PROLOGUE: CUSTOMS—A CASE STUDY

1. Three co-ordinates converge in a warped space

In 1998, the Sydney-based contemporary performance company Theatre of Desire, of which I was director at the time, produced Customs, by Josephine Wilson. Wilson, a Perth-based writer, had the previous year toured a successful production, The Geography of Haunted Places, directed by Nigel Kellaway, a well-known performance maker in Sydney. Wilson’s new production played at the Sidetrack Theatre under the auspices of Sydney’s The Performance Space, a national centre for interdisciplinary experimental work. Originally inspired by Bruce Chatwin’s The Songlines, Customs was described by Wilson as follows:

Three co-ordinates converge in a warped space where no-one is quite sure where they are, where they have been or where in the world they are headed. Trapped in a space of televised terminal deferral, The Consultant, The Explorer and The Air Hostess reluctantly act out their relationships to time and space in situations that teeter between the existential and the ridiculous. For The Consultant, the future has well and truly arrived, and the body is but the terminus of a radical maladaption; for The Explorer, the fragility of the body is to be disarmed through stories of a Golden Past; for The Air Hostess, the promise of flight is confounded by the twin burdens of femininity and nostalgic excess (Real Time 27 October/November 1998).

Critical responses to the work were generally favourable. John McCallum, theatre scholar and critic for the national newspaper, The Australian, wrote:

A transit lounge is like a stage, in which people on their way somewhere else sit and watch each other. And a stage is like a transit lounge, where performers and audience meet in passing. Customs is a show which revels in such connections, from simple puns (such as the title) to complex intertextual associations of ideas and stories. It is a comic meditation on the physical and cultural spaces where travelling people meet and briefly pause—airports, theatres, homelands, empires, cyberspace . . . Everywhere there are disembodied voices, silent figures and experiences of dislocation . . . [a] light but deft fragmentary show (The Australian, 12/10/98).

Other reviewers were equally impressed. Ruby Boukabou wrote, “inside Customs, this production does take off. The performances and the production are well defined and engaging. It’s most definitely worth a visit” (Revolver, 19/10/98), and Carrie Gray “congratulated”
Wilson and me for “this confronting, yet thoroughly enjoyable production” (The Bridge, November 1998). Although the daily broadsheet, The Sydney Morning Herald, refused to send a reviewer—at the time the paper selectively reviewed productions, usually from the “big end of town”—one of their critics, Stephen Dunne, saw the production and managed to sneak in a one-line review: “Josephine Wilson’s text doesn’t quite have the audacious strength of her previous work, but Glen McGillivray’s production (with three excellent performances) finds the frozen heart of tourism” (Sydney Morning Herald Metro, 16-22 October 1998).

There was, however, a notable exception to this critical response: the review in Real Time, a national bi-monthly journal of contemporary arts, published in its on-line edition. The review was written by Keith Gallasch, editor and publisher of Real Time, and a theatre worker of considerable repute in Australia.

In many ways, this review, and, in particular, the assumptions framing it, were the impetus for the investigations informing this thesis. Although Gallasch’s role as critic is, in part, interpreter and taste-maker, it is not these functions that interest me, nor am I concerned with refuting—or testing the “truth” of—the claims he made about the production itself. Rather I am interested in how Gallasch deployed a particular discourse, the terms of which enabled him to construct a critique which referred less to the production itself than to how the production could be located within that discourse. In the pages that follow, I attempt to render explicitly the terms of an implicit theory of theatricality informing Gallasch’s writing, or rather, the discourse within which Gallasch’s critical-interpretive practice is imbricated.

2. Uncovering a will to truth

To start, then, I turn to a close reading of Gallasch’s text, interrogating it in order to reveal what Dreyfus and Rabinow describe, in their overview of writings of Foucault, as its “accepted concepts, legitimised subjects, taken-for-granted objects, and preferred strategies, that yield justified truth claims” (1983, xxiv). In so doing, I wish to discern a “will to truth” functioning within the discourse, in terms of which certain kinds of practices (and not others) are positioned as productive of authentic experiences. This movement towards authenticity, as will be demonstrated time and again in other texts dealing with certain theatrical experiences, produces a political position that is equated with a politics of resistance and personal emancipation.

The terms of Gallasch’s discourse of theatricality are, in fact, laid out in the first statement of the review, in which the field of performance is neatly divided. “For those within the contemporary performance milieu”, writes Gallasch, “who believe attempts to delineate ‘performance’ are unnecessary and that in the end it’s all theatre, Theatre of Desire’s
production of Josephine Wilson’s *Customs* is an interesting phenomenon” (Gallasch www.rtimearts.com/~opencity/rt28/customs.html: 1). Gallasch’s statement gestures towards a discursive position, the truth claims of which are presumably well-established within the *Real Time* readership and can, therefore, be taken for granted. Clearly, for Gallasch (and his readership) the terms “performance” and “theatre” denote, in Dreyfus and Rabinow’s Foucauldian terms, “accepted concepts”, and the setting of one against the other is a “preferred” discursive strategy. What, then, is the effect of such a strategy? What “justified truth claims” might this discourse “yield”? How does Gallasch put this logic to work in order to arrive at a critical judgement about the work in front of him?

The review proceeds via a brief summary of the production’s genesis, in which Gallasch details how the text came into being, before turning to a terse exegesis of the putative formal properties of “performance”, through which it is distinguishable from “theatre”:

> From the outset, the production appears to be on a performance tack with some recognisable motifs—repetition, minimalist architectonic staging, video monitors relaying earlier versions of the performance, slide projections and recurring sequences of airport lounge music, spare movement patterns verging on dance, and disjunctive actions eg apparently calm dialogues realised as wrestling matches (Gallasch www.rtimearts.com/~opencity/rt28/customs.html: 1).

In this account, *Customs* would appear to conform to “performance”, construed as a distinct genre, the definable features (“recognizable motifs”) of which Gallasch has neatly summarised in terms that assume the reader’s concurrence. Having established the presence in the production of generic markers establishing the work as “performance”, the review registers a certain disappointment:

> However as you listen to the actors delivering Wilson’s mix of sophisticated and calculatedly naive texts . . . and her shifting ground of 50s airtravel culture and 90s politics, you sense that the actors’ voices are in the wrong place. Meaning is wrung out of every word, knowing looks are beyond knowing . . . What is potentially a strong performance veers into conventional theatricality, in other words, too loaded, too little distanced from itself, “hot” when it should be “cool” (Gallasch www.rtimearts.com/~opencity/rt28/customs.html: 1-2 [emphasis added]).

Here the logics of the binary theatre/performance are invested with aesthetic, moral and,
ultimately, ontological values. Against the strength and revelatory potential of “performance” as a genre is set the “mere” conventionality of “theatricality”. The production strays—“veers”—into the “wrong place”. The desirable coolness of performance is displaced (or even possibly reclaimed) by the very uncool heat of theatre, here construed, in Gallasch’s revealing phrase, as a practice (if not a genre) “too little distanced from itself”. Just as the historical avant-garde railed against “conventional theatricality”—the empty gesture, the tired routine, the clichéd and hackneyed “going through the motions”—Gallasch negatively endows, in fact, identifies theatricality with conservatism and dullness to which “strong performance”, brimming with dynamism and innovation (“minimalist architectonic staging, video monitors relaying earlier versions of the performance, slide projections and recurring sequences of airport lounge music, spare movement patterns verging on dance, and disjunctive actions”) is the vibrant alternative. The coupling of “strong performance” and “conventional theatricality” suggests that the latter is an etiolation of the former. In the terms of this loaded logic, a movement towards “theatre” is a move away from “performance”; a move which, in this context, is counter to an implicit “will to truth” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983) sited in the notion of “performance”.

How this can occur and what is at stake is unclear without an understanding of the broader theoretical context for Gallasch’s writing. In her introduction to the aptly named (in this context) collection, Performance and Cultural Politics (1996), Elin Diamond carefully defines the problematic and contested boundaries of the field “performance”. In a section entitled “Performance/Theatre” she describes how, through the practices of primarily US artists in the 1960s and 1970s, together with journals such as The Drama Review (TDR) and Performing Arts Journal, and “in mid-1960s poststructuralist theorizing (Barthes on Brecht, Derrida on Artaud), performance came to be defined in opposition to theater structures and conventions”. Diamond then succinctly summarises the ideas underpinning this opposition:

In brief, theater was charged with obeisance to the playwright’s authority, with actors disciplined to the referential task of representing fictional entities. In this narrative, spectators are similarly disciplined, duped into identifying with the psychological problems of individual egos and ensnared in a unique temporal-spatial world whose suspense, reversals, and deferrals they can more or less comfortably decode. Performance, on the other hand, has been honored with dismantling textual authority, illusionism, and the canonical actor in favour of the polymorphous body of the performer. Refusing the conventions of role-playing, the performer presents herself/himself as a sexual, permeable, tactile body, scourging audience narrativity along with the barrier between stage and spectator (1996, 3).
Diamond’s phrase “psychological problems of individual egos ensnared in a unique temporal-spatial world” highlights the characteristic identification of “theatre” with nineteenth-century naturalism and its historical derivatives. “Conventional theatricality” operates as a signifier (or perhaps more accurately a “code”) for a set of practices—here associated with the historical genre of realism—which it is unnecessary to elaborate, precisely because of a certain taken-for-grantedness informing the discourse. The epithet “conventional theatricality” operates as a kind of shorthand that allows the binary oppositional logic to function. Such a logic creates a useful subordinate “other”, against which the primary term, in this instance “performance”, can be defined and legitimated. As I argue further in this thesis, positioning “theatricality” in this way is a common discursive strategy. “Performance”, on the other hand, gestures towards a discourse that “refuses” conventions (in contrast to “conventional theatricality”), and promises a plenitudinous pre-symbolic union of spectators and performance.

It would appear from Gallasch’s opening definition of “motifs” of “performance”, which emphasises the non-textual, that he too shares the view of “performance” Diamond describes (but which she did not endorse). Indeed, he goes even further. In addition to framing his review within the discourse of “theatre/performance”, Gallasch also invokes one of the key discourses of theatrical modernism: the struggle between text and non-textual elements of performance. Here the discursive will to truth manifests, curiously for an advocate of “performance”, in the text of the performance:

Although clearly an admirer of Robert Wilson and his like, McGillivray is unable to give Josephine Wilson’s text the tone, voices and bodies it needs. The performances are conventionally theatrical and the time-out-of-kilter conceit remains just that (Gallasch www.rtimearts.com/~opencity/rt28/customs.html: 2 [emphasis added]).

Gallasch’s reference to “Robert Wilson” suggests a particular tradition (the North American avant-garde) and style of work (indeed, Wilson is one of the artists to whom Diamond refers) that emphasise the visual aspects of a performance over other elements. In this instance, however, according to Gallasch, such an approach falls short of the demands of Josephine Wilson’s text: for him, “textual authority” cannot, must not, be “dismantled”.

How, then, does the discursive logic of “performance/theatre” operate in Gallasch’s championing of Wilson’s text? In a sense, we can see the historical avant-garde’s desire to “liberate” the elements of theatrical performance from the play text as being the precursor of
the contemporary performance versus theatre debate. The term “performance”, in the sense that Gallasch uses it, was not in the vocabulary of the historical avant-garde, although the logic of his argument derives from similar avant-gardist positionings. In both cases a genre of theatre—representational, narrative, psychologically-based—was set up as a straw man. Text, therefore, if it is to be used in avant-garde “theatre” or contemporary “performance”, is required to have a non-representational function and is positioned within the performance as just one element in a constellation of other production elements. The French critic, Bernard Dort, defined such a pluralist vision of theatre as “liberated performance” (1982, 60)—a notion that, while often unstated, underlies most writings dealing with aesthetically, culturally or politically progressive performances.

Gallasch’s emphasis differs slightly from that of Dort, although an idea of “liberated performance” informs his critique too. Viewing the enunciation of the text through the discursive formation of “theatre/performance”, Gallasch discerns a “performance” text which is given a “conventionally theatrical” performance. In other words, although he interprets the text as functioning on a level of postmodern pastiche and irony—“Wilson’s mix of sophisticated and calculatedly naive texts . . . and her shifting ground of 50s air travel culture and 90s politics”—this function is lacking in the performance, which “is unable to give Josephine Wilson’s text the tone, voices and bodies it needs” because, as he interprets the production, the putative urge to psychologically represent infiltrates the performances: “meaning is wrung out of every word, knowing looks are beyond knowing”.

Gallasch critically positions *Customs* within a binary logic that operates on a broad generic understanding of the terms “theatre” and “performance”. The discourse that is articulated thus attributes “authenticity” to the text, juxtaposed against the “conventionally theatricality” of the performances.

The final piece of Gallasch’s discursive mosaic is his positioning of *Customs* against Wilson’s previous work, *The Geography of Haunted Places*, a work that functions as his default standard of an “authentic” performance work. In concluding his review, Gallasch returns to the earlier production:

> Among the strengths of *The Geography of Haunted Places* beyond its text, were its direction by Nigel Kellaway and its collaboration with the performer Erin Hefferon. Both had strong dramaturgical input yielding a strong imagistic, performative and intellectual structure, taking its audience through iconic Australian history in a simple but unnerving trajectory, with Hefferon intoning her lines, rarely underlining text that could already speak for itself without any
Here, as I have suggested, the ontological value implicit in Gallasch’s deployment of the discourse “theatre/performance” becomes apparent. He positions the text as a transcendent object that is able to “speak for itself”, and the agency of the performer in the enunciation of that text is reduced to that of a “transmitter”.1 Gallasch’s use of “underlining” and “doubling” suggests a Platonic ontology that yearns for direct and unmediated connection with the “Ideal Form” of the thing itself. Again, as will become apparent time after time in this thesis, pejorative uses of “theatricality” are always deployed to reinscribe the truth value of something else.

3. The formation of theatricality as an object of discourse

In subjecting Gallasch’s writing to such a stringent reading, I am not necessarily seeking to take issue with Gallasch, the writer, himself. Rather, I am, in the first instance, taking his text as an exemplar of a certain pervasive discourse in which certain claims invoking an idea of, and not merely “about”, theatricality could be made. At the same time, such a text operates somewhat paradigmatically, given Gallasch’s position in the field of theatre/performance in Australia. His description and identification of generic signifiers, for example, function as “statements” in the Foucauldian sense. Dreyfus and Rabinow develop this understanding of “statement” as a “type of linguistic function” which is “neither an utterance nor a proposition, neither a psychological nor a logical entity, neither an event nor an ideal form” (1983, 45). For Foucault, the statement’s identity is

relative and oscillates according to the use that is made of the statement and the way it is handled . . . The constancy of the statement, the preservation of its identity through the unique events of the enunciations, its duplications through the identity of the forms is constituted by the functioning of the field of use in which it is placed (Foucault {1969} 1972, 104; quoted in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 45 [translation modified by Dreyfus and Rabinow]).

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1Gallasch, however, in contrast to what he suggest here, ascribes considerable agency and “underlining” to Hefferon. In his enthusiastic review of Geography, he writes:

Hefferon (with cool grace and essential stillness) declared no influences (save the careful framing of scenes provided by director Nigel Kellaway) and thus could frighten with her sheer strangeness and the sudden swerve into what felt like real anger as, naked on a chair, between long cigarette inhalations, she transformed momentarily, without a trace of irony, into a raving Australian fascist . . .

I had to see Geography . . . twice to believe the achievement it is. Hefferon performs a bizarre bewigged bimbo, Miss Discovery, in cheong sam, grappling with theories of place and desire . . . surrounded by stuffed Australian animals . . . shedding her clothes in a set of delicately moved transitions from Oriental to South Pacific to naked ‘self’ (Real Time 17, February-March 1997, 32).

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In distinction to a Searlian speech act, which is concerned with the linguistic function of everyday utterances, the Foucauldian statement describes a particular linguistic function defined by Dreyfus and Rabinow as a “serious speech act”. A serious speech act is legitimised by the authority of the person who utters it and whose authorisation is licensed by their expertise—position of power—in the social context of the statement. Furthermore, according to Dreyfus and Rabinow, the “systematic, institutionalized justification of the claim of certain speech acts to be true of reality takes place in a context in which truth and falsity have serious social consequences” (1983, 48). Foucault argues that everyday speech acts can be converted into serious speech acts depending on the context of their use and the authority of the person using them. He notes a proliferation of such conversions which he diagnoses, according to Dreyfus and Rabinow, as a “manifestation of a will to truth, which ‘daily grows in strength, in depth and implacability’” (ibid.).

As a critic and co-editor of a reputable contemporary arts journal, Gallasch is authoritative in articulating the parameters of the discourse “theatre/performance”, because he is clearly a “privileged speaker” in this context (ibid.). Gallasch, it must be stressed, is not inventing the discursive field but rather is positioning himself within one that predates his specific statement: one which he, through Real Time, has nevertheless played a role in articulating. In such articulations as this review, the exigency of the discursive “will to truth” quickly becomes apparent.

According to Dreyfus and Rabinow, Foucault posited a strategy of discourse analysis which revealed that a phenomenon such as “madness”, for example, was not “an object or limit experience outside of discourse which each age had attempted to capture in its own terms”; rather, it was an object formed by discourse. Foucault claimed that

a mental illness was constituted by all that was said in all the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it, traced its developments, indicated its various correlations, judged it, and possibly gave it speech by articulating, in its name, discourses that were to be taken as its own ({1969} 1972, 32; quoted in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 61).

Similarly, when Gallasch utilises a distinction between “performance” and “theatre”, he is not writing about an object of enquiry, but is in fact enacting a discourse that forms that object. His review of Customs, then, “captured in its own terms” the production and positioned it within the discourse he had activated. The terms of this discourse required of readers certain

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2Dreyfus and Rabinow also stress that a statement is not necessarily a “grammatical identity” and suggest that “maps can be statements if they are used as representations of a geographical area” (1983, 45).
assumed knowledges if they were to fully understand the implications of his review. Writing within the context of a contemporary arts journal, Gallasch could safely assume that his readership would share these knowledges. Implicit in this discourse enacted by Gallasch are avant-garde thematics of art and theatre, and an understanding of a particular field in which certain kinds of work are valorised and others denigrated within the loaded terms of the discourse. In the pages that follow I engage in some detail with this discourse (which I have termed a discourse of theatricality) revealing its recurring patterns and the particular claims to truth that underlie it.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 The foundations of the discourse of theatricality

1.1.1 Roland Barthes’s anti-theatrical theatricality

In his essay “Baudelaire’s Theater”, written in the 1950s, Roland Barthes asked, “What is theatricality?”, and in response wrote:

It is theater-minus-text, it is a density of signs and sensations built up on stage starting from the written argument; it is that ecumenical perception of sensuous artifice—gesture, tone, distance, substance, light—which submerges the text beneath the profusion of its external language (1972, 26).

Barthes’s definition activated a theme of the historical avant-garde, the discourse of which positioned theatricality as the “essence” of theatre; an “essence” that was located not in the written text but in the non-textual elements of production: the bodies and gestures of the actors, lighting, sets and so forth. Implicit in Barthes’s statement was the idea of a corporeal theatricality that joyously overflowed the limitations of the written text, and it is the discourse of this liberatory theatricality that has been so persuasive throughout the twentieth century, and that continues to resonate in contemporary writings such as Gallasch’s. Barthes’s statement, however, is better understood as activating some key terms, values and principles of a particular modernist discourse that had been circulating for at least half a century before his own intervention in the field. Indeed, Barthes’s claims for theatricality reinforced those assumptions, and contributed to the taken-for-grantedness of that discourse.

In the preface to this thesis I highlighted how a particular text, Gallasch’s review of Customs, deploys a certain interpretive logic and ascribes an ontological value to the categories performance/theatre. In Gallasch’s writing, there seems much more at stake than just a review of a particular production; there is, rather, evidence of a struggle or a battle for a truth, a shoring-up of a particular ideological position. This same position was shared by Barthes, and although there is slippage in how he and Gallasch use the term “theatricality” (for Gallasch it is a pejorative), nevertheless, both writers advocate a similar vision of what theatre or performance could (and should!) be. The project of this thesis, then, is to suggest that there is an identifiable discourse of theatricality that is perceivable in writings such as those of Barthes and Gallasch, and that the struggles of interpretation and the battles for the truth exemplified by their writings recur consistently in other texts that deploy a notion of theatricality.

As a key statement in the discourse of theatricality, Barthes’s text gets considerable mileage,
particularly his succinct formulation of theatricality as “theater-minus-text”. In this passage Barthes seems to be positioning the role of the written text as needing to be “fulfilled” by the production, as opposed to the Aristotelian positioning of the production as simply “illustrating” a text that is already complete in itself.\(^3\) However, the inflection of Barthes’s musings on theatricality changes within the context of his discussion of Baudelaire’s writings. Barthes, in effect, creates his own fantasy of Baudelairean theatre that is based on Baudelaire’s sketches for plays. Thus, when Barthes writes of Baudelaire’s “theatre”, his objects of study are texts by Baudelaire. Despite invoking the avant-gardist claims that Baudelaire’s “authentic theatricality is the sentiment . . . of the actor’s disturbing corporeality”, and the “necessity” of “artificiality” to the “Baudelairean universe” (1972, 27), Barthes also claims that “Baudelaire put his theater everywhere except, precisely, in his projects for plays”; in other words, in texts not intended for performance (28).

Through his idea of Baudelaire’s “theatre”, Barthes enacts the anti-theatricalist gesture of invoking an idealised theatre that is juxtaposed against and rejects actual theatre: “Baudelaire’s theatricality evades his theater in order to spread through the rest of his work” (ibid.). Barthes claims that Baudelaire’s “theatre” was “striving to destroy itself” (ibid.), that his work “testif[ied] to the . . . horror of the theater” (29), and, even more tellingly, that “Baudelaire had to protect theatricality from the theater” (30). Theatricality, framed in this way, becomes detached from theatre and starts to function as a transcendent category, a value and an impossibility. Barthes’s essay, taken as a whole, can in fact be seen as a flight from the very theatricality he extols; he seeks refuge in a far more stable site: the written text.

Contrary to what he appears to be arguing, Barthes is not discussing theatre as an embodied event; he is, rather, deploying theatricality as a metaphor to describe certain textual devices used by Baudelaire. If theatricality is what he claims it to be, “theater-minus-text”, then how can Baudelaire’s text embody theatricality? The answer would seem to lie in his proviso that theatricality exists “in the first written germ of a work” (26); in other words, it originates in the text but only reaches its full potential in performance (an imagined performance, in Baudelaire’s case).

My critique of Barthes’s use of “theatre” and “theatricality” is not intended to denigrate Barthes’s argument; I am not making some counter-claim to the truth. Nor, I might add, was that my intention in critiquing Gallasch. Rather, these examples are intended to demonstrate, first, that there is a discourse of theatricality which has consistent and definable features; and second, that this discourse is shaped by a certain interpretive logic that we can characterise as Platonic, which is predicated on a binary coupling of theatricality and anti-theatricality.

\(^3\)See Carlson (1985, 5-11) for the taxonomy of theories of “fulfillment” and “illustration”.
This discourse of theatricality emerges as a battle for the truth with writers such as Barthes and Gallasch laying claim—either explicitly in the case of the former, or implicitly for the latter—to particular interpretations of theatricality and theatre. Foucault argues that:

There is a battle “for the truth”, or at least “around the truth”—it being understood once again that by truth I do not mean “the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted”, but rather “the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true”, it being understood also that it’s not a matter of battle “on behalf” of the truth, but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays (Foucault 1980, 132; quoted in Rabinow and Dreyfus 1983, 117).

Foucault’s notion of the “truth” standing for an “ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true” provides a helpful clue to the way theatricality has been deployed in writings such as those of Barthes and Gallasch, and, further, it reveals what is at stake in texts such as these. In these writings there is an implicit “truth” of performance, and both writers have an investment in promoting that “truth”. Turning now to a third example, we can begin to see how the same implicit values are present even though the ostensible object of analysis has changed.

1.1.2 Theatricality as reflexive and politically resistant
Barbara Freedman, in the early 1990s, also invoked a notion of theatricality in a discursive deployment which, on the face of it, differs from the other writers, but on closer examination, reveals many of the same features. Freedman, like Barthes, begins with a rhetorical question: “What do we mean when we say that someone or something is theatrical?” Her response, however, attributes to the “theatrical” slightly different qualities:

What we mean is that such a person is aware that she is seen, reflects that awareness, and so deflects our look. We refer to a fractured reciprocity whereby beholder and beheld reverse positions in a way that renders steady spectatorship impossible. Theatricality evokes an uncanny sense that the given to be seen has the power both to position us and to displace us (1991, 1).

Theatricality, here, describes a self-reflexive relationship between a “beholder and [a] beheld” in which the putatively voyeuristic watching of the spectator is subverted by “she-who-is-seen’s” awareness of the power dynamics of the relationship. Like the Barthesian
formulation, theatricality for Freedman appears to stand for a libidinous force (Barthes’s “ecumenical perception of sensuous artifice”) that challenges structures of power and control (“the given to be seen has the power both to position us and to displace us”). Theatricality, in Freedman’s deployment, in contrast to Barthes, shifts the emphasis from what is deemed as legitimately “theatrical” on stage to the interaction between an observer and an observed—an interaction within which agency (that is, who “commands” the look) shifts between the two.

To illustrate this process, Freedman analyses Albrecht Dürer’s early sixteenth century woodblock print of a draftsman gazing through a velum or grid at a recumbent female model. She suggests that the image’s “complex relay of looks among painter, model, and spectator not only stages our look, but reflects it back to us in a way that we cannot but identify as theatrical” (1991, 1). Freedman argues that the image encourages a notion of “right spectatorship”—which positions the spectator in the gendered position of the male artist (the “appropriate bearer of the look”)—a position that is subverted when the image is viewed from the counter position of the female model (the “proper object of that look”) (2). As a result, Freedman argues, the binary oppositions of “reason against sexuality, activity over passivity, . . . seeing instead of showing” and “masculinity as culture against femininity as disorganized nature” are problematised (ibid.). According to Freedman, the relaxed position of the woman and her knowledge that “she is seen”, are in contrast to the “rigid” and “fixed” position of the artist who, through his viewing apparatus, attempts to “order visually and to distance himself from that which he sees”, thereby suggesting “a futile attempt to protect himself from what he would (not) see” (ibid.). Viewed from the female model’s position, the gazing artist, and by extension, the beholder of the image itself, are not as secure in their positions of mastery as one might think. “The perspective painter”, Freedman concludes, “is transfixed in this moment, paralyzed, unable to capture the sight that encloses him. Enclosing us as well, Dürer’s work draws our alarm” (ibid.).

Theatricality, as Freedman deploys it in her analysis of the Dürer woodcut, functions as that which resists the all-knowing hegemonic gaze of the distanced observer by confronting “him” with his own desire. Like Barthes, Freedman positions theatricality as a force for emancipation, a triumph of surfaces, the opacity of which, in the case of the former, seduces the spectator, and for the latter, takes on a specular quality which disconcertingly reflects the spectator’s desire. At stake for both Freedman and Barthes is an emancipatory humanism that resists what psychoanalytic theory sees as the Oedipal integration of the subject into the Symbolic order (Freedman), or resists processes of semiosis (the “text”) which also constrain the human subject (Barthes).4

4These positionings, as we shall see, emerge elsewhere in the discourse of theatricality—particularly in the early writings of Josette Féral (1982).
1.1.3 The interpretive logic of the discourse of theatricality

In the writings that constitute the recent discourse of theatricality, deployments of ideas of theatricality swing to either side of the theatrical/anti-theatrical divide. In Chapter 2 I examine the interpretive logic that defines the discourse, a logic that positions theatricality either as a vital force for political, aesthetic and personal liberation; or else it is positioned oppositionally because a particular writer perceives theatricality as vitiating the integrity or authenticity of something else (the Platonic argument, cf. Gallasch). Foucault’s (1980) metaphor of a “battle” over the status of the truth gestures toward what Samuel Weber (1987) sees, in his analysis of interpretation of interpretation, as a struggle of interpretations. Weber reconsiders Derrida’s (1978) distinctions between, on the one hand, “nostalgic” interpretation, which seeks an original and transcendent truth, and on the other, “affirmative” interpretation, which is concerned not with origins but with play, intersubjectivity and surfaces.

The discourse of theatricality, in its late twentieth century manifestation, exemplified by the writings of Barthes, Freedman and Gallasch, is concerned with valorising resistant aesthetic and political positions. Such positions, while affiliated with playfulness and process, and therefore with affirmative interpretation, in fact disguise a hegemonic impulse to validate some performances at the expense of others. Indeed, in the writings of Barthes and Gallasch, a straw man, theatre, is created, with which the values of hoary conservatism and reactionary politics are affiliated. Barthes’s “theatricality” and Gallasch’s avant-gardist “performance” are, in contrast, undeniably affirmative.

Weber, however, rejects an easy acceptance of what Derrida saw as the “irreconcilable” “common ground” of nostalgic and affirmative interpretations and the invitation of Derrida’s text “to identify the authorial standpoint with the ‘affirmative’ interpretation’” (1987, 3, 4). Rather, Weber makes a claim which, unlike Derrida, approaches Foucault’s concern with truth and power:

> beyond the “irreducible difference” of nostalgic and affirmative interpretations, there is a third version, interpreting interpretation as a struggle to overwhelm and dislodge an already existing dominant interpretation and thus to establish its own authority (5).

We can view this establishment of interpretive authority as one of Foucault’s “specific effects of power attached to the true” (1980, 132). What becomes “attached to the true” of theatricality, then, are, on one hand, qualities of process, plurality, artifice, playfulness; and
on the other, deceit, insincerity, moribund tradition, meretriciousness. In examining the various claims and counter-claims of writings that constitute the discourse of theatricality, I am attempting to delineate the interpretive positions of the various texts in order to determine the will to truth or power that underlies them. In other words, I am attempting to highlight what is at stake for a particular writer deploying theatricality in either a pejorative or affirmative way. Chapter 2, therefore, is primarily concerned with mapping out the contours of the discourse of theatricality—indeed, identifying that there is a distinct conversation occurring in the field of theatre and performance studies.

1.2 The emergence of theatricality as a value

1.2.1 The activation of theatricality by the avant-garde

From the various texts that engage with the notion of theatricality, a discourse with a distinct genealogy emerges. The binarism of theatricality/anti-theatricality takes on new inflections in the early twentieth century when the idea of theatricality as a liberatory force begins to circulate in the writings and practices of avant-garde artists. In Chapter 3 I analyse how this emerging discourse of theatricality manifests as part of a wider discourse, modernism, and I then explore how avant-gardist ideas manifested in their interpretations of theatricality. Finally I return to the discursive field mapped out in the previous chapter in order to demonstrate how avant-gardist themes continue to inflect contemporary writings on theatricality.

