have suggested occurs for spectators of *Tueur sans gages*. We secure our ideals and our places in a dominant social framework by way of illusion. Lacan uses the optical illusion 'l'expérience du bouquet renversé' as an analogy for the subject's ideal, self-invested form of vision in the mirror stage.<sup>184</sup> Since the mirror stage occurs throughout life, the experiment also serves as a model for the subject's potentially narcissistic dynamic with reality at certain moments. Dominant ideology frequently exploits the subject's idealised image-relation to outside reality for its own gain. Shannon Winnubst, countering the ahistorical nature of Lacanian thought, deploys Lacan's concept of the optical trickery of the inverted bouquet to analyse individuals' contemporary racial preconceptions (a 'phallicized whiteness') that promote the narcissism of the white subject to prop up white supremacist ideology.<sup>185</sup>

Taking Henri Bouasse's optical experiment of the inverted bouquet, Lacan shows that an illusion of flowers is produced in the reflection of the vase when the subject looks at the mirror from the position of the eye denoted here:<sup>186</sup>



<sup>184</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'Remarque sur le rapport de Daniel Lagache', in *Écrits* (Paris : Seuil, 1966), pp. 647-84 (pp. 672-73).

<sup>185</sup> Shannon Winnubst, *Queering Freedom* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 73.

<sup>186</sup> Image taken from <<http://personal.bgsu.edu/~dcallen/imaginary.html>> [accessed 30 November 2010]

The optical illusion of the bouquet might only be sustained from a fixed 'cone' of perspectives (the arrows pointing outward from the flowers towards the eye in the above image). From these positions, the subject of the experiment sees contrasting strengths of the vase and the bouquet; the mirror image of the seemingly sourceless bouquet is much weaker compared to that of the directly reflected vase. For Lacan, the difference demonstrates that: 'il y a un certain narcissisme [...] [qui] permet d'organiser l'ensemble de la réalité dans un certain nombre de cadres préformés'.<sup>187</sup> The real image of the vase represents the presence of the subject's narcissistic ideals in reality. The vase has a place in framing and precipitating other idealised images, which are represented by the optical illusion of the bouquet. This optical illusion represented Lacan's concept that the mirror stage frames and fabricates the subject's narcissistic impression of 'reality' throughout life.

We might imagine that the spectator, having been presented with nothing else before the start of the performance, is co-opted into believing in the 'magic' of the *Cité radieuse*, through a similar logic to the inverted bouquet illusion. It might be posited that the spectator's narcissism (functioning as the image of the framing vase in Lacan's experiment) is encouraged through the onstage trick of light that invokes the *Cité radieuse* (functioning as the illusion of the bouquet). This form of vision might then shape the spectator's apprehension of the *Cité radieuse* as authentic, perfect and ideal. It is possible that the theatre spectator of *Tueur sans gages* may be inclined to believe in the utopian *Cité radieuse* if the play's unconscious logic stirs up similar processes to those in Lacan's inverted bouquet experiment.

However, eventually, Ionesco begins to direct the spectator explicitly towards the falseness of the *Cité radieuse*, firstly through Bérenger's discourse and then through the play's altered visuality (I explain the latter in the next section). Regarding the former, there are clear verbal signals to the spectator that the luminosity that enchants the protagonist is weightless and without substance in nature. While Bérenger still believes wholeheartedly in this illusion, his increased references to the levity that he feels may, in turn, point to

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<sup>187</sup>*SI*, p. 222.

the *Cité radieuse*'s lack of substance. He starts to invoke a psychical plenitude very different from that based on the brightness described at the start of the play: 'tout était un mélange de plénitude et de légèreté' (p. 40). The two strictly antithetical terms (how can something be full and weightless at the same time?), it may be argued, start to draw attention to the falseness, to the hollow nature of the space created by the lighting. This is further emphasised by the following:

Mais vous devez vous-même parfaitement me comprendre, cette lumière est aussi en vous, c'est la même, c'est la mienne puisque (*grand geste : montrant dans le vide*) vous l'avez, de toute évidence, recréée, matérialisée. (p. 41)

It is not certain how the actor who plays Bérenger will indicate a split between his expressions of plenitude and the actuality of the absence of utopia but the stage direction '*grand geste : montrant dans le vide*' would indicate that the playwright wanted to point his spectators towards the irony of the scene. The emptiness of Bérenger's illusion is further brought to our attention by the fact that the lake, *le bassin*, into which the killer's victims fall must appear as an insubstantial '*forme vague*' according to the stage directions, that appears by means of '*l'éclairage*,' immediately after Bérenger talks of mirages and '*les étangs de lumière*' (p. 29).

These markers of impermanence recall, it may be argued, the floundering of the mirror stage. Lacan describes the propensity of the subject's self-image in the mirror to become 'floue', the French for insubstantial and out of focus, 'selon l'inclinaison du miroir'.<sup>188</sup> He further uses the verb 'ébaucher', meaning to 'sketch out', to describe the objects rendered in the mirror stage: 'il y a une certaine ébauche d'imaginification, si je puis dire, du monde extérieur'.<sup>189</sup> As an analogy of the mirror stage, the illusion of the *bouquet renversé* demonstrates this same transience because it can only be produced within set parameters (the 'cône'). By extension of the analogy that I have set up linking Lacan's experiment and Ionesco's play, it may be posited that Bérenger's verbal signals to the

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<sup>188</sup>Lacan, *SI*, p. 246.

<sup>189</sup> *SI*, p. 154.

spectator that the *Cité radieuse* is weightless might similarly undercut the power of lighting to convey the illusion.

The allusions to the weakness and weightlessness of the light in *Tueur sans gages* may serve, continuing the analogy of the spectator who is put in a position of viewing the optical illusion of the inverted bouquet, to unthread the narcissistic suturing of the viewer's vision to the *Cité radieuse*. The spectator-stage disjunction may be further emphasised by certain sounds which undercut the trick of light that denotes Bérenger's fantasy. At the same time as he asserts the link between the exterior brightness and his own introspective tranquillity, Bérenger faces numerous interruptions that serve to undermine his lofty ideals. The telephone rings, and the Architect proceeds to converse with his interlocutor. The Architect's stern words and crisp manner are juxtaposed with Bérenger's self-contentedness ('je me comprenais très bien'):

Bérenger : C'est bien cela, me disais-je, c'est bien cela...Je ne puis vous expliquer ce que « cela » voulait dire, mais, je vous assure, Monsieur l'Architecte, je me comprenais très bien.

L'Architecte, *au téléphone* : Je ne vous comprends pas, Mademoiselle. Vous n'avez aucun raison de vous plaindre de nous. Ce serait plutôt le contraire. (p. 41)

The seeds of doubt, theoretically speaking, may have been sown in the spectator's mind by the verbal and acoustic disruptions of the luminous artifice. However, it is at the end of the first act and throughout the following two acts that Bérenger's dreams come crashing down, and it is at this point that the notion of the idealised, utopian space onstage is debunked once and for all. This, I shall argue, may constitute the impetus for the spectator's full misrecognition of the stage.

## Part II - Illusion Shattered: Misrecognition

Ionesco may signal to the spectator that something is amiss and not quite as it seems in the *Cité radieuse* when luminosity turns into weightlessness. In this way, he returns spectators to their feelings of unease that he had wanted to conjure up by means of staging emptiness, both visually (*'la scène vide'*) and acoustically (*'le silence'*), before the play starts as described above. By the end of the first act, the realisation also begins to dawn on Bérenger that this perfect land is based on an illusion. He discovers that a killer is terrorising the *Cité radieuse* and expresses a desire to flee. He experiences this sense of terror viscerally:

BERENGER : Partons, partons vite. (*Il tourne en rond, de plus en plus vite, tête baissée.*) Les riches ne sont pas toujours heureux, non plus, ni les habitants des quartiers résidentiels...ni les radieux ! Il n'y a pas de radieux !... c'est encore pire chez les autres, chez nous, les fourmis ! Ah, Monsieur l'Architecte, j'en ressens une telle détresse. Je me sens meurtri, fourbu !... Ma fatigue m'a repris...l'existence est vaine !<sup>190</sup>

At the same time Bérenger articulates a sense of self-alienation that comes as a consequence of discovering that the *Cité radieuse* is not the utopia that he had imagined: 'Il [ce paysage] n'a plus pour moi, à présent, qu'une clarté morte, il n'est plus qu'un cadre vide...Je me sens hors de tout' (p. 57). Bérenger's illusions come to an end. The light, as Bérenger describes, no longer presents itself as a heady lure; rather, it only exposes emptiness and alienation. Whereas before he had perhaps hinted at the emptiness of the illusion in his conflation of light and weightlessness, Bérenger's tone was still ecstatic. With the advent of his anguish, the protagonist may direct the spectator more explicitly to the hollow nature of the *Cité radieuse* and the terror that this realisation brings. It is not simply that Bérenger feels outside of everything (*hors de tout*). With the collapse of utopia and the concomitant breakdown of the illusion of his own mirror stage, Bérenger is isolated from *le tout*, 'the whole' body image projected in the mirror. His dreams of wholeness and plenitude have been shattered.

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<sup>190</sup> *Tueur sans gages* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), p. 69

I have addressed how the brilliance of the light in *Tueur sans gages* may theoretically re-enact the mirror stage for the spectator by drawing upon a similar trick of light of the inverted bouquet that Lacan uses to describe the latter. By the same philosophical logic, a lack of light, and in particular the play's renunciation of lighting to denote space and physical objects may precipitate the collapse of the viewer's mirror stage. Béranger describes how he feels 'de nouveau envahi par la nuit intérieure' when he learns of the damage orchestrated by the killer in the *Cité radieuse* (p. 58). A few pages on, Ionesco may usher in the same sensation for the spectator. Onstage luminosity begins to ebb away, giving way to a space that puts itself on a more equal footing with the darkness of the auditorium, thereby potentially drawing spectators into feeling the darkness experienced by Béranger:

*On peut apercevoir, en perspective, quelques rues sous un ciel de pluie, des silhouettes, de vagues lumières rouges. Le décorateur devra faire en sorte que tout devienne, TRES PROGRESSIVEMENT, plus réel. Le changement doit s'effectuer par l'éclairage et avec très peu d'éléments scéniques : des enseignes et des réclames lumineuses, dont celle d'un bistrot, à gauche, doivent apparaître graduellement, l'une après l'autre, pas plus que trois ou quatre en tout. (pp. 64-65)*

The stage is no longer alluringly luminous; the emphasis is placed on earthy colours and shadows. Further potentially bringing the stage and the spectator together, Béranger and the Architect peer into the darkness of the auditorium, searching for the *bassin* in which the killer's victims drown (pp. 58-59). As they do this, they are horrified to find a dead body, floating in the metaphorical *bassin*; this *bassin* never materialises in the play, as it is only ever alluded to or signified by light (as the '*forme vague*' cited above) or darkness. The play signals that the spectator's space is dystopian, where murders and atrocities are committed.

The admixture of light and dark in *Tueur sans gages* can be analogised as the bellicose forces that subtend the Lacanian mirror stage and which come to the fore when specular synthesis fails. Lacan describes the mirror stage as an arena that recalls the gladiators and games of Ancient Roman due to the battling



psychical forces of this formative event. *Stade*, or stage, is also the French for stadium:

Corrélativement la formation du *je* se symbolise oniriquement par un camp retranché, voire un stade, - distribuant de l'arène intérieure à son enceinte, à son pourtour de gravats et de marécages, deux champs de lutte opposés où le sujet s'empêtre dans la quête de l'altier et lointain château intérieur, dont la forme (parfois juxtaposée dans le même scénario) symbolise le *ça* de façon saisissante.<sup>191</sup>

The subject is split between his or her lofty ideals (*l'altier*) and the deep, dark recesses of his or her interior. When these two come to blows, the conflicts of the id, *le ça*, energise the subject's actions. Transposing this metaphor onto spectatorship in *Tueur sans gages*, we may witness a similar sort of psychical conflict. Contained in the same *stade* as the ego and id, the theatrical parameter of the 'fourth wall' intercepts and divides the spectators from the stage – that is, while the two spaces remain starkly contrasted. Lacan analogises the subject's conflict as a matter of height and depth in the above passage. However, it is where the two become tangled up (*s'empêtrer*) that the trouble really starts. A similar contrast, this time of light and darkness, may operate in the auditorium of *Tueur sans gages*. While dark and light are strictly divided in *Tueur sans gages*, the spectator may derive comfort and shelter from the bright lights of the idealised *Cité radieuse* on the stage. However, once this delineation is overturned and darkness triumphs on the stage and in the auditorium, the underside of the mirror stage may return: *le corps morcelé*.

By the time the second act of this play starts, the contrast between the darkness of the auditorium and the light of the stage is fully eliminated. On the stage, the emphasis is placed on dark, heavy furniture, and a dismal grey:

*La chambre de Bérenger. Pièce obscure, basse de plafond, avec, face à la fenêtre, un centre plus lumineux. Près de cette fenêtre large et basse, un bahut. A la droite*

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<sup>191</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'Le stade du miroir comme formateur du *je*', in *Ecrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 93-100 (p. 97).

*du bahut, un recoin sombre ; dans ce recoin très obscur, un fauteuil de style régence, en assez mauvais état, dans lequel, au lever du rideau, silencieux, Edouard est assis. Au début de l'acte, celui-ci ne se voit pas le fauteuil non plus, à cause de l'obscurité qui règne dans la chambre de Bérenger située au rez-de-chaussée. (p. 80)*

Not only has Bérenger left the space of the *Cité radieuse* and returned to his bedroom in Paris, but the lighting of this space has transformed completely too. The light is no longer strong and bright but lacklustre and yellowing (*'une lumière blafarde, jaunâtre'*). Jacques Mauclair, when he staged *Tueur sans gages* in 1972, placed emphasis on the disappointing nature of the Parisian space compared to the mystical *Cité radieuse*, an effect achieved by means of a simplistic stage-set that was 'sobre, dépouillée, [et qui] donne au drame tout son relief et toute son intensité'.<sup>192</sup>

It is as if perspectives on the play had been transformed without spectators even needing to move from their seats. Recalling the analogy that I have established between this play and Lacan's metaphor for the subject's mirror stage in the optical illusion of the *bouquet renversé*, it may be argued that spectatorial misrecognition, a failed mirror stage, may ensue from this shift in viewpoint. The play's trajectory from a luminous paradise to a sombre dystopia – to put it simply, a staging of the failure of illusion – may parallel the *bouquet renversé* once the subject moves out of the perceptual parameters denoted by the *cône* and the optical trick fails. It is to be noted that this moment of potential misrecognition may not imply the discovery of a great 'truth' by the spectator. Lacan is careful not to promote the moments of misrecognition as those of self-demystification. When the mirror stage fails, a tension is invoked that manifests itself in, as Lacan puts it, 'des mécanismes d'inversion, d'isolation, de reduplication, d'annulation, de déplacement, de la névrose obsessionnelle'.<sup>193</sup> There seems to be a back-and-forth shunting motion between sustaining the plenitude of the mirror image, by reduplicating and displacing, and the will to

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<sup>192</sup> André Ransan, 'Au Théâtre Rive Gauche « Tueur sans gages » d'Eugène Ionesco', *L'Aurore*, 16 December 1972.

<sup>193</sup> Lacan, 'Le stade du miroir', pp. 97-98.

destroy it, by isolation, inversion and cancellation. Lacan explains that an upsurge of aggression starts in the formation of the ego in the mirror stage; the objectifying nature of the process leads to a tension between self-love and defensive aggression at the potential failure of narcissism.<sup>194</sup> Aggressive tendencies are bound up with the inability of the ego to fix the mirror image of Gestalt indefinitely. The spectator may face the same impossibility and the same inexplicable aggression in *Tueur sans gages*, as the illusion falls apart. This could help to explain spectators' experiences of feeling unsettled when viewing the 1972 production of the play, recalling Jean-Jacques Gautier's and Nicolas de Rabaudy's descriptions that all had become grey and lifeless (*terne*) as a result of the play and that *Tueur sans gages* made spectators shudder (*frémit*) as the dramatic action wore on.

### **Theatrical *Corps morcelés***

As mentioned earlier, the destruction of the mirror stage, according to Lacan, is accompanied by the return of the subject's plaguing fear of the *corps morcelé*. Apart from the shifts in the lighting, Ionesco's play may lead the spectator to the other side of the mirror stage by staging a series of *corps morcelé* that I shall outline presently. The spectator is witness to both literal corporeal fragmentations and the breakdown of the unified Aristotelian theatrical model that may be analogised as the Lacanian phantasy of the *corps morcelé*.

Bérenger reveals to his audience that the light of the *Cité radieuse* was nothing more than a 'lumière mensongère' (p. 118). As if to emphasise his point, Ionesco potentially stresses the sinister side of a collective form of narcissism and idealisation. A harmless individual *illusion* of plenitude felt by Bérenger snowballs into a *delusion* felt by the masses in the second act. The community depicted on the stage develops an obsession for their leader, mère Pipe, based on a similar promise, it might be argued, of plenitude (*désaliénation*) evinced by the mirror stage:

VOIX DE LA FOULE : Vive la mère Pipe ! Vive les oies ! Vive les oies !

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<sup>194</sup>Lacan, 'L'Aggressivité', p. 116.

VOIX DANS LA FOULE : Et nous serons désaliénés, grâce à la mère Pipe ! (p. 153)

The potential mirror stage evoked by the collective admiration for la mère Pipe may be kept within the parameters of the stage, excluding the spectator this time. The viewer may be one step removed from it and may be presented with a window that looks onto the collective delusion underpinned by narcissism. Indeed, the spectator may be given access to the other side of the formation of a narcissistic ideal in the social order – the aggressive marginalisation of whosoever should disagree with the dictator. A fight breaks out between la mère Pipe and a character simply called l'Homme, who has dared to disagree with her:

*La mère Pipe et l'Homme, luttant, tombent de l'autre côté de l'estrade. On verra, pendant la scène qui suivra, tantôt la tête de la mère Pipe, tantôt la tête de l'Homme, tantôt les deux à la fois, au milieu d'un vacarme épouvantable. Les voix crient : « Vive la mère Pipe ! A bas l'ivrogne » Puis à la fin des répliques qui vont suivre, une dernière fois, seule la tête de la mère Pipe réapparaîtra, hideuse. La mère Pipe dira, avant de disparaître : « Mes oies l'ont liquidé. » Style guignol. (p. 165)*

The spectator witnesses this scene in the half-light of the Parisian space. The previous illusion of plenitude in the *Cité radieuse* seems a long way off. Somewhere between absurdity and parody – the 'style guignol' making this scene bear a resemblance to a Punch and Judy show – the spectator glimpses disembodied heads, and these may resonate with the fantasy structure of the *corps morcelé*. Thus, in the scene, not only is the mirror stage potentially destroyed but the obverse phantasy of the *corps morcelé* may be enacted. Not only may the spectator theoretically be removed from the central locus of the mirror stage and be forced to view the characters' obsession with la mère Pipe from the outside, the *corps morcelé* may upsurge as a psychical *revenant* in the fight between the leader and her detractor.

This is not the only instance in which the Lacanian *corps morcelé* is potentially theatricalised for the spectator of *Tueur sans gages*. It is fruitful to recall Compagnie l'Informel's efforts to erase and fragment the full-bodied image of the protagonist and the killer by way of red lighting in the photographs shown

earlier. In addition, there are textual indications of destroyed and fragmented bodies. In Act II of the play, the concierge at Bérenger's lodgings appears against the window, so that the only thing that the audience can see is her head and '*son visage qui, naturellement, doit être hideux ; il s'enlaidit encore davantage, par l'aplatissement du nez contre la vitre*' (p. 106). One of la mère Pipe's policemen is disproportionately large in size (p. 170). Other soldiers are merely painted onto the set of the stage, and thus rendered uni-dimensional (p. 180). These corporeal images are in marked contrast to the three-dimensional, unified and proportionately sized bodies of the Architect and Bérenger in the *Cité radieuse* of the first act.

In addition to these staged bodily fragments, the *corps morcelé* may function as a structural thread throughout Ionesco's work. Marie-Claude Hubert understands Ionesco's theatre itself as a fragmented body:

[Dans l'œuvre de Ionesco] le personnage dramatique s'est atomisé car il est partout et nulle part. Un nom, un rôle ne lui sont plus attachés. Son corps est incarné par un acteur, son âme s'exprime partiellement dans un discours. Mais en même temps, elle se profile ailleurs, sur l'espace et les mouvements scéniques. Elle est à lire aussi dans la structure de l'intrigue. Ses pensées, ses sentiments prennent vie des êtres qui ont valeur métonymique. C'est un personnage « en miettes », comme son *Journal*, que Ionesco propose aux spectateurs, un puzzle dans lequel il manque des pièces et dont les morceaux ne s'emboîtent pas.<sup>195</sup>

Hubert's description of Ionesco's fragmentation of 'le personnage dramatique' dovetails with a wider conceptualisation of the playwright's œuvre as breaking the rules of drama defined by Aristotle. The latter placed emphasis on the unities of certain dramatic components – namely, those of place, time and action – in order to form the requisite unified plot.<sup>196</sup> Over the centuries, the rich history of theatre has been shaped and coloured by the dramatic theory that was first laid out by Aristotle in the *Poetics* (c. 335 BC). The theatre of Camus and

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<sup>195</sup>Marie-Claude Hubert, p. 68.

<sup>196</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* (London: Penguin, 1996).

Sartre (such as *Huis clos* (1944)) that preceded the theatre of the absurd drew heavily upon this touchstone of a unified plot. In contrast to the theatre of his immediate predecessors, Ionesco's plays figure, alongside earlier contestations such as Victor Hugo's plays, as works that run counter to an Aristotelian emphasis on time, space and action that coalesce with one another. Ionesco's plays, in their rupturing of traditional dramatic logic, may exert a similar fragmenting force on the unified plot as that of the *corps morcelé* on the whole-body image of the Lacanian mirror stage.

This 'morcelisation' of a unified, Aristotelian theatrical schema is pronounced in *Tueur sans gages*. The audience is exposed to a progressive fragmentation of theatrical unity. There is a descent into pandemonium in the third act of the play. Characters speak to no one in particular and the action becomes confused. In the midst of it all, a nameless 'Homme' begs for the return of 'l'héros'. Here, the man refers to the need for a person who is capable of overturning fascist rule and who 'ose penser contre l'histoire' (p. 157). The man's demand for the heroic figure also ironically recalls the hero of traditional Aristotelian drama, whose actions form the central point of the plot and who is so patently lacking in Ionesco's drama in general and in *Tueur sans gages* in particular. In this sense, the audience also may glean a kind of theatrical *corps morcelé*, a fragmentation of Aristotelian paradigms that hold together a drama.

I have suggested that, following the Lacanian logic of misrecognition, the spectator experiences aggression as the obverse of narcissistic love. Moreover, following the Lacanian schema of the *corps morcelé*, the spectator of *Tueur sans gages* may be plagued by anxiety. These dual affects are, nonetheless, potentially accompanied by the allure of phantasmatic pleasure. Lacan holds the fluid 'corps comme *désir morcelé*' in opposition to the static 'corps comme idéal de soi' of the mirror stage.<sup>197</sup> However, for Lacan desire realises itself in phantasy. The latter may play out the destruction of fixed, normative forms of subjectivity (such as in sadistic or masochistic phantasy), undoing the logic of the oppressive ideologies that construct the unified subject.

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<sup>197</sup> My emphasis. *SI*, p. 255.

As we saw above, Ionesco disrupts the formal codes of theatre in *Tueur sans gages*, by laying waste to the Aristotelian unified plot. While the playwright upends the formal theatrical *corps*, he upholds the unity of the physical theatrical body – that is, that of the actor. In this sense, Ionesco adheres to the Aristotelian precept of theatrical decorum or *bienséance* that Patrice Pavis describes as a set of ‘convenances morales’ on the stage; since Ancient Greek times, a stress has been placed on the need to hold back from depicting reality ‘sous ses aspects vulgaires ou quotidiens’ in the theatre.<sup>198</sup> By turning to discourses of ‘theatricality’, it is possible to argue that Ionesco’s paradoxical subversion of theatre’s formal unity and adherence to *bienséance* (in terms of the preserved physicality of the actor’s body) may evoke phantasy as well as anguish for the spectator. As explained in the Introduction, Josette Féral conceptualises that ‘theatricality’ informs a specific way of seeing on the part of its spectators. Theatre spectators, by virtue of being under the influence of ‘theatricality’, become inscribed in a space that is mid-way between fiction and reality. On the topic of the body and the theatre, Féral suggests that the fictionalisation of the perceived space protects the spectator from experiencing too much anguish, particularly in relation to the mutilated body. When actual bodily damage occurs in performance, theatricality is torn asunder. The actor transgresses ‘all shared rules and codes and is no longer perceived as illusion, fiction, or play’.<sup>199</sup> In this instance, ‘theatre as such has disappeared’.<sup>200</sup> Since no actual bodily harm occurs in *Tueur sans gages*, spectators, following Féral’s logic, may be freer to break the shackles of a traumatising anxiety that would come about from viewing actual, non-theatrical bodily harm.

Relating Féral’s argument on the body in theatre to Lacanian theory of the *corps morcelé*, it might be posited that spectators may explore the phantasmatic portion of the broken body. This theoretical implication could indicate that spectators’ reported discomfort with the play (noted above) may not develop into the form of a paralysing anxiety, but, rather, into that of an unease that

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<sup>198</sup> Patrice Pavis, *Dictionnaire du théâtre* (Paris: Messidor, 1987), pp. 48-49.

<sup>199</sup> Josette Féral, ‘Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language’, trans. by Ronald P. Bermingham, *SubStance*, 31 (2002), 94-108 (p. 104).

<sup>200</sup> Féral, pp. 104-05.

comes from pushing the limits of social norms in phantasy. Jean-Jacques Gautier's declaration that the performance represented the 'première franche interrogation de l'homme' would seem to confirm the play's phantasmatic probing of subjective boundaries.<sup>201</sup> In Lacanian phantasy, as Malcolm Bowie notes, 'the ego experiments with its own future'. It may 'imagine an ideal counterpart' or conversely may consist of a 'phantasy towards cruelty and death'. Bowie glosses Lacanian phantasy as 'creat[ing] for us a dream of identity, symmetry and reversibility'.<sup>202</sup> The spectator, by virtue of the theatrical space, may operate within an analogous phantasmatic logic in the theatre auditorium. *Tueur sans gages*, if it evokes phantasy, may theoretically become a testing-ground for the spectator's ego.

### **Desire and Phantasy in *Tueur sans gages***

In the final scene of *Tueur sans gages*, Bérenger confronts the killer whom he had so desperately sought. However, Bérenger does not achieve the justice that he longs for; he cannot reform the killer and make him see the error of his ways. Far from it, in fact. Bérenger, in a long monologue, finds himself progressively weakened by his own discourse. Rationalism flounders. The final image of the play consists of the killer who, despite his dwarf size, towers over Bérenger with a knife.

By dint of the spectator-stage dynamic of the final scene of *Tueur sans gages* (which I shall describe below), it may be argued that the spectator is placed in an analogous position to Lacan's second experiment of the *vase renversé*.<sup>203</sup> The experiment illustrates the subject's move beyond a narcissistic structure of vision. In this second optical illusion, Lacan introduces a plane mirror into the equation and hides the vase from view (as opposed to the

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<sup>201</sup> *Tueur sans gages* (1973) p. 33

<sup>202</sup> Malcolm Bowie, *Lacan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), pp. 177-78.

<sup>203</sup> Barbara Freedman applies Lacan's two experiments – that of the inverted bouquet and vase – to the spectatorship of Shakespeare's theatre. She exemplifies Shakespeare's use of mistaken identity in *Twelfth Night* and meta-dramatic moments in *Taming of the Shrew* in her method. In a manner similar to my analysis, Freedman uses Lacan's experiments to show how Shakespeare stages misrecognition. Freedman, *Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearean Comedy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp. 32-35.



bouquet in the first experiment). The viewer sees the illusion of the vase surrounding the flowers, this time in the plane mirror. Lacan uses this experiment to illustrate that the subject's securing of narcissistic vision is much more convoluted once the dominant ideologies of the social order (the Lacanian 'Other', represented by the plane mirror in the experiment) are brought to bear on the subject's way of thinking. The Other, as explained in the Introduction, encourages the subject to desire and to cease its purely narcissistic relationship with itself and its surroundings. The subject of desire analogised in the inverted vase experiment may only secure the illusion – which represents the narcissistic ideal of the mirror stage – from one point only in contrast to the cone of positions permitted by the inverted bouquet experiment. As Barbara Freedman puts it, this experiment 'plays out a fundamental alienation that is expressed in relationships of desire, aggressivity, and rivalry'.<sup>204</sup> It represents the combined forces of desire and narcissism on the subject, dual forces that tend to operate on the subject later in life.

It might be hypothesised that the spectator is urged to adopt this desiring form of vision over a narcissistic counterpart. A perceptual reduction of the previously idealised stage occurs. This may emulate the confinement of the optical illusion of the inverted vase to one singular point, rendering narcissistic vision improbable as a result. Immediately before Béranger chances upon the killer, the stage space is suddenly constricted, potentially creating the effect of an expanding sense of darkness, and an unease that may accompany it, in the auditorium:

*Dans le fond, on ne voit plus le tramway en miniature. Le metteur en scène, le décorateur, le spécialiste de l'éclairage doivent faire sentir la solitude de Béranger, le vide qui l'entoure, le désert de cette avenue entre la ville et la campagne. [...] Puis, on pourra [...] de nouveau faire apparaître des murs, les rapprocher en couloir, afin de donner l'impression que Béranger va être pris dans un guet-apens.*<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>204</sup>Freedman, *Staging the Gaze*, p. 34.

<sup>205</sup> *Tueur sans gages* (1973), p. 29.

The lighting, having once overwhelmed the stage, is radically reduced in the final scene between Bérenger and the killer. The spotlight focuses on the two characters whilst the darkness of the rest of the stage surrounds them. The stage direction reads: '*Le vide de la plaine. Vague lueur à l'horizon. Les projecteurs éclairent les deux personnages d'une lumière blafarde, le reste est dans la pénombre*' (p. 193). Although the spotlight illuminates Bérenger and the Tueur, the light remains 'blafarde', weak and pathetic. The diminished strength of the light may incarnate the demise of the *Cité radieuse* and its ideals. Darkness shrouds the rest of the stage.

Within this constricted space that potentially weakens the spectator's narcissistic form of vision, a metaphorical mirror stage is presented to the audience: Bérenger kneels opposite the Tueur; the spectator has a profile view of an invisible 'mirror' between Bérenger and the killer in this scene. This mirror does not elicit absolute symmetry from the two parties, but rather the gradual weakening of one image at the other image's expense. As we saw in Chapter One, Lacan explained that the specular dynamic did not have to be one of exact symmetry but of complementarity. It is to be found in 'toute la gamme des réactions de prestance et de parade[...] [l']esclave identifié au despote, [l']acteur au spectateur, [le] séduit au séducteur'.<sup>206</sup> A suppliant Bérenger acts as the 'esclave' to the Killer's 'despote'. The following image, taken from Quaglio's production of the play, demonstrates this dynamic. The impassive, indifferent facial expression of the killer emphasises his authority and Bérenger's subordination:<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup>Jacques Lacan, 'L'Aggressivité', p. 113.

<sup>207</sup>Eugène Ionesco, *Notes et contre-notes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 186 (plate 12).



Image from *Notes et contre-notes*

The Tueur now, it may be argued, comes to represent the other side of Béranger. As Gisèle Féal puts it, 'le Tueur est la concrétisation des forces psychiques que Béranger a réprimées; le même retour en force du monde du refoulé dont étaient victimes les habitants de la Cité radieuse'.<sup>208</sup> Corroborating this, the protagonist declares that 'nous sommes frères..., et si je vous déteste je dois me détester moi-même' (p. 200). Like the *corps morcelé* and the projection of Gestalt onto the mirror, Béranger and the Tueur are two sides of the same coin: 'vous avez un tempérament diamétralement opposé au mien' (p. 202).

Now, the constituents of the mirror stage – '[l']esclave identifié au despote' – are theoretically confined to the stage itself. This potentially precludes the specular suturing of the 'acteur au spectateur' as may have happened when the *Cité radieuse* took aesthetic precedence on the stage in the form of bright, overwhelming lighting. The spectator may have a different, more ironic perspective on the phenomenon of the mirror stage. In addition, this theatrical representation of the mirror stage appears proportionately smaller;

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<sup>208</sup>Féal, pp. 67-68.

rather than occupying the entire stage, the surrounding darkness of the auditorium creeps onto the stage. Jacques Mauclair's production of *Tueur sans gages* in Paris's Hôtel Sully (1967) emphasised the perspectival reduction of the final scene by constricting the large stage space at the start of the play by 'screens coming forward from either side [...] [of the wings] and splaying out towards the front of the stage'.<sup>209</sup>

Bérenger engages in a final monologue before the lights go out and the play ends. The monologue reaches its climax when Bérenger accuses the killer of destroying the bonds of society. The killer may function as the agent of the underside of the mirror stage, the *corps morcelé*. He exerts a fragmenting effect on the utopian society of the *Cité radieuse*, as Bérenger declares: 'L'univers est peut-être inutile et vous avez peut-être raison de vouloir le faire sauter, ou de le grignoter au moins, créature par créature, morceau par morceau' (p. 205). Bérenger's rhetoric of societal fragmentation is finally replaced by his own corporeal fragmentation of sorts. The audience is exposed to the protagonist's bodily and psychological atrophy by the increasing power of the Tueur. The killer's laughter becomes more potent and there is a '*déroute de plus en plus visible de Bérenger*' (p. 204). Finally, Bérenger's physical strength wanes, and he cowers in submission:

*Puis, de nouveau, devant l'assassin qui tient le couteau levé, sans bouger et en ricanant, Bérenger baisse lentement ses deux vieux pistolets démodés, les pose à terre, incline la tête, puis, à genoux, tête basse, les bras ballants, il répète, balbutie.*  
(p. 207)

This final image, by potentially conjuring up the language of the *corps morcelé*, may cement the spectator's own play of phantasy and concomitant desiring form of vision.

To recapitulate, I have argued that the spectator witnesses a transformation of the stage space from illusion and plenitude, to the destabilisation of illusion by a reduction in the intensity of the light, to the weakening of Bérenger's body and mind. The final image, before the lights go

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<sup>209</sup> J. H. McCormick, p. 36.

out completely at the play's finish, is one of the weakened body, the fantasised body that the mirror stage had tried so hard to cover up by the projected whole body image. It may be argued that the spectator perceives all of those points *other than* the point that fixes narcissistic vision in the inverted vase experiment. As Béranger himself admits: 'Tout s'éteindra, tout finira de soi-même' (p. 199). We might suggest that Béranger's words are echoed conceptually in the spectator's broken-down mirror stage. The spectator's narcissistic vision may be extinguished by the dramatic logic of the play.

### **Assessing a Politics of Misrecognition**

I have argued that Ionesco progressively liberates spectators from the stranglehold of narcissistic identification with the stage. His play, *Tueur sans gages*, may stage the demise of the Imaginary by potentially following Lacan's inverted bouquet and vase experiments when these two fail. By exposing spectators to the spurious actuality of the *Cité radieuse*, Ionesco potentiates a politics of spectatorship that interrogates and flouts (via phantasy) the norms and ideals that construct subjectivity. Ionesco in *Tueur sans gages* may create a space in which misrecognition and phantasy are privileged. Although Lacan may have expressed his hopes for a politics of phantasy in the clinic ('c'est ce qui lui permettra de prendre au terme vrai de l'analyse sa valeur électorale, de figurer dans le fantasme, devant quoi le sujet se voit s'abolir, en se réalisant comme désir'), both misrecognition and phantasy have by no means been conclusively held to be political in other settings.<sup>210</sup> This is an ambivalence that I will discuss in the following in relation to a politics of spectatorial misrecognition conceptualised in this chapter.

In the theatre and performing arts, misrecognition is politically ambivalent. Elizabeth Wright has related the concept to Brechtian theatrical *Verfremdungseffekt*;<sup>211</sup> as such, it has also been associated with a politics of theatre. Rebecca Schneider, on the other hand, argues that misrecognition has

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<sup>210</sup>Lacan later called this advent of desire at the expense of subjectivity '*fading*' after Ernest Jones's concept of 'aphanisis'. Lacan, 'Remarque sur le rapport de Daniel Lagache', in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966) pp. 647-84 (p. 682).

<sup>211</sup>Elizabeth Wright, *Postmodern Brecht: A Re-presentation* (London ; New York : Routledge, 1989).

been commodified in performance art, and she calls for a 'recognition of misrecognition' to rectify this.<sup>212</sup> With these two very different views, I want to show how misrecognition and a closely aligned concept of Lacanian phantasy are by no means a closed topic in the arena of performance criticism.

Misrecognition is inscribed within the mirror stage. As such, Elizabeth Wright (1989) describes how it acts as a kind of 'built-in estrangement effect' – an intrinsic Brechtian strategy – within the subject. The structure of misrecognition inherent to perception ultimately helps to reinforce what Brecht alluded to as *Verfremdungseffekt* in his theatre. Brechtian theatre worked on the premise that, if the spectator were reminded of the fact that he or she was in the theatre, this would initiate the instigation of critical distance between the stage and the spectator. In other words, the spectator is precluded from forming narcissistic plenitude with the stage by the intercession of misrecognition in the process of rendering the stage a mirror image. Brechtian theatre is self-referential, constantly reminding the spectator of its illusoriness. Wright goes on to say that through the Brechtian strategy, mirror identification is broken:

The narcissistic subject will tirelessly continue to search for itself in the other, but the other will surprise it by having a desire of his or her own. Thus continuous perception is disorganized by another's gaze, a kind of built-in estrangement effect. [...] Lacan sees this as a universal black comedy, where lack paves the way to desire – the other has not got what I want so I must look beyond to the Symbolic Order and a provisional name and role – and lack is simultaneously a threat to narcissism and the desire for a safe identity.<sup>213</sup>

The spectator cannot look to the stage for the security of stable subject identity. The stage constantly reminds the spectator of its autonomy by means of misrecognition. This allows the spectator to contextualise the dramatic action, to deduce the wider socio-political significance of the play.

However, the double misrecognition that informs Wright's Brechtian theatrical politics – that of the subject and that of *Verfremdungseffekt* in the

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<sup>212</sup>Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 93.

<sup>213</sup>Wright, p. 56.

theatre – is not necessarily instigated in Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages*. Unlike Brecht, the Romanian playwright resolutely denied any overt kind of political intentionality in his theatre. He strongly disagreed with Brecht's mode of theatre because of its crude ideological overlay and aesthetic paucity:

Le bourgeois n'est-il pas, selon le marxisme, quelqu'un qui a perdu, en quelque sorte, son humanité ? M. Brecht prenait la chose au pied de la lettre : dans une de ses pièces, les tyrans sont des marionnettes géantes auxquelles on coupe la tête sereinement, car le sang ne coule pas des gorges en cartes des marionnettes : tuons les bourgeois, n'ayez pas crainte, ils ne sentent rien.<sup>214</sup>

Therefore, Wright's theatrical politics of misrecognition is brought into question when it is applied to Ionesco's theatre. Wright's strategy, moreover, risks overlooking the fact that misrecognition is inextricably linked to the unconscious life of the subject, as I have shown in this chapter. How can a spectator seize upon his or her 'political consciousness' by a process that speaks to the spectator's unconscious? This underscores a tension at the heart of a Lacanian theory of misrecognition. Even though misrecognition does point to the alienation within subjectivity – to an inability to shore up stable, normative identities – it is also *necessary* in order to form the defensive ego that strives to counter this alienation. Every ego identification is a misrecognition. Even if misrecognition comes to the fore, as it does in the spectator's reaction to *Tueur sans gages*, this does not automatically imply the rupturing of reified values of selfhood and subjectivity.

Misrecognition as a simple process of uncovering ideological artifice, suggested by Wright, is a limited solution for a politics of spectatorship in a postmodern world. Louis Althusser (1970) connected Lacanian misrecognition and the Imaginary to the processes by which an individual is hailed into the ideologically laden construct of subjectivity ('interpellation').<sup>215</sup> Following Althusser, Slavoj Žižek circumscribes both misrecognition and phantasy within

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<sup>214</sup>Ionesco, *Notes et contre-notes: pratique du théâtre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 324.

<sup>215</sup>Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation', in *Media and Cultural Studies Keywords*, ed. by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner, 2edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 79-88.

the realm of the apolitical. For Žižek, the belief, prevalent in some discourses of postmodernity, that the current world is post-ideological is a phantasy based on misrecognition. Even if we claim to divine the inner workings of ideology:

The fundamental level of ideology [...] is not of an illusion masking the real state of things but that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality itself. And at this level, we are of course far from being a post-ideological society. Cynical distance is just one way – one of many ways – to blind ourselves to the structuring power of ideological fantasy: even if we do not take things seriously, even if we keep ironical distance, *we are still doing them*.<sup>216</sup>

It would seem then that misrecognition and phantasy hold little for a politics of spectatorship in postmodern times. By this charge, a politics of spectatorship evoked by Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages* is limited.

Through a similar logic, Rebecca Schneider notes the parallel commodification of misrecognition in the para-theatrical field of performance art. It duplicates the logic of capitalism. Far from explaining misrecognition as an opportunity for alienating the spectator from the stage, she explains that there is a lure to misrecognition:

If anxiety were to cease to masquerade, and to pass, a desire, perhaps we could acknowledge, practice, and circulate a desire based on something other than the thrall to loss, deferral, displacement, misrecognition and insatiability – a satiable desire, built on present satisfaction, reciprocity, and mutual exchange.<sup>217</sup>

Misrecognition is inscribed within the structure that keeps the subject desiring. I have identified a similar logic at play in *Tueur sans gages*. Phantasies of the *corps morcelé* are played with, sated and exchanged in order to feed desire. To make her case, Schneider uses the example of the 'dreamgirls' displayed on the tins of hot chocolate brand in the Netherlands of the 1930s and 40s. The dreamgirls encouraged buyers to purchase the item. The paradox is that whilst this image

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<sup>216</sup>Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London; New York: Verso, 1989), p. 33.

<sup>217</sup>Schneider, p. 83.



can be possessed by means of buying the product, they cannot fully be possessed because their image remains on the tin whilst the hot chocolate powder within is consumed. The buyer cannot consume the substance of these dreamgirls. This, as Schneider explains, is a misrecognition of the product that actually helps to boost its commodification. Far from causing a terrifying self-alienation at the realisation of this lack of power over the dreamgirls, the consumer continues to buy. Phantasies can be consumed and sated by the spectator and the play will end, but desire carries on untouched and intangible in the same way that the dreamgirls remain aloof, always out of reach.

In sum, the self-alienation potentially induced by misrecognition in the spectatorship of *Tueur sans gages* is politically ambiguous. Where Wright insists, in Brechtian terms, upon the value of the alienation effects brought about by misrecognition, Schneider calls for a 'recognition of misrecognition'. The exclusionary practices of Lacanian discourse may, in fact, lead us to dismiss misrecognition and phantasy too hastily as politically ineffectual. In fact, it must not be forgotten that phantasy becomes a potential means of *escaping* social stricture (a view expressed by Lacan himself in terms of clinical praxis), because of the subject's loosened shackles with its own narcissism that secures the formation of subjectivity. In Tim Dean's gloss: 'if the imagination may be coordinated with the Lacanian imaginary as a synthesizing power, then fantasy must be coordinated with the Lacanian real as a disintegrating force, one that ultimately resists all efforts at assimilation and domestication'.<sup>218</sup> The debate on a phantasmatic politics of spectatorship is, in short, far from over.

### **Concluding Remarks: Parallels with Jean Genet's *Les Bonnes***

The broken-mirror logic of Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages* that I have studied in this chapter draws parallels with plays by another absurdist playwright: Jean Genet. Genet's *Adame Miroir* (1944) constitutes a dance performed by three characters, le Domino, le Matelot and l'Image (of the Matelot). The sailor and his mirror image engage in a dance that results in the latter emerging from the mirror. The interaction between them reflects the same paradoxical dynamic (love and

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<sup>218</sup> Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 259.

aggression) of the Lacanian mirror stage. Sometimes the sailor and his image betray signs of extreme love for one another (*'les deux danseurs tentent d'évoquer une course amoureuse. Il se prennent par le cou, puis se délivrent, dansent joue contre joue. En fait ils se lâchent très peu'*).<sup>219</sup> Other times the dynamic is aggressive: the Domino kills the seaman while the latter's mirror image looks on impassively; the former then metamorphoses into the murdered seaman and proceeds to chase the image back into the mirror (*'le Domino poursuit le Matelot. Le Matelot se sauve. Il essaye de rentrer dans un miroir, sans jamais s'y réfléchir'* (p. 251)). Genet's *'Adame Miroir* theatricalises, perhaps more explicitly than Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages*, the complexities and vicissitudes of the specular dynamic. Since the playwright brings these tensions onto the stage and forecloses the spectator from involvement in this specular interaction, his ballet might similarly be argued to conjure up a space of misrecognition for the spectator, one that is inflected, as I have argued by turning to Lacanian theory, with phantasy and subjective instability.

*'Adame miroir* was performed as a ballet by Théâtre Marigny in Paris in 1948.<sup>220</sup> However, to my knowledge, there is no documentation to suggest that contemporary performances of *'Adame miroir* have taken place, much less any detail on spectator reaction to the play. As a result of this lacuna, it is fruitful to turn to spectatorial accounts of Genet's most performed play, *Les Bonnes* (1947), in order to explore the playwright's links with a spectatorial politics of misrecognition and phantasy and the empirical implications of this form of politics further. Both *Les Bonnes* and *'Adame miroir* contain a fundamental structure of mirroring. In contrast to the historical abstractness of *'Adame miroir*, *Les Bonnes* was inspired by the infamous real-life case of two sisters and servants, Léa and Christine Papin, who brutally killed their mistress in 1933 and were then discovered by the police in bed together.

Genet's loose fictionalisation of this event features two sisters Claire and Solange who act out a 'cérémonie' each night in their servants' quarters in an

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<sup>219</sup> Jean Genet, "Adame Miroir", in *Théâtre complet* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), pp. 245-53. Subsequent references to *'adame Miroir* will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>220</sup> Peter Stoneley, *A Queer History of the Ballet* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 142.

attic. They rehearse their plot to kill their employer by means of this ceremony. The two sisters take turns in a Master-Slave dialectic:

CLAIRE, *énumérant méchamment, et imitant Madame* : Passe-moi la serviette !  
Passe-moi les épingles à linge ! Epluche les oignons ! Grattes les carottes ! Lave  
les carreaux ! Fini. C'est fini. Ah ! J'oubliais ! ferme le robinet ! C'est fini. Je  
disposerai du monde.<sup>221</sup>

SOLANGE : Hurlez si vous voulez ! Poussez même votre dernier cri, madame !  
(*Elle pousse Claire qui reste accroupie dans un coin.*) [...] Madame peut m'appeler  
Mademoiselle Solange. Justement. (p. 105)

The interchangeable power dynamic between Solange and Claire is inflected with the sisters' own paradoxical feelings for one another, which are a mixture of hatred and love:

SOLANGE : Je voudrais t'aider. Je voudrais te consoler, mais je sais que je te  
dégoûte. Je te répugne. Et je le sais puisque tu me dégoûtes. S'aimer dans le  
dégout, ce n'est pas s'aimer.

CLAIRE : C'est trop s'aimer. Mais j'en ai assez de ce miroir effrayant qui me  
renvoie mon image comme une mauvaise odeur. Tu es ma mauvaise odeur. (p.  
58)

The Master-Slave dyad of the two sisters and their simultaneous love and hatred for one another recalls the paradoxes of the mirror stage that are brought to the fore in misrecognition as we have seen in this chapter.

As Kenneth Krauss notes in his hypothesising of a 'rhetorical audience' to Genet's *Les Bonnes*, 'literal and figurative mirrorings' abound in the dramatic action:

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<sup>221</sup> Jean Genet, *Les Bonnes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 59. Subsequent references to *Les Bonnes* will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.

The mirror, as is obvious to my spectators, plays a central and ongoing role [...]. The dressing table and its mirror remain onstage throughout. Claire as Madame primps before it; Madame talks to herself in front of it; and in it she catches Claire entering on tiptoe with the poisoned tea. During their “game”, Claire demands that Solange use Madame’s patent leather shoes as a mirror, and later Solange gives Claire a hand mirror.<sup>222</sup>

For Krauss, the spectators that he imagines ‘cease to regard what is framed by the proscenium as an operative looking glass [...] [and] the whole concept of the stage-as-mirror, according to which what is enacted on stage is reflected in real life, they feel obliged to debunk, to negate’.<sup>223</sup> Following Krauss, it could also be argued that the concepts that we have seen in this chapter – a broken mirror stage, misrecognition and phantasy – are equally prominent in Genet’s *Les Bonnes*. Like *Tueur sans gages*, the spectator is presented with the onstage Master-Slave dichotomy, a profusion of mirrored actions and the simultaneous love and aggression that Claire and Solange display towards one another. All these could, like *Tueur sans gages*, be said to rupture any narcissistic relationship that the spectator may experience towards the stage. It could be argued that these elements expose the mechanisms of the mirror stage and its underside to the ironic gaze of the viewer.