The discursive field of modernism—that is, how it is defined, what is taken to constitute it—is contested; therefore it is important to distinguish between, first, writings about modernism, and second, writings that are understood as being those of the modernists themselves. Within discourse about modernism, its objects, definitions, parameters are contested by cultural theorists and practitioners (particularly when postmodernism is factored into the argument). This conflict, however, arose from a tension within the discourse of modernism itself; a struggle between “triumphalist”, “progressive” bourgeois modernism on the one hand, and avant-gardist, auto-critical, “bohemian” and aesthetic modernism on the other.

This fundamental dichotomy underpins the cultural battle-lines of the twentieth century, positing as it does on one side a conservative, self-congratulatory and institutionalised art, and on the other, art created in reaction against the former, that seeks to challenge and destroy institutions and orthodoxy, and is informed by a resistant politics. In his analysis of the field of cultural production of late nineteenth century French literature, Pierre Bourdieu identifies a similar distinction between what he terms the “heteronomous” field that is market or demand driven, and the “autonomous” field that is without profit and best captured by the idea of “art
for art’s sake” (1993, 45-51). Avant-gardist theatricality was, in the main, a reaction against the “rational” theatre of bourgeois modernism (for example: Futurism and Dada; the Russian and German theatricalists, such as Meyerhold, Evreinov, Reinhardt; the theatre of Artaud). Yet, when viewed from a different perspective, avant-gardist theatricality could be seen also as anti-theatrical: avant-garde artists sought an essence of humanity which, they believed, could be accessed through the theatre, but was unavailable to it in the theatre’s modern manifestation.

A key theme of avant-gardist modernism, in the early twentieth century, which I discuss in Chapter 3, was the belief that the modern individual was alienated from his/her essential humanness. The artistic objective of the avant-garde was to reunite this divided subject. Therefore, the art that they produced sought to break down what they saw as a division between art and life. This division, at the end of the nineteenth century, was perceived as a symptom of more general malaise, a “culture crisis”; and for the avant-garde, who were disaffected with language, returning to the body was seen as a way to resolve the crisis (Fischer-Lichte 1997). They associated the body with spontaneity and intuition, and equated language with rationality and repression (Segel 1998; Fischer-Lichte 1997; Innes 1993). In Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s “Letter of Lord Chandos” (1902) he complained of an inability to express an opinion on anything because “the abstract terms of which the tongue must avail itself as a matter of course in order to voice a judgement—these terms crumbled in my mouth like mouldy fungi” (quoted in Fischer-Lichte 1997, 62). Hofmannsthal’s character, detached from language, suffered an existential crisis that threatened him with annihilation:

Single words floated round me; they congealed into eyes which stared at me and into which I was forced to stare back—whirlpools which gave me vertigo and, reeling incessantly, led into the void (ibid).

However, emphasis on the physical, as Harold Segel writes, was a defining characteristic of modernism in general. In a broad social sense, modernism’s valorisation of physicality was expressed through the formation of nationalist athletics movements in the nineteenth century and, in a specifically artistic sense, through the ideal of the male writer as man-of-action (Segel 1998, 5-7). Despite their differing interpretations, avant-garde and bourgeois modernisms both emphasised physicality and the role of bodies.

Related to this valorisation of the body and physicality was a renewed focus on the “essence” of theatre, which avant-garde theatre practitioners saw as its materiality. In 1905, the German theatricalist, Georg Fuchs, wrote: “drama must be understood in terms of the materials in which it is made manifest. The term theatre consists of the totality of these materials”
(quoted in Gorelik {1940}1947, 285). From this emphasis on the materiality of theatre, avant-garde theatre artists promoted a notion of “theatricality” that was grounded in the materiality of production and performance, and set in opposition to a bourgeois notion of “theatre”, the predominant element of which was the written script and spoken word. These, then, are the genealogical foundations of the Barthesian claim that theatricality was “theatrical-minus-text”.

1.2.2 The valorisation of avant-gardist discourse in twentieth century Theatre Studies

In his “Stages of Forgetting: Theatre History and the Dynamics of Amnesia”, the keynote address to the 2002 International Federation of Theatre Research conference in Amsterdam, Christopher Balme argued that in the early twentieth century the theatrical field was divided between, on the one hand, commercial and boulevard theatre, and on the other, avant-gardist theatre. However, according to Balme, theatre historiography has tended to “remember” the latter, and the history of theatre in the twentieth century is a narrative of the victory of avant-gardist aesthetics. The early 1900s production of Max Reinhardt’s Sumurun, for example, is celebrated as a key moment in theatre history (Fischer-Lichte 1997, 65) but, in the same year that Sumurun toured to New York, 1912, Richard Walton Tully’s The Bird of Paradise also premiered. Tully’s play, according to Balme, enjoyed a long and financially successful run on a number of different stages. However, it was forgotten, and does not, unlike the Reinhardt production, appear in accounts of twentieth century theatre.

Balme’s discussion of how Theatre Studies has positioned The Bird of Paradise exemplifies the privileging of a particular narrative, as a result of which avant-gardist ideals, values, principles have had a significant influence on the formation of theatrical discourse. According to Alan Woods, “the search for the new is present in virtually all areas of scholarly work”, yet, among all the journals in the United States, “devoted to the documentation of the new, the experimental, the avant-garde”, Woods claims that “no scholarly publication devotes such attention to the popular or commercial theatre” (1989, 166). The exclusion of The Bird of Paradise from serious scholarly consideration is a manifestation of avant-gardist anti-theatricality. Productions such as The Bird are too commercialised, are reified objects, and bedazzle spectators, taking them further away from the Truth.⁵ Indeed, to engage in giving serious consideration to theatre as an “art” at all is to take up a position within a discourse whose “accepted concepts, legitimized subjects, taken-for-granted objects, and preferred strategies” are those of the theatrical avant-garde (Rabinow and Dreyfus 1983, xxiv). Fischer-

⁵These same anti-theatricalist charges could be laid by any “serious” theatre scholar against a contemporary commercial show. Philip Auslander’s critique of the valorisation of “liveness” (1999) as a putative value, that is, how we understand notions of “liveness” and “mediatization”, is, I believe, seeking to interrogate this anti-theatricality from another direction. The valorisation of “liveness” is again symptomatic of a Platonic anti-mimetic prejudice, as is anti-theatricality.
Lichte’s attention to the Reinhardt production, therefore, can be understood in this context.

1.2.3 Martin Puchner’s genealogy of anti-theatricality in modernist discourse

The notion of a genealogy of theatricality has, until recently, received little attention. Martin Puchner’s *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-theatricality, and Drama* (2002), however, actively pursues such a project. The “triumph” of avant-gardism is contextualised by Puchner who, by means of a re-configuration of Jonas Barish’s (1981) notion of “anti-theatricality”, builds on Barish’s suggestion that it was a productive force within modernist theatre (Barish 1981, 450). “An analysis of anti-theatrical theatre”, writes Puchner, demands, not a descriptive history of the theater, but a history of the value of theater or theatricality, what one might call, borrowing from Nietzsche, a “genealogy” of the theater . . .

In order to understand the avant-garde’s triumphant theatricalism and thus the modernist resistance to it, it is necessary not only to look forward, toward contemporary theater studies, but also to look back, for the figure to which many partisans of the theater continue to refer in one way or another, and from whom they derive their central slogans, is Richard Wagner . . .

The argument I advance here is that Wagner’s pivotal role with respect to modernism was transforming the concept of theatricality from a description of the theater as an art form—defining what happens onstage—into a *value that must be either rejected or embraced* (2002: 7-8, 31 [emphasis added]).

Puchner argues that the modernist invocation of theatricality as a “value that must be either rejected or embraced” straddled a divide between “(pro)-theatricalism” on one side and “anti-theatricalism” on the other. The former position, writes Puchner, was perhaps, encapsulated in the Futurist Marinetti’s call for a “theatricality without theater”: a kind of battle cry of the avant-garde, while its inversion could function as a slogan for their modernist detractors: “theater without theatricality” (7). In either case, Puchner argues, what was at stake was the “value of theater or theatricality” (ibid. [emphasis added]).

From Puchner’s work emerges the idea of a struggle within modernism over the value of theatricality, a struggle that, for Puchner, began with Wagner. The Wagnerian “invention” of theatricality as a value, he writes, “polarized the cultural field of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Europe, and even outside Europe”, and any genealogy of theatre and theatricality as values must “begin with those who oppose it” (32).

Nietzsche and Adorno, in their opposition to Wagnerian theatricality, positioned theatricality
itself as an oppositional term. According to Puchner, “the most symptomatic feature of Nietzsche’s and Adorno’s critiques is the linkage of, or slippage between, two terms: theatricality and mimesis” (ibid.). The latter term, since Plato, has accrued considerable critical baggage but, Puchner observes, critics of mimesis agreed that if there must be mimesis then better it be mimesis without actors because, as in the Platonic schema,

there is no mimesis more vulgar than the mimesis of actors . . . who practice the most basic and mindless kind of mimesis with their hands and postures, grimaces and mannerisms (ibid.).

Puchner writes that both Nietzsche and Adorno inveigh against Wagner and mimesis, Nietzsche describing “Wagner sarcastically as ‘the greatest mime [größte Mime]’”, and Adorno observing that “it is as if the aversion to mimic art [Scheu vor der Mimik] did not have full power over him” (32-33).

Puchner concedes that the basis for these claims, overstated as they are, is grounded in Wagner’s aesthetic theory itself. Puchner writes that Wagner, in The Art Work of the Future (1849),

leaves no doubt that the central part of the total work of art is neither the music nor the libretto, but the theatrical performance of singers, whose gestures constitute the foundation of the Gesamtkunstwerk (2002, 41).

Wagner’s emphasis on gesture in his conception of the total artwork is dealt with in some detail by Puchner, who identifies that for Wagner the “unsayable” could be expressed through physical as well as musical gesture (43-44). Yet Puchner also notes Wagner’s ambivalence towards theatricality, an ambivalence which manifested as a distinction between “true” and “false” theatricality. Whereas the former, in which his oeuvre is imbued, was entrusted with the task of modelling the true German Volk, the latter, inscribed on the body of the Jew, writes Puchner, was “Wagner’s nightmare”; that the association of actors [Schauspielergenossenschaft] which for him is the agent of the theatrical artwork of the future, would turn out to be a bunch of Mimes [the dwarfish, deceiving foster father to Siegfried in Der Ring des Nibelungen] and that their theatricality and mimesis would never be anything but deception and lies (51).

In this conception of theatricality, and its attendant anti-theatrical anxiety, a modernist
thematics of the body emerge. The body is constructed as site of meaning-making, indeed, a superior meaning-maker that can express the “unsayable”. Yet these same mimetic-gestural-theatrical skills can also deceive, fundamentally betraying the very status of the art work.

The attack on Wagner’s championing of the arts of mimetic theatre as pernicious theatricality, initiated by Nietzsche, is not an attack on the theatre per se. Rather, it is an attack on the detrimental influence of theatre upon the other arts. Puchner argues that an anti-theatricalist view of theatricality emerges in the “fear that the theater might have a bad influence on the other arts”, therefore, as an “aesthetic value” it “must be opposed” (33). The positions laid out by Wagner and his detractors set the tone for the contemporary discourse on theatricality. In them we can discern certain claims for and against theatricality which, in fact, continue to define the field of contemporary discourse.5

Clearly, in the writings of Barthes, Freedman and Gallasch, theatricality can be seen to be functioning as a value and, in the latter case in particular, we can discern an anxiety about “true” and “false” theatricality, here configured in the discourse “performance/theatre”. Gallasch’s writing is exemplary of high modernism’s disdain for theatre and theatricality’s detrimental effect on other art forms (here “performance”)—prefigured in the writings of Nietzsche and Adorno, and coming into full flower in the critical writings of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Furthermore, Gallasch’s text expresses a polarity, arising from the Wagnerian “invention” of theatricality as an “absolute value”, which, in Puchner’s argument, requires “one . . . to declare one’s allegiance to the theater or come forward with a critique of its value” (2002: 9, 32). It is in this sense that we can understand the stringent critique of Fried in “Art and Objecthood” (1967; 1998). In championing an “absorbed” and autonomous art work, Fried felt the need to defend it against the pernicious “corrupting” influence of “theatre” (understood, in this sense, not as the art form, but the value of “theatricality”).

It is, however, the association of theatricality with corporeality that is the single most defining characteristic of the genealogy of twentieth century, avant-gardist influenced, theatrical history. It emerges in Marinetti’s call for “theatricality without theatre”, a slogan that echoes in the Barthesian formulation of theatricality. Similarly, in Gallasch’s text, the same discourse emerges (the production of “Wilson’s text [lacks] the tone, voices and bodies it needs” [emphasis added]); and Freedman, from a psychoanalytic perspective, also invokes theatre’s relationship to the body: “Theater plays upon our specular captivation by corporeal images; the body as a vehicle facilitates identifications that evoke the illusion of self-preservation” (1991, 3).

5According to Puchner, although Wagner never used the term “theatricality”, preferring to use his detractors’ term, “gesture” “(Gebärde)”, it was, nonetheless, a distinct concept for him (2002, 41).
3). In the limited examples canvassed here, we have seen how an idea of theatricality as a description of an art form was reformulated by Wagner as a value that manifested in mimetic gesture. This idea was taken-up by the early twentieth century avant-garde who called for a re-orientation of theatre centred on the materiality of bodies and things (“theatricality without theater”): a powerfully compelling idea that has continued to inflect the thinking of post war critics from Barthes to Freedman and Gallasch.

One study that engages with theatricality outside the parameters of avant-gardist discourse is Elizabeth Burns’s (1972) sociological analysis of it as a convention of behaviour. In Chapter 4 I take the opportunity to re-evaluate Burns’s work in the light of recent discussions of theatricality which, for the most part, dismiss it. Contrary to these views, I argue that Burns’s study still provides a theory of theatricality that usefully positions a range of practices and ideas within a broader social setting. Her work on the use of the theatrical metaphor in a broader social sense, informed as it is by her awareness of theatre history, avoids some of the mis-recognitions of Goffman (1956), and provides a useful analysis of how the metaphor functions to create a particular understanding of the world. Similarly, Burns’s categories of rhetorical and authenticating conventions are helpful for understanding the interpretive processes engaged in by spectators and theatre makers at different moments in history while, at the same time, avoiding some of the ontological assumptions that underpin other texts that also deploy, often implicitly, a theory of theatricality. Importantly, in Burns’s analysis, theatricality does not emerge as a transcendent category but, on the contrary, functions as an analytic with which certain social processes can be examined.

1.3 The emergence of theatre as an “effect” of shifting power–knowledge relations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

1.3.1 Re-examining the theatrical palimpsest

Although Puchner argues for the compelling hold of Wagner’s ideas on subsequent theatrical practice, there is a longer story to tell. Already in the sixteenth century, “theatre” did not simply stand for an art form, but was a term to which values had been assigned. In the sixteenth century we see the formation of particular cultural practices which became associated through contemporary writings with a particular word used by the Greeks and Romans. Puchner (2002) argues that assigning value to particular things makes the modernist discourse on theatre what it is; it is this assignment of value that defines modernist discourse and makes it distinct. However, while the story of the conditions of emergence of the modernist positions on theatricality had one of its beginnings in the Wagnerian value of the

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7 Goffman’s use of the theatrical metaphor is based on a traditional realist proscenium arch model. He suggests that while behaviour is performed for others, there are, also, times when the subject is “back stage”; a region where “the performer can relax; he [sic] can drop his front, fogo speaking his lines, step out of character” (1956, 70).
nineteenth century, it had another in the theatre of the late sixteenth century.

In stitching together the panels of the patchwork of influences, contesting claims, definitions, statements—or in other words, Foucault’s “piecemeal . . . alien forms” (1977a, 142), my genealogy of theatricality acknowledges the importance of the modernist moment identified by Puchner. However, although Puchner marks a shift, a transformation of the concept of theatricality from a “description of the theater as an art form” to a “value”, the explication of such a description falls outside the parameters of his study. Puchner’s notion of theatricality as a value, and his locating of it in the socio-historical moment of early modernism, is a useful starting point for the interrogation of the discourse of theatricality, the values of which have remained largely taken for granted. Yet the genealogical project requires us to delve even further, chronologically, to interrogate this “description of the theater as an art form”. Such an interrogation leads us back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, when we are able to discern something like the art form of theatre as we understand it today. The project of Part Two of this thesis, then, is to tease apart some of the strands of an interconnected web of cultural practices and ideas in order to isolate and highlight those threads, describing “theatre”, from which the discourse of theatre is stitched.

When we engage in such a project, we are covering well-travelled territory; but “genealogy”, Foucault reminds us, “is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times” (1977a, 139). In his re-reading of Nietzsche’s *The Genealogy of Morals*, Foucault considers three key concepts: “origin”, “descent” and “emergence”. Foucault argues, after Nietzsche, that the “metaphysics” of “origin” arise from a belief in the “preciousness” of the “birth” of “things”, that

we tend to think that this is the moment of their greatest perfection, when they emerged dazzling from the hands of a creator or in the shadowless light of a first morning. The origin always precedes the Fall. It comes before the body, before the world and time (143).

Yet the genealogist does not believe in “essences”, and in “listen[ing] to history,” discovers that there is not “behind things . . . a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms” (142).

Foucault’s genealogy, in terms of “origin”, is “the history of an error we call Truth” and the “genealogist needs history to dispel the chimeras of the origin” (144). “Origin”
(“Ursprung”), in Nietzsche, is also the translation of “Entstehung” and “Herkunft”. The latter, Foucault suggests, is “the equivalent of stock or descent; it is the ancient affiliation to a group, sustained by the bonds of blood, tradition, or social class” (145). Rather than tracing a bloodline or a continuous development, or “restor[ing] an unbroken continuity”, on the contrary, a genealogical “examination of descent . . . permits the discovery, under the unique aspect of a trait or concept, of the myriad events through which—thanks to which, against which—they were formed” (146 [emphasis added]). It is precisely this use of “descent” that informs my examination of the “unique aspect” of “theatricality” in this thesis.

The third Nietzschean term, “Entstehung”, Foucault designates “as emergence, the moment of arising” (148). We must not, however, expect a single inaugural moment because “no one”, Foucault writes, “is responsible for an emergence; no one can glory in it, since it always occurs in the interstice” (150); or, as Dreyfus and Rabinow understand it, a clearing is created and “the play of forces in any particular historical situation is made possible by the space that defines them” (1983, 109).

1.3.2 The theatrical metaphor and the emerging of non-art form theatres

In leaping from one “moment of arising” in the nineteenth century back to another in the sixteenth century I am not suggesting a causal relationship between the two moments. The idea of theatricality as an aesthetic value, in fact, would be incomprehensible to the sixteenth century mind. Nevertheless, there are at work, even at such an early date, “unique” theatrical theories, metaphors and practices that will later inform the Wagnerian value of “theatricality”.

First among these is the theatrical metaphor, the topos of theatrum mundi, which was the golden thread running through all the different deployments of theatre and notions of theatricality in the Renaissance. Chapter 5 explores the thematic and structural dimensions of the metaphor before examining some of its ancient and its (rare) medieval manifestations. The theatrical metaphor took a variety of forms, but in essence it described a particular ontology: the human as spectator in and of a theatre of the world created by God; or humanity as actors in a theatre of the world watched over by God the divine spectator/producer/designer/playwright (Christian {1969} 1987). Although the metaphor of theatrum mundi was virtually unknown in the middle ages, its revival in the sixteenth century was part of humanist scholarship’s interest in all things theatrical from the ancient world. Indeed, as I discuss below, hermetic and neo-Platonist uses of the topos informed Camillo’s design of a memory theatre (Yates 1966), while neo-Platonist ideas of the human as a microcosmos underpinned Renaissance practices of anatomy: a theatre was deployed to look into the little world of the human body, just as the same instrument could be used to examine the world at large (Ferrari 1987). With the emergence of playhouses, the theatrum
The **mundi** metaphor was readily to hand for playwrights, and the “fit” between metaphor and the new technology of representation in turn reinforced the ontological “truth” of the metaphor.

It is in the light of this and, for the following reasons, that I make the distinction of theatre as an “art form”. First, as I demonstrate in Chapter 6, both prior to 1576, the year the first English playhouse was built, and for some time afterwards, the term “theatre” was used in a variety of contexts and only gradually, once the practice of performing plays in spaces defined as “theatres” was well established, did it become associated with this practice. Second, I wish to avoid the historical errors of “presentism” and “finalism” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 118); we cannot assume that the object we think of as “theatre” today was thought of in the same way four hundred years ago. The question we must ask, therefore, is: what did people in the sixteenth century mean when they referred to “theatre”, if “theatre” as we understand it did not exist?

We cannot claim for theatre as an art form, as we know it today, as Dreyfus and Rabinow gloss Foucault, that we can find “at some distant point in the past” a “kernel of the present”, and thereby understand the art form “theatre” as “the finalized necessity of the development from that point to the present” (ibid.). Foucault argues that such is the mistake of “traditional history” that seeks to “writ[e] a history of the past in terms of the present” (1977a, 154; {1975}1977, 31). In contrast, a genealogy of theatre traces its descent and maps its emergences and in so doing, the discourse of theatre as an art arises and is subsequently entwined and enmeshed with theatricality as a value—which is where Puchner’s genealogy of it as a concept within modernism begins. This bigger picture allows us to interrogate the discourse of theatricality in order that we may write, as Foucault suggests, “the history of the present” ({1975}1977, 31). It is this “history” that we find embedded in the statements of Barthes, Freedman and Gallasch and which, through its inclusions and exclusions, institutes a particular set of understandings and assumptions about theatre and theatricality.

Traditional theatre history,⁸ misrecognising the formal similarities between the ancient theatre and that of the Renaissance, homologises the two activities so that what the Greeks understood as “theatre” is represented as the same as that produced, for example, by sixteenth and seventeenth dramatists. The way in which the art form that emerged during the European Renaissance interacted with its society differed considerably from that of its ancient ancestor (despite the Renaissance humanist scholars’ active interest in antiquity). Alan Somerstein

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⁸I use “traditional” in its commonly understood sense, but also in the sense which Foucault uses it, that is, in contrast to “wirkliche Historie”, a term he takes from Nietzsche, meaning “effective” history, or, genealogy. Foucault sees the role of “effective” history in relation to traditional history as “to uproot its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt its pretended continuity. This is because knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting.” (1977a, 154).
emphasises the civic nature of Athenian dramas (these, he argues, can be taken as the
standard for how it was used in other Greek cities), which were “essentially and in principle
events for the whole community” (2002, 5). The audiences which attended the theatres,
Somerstein writes, after subtracting women and slaves (of which there were few) from their
number, were “probably never less than 20 per cent, and often as much as 40 to 50 [per
cent]” of the whole community (ibid.).

The art form “theatre”, as we now understand it, in contrast, did not emerge from the civic
communality of the Greeks (this is the humanist fantasy of traditional theatre scholarship),
but from the interstices of a range of social practices and epistemologies during the fifteenth
to seventeenth centuries. These included, but were not limited to: royal and municipal
“triumphs”; literature describing conventions of behaviour and social “types”; the study of
natural philosophy; the practice of anatomy; map-making, architecture, optical theory and
perspectivism; the revival of the theatrical metaphor; animal-baiting; folk dramas and
fooling; the performance of interludes and intermezzi.⁹

Michael Anderson provides a clue to some of these diverse usages of the term “theatre”,
explaining that the Italian word “teatro” carried its association with the ancient performance
practice together with a

simpler etymological sense of “a place for watching.” Not every comedy
needed the construction of a theatre for its presentation, and not every “theatre”

⁹The literature on each of these topics is considerable and I do not claim to have undertaken an exhaustive search
through it. Furthermore, through my combining of social practices and epistemologies, the point I wish to
emphasise is that ways of knowing and of doing were not separate and leaked into each other. In the following
references, several of these categories fall within the scope of each of the studies. Roy Strong’s _Art and Power: _
_Renaissance Festivals 1450-1650_ (1973) provides a thorough account of the development of the
renaissance triumph and other court ceremonial. Jean-Christophe Agnew in _Worlds Apart: The Market and the _
Blair’s _The Theater of Nature: Jean Bodin and Renaissance Science_ (1997) and Giovanna Ferrari in “Public
Anatomy Lessons and the Carnival: The Anatomy Theatre of Bologna” (1987) provide, respectively, good
accounts of natural philosophy and the practice of anatomy. John Gillies in _Shakespeare and the Geography of _
_Difference_ (1994) and David Woodward’s _Art and Cartography: Six Historical Essays_ (1987) discuss the
theories and development of map-making; and Joan Gadol’s study _Leon Battista Alberti: Universal Man of the _
_Early Renaissance_ (1969) is a good foundation not only for Renaissance architecture, but also for Renaissance
humanist scholarship. Mark Smith’s “Getting the Big Picture in Perspectivist Optics” (1981) and James Elkins’s
“Renaissance Perspectives” (1992) discuss medieval and Renaissance optical theory. Linda G. Christian gives a
thorough history of the theatrical metaphor in _Theatrum Mundi: The History of an Idea_ (1969) and Brian
Vickers’s “Bacon’s Use of Theatrical Imagery” (1971) still gives the most comprehensive articulation of the
metaphor’s use in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Mulryne and Sherwin’s (eds) collection _Theatre of _
The English and Italian Renaissance_ (1991) has some good essays on interludes and intermezzi, particularly
Michael Anderson’s “The Changing Scene: Plays and Playhouses in the Italian Renaissance” which discusses
how they were staged and why. Howard Norland’s _Drama in Early Tudor Britain 1458-1558_ (1995) also is
useful for Tudor interludes and folk dramas, and Robert Weimann’s _Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition: _
_Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function_ (1978) provides a helpful sociological analysis
of fooling and folk drama.
was used exclusively for dramatic performances (1991, 7).

According to Anderson, the room set aside for performances of the first comedies in Ferrara was commonly referred to as “sala or salone, ‘hall’” and that “where the word teatro or anfiteatro appears it refers to the arrangements for seating the spectators” (ibid.). We can equate this Renaissance Italian use of teatro with contemporary terminology of “seating stand” or “bleachers”. If we divorce “theatre” for a moment from its humanist didactic usage, the term referred simply to a place which allowed people to watch anything being displayed, be it an anatomical dissection, a wedding, a coronation, dancing or feasting and, increasingly from the middle of the 1500s onwards, plays (Anderson 1991; Ferrari 1987; Strong {1973} 1984).

The practice of presenting and watching plays as entertainment occurred in a range of circumstances and contexts—separate from dedicated spaces provided for that purpose—for at least a century before 1576, both in England and on the continent. Additionally, social life itself became increasingly performative from the late 1400s onwards, a theatricalisation of social life that manifested, particularly, in the rituals of Renaissance state power. However, by the 1590s, the presentation of plays in purpose-built playhouses was a clearly identifiable phenomenon: in addition to the London playhouses, there was the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, and other permanent (or semi-permanent) purpose-built theatres became a feature of European cities. Concurrent with these developments there arose a range of writings on the social, moral and ontological effects of this cultural practice—which had both its advocates and its detractors—from which emerged a discourse that, in turn, shaped theatre as a cultural practice.

1.3.3 A new paradigm emerges

Although the question of what did “theatre” mean to people in the sixteenth century underpins the whole of Part Two of this thesis, it is principally addressed in Chapter 7 where I examine what I call a theatricalised epistemology—a particular way of organising knowledges of the world. Theatre as an art form developed as one of a myriad of consequences and implications arising from the great theoretical paradigm shift that occurred in a space of two to three hundred years, and which made redundant the elegantly structured and theological Aristotelian conception of the universe (explored in the first section of Chapter 7), replacing it with a bumptious empiricism that accepted nothing that could not be seen and tested, proved or disproved. Slowly and inexorably, God slipped beyond the

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90 Clearly identifiable but unusual, as the Claes Visscher panorama of London of 1616 identifies the theatres as, West writes, “unusual landmarks, and they are frequently commented on in the accounts of foreign visitors to London” (West 1999, 245 n. 2).
purview of Galileo’s telescope.

In section two of Chapter 7, I explore some of the ways in which the medieval, theocentric, understanding of the world was gradually transformed by humanist scholars’ observations of the material world and their recovery of previously unavailable texts of the ancients (for example, Ptolemy’s *Geography* and Vitruvius’s *De Architettura*). Martin Heidegger characterises the shift from an ancient and medieval sense of being in the world to a Renaissance sense of being in the world as lying in the conception “world picture” which, he suggests, “when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as a picture” (1977, 129; quoted also in Freedman 1991, 9).

According to Heidegger, the modern “world picture” could be distinguished from that which had come before by “the fact that the world becomes a picture at all” (130). Therefore, from understanding existence as being within the world, the human subject becomes aware of itself as separate in its subjectivity from the world. Furthermore, he argues, the construction of “man” as a “subiectum” leads to an “anthropologizing” of the world, and the fundamental stance of man in relation to what is, in its entirety, is defined as a world view (*Weltanschauung*) . . . As soon as the world becomes a picture, the position of man is conceived as a world view (133-134).11

The Renaissance pictorialising of the world literally made the world a “theatre”, a place for looking, with the human observer positioned as either subject or object of this looking. The problem with this positioning, as the sixteenth century Italian rhetorician and hermetic scholar, Giulio Camillo, noted, was the loss of a vantage point: “to want to see these lower things well, it is necessary to climb to higher ones and, looking down from above, we can have surer understanding of them” (quoted in West 1999, 249). In the late sixteenth century, one means by which the human observer could view this theatre of the world was to represent the world in a “theatre” which, as Chapters 6 and 7 explore, could take a number of forms, such as book-form collections of maps or of natural philosophy, or anatomy theatres. A “theatre” thus became a place for looking at the world, and through such looking the watcher would come to know the world. The notion of “world picture” suggesting, too, a detached spectator, provided a clearing within which “theatre”—both as place for looking and a methodology of spectatorship—took its place.

11Heidegger defines “anthropology” as he uses it in this essay as designating “that philosophical interpretation of man which explains and evaluates whatever is, in its entirety, from the standpoint of man and in relation to man” (1977, 133).
This idea of a “theatre” as a technology for contemplation and knowing is explored by West in his essay, “The Idea of a Theater: Humanist Ideology and the Imaginary Stage in Early Modern Europe” (1999). West proposes that an idea of a “theatre”, as imagined by humanist scholars, existed before the thing itself. West concludes, however, that the vicissitudes of this “idea of a theatre”, particularly when it intersected with sixteenth century performance practices, meant that, in practice,

the [humanist] idea of a theater as a common beholding place of visual comprehension that safely and constructively educated its passive audience was possible only so long as it was confined to the imagination (1999, 278).