This logic of misrecognition can, in fact, be deduced from the documented responses of spectators of *Les Bonnes*. Although conducted in 1975, Anne-Marie Gourdon’s empirical survey of audience response to Víctor García’s production of Genet’s play is nonetheless insightful for this thesis’s focus on postmodern spectatorship of the theatre of the absurd, as the advent of postmodernity as a cultural attitude has been argued by many critics to come before and around this date.<sup>224</sup> Gourdon reports that twenty percent of her respondents felt that the play had a ‘portée psychologique’ and one spectator even connected the onstage ‘psychodrame’ to her own psychical experiences: ‘Genet a voulu montrer des

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<sup>222</sup> Kenneth Krauss, *Private Readings/Public Texts: Playreaders’ Constructs of Theatre Audiences* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1993), p. 106.

<sup>223</sup> Krauss, p. 106.

<sup>224</sup> Lyotard published *La Condition Postmoderne* in 1979 but conducted his sociological research throughout the 1970s.

personnages que nous avons l'habitude de jouer au plus profond de nous-mêmes, sans jamais oser les extérioriser'.<sup>225</sup>

A spectator of Neil Bartlett's 2007 version of *The Maids* at the Brighton Festival argued that this is a 'great play about identity' or, more specifically, its capacity to subvert a stable notion of subjective identity. In addition to the exposed mirror relations between the protagonists detailed by Genet in the play-text and brought out by Krauss (above), a stable view of identity was undermined by the play's nightly interchanging of the three actors who play Claire, Solange and Madame. According to this reviewer, 'for the audience this is a thrill; 'who will we get tonight' will be the question before the play, and who suits which role best the vexed question for afterwards'.<sup>226</sup> Not only does this identity-switch recall the instability of stable subjectivity exposed in a process of Lacanian misrecognition, the 'thrill' that this creates hints at a similar form of phantasmatic pleasure of the *corps morcelé* that the subject derives from his or her dissolution in the process of misrecognition.

This blogger describes Bartlett's production as set in 'an industrial looking space off the hotel's car park and up some grotty back stairs' while 'the traverse stage is simply the red and white confetti strewn concrete floor, and the set a bed and side table, with several warped chandeliers on the floor, acting as atmospheric lighting'. Despite the intimate and atmospheric nature of Bartlett's production ('the audience [gets] up close to the actors'), this blogger describes the play as creating the sensation of being in a 'cavernous space'.<sup>227</sup> The psychical distance that this spectator felt from the stage, despite paradoxically retaining a close physical proximity to the actors, could be argued to recall the alienation that the subject experiences when the mirror stage is broken in misrecognition.

Related to this sense of alienation from the stage, another reviewer describes the protagonists of Frogface Productions' 2010 version in Oxford as

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<sup>225</sup> Anne-Marie Gourdon, *Théâtre, Public, Perception* (Paris: Centre National de Recherches Scientifiques, 1982), p. 157.

<sup>226</sup> <<http://seaninthestalls.blogspot.com/2007/05/review-maids.html>> [accessed 19 October 2011].

<sup>227</sup> <<http://seaninthestalls.blogspot.com/2007/05/review-maids.html>> [accessed 19 October 2011].

'act[ing] out the ritual of their respective class's desires to each other' and expos[ing] the fetishistic nature of desire itself, symbolised by the individual's rapt consumption of her own mirror image'.<sup>228</sup> This reviewer articulates an onstage exposure of the sisters' and Madame's narcissism ('the individual's rapt consumption of her own mirror image'). I have argued in this chapter that the mirrored relations between protagonists potentially conjure up the spectator's experience of misrecognition. Similarly, this reviewer articulates her own sense that the ideologies of desire are 'exposed' by means of a narcissism that remains confined to the stage. It is instructive to recall Shannon Winnubst's argument (cited earlier) that the Lacanian theory of the *bouquet renversé* experiment helps us to understand the co-optation of narcissistic visuality in the service of dominant ideologies. This reviewer's sense that 'the fetishistic nature of desire' is 'exposed' consequently bears a striking resemblance to Lacanian misrecognition and its exposure of the pernicious ideologies that prop up this idealised form of vision. It could help to explain this spectator's instinctual impressions of this production.

Another blogger articulates a sense of ontological instability – analogous perhaps to Lacanian misrecognition – that the play conjures up for the spectator in a commentary on the 2010 production of *The Maids* directed by Thomas Gruenewald in Pittsfield. Here, the two sisters were played by cross-dressing men:

In this new production, one that shines with brilliantine and bubbles with borax, one is left doubting the senses one was born with. There is a compulsion to laugh, but little to laugh at. There is an equal compulsion to cry but nothing to cry about. To make matters even more indelicate one wishes to scream at times, but one knows how inappropriate that would be and so one doesn't.

This oddness of human reactions is the logical outcome, or illogical if you prefer it, of an evening spent with three wonderful actors giving the performances of

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<sup>228</sup> Sophie Lewis, 'New Production of absurdist play by Jean Genet', <[http://www.dailyinfo.co.uk/reviews/feature/5073/The\\_Maids](http://www.dailyinfo.co.uk/reviews/feature/5073/The_Maids)> [accessed 19 October 2011].

their lives in cross-gendered roles that constantly vary between simulated life and real life and after a while it is hard to tell which is which. Or what is what.<sup>229</sup>

The defamiliarisation that this blogger experiences suggests a similar kind of subjective insecurity and displacement that Lacan describes when the dominant narcissistic relationship of the individual to his or her surroundings is severed.

I discussed above the ambivalent form of politics that may result from spectatorial misrecognition: on the one hand, the concept has been linked to Brecht's alienated and politicised spectator; on the other, theorists such as Althusser, Žižek and Schneider have argued that it nourishes the logic of late capitalism, since our interpellation as subjects of ideologies is based on a misrecognition. Empirical spectators' responses to Genet's *Les Bonnes* echo the political ambivalence noted by these theorists. Anne-Marie Gourdon observes that 23% of her respondents considered that García's production of *Les Bonnes* had first and foremost 'une portée sociale', denouncing 'l'oppression des bonnes' and 'l'écrasement des petits par la bourgeoisie'.<sup>230</sup> This is despite the fact that Genet stated explicitly in his prefatory 'Comment jouer *Les Bonnes*' that 'il ne s'agit pas d'un plaidoyer sur le sort des domestiques. [...] Cela ne nous regarde pas' (p. 10). Whilst Gourdon notes that this figure of 23% denotes 'une majorité de spectateurs' when compared with her other findings, the reality is that this critic's findings did not reveal any overwhelming principal impression of the play.<sup>231</sup> Nobody in Gourdon's survey expressed the feeling that they themselves felt liberated as a result of the play's acting out of the workings of class ideology or the battle between master and slave. Indeed, one respondent observed that this play unearths precisely the difficulties of overturning dominant ideologies relating to class: 'Genet traduit au niveau psychologique le besoin d'identification du sous-prolétariat aux patrons'.<sup>232</sup> This observer, a student in philosophy,

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<sup>229</sup> My emphasis. Peter Bergman, "The Maids", <[http://www.blogtheberkshires.com/theater/2010/10/hay\\_fever.html](http://www.blogtheberkshires.com/theater/2010/10/hay_fever.html)> [accessed 19 October 2011].

<sup>230</sup> Gourdon, p. 157.

<sup>231</sup> For instance, 10% gave no interpretation of the play; 12% decided that the production was not relevant either due to the text of the production; 5% found it outdated; 8% found the play political. Gourdon, pp. 156-57.

<sup>232</sup> Gourdon, p. 157.

recalls in his words Althusser's theory of the interpellation of individual as a subject of dominant ideologies by means of Lacanian misrecognition. Subjects willingly recognise their subordinate positions in an ideological framework as it accords them a sense of identity and misrecognise their alienation in accepting this subordination.

Whilst this comment was made by a philosophy student and thus could even be directly inflected by Althusserian theory, it is in the audience's general, non-theoretical observations of García's production that the notion of misrecognition comes to the fore. Many spectators articulated a 'cynical distance' described by Žižek (cited above). This not only suggests that the spectator experiences a kind of misrecognition of the stage; it also serves to underscore the fraught politics of this Lacanian concept on a level of theatrical spectatorship. One spectator deems the play to be gratuitous because 'il n'y a plus de bonnes dans cette condition'.<sup>233</sup> Another states that 'il y a trente ans, on aurait pu dire que c'était une pièce sociale, maintenant, ce n'est rien'.<sup>234</sup> Another spectator opines that 'c'est gratuit, car dans la vie cela ne se passe pas ainsi : les bonnes ont des compensations, elles peuvent être heureuses que d'autres personnes'.<sup>235</sup> Finally, one respondent states that:

Les faits sont tellement éloignés de la réalité que cela ne m'intéresse pas, la pièce pour moi est gratuite ; je me demande si le public peut y trouver quelque chose qui concerne ses propres problèmes.<sup>236</sup>

These thoughts perhaps stress the depoliticising effects of the spectator's misrecognition of the stage. Misrecognition leaves the spectator predisposed to disconnect from the issues presented on the stage. The spectator fails to recognise, it might be argued, his or her own role of complicity and

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<sup>233</sup> Gourdon, p. 158.

<sup>234</sup> Gourdon, pp. 156-57.

<sup>235</sup> Gourdon, p. 158.

<sup>236</sup> Gourdon, p. 158.



subordination in the ideologies of class laid bare by *Les Bonnes*. He or she is able to say: "This play is irrelevant. It is not about me".

Notwithstanding this anecdotal evidence of the spectator's disconnection from the issues at the heart of *Les Bonnes*, Gourdon writes that a certain proportion (6%) of viewers expressing cynicism recognise the play's value 'sur un plan artistique'.<sup>237</sup> One spectator comments that 'il faut cependant en reconnaître la beauté'.<sup>238</sup> Given viewers' admiration of the play's aesthetic appeal, it might be asked if a politics of spectatorship might yet be extracted from the unconscious logic that it deploys. Can the misrecognition within the spectator-stage dynamic be mobilised for political ends? The 2011 production by Buddies Theatre in Toronto would suggest so, as detailed by blogger Bob Leahy:

I don't want to give the impression that the show is at any point anything less than thoroughly enjoyable. It's dialogue-heavy, true, but quite often riveting. [...] [...] The opening segment of the show at least is easy-peasy to relate to – an S&M play scene, clearly one repeated many times in the past with elaborate rules, which occasionally the actors will refer to, slipping out of character for a moment, ended by an alarm which signifies that even its timing is planned out in advance. It's very queer friendly too, weirdly erotic and all about power imbalances, servitude and social imbalance. We can relate to this, no? [...] But above all, I *think* you'll like the mental challenge.<sup>239</sup>

The claims made by this commentator would suggest that the production reinvigorates its depiction of the master-slave dialectics of Genet's original text, and this creates contemporary resonances with queer and S&M communities in Toronto. It would seem to strike a chord with this spectator that, as we might note, negotiates all of the negative, depoliticising consequences of misrecognition and overturns them. This spectator's experience of distance

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<sup>237</sup> Gourdon, p. 158.

<sup>238</sup> Gourdon, p. 158.

<sup>239</sup> Bob Leahy, 'Sadomasochistic role-playing, anyone?', <<http://positivelite.com/content/blog/blog-all-contributors/tag/blog/Review%20of%20The%20Maids%20by%20Jean%20Genet>> [accessed 19 October 2011].

from the stage (it is a 'mental challenge') implies something analogous to Elizabeth Wright's Brechtian politics of misrecognition as critical alienation. Similarly, another blogger who commented on this production experienced a sense of distance from the action in 'the subtle lighting and the actors' stage directions [that] ensure[d] that the audience [was] never really addressed'. A 'figurative fourth wall [...] [was] eventually built around the stage'.<sup>240</sup> Bob Leahy's account that power is eroticised and manipulated in this production hints at a phantasmatic exploration of subjective and social dissolution (recalling *le corps morcelé*) that might also ensue from a ruptured mirror stage. This probing chimes with Tim Dean's championing of a Lacanian politics of phantasy. The blogger's repeated suggestions that queer sub-culture can relate to and identify with this onstage probing of power relations suggest that any misrecognition that the spectator experiences is not converted into his or her own exculpation from the ideologies onstage (as empirical accounts of García's production would indicate). Rather, misrecognition may be channelled into a form of critical distance that resists evacuating the spectator's eroticised connection to the power structures being played out on the stage.

The political ambivalence of spectatorial misrecognition borne out in the findings of this chapter has illustrated the first signs of a politics of the discordance at the heart of the aesthetic of absurd theatre. The next chapter considers one of Ionesco's earlier plays, *La Cantatrice chauve* (1950) which, as we shall see, bears a similar political ambivalence to *Tueur sans gages*. In contrast to this play's stimulation of the spectator's misrecognition, however, the modality of reaction to this play will be argued to be one of perversion.

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<sup>240</sup> Rose Graves, 'The Maids by Jean Genet – A Domestic Detestation', <<http://theatreinreview.wordpress.com/2011/09/29/%E2%80%98the-maids%E2%80%99-by-jean-genet-%E2%80%93-a-detestation-of-domesticity/>> [accessed 20 October 2011].

### Chapter 3

#### Comedy in Unexpected Places: Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* (1950) and the Perverse Mode of Spectatorship

Eugène Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve* (1950) constitutes one of the paradigmatic examples of the theatre of the absurd, according to Martin Esslin.<sup>241</sup> In many respects, this play was amongst the first of its kind to align itself with the notion of 'anti-theatre', a term that Ionesco was retrospectively to use to designate his play as Ronald Hayman points out.<sup>242</sup> According to Hayman:

To use the term 'anti-theatre' is to emphasise the negative, destructive, revolutionary, reductionist and abstractionist tendencies in the new theatrical art. The anti-play is less mimetic than satirical, not so much a story about life in a particular time as an object in its own right, non-referential, implicitly denying the feasibility of referential art.<sup>243</sup>

This non-referentiality is pronounced in *La Cantatrice chauve*, as the dramatic characters – the two British couples the Smiths and the Martins, the fireman and the maid Mary – offer up no signs of personality with which the spectator can identify. Description of their costumes scarcely figures, much less any background information on their lives prior to the play. Stripped bare of these traits, they exist solely as entities that spout forth a series of nonsensical phrases. Their discourse is comprised of clichés, paradoxes, homonyms, rhymes and rhetorical commonplaces. The play ends with a return to the start of the dramatic action with the roles of the Smiths and Martins reversed, thereby refusing the spectator a resolution of the drama that might make sense of its nonsensical language.

The stream of unrelated words was the reason why Ionesco considered *La Cantatrice Chauve* to be a 'Tragédie du langage'.<sup>244</sup> Ionesco's capitalisation of

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<sup>241</sup> See 'Eugène Ionesco: Theatre and Anti-theatre', in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1961), pp. 128-99.

<sup>242</sup> Ronald Hayman, *Theatre and Anti-Theatre: New Movements since Beckett* (London: Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd, 1979), p. 50.

<sup>243</sup> Hayman, pp. xi-xii.

<sup>244</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Notes et contre-notes: pratique du théâtre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 131.

the word ‘Tragédie’ is revealing; it suggests that he expected that his play would figure as a magisterial, convention-defying tragedy that would reinvent the genre. Yet, the playwright’s hopes were quickly dashed in one respect. While the play gained avant-garde status in the 1950s, it was not for its innovations with regard to the genre of tragedy but, rather, to that of *comedy*.

*La Cantatrice chauve* has experienced an extraordinary history as this comedy. The tiny Huchette Theatre on Paris’s Left Bank has performed Nicolas Bataille’s production of Ionesco’s play since 1957. As noted on the Huchette’s website, this production has attracted an estimated one and a half million spectators.<sup>245</sup> It continues to be performed to an audience most nights. The production continually generates laughter and exerts a comedic effect on spectators. As Gonzague Phélip notes, the play represents ‘un demi-siècle de frissons, de drames, d’ultimatums, de crises, d’applaudissements et de bonheurs’.<sup>246</sup>

This is not the only example of the comic force of *La Cantatrice chauve* in performance. There is an extensive range of productions of this play, and some have deployed new and creative techniques to generate laughter among audiences. In Brat Productions’ version of *The Bald Soprano* in New York (1998) and Pennsylvania (2010), actors performed the play every hour for twenty-four hours. The production generated laughter, particularly owing to its introduction of an ‘energiser bunny’ on the stage in the play’s doorbell scene in which Mme Smith goes to the door three times before someone enters (‘Ça doit être quelqu’un. Je vais voir. *(Elle va voir. Elle ouvre et revient.)* Personne’).<sup>247</sup> John Lloyd Davies adapted *La Cantatrice chauve* into an opera at the Royal Opera House in London in 2006, and, as the title *The Bald Soprano: A Comic Opera* would indicate, the production aimed to stress the play’s comedic elements. Asylum Productions’ *The Bald Prima Donna* (2001) was performed in Edinburgh, Cologne and San Francisco with only two actors playing the entire cast of characters. Reviewer Don O’Mahony, in an ambivalent tone, still noted the

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<sup>245</sup> <<http://www.theatrehuchette.com/>> [accessed 6 November 2011].

<sup>246</sup> Gonzague Phélip, *Le fabuleux roman du théâtre de la Huchette* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), p. 172.

<sup>247</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *La Cantatrice chauve*, ed. by Emmanuel Jacquart (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p. 67. Subsequent references to *La Cantatrice chauve* will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text. Scene from Brat Productions’ 2010 production: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvCJQEeEuQ>> [accessed 5 November 2011].

comedic dimension of the production: 'Some of the humour may be corny but this still makes for a satisfying production'.<sup>248</sup>

Audiences have responded to Ionesco's play as a comedy time and again. As we shall see, Ionesco was forced to admit to his error in his assumptions about the play, as he eventually reclassified it as a comedy. However, he did not abandon a theory of the play's tragic elements altogether. He instead insisted that such elements contributed to the subversive, avant-garde nature of the play's comedy.

This chapter takes as its premise the difficulties of circumscribing this play as a comedy and puts it in dialogue with the commercial longevity of the Huchette production. It does this in order to interrogate the play's political cogency today. I take the discrepancy between authorial expectation and the spectator's comedic response as a point of departure for exploring how theoretical insight might inform this quandary. As part of my analysis, I will show how the play's commercial success at the Huchette has clouded critical response up to the present day. The Huchette's *La Cantatrice chauve* is inscribed within the canon as a 'timeless classic'. This unchanging hallmark justifies my deployment of a new research methodology that draws upon postmodern critical discourses in order to consider the political cogency of this play today. Current Lacanian approaches to comedy (Zupančič) and perversion (Fink and Miller) and a postmodernist consideration of the concept of the avant-garde (Bürger) inform my formulation of the modern-day theoretical spectator of *La Cantatrice chauve*.

With this critical framework in mind, I divide my argument into two main parts: firstly, using Alenka Zupančič's Lacanian take on comedy, I show how the thematic content of Ionesco's play corresponds closely to the genre despite the playwright's personal opinions of his drama; secondly, with reference to the Huchette production, I respond to the less clear-cut issue of whether *La Cantatrice chauve* fits into the category of 'true, subversive comedy' or 'false, conservative comedy' as Zupančič defines it.<sup>249</sup> In order to link these two sections, I theorise that the textual logic of Ionesco's comedy operates to stir up a perverse structure of spectatorship as Lacan would define it. It is this modality

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<sup>248</sup> Don O'Mahony, 'The Bald Prima Donna', <<http://www.rte.ie/ten/2001/0628/baldprima.html>> [accessed 5 November 2011].

<sup>249</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *The Odd One In: On Comedy* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2008).

of viewing that will be the linchpin allowing me to situate the Huchette's production of *La Cantatrice chauve* according to a true or a false comic paradigm. My theorisation that a perverse mode of spectatorship is encouraged by this play will not only allow me to explain why the Huchette production has become 'false comedy'; it also enables me to look at the potential for 'true comedy' that the play might still stir up among contemporary audiences of *La Cantatrice chauve*.

In the conclusion to this chapter, I turn to an analysis of Alambic Comédie's production of *La Cantatrice chauve* to demonstrate empirically this potential for true comedy. I do this to provide evidence for my final theoretical postulation that a perverse mode of spectatorship holds the potential to revitalise this sixty-year-old play in political terms.

### **The Comedic Grain of *La Cantatrice chauve***

It is important not to underestimate the extent to which Ionesco supposed *La Cantatrice chauve* to be a tragedy. The writing process of the play, he confesses, was a form of overwhelming self-torture. He was 'envahi par la prolifération des cadavres des mots, abruti par les automatismes de la conversation'. The destruction of language to which this play bears witness led to 'une tristesse innommable, à la dépression nerveuse, à une véritable asphyxie' for the playwright.<sup>250</sup> He could only conclude, several years later in 1956, that he must be an 'auteur inconsciemment comique'.<sup>251</sup>

One possible explanation for the playwright's unwitting foray into comedy is that he draws upon the particularities of the aesthetic code of the comic genre. This is confirmed on closer inspection; in certain formal and thematic respects *La Cantatrice Chauve* resembles a comedy more than it does a tragedy. Like Ionesco's play, comic scenarios often set out to undermine or mock societal precepts. Ridicule of societal customs and stricture can be detected in comedies as far ranging as Aristophanes's *The Cloud* (c. 420 BC) and Molière's *L'Avare* (1668). The former parodies Athenian intellectual life and the latter derides the protagonist's obsession with money and social stature. Philosopher Henri Bergson (1944) famously claimed that comedy was to be found in the

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<sup>250</sup> Ionesco, *Notes et contre-notes* (1966), p. 131.

<sup>251</sup> Ionesco, *Notes et contre notes* (1966), p. 132.

disjunction between that which has become mechanical, such as social customs and norms, and the creative force of life: '*du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant*'.<sup>252</sup> Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* betrays this element of social ridicule in the depiction of the characters' discourse as meaningless and circuitous. The Huchette production of Ionesco's play emphasises this role of social derision by setting the play in a stuffy, upper-class household in Victorian Britain.

Observing the derisive tactics of comedy, Alenka Zupančič, in *The Odd One in: On Comedy* (2008), identifies that the genre sets about undermining such precepts in a concrete, material way. She places comedy within a psychoanalytic topology, and theorises a 'surplus comic object' akin to the Lacanian 'object-cause' of desire, the '*objet petit a*'.<sup>253</sup> As explained in the Introduction, Lacan privileges desire as the (albeit elusive and ever-changing) source of 'truth' of subjectivity. However, Lacanian desire is fluid and ultimately insatiable. No teleological, monolithic 'Object' of desire can be envisaged; only what motivates desire is knowable, its causes or 'object-causes'. Comedy, according to Zupančič, evinces these *objets petit a*. Slapstick most obviously illustrates the material nature of the comic object-cause of desire: 'banana peels' and 'muddy puddles' constitute physical objects that undermine human perfection.<sup>254</sup> The archetypal scene of a man who trips on a banana skin concretely demonstrates the destabilisation of what Zupančič calls 'man's idealist escapades'.<sup>255</sup> The comic surplus, the banana skin in this case, draws attention to human finitude, to something beyond the purview of human control. And this material object, Zupančič continues, confirms the preponderance of social ridicule in comedy.

*La Cantatrice chauve*, we might argue, abounds in comic surplus objects. Such objects do not, according to Zupančič, only take a material form but can range from the signifiers of language to excessive sounds. As the discourse between the dramatic characters unfolds, a clock chimes repeatedly but at inconsistent intervals ('*Un assez long moment de silence...La pendule sonne vingt-neuf fois*' (p. 39)). This serves as an acoustic excess, destabilising the notion that

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<sup>252</sup> Henri Bergson, *Le Rire: essai sur la signification du comique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1945), p. 44.

<sup>253</sup> Zupančič, p. 53.

<sup>254</sup> Zupančič, p. 29.

<sup>255</sup> Zupančič, p. 47.

time is consistent. The clock undermines the reducibility of time to a closed, finite system.

The most notable comic surplus in this play, however, lies principally in the characters' senseless and gratuitous discourse; there is a profusion of signifiers that float free of meaning. Excess signifiers emerge from Mrs. Smith's description of the elusive Bobby Watson. Bobby Watson is both 'trop grande et trop forte' and, a few moments later, 'trop petite et trop maigre' (p. 47). The oxymoronic descriptions continue as the name 'Bobby Watson' comes to refer to a wife, husband, two children and an uncle. As Emanuel Jacquart explains in his introduction to the play, 'les signifiés se fondent et se confondent donc en un même signifiant' (p. 32). Bobby Watson becomes a pure signifier in language, devoid of a fixed identity and of an ascription to a corporeal form.

In Lacanian terms, such signifiers cannot be shackled to an underlying signified or 'meaning'. Despite its lack of tangible form, Zupančič circumscribes the signifier within the schema of the surplus comic object. Comedy flags up certain dualisms and, additionally, the hiatus within these binary pairings, such as the split between the letter and the spirit.<sup>256</sup> In this way, language is torn asunder in comedy. The genre undermines humanist assumptions that language is a transparent instrument at our disposal and under our control. According to Zupančič, the destabilisation of the locus of language and ideology, the Lacanian Other, 'coincides with the surprising appearance of a (small) other' of the comic *objet petit a* just described.<sup>257</sup> Ionesco's play, in its systematic attack on language, may orchestrate the comedic move from Other to *objet petit a*, from the ubiquity of dominant ideologies to the rebellious desire of the subject that the Other activates (as explained in the Introduction). Paradoxically, the devaluation of language that Ionesco once considered *tragic* may be re-interpreted by Zupančič's modern-day Lacanian schema as *comedic*.

Another comic strategy described by Zupančič transpires in the dramatic action of *La Cantatrice chauve*: the devaluation of Lacanian 'master' signifiers, privileged for giving meaning and coherence to language. One of the master signifiers of any play is its title. In *La Cantatrice chauve*, the comic destruction of

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<sup>256</sup> Zupančič, pp. 120-21.

<sup>257</sup> Zupančič, p. 92.



the master signifier is exemplified by the role of the title. It is a misnomer, as the action has nothing to do with a bald singer other than one tenuous reference made by the fireman half-way through, much to the consternation of the other characters:

LE POMPIER, *se dirige vers la sortie, puis s'arrête* : À propos, et la Cantatrice chauve ?

*Silence général, gêne.*

Mme SMITH : Elle se coiffe toujours de la même façon !

LE POMPIER : Ah ! Alors, au revoir, messieurs, dames. (p. 92)

The dramatic characters immediately abandon the topic of the bald singer after these lines. The phrase 'la cantatrice chauve' lends no overall 'meaning' or consistency to the play, as we might expect a title to do conventionally. The insertion of the play's title in the dramatic action draws attention to its extraneous nature, perhaps highlighting the fact that it acts as the destroyed master signifier of comedy described by Zupančič.

The most notable destruction of the master signifier, however, comes in a bizarre 'reunion' scene between the long-married couple the Martins, who are initially unable to recognise each other. Despite arriving together at the Smith soirée, the pair are surprised to discover that they live in the same town, on the same street, in the same house and that they sleep in the same bed. Ionesco instructs the characters to pronounce such discoveries not with awe or surprise, but counter-intuitively with a mechanical disdain. The couple repeat variations on the phrase 'comme c'est curieux, comme c'est bizarre' over a series of pages in a monotonous tone (pp. 54-59). Following this drawn-out repetition, the moment in which the couple finally recognise each other is bathetic: '*Ils s'embrassent sans expression*' (p. 60). Not only does their robotic exchange remind us of the Bergsonian dictum that comedy is 'du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant', but it exemplifies Zupančič's theory that comedy bears witness to the degradation of the master signifier.

Archetypal comic scenes start off with an overriding referent or dominant signifier such as a person or the phrase described above ('comme c'est curieux,

comme c'est bizarre'). The twist that comedy applies to this master signifier is to turn it into the comic object or the *objet petit a* through repetition, displacement and overuse to the extent that it merely manifests itself as just another excess. Zupančič describes this as the 'snowball effect' of comedy, analogous to a "ball" [that] bounces back and forth in the comic space, as in table tennis ("ping-pong").<sup>258</sup> The gradual degradation of the phrase 'comme c'est curieux, comme c'est bizarre' from an incredulous pronouncement to a phrase said with 'une voix traînante' (p. 59) illustrates the downhill trajectory of the master signifier in comedy. The role of language shifts in this manoeuvre, from producing 'meaning', which is always normative and restrictive according to Lacanian theory (represented by the Lacanian Other); to propelling non-normative 'meaninglessness' which may initiate desire in the form of comic *objets petit a*. Alambic-Comédie's production of *La Cantatrice chauve* (which I will discuss in the conclusion) stresses and encourages the spectator's comic revelry in meaninglessness. At the end of the performance, the cast reassure the audience in the event that they may be confused, declaring in unison that: 'Si vous n'avez rien compris, c'est normal !'.

### Comedic Overlays and Tragic Undercurrents

Having illustrated the comic dimension of *La Cantatrice chauve* by underscoring the link with Zupančič's comic surplus object, I return to Ionesco's disappointment that his linguistic 'tragedy' was taken to be a comedy by audiences. Whilst the playwright eventually acknowledged the comic elements of *La Cantatrice chauve*, he was never quite able to circumscribe the play fully within the genre of comedy. He declared that comedy was taken to such an extreme in this play that it entered the domain of tragedy for the audience.<sup>259</sup> Emmanuel Jacquart concurs with Ionesco in this respect, as 'dans *La Cantatrice chauve*, le comique n'est pas si comique que cela. [...] Au fond, c'est l'expression de l'angoisse' (p. 29). If, as I have just shown, the comedic nature of *La Cantatrice chauve* can be demonstrated by a few examples, then why did Ionesco cling so tenaciously to a definition of his play as a tragedy? The answer, in part, seems to

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<sup>258</sup> Zupančič, p. 147.

<sup>259</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Notes et contre-notes* (1966), p. 256.

be that the playwright had envisioned political potential within his particular mode of theatrical tragedy. Confirming this, both Ionesco and Jacquart proclaimed that, in this comedy shot through with tragedy, this play subverted dominant ideology and theatrical convention. Ionesco elaborates on this:

*La Cantatrice chauve* est la seule de mes pièces considérée par la critique comme « purement comique ». Là encore, pourtant le comique me semble être l'expression de l'insolite. Mais l'insolite ne peut surgir, à mon avis, que du plus terne, du plus quelconque quotidien, de la prose de tous les jours, en le suivant jusqu'au-delà de ses limites. Sentir l'absurdité du quotidien et du langage, son invraisemblance, c'est déjà l'avoir dépassée ; pour la dépasser, il faut d'abord s'y enfoncer. Le comique c'est de l'insolite pur ; rien ne me paraît plus surprenant que le banal ; le surréel est là, à la portée de nos mains, dans le bavardage de tous les jours.<sup>260</sup>

According to the playwright, something strange and destabilising ('l'insolite') lay underneath the comic overlay of the play. By extension, the playwright suggests that a more profound kernel was contained within his comedy.

Despite the speculative nature of both Jacquart's and Ionesco's claims, their comments raise an important point about the inadequacy of defining comedy according to a 'one-size-fits-all' model of the comedic genre. It is perhaps surprising that the play should still provoke laughter to the extent that it does, given that the humour is not physical or slapstick and the play is now over sixty years old. There are moments that illustrate Ionesco's intentions to bore audiences, to reveal the 'tragic' dimension of language. For instance, there are protracted moments of silence that would potentially make it an uncomfortable, rather than a funny, viewing experience:

M. SMITH : Hm.

*Silence.*

Mme SMITH : Hm, hm.

*Silence.*

M. MARTIN : Hm, hm, hm.

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<sup>260</sup> Eugène Ionesco, *Notes et contre-notes : pratique du théâtre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 283.

*Silence.*

Mme. MARTIN : Oh décidément.

*Silence.* (p. 63)

However, comic effects are created within these silences. The sound of the erratic clock often undermines Ionesco's tragic intentions ('*Un long moment de silence anglais. La pendule anglaise frappe dix-sept coups anglais*' (p. 41); '*La pendule sonne cinq fois. Un long temps*' (p. 47)). Given this disjunction between the playwright's intentions and the actuality of spectator response, it proves problematic to pin down *La Cantatrice chauve* as 'pure' comedy or tragedy.

Perhaps it is not so much a tragic undercurrent that is at stake in determining the political resonance of *La Cantatrice chauve*. The impasse of genre that has confounded the playwright and critics may be averted by bringing to the fore Zupančič's reclassification of comedy as bi-partite. She draws a distinction between two typologies of comedy: the true, subversive comedy, and the false, conservative one. Ionesco's opinion of *La Cantatrice chauve* would certainly seem to correspond to Zupančič's definition of 'true', subversive comedy. By stating above that his form of comedy draws attention to the 'banality' of everyday life and a 'surreal' underside, Ionesco reconceptualises language – the Lacanian Other – as a flawed framework. By the same token, Jacquart articulates the play's radical edge when he declares that it is 'anti-thématique, anti-idéologique, anti-réaliste-socialiste, anti-philosophique, anti-psychologique de boulevard, anti-bourgeois' (pp. 19-20).

However, the issue of the categorisation of *La Cantatrice chauve* as true or false comedy is more vexed than this. According to Zupančič, the latter presents the social order and the dimension of the Lacanian Real as radically separate from one another. The Lacanian Real, as Dylan Evans states, is 'outside and inassimilable to symbolisation' and it 'implies the permanent possibility that something may be missing from the 'symbolic order'.<sup>261</sup> The Real can contest the social order in the right circumstances. However, in false comedy's separation of the Real and the social order, the former remains an 'abstract universal',

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<sup>261</sup> Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 159.

unattainable except in the impossibility of the transcendental experience. It is fully outside of the social relation. The comic object of false comedy materially incarnates the limitations of humanity; it implies that something always remains beyond the subject's control, such as the man who trips over the banana skin because he cannot manipulate or alter gravity's sway. The subject resigns him- or herself to the limitations of humanity. This has the effect of reinforcing the boundaries of the social order; and, with reinforced parameters, the social order and its laws exert a stronger and more oppressive hold on the subject.

False comedies 'get stuck halfway down the path to the comical'.<sup>262</sup> In 'true' comedy, the Real *invades* the social order in material form. Consequently, the abstract universal becomes the 'concrete universal' of the *objet a*. Returning to the example of the banana skin, it is the point at which the man gets up after having tripped and goes about his business as if nothing had happened that is truly comic. The *tour de force* of the true comic paradigm lies in the ability to expose the conventions of the social order as pretensions. The man's ego and the importance of his social standing are risible. The abstract universal, gravity in this case, is downgraded to the concrete universal, to the absurdity of the man's dignity and his desire to save face and preserve his social status.

How may we define Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* with this differentiation in mind? Zupančič affirms that it is not the thematic content of comedy that influences its classification as true or false, but rather 'the mode of comic processing itself'.<sup>263</sup> In other words, it is not so much the form in which the surplus manifests itself, whether as a banana skin or a signifier, but how the recipient is directed to *interpret* this surplus. In the example of the banana skin, false comedy would direct us towards the man's lack of control when he trips; true comedy would point us towards the point at which he gets up, dusts himself off and pretends that nothing happened. In order to assess whether *La Cantatrice chauve* is a true or false comedy, it is therefore necessary to turn in greater theoretical detail to the implied spectatorial responses that the play encourages. By delving into the unconscious dynamic that this play may strike up

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<sup>262</sup> Zupančič, p. 31.

<sup>263</sup> Zupančič, p. 30.

with the spectator with the aid of textual analysis, I suggest in the following that perversion plays a prominent role in conditioning the reception of this comedy.

### **The Processing of the Comic Object: Perversion and *La Cantatrice chauve***

Ionesco, in his theoretical musings, considered that the crossover between tragedy and comedy occurs when theatre reveals human fatality:

Pour certains, le comique peut paraître, en un sens, réconfortant, car, s'il veut exprimer l'impuissance de l'homme vaincu, brisé par la fatalité par exemple, le tragique reconnaît, par là même, la réalité d'une fatalité, d'un destin, de lois régissant l'Univers, incompréhensibles parfois, mais objectives. Et cette impuissance humaine, cette inutilité de nos efforts peut aussi, en un sens, paraître comique.<sup>264</sup>

Ionesco implies that the spectator's comedic response to tragic fatalism is one of self-comfort and capitulation. Critic Serge Doubrovsky's comments reveal a very different view on the subject. Doubrovsky explains that the reception of Ionesco's plays such as *La Cantatrice chauve* as a comedy demonstrates a 'determination to be gay in the face of utter confusion'. This determination 'does not conquer absurdity, [but rather] it stresses it, it does not try to dodge it, it revels in it'.<sup>265</sup> Where Ionesco saw a lack of agency on the spectator's part in responding to *La Cantatrice chauve* as a comedy, Doubrovsky sees a strong spectatorial will in the face of adversity. The spectator defiantly laughs at something that, in reality, might not be particularly funny.

How can the spectator's 'determination' be explained? Doubrovsky's choice of the verb 'to revel' implies the spectator's jovial engagement with excess in viewing Ionesco's œuvre. As explained previously with reference to Zupančič, this excess may take the form of a linguistic comic surplus in *La Cantatrice chauve*. Etymologically, 'to revel' shares roots with the verb 'to rebel', as both stem from the Latin *rebellare*. A kernel of rebellion may be encouraged by the

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<sup>264</sup> Ionesco, *Notes et contre-notes* (1966), p. 61.

<sup>265</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, 'Ionesco and the Comic of Absurdity', in *Ionesco: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Rosette C. Lamont (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 11-20 (p. 19). Original publication: Doubrovsky, 'Ionesco and the Comic of Absurdity', *Yale French Studies*, 23 (1959), 3-10.

play's (non)narrative, by its minimal plot. Doubrovsky's allusion to 'determination' also indicates a similar form of recalcitrance on the spectator's part, as this critic suggests that Ionesco's œuvre disallows the possibility of the spectator's imposition of a 'safe' distance vis-à-vis the stage:

Since the subject at hand is human reality and since the actors are nobody in particular, they are precisely *ourselves* and what they are enacting is *our* drama. When I laugh at Molière's *Miser* or *Misanthrope* I can set my mind at rest, on leaving the theater, with the thought that I am neither a miser nor a misanthrope. In traditional comedy, there always is a safe distance between the actors and me. But when I laugh at "everyone" and "anyone", I laugh at myself. There is no separation between the spectator and the spectacle, the latter becomes a mirror, just like consciousness.<sup>266</sup>

The spectator laughs, according to Doubrovsky, in defiance of a form of drama that lays bare a nonsensical, phatic language that is all too resonant. Whilst I disagree with the universalising nature of Doubrovsky's claims about the spectator here, his point about the rebellious nature of the viewer's laughter elicited from a comedy that deviates from the classic norms of comedy is insightful. As I have noted, it is perhaps surprising that the spectator's comedic response should reign supreme given the self-conscious moments of boredom in the dramatic action of *La Cantatrice chauve*, and Doubrovsky's comments help to clarify that it may constitute an act of spectatorial recalcitrance. Drawing upon Lacanian theory, we might argue that the spectator flouts all expectations and digests this play as a comedy, and this corresponds closely to the behaviour of the figure that psychoanalysis terms 'the pervert'. Both the spectator and the subject of perversion, as I will outline, take pleasure from 'adverse' conditions at the margins of convention, whether that convention is defined in social or dramatic terms.

*La Cantatrice chauve* is divested of a cogent or cohesive plot. As we have seen, vagrant signifiers abound without signification (Bobby Watson), master signifiers that should connote 'meaning' are devalued ('comme c'est curieux,

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<sup>266</sup> Doubrovsky, pp. 18-19.

comme c'est bizarre'), and the play fails at dramatic linearity and resolution of the plot by ending on the same note with which it started. This theatrical chaos bears a striking resemblance to the description of the pervert's strategy laid out by Lacan in Seminar VI. Freud posited that perversion constituted any form of behaviour that digressed from the normative, reproductive heterosexual paradigm of sexuality that is imposed on individuals by dominant ideology. Lacan puts this rebellious perversity in language and, at the same time, makes it a more general 'structure' of behaviour extending beyond its sexual specificities laid out by Freud. For Lacan, perversion constitutes a rebellious position in dominant discourse (in the Other). The pervert centres attention on non-normative language as it rebels against the Other. This recalcitrant language is composed of the same object-causes of desire (*objets a*) described by Zupančič as an intrinsic part of comedy. Perversion effectively ruptures the cohesive, proscriptive narratives imposed on subjects by the dominant social framework of the 'Other'. Putting this in rather theatrical terms, Lacan explains that the pervert stages (*met en scène*) elements of a drama that resist integration within narrative unity. Perverse phantasies are analogous to 'une séquence coupée du développement du drame [...] Ce qu'ont de séduisant ces images tient bien, en effet, à leur côté de désinsertion de la chaîne, de rupture par rapport au thème'.<sup>267</sup> Likewise, *La Cantatrice chauve* may conjure up the Lacanian perverse scenario by upending narrative unity. The play centres its attentions instead, as Rosette Lamont points out, on 'the mechanism of dramatic tension, free of any plot line, or even a subject'.<sup>268</sup>

According to Lacan, the pervert, in direct contrast to the neurotic, gleans sexual enjoyment from the wayward, transgressive *objets a* because they break away from normative, ideologically-bound notions of 'meaning' instituted by the Other. In this act, he or she transforms neurotic anxiety caused by the Other into a perverse sexual enjoyment that is taken from rebelling against the Other. This is called 'disavowal' (*Verleugnung*). Psychoanalytic, particularly Lacanian, discourse stresses that this mode of behaviour is ultimately a form of *defence* against the Other, even if it is, at the same time, a mode of rebellion. In a

<sup>267</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire VI: Désir* (unpublished seminar, 1958-59), p. 459.

<sup>268</sup> Rosette C. Lamont, *Ionesco's Imperatives: The Politics of Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), p. 48.



Lacanian logic, disavowal helps the subject to ignore the Other and its pressures in the very act of flouting it in perverse rebellion. Indeed, Lacanian theory emphasises the defensive nature of disavowal to such an extent that it proposes that the subject becomes the object *of* dominant ideology – he or she is at the latter's disposal. In Lacanian terminology, the perverse subject becomes the *objet petit a* of and for the Other.<sup>269</sup>

It might be hypothesised that the spectator takes comedic enjoyment from the non-narrative content of *La Cantatrice chauve* just as the Lacanian pervert converts anxiety produced by the Other into non-normative pleasure of *objets a* derived from the same. There may be a profusion of perverse-comic *objets a* in the play to do this, as outlined above.

This may theoretically account for both Doubrovsky's observation that the spectator betrays a bellicose 'determination' in viewing Ionesco's play *and* the playwright's own opinion that the spectator engages in a form of comforting capitulation by laughing. The double-edged logic of perverse disavowal as both rebellion and defence corresponds to both Doubrovsky's and Ionesco's opinions. Either way, the spectator may perversely enjoy a comedy rather than neurotically suffer a 'Tragédie de langage'.

The perverse unconscious dynamic between the spectator and stage is given the opportunity to play itself out, for instance, at the point in the play when a fireman inexplicably enters the scene. He does not offer much explanation for his presence other than that he believed there to be a fire where there patently was none. He proceeds to tell a fable that contains no moral message.<sup>270</sup> The fireman classifies 'Le Chien et le bœuf' as a 'fable expérimentale' for its lack of underlying moral message (p. 80). The fable is as follows: the 'bullock' (*bœuf*) questions the dog as to why he has not swallowed his trunk, to which the dog replies that he had thought himself to be an elephant. The lack of logic renders this a series of pure signifiers for the spectator that are disconnected from any meaning. This is further accentuated when it is explicitly stated that there is no moral:

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<sup>269</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Livre XX : Encore, 1972-1973*, ed. by J-A. Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 183.

<sup>270</sup> As such, Ionesco references, recalls and plays with the ensconced prestigious status of the moral fable in the French cultural imaginary, particularly as it hails from the tradition of 'contes' and 'fables' of the seventeenth-century poet and fabulist Jean de La Fontaine.

Mme. Martin : Quelle est la morale ?

Le Pompier : C'est à vous de la trouver. (p. 80)<sup>271</sup>

The fireman follows this with two equally nonsensical fables of a calf (*veau*) that gives birth to a cow by eating crushed glass, and a cockerel that convinces no one of his disguise as a dog. After listening to the fireman, M. Smith then offers a pointless fable of 'Le Serpent et le renard' (pp. 81-82).

The divagation into such fables without a moral nexus might theoretically encourage the spectator to profit from the lack of didactic message and to render such lines a series of surplus comic signifiers by way of perverse disavowal. They also reflect, recalling Jacquart (cited above), the radical nature of Ionesco's theatre as 'anti-thématique, anti-idéologique, anti-réaliste-socialiste, anti-philosophique, anti-psychologique de boulevard, anti-bourgeois'. Such fables distance themselves from bourgeois norms of morality.

Ionesco's meaningless fables also engage a strikingly similar strategy to that described by Lacanian theorist Bruce Fink in relation to perversion in criminality. The criminal experiences the pleasure of the moral enunciation of the law whilst taking little heed of its proscriptive content. In this way, the criminal disavows the content of the law whilst simultaneously acknowledging the sovereignty of the law.<sup>272</sup> The neurotic, on the other hand, locates his or her anguish in the content of the law. In an analogous way to Fink's model, the spectator of *La Cantatrice chauve* may be encouraged into a mode of enjoyment by the enunciation of the four fables, 'Le Chien et le bœuf', 'Le Veau et la vache', 'Le Coq' and 'Le Serpent et le renard', without being offered the opportunity to locate an anguished, neurotic response, in the moral message.

In finding fables and scenes such as these comical, the spectator may be motivated by perverse disavowal. Disavowal, however, constitutes a politically ambivalent mode of defence in psychoanalytic discourse as pointed out above: it denies the pressures of the Other (the locus of dominant ideologies) bearing

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<sup>271</sup> Martin Esslin quotes these lines as an epigraph to *The Theatre of the Absurd*.

<sup>272</sup> Bruce Fink, 'Perversion', in *Perversion and the Social Relation*, ed. by Molly Anne Rothenberg, Dennis A. Foster and Slavoj Žižek, SIC 4 (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 38-67 (p. 57).

down on the subject by refuting the traumatic, neurotic effects produced by the Other. Disavowal allows the pervert to cling obstinately to the quest for pleasure from the Other (albeit in rebellion against it). As Dylan Evans puts it, 'perversion is characterised by the lack of a question: the pervert does not doubt that his acts serve [...] the Other'.<sup>273</sup> Psychoanalytic discourse doubts how far disavowal can act as a mode of contestation of the Other as a result.

How, therefore, is the ambivalence of the perverse strategy brought to bear on a politics of spectatorship in *La Cantatrice chauve* and on Zupančič's true and false distinction of comedy? Does the perverse mode of spectatorship bolster or undermine a politics of spectatorship? In order to answer these questions but at the same time avoid a monolithic categorisation of perversion as either 'political' or 'apolitical', it is necessary to turn to the specificities of the performance history of *La Cantatrice chauve*. In particular, my analysis will focus on the fate of Ionesco's play at the Huchette theatre mentioned at the start of the chapter. *La Cantatrice chauve* has undergone a trajectory of commercialisation at the Huchette that few avant-garde plays could claim to rival.<sup>274</sup> It is this unique performance history that will enable me to determine the political resonance of the perverse mode of spectatorship of *La Cantatrice chauve*.

### **The Huchette Hit: Observations from One Performance**

Given the unique history of Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* at the Huchette, it appears particularly apposite to suture the divide between the theoretical spectator (formulated in the previous part of the chapter) and its empirical counterpart, between the play-text and the play-as-performance. Nicolas Bataille's production of *La Cantatrice chauve* at the Huchette has wielded a unique power over the development of the play. The play-text and Bataille's *mise en scène* have engaged in a dialectical relationship over the years, influencing and transforming one another. Gonzague Phélip notes that, in 1964, the French publishing house Gallimard released an edition of the play that was 'une extraordinaire mise en page de *La Cantatrice Chauve* [de Bataille], transcrivant typographiquement la moindre inflexion, les moindres silences de la pièce [au

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<sup>273</sup> Evans, p. 140.

<sup>274</sup> Perhaps only Samuel Beckett's *En attendant Godot*, another absurdist play, could compare.