West tracks a particular conception of a “theatre”, derived from the humanist literary tradition, which sought both to educate and entertain, and which emphasised the act of seeing (and the creation of a place for seeing) in the process of knowledge formation. However, West argues, when humanist writers attempted to physically stage their ideal of a “theatre”, the didactic function of humanist drama was subordinated to the need to entertain, a need that became paramount in the interactive process of performance. The humanist ideological project of creating a tool that enabled knowing-through-seeing struggled against the socio-economic and cultural imperatives of Renaissance performance practices.

There was also, West observes, a tension in humanist scholars’ understanding of the antithetical notions of, on one hand, “theatre” (a “common beholding place”), and on the other, their understanding, derived from Aristotle, of “drama” (the “imitation of something done” (250). The humanist performed “theatre” (as opposed to the read literary “theatres”) needed bodies, but it was the interpolation of the bodies of actors and audience into the humanist ideal “theatre” that threatened its ideological agenda. Threatened, but did not entirely vanquish because, as West argues:

The early modern theater was in fact a place for learning, but not through contemplation as humanist scholars had imagined. It taught through action, both that of its actors and its lookers (1999, 258).

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1 Using John Rastell’s Tudor interlude, The Nature of the Four Elements (circra 1517), as a case study, West notes a paradox: the humanist pedagogical model presented by the play is not that of the play itself, in other words, the medium conflicts with the message. Through its action, the play demonstrates that valuable learning can be had, not by “traditional” study nor experience, but through performance, hence complicating “the relations among study, experience, and desire” (277). Ostensibly the audience is witnessing the interlude for their “edification but hoping for amusement.” (ibid.) In the printed text, potential producers are advised that the play can be shortened by cutting a “touche of the sad mater as the messengers parte, and some of naturys parte and some of experyence parte”; however, the entertaining Sensuall Apetye’s section is to remain (278).
The humanist ideal of a “theatre” as a didactic tool continued in other areas; it could also be, West writes: “a large book that contained knowledge in a visual or visualizable form” (1999, 247). This usage points towards a particular instrument for knowing the world, a theoretical “theatre”; to know the world thus was to theatricalise it. Among the reasons such an instrument was useful in knowing the world was the philosophical topos of the theatrum mundi: if the world was a “theatre” then a “theatre” was the appropriate tool for knowing the world.13 The range and scale of such “theatres” is explored by Ann Blair (1997) in her work on Jean Bodin’s Universae Naturae Theatrum, and I refer to Blair’s survey of such usages in Chapter 7. By contrasting these different uses of “theatre” during the Renaissance—the “theoretical” and “actual” theatres—we can identify what Foucault calls the “numberless beginnings whose faint traces and hints of color are readily seen by an historical eye” (1977a, 145).

From the above, I do not intend to suggest that in the late sixteenth century, theatre as we understand it today simply began. Rather, in this genealogy I am marking an emergence, a moment of arising, which becomes significant when viewed retrospectively. Similarly, in Puchner’s study of modernism and anti-theatricality, he identifies an emergence which he associates with a charismatic individual, Wagner, whose writings and artistic practices marked a shift from theatricality as a description of an art form to a value, thereby inaugurating modernism’s contested relationship to the term. So although James Burbage and John Brayne erected a purpose-built space for presenting plays on London’s Southbank in 1576, we must be careful not to assign, as J. L. Styan does, too much significance to this event. This “first playhouse”, in Styan’s account, Burbage called “The Theatre’ [from the Greek for ‘a place for seeing’], a name of ancient lineage which has stuck” (1996, 92). This line of argument reassuringly links the Burbage and Brayne emergence back to the Greeks through a word (and, also, he implies, forward to contemporary times, allowing modern theatre to be comfortably inscribed in a two and half thousand year old tradition).

In the next chapter I begin to map out the territory of the discourse of theatricality. Time and again, it is evident that these writings deploy theatricality as a value—either affirmatively or pejoratively—and, just as frequently, certain unexamined ideas as to what constitutes theatre are also used. This thesis, then, is an archaeology (to borrow Foucault’s metaphor) concerned with two specific strata from which sediment has arisen and has affected—is affecting—contemporary discourses in the fields of theatre and performance studies. The

13 An example of this is Giulio Camillo’s L’Idea del Theatro (1550) whose title, West observes, associates vision and knowledge:

**Any humanist scholar would have recognized the graceful compression with which Camillo’s title expresses the visual foundation of knowledge in the etymology of its two nouns, ideu and teatro, each drawn from a different Greek word relating to sight (1999, 249).**
ideas upon which the interpretations of theatricality by Barthes, Freedman and Gallasch are founded have a distinct genealogy that stretches back to Wagner’s invention of it as a value but, more specifically, can be located in the ideas of the avant-garde.

The sedimentation from the second stratum is a little less obvious and more diffuse; it arises from the question: what did “theatre” mean to people in the sixteenth century if the definition of it as we understand it did not yet exist? By examining some of these sixteenth and seventeenth century understandings of “theatre” I am able to challenge a fundamental assumption, that “theatre” always refers to the embodied entertainment/art form involving actors, spectators and performance spaces. A genealogy of sixteenth and seventeenth century uses of theatricality cuts the commonsense association of theatricality with the art form theatre. Without doubt, in such usages, there remains a performative dimension but, more importantly, there is the crucial distinction, highlighted by West (1999), of a theatre as place for seeing, and through seeing, coming to know the world in a particular way.
PART I: MAPPING THE DISCURSIVE FIELD

CHAPTER 2: INTERPRETIVE LOGICS

2.1 The struggle for interpretive dominance

2.1.1 Identifying the field of discourse

Over the last twenty years an identifiable body of writings has emerged which, to a greater or lesser extent, engages with the notion of theatricality. These texts articulate a discourse of theatricality, a discourse in which the term is configured as a value (as Puchner (2002) understands it) and associated with the art form theatre. As I illustrated with the employment of the term by Barthes’, Freedman’ and Gallasch’, the interpretation of theatricality as a value changed with its use, as did the idea of theatre to which these writers linked it. Such slippages, and the (mis)understandings of the term that arise from them, are in turn based upon certain assumptions that can be revealed through a genealogical analysis. This chapter and the next, then, examine these writings, first, to expose the recurring patterns and interpretive strategies that emerge when they are viewed as a group of texts constituting a discursive whole; and second to demonstrate, notwithstanding the writers’ claims to the contrary, that the discourse of theatricality has been distinctly marked by certain modernist discourses and is, therefore, inflected by the aims, assumptions, methodologies and struggles of modernism.

Any review of the literature of theatricality is faced by the sheer volume of texts that invoke the term, sometimes only in passing, across a range of fields. The large scale of this collection—a collection that continues to grow—means that a comprehensive review and analysis of this literature is virtually impossible. For the purposes of this thesis, it is also not particularly helpful. Of greater use is a close examination of key writings—texts that identify theatricality as a “key concept” (Fischer-Lichte 1995a)—in the field of Theatre/Performance Studies, in order to identify what such writings claim as their own, what they authorise, and what they claim as true. In this chapter and the next I lay out a body of literature spanning twenty years, and trace the emergence of a discourse of theatricality that is predicated on an interpretive logic which positions an idea of “theatricality” as a subordinate or pejorative value against and over which another term can be privileged. Imbricated in this logic are writings—of which Gallasch’s review is a minor example—that define “performance” as “not-theatre”, and that assign a hierarchy of values to both terms. However, the same logic also operates in reverse: I examine certain texts and writers for whom theatricality is not pejorative but is a value to be celebrated; indeed, it is positioned as a transcendent category, to which various forms of practice aspire. The value
and status of theatricality, then, varies in these writings depending on the interpretive context within which it is deployed.

Such competing claims as to the value and status of theatricality can best be understood as a series of claims for and on the meaning of the term itself; that is, as interpretative struggles. In order to establish the grounds upon which such struggles are played out, in the first part of the chapter I consider Derrida’s (1978) interpretations of interpretation—two interpretations of interpretation that are, writes Derrida, “absolutely irreconcilable” and that “together share the field of which we call, in such problematic fashion, the social sciences” (1978, 293). Samuel Weber (1987) finds in Derrida’s essay implications for interpretation in general: a third paradigm, not rendered explicitly by Derrida, that suggests the “common ground [of interpretation] is above all a battleground” (1987, 4). Weber’s metaphor of a battleground of interpretations—a metaphor that echoes Foucault’s (1980) battle for the truth to which I referred in the previous chapter—is the foundation upon which I base my analysis of how certain Performance Studies scholars have attempted to produce and institutionalise particular interpretations of theatricality. By linking these interpretations to a rendering of performance that is both politically resistant and culturally pluralist, and inspired by the historical avant-garde, certain scholars have achieved interpretive dominance over the field. As a case study I refer briefly to the way these battles for the truth were manifested in the Performance Studies versus Theatre Studies debates in the US and Australian academies in the early 1990s.

In the second part of this chapter I review some early writings that seek to critically engage with a notion of theatricality as a distinct object of study. In particular I interrogate Josette Féral’s “Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified” (1982), a work which is unmistakably inflected by the interpretive strategies critiqued by Weber (1987). In the same volume of Modern Drama in which Féral’s essay appears are two further essays by Chantal Pontbriand (1982) and Philip Monk (1982), both of which, despite differing emphases, adopt a similar strategy to that of Féral. Finally, I turn to an essay by Philip Auslander (1997) that offers a critique of Féral’s and Pontbriand’s use of Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” (1967; 1998); in particular I develop Auslander’s critique of those writers’ problematic enlisting of Fried’s argument—itself a response to a specific historical moment in art and criticism—to a different critical and cultural context.

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14 There is a shift of emphasis in Samuel Weber’s (1987) translation of this phrase: “they divide—se partage—the field of what is called, problematically, the human sciences” (3). Weber’s translation, unlike that of Alan Bass, implies struggle rather than peaceable cohabitation.
Twenty years after her initial excursus into exploring notions of theatricality, Féral again edited a collection the focus of which was theatricality, published in the journal *SubStance* and entitled “The Rise and Fall of Theatricality” (2002). In this volume Féral outlines the objects of enquiry in her introduction and re-publishes, in a new English translation from French, her essay “Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language” (1988) 2002). It is apparent (and fascinating) that Féral does not seem to think that the discourse of theatricality—a discourse that she, herself, had a major role in articulating—has shifted in the ensuing fourteen years; and believes that her early essay can still stand without revision. In the final part of this chapter, I interrogate the interpretive positions taken by Féral and challenge the entrenched truth claims that inform her writing and the discourse of theatricality she articulates.

Against my reading of Féral, I juxtapose an analysis of Erika Fischer-Lichte’s (1995) contribution to the discourse of theatricality, which adopts many of the same positions and reflects a similar anxiety over the status of Theatre Studies as a discipline. Marvin Carlson (1995, 2002) contributes to both volumes and in both instances vigorously advocates a (pro)-theatricalist position: a common response of theatre supporters to anti-theatricalist attacks. Sandwiched between Carlson’s 1995 and 2002 essays, I examine the work of Rebecca Walkowitz (2001) in a *Modern Drama* collection, published on the twentieth anniversary of Jonas Barish’s *The Anti-theatrical Prejudice* (1981), and edited by Martin Puchner and Alan Ackerman. Walkowitz’s work, despite its inclusion in this volume, is less an interrogation of theatricality or anti-theatricality, and more an example of the deployment of theatricality as a metaphor in aid of a literary analysis. The interpretive premises that underlie this use—a platonic ontology of authenticity and pretence—are typical of deployments of theatricality in the broader literary field, and that also inflect uses of the term in Theatre and Performance Studies.

### 2.1.2 The battle ground of conflicting interpretations of interpretation

At stake in these struggles over the term theatricality is the authority to include or exclude certain kinds of practice through delimitations of the meanings and referents of key terms. For some, this struggle takes the form of the positioning of a certain essence of theatricality: the construction of a metaphysics in which The Theatre appears as an ahistorical Form manifesting in specific cultural contexts with varying degrees of verisimilitude to the original theatre, to which all theatres must aspire. Those aspiring to such pure theatricality—critics, practitioners, theorists alike, as we shall see—make particular claims as to the provenance and moral worth of theatre.
Jacques Derrida, in his essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1978), describes the interpretational strategies associated with such an ontology as “nostalgic”. For Derrida, nostalgic interpretation “seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or origin which escapes play and the order of the sign” (1978, 292). Against this “saddened, negative, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side” of interpretation, Derrida posits an alternative, “no longer oriented toward the origin”; an interpretive strategy that “affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism” (ibid., quoted in Weber 1987, 3). The alternative interpretation of interpretation, according to Weber, at first glance appears to be celebrated in Derrida’s text. It is “affirmative, playful”, revolutionary or at least evolutionary, moving us towards an emancipation, rather than returning us to a prelapsarian state of grace. This binary logic offers a clear set of political affiliations: the forces of vivacious, animated progress pitted against those of hoary conservatism. In the following pages, I map various claims made for and against theatre and theatricality against this logic.

The thrust of Weber’s analysis of Derrida (and Derrida’s intention as interpreted by Weber), is that these interpretations of interpretation appear to be, indeed, they present themselves, in the logic of twentieth century critical thinking, as mutually exclusive, defining themselves one against the other. The fact of the matter, however, is that each is grounded within an overarching logic of interpretation: a logic that owes more to the battlefield than to the cloisters of the academy, at least insofar as the academic world understands and represents itself as being disinterested. All interpretation, suggests Weber, involves not only a struggle to impose a set of ideas, but also a battle to impose a logic that determines the possibility of thinking certain ideas and not others. Such a struggle may be conducted in a civil manner, or may escalate into the open hostility which Foucault described as the “battle about the status of the truth” (1980, 132). Further, some players/combatants may pursue an interpretational strategy that claims not to be an interpretational strategy, but rather, for example, a claim to a super-ordinate Truth, whether that be the word of (a) God or the verifiability of scientific protocol.

Derrida is directing us towards the contours of specific struggles, asking us to see what is at stake, to bear witness, Weber argues, to “the staking of claims, the effort to appropriate” (1987, 4), and also to the effort of interpretation “to overwhelm and to dislodge an already existing, dominant interpretation and thus to establish its own authority” (5). Puchner’s discussion of the Wagnerian invention of theatricality sign-posts such a struggle: he identifies the concept of theatricality arising as a value in the nineteenth century—“a value that must be
either rejected or embraced”—within an emerging discourse of modernism (2002, 8).

The early modernists’ re-interpretation of “theatre” and “theatricality” as values set the stage, so to speak, for a contest of interpretations that has continued to the current day. This, then, is the background, only half acknowledged, of the contemporary discussion of theatricality. Indeed, the positioning of theatricality as a thing to be probed, measured, attacked or celebrated suggests that for many of these writers theatricality is an identifiable phenomenon before it is a term that circulates in, as, and of discourse. The reification of theatricality, however, as my reading of the following texts will demonstrate, in fact confirms that a particular discourse is in operation, and that a particular will to knowledge and truth—itself a manifestation of the discourse—is engaged in a struggle to maintain its own authority.

2.1.3 Battles for truth in a discourse of Performance Studies
Peggy Phelan, in her introduction to the collection The Ends of Performance (1998), engages in a somewhat “twee” and solipsistic attempt at performative writing (she structures her essay into act divisions and engages in a dialogue with herself as different personae). In the course of this attempt, Phelan deploys some of the interpretational strategies discussed above, repeating the same slippages, elisions and misrecognitions. She writes:

If the diversity of human culture continually showed a persistent theatricality, could performance be a universal expression of human signification, akin to language? . . . If ritual were to be understood as a piece of theatre, how would the definition of theatre need to be revised? Was “theatre” an adequate term for the wide range of theatrical acts that intercultural observation was everywhere revealing? Perhaps “performance” better captured and conveyed the activity that was provoking these questions? (1998, 3 [emphasis added])

In this passage, Phelan positions the terms “theatricality”, “theatre”, “theatrical” in a series of rhetorical questions against which the term “performance” is set as the putative answer. There are, however, a number of slippages in her analysis. First Phelan invokes “persistent theatricality” as a metaphor representing “performance . . . [as] a universal expression of human signification”. Shortly afterwards she conflates “theatre” and “ritual” in order to suggest that the former term is inadequate for the task of accounting for culturally complex phenomena such as rituals. This usage is surprising for a performance scholar because symbolic anthropology, from which Performance Studies draws much of its methodology,
defines “theatre” and “ritual” as mutually exclusive. Phelan’s agenda, however, is revealed when she suggests, a propos the nexus of theatre/ritual, that the term “theatre” may require revision. After creating a fallacious homology of ritual and theatre, Phelan declares that “theatre” is an insufficient interpretive category for a “wide range of theatrical acts” that were revealed by “intercultural observation” (by whom? observing what?).

Beneath the rhetoric of playful interpretation, Phelan reveals her stake in a disciplinary struggle, a battle for interpretive dominance. Employing the imperial pronoun she writes “We have created and studied a discipline based on that which disappears, art that cannot be preserved or posted. And we know performance knows things worth knowing” (1998, 8). In this statement, Phelan is both enacting a gesture of ownership and making a claim for an implicit truth that cannot be verified, yet, nonetheless, demands of “us” an act of faith.

In the claims Phelan makes for Performance Studies, her deployment of “theatricality”, “theatre” and the “theatrical” works within an interpretive logic that is both value-based (in Puchner’s sense), and is oriented towards a particular truth claim; a claim that positions “performance” as the solution to a series of putative critical “problems”. Phelan suggests that, unlike theatricality, performance will allow us access to a deeper level of human interaction, a level of “universal expression”, of interculturalism and of ritual. “Theatre”, she claims, is an interpretive category that is now “inadequate” for the task of accounting for various “theatrical acts”.

Phelan decries the amnesia of the “discourse” of “new technologies” which “forget the technologies that preceded it and helped bring it into being” (1998, 9), yet she refuses to acknowledge a similar lacuna in her own discourse. The humanist, nostalgic and values-based discourse of the early twentieth century avant-garde haunts the discourse of contemporary Performance Studies as it is articulated by Phelan and others (just as much as it haunts Theatre Studies), but apart from making a fetish of innovation, this discourse of the avant-garde continues to inform, yet remain resolutely unexamined, in the writings of these scholars. Indeed, rejection of the past is firmly within the “tradition” of modernism, a discourse that such critics position themselves as being beyond or “post”; however, as Michael Vanden Heuvel argues:

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15 According to John MacAloon:
Ritual invokes and involves religious or sacred forces or, in Paul Tillich’s phrase, the locus of a people’s “ultimate concern.” And ritual action effects social transitions or spiritual transformations; it does not merely mark them or accompany them. (MacAloon 1984, 250 [emphasis added])

MacAloon’s point is that ritual is instrumental; it does something, it has an effect in the world. Richard Schechner also has written extensively on the distinction between theatre and ritual, and his essay “From Ritual to Theater and Back: the Efficacy-Entertainment Braid”, depends upon the distinctions of ritual-efficacy and theatre-entertainment for its argument ((1977) 1988, 106-152, especially 120-124).
Modern variety and postmodern eclecticism notwithstanding, almost everything we see in today’s theater, mainstream or experimental, is traceable to a surprisingly restricted set of traditions. . . As a reflection of modernism’s combusive and oedipal attitude toward tradition, modernist artists have often insisted upon their radical departure or separation from the past (1993, 1).

The positioning of Performance Studies within the critical context described by Vanden Heuvel is manifest in the way Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, the founding chair of Performance Studies at New York University, describes the discipline. In Performance Studies, she writes,

We take our lead from the historical avant-garde and contemporary art which have long questioned the boundaries between modalities and gone about blurring them, whether those boundaries mark off media, genres, or cultural traditions. What they found interesting—Chinese opera, Balinese barong, circus—we find interesting (1999 quoted in Schechner 2002, 3).

There is a charming (or alarming) naïveté to Kirschenblatt-Gimblett’s unreflexive appropriation of the avant-garde’s “interests” in non-Western forms of performance, an approach which refuses to acknowledge the colonising impulses and processes of “othering” behind such interest16. This approach, more than simply fetishising innovation for innovation’s sake, uncritically adopts the values and assumptions of the avant-garde. Such values and assumptions are grounded in humanism, and the avant-garde’s attraction to non-Western art forms, uncritically endorsed by Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, reflects a humanist bias. By positioning Performance Studies as the subversive, pluralist Other to the “traditional curriculum in European and American drama and theatre” (quoted in Schechner 2002, 6), Kirschenblatt-Gimblett in fact denies the colonising interest of Performance Studies (in its construction of non-Western cultural forms as objects of interest to Western epistemology), instead politically affiliating it with the non-Western Other. The avant-gardist bias of Performance Studies, again, justifies this approach.

In a letter to Richard Schechner, Kirschenblatt-Gimblett writes about the scholars in the fledgling Performance Studies department, in 1980, that

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in taking their lead from the historical avant-garde and contemporary experimental performance, they determined that Western theatre and the dramatic text would not be at the center of the new Performance Studies curriculum, though it continues to play an important role (2001, quoted in Schechner 2002, 6).

Kirschenblatt-Gimblett employs a binary logic which, contrary to the apparent aims of Performance Studies, acts in an exclusionary manner by instituting a hierarchical division (note Kirschenblatt-Gimblett’s topography of centres and margins) of genres and approaches to performance; an arrangement of interpretations that privileges the avant-garde. Such an approach, Vanden Heuvel argues, only “succeed[s] in maintaining the dialectical tendencies of Western culture by substituting one authoritarian locus of power for its opposite” (1993, 11).

Schechner, however, despite such objections, continues to promote the avant-gardist bias of Performance Studies:

Artistic practice of a particular kind is a necessary part of the performance studies curriculum. This practice privileges a living avant-garde—performance art, performance composition, performative writing, and the like (2002b, xi).

Notions of hierarchy and exclusivity are, politically, anathema to the discourse of avant-gardism and also to the pluralist agenda of Performance Studies as articulated by Schechner and others. Avant-gardism opposes authoritarian loci of power, therefore, to “privilege” an avant-garde, paradoxically, is to promote a position that is, by definition, oppositional and antithetical to privileged positions. Yet, as Vanden Heuvel argues, in the footsteps of Derrida, the dialecticism of Western culture (and thought) requires two terms, with one dominating the other. The locus of “truth”, then, in Schechner’s and Kirschenblatt-Gimblett’s associating of Performance Studies with avant-gardism, shifts to the category in opposition—in this instance avant-gardism/performance—and reasserts it as the dominant term.

The justification for an approach that asserts the opposite to authority as itself authoritative is provided by the playful and “subjunctive” mode that Schechner attributes to performance. In his introduction to Performance Theory (1977) 1988), Schechner argued that
performances are make-believe, in play, for fun. Or, as [the anthropologist] Victor Turner said, in the subjunctive mood, the famous “as if.” Or, as Sanskrit aesthetics would have it, performances are *lilas*—sports, play—and *maya*, illusory. But, the Sanskrit tradition emphasizes, so is all life *lila* and *maya*. Performance is an illusion of an illusion and, as such, might be considered more “truthful”, more “real” than ordinary experience. This, too, was Aristotle’s opinion in his *Poetics* where theater did not so much reflect living as essentialize it, present paradigms of it (*{1977}* 1988, xiv).

In this statement, Schechner made a number of claims for the truth—claims which emerge in subsequent writings by him and other writers on performance—and that have their antecedents in similar claims by the avant-garde. Despite his invocation of playfulness, Schechner’s project is teleological: he is searching for “truth” and “essence” and finding them in the “more ‘real’” experiences of performance. It is not, therefore, surprising that he turns to ancient Indian philosophy for the metaphors to support his argument and also to the touchstone of Western philosophy, Aristotle (the truth, after all, is more real if it can be located in an old, alien and non-Western culture, thereby suggesting its cultural universality and timelessness).

Thus, Schechner suggests, if Sanskrit scholars and Aristotle wrote that the truth of life can be found in the illusion of performance, then so it must be. It is from this position that he can later suggest “performance consciousness” to be the master trope organising human interaction and interpretation of behaviour: “performance consciousness is subjunctive, full of alternatives and potentiality . . . [I]t is a celebration of contingency” (Schechner 1982, 6; also quoted in Vanden Heuvel 1993, 6). The art forms that manifest such contingency must, therefore, be superior to those that do not, and practices that do not gesture towards “performance consciousness”, in the terms of this argument, can be excluded from the discourse. This, then, is the interpretational context for the disciplinary “boundary wars” (Worthen 1995, 14) that occurred in the 1990s: a struggle over what could be included and what should be excluded in the fields of Theatre and Performance Studies.

### 2.1.4 The struggle for disciplinary domination: laying claims to a field
In a speech to the American Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) conference in Atlanta in 1992, Schechner declared, “The new paradigm is ‘performance’, not theatre. Theatre Departments should become ‘performance departments’” (1992, 9). Prior to this institutional “throwing down the gauntlet” he had claimed that
theatre as we have known and practiced it—the staging of written dramas—will be the string quartet of the 21st century: a beloved but extremely limited genre, *a subdivision of performance* (1992, 8 [emphasis added]).

Although Schechner claimed he was responding to the then current state of studying the theory and practice of theatre, his position, as Jill Dolan noted, could be contested. Dolan was also at the keynote panel where Schechner “as the only white male” panellist delivered his address (1993, 427). According to Dolan “since the people sharing the dias [sic] with him were men and women of color” his remarks were “deeply inappropriate”. His co-panellists were “engaged in theatre practice”, both as professionals and academics, of the kind that “Schechner unwittingly implied”, writes Dolan, should be rejected (or at the very least, be progressed beyond) in favor of the broader scope of performance studies, which, one might infer from his remarks, would make racism disappear (428).

It is of particular interest to me to note how Schechner’s language set performance against an idea of theatre: performance was “not-theatre”. Schechner’s exclusionary definition of the field—*theatre* reduced to the “staging of written dramas”—was an interpretive strategy, based on the principles discussed above, that through a loaded binary logic allowed his “new paradigm” of performance to dominate.

However, the weakness of Schechner’s interpretational construct was revealed in a later article in which he struggled to maintain the hegemony he had imposed. Taking the same position he had established the year before, Schechner wrote, “theatre as a genre is joining classical music and the ballet as an historical rather than a contemporary art” (1993, 7)—an interpretation that affiliated theatre with old (“classical”, “historical”) and, by implication, conservative values. However, on the next page, he asserted that “‘community theatre,’ performance art, political performance, ritual performance, popular music, and sports are all flourishing” (8). In Schechner’s mind, apparently, there was a distinction between “theatre as a genre” and the categories (genres?) of “community theatre” and “performance” of the artistic, political or ritualistic varieties, “popular music and sports”, these latter being anything but old and conservative. “Theatre”, it would seem, as Schechner deployed it, was a value that could stand for a “genre” that was redundant and out-moded, but that also could be more positively valued when it was strategically linked with another category (“community theatre”). Beneath the ambiguity of Schechner’s terminology the interpretational logics of a discourse that promoted the aesthetically vital and politically progressive was readily apparent.
This became even clearer when in a recent editorial, Schechner (2000) appeared to retreat from his earlier position but without giving any ground. Once again deploying ambiguous language, Schechner claimed that the formerly generic theatre “has proven vital because it is extremely adaptable and not locked into one or another genre. Even spoken drama shows signs of a new viability” (2000, 6). It appears, then, that what Schechner had been railing against all along was “the repertory of realist dramas . . . almost always [being] staged according to realist conventions” (ibid.). Despite contradicting his earlier claims—was theatre a limited genre or did it resist genre limitations?—Schechner struggled to reconcile his earlier polemics with what, I presume, the evidence of what was actually happening, was showing him. Theatre did not necessarily equal realism, and in attempting to maintain his position on the cutting edge of critical thinking in the field, Schechner resorted to making a claim similar to that of Barthes, fifty years earlier, and also to other theorists and practitioners before and after him; yet typically claiming it as his own:

There is the text of plays; but there is also the text of behaviour, of acting, of scenography, of blocking. Each of these is autonomous, and can be developed on its own and/or in relation to the others (ibid.).

Schechner’s reaffirmation of the non-centrality of the written text in theatre was thus perfectly in the tradition of the European avant-garde, a discourse which I discuss in greater detail in the following chapter.

Jill Dolan’s (1993) commentary on the 1992 ATHE conference suggests that a sociological analysis of these boundary wars would no doubt reveal a very human history of ego clashes, old vendettas, personal ambition and wounded pride; it would reveal that such struggles are anything but disinterested. This thesis, however, is not the place for such an analysis. Willmar Sauter’s The Theatrical Event: Dynamics of Performance and Perception (2000, 39-41) provides an overview of these debates from a European perspective. The primary texts for the debate itself, in addition to the Schechner articles already mentioned, are Bill Worthen’s response to him, “Disciplines of the Text/Sites of Performance”, that appeared in a later issue of TDR (1995, 13-28), and the responses to Worthen, which were published in the same issue, from Jill Dolan (1995, 28-34), Joseph Roach (1995, 35-36), Schechner (1995, 36-38), and Phillip Zarilli (1995, 38-40). Worthen was also allowed a right of reply in that issue (1995, 41-44).

Outside of TDR, Jill Dolan (1993), in the essay cited above, thoughtfully critiqued Schechner’s positioning of Performance Studies as antithetical to theatre studies, raising a
number of concerns regarding the political implications of what he proposed (that is, replacing Theatre Studies with Performance Studies). Dolan argued that

theatre studies . . . can raise questions about the imperialist gesture of performance as ethnography, skeptically draw out the partialities of stories as truth, demystify the coincidence of actor and text, and fill its spaces with complex identities that anchor its commitments to a politics of anti-canonical inclusion (1993, 432).

Bonnie Marranca, in “Theatre and the University at the End of the Twentieth Century” (1995), although not referring specifically to the TDR controversy, argued that Performance Studies could be substantially strengthened by bringing together histories of avant-garde theatre and performance art (69-70)—a genealogy which I examine in the next chapter.

In Australia the debate occurred within the pages of Australasian Drama Studies in the mid-1990s, principally between Glenn D’Cruz and Gay McAuley. D’Cruz’s essay, “From Theatre to Performance: Constituting the Discipline of Performance Studies in the Australian Academy” (1995), referred to the debate in the US and situated it and a similar debate in Australia within the context of institutional power struggles. Deploying a Foucauldian notion of discourse, D’Cruz argued that categories of “theatre” and “performance” be viewed as discursive formations. Of interest for the purposes of this chapter, D’Cruz suggested, citing Foucault, that the “discursive practices that dominate the field of theatre studies may provide a strategic ‘starting point for an opposing strategy’” (1995, 50). Against theatre studies, D’Cruz argued, it was possible to set an oppositional set of practices which he provisionally characterised as “construction, as well as the analysis of texts”, a process that would “grant more agency to students and teachers engaging with the politics of interpretation and representation” (ibid.).

McAuley, in “Performance Studies in the Australian Academy—a Reply” (1995), argued, contra D’Cruz, that her interest in theatre did not seek to exclude other “para-theatrical” performance practices but was imbricated within the context of these practices. McAuley, however, like D’Cruz, positioned her response within an interpretive paradigm based on a logic of theatre and another category: “I disagree with his [D’Cruz’s] relegation of text-narrative-character-based theatre to the margins” (McAuley 1995, 152). Picking up this theme in a later article, McAuley suggested that contemporary critical discourse enacted a strategy that excluded the text-narrative-character-based paradigm of theatre, or else relegated it to a “folk memory of front curtains, wings and painted scenery” (1996, 142).
According to McAuley, her own interest in this particular cultural form arose not from residual conservatism but because, as a cultural practice, she believed it was “situated at the interface between the textual and the oral” (144).

Many of the US arguments were rehearsed, also, within the pages of *Real Time* \(^1\) (published and edited by Gallasch), and the critical strategies Gallasch adopted in his review of *Customs*—that is, decisions as to which artists and works are extolled and which are condemned—were predicated on many of the same assumptions. Such assumptions, however, are founded upon interpretive slippages, elisions and misrecognitions of theatricality that are enacted by writers such as Gallasch or Schechner in order to impose an interpretive hegemony that precludes thinking about things—here “theatre” and “performance”—outside the logic of that interpretation. For a commentator such as Schechner, whose writings and art practice span over forty years, such ideas are indelibly marked by modernism’s infatuation with the new and the original. \(^2\) This discourse, as the ATHE address as reported by Dolan demonstrated, at times clashed with other discourses for which newness was not a fetish:

Then Schechner took the podium, and a curious shift of emphasis occurred. Schechner stood out as the only white male, but he determinedly (and unfortunately) didn’t foreground his own identity position, marked personally and institutionally by power and authority; never once theorized his own speaking position on a panel about and of cultural pluralism; and proceeded to deflect the conversation away from issues of race and ethnicity toward a discussion of the problems with theatre as a discipline (1993, 427).

Dolan’s trenchant and relevant objection to Schechner’s hijacking of the panel, however, takes insufficient account of her own and Schechner’s *habitus* as theatre scholars. To borrow from Bourdieu, twentieth century theatre scholarship invariably privileges the new, the cutting edge and the avant-garde. In the next section I examine three essays published in *Modern Drama* (1982) that engage with the “new” and emerging genre of performance and reveal how, once again, the logics of interpretation, as they operate in Theatre Studies,

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\(^1\)See Peta Tait’s “Thinking through performance” in *Real Time* (1996, 12) and Mark Minchinton’s “Performance acts, performance studies” in the same issue (1996, 14). D’Cruz reported on the 5th Performance Studies International conference, held in Aberystwyth, Wales, in *Real Time*, concluding that it was “dominated by North American academics, who demonstrated little interest in the work of people located outside the major metropolitan centers” (1999-2000, 26). Ed Scheer’s “Ten Memos on Performance Studies in Australia” provides a sardonic commentary on the whole issue: “[i]n some ways the recent history of performance studies (PS) is something like the MTV claymation segment called Celebrity Deathmatch in which 2 celebrity caricatures beat each other to death” (1999, 31).

\(^2\) See Bottoms (2003) for an analysis of some of Schechner’s earliest writings, in which the interpretational logic I am discussing is already apparent.
load the discussion in favour of affirmative interpretation, while at the same time remaining blind to and denying the implicit nostalgia that energises the discourse.

2.2 The impossible theatre of performance

2.2.1 The inauguration of a “new” genre

The tension between what can be included and what is rejected in an emerging discourse of performance is apparent in three essays by Chantal Pontbriand, Philip Monk and Josette Féral, in a 1982 collection edited by Féral, Jeannette Laillou Savona and E. A. Walker. These writers wrestled with the “problem” of performance art within an interpretive context, determined by the editors, that sought “to discover the characteristics peculiar to theatre, to define theatricality” (Féral et al. 1982, 1). The editors suggested that the essays in the collection, in particular these essays on performance, offered “not a conclusion, but rather an invitation to question still more closely the phenomenon of theatre” (2). From these comments, it would appear that the editors wished to apply the binary logic of performance/theatre, the first term functioning as a lens with which to examine the second term “more closely”.

The discussion, framed in this way, was predicated upon two interpretive assumptions. The first suggests that there is a theatrical ur-form to be uncovered, against which all subsequent interrogations of “theatre” can be positioned; the second assumes a dialectical relationship between “theatre” and “performance” as interpretive categories. Both assumptions can not only be seen as extreme examples of agenda-setting, but also represent particular critical positionings that reflected more an orientation towards an abstract truth than a concern for the putative objects of study. The theme that starts to emerge in the essays is that of an impossible theatre—this is the modernist fantasy articulated by Barthes (1972)—a quasi-Artaudian theatre that is corporeal, fragmented, resisting rationalisation and offering the spectator-participant reunion with an inchoate sense of fulfillment. However, for these writers, like Barthes before them, Schechner and the later performance scholars, this impossible theatre, which they have framed as “performance”, can only be defined by what it is not: in this case, text-based, representational theatre.

For example, Chantal Pontbriand, in the first essay in the collection, entitled “The eye finds no fixed point on which to rest . . .”, attributes to performance a particular quality of “presence” that she finds lacking in theatre (1982, 155); however, she does not question the interpretive premise that underlies her notion of presence in the first place. However, I do not read Pontbriand’s essay in order to engage with arguments concerning presence; rather, my interest is in the interpretive logic she uses to make her case. Philip Monk, in contrast, begins his contribution promisingly by challenging the validity of presence as an
appropriate analytical category with which to discuss performance (1982, 163). Yet he, too, can only write about performance by distinguishing it from theatre (ibid.). In addition, for Monk, theatricality has a role to play in performance: it stands for those moments of tableau or “posing” which resemble traditional theatre yet, importantly, are not it (ibid.).

Finally, Josette Féral explicitly invokes a notion of theatricality that, in the title of her essay, she couples with performance. Féral’s essay marks out the interpretive territory, inscribes the binary logic of theatre/performance, invokes the touchstone of the avant-garde, and her rhetoric gestures towards plurality and political freedom (1982, 170-171); yet, at the same time, her interrogation is ultimately nostalgically modernist—she is searching for an “essence” of theatre:

My ultimate objective is to show what practices like these [that is, performance practices], belonging to the limits of theatre, can tell us about theatricality and its relation to the actor and the stage (171).

By analysing these essays in some depth, we are able to discern the contours of the discourse of theatricality that is being instituted. Pontbriand reads Michael Fried’s essay “Art and Objecthood” (1967) against Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1936, 1973) in an attempt to engage with the notion of “presence” (defined by Fried as “presentness”, and by Benjamin as “aura”) in performance. Prefiguring Peggy Phelan’s “The Ontology of Performance” (1993) by eleven years, Pontbriand’s essay is similarly concerned with issues of being qua “presence”. Pontbriand argues that the notion of “presentness” occurs in the “coming into being” of “performance”, and it is this idea of “presence” which, contra Fried, draws “performance closer to theatre and theatricality” (1982, 155). By invoking “presentness” Pontbriand adopts Fried’s discursive category, but limits the referent of the category to a “kind of theatricality” which invigorated the visual arts of the sixties and seventies precisely because artists were disregarding the strict codification of high modernism (154). These artists, Pontbriand suggests, were more interested in the “shifting of fields between these codes” and in giving “emphasis . . . to a device which is akin to the theatre, that of spectator/stage/spectacle, seen as process” (ibid.). ForPontbriand the “whole phenomenon” she describes is “called performance” (ibid.).

Although Pontbriand invokes the formalist model of performance space/performance/spectator—an early modernist theatrical formula which, as we shall see in the next chapter, has infused theatrical/performance theory and practice in the twentieth century—she distinguishes the genre “performance” from “theatre” through an interpretive
logic which ascribes ontological status to the former over the latter. Pontbriand’s essay is, in part, an attempt to argue for the value of performance art against the criticism of modernist art critics Michael Fried and Clement Greenberg who, she claims, make “no distinction between theatre and performance” and for whom “performance [art] . . . represents the ultimate decadence of theatre, which modernism, in its discomfort, has tried to conjure away by making it a theatre of absence, emptiness, void” (155). However, by invoking Friedian categories of presence and presentness, with their attendant assumptions of something like a pure, unmediated being, Pontbriand merely reinscribes Fried’s discursive categories, with an important inflection: instead of “theatre” standing for “performance art” contra modernist art, it now stands for “classical presence” contra the “post-modern presence” of performance (ibid.).

Classical presence, Pontbriand argues, is the Aristotelian “imaginary or transcendental space-time a priori”, whereas postmodern presence qua performance “unfolds in a real time and a real place . . . performance ‘actualizes’ time and place” (ibid.). Ontologically, classical presence qua “theatre” is problematic, she claims, because it is “dependent on the problem of representation” (which I understand to mean Aristotle’s imitation of an action) (ibid.). However, for Pontbriand, there is “distance” between this Aristotelian re-presented presence and the postmodern presence of “performance” because the latter “presents; it does not re-present” (ibid.). Therefore, Pontbriand implies that a notion of unmediated being exists through “performance” and that it can be distinguished from “classical presence, which is dependent on the problem of representation” (ibid.). In other words, Pontbriand’s problematic re-presented presence allows her to subscribe to an ultimate Truth value, a value she accords to performance. In her privileging of presentation over representation, Pontbriand may well be seen as reinscribing the ancient Platonic prejudice against mimesis in a postmodern discourse.

However, when Pontbriand turns to Benjamin’s essay in support of her idea of postmodern presence, her interpretive logic becomes twisted indeed! Expanding on the notion of distance, she rehearses the Benjaminian argument that the reproduced art work is able “to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, [thus] it reactivates the object reproduced” (Benjamin {1936} 1973, 215; quoted in Pontbriand 1982, 156). Benjamin’s mechanically reproduced art work becomes “actual” to the beholder or listener because now, she writes, it is “invested” with “a proximity or immediacy, a presentness, and a materiality, previously unthinkable” (1982, 156). Pontbriand argues that the expression of performance through “technical means” increases its “chances” of “being removed from theatre and theatricality”, allowing it to “withdraw from representation into simple presentation . . . from aura into simple actuality . . . from classical presence to assert a new
and different presence, a radical presence” (ibid.). “Technical mediation”, she claims, increases the “materiality of the work” not only through increased accessibility, but also because it allows the work to be “disarticulated” or “dismembered” (ibid.). “Very often performance presents itself not, a priori, as a totality, but rather as the sum of all its parts,” writes Pontbriand,

whether or not these are perceived in relation to the whole. Performance appears much more as disarticulation of the whole than as signifying totality. In this respect performance reveals an aversion to metaphysics (ibid.).

That which Pontbriand attempted to define as an ontological category, then, is that which, by its very nature, resists metaphysics: a curious and convoluted conclusion.

The “new” technologies of mechanical reproduction—radio, the gramophone, film—not only made art more accessible but also, Benjamin believed, could re-present reality to us in such a way that we saw it in a new light:

A different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye—if only because an unconsciously penetrated space is substituted for a space consciously explored by man. . . Here the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions ({1936} 1973, 230).

Benjamin never lost sight of the fact that he was discussing a technology of representation and its techniques. Pontbriand, on the other hand, conflates the techniques of a technology of representation—film—with a metaphysics of presence, the radical presence of performance which, she would have us believe, resists representation. The spectator in performance is positioned similarly to the spectator in cinema and is no longer allowed the “contemplative” attitude, she writes, “such as one might assume in front of a painting” (1982, 158). Instead, “the spectator is jarred, jostled”, and, further, “faced with the dismemberment and the decentralization of the work of art, the spectator is always waiting for something” (ibid.). Pontbriand argues that the “event”-like nature of performance means that the spectator is “like the involuntary witness of a situation” (ibid.). Through Benjamin’s notion of an “examiner, but an absent-minded one” Pontbriand equates the spectator of performance with a cinema spectator (Benjamin {1936} 1973, 234, quoted in Pontbriand 1982, 159). Pontbriand uses Benjamin’s identification of cinematic techniques to support her ontological claims for performance. Disarticulated performance—the cuts, dissolves, close-ups, changes of speed and angle, and so forth of cinema—acts on the
spectator not *like* but *just as* a film does. Therefore, through a fallacious homology, the syntactical devices of cinema become, in Pontbriand’s argument, an ontology of performance.

In the final part of her essay, Pontbriand examines some of the ideas and techniques of Richard Foreman’s “ontological-hysteric” theatre as a case-study of performance to illustrate her argument. “The spectator at Foreman’s plays”, she writes, “is bombarded by a multiplicity of visual and auditory events” (ibid.). Foreman’s highly self-reflexive work, according to Pontbriand, exposes the spectator to the processes of theatre and problematises the relationship of “viewer-viewed” by emphasising the putative voyeurism inherent in theatre (160). “Foreman”, she argues, “places the theatre on trial through the demonstration of its processes” (ibid.).

Ultimately Pontbriand sees Foreman’s art—which, she claims is obsessed with framing and focusing—as “cinematographic”, concluding that his “theatre illustrates how theatre today, in order to overcome the impossibility of theatre, has chosen the path of cinema” (ibid., 161). Once again, as it was for Phelan, theatre is inadequate—it is an “impossibility”, it is guilty and must be placed “on trial”—and the only way forward, exemplified by Foreman and supposedly theorised by Benjamin, is to reject theatre and take the path of cinema. However, what Pontbriand identifies as “cinematographic” in Foreman’s work is not so much a new ontology of theatre (which she characterised as “performance”) but a description of syntactical devices derived from cinema. Pontbriand, therefore, like Phelan in later writings, gestures towards an invisible (“impossible”) Truth in performance that can be discerned only by juxtaposing it against a negatively valued “theatre”; that is, by making a truth claim in respect of something which can only be defined as “not-theatre”.

Philip Monk, in “Common Carrier: Performance by Artists” (1982), also deploys an interpretive logic that distinguishes between “theatre” and “performance” but, unlike Pontbriand, he is not making an ontological claim; rather, his is a genre distinction made for analytic purposes. Indeed, he consigns to the “early history of performance” the distinction upon which Pontbriand bases her argument, “between theatre as representation and performance as the literalization of the event . . . the difference between material and presentation” (Monk 1982, 163). Such distinctions, it would seem from these statements, Monk perceives as redundant. He prefers, instead, a set of interpretive analytics that question the uses that theatre “make[s] of performance”, and that question also why visual artists who create performances are “interested in theatricality” (ibid.).
However, despite his assertions to the contrary, Monk continues to set up an idea of “theatre” as a straw man contra “performance art”. Through the trope of “theatricality” he claims that

more than an interest in theatre per se, although now there is that interest, performance takes over moments of theatricality—coded moments of the pose, or consumption of a complete code (ibid).

Although the bulk of his essay is devoted to an analysis of Demo Model—a 1978 performance by the artist Elizabeth Chitty that utilised video and sound technologies—his discussion is framed by the argument that “performance” appropriates theatrical codes but avoids becoming “theatre” (despite its professed “interest”). “If theatricality is setting up of a scene (a mise en scène) rather than representation of a text,” Monk writes,

then in order that theatricality not fall into a succession of dramatic moments or poses leading to a climax within a logic of representation, the scene must be delayed or held—as a frozen frame or film still—to be dissolved either by the device of the tableau vivant (which collapses or decomposes itself under its own inertia or artificiality—its production is made evident, displayed as a representation), or by repetition (which empties the gesture and presence of the performer) (164).

Theatre, here, is equated by Monk with the classical Aristotelian paradigm of dramatic tragedy—a narrative arc consisting of imitations of actions “leading to a climax”. Representation, once again, is the bogey-man and, echoing Pontbriand’s argument, Monk claims that it is through “repetition” that performance avoids falling into theatre: “Performance sets up a scene only to repeat it, forcefully inscribing its representations onto the body” (ibid.). Furthermore, he claims a genealogy of the technique of repetition, derived from the visual arts, which was “introduced formally by minimal art to combat the representational theatricality of European painting and American abstract expressionism” and, also, from “task-oriented” dance (ibid. [emphasis added]). By distancing performance from representation, Monk stakes a claim for “performance” as a genre distinct from “theatre”, and in contrast to “conservative” theatre he positions performance as progressive. According to Monk

performance takes on society’s symptoms, develops them intensively, obsessively, and logically (i.e., perversely), and re-presents them to society as
society’s own desires—whether positive or reactive—freed from their ideological cover (165 [emphasis added]).

However, because “theatre” is not entirely evacuated from a “performance” piece such as Demo Model, Monk enlists the notion of “theatricality” to account for elements which are theatrical-but-not-theatre in the work. “Performance”, he suggests, “consumes” the “codes” of “theatre” and functions as a “disguised discourse within another conventional language for the purpose of critical disruption” (164). Such a process he describes, quoting from Barthes, as “inhabitation” or—as we more familiarly understand the concept—postmodern appropriation. Implicit in this construction is a dichotomy between the institution of “theatre” which (as it appears from Barthes’s metaphor) would seem to “own” its codes, and “performance”, whose role it is to “steal” and “change its features according to the formulae of disguise, as one disguises stolen goods.”19 Demo Model, Monk argues, appropriated gestural codes from theatre but emptied them of their representational force by employing metatheatrical strategies that either self-consciously displayed them as representations (“poses”), or emptied them of meaning by denying narrativity through repetition.

At the beginning of his essay Monk suggested that distinguishing between theatre and performance, aside from the purpose of making a genre distinction, was a specious analytic practice. However, his own essay (which, unlike Pontbriand’s, takes as its object an actual performance work) still relies on an interpretive logic that sets “theatre”—associated with conservative Aristotelian principles—against “performance” which subverts those same principles. This does not prevent him, however, from trying to appropriate to “performance” certain aspects of “theatre”—“coded moments of the pose, or consumption of a complete code”—aspects which he describes as “moments of theatricality” (163). Monk’s separation of “theatricality” from “theatre” prefigures a similar operation enacted by Phelan (described above) and mirrors, as I suggest below, the pre-occupations of the avant-garde.

Indeed, this is the position put by Pavis Patrice (1998), who argues that “theatricality” was firmly situated as a twentieth century phenomenon arising from the resistance by the “historical avant-garde” (among whom Pavis counts Artaud, Adamov, Brecht, Copeau, Meyerhold) to the traditional hegemony of literary text over performance. From the early twentieth century, he continues, “theatricality”, understood as the mise-en-scène and other non-textual elements of theatre, “became the essential and specific nature of theatre and, in the era of the director, the object of contemporary artistic study” (1998, 396-397). Viewed

through the lens of the theatrical avant-garde, therefore, Monk’s and Pontbriand’s arguments for performance can be seen as exemplars of a discourse of modernist anti-theatricality, a discourse that constructs theatricality as a value (progressive and politically resistant) that can be set in opposition to values associated with theatre (nostalgic, text-dominated, conservative).

The key discursive thematics that I have identified in the texts by Monk and Pontbriand are apparent also in Josette Féral’s “Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified” (1982); indeed, the title of her essay declares its interpretive logic. Féral distinguishes “performance” as a “new genre”; she suggests that this new genre is on the cutting-edge; and she invokes, by way of an associated figurehead, a key figure of the historical avant-garde: Artaud (170-171). Féral also deploys the formalist model—bodies, spaces, and the spectators’ interaction with them—with which to examine “performance” (ibid.). In addition, despite her rhetoric of affirmative interpretation, the objective of her study is irredeemably nostalgic: this essay, and her subsequent work, are predicated upon a searching for “fundamental characteristics” and “essential foundations” (ibid.). Her aim, like that of the other writers in the issue, is to account for the new genre of performance art: she “hopes” to reveal “its fundamental characteristics as well as the process by which it works” in order to reveal new insights into theatre (ibid.). For Féral, there is a topography of theatre—it has its “limits” (ibid.), as far as it can go—and by now, it should come as no surprise to us to discover just what those limits are, and how the adventurous category of performance, according to these writers, exceeds them.

In her account of this putative new genre, Féral argues that performance “corresponds” to an Artaudian “theatre of cruelty and violence, of the body and its drives, of displacement and ‘disruption’, a non-narrative and non-representational theatre” (ibid.). She invokes some familiar limits—narrativity and representation—and suggests that performance may provide a way beyond those limits, a way that centres on the body and also in the inchoate and libidinous realm of the unconscious. The body, in performance, she argues, is “a chameleon body, a foreign body where the subject’s desires and repressions surface”,

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20See McAuley 1999 for a succinct summary of twentieth century formalist discourses which, with differing emphases, ultimately reduce theatre to the “minimalist” model of spectator, performer and performance space (1999, 1-4). Erving Goffman (1959) offered a similar paradigm of this reduction: “Performance [is] all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his [sic] continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers” (quoted in Carlson 1996, 37-38). However, it is important to note that Goffman was writing not about theatre but about behaviour as performance: a distinction that is germane to this discussion. There are numerous other examples from the twentieth century, all of which include the elements of time, space, and a relationship between a perceiver and a doer, with varying emphases on each of these elements. Féral, however, argues that “performance . . . escapes formalism” because it has “no set form” and, thus, “every performance constitutes its own genre” (174). This strikes me as a rather ingenuous rationale.
Féral argues that unlike the putatively repressed body of theatre, the body of performance struggles for liberation through acts of violence that fragment it into “part-objects” and expose the fantasy of unified subjectivity in the spectator (172). Such “performances”, Féral claims, are “a phenomenon worked through by the death drive” (ibid.). Her claims for the space of performance are equally hyperbolic; in performance:

exactly like the body, therefore, space becomes existential to the point of ceasing to exist as a setting and a place. It no longer surrounds and encloses the performance, but like the body, becomes part of the performance to such an extent that it cannot be distinguished from it. It is the performance (172-173).

Like Pontbriand, Féral attributes to performance an ontology of plenitudinous presence which, nevertheless, Féral argues, is threatened by what she sees as its inescapable confrontation with representation:

Every performance ultimately meets the video screen . . . There, performance once again encounters representation, from which it wanted to escape at all costs and which marks both its fulfilment and its end (73).

This obsession with death and endings marks the nostalgia of her writing, a mourning for the past shared by Phelan in the essay referred to above (Phelan 1998, 18). Like Phelan, Féral is acutely attuned to the political dilemma of the performance scholar wishing to mention her unmentionables—“how can we talk about the subject without betraying it? How can we explain it?” (Féral 1982, 175 [emphasis added])—but realises that all she can ever speak about are its artefacts; its “fixed traces” in the form, usually, of the photographs

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21Féral’s invocation of the death drive in this context is perplexing. The sense in which she uses it is in terms of Lacan’s idea of the death drive as excessive, going beyond the pleasure principle, to where “enjoyment is experienced as suffering” (Evans 1996, 33). Later in her essay, however, she suggests that performance somehow exists outside the realm of the symbolic; for Lacan, however “the death instinct is only the mask of the symbolic order” (Evans 1996, 32).

22Eleven years later, Peggy Phelan deploys a similar rhetoric in her chapter, “The Ontology of Performance”: “Performance’s only life is in the present . . . To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology” (1993, 146).
and videos with which “performance” has “given itself its own memory . . . provided itself with a past” (ibid.).

In the second part of her essay, Féral discusses Michael Fried’s polemical deployment of “theatre” as an oppositional category to “art” in “Art and Objecthood” ({1967} 1998). According to Fried,

theater and theatricality are at war today; not simply with modernist painting (or modernist painting and sculpture), but with art as such—and to the extent that the different arts can be described as modernist, with modernist sensibility as such (Fried {1967} 1998, 163; quoted in Féral 1982, 175).

Although Féral rhetorically asks how such statements can be “explained” or “justified”, she continues to equate theatre with representation and narrativity (via Derrida), and to position her version of theatre within the interpretive logic deployed by Fried (175). Yet there is a caveat to this seemingly proscriptive definition of theatre: the theatre of the avant-garde (among whose practitioners, in addition to Artaud, she counts Grotowski, the Living Theatre, Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman). This “theatre”, Féral argues, “already belong[s] to performance” and, thus, escapes the twin bogey-men of representation and narrativity that she associates with conservative ideas of theatre (175-176). Quoting Alan Kaprow on art “happenings” in the fifties, Féral emphasises his insistence on blurring the line between art and life, which was also a key distinction of the theatrical avant-garde of the early twentieth century, a history she ignores (175). Instead, Féral imbricates artists such as Grotowski and the Living Theatre into the visual arts genealogy exemplified by Kaprow, artists who, she claims, after Artaud, “demanded as the model for theatre’s renewal: the stage as a ‘living’ place and the play as a ‘one time only’ experience” (176). Replicating Fried’s logic, but now substituting “performance” for “modernist art”, Féral claims that “performance explores the under-side of . . . theatre, giving the audience a glimpse of its inside, its reverse side, its hidden face” (ibid.).

Féral also rehearses the theme of multiplicity that Pontbriand emphasises in her essay. Like Pontbriand, Féral worries about the problem of “oneness” in theatre:

whenever an actor is expected to ingest the parts he [sic] plays so as to become one with them . . . the stage asserts its oneness and its totality. It is, and it is one, and the actor, as a unitary subject, belongs to its wholeness (ibid.).
Contemporary avant-garde theatre and performance, in contrast, is concerned with multiplicity: “it sets subjects (and not a subject) on stage” (ibid), and those “subjects in process” are contrasted with “alienated . . . figure[s] of fixation like characters in the classical theatre, or in any other fixed theatrical form” (176-177). In a breathless and escalating description of performance’s capacity to free and subvert, Féral claims that performance “escapes all illusion and representation” and, “with neither past nor future, performance takes place”, thereby “turn[ing] the stage into an event from which the subject will emerge transformed until another performance” (177). By rejecting what Féral describes as “the symbolic organization dominating theatre”, performance “exposes the conditions of theatricality as they are”. Therefore, she argues,

theatricality is made of this endless play and of these continuous displacements of the position of desire, in other words, of the position of the subject in process with an imaginary constructive space (ibid.).

For Féral, “performance” engages the fragmented psychoanalytic “subject” who “brings emotional flows and symbolic objects into a destabilized zone—the body, space—into a infrasymbolic zone” (ibid.). Féral suggests that the “subject” of “performance” (not a “completely assumed subject”, by which I think she means a “character”) exists as a kind of filtering system to regulate the flow of semiosis (ibid.). The performance subject, according to Féral, is engaged in an act of unmediated energy exchange: “Performance, therefore, appears as a primary process lacking teleology and unaccompanied by any secondary process, since performance has nothing to represent for anyone” (177-178). In relation to theatre, Féral argues, performance fulfils the psychoanalytic function of bringing into the light all that for theatre remains unsaid, “most hidden, most repressed, yet most active as well” (178). Punning on the psychoanalytic “scene”, Féral claims that “performances” are “a storehouse for the accessories of the symbolic” and “a depository of signifiers which are all outside of established discourse and behind the scenes of theatricality” (ibid.).

There is, however, slippage in Féral’s usage of “theatricality”, between it functioning as a description of a particular performance genre and as a generalisable value. The former usage, as just quoted, refers to “theatre” which “is built” but “cannot call upon” these behind the scenes “accessories” which, Féral implies, are available to “performance” (ibid.). Yet her sense of the term slips when she describes it as follows:

Theatricality can therefore be seen as composed of two different parts: one highlights performance and is made up of the realities of the imaginary; and the
other highlights the theatrical and is made up of specific symbolic structures . . . Theatricality arises from the play between these two realities (ibid.).

Although I question Féral’s understanding of Lacanian orders of psychic function—the imaginary, the symbolic and the real—and the way she uses them in this context, my concern is more with the logic of her argument.\(^2\) Theatricality, she argues, is now a process, an interplay between “the theatrical” and “performance”. In an echo of Fried, however, she problematically claims that “theatricality cannot be, it must be for someone” (ibid.). In contrast, Féral claims that “performance seems to be attempting to reveal and to stage something which took place before the representation of the subject (even if it does so by using an already constituted subject)” but not, it would seem, for anyone (ibid.).

Féral’s orientation towards what Derrida identifies as nostalgic interpretational practice is apparent in her treatment of the objects “performance”, “theatre”, “subjectivity” and “theatricality”. This is, of course, entirely consistent with the task set for the contributors by the editors, “to discover the characteristics peculiar to theatre, to define theatricality” (Féral et al. 1982, 1): an interpretive activity that certainly suggests a desire to “decipher a truth or an origin” (Derrida 1978). Paradoxically, however, the “truth” that is “deciphered” is an idea of “performance” which insists on playfulness and process. It is a “truth” that celebrates a triumph of affirmative interpretation over nostalgia, but in doing so reveals itself as yearning for truth or an origin like the most conservative of interpretations.

The resolution of this paradox is by way of predicating, contra performance, an idea of “theatre” that is not-playful, not-processual; that is irredeemably “nostalgic”. Performance, notwithstanding its grounding in a yearning for presence, is thereby championed as that which is in fact resistant to the (representational) metaphysics of theatre. Féral concludes by invoking “performance” as an agent:

\(^2\)Lacan distinguished between the “ego” and the “subject” with the former term belonging to the realm of the imaginary and the latter, by virtue of being constituted through language, belonging to the symbolic (Evans 1996, 195). The symbolic order is a “network of signification” which includes (in addition to language) “dietary rituals, marriage ceremonies, hysteria, conventions of dress, and neuroses [that] all generate signifiers” (Silverman 1983, 164-165). Although the imaginary order precedes a subject’s entry into the symbolic, the fundamental mis-recognition upon which it is based—the infant’s mis-identification of itself during the “mirror stage”—always occurs, according to Silverman, from within the symbolic order, and as an event which is in some way culturally orchestrated.

Lacan himself encourages us to conceptualize the mirror stage along these lines, since he describes it as a moment which is only retrospectively realized—realized from a position within language, and within the symbolic (1983, 161). From this we could conclude that performance, like theatre and many other types of human actions and behaviours, functions entirely within the realm of the symbolic. To make a distinction, as Féral does, between the “theatrical” qua “symbolic” and “performance” qua “imaginary” is nonsensical in Lacanian terms. However, within a logic of interpretation where one term struggles to dominate the other, it makes perfect sense.
performance *poses a challenge* to the theatre and to any reflection that theatre might make upon itself. Performance reorients such reflections by *forcing them* to open up and by *compelling* them to explore the margins of theatre (179 [emphasis added]).