Théâtre de la Huchette]'.<sup>275</sup> Phélip 's comments give a cursory insight into a play that has become ritualised through Bataille's production, with all of the imperfections that have been borne out by rehearsals and performances diligently erased in the play on the page. For Phélip, 'ce n'est plus un spectacle'. It has become 'une cérémonie'.<sup>276</sup>

The progressive ritualisation of *La Cantatrice chauve* at the Huchette described by Phélip is, in fact, in evidence in spectators' responses to the production. Phélip has observed theatregoers distractedly knitting while they watch and laugh at the production.<sup>277</sup> The performance of the Huchette production that I witnessed (on 28<sup>th</sup> October 2011) was itself shot through with the audience's laughter, but it was subdued and almost automatic – ritualised – in form. The opening scene of the play – in which Madame Smith tries and fails to engage her reluctant husband in conversation – produced laughter each time that M. Smith clicked his tongue. The couple's "conversation" lasts several minutes in the production:

Mme SMITH : Tiens, ils est neuf heures. Nous avons mangé de la soupe, du poisson, des pommes de terre au lard, de la salade anglaise. Les enfants ont bu de l'eau anglaise. Nous avons bien mangé, ce soir. C'est parce que nous habitons dans les environs de Londres et que notre nom est Smith.

M. SMITH, *continuant sa lecture, fait claquer sa langue.*

[...]

Mme SMITH : Mrs Parker connaît un épicier roumain, nommé Popesco Rosenfeld, qui vient d'arriver de Constantinople. C'est un grand spécialiste de yaourt. Il est diplômé de l'école des fabricants de yaourt d'Andrinople. J'irai demain lui acheter une grande marmite de yaourt roumain folklorique. On n'a pas souvent des choses pareils ici, dans les environs de Londres.

M. SMITH, *continuant sa lecture, fait claquer sa langue.* (pp. 41-44)

Nearly each of M. Smith's tongue clicks was punctuated by the sound of laughter in the auditorium. The same phenomenon erupted in the auditorium when the

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<sup>275</sup> Gonzague Phélip, *Le fabuleux roman du théâtre de la Huchette* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), p. 112.

<sup>276</sup> Phélip, p. 112.

<sup>277</sup> Phélip, p. 112.

Martins acted out their reunion scene. As if on cue, a rather staid form of laughter could be heard every time the couple repeated 'comme c'est bizarre, comme c'est curieux'. A person in the audience started to cry out 'comme c'est bizarre' before he caught himself, suggesting an almost automatic response to the lines.

The production was timed perfectly to last an hour, and the actors' *jeu* was so well trodden that there were no moments in which the live and precarious nature of the theatre – which could alter spectator response, as my analysis of empirical response to Beckett's *Pas moi* will show – did not intervene. The actors did not falter in their lines and, even when they addressed the audience, they did little to break the fourth wall separating spectators and the stage. They constantly looked beyond spectators and failed to take account of their reactions. Perhaps this lack of live spectator-actor interaction could explain why there seemed to be little more than subdued laughter and muffled giggles in response to this production.

There were two moments in the play that provoked a more authentic, spontaneous form of laughter: when Mary, heavily wrinkled and clearly wearing a brunette wig over her grey hair, came on the stage and announced 'Je suis la bonne !' in a dead-pan manner; and when Madame Smith announced that she would tell an anecdote, 'Le Bosquet'. The characters repeated the following lines three times:

M. Smith : Ma femme a toujours été romantique.

M. Martin : C'est une véritable Anglaise. (p. 83)

Notwithstanding these two instances, a rather mechanical and lacklustre form of laughter dominated the audience's response to the play. Given this prevailing mode of reaction, it was perhaps surprising that the cast, when they had finished the play, received a fervent and enthusiastic round of applause from the audience. However, the disjunction between the lack of spontaneous or raucous laughter and the applause perhaps further signals a mechanistic response to the production, as, after all, the final round of applause constitutes another ritualised part of theatre performance.

The audience's laughter in response to the Huchette's *La Cantatrice chauve* perhaps corroborates the idea of a perverse pleasure taken from the play's lack of plot in the disavowal described above. However, the robotic response that I observed during this particular production may also be aligned conceptually with the 'fixation' practised, according to psychoanalysis, by the pervert. For Freud the pervert, in particular the fetishist, fixates upon an object of desire that would jettison the fear of castration accompanying normative (Oedipal) sexual development.<sup>278</sup> The pervert clings to one object or one mode of behaviour for disavowal. Lacan, conceptualising the perverse structure at a level of language, describes the apotropaic object as a non-normative signifier or set of signifiers that oppose the linguistic castration occurring upon the subject's entry into language ('c'est que celle-ci [la fixation] est portée à la fonction de signifiant').<sup>279</sup> Audiences' mechanised comedic responses to the repeated elements of the Huchette play – such as M. Smith's tongue clicks and 'comme c'est bizarre, comme c'est curieux' of the Martins' reunion scene – suggest a similar unconscious process of fixation.

The mechanised responses in evidence among audiences at the Huchette, which could be explained as analogous to perverse fixation, perhaps indicate that audiences are typically trained into a rather tamed, conservative form of reception. The lack of raucous laughter or spontaneous engagement may indicate that the production has become a 'false comedy'. However, it is crucial to resist pathologising perverse fixation as psychoanalytic discourse tends to do (as Freud said, 'if [. . .] a perversion has the characteristic of exclusiveness and fixation—then we shall usually be justified in regarding it as a pathological symptom').<sup>280</sup> Fixation is not necessarily equivalent to the conservatism of false comedy. What I want to suggest here is that such fixation on the part of the Huchette's audiences *may have been channelled* into a strategy of false comedy.

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<sup>278</sup> Freud, 'Fetishism' (1927), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, XXI (1927-1931): The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works, pp. 147-58.

<sup>279</sup> Lacan, *Livre V: Les Formations de l'inconscient* (Seuil: Paris, 1998 [1956-57]), p. 479.

<sup>280</sup> Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953-1974), VII (1901-1905), pp. 125-248 (p. 161). For a critique of the pathologisation of perverse fixation, see also: Lisa Downing, 'The Measure of Sexual Dysfunction: A Plea for Theoretical Limitlessness', *Transformations*, 8 (2004).

In order to confirm this suspicion, it is necessary, in the next section, to turn to the conservative discursive practices surrounding the Huchette production. My theory of a perverse mode of spectatorship intrinsic to *La Cantatrice chauve* will help me to explain why and how spectatorial reaction has been moulded to fit these conservative discourses.

### **The Critical Reception of the Huchette Production: Timelessness and Universal Appeal**

Bataille's production has generated a curious amount of enthusiasm and hyperbole from critics and bloggers alike. It is difficult to find a negative critical response to the Huchette's *La Cantatrice chauve*. The extraordinary durability of the production would seem to account, at least in part, for the lack of negative response to the play, as Phélip's narrative account of Bataille's double-bill of *La Cantatrice chauve* and *La Leçon* indicates:

En février 2007, la petite salle de bric et de broc et sa résistante troupe célèbrent leurs cinquante ans de *Cantatrice Chauve* et de *Leçon*. Deux pièces qui ont vu passer six présidents de la République, enduré la guerre d'Algérie puis vécu Mai 1968, connu le passage à la télévision couleurs, résisté à quatre chocs pétroliers, assisté à la chute du mur de Berlin, à la naissance de l'euro et à l'effondrement des Twin Towers.<sup>281</sup>

In Phélip's glorified account of the Huchette theatre – the title of his book having the air of insouciant *bonheur* that references and recalls the film *Le fabuleux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001) – it is implied that Ionesco's play has not only withstood the tribulations of history and the test of time, it has also effaced the significance of any other plays that have been staged there over the years.

This implication of the timelessness of *La Cantatrice chauve* extends far and wide into the discourses surrounding the play. With equal adulation, Emmanuel Jacquart, in his prefatory note to the 1993 edition of Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve* (based on Bataille's *mise en scene*), insists that the Huchette's staging of the double-bill will be something to be very proud of in the future (p.

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<sup>281</sup> Phélip, p. 172.

14). Maya Saraczynska claims that the production is not only timeless, it is universal in its appeal too.<sup>282</sup> Critics make the comparison between the longest performed play in Britain – Agatha Christie’s *The Mousetrap*, first performed in the West End in 1952 – and Ionesco’s *La Cantatrice Chauve* as its French counterpart. In an evening with Nicolas Bataille in 2007 designed to mark fifty years of the play at the Huchette, the BNF (Bibliothèque Nationale de France) also trumpeted the play’s universal appeal and perennial success with audiences.<sup>283</sup>

Bloggers who have written commentaries on the Huchette *mise en scène* are equally keen to emphasise the play’s history at the theatre, its timelessness and universality. These reviewers tend to foreclose the specific details of viewing the play in favour of relating their accounts to the scholarly commonplaces surrounding the play. For instance, Mélanie Goujon emphasises the notion of the absurd in her interpretation. She prefers to universalise audience response instead of making concrete observations about individual spectators’ – or her own – form of engagement with the piece:

Nous rions du claquement de langue de Mr Smith, la rencontre du couple Mr et Mme Martin (qui en arrivent à la conclusion qu’ils habitent le même appartement et qu’ils dorment dans le même lit), ou la cacophonie finale, et bien d’autres moments encore. Nous sommes plongés dans ce monde, de par la situation, mais aussi par l’absurde de la pièce qui en devient presque normalité. La surprise est d’autant plus forte si nous n’avons pas lu les pièces avant de les voir jouées. Car chaque spectateur attend avec impatience le personnage de la Cantatrice Chauve, mais la surprise est telle qu’on n’a sur elle qu’une seule et pauvre phrase prononcée par le Pompier « A propos où est la Cantatrice Chauve ? ». C’est tout.<sup>284</sup>

Another blogger stresses the tradition of the play and urges spectators to make themselves part of this history: ‘Imagine the opportunity to see this French

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<sup>282</sup> Maya Saraczynska, ‘Le Rire atemporal’, <<http://www.lestroiscoups.com/article-17634933.html>> [accessed 13 January 2011]

<sup>283</sup> See: <[http://www.bnf.fr/documents/cp\\_ionesco.pdf](http://www.bnf.fr/documents/cp_ionesco.pdf)> [accessed 13 January 2011].

<sup>284</sup> Mélanie Goujon, ‘*La Cantatrice chauve* du théâtre de la Huchette, une pièce hors du temps’, <<http://blogshumanites.u-paris10.fr/content/la-cantatrice-chauve-du-th%C3%A9%C3%A2tre-de-la-huchette-une-pi%C3%A8ce-hors-du-temps>> [accessed 29 October 2011].



classic in the exact venue where it debuted over 50 years ago!'.<sup>285</sup> These comments privilege the spectator's opportunity to figure as part of history (seeming more like an advertisement for a fairground ride than a review of a play) over an account of the specificities of the spectator's viewing experience.

It is important to scrutinise the effects that the commercial success, critics' and bloggers' unchecked praise and the hubristic gloss on Bataille's version of *La Cantatrice chauve* have had on the play's political cogency. Inevitably with such a long run, the Huchette's production has become something of a tourist trap and a cult phenomenon, as the descriptions above would indicate. The Huchette's *La Cantatrice chauve* is evidently now a brand; the theatre itself proudly displays this, as newspaper clippings that document the play's success are plastered to its walls and images of the production adorn its double-doors.

Rosette Lamont considers the effects of the play's success on Ionesco's reputation as a playwright:

[Ionesco's] first play, *The Bald Soprano*, has become one of the great modern classical works in France, recommended viewing for lycée classes. It is ironic that Ionesco, an *enfant terrible*, is now enthroned in the pantheon of assigned authors. No play has had a longer run, nor been performed in so many countries. Once considered difficult, it has proved that its appeal is universal.<sup>286</sup>

Lamont underscores the progressive institutionalisation of this play, and what this has meant for the reception of the playwright's œuvre in general. Ionesco, once a luminary of the avant-garde, is now thoroughly ensconced in the theatrical canon.

The discourses that emphasise the play's illustrious history at the Huchette point to its nature as the 'false, conservative comedy', because they endorse the ideologies of late capitalist society. Critics' unchecked praise, their resistance to critiquing or even analysing the specificities of the play signal this treatment of the play as a commodity of French theatre. Critics' assertions of the

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<sup>285</sup> <<http://parisaav.blogspot.com/2011/07/experiencing-french-theater-up-close-at.html>> [accessed 19 December 2011].

<sup>286</sup> Rosette C. Lamont, p. 48.

play's 'universal' appeal are strongly suggestive of the paradigm of false comedy as Zupančič describes. According to Zupančič, false comedies uphold an 'abstract universal' as I described earlier:

This mechanism [of false comedy] [...] leaves all universals, the human side of which it tries to expose, fundamentally *untouched* in their abstract purity, since the dirt is absorbed by the human side, which is then forgiven for belonging to the "necessary evil".<sup>287</sup>

Following Zupančič's logic, the discursive practices surrounding the Huchette production – which stress its wide-ranging appeal and timeless import – might actually limit the production's capacity for true subversive comedy, if we align such discourses with the 'abstract universal' cited above.

Zupančič asserts that in false comedy, the comic objects, the *objets petit a*, are assimilated into dominant ideologies; they support the latter. In Zupančič's example of the man who slips (described above), the comic object of the banana skin is depicted in such a way that he could not have prevented himself from falling over. The banana skin then props up dominant ideologies of human finitude and fallibility. It then becomes the 'dirt absorbed by the human side', the latter phrase leaving us in doubt of Zupančič's feelings towards the strategy of false comedy.

Zupančič looks at how the objects in comedy link to external dominant ideologies and prop them up. In *La Cantatrice chauve*, we might have an example of the opposite process that produces the same effect of false comedy. In the Huchette case, it may not be the comic objects intrinsic to the dramatic logic that make it a conservative comedy. Rather, it might be that the conservative discursive practices surrounding this production *shape spectators' conservative perspectives on the comic objects*. The 'abstract universal' that Zupančič refers to would seem to be upheld by the promotion of this play as a timeless and faultless classic. In defining *La Cantatrice chauve* as 'timeless', critics would seem to want to de-traumatise and control, with the aid of the play, the unknowable realm of the Lacanian Real (what *is* timelessness exactly? can we lay claim to it?) that

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<sup>287</sup> My emphasis. Zupančič, p. 31.

would undermine the social order. Perhaps it is no coincidence that at the same time as deeming the piece timeless, critics vaunt humanistic ideals, which support what Zupančič calls ‘the metaphysics of human finitude’. With this play: we have surmounted the march of history (as my citation of Phélip suggests); we have reached the pinnacle of human achievement, since we will continue to be proud of this play for a long time to come (Jacquart); we can even guarantee that this play will please everyone (Saraczynska and Goujon). Given the humanistic nature of these discursive practices surrounding the Huchette production of *La Cantatrice chauve*, it is possible to see that the play risks becoming a conservative comedy by the spectator’s acceptance of, as Zupančič puts it, ‘the material, physical, concrete, and human aspect of things’. Timelessness may be defined in human terms as the Huchette’s version of *La Cantatrice chauve*.

Not only do these discourses suggest the ideology of a ‘metaphysics of human finitude’, it must not be forgotten that their espousal of such timelessness also aids a commodification of the Huchette production. The press reviews on the Huchette theatre’s website all attest to this; each critic’s stress on the play’s longevity has been deployed by the theatre to advertise the production:

Quand la pièce fut jouée pour la première fois, en 1950, elle était une merveille de comique. Pure et simple. Chaque mot déclenchait le rire. C’était comme l’a dit Ionesco du « théâtre à vide ». [...] Nicolas Bataille avait réglé ce jeu à la perfection [...] *Comment s’étonner que cette pièce soit jouée, chaque soir, dans le même petit théâtre, depuis un demi-siècle ?* – Michel Cournot, *Le Monde*, 20 octobre 2000

Mrs Smith entra en scène pour annoncer qu’il était neuf heures tandis qu’une horloge derrière, faisait entendre les 17 coups. C’était en 1950. *Il en est toujours ainsi, chaque soir, dans La Cantatrice Chauve d’Eugène Ionesco au Théâtre de La Huchette*, une salle de 95 places à deux pas de la place Saint Michel à Paris. [...] *La Cantatrice Chauve fut représentée devant des salles vides, avant de devenir la pièce jouée le plus longtemps et le plus souvent dans le monde.* – Nicholas Powel, *Financial Times*, 09 octobre 2000

La pièce, créée au Théâtre des Noctambules en 1950, s'est jouée *sans discontinuer depuis...* – Frédéric Ferney, *Le Figaro*, 20 Octobre 2000<sup>288</sup>

The logic of these discourses is: "Come and marvel at the spectacle of Ionesco's never-ending play, a timeless masterpiece!". This points to the capitalist power structure that the rhetoric of false comedy's abstract universal (that is to say, the play's timelessness) nourishes. Whilst it would be wrongheaded to equate the dominant discourses surrounding the play with the individual act of spectatorship, it would perhaps be naïve to assume that spectators' views and impressions of the Huchette production were not at all influenced by such ubiquitous and readily available rhetoric. This was evident in the production that I saw, as oft-repeated phrases belonging to these dominant discourses circulated in the auditorium before the performance started: 'Ionesco, c'est de l'absurdité'; '*La Cantatrice chauve* [le titre de la pièce] n'a aucun rapport avec l'intrigue'; '*En Attendant Godot* et *La Cantatrice chauve* sont les pièces les plus connues de l'absurde'.

It is useful to return to my contention that the textual logic of *La Cantatrice chauve*, its unruly signifiers, produces a perverse mode of spectatorship in order to understand how this mode of viewing may be co-opted by dominant capitalist ideologies. A strategy similar to that of false comedy may be identified in Lacanian perversion. Both perversion (according to the Lacanian view) and the false comedy encourage a process of 'absorption'. In the case of perversion, the surplus *objet a* is absorbed to complete the Other and support dominant ideologies, as we will see below; in the case of false comedy, the 'dirt' is assimilated into one specific dominant ideology of a post-religious 'human finitude' described by Zupančič.

It would not be a step too far to suggest that the Huchette theatre functions as a metaphorical crucible for capitalist ideologies, given the conservative discursive practices of commodifiable timelessness and universal appeal surrounding the production that I have pointed out. Indeed, the Huchette's support of capitalism was evident in the production that I saw.

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<sup>288</sup> My emphases. <[http://www.theatrehuchette.com/la\\_presse\\_en\\_parle](http://www.theatrehuchette.com/la_presse_en_parle)> [accessed 29 October 2011].

Moments before the play started, a man came to address the audience directly. He informed us that we were at the 17061<sup>st</sup> performance of this production, much to the evident delight of the audience. He advertised, at the same time, Gonzague Phélip's *Le Fabuleux roman du théâtre de la Huchette* (2007). Even before the start then, the spectator is strategically situated within capitalist ideology: we are informed that we are playing a part in the history of the performance and we are urged to purchase an extra accessory that will bolster our enjoyment in consuming Ionesco's play. Spectators also unconsciously perpetuate the mythology surrounding the play by citing catchphrases associated with the theatre of the absurd.

With this theorisation of the Huchette space as a capitalist Other in mind, it is instructive to turn to Bruce Fink who explains that in embodying the *objet a* for the Other, the Lacanian pervert plugs the holes in this locus of dominant ideologies in a process of disavowal.<sup>289</sup> If this lacuna were to remain unfilled, the Other would be unable to guarantee the subject a sense of security. In this case of neurosis, the Other would be susceptible to radical interrogation by the subject. Its flaws and its ubiquity would be called into question. However, such a politically enabling position of subjectivity is not available to the pervert, according to Fink. With the pervert functioning as the transgressive *objet petit a* completing the locus of ideologies, a full and consistent Other provides a sense of ontological *stability* for the subject. This is the paradox of psychoanalytic disavowal pointed out above: the pervert, according to psychoanalytic discourse, denies the ubiquity of the Other in embodying the transgressive object that completes it. Fink uses the following diagram to illustrate his point:<sup>290</sup>

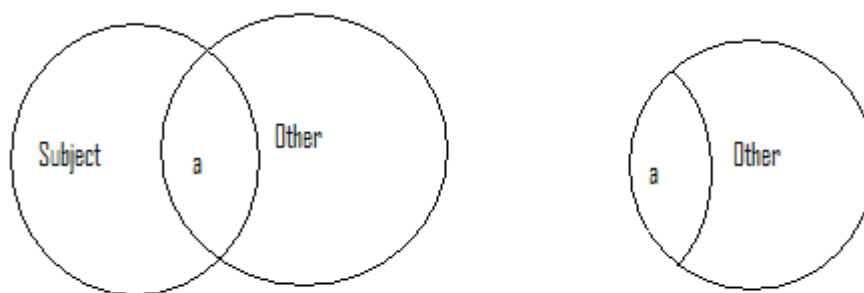
## Neurosis

## Perversion

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<sup>289</sup> This, however, only constitutes one half of the Lacanian view on perversion, the other half of which *promotes* a Lacanian politics of perversion. I return to the significance of this dual discourse at the end of this chapter in order to highlight that I do not wish to condemn perversion wholesale to nosology.

<sup>290</sup> Bruce Fink, 'Perversion', p. 49.



The neurotic (on the left-hand side) interacts with the Other via desire, the *objet a*, but a large proportion of his or her subjectivity remains uncharted territory for the ideological Other. From this uncovered portion stems the neurotic's reliance upon that part which *is* covered by the Other. As Fink sees it though, the perverse subject's trust in the Other goes one step further, by effacing all subjectivity apart from that which lies within its purview. According to Fink, the locus of language and ideology has a totalising hold over the pervert in contrast to the neurotic.

The spatial dynamics involved in the perverse structure (on the right-hand side) resemble the hermetically sealed nature of the theatre auditorium, and the tiny space of the Huchette exacerbates this boxed-in intensity. Returning to my postulation that the Huchette theatre has come to function as a stronghold of the capitalist Other, we may theorise that the spectator in the perverse mode of subjectivity has limited opportunity to experience the insecurity necessary to impugn, and consequently debunk, the primacy of this capitalist Other. This would be spectatorial disavowal at its most paradoxical: despite the fact that Ionesco's comedy was and is still known among audiences for the revolutionary and transgressive nature of its aesthetic, the politics potentiated within this knowledge are cancelled out by the play's containment within the capitalist logic of commodification.

Perversion, Lacanians have often noted, may be an alternative mode of subjectivity but it is a version of the socio-symbolic Father (*père-version*) nonetheless. Concomitantly, Lacanian dogmatist Jacques-Alain Miller makes clear his misgivings about a politics of perversion when he states that 'it implies *a turning to the father, a call to the father*, which perhaps is also a very profound

reminder that perversion is, in no sense, a subversion'.<sup>291</sup> Miller's claims are monolithic – imperious even – but they are useful in the context of analysing the Huchette's *La Cantatrice chauve* insofar as they reveal the potential barriers to a politics of perversion. The spectator of *La Cantatrice Chauve* may soak up the surplus comic object and experience comedic pleasure, but he or she cannot reach a position outside of the locus of capitalist ideologies that the Huchette theatre may represent. Perverse fixation, which I have suggested constitutes the predominant mode of reaction to this production in the previous section, then becomes moulded and shaped – tamed – to fit the capitalist ideologies that the Huchette incarnates. Ionesco's attempts at subversion may be rendered politically futile as a result.

The fate of Bataille's production of *La Cantatrice chauve* as a false comedy feeds into postmodern critics' identification of the politically precarious nature of the avant-garde as a whole. In the move from modernity to postmodernity, what was once subversive as an avant-garde work ceases to be so over time, a topic which will be addressed in the following section in direct application to Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* at the Huchette. My theorisation of the perverse mode of spectatorship chimes with this postmodern problematisation of the concept of the avant-garde.

### **Commodification of the Avant-garde: The Taming of a Perverse Spectatorship**

Je suis, paraît-il, un auteur dramatique d'avant-garde. La chose me paraît même évidente puisque je me trouve ici, aux entretiens sur le théâtre d'avant-garde. Cela est tout à fait officiel.<sup>292</sup>

In the Huchette production of *La Cantatrice chauve*, members of the audience, once they are all seated, are handed a programme that boasts of the play's trajectory 'de l'avant-garde au classicisme'. As spectators, we are told to

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<sup>291</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, 'On Perversion', in *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*, ed. by Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 306-22 (pp. 307-08).

<sup>292</sup> Ionesco, *Notes et contre-notes* (1966), p. 75.

celebrate the play's classical status despite – and perhaps even because of – its aesthetically revolutionary beginnings.

The Huchette's attempts to 'sell' the play's avant-garde/classical status feed into a wider theory of the avant-garde in postmodern times.<sup>293</sup> Peter Bürger laments the continual assimilation of avant-garde work into the mainstream of capitalised enterprise. Martin Esslin (1970), who focused his attention on the avant-garde theatre of the 1950s, joked that his concept of the theatre of the absurd had been transformed into 'a reality as concrete and specific as a branded product of the detergent industry', only nine years after he first formulated it.<sup>294</sup> I have been focusing on the gradual commodification of one of Esslin's prototypical 'absurd' plays *La Cantatrice chauve* over its sixty-year stint at the Huchette theatre. Debates on the political validity of the avant-garde by postmodernists, therefore, help to inform my theoretical account of the unfortunate fate of Ionesco's play at the Huchette.

Peter Bürger attributes the commodification of the avant-garde to the dissolution of the boundary between life and art. Generally, the avant-garde, in its efforts to radicalise the cultural terrain, aims to situate the 'praxis of life' in the 'art object'.<sup>295</sup> Bürger relates this stratagem to the Hegelian process of *Aufhebung* (or sublation):

The avant-gardists proposed the sublation of art – sublation in the Hegelian sense of the term: art was not simply destroyed, but transferred to the praxis of life where it would be preserved, albeit in a changed form.<sup>296</sup>

Bürger draws out the similarities between this process of absorption of the avant-garde object into the praxis of life, and the operations of commodity

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<sup>293</sup> See: Peter Bürger, 'Avant-Garde and Engagement' (1984), in *Modernism/Postmodernism*, ed. by Peter Brooker (London; New York: Longman, 1992), pp. 58-71; Charles Russell, *Poets, Prophets and Revolutionaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 1985).

<sup>294</sup> A fuller version of this citation was quoted in the Introduction. Esslin, 'The Theatre of the Absurd Reconsidered', in *Reflections: Essays on Modern Theatre* (New York: Anchor Books, 1971), pp. 179-86 (p. 179).

<sup>295</sup> Peter Bürger, 'The Negation of the Autonomy of Art by the Avant-Garde', in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. by Thomas Docherty (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 237-43 (p. 242).

<sup>296</sup> Bürger, 'The Negation', p. 239.



aesthetics. In postmodern society, consumers are motivated to 'purchase' the art object, so that 'here also, art becomes practical, but it is an art that enthralls'. The avant-garde object undergoes a process of the 'false sublation of art as institution', and loses its radical potential in the process.<sup>297</sup>

So how might this 'false sublation' of the avant-garde be linked to the perverse mode of spectatorship in the Huchette's *La Cantatrice Chauve*? Perversion, according to Lacanians, encourages the subject's totalised reliance upon the ideological Other (as Fink's diagram above indicates). The specificity of this perverse interaction with the Other coincides strikingly with Zupančič's theoretical formulation of prevailing social attitudes towards the ideological Other of the modern day. In a post-communist and late capitalist society, these predominant social attitudes are ambivalent; subjects recognise the perfidious nature of dominant (capitalist) ideologies but continue to have faith in them. Dominick LaCapra describes postmodernity as an age of 'enlightened disempowerment' for similar reasons.<sup>298</sup> Prevailing attitudes towards the postmodern Other thus follow a logic of "‘*Je sais bien, mais quand même...* (I know very well, but nevertheless...)'".<sup>299</sup> In this phrase, Zupančič references Freud's dictum on perversion, and this logic apes that which is operative in perverse disavowal (*Verleugnung*) as psychoanalysis defines it. As Freud understood it, the pervert simultaneously disavows the 'castrated' status of the mother and tacitly acknowledges it in the creation of the fetish object.<sup>300</sup>

From Zupančič's descriptions of a collective somnolent disavowal vis-à-vis the modern-day Other, it can be surmised that the perverse defence mechanism also operates in the processes of 'commodity aesthetics' (suggested by Bürger) that nullify the radical edge of the avant-garde. Any perverse mode of spectatorship that functions to transform *La Cantatrice Chauve* into a comedy (argued earlier) may, therefore, be co-opted by a homologous logic of commodity aesthetics. In other words, the postmodern spectator's attitude towards Ionesco's long-running play at the Huchette follows the perverse logic of late

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<sup>297</sup> Bürger, 'The Negation', p. 242.

<sup>298</sup> Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit: Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 8.

<sup>299</sup> Zupančič, p. 15.

<sup>300</sup> Freud, 'Fetishism'.

capitalist society: I know that the Other is called into question by this play – by way of Ionesco's interrogation of language and discourse in the characters' phatic and pointless lines – but nevertheless I continue to consume it as a commodity. More specifically, returning to the example of the play's programme, we are subjected to a logic of 'I know that this play is a commodity ('a classic'), but I will enjoy it all the same'. It might be argued that spectators are encouraged into a logic of commodity fetishism even before the play begins in reading this programme. And, herein lies the link between the micro- and macro-, between the individual's act of spectatorship and the play's performance history. As such, the individual perverse modality of spectatorship has been transformed into collective support for commodification, potentially divesting the Huchette production of its radical potential.

### **Nuancing the Debate: What does spectatorship in *La Cantatrice chauve* Reveal about Psychoanalytic Discourse?**

Having used psychoanalysis as a heuristic tool to theorise the spectator of *La Cantatrice Chauve*, it is necessary to acknowledge some of the exclusionary practices of this discourse that have a bearing on the conclusions drawn in this chapter. Views such as those of Jacques-Alain Miller expressed above – that 'perversion is in no sense a subversion' – must be contextualised as a product of a discourse that has tended to view perversion within a nosological framework (that is, within the framework of disease classification). The process of outlining the exclusionary tactics of psychoanalysis will help me to argue that a radical politics of perverse spectatorship can be developed in other production contexts of *La Cantatrice chauve*.

Jonathan Dollimore (1991) problematises psychoanalytic insights into perversion. With specific focus on the Freudian school, Dollimore critiques the attempts made by psychoanalysts to divest perversion of its radical potential via discursive 'containment'. For Freud, the child is obliged to undergo a process of normalisation of desire. This involves the subject's renunciation of all impulses that do not terminate in the genital sexual act. (The recurrence of perversion later in adult life, as a corollary, is considered a return to the

recalcitrant sexual behaviour of the pre-Oedipal child).<sup>301</sup> A problematic aspect of this, as Dollimore points out, is that perversion is implicitly set up as a threatening force that must be vanquished by 'civilising' and 'socialising' forces of dominant ideology. The Lacanian School is witness to similar discursive efforts to 'contain' and modulate perversion. As Bruce Fink's diagram of the 'perverse' subject demonstrated, Lacanian psychoanalysis circumscribes perversion within the realm of the normative Other. Whilst this argument has proved useful in discussing the political efficacy of a perverse mode of spectatorship of Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve* at the Huchette theatre, it risks the general devaluing of perversion by 'containment theory'.<sup>302</sup>

However, the view of the perversions propounded by psychoanalytic discourse may be more complex than Dollimore considers, particularly with regard to Lacanian theory. Dwelling on this point will help me to clarify that a radical politics of perversion in spectatorship can be developed in contexts other than that of the Huchette's production of *La Cantatrice chauve*. In order to strengthen his argument that psychoanalysis essentialises perversion as a 'necessary evil' of normative sexual development that can subsequently be contained by the powers that be, Dollimore quotes this passage from a translation of Lacan's first seminar:

In adults, we are aware of the palpable richness of perversion. Perversion, in sum, is the privileged exploration of an existential possibility of human nature – its internal tearing apart, its gap, through which the supra-natural world of the symbolic was able to make its entry.<sup>303</sup>

For Dollimore, this encapsulates the attempts by psychoanalysis to set up perversion as a quasi-bestial, because atavistic, force in opposition to the social order. By equating the binary opposition 'perversion-Symbolic' with its assumed discursive bedfellow 'nature-society', Dollimore suggests that the Lacanian take is ultimately unhelpful in our theoretical efforts to politicise the perversions.

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<sup>301</sup> Freud, 'Three Essays'.

<sup>302</sup> Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 86.

<sup>303</sup> Dollimore, pp. 201-02.

The social order can effectively quash its 'natural' adversary by channelling it into cultural works. This process is known as Freudian 'sublimation'.

On closer inspection of Dollimore's citation of Lacan, however, it becomes clear that he is too hasty in his dismissal of the input of Lacanian discourse on perversion. In the original French version, we see that Lacan's tone is a lot more sceptical of the view that perversion is a monolithic 'natural' incursion in the Symbolic:

Et alors qu'est-ce que ça veut dire ? Est-ce que ça veut dire que ce que nous appelons la perversion polymorphe chez l'enfant est vécue avec cette richesse sensible dont nous pouvons dire, par son intermédiaire chez l'adulte, que la perversion est en somme un mode de l'exploration privilégiée d'une certaine possibilité existentielle de la nature humaine, d'un certain déchirement interne qui est cette béance par où a pu aussi entrer tout ce monde supranaturel du symbolique ?<sup>304</sup>

Whether this is an error of translation or Dollimore's act of citing Lacan out of context, the change in tone is revealing. Lacan puts into contention the Freudian touchstone of an originary 'polymorphous' behaviour in childhood. This is further corroborated when, shortly after the citation above, Lacan answers his own questions:

En d'autres termes, la question que je vous pose est celle-ci : devons-nous chercher chez l'enfant cette intersubjectivité fondamentale si elle est celle que nous voyons être constitutive de la perversion chez l'adulte ?

Eh bien, non.<sup>305</sup>

Dollimore's categorical condemnation of a Lacanian view of perversion appears reductionist. Lacan picks apart the knot tying together pre-Oedipal sexuality and the adult perversions. Indeed, Vincent Descombes, in an overview of French poststructuralist philosophy, states that the radical potential of the Lacanian turn in psychoanalysis lies precisely in Lacan's break from 'eighteenth-century

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<sup>304</sup> Lacan, *Séminaire I: Écrits techniques* (unpublished seminar, 1953-54), p. 363

<sup>305</sup> Lacan, *SI*, p. 364.

inaneities: nature is good, the savage noble, society evil'.<sup>306</sup> A radical politics of perversion, if it is to be extracted from the Lacanian School, must focus on this break with a naturalised conception of desire by its theorisation of perverse as a structure of behaviour or position in discourse. Lacanian theory may go some way to challenging the view that perversion is a universal behaviour that can be uniformly contained and crushed by the normalising forces of the social order.

The political worth of perversion in Lacanian discourse is, in fact, a moot point. Lacanian theory remains undecided regarding the question of whether perversion constitutes a transgression of the normative strictures of the Symbolic register. In essence, the perverse structure of subjectivity runs counter to the normative sexual paradigms of the Symbolic. It may be argued therefore that it could potentially be harnessed for true, subversive comedy. We remember that the spectator's 'revelling' in Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve*, outlined by Doubrovsky, coincides etymologically with the notion of rebellion. By a similar token, the pervert, in Lacanian theory, experiences an intrinsically rebellious mode of subjectivity by virtue of taking pleasure from that which has been proscribed, at the margins of the Other. As Dany Nobus makes clear, the Lacanian pervert operates within an 'alternative symbolic order' that foregrounds non-normative pleasure.<sup>307</sup> *La Cantatrice Chauve* provides this perverse 'alternative' framework in its fragmenting attack on language, brought to its most extreme point in the following:

M. SMITH : A, e, i, o, u, a, e, i, o, u, a, e, i, o, u,

Mme MARTIN : B, c, d, f, g, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, t, v, w, x, z ! (pp. 98-99)

The fact that the play has been interpreted as a comedy reveals a perverse privileging of non-normative enjoyment suggested by Nobus. At the same time, an alternative to a coherent ideological Other is provided here, thereby calling its hegemony into question.

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<sup>306</sup> Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. by L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980 [1979]), p. 172.

<sup>307</sup> Dany Nobus, *Jacques Lacan and the Freudian Practice of Psychoanalysis* (London; Philadelphia: Routledge, 2000), p. 44.

Lacanian ambivalence vis-à-vis a politics of perversion suggests that it is important to differentiate discursively between the perverse 'structure' as seen by psychoanalysis and actual acts of perversion, and similarly between a 'perverse mode of spectatorship' in other production contexts of *La Cantatrice chauve* and the specificity of its vicissitudes in the Huchette's production of this play. The de-politicisation of *La Cantatrice chauve* finds evidence in empirical reality. However, this does not therefore mean that *all* perverse structures or actual perverse acts fail to subvert the dominant ideology. Lisa Downing identifies a schism within psychoanalytic theories of perversion that separates the subversive potentiality of perversion from the view that it is incapable of transgressing societal strictures. She posits that this is attributable to Freud's originary definition of the perverse act as at once subversive of normative sexual strictures on sexuality and ideologically reifying insofar as it is conceptualised as a ritualised act of fixation (a concept that I applied to my observations of an audience of the Huchette's production earlier):

Two perceptions of perversion persist and coexist uncomfortably [...] in much psychoanalytic writing. On the one hand, there is the tendency to see perversion as a transgressive, disruptive, dangerous force, a metonymy for the human desire and capacity to break down the social hierarchy and overturn meanings. [...] On the other hand, there is the tendency to see perversion as conservative, rigid, and fixated, a mentality or practice not concerned with renovation, and re-creation, but with endless unchanging repetition of a "script" carefully constructed in advance.<sup>308</sup>

I have related perverse fixation and disavowal to the play's commodification in my analysis. However, as Downing indicates above, the two tendencies to promote and disparage the perversions within the same discipline of psychoanalysis are irreconcilable with one another. What is also suggested by the above citation is that perverse 'fixation' and political conservatism can be

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<sup>308</sup> Lisa Downing, 'Introduction: Perversion, Historicity, Ethics', in *Perversion: Psychoanalytic Perspectives/Perspectives on Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Dany Nobus and Lisa Downing (London: Karnac, 2006), pp. 149-64 (pp. 153-54).

held discursively separate. A psychoanalytic politics of perverse spectatorship, therefore, may be conceptualised in other instances.

Indeed, other psychoanalytic cultural theorists have demonstrated that the transgressive *objets petit a* of perversion can hold political clout. Tim Dean (2000) posits that the fluid and potentially non-genital nature of Lacanian object-causes of desire helps to inform the HIV/AIDS debate.<sup>309</sup> The act of plugging the Other, *à la* pervert, is not problematic in itself. In this chapter, it is only through my connection of this mode of spectatorship with the documented commercial prowess of *La Cantatrice chauve* at the Huchette that has enabled me to conclude that the play has potentially lost its subversive edge. By tempering the conservative view of perversion offered by such psychoanalysts as J-A Miller with the work of revisionist perversion theorists, however, a Lacanian conceptualisation of the perverse mode of spectatorship may be interpreted for its radical import.

### **Towards a Politics of Perverse Spectatorship in *La Cantatrice chauve***

L'avant-garde, c'est la liberté.<sup>310</sup>

How might a radical politics of perverse spectatorship be conceived in the case of *La Cantatrice chauve*? Perhaps it comes from unpicking the knot that ties together the perverse structure of spectatorship and its manipulation by the dominant capitalist order. Erich Segal proclaims that Ionesco's play, among other prominent Absurdist works, signalled the 'death of comedy' owing to its deviation from classical comedic themes and the bleak picture that it paints of an 'increasing dehumanization of the word in modern culture'.<sup>311</sup> Yet, Segal's claims emerge as pessimistic in light of the fact that audiences have persisted in interpreting Ionesco's play as a comedy in postmodern times. It is necessary to return here to the obstinacy, on the spectator's part, to interpret this play as a comedy. Perhaps this 'perverse' determination does carry radical potential,

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<sup>309</sup> Tim Dean, *Beyond Sexuality* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>310</sup> Ionesco, *Notes et contre-notes* (1966), p. 91.

<sup>311</sup> Erich Segal, *The Death of Comedy* (London; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 431.

since the actuality of the spectator's laughter has defied the odds – confounding Ionesco's expectations as much as Segal's – over the years.

Perversion, it must be stated, provides an escape from the pressures of normative 'reality'. Theatre spectatorship potentially offers the same release valve. As Joel Whitebook (1995) puts it, psychoanalytic theorists of a politics of perversion (in particular, Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel and Herbert Marcuse) centre on 'the wish to circumvent the reality principle'.<sup>312</sup> Whitebook turns to Marcuse's work *Eros and Civilisation* (1955) that describes this dominant 'reality principle' as contingent upon historical circumstances. Marcuse renames and redefines the reality principle of Freudian theory as the 'performance principle' of capitalist society.<sup>313</sup> He does this in order to emphasise the potential for change, encapsulated in the noun 'performance', in capitalist society, to break from restrictive norms that alienate labour and subjugate sexualities deviating from the genital act.

This notion of a constantly mutating and pliable 'reality' in the performance principle may be transposed onto a historically conditioned model of the social order. A perverse form of spectatorship in *La Cantatrice chauve* may then well become re-politicised by focusing on a historically contingent social order and the play's radical 're-performing' of Marcuse's performance principle. Could modifying the conditions of producing and performing this play create new ways in which a perverse spectatorship might be permitted to challenge the Other? Could these conditions temporarily create a pocket of relief from the capitalist Other that I have suggested tames the spectators' reactions to the Huchette production? Performance studies critic Richard Schechner would certainly seem to concur that *La Cantatrice chauve* could be revitalised in performance: 'if a fresh interpretation of the play is possible, then maybe a fresh way of playing is called for'.<sup>314</sup> In Schechner's opinion, the new *mises en scène* of *La Cantatrice chauve* must re-invent the actors' performance method in order to recapture the subversive aspect of Ionesco's comedy:

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<sup>312</sup> Joel Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT, 1995), p. 60.

<sup>313</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (London: Sphere, 1969).

<sup>314</sup> Richard Schechner, 'The Bald Soprano and The Lesson: An Inquiry into Play Structure', in *Ionesco: A Collection of Critical Essays*, pp. 21-37 (p. 27).



In Ionesco's drama we are able to have the creativity of performers and the vitality of a liberated language. To perform the *Bald Soprano* this way would be to radically re-interpret it, and make of it what I think it wants to be, a driving life-force comedy.<sup>315</sup>

In the event of a new performance style, perhaps the spectator's 'perverse' obstinacy to receive this play persistently as a comedy would pave the way for its re-birth as Zupančič's true, subversive comedy. After all, as Lacan states, the subject can never fully escape the locus of ideologies, the Other. As such, the *objets petit a* of perversion constitute the 'seule forme de transgression qui soit permise au sujet'.<sup>316</sup>

### **Concluding remarks: A Radical Re-performance of *La Cantatrice chauve*?**

In this conclusion, I will turn to an analysis of Alambic Comédie's production of *La Cantatrice chauve* in Paris in order to point towards a radical re-performing of Ionesco's text and a chance for 'true' comedy from the perverse mode of spectatorship suggested above. I have chosen to focus my analysis on Paul Clément's *mise en scène* at the Alambic Comédie, because, despite being in close geographical proximity to the Huchette version, the production differs radically from its more illustrious counterpart. I want to suggest that the performance and production contexts diverge from the Huchette forerunner and this may have the effect of stirring up the most subversive aspects of a perverse mode of spectatorship. Spectator response is very different to Alambic Comédie's production, as will be revealed in due course.

Alambic Comédie's production of *La Cantatrice chauve* starts in a radically different manner to the Huchette performance. Spectators are not faced with any of the capitalist pomp and ceremony of the Huchette production prior to the play's start: no paraphernalia vaunting the play's legacy is thrust upon them in anticipation of the beginning of the dramatic action; no mention is made of the other, much better-known production of this play a few Métro stops away in an attempt to ride on the coat-tails of the commercial success of the Huchette; the

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<sup>315</sup> Schechner, p. 28.

<sup>316</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Les Quatre concepts de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 205.

publicity (the right-hand image) notably departs from the staid colours of the Huchette's poster:<sup>317</sup>



Without any of the devices used to suture a potential perverse mode of spectatorship to the logic of commodity aesthetics in evidence in the Huchette production, it could be argued that the viewer is set up to interpret the play in a very different way prior to its start. It could be argued that this theoretically conjures up a space suspended from the dominant capitalist Other – that puts a stranglehold on the Huchette – in which the perverse mode of spectatorship may be given the opportunity to play itself out in all its subversive nature.

Confirming this postulation, the difference in audience reaction is palpable. Laughter does not punctuate every line as in the Huchette production. This is not necessarily an indication of the play's lack of comedic force, because, as I have suggested, such constant laughter in the Huchette production points to a mechanical, unthinking response to the play. Indeed, the lack of constant laughter in Alambic Comédie's production may even signal spectators' engagement with the uncomfortable and challenging moments of the play that Ionesco considered tragic initially. There were occasional, single bursts of laughter as M. and Mme. Smith run through the 'Bobby Watson' spiel.

It is clear that this theatre company has attempted to revitalise Ionesco's hallmark play. As distinct from the sombre colours of the Huchette stage – emulating the style of a house in Victorian Britain – the viewer of Alambic

<sup>317</sup> Left-hand image taken from: <[http://www.theatrehuchette.com/a\\_l\\_affiche](http://www.theatrehuchette.com/a_l_affiche)> [accessed 29 October 2011]. Right-hand image taken from: <<http://www.billetreduc.com/34408/evt.htm>> [accessed 29 October 2011].

Comédie's *La Cantatrice chauve* is confronted with a vibrant backdrop of a Union Jack flag split across various wood panels. The cast of characters are notably much younger too. Mme. Smith and Mme. Martin wear modern black dresses, drastically departing from the Victorian outfits of their counterparts at the Huchette.

The director has clearly tried to modernise the dramatic content of *La Cantatrice chauve* as well, making it more accessible to contemporary audiences. Ionesco originally instructed Mme. Smith to knit (or crochet as in the Huchette version) while her husband reads the newspaper. In this version it is Mme. Smith who starts by reading the newspaper and M. Smith who knits, and the two characters switch tasks mid-way through their first conversation. This constitutes a possible underlying critique of gendered roles in society. This critique is made more emphatic moments later when the characters square up to one another in a visibly combative style (that the Huchette production holds back on) as they repeat the following lines from Ionesco's text:

Mme. SMITH : Les hommes sont tous pareils ! Vous restez là toute la journée, la cigarette à la bouche ou bien vous mettez de la poudre et vous fardez vos lèvres, cinquante fois par jour, si vous n'êtes pas en train de boire sans arrêt !

M. SMITH : Mais qu'est-ce que tu dirais si tu voyais les hommes faire comme les femmes, fumer toute la journée, se poudrer, se mettre rouge aux lèvres, boir du whisky ? (p. 50)

The issue of gender is also brought to the fore by the Pompier who triumphantly strolls onto the stage dressed as an infantry soldier (a heavy chain is placed over his shoulder and he wears a gas mask). The lights dim to an atmospheric red hue as he makes his entrance and strikes a pose that makes him seem more like a hero from Hollywood cinema than a British fireman. Mme. Smith – who is clearly more sexualised than her counterpart in the Huchette production – swoons at the sight of him and hangs on his every word, inciting the jealousy of her husband. Wanting the fireman to recount an anecdote, Mme. Smith squeaks at one point in a coquettish and parodically 'feminine' manner: 'je vous en supplie !'. The exaggerated performance styles of both Mme. Smith and the Pompier,

quite clearly designed to be interpreted ironically by the audience, may constitute a further commentary by the production on gender normative roles in society.

There are other ways in which this production breathes new life into Ionesco's play. The cast of characters walk among the audience in an attempt to elicit an active form of engagement from them, as opposed to the Huchette's resistance to breaking the fourth wall; the cast of characters applaud the Pompier before he starts to recount his fables, thereby bringing to the attention of the audience its own role in an ironic way (since there is nothing to clap); M. Smith, M. Martin and the Pompier emit competitive, aggressive 'masculine' grunts at one point. Whilst not always inciting laughter, these moments tend to provoke a more spontaneous and genuine form of comedic response from spectators than the mechanical giggles that end every line of the Huchette's *La Cantatrice chauve*.

There were two points in particular in Alambic Comédie's production when the auditorium erupted in laughter. Both of these moments constitute new contributions to Ionesco's play-text and demonstrate the chance for 'true' comedy from a reinvigorated performance style that I have discussed above. Immediately before beginning his final disquisition 'Le Rhume' ('mon beau-frère avait, du côté paternel, un cousin germain dont un oncle maternel avait un beau-père' ... (p. 84)), the Pompier, in a highly choreographed and stylised manoeuvre, places Mme. Smith on a Union Jack-covered beanbag while twirling Mme. Martin around to sit on the chair where Mme. Smith had been moments before. This constitutes another moment in which gender norms (active masculinity and feminine passivity) are exaggerated and parodied. The audience responded to this choreography with an engaged (and loud) form of laughter.

The moment that raised the most laughter from the audience, however, was when Mary recited her poem 'Le Feu':

Les polycandres brillaient dans les bois  
 Une pierre prit feu  
 Le château prit feu  
 La forêt prit feu

Les hommes prirent feu  
 Les femmes prirent feu  
 Les oiseaux prirent feu  
 Les poissons prirent feu  
 L'eau prit feu  
 Le ciel prit feu  
 La cendre prit feu  
 La fumée prit feu  
 La fumée prit feu  
 Le feu prit feu  
 Tout prit feu  
 Prit feu, prit feu (p. 91)

The actress who plays Mary in the Huchette version recites the poem in her unceasing deadpan manner and is eventually dragged off the stage. By contrast, Mary in the Alambic Comédie production makes a series of karate-like, staccato gestures as she proceeds with the poem. She accelerates in rhythm towards the end of her poem and her gestures increase in frequency and speed to such an extent that she gives the impression of losing all control of her body. Met with an intense burst of laughter from the audience, this gesture (absent from the Huchette script) brings into relief new ways in which the play may convey the mechanical nature of language that Ionesco had intended in writing this play. This Mary creates the impression that the signifiers that flow out of her mouth are out of her control, that they are disembodied. Spectators' spontaneous form of laughter would suggest that they derive enjoyment from Mary's disembodied language, taking pleasure from a barrage of meaningless, non-normative signifiers in a manner akin to the Lacanian pervert described in this chapter. The engaged laughter from spectators also points to a successfully executed radical re-performance of *La Cantatrice chauve* in emphasising, as Schechner describes, 'the creativity of performers and the vitality of a liberated language'.<sup>318</sup>

When the production ended, the fervent and enthusiastic round of applause from the audience seemed more connected with the active form of

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<sup>318</sup> Richard Schechner, 'The Bald Soprano and The Lesson: An Inquiry into Play Structure', in *Ionesco: A Collection of Critical Essays*, pp. 21-37 (p. 27).

comedic engagement that moments such as these produced than at the end of the Huchette production that I described earlier. Whilst this production is by no means without its weaknesses (there was, for instance, an awkward moment when Mme. Martin cackled for no particular reason), the responses of the audience would suggest that this theatre company's efforts to revitalise the comedic value of the play have succeeded.

The spontaneous form of laughter in response to Alambic Comédie's production may be linked to Zupančič's notion of true, political comedy. The play's parody of gender, in particular, suggests new forms of subverting the normative Other. Rather than championing the 'abstract universal' of the Huchette's supposed timelessness, this production may promote the 'concrete universal' of the transgressive comic surplus objects that undermine patriarchal ideology. A perverse mode of spectatorship suggests theoretically that audiences would take pleasure from this form of gender subversion, and the laughter on the part of certain spectators empirically gestures towards this perverse mode of spectatorship. Isolated from the capitalist discourses of the Huchette that serve to inoculate against the radical edge of this form of spectatorship, it may be argued that the audience's laughter indicates a politicised form of engagement with such sequences in the style of true comedy.

Online spectator accounts may corroborate this production's potential for 'true, subversive comedy'. Spectators have responded to the Alambic Comédie production with a greater degree of description of their experiences as individual viewers rather than repeating *ad nauseam* the commonplaces about the 'absurdity of the human condition' – which I have associated with false comedy's 'metaphysics of human finitude' – as with the Huchette production. Equally, spectator response has not been collapsed into the capitalist discourses of the play's universal appeal and timelessness. One spectator admits to finding renewed import in the play, despite his or her introduction to *La Cantatrice chauve* as a 'modern classic' decades before:

J'y ai emmené deux garçons ados à qui je voulais faire connaître le théâtre de l'absurde, déjà considéré comme classique moderne quand j'étais jeune ! Sans rien leur dire pour éviter de les influencer... Verdict: ils ont reconnu leurs délires

de cour de collège dans ces dialogues insensés... et ont continué à la sortie! Jeu des jeunes acteurs excellent, très rapide, avec de brusques attentes insupportables... C'est jubilatoire et irritant, comme la vie même!<sup>319</sup>

This spectator's description of the production as paradoxically 'jubilatoire et irritant' suggests the challenging nature of this production of Ionesco's comedy; spectators are perhaps prohibited from laughing thoughtlessly and automatically, and this points to the potentiality of this production for true, politicised comedy.

Another spectator recounts feeling heavily involved in the linguistic revelry of the stage: 'on était au 1er rang et on a l'impression d'être rentrés dans cette pièce complètement décalée. Le jeu des acteurs est formidable. On a passé un fort agréable moment. On est à deux doigts d'y retourner!'.<sup>320</sup> The spectator's impression of being transported into the chaos of the action gestures towards a political mode of enjoying the play by connecting with the non-normative signifiers of the piece in the style of the Lacanian pervert. Another individual's observations that 'la pièce peut être déroutant pour un public non averti' would seem to illustrate a non-normative, challenging spectatorial experience that breaks the bounds of accepted social codes.<sup>321</sup> Finally, another spectator notes that the Alambic Comédie production successfully manages to affect those who would not normally go the theatre. Performed in a 'quartier qui n'attire pas les spectateurs', this piece affects 'des jeunes' and 'des plus âgés'.<sup>322</sup>

Comments such as these demonstrate the political mileage that is still to be discovered in *La Cantatrice chauve*. Given that the prevailing form of spectator response to Ionesco's play remains laughter, empirical accounts of the Alambic Comédie production attest to the potential signs of a radical re-working of this play as a true comedy that may be potentiated by new ways of performing and producing it. On a more concrete level, the form of reception of the Alambic

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<sup>319</sup> <<http://www.billetreduc.com/34408/evtcrit.htm?crit=1&tri=G&CRITIQUESp=5>> [accessed 29 October 2011].

<sup>320</sup> <<http://www.billetreduc.com/34408/evtcrit.htm?crit=1&tri=G&CRITIQUESp=5>> [accessed 29 October 2011].

<sup>321</sup> <http://www.billetreduc.com/34408/evtcrit.htm?crit=1&tri=G&CRITIQUESp=4> [accessed 29 October 2011].

<sup>322</sup> <<http://www.billetreduc.com/34408/evtcrit.htm?crit=1&tri=G&CRITIQUESp=6>> [accessed 9 November 2011].

Comédie production gestures towards this theatre company's and the spectator's combined subversion of the normative, received – and as I have shown ultimately commodified – academic notions of Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve*. These comments point towards the radical channels down which a perverse form of spectatorship – one that derives radical enjoyment from meaninglessness – can be diverted.

This chapter has identified political potential in the plotless, fragmentary *La Cantatrice chauve*. Taking this together with Chapter Two on Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages*, it is possible to state that Ionesco's absurd politics emerges out of the libidinal aesthetic regimes of phantasy and perversion that provoke the spectator to derive pleasure from his plays. Chapter Four of this thesis distances itself from a spectatorial politics of pleasure, by going on to look at the third playwright of this thesis: Arthur Adamov. In what follows, I conceptualise a 'psychotic mode of spectatorship' conjured up by his play *Off limits*.



## Chapter 4

### ***Dissensus and Dialectics in Arthur Adamov's Off limits (1969): The Psychotic Mode of Spectatorship***

The political charge of Arthur Adamov's theatre has been understood by critics to lie in a two-fold Brechtian strategy adopted by the playwright: the concrete rooting of the dramatic action in a historical referent and the spectator's subsequent alienation from the historical paradigms of dominant ideology via an aesthetic of estrangement effects (*Verfremdungseffekt*). The communist journal *La Nouvelle critique* published an edition in 1973 that focused attention on the topic of Adamov's Brechtian theatre.<sup>323</sup> However, *Off limits* (1969), one of the last plays that Adamov wrote, figures as an anomaly in this Brechtian systematisation of the playwright's political theatre. The play denounces the egregious history of the Vietnam War and the Cold War, but it strikes up an at best tenuous link with historical reality. It departs from the didactic, Brechtian aesthetic.

The playwright chose to depict the turbulence of the Vietnam conflict from an American viewpoint. Based on his personal experiences of New York, Adamov centres attention on the whims and desires of the party-going cast of characters as they launch into abstruse, solipsistic sketches, happenings and recitations.<sup>324</sup> Whilst Adamov confessed to his struggle to find a way of transfiguring the atrocities of Vietnam in a way that was 'théâtrale et humainement admissible', critics condemned the playwright's use of happenings as politically disingenuous.<sup>325</sup> The eroticised happenings, for these critics, nullify the thematic gravity of the play. Jean-Jacques Gautier dismissed the erratic content of the play as 'sans queue ni tête'. He went so far as to say that such a

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<sup>323</sup>*La Nouvelle critique : politique, marxisme, culture, Arthur Adamov*, ed. by Antoine Casanova, 66 (Paris: La Nouvelle Critique, 1973).

<sup>324</sup>David Bradby explains that Adamov was inspired by the happenings and other literary experiments of the collaborative work *The Four Suits* (1965) (by Benjamin Patterson, Philip Corner, Alison Knowles and Tomas Schmit). David Bradby, 'Finita la commedia: l'emploi du jeu dans le théâtre adamovien des années soixante', in *Lectures d'Adamov: actes du colloque international: Würzburg 1981*, ed. By Robert Abirached, Ernstpeter Ruhe and Richard Schwaderer, Études littéraires françaises, 27 (Tübingen; Paris: Gunter Narr Verlag; Jean-Michel Place, 1983), pp. 56-73.

<sup>325</sup>Arthur Adamov, *Off limits* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 10. Subsequent references to *Off limits* will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.

play 'n'honore ni le théâtre, ni l'auteur, ni son metteur en scène'.<sup>326</sup> In equally morally charged rhetoric, Pierre Marcabru labelled the play 'décadente [...] réservée au stricte usage d'intellectuels masochistes et bohèmes, fascinés par leur propre déroute'.<sup>327</sup> Theatre critic Philippe Madral's comments explicitly attribute the play's perceived shortcomings to a deviation from the Brechtian norms of political theatre, stating that the playwright refused to 'accentuer volontairement le didactisme'.<sup>328</sup>

Despite opprobrium from Brechtian theatre circles, *Off limits* was not Adamov's only play to diverge from the didactic aesthetic. The playwright pioneered a theatre that lay between both the personal (which he ominously dubbed 'le mal incurable') and the political (more optimistically termed 'le mal curable').<sup>329</sup> Although there was a brief foray into Brechtian 'epic' drama (*Paolo Paoli* (1957), *Le Printemps '71* (1960) and *Sainte Europe* (1966)), the playwright's corpus mostly rebuffed a purely didactic-Marxist line. Adamov found fault with Brechtian stylisation, since 'Brecht montre des personnages aliénés, mais débarrassés du coefficient le plus lourd de l'aliénation : la névrose'.<sup>330</sup> While his contemporary critics placed primacy on the didactic strengths of his earlier theatre, Adamov's last theatre pieces (among them, *M. le Modéré* (1968), *Off limits* (1969) and *Si l'été revenait* (1970)) departed from the tenets of Brechtian modernism.<sup>331</sup>

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<sup>326</sup>Jean-Jacques Gautier, 'Off limits', *Le Figaro*, 27 January 1969.

<sup>327</sup>Pierre Marcabru, 'Off limits, d'Arthur Adamov, au Théâtre d'Aubervilliers: suffit-il d'être contre la guerre du Vietnam pour avoir du talent?', *Paris Presse*, 29 January 1969.

<sup>328</sup>Philippe Madral, 'Un Univers torturé: Off Limits, d'Arthur Adamov', *L'Humanité*, 27 January 1969, p. 17.

<sup>329</sup>Adamov, *Ici et maintenant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 45.

<sup>330</sup>*Ici et maintenant*, p. 162.

<sup>331</sup>With regard to Martin Esslin's technical schematisation of the 'theatre of the absurd', it could be argued that the playwright comes full-circle with the movement while maintaining links with it throughout his career. His earliest plays such as *La Parodie* (1947) and *L'Invasion* (1949) theatricalise the plight of the individual in a corrupt and hopeless world, a motif that enabled critics to marry the concept of the absurd to the contemporaneous existential philosophy of Sartre and Camus. During Adamov's Brechtian period, Esslin found that plays such as *Paolo Paoli*, despite the didactic epic style, still resonated with the concerns of absurd theatre owing to the playwright's privileging of symbolism over realism (pp. 123-24). Finally, Adamov's last plays – in his own words, a 'retour à l'absurde d'une certaine manière' – revisited the historically abstract thematic of his technically defined 'absurd' earlier period. (See: Arthur Adamov, *L'Homme et l'enfant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 231.) As I explained in the Introduction, I widen the conceptual scope of absurd theatre and associate it with the Lacanian split-subject. This chapter explores the creation of the split psychotic spectator-subject dynamic in *Off limits*.

In many ways, Adamov's latter-day theatre mirrored and bore witness to the changed approach to politics in contemporaneous continental philosophical circles. As intellectual historian Vincent Descombes (1979) writes with reference to the work of theorists such as Lacan, Deleuze, Guattari and Derrida, 'an attempt was made to rehabilitate the referential political theory (Marxism) with an injection of *desire* and *jouissance*'.<sup>332</sup> This became a particularly pressing philosophical agenda after the turbulence and failings of the events of May 1968. Indeed, Descombes goes on to argue that 'Marx had to be completed with Freud'.<sup>333</sup> Adamov's *Off limits* and its aesthetic stress on the whims of the party-goers parallel the contemporaneous philosophical shift towards a politics of desire. By the same token, it becomes clear that the playwright's detractors were still under the conceptual sway of the modernist grand narrative of social progress. They argued that his political theatre needed to suppress desire, or, at the very least, insisted that psychological complexity had to be subordinated – as a precursor – to a 'greater' political agenda of modernist progress. Roland Desné's (1973) comments on the playwright's latter-day theatre make this clear: 'c'est seulement à ce niveau de *l'utilisation des névroses* que la connaissance politique peut intervenir afin que la transposition artistique de l'expérience intime fortifie au lieu d'affaiblir, ou d'égarer devant la vie, le lecteur, le spectateur'.<sup>334</sup> By contrast, modern-day continental philosophy not only takes account of desire, but *politicises* it too. *Off limits*, it might be argued, leaves behind an ossified standard of Brechtian didacticism championed by theatre critics such as Gautier, Madral and Marcabru in their condemnation of this play.

This chapter sets out to reinvestigate the political efficacy of *Off limits*. To do so, however, it is necessary to reframe the argument surrounding the play in earlier criticism. I distance the play from critics' emphasis on the politics of theatrical didacticism and align it with the theoretical dyad of desire and politics that has become crucial to French philosophical considerations of politics. Where critics found fault with Adamov's individualistic portrayal of solipsism and

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<sup>332</sup> Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. by L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980 [1979]), p. 17.

<sup>333</sup> Vincent Descombes, p. 17.

<sup>334</sup> My emphasis. Roland Desné, 'Adamov et la politique', *La Nouvelle Critique : politique, marxisme, culture, Arthur Adamov*, 66 (Paris: La Nouvelle Critique, 1973), 11-15 (p. 15).

nihilism in *Off limits* ('ne rien demander, ne jamais rien demander. Rien demander, rien demander' (p. 21)), I argue that this is precisely where the politics of the play lies. Its aesthetic, I will argue, bears the theoretical potential to evoke a form of desire in the spectator that becomes inflected with psychosis as Lacanian theory defines it. Psychosis is a behaviour that separates its victim from the collective; the psychotic views society with a suspicious eye. The political purchase of psychotic spectatorship, therefore, lies in the subject's separation from socially accepted norms.

While this was a play that aimed to critique the USA of the 1960s, it does not do so in a totalising way. Adamov wished to theatricalise a fragmented snippet of the increasing grip of Western liberalism and American hegemony ('je n'ai pas voulu découvrir ici l'Amérique entière, mais un certain milieu social hétéroclite, qui s'étend à New York, entre Washington Square, la General Motors et la villa de Katherine Hepburn' (p. 11)). Whilst much of Adamov's corpus of plays can be situated in terms of the modernist themes identified by Jean-François Lyotard in *La Condition postmoderne* (1979), his later plays such as *Off limits* mark a turning point. In Adamov's early to mid-career plays (such as *Paolo Paoli*), the Russian-born playwright takes up the modernist motif of what Lyotard alludes to as society's rational metanarrative, a trajectory of society's self-improvement through the acquisition of historical knowledge.<sup>335</sup> *Off limits* finds itself in sharp contradistinction to the modernist bent. The play's fragmentary reconfiguration of the Cold War bears more of a resemblance to the postmodern dissolution of the historical metanarrative.

In *Off limits*, Adamov subtly undermines American idealism from start to finish. This is most explicit in the play's continual derision of the Statue of Liberty. The character Molly pathetically emulates the lodestar of American ideology, and the play ends with an apocalyptic, mass-scale destruction of the statue. The statue occupied a central place for Teatro Piccolo's 1969 *mise en scène*, forming the backdrop to many scenes. The prop's accusatory pointing of the finger at the audience leaves us in no doubt of the play's attempts to

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<sup>335</sup>Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1979).

undermine the American triumphalism that is represented by its referent's conventional bearing of the torch in the right hand:<sup>336</sup>



Images from Teatro Piccolo 1969 taken by Ciminaghi Luigi

This production's littering of the stage with excessive objects also illustrates the play's critique of American consumerism. However, through its geographical and cultural displacement of the Vietnam conflict in the setting of the New York elite, the play cannot simply be interpreted as Anti-American but also as an indirect critique of France. Both the topic of Vietnam, as an ex-colony of French Indo-China, and the references to the Statue of Liberty, a symbol linking the

<sup>336</sup> Images taken from <<http://archivio.piccoloteatro.org/eurolab/index.php?provenienza=1#a>> [accessed 7 November 2011].

constitutional ideologies of France and the USA, are culturally and historically resonant in a French context.<sup>337</sup> As such, notwithstanding its anti-Americanism, the play conveys and critiques the imperialist anxieties of France in 1969 ('les meurtriers parlent anglais eux aussi et le dialecte français à l'occasion' (p. 80)). It references not only the plight of the Vietnamese – which garnered a strong sense of solidarity among the French particularly during the Paris riots of May 1968, as Kristin Ross observes – but also indirectly alludes to France's own egregious colonial legacies both in the historically more distant case of Vietnam (ending in 1954) and the more immediate case of Algeria (1962).<sup>338</sup> While a critique of Westernised modernity figures at the forefront of the dramatic action, Adamov also sounds a note of caution against communist ideology and leftist supremacy ('Jim O'Sullivan, nouvelle recrue gauchisante de la Grande Gauche, Respectable, Respectée' (p. 105)).

This, therefore, was a play that disrupted the dominant constitutional ideologies that divided the world in 1969. However, the play's continued jibes at Western liberalism combined with its historical allusiveness (Vietnam is not depicted in a realistic or naturalistic manner) could be argued to conjure up a similar critique for the theoretical spectator of the postmodern age. It strikes up a relationship with Jacques Rancière's notion of the emancipated spectator who is liberated from neoliberal market ideology, as I will explain later. The chaotic and nihilistic aesthetic of this play may also speak to what Frederic Jameson (1991) identifies as a postmodern devaluation of the historical metanarrative of social progress through a politically 'suggestive' schizophrenic logic.<sup>339</sup> I will argue, from close textual analysis, that the aesthetic strategy of *Off limits* conceptually dovetails with the wider Lacanian category of psychosis. With reference to Jameson's schizophrenic version of postmodernism and Rancière's notion of the emancipated spectator, it may be argued that Adamov's play is

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<sup>337</sup>The Statue was originally a gift from the French to the United States in 1886.

<sup>338</sup> See: Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1999); Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002).

<sup>339</sup>Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 26.

prescient of a modern-day politics of spectatorship, because its aesthetic regime might be argued to encourage theoretically a 'psychotic mode of spectatorship'.

The theoretical breadth of this chapter has necessitated its division into two parts. In the first part, I use Lacanian theory to conceptualise how the psychotic mode of spectatorship is created by the 'irreality' of *Off limits* (journalist Pierre Madral's term). In this first half, I also explain the processes at work in the 'psychotic' dynamic between the stage and spectator with reference to the non-pathologising theories of Freud, anti-psychiatry (Laing, Szasz), and Lacan. The second part of the chapter situates the psychotic mode of spectatorship and the spectator's dynamic with the stage that animates it in a postmodern project of political spectatorship, drawing heavily upon Jacques Rancière's *Le Spectateur émancipé* (2008). I argue that the psychotic mode of spectatorship potentially generated by *Off limits* allows for a political mode of theatre based on what Rancière terms 'dissensus', vocal and visible resistances to the ubiquitous collective consensus of the neoliberal age. With reference to Jameson's re-envisioning of a politically charged dialectics of the modern-day (2009), I end my analysis of *Off limits* with a speculative consideration of how the psychotic *dissensus* depicted in the play might pave the way for post-theatrical politics – that is to say, a form of politics outside of the theatre after the spectator's viewing experience of the play has ended – in a new, non-totalising form of dialectics. In this way, it shall be shown how postmodern models of political spectatorship may be brought to bear on Adamov's unique theatrical mixture of Marxism and madness.

The critical condemnation has meant that very little, if anything, is known about actual spectator response to *Off limits*. Colin Duckworth (1972) notes the lamentable power that critical reception may hold over records of spectator response. He carried out an audience response survey of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* in order to counteract the hegemony of the theatre critic in determining a play's reception ('it was possibly the idea of taking a little of the critics' power away that won the theatre people over to the survey').<sup>340</sup> The last productions of *Off limits* occurred in 1969 in the Théâtre de

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<sup>340</sup> Colin Duckworth, *Angels of Darkness: Dramatic Effect in Beckett and Ionesco* (London: George Allen & Unwen, 1972), p. 99.

la Commune d'Aubervilliers and Teatro Piccolo, so that there is little that can be done within the scope of this thesis to establish empirical reaction. It has been necessary to base the following argument on theoretical insight and a heuristic approach to textual analysis. Given the speculative nature of the concepts discussed throughout, I conclude the chapter by turning to spectator accounts of two of Samuel Beckett's plays that might be argued to have a similar textual logic to *Off limits: Pas moi* (1972) and *Oh les beaux jours* (1961). According to these accounts, these plays conjure up disruptive and disturbing spectatorial affects. My analysis of contemporary spectators' experiences of these plays will ground the chapter's theoretical insight into psychotic form of spectatorship, propelled by absurd theatre, in empirical evidence.



## Part I: The Psychotic Aesthetic of *Off limits* and the Psychotic Mode of Spectatorship

The evasion of theatrical didacticism in *Off limits* is made possible by the series of 'happenings' and sketches performed by the play's sizeable cast of over twenty-five characters. The play begins with a parody of a school classroom scene. Lisbeth O'Douglas, wife of the television mogul Humphrey, instructs her 'students' – fellow revellers – to close their books, drink beer, take a bath and empty their minds of thoughts. The incongruity of these instructions is interspersed with tenuous allusions to an exteriorised political reality ('nous avons fourni des fusées sol-air à la Thaïlande' (pp. 19-20)).

An aesthetic of senseless festivities – which seems to stir up a paradoxical mixture of enjoyment and distress in the characters – and a strained historical referentiality continue throughout the play. Scenes are filled with dancing one moment and references to Vietnam the next:

*Dorothy et Doris Roan dansent. Elle froide, impeccable ; lui titubant à chacun de ses pas. Twiste réglementaire : les danseurs se tiennent éloignés l'un de l'autre. Reynold Day, toujours digne, et Mr Hinker, digne également, traversent la scène. REYNOLD DAY : Mr Johnson aura, je le crains, du mal à garder le juste milieu entre l'intimidation et l'intervention massive. (p. 79)*

The non-realistic aesthetic dominates proceedings. In another moment, the characters start barking inexplicably, conjuring up a sense of the burlesque:

*Molly pleure mais aboie. Jim et Sally poussent une sorte d'abolement, bref, comique. Dorothy profite du commandement pour se mettre à quatre pattes et pousser un nouvel abolement aigu, affreux. (p. 99)*

The play's logic leads Philippe Madral (1969) to argue that the play's break with the spectator's familiar reality is so extreme that it becomes 'le plus grand irréalisme', and, as a corollary, it no longer retains any ties with the outside

world.<sup>341</sup> However, it can be construed that the hermetic and incongruous thematic of the play, while unacceptable for Madral, theoretically paves the way for the spectator's politicised response. Adamov stated, in the preface to *Off limits*, that he wished for audiences to criticise the play by means of the multi-layered aesthetic:

*Ce que j'ai voulu entreprendre ? En somme, utiliser les happenings [...] pour pouvoir les regarder et les critiquer. La confusion de la pensée des personnages ne doit pas entraîner la confusion dans la pensée du spectateur. (p. 10)*

We can understand how the playwright might have considered that a politicised response to representational fragmentation would be potentiated, by turning to dramatic criticism contemporaneous with the play's publication. As Bernard Dort argues, plays such as *Off limits* conjure up a 'propédeutique de la réalité'. According to Dort some of the French theatre of the 1960s – including Armand Gatti's *Chant public devant deux chaises électriques* (1962) and Jean Genet's *Les Paravents* (1961) – moved away from a presentation of a coherent, universally held and rational view of reality. A monolithic truth about reality was deemed untenable following World War II that had been justified in the name of a struggle for the 'greater universal good' of Nazism. In fact, the trend that Dort identifies in the theatre of the 1960s – that of a 'propédeutique de la réalité' – continues the critique of a universal 'Reality' that Esslin first identified in the theatre of the absurd of the 1950s (as described in the Introduction). For instance, Ionesco's *Rhinocéros* (1959) depicts the pernicious spread of mindless conformism under a grand, nameless ideology as the characters, one by one, turn into rhinoceroses. Beckett's *Fin de Partie* (1957), as another example, reveals four characters (Hamm, Clov, Nagg and Nell) in a post-apocalyptic, tedious world in which the notion of a greater social 'reality' is foreclosed entirely from the space of the stage. 'Reality', in this play, is radically reduced to the most minimal of coordinates, the daily grind of life. Dort opines that the theatrical explosion of 'Reality' particular to the 1960s had direct ramifications for spectatorship:

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<sup>341</sup>Madral, 'Un Univers torturé', p. 17.

Maintenant, il s'agit moins de refléter le monde actuel dans le miroir trop étroit de la scène traditionnelle [...] : au lieu d'être les temples d'une vérité historique ou esthétique, nos théâtres doivent [...] devenir des laboratoires où auteurs, metteurs en scène, acteurs et spectateurs puissent confronter librement leurs expériences et leurs représentations de la réalité.<sup>342</sup>

Dort's descriptions of theatre as 'des laboratoires' recall, coincidentally or intentionally, Jerzy Grotowski's concept of experimental 'laboratory theatre' in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>343</sup> The aesthetic shift galvanising spectatorial experimentation in *Off limits*, as can be gathered from Dort's above commentary, is liberating for the spectator, and this might leave him or her free to critique as Adamov had wished. In order to stake out the political charge of the spectatorship of *Off limits*, it is instructive therefore to suffuse Madral's description of *Off limits* as '*le plus grand irréalisme*' with the emancipatory potential of Dort's concept of a theatrical '*propédeutique de la réalité*'.

The conflation of these two concepts – into a potentially emancipatory form of subjective distancing from social and/or dramatic reality – brings us strikingly close to the logic of psychosis, as laid out in non-pathologising approaches to the subject. Adamov's *Off limits* shares historical, cultural and aesthetic common ground with the principles of the 'anti-psychiatric movement' that dominated certain circles in France after 1968. Sherry Turkle (1979) describes the movement as one that privileged, rather than punished, individual madness because of its capacity for circumventing the strictures of dominant ideology. She lists the magazines *Cahiers pour la folie* and *Gardes Fous*, the newspaper *L'Idiot Internationale* and the Woodstock festival of the 1970s as examples of the anti-psychiatric cultural output.<sup>344</sup> Similarly, the emancipatory potential of madness is clearly woven into the narrative of *Off limits*. Visual evidence suggests that a liberating form of behaviour akin to madness or delusion directly inflects the characters' actions:<sup>345</sup>

<sup>342</sup> Bernard Dort, *Théâtre réel: essais de critique 1967-1970* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), p. 27.

<sup>343</sup> See: Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1968).

<sup>344</sup> Sherry Turkle, *Psychoanalytic Politics: Freud's French Revolution* (London: Burnett Books, 1979), pp. 154-56.

<sup>345</sup> Images taken from: <<http://archivio.piccoloteatro.org/eurolab/index.php?IDtitolo=130#a>> [accessed 7 November 2011].



Images from Teatro Piccolo 1969

In addition, a politicised madness emerges from the character Jim who declares that he takes inspiration from real-life writer Carl Solomon (1928-1993). The latter made the decision to enter a lunatic asylum, 'Rockland', in New York State. Adamov's reference below to 'Je suis avec toi à Rockland' directly translates into French a line from Beat Generation Allen Ginsberg's poem 'Howl' (1955). As a friend and comrade-in-arms in the struggle for the liberation from social and sexual mores, Ginsberg dedicated this poem to Solomon. Therefore, madness, both for Solomon and for the character Jim of *Off limits*, connotes liberation:

JIM, *récitant* : Carl Salomon [*sic.*], je suis avec toi à Rockland  
 Où tu es plus fou que moi  
 Je suis avec toi à Rockland  
 Où tu dois te sentir très bizarre.  
 Je suis avec toi à Rockland  
 Où tu imites l'ombre de ma mère.

Je suis avec toi à Rockland  
 Où ton état devient grave, et on en parle à la radio  
 Je suis avec toi à Rockland. (p. 91)

A political stance on madness, it may be argued, subtends 'le plus grand irréalisme' (Madral) of *Off limits*. This also parallels non-pathologising approaches to psychosis in theoretical and psychoanalytic circles. As Freud argued, 'every normal person, in fact, is only normal on the average. His ego approximates to that of the psychotic in some part or other and to a greater or lesser extent'.<sup>346</sup> Similarly, anti-psychiatrist clinicians Thomas Szasz (1973) and R. D. Laing (1967) condemned the zealots of institutional psychiatry for their pathologisation of behaviours that do not adhere to social norms. Laing referred to psychosis as a 'modality of experience', no less valid than other so-called 'normal' behaviours. His famous dictum was that madness and schizophrenia constituted a 'sane response to an insane world'.<sup>347</sup> In these accounts, emphasis is placed on the individual's nonconformity in experiencing psychosis. These critics champion the psychotic's delusional experiences, or what Laing calls the psychotic's 'experiential drama'.<sup>348</sup> Contemporary to the anti-psychiatry movement, Lacan theorised that psychosis was not a deficit or hindrance in subjective existence. Psychosis permitted the subject to gain ironic distance from the ideologies making up collectively held preconceptions of 'reality' ('quand vous aurez la pratique du schizophrène, vous saurez l'ironie qui l'arme, portant à la racine de toute relation sociale').<sup>349</sup>

As Slavoj Žižek puts it, 'in Lacan's view, pathological formulations like [...] psychoses have the dignity of fundamental philosophical attitudes towards reality'.<sup>350</sup> Long before his entry into the psychoanalytic school, Lacan (1932) determined in the thought patterns of his analysand Aimée that psychosis

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<sup>346</sup>Sigmund Freud, 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. by James Strachey, 24 vols (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953-1974), XXIII, pp. 209-53 (p. 235).

<sup>347</sup>Thomas Szasz, *The Manufacture of Madness* (St. Albans: Paladin, 1973); R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), p. 23.

<sup>348</sup>Laing, p. 102.

<sup>349</sup>Lacan, 'Réponses à des étudiants en philosophie', in *Autres Ecrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001), pp. 203-11 (p. 209).

<sup>350</sup>Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2006), pp. 3-4.

constituted a particular stance on reality, as 'irreality' and reality co-exist alongside one another. He observes in Aimée that 'à côté de cette vie professionnelle où l'adaptation est relativement conservée, la malade mène une autre vie « irréaliste » nous dit-elle ou « entièrement imaginaire »'.<sup>351</sup> *Irréalité* does not usurp the psychotic subject's apprehension of reality as some might suppose. The two are not mutually exclusive. The psychotic subject gains an ironic perspective on reality by means of the creation of *irréalité* in delusion. According to Lacan, the *irréalité* of delusion sets in motion a process whereby the signs of language (the signifiers) outstrip any notion of 'meaning' (the signifieds) ('c'est le signifiant même (et non ce qu'il signifie) qui fait l'objet de la communication').<sup>352</sup> As was addressed in Chapter Three, meaning is normative and restrictive in the Lacanian schema (encapsulated in the notion of the 'Other'). Therefore, psychotic *irréalité* is a (albeit obfuscatory) defence mechanism against the impositions of meaning by dominant ideologies. It allows the psychotic to cope with the hardships of living by inhabiting a realm of non-normative meaninglessness whilst not entirely refuting reality itself.

I want to suggest that we find a strikingly similar logic of Lacanian *irréalité* in *Off limits* not only in the character Jim's self-avowed faith in madness but also throughout the entirety of the play. As John H. Reilly (1974) notes:

The characters in *Off limits*, through their "parties" and "happenings", carve out their own versions of reality, a reality which allows them to wall themselves up within their own limited sphere. Their worlds, those of big business, industrialism, and capitalism are hollow and empty, void of any real human relationships. [...] Theirs is a counterfeit life because it does not recognize realities, particularly the realities of the Vietnam war, which becomes the leitmotif of the work.<sup>353</sup>

Reality is shut down in *Off limits* by means of the happenings and sketches. What Reilly overlooks in his condemnation of the non-realist aesthetic of *Off limits* is

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<sup>351</sup>Jacques Lacan, *De la psychose paranoïaque dans ses rapports avec la personnalité* (Paris: Seuil, 1975 [1932]), p. 238.

<sup>352</sup> Lacan, 'D'une question préliminaire à tout traitement possible de la psychose', in *Ecrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), pp. 531-88 (pp. 537-38).

<sup>353</sup>John H. Reilly, *Arthur Adamov*, Twayne's World Author Series, 318 (New York: Twayne, 1974), p. 141.

that Vietnam and the political turbulence of the Cold War still intercede in the dramatic action *by means of these 'irreal' moments*. *Off limits* conceives the atrocities committed by the United States in Vietnam with a high degree of irony. This is executed by means of the characters' irreality, their happenings and their sketches. The Aristotelian function of theatre as *mimesis*, as a representation of nature, may be impugned but, crucially, not dropped altogether.<sup>354</sup> This ironic stance on reality by means of the non-realistic aesthetic parallels the notion of psychotic *irréalité* conceptualised by Lacan.

This concept of *irréalité* may subtend, for instance, the character Molly's monologue at the end of one party. Dismissing the tribulations of Vietnam as 'là-bas', Molly describes her life of prostitution and drug addiction. Her monologue may approximate the non-normative logic of psychotic delusion, because it lacks a cohesive structure, it is in free verse and it is devoid of punctuation:

Regardez regardez bien tous je l'ai mise là-dedans la photo de ma copine  
Miss Souterrain 1965  
Dis Sally Molly la Marranta la ballottée a bien le droit de dire  
Que Sally et elle ce sont des copines  
Et des vraies avec ça (p. 52)

Her discourse runs from Miss Souterrain to Sally, to the latter's boyfriend Jim, to drug-use, and finally to Sally's job as a singer on TV for Humphrey O'Douglas. All of this is recounted in no more than two hundred and fifty words. Molly's discourse recalls James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), specifically the largely unpunctuated soliloquy in the final chapter given by the character Molly Bloom. It may more broadly situate itself among an experimental modernist style of the twentieth century of writers such as Virginia Woolf and Joyce, in which streams of consciousness are privileged over clearly structured prose. Régis Durand compares such experimentalism to a Lacanian process of subverting the dominant discourses that construct the subject:

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<sup>354</sup>Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996).

There are moments when Lacan's description of the "subversion" of the subject, of its complex strategies of ruptures and displacements, read like a compendium of "modernistic" [...] mirror reflections, feints, snares, a glimmer that fades out, a stutter, an enunciation that renounces itself, etc.'<sup>355</sup>

We might more specifically make the connection between the high modernist style of this scene of *Off limits* and the Lacanian subversion of the subject in psychosis because the scene may approximate Lacanian *irréalité*. Despite the abstract nature of Molly's discourse, there are nevertheless vague allusions to a more concrete external reality ('toujours en train de tempêter contre la guerre que nous menons là-bas' (p. 53)), thereby potentially recalling the Lacanian psychotic defence mechanism.

In the scene that follows Molly's recitation, fellow prostitute and friend Sally once again may bring the psychotic aesthetic of *irréalité* into sharp relief. She sings an opaque diatribe on the perniciousness of capitalism, thereby once again implying a form of psychotic-ironic distance from this ubiquitous ideology and the reality that is constructed by it:

VOIX de Sally, *chantant*

Je ne suis pas l'American Express

Je ne suis pas l'American Express

Je ne suis pas l'American Express

Mais c'est de là précisément que vient toute ma détresse

*S'arrêtant de chanter*

ET LA VOTRE (p. 54)

Like the preceding scene, Sally's ditty alludes to the actuality of lived experience in American society, but in the vaguest of ways. The logic may be analogous to what Lacan describes as the psychotic privileging of the 'phénomènes de code' over the 'phénomènes de message', the prioritisation of the signs of language over their content and meaning.<sup>356</sup> This is a point made all the more palpable by

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<sup>355</sup> Régis Durand, 'On Aphanisis: A Note on the Dramaturgy of the Subject in Narrative Analysis', *Comparative Literature*, 98 (1983), 860-70 (p. 862).

<sup>356</sup> Lacan, 'D'une question', p. 537.



the fact that the scene is deprived of a corporeal dimension as Sally's voice is disembodied. The scene, deprived of the physicality of the actor's body, may bring into relief a pure 'irreal' language of psychosis analogous to that which is described in Lacan.

It may be posited that *Off limits*'s aesthetic of irreality potentiates a 'psychotic mode of spectatorship'. I base this on Georges Balassa's argument that both the theatre and the psychoanalytic clinic foster an environment in which the demarcation between reality and 'irreality' (Balassa's term) is relaxed.<sup>357</sup> Balassa argues that the 'irreal' facilitates a process of expiation for both the analysand and the spectator, by virtue of the loosening of defensive mechanisms that both subject-positions shore up in everyday lived experience:

This irreality makes the spectator receptive, available to the actor. In real life, if I see two people making love, I may turn away or try to participate. I may be attracted or repulsed, but I am obliged to react. [...] If the same scene happens on stage, I do not have to *do* anything. I can watch and imagine myself in the role of the actor making love. [...] I give a *procuration* to the actor on my behalf. [...] The introduction of immediate reality destroys the T-space. This is of course equally true in psychotherapy: it is therapeutic to tell your analyst you love him, but to make love to him destroys all possibilities of therapy.<sup>358</sup>

'Irreality', as the suspension of the pressures of everyday reality, is intrinsic to both the theatre and therapeutic dynamic. Balassa's argument in many ways constitutes a prescient psychoanalytic take on later theories of the specificity of the theatrical mode of looking, namely 'theatricality' (described in the Introduction). Dramatic theorist Josette Féral (2002) explores the affinity between certain modalities of the gaze in lived experience – in which we are rendered the spectators of an occurrence – and in the medium of theatre. Féral describes the creation of a 'cleft in the quotidian' and 'virtual space', a notion that lends itself to Balassa's theorisation of an 'irreality' in the theatre and

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<sup>357</sup>Georges Balassa, 'A Psychoanalytic Model for the Stage', *Performing Arts Journal*, 3 (1), 1978, 35-39 (p. 36).

<sup>358</sup>Balassa, pp. 36-37.

therapeutic spaces. The subject's unconscious, once put in the role of spectator, readily accepts the breakdown of a reified, objective 'reality'.

Turning back to Adamov's *Off limits*, we may argue that 'irreality' is even more pronounced than that which is intrinsic to the structure of theatre spectatorship described by Balassa and Féral. The sketches, happenings and recitations, contained within an *always-already* theatrical irreality subtending the economy of spectatorship, may evoke an ironic spectatorial distancing from the 'reality' of Vietnam. In short, the potentially two-fold form of shutdown on reality – by means of both the generic irreality that conditions theatre spectatorship (Balassa, Féral) and the unreal aesthetic regime of *Off limits* – makes the conceptualisation of a psychotic mode of spectatorship even more apposite in the context of this play.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>359</sup>In theorising this form of spectatorship, it is important to conceptualise these moments as *temporarily* evoking a psychotic affect for the spectator. A form of spectatorship inflected with psychosis must be differentiated from the psychotic afflictions described in clinical cases. The two categories may be put into dialogue in order to establish the political resonance of psychosis, but they must ultimately be held discursively separate to avoid the risk of making light of the torturous nature of psychotic delusion as documented in clinical evidence (a topic to which I will return later).

## Part II: *Off limits* and the Politics of a Psychotic Mode of Spectatorship

Adamov was repeatedly criticised by theatre reviewers of his time for the solipsistic thematic of his plays, as described in the introduction to this chapter. Guided by the Brechtian model, contemporary critics held the individualist aesthetic and the mobilisation of the theatre collective in discursive opposition. Yet, turning to Jacques Rancière and his comments on a politics of spectatorship in *dissensus*, we may see a way out of the Brechtian impasse. In his model for a twenty-first-century politics of theatre laid out in *Le Spectateur émancipé*, Rancière prioritises the spectator's autonomy from the stage. Brechtian theatre does not permit this, he continues, since this didactic form of theatre conjures up a highly undemocratic 'logique du pédagogue abrutissant' with the spectator:

Le dramaturge ou le metteur en scène voudrait que les spectateurs voient ceci et qu'ils ressentent cela, qu'ils comprennent telle chose et qu'ils en tirent telle conséquence. C'est la logique du pédagogue abrutissant, la logique de la transmission droite à l'identique [...] Ce que l'élève doit *apprendre* est ce que le maître lui *apprend*. Ce que le spectateur *doit voir* est ce que le metteur en scène lui *fait voir*.<sup>360</sup>

Theatre practitioners often overlook the politics occurring within the locus of the theatre itself, in favour of the transposition of the didactic message in the hope that it will serve as an impetus for the spectator's direct political action outside of the auditorium. By contrast, Rancière's research develops the possibilities of an individual-aesthetic mode of politics within the theatre that he dubs *dissensus*. As an ardent supporter of authentic 'democracy', Rancière's system of *dissensus* enables the individual or marginalised units of society to resist a social consensus continually. Consensus, according to Rancière, can only be defined as a common right to consume in an age of neoliberal hegemony. Authentic democracy, based on the presupposition that all individuals are truly equal in society, constitutes anything that breaks this consensual contract. Democracy is, for Rancière, an equal right to a show of difference and diversity, and is a working principle that is never completed.

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<sup>360</sup>Jacques Rancière, *Le Spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2008), pp. 19-20.

The theatre, according to Rancière, provides an apposite setting in which politics may occur, since 'théâtre et assemblée sont deux formes solidaires d'un même partage du sensible, deux espaces d'hétérogénéité'.<sup>361</sup> The communal 'partage du sensible' refers to the mode by which subjects apprehend collective reality. Theatre, as a forum that unites a heterogeneous, potentially democratic collective, has attempted since Ancient Greece to modulate the 'partage du sensible', as Rancière notes: 'Platon doit répudier en même temps pour constituer sa République comme la vie organique de la communauté'.<sup>362</sup> By the same token, Brechtian didacticism inadvertently evacuates politics from the theatre because it dictates the conditions of the theatrical order of the sensible, subordinating and homogenising the realm of unknowing spectators to the authority of the stage. For theatre to be truly political, it must explode the uniform order of the sensible and foment the individual spectator's creative acts of *dissensus* ('il y a l'essai de dénouer le lien entre la logique émancipatrice de la capacité et la logique critique de la captation collective').<sup>363</sup> The form of these acts of protestation is not prescriptive, but they must work at a reconfiguration of the 'partage du sensible'.

We might argue that the textual logic of *Off limits* constitutes in itself a potential space of *dissensus*, because of the multi-layered psychotic irrealities that it presents (as discussed above). *Dissensus* refutes a 'régime unique de présentation et d'interprétation'. Equally, *Off limits* rejects a uni-dimensional view of reality. It may consequently be argued that this textual *dissensus* theoretically encourages the spectator's own *dissensus*, since as Rancière describes:

Ce que *dissensus* veut dire, c'est une organisation du sensible où il n'y a ni réalité cachée sous les apparences, ni régime unique de présentation et d'interprétation du donné imposant à tous son évidence.<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>361</sup>Rancière, *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), p. 40.

<sup>362</sup>Rancière, *Malaise*, p. 40.

<sup>363</sup> Rancière, *Le Spectateur*, p. 54.

<sup>364</sup>Rancière, *Le Spectateur*, p. 55.

Rancière seems to connect implicitly the textual logic that refutes the ‘unique de présentation et d’interprétation’ and the viewer (it is important to avoid ‘imposant à tous son évidence’). The psychotic mode of spectatorship in *Off limits* (conceptualised above) may act, I want to suggest, as a catalyst for the spectator’s *dissensus*. We might then argue that in a theatrical context, a psychotic mode of spectatorship may lacerate established regimes of perception and reception that hold the subject-spectator in subordination to the all-knowing stage. It is important to recall that the psychotic’s irreality constitutes an ironic stance on reality. However, psychotic psychical mechanisms, as psychoanalysis describes, are more complex and creative than simply instigating ironic distance. As I will argue in the following, the potentially psychotic conditioning of the spectator’s reaction may allow him or her to use the stage not only for the development of an ironic viewpoint (vis-à-vis the norms of morality, the first form of *dissensus*), but also as a chance for a heuristic form of critique (of the whole process of meaning-making, the second form) and for a non-normative creativity that radically rethinks collectively held assumptions about reality (in the final scene of foreclosure, the third form). The conceptualisation of a psychotic mode of spectatorship becomes crucial in adumbrating the *modes and impetuses* by which *dissensus* may be set in motion by *Off limits*.

### ***Dissensus through Rebellion against Moral Norms***

As the character Reynold Day’s declaration (cited above) about finding ‘le juste milieu entre l’intimidation et l’intervention massive’ indicates, *Off limits* is not concerned with portraying the Vietnam conflict in a way that would interrogate the morality of the war or that directly stress the plight of the victims of the atrocities. In one exemplary moment of the play’s solipsism and nihilism, the character Jim makes an objectionable comment on the infamous widespread use of napalm in Vietnam by American troops:

JIM, *bondissant* : Na...na...na...na...pal...palm. (*A tue-tête :*) Napalm ! Mort aux enfants ! Mort aux moins de treize ans ! Tous atteints ! Victoire acquise ! (p. 76)

The rebarbative nature of Jim's declaration would suggest that the playwright wished for the spectator to interpret it ironically. Jim's gestures of jumping (*bondissant*) and shouting (*à tue-tête*), combined with his rejoicing in the rhetoric of mass murder, may imply what Lacan describes as the psychotic's propensity to luxuriate in a code without a message: 'd'un code constitué de messages sur le code, et d'un message réduit à ce qui dans le code indique le message'.<sup>365</sup> Jim repeats and emphasises this rejoicing moments later ('Na... na... napalm !' (p. 77)).

Jim's refusal of moral meaning in his indulgence in the signifiers of language may conjure up a sense of irony for spectators. However, this irony (as a technique conventionally deployed to designate the opposite of what is expressed) does not direct spectators to a privileged moral norm that would stress the victimhood of the Vietnamese. The character Luce reacts to Jim's statement with the moral propriety that one might expect from Jim's statement, which is immediately undercut by another character, Dorothy:

LUCE, *à Dorothy* : C'est une honte. Comment tolérez-vous que chez vous...

DOROTHY : On tolère tant de choses, même que la Dow Chemical Company envoie ses acolytes interroger des chimistes dans nos universités. (pp. 76-77).

By putting the moral reaction to Jim's statement on the stage and then undercutting it through Dorothy's almost joyful declaration that they tolerate 'tant de choses', Adamov clearly provides spectators with a sense of ironic distance from *any* form of morality relating to this conflict. The irony is further underscored by the fact that Jim's statement contradicts his later declaration that he wishes to flee to Europe in order to 'refuser la guerre' (p. 88) and by the implication that the character's drug-taking usurps his political ideals.

Although such a scene is clearly morally problematic, it implies a form of liberation from codified moral norms. Jim's discourse wrests the signifier 'napalm' from the normative moral rhetoric in which it is usually couched. Dorothy's disparaging of Luce, in its turn, refutes the moral discourses that would demonise Americans and sanctify the Vietnamese. The scene may

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<sup>365</sup>Lacan, 'D'une question', p. 540.

theoretically enable the spectator to refute the normative discourses of morality in this scene. The character's *dissensus* may pave the way for the spectator's *dissensus*, by providing the spectator with a creative, ironic mode of liberation from the over-familiar journalistic rhetoric surrounding this war.

An equally counter-intuitive moment of *dissensus* from the norms of morality – this time, those relating to the notion of equality – occurs later in the play when the Cold War is referenced in a party hosted by Humphrey O'Douglas, who Adamov describes as 'débonnaire, presque toujours saoul, industriel, directeur de la Cinquième Chaîne de T.V.' (p. 13). The media magnate implores his guests to champion the 'libertés élémentaires de l'homme et du citoyen', a lodestar of Western liberal ideology. He invokes 'un monde où on peut dire ce qu'on pense, sans peur, un monde inconnu à Pékin, à la Havane, à Moscou, un monde libre' (p. 139). The scene indirectly references both the universal human rights established in the French Revolution and the United States Declaration of Independence of 1776, thereby connecting the American setting of *Off limits* to a French touchstone. The statement further recalls the Universal Declaration of Human of 1948 by the United Nations.