For Féral “performance” struggles with “theatre”, an *agon* that is expressed in her verbs “challenge”, “compel” and “force”. “Theatricality” is deployed by Féral as a flexible trope to describe a range of avant-gardist practices that she forcefully promotes throughout her essay, but which she wants to keep separate from “theatre” (which, we are given to understand, is the tradition of “nineteenth-century theatre, of naturalist theatre, and of Sarah Bernhardt’s first parts” (176)). In her topography of theatre—it has margins (and, by implication, a centre) which are explored, extended, violated and constantly redefined by performance—Féral’s locating of avant-gardist practices on theatre’s margins is, of course, where one would expect them to be. The trope of “theatricality” allows Féral to explore these margins, but without ever losing sight of her centre:

> an excursion into performance has seemed not only interesting, but essential to our ultimate concern, which is to come back to theatre after a long detour behind the scenes of theatricality (179).

In a deft rhetorical sleight-of-hand, Féral, in one sentence, maintains her avant-gardist credentials while, in acknowledgement of where her disciplinary power-base lies, at the same time reaggregates the liminal subject of performance once more into the interpretive community of theatre. From her ostensible self-positioning as an explorer in the wilds of performance, Féral concludes by revealing herself to be simply an “interested” tourist.

Underpinning the essays of Féral, Monk, Pontbriand and the later work of Peggy Phelan is a yearning for the reinstatement of something missing or lost—for example Phelan’s “universal expression” of humanity—which “performance” can somehow help to recapture. Writing in the shadow of Derrida, these commentators attempt to disguise their rather charming idealism, their nostalgia, with the language of affirmative interpretation. For Michael Fried, writing only fifteen years before Féral et al., the immanence of Modernist Art was unassailable: “*at every moment the work itself is wholly manifest*” ([1967] 1998, 167). Fried’s “onto-theology” (to borrow Derrida’s term (1978, 280)) was declared in his epigraph to “Art and Objecthood”:
The abiding assurance is that “we every moment see the same proof of a God as we should have seen if we had seen Him create the world at first”({1967} 1998, 148).

Peggy Phelan, some twenty-five years later, proposed an “ontology of performance”, a metaphysics that claimed “performance’s only life is in the present” and “performance’s being . . . becomes itself through disappearance” (1993, 146). Like the Friedian category of Modernist Art, Phelan elevated performance to a transcendent category, a position subsequently critiqued by Philip Auslander, who caustically observed,

I doubt very strongly that any cultural discourse can actually stand outside the ideologies of capital and reproduction that define a mediatized culture, or should be expected to do so (1999, 40).

2.2.2 Identifying struggles over interpretations of theatricality as effects of modernist discourse

Prior to his 1999 critique of Phelan’s ontology of performance, Auslander had also re-evaluated Fried’s “Art and Objecthood”, and in the process, revisited the essays by Féral and Pontbriand just discussed. Rather than adopting a position for or against Fried’s Modernist and anti-theatrical metaphysics, however, Auslander argued that Fried’s essay set the terms and marked out the discursive field for subsequent discussions of the putative struggle between modern and postmodern art.24 Fried’s categories of “theatre” and “theatricality”, Auslander observed, did not refer to the art form of theatre per se, but were, rather, signifiers for an emerging postmodernist “sensibility” in the visual arts. Fried’s metaphorical “war” between art and theatricality, Auslander suggests, is a cipher for the “agon” between postmodernism and modernism (1997, 52).

Auslander is interested in how the discursive claims made by Fried in 1967 have (in)formed later performance and visual arts discourse, and how, in particular, Fried’s binary opposition between immanent “presentness”(which Fried associates with modernist art) and theatrical “presence” (associated with minimalism) has infiltrated subsequent discussions. Auslander argues that visual arts discourse, in attempting to establish the discursive (interpretive) dominance of postmodernism over Friedian and Greenbergian modernism, accepts without question the field as defined by Fried:

24Fried himself arrives at a similar conclusion:
I continue to be struck by the extent to which hostile responses to “Art and Objecthood” tend not to be deconstructive in approach but rather to attack my “positive” terms in the interests of my “negative” ones, so that on the whole the disputes have continued to take place within the conceptual space the essay established twenty years ago (1987, 56).
By reifying Fried’s position, along with Greenberg’s, as the late modernism against which postmodernism defines itself, [the critical discourse of postmodernist art] unintentionally recuperates postmodernist art for the very critical discourse it is said to have surpassed (53-54).

Therefore, Auslander continues, in an echo of Vanden Heuvel (1993), the discourse of postmodernism “repeats the modernist gesture of defining itself” against a past discourse which it views as no longer growing or developing (54).

Auslander notes that, according to the critic Rosalind Krauss, Fried did not, in his 1967 essay, define what he understood by the terms “theatre/theatricality” (52), beyond the comment that “what lies between the arts is theater” (Fried 1967 1998, 164, Krauss 1987, 62). According to Krauss, this definition

specifies theater as a nonthing, an emptiness, a void. Theater is thus an empty term whose role it is to set up a system founded upon the opposition between itself and another term (1987, 62-63).

Krauss argues that this opposition is not “unloaded”, that Fried assigns a value “that is vectored along an axis of good and bad”, a Derridean hierarchical inequality found in all binary oppositions. Therefore, she continues, “Theater as the empty, unlocatable, amorphous member of the pair is bad, while the nontheatrical rises within the pair to be coded as good” (63). In this “ethical vector of terms” (ibid.) we can see what Puchner (2002) identified as the typical modernist embrace/rejection of theatricality as a value. However, such positioning of ideas of theatre and theatricality, as Krauss suggests, reflects a discursive practice that extends beyond the performing arts.

Indeed, in a later essay Fried (1987) argues that in “Art and Objecthood” he was not attacking theatrical art per se; rather, he claims, he was “proposing that contemporary work [that is, minimalist sculpture] that didn’t understand itself to be theatrical was in effect merely that [theatrical]” (1987, 57). Fried’s use of the word “merely” expresses his continued belief that theatricality is a quality which, in Krauss’s “ethical vector of terms”, diminishes an art work’s orientation towards an abstract standard of authenticity (a standard determined by critics such as Fried). Nevertheless, in the next paragraph, Fried historicises his own use of “theatre/theatricality” in his critical lexicon, with the observation that
the issue of theatricality[,] defined as a pejorative term implying the wrong sort of consciousness of an audience[,] originally arose around the middle of the 18th century in France

and that, subsequently, he had “done a lot of historical work aimed at establishing that the attempt to defeat the theatrical was a central impulse of a major tradition within French painting . . .” (ibid.). Fried concludes by arguing that “the antitheatrical arguments of ‘Art and Objecthood’ belong to a larger historical field than that of abstraction versus minimalist art in 1967 . . .” (ibid.).

Turning to the discourse of performance, Auslander observes that Fried’s agenda-setting has also been influential—he illustrates this influence by reconsidering the essays by Féral and Pontbriand. Féral attributed to “performance”, Auslander writes, Friedian qualities of “presentness”, against which she set “narrativity” and “representation”, both associated in her text with “theatre”. Auslander, however, is alert to the discursive operations of both Féral’s and Fried’s essays; he observes that Féral transplants Fried’s argument from one critical era and context to another. Whereas Fried argued that theatricality was the enemy of art understood from the point of view of Greenbergian modernism, Féral argues, on very similar grounds, that theatricality is the enemy of art understood from the point of view of Derridean poststructuralism (1997, 55).

Pontbriand, as we have already seen, similarly invoked Fried’s notion of “presentness” in her notion of “post-modern presence”, which she contrasted with the “classical presence” of theatre—a distinction that mirrored Fried’s original binary categories. Auslander concludes his analysis of Fried’s, Féral’s and Pontbriand’s essays by suggesting that it is historically “anomalous” for Féral and Pontbriand to focus on “the same aesthetic

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2Michael Quinn, in “Concepts of Theatricality in Contemporary Art History” surveys not only Fried’s use of the term but also how it has been used by a range of other art theorists. Quinn traces Fried’s examination of “theatricality” in French painting from Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot (1980) to later works such as Realism, Writing and Disfiguration: On Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane (1987) and Courbet’s Realism (1990). In the earlier work, Quinn glosses Fried’s argument that theatricality becomes an aspect of the subjects inside the painting, their organization in the picture plane, the thickness of the paint and so on. Turned out poses, i.e. heavily painted pictures of people who seem to be aware of the painter’s act of representing them, are devalued in relation to other more “absorbed” kinds of behaviour, like play or work, by thinly painted subjects who do not acknowledge the artist (or the gallery viewer) as a spectator (1995,107).

In other words the notion of “absorption” suggests an unself-consciousness of the painted subjects and thus a lack of self-reflexivity in the painting itself. Unlike its opposite, such painting does not self-consciously “pose” or “perform” for the viewer. Although such a view still prevails in his later work, Quinn perceives Fried as “subtly changing” his perspective and moving from “authentic objectivity toward the authentic performative act” (ibid.), a comment Quinn allows to hang provocatively, without further explication.
criterion” as used by Fried (56). In “recuperating” Fried’s notion of “presentness” and attributing it to postmodern performance, Auslander argues that what appeared at first to be a “deconstructive reversal” is, rather, a demonstration of “the degree to which Féral’s and Pontbriand’s ideas are steeped in the Greenberg-Fried account of modernism” (ibid.). Categories of “modernism” and “postmodernism”, and their respective discourses, Auslander writes, are “medium-specific” and “historically contingent”. Fried, he argues, was simply trying to maintain the modernist idea of painting as a “pure” art form against the Pop Art movement in the mid-sixties (ibid.). For Féral and Pontbriand, writing in the “deconstructionist early 1980s”, Auslander argues,

performance needed to defeat representation and assert presentness in order to establish its specificity as a medium (that is, to distinguish itself from theatre) and to differentiate an emerging postmodernism from an existing modernism (ibid.).

It is ironic, however, that the discourses of Féral and Pontbriand were, Auslander observes, “firmly inscribed within the Greenbergian mythic narrative of a medium’s struggle to discover and assert that which is specific to itself” (ibid.). That the “Greenbergian mythic narrative” explicitly yearns for a decipherable truth is unsurprising, given its historical, social and cultural contexts. What is surprising, as Auslander demonstrates so succinctly, is how this narrative continues in the work of Féral and Pontbriand, even though the discursive field within which their work is situated has shifted, apparently, from (what I have characterised in Derrida’s terms as) nostalgic modernism to affirmative postmodernism. Interestingly, this demonstrates that what is always and already there is not the Truth qua “theatre” or “performance”, “modernism” or “postmodernism”, but rather the battlefield of contesting interpretations.

The essays by Fried, Monk, Féral and Pontbriand reveal how theatricality can be, and has been, co-opted as the binary Other to reinforce the truth value of another category. What are claimed as potentially subversive concepts, such as ambiguity, in-between-ness and process, are attributed to theatricality, as are what I argue are the anti-theatrical values of inauthenticity, exhibitionism, and excessiveness. As Krauss argued, theatricality is an “empty term”, the value of which is in how it lends itself to use in binary systems, most frequently, as in the Friedian use, to reaffirm the unquestionable ontological Truth of another category (for example, “presentness”).

Within discourses of theatre and performance, however, the term acquires a different inflection. As a value, theatricality in fact functions as a banner for avant-gardist anti-
theatricalism, that is, it stands for opposition to representation, narrativity and character, all of which are associated with certain kinds of theatre. In addition, theatricality can also stand—through attributions of ambiguity, in-between-ness and process—for a politically resistant and/or emancipatory mode of performance. This latter positioning of theatricality was how the term was used proactively by the historical avant-garde. The discourse of theatricality, then, as it emerges in the writings of Fried and others, either positions the term as a pejorative ontological category (with a value of inauthenticity), or else it stands for putatively anti-theatrical practices that through performance transcend inauthenticity thereby accessing a fundamental Truth: presence, illusion, play and the like.

2.3 Defending the borders
2.3.1 Deploying theatricality to defend a disciplinary border
These positionings of theatricality are remarkably consistent and, despite shifts in contexts of struggles of interpretation, continue to recur in texts that, either explicitly or by implication only, utilise the term. In the 1982 collection Féral and her co-contributors writing on performance art considered it a genre on the margins, a subversive theatrical form. However, in a collection entitled “The Rise and Fall of Theatricality”, in the journal SubStance (2002), again edited by Féral, “theatricality” is recruited by Féral in a rearguard action against the aggressive incursions of theories of performance (this particular struggle, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter, was fought with particular virulence in the US in the early 1990s).

Féral asks three key questions to frame the contributions (and, effectively, to frame the discourse within which the contributors are to be read): To what does the term “theatricality” refer? To what kind of theater is it related? and Is “theatricality . . . still a pertinent concept compared to performativity, which has overshadowed it in the last 15 years?” (2002, 3). This last question, in particular, betrays a certain anxiety: that recent struggles over the term “performativity” had, in a real sense, prevailed, and succeeded in consigning “theatricality” to the position of a negative against which “performativity” was now juxtaposed as a positive term. It would seem that the oppositional and avant-gardist tendencies apparent in the earlier writings on performance, were, through the label of “performativity”, now threatening the relevance of the theatrical discourse itself. “Theatricality”, then, becomes a useful term that allows Féral and other writers in the collection not to resile from their earlier positions vis-à-vis performance and thereby, in the logic of the struggle, to become associated with the conservative position. Through “theatricality” the discourse of theatre is reconfigured; the term no longer refers to hoary old theatre, instead, by drawing on certain anthropological and sociological texts, the term is elevated (re-valued?), particularly in Féral’s writings, to stand as a foundational concept.
Similarly, in a collection edited by Erika Fischer-Lichte appearing in *Theatre Research International* (1995), contributions by Fischer-Lichte and Marvin Carlson (Carlson also contributes to Féral’s 2002 volume), in particular, articulated the need to fortify Theatre Studies in response to and against perceived incursions by other disciplines. In her introduction to the collection, Fischer-Lichte identified “theatricality” as a “key term” that “came into circulation” at the 1993 IFTR/FIRT (Federation of International Theatre Research) conference at Helsinki (1995a, 85). This conference sought, Fischer-Lichte writes, to analyse theatre historiography as a discipline, and also to consider the “application of analytic strategies from other disciplines to theatre history and . . . to identify the distinctive features of theatre history as a single discipline” (ibid.). While Fischer-Lichte’s second objective echoed the intention of Féral’s 1982 collection—“to discover the characteristics peculiar to theatre, to define theatricality” (Féral et al. 1982, op. cit.)—her primary aim was to account for disciplinary incursions on to the home turf of Theatre Studies.

It was in the interests of mounting a defence of Theatre Studies as a discipline that Fischer-Lichte argued that “theatricality” could be seen as a “key concept” employed in the “analytic strategies” of a range of disciplines in the human sciences or cultural studies (1995a, 85). However, she observed, although many of these uses were “metaphorical”—in itself not a “recent development”—there was also an increasing tendency to use “theatre” as a “cultural model”, to “such an extent that nowadays it seems to be the most widespread heuristic model in cultural studies” (ibid.). Theatre history, in attempting to discover alternative analytic strategies from other disciplines, she concluded, was returned to itself (ibid.).

These framings of the discussion of theatricality by Fischer-Lichte in 1995 and Féral in 2002, despite marginally different emphases, expressed a recurring interpretive position which, in its regularity, indicates the emergence of a certain discourse of theatricality. The questions asked by Féral in her introduction to the 2002 collection express a disciplinary anxiety similar to that which fuelled Fischer-Lichte’s 1995 volume: is theatre as an art form relevant, and, if not, how can we make it so? Is “our” discipline (the theme of ownership being marked throughout the introductions to both collections) being colonised by other disciplines, in particular the nascent discipline of Performance Studies? Has Theatre Studies somehow missed the theoretical “boat” and, if so, how can we catch up?

This last question, in particular, is germane to Theatre Studies, which, as Alan Woods argues, is a discipline that “search[es] for the new . . . in virtually all areas of scholarly


work” (1989, 166). The problem for theatre historiography, as Fischer-Lichte argued in the 1995 collection, was to agree on the object of study “whose so-called history is being explored”; could a “consensus” as to what constituted “theatre” be reached, particularly when “there is no reason to assume that such a consensus, actually exists” (1995a, 85). Side-stepping the interpretive trap of attempting to discover the essential characteristics of the object, Fischer-Lichte proposed instead that the term “theatre” was “culturally and historically determined”, and that it “has been applied to quite different cultural, social and political events” as well as being “employed as a purely aesthetic term in the narrowest sense of the word” (1995a, 86). Such “different uses of the term”, Fischer-Lichte noted, at times “competed with each other”; however she does not seem to have noticed this same struggle being fought out in her own writing.

Such critical lacunae occur frequently also in Féral’s writings on theatricality. Central to Féral’s rhetorical strategy is the figuring of a non-definitional definition of theatricality, or rather, an indeterminate positioning of the term that allows Féral to adapt it to a range of arguments. Looking once more at the three questions she poses to frame the 2002 collection, we can see this process in operation: theatricality at first lacks a point of reference (“to what exactly does this term refer?”); next, “theatre” is claimed as an enigmatic point of reference (“to what kind of theater is it related?”); and finally, theatricality is positioned specifically in relation to a particular theoretical debate (is “theatricality . . . still a pertinent concept compared to performativity, which has overshadowed it in the last 15 years?”). Féral constructs a tendentious argument that, through its indeterminate positioning of theatricality, marked by such slippages, is virtually unassailable.

Compounding this discursive strategy, Féral moves to organise the discourse on theatricality around and upon her own terms. Thus, surveying the other contributors in the SubStance collection, she suggests that all the essays responding to her question “How would you define the notion of theatricality?” (3), are in “dialectical dialogue with each other” (4). Féral, on one hand, claims that these writings have been “gathered” by her to “clarify the concept of theatricality and to reach a better understanding of what is at stake in using (or renouncing) this concept today” (ibid.). On the other hand, she claims that what the writings reveal

that the notion of theatricality is indeed not only a tricky one but also one that replays the whole history of theater. It is precisely because the notion of theater has changed that we must constantly redefine the notion of theatricality (ibid. [emphasis added]).
Theatricality, however, despite the imputation of indeterminacy in the Féralian sense, is not “tricky”; it remains a value that Féral very clearly associates with a historically changeable notion of theatre. The most striking conclusion we can draw from her survey of the various contributors is that the apparent indeterminacy of the concept of “theatricality”, is paradoxically counterpointed by the assumption that, notwithstanding the lack of an explicit consensus, everybody is in fact writing about the same thing. Further, underpinning these writings is the assumption that there is a “same thing” in the first place, about which such dialogue may proceed. Theatricality thereby becomes a kind of passe-partout—a one-size-fits-all analytic available for any and all arguments.

In this collection, Féral publishes, for the first time in English her 1988 essay “Theatricality: the Specificity of Theatrical Language”, in which she takes the same interpretive approach. After historically situating the term with the avant-garde—in particular the early twentieth century Russian director and playwright Nikolai Evreinov’s “discovery” of “teatralnost [theatricality]” (2002, 95)—Féral suggests that the term is both “poorly defined and etymologically unclear” (ibid.). This discursive strategy serves to reinforce the putative ambiguity of the term, all the better against which to launch her own critical foray. Adopting a critical approach in her 1988 essay that she repeats, holus-bolus, in her 2002 introduction, Féral writes

[theatricality] seems to be much like the “tacit concept” defined by Michael Polany: “a concrete idea that one can use directly but that one can only describe indirectly.” It is a concept that one associates in a privileged way with the theater (ibid [emphasis added]).

. . . or indeed, one that can be associated in a “privileged way”, as her 1982 essay demonstrated, with “performance”, which is, after all, on the margins of theatre in any case. Unlike Rosalind Krauss’s (1987) figuring of Michael Fried’s use of “theatricality” as an “empty term” in a critical/interpretive binarism, Féral’s claim that it is a “tacit concept” fails to provide any critical traction at all. Indeed, Féral’s indefinable definitions of theatricality in her 1982, 1988, and 2002 essays function like the emperor’s new clothes of the children’s story: they are interpretational constructs which, when subjected to closer examination, amount to very little. Nevertheless, such strategic ambiguity allows her to suggest that theatricality can be deployed in a range of different contexts. This diversity then allows Féral to postulate a generalised thematic dichotomy of theatricality—the term

relating both to art and to the social world—that, she writes, informs the “larger contexts of the articles in this issue” (2002, 6).

Like Fischer-Lichte, Féral is defending the disciplinary borders of Theatre Studies. But because she positions herself on the side of the angels—that is, on the side of the avant-garde, the politically progressive and the playful—she is compromised if she is seen to be defending that which in the logics of this interpretational struggle is positioned as reactionary, repressive and boring. The trope of theatricality allows Féral both to defend the home turf and maintain political credibility: “Today I am convinced”, she writes, “that the opposition between performativity and theatricality is purely rhetorical, and that both are necessarily enmeshed within the performance” (2002, 5). “Theatricality”, for Féral, rather than being opposed to or distinct from “performativity”, is a quality within which a range of practices (and, presumably, other qualities such as “performativity”) are embedded: “indeed, any performance remains necessarily inscribed in theatricality” (ibid.).

Féral is nothing if not consistent in her contributions, over twenty years, to a discourse of theatricality. For her, theatricality remains, a universal value and a transcendental signified, the fons et origo of human performance. In her latest writing, Féral arrives at the familiar discourse which locates “theatricality” playfully “between” a set of interpretive binarisms: “In this permanent movement between meaning and its displacement, between the same and the different, alterity arises from the heart of sameness, and theatricality is born” (2002, 12). Triumphantely heralding the ascendance of affirmative interpretation, within which theatricality is inscribed, Féral celebrates the “always already” returning to restore a lost purity.

The transcendence of theatricality is a theme which runs throughout her 1988 essay. Written only six years after her initial incursion into the discourse on theatricality, it is not surprising that the essay betrays an anxiety, expressed in the earlier article, as to those qualities “specific” to the art form “theatre”, and the properties, qualities and processes of “theatricality” that distinguish it from “other genres . . . [and] from other kinds of spectacle—dance, performance, art, or multi-media art” (2002, 94). Furthermore, she continues, her objective was

to bring the nature of theater itself into focus against a background of individual theatrical practices, theories of stage-play, and aesthetics. It is an attempt to find parameters shared by all theatrical enterprises from time immemorial (ibid.).

27 Adopting such a position, as Alan Woods (1989) argues, is consistent with Theatre Studies in general which has made a fetish of the avant-garde.
The impetus for such anxiety was the “decentring” of the theatre in the twentieth century, as a result of which theatre was, therefore, “obliged to redefine itself” (ibid.). Féral’s self-stated project was to ask whether “theatricality” was a property which “pre-exist[s] its manifestation in the theatrical object, with the object then becoming the condition of its emergence”, or whether it was a “consequence” of “process[es] related to either reality or to the subject”? (95).

To overcome the difficulty of describing such an elusive concept, Féral explored theatricality as a “property of the quotidian” with three mind experiments—that is, an imaginary testing of certain propositions—concluding in all three instances that theatricality was a spectatorial operation (95-97), and that the “gaze of the spectator” created a “cleft in quotidian space” through which “theatricality as alterity emerges” (97). On the basis of these imagined experiments, Féral claimed to have established theatricality as an empirically recognisable phenomenon (although she did actually do the experiments).

The next step, however, was a huge one. Féral argued that “if one is ready to admit the existence” of theatricality in the quotidian, then one must be prepared to accept the possibility of “attributing a transcendent nature to theatricality, and of thus defining stage-related theatricality as only one expression of a transcendent phenomenon” (98). The “possibility” very quickly becomes axiomatic. If theatricality is a “transcendent phenomenon”, or as Evreinov argued, a “pre-aesthetic instinct” (106, note 11), then

theater is possible only because theatricality exists and because the theater calls it into play . . . the theatricality of the stage could not exist were the nature of theatricality not transcendent (99).

The argumentative turn here is revealing: Féral used a set of mind experiments which take for granted a certain range of cultural competencies. On the basis of the “results” of those experiments—results given by the very assumptions upon which the experiments were predicated—she argues for the possibility of a transcendent phenomenon of which those empirical examples were mere manifestations. Having established the transcendent phenomenon on the basis of these empirical examples, Féral then proceeds to argue that stage-related theatricality is but one example of a broader category—on the basis of no further evidence. Theatricality does not exist, it is not a thing; rather it is a discursive term used to describe certain practices, that emerged with the practices themselves; as such, it is culturally and historically specific.
Féral’s positioning of theatricality as a transcendent phenomenon that is fundamental to “all theatrical enterprises from time immemorial” reflects the similar claims made for performance by Phelan, quoted earlier, who argued that because the “diversity of human culture continually showed a persistent theatricality, [perhaps performance] could . . . be a universal expression of human signification, akin to language” (1998). Such views express an immanent humanism, the universalism of which runs counter to the culturally respectful discourses of theatre and performance scholars.

The relationship of this view of performance (or theatricality in the case of Féral) to a Derridean imperative to deconstruct nostalgic interpretation, and turn the activity of interpretation itself into one of play and process, is considered by Vanden Heuvel:

Performance as a purely autonomous form of expression does not displace the dramatic text and its Presence, but simply mimics and restates it while only marginally dispersing its power. Seeking to break down the text’s transcendent signifieds, performance often inadvertently proposes itself as a new transcendental signifier (1993, 12).

Vanden Heuvel’s observation reinforces Weber’s (1987) thesis, which I have pursued through these writings, that interpretation is best understood as a struggle for domination between opposing interpretations. Read through the lens of genealogy provided by Foucault, we begin to understand that what is at stake in these texts are contesting wills to Truth and the Nietzschean will to power. The terms “performance” and “theatricality” are wielded as weapons in this battle—they are objects of discourse—and as such we can disregard any truth claims made in their name. Instead, it is to the discursive context, the field of battle itself, which we must look to discover the “myriad events through which—thanks to which, against which”—such “trait[s] or concept[s]” were formed and began to circulate in discourse (Foucault 1977a, 146).

Fischer-Lichte (1995a), in her introduction, recognises the discursive context of theatricality as a contested site in various disciplinary contexts. However, although her approach to the question of theatricality appears, at first, less problematic than that of Féral, Fischer-Lichte, too, uncritically adopts an avant-gardist stance, and positions theatricality so as to enable her to make similar ontological claims. Fischer-Lichte’s own contribution, “From theatre to theatricality—how to construct reality” (1995b), exemplifies some of the problems confronting the use of “theatricality”. From her introduction we are given to understand that the term will be explored as a discursive
category that is contingent upon the historical circumstances and cultural contexts of its articulation. However, the warning bells are rung by the title of her essay. “From theatre to theatricality” (italics added) suggests a movement away from the first term towards the second, and further implies that the latter term can be separated from the former. In Fischer-Lichte’s argument, it emerges that “theatre” stands for a particular mode of performance which presents representations of reality that have coherently coded semiotic systems; “theatricality”, on the other hand, stands for a mode of performance that emphasises both its own materiality, and reflexively declares reality to be contingent and subjectively constructed by the spectator.

The second half of the title—“how to construct reality”— does not suggest a discursive project, but rather an ontological exploration. Although the gesture towards poststructuralism is made by the suggestion of the constructedness of “reality”, the impulse towards political and personal freedom underpinning her essay quickly becomes apparent: Fischer-Lichte insists that

the theatre of the avant-garde movement . . . emphatically stressed theatre’s faculty to serve as a field of experimentation where each spectator can experience and test her/his possibilities of constructing reality (1995b, 104).

Again, “theatricality” operates as a signifier for a particular interpretive mode, the logic of which relies on the (negatively valued) term “theatre” in order to signify its (plentiful, positively valued) opposite. Fischer-Lichte (who elsewhere displays a keen historical consciousness) disappointingly allows herself to be seduced by the rhetoric of the avant-garde, so that rather than relying on her analysis of their use of “theatricality” as a discursive strategy, she instead falls for the liberatory dream promoted by that same discourse.

2.3.2 Platonic prejudices: anti-theatricalism in contemporary discourse

Marvin Carlson, in “Theatre History, Methodology and Distinctive Features”, his contribution to the 1995 collection, is not concerned with the notion of theatricality as the putative “key concept” claimed by Fischer-Lichte. He does, however, share Fischer-Lichte’s concern that theatre studies, if it is to maintain its own disciplinary boundaries as “a separate or independent discipline . . . must first confront what distinguishes theatre itself from other phenomena that might be considered historically” (1995, 91). Carlson’s definition of “theatre” as a phenomenon which can be distinguished from other phenomena, and open to historical consideration, positions it as an object of study that is contingent, diverse, and historically and culturally mutable. If a field of study is defined
by its objects, then it is also defined by what it excludes (that is, that which lies outside its purview; Carlson cites the example of puppet theatre), and what it represses (what it does not consider “legitimate”; Carlson cites the “doubtful” legitimacy, for some theatre historians, of “studying circus, or medicine shows or professional wrestling”) (ibid.). What is to be studied and how it is to be studied, Carlson argues, are determined by the interests and activities of those who designate themselves, or are designated by the culture, as practitioners in that field at any particular point in time. It is the general consensus of this group that defines what “theatre history” is (92).

Carlson notes, however, that in keeping with the contemporary environment of “overlapping and interpenetration of disciplines”, the terms “theatre” and “performance” are now used by “more people outside the traditional grouping of theatre researchers” (93). Theatre researchers, however, have “an intellectual and professional stake in what theatre means, and thus what theatre research and indeed theatre history may mean” (ibid.). Although in many cases, he writes, such interest from outside the field adds “to the richness and variety of theatre study”, in other cases, repression and exclusion could be a deliberate strategy pursued by some scholars who “are attempting to limit and purify their own presumed discipline and feel that this can in part be done by excluding a specific area, called theatre, from it” (ibid.). Indeed, this is the same “paranoid” anti-theatricality that Puchner identified in the writings of Nietzsche and Adorno, and also in the writings of Michael Fried and other modernist critics “who define the canon of high modernist art through its opposition to the theater and theatricality” (Puchner 2002, 32; 2001, 356).