The Hungarian character Lazlo then enters the scene; the interaction between the latter and Humphrey senselessly undercuts the earlier espousals of universal human rights:

HUMPHREY, *bondissant de sa civière, et se jetant sur Lazlo Dery.*

Avoue que tu as piqué mon portefeuille, avoue victime ! (*Humphrey fouille Lazlo Dery, trouve son portefeuille sans sa poche ; Lazlo Dery tremble de tous ses membres.*) Tiens, je découvre une vieille connaissance. (*Pause.*) Alors c'est comme ça qu'on file, à la hongroise ? Clandestinité retrouvée ! (*Secouant Lazlo Dery :*) Eh bien, si les tanks russes t'avaient passé dessus, ça aurait fait une victime de plus mais un voleur de moins. (p. 140)

The paradigm of Western liberalism is revoked by Humphrey's invective threats and physical violence, thereby exposing his hypocrisy. Again, the spectator is presented with a deeply ironic scene. This time the scene constitutes a critique of both communist equality and Western liberalism. Humphrey's words and actions recall the 1956 Hungarian Uprising and the quashing of the revolt by

Soviet troops in Budapest. Stressing this critique of communism, Adamov interpolates Doris Roan – another ‘industriel [...], toujours saoul’ (p. 14) – in the action of this scene. He dresses up as a KGB agent and shoots Humphrey, after having denounced the latter as an ‘intellectuel cynique au sourire dépravé’ and an ‘agent de l’impérialisme américain’ (p. 139).

Conflicting Cold War forces are brought to bear on this scene, but it could be argued that they remain unresolved. We are drawn to dislike Humphrey and his physical and verbal violence towards the other characters. However, we are also directed to dislike the drunkard Doris Roan who plays the KGB agent. Lazlo Dery, the victim of their crossfire, constitutes the only character who may incite sympathy from the audience, given his constant optimism in the play (‘L’Europe est la patrie de mon passé, l’Amérique, celle de mon avenir’ (p. 63)). He is attacked by a representative of Western liberalism (Humphrey), but the atrocity that these actions denote (the Hungarian uprising), in reality, pertain to the legacy of communism, represented by Doris Roan. The scene, it may be argued, impugns both ideologies as a result. Its only sympathy lies with the victims of the ideological crossfire (represented by Lazlo), demonstrating Adamov’s resistance to theatrical didacticism.

As in the previous scene, Adamov orchestrates a theatrical assault on prevailing moral codes. Such moral norms may also be connected with modern-day neoliberal tenets. Given that the scene draws attention to the disingenuous nature of both communist and Western liberal ideology, the human rights articulated by Humphrey may also refer ironically to communist equality. This is relevant for a modern-day political spectatorship because, in a late capitalist age, human rights and equality have been reduced to common economic entitlement, as Rancière would remind us: ‘les droits de l’individu égoïste bourgeois, les droits des consommateurs de toute marchandise’.<sup>366</sup> ‘Freedom’ and ‘choice’ have become commodified. Postmodern theorist Zygmunt Bauman criticises the homogenising elements of human rights, as they are only accorded and distributed by the state.<sup>367</sup> Contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou similarly critiques human rights, as they have been elevated to the status of an

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<sup>366</sup>Rancière, *Le Spectateur*, p. 44.

<sup>367</sup>Zygmunt Bauman, ‘Making and Unmaking of Strangers’, in *The Bauman Reader*, ed. by P. Beilharz (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2001 [1995]), pp. 200-17 (p. 216).



unquestioned ideology in the modern-day world.<sup>368</sup> With its confused Franco-American frame of reference and the characters' contradictory discourse, this scene might be said to throw into relief a reductionist version of universal human rights that chimes with the political concerns of the neoliberal era.

As in Jim's vitriolic pronouncements on the topic of Napalm, the moral ambiguity of the second scene may theoretically initiate a 'psychotic' position by which the spectator harnesses the irony of the irrealties on the stage to reconsider the norms of morality that construct our present-day social order. This second scene, in particular, gestures towards the ideologically constructed nature of the moral norm of equality – a key tenet of modern-day neoliberal ideology – by means of showing up the disingenuous natures of both Western liberalism *and* the Soviet Empire. Both scenes analysed here indicate that the spectator's *dissensus* may be located in moments where onstage moral *consensus* is undermined (in Jim's confused political stance; in the acts committed by both sides in Humphrey's happening). The spectator's ironic jettisoning of moral universals in both scenes considered here may serve to undo the dominant ideologies that structure the spectator-subject, thereby actualising what Simon Bayly refers to as the 'self-evisceration' necessary for Rancière's emancipated spectator.<sup>369</sup>

### ***Dissensus through le Vide énigmatique***

This section turns to a second mode of *dissensus* that may theoretically occur for the spectator. I put the play's fragmentation of the notion of a monolithic History into dialogue with the Lacanian *vide énigmatique* of psychosis, thereby elucidating the spectator's second theoretical opportunity for *dissensus*.

Disheartened by the insouciant and hedonistic lifestyle that they lead in New York, the adolescent characters Jim and girlfriend Sally attempt to flee the country, but are killed at the Mexican border. As previous scenes have shown, this is not the first instance in which Adamov supplants political idealism with a futile nihilism. The television producers Humphrey O'Douglas and Reynold Day – the latter is 'industriel [...], maigre, jamais saoul' (p. 14) – undertake the project

<sup>368</sup>Alain Badiou, *L'Éthique: Essai sur la conscience du mal* (Paris: Éditions Nous, 2003).

<sup>369</sup>Simon Bayly, 'Theatre and the Public: Badiou, Rancière, Virno', *Radical Philosophy* (September/October 2009), 20-29 (p. 25).

of dramatising Jim and Sally's tragic demise. As their television programme is in its preliminary stages, Reynold Day inadvertently draws attention to its inauthenticity. His sole goal is to create 'un vrai drame' that elicits emotional upset from the television spectator:

Drôle d'histoire. On devrait, je ne sais pas encore bien comment...mais on devrait pouvoir avec Humphrey l'utiliser. Un vrai drame, et qui touchera le téléspectateur comme il nous touche nous-mêmes. (*À voix basse, très grave :*) Un vrai drame. (p. 149)

This moment in the text is more than a little self-reflexive. The spectator's attention is directed towards the *production* of meaning in drama as opposed to a transparent *representation* of outside reality in drama (which would belong to a naturalistic theatrical tradition). This scene points to a drama within a drama. The spectator viewed the killing of Jim and Sally – itself a falsity of fiction – and the 'téléspectateur' will watch an intra-diegetic fictionalisation of their fate. In its move from theatre to television, *Off limits* draws attention to the manipulation of meaning in and by mediation.

Returning to my theory that *Off limits* may encourage a psychotic mode of spectatorship, the moment bears an affinity to the linguistic self-reflexivity reached in the Lacanian *vide énigmatique* of psychosis. Whilst the self-reflexivity of the stage dovetails with Lionel Abel's notion of 'metatheatre' (1963), exploring the links between the Lacanian *vide énigmatique* and *Off limits* informs a theory of the unconscious processes that may occur in the metatheatrical moment in theatre spectatorship.<sup>370</sup> Lacan theorises that the unreal language of psychotic delusion reaches such a point that 'meaning' undergoes complete annihilation. We recall, from Part I of the chapter, that the language of delusion privileges an endless, senseless stream of signifiers which outstrip any meaning that the former may bear. As we saw in the last section, the senseless signifiers of *Off limits* bore the capacity to present the spectator with a highly ironic view on *moral* meaning, allowing him or her potentially to contest the norms of morality that structure our everyday lives (particularly those pertaining to the notion of

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<sup>370</sup> Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963), pp. 78-79.

human rights and equality). In what Lacan describes as the *vide énigmatique*, however, the subject does not merely have an ironic view on normative 'meaning'. He or she completely *destroys* the notion of meaning. The difference, we might assert, is one of strength; the former potentiates the contestation of meaning (in order to be ironic, there must be a dominant meaning to subvert); the latter, the complete destruction of meaning. The subject of the *vide énigmatique* experiences such a profusion of senseless signifiers that this creates a linguistic abyss where meaning should be. Lacan argues that the totalised liquidation of meaning exposes the phenomenon of meaning-making itself as an artifice. Lacan associates the enigmatic experience, even though he promptly dismisses it, with the psychotic's ability to intuit certain things about the social order that the non-psychotic subject cannot discern. He describes the *vide énigmatique* as 'ces phénomènes que l'on a appelés à tort intuitifs'.<sup>371</sup>

Analogously, we might posit that the abundance of irrealties within *Off limits* reaches such a point that irrealties are created within these irrealties themselves. The result is a *mise-en-abyme* that disrupts the 'truth' of theatrical representation and its role in meaning production. In dramatising Jim's and Sally's fate, the television producers dispel the coordinates of the play's implied 'reality' for the spectator, even though the latter was already highly tenuous. This may be similar to the psychotic subject's inability to grasp underlying 'meaning' in *le vide énigmatique*. As the psychotic glimpses the workings of meaning production itself, we might argue that the spectator of *Off limits* is analogously permitted to discern a theatrical counterpart in the exposed process of meaning production in representation. Both meaning (for the psychotic) and the notion of representation (for the spectator) are uncovered as artifices.

When the television dramatisation of Jim's and Sally's story comes to be staged in the play, their story is imbued with melodrama. Their relationship is reduced to a series of clichéd love scenes:

BOB-JIM, *d'une voix qui se veut rythmée*.

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<sup>371</sup>Jacques Lacan, 'D'une question', p. 538.

Nous grimperons sur tes sommets aux neiges éternelles, Himalaya. Nous franchirons les mille et une portes de la mort. (*Ouvrant les bras, extatique :*)  
Tibet, tes enfants adoptifs, les voilà.

DOROTHY-SALLY, *idem*.

Mais nous irons d'abord aux Indes, dis, tu veux bien...Dieu, Matière-Vie, Mexique, tu nous auras préparés. Prêts au voyage ! (*Ouvrant les bras, extatique :*) Soleil, Père des Mondes, nous sommes à toi. (p. 167-168)

'Real-life' Jim and Sally, by contrast, are motivated by reasons quite different from the thirst for peripateticism implied above. Jim craves glory and immortality for himself and for Sally in their escape, musing that they will become the 'déserteur américain [et] la vedette des manifs, là-bas !' (p. 89). In the televised version of events, it is claimed that the couple's enduring love for one another feeds into and bolsters their determination for political change:

DOROTHY

Et le jour où nous serons instruits, nous te reviendrons, Amérique. (*Pause.*)  
Maison maternelle, je te revois, accueillante, avec tes beaux calmes ombrages.

BOB

Sally, mon amour, ma femme devant Dieu et les hommes.

DOROTHY, *chantant*.

Chéri, nous avons ensemble exploré les Enfers Ensemble, chéri, nous gagnerons la lumière Revenir ! (p. 169)

The earlier tensions of Sally and Jim's 'real-life' relationship are sharply contrasted with the quasi-spiritual intonations of Dorothy (playing Sally) and Bob (Jim). Their relationship is far from this idealised cliché elsewhere in the play:

SALLY : C'est mon obstination qui t'a séduit ?

JIM : Oui, sans parler de ta frimousse, bien sûr.

SALLY : Et aussi parce que tu m'avais vue faire la putain à Central Park, avoue ?

JIM : Oui, aussi. Parce qu'à cette époque-là, je n'avais jamais encore couché avec une putain.

*Jim rit. Sally l'imité. Complicité.* (p. 51)

Sally also accuses Jim of being a 'petit raciste' for failing to be concerned with the death of a black man on the stage (p. 131). Before they are killed at the border with Mexico, Sally bitterly calls Jim a 'salaud' for his lack of concern for their friend Neel, an ex-marine who returns from Vietnam on crutches (p. 133).

As the barefaced disparities between the television programme and Jim's and Sally's 'actual' fate would show, it is clear that Adamov wished to imbue his spectators with a sense that what they were watching was a drama. In Gabriel Garran's 1969 production of the play, this self-reflexivity was taken further, as television sets and equipment were distributed throughout the auditorium, thereby entangling the spaces of the spectator and the stage. The distinction between that which the spectator of *Off limits* discerns as true and false may be blurred. To stress this further, the play-text is littered with references to the hollow and constructed nature of the concept of reality. In one happening, the characters give their impressions of reality:

BOB, *commençant le happening*.

Qu'est-ce que la réalité pour vous ?

Une fiction ?

Une manière qui vous est propre de regarder le monde extérieur ?

La somme des sommes ?

Rien et tout à la fois ?

Des lignes noires sur du papier blanc ?

GEORGE : La mort.

MOLLY : Une fiction, une rêve.

LUCE : Une manière qui vous est propre de regarder le monde, bien sûr.

[...]

DOROTHY : Mais il n'y a pas de réalité, il n'y en a pas ! (p. 72)

These characters imply to the spectator that reality is unstable, highly subjective and no different from its obverse, fiction. The subversion of an authentic 'reality' is finally cemented by television prestidigitator Humphrey's derision of 'reality':

HUMPHREY, *ricanant*.

La réalité ! La réalité ! (*Il s'écroule.*) (p. 173)

Humphrey's collapse is more than a little ironic, since the spectator cannot be sure if his tumble is 'true' (in terms of the implied 'reality' of *Off limits*) or 'false' (part of the television dramatisation).

The theorisation that such metatheatrical moments might encourage a mode of spectatorship akin to the Lacanian *vide énigmatique* informs a politics of spectatorship based on Rancière's *dissensus*. Rancière demands from the emancipated spectator an interrogatory form of engagement with the spectacle: 'Le *dissensus* remet en jeu en même temps l'évidence de ce qui est perçu, pensable et faisable et le partage de ceux qui sont capable de percevoir, penser et modifier les coordonnées du monde commun'.<sup>372</sup> The potential for a *vide énigmatique* arms the spectator with the tools for interrogating the truth-value of representation, but, perhaps more importantly, the Lacanian *vide énigmatique* provides the spectator with a fluid mode of questioning that could be aligned with the heuristic nature of Rancière's *dissensus* as is evident in his description of the 'pensable', the 'faisable', 'ceux qui sont capable de percevoir, penser et modifier'.<sup>373</sup> A politics of *dissensus* must constantly resist reification; it must not stop. The enigmatic *vide* that the viewer of *Off limits* may experience is well suited to the heuristic constitution of *dissensus* because of its impermanent, constantly mutating and radical nature. It may be a fleeting 'divine intuition', as Lacan notes, but it also constantly collapses in on itself, chasing another point at which meaning might dissolve into an abyss. Herbert Wachsberger describes this as process of 'suspended signification, referred first to itself, then reducible to another signification'.<sup>374</sup> Applied to spectatorship, the energies of the enigmatic experience may have a self-compounding effect. The discovery of the 'meaning of meaning' tips over into another signifying set that is, itself, composed of a psychotic language. By this charge, the enigmatic experience may operate as a driving force for a political form of spectatorship in heuristic

<sup>372</sup> Rancière, *Le Spectateur*, p. 55.

<sup>373</sup> Rancière, *Le Spectateur*, p. 55.

<sup>374</sup> Herbert Wachsberger, 'From the Elementary Phenomenon to the Enigmatic Experience', in *The Later Lacan: An Introduction* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), pp. 107-15 (p. 110).

*dissensus*. It may be an *impetus* for the spectator's unceasing interrogation of the meaning produced by representation.

### ***Dissensus through the Destruction of the Paternal Metaphor***

This section turns to the third mode of potential *dissensus* for the spectator of *Off limits*. I conceptualise a logic of the psychotic psychical mechanism of foreclosure (*forclusion* or Freudian *Verwerfung*) at work in the end scene of the play. I argue that this acts as another form of textual *dissensus* that may precipitate the spectator's own *dissensus*. For Lacan, foreclosure occurs when the child enters language. The 'paternal metaphor' – according to Dylan Evans 'the fundamental metaphor upon which all signification depends [...] for this reason all signification is phallic' – structures the subject's way of thinking in highly normative terms which support dominant ideologies.<sup>375</sup> In psychosis, this central basis of subjectivity is rejected. While Lacan used psychotic foreclosure to differentiate between psychotic and non-psychotic structures of subjectivity from the first moment of subject formation, a non-pathologising approach to the psychotic mode of behaviour would suggest that this recalcitrant mechanism can occur throughout psychical life and to anyone. It is important to remember, in this theorisation, that Freud argued that 'every normal person['s ego] [...] approximates to that of the psychotic in some part or other and to a greater or lesser extent'.<sup>376</sup> I argue that a process analogous to the logic of foreclosure can, theoretically, occur in theatre spectatorship.

The ending of *Off limits* is brief and free of dialogue, but certainly not lacking in grandiosity. It may be cited in full here:

*Reynold Day étendu tout habillé.*

*Le visage de Reynold Day, les yeux fermés. Gros plan.*

*La statue de la Liberté fracassée. Puis une seconde de la Liberté fracassée. Puis une troisième, fracassée, elle aussi.*

*Des dizaines de statues de la Liberté fracassées.*

*Musique assourdissante. Bruits de la fin d'un monde. (p. 180)*

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<sup>375</sup> Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 137.

<sup>376</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Analysis Terminable and Interminable', p. 235.

The Statue of Liberty, an idealised master signifier of the 'American way of life', is destroyed and replicated to the extent that its reproducibility renders it meaningless. The implied death of television producer Reynold Day in the projected image of his face suggests Adamov's aesthetic jibe at and subversion of mass American industrialisation. (Adamov's explicitly stated aesthetic assaults, it is important to remember, were on the USA of General Motors, Katherine Hepburn and Washington Square). The venerable status of the Statue of Liberty in the American national and cultural imaginary, in addition to the statue's defiant lapidary gesture – symbolising the Roman Goddess of freedom, Libertas – demonstrate parallels, we might suggest, with the Lacanian paternal metaphor, as both are beacons encapsulating a whole set of dominant ideologies (the Statue representing American liberalism). In this end scene, I suggest that the ideological signification of the statue collapses under the weight of its own mass reproduction.<sup>377</sup>

The logic of foreclosure lends itself in application to the aesthetic processes occurring in this grand finale of *Off limits*, because as Lacan notes foreclosure bears witness to a 'cascade des remaniements du signifiant' in addition to the rejection of an ideological beacon. It might be argued that this description bears a great affinity to the disarray of the visual and acoustic devices in this final scene. The decentring of the paternal metaphor – that we might suggest is symbolised by the broken proliferation of the Statues of Liberty – is coupled with the apocalyptic ending that denotes the end of an old order. This scene lays waste to language and is replaced by whirl of indistinguishable sounds ('*Musique assourdissante. Bruits de la fin d'un monde*'), resembling, in acoustic terms, the 'cascade des remaniements du signifiant' described by Lacan. The spectator is not allowed to latch onto the Statue of Liberty as a safe locus of dominant ideology. Ideological certainties, it may be argued, are destroyed.

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<sup>377</sup>The endless reproduction of the Statue of Liberty at the end of *Off limits* lends itself to Jean Baudrillard's later theory of 'simulacra' of an image-laden and media-manufactured postmodern 'hyperreality'. Roland Barthes (*Mythologies*, 1957) and Guy Debord (*La Société du spectacle* (1967)) also grapple with the ideologically replete image-culture of the modern, mass industrialised world. See: Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981); Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957); Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Champ Libre, 1971[1967]).



Freud noted that foreclosure (*Verwerfung*) was coupled with the advent of a form of delusion that attempts reparation with reality. He observes this in the case of German judge Dr Schreber, who imagined that his transformation into a woman was necessary in order to redeem the world and experience an affinity with God. In his observations, Freud stressed (in italics) that '*the delusional formation, which we take to be the pathological product, is in reality an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction*'.<sup>378</sup> The similarities between the apocalyptic intonations of Schreber's delusion and those of the ending of *Off limits* might be drawn out. Both theoretically refashion the subject's relationship to the Powers that be: Schreber's transformation of gender renegotiates his relationship to the divine; the mass proliferation of broken statues in *Off limits* reworks the spectator's viewpoint on 'reality' in the Western world.

But how do foreclosure and a delusional reparation with reality aid a politics of *dissensus* for the spectator? While both deal with the rejection of meaning, foreclosure is the active counterpart to the *vide énigmatique* discussed in the last section. The difference between the two enables me to identify an even more cogent impetus for the spectator's *dissensus* in this end scene than the heuristic intuition propelled by the *vide*. In the television dramatisation of Sally's and Jim's demises, the spectator discerned meaninglessness retroactively in the metatheatrical moment. By contrast, the ending of *Off limits* bears witness to an *active* rejection of meaning in foreclosure and, more importantly, it stages the *creative* advent of delusion in the apocalyptic aesthetic that reworks, rather than merely contests, meaning. Whereas Lacan associates 'intuition' with the collapse of meaning in the retroactive *vide énigmatique*, he connects the epithet 'certitude' with active foreclosure and delusion. Describing Freud's Schreber and his convictions in his delusion, Lacan states that 'ce n'est pas de cette réalité qu'il s'agit chez lui [Schreber], mais de certitude [...] cette certitude est quelque chose de radical [...] Il n'en reste pas moins que le fait que cela signifie quelque chose d'inébranlable pour lui'.<sup>379</sup> The difference between the 'intuition' of the *vide énigmatique* and the 'certitude' of delusion is one of strength. Delusional

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<sup>378</sup>Sigmund Freud, 'Psycho-analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoids)', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols (London: Vintage; Hogarth Press, 2001), XII (1911-1913), pp. 3-83 (p. 71).

<sup>379</sup>Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire III : Les Psychoses* (unpublished seminar, 1955-56), p. 133.

certainty is 'quelque chose de radical', a concept that can be applied fruitfully to the spectator's unconscious interactions with the ending of *Off limits*. The previous modality of *dissensus* through the Lacanian *vide* demonstrated the potential for the spectator's heuristic form of critique in the intuitive aesthetic impulses propelled by this enigmatic experience. In the foreclosure of the end scene, the spectator theoretically comes face-to-face with a stimulus so radical and certain that it may actively fuel an unconscious desire to *create* new non-normative meanings that may rework the spectator's lived reality.

Throughout Part II of this chapter, it has been argued that the spectator's *dissensus* is evoked in three key ways in *Off limits*: in the play's rebellion against moral norms; in the spectator's *vide énigmatique* enabled by the intra-diegetic dramatisation of Jim and Sally's fate; and finally, in the radical foreclosure at the end of the play. It is important to recall Lacan's statement that 'quand vous aurez la pratique du schizophrène, vous saurez l'ironie qui l'arme, portant à la racine de toute relation sociale'.<sup>380</sup> In my application of Lacanian theory of psychosis to the spectatorship of *Off limits*, this (literally speaking) exceptional and ironic stance on the social relation has perhaps proven conceptually insightful in informing our understanding of the aesthetic processes of *dissensus* required for a politics of spectatorship in a modern-day world of mind-numbing neoliberal consensus.

### **Assessing a Politics of Psychosis: A New Dialectics and Further Thoughts**

I return to the problematic laid out at the start of the chapter: the non-Brechtian nature of *Off limits* and the concomitant reluctance on the part of theatre critics to identify a potential politics in this play. It was argued, at the start, that the question of the theatrical politics of *Off limits* needed to be reconfigured according to philosophical shifts that have occurred in conceptualising the political from modernity to post-modernity. In this body of thought, politics is no longer simply determined as a class struggle or as a process of socio-historical progress; rather, it concerns desire. My analysis has attempted to recapture the theoretical spectator's politically enabling psychotic desire evoked by *Off limits* with the aid of theorists such as Rancière and Lacan. I have shown that the play

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<sup>380</sup>Lacan, 'Réponses à des étudiants en philosophie', p. 209.

*Off limits* sits well with a postmodern politics of spectatorship, because of its refusal to show the 'right' political way. The criticisms of *Off limits* made by doctrinaire Brechtians may now be put into their proper historical context.

While Brechtian Bernard Dort posits that the spectator interacts with a heuristic 'propédeutique de réalité' in assaults made on a totalising notion of History or reality in the theatre of the 1960s, he stated that this move, properly speaking, was 'pre-political' (la représentation théâtrale, en tant qu'elle est critique de nos propres représentations de la réalité [...], nous convie à refuser celui-là pour aborder celui-ci. Elle est ouverture sur la réalité et préparation à l'action').<sup>381</sup> We may see that, in light of Rancière's modern-day notion of *dissensus*, Dort's ideas take as a touchstone the Brechtian view that art functions as a precursor to the modernist grand narrative of social progress in lived reality. Brecht himself made clear the linear political trajectory between art and outside reality: 'we [...] shall make a lively use of all means, old and new, tried and untried, deriving from art and deriving from other sources, in order to put living reality in the hands of living people in such a way that it can be mastered'.<sup>382</sup> The demarcation between 'art' and 'real-life' is no longer held to be so clear-cut in postmodern thinking. Rancière, as we have seen, conceptualises politics as aesthetic in nature, whether the political platform be the theatre or any other collective scenario. A modern-day aesthetic conceptualisation of politics has been brought to bear on *Off limits*, making possible a theorisation of a postmodern spectatorial politics from the play's psychotic grain. It may now be qualified that *Off limits* – far from being a precursor to radical social transformation – *is* political. I have made this theoretical discovery by leaving behind theatre critics' attempts and failures to spell out the 'message' of *Off limits* for spectators who could then apply them to a supposed *ur*-political realm outside of the theatre. Instead, I have fleshed out the creative unconscious impulses made possible by the psychotic mode of spectatorship invoked by *Off limits*. These impulses may be politically enabling.

In order to contextualise the conceptual import of the psychotic modality of spectatorship developed here in a wider framework of dramatic theory, it is

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<sup>381</sup>Dort, *Théâtre réel*, p. 286.

<sup>382</sup>Bertolt Brecht, 'from "The Popular and the Realistic"', in *Modernism/Postmodernism*, ed. by Peter Brooker (London; New York: Longman, 1992), pp. 42-44 (pp. 42-43).

fruitful to explore the ways in which these psychotic creative energies inform a post-theatrical politics that Dort – erroneously in my opinion – categorises as ‘politics proper’ (‘ouverture sur la réalité et préparation à l’action’). This may be done by comparing Lacan’s descriptions of a post-delusional politics to the post-theatrical scenario of a spectator who may have experienced a ‘psychotic mode of spectatorship’. From his earliest, non-psychoanalytic, work on psychosis, Lacan observes that his analysand Aimée engages an unconventional system of subject-object dialectics after delusion wanes. She experiences a ‘guérison [qui] ne représente en effet pour le sujet rien de moins qu’une libération d’une conception de soi-même et du monde’. Lacan is quick to add that ‘cette *catharsis* spontanée ne se produit pas dans une entière prise de conscience de cette réalité [...] [mais] sa portée de résolution conceptuelle suffit à lui assurer [...] la valeur d’un progrès dialectique’.<sup>383</sup> Probing further into what this ‘dialectical progress’ might consist of, I turn to Lacan’s later development of a post-delusional ‘schema I’. Lacan describes the psychotic subject’s post-delusional relationship with reality as oscillatory; the post-psychotic subject experiences a sustained ‘désaxement de la relation au grand Autre’.<sup>384</sup>

Applied to a theoretical consideration of the post-theatrical politics of *Off limits*, the psychotic dialectical modality might be argued to carry political charge in late capitalist times. According to Frederic Jameson (2009), an authentic dialectics can never resolve itself in a tri-partite linear configuration of ‘thesis-antithesis-synthesis’ (a common misappropriation of Hegel’s original conceptualisation, according to Jameson).<sup>385</sup> In actuality, the ‘unity of opposites’ is never a harmonious solution, a theory that has never been more salient than in application to our postmodern knowledge of cultural diversity or indeed to the topic discussed throughout this chapter of an exclusionary neoliberal model of consensus (posited by Rancière). For Jameson, ‘it is the unmasking of antinomy of contradiction which constitutes truly dialectical thinking as such’.<sup>386</sup> The true value of dialectics lies in the uncomfortable and inconvenient bringing together of opposing forces, which will then throw into relief the inherent contradictions

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<sup>383</sup> Lacan, *De la psychose paranoïaque*, p. 317.

<sup>384</sup> Lacan, ‘D’une question’, p. 573.

<sup>385</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (New York; London: Verso, 2009), p. 19.

<sup>386</sup> Jameson, *Valences*, p. 43.

making up the union. The post-delusional dialectics described by Lacan constitutes one such way of enacting Jameson's political model of dialectics in late capitalist society.<sup>387</sup> Its application to the post-theatrical scenario of *Off limits* opens up conceptual pathways for a consideration of politics outside of the theatre auditorium. By nature of the sustained, because irresolvable, energies of this post-delusional dialectical system, my analogy potentiates the spectator-subject's political engagement with a wider lived reality that may be truly radical.

However, it is the very conditioning of this post-delusional dialectics that exposes the need to take conceptual heed in applying psychosis to spectatorship. The same kernel of this dialectics that is politically inspiring also lays bare the undeniable reality of this behaviour as both torturous and unrelenting in its clinical guise. Lacan describes Schreber's delusional experiences as having the capacity to 'le pénétrer, le diviser lui-même, l'envahir, l'habiter', a list of verbs that hardly connote agency.<sup>388</sup> Lacan is, in fact, highly ambiguous about the politics of psychosis. This is perhaps encapsulated best in his declaration that 'le psychotique essentiellement se présente comme le signe, le signe en impasse, de ce qui légitime la référence à la liberté'.<sup>389</sup> It becomes clear to the psychotic individual that subjectivity in general is modulated and policed by the locus of dominant ideology, the Lacanian Other. The psychotic rebuffs the Other by creating a non-normative language of delusion. As such, the Other is not the guarantor of the subject's sense of stability ('un désaxement de la relation au grand Autre'). The visceral and perceived symbiotic connection between the subject and the Other is torn asunder in psychosis. This is liberating because it provides an escape route from the normative strangleholds of the Lacanian Other, as we have seen with reference to a politics of *dissensus* in *Off limits*. But,

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<sup>387</sup>Turning to Judith Butler's work on the import of Hegelian dialectics in French intellectual thought in the twentieth century, it becomes clear that Lacanian thought lends itself to Jameson's political re-conceptualisation of dialectics. Lacan, who was heavily influenced by the ideas of philosopher Alexandre Kojève, associated final dialectical synthesis with the operations of the ego. Any politics that we may extract from Lacanian thought takes as a point of departure the split subject and a disruption of the workings of the ego. See: Judith Butler, *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (New York; Guildford: Columbia University Press, 1987).

<sup>388</sup>Lacan, *SIII*, p. 176.

<sup>389</sup>Lacan, 'Allocution sur les psychoses de l'enfant', in *Autres Ecrits* (Paris: Seuil, 2001 [1967]), pp. 361-71 (p. 363).

and this is crucial to Lacan's description of the psychotic 'signe en impasse', even though dominant ideologies are experienced as radically separate and tyrannical, the psychotic subject is still bound to them. Indeed, the Other is felt more acutely in psychosis. It taunts the subject. The Other grafts itself on the subject. For Lacan, it is this that marks the limit of the emancipatory politics of psychosis.

However, the political impasse of psychosis described by Lacan may be put into dialogue with Rancière's reference to 'le paradoxe du spectateur' in order to inform and enrich our understanding of its political potential for spectatorship. Rancière states that:

Ce paradoxe est simple à formuler : il n'y a pas de théâtre sans spectateur [...]. Le spectateur se tient en face d'une apparence en ignorant le processus de productions de cette apparence de la réalité qu'elle recouvre. [...] La spectatrice demeure immobile à sa place, passive. Être spectateur, c'est être séparé tout à la fois de la capacité de connaître et de pouvoir agir.<sup>390</sup>

Simply put, spectatorship would not be possible without some form of theatre; equally, theatre is impossible without a spectator. Putting this paradox into dialogue with Lacan's descriptions of an ambivalent agency of psychosis, absolute emancipation from the stage (in theatre) or from the Other (in psychosis) is impossible. The spectator is always, to a certain extent, at the mercy of the stage, just as the psychotic finds him or herself subject to the Other's will.

It is crucial at this point, therefore, to stake out the conceptual differences between psychosis in a psychoanalytic clinic and psychosis in a modality of spectatorship considered in this chapter: the latter engages the creative, potentially political, energies of the former, but drawing too strong a link between the two risks downplaying the gravity of the psychotic affliction for the subject who has to cope with a torturous lived reality. Indeed, in the dialogue that I have opened up between *dissensus* and psychosis, I do not pretend that either is without its conceptual faults. Rancière's notion of *dissensus* cannot, of course, be squared entirely with the psychotic mode of spectatorship. The extent

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<sup>390</sup>Rancière, *Le Spectateur*, p. 8.

to which a psychotic mode of subjectivity could have political valency is contentious, and equal doubt may be thrown on the validity of Rancière's model of the emancipated spectator. Simon Bayly disrupts the intrinsic link that Rancière forges between *dissensus* and mobilisation of the theatre collective in the spectator, since the latter is heterogeneous and thus unpredictable: 'there can be no expectation that this will directly be translated into action in any specific milieu, either in or outside of the immediate context of spectatorship itself'.<sup>391</sup>

However, the limitations of an emancipatory politics of both psychosis and of spectatorship in *dissensus* can, in fact, speak to one another. Both concepts grapple with and lay bare the complex machinery at work in a consideration of subjective agency. Passivity, as Rancière points out, does not connote complete political inertia. The spectator is not all-powerful but a translator of signs. Rancière envisions that the spectators must play 'interprètes actifs'. Furthermore, 'une communauté émancipée est une communauté de conteurs et de traducteurs'.<sup>392</sup> The passivity of the spectator is a prerequisite for the capacity for learning, experimentation and heuristics that enable him or her to challenge dominant ideologies. Similarly, psychosis demonstrates that the creativity inherent within subjectivity for renegotiating hegemonic codes is so radical that it must be coupled with the subject's 'passivity', of sorts, in relation to the Other. For psychotic rebellion to occur, the subject must make reference to the dominant social order. Like Rancière's paradoxical spectator, the psychotic subject must first of all function as an interpreter and translator of the machinations of the Other before and in the very act of protesting them.

The freedom that both psychosis and spectatorship therefore accord is a *relative* one. The relative freedom offered by post-delusional dialectics consists of the spectator-subject's renegotiation of a Master-Slave relationship with normative reality. Moreover, as has been shown in application to Adamov's *Off limits*, a post-theatrical dialectics is potentially unceasing and radical. A psychotic reading of spectatorship serves to contribute a complexified and enriched understanding of the subject's agency in the spectatorial act. While pointing to

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<sup>391</sup>Bayly, p. 26.

<sup>392</sup>Rancière, *Le Spectateur*, p. 29.

the complexities of a non-normative dialectics with external reality, my conceptualisation of the psychotic mode of spectatorship in *Off limits* demonstrates that these workings of the unconscious can be understood as political.

### **Concluding Remarks: An Analysis of Spectator Response to Contemporary Performances of Samuel Beckett's *Pas moi* (1972) and *Oh les Beaux jours* (1961)**

In this conclusion, I will analyse two plays by another Absurdist playwright, Samuel Beckett: *Pas moi* and *Oh les Beaux jours*. I discuss the viability of the theoretical ideas developed in this chapter in relation to two plays that arguably have a similar aesthetic logic to Adamov's play. In a similar way to *Off limits*, both of Beckett's plays analysed here grapple with a fragmented form of language and representation, and they could carve out a theoretical space for psychotic spectatorship as a result.

Samuel Beckett wrote *Not I* in 1972 (and translated it into French as *Pas moi* in 1974). The play consists of a fifteen-minute monologue composed of broken thoughts and sentences imparted at great speed by a woman who is referred to simply as 'Bouche' or 'Mouth'. The monologue recalls the streams of consciousness of Molly and Sally in *Off limits*, but Beckett takes theatre to its limit by making this form of expression the sole content of his play. The stage is stripped down to its barest minimum, deprived of both props and of the actors' corporeality: on the right-hand side of the stage, the woman's mouth is illuminated and nothing else ('*vers le fond côté cour, environ trois mètres au-dessus du niveau de la scène, faiblement éclairée de près et d'en dessous, le reste du visage dans l'obscurité*');<sup>393</sup> on the left-hand side a listener (simply named 'Auditeur'), clad in an '*ample djellaba*', makes a total of four futile gestures ('*une sorte de haussement des bras dans un mouvement fait de blâme et de pitié impuissante*' (p. 95)) each time that Bouche cries 'quoi?...qui?...non...elle!'. The

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<sup>393</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Pas moi', in *Oh les beaux jours suivi par Pas moi* (Paris: Minuit, 2009), pp. 81-95 (p. 81). Subsequent references to *Pas moi* will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.



stumbling blocks of language and discourse take aesthetic precedence in this play, as the tirade of disjointed thoughts and words surging forth from an anonymous, floating mouth are met with the mute, pathetic gestures of the Auditeur. Bouche's soliloquy gives only a fragmented account of her life: she was born prematurely ('petit bout de femelle...au monde...avant l'heure' (p. 82)); she was abandoned by her parents ('père mère fantômes...pas trace...lui filé...ni vu ni connu...pas plus tôt boutonnée la braguette...elle pareil...huit mois après' (p. 82)); she is physically incapable of claiming the first-person voice ('ce que c'est qu'elle - ...quoi ?... qui ?...non...ELLE !' (p. 94)); and she is ageing and anticipating death ('silence de mort à part le bourdon' (p. 85), 'silence de tombe à part le bourdon' (p. 86).

Bouche is at the mercy of the vicissitudes of language in her near senseless tirade. She experiences language as an external, invasive force. She attempts to claim ownership of this discourse:

La langue ? ... oui... la langue dans la bouche...toutes ces contorsions sans lesquelles... aucune parole possible [...] l'être tout entier...pendu à ses paroles... si bien que non seulement elle doit... elle doit non seulement... renoncer... la reconnaître pour sienne... la voix pour sienne... (p. 88)

Bouche's experience recalls the Lacanian psychotic subject whose relationship to language, we have seen, is fraught. Indeed, Eileen Fischer argues that Beckett's play represents the Lacanian Other, the locus of language because 'the dialogue [is] important not for its content or message, but rather for its verbal form and agonizing tone'.<sup>394</sup> Bouche is tortured by language, by the Other, in a similar way to the Lacanian psychotic.

This play's aesthetic resembles the psychotic logic of broken-down language and meaning that I have argued takes place on a theoretical plane in Adamov's *Off limits*. We might surmise from this that a position of spectatorship similar to that of psychosis is encouraged by Beckett's play. Indeed, the

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<sup>394</sup> Eileen Fischer, 'The Discourse of The Other in *Not I*: A Confluence of Beckett and Lacan', *Theater*, 10 (1979), 101-103 (p. 102). Beckett's *Pas moi* has frequently been linked to the notions of psychosis and schizophrenia. See, for instance: Shane Weller, "'Some Experience of the Schizoid Voice": Samuel Beckett and the Language of Derangement', *Forum for Modern Languages Studies*, 45 (2009), 32-50.

playwright wanted the spectator of *Pas moi* to experience something remarkably similar to a Lacanian psychotic breakdown of normative 'meaning' discussed above. He confessed that 'I am not unduly concerned with intelligibility. I hope the piece would work on the necessary emotions on the audience rather than appealing to the intellect'.<sup>395</sup>

The playwright's intentions for the play are in fact borne out by accounts of reader and audience response to recent performances of *Pas moi*. One reader of Beckett's text recounts that 'the disembodied bit of a person speaking haltingly form [*sic.*] disturbed me too much to dwell on the actual words for long enough to extract meaning. But it seemed sexual and scarily hollow'.<sup>396</sup> Spectator responses to live performances of the play conjure up the same sentiment expressed by this reader. Elyse Somer, reviewing Lawrence Sacharow's 2003 production of *Not I* at the Century Center for Performance Arts in New York, observed that 'the elliptical stream of words is not going to result in a sudden flash of making complete sense as to what all the words are about. The shadowy presence of a man identified as Auditor (Peter Kybart) adds to the aura of otherworldliness'.<sup>397</sup> In a more emphatic manner, one spectator of the Southbank Centre's 2009 version of *Pas moi* (with actress Lisa Dwan) comments that:

The manner in which I am accustomed to being communicated to, the prompts that a person's facial and bodily gestures provide, the access to sense that grammar immediately delivers, was [...] taken away from me. My brain was of no use in discerning any literal meaning of what was being said by the mouth. The mouth refused to divulge specific details or facts of its evidently sad story; instead, it merely voiced incomplete thoughts. All that I was capable of doing was to listen with my heart, rather than my head.<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> Beckett quoted in Eileen Fischer, p. 102.

<sup>396</sup> Author unknown, <[http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1130989.Not\\_I](http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1130989.Not_I)> [accessed 13 October 2011].

<sup>397</sup> Elyse Somer, 'A CurtainUp Review: Beckett/Albee', <<http://www.curtainup.com/beckettalbee.html>> [accessed 13 October 2011].

<sup>398</sup> Author unknown, <<http://litandspoken.southbankcentre.co.uk/2009/07/09/not-i/>> [accessed 14 October 2011].

This resembles the psychotic evacuation of meaning from discourse discussed in this chapter ('the access to sense that grammar immediately delivers [...] was [...] taken away from me').

What is striking about these commentators' reminiscences is the implication that their experiences of linguistic breakdown and meaninglessness are, in fact, *highly engaging*. The barrage of language profoundly moves these commentators ('scarily hollow', 'an aura of otherwordliness', 'all that I was capable of doing was to listen with my heart'). These three accounts reveal an experience of being viscerally moved by the senseless stream of words in *Pas moi*. They suggest a possible link with the concept of *dissensus* through the collapse of meaning, *le vide énigmatique*, discussed in this chapter. I argued that the constant psychotic collapse of meaning theoretically parallels Rancière's heuristic conceptualisation of *dissensus*. The impermanent, constantly mutating way in which the psychotic interrogates normative meaning in the psychotic *vide énigmatique* may be extracted from these spectators' accounts of the speed of *Pas moi* and the insight they derived from this linguistic flow.

Accounts of reactions to Beckett's *Pas moi*, from its first stage productions to contemporary *mises en scène*, encapsulate the double-bind between insight and oppression that I have argued is at the heart of the psychotic mode of spectatorship. They reveal the precarious nature of the form of agency carved out by this form of spectatorship. Actress Billie Whitelaw, who played Mouth in the 1976 Royal Court Theatre production (commonly interpreted as the signature performance of this play), recalls that:

The atmosphere when [the play] started out was [...] one of [...] "oh, what is this" and as it went on and as there was no escape – because we killed all the lights, we broke all the rules and took the light bulbs out of the exit lights and took the light bulbs out of the lady's loo lights because people tried to escape into the loo to get away from this relentless mouth that wouldn't let go. Plenty of writers can write a play about a state of mind but [Beckett] actually put that state of mind on

the stage in front of your eyes and I think a lot of people recognised it [...] an inner scream in there and no escaping it.<sup>399</sup>

According to Whitelaw's account, the performance of *Pas moi* was a transformative experience for the spectator. The audience's attitude changed from one of suspicion to one of absolute identification with the 'inner' voice of protest stimulated by lines such as the play's refrain 'quoi? ...qui? ...non! ...elle! ...'. This internal vocal protest seemingly arises out of nowhere for the spectator but has, effectively, been absorbed from the stage. This supports the underlying premise of my analysis of *Off limits* that a schizophrenic stage has the capacity to conjure up a psychotic form of spectatorship. Whitelaw's remarks on the spectator's 'inner scream' – hardly a description that denotes consensus – could further be said to recall the spectator's politicised *dissensus* by way of non-normative language that I have discussed in this chapter. By virtue of its minimal plot, the play, like Adamov's *Off limits*, refuses to impose upon the spectator a didactic, de-politicising 'meaning' or a monolithic sense of 'reality'. While the spectator may submit to the stage to connect with this voice – which, as Rancière's theory would suggest, is undemocratic – he or she is nevertheless free to extract his or her own meanings from the meaninglessness of the plot. In a similar manner to the double bind of psychotic agency that I have laid out in the first part of the conclusion to this chapter, the spectator's insight from *Pas moi* is coupled with an experience so intense and radical that spectators of Whitelaw betrayed a desperate will to flee this voice.

Another spectator of Lisa Dwan's 2009 performance recalls that 'I thought I could see Mouth move across to the left, about a foot from her starting point, and wondered briefly how on earth this had been achieved and lit, before dismissing it'. According to this spectator, this is a relatively common spectatorial experience in response to the play (this was borne out by the question and answer session after the production) and it might be argued to be similar to the conjuring up of a psychotic delusion. Despite the disconcerting nature of this quasi-hallucination, this spectator admits that this was an

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<sup>399</sup> Billie Whitelaw, Introduction to the 1973 televised version of *Not I*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4LDwfKxr-M>> [accessed 15 October 2011].

‘astonishing and compelling performance’ with an extraordinary ‘power and intensity’.<sup>400</sup> Equally, another spectator recounts that ‘I [...] saw a performance of *Not I* a couple of years ago [that] was staged unconventionally in that we stood around a small hole in the floor through which the actress’ mouth was visible. It was a rather intense experience’.<sup>401</sup> Reviewer Nicholas Lezard articulates the same paradoxical experience of excitement and pain in his commentary on Dwan’s performance of *Mouth* as ‘hinting at deep trauma and [an] extinction of self’ at the same time as affirming that ‘there were moments when the hairs went up on the back of one’s neck’.<sup>402</sup> These comments suggest the same form of insight that I have argued theoretically informs the psychotic mode of spectatorship in Adamov’s *Off limits* that is compelling because it is so challenging and radical (recalling the snow-balling, self-compounding effect that I suggested resulted from the *vide énigmatique* and the more active foreclosure of the end scene of *Off limits*).

I noted earlier in the chapter that the ‘irreality’ of theatre (Balassa’s concept) combined with the contestation of ‘reality’ in the non-realist aesthetic of *Off limits* open up a psychotic mode of spectatorship that is specifically theatrical. An analysis of the potentially psychotic effects of Beckett’s *Pas moi* enriches theoretical insight into this theatrical guise of this form of spectatorship. A reviewer of La Mama’s 1980 New York production of the play observes that:

Unfortunately, on the night I witnessed the performance, Ms. Sherman was slightly out of place on her seat, or else the pin light had slipped, and her neck and chin (not her mouth) were all that was visible (part of the problem may have been that the light came from above, not *below*, as Beckett indicates). Thus we missed the fundamental image, the mesmerizing dance of tongue, teeth and

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<sup>400</sup> Tanya Izzard, ‘Not I by Samuel Beckett’, <<http://20thcenturyvox.blogspot.com/2009/07/not-i-by-samuel-beckett.html>> [accessed 14 October 2011].

<sup>401</sup> Author unknown, <[http://www.dangerousminds.net/comments/billie\\_whitelaw\\_samuel\\_beckett\\_not\\_i/](http://www.dangerousminds.net/comments/billie_whitelaw_samuel_beckett_not_i/)> [accessed 14 October 2011].

<sup>402</sup> Nicholas Lezard, ‘Play Samuel Beckett’s Mouth? Not I?’, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2009/jul/08/samuel-beckett-not-i>> [accessed 14 October 2011].

lips that haunts anyone who saw Billie Whitelaw's performance of this work, a performance which will probably always remain the definitive one.<sup>403</sup>

The compelling effect of Bouche's performance, which I have argued strikes up a relationship with the psychotic mode of spectatorship developed in this chapter, is entirely dependent on the contingent nature of performance. If, in the live theatrical moment, the visual effects of Bouche's free-floating mouth do not come across, then the haunting effect is lost, as this spectator observes. The transformative spectatorial experience and, by extension of my argument, the psychotic politics of the theatre text are missed. Similarly, Fintan Walsh critiques the 2010 Mouth Piece Productions version of *Not I* for representing 'Mouth [a]s both present on stage and digitally mediated'. He notes that 'the overall effect does not pack the punch that Beckett sought to achieve' because 'instead of being shocked by the spew of words that Mouth releases, taking us from birth to old age, in this version our attention is drawn to the machinery of representation'.<sup>404</sup> The mediatisation of Mouth fails to affect the spectator in the same way as described in the accounts cited above.

These two accounts reveal the precarious nature of inducing the compelling form of spectatorship that *Pas moi* has proven capable of evoking in certain performances. This precariousness feeds into a wider concept in performance studies of the fraught logic of 'presence' in the theatre. As Suzanne M. Jaeger notes:

Stage presence can be defined as an active configuring and reconfiguring of one's intentional grasp in response to an environment. It is to be aware of the uniqueness of a particular audience and of certain features of a theatrical event rather than performing a perfect repetition of a familiar and well-rehearsed pattern of behaviour.<sup>405</sup>

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<sup>403</sup> Thomas J. Taylor, 'Footfalls and Not I: The La Mama Production of 1980', <<http://www.english.fsu.edu/jobs/num07/Num7Taylor.htm>> [accessed 14 October 2011].