To this point, Carlson has been setting the scene, so to speak, for his primary interest, which is to explore how the “boundaries of theatre” are defined by non-theatre disciplines in a “process of the transfer and appropriation of theatre and performance as concepts and metaphors by other disciplines” (1995, 93). In a deft piece of historical analysis, Carlson then debunks what he sees as the misappropriation or misrecognition of certain concepts of theatre, first by Erving Goffman, and then by Bruce Wilshire, who critiques Goffman (93-94). In contrast to theatre historians, Carlson argues, a philosopher of ethics like Wilshire, or a sociologist like Goffman, lack a depth of knowledge of the field. Without such knowledge, Wilshire draws, like Goffman, “upon a general view of theatre as a metaphor for his actual interest and audience” (Carlson 1995, 94). In other words, Carlson challenges the assumptions made by Wilshire and Goffman as to the qualities they attribute to theatre, suggesting that historical analysis reveals the fallacy of many of their

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claims for theatre. In reference to a later article that Wilshire contributed to *The Drama Review*, “The Concept of the Paratheatrical” (1990), Carlson writes that “Wilshire has entered the domain of direct theatre speculation . . . [and] in this context his assertions become more troubling” (1995, 94).

It quickly becomes apparent that Carlson is not only concerned with Wilshire’s disciplinary incursion, but also, is “troubled” by the claims for truth Wilshire makes in the name of theatre. Indeed, Carlson is contesting what he perceives as an alarming anti-theatricality in Wilshire’s writings, an anti-theatricality based on a fundamental ontological fallacy, that there is, according to Wilshire, a “basic and unequivocal difference between what an actor does and says on stage and what he or she does in real life” (1995, 94). Carlson refutes Wilshire’s larger claim that “theatre, as a fictive world, can have no consequences outside this fiction” (ibid.), and Wilshire’s expectation that “paratheatrical performance” be

as distinctly bounded as conventional theatre . . . he wishes these boundaries to protect the outside world not [just] from illegal or socially unacceptable effects arising from performance, but indeed from any effects whatever (94-95).

Carlson critiques Wilshire’s writings to provide a case study of a particular discursive approach that can be found, he claims, within both Theatre Studies and other disciplines. Such discourses, Carlson writes, aim to delimit the boundaries of theatre and act reductively upon it, producing “a model of ‘theatre’ that in practice is clearly inadequate to deal intellectually with this complex human activity” (95). In particular, Carlson is concerned with the ahistoricism of such an approach that attempts to “to construct an abstract definition of theatre that stands outside the corrosive effects of a historical situation” (ibid.). Such boundary setting, Carlson feels, is ultimately a “futile” activity “at a time when the interpenetration of fields has become an accepted fact of intellectual life” (96).

The new “permeability” of academic boundaries presents, according to Carlson, “new opportunities for research” and for inquiry into a myriad of different “aspects of human culture and society” (ibid.). In such a landscape, Carlson argues, scholars should not feel the need to justify their work in terms of disciplinary boundaries, methodologies, or traditions. Rather, particularly for the theatre historian, Carlson sees that the

overlapping with other areas has placed at our potential disposal a stimulating array of methodological strategies, offering the potential for exciting new
discoveries even in the areas most thoroughly covered by traditional research (ibid.).

Carlson finds the “totalizing” questions asked by the Helsinki symposium—“what are the methods and subject matter of theatre history?”—unproductive. In their stead, he proposes a more “pragmatic and case-based” approach, the methodologies and questions of which would be determined by the particular “historiography project” being pursued by a researcher (ibid.).

Carlson’s essay is, itself, an interesting phenomenon. On the one hand he mounts an argument for disciplinary plurality, while on the other he defends his own discipline against the assumptions and misrecognitions of it that such interdisciplinarity may bring. His project, in many ways, is admirable, calling as it does for recognition of what is specific to Theatre Studies—its objects of study, methodologies, and even, I suggest, its lacunae—and challenging both theatre scholars and researchers from other fields to be equally rigorous in their approaches. However, his essay fails to acknowledge its own positioning within a discursive field. Once again, the discourse of theatricality, as deployed by Carlson, positions the term to resist anti-theatricalist onslaughts (such as Wilshire’s) which seek to foreclose and limit theatre, its study and the effects of both these practices on society in general.

Carlson’s understanding of theatricality, then, follows a discursive tradition that sees theatre as a potential source of political and personal freedom. As such it is a force for Truth, a force that Jonas Barish described so evocatively in The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice (1981) as that which “confront[s] us with an account of our own truth struggling against our own falsity” (477). As Alan Ackerman observes, the idea of “freedom” recurred constantly in Barish’s work, freedom expressed through theatricality which, Ackerman writes, for Barish was “continually associated with the possibilities of self-determination” (2001, 276). By tracing the descent, in Foucault’s (1977a) sense, of the discourse of theatricality in the twentieth century, we can position Carlson’s writing within the same modernist tradition as that of Barish. These ideas, as we shall see in Carlson’s 2002 contribution, continue to emerge in and inflect his writings.

Carlson’s call for at least a degree of rigour in the deployment of theatricality as a metaphor is given some validity by Rebecca L. Walkowitz’s contribution to the Ackerman and Puchner edited Modern Drama (2001) collection, published to mark the twentieth anniversary of Barish’s work. Walkowitz’s essay, “Conrad’s Adaptation: Theatricality and Cosmopolitanism”, gives a passing glance to Joseph Conrad’s stage adaptation of his novel
The Secret Agent (1907), and instead makes the novel itself the object of study. Walkowitz’s thought-provoking interpretation interrogates Conrad’s depiction of how “cultural identity” is performed, and how the binary opposition of the “natural–indigenous” and the “artificial–foreign” is constructed through such performances.

Surprisingly, considering the nature of her inquiry, Walkowitz does not frame her argument in terms of performativity, nor does she utilise sociological role theory, both of which would appear to be fundamental to her analysis. Although she invokes the term “social drama”, it is clear that she does so not with reference to Victor Turner’s (1987) sense of it, but rather in the sense of a “social issue drama”. Instead Walkowitz drafts “theatricality” as a trope that functions as her key analytic term. Thus, in contrasting the stage adaptation with the novel, she remarks that “the literal theatricality of the drama only begins to convey the complex theatricality of culture that the narrative proposes” (2001, 319 [emphasis added]). This same dichotomy is reiterated a few sentences later when she observes that in adapting the novel into a play, a distinction can be made between “two ‘theatres’: theatre as a genre of representation (a play) and theatre as a paradigm of culture, in which social categories and conventions are structured by repetition and reception” (ibid.). This separation is further reduced in the next sentence where she refers to the former as “literal” and the latter as “metaphorical” theatre (ibid.).

Walkowitz’s argument is predicated on the simplistic binary opposition of “theatrical” and “social” (or “cultural” in her terminology) “realities”, with the latter revealing, in a work such as Conrad’s, qualities that are analogous to the former. Through revealing how social behaviour is constructed as performance, Walkowitz argues that the desire for “authenticity” in cultural identity (“natural Englishness” in Conrad’s case) is subverted by Conrad, who, she writes,

proposes that English culture is made up of gestures, in speech, body, and social ritual, that are regularly performed and negotiated; he shows, in addition, that these gestures achieve different meanings in different contexts, that there is no characteristic that is naturally English (333).

In this instance, as I have argued above, “theatricality” tends to function as an empty signifier serving whatever polemic a writer—in this case, Walkowitz—requires. The theatricalised view that Walkowitz attributes to Conrad’s novel is, in fact, better understood as the “laying bare the device” of Russian Formalism which encourages the reader, in this case, “to observe their patterns of observation and to observe moreover that
patterns of observation (such as reading) are consistent with everyday practices of social interpretation” (319).

Theatricality, as deployed by Walkowitz, becomes simply reflexive interpretation, a noticing of the “frame” and a recognising of the model. Walkowitz’s analysis is sophisticated and nuanced but it remains a literary analysis, and theatricality becomes a useful metaphor for her to construct a meaning from the novel. The “theatricality of culture” (333) that Walkowitz perceives in the novel remains in its imagined world, but she equates these imagined effects with actual behaviour. Indeed Walkowitz seems oblivious to the theorisation, by theatre and performance scholars, of “performative” behaviour; that is, expressive behaviour intended to communicate to another on either a conscious or habituated level through shared social conventions. Therefore, her argument that Conrad’s novel represents performances of race, cultural or national identity, or gender—performances that she collects under the metaphor of “theatricality”—would be more precisely analysed and described, by theatre/performance scholars, using a theory of performativity.

In comparing Conrad’s novel with his stage adaptation, Walkowitz compares two literary objects and, hardly surprisingly, finds the play lacking: “The problem with Conrad’s dramatic adaptation of his novel is that it fails in almost all ways to incorporate his adaptation of culture” (ibid.). Theatre, once again, is seen to fall short, to fail. The misrecognitions and assumptions of Walkowitz’s essay provide a compelling case study for Carlson’s (1995) argument for a rigorous application of methodologies of theatre history and performance theory. At the same time as she suggests that “the theatricality of culture in Conrad’s work requires an ‘anti-theatrical’ theatre” (ibid.), Walkowitz is blind to the anti-theatricality of her own work that once more reinstates the ancient anti-theatrical prejudice identified by Barish (1981), that prefers the literary over the performed.

A similar anti-theatricalism is identified by Carlson in “The Resistance to Theatricality”, his contribution to the 2002 collection edited by Féral. Positioning his response to Féral’s questions within the binary logics of “theatre/performance”, “theatricality/performativity”—logics Féral herself established—Carlson argues that theatricality is “resisted” in the academy, particularly through the study of “performance”, a term which, he observes (in a phrase that echoes Fischer-Lichte’s (1995) claim for theatricality) has become a “key critical term” (2002, 239). “Theatricality”, Carlson argues, within this research context, is limited as a critical term by its rhetorical positioning in opposition to “performance” (ibid). The claims made against theatricality,
he argues, reflect the ancient Platonic injunction against mimesis; mimesis if left “unchallenged threatened the authenticity of the real self” (241). Used in this way, theatricality signifies an ontological value that can be deployed to assert the “truth” of something else (as I discussed above). Carlson reviews such usages in visual arts writings of the sixties (he cites the familiar suspects, Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried) and also similar usages in literary criticism. The positioning of theatricality as the pejorative Other in these discourses, Carlson writes, derives from the “the same assumptions concerning the relationship between authenticity and mimesis” of the Platonic tradition; a view that assumes the “metaphor of theatricality . . . suggest[s] a lack or falseness, even when this lack is perceived as inevitable” (242).

These same ontological values, Carlson observes, emerged also within the field of Theatre Studies through the positioning of “performance” in a “dialectical relationship to theater” (ibid.). Carlson notes how a Derridean “metaphysics of presence” has “crept into discussions of this phenomenon”, a metaphysics that positions “theatricality” as the inferior term in a binary opposition with “life” (243). The way this operated in the twentieth century is described by Carlson in a curious example of theatricality becoming the discursive whipping boy for opposing positions. The “declining fortunes” of theatricality throughout the twentieth century, Carlson argues, could be attributed in no small way to the “dominance in this century of realism in the mainstream Western theater” (244). Early twentieth century realism, that sought to present a mimetic illusion of “real life” on the stage was, Carlson writes, vigilant in policing its borders to exclude anything that smacked of the artificial or the composed. This policing was institutionalised in the Soviet Union, where in the 1930s “socialist realism” was proclaimed the appropriate aesthetic of the fledgling state. Similarly in the United States a few decades later, anti-theatricalist taste-makers, rather than state-political arbiters, sought to exclude theatricality from the fields of abstract and minimalist art in the mid-century (ibid.).

However, these apparently contradictory anti-theatrical positionings are not inconsistent if we view them again through the lens of modernist discourse. Barish, writing on the “theater against itself”, articulated the reasoning behind such anti-theatricalism:

By tilting against what they see as the falsely theatrical, theatrical creators attempt to topple it in order to make room for the truly theatrical. They burn down the ornate, overloaded theater of the past in the hope that a purified theater will rise from its ashes (1981, 464).
Barish described how theatrical innovators, the avant-garde, in their violent rejection of the past yearned towards the “truth”. Seen in this light, there is little difference, in fact, between the anti-theatricality of the theatrical avant-garde and of high modernist art critics such as Fried and Greenberg: in both cases an ontologically “pure” value of truth is posited against an anti-theatricalism, described by Barish as “specious theatricality . . . [with] its complacent reliance on mimicry . . . its slavish clinging to spectacle, and its facile trust in the rational, the social, and the objective” (458).

In responding to the assaults of anti-theatricalism, Carlson, like previous defenders of the theatre (as Puchner (2002) observed) reinscribes theatricality as a “positive” value. Rather than a lessening or an etiolation of the “life process”, Carlson argues, theatricality could instead be viewed as a “heightened celebration of that process and its possibilities” (2002, 244). Once more the liberatory theme emerges, but Carlson does not argue that the values associated with performance/performativity are remarkably similar to those of modernist anti-theatrical theatricality; instead he adopts another set of signifiers with which to discuss this phenomenon. Carlson deploys two terms used by Jean Alter (1990), “referent” and “performant” functions. The first term refers to theatrical signs that impart information. However, the second term, as Carlson quotes Alter, “‘falls outside the operations of semiosis’, [and] seek[s] to please or amaze an audience by a display of exceptional achievement” (Carlson 2002, 245; Alter 1990, 32). The performant function (which is not restricted only to the performer), Carlson suggests, provides an alternative version of the “function of theater”; a version of theatricality that does not

provide an exact duplication of everyday life (as realism suggested) nor a pale, secondary, derived imitation of life (as Plato charged), but rather a heightened, intensified variation on life, not so much a mirror as an exploration and celebration of possibility (2002, 246).

Theatricality, then, seen by Carlson as a performant function, is liberated from Platonic essentialism, from interpretation based on a binary metaphysics of the real and the copy. Carlson concludes that the charges laid against theatricality—“that it is artificial, removed from everyday life, exaggerated, extreme, flamboyant, distracting”—are in fact those same qualities that could “still be recognized as an essential element in the continued vitality and enjoyment of both theater and performance and beyond that, as a positive, indeed celebrative expression of human potential” (249). This positioning by Carlson of theatricality as affirmative, a “heightened, intensified variation on life” is the standard, and remarkably consistent (in the twentieth century) use of the term and the qualities it conveys; it is, in short, the same discursive deployment of theatricality as that of the early
twentieth century avant-garde. How the discourse of theatricality was activated by the avant-garde, and what claims to truth were made in its name, are explored in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 3: AVANT-GARDISM AND THE DISCOURSE OF THEATRICALITY

3.1 Reinterpreting avant-gardist discourse

3.1.2 Folding contemporary deployments of theatricality back into avant-gardist discourse

In the previous chapter I mapped out the principal positions of various influential theorists of theatricality writing in the final decades of the twentieth century. Fundamental to these arguments was the operation of an interpretive logic within which theatricality was positioned as what Rosalind Krauss (1987) called an “empty term” in a binary relationship with another term. This logic of interpretation operated, I suggested, following Weber’s (1987) reading of Derrida (1978), as a struggle for interpretive dominance, a struggle which, in terms of theatricality, produced some curious effects. Recurring time and again in the writings was the claim that a particular version of performance expressed a fundamental truth about humanity. However, truth can only be perceived as such against untruth, and in battle for the truth, theatricality stood either for truth, or else was positioned as that against which what was true could be defined. In this chapter I argue that such an interpretive logic is imbricated with certain discourses of modernism, in particular, the discourse of the European avant-garde.

In this chapter I map-out the genealogy of such ideas and demonstrate how a distinct avant-gardist discourse emerged in the early twentieth century. The term “avant-garde” is itself an object of discourse within the broader discursive system that constitutes “modernism”, and various writings on modernism themselves reveal a struggle of interpretations within modernist discourse that ranges from the aesthetic revolts of avant-garde artists to the authoritarian political regimes of the early twentieth century.

The discourse of theatricality, inflected by avant-gardist ideas and practices, has come to prominence in the late twentieth century, largely in response to emerging discourses of, at first, performance art, and later, simply performance. Theatricality was always a value that, in these different deployments, was either rejected or embraced (as Puchner argued) in respect of a binary logic that allowed different commentators to take up a range of positions and adopt a range of strategies. My reading of the texts from 1982 to 2002 dealing with theatricality revealed the recurrence of certain ideas that could be attributed to the early twentieth century avant-garde. Underpinning these avant-gardist ideas was a yearning for an essential Truth, a *fons et origo* of human expressivity that was always and already there, a supposed universal transcendental value linking all humanity.
The strategies enacted by the avant-garde in pursuit of Truth are repeated by contemporary theorists who, as Woods (1989) noted, following the disciplinary imperatives of Theatre and Performance Studies, position themselves at the forefront of these disciplines. However, the rhetoric of contemporary scholarship distances it from the search for Truth, an activity that cannot be reconciled with the imperatives of Derridean deconstruction, which challenge the nostalgia of such an approach to interpretation. Instead, according to Weber (1987), Derrida implied a preference for affirmative interpretation that admits contingency, plurality, fragmentation and the possibility, through the subversion of long held verities, of political liberation. However, the “play (jeu)” of affirmative interpretation, writes Weber, is “a power play, a game that belies any simple opposition, such as ‘active’ and ‘reactive’” (1987, 6). Nevertheless, post-avant-garde commentators declare their affiliation to interpretive positions that acknowledge the contingency of such interpretations, thereby establishing themselves as being on the cutting edge of theory and, paradoxically, reinscribing themselves into a modernist discourse of progress that valorises the trail blazer. As Vanden Heuvel observed, the oedipal assassination of the discourse of the parents, characterised as “tradition”, is a thoroughly modernist act (1993, 1).

Weber suggests, however, that a careful reading of Derrida directs us towards the struggle in which these interpretations of interpretation are themselves engaged. As I suggested in the previous chapter, on Weber’s reading of Derrida, all processes of interpretation are less informed by an orientation to either origin on the one hand, or playfulness on the other. Rather, all acts of interpretation answer only to a Nietzschean imperative to drive all other interpretations from the field of interpretation itself. “Interpretation, for Nietzsche,” argues Weber, “is—or begins as—reinterpretation, and its designs are never ‘innocent’, if the word implies ‘disinterested’” (1987, 6). One generally successful strategy to achieve this end on the part of any one interpretational moment is that of defining the very rules of engagement for the struggle for meaning itself. Such redefinitions may involve, for instance, simply reversing the polarities of key rubrics, with the support of institutional main force. Michael Fried (1987) suggested as much when, in relation to criticism of “Art and Objecthood” (1967) 1998), he argued that his detractors, rather than refuting his interpretive premises, simply inverted them, and left the logic of his interpretation intact. Similarly, the notion of theatricality as Puchner (2002) understands it, interpreted via Wagner as a value, created a dichotomy of advocates and detractors, but the interpretation of it as a value remained unquestioned.

For modernist anti-theatricalists, theatricality was equated with an ontological value of inauthenticity, a recasting of Platonism’s suspicion of mimesis. On the other hand, theatricality, interpreted as a value that emphasised the corporeal in performance, was seen
by its advocates to be the essence of theatre. This value of theatricality was enlisted by the avant-garde in order to refute a neo-Aristotelian dramaturgy of text, logical narrative, and psychologically plausible character, in short, the value of theatricality-as-essence was set against the illusionism of the realist paradigm. Furthermore, such avant-gardist “pro-theatricalism” (Puchner 2002) advocated that the anti-theatricalist charge of “inauthenticity”, on the contrary, pointed towards a greater ontological Truth, that existence itself was contingent, composed, playful. In this light a curious effect emerged: underlying two apparently conflicting interpretive positions was a single claim to the Truth—a claim of a fundamental human essence towards which theatricality either leads us or masks from us.

This chapter, therefore, has two objectives. The first is to lay out the fundamental premises of modernism and demonstrate how these informed the theatricalist/anti-theatricalist discourses of the avant-garde; the second is to map these avant-gardist discourses onto writings in the collections discussed in the previous chapter, thereby revealing the underlying truth claims of these texts.

3.2 A genealogy of the discourse of modernism

3.2.1 The dialectics of modernism

The concept of “modernism” is, of course, itself a contested category, indeed, other terms—“the modern”, “modernity”—are also used by commentators, and the “truth” of such appellations are fiercely fought over. Raymond Williams and Henri Lefebvre note that ideas of the modern emerged during the Renaissance and were deployed by Renaissance humanists to distinguish their own era from antiquity (Williams 1976, 208-209, Lefebvre {1962} 1995, 168). Lefebvre observes that, even at this early date, the term was being applied polemically within the field of music. “From this period on”, Lefebvre argues, “innovative techniques and experiments give music an aggressive ‘modernity’” ({1962} 1995, 168). However, by the nineteenth century, according to Lefebvre’s analysis, there was an ideological fragmenting of the modern. On the one hand the modern had become “subsumed in the self-triumphalism of ‘modernism’ and ‘modern’ tastes” and with it the “‘modern style’, ‘modernity’ (i.e. the cult of innovation for innovations sake, innovation as fetish) [had become] fully fledged” (169). In contrast, argues Lefebvre, was “modernity”, which he describes as “the beginnings of a reflective process, a more-or-less advanced attempt at critique and auto-critique, a bid for knowledge” (1).

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20Lefebvre describes an even earlier emergence in France in the Middle Ages. Retiring magistrates were known as “ancients” and the newly elected officials as “moderns”. “The latter term”, Lefebvre writes, involved the double idea of renewal and regularity in renewal” (168).
Although other commentators differ in their terminology, they nonetheless repeat Lefebvre’s conceptual distinction between on the one hand, an aggressively forward-looking, utopianist, modernism, and on the other, its self-critical negation. Indeed, Lefebvre explicitly casts the difference in terms of a “confrontation”, a struggle for interpretation: “two conflicting trends and two rival attitudes are brought face to face: cocksure conviction and uneasy uncertainty, arrogance and fear” (2). In *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1974 1984), Peter Bürger discusses the notion of “self-criticism”, derived from Marx, in the field of Art. Importantly for our discussion, Bürger identifies how the avant-garde artist (by this he is referring to the early twentieth century “historical avant-garde”) attacks both the system of production and distribution of art (Art as an institution), and the “bourgeois” concept of the art work as “autonomous” (1974 1984, 22). According to Bürger, “the avant-gardiste protest, whose aim it is to reintegrate art into the praxis of life, reveals the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences” (ibid.).

Zygmunt Bauman, through his notions of “modernity” and “modernism”, maintains the same ideological split; his genealogy, however, of “modernity” provides some additional distinctions. Like Lefebvre and Williams, Bauman also identifies the “historical period” of “modernity” as beginning primarily “in Western Europe with a series of profound social-structural and intellectual transformations of the seventeenth century” (1991, 4 n.1). This period of “modernity”, for Bauman, can be seen in two ways: first “as a cultural project—with the growth of Enlightenment”, and second “as a socially accomplished form of life—with the growth of industrial (capitalist, and later also communist) society” (ibid.). In contrast to “modernity”, Bauman argues that “modernism” is

... an intellectual (philosophical, literary, artistic) trend that—though traceable back to many individual intellectual events of the previous era—reached its full swing by the beginning of the current century [that is, the twentieth century], and which in retrospect can be seen (by analogy with the Enlightenment) as a “project” of *post modernity* or a prodromal stage of the postmodern condition (ibid.).

The seeds for a postmodern consciousness, he suggests, were planted by modernism’s self-reflexive examination of modernity, an activity that “would eventually disclose its impossibility, thus paving the way to postmodern reassessment” (ibid.). Bauman’s conclusion gestures towards another struggle of interpretation—between the categories “modern” and “postmodern”—the influence of which emerges also in the writings on theatricality discussed in the previous chapter.
The contours of this argument are varied, but there are some features of it that bear on how theatricality is understood and deployed. The dialectics of modernism discussed above are arguably reproduced in the modernism/postmodernism debate. Hans Bertens, in “The Postmodern Weltanschauung and its Relationship with Modernism”, argues that there is a distinct postmodern sensibility that is “governed by a radical epistemological and ontological doubt” (1986, 28). Bertens argues that

whereas the Modernists sought to defend themselves against their own awareness of cosmic chaos, of the impossible fragility of any “center” they might perceive, the Postmodernists have accepted chaos and live in fact in a certain intimacy with it (ibid.).

Postmodern acceptance of “chaos”—and, by extension, fragmentation, multiplicity and de-centredness—is contrasted by Bertens with the modernists’ putative fear of chaos. James McFarlane, in “The Mind of Modernism”, echoes Bertens’s view of modernism, but suggests a slightly different nuance to modernism’s relationship to chaos:

The very vocabulary of chaos—disintegration, fragmentation, dislocation—implies a breaking away or a breaking apart. But the defining thing in the Modernist mode is not so much that things fall apart but that they fall together (1976, 92).

The reference for McFarlane is, of course, Yeats’s line “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” (1962, 99). However, the tension between things “falling apart” and “falling together”, does not, as McFarlane implies, suggest a distinction between postmodernism and modernism. Rather, it again reflects the dialectical tension within modernism itself. It must be remembered that it was Yeats who wrote, deeply concerned, on attending the opening night of Alfred Jarry’s proto-avant-gardist Ubu, “after us, the Savage God” (quoted in Braun 1982, 56). Jarry’s assaults on rationality, while extreme, were certainly not uncharacteristic, as William Everdell wrote, in relationship to the poet Jules Laforgue:

he embraced, as wholeheartedly as a modern mind can embrace anything, the failure of certainty—even subjective certainty. “Aux armes, citoyens. Il n’y a plus de raison!” . . . “To arms, citizens! There is no more reason.” Ambiguity is more than a style, and irony more than an attitude. It is the epistemological model of Modernism (1997, 99).
The embrace of chaos attributed to postmodernism cannot be used to distinguish it from, at least, the strand of modernism, “aesthetic” modernism, that was opposed to the certainty of a nineteenth century positivist view of the world, and which was characterised by insecurity and lack of certainty. Positivism held that the world consisted only of matter and motion that could be objectively observed, recorded and analysed. However, increasingly to the modern mind, the impossibility of the subject having an objective view of itself, and the uncertainty this engendered, became defining characteristics of modernist epistemology.

3.2.2 Continuity and discontinuity within modernism

Nevertheless, in relationship to what had come before, the latter half of the nineteenth century was undeniably “modern”. Despite resurgences of idealism throughout the century, manifesting in the movements of Romanticism, Decadence, and Symbolism, the nineteenth century was, at least until its closing decades, a resolutely materialist century. There was, as Everdell writes, “no going back on the positivist demand for analysis” (1997, 28). It was a century in which many countries throughout Europe subscribed to the idea of “Progress” and the benefits it would and was bringing to their different societies (although, of course, not for all and not equally). “Positivism” and “Progress” led to the smug assumption of the current state of the world as being at its most developed, its most stable and ordered, its most prosperous (again with the caveat, not for all equally), and European history was seen as a smooth succession of epochs leading up to the nineteenth century, with each new era an improvement on the preceding ones. “The mid- to late-nineteenth century,” writes Jane Goodall,

was a period in which Europe and North America developed an acute consciousness of themselves as the modernising nations, the leaders of the industrial revolution and therefore the generators of progress for mankind in general (2002, 3).

Henri Lefebvre has argued that the notion of continuity was not just confined to history but was fundamental to nineteenth century epistemologies that accepted without challenge “the adage that ‘nature never moves in leaps and bounds’ as an axiom and eternal truth” (1962, 1995, 179). Continuity was the defining paradigm of nineteenth century epistemologies. Lefebvre argues that the “dominant mechanism of nineteenth-century science was founded on the study of continuous trajectories”; thus, evolution “borrowed its schema” from mathematics and “applied it to natural history”, and, “in turn, sociology and the philosophy of history applied the evolutionist schema to social man” (ibid.). Also in the
field of psychology, he argues, was the insistence on “the unity and continuity of the ‘self’, using divergent hypotheses to explain and accommodate it” (ibid.). Nineteenth century thought, Lefebvre concludes, “attempts to establish a philosophical picture of the world . . . organized around this concept of continuity” (ibid.). Everdell similarly notes that a metaphor for the idea of continuity was the Renaissance painting technique of *sfumato*, or the gradual shading from one colour to the next:

Nineteenth-century minds disagreed about almost everything except how much they disliked hard edges. Between one thing and another, whether on the canvas of an academic painter or in the natural and social worlds, there was always a *sfumato*, a transition. Marx, Hegel, and Darwin agreed that change was, if not regular, at least smooth (1997, 9-10).

However, when considering modernist notions of continuity, we must also account for the dialectical aspect of modernism. Matei Calinescu argues that the split between “two distinct and bitterly conflicting modernities” occurred “at some point during the first half of the nineteenth century” (1987, 41). From materialist and positivist modernity arose a model of continuity described by Calinescu as the “bourgeois idea of modernity”. This version of modernity, the “triumphalist” model, he writes, promoted

the doctrine of progress, the confidence in the beneficial possibilities of science and technology, the concern with time (a measurable time, a time that can be bought and sold and therefore has, like any other commodity, a calculable equivalent in money), the cult of reason, and the idea of freedom defined within the framework of an abstract humanism, but also the orientation toward pragmatism and the cult of action and success—all have been associated in various degrees with the battle for the modern and were kept alive and promoted as key values in the triumphant civilization established by the middle class (41-42).

The other face of modernity, the early seeds of which were sown by Romanticism, emerged in what Calinescu terms “cultural” or “aesthetic” modernity—in other words, the avant-garde—and set itself in opposition to the bourgeois triumphalism of the first model (42). In what amounts to a virtual job description of the avant-garde, Calinescu writes that representatives of cultural or aesthetic modernity were

disgusted with the middle-class scale of values and expressed [their] disgust through the most diverse means, ranging from rebellion, anarchy, and
apocalypticism to aristocratic self-exile. So, more than its positive aspirations (which often have very little in common), what defines cultural modernity is its outright rejection of bourgeois modernity, its consuming negative passion (ibid.).

Therefore, to effectively account for both the continuity and discontinuity within modernism, we must continue to recognise the dialectical tension between “bourgeois” and “cultural” modernity: the former, concerned with unified “truths”, historical “Grand Narratives”, progress, materialism and continuity; and the latter, more idealist, and tending towards playfulness and contingency, rupture, fragmentation and discontinuity.

### 3.3 The crisis of modernity

#### 3.3.1 Loss of faith in language as a medium of communication

Cultural modernity, or avant-gardism, was more than a reaction to the smug assumptions of bourgeois modernity. It was, rather, a profound response to the belief that the modern human had become alienated from his or her essential self. The epistemologies of bourgeois modernity, the master narratives of nineteenth century positivist thought, paradoxically reinforced the belief that the modern human was fragmented within him/herself and disconnected from his/her society. As Everdell writes, modernism had not

accepted . . . the nineteenth-century assumption that we can analyze nature, whether it be physical, biological, or human, without analyzing the means we use to become aware of it: language, symbols, and what we persist in calling “mind” (1997, 28).