<sup>404</sup> Fintan Walsh, 'Not I', <<http://www.irishtheatremagazine.ie/Reviews/Current/Not-I->> [accessed 7 November 2011].

<sup>405</sup> Suzanne M. Jaeger, 'Embodiment and Presence: The Ontology of Presence Reconsidered', in *Staging Philosophy: Intersections of Theater, Performance and Philosophy*, ed. by David Krasner and David Z. Saltz (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), pp. 122-41 (p. 122).

When 'presence' succeeds, as Jaeger suggests above, the effects of theatre performance can be disruptive and transformative, creating new meanings in the liveness of the event. However, as the accounts of the 1980 La Mama Production and 2010 Mouth Piece Productions of Beckett's *Pas moi* suggest, when presence fails, its transformative effects on spectatorship are stymied. The disturbing, compelling position of spectatorship that I have argued is psychotic fails to be conjured up as a result. These accounts therefore elucidate the precarious nature of instigating such a mode of spectatorship in the theatre.

These critiques draw attention to the limits of theatre as text and point to further possibilities identified through a discussion of presence and an analysis of empirical spectatorship. My analysis of *Off limits* and the transformative politics of psychotic spectatorship that I theorise could justify the need for contemporary re-stagings of this play. However, a comparison with contemporary performances of Beckett's *Pas moi* leads us to reflect further on the possibilities of psychotic spectatorship. We might ask: How could a psychotic aesthetic be brought out and emphasised by means of performance? How might it be thwarted by live performance? Accounts of Beckett's *Pas moi* suggest that psychotic spectatorship is best precipitated when the liveness of voice in theatre is emphasised and not when it is downplayed via its mediatisation or re-embodiment. This might lead us to focus our attention on the potential of scenes such as Sally's disembodied diatribe in *Off limits* ('Je ne suis pas l'American Express, Je ne suis pas l'American Express, Je ne suis pas l'American Express'). However, insights from Beckett's *Pas moi* also lend credence to my idea that the fragmentary language of *Off limits*, ripped apart from meaningful signification, have the capacity to shunt the spectator into a traumatic form of spectatorship that we might call psychotic. What spectator accounts of *Pas moi* reveal is that the fragmentary nature of this language needs to be taken to its extreme in disembodiment from the actor to maximise the clout of the psychotic aesthetic.

These spectatorial accounts confirm Julie Campbell's contention that Beckett's *Pas moi* acts as such a compelling force on the spectator because of the disembodied nature of Bouche's voice. Shrouded in complete darkness, the audience can see only a floating, anonymous mouth, and this becomes the 'voice of the unconscious':

We are hearing a voice from the unconscious. The body of the actor is hidden; only the mouth is visible, and the voice we hear is a voice from within. What is important here is not the body of the actor, but the emancipated voice from the unconscious, which eerily, has “a body of its own”, although we cannot see it. We see the mouth, out of which the voice escapes the confines of the unconscious, and we hear the voice.<sup>406</sup>

With this disruptive spectatorial affect created by the disembodied voice in mind, it is instructive to turn to another of Beckett's plays which features a similar aesthetic: *Oh les beaux jours* (1961). Like *Pas moi*, we are presented with an immobilised body of a female character: Winnie. This character is buried up to the waist in a mound of dirt (*'enterrée jusqu'au-dessus de la taille dans le marmelon'*).<sup>407</sup> By the second act of the play, the mound covers everything apart from Winnie's face (*'Winnie enterrée jusqu'au cou, sa toque sur la tête, les yeux fermés. [...] Seuls les yeux sont mobiles'* (p. 59)). Like Bouche and her Auditeur, Winnie engages in a near-monologue while her hapless partner Willie, unhampered by the mound, adds the occasional word or phrase that adds a hint of sexual innuendo to the play (*'cochon mâle châtré'* (p. 56), *'formication'* (p. 37)).

Winnie's monologue, unlike Bouche's, is not an acerbic diatribe against the traumas of her life, but a sentimental, nostalgic reflection on times gone by (*'Mon premier bal ! [...] Mon premier baiser !'* (pp. 21-22)). Unlike Bouche's intensely bitter monologue, Winnie's discourse is occasionally inflected with regret and anger about the repetitious and monotonous nature of her life with Willie (*'La tristesse au sortir des rapports sexuels intimes, celle-là nous est familière, certes'* (p. 69)).

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<sup>406</sup> Julie Campbell, 'The Entrapment of the Female Body in Beckett's Plays in Relation to Jung's Third Tavistock Lecture', in *Historicising Beckett: Issues of Performance*, ed. by Marius Buning (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 161-72 (pp. 163-64).

<sup>407</sup> Beckett, 'Oh les beaux jours', in *Oh les beaux jours suivi par Pas moi* (Paris: Minuit, 2009), pp. 10-77 (p. 11). Subsequent references to *Oh les beaux jours* will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.



Despite the aesthetic similarities between *Pas moi* and *Oh les beaux jours*, there are important differences in the intensity of the words and language. Concomitantly, the plays have proven to produce very different effects on contemporary audiences, and this could be attributed to this difference in linguistic intensity. Winnie is potentially similar to the Lacanian psychotic subject insofar as she almost becomes a pure subject of broken language, as she is progressively deprived of corporeality. Her subjectivity is nearly reduced to pure, babbling language. However, unlike Bouche and even the characters of *Off limits*, her discourse – even though it is perhaps inane – still conveys a fair degree of meaning. Unlike the psychotic aesthetic of *Pas moi*, language is not rendered a pure chain of signifiers in this play. This has led audiences to identify with the character of Winnie with a tender sentimentality that detracts from what could be potentially a traumatic, quasi-psychotic spectatorial experience that we see in relation to *Pas moi*. Reviewer Ben Brantley, commenting on a production of *Happy Days* at the Harvey Theater in New York in 2008, recounts both his and his fellow theatregoers' experience of the play:

Afterward it was clear that both [of my fellow theatregoers] identified with Winnie, and both left the theater looking, well, extremely happy. I certainly felt happy myself.

That we should have been able to find such joy in what is finally a mercilessly bleak portrait of what Winnie calls "life itself" I find deeply comforting somehow.<sup>408</sup>

The 'comforting' effect that Brantley relates would seem to go against the unceasing, uncomfortable and dissensual psychotic position of spectatorship that I have conceptualised in this chapter. The optimism that spectators extract from this play differs radically from the political nihilism that I have identified in *Off limits*. This aesthetic divergence could lend empirical support to my theoretical contention that the exposition of non-didactic nihilism in *Off limits*

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<sup>408</sup> Ben Brantley, 'Cast in Stone' <<http://theater.nytimes.com/2008/01/11/theater/reviews/11happ.html>> [accessed 15 October 2011].

paves the way for a rebellious form of spectatorship because it precludes the tender form of identification that spectators of *Oh les beaux jours* experience.

In a similar way to Adamov's *Off limits*, Beckett's *Oh les beaux jours* has apocalyptic undertones. I argued earlier that Adamov's staging of an apocalyptic ending to the American dream, in the proliferation of broken Statues of Liberty that amass on the stage, resembles Lacan's theory of the rejection of dominant ideology in psychosis. In Beckett's piece, we are similarly confronted with a post-apocalyptic terrain. The stage is stripped down. Apart from the mound that encompasses Winnie, the space is sparse and vast:

*Lumière aveuglante.*

*Une toile de fond en trompe l'œil très pompier représente la fuite et la rencontre au loin d'un ciel nuages et d'une plaine dénudée. (p. 11)*

I argued earlier that Adamov's staging of an apocalypse potentially conjures up a psychotic affect in the spectator that is radical and creative. Similarly, these post-apocalyptic elements of *Oh les beaux jours* would seem to be where the most potential to disturb the spectator lies. Brantley writes on the 2008 production in New York that the theatre company 'brought an Imax-size sense of the apocalypse, of a world scarred and sapped by global warming or nuclear holocaust, to a play most often presented as a chamber piece'.<sup>409</sup> Assessing the same production at the Kennedy Center in Washington DC, reviewer Jill Dolan establishes parallels between the play and 'the post-WTC attack landscape of lower Manhattan'. Similar to the 'musique assourdissante' that marks the apocalyptic ending of Adamov's *Off limits*, Dolan notes that 'dissonant, loud, and unpleasantly grating music plays to usher us with some trepidation into the play's world. Rumbling, rattling sounds that could be the mechanisms of building or the apparatus of destruction echo through the air'.<sup>410</sup> Justine Jordan reflects on her viewing experience of the 2011 production of *Happy Days* at the Sheffield Crucible in a similar vein:

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<sup>409</sup> Ben Brantley, 'Cast in Stone'.

<sup>410</sup> Jill Dolan, 'Fiona Shaw in Beckett at the Kennedy Center' <<http://feministspectator.blogspot.com/2007/11/fiona-shaw-in-beckett-at-kennedy-center.html>> [accessed 15 October 2011].

The extraordinary thing about the play is that it makes what sounds like some stark allegory of hell and the afterlife, or a suffocating marriage, or that old chestnut the human condition, so immediate and particular and affecting. And to the various allegorical interpretations we can add, 50 years on, climate change and environmental doom. That "blaze of hellish light"; Winnie's dwindling resources, all running out and running down; her description of other wanderers in this wilderness where nothing grows any more as the "last human kind to stray this way" – all speak to our fears in the era of *An Inconvenient Truth* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. The unnerving hints that the Earth has lost its atmosphere and its gravity, that there is an "everlasting perishing cold" to come, transmit an ecological chill as well as a personal shiver about ageing and death.<sup>411</sup>

Yet, any potentially disruptive or psychotic effects of this apocalyptic tone in *Oh les beaux jours* appear to be cancelled out by Winnie's strident happiness, her will to carry on, and her tenderly comic tone with which spectators identify. Dolan notes that 'the pleasure [Winnie] takes in her effort mirrors the spectators' own pleasure'. A blog response to the 2008 production of the play in New York similarly reads: 'there are few images in human culture as historically terrifying as an angry, bodiless head come back to torment us' that *Happy Days* stages. However, this production misses out on this disturbing effect by stressing hopefulness and optimism:

All in all, this probably is the happiest of "Happy Days" you can find. Some advice to Ms. Warner: Stop meddling with the script and the fancy curtain, and get comfortable with the darker side of Beckett.<sup>412</sup>

Another commentator responds to this blogger's opinion stating that 'I felt much the same about this production, which diluted the power of Beckett's play'.<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>411</sup> Justine Jordan, 'Beckett's Happy Days are here again (with a little help from Father Ted)', <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2011/may/23/beckett-happy-days-father-ted>> [accessed 15 October 2011].

<sup>412</sup> Author unknown, 'These Days Are Ours', <<http://countercritic.com/2008/01/24/these-days-are-ours/>> [accessed 15 October 2011].

<sup>413</sup> Author unknown, 'These Days Are Ours'.

The fact that *Off limits* differs from *Oh les beaux jours* in its holding back on optimism, its stress on both political and moral nihilism and its *ending* with an apocalyptic scenario suggests that a disruptive, psychotic mode of spectatorship is made empirically possible in sharp contrast to the spectators of Beckett's play who derive satisfaction from the very different form of dramatic content. In a similar way to spectators' accounts of *Pas moi*, the most disturbing aesthetic would seem to be potentiated by the disembodiment of language. The de-corporealised subject of language (the floating head) that could be stressed in Beckett's *Oh les beaux jours* holds the potential to disrupt, according to this blogger.

Contextualising the implications of this more broadly, Lacanian performance studies critic Elizabeth Wright argues that effective experimental theatre stresses the disjunction between language and the body:

The post-Freudian theatre, in the wake of Lacan, reveals theatricality as a necessary element in the construction of the subject. Its effect is to make the subject (artist and spectator) experience the gap between the body as a discursive construct and its felt embodiment in experience, between the representation and the real, and to expose it to continual risk of re-definition.<sup>414</sup>

Theatre's ability to stage a disjunction between language and embodiment disrupts the notion of a centred, ego-driven subject who believes him or herself to be in control of language, whose body and language are unified and whole. In psychosis, the rupturing of language and body results from the subject's submission to and distrust of the locus of language, the Other. From an analysis of spectatorial accounts of Beckett's *Pas moi* and *Oh les beaux jours*, I would suggest that the playwright succeeds in staging this radical psychotic disjunction in the former and fails in the latter. In *Pas moi*, spectators are witnesses to a deeply disturbing disembodied voice. The form of spectatorship conjured up by this could be argued to be psychotic as Lacanian theory would define it, as empirical spectatorial accounts document a mode of reception somewhere

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<sup>414</sup> Elizabeth Wright, 'Psychoanalysis and the Theatrical: Analysing Performance', in *Analysing Performance: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Patrick Campbell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 175-190 (p. 189).

between insight and oppression that resembles the complex form of agency of a psychotic psychical structure.

Spectators' accounts of *Oh les beaux jours* reveal the same disturbing potential of the play in the apocalyptic nature of its aesthetic, the de-corporealised head of Winnie and the broken-down nature of the protagonist's discourse. However, this politics of spectatorship could be stymied by Winnie's stubborn endurance, or more specifically, this character's ability to encourage sympathy and identification from her audiences because of this obstinacy. Winnie's endurance, according to these spectators, is comforting. Winnie's words suggest an acceptance of life's difficulties ('ça que je trouve si merveilleux [...] la façon dont l'homme s'adapte [...] aux conditions changeantes' (p. 43)); her lines reveal her desperate search for a form of authority that would give her comfort and assurance in a post-apocalyptic world ('quelqu'un me regard encore [...] se soucie de moi encore [...] ça que je trouve si merveilleux' (p.60)). The fact that the spectator takes comfort from Winnie's faith in the powers that be hints at a form of social consensus, the acceptance of the way things are and submission to the 'absurdity' of life. This consensus must be defined in contradistinction to radical *dissensus* of psychotic spectatorship, which involves the active questioning of authority and ideologies that I have looked at in this chapter. Even if, by the end of the play, all that the spectator can see is Winnie's face, those performances that stress the humour and tenderness of this character reveal that the protagonist is still an embodied and centred subject of language. There is no separation between language and the body that Wright argues above could re-define subjectivity and its constituent ideologies in the theatre. The resultant spectator response, the comfort that audiences have derived from recent performances of the play, could be argued to bolster the spectator's ego. It suggests that spectators take inspiration from Winnie's defiant attitude to remain stable and unified despite the adverse circumstances.

Having identified the compelling nature of the politics of spectatorship permitted by Adamov's fragmented absurd aesthetic, and the potential for psychotic spectatorship in performances of absurd theatre in Beckett's *Pas moi* and *Oh les beaux jours*, I move onto the final chapter which returns to the playwright with whom I started this thesis: Fernando Arrabal. I discuss a topic

hitherto left foreclosed from my argument, the pronounced masculinism of the theatre of the absurd. By taking Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs*, I assess the possibilities of a feminist modality of spectatorship with regard to this body of theatre.

## Chapter 5

### A Feminist Spectator of the Theatre of the Absurd? The Public and the Private in Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs* (1969)

It can be argued that Fernando Arrabal depicts women in a crude, reductionist light in his theatre. His female characters divide themselves into two camps: the overbearing matriarchs of plays such as *Les Deux bourreaux* (1952), *Le Grand cérémonial* (1965) and *La Communion solennelle* (1967), and the prurient coquettes of *Fando et Lis* (1958) and *Le Lai de Barrabas* (1969) who inevitably become disempowered or even annihilated by the end of the dramatic action. Given this crude binary opposition, it is unsurprising that his œuvre and the male-dominated theatrical Absurd aesthetic more generally have rarely been considered in feminist terms.

Notwithstanding the pronounced masculinism of Arrabal's theatre, Judith G. Miller gestures towards a way out of this misogynist problematic for the feminist theorist concerned with his work. She suggests that 'the castrating *and* victimized woman, a constant presence in Arrabal's theater, calls for a combined psychoanalytical and feminist approach to demystify the Arrabalian variation on the unholy whore-virgin-mother trinity'.<sup>415</sup> Miller's advocacy of a psychoanalytic-feminist critical methodology follows the same line of thought as Barbara Freedman, who pinpoints the 'deconstructive' capacities – in the widest sense of this term – of a psychoanalytic theorisation of the unconscious. Such a methodology enables an interrogation and dismantling of embedded unconscious social preconceptions produced by patriarchal ideology.<sup>416</sup>

Yet, Miller's demands for a feminist recuperation of Arrabal's theatre have remained unanswered to this day. Viveca Tallgren's study (2005) illustrates this elision. She focuses on the historical reception of Arrabal's theatre. She comments, for instance, on one of the playwright's most contentious plays, his 1969 piece *Et ils passèrent les menottes aux fleurs*, that:

<sup>415</sup> Judith G. Miller, 'Reviewed work(s): *The Theater of Fernando Arrabal: A Garden of Earthly Delights* by Thomas J. Donahue', *Substance*, 9 (1980), 92-93 (p. 93).

<sup>416</sup> Barbara Freedman, 'Pedagogy, Psychoanalysis, Theatre: Interrogating the Scene of Learning', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 41 (1990), 174-86 (pp. 178-79).

The much-contested *And They Put Handcuffs on the Flowers* was presented in Paris, and, with its erotic, eschatological and blasphemous scenes, the play encapsulated the predominant rebellious mentality so dedicated to breaking taboo. Without a doubt, Arrabal was influenced by the sexual revolution, harnessing it to express his protests against the system that deprived him of a father and prevented him from freely expressing his opinions and feelings.<sup>417</sup>

Tallgren's comments reveal that this play and its sexual content provided Arrabal with a locus for working through his personal grievances with regard to Franco's authoritarianism, the Catholic Church that supported the former, and his father (whose Republican sympathies left him imprisoned and estranged from his son). Despite the fact that this play (1969) is contemporaneous with the first throes of second-wave feminism, newspaper reviewers failed to address its depictions of women or the ways in which it was received by female spectators.<sup>418</sup> This chapter follows Miller's recommendation above of a 'combined psychoanalytical and feminist approach' in order to consider the theoretical ways in which the radical emancipatory gesture of Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent* (hinted at by Tallgren) may be mapped onto a feminist agenda.

Arrabal insisted that acquaintances, friends and families sit apart in order to watch *Et ils passèrent*. He sends lone spectators through a darkened conduit before entering the theatre auditorium. The spectator is temporarily deprived of both sight and the familiarity of sitting in established social groups. As spectators arrive at the theatre, they are taken, one by one, by the actors from a lit hall, through a penumbral 'chambre noire' and finally they are led into the completely dark theatre auditorium. Once they are seated, the drama begins. It depicts the lives in prison of the four male political dissenters Tosan, Pronos,

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<sup>417</sup> Viveca Tallgren, *El temor al dios Pan: reflexiones sobre la recepción de algunas obras de Fernando Arrabal* (Zaragoza: Libros del innombrable, 2005), pp. 49-50. My translation. Original: 'Se presentó en París su muy debatida obra *Y pusieron esposas a las flores*, que con sus escenas eróticas, escatológicas y blasfemas encajaba bien con la predominante mentalidad rebelde tan afanada en romper con todos los tabúes. Sin duda Arrabal también se dejó influenciar por las corrientes de la revolución sexual, aprovechándolas para poder al fin expresar su protesta contra el sistema que le quitó a su padre y le prohibió expresar libremente sus opiniones y sentimientos'.

<sup>418</sup> For further details on the link between the 1960s sexual revolution and second-wave feminism, see: Ellen Willis, 'Toward a Feminist Sexual Revolution', *Social Text*, 6 (1982), 3-21; Sue O'Sullivan, 'Passionate Beginnings: Ideological Politics 1969-1972', *Feminist Review*, 11 (1982), 70-86; Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920-1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).



Amiel and Katar. Although never exclusively named as such, there are strong hints that these are characters who have dissented from General Francisco Franco's regime that controlled Spain between 1936 and 1975. Through the staging of hallucinations, dreams, sketches and flashbacks, which reveal the reasons for the characters' imprisonment, Arrabal aimed to denounce the injustices and the nonsensical logic of their incarceration. The playwright ends the play with a pseudo-ceremonial act of redemption and resurrection. The character Tosan is killed and then brought back to life, a scene clearly paralleling and parodying the sacrifice of Christ. It is thus a maligned male political prisoner who saves humanity in this play. Meanwhile, the female dramatic characters – Falidia, Lelia and Imis – oscillate between patriarchal stereotypes of servitude (the mother and wife) (*Falidia pleure à genoux, le front collé au sol*) and sadism (the dominatrix, the whore) (*avec la chaîne elle le frappe elle-même*).<sup>419</sup>

### **Performances of *Et ils passèrent***

It is important to stress that the feminist analysis of Arrabal's play in this chapter will be primarily conceptual, speculative and heuristic. It is of this nature in order to push the bounds of prevailing critical assumptions that confine the playwright's œuvre and the theatre of the absurd more generally to masculinist or even misogynistic paradigms. However, it is useful to consult accounts of contemporary spectator response to this play, in order to establish an empirical point of departure for the concepts that I will discuss in my argument. When it was first staged, the play and its transgressive content – such as a staged act of fellatio replete with pious and baroque overtones – generated lively audience reactions, ranging from critics' excitement about the play's experimentalism in Parisian and New York avant-garde quarters, to the Swedish Neo-Nazi movement's call for its ban.<sup>420</sup> This combination of excitement and outrage has mutated into a form of politicised pleasure in recent years as spectators' accounts of contemporary performances of *Et ils passèrent* demonstrate.

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<sup>419</sup> Fernando Arrabal, 'Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs', in *Théâtre de guerrilla* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1969), pp. 11-106 (p. 101, p. 77). Subsequent references to *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs* will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.

<sup>420</sup> Tallgren, pp. 54-61.

There is a high degree of spectator-actor interaction in this play (described above) that could potentially be disquieting and uncomfortable for the viewer. However, contemporary *mise en scènes* do not evoke an uneasy reaction, as spectator accounts of Fafiole Palassio's, Ximoun's and Manex Fuch's production of the play in Avignon in 1998 and Blanquefort in 2000 would suggest. One spectator, Andrée Sanchez, declared that the piece made her feel 'pleinement heureuse en sortant du spectacle' and 'enchantée'. She expressed admiration for the actors and the energy in the auditorium that they were able to cultivate during the performance: 'presque deux heures qui me semblent courtes grâce au jeu des comédiens, tantôt dramatique, tantôt retenu, tantôt violent et démesuré mais toujours "juste"'.<sup>421</sup>

Similarly, another spectator Jean Thibaudou described how the production was able to make him feel both comfortable and highly engaged with the subversive content of the dramatic action:

La troupe a obtenu mon adhésion, faisant alterner avec bonheur les moments de description réalistes et ceux où les détenus s'évadent par le rêve, à la recherche d'une lueur d'espoir. J'ai bien sûr trouvé les traces de thèmes provocateurs chers à Arrabal : anticléricalisme forcené, sexe, scatologie mais, ils sont traités, ici, avec suffisamment d'humour et de tact pour ne pas bloquer le spectateur un peu frileux que je suis parfois.<sup>422</sup>

Spectator Sophie Reine recounts that 'j'ai regardé tout ce spectacle le sourire aux lèvres et j'ai franchement ri à plusieurs reprises'. She goes on to say that 'je suis sortie au bout de deux heures de spectacle, le coeur léger, les yeux pleins d'images, les oreilles encore emplies de chants et de mots doux et généreux; mais

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<sup>421</sup> Andrée Sanchez, 'Témoignages des Spectateurs', <[http://www.passion-theatre.org/cgi-bin/pti\\_lol/spectacle/affiche/fiche.pl?id\\_planning=1952&annee=2000](http://www.passion-theatre.org/cgi-bin/pti_lol/spectacle/affiche/fiche.pl?id_planning=1952&annee=2000)> [accessed 21 October 2011].

<sup>422</sup> Jean Thibaudou, 'Témoignages des Spectateurs', <[http://www.passion-theatre.org/cgi-bin/pti\\_lol/spectacle/affiche/fiche.pl?id\\_planning=1952&annee=2000](http://www.passion-theatre.org/cgi-bin/pti_lol/spectacle/affiche/fiche.pl?id_planning=1952&annee=2000)> [accessed 21 October 2011].

le message est passé, je n'oublierai pas qu'un jour "ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs...".<sup>423</sup>

These spectators describe experiencing a kind of pleasure suffused with political engagement ('tantôt dramatique, tantôt retenu, tantôt violent et démesuré mais toujours "juste"; 'j'ai bien sûr trouvé les traces de thèmes provocateurs [...] avec suffisamment d'humour et de tact pour ne pas bloquer le spectateur un peu frileux que je suis parfois'; 'je suis sortie au bout de deux heures de spectacle, le coeur léger [...] mais le message est passé'). With this in mind, I assess the theoretical possibility of a 'feminist politics of spectatorship' in relation to this play by means of the Lacanian concept of non-phallic '*jouissance*'. Although, as one spectator cited above recounts, this play is largely concerned with Arrabal's reaction against and desire to subvert the teachings of the Catholic Church ('anticléricalisme forcené') and Franco's regime that the former supported, this will not be my main concern in my analysis. Arrabal's use of sacrilegious parody has been widely commented upon, but, as noted above by Miller, critics have overlooked the specifically feminist possibilities and pleasures that may be carved out in viewing Arrabal's theatre.<sup>424</sup>

I take these spectators' descriptions of their pleasure in viewing Arrabal's play as a point of departure for conceptualising a form of non-phallic *jouissance* encouraged by the dramatic action of this play. This Lacanian concept constitutes a form of transgressive, boundary-defying and potentially feminist form of enjoyment, which would both seem to fit well with these spectators' accounts of a politicised pleasure and permit me to inflect their reactions with a feminist stance. As Elizabeth Grosz notes, 'this enigmatic *jouissance* is attributed to woman as her mark of resistance to the Other'.<sup>425</sup> Taken up by feminist theorists such as Joan Copjec, Luce Irigaray and Parveen Adams, non-phallic *jouissance* bears the potential to outstrip the patriarchal Other of the dominant social order. It constitutes a paradoxical, challenging and heavily politicised form of pleasure

<sup>423</sup> Sophie Reine, 'Témoignages des Spectateurs', <[http://www.passion-theatre.org/cgi-bin/pti\\_lol/spectacle/affiche/fiche.pl?id\\_planning=1952&annee=2000](http://www.passion-theatre.org/cgi-bin/pti_lol/spectacle/affiche/fiche.pl?id_planning=1952&annee=2000)> [accessed 21 October 2011].

<sup>424</sup> For recent criticism on Arrabal's theatrical deployment of sacrilegious parody, see: Frédéric Aranzueque-Arrieta, *Arrabal: la perversion et le sacré* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2006) and Aranzueque-Arrieta, *Panique: Arrabal, Jodorowsky, Topor* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008).

<sup>425</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London, Routledge, 1990), p. 129.

that potentially emerges from the feminine subject's existence at the margins of patriarchy. This chapter puts forward the argument that Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent* creates a space for a feminist *jouissance*, based on Lacanian theory, by turning to Arrabal's innovative alterations to the regime of spectatorship (the way that the spectator is set up to view the piece).

### The Theoretical Framework

The sensorial destabilisation at work in the play's spectatorship (as described above, the plunging of spectators into complete darkness, the physical separation of theatregoers, the tactility of the actors towards viewers) provides a theoretical platform from which to explore a feminist politics of affect that responds to and challenges the gender binaries set up in the play's narrative. Historically, *Et ils passèrent* can be situated within a body of 'guerrilla' theatre (San Francisco Mime Troupe member Peter Berg's term) designed to mobilise the theatre collective in the wake of the events of May 1968 and the protracted, sanguinary Vietnam war.<sup>426</sup> Originally a US cultural export of the radical theatre troupe Living Theatre, guerrilla theatre developed an aesthetic designed to rupture traditional configurations of theatre spectatorship and staging (its most extreme incarnation was perhaps found in the move to street theatre).<sup>427</sup> The socially transformative import of guerrilla theatre, as Arrabal's critic R. L. Farmer outlines, lies in its altered spectator-subject/stage-object dialectic:

Guerrilla theatre, like guerrilla warfare, admits of no passivity. It purports to dynamite the subject-object dialectic and rearrange the fragments resulting from the explosion. New relationships between art and event, spectator and spectacle must of necessity emerge.<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> Adamov's play on Vietnam *Off limits*, which we saw in the previous chapter, was written in the same year as Arrabal's guerrilla play under examination here. Thomas John Donahue, *The Theater of Fernando Arrabal: A Garden of Earthly Delights* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), p. 93. See also, Richard Schechner, 'Guerrilla Theatre: May 1970', *The Drama Review*, 14 (1970), 163-68.

<sup>427</sup> Donahue, p.93.

<sup>428</sup> R. L. Farmer, 'Fernando Arrabal's Guerilla Theatre', *Yale French Studies*, 46 (1991), 154-66 (p. 156).

As Farmer's metaphor of an explosion signals, it is important to recuperate the originary dialectical provocations at work in *Et ils passèrent* for this chapter's investigations into a transformative feminist politics of spectatorship in a postmodern age.

With this in mind, it is heuristically productive to situate the 'subject-object' dynamic in a wider spatial theorisation of the 'private' versus the 'public' owing to the latter's political resonance across the discursive terrain of dramatic theory, philosophy and feminism taken up in this chapter. The role of theatre, since Ancient Greece, has been one of a public forum of the *polis*. This is contrasted with the private domestic sphere of the *oikos*. Yet, Jacques Rancière has noted that the political emerges within the theatre where the heterogeneity of both theatrical categories of 'stage' and 'audience' threatens to overturn the role of theatre as a homogenised public *polis*. Indeed, the spatial commingling of two heterogeneous forces informs Rancière's entire theory of politics: 'Qu'est-ce que *le* politique, nous est-il demandé ? [...] le politique est la rencontre de deux processus hétérogènes'.<sup>429</sup> In terms of the politics possible within the theatre locale, Rancière references Plato's calls for the homogenisation of the theatre audience to elucidate the threat of an underlying theatrical heterogeneity that would disrupt a cohesive, implicitly normative, public sphere.<sup>430</sup> The processes of theatrical homogenisation and normalisation even find themselves confirmed by the French for 'audience': *le public*. In philosophy, it is likewise the public domain that has frequently been privileged over the private. In Enlightenment tradition, Kant prioritised a subject's 'public use of reason' over a private counterpart, and Hegel clarified a distinction between a public masculine realm and a private feminine-domestic sphere.<sup>431</sup> The spatial gender normalisation and consignment of women to the private domestic arena gave rise to the popular

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<sup>429</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aux Bords de la politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 112.

<sup>430</sup> Rancière's ideas on this were cited in the previous chapter. Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l'esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), p. 40.

<sup>431</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment' (1784), in *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, trans. by H. B. Nisbet (London: Penguin, 2009), pp. 1-11; G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. by Allen W. Wood, trans. by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 206; Dorothy G. Rogers, 'Hegel, Women, and Hegelian Women on Matters of Public and Private', *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 18 (1999), 235-55. In addition, see Frankfurt School philosopher Jürgen Habermas's lamentations of the de-politicisation of the public realm accompanying the advent of postmodernity, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989).

slogan of second-wave feminism: the personal is political. Yet, even some feminist theory itself – that which locates its critique in a materialist Marxist vein – is frequently accused of favouring the public political project over ‘private’ feelings and concerns. Jacqueline Rose laments that this omission of the private ‘divests [feminist politics] [...] of psychic complexity’.<sup>432</sup> Across these discourses of dramatic theory, philosophy and feminism, the private space is construed as a maligned, insidious menace that threatens public life and normative values. By the same token, its threatening nature suggests that it retains within it a political subversive grain that would dismantle public, normalising projects.

This chapter theorises that a ‘private’ political space can be conjured up in the theatre. Mapping the private-public dyad onto the politicised subject-object dialectic of Arrabal’s guerrilla play, I argue that *Et ils passèrent* promotes a private domain of spectatorship that dismantles the masculine gaze intrinsic to the theatre (as theorised by theatre critics such as Barbara Freedman, Elin Diamond and Jill Dolan). This mode of viewing finds itself at odds with the onstage narrative that functions to reinforce public norms of gender. Law scholar Ruth Gavison identifies ‘cluster meanings’ surrounding both the preserve of the public (for instance, the economy, politics, welfare) and the private (domesticity, family life, sexuality).<sup>433</sup> According to Gavison, the two spheres may be distinguished more generally as a private ‘self-regarding’ sphere and a public ‘other-regarding’ counterpart. Gavison’s generalised distinction points to an assumption that the private lends itself to a philosophy of individualism. However, her identification of ‘cluster meanings’ indicates that both public and private realms are capable of accruing new, socially transformative meanings. Taking inspiration from this double implication, this chapter theorises a radical ‘privatised’ realm of feminist spectatorship that operates to challenge a public stage that evinces a gender-normative narrative.

It might be argued that Arrabal, by atomising his audiences (as described above), dissolves the social links that hold together theatregoers, unsettling the platitude that the audience functions as a subset of the category ‘public’. In

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<sup>432</sup> Jacqueline Rose, ‘Femininity and its Discontents’ (1983), *Feminist Review*, 80 (2005), 24-43 (pp. 40-41).

<sup>433</sup> Ruth Gavison, ‘Feminism and Public/Private Distinction’, *Stanford Law Review*, 45 (1992), 1-45 (p. 21).

requesting that spectators be deprived of their sight, isolated and guided by the actor's physical touch, the playwright (consciously or not) deploys techniques that are strikingly similar to sensory deprivation or brainwashing. Just as sensory deprivation techniques (such as using a blindfold, earmuffs or a hood on an individual) manipulate their victim into saying a certain thing or experiencing a certain feeling, it might be argued that the playwright cajoles spectators into perceiving in a way that is potentially traumatic or anxiety-inducing.

However, unlike the victims of punitive sensory deprivation techniques, theatregoers enter the auditorium of their own volition and spectatorship is manipulated on the basis of this consent. Morse Peckham notes the effects of sensory deprivation in the theatre in those circumstances when the spectator had been unaware of the manipulation under which he or she was to be put. He observes that spectators – while exhibiting none of the behaviours of 'disorientation [...] hallucinations, sensations of weightlessness' of those who undergo sensory deprivation involuntarily outside of the theatre – experienced 'negative' emotions when being subjected to sensory deprivation in the theatre setting.<sup>434</sup> The positive reactions betrayed by theatregoers of Arrabal's play (cited earlier) would indicate that the manipulations to spectatorship were unlike the experience of sensory deprivation. Looking to dramatic theory, Arrabal might be said to have successfully orchestrated elements of Antonin Artaud's theory of the 'théâtre de cruauté', whereby theatre would ideally stir up the spectator's basest, most repressed instincts in order to enlighten and empower (described in the Introduction).

We might theorise, following Gavison, that this enjoyment experienced by contemporary spectators of *Et ils passèrent* can be explained by the playwright's production of a private, more 'self-regarding' spectatorial space than in conventional theatre, which connotes liberation. A private regime of spectatorship is political because Gavison's 'self-regarding' qualifier is suggestive of the spectator's greater remove from social, public pressures. Wider concerns of the spectator's position in the social fabric are put on the back burner. This

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<sup>434</sup> Morse Peckham, *Explanation and Power: The Control of Human Behaviour* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), p. 21.

idea finds corroboration in theatre critic Bernard Gille's commentary on *Et ils passèrent*:

Depuis son entrée solitaire dans l'obscurité le spectateur a pu écouter et rêver, dépouillé de son personnage social car il n'a plus personne auprès de qui il doive se composer un masque.<sup>435</sup>

Gille's idea of the spectator's unconscious freedom evoked by this play is derived from a touchstone of liberalism in which the private sphere is one of freedom, of 'no trespassing'.<sup>436</sup> As the French word 'privé' indicates, the private can also connote deprivation and isolation, and it would be an ill-advised, de-politicising gesture to champion a private sphere wholly severed from the public counterpart. It is thus taken as a given, in this chapter, that politics cannot rule out the public or be exclusively the preserve of an asocial private spectatorship. In addition to a 'public' conceptualisation of the stage, the theatre space is overall held to be a public domain in this chapter. It is taken as a premise that the spectator engages in a 'private' modality of interaction with *and* within a public microcosm – with the stage and within the public space of the theatre – of *Et ils passèrent*. We shall see, in this chapter, how the spectator's private remove from socialisation carves out a space of feminist, non-phallic affect in dialogue with viewing the play.

To recapitulate, spectatorship is considered to be private in this play, whilst the stage and theatre space in general (recalling the *polis*) are conceptualised as public. The radical import of this theoretical setup is that a subversive pocket of private spectatorship within a public theatrical setting of *Et ils passèrent* fits with the concerns of a modern-day politics of feminism. This is because a private politics functions to contest a co-optation of the private by embedded modern-day neoliberal ideology. Such ideology has laid waste to a collective public feminist politics in the name of an increasingly re-privatised – in

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<sup>435</sup> Bernard Gille, *Arrabal* (Paris: Seghers, 1970), p. 119.

<sup>436</sup> Joan B. Landes, 'Introduction', in *Feminism, the Public and the Private* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 1-20 (p. 2).



the economic sense – realm of ‘post-feminist liberal individualism’.<sup>437</sup> In the modern-day age, as St  phanie Genz notes, the ‘discourses of capitalism and neo-liberalism [...] encourage women to concentrate on their private lives and consumer capacities as the sites of self-expression and agency’.<sup>438</sup> While the private has clearly become de-politicised by neoliberalism, Genz’s comments suggest that the private space constitutes an inevitable part of a modern-day social *Weltanschauung* and must not be obfuscated in feminist philosophy.

This chapter undertakes the task of re-politicising the private in the context of spectatorship, wresting it from economic (in)determination in a neoliberal age, forcing the private space back into dialogue with a contentious public, gender-normative stage. Of relevance to this, Ranc  re’s theory of political *dissensus* (seen in the last chapter) is highly suggestive of a private, monadic realm of spectatorship that would counter neoliberal public consensus.<sup>439</sup> Certain modern-day feminist theorists similarly grapple with and lay out the paradoxical possibilities for a collective emancipatory feminist politics that would harness individual choice that is habitually the preserve of the private.<sup>440</sup> This chapter’s theorisation of a private pocket of feminist affect in the spectatorship of *Et ils pass  rent* thus speaks to the paradoxes and possibilities enabled by a postmodern, individuated approach to feminism. It is important for feminisms of a postmodern age, as Elizabeth Wright notes, to take as their premise the unstable and pluralistic definitions of gendered identity enabled by discourses such as post-structuralism and Lacanian

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<sup>437</sup> See: Rosi Braidotti, ‘A Critical Cartography of Feminist Post-Postmodernism’, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 20 (2005), 169-80.

<sup>438</sup> St  phanie Genz, ‘Third Way/ve: The Politics of Postfeminism’, *Feminist Theory*, 7 (2006), 333-53 (pp. 337-38).

<sup>439</sup> Ranc  re praises the efforts of the artistic group *Campement urbain* whose ‘Je et Nous’ installation could only be viewed in isolation. He clarifies that the group create a politics based on individualism in a collective – ‘la possibilit   d’  tre seul(e) appara  t comme la forme de la relation sociale’ – and this corresponds to his theory of political *dissensus*. See: Ranc  re, *Le Spectateur   mancip  *, pp. 69-70.

<sup>440</sup> Such as Rosi Braidotti’s theory of ‘becoming minoritarian’ which ‘is a situated and highly politicised attempt to re-think the subject in terms of his/her ‘embodied singularity’. See: Rosi Braidotti, ‘A Critical Cartography of Feminist Post-Postmodernism’, *Australian Feminist Studies*, 20 (2005), 169-180 (p. 176). See also: St  phanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon’s attempts to ‘reconceptualise the postfeminist individual by re-imagining the connections between public and private spheres and expanding the range of political actions to allow for more diverse and conflicting forms of agency that combine emancipatory objects with individual choices’. In *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 169.

psychoanalysis.<sup>441</sup> My categorisation of the private realm of spectatorship in Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent* hopes to re-suffuse the private with the political while stressing one way of achieving an individual, non-totalising mode of feminist subjectivity corresponding to the demands for postmodern pluralism. The critical methodology of this chapter draws on a philosophy of psychoanalytically inflected 'difference feminism' by theorists such as Luce Irigaray. This permits a consideration of the unstable and the politically enabling specificities of the 'feminine' in terms of pleasures, the unconscious and sexuality.<sup>442</sup>

The public-private distinction and its vicissitudes in *Et ils passèrent* dictate the course of this chapter. The process of conceptualising a feminist politics of spectatorship vis-à-vis Arrabal's play will be divided into three parts. In Part I ('The Private'), the conditions of private spectatorship will be elaborated upon in relation to my conceptualisation of a feminist spectatorial *jouissance*. This draws upon Lacanian feminist thought (Copjec, Zupančič), theories of a psychoanalytic feminist spectatorship (Friedlander, Freedman) and dramatic theory (Weber, Whitman).

Part II of the chapter ('The Public') conceptualises the spectator's 'private' interaction with the public stage of *Et ils passèrent* that, as shall be shown, to some extent subverts gender norms of masculinity, but ultimately re-instates masculinist supremacy. The tension generated between a masculinist public and a feminist private paves the way for the evocation of the spectator's non-phallic *jouissance* (conceptualised in Part I).

In Part III of the chapter ('The Public and the Private'), I develop a theory of an affirmative politics of feminist spectatorship permitted by Arrabal's play. The playwright allows spectators to rehearse a process of emancipation from the stage by mixing public and private theatrical regimes in the improvised and self-reflexive moments of the play. The ending of the play, which elicits a complete imbrication of public and private in the spectator's confessional 'rite', is

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<sup>441</sup> Elizabeth Wright, *Lacan and Postfeminism* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2000).

<sup>442</sup> It is necessary to take account of the charges laid against 'difference feminism' of essentialism, heterosexism and ethno-centrism, and to stress that this chapter considers one way in which spectatorship can read as politically enabling. The 'feminine' cannot be read monolithically. I return to a critique of Lacanian difference feminism in the concluding part of my analysis of the text in this chapter.

discussed in relation to a conceptualisation of a feminist catharsis based on a 'feminine morphology' described by post-Lacanian philosopher Luce Irigaray.

Before proceeding to my analysis, it is necessary to sound a note of caution: it may seem contentious to propound a feminist critical methodology based on Lacanian theory, which has often been taken to task for its *antifeminism*, in conjunction with the male-authored *Et ils passèrent*.<sup>443</sup> Despite this, this chapter shows that the two in dialogue generate a fruitful tension that can reveal much about the possibilities for feminism within a masculinist economy of *both* the theatre and theory. The concluding section of my analysis of Arrabal's play makes this implication explicit by turning this chapter's methodology on its head in order to question what Arrabal's play can reveal about the scope and possibilities of Lacanian feminist theory.

The chapter concludes with a turn to spectators' accounts of Jean Genet's *Les Nègres* (1958). In a similar way to Arrabal's play, Genet endeavours to manipulate spectators prior to the start of the play so that they may view the dramatic action in a politicised way. By drawing out the parallels between this and Arrabal's play, I use my analysis of Genet's play to reflect upon the empirical validity of the theoretical concepts developed in this chapter.

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<sup>443</sup> One striking example that addresses the antifeminism of Lacanian theory is Toril Moi's 'From Femininity to Finitude: Freud, Lacan, and Feminism, Again', *Signs*, 29 (2004), 841-878. This critic retreads her own critical steps in psychoanalytic discourse and changes her opinion of the feminist insight of Lacanian theory. Her article constitutes a damning indictment of Lacanian theory of femininity.

## Part I: The Private

### The Contested Masculine Gaze

*Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs* is, as Thomas Donahue points out, not just a 'powerful indictment of the Spanish government under Franco'.<sup>444</sup> The play represents, rather, 'an expression of man's fantasy life [that] is an effective force against an oppressive society'.<sup>445</sup> Donahue is emphatic on this point, later reiterating in his commentary that the play condemns 'any sort of oppression'.<sup>446</sup> Leaving aside this critic's gender blindness manifested by his use of the universal 'man', Donahue gives an insight into the possibility of this play's deployment for a feminist politics of spectatorship against patriarchal oppression. In order to re-read the play's contestation of oppression in a feminist light, it is helpful at this point to repeat and give further details of its conditions of spectatorship, which were outlined above as potentially conducive to a feminist politics earlier. The play, according to Arrabal, 'commence avant le début de l'action; avant que le spectateur prenne place' (p. 11). He instructs the actors to stop spectators from entering the auditorium in a conventional fashion and taking their seats. They must pass through a penumbral 'chambre noire', in which all couples and groups who know each other are separated, and are led individually by the actors into a completely dark room where the play then takes place: '*les spectateurs passent un par un du hall à la chambre noire. Il faudra donc séparer les couples ou les groupes*' (p. 12).

It may be argued that *Et ils passèrent* dismantles, in these manipulations of the regime of spectatorship, the theatrical 'masculine' gaze. This may be activated in three ways: through the dissolution of the collective shackles that shore up a patriarchal microcosm of the theatre; through the undermining of vision as the primary sense in the process of theatrical spectatorship; and through the elimination of a spatial hierarchy that elevates the spectator to a position of control over the female theatre actor.

Critics have imported the concept of the masculine gaze (as noted in the Introduction) from film studies following Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and

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<sup>444</sup> Donahue, p. 110.

<sup>445</sup> Donahue, p. 108.

<sup>446</sup> Donahue, p. 110.

Narrative Cinema' (1975).<sup>447</sup> The masculine gaze conditions theatre spectatorship to placate and shore up patriarchy, by reducing the actress onstage to an object of masculine desire. Directly taking from Mulvey, Barbara Freedman notes that the theatre relies upon a 'scopic regime of [the male's spectator's] voyeurism and [the female actor's] exhibitionism'.<sup>448</sup> While theatre critics have mostly researched techniques within the dramatic action that would dismantle the viewer's masculine way of looking, we might argue that the theatrical gaze is brought into question by the isolated spectatorial experience of *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs*.<sup>449</sup> One of the defining features of the theatre is its capacity to function as a space of socialisation. It may forge new social alliances or, more often, reinforce existing ones, as Jon Whitmore notes:

Many theatregoers are drawn to the theater because of its social dimension – the opportunity to go out with friends or relatives, perhaps with dinner beforehand and drinks and dancing afterward. By purposefully framing a production to capture or negate the social aspects of the performance event, the director shapes the meanings of a performance before it even begins.<sup>450</sup>

Whitmore further observes that 'if a director wants spectators to be alienated and analytical' 'he can break up couples and groups by not allowing them to sit together', as has been done for instance in productions of Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage*.<sup>451</sup> Given that feminist dramatic theorists insist that the masculine gaze

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<sup>447</sup> Such as: Mary K. Deshazer, 'Fractured Bodies: Women's Cancer and Feminist Theatre', *NWSA Journal*, 15 (2003), 1-26 (p. 4); Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991); Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (London: Routledge, 1997); Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (Basingstoke; London: Macmillan, 1988).

<sup>448</sup> Freedman, Barbara, 'Frame-up: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Theatre', *Theatre Journal*, 40 (1988), 375-97 (p. 381).

<sup>449</sup> Such as: Rob Baum's indictment of theatre's historical reduction of women to the 'stock female' and, as a result, to a 'laughing stock' (Rob Baum, *Female Absence: Women, Theatre, and Other Metaphors*, Dramaturgies, 10 (Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2003), p. 100); Jeanie Forte's insistence on the non-realist narrative in feminist theatre ('Realism, Narrative and the Feminist Playwright – A Problem of Reception', in *Feminist Theatre and Theory*, ed. by Helene Keyssar (Basingstoke; London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 19-33); and Jill Dolan's insistence that 'gender is produced by the representational processes that inscribe the ideology of gender through both psychoanalytic and material means of production' (Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991), p. 18).

<sup>450</sup> Jon Whitmore, *Directing Postmodern Theater: Shaping Signification in Performance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 58.

<sup>451</sup> Whitmore, p. 59.

dominates proceedings in theatre spectatorship, it may be posited that forcing spectators into an 'alienating' and 'analytical' stance (Whitmore) could, in the right circumstances and with the right guidance, lead them to critique the patriarchal lens which conventionally inflects their ways of seeing.

We might argue that the isolated way of viewing that Arrabal's play demands potentially demolishes the masculine gaze because it encourages the creation of a private space free from the pressures of patriarchy. Whilst her research is into photographic spectatorship, Jennifer Friedlander formulates a Lacanian feminist form of spectatorship (described below in further detail) that strikes up a similar logic to my contention. She describes how feminist spectatorship may be potentiated by 'surrendering the suffocating symbolic cloaks' and experiencing the 'thrills [...] of symbolic rupture'.<sup>452</sup> The theatrical specificities of this symbolic or social rupture may come from breaking up the space of socialisation that the medium shores up (as described by Whitmore), as in Arrabal's play. In this way, Friedlander's description of the thrill of patriarchal divestiture could perhaps suffuse Gille's description (cited above) of the isolated spectator as 'dépouillé de son personnage social' with a specifically feminist critical take on the spectatorship of Arrabal's play.