By the turn of the twentieth century, therefore, as several commentators have noted, the modern condition could be described as a condition of crisis. The notion of “aesthetic modernity”, Calinescu argues, was a “crisis concept”, defined by the contradictions of modernity. It was, in short, nothing less than a radical rejection of the condition of modernity. “Aesthetic modernity”, Calinescu writes,

should be understood as a crisis concept involved in a threefold dialectical opposition to tradition, to the modernity of bourgeois civilization (with its ideals of rationality, utility, progress), and, finally, to itself, insofar as it perceives itself as a new tradition or form of authority (1987, 10).

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Erika Fischer-Lichte similarly invokes the notion of crisis in modernity. Echoing Everdell’s analysis, Fischer-Lichte writes that “the proverbial ‘cultural crisis’ of that time . . . [was] the consequence of an enormous dissemination of ruptures between the process of perception and meaning-generating” (1997, 77). Nowhere was such rupturing more apparent than in language which, by the end of the nineteenth century, had become, according to Lefebvre, the “paradigm for all the other arts” (1962) 1995, 175). Lefebvre argues that language became “alienating and alienated”, as its influence in other, non-linguistic fields increased, and it became “reified . . . a supreme good” and hardened, something external to the “living word” (176).

However, the objectification of language was a double-edged sword because, Lefebvre writes,

> Now that the arbitrary character of the linguistic sign has finally been recognized, it becomes possible simultaneously to study language in a way which raises its status to that of an essential structure and the model of all structures, and to mount an active critique which will degrade it by submitting it to a whole range of abuses, until it disintegrates in a process of absolute negation (177).

Language could thus no longer be relied on to provide an accurate and objective account of the world.\textsuperscript{31} The recognition of language as an “essential structure” produced a somewhat paradoxical effect: it was objectified, “fetishized”, and became “an object of doubt and anxiety”; as Lefebvre evocatively writes, “The shadow of eternal silence falls on the word, threatening it, enshrouding it” (175).

Lefebvre’s analysis of the objectification and destabilising of language demonstrates, once again, the Janus-face of modernism. The elevation of the status of language “to that of an essential structure and model of all structures” (Lefebvre, 1962 1995), Lefebvre argues, reflected the urge towards consistency, unity, coherence and rationality of bourgeois materialist modernism. However, the smugness of this linguistic hegemony invited assault: its failings and weaknesses were perceived; language was seen as a “deficient medium” that was incapable of communicating the immediacy of lived experience; it was no longer “transparent”, it was an “obstacle” and “opaque”; and worst of all, it “distorted” reality (176). It was, therefore, unsurprising that the “‘cultural crisis’ at the turn of the century”,

\textsuperscript{31}The representative function of language, as Natalie Crohn Schmitt observes, was commented on by Aristotle: “Aristotle assumed that language, like mind, corresponds to and reflects the world exactly, and that the world, with its logical, discursive character and systematic structure, lends itself to the grasp of language” (1990, 16).
according to Fischer-Lichte, “seems to have sprung from the absolute dominance of language over the other semiotic systems; it was sensed the moment the crisis of language became apparent” (1997, 62).

Lefebvre’s evocative phrase—the “shadow of eternal silence”—provides a key to what, in the early twentieth century, was seen to be a way forward. If the word, on the one hand, rationalised lived experience into a positivist structure, and on the other, obstructed and distorted reality, then the only way to truly grasp lived experience was to renounce language. According to Harold Segel:

Intellectual (and, in some instances, political) depreciation of verbal culture became a sign of the times. Writers and philosophers alike sought to revitalize language, to restore to it a lost vigour, through relentless questioning of meaning, usage, and convention. And while all this was in progress, a parallel shift of emphasis from the spoken word to the physical gesture, from speech to body, was occurring demonstrably and logically (1998, 15).

The modernist revolt against language arose from a view of rationalism that saw it, according to Segel, as “suspect and negatively related to a materialistic and deterministic world view . . . Intuition and spontaneity were the catchwords of the day”; and, he continues:

The campaign against tradition was dynamic and aggressive, and sought to subordinate the virtues of the mind to those of the body. Passivity yielded to activism, the rational to the irrational, the conscious to the unconscious (1).

In the arts, this shift from mind to body, from language to gesture, from conscious rationality to unconscious intuition and spontaneity expressed itself in two different but related modes. The first mode promoted a reinvigorated and physicalised language, whereas the second renounced spoken/written language in favour of embodied expressivity. The movement towards silence could be seen as a movement towards the body; thus, ellipses in dialogue, bare canvas in painting, and silence in music all created space for the body to be present. Whereas the sfumato of earlier centuries suggested cognitive cohesion, the discontinuities of the new century opened up jagged spaces in which, it was supposed, a raw unmediated physicality could occur now take hold.
Just as strong, however, was the mode that sought to reclaim the “physicality” of words that had, as Nietzsche noted as early as 1876, become severely etiolated. Writing in *Thoughts Out of Season* on Richard Wagner, Nietzsche observed that

> language is everywhere diseased, and the burden of this terrible disease weighs heavily upon the whole of man’s development . . . its strength has become so exhausted . . . that it is no longer able to perform even that function which justifies its existence, to wit, the assisting of those who suffer in communicating with each other concerning the sorrows of existence . . . language has gradually become a force in itself which with spectral arms coaxes and drives humanity where it least wants to go (quoted in Fischer-Lichte 1997, 61).

In response to the perceived weakening of language, writes Segel, “writers and philosophers alike sought to revitalize language, to restore to it a lost vigour, through relentless questioning of meaning, usage, and convention” (1998, 15).

### 3.4 The alienation of the modern human and the return to primitivism

#### 3.4.1 Emphasising the body

Nietzsche’s thoughts on language reflected the profound sense of alienation that lay beneath cultural modernity’s view of existence. Modern “man” was perceived by these modernists as alienated from himself, and the impulse behind the activities of this period was a teleological pursuit of an imagined pre-lapsarian state of grace. Christopher Innes argues that this reactive modernist impulse, expressed by the avant-garde, was ultimately utopianist (1993, 6). Innes notes the “paradox” of cultural modernism or avant-gardism: it was characterised not by a valorisation of technological progress (its *bête noire*, notwithstanding the Futurists’ “romance of technology”); rather, it was defined by “primitivism”, an ontological essentialism that aimed to “return to man’s [sic] ‘roots’, whether in the psyche or prehistory” (3). Modernist primitivism, Innes writes, “could be seen as an extension of the medievalism and orientalism of the nineteenth-century romantics” (ibid.). It is arguable, therefore, that Performance Studies, as promoted by Schechner, Phelan, Kirschenblatt-Gimblett and others, positioning itself within the tradition of the avant-garde, in its intercultural pretensions, is ultimately heir to and a continuation of a nineteenth century romantic discourse, dressed-up in the emperor’s new clothes of a rhetoric of plurality, progress and political liberation.

The avant-garde, alienated from Western enlightenment civilisation and its putative ideals of rationality, materialism and progress, rejected the Cartesian hierarchy of mind over body (expressed as rationalism) and promoted in its stead spontaneity, intuition, and sensuality,
the site of which was the body. It is within the context of this valorisation of the physical that the avant-garde’s fascination with primitivism in the theatre, as explored by Innes (1993) and in the visual arts by Rubin (1984), must be placed. However, Segel argues that this fascination with the physical extended beyond the province of the avant-garde, and can also be seen as a fundamental defining characteristic of modernism in general. In Body Ascendant: Modernism and the Physical Imperative (1998), Segel surveys the prevalence of physical culture in European and North American societies in the early twentieth century. Segel similarly notes the modernist questioning of the “epistemological authority of language” and argues that, “for all its apparent concern, even obsession, with words, modernism was the great age of silence” (1).

Modernism’s “physical imperative”, Segel writes, emerged in the “physical culture movement that swept across Europe and America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (1998, 3) and manifested itself in “the new emphasis on the organized physical training of youth [that] transformed traditional school curricula” and the beginnings of the body-building fad (4). However, he continues, “of far greater impact both socially and politically, were the physical culture and gymnastics organizations” (ibid.). The importance of gymnastics organisations to a sense of national identity, together with the jingoism of many European countries, Segel suggests, meant that the “institutionalization of physical culture was inevitable, certainly once the compatibility of its aims with nationalist objectives and military preparedness were discerned” (5).

There was, too, Segel writes, at this time “an emphasis on sport unparalleled in history”, and sport was enthusiastically embraced by the public and “popular culture” (ibid.). Artists and “high culture” were not immune to this new enthusiasm particularly since, in response to the crisis in language, according to Segel, “modernist anti-intellectualism favored action over contemplation and the passive culture of the word” (5-6). The avant-garde’s emphasis on the body, therefore, was consistent with the physical Zeitgeist of the early twentieth century which, in Segel’s analysis, took the forms of nationalist gymnastics and athletics movements, and the new popularity of mass organised sport.

It was through the body that the avant-gardist and triumphalist strands of modernism met, finding common ground in a differently configured, yet similar, utopian belief in the body as the source and site of autochthonous self-hood. Where they differed was in the former’s resistance to institutionalisation and in the latter’s wish to reconfigure institutions to conform to a particular physical ideal. Both were suspicious of rationalist thought. For the avant-garde, rationalism alienated humans from themselves, particularly their physical intuitive selves; and for mainstream modernism, rational thought was the antithesis of a
nationalistic communitarian ideal expressed (relatively) innocently through nationalist sporting and athletics movements (the apogee of such ideology being “Olympism”, the ideology of the modern Olympic Games, that started in 1896). However, the “dark side of modernist physicality”, as Segel argues, was its “facile exploitation by racist supremacy theories” (7). A utopian belief in the body could quite easily turn dystopic when appropriated by “physical-cultist authoritarian state[s]” such as Hitler’s Germany, Mussolini’s Italy or Stalin’s Soviet Union (8).

Despite the avant-garde’s deep disenchantment and sense of alienation from modernity, and their desire to return to an imagined Golden Age, they were, of course, products of their time, and susceptible to the analytic method which characterised modern scientific methodology. Thus, the early theatricalist, Georg Fuchs, who sought to revitalise the theatre, could state, in Revolution in the Theatre (1909),

> There is a strange intoxication which overcomes us when, as part of a crowd, we feel ourselves emotionally stirred. Scientific investigation may perhaps determine from what distant ancestors we inherit the proclivity for such intoxication (quoted in Fischer-Lichte 1997, 43 [emphasis added]).

In the same treatise, Fuchs expressed a desire, too, for a theatre that would produce “a systematic and well-organized technique for the satisfaction of that atavistic urge—the primitive greed for the intensification of life” (ibid.). In this statement and that quoted above, we can discern the avant-gardist urge to find an “authentic” experience of life (an inheritance from “distant ancestors”, vestiges of which were believed to remain, although stunted, in the modern human), together with the belief that “scientific” and “systematic” principles and methods would enable the recovery of this “primitive” self. Influenced by Nietzsche’s The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music, Fischer-Lichte argues, Fuchs “hoped that theatre would provide the birth of a ‘new’ transindividual being who would revoke the self-estrangement of modern individuals and the restrictions of class society” (1997, 44). According to Fischer-Lichte, Fuchs believed that the individual could be “redeemed” “through the cultish monumental theatre in the 1920s and early 1930s” which was only a step away from “fascist ideology” (ibid.). In a fascinating contemporary account, Mordecai Gorelik, in New Theatres for Old (1940) 1947), provides a similar analysis of “fascist” theatre: “The fascist ideal of theatre is the method of primitive emotional appeal. It is the method of turning away from concrete thought to abstract conjecture” (461).
In his analysis of the Nazis’ Nuremberg rallies in the 1930s, Hans-Ulrich Thamer suggests how powerful yet inchoate emotional responses were deliberately manipulated at such events:

All forms of communication and propagandist elements were summoned up to create a Gesamtkunstwerk (Total Work of Art) under the guidance of a political aesthetic that replaced rational forms of discourse with vague and emotional appeals to the audience’s fears and aspirations (1996, 176).

The Nuremberg rallies were uniquely modernist occurrences which provoked “vague and emotional” responses from events that were coolly, “rationally”, and technologically designed to create just that effect. “It was exactly this link between irrationality and technical rationality,” writes Thamer, “between atavistic ideology, mystical ceremony and the modern age, which helped to eliminate all critical reasoning in both, audience and participants” (186). In addition to their combining of modernist pre-lapsarianism with modern analysis and manipulation of effects, the Nuremberg rallies, with their massed spectators watching massed levies of marching troops and party functionaries, and massed sporting displays, exemplified also the physical-cultism of the authoritarian state.

Yet the appeal to the primitive and the irrational, did not in itself necessarily lead to fascism. Fischer-Lichte writes that the Artaudian idea of theatre, for example, worked a kind of sympathetic magic through the recovery of ritual in Western theatre. Such “ritualised” theatre would bring about an exorcism, a rite de passage in the spectator: it should heal those Westerners who are suffering the disease of civilization in that it should reconstitute “life” and “man” [sic] to the spectator, not as “psychological man [sic] with his very different emotions and characteristics”, nor as the “social man [sic] who is subjected by laws and distorted religion and regulations”, but instead the “total man” [sic] (1997, 44).

The Artaudian theatre, conceived in this way, conformed to the primitivist urge to “revert”, as Innes argues, “to ‘original’ forms: the Dionysian rituals of ancient Greece, shamanistic performances, the Balinese dance-drama”; the avant-garde, he continues, aspired “to transcendence, to the spiritual in its widest sense” (1993, 3).
3.5 Theatricality as ontology and the search for origins

3.5.1 The theatricalisation of life

The historical avant-garde’s deployment of notions of theatricality was predicated on the fundamental belief in the alienated modern human who could be saved from the “disease of civilization” only by returning to a performative ur-form, understood as Theatre. This autochthonous Theatre could be brought into being through appropriation of non-Western performance forms, or by reclaiming archaic performance forms, or through “research” into that which was “essential” to the theatre itself (which often ended up including elements of the first two approaches). Wherever it was to be found, the “essence” of theatre—perceived by the avant-garde to be absent, distorted, perverted or traduced in the contemporary theatre of the time—was its theatricality. Aesthetic modernity, as we saw above, was disenchanted with language and, increasingly, avant-garde theatre makers sought the “essence” of theatre in its materiality. According to Puchner’s (2002) thesis, theatricality as a value, based in corporeality and the elements of production, emerged in Wagner’s aesthetics in the nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century such ideas were in common circulation amongst the avant-garde. As Georg Fuchs wrote in Revolution in the Theatre (1909),

...drama must be understood in terms of the materials in which it is made manifest. The term theatre consists of the totality of these materials. This is what we mean when we demand that the drama become once more theatrical (quoted in Gorelik {1940} 1947, 285).

Edward Gordon Craig, in conceiving the “Über-marionette” to replace the actor, combined the essential artifice of which Fuchs wrote with the idea of a return to a point of origin. Über-marionettes, according to Craig, were

...the descendents of a great and noble family of images, images which were indeed made “in the likeness of God”; ...I pray earnestly for the return of the image—the Über-marionette to the theatre; and when he comes again ... once more will it be possible for the people to return to their ancient joy in ceremonies (from “The Actor and the Über-marionette” (1907) in Craig 1999, 87).

In “Theatricality as Estrangement of Art and Life in the Russian Avant-garde”, an essay in the 2002 SubStance collection, Silvija Jestrovic writes that “avant-garde art and theory” were concerned both with aesthetic forms and also with renegotiating “the boundaries between art and life” (2002, 49). Echoing the transcendentalism Innes attributes to
Artaud’s theatre, Jestrovic argues that the artistic experimentation of the Russian avant-garde, in some instances, had a greater purpose than simply formal innovation. She cites the example of Evreinov, who believed that not only could life be theatricalised when represented on stage, but that such “experiments in theatricality were . . . attempts to find an immanent artistic structure of life” (ibid.). Art and life were intertwined because avant-garde experimentation had a “metatheatrical dimension”: witness the ubiquitous theatrical metaphor which “defamiliarized” the real by suggesting that life could be “shown as an endless play, an ongoing theater of sorts” (Jestrovic 2002, 49-50). Spencer Golub writes, for example, that for Evreinov, God was a “Theatrarch, ‘the Great Director of the Theatre of Life’” (1984, 76).

Jestrovic explains that for the most “radical” artists of the Russian avant-garde, such as Evreinov, metatheatricality was not metaphorical “but also a fact of life” (2002, 50). In addition, such theatricality could reinvigorate life by “aestheticizing the relation to reality”—a notion which, Jestrovic observes, approached the Russian Formalists’ notion of ostranenie or estrangement (ibid.). Directors such as Meyerhold, Tairov and Evreinov, Jestrovic writes, took the idea of ostranenie and created theatrical devices—in order to transform “life ‘into a spectacle’, both on stage and in reality” (42)—and presented the “theatrical stage” as a “place of play and artifice, which [did] not ‘copy’ reality, but represent[ed] it, through immanent theatrical means” (44). As Tairov wrote:

The stage . . . is the instrument on which the actor plays, is a keyboard with the help of which the actor and the régisseur build up the scenic action so as to convey the meaning of it to the audience as effectively as possible (quoted in Gorelik {1940} 1947, 298).

For Evreinov, a return to theatricality represented a return to life from which humanity had become estranged:

the more people came to neglect theatricality, the more they turned from art to life, the more tedious it became to live. We lost our taste for life. Without seasoning, without the salt of theatricality, life was a dish we would only eat by compulsion (quoted in Golub 1984, 53).

The Russian avant-garde’s theatricalised “aestheticization of life” seems to have taken two predominant forms, writes Jestrovic: Evreinov’s notion of the aesthetic transformation of quotidian existence, and the Russian Futurists’ “new community” which sought to fuse art and life (2002, 50). The Futurists defamiliarised the everyday by “carnivalizing” it,
thereby challenging a quotidian view of reality and transforming it “into a spectacle”. Golub writes of the “Harlequinade” that was pre-revolutionary St Petersburg, and observes the influence of commedia dell’arte with its “playful yet serious secular faith in man’s ability to penetrate into essences and unmask their mysterious power” (1984, 3). He notes that Meyerhold was painted twice as Pierrot and adopted the commedia-esque alias of “Doctor Dapertutto” (2). Similarly, the founder of Italian Futurism, F. T. Marinetti, declared: “Thanks to us the time will come when life will no longer be a simple matter of bread and labour, nor a life of idleness either, but a work of art” (quoted in Goldberg {1979} 1988, 30).

The concept of theatricality was activated by the avant-garde in order to acknowledge an essence of theatre, the truth of which, they believed, lay both in its materiality as well as in its constructedness, its artifice. Meyerhold wrote, “The theatre is art and everything in it should be determined by the laws of art. Art and life are governed by different laws” (Meyerhold 1998, 147), a view echoed by Paul Kornfield in Epilogue to the Actor (1913), who declared: “Let [the actor] not deny the theatre or try to feign reality” (quoted in Innes 1993, 43). A decade later, Artaud wrote, when working on his production of Strindberg’s “A Dream Play” (1928):

> There is in the simple exposition of real objects, in their combinations, in their order, in the relationships of the human voice with light, a reality which is self-sufficient and has no need of any other to live. It is this false reality which is theatre and it’s that which it is necessary to cultivate . . . The false in the context of the true, that is the ideal definition of this mise en scène (quoted in Innes 1993, 73).

For Artaud the ontology of theatre, its theatricality, was summed up in the paradox of “false reality” and, like Fuchs, he also emphasised the formal arrangement of material theatrical elements. According to Innes, for Artaud, the “consistent principle” was that “objects should be understood for what they actually are in an immediate sense” (1993, 75).

The discourse of theatricality, as activated by the avant-garde, was demonstrably circulating in the writings of early modernists such as Fuchs and Craig in the first decade of the twentieth century, and also in the early writings of Marinetti. In addition, Russian Futurism was seeking to carnivalise life, and the theatricalists, chief amongst whom were Evreinov and Meyerhold, sought to resolve the “crisis in the theatre” by seeking its essences in self-conscious stylisation (Golub 1984: 6, 8). There were at this time a number
of truth claims made in the name of theatricality, that would continue to be made, with more or less emphasis, throughout the twentieth century and, as I suggested in the previous chapter, into the new millennium. Theatricality, as it emerged in these writings, referred first and foremost to an ontology. Human existence, as it appeared to the self-critical eye of aesthetic modernity in Europe and North America, was alienated from its essential humanity, and its institutions—social and artistic—were similarly perceived to be disengaged from the reality of human life. Language, that formerly pellucid instrument of positivist analysis, was revealed, on the contrary, to obscure, distort and lie about the truth of existence.

In the theatre itself, the avant-garde’s rejection of language was manifested in a rejection, or at least a downgrading, of the play text. In his first letter on language, in *The Theatre and Its Double*, Artaud wrote:

> Here is what seems to me an elementary truth that must precede any other: namely, that the theater, an independent and autonomous art, must, in order to revive or simply to live, realize what differentiates it from text, pure speech, literature, and all other fixed and written means (1958, 106).

Modernism’s concern with the purity of form is reflected in Artaud’s letter, a concern that, later, would be transformed into a fetish by the modernist art critics Greenberg and Fried, and used to condemn theatricality precisely because they perceived it *lacked* formal purity. Artaud’s rejection of language in the theatre was prefigured by Craig, who wrote in his first dialogue on “The Art of the Theatre” (1905), that the origins of theatre lay not with the “poet” but with the “dancer” (Craig 1999, 53). The turn to the body, for aesthetic modernity, represented a chance to engage with the very stuff of existence that lay below linguistic comprehension. However, the great ontological Truth for the avant-garde, a Truth that echoes in the writings of Schechner and other contemporary performance theorists, was that the essence of theatre lay in the artifice, its “false reality” (as Artaud declared). The greater truth of reality suggested by the theatre, to the avant-garde, was that life itself was theatrical; thus, the greater the theatricality, the more true to life it was. Theatricality as an ontology, therefore, was believed to be greater than the institution and art form of the Theatre, and it is this ontology that Féral invoked with her notion of theatricality as a “transcendent phenomenon” (Féral 2002, 98), and that underlay also Schechner’s appropriation of Sanskrit notions of *maya* and *lila* (Schechner {1977} 1988, xiv).
3.6 Modernist anti-theatricality

3.6.1 Reconsidering the anti-theatrical prejudice

Even as the early modernists were championing an idea of theatricality grounded in non-linguistic codings and an ontology of contingent reality, the ambivalence of these positionings brought with it an attendant anxiety. Puchner argued as much when he referred to Wagner’s fear that the physical-mimetic-gestural power of theatricality would undermine the fundamental status of the art work itself (2002, 51). In the issue of Modern Drama that Puchner co-edited with Ackerman, the editors took Barish’s trope of “anti-theatricality” as their starting point and framed their discussion by interrogating Barish’s view that “anti-theatricality” was a trans-historical term describing particular “philosophical, moral, and aesthetic assumptions” adopted by detractors of the theatre throughout its history. In Barish’s argument, such anti-theatricality was expressed, according to Ackerman, as “a bias against the expressive, the imitative, the deceptive, the spectacular, and the subject that arouses, or even acknowledges, an audience” (2001, 275). As Ackerman suggests, there was in Barish’s work a reification of “theatre” as the term that stood for range of similar performance practices in discrete European cultures and in different historical periods, beginning with the Greeks and Romans and culminating in post-World War II theatre.

The authors collected in the issue, however, do not share Barish’s “monolithic” view of theatre, preferring instead, Ackerman writes, to see it as a “field marked by competing, and often contradictory, impulses and developments, a field in which different theatres are engaged in a contentious struggle with one another” (ibid.). Ackerman writes that “freedom” for Barish, as I noted in the previous chapter, was expressed as a liberatory theatricality (276), and it is precisely this theme, which I have been tracking through the different discourses on theatricality, that formed the golden thread of Barish’s argument. Barish, however, like Wagner, was also ambivalent about the power of theatricality; as Ackerman observes, Barish found “the spectacle of frenetic metamorphosis, disquieting” (Barish 1981, 469; Ackerman 2001, 276).

Ackerman and Puchner’s selections thematise anti-theatricality as a key term in the discourse of modernism. Theatre Studies becomes a particularly significant field through which to develop a critique of modernism, as Ackerman suggests, identifying three “coordinates” through which the term “modernism” itself is brought into critical engagement with Theatre Studies. These are:

(1) an insistence on authenticity that can only ultimately uncover its own artifice;
(2) a newly heightened aesthetic self-reflexivity or attention within art to its art-
ness, its media, and, especially in theatre, to the constituting role of the audience; and (3) an emphasis on pluralism or multiplicity that is both internal and external to art and a consequent perspectivism (2001, 277).

Ackerman characterises the modernist project as a search for “authenticity” which, as we have seen, is a recurring theme in modernist art, and that involves destroying “the Apollonian world of appearances, the rending of the veil of Maya, the shattering of illusion” (ibid.). Modernism reveals the subjective self explored by the Romantics and “empirically” examined by Naturalism as “fractured in both spatial and temporal senses, driven by a death instinct, amoral, and out of sync with the natural or exterior world” (278). Although modernist art “extends the Romantic concerns with interiority”, it also “decentres the subject and shifts the emphasis from the individual person onto the texture of the work itself” (ibid.). If there can be no “authentic” selfhood, then emphasis shifts from the individual to the material of the art work itself which is both defined and contained by its form (ibid.). Further, according to this view, the only valid criticism of such art can come from within the art work itself.

This, then, as we have seen elsewhere, was the basis of Clement Greenberg’s and Michael Fried’s modernism. However, if the art work is expected to be “autonomous” then the question of the role of the “beholder” or “audience”, as we have seen, becomes problematic. “Theatricality” for the brand of modernism practised by Greenberg and Fried, writes Ackerman, is a “pejorative term” because it “implies a work of art that postures for an observer external to it” (2001, 279).

Although Ackerman does not characterise the three coordinates of Theatre Studies as historically determined, a chronology is nonetheless implied. Without being too prescriptive, and allowing that such categories leak, we can see that the question of authenticity is clearly a late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century concern, and the self-reflexivity of art is an early twentieth/mid-twentieth century concern. The third category, concerned with the plurality and multiplicity of “theatres”, suggests the radical decentredness of late-twentieth century postmodernism and the ontological failure of “conventional forms of representation”. Such a view, Ackerman suggests, arose from “the Holocaust . . . as the paradigmatic modernist event, the epitome of the unrepresentable” (281). The epistemological certainty of earlier eras ends and the threat of nihilism is reflected in Stanley Cavell’s commentary on the work of Beckett: “damnation lies not in a particular form of theater, but in theatricality as such” (quoted in Ackerman 2001, 281).32

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32 Cavell, Stanley “Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett’s Endgame” in _Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays_ (1976).
Thus modernism yearns for, but ultimately reveals the impossibility of, teleological interpretation, and finds in its stead a theatricalised rhetoric that represents nothing but its own enunciation. Criticism of theatricality, as we shall see below with the work of Bernard Dort and Roland Barthes, often carries a sense of loss (of meaning and certainty) together with a celebration of the emancipatory vision associated with theatricality.

Ackerman proposes, in contrast to Barish, that “anti-theatricality”, rather than being an enemy to theatre and a defence against a malignant viral invader—Michael Fried writes of “the same general, enveloping, infectious, theatricality which corrupted literalist sensibility in the first place” (1998, 161)—might better be viewed as a “productive force within modernism, a force that has led to the most successful reforms of modern theatre and drama” (Ackerman 2001, 281). In the examples explored in the Modern Drama collection—German/Austrian nineteenth century Naturalist drama, the modernist opera, the modern novel, and (post)modern “theatricalist” drama—“anti-theatricality” is revealed as signifying a revolt against, and a reconfiguration of, aesthetic and social conventions. Or, as another contributor, Kirk Williams, suggests, Barish’s work revealed

the startling paradox that anti-theatricality is ultimately not about the theatre and always about something else: the stage is inevitably a mere symptom of some other, less effable social or metaphysical malady (2001, 284).

The productive role of “anti-theatricality” and its link to “theatricality” is examined, in the Puchner and Ackerman collection, by Elinor Fuchs in “Clown Shows: Anti-Theatricalist Theatricalism in Four Twentieth-Century Plays”. Fuchs identifies theatrical self-reflexivity as “metatheatre” or, to borrow Gorelik’s (1940) term, “theatricalism”. Perhaps, Fuchs suggests, because theatrical self-reflexivity is so old, or because modernism saw all art as self-referential, theatricalism had received relatively little critical attention. Even the “variety and ubiquity of metatheatrical motifs”, she speculates, may have “defeated inquiry” (Fuchs 2001, 337). The purpose of Fuchs’s essay is to “reopen the question of metatheatre” which she proposes to examine through the structural organisation within plays of “incommensurate ontological ‘worlds’ (‘real’ and theatricalized, or ‘real’ and dream-like)” (337-338). Fuchs traces the structural origin of the “theatricalist text” to Plato’s “parable of the cave” which stages a “drama” in “three scenes” of “ascending progress” in which the cave-dweller exchanges the illusory world of shadows on the cave wall for the bright sunlight of ultimate “truth”. Fuch comments,
The progression is not simply scenic but spiritual and moral, for the same upward movement signifies the exchange of artifice for nature, mere appearance for truth, and error for Good (338).

Fuchs argues that this becomes the structural model for the “incommensurate ontological ‘worlds’” of later theatricalist drama.

The four “clown shows” that Fuchs examines, reflect in different ways this ontological structure. In Jean Genet’s *The Blacks* and Heiner Müller’s *Hamletmachine* the “opposing world” to the “clown show” being staged for the audience is “a domain of revolution and terror that threatens to sweep away the decadent artifice of visible culture in an apocalyptic whirlwind” (341). Similarly in Peter Handke’s *Kaspar*—the title of which, Fuchs points out, is a pun on the German word for clown “kasper” (352 n 8)—a juxtaposition is made between an onstage, rigorously self-referential, “theatrical” world, and an invisible offstage world which, although it may be “real” is, nevertheless, “flattened and without dimension” (346). Kaspar struggles, and briefly succeeds, in aligning his onstage actions with the verbal instructions delivered from offstage and for a moment, Fuchs writes, the realist fantasy of word fitted to object provides him with ontological certainty (347). But it cannot last and the illusion of selfhood that Kaspar briefly achieves disintegrates as he discovers that “for him, there is no available representation outside the shadows of Plato’s cave” (349).