Added to the potential dissolution of the patriarchal theatrical space, the destruction of the masculine gaze seems to be encouraged further in *Et ils passèrent* through the playwright's temporary disenabling of the spectator's sight and the heightening of his or her olfactory and tactile sensibilities. When the spectators enter the auditorium of *Et ils passèrent*, 'l'air sera lourd de parfums orientaux: encens et myrrhe' (p. 12). Physical contact also occurs between the actors and the spectators:

*Chaque acteur peut conduire son spectateur, soit en le tirant par la main, soit en le poussant d'une main posée sur le derrière et l'autre sur le cou, ou bien en le transportant sur son dos comme un âne.*

*Les actrices conduiront les spectateurs masculins avec douceur en murmurant pour leur exprimer leur joie, leur crainte de commencer la pièce.*

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<sup>452</sup> Friedlander, *Feminine Look: Sexuation, Spectatorship, Subversion* (Albany: SUNY, 2008), p. 45.

*Les acteurs guideront les spectatrices en les empoignant avec la plus grande énergie. Ils leur murmureront des phrases peut-être compréhensibles. Les spectateurs sentiront qu'ils ont été plongés dans l'obscurité. Si le spectateur s'agrippe peureusement et avec force à l'acteur durant le trajet, celui-ci devra le caresser, le rassurer. (p. 13)*

The playwright sets up a gendered binary in this interaction by instructing biologically defined male actors to guide biologically defined female spectators to their seats, and vice versa for male spectators.

It may be argued that Arrabal does two things in these actions: he undermines the masculine gaze that relies exclusively on vision to secure itself (discussed below); and he brings to the fore a heterosexist logic that inheres within the theatre gaze, following the theory of the masculine gaze that privileges the male spectator as all-powerful and the female actor as subordinated to his look. Arrabal potentially plays with and subverts the heterosexist underpinnings of this masculine gaze via the sense experience of touch in the theatre. Tactility is conceived as a non-normative sense experience in the primarily visual medium of theatre. As Whitmore describes touch can:

embody a depth of sensory experience that can never happen through observation alone. Indeed there is a whole science of healing associated with touch. For example, the laying on of hands is a time-honoured religious rite that transcends cultures. This kind of intense spiritual touching seemingly transforms the touchee into a new realm of experience; he becomes healthy or the true believer or the like.<sup>453</sup>

Sometimes, as Whitmore notes, the strategy of theatrical touching can go awry and unintentionally induce anguish in spectators. It is evident that this does not occur in the performances of Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent*, that I have discussed, above as seen in spectators' accounts of feeling joyful and happy as a result of the production; the viewer is theoretically directed towards the transformative experience outlined by Whitmore.

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<sup>453</sup> Whitmore, pp. 199-200.

The stress on the tactile sense experience also subverts the primacy of vision that is traditionally relied upon in the theatre to shore up the masculine gaze. In dramatic theory, Samuel Weber notes that the 'valorization of sight over the other senses [...] often results from the desire to secure a position, from a distance that ostensibly permits one to view the object in its entirety while remaining at a safe remove from it'.<sup>454</sup> Feminist critics, more specifically, would identify this 'safe remove' as a support for a masculinist way of looking. Feminist psychoanalytic critics have identified the patriarchal basis of a system of 'scopophilia' that privileges vision over the other senses, which reduces, by the safety of visual distance, the female body to an object of the male or masculine gaze.<sup>455</sup> This is, according to feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti (2006), more salient than ever in a modern-day age of digital technologies that has promoted a 'commodification of the scopic' and 'turned visualization into the ultimate form of control'.<sup>456</sup> Arrabal may destroy the masculinist modality of 'looking' in a theatrical context.

According to Barbara Freedman, who conceptualises the ubiquity of the Lacanian masculine gaze in the theatre, the theatre spectator 'assumes a gaze which is a [...] staring down'.<sup>457</sup> In a conventional, proscenium theatre, the spectator looks down upon the theatre actress in order to reduce her to a fetishised object, from the safety of the raised seats of the theatre auditorium. By contrast, it may be argued that Arrabal's spectators are, quite literally, not permitted the 'staring down'. For Arrabal, '*il n'y a pas d'opposition acteur-spectateur. Les acteurs inventent un jeu, invitent le spectateur à se joindre à eux*' (p. 13). In an additional step that would undermine the hierarchical 'staring down', Arrabal carries out a 'dénivèlement' of the theatrical space:

*Le local, le théâtre, est composé d'une série de planches ou d'échafaudages placés à différents niveaux. Il y aura sept ou huit petites plates-formes scéniques disséminées parmi le public. Au centre (au-dessous), se dérouleront les scènes de*

<sup>454</sup> Samuel Weber, *Theatricality as a Medium* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>455</sup> For instance: Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd edn. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009 [1975]), pp. 14-27; Luce Irigaray, 'Speculum', in *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit, 1974), pp. 165-300.

<sup>456</sup> Braidotti, 'Posthuman, All too Human: Towards a New Process of Ontology', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23 (2006), 197-208 (p. 200).

<sup>457</sup> Freedman, p. 379.



*prison dans un espace irrégulier. Les spectateurs seront assis par terre...sur les planches, sur les échafaudages. Grâce au dénivellement, ils verront bien la pièce.*  
(p. 14)

By putting spectator and the stage on an equal footing, it may be argued that Arrabal derails the masculine gaze that relies on the spatial division and hierarchy for its hegemony, as described by Freedman.

As a review of Le Petit Théâtre de Pain's 1998 production of *Et ils passèrent* demonstrates, even three decades after the play's publication, it was capable of conjuring up an 'énergie décoiffante'.<sup>458</sup> Having considered the theoretical conditions that might encourage the destruction of the masculine gaze – the dissolution of the patriarchal collectivity of the audience, the subversion of vision and the erosion of the spectator's 'staring down' – it might be argued that Arrabal's play could harness this energy to disrupt (*décoiffer*) the machinations of patriarchy on the stage in a feminist politics of spectatorship.

### **Non-Phallic *Jouissance***

It must not be forgotten that, far from just enabling a form of critique in spectators, Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent* has empirically paved the way for politicised enjoyment. A theory of the contested masculine gaze appears inadequate in accounting for this transgressive enjoyment. This section therefore turns briefly to a theorisation of the feminist *pleasures* that may be garnered from the assaulted masculine look in *Et ils passèrent*, in order to proceed to textual analysis in Part II of the chapter.

Lacanian critic Jennifer Friedlander differentiates between the feminine spectator's potential capacity to engage in an 'active questioning of sexual identity' and the masculine spectator's tendencies in patriarchy to look 'to confirm sexual identity through investing in the authority of the Symbolic'.<sup>459</sup> The patriarchal silencing of feminine sexualities can, in this line of thought, only go so far before it provokes a rebellious feminine position that interrogates the masculinist social order through a *jouissance*, a transgressive enjoyment, that

<sup>458</sup> <<http://www.lepetittheatredepain.com/fr/spectacles/arrabal>> [accessed 22 June 2011]

<sup>459</sup> Friedlander, p. 38. My emphases.

falls outside of its remit. Friedlander takes as her premise Lacan's formulae of 'sexuation' separating the 'masculine' from the 'feminine' position in discourse. Lacan does not assume a biologically prescriptive outline of men and women's interaction in the collective, but rather as Elizabeth Wright puts it, the formulae of sexuation represent 'two sets of speaking beings not in a complementary relation to each other. Crucially, the formulae do not plot which sexual position a subject takes up – they are not *hetero*-sexuation formulae'.<sup>460</sup> Lacan conceives of two distinct forms of sexuate *jouissance*, a masculine 'phallic' *jouissance* and feminine *jouissance* 'au-delà du phallus'. A feminine discursive position, according to Lacan, has the potential to resist the locus of patriarchal ideologies, the Other. For Lacan, a feminine position can reach a point of realisation that the normative Other is radically other to the subject ('radicalement l'Autre'). It cannot 'complete' the subject, as patriarchal ideology would promise, but grafts itself upon the subject.<sup>461</sup> As such, Lacan names this feminine positionality as '*La barré*', or the barred Other, where the locus of patriarchal ideologies appears limited and flawed.

Through the assaulted masculine gaze and spectators' accounts of the pleasure that they experienced in viewing the play, it may be argued that Arrabal's play bears the potential to conjure up Lacanian feminist *jouissance* in its audiences. It is instructive at this point to turn to those theorists who have actively developed Lacanian insight into sexuation for a feminist agenda in order to understand this.<sup>462</sup> Joan Copjec states that feminine *jouissance* represents an internal limit within sites of dominant discourse:

The *jouissance* of the woman of which Lacan speaks has nothing to do with her capacity to transcend the symbolic or exist outside language. In fact, if woman has easier access than man to the God of *jouissance*, this is because she is less susceptible than he is to the lure of transcendence.<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>460</sup> Wright, *Lacan and Postfeminism*, p. 30.

<sup>461</sup> Lacan, *Séminaire XX: Encore* (unpublished seminar, 1972-73), p. 73.

<sup>462</sup> This feminist development can certainly not be attributed to Lacan himself, who at most hypothesised, somewhat patronisingly, that it would be 'mignon' to publish a book on *jouissance au-delà du phallus* which 'donnerait une autre consistance au MLF [Mouvement de Libération des Femmes]'. Lacan, *SXX* (unpublished version), p. 69.

<sup>463</sup> Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2004), p.9.

Copjec's phrasing 'the God of *jouissance*' derives from Lacan's description of feminine *jouissance* as 'une face de l'Autre, la face Dieu'.<sup>464</sup> In Copjec's schema, non-phallic *jouissance* constitutes an internal oppositional force within patriarchy. Similarly, Lacanian Alenka Zupančič – whose theory of comedy we explored in Chapter Three – pinpoints that 'what is at stake is [...] that the sexual is the *edge of meaning*, its border, its inner limit. And this is not simply to say that it is 'meaningless,' it is more than that – it is the point of inconsistency of being that induces the production of meaning'.<sup>465</sup> In this logic, a feminist affect of *jouissance* upsurges from the 'point of inconsistency' in dominant discourses of sexuality and gender.

In these developments of Lacanian thought, a contrary non-phallic *jouissance* is contingent upon a patriarchal master narrative. Crucially, Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent* potentiates this dynamic. We might argue that the point where a subversive, non-masculine gaze meets the patriarchal narrative of the stage theoretically constitutes one such aporetic point of 'inconsistency' described by Zupančič. This is, in this chapter's spatial configuration of *Et ils passèrent*, where the private meets the public. In this way, a subversive mode of spectatorship may challenge a non-didactic male-dominated absurd aesthetic for an unconscious politics of feminist spectatorship, a contention that is explored in greater detail in Part II of this chapter.

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<sup>464</sup> Lacan, *Livre XX: Encore, 1972-1973*, ed. by Jacques Alain-Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 98

<sup>465</sup> Alenka Zupančič, *Why Psychoanalysis? Three Interventions* (Uppsala: NSU Press, 2008), p. 27.



## Part II – The Public

In the following, it will be illustrated that Arrabal reinstates the primacy of patriarchal ideologies on the stage of *Et ils passèrent*. While it would be impossible to list every instance in which women are denigrated in this play, the following provides a survey of the gender encoding operative on Arrabal's stage. This gendered snapshot shows itself as divided into two camps: on the one hand, the female characters oscillate between a binary opposition of mother and whore; on the other hand, the male characters manifest an autonomy that leaves them free to shed the suffocating patriarchal trappings of masculinity while rendering their female counterparts subservient in this endeavour.

At the start of the play, the spectator is presented with the four male heroes of *Et ils passèrent*: prisoners Tosan, Amiel, Katar and Pronos. These characters hope to liberate themselves from the social order that has imprisoned them. Meanwhile, the only female character to figure on the stage in this introductory part is Lelia, who quickly runs the whole gamut of masculinist abstractions of 'Woman' for these four prisoners. Arrabal thus sets up a paradox for his spectators: having potentially broken down the patriarchal coordinates of conventional theatre spectatorship, he counteracts this eroded masculine hegemony as soon as the male prisoners speak. The stage is the tightly enclosed space of a prison, cut off from the outside world. Amiel alludes to being trapped in the 'matrice d'une femme, en marche vers l'infini, par la membrane intérieure' (p. 16). This biologicistic motif runs throughout the play, and will be taken up in greater detail in Part III of the chapter. Apart from the play's espousal of a potentially essentialising spatial 'womb', Lelia is enjoined to bolster a masculinised dream of freedom. Amiel, Pronos and Katar do very little to acknowledge the specificities of women's oppression in the social order that they contest. When alluding to the Renaissance artist Alberto Durero (1471-1528), Katar briefly recounts that Durero had assumed that 'la femme était victime de la même société qui l'avait enfermé lui' (p. 28). However, this is as far as this play ventures in a direct critique of patriarchy.

Lelia, who plays the role of the prostitute Roupa, abandons the specificities of her own oppression in order to comfort and guide Amiel, playing Durero, through his liberation from oppression. She puts herself in a servile role

and venerates a masculine martyr of humanity. Moreover, she implores the other female characters, Falidia and Imis, to follow suit:

Venez mes amies. Il nous faut rendre heureux cet homme qui a souffert et peiné pour tous les autres. Qui a donné ses larmes, son sang et ses années de silence et de bâillon pour que l'humanité soit meilleure. (p. 26)

Considering this narrative bereft of its subversive conditions of spectatorship, the only form of revolution and liberation that is rehearsed is that which affords the male characters their freedom.

Lelia is reduced to a series of masculinist abstractions at the start of the play, as she changes her role from Roupá, Durero's prostitute, to Marguerite, Amiel's faithful wife. As Roupá, 'la reine du Tango', she is transformed from an unfeeling entrepreneurial prostitute to the guarantor of male freedom (p. 21). As Marguerite, Lelia provides a sacrosanct form of love that Amiel believes will redeem the world of its sins:

AMIEL. – Nous n'avons plus besoin de Dieu ; à présent quand je rêve je ne pense qu'à un univers heureux par lequel nous irons toi et moi en nous tenant la main pendant des années et des années et toi tu joueras pour moi du clavecin parmi le tournoiement des colombes à corsets. (p. 31)

Amiel's musings reference and recall a long tradition in Spanish literary heritage, such as are to be found in the neoplatonic love of the poetry of Garcilaso de la Vega (1501-1536) and the courtly love of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605 and 1615). In this tradition, love is a sacrosanct and mystical abstraction. Arrabal subsequently subverts this tradition, exposing it as a false ideal, as Lelia demands to be slapped (*une mornifle*) in place of her veneration as Goddess. What is extremely questionable, however, is the extent to which Arrabal seeks to mount a critique of patriarchy in this subversion of the idealisation of love. Amiel refuses to submit to Lelia's demands. Instead, she is raised to the level of ideal once more, as Amiel celebrates her virtue:

*Elle ferme les yeux et attend le coup de poing.*

AMIEL. – Je ne te battraï pas. Je monterai en zeppelin et je te lancerai des serpents avec du lait d'arc-en-ciel. (p. 31)

An essentialist 'feminine', maternal narrative of Lelia may be plotted by the playwright's allusion to a milky rainbow.

In the role of Marguerite, Lelia provides plenitude for her husband Amiel, as he muses that 'nous allons être le couple, l'eau et le feu et nous nous aimerons toujours' (p. 29). For Lacan, narratives of idealised love such as this spuriously promote patriarchal ideology which would promise the subject's completion and wholeness (which the feminine position disturbs). Amiel's rhetoric corresponds to what Lacan terms 'l'Un de la fusion universelle', the conjoining of two halves ('soul mates') to make a whole.<sup>466</sup> Love, in this sense, attempts to cloak sexuality in transcendental and ultimately patriarchal meaning. What Lacan labels 'l'Un de la fusion universelle' taken up by discourses of love is 'la façon la plus grossière de donner au rapport sexuel [...] son signifié'.<sup>467</sup> The elevation of love as the conjoining of two halves is manifest in Amiel's idealisation of Lelia.

Lelia, in her roles as the prostitute Roupa and wife Marguerite, constitutes little more than an actor in Amiel's phantasy. This reduction of feminine sexuality to an object of masculinist musings is made explicit as the dramatic action develops in what is presented to the spectator as Amiel's dream. Amiel assumes the role of the Flemish baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640). Imis joins Lelia on the stage, and both pay homage to a male-dominated tradition of the female nude to which some of Rubens's paintings belong. They remain in awe of his artistic genius and laud his talent for depicting female sexuality:

AMIEL. – Vous me connaissez ?

IMIS. – Bien sûr. C'est vous qui peignez des femmes si grosses et si belles avec des angelots. Lorsque j'étais petite à mes moments perdus je regardais vos tableaux et je m'imaginais entourée de jasmin et de chats tandis que vous me peignez nue perchée sur une échelle d'ivoire bleu marine.

AMIEL. – Vous aimez mes tableaux ?

LELIA. – Je les adore. J'en raffole.

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<sup>466</sup> Lacan, *SXX* (unpublished version), p. 15.

<sup>467</sup> *SXX* (unpublished version), p. 46.

AMIEL. – Alors, voulez-vous me brosser cette tache ? (*Il montre une tache sur sa braguette.*)

LELIA. – Bien entendu.

*Elle s'agenouille pour le brosser.* (p. 44)

Imis articulates, in her compliments to Amiel-Rubens, the female subject's split in patriarchy between a masculinist self-surveying and the desire to be surveyed by the masculinised gaze, theorised by art critic John Berger's account of the female nude in the artistic tradition:

A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.<sup>468</sup>

Imis's desire to emulate the idealised female nude further recalls film critic Mary Anne Doane's theory of the double-bind of female spectatorship in a patriarchal social order. According to Doane, the female spectator is caught between assuming the fetishising gaze – implicit in Imis's statement '*à mes moments perdus je regardais vos tableaux*' – and identifying with the objectified feminine body ('*je m'imaginai entourée de jasmin et de chats tandis que vous me peignez nue*').<sup>469</sup> The patriarchal shackles that constrain female spectatorship are, it may be argued, brought onto the stage. Lelia's and Imis's admiration of Rubens is exploited to ensure a male supremacy ('*voulez-vous me brosser cette tache ?*') by way of female servitude ('*Elle s'agenouille*'). Both Lelia and Imis subsequently proceed to adopt the roles of two female literary and biblical characters that have contributed to perpetuating stereotyped versions of feminine sexuality and conduct throughout the ages: Imis plays the defenestrated Queen Jezebel of Judean mythology and Lelia adopts the role of the maligned Desdemona from

<sup>468</sup> John Berger, 'From *Ways of Seeing*', in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 2nd edn. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 37-39 (p. 37).

<sup>469</sup> Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator', in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. by Amelia Jones (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 60-71.



Shakespeare's *Othello* (c. 1603). It may be argued that the stage, in its evocation of these maligned female figures of mythology and theatre, bolsters a patriarchal regime of representation.

The textual logic of the play, it might further be posited, relies on a binary delineation of 'female' and 'male' stereotypes. Despite their incarcerated status and their critique of fascism, Amiel, Katar, Tosan and Pronos all inhabit a privileged locus of autonomous masculine subjectivity. This is brought into relief when comparing their actions with the three female characters of this play, Imis, Falidia and Lelia, who act as supporting roles to the four men. These female characters oscillate between a binary subset of feminine sexuality as maternal-nurturer and lubricious whore ('la mère [...] impudique et castratrice', according to Bernard Dort).<sup>470</sup> In particular, the character Imis illustrates this crude cleaving of the female body. On the one hand, she represents a destabilising feminine force that threatens patriarchal hegemony. She plays the wife of Katar, and reports her husband to the authorities for his betrayal of the dictatorial regime.<sup>471</sup> On the other hand, she corresponds to a stereotyped version of feminine passivity in her lofty idealisation of the female nude above and her later role as spokesperson for male prisoner Pronos, who is mute. In the latter characterisation, Imis vocalises Pronos's aspirations to be king of the moon:

IMIS, *lisant*. – « Je porte une muselière pour ne pas parler et pour que tous mes sens soient en alerte pour le jour où l'on me couronnera Roi en vie. »

IMIS. – Oui, oui, tu seras roi de la lune [...] C'est une nouvelle époque et toi et moi nous serons heureux. On te nommera roi de la lune. Et on te couronnera avec une couronne d'acier qui pèsera une tonne mais que tu porteras comme s'il s'agissait d'une plume. Laisse-moi te laver les dents. (pp. 62-63)

It is possible to discern, in this scene, the crude reduction of Arrabal's female characters to the object of masculine phantasy. Imis must literally split herself in

<sup>470</sup> Bernard Dort, *Théâtre réel: essais de critique 1967-1970* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), p. 222.

<sup>471</sup> Critics claim that Imis's actions echo Arrabal's personal experiences, as documentation has shown that he bitterly upbraided his mother for denouncing his Republican father to Franco's authorities. Various critics have noted the biographical influences of the playwright's personal drama in his depiction of feminine sexuality. See: Donahue, *The Theater of Fernando Arrabal: A Garden of Earthly Delights*; Bernard Gille, *Arrabal*; Peter L. Podol, *Fernando Arrabal*, Twayne World Author Series, 499, (Boston: Twayne, 1978).

two in order to articulate Pronos's desire for masculine potency as king of the moon and to confirm this in feminine servitude. Furthermore, Imis's statement lays bare an irony as the historically specific moment of the first moon-landing (1969) is referenced. As Gille points out, the play exposed a deep irony as technological innovations brought the promise of a new world, while human suffering on a mass scale prevailed in dictatorial countries, such as Spain.<sup>472</sup> Pronos, deprived of a voice, manages to convey autonomy as his thoughts are transmitted through Imis. This female character can do nothing more than care and provide for the needs and whims of a male cause, as the above allusion to cleaning Pronos's teeth indicates.

A pattern emerges persistently from an analysis of the dramatic action of this play: it is only the male characters who champion this new world order and bear the weight of responsibility that revolution entails. As has been shown with reference to the characters' descriptions of love and the female nude, Spanish literary and artistic traditions are co-opted into evincing an autonomous masculinist ideal in *Et ils passèrent*. In another notable instance of this, the playwright makes reference to the Spanish Civil War martyr Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) played by Amiel. The characters of *Et ils passèrent* perform a parodied version of Lorca's execution. Falidia and Imis crowd around Lorca's corpse in grief. While Arrabal clearly critiques the atrocities committed under Franco's fascist regime, a feminist analysis might identify one more instance in which the literary veneration of the male figure denies (not necessarily deliberately) the female characters any role in the struggle against oppression. Significantly, it is the male character Amiel who articulates Lorca's wish for a world rid of oppression:

*Falidia et Imis pleurent sur le cadavre du poète assassiné.*

AMIEL. – Et ce petit homme qui prophétisa la tyrannie dans laquelle nous vivons aujourd'hui prophétiserait la liberté et la justice pour demain. (p. 75)

In each characterisation, Imis, Lelia and Falidia do not manifest any agency outside of their roles relating to the male prisoners: Imis acts as Pronos's voice;

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<sup>472</sup> Gille, p. 115.

Lelia plays the faithful lover of Amiel; and Falidia and Imis grieve for Lorca-Amiel.

This feminine subservience is particularly striking when contrasted with the play's reversal and subversion of gender norms relating to masculinity. Pronos, recovering his voice from a previous point in the play, transforms himself from the judge who condemns Katar to life-imprisonment to a ballet dancer. Pronos performs a 'danse efféminée' of Swan Lake that should deliberately defamiliarise audiences ('*très étrange*'), as the actor is instructed to wear a tutu (p. 52). This constitutes a gender-fluid backdrop against which Imis, now Katar's wife, implores her husband to confess his sins (p. 53). Katar plays the tortured victim whilst Imis acts as his torturer, as *la femme castratrice* or Medusa figure.<sup>473</sup> Imis remains immutable in her role as a cruel, castrating woman. Against this, Pronos breaks free of gender fixity, as he changes from an authoritarian judge, to an effeminate ballet dancer, to a 1950s crooner in the style of Frank Sinatra (p. 53).

Just as the male characters are the only revolutionaries of this play, it is only the men who have the freedom to cross the gender-normative boundaries inscribed by patriarchy. Later in the play, conventional gender configurations are breached again only by the male character. Arrabal draws upon the story of the Virgin of Fátima, the Virgin Mary who appeared to three shepherd children in Fátima, Portugal. Her prophecy forewarned the world of the impending threat posed by the Soviet empire to the Catholic Church. In Arrabal's play, Amiel, one of the male characters, plays the Virgin, while three admiring shepherd women surround him. Amiel declares: 'Je serai votre Vierge de Fatima fait homme. Votre Rédempteur en sa vêtue charnelle' (p. 70). Through his alterations to this parable, Arrabal draws upon the ambiguities of the imagery of Catholicism and the Catholic Church, which was, in 1969, heavily involved in supporting Franco's dictatorship. Imis, Lelia and Falidia at first doubt Amiel's legitimacy but are rendered faithful servants of this male redeemer, as he performs a 'miracle' of secreting hot chocolate into Imis's mouth: 'comme c'est bon ! Comme c'est chaud ! Comme c'est sucré ! C'est du chocolat au lait !' (p. 71).

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<sup>473</sup> For more on this figure as a product of patriarchy, see Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993).

This scene is a sexualised, sacrilegious parody of a Catholic parable. Taking the Fátima incident as one of his examples, R. L. Farmer argues that 'throughout Arrabal's play we shall see God used and abused. [...] Empty rituals are replaced with mock miracles, themselves a bitter commentary on the mysteries of religion and, at the same time, a reinstatement of magic, despite its quality of inverted dignity'.<sup>474</sup> The scene also recalls, in Catholic doctrine, the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper, which turned Christ's body into bread and his blood into wine. The hot chocolate bursting forth from Amiel could be argued to be a scatological variation on the Eucharist. Arrabal's alterations and referencing of Catholic rituals make up part of the playwright's baroque aesthetic that suffuses existing orders and codes, such as the above religious mythology, with chaos, profusion and ecstasy, hence Farmer's description of Arrabal's blend of religious parody and 'magic'. The appropriation of the baroque motif by Arrabal among other avant-garde playwrights of the post-WWII period – Jean Genet and Jean Anouilh for instance – acted, as critic Jeanyves Guérin points out, as a recalcitrant counterpoint to the capitalist hyper-rationalism that accompanied the ascendancy of post-war mass industrialisation.<sup>475</sup> Arrabal's deployment of the baroque – literally meaning 'rough pearl' – allows him to critique Spanish fascism. Nonetheless, as can be gathered from the feminist critical focus of this chapter, Arrabal's baroque aesthetic constitutes political leverage solely for his male characters. It allows them to subvert the sexual norms relating to masculinity only. Once again he privileges the male hero over female counterparts. Imis, Lelia and Falidia are the servants of Amiel's sexual ecstasy. They help him in his liberation from the chains of fascism, but do not gain freedom from this moment themselves.

Although Arrabal's use of sacrilegious parody in his Virgin of Fátima parable reveals the possibility of the transgression of gender norms while launching an assault against the Church, his crudely binarised portrayal of a relatively fluid masculinity and a static femininity mired in the stereotype of female servitude, in effect, re-asserts an oppressive system that feminist theorist Judith Butler names as 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Butler uncovers

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<sup>474</sup> Farmer, p. 163.

<sup>475</sup> Jeanyves Guérin, 'Quelques résurgences baroques dans la culture contemporaine', *Modern Language Studies*, 8 (1978), 38-48.

compulsory heterosexuality in patriarchy as an 'intrinsic comedy' and 'a constant parody of itself' paving the way for its potential subversion.<sup>476</sup> Following Butler, Arrabal's parody, despite its sexual libertarianism and its playing with received notions of masculinity, cannot be aligned with a strategy of subversion of compulsory heterosexuality. As Butler points out, a monolithic definition of paternal Law – a criticism that she lodges against a Lacanian understanding of the social order – is unhelpful in a conceptualisation of the subversion of gender norms. Basing her theory on Michel Foucault's 'repressive hypothesis', Butler posits that laws are subject to change. As such, laws continually assert new, historically contingent, modes of oppression. This suggests that any partial transgression of the gender norms of masculinity on Arrabal's part instantiates new modalities of power and subjugation, a fact all too visible in an analysis of Arrabal's parody of the Virgin of Fátima parable. Arrabal maintains a gendered division on the stage between the potent male redeemer and immutable female subjects who are denied the right of free sexual expression. The above motif of sexual ecstasy through the secretion of hot chocolate into Imis's mouth is strongly suggestive of the male orgasm, and so is dependent upon masculinist norms. With recourse to a theory of compulsory heterosexuality, it is difficult to see how, even in those instances in which Arrabal subverts the gender norms of masculinity, the representations on the public stage of *Et ils passèrent* can be aligned with a feminist strategy.

The following image, taken from a production of the play at the Théâtre de la Rampe at the Berne Festival, visually encapsulates the prescribed notions of gender that are set up in this play. The autonomous male character towers over the suppliant female counterpart:

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<sup>476</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999 [1990]), p. 155.



Image by Bärni Giger, *La Tribune de Genève*, February 1973

How then can this stage, which persistently denigrates and denies an affirmative and fluid portrayal of femininity, be appropriated for a feminist theatrical politics? Recalling the private pocket of non-phallic affect brought into effect by Arrabal's modifications to the regime of spectatorship (see Part I), it is necessary to turn away from what Lacanian theorist Friedlander describes as 'what it means to look *at* Woman'. In order to dislodge and escape the patriarchal stranglehold on femininity on the stage, it is instead fruitful to, as Friedlander continues, 'focus upon what it means to look *as* Woman'.<sup>477</sup> I turn to this in the following.

### **The Private *against* the Public**

It was adumbrated in Part I of this chapter that feminist spectatorial *jouissance* may be encouraged when the internal 'points of inconsistency' (according to Zupančič) of patriarchy are exposed. In order to see how this applies to *Et ils passèrent*, it is necessary at this point to state explicitly the stark differences between the findings of my analysis in Parts I and II of this chapter: Part I theoretically conceived of a radical form of spectatorship based on the playwright's destruction of the masculine gaze; Part II (thus far) has highlighted the playwright's continual reification of oppressive gender norms of femininity.

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<sup>477</sup> Friedlander, p. 5.

As such, a non-masculine gaze may be radically at odds with the patriarchal stage in Arrabal's play. This potential spatial inconsistency may align itself with descriptions of the impetus for a feminist modality of non-phallic *jouissance* sketched out by Lacanian feminists (as I discussed at the end of Part I).

It is instructive to turn to Lacan's (albeit cursory) outline of a 'feminine' version of the unconscious, in order to pinpoint how his theory maps onto the spatial variegation of *Et ils passèrent*. For Lacan, a 'feminine' unconscious follows the feminine discursive position's marginalisation by the patriarchal Other (described earlier). As such, a feminine unconscious entails the subject's ignorance and confusion:

Elle a des effets d'inconscient, mais son inconscient à elle - à la limite où elle n'est pas responsable de l'inconscient de tout le monde, c'est-à-dire au point où l'Autre à qui elle a affaire, le grand Autre, fait qu'elle ne sait rien.<sup>478</sup>

This modality of the unconscious positions itself, as Lacan describes here, as exempt from the locus of patriarchal ideologies, the Other. In order to recuperate the radical aspect of this positionality, it is necessary to refigure Lacan's claim that a feminine unconscious remains ignorant through the unanswered calls to an Other that does not understand this position ('le grand Autre [...] fait qu'elle ne sait rien'). It must be stressed that this feminine ignorance is not the same as Lacan's theory of the subject's 'Passion de l'ignorance', described elsewhere in his theory. This ignorance, assuming wilful proportions, stems from the subject's reliance on the ideologies of the Other that secures his or her peaceable existence in the social order.<sup>479</sup> In order to situate the Lacanian feminine unconscious within a discourse of feminine empowerment, it is imperative to *reverse* the coordinates of the statement cited above. Seen in reverse, the patriarchal Other cannot control the pleasures of the feminist subject. Patriarchal ideology is disarmed of its hegemony, and rendered ignorant. In this case, the 'Passion de l'ignorance' belongs to the patriarchal Other, *not* the feminine subject.

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<sup>478</sup> SXX (unpublished version), p. 90

<sup>479</sup> SXX (unpublished version), p. 110.

The ending of *Et ils passèrent*, in particular, may give the feminist spectator the opportunity to play out an empowering version of the patriarchal Other's 'Passion de l'ignorance'. The character Tosan is threatened with execution and his wife Falidia begs the authorities to spare him. She ultimately fails in her mission, and Tosan is killed. However, miraculously, he is brought back to life, emulating Christ's resurrection:

*Les hommes et les femmes, avec des chants joyeux dédiés à la liberté et à la justice, détachent Tosan et le portent en procession. Ils le conduisent jusqu'à l'endroit le plus élevé du théâtre, et là ils s'enlacent autour de Tosan vivant et heureux.* (p. 103)

This constitutes another example of Arrabal's aesthetic use of sacrilege to parody the Catholic Church and to champion the victims of fascism and their revolutionary cause. As in earlier examples, such an aesthetic promotes the victorious male character (Tosan) over the specificities of the female characters' desires. However, we might see how such moments may encourage the feminist viewer's pleasure via a theoretical spatial inconsistency between spectatorship and stage. The feminist spectator, theoretically situated in a non-phallogentric space, may view the finale of *Et ils passèrent* in an analogous manner to the feminine unconscious and its disjunction with the patriarchal Other. It might then be argued that the final veneration of Tosan's body can only bring into relief a radical inadequacy of masculinist ideologies. This may encourage a perpetuation of the spectator's feminist *jouissance* that departs from the patriarchal ideologies of Catholicism presented on the stage. It may be argued that Tosan's enactment of the 'Passion of Christ' onstage becomes the Other's 'Passion de l'ignorance' of the feminine unconscious. Louise Fiber Luce (1974) posits that Arrabal's plays create a 'dialectic of space' 'where the silence which surrounds the spoken word, the very emptiness which frames a gesture give to both word and gesture their most profound significance'.<sup>480</sup> Given the private-public spatial dialectic of *Et ils passèrent* conceptualised in this chapter, this

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<sup>480</sup> Louise Fiber Luce, 'The Dialectic of Space: Fernando Arrabal's *The Automobile Graveyard*', *Journal of Spanish Studies: Twentieth Century*, 2 (1974), 31-37 (p. 31).



emptiness may be understood as a spectatorial process that acts to divest the stage of its power. The 'emptiness' described by Fiber Luce may be redefined as the ringing hollow of the patriarchal ideologies of the stage.

It is necessary to sound a note of caution with regard to the theory of a Lacanian feminine *jouissance* that demands an implicitly negative politics born out of tension and disjunction between public norms and private affect. On the one hand, feminists such as Germaine Greer have taken issue with the entire schematisation of sexual difference posited by psychoanalysis that defines the feminine against a male majoritarian norm. Greer contests the idea that women are *a priori* castrated beings as perceived by the masculine, patriarchal unconscious.<sup>481</sup> On the other hand, feminist critics such as Parveen Adams have found that psychoanalysis effectively lays bare an undeniable history of the patriarchal straitjacketing of femininity. In the latter line of thought, it is considered utopian to suppose that this can be cancelled out by a theory of feminine 'wholeness'. This would effectively deny women's frequently subordinated positions in dominant patriarchal discourse and promote a logic whereby women's 'relation to norms will be to fulfil them and find fulfilment in them'.<sup>482</sup> This chapter propounds a model of the Lacanian feminist spectator that lies between these two modes of feminist critical thinking (of a Greer vs. an Adams). As Rosi Braidotti argues, it would be wrongheaded 'to blame psychoanalysis for bringing the bad news that we live under a phallogocentric regime'. However, as this theorist also points out, it is pivotal for a feminist politics to conceive new ways of continually contesting the 'historical necessity and immutability of the phallogocentric regime' that is risked by Lacanian feminine 'castration' and 'ignorance'.<sup>483</sup>

This chapter's deconstruction of a patriarchal stage by non-phallic *jouissance* would therefore be an impoverished model of spectatorial politics without developing ways to channel this affect into an affirmative feminist politics. Such a politics would encourage the transformative capabilities of a celebration of feminine difference from the masculine norm posited by Arrabal.

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<sup>481</sup> Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: McGibbon & Kee, 1970).

<sup>482</sup> Parveen Adams, *The Emptiness of the Image: Psychoanalysis and Sexual Difference* (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 55.

<sup>483</sup> Braidotti, 'Posthuman, all too Human', p. 204.

Crucially, the critical thread that informs my analysis of this play – the public-private spatial duality – may pave a theoretical way for the realisation of this affirmative politics. As the third and final part of this chapter reveals, Arrabal forces the spatial intermixture of the spectatorial and the stage, the public and private, in parts of *Et ils passèrent*. The spectator's individuated mode of processing the play in private may be brought to bear directly on the misogynistic machinations of the stage.

### Part III – The Public and the Private

As has been established, Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent* cements a patriarchal dichotomy between the autonomous male hero and the suppliant woman-container in his characterisations (or perhaps caricatures) of masculinity and femininity. This binary opposition is invoked in spatial terms twice in the play. The dramatic characters invoke the trope of the maternal womb to refer to the prison space in which they find themselves trapped. While this may be indicative of the play's predilection to link femininity with passivity, this time with the aid of biology, it is important to take into account the fact that both references to this spatial 'matrice' are suggestive of an *active* reinvention and rebirth – through the spectator's invitation to activity in participation in the dramatic action – that could be put to use in a transformative feminist politics. With the fostering of non-phallic *jouissance* in mind, the feminist spectator of *Et ils passèrent* could potentially harness allusions to a spatial reinvigoration for new modes of sense-making relating to feminine subjectivity.

The male characters express the feeling of being contained by 'la matrice d'une femme', at the beginning and mid-way through this piece. The same lines are repeated:

AMIEL. – Où sommes-nous ? Nous escaladons une cordillère ?

KATAR. – Non. Nous sommes entre quatre murs.

AMIEL. – Ne crois-tu pas plutôt que nous nous trouvons dans la matrice d'une femme, en marche vers l'infini, par la membrane intérieure ? (p. 16, pp. 58-59)

Arrabal takes up an essentialising trope of woman as a vessel for a masculinist re-birth. This idea finds corroboration in Peter Podol's reading of *Et ils passèrent*. Arrabal's father, imprisoned for his Republican allegiances after being denounced by his mother, figures heavily in Podol's reading of the spatial womb:

The play glorifies the memory of the author's father. [...] By equating the prison cell with the womb, Arrabal reaffirms the idea of his own rebirth into socio-

political awareness and rediscovery of the full psychological significance of his father.<sup>484</sup>

In Podol's biographical reading, a paternalistic commandeering of the womb takes precedence over the feminine specificities of matrixial locus. The play functions as a tool through which the playwright achieves a symbolic matricide and the veneration of his father.

However, the trope cannot be discarded as misogynist and deemed redundant in terms of a feminist agenda when considering that it follows two key moments of the play when private and public, the radical non-masculine gaze and the conservative, patriarchal dramatic action (that the former may feed off to create a feminist form of *jouissance*), become directly involved with one another. In this way, the feminine unconscious may have direct access to an active feminist refiguring of the masculinist trope. The matrixial metaphor is brought into relief twice, both times after Arrabal's instructions to his actors to incite spectatorial activity. The first time, as pointed out above, comes after the spectators' entry into the auditorium at the start of the play. The second instance follows the characters' attempts to solicit confessions from the audience in a moment of theatrical improvisation.

Mid-way through the play, Katar and Amiel impress upon the spectator the staged nature of the dramatic action. The character declares that, in a dream, he had formed a theatre troupe with the three other men (Katar, Pronos and Tosan) and three women (Imis, Lelia and Falidia). As if to stress the play's self-reflexivity at this point, Amiel invokes the title of this troupe's play: also *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs*. Forewarning the spectator of the invitation to participate, Amiel outlines his intentions: 'Je dirais aux acteurs et aux actrices de se mêler aux spectateurs' (p. 56). The characters then break through the 'fourth wall', the parameters of the stage, and disperse themselves amongst the audience in order to request spectatorial confessions. Whispering into their ears, the play's characters implore randomly selected spectators to 'raconter un passage de [sa] vie' (p. 57). This moment in the play should assume confessional and revelatory proportions, as Amiel describes: 'À l'occasion, un spectateur se lève et

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<sup>484</sup> Podol, p. 99.

raconte un épisode grotesque, criminel ou obscène de sa vie, après que l'acteur a parlé' (p. 57). Arrabal appears to leave little to chance in his strategy of eliciting confessions from the spectators; the characters guide the action and make confessions – fictitious or otherwise – of their own. The cathartic and religious overtones of this moment become palpable as Arrabal directs his characters to create a 'climat d'hystérie' (p. 57). In order to ensure the cathartic paroxysm of emotion, selected actors are escorted away from the auditorium. The improvisation then ends and the staged play resumes. It is at this point that Amiel and Katar reiterate that they feel enclosed in a mother's womb, which, as suggested before, heralds a re-birth of humanity.

It may be argued that Arrabal accords the spectators greater agency to define the theatre space in these actions. The playwright asks for disclosure and revelation from his spectators, but he does not provide specific details on the content of these confessions. The spectator's freedom in improvisation figures as part of Arrabal's fight against social oppression in this play. By extension, improvisation can be deployed by the feminist spectator to depart from the gendered oppression in evidence in this play. As Hazel Smith and Roger Dean point out, theatrical improvisation has historically been used productively in the service of a feminist agenda:

Since the 1980s feminist theatre has sometimes used improvisation as a political weapon against male theatrical practice. [...] Feminist playwrights who have worked this way include Caryl Churchill, Elaine Feinstein and the groups Trouble and Strife and Common Ground. This demonstrates that improvisational techniques tend to reappear in social contexts in which egalitarianism is stressed.<sup>485</sup>

Bolstered by the feminist *jouissance* of the private-public disjunction of the play, the spectator may harness this moment for vociferous expressions that would refigure this play's orchestration of a patriarchal stifling of feminine sexuality and subjectivity elsewhere. The regenerative and transformative capacities of

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<sup>485</sup> Roger Dean and Hazel Smith, *Improvisation, Hypermedia and the Arts since 1945* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997), p. 214.

the 'matrice', invoked moments after the improvisation, may assume a new meaning for a feminist strategy of spectatorship.

This feminist reinvigoration of Arrabal's masculinist theatrical appropriation of the womb lends itself to the Lacanian inflected thought of Julia Kristeva and her idea of the fluid, pre-Symbolic 'chora'. Borrowed from Plato's *Timeus*, Kristeva defines the chora as a pre-social, 'semiotic' space. For Kristeva, feminism may productively deploy the linguistic motility or free play of meaning of the space of the chora. A feminist politics may, with the aid of this free space of meaning-production, displace and resist patriarchal discourse; the chora may be used to challenge misogynistic stereotypes, clichés and commonplaces that pervade dominant discourse. Like the chora, the spatial 'matrice' of *Et ils passèrent* could be defined as a feminist 'articulation toute provisoire, essentiellement mobile, constituée de mouvements et de leurs stases éphémères'.<sup>486</sup>

However, it is the possibilities afforded by Luce Irigaray's similar philosophy of a feminine morphology that become more relevant for our purposes, because she conceptualises a transformative feminist interaction with the masculine histories and genealogies that make up dominant discourse, instead of conceiving a separatist feminist space of Kristeva's chora. It is important to remember that the spectator of Arrabal's play never entirely escapes patriarchal ideologies, as my analysis of the representational logic has confirmed. Irigaray's theory of the 'two lips' may permit a reading of the complex task of an affirmative feminist spectatorial strategy vis-à-vis *Et ils passèrent*. As a fierce critic of the Lacanian School, Irigaray deploys psychoanalysis as an investigative tool into feminine sexual difference that must nonetheless take account of and depart from a tradition of thought historically mired in the misogyny of its predominantly male proponents. Given this strategy, Irigaray's feminist refiguring of the masculine may also become invaluable in a feminist-psychoanalytic reinvigoration of the male-dominated tradition of the theatre of the absurd.

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<sup>486</sup> Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique : l'avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle : Lautréamont et Mallarmé* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), p. 23.

In particular, Irigaray propounds a system that recaptures feminine sexual difference from patriarchal rituals such as those connected with religiosity, 'des rites *sacrificiels* ou *réparateurs*'.<sup>487</sup> These religious rites pervade the dramatic action of *Et ils passèrent* through Arrabal's deployment of sacrilegious parody and confession to subvert Spanish fascism. However, a brief look at the commentary on Arrabal's tendency towards the religious and cathartic confirms a grain of masculinism subtending this aesthetic strategy, which a feminist spectator must combat. Arrabal draws upon theatre's long history with catharsis and its therapeutic worth. He follows in the footsteps of Antonin Artaud who theorised that 'le théâtre est fait pour vider collectivement des abcès'.<sup>488</sup> Whilst Artaud's cathartic designs for the theatre remain fairly gender-neutral, Arrabal's critic Frédéric Aranzueque-Arieta (2006) effectively erases this gender plasticity by pinning the playwright's 'panic' aesthetic to the biological act of male ejaculation. He describes the spectator of Arrabal's theatre:

L'homme ressent un soulagement intense en vidant sa vessie – tout comme il expérimente avec ses intestins [...]. Nous pouvons faire le lien de ces actions avec le phénomène de l'éjaculation qui provoque du plaisir et un certain apaisement.<sup>489</sup>

Even though this critic also takes up the processes of the digestive and urinary tracts in his cathartic metaphor, he privileges the male body in his use of 'l'homme' and the subject pronoun 'il'. Even if we assume that Aranzueque-Arieta uses these terms to designate a universal 'Man', his comments bring into sharp relief the risk faced by Arrabal's theatre of being co-opted into a masculinist redemption that denies the feminist spectator the specificities of her or his pleasures of purgation. Aranzueque-Arieta's comments on Arrabal's œuvre confirm Irigaray's point that the sacrificial and the reparative typically bolster masculine hegemony.

<sup>487</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Le Temps de la différence* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1989), pp. 28-29.

<sup>488</sup> Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 44.

<sup>489</sup> Frédéric Aranzueque-Arrieta, *Arrabal : la perversion et le sacré* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2006), p. 130.

However, following Irigaray's thought, Arrabal's use of the spatial womb may grant the feminist spectator a chance to eradicate the patriarchal underpinnings of catharsis. For Irigaray, 'pour se constituer comme identité sexuelle, une relation généalogique avec son propre genre et le respect des deux genres sont nécessaires'.<sup>490</sup> She indicates that masculine genealogies need to be re-visited in order to root out the specificities of feminine pleasures. Hilary Robinson (2006) defines Irigaray's strategy as a feminist 'productive mimesis': 'thus the world is not so much re-described through mimesis, as re-signified'.<sup>491</sup> Feminists may redefine masculine histories and patriarchal spaces.

Similar to a theory of Irigarayan 'productive mimesis', the confessional moment of *Et ils passèrent* may invite and encourage the feminist redefinition of the theatrical space, particularly if it is propelled by a theoretically possible non-phallogocentric form of spectatorship. The mobility of improvisation holds the potential to push the spectator to redefine the 'matrice' invoked a few moments after. Aranzueque-Arrieta points out that Arrabal 'va cracher sur les « acquis moraux » en les désacralisant afin d'élever ce qui est considéré comme profane'.<sup>492</sup> Despite the religiosity of this critic's rhetoric, my analysis of the public-private interaction in *Et ils passèrent* suggests that it is possible that the playwright's theatre may encourage the spectator's rejection and re-signification of more loosely defined patriarchal 'acquis moraux'.

Pertinent to this reading of feminine productive mimesis and matrixial re-invention in *Et ils passèrent* is Irigaray's descriptions of the two lips that could recast the patriarchal social order in a 'feminine morphology'. Irigaray links feminine morphology to female bodily specificities such as the mucous membrane, two lips and the womb in order to posit a 'feminine' site of articulation. The feminine subject may be capable of a fluid form of expression through her ability to engage the 'two lips'. She is potentially forever 'becoming'. In Irigaray's schema, the trope of the womb becomes the feminine subject's mode of affirmative and fluid expression. The receptacle, Irigaray insists, must never be sealed; the two lips must never be sutured and must always be in

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<sup>490</sup> Irigaray, *Le Temps de la différence*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>491</sup> Hilary Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), p. 51.

<sup>492</sup> Frédéric Aranzueque-Arrieta, p. 46.



dialogue ('*La/une femme jamais ne se re(n)ferme en un volume. [...] La matrice à moins d'être réduite – par lui, par lui en elle – en une appropriation phallique n'obture pas l'écart des lèvres*').<sup>493</sup>

Arrabal's invocations of the spatial receptacle of the womb, after the spectator's accorded moment of feminist agency in improvisation, may enable the spectator's playing out of a perpetually transformative feminine morphology. The description of the play's womb as 'en marche vers l'infini' is consonant with Irigaray's model of unceasing feminist space of the two lips. It may be argued that Arrabal's masculinist reduction of the womb described by Podol may be turned on its head by its own unconscious logic. As Arrabal himself stated, through a particularly rhetorical stage direction, *Et ils passèrent* plays out '*la fin de la répression et le commencement d'une époque nouvelle*' (p. 103). This 're-birth', following Irigaray's descriptions of the feminist version of the womb, could be channelled into a feminist emancipatory politics.

The final gesture by which Arrabal may enable a feminist politics of spectatorship lies in an invitation to spectators, who wish to remain behind, to 'célébrer «un rite»'. His play, from start to finish, is framed and punctuated (recalling the mid-way improvisation) by the spectator's interaction with the cast of characters. Similar to the conditions in which they were guided into the auditorium at the play's beginning, spectators are divested of their sight, this time by being blindfolded. This potentially challenges once again the masculine gaze and the primacy of vision upon which it depends. Spectators are instructed to hold hands, and those who want to can play the role of either torturer or victim. Arrabal stimulates the spectator's tactile and gustatory senses by giving them oranges and imploring them to rub hands with one another. According to Arrabal, the rite was designed to grant absolute autonomy to spectators: '*Enfin, ils [les acteurs] les laisseront agir seuls, hors de la présence de tout « professionnel » du théâtre*' (p. 106).

It may be argued that this moment potentially propels a collective feminist politics for the audience, by harnessing the non-phallic *jouissance* of the spectator set up elsewhere in the play. By extension, Arrabal's play theoretically

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<sup>493</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'Speculum', in *Speculum de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit, 1974), pp. 165-300 (p. 296).

offers one such way out of a problematic of a collective feminist politics in a postmodern-individualist age stated at the beginning of this chapter. According to Arrabal, 'il faudrait que les spectateurs se passionnent pour le jeu et y participent carrément [...] j'aimerais pouvoir les passionner à travers les artifices habituels du théâtre, jusqu'à faire éclater le théâtre dans ses traditions'.<sup>494</sup> The playwright's stress is on the creation of pleasures and 'passions' that permit the spectator's emancipation from the traditional (patriarchal?) constraints of theatre.

As in the improvisation, this final rite gains cathartic proportions. This final catharsis may be refigured as conducive to feminism by turning again to Irigaray's philosophy. Irigaray rails against the catharsis operative in psychoanalysis, because it privileges the (frequently male) analyst's control over the (frequently female) analysand: 'l'opération cathartique, telle est la difficulté majeure de l'œuvre analytique, tâche à la limite du possible si elle se veut sans amputation ni sacrifice'.<sup>495</sup> Irigaray's concerns focus on the loss or reduction of the complexity of affect that inheres within the clinical dynamic. It is noteworthy that she does not criticise the concept of catharsis *per se*, but rather the specificities of a psychoanalytic catharsis.

The final *rite de passage* of Arrabal's play may foment the spectator's emancipation from the bounds of the theatre by full spectator-actor interaction. It does not emulate psychoanalytic catharsis in which the analyst ultimately controls the analysand. Indeed, Arrabal's form of catharsis plays with and bears the potential to encourage a re-performance and re-signification of the power dynamics of catharsis that Irigaray critiques in psychoanalysis, since spectators can *choose* to adopt the role of torturer or victim. The end of the play may be one such way in which an enabling, feminist catharsis, defined by Irigaray, may be realised as a result. Unlike the play's prior moment of improvisation, which was still controlled and directed by the characters and the dramatic action, this *rite de passage* feeds into the spectator's casting free of the theatrical stranglehold. In this liberation, the play directs spectators to assume a position of agency. The spectator's unconscious, in full creative freedom, may be given leave to act as

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<sup>494</sup> Alain Schifres, *Entretiens avec Arrabal* (Paris: Pierre Belfond, 1969), p. 152.

<sup>495</sup> Irigaray, 'La Limite du transfert', in *Parler n'est jamais neutre* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), pp. 293-306 (p. 293).

what Irigaray terms a feminist perpetual becoming, a 'réserve d'un à venir'.<sup>496</sup> In sum, this final rite of *Et ils passèrent* may summon into existence the feminine becoming conceived by Irigaray, cementing the feminist possibilities of spectatorship that have been discussed throughout my analysis.

### **Assessing a Politics of Feminist Spectatorship**

I have assessed the possibility of a feminist politics of spectatorship with regard to Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs*. As a play that is paradoxically both experimental (the spectator-stage interaction) and conservative (its codification of gender), it has been argued that any feminist mode of spectatorship must be complex and nuanced in form, taking a critical stance on and departing from the play's dramatic content. Arrabal's spectator is given a theoretical opportunity through a spatial politics of an intrinsically oppositional private-public dyad. This, it has been argued, may force him or her to confront, reject and leave behind the dramatic action in the final *rite de passage*. We recall spectators' descriptions of a politicised pleasure in viewing the play. Following my argument, feminist *jouissance* may be one theoretical explanation for this reaction.

It is fruitful to return to Judith Miller's expectation laid out at the start of this chapter that the feminist analysis of Arrabal's œuvre must entail a psychoanalytic demystification and deconstruction of the 'unholy whore-virgin-mother trinity'. My analysis has both followed and exceeded the terms of Miller's feminist strategy. Parts I and II have demonstrated a radical potential in the spectatorial unconscious that might deconstruct the masculinist representational regime of the stage. It has been argued that the spectatorial 'private' space may act as the locus for a picking apart of the patriarchal unconscious onstage. Part III departed altogether from Miller's understanding that the feminist assault on the male-authored theatrical representation must consign itself to deconstruction and critique. I highlighted the possibilities of an affirmative feminist spectatorial strategy invoked by the play's improvisation and *rite de passage*.

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<sup>496</sup> Irigaray, 'La Misère de la psychanalyse', in *Parler n'est jamais neutre*, pp. 253-281 (p. 256).

Throughout my analysis, Lacanian and post-Lacanian (Irigaray) schematisations of feminine *jouissance* have been considered for how they can elucidate a feminist interpretation of Arrabal's play-text. I will finish my analysis of Arrabal's play by reversing the coordinates of the overarching concern of this chapter. I ask: what can Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent* reveal about Lacanian feminist criticism? Indeed, why does a theory of feminine *jouissance*, as has been demonstrated throughout, lend itself *so readily* to this male-authored theatrical representation of femininity? I grapple with these questions in order to draw out both the limits and possibilities of Lacanian feminism and to contextualise the import of my feminist reading within the wider bodies of the male-centred absurd and spectatorship theory that remain the foci of this thesis.

One of the remarkable features of *Et ils passèrent* is its continual recourse to a baroque manipulation of Christian mythology: the sacrilegious parody of the Virgin of Fátima parable; the reference to prominent painter of the Flemish Baroque, Peter Paul Rubens; Tosan's resurrection; and, the confessional rite half-way through the play. Even the post-theatrical *rite de passage* finds parallels with Catholic flagellation. It is important to recall, as stated above, that the Baroque enabled Arrabal to play with and subvert the post-World War II ascendancy of capitalist rationalism through that which is irrational, excessive and profuse. Such an aesthetic coincides – to a startling degree – with a psychoanalytic, semi-mystical and quasi-baroque conceptualisation of feminine *jouissance*. Theologian Amy Hollywood (2002) points out that Lacanian and post-Lacanian feminisms rely upon a genealogy of the female Christian mystics of the Middle Ages.

Hollywood's research draws out the links between a 'mystical turn' taken by resolutely secular French philosophical figures of the twentieth century, such as Lacan and Irigaray, and documented accounts of the experiences of prominent thirteenth-century female mystics such as Beatrice of Nazareth, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Hadewijch and Angela of Foligno. Lacan derives, to a large extent, his notion of non-phallic *jouissance*, Hollywood continues, from 'mysticism in its apophatic moment'. Such moments experienced by the female mystic bring to light a refusal of 'the claims to mastery and wholeness on which male-dominated

culture, society and their unconscious rest'.<sup>497</sup> We have seen that this feminine refusal of the mastery of the patriarchal Other may upsurge from the radical incompatibility of a public stage and private spectatorship. Lacan himself makes clear how the gendered distinction feeds into his theory of feminine *jouissance*, by juxtaposing the 'fonction phallique' of the German mystic Angelus Silesius with Hadewijch and Saint Teresa of Avila. In the former case, the male mystic imagines his completion by God, whereas in the latter 'feminine' form of mysticism, the call to a higher force remains partial, incomplete and unanswered ('il est clair que le témoignage des mystiques, c'est justement de dire qu'ils l'éprouvent mais ils n'en savent rien').<sup>498</sup> Mapped onto Lacan's secular, structuralist model, the feminine position could be deployed politically because it refutes the hegemony of an all-knowing patriarchal Other.

Arrabal's favoured motif of the baroque, playing with Christian supremacy, at times corresponds almost exactly to the radical disjunction and ensuing *jouissance* between the female mystic and God as described by Lacan. This may be one reason why Lacanian feminine *jouissance* and Arrabal's play have worked in tandem, the one mapping itself neatly onto the other, in my analysis. Like Arrabal, Lacan deploys baroque aesthetic excess in his theory of feminine *jouissance*. According to Hollywood, Lacanian feminine *jouissance* overwhelms representational logic and meaning 'by the materiality of the sign'. For this critic, Lacan's recourse to the baroque manipulation of Christian mysticism is exemplified by his description of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculpture of the mystic Teresa of Avila, in which 'the folds of Teresa's gown overtake her figure'.<sup>499</sup> Overwhelming visual profusion, in this case, outstrips patriarchal meaning.

Baroque profusion is, it might be argued, found in both the representational logic of Arrabal's play and Lacan's theory of feminine *jouissance*. The aesthetic homology between Lacanian non-phallic *jouissance* and Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent* points to certain limitations of a Lacanian feminist critical methodology in the task of answering questions relating to both

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<sup>497</sup> Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 16-17.

<sup>498</sup> Lacan, *Livre XX: Encore*, p. 97.

<sup>499</sup> Hollywood, p. 166.

spectatorship theory and the male-dominated theatrical absurd. The model of non-phallic *jouissance* relies upon Western – if not strictly *Christian* – paradigms of subjective sacrifice and affect. It must be asked, therefore, to what extent a theory of Lacanian feminism reifies a Christian ideal of sacrifice and penury. Moreover, while such paradigms are easy to discern in Arrabal's œuvre, would this critical feminist methodology lend itself, in equal measure, to other works of the male-authored theatre of the absurd? In addition, Lacanian feminism and its mystical origins risk privileging a negative, 'apophatic' modality of feminist politics that cannot be deemed practical. Finally, the neat assimilation of Arrabal's play into a Lacanian theory of non-phallic *jouissance* raises the question of the degree to which Lacanian feminism could effectively apply its philosophy to the feminist theatrical canon.<sup>500</sup>

Yet, these questions and limitations also point to the complexities of form and discursive possibilities for a feminist philosophy of non-phallic affect in male-authored works. Not only does the textual logic of Arrabal's play suggest that the feminist affect can be garnered from a male-centred aesthetic, it has helped us to cast a fresh look at the possibilities of non-phallic *jouissance* in the context of a modern-day politics of spectatorship. Whilst a baroque commonality between Arrabal's play and Lacan's non-phallic *jouissance* is at times striking, it has not taken precedence in my analysis for a reason. My focus on the antagonistic public-private spatial dynamic has illustrated that a conceptualisation of non-phallic spectatorial affect might outstrip the playwright's use of Catholic mythology or iconography in theatrical representation. By displacing the latter in favour of a critical focus on spatiality, it might be argued that I have paved the way for new, secular and political understandings of feminine *jouissance* in the theatre.

Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs* gestures towards a *private and political* experience that chimes with and appeals to an embedded postmodern individualism. Twenty-first-century feminist philosophy would be hard-pressed to disregard this individualist tendency in conceptualising a collective politics. This implication provides a compelling case for a continual

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<sup>500</sup> Similarly, Hollywood stresses that both Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray, who also take up the topic of the feminist mystic, betray a lot more scepticism than their male counterparts, Georges Bataille and Lacan (p. 19).

investigation into the guises and political forms of Lacanian feminist affect in a modern-day, neoliberal age. What has emerged as most significant from this play's insight into Lacanian feminist theory is, in my opinion, its demonstration of the affirmative and transformative possibilities of non-phallic *jouissance*. Catharsis, improvisation and the final *rite de passage* in Arrabal's play all suggest ways of redefining non-phallic affect from an alienating, critical experience into a collective affirmative politics. Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent* may not iron out the fraught relationship between patriarchy and feminist politics, but his play does point to the complexity – indeed a kind of 'fruitful messiness' – of feminist interactions with dominant masculinist discourse. The playwright's spatial and aesthetic manipulations show us concrete ways in which non-phallic affect may be directed towards a feminist-affirmative apprehension of the male-authored theatre of the absurd.

### **Concluding Remarks: Parallels with *Les Nègres***

I conclude the chapter by turning to Jean Genet's *Les Nègres* (1958), a play which bears a considerable number of parallels with Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs*. Although the play concerns a very different issue, that of racial prejudice in an era of French decolonisation in the 1950s and 1960s, the aesthetic similarities of this play allow me to establish points of connection with the concept of non-normative *jouissance* elaborated in the foregoing analysis. My analysis of empirical spectator response to this play does not attempt to flesh out a specifically *feminist* pleasure, since this is not evident in spectatorial accounts of the play. However, I establish parallels between the aesthetics of both plays and identify an arguably similar non-normative form of pleasure in Genet's play that might permit the spectator to break free of social preconceptions of race.

The action of this play centres on the murder of a white woman, whose corpse is covered by a white sheet and placed in the centre of the stage on a bier. Her assailant is black ('seuls nous étions capables de le faire comme nous l'avons fait, sauvagement' (p. 28)). The play's cast consists entirely of black actors; those who play white characters wear a white mask. As in Arrabal's play, Genet had specific designs for the audience prior to the start of the dramatic action. The playwright designed *Les Nègres* for a white audience:

*Cette pièce [...] est destinée à un public de Blancs. Mais si, par improbable, elle était jouée un soir devant un public de Noirs, il faudrait qu'à chaque représentation un Blanc fût invité - mâle ou femelle. L'organisateur du Spectacle ira le recevoir solennellement, le fera habiller d'un costume de cérémonie et le conduira à sa place, de préférence au centre de la première rangée des fauteuils d'orchestres. On jouera pour lui. Sur ce Blanc symbolique un projecteur sera dirigé durant tout le spectacle.*<sup>501</sup>

Genet was emphatic that the target audience of this play needed to be white. Failing the participation of a 'Blanc symbolique', he requested that the audience wear 'des masques de Blancs' or, if the audience refuses this, a white dummy would be used (p. 15).

Although Genet's attitude towards his audience is far more aggressive than that of Arrabal's towards spectators of *Et ils passèrent, Les Nègres* also celebrates sacrilegious ritual and ceremony. The centrepiece of this rite is the murdered white woman on the *catafalque*. As the character Archibald reminds his fellow cast members in response to the often incongruous, chaotic nature of the dramatic action: 'ce n'est pas une séance d'hystérie collective, c'est une cérémonie' (p. 64). As Arrabal deploys a mixture of the ceremonial (in the confession mid-way through and the final *rite de passage*) and baroque profusion (the Virgin of Fátima parody) to work through and challenge Franco's fascist regime, Genet similarly parodies Catholic ceremony to contest white supremacist ideologies. The beginning of the play starts with a quasi-jubilant, quasi-grotesque set of funereal actions:

*Quand le rideau est tiré, quatre Nègres en frac – non, l'un de ces Nègres, Ville de Saint-Nazaire, sera pieds nus et en chandail de laine – et quatre Nègresses en robe du soir dansent autour du catafalque une sorte de menuet sur un air de Mozart, qu'ils sifflent et fredonnent. Le frac – et cravate blanche des messieurs – est accompagné de chaussures jaunes. Les toilettes des dames – robes du soir très pailletées – évoquent de fausses élégances, le plus grand mauvais goût. Tout en*

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<sup>501</sup> Jean Genet, *Les Nègres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 15. Subsequent references to *Les Nègres* will be to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.



*dansant et sifflant, ils arrachent des fleurs de leur corsages et habits, pour les poser sur le catafalque.* (p. 20)

The ceremonial aspects and the parodying of Catholicism in *Les Nègres* has led audiences to experience a subversive kind of pleasure that could echo the mystical consistency of Lacanian non-normative *jouissance* discussed in the conclusion to my analysis of Arrabal's play. On the 1959 production by Compagnie Les Griots, André du Dognon remarks that the play was paradoxically and subversively 'sordide, sublime, allégorique'. This spectator observed that: 'la beauté du jeu théâtral, la puissance du verbe, l'invention dramatique qui rappelle souvent Ghelderode, mettent certains spectateurs tels que moi dans les transes tout en jetant des graines de pavot dans la salle'.<sup>502</sup> The reviewer's evocation of the Belgian avant-garde playwright and writer Michel de Ghelderode recalls the sense of baroque chaos and profusion that may be linked with Lacanian non-normative *jouissance* as discussed in this chapter.<sup>503</sup> Cristèle Alves Meira, who directed the production in Paris's Théâtre de l'Athénée in 2007, observed that the play's charm for the viewer lay in its ceremonial elements: 'c'est très jubilatoire à monter parce que c'est une grande cérémonie [...] il y a des paillettes, c'est un carnaval. En même temps c'est un rituel, une sorte de messe noire aussi. [Ce sont] des situations qui font que c'est complètement fascinant'.<sup>504</sup> Describing this production, one spectator similarly observed the beauty of the piece and deemed the production to be 'formidable'.<sup>505</sup> This sense of spectatorial pleasure from sacrilegious ceremony recalls the subject's experience of an ineffable excitement produced from being at the limits of

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<sup>502</sup> André du Dognon, 'Jean Genet ou les fastes de l'érotisme', <<http://culture-et-debats.over-blog.com/article-jean-genet-fastes-erotisme-par-andre-du-dognon-57753256.html>> [accessed 21 October 2011].

<sup>503</sup> For instance, in Ghelderode's *La Balade du grand macabre* (1935), Nékrozotar (the *Grand Macabre*) descends from Heaven to announce that the end of the world is imminent and that he will destroy it with a comet. The play is shot through with chaos and excess, and the parodying of Biblical parables. In one scene, for instance, Nékrozotar responds angel-like to the character Mescalina's wishes for a more sexually potent lover than her husband in a dream and kills her during violent sex.

<sup>504</sup> News report on Alves Meira's production of *Les Nègres* on France 3, 16 October 2007, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Sl5Lo9ilQw>> [accessed 24 October 2011].

<sup>505</sup> Blog response to news report on Alves Meira's production of *Les Nègres* on France 3, 16 October 2007, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Sl5Lo9ilQw>> [accessed 24 October 2011].

Christianity as described by Hollywood as informing Lacan's theory of feminine *jouissance*.

Empirical spectator response does not point us towards the experience of feminist *jouissance* as discussed conceptually in this chapter, but towards an analogous paradoxical form of pleasure that challenges racial prejudice (rather than the norms of patriarchy). Emmanuel Daumas directed a production of *Les Nègres* at l'Institut Français in Benin and flooded the stage with violent and stark neon lighting. He observed that:

Les spectateurs ont été ébahis par le spectacle. Ils ne pensaient pas qu'un blanc, en l'occurrence Jean Genet, ait pu écrire une telle pièce [...] La pièce n'est pas forcément facile à comprendre lors de sa lecture mais la mise en scène s'efforce d'éclaircir le propos. Genet a tout fait pour créer une expérience unique entre le public et la scène.<sup>506</sup>

This 'expérience unique entre le public et la scène' could recall a similar antagonistic divide between public and private analysed in relation to Arrabal's play that I conceptualised as a potential stimulus for the spectator's experience of non-phallic *jouissance*.

Despite the lack of direct spectator-stage interaction as in Arrabal's play, Genet constantly draws attention to both the theatrical, fictionalised nature of the action and the spectator's role in watching it. His play therefore bears a parallel with the metatheatrical moment of *Et ils passèrent* in its mid-way improvisation. As the following would suggest, Genet's use of self-reflexivity and direct address to spectators might serve to pit the audience against the stage:

Ce soir nous jouerons pour vous. Mais, afin que dans vos fauteuils vous demeuriez à votre aise en face du drame qui déjà se déroule ici, afin que vous soyez assurés qu'un tel drame ne risque pas de pénétrer dans vos vies précieuses, nous aurons encore la politesse, apprise parmi vous, de rendre la communication impossible. La distance qui nous sépare, originelle, nous

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<sup>506</sup> 'Les Nuits de Fourvière 2011', <<http://www.blognuitsdefourviere.fr/tag/les-negres/>> [accessed 24 October 2011].

l'augmenterons par nos fastes, nos manières, notre insolence – car nous sommes aussi des comédiens. (p. 26)

Genet wished to stress the divide between the audience and the stage; he wanted white audiences to feel culpable and involved in the prejudice clearly laid out on the stage.

As Daumas's descriptions of the spectator's dumbfounded response ('ébahis') to Genet's play indicate, the viewer tends to be disempowered by this play. Genet makes it clear that the white audience should be made to feel marginalised and draws attention to the power that the stage retains over the spectator. The playwright equates the murder victim at the centre of the stage with the passivity of the audience at one point in an ironic moment of address to the auditorium:

VILLAGE, *après un temps d'hésitation* : [...] Elle n'a jamais cessé d'être présente, à mes côtés, sous sa forme immortelle. (*Au public* :) captive et domptée. (p. 74)

However, this experience of disempowerment is, perhaps surprisingly, *not* a wholly negative experience for spectators of the play. The play was performed a remarkable 1408 times to audiences off-Broadway between 1961 and 1964, and, as Edmund White notes, the prevailing response here was one of laughter. Analysing Roger Blin's production in 1959 at the Théâtre de Lutèce in Paris, White further observes that the response was paradoxically one of pleasure and disquiet:

Audiences scarcely knew how to react – whether to applaud the beauty, hiss at the hostility or walk out in cold disapproval. In any event the Lutèce was packed every night and Genet had never seen such brilliant notices.<sup>507</sup>

Derek F. Connon explains this paradoxical viewing experience:

The experience of witnessing a performance of *Les Nègres* is harrowing because the audience is so much more directly implicated than in most theatre, and we

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<sup>507</sup> Edmund White, *Genet* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), p. 499.

are left feeling upset, confused, threatened. And yet, this is such an unusual and powerful experience in the theatre, that its novelty makes the play a unique source of aesthetic fulfilment.<sup>508</sup>

This 'aesthetic fulfilment' from spectatorial marginalisation could be argued to emulate the logic of Lacanian non-normative *jouissance* if we recall Župančič's description of this *jouissance* as 'the *edge of meaning*, its border, its inner limit [...] the point of inconsistency of being that induces the production of meaning'.<sup>509</sup> The spectator's experience of alienation from Genet's aggressive and accusatory stage may be analogous to the 'border' or '*edge of meaning*' because the play precipitates, empirical evidence would show, aesthetic enjoyment in a similar fashion to Lacanian non-phallic *jouissance*.

In more recent performances of *Les Nègres*, a sense of shock and disquiet has been the dominant mode of reaction to the play. Elisa Bray notes that spectators could be disconcerted by the actors' 'whiting-up' for the performance in 2007.<sup>510</sup> If such a reaction were indeed informed by Lacanian transgressive *jouissance*, then the 'production of meaning' that this experience induces is channelled into a politics of spectatorship aimed at demolishing white supremacist norms even among contemporary audiences. Excalibah and Ultz directed a version of *The Blacks* in London's Theatre Royal Stratford East in 2007, and modernised the play by turning the play's lines into rap. While one spectator found the production to have 'failed to maintain the edge necessary to cut through the British class system and the audience's expectations of black society', other critics felt that this production was politically relevant.<sup>511</sup> Artistic director Kerry Michael of the theatre found the play's politics compelling because:

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<sup>508</sup> Derek F. Cannon, 'Confused? You will be: Genet's *Les Nègres* and the Art of Upsetting the Audience', *French Studies*, 4 (1996), 425-38 (p. 437).

<sup>509</sup> Župančič, *Why Psychoanalysis?*, p. 27.

<sup>510</sup> Elisa Bray, 'The Blacks: Genet's Contentious Play Returns', <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/the-blacks-genets-contentious-play-returns-394981.html>> [accessed 24 October 2011].

<sup>511</sup> 'Review: The Blacks', <<http://roguezentradi.blogspot.com/2007/11/review-blacks.html>> [accessed 24 October 2011].

London is over 30% non-white. But how many theatres do you walk into that have that kind of demographic in their audience? And there are no more non-white creative leaders in British theatre now than there were 15 years ago. Everyone who works in the arts has to take responsibility for that.<sup>512</sup>

Bray finds the performance a timely intervention, because racial prejudice still remains and 2007 marked the bicentenary of the abolition of slavery in the UK.<sup>513</sup>

Spectators' shock, pleasure, sense of 'aesthetic fulfilment' and absorption of the political message about radical norms could reflect the evocation of something akin to Lacanian transgressive *jouissance* discussed in this chapter. The key difference that we might note between *Et ils passèrent* and *Les Nègres*, however, is the lack of spectatorial interaction in the dramatic action in the latter that would attempt to empower the spectator. The difference could help to explain why spectators of *Et ils passèrent* reported experiencing a high degree of pleasure as opposed to shock at the end of Petit Pain's production. We might argue that the transgressive spectatorial *jouissance* stimulated by both plays is directed into divergent channels and to very different effects: while Arrabal's play may be theoretically compatible with a feminist strategy of collective feminine empowerment, Genet's play is more suited to a more ambivalent form of *jouissance*, pleasure mixed with pain, that challenges the white theatre audience in a racial politics of spectatorship. The comparison between the two plays has revealed the diverse applications and effects of spectatorial non-normative *jouissance* in absurd theatre.

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<sup>512</sup> Quoted in Brian Logan, 'Do the White Thing', <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/oct/17/race.uk>> [accessed 24 October 2011].

<sup>513</sup> Elisa Bray, 'The Blacks: Genet's Contentious Play Returns'.

## Conclusion

### The Theatre of the Absurd Reconsidered

This thesis aimed to reconsider the politics of absurd theatre in the postmodern age. In the Introduction, Martin Esslin's contention that his term 'the theatre of the absurd' was meant as 'a working hypothesis' guided my construction of a paradigm that would reinvigorate critical perceptions of this body of theatre.<sup>514</sup> It is therefore helpful to return to this contention in concluding, in order to assess the extent to which I have succeeded in this task. The main plays that I have analysed cover topics ranging from the Vietnam and Cold wars (Adamov's *Off limits*) to Franco's dictatorship (Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs* and *La Tour de Babel*) to murder and tyranny in a fictitious dystopia (Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages*) to the parodying of the drawing room comedy (Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve*). In addition, I have drawn parallels with other, more frequently performed, absurd plays that deal with the themes of counter-revolution (Genet's *Le Balcon*), a murderous ceremony committed by two maids (Genet's *Les Bonnes*), the play of dancers with their mirror images (Genet's *'Adame miroir*'), one anonymous woman's experience of her own torturous voice (Beckett's *Pas moi*), another woman's struggle to keep on living in a desolate, post-apocalyptic landscape (Beckett's *Oh les Beaux jours*), and a cathartic ceremony carried out by black actors based on the murder of a white woman (Genet's *Les Nègres*). The aesthetic logic of each play has revealed that their historically specific content is only one part of the picture. Baroque motifs (Arrabal's and Genet's plays), happenings (Adamov), linguistic disintegration (Ionesco and Beckett), catharsis (Arrabal and Genet) and comedy (Ionesco) figure just as prominently. It is this complexity that has allowed me to unpick the knot tying together historical overdetermination and absurd theatre. I have re-assessed these plays, not by robbing them of their historical specificity, but by foregrounding an analysis of their aesthetic implications for present-day spectatorship. Having thus analysed eleven thematically, historically (1944-1976), and aesthetically disparate plays connected with Esslin's neologism, I

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<sup>514</sup>Esslin, 'The Theatre of the Absurd Reconsidered', in *Reflections: Essays on Modern Theatre* (New York: Anchor Books, 1971), pp. 179-186 (p. 179).

hope to have recaptured this critic's emphasis on this body of theatre as 'a large number of extremely varied and elusive phenomena'.<sup>515</sup> I have returned to Esslin's premise that absurd theatre was a 'working hypothesis' by disengaging it from existentialist overdetermination. Instead, by means of a critical Lacanian approach, I have been able to identify the political valence of absurd theatre in a postmodern age, thereby rescuing it from reification as 'a reality as concrete and specific as a branded product of the detergent industry', as Esslin puts it.<sup>516</sup>

In this manoeuvre, I have resisted positing an idealised view of the theatre of the absurd as simply 'postmodern' or simply 'political'. To do so would have been to repeat the error of past critics in overlooking the aesthetic specificities of absurd theatre in favour of a philosophical ideal, with only a shift from the existentialist 'philosopheme' to the Lacanian 'philosopheme' to account for the difference. Some of the chapters have argued that the contemporary politics of absurd theatre have sometimes been frustrated by a variety of theoretical and actual circumstances. In Chapter One, we saw that Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel* resonates lamentably with an ingrained de-politicised culture of narcissism of the contemporary age by emulating the logic of the mirror stage. In Chapter Three, I posited that the performance legacy and commodification of *La Cantatrice chauve* at the Huchette theatre exerted a stranglehold on the political potential of this play.

However, each chapter has also brought to light the fact that there is always at least a theoretical *chance*, however slight, for these plays to undergo re-politicisation given their capacity to resonate with the cultural givens that define our postmodern age: from the development of an ethico-political form of catharsis that would re-energise Arrabal's *La Tour de babel* in Chapter One; to a politics of phantasy in Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages* in Chapter Two; to a politics of perversion and true comedy in Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* in Chapter Three; to a psychotic spectatorial politics with regard to Adamov's *Off limits* in Chapter Four; and finally, to the feminist politics potentiated by Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs* in Chapter Five. Taken in order, Chapters One to Five chart an increasing capacity for a politics of spectatorship in absurd theatre,

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<sup>515</sup> Esslin, 'The Theatre of the Absurd Reconsidered', p. 179.

<sup>516</sup> Esslin, p. 179.

predicated not on the chronological or historical specificities of the plays but on the subversiveness of their aesthetic regimes. On the one hand, I argued that Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel* would have to rework its modality of catharsis considerably for political engagement to occur, since it is potentially so bound up in the irresistible lure of the mirror stage for the spectator. My concluding comparison with Genet's *Le Balcon* showed, with the aid of empirical spectator response, how this politics might be possible by identifying a broken mirror stage within the spectator-stage dynamic. On the other, Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs* in the final chapter establishes crossovers (albeit unwittingly) with the concerns of the politics of feminist spectatorship in the present age of postmodernity. A comparison of this play with Genet's *Les Nègres* confirmed that a politics of non-normative *jouissance* – based on blasphemous ceremony – may well be possible to conjure up in theatrical performance. The two very different political outcomes of Arrabal's œuvre in Chapters One and Five illustrate the rich complexity of the theatre of the absurd, thereby recalling once again Esslin's description of 'a large number of extremely varied and elusive phenomena'. This tightrope between political success and political failure of the absurd play corresponds to the precariousness and ambivalence that I believe subtended Esslin's calls to approach the theatre of the absurd as a 'working hypothesis'.

My turn to Genet's and Beckett's plays and a performance analysis of Alambic Comédie's *La Cantatrice chauve* empirically confirmed my theoretical hypothesis that the theatre of the absurd is still capable of creating politicised responses in a postmodern age. Genet's *Le Balcon* was capable, we recall at the end of Chapter One, of stirring up a disruption of the boundary between truth and fiction, which one spectator found relevant to today's media-saturated society. The playwright's *Les Bonnes*, analysed at the end of Chapter Two, was able to resonate with the S&M and queer communities in Toronto. My analysis of the challenging nature of Alambic Comédie's *La Cantatrice chauve* and the engaged form of laughter of audiences in response to this production, at the end of Chapter Three, demonstrated the play's potential to become a 'true comedy'. My turn to Beckett's *Pas moi*, at the end of Chapter Four, brought into relief spectators' experiences of insight and engagement from the play's assault on



structured, meaningful language. Finally, my study of Genet's *Les Nègres*, at the end of Chapter Five, pointed towards a racial politics of spectatorship based on the ecstasy of ceremony.

The word 'absurd', we recall from the Introduction, connotes division and dissonance etymologically. Taken together, the foregoing chapters have shown that the politics of spectatorship evoked by absurd theatre is dependent upon the degree to which each play centres on this intrinsic discordance. The more the absurd play evokes this division, the more resoundingly and definitively subversive it becomes. This has been argued with reference to a model of politics based on Lacanian theories of the split subject. The spectator may experience the division invoked by this body of theatre as a multivalent phenomenon: sometimes theatrical division may be traumatic or psychotic (Adamov's *Off limits*, Beckett's *Pas moi*); other times it may be comical (Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve*); or, sometimes it may even hold the seductive allure of a phantasy (*Tueur sans gages*, *Les Bonnes*). The politics of this discordant aesthetic was a premise outlined in the Introduction. What has emerged over the course of my analysis is the specific modality of division that absurd theatre invokes. Invariably, the split conjured up by absurd theatre is that between the stage, always functioning in the capacity of the Lacanian Other, and the spectator. It has been argued that where the cleft between the spectator and the stage is sutured, as in Arrabal's *La Tour de Babel* (Chapter One), a political spectatorship may be stymied. Where the divide is most palpable and pronounced, such as in the spectator's psychotic *dissensus* precipitated by the fragmented stage in the case of Adamov's *Off limits* and Beckett's *Pas moi* (Chapter Four), political spectatorship stands a much better chance. This is for two reasons: firstly, the hiatus between the viewer and the stage may bring the spectator's own internal subjective division into sharp relief; and secondly, by virtue of this severance, the agency and autonomy granted to the spectator with regard to the ideological Other are greatly increased. As mentioned in the Introduction, the politics of the Lacanian subject is ambivalent and non-utopian, working always in respect of the prohibitions and possibilities presented by the ideological Other. A look back at the chapters indicates the extent to which the theatre stage functions as this Other.

Throughout the chapters, the Lacanian split between the subject and the Other has been mapped onto the dynamics of the spectator and stage in absurd theatre. The chapters show that absurd theatre instigates this division between the spectator and the stage in a variety of ways: in *Tueur sans gages*, the transformation of the stage from a luminous utopia to a dark dystopia may forcibly change the spectator's perspective from one of narcissistic self-gratification to misrecognition; in *Off limits* and *Pas moi*, the dramatic action and language is so splintered and fragmentary that the spectator may be pushed to dissent from it, either by way of questioning the stage's 'truth' value (*Off limits*) or by understanding the insight given by Bouche's 'inner scream' of dissent from a society that has ostracised her (*Pas moi*). The divisive politics of absurd theatre is perhaps taken to its most extreme and fruitful point in the final chapter on Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent des menottes aux fleurs*. The spectator's departure from the authority of the stage is so radical that he or she is free to interact with the play's characters on an equal and democratic footing in the final *rite de passage* in Arrabal's play.

This division is not the same, however, as the Brechtian critical alienation from the stage described in the Introduction. The Lacanian spectator conceptualised here does not find him- or herself in a superior position with regard to the stage. Instead, neither the stage nor the spectator is guaranteed a sovereign position in the absurd dynamic. This topic was explicitly addressed in my conceptual alignment of Rancière's 'paradox of the spectator' with Lacan's psychotic subject who enjoys neither complete emancipation nor absolute subordination with regard to the Other in Chapter Four. Unlike Brecht's model, the theatrical division conceived here has not been valued for its capacity to invoke a form of critical consciousness in the spectator. The allusive nature of absurd theatre would suggest that this hyper-awareness on the part of the spectator is not what is privileged here. On the contrary, I have argued that the division within absurd theatre stirs up spectatorial affects that are unconscious in nature. This argument has enabled, throughout the course of this thesis, the development of a politics of absurd theatre of perpetual possibility, from the spectator's continual interrogation of 'reality' as a result of Adamov's *Off limits* to

the potential of spectatorial phantasy to bypass the stranglehold of dominant ideologies in Ionesco's *Tueur sans gages* and Genet's *Les Bonnes*.

A contemporary politics of absurd theatre, we might advance, hinges upon the hiatus between the stage and the spectator. This has implications for the way the theatre of the absurd is critically considered today. Whereas past critics have emphasised the heightened visuality as one of the most salient traits of the theatre of the absurd (see Introduction), a new absurd blend of transformative *spatiality* has been elucidated in this study. This critical elision is no doubt due in part to the less obvious nature of the spatial politics occurring in the auditorium-bound absurd theatre in comparison with, say, the heavily politicised street theatres of Augusto Boal and the Red Ladder theatre company. Yet, the recurrent theme of an embattled spatial dialectics between spectator and stage has informed all of the chapters and been taken up explicitly in Chapters Four – in which the psychotic spectator of *Off limits* is pitted against the ideologies of the stage – and Five – in which the spectator of *Et ils passèrent* inhabits a private viewing space in contrast to the public stage. Indeed, visuality, commonly assumed to be so pivotal to absurd theatre, is only part of the story. On the one hand, I have considered the capacity of this visuality to precipitate spatial configurations in the auditorium that emulate the variant structures of the psyche as Lacan lays out, such as the visual instigation of the mirror stage in Chapter One. On the other hand, I have looked at those pieces that do not so much draw upon visuality to alter the spatial setup of the theatre as directly manipulate the latter, as in Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent* (in Chapter Five) which reconfigured the regime of spectatorship and Genet's *Les Nègres* which conjures up the stage's aggressive stance towards the spectator. Commenting on the visuality of absurd theatre, Jan Kott (1984) opines that the viewer 'is often in the position of one who must decode messages [...] or in the position of a psychoanalyst who must listen to the ramblings of his patient'.<sup>517</sup> In the subsumption of visuality into a wider analytical framework of spatiality, I have considered the spectator of absurd theatre in a very different manner to that described by Kott. The space of absurd theatre has been conceptually aligned

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<sup>517</sup>Jan Kott, *The Theater of Essence and Other Essays* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1984), p. 136.

with that of the psyche defined by Lacanian theory as the different positionalities of the subject within dominant discourse (the Other). As such, I have recaptured the visceral pull of this body of theatre. In this way, I hope to have brought to light a much more compelling form of theatre than that described by those critics who have reverted to Esslin's descriptions of 'absurdity of the human condition' to judge the 'meaning' of the theatre of the absurd.

Moreover, the discordant spatiality furnishes this body of theatre with an epochal fluidity that is wont to exceed the plays' historical underpinnings. This is not a repetition of the past critics' shortsighted claims of the humanist-universalist resonance of absurd theatre pointed out in the Introduction. The process of laying waste to grand ideologies depicted by absurd theatre has become a cultural given in the postmodern age as noted in the Introduction. What I have shown is that this body of theatre acquires a richly hued and complex resonance in its spatial outstripping of historical circumstance. My findings contest this body of theatre's consignment to the history books as the theatricalisation of a perennial existential anguish. The spatial effects of this body of theatre may be narcissistic (Chapter One), phantasmatic (Chapter Two), perverse (Chapter Three), psychotic (Chapter Four) and feminist (Chapter Five). Taking this further, the spatio-psychical effects of Ionesco's 'flying characters' such as the eponymous hero of *Amédée, ou comment s'en débarrasser* (1954) or Bérenger of *Le Piéton de l'air* (1961) might be considered. Extending analysis beyond the eleven plays studied here, critical enquiry might alternatively focus upon the politics of spatiality set in motion by the pared-down setting of Beckett's *En Attendant Godot* or Sławomir Mrożek's *Strip-tease* (1961). Further research might, in addition, go on to investigate the subversive spatiality of absurd theatre in conjunction with the 'spatial turn' often used to describe the age of postmodernity.<sup>518</sup>

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<sup>518</sup>See, for instance: *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. by Barney Warf and Santa Arias (Oxon: Routledge, 2009).

### Future Pathways of a Critical Paradigm

It could be argued that I have enriched critical perceptions of the theatre of the absurd for all of the reasons indicated above. However, the fruitful political results yielded by the innovation of a critical paradigm through which to re-vision this body of theatre extend the former's potential applicability far beyond the purview of the latter. Having drawn on insights from theatre studies, performance studies, dramatic theory, film studies, Lacanian thought, feminism and political theory, this thesis contributes to each of these discourses and disciplines. For instance, I have revised preconceived notions of theatrical catharsis (Chapters One, Four and Five) and metatheatre (Chapter Four), and propounded a new notion of psychosis in theatre spectatorship. All of these insights help us to understand theories of political theatre.

Each chapter has investigated theatrical material that appears historically limited. In the critical reception of the theatre of the absurd, a generous reading of the import of this body of theatre notes its relevance to preoccupations of the age of modernity in general, whereas a less generous one defines it as relevant only to a particular moment of social crisis following World War II. My theoretical model, the Lacanian spectator, has permitted me to venture beyond such critical hypostatisation to reveal the contemporary relevance of absurd theatre.

I have drawn upon actual spectator response to plays by Genet and Beckett to extend the range and complexity of the theoretical issues discussed in each chapter. In Chapter One, for instance, it was suggested that a rupturing of the mirror stage in Genet's *Le Balcon* may carry political benefits for spectatorship but that this was potentially stymied by the concomitant breaking the allure of the mirror stage for the spectator and the latter's subsequent loss of interest in the dramatic action. Also, my theorisation of a psychotic politics of spectatorship in Adamov's *Off limits* was complexified by my comparison of this play to Beckett's *Pas moi* and *Oh les Beaux jours*, which revealed the empirical difficulties of creating this reaction in performance (particularly when theatrical liveness and presence are missed) even though it may be potentiated by the text.

In essence, my research situates itself within psychoanalytic cultural criticism, which features such varying works as Thomas Albrecht's *The Medusa*

*Effect: Representation and Epistemology in Victorian Aesthetics* (2009) and Scott Wilson's *The Order of Joy* (2008). Psychoanalytic cultural criticism focuses on the heuristic potential of the text based on close readings, an all-too-often maligned practice in the field of cultural studies too caught up in 'themes, identities or sets of artifacts to examine more generally cultural meaning, materiality or functioning', as Esther Rashkin notes (2008).<sup>519</sup>

I have contributed in two ways to the field of psychoanalytic cultural criticism: firstly, I have shown that it is fruitful to nuance psychoanalytic heuristic readings of the text with empirical evidence (my focus on spectatorship permitted this); secondly I have elucidated the ways in which theatre and performance could avert the de-historicising charges levelled against psychoanalytic cultural criticism. Psychoanalytic cultural criticism investigates the slippage between historical 'fact' and the psychical, which resists circumscription within historical discourse. Related to this, theatre and performance have a unique propensity to straddle the temporal divide between past and present, between the playwright's creation of the work and the 'liveness' of each *mise en scène*. This fact has been mobilised to conceptualise the retained but nevertheless transfigured potency of the historical play, thriving not on a reification of its originary conditioning but on its capacity for historical and cultural mutability. This has been made possible only by means of constantly interrogating Lacanian theory via the extension of my analytical scope to other theorists of the present such as Jacques Rancière, Rosi Braidotti and Tim Dean. Yet, similar considerations of historical slippage are somewhat occluded elsewhere in psychoanalytic cultural criticism, and this perhaps could account for the repeated condemnation of psychoanalysis as ahistorical. Rashkin concentrates on exposing 'aspects of textual psychic histories' as this is 'a crucial and necessary prerequisite to unveiling and assessing the narratives' concealed sociocultural, historical, and ideological contexts'.<sup>520</sup> While this psychic underside of historiography is in itself revelatory in terms of the contexts surrounding the production of an *œuvre*, it is a form of analysis still grounded in the work's past. It falls short of getting to grips with the future radical mileage of

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<sup>519</sup>Esther Rashkin, *Unspeakable Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Culture* (Albany: SUNY, 2008), p. 17.

<sup>520</sup>Rashkin, p. 14.

a work. Elsewhere in psychoanalytic cultural studies, Jennifer Friedlander's rich analysis in *Feminine Look: Sexuation, Spectatorship, Subversion* (2008) gestures towards 'the question of how images may "move" viewers in a [...] political sense' in a way 'that enables viewers to view images subversively'.<sup>521</sup> Yet, Friedlander resists identifying the changes in constitution that subversion might take in the cultural objects that she analyses. This is in spite of the fact that the photographic images of her enquiry cover an extensive period of history from the 1920s to the 1990s. By contrast, critical focus on the contemporary Lacanian spectator of absurd theatre – backed up by empirical contemporary accounts of the spectatorship of absurd theatre – enlists the temporal divide of the medium – the intrinsic split between past and present – to conceive the effect of a past work on the present. The final chapter, for instance, brought Arrabal's *Et ils passèrent* in dialogue not only with Lacanian feminist theory but also with contemporary attitudes towards the individuated mode of spectatorship necessary for politics in the postmodern age of individualism. It revealed novel feminist modalities of subversion that were not apprehensible or conceivable at the time of this play's publication in 1969. My approach, therefore, has not evaded the text's historicity. Rather, it has stressed the incommensurable gap between the present and the past. It has refused to collapse this gap in the analysis of a historical body of work. By this charge, my critical paradigm contributes an ethics of reading to the field of psychoanalytic cultural studies. As such, my reading methodology enriches a growing body of scholarship on psychoanalysis and ethics.<sup>522</sup>

Future research might go on to focus on the role that the theatre and theatre spectatorship can play in this ethically grounded reinvigoration of a past text. The connection between psychoanalytic cultural studies and research on the notion of theatrical 'presence' would provide a fruitful way of assessing this role, particularly since, as I suggested in Chapter Four in relation to Beckett's *Pas*

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<sup>521</sup>Friedlander, p. 5.

<sup>522</sup> See: Lisa Downing, 'The Cinema Ethics of Psychoanalysis: Futurity, Death Drive, Desire', in *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 134-146; Ernest Wallwork, *Psychoanalysis and Ethics* (London: Yale University Press, 1991); Ewa Płonowska Ziarek, 'The Libidinal Economy of Power, Democracy and the Ethics of Psychoanalysis', in *An Ethics of Dissensus: Postmodernity, Feminism and the Politics of Radical Democracy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 117-50.

*moi*, a psychotic spectatorial reaction is missed when liveness fails.<sup>523</sup> Whilst I engaged in analyses of contemporary performances of plays by Genet and Beckett to show the importance of empirical evidence in any consideration of theoretical spectatorship, future critical study of the theatre of the absurd might consider in more detail the transformative politics potentiated by contemporary *mises en scène* using the textual findings of this thesis as a point of departure. After all, as was noted in the Introduction, absurd theatre garners more politically positive criticism in theatre praxis than it does in French literary and theatre studies, as those such as the Living Theatre, the Bread and Puppet Company and the Japanese 'Neo-Theatre of the Absurd' tend to explicitly cite it as a key influence on their innovations. An analysis of contemporary spectators' reactions to *Le Balcon*, *Les Bonnes*, *Pas moi*, *Oh les Beaux jours* and *Les Nègres* has confirmed that the theatre of the absurd can still be engaging and political. A more thoroughgoing bringing together of the theoretical and actual conditions of performance would go a long way towards the reinvigoration of the theatre of the absurd in the French theatrical canon.

In addition, the critical paradigm would find relevance in the revitalisation of criticism with regard to other works condemned to overdetermination by historical enquiry. The paradigm would work particularly well with re-assessing the case of Antonin Artaud, who has been defined as a cornerstone of twentieth-century French theatre history. As Kimberley Jannarone (2010) observes, the pioneer of the visceral and hypnotising 'théâtre de la cruauté', who was central to the development of American left-wing theatre in the 1960s, was much more influenced by the principles of fascism and totalitarianism than the ideologues of radical theatre would like to consider. The Lacanian spectator would inform Jannarone's re-examination of Artaud. With the aid of this paradigm, we might ask: what would the present-day spectator experience when viewing Artaud's totalising form of theatre, so radically at odds with the postmodern touchstones of individualism and ruptured grand ideologies? What would be the political valence of this disjunction? How would it help us to nuance critical considerations of a figure who has been, as Jannarone

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<sup>523</sup>See: Cormac Power, *Presence in Play: A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008); Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye, *Performing Presence: Between the Live and the Simulated* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).



puts it, 'canonized – sanctified, even – by artists and intellectuals who strive towards a more progressive, liberal, and democratic society'?<sup>524</sup> Equally, the critical paradigm might lead us to wonder: what would a postmodern spectatorial interrogation of the lionised Bertolt Brecht yield for our understanding of his theatrical politics today? How might this understanding of the contemporary Lacanian spectator elucidate a re-politicisation of the works of Brecht, Artaud and other luminaries of the modernist performance canon in and by theatre praxis?

My critical paradigm gives rise to these questions and provides a methodological strategy for answering them. Far from disavowing the past, my deployment of the Lacanian spectator has enabled a pinpointing of the hindrances and possibilities of making this past relevant for the present. In this temporal juggling act, I hope to have revitalised the theatre of the absurd, to have re-found the subversiveness and political value of this body of theatre in a different form to the one laid out by Esslin fifty years ago. This is surely an approach that has returned the theatre of the absurd to Esslin's designs for the term, to function as a 'working hypothesis'.

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<sup>524</sup>Kimberley Jannarone, *Artaud and His Doubles* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 189.

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