The final “clown show” is Suzan-Lori Parks’s *The America Play* which contrasts two “worlds”, the represented and unrepresented worlds, that are “deliberately concordant”. They are both sites of fake memory, “both are theme parks [called the “Great Hole of History”], sites of ahistorical historical entertainment” (Fuchs 2001, 350). Rather than working from the ontological separation of theatrical world/real world, *The America Play* foregrounds history itself as performance. Fuchs suggests that Parks

...toys semantically with the (w)hole. She offers a double perspective on the hole in the ground where these speculations began, the cave of Plato’s parable. From the perspective of the light above, the cave is the cultural capital of illusion, there only to be fled. But from another perspective, the bright light of “truth” is itself a kind of performance, designed to keep the “lesser” world in chains (351).

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33 Fuchs positions “Kaspar” as being in the “long-standing tradition of the Austrian absorption with the problem of language, witnessed by Hofmannsthal’s Letter of Lord Chandos of 1902” (2001, 345-346). As such, its genealogy directly links it to early twentieth century avant-gardist suspicion of language.
Fuchs argues that the Platonic dichotomy of “less real”/“more real” is the structuring principle that organises these twentieth century “theatricalist” plays, and at the ““more real’ end of the ontological spectrum”, she suggests, is a “buried vein of anti-theatricalism” (ibid.). Whereas deliberately metatheatrical works, such as these, written in the autocritical tradition of aesthetic modernity, problematise notions of the “real”, theatricality is not necessarily suggested as an ontological solution. Nevertheless, Fuchs suggests, the offstage anti-theatrical “real” is suspected by the onstage figures, Plato’s “light” may yet prove to be simply another illusion, and the condition of human existence offered by the “stage image” of “theatricalist anti-theatricalism”, is one of profound ontological doubt (ibid.).

The picture that emerges from this discussion of modernist anti-theatricality suggests that anti-theatricality is integral to theatricality and that the two are, as co-editor Martin Puchner writes, “deeply intertwined systems, enabling one another and propelling one another forward in history” (2001, 355). Puchner observes that anti-theatricalist criticism of theatre, in general, usually begins as a reaction to a specific kind of theatre—for example, Naturalism as an anti-theatricalist response to melodrama—and “each anti-theatricalism tends to construct” what he evocatively terms “its own horror fantasy of the theatre” (2001, 356). Puchner notes, in particular, the curious opposition of philosophy to theatricality (and also the opposition of “rival art forms”): an anti-theatricality that has “a paranoid image of the theatre, of a theatre that is at work everywhere, infiltrating and corrupting everything, and which therefore demands the greatest vigilance” (ibid.). Yet he notes philosophy’s ambivalence to theatricality, citing the discipline’s great “anti-theatricalist” Plato’s use of theatre and dramaturgical techniques in his texts, suggesting that “philosophy, here, seems to be a special form of theatre that must therefore differentiate itself from the regular modes of tragedy and comedy” (2001, 357).

In the other art forms, Puchner argues, the opposition to theatre is “more limited” than that of philosophy and religion; however, in each case

the theatre signifies a different danger or seduction; each genre or art form has its own investment in attacking the theater, and each, therefore, has its own history of anti-theatricalism (ibid.).

Such a view certainly supports the recurring use of theatricality that positions it as the “empty other”, the Platonic “less real”, and allows for the construction of a version of the “more real” in contrast. Attacks on “theatre” from within, on the other hand, characteristic
of twentieth century modernism, have taken the form of a radical self-critique which leads Puchner to suggest that, seen in this way, “theatrical becomes an adjective that describes a condition or value rather than simply the essence of one art form” (2001, 358), a thesis to which he returned in his recent book (Puchner 2002), discussed above in my introduction. The recent turning of critical attention to theatricality as a concept, in the light of these arguments, can be seen as another manifestation of anti-theatricalism operating both as an expression of auto-critical aesthetic modernity that orients toward politically progressive positions and as an expression of ontological anxiety.

3.6.2 An anti-theatrical theatricality: perverse, problematic and split

Timothy Murray (1997), in his introduction to the collection he edited of French theoretical writings that used theatricality as a metaphor, rehearses a similar anti-theatricality. Interestingly, he deliberately excludes Bernard Dort, Patrice Pavis or Anne Ubersfeld, all of whom had written on theatricality, on the grounds that their work “dwells more on specialized issues in French theater and dramatic theory than on the broader epistemological and ideological questions of French thought” (1997, 4), a rationale that would seem to echo the conventional anti-theatricalism of philosophy since Plato. To the various writers in the collection, Murray assigns familiar positions in respect of the subversive and politically pluralist interpretations of theatricality. Thus, he writes “Theatricality is called upon by French theory as something of a third term” (2). For Gilles Deleuze he claims “theatricality is an unbalanced, nonrepresentative force that undermines the coherence of the subject through compelling machineries” (3); and Andre Green and Michel Foucault, argues Murray, see that the “underlying subject/object dichotomy is destabilized . . . by the empty form of mime rather than revered by the mimetic paradigm” of what Foucault terms a “central founding subject” (Murray 1997, 3; Foucault 1977c, 178).

For Murray himself and the writers in his collection, as the title of his volume declares, there is a “politics of theatricality” that emerges through what he terms a “topological map” of “three allegorical compounds around which Occidental theories of mimesis and performance (graphic and plastic) seem consistently to revolve” (1997, 9). These are “Nature and Art” (9-13), “Pleasure and Pain” (14-19) and “Mime and Disavowal” (19-22), a series of binary opposites within which the trope of theatricality does its work: in Murray’s analysis theatricality stands for that which is ontologically problematic, split, perverse, resistant, alternative.

Murray also contributes an essay to the SubStance 2002 collection. He begins by declaring that theatricality is in a “paradoxical situation” (2002, 265), a paradox that arises from the
spectacular allure of “the dazzling images of computer wizardry and the magical resonance of digitized sound” and what he perceives as “a certain desire or nostalgia for simpler times and less complicated world views” than those portrayed by contemporary “dramatic theory and practice” (ibid.). Rehearsing his theorisation of theatricality from the earlier volume (Murray 1997), Murray argues that the use of “digital technology” in recent “performance and installation art” poses “interesting challenges to the legacy of theatricality” (2002, 268). In a supreme anti-theatrical gesture that both aligns him with the cutting edge of theory and banishes the problematic role of the body/bodies in performance, he declares that the

return to the show and display of visual form contests the one humanistic remnant lingering in even the most radical of performance theory: theater’s celebration of the display of the actor’s body as the foundation of dramatic realism, mimesis, and even its internalized masochism (269).

What, then, is the alternative? Having banished the body as a “humanistic remnant”, Murray turns to another, less messy, “remnant”—the text. Murray’s “texts” are, principally, the video installations of the artist Bill Viola in which the performing body is absent and only its representation remains. For Murray, the video texts of Viola’s works are the sole objects of his analysis. He does not, for example, discuss the emplacement of Viola’s The Messenger as an image projected onto the wall of Durham Cathedral. Despite claiming that the viewer “masochistic[ally] identifi[es]” with the image, Murray never really engages with the spectator’s relationship to the event (271).

Murray thus equates theatricality with the actor’s body. Like Adorno and Nietzsche before him, and other modern anti-theatricalists, Murray sees it as threatening the integrity of the art work. Murray’s text, like Barthes’s description of “Baudelaire’s Theater”, ostensibly promotes theatricality, but in effect, shies away from the messiness of corporeality. Instead, the body is bracketed out of Murray’s text, and in place of it he discusses the cool and containable image (text).

3.7 Avant-garde thematics in the contemporary discourse of theatricality

3.7.1 Yearning for theatrical “authenticity”

“Theatricality”, as it has been used throughout the twentieth century, proves to be quiescent and accommodating as a term and, as the recent discussions in SubStance and Modern Drama demonstrated, it can be used as a cipher within a wide range of differing discourses. Anne-Britt Gran’s contribution to the collection, “The Fall of Theatricality in the Age of Modernity”, unlike many of the other essays, is alert to how this discussion of
theatricality is positioned within a larger discourse of modernism/postmodernism. According to Gran, “the rhetoric of a number of these discourses is characterized by something theater-like, by a kind of theatrical gesture. This theatrical rhetoric is part of postmodern self-perception” (2002, 252). The theatrical “self-perception” of postmodernism, she suggests, sets up a binarism of theatrical/non-theatrical, and, contra the theatricality of postmodernism, “anti- or non-theatricality” is associated with modernism. Gran, also, notes the paradox that the positioning of the discourse in this way by postmodernist critics is in the “true spirit of modernity” (252-253).

From the outset, Gran’s essay is promising: she identifies weaknesses in sociological and philosophical appropriations of theatricality as a metaphor that arise from their failure to acknowledge “that all theater metaphors and perceptions of theatricality are, to a large extent, indebted to the actual theater upon which they are built” (253), which is the charge that, as we saw, Carlson levelled against Wilshire (Carlson 1995, 93-94). Gran suggests, also, that “we . . . attempt to understand theatricality as produced by a number of discourses that are always interwoven with various historical, social and philosophical ways of understanding the world” (Gran 2002, 254), an approach that implies that she is tending towards an acknowledgement of theatricality itself as discourse.

However, contrary to what such statements would lead us to expect, Gran, like the other writers in the collection, deploys theatricality as a definitionally ambiguous signifier predicated on a set of unstated assumptions. Referencing Féral’s work in the same collection, Gran claims that theatricality could not be a “substance” but was, instead, concerned with relationships; principally, perceptual interpretations of spatial relationships (Gran 2002, 254-255). However, hedging her bets by keeping this definition fuzzy, she prefers to “see [ . . . ] theatricality as a sort of relationship” (256 [emphasis added]).

Gran’s notion of the “fall of theatricality within modernism” is revealing. From her argument, it becomes apparent that theatricality, viewed from the perspectives of modernist and postmodernist discourses, is something that was lost. Using Michael Fried’s writings as exemplifying modernist anti-theatricality (Fried {1967} 1998, 1980), Gran repeated his argument that “theatricality comprises a postmodern threat to modernism’s autonomy and authenticity” (Gran 2002, 261). In other words, Gran runs the modernist argument that theatricality is needed so as to assert against it the “autonomy and authenticity” of Art.

On the side of postmodernism, Gran cites Richard Sennett’s *The Fall of Public Man. On the Socialpsychology of Capitalism* (1978), and, again emphasising relationship, she
equates “theatricality” with Sennett’s notion of “sociality”—a construction, she acknowledges, that Sennett himself does not make (2002, 256)—and argues that what Sennett perceives as a “breakdown in sociality” is “related to the fall of theatricality” (ibid.). According to Gran’s gloss of his argument, Sennett, in contrast to Fried, and in a different field—social theory rather than art theory—argues that a social, outwardly expressive and public feudal world was replaced by a “‘tyranny of intimacy’” that emerged with a strong bourgeoisie in Paris in the eighteenth century, and in London in the nineteenth century (Gran 2002, 259). Bourgeois behaviour thus became the paradigm of public behaviour and this affected both the type of theatre that was produced (realism) and how audiences responded to it. According to Gran’s summation,

[the spectator] does not know how to behave, either in the street or in the theater. The result is that s/he does as little as possible, becoming a voyeur, an observer. In the theater he [sic] can no longer boo, cheer or interrupt—only clap at the end (260).34

From the modernist perspective of Fried and the putatively postmodern perspective of Sennett, Gran argues, the loss of theatricality (or its “fall”) was the same, only its “evaluation” was different. For Sennett, she concludes, the “fall of theatricality” was a negative and signified the end of sociality, whereas for Fried it was a positive, as it facilitated the emergence of the autonomous modern art work (262). For Fried, Gran writes, the loss of theatricality allowed the “triumphant” modernist assertion of autonomy of the art work, whereas for Sennett, the loss of “theatricality/sociality” was a loss of “performance, irony, masquerade, and seduction in modern public life” (ibid.). Gran’s uncritical acceptance of theatricality as a value blinds her to how, firstly, its construction as a value is itself historically contextual, as Puchner (2002) argued, and secondly, it allows her to construct conclusions regarding the past based on the present: “I will rely on the philosophic, hermeneutic insight wherein each definition of theatrical standards in history is characterized by how we understand and experience theatricality today” (2002, 256 [emphasis added]). Foucault would have had her undertake such a task differently: not to judge the past by the standards of the present, rather, to engage with the past so as to write “the history of the present” (1977, 31).

In writing a genealogy of theatricality I am conscious of its myriad emergences from the late sixteenth century to the present day, many of which can be seen only with the

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34 Sennett’s “normative” view of theatre is not remarked upon by Gran. Highly relational theatrical experiences—melodrama, music hall and pantomime—spring immediately to mind which, while not enjoying the kudos of bourgeois appreciation (including critical appraisal), nevertheless, were still popular in the nineteenth century.
perspective of history, as emergences of this particular discourse. What Gran, Féral and others failed to recognise is that the discourse of theatricality that arose in the early twentieth century cannot be separated from the discourse of early twentieth century modernism; that the assumptions, values, terms of reference of the early modernists defined this field and we are all situated, as either allies or enemies, within this field. Gran notes, with some surprise, that Sennett’s views on sociality brought him “closer to Evreinov and his re-theatricalization colleagues than to Fried, his contemporary” (2002, 262); but this is only surprising if Evreinov and his contemporaries’ ideas on theatricality are seen as distant historical objects with little connection to today. On the contrary, a genealogy of these ideas reveals that we are not so far from the historical avant-garde as commentators such as Gran may believe nor, indeed, the imperatives of their discourse demands.

In her contribution to the 2002 Féral-edited collection, “Theatricality from the Performative Perspective”, Virginie Magnat argues that the “ancient conception of life based on a dialectic between sacred and profane”, is “translate[d] into a dichotomy between what is ‘true’ and what is ‘false’” in contemporary secular societies (Magnat 2002, 148). At stake, she claims, is the ontological separation rendered by the opposition “Theatricality versus Reality”, with the former term bringing with it a certain ontological ambivalence as its “power . . . is both acknowledged and condemned” (ibid.). The theatre itself, Magnat writes, is a “live” art form, subject to “socially constructed conceptions of ‘life’ and ‘reality’”, thus, it is caught in a double-bind of either imitating “the currently accepted notion of reality too poorly” or of “transfor[m] it and subver[t] it too artfully” (149). Such problematical views of theatre, Magnat argues, derive from Diderot’s paradox which “implies disregarding the process-oriented nature of performance while emphasizing the duality between concepts such as the real and the fictitious, spontaneity and structure, the concrete and the abstract” (147).

In the ensuing discussion of Stanislavski and Grotowski’s respective engagements with these issues, Magnat traverses territory that by now in this analysis of the discourse of theatricality is becoming repetitively familiar. Grotowski and Stanislavski, Magnat argues, were on a “Quest For An Authentic Performative Process” (149); and, in attempting to resolve the contradictory binarisms suggested by Diderot’s paradox, arrived at the primacy of the actor’s “presence” and the “embodied awareness” of actor and spectator (153). In a revealing statement, Magnat articulates a complete set of avant-gardist theatics which she attributes to the work of Stanislavski, Grotowski, and others:
The existential process inherent to theatricality is, for artists such as Artaud, Stanislavski, Chaïkin, Blau and Grotowski, clearly rooted in dissatisfaction with quotidian reality, based on the intuition that there is more to life than one commonly perceives; that the intimate experiential area that theater must become—if it is to fulfill its promise—is endowed with a “revelatory power”, an affirming, rebellious force that (re)activates human creative potentialities (156 [emphasis added]).

Magnat’s uncritical acceptance of these ideas as Truth once more pushes her text towards the by now familiar discourse of personal and political emancipation, revealing a surprising (and worrying) blindness to the formation of such ideas as manifestations of the auto-critical and prelapsarian attitudes of aesthetic modernity. In concluding her essay, Magnat’s tendentious “performative perspective” reveals that

the phenomenon of performance itself cannot be grasped by language alone (or as Grotowski puts it, “the machine for thinking”) precisely because it is a living, changing and unpredictable process, once defined by Stanislavski as the “conscious process” (165).

Magnat effectively reprises the avant-gardist gesture of rejecting language as inadequate to the task of accounting for the “phenomenon of performance”, and duplicates the discursive imperative, evident in other writings on theatricality, of keeping the object of analysis indistinct, thereby allowing a quality of numinous and largely unchallengeable Truth to be “tacitly” attributed to it. My reservations about this approach—reservations which, in the face of such irrepessible romanticism, may seem unnecessarily curmudgeonly—are that it disguises an ongoing struggle of interpretation, and defines rules of engagement that privilege certain claims to truth over others while, at the same time, pretending not to.

There is, as I have been emphasising, a remarkable consistency to the positioning of theatricality as definitionally indistinct. In the 1982 Modern Drama volume, Wladimir Krysinski’s essay, “Changed Textual Signs in Modern Theatricality: Gombrowicz and Handke”, used the definitional ambiguity of theatricality to reassert certain claims for the written text. His approach and deployment of theatricality to this end echoes Pontbriand’s (1982) deployment of the term in the same volume, as discussed in the previous chapter. Pontbriand asserted a distinction between what she termed “classical” and “postmodern” presence (the latter, she suggested, was imbued with theatricality) and Krysinski, similarly, distinguished between a text and a metatheatrical text; the latter texts, he argued, “subvert a certain kind of theatre and . . . build a certain kind of theatricality” (1982, 5).
Krysinski begins his essay by asserting that “the status of the theory of theatricality is equivocal and perhaps incapable of resolution” (3). Just as “literariness” was metalinguistically related to “literature”, he argues, so too is “theatricality” related to “theatre” because “theatricality is defined by characteristics of theatre as object” as literariness is by literature (ibid.). However, in an attempt to forestall criticisms of his use of an overly textual metaphor, Krysinski argues that the experience of theatre must overflow the limits of literature: “theatricality is a concretization of the theatrical fact—histrionic or ludic, but also physical”, and, he continues, paraphrasing Barthes, “it is the performance minus the text” (ibid.). However, the Barthesian formula was, according to Krysinski, “too equivocal” and did not take sufficient account of the dual “dependencies” of performances on the input of the director and the written text (ibid.). From Krysinski’s notions of these different dependencies, we are given to understand that theatricality is a quality that is generated by either a particular director’s production or by a text: the spectator’s role in interpreting theatricality is not canvassed by Krysinski.

As these framings suggest, Krysinski’s essay is situated within the twentieth century debate, instigated at the beginning of the century by the avant-garde, where the hegemony of the play text was challenged by the material elements of production and performance. Krysinski’s point of departure is Barthes’s paragraph on theatricality in his essay, “Baudelaire’s Theatre”, referred to in the introduction (Krysinski 1982, 4). In his critique, Krysinski argues that Barthes “project[s] the performance” onto the written text and attributed to the performance “a secondary almost parasitic function”, yet, he argues, contra Barthes, it was the text itself that provided “a vehicular structure of theatricality” (ibid.). The opacity of Krysinski’s language does not disguise his project, which is to assert the primacy of certain texts: that is, the avant-gardist texts of Witold Gombrowicz and Peter Handke. Krysinski, however, is alert to the Derridean charge of logocentrism and he argues that the texts of Handke and Gombrowicz were “situat[ed] . . . in a decentered place, somewhere between a theological theatre dominated by the Word, and an atheological theatre where the Word as such is absent” (5). The theatricality of their texts, he writes, is characterised by “deliberate verbal inflation”, and

theatricality is projected on a sort of metatheatre where it redefines its parameters in the context of specific sign systems which make of this theatricality at once a goal and target (ibid.).

Krysinski’s invoking of “metatheatre” and “deliberate verbal inflation” orients his text towards modernist/avant-gardist thematics: theatricality, he suggests, is imbued through the
first term with self-reflexivity and auto-critique, and the latter phrase suggests an alienation of language, an objectifying of it, consistent with the Russian Formalists’ approach to language. In what is revealed to be a conventional textual analysis of Gombrowicz’s plays *The Marriage* and *Operetta*, and Handke’s *Offending the Audience* and *Kaspar*, Krysinski aligns these texts with a subversive and emancipatory politics, claiming that they “exorcise logocentrism even while using words abundantly” (ibid.). Indeed, he claims that these texts display a “ludic theatricality” (1982, 14). By now we are in a position to ask what other kind of theatricality there is, as theatricality, used in its avant-gardist sense, is _always_ associated with playfulness, process and contingency (despite its oft-declared “equivocality” as a “theory”).

Krysinski, like the editors of the 1982 *Modern Drama* collection, makes two claims for “theatricality”: first, it is difficult to define the term but, nevertheless, second, it is a characteristic intrinsic to theatre as an art form. Krysinski makes a further claim, that theatricality is a quality that can be produced by certain texts, here characterised by “verbal inflation” and metatheatricality. As his point of reference is the avant-gardist play text, it would seem that theatricality, then, can be defined as a quality that exceeds the performative demands of the realist script, indeed, celebrates the “performant” function of the text (in Carlson’s (2002) use of Alter’s term, discussed in the previous chapter). Thus, by emphasising the materiality of text-as-object, Krysinski makes _unequivocal_ claims for theatricality, claims that are consistent with the discursive trajectory of twentieth century avant-gardist discourse.

Krysinski’s contribution can be read within a post-World War Two critical context, the territory of which was largely marked out by Barthes and Bernard Dort, both of whom in the 1950s edited the journal, *Théâtre Populaire*. Jean-Pierre Sarrazac’s contribution to the 2002 *SubStance* volume is a “rereading” of Dort and Barthes, to whom he attributes the “invention of ‘theatricality’” (2002, 57). Sarrazac’s essay illustrates how many of the same issues that obsessed the Russian avant-garde in the early twentieth century re-emerged after the second world war: both pre- and post-war avant-garde theatrical criticism were largely responses to the perceived “emptiness” of the stage derived from the inadequacy of realism and what was perceived as its empty illusion of “life” (58).

In response, Sarrazac writes, modernist theatre emerged through a series of developments: the emergence of the director as _auteur_, the subversion of the hegemony of the play text, a new focus on the “essence” of theatre as an art, and a recognition of theatre as fully “autonomous” as an art form (ibid.). It was in this post-war period that Barthes wrote his essay on “Baudelaire’s Theatre”, and his formulation of “theater-minus-text” (Barthes
Sarrazac writes, was posited on a radical process of deduction in which the “content” of theatre was “exhausted” by the “form” (2002, 59).

Inspired by the work of Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble, Strehler’s Piccolo Teatro and Vilar’s Théâtre National Populaire (TNP), Barthes and Dort proposed a notion of “critical theater” which offered both a social critique and a critique of the theatre itself. The auto-critical reflexivity of aesthetic modernity emerged in Barthes’s and Dort’s critical theatre and, like the pre-war avant-garde, Dort and Barthes, Sarrazac writes, “insist[ed] upon the cleavage, the disjunction between the real and the stage” (ibid.). Unlike earlier theorists, however, Sarrazac argues, Barthes and Dort saw a place for realism in the theatre, not the realist illusionism of Stanislavski or Antoine, but a

Realist Theater . . . [which] had become more of a kind of in vitro space, a space under vacuum where experiments about the real might be conducted according to the sole criteria of theatricality (60).

For the practitioners and theorists of the fifties and sixties, the emptiness of the stage would be filled by a radical “present-ness” or “literalness” which, Sarrazac reminds us, was declared by Artaud as early as 1926:

The objects, the props, even the scenery which will appear on the stage will have to be understood in an immediate sense, without transposition; they will have to be taken not for what they represent but for what they really are (Artaud 1976, 160; quoted in Sarrazac 2002, 61).

For Barthes and Dort, the work of Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble exemplified this “literal” theatricality through “their commitment to literalness with historical, social and political dimensions” (Sarrazac 2002, 63). Such “literalness” functioned as a kind of estrangement device when the “scenic presence of objects and beings” was presented to the spectator in a phenomenological rendering which acknowledged their “commonplace” status both as objects of the stage and reality (and thereby inscribed by the history of both) (ibid.). Sarrazac writes that Barthes and Dort saw, in Brechtian realism’s re-positioning of “objects and beings”, a “presence” that “suddenly regains its archaic and enigmatic power” (ibid.). According to Sarrazac, Barthes’s notion of theatricality in “Baudelaire’s Theatre” was based on “[p]ure theatrical presence”, a presence that, he continues,
was what rendered an object, a body, a world perceptible in all its fragmentary hyper-visibility, its reflexive opacity, so that it might be deciphered, although it could never be deciphered in its entirety (64).

“Literalness”, thus, provoked the spectator into a heightened level of concentration so that he/she was, Sarrazac writes, “inescapably confronted with the mutual Present-ness of men [sic] and the world” (ibid.).

Turning next to the vexatious relationship of text to performance, Sarrazac writes that Dort and Barthes did not reject the text outright but, rather, viewed the dramatic text as an incomplete object that could only be completed by performance. Barthes’s view of theatricality, Sarrazac suggests, was less concerned with the “paradoxical” relationship of text and performance, but was a formulation that “secure[d] the possibility of a dialectic, a tension between these elements” (65). Similarly, although Dort rejected “textocentrism”, Sarrazac argues, he held neither text nor “scenic elements” as central to “theatrical performance”, but posited “an open, incomplete, dramatic text awaiting its staging” (66). Dort did not, Sarrazac writes, see the actor’s role as “interpretive or illustrative”, rather, he held a “Hegelian” view of it, it was a “creative role”, and the actor “through his/her mimicry and silent actions filled in the gaps in a text which, in itself, remained unfinished” (ibid.).

In an essay in the 1982 Modern Drama collection entitled “The Liberated Performance”, Dort argued that the “essence of the theatre” is in the “unnatural alliance” between “text and performance” (1982, 60). However, the trajectory of Dort’s argument, signalled by his title, arcs towards a notion of theatre that is “emancipated”, that has all its elements, including text, playfully interacting on equal footing:

Today, with the progressive emancipation of its various elements, [the contemporary performance] is opening up to an activation of the audience, bringing to light what is undoubtedly the driving force behind the theatre—not the fact of illustrating a text or organizing a production, but an appreciation of meaning in action. Play [le jeu] is regaining its full force. Theatricality is both a construction and a suspension of meaning (67).

Typically, theatricality is situated as ambivalent, disrupting the process of signification by constructing and suspending meaning through a playful interaction with the audience. Sarrazac, however, suggests that Dort’s “emancipation” calls less for Barthes’s “ecumenical” brotherhood, and more for a “violently contradictory relationship” of stage
elements. For Dort, Sarrazac writes, “‘play’ was always synonymous with struggle and strife” (2002, 69). Ultimately, for Dort and Barthes, the theatre became a site of loss and mourning, disillusionment and lack. Barthes declared that he “no longer go[es] to the theater” and, Sarrazac writes, “Dort never ceased to warn us mezzo voce that the theater was constantly forsaking, deserting us (and itself)” (Sarrazac 2002, 70). Sarrazac speculates whether such “disillusionment” arose from “the feeling of the loss of theater within theater itself” that was “connected to the advent of theatricality” (ibid.). Strangely this returns us to anti-theatricalism of the claimed “paradox” of “theater . . . only be[ing] achieved outside itself”, and only when it “it is able to let go of theater”, a process that “can only be accomplished if theater is recurrently emptied of theater” (ibid.). Thus in this context, theatricality is conceived of as a lack that produces an idea of “theatre”; an idea that, apparently, can occur only in the interstices of an overly-aestheticised memory and imagination.

Theatricality emerges in Sarrazac’s analysis of Dort and Barthes as an essence of theatre that is rare, indefinable, unknowable and impossible. It also stands for absence and loss. It is, as I discussed in the previous chapter, in relationship to Féra’s (2002) essay in the same volume, the thing which no-one can define but which, all the same, can still be written about in a range of discourses. This is the salutary lesson from the SubStance collection—that the putative indeterminacy of “theatricality” allows it to be hitched on to any argument. For example, Malgorzata Sugiera enlists the assistance of cognitive science to “help to define more convincingly the still quite vague notion of ‘theatricality’” (Sugiera 2002, 225), a problem of audience “reception and perception” arising from what she sees as an overly semiotic approach to performance analysis (225-226). Such an approach, she argues, when confronted with para-theatrical events, Happenings and performance art—performances “characterized by a plethora of powerful sensory stimuli that act directly on our ‘body memory’”—could not account for these genres of performance which resisted traditional semiotic analysis but, nevertheless, demanded to be accounted for as “real, material actions” (227).

Sugiera’s cognitive science model of audience reception is based on a familiar assumption: theatricality defines that which is characteristic of, or specific to, the art form, “theatre”. She argues that while the “coding mechanisms” for “theatre” and “performance” are different (the former being more “restricted” than the latter), both are “usually combined in a conventional performance, and may even be played against each other” (229). Although Sugiera articulates an interesting theory of how avant-garde performance may be perceived and understood by spectators, she does not, despite her claim, clarify or resolve the “thorny problem of theatricality” (225). On the contrary, in her attempt to graft
terms such as “theatricality” and “performance”—both of which are based on a recurring set of assumptions within a specific discursive field—onto an analytic model derived from cognitive science, not only do such assumptions remained unchallenged, but the terms themselves become even more obscure.

Sugiera argues against a generic separation of theatre and performance (such separation being “bogus”) (226) but then argues that a functionalist analysis, cognitive science’s mode of analysing audience reception, would somehow provide a solution to the “problem” of theatricality. Such a strategy is possible because theatricality is positioned as definitionally ambiguous, and yet sufficiently defined to be identifiable as problematic, thereby allowing a writer, Sugiera in this instance, to set out to try to “solve” the problem.

3.7.2 Reactionary and politically resistant theatricalities
Theatricality, for Sugiera, related specifically to the art form, theatre. Sue-Ellen Case’s essay in the same collection, on the other hand, employs the term as a value applied to a moment of libertarian performance in the United States in the late sixties. Citing The Performing Garage’s Dionysus in ’69 and productions by The Living Theater, Case argues that the naked body, in the social context of the time, represented “theatricality”, defined by the American Heritage Dictionary as “exaggerated self-display” and “unnatural behavior” (Case 2002, 187). In this definition, Case conflates transgression of a particular social code (in this instance, public nakedness and expression of sexuality) with a genre description, “theatricality”. However, because such demonstrations reinforced heteronormative gender constructions of “fertile” women and “virile” men, Case argues, then, that “theatricality” stood for such “hyper-gendering” (2002, 190).

Although the logical premise of her argument is false (nakedness = exaggeration, theatricality = exaggeration, therefore, nakedness = theatricality), Case is able to run such an argument because of tacit understandings of theatricality. Early modernist discourse, as we saw above, constructed a notion of theatricality in which it was claimed to be the essence of theatre, and was characterised by formalist self-reflexivity expressed frequently through exaggeration. Similarly, modernist anti-theatricality emphasised theatricality as a value that could be opposed (or not). Case’s idiosyncratic deployment of theatricality, describing the sexual politics of 1960s avant-garde performance, is fundamentally grounded upon these principles, and the way she positions it in her argument is consistent with the interpretive logic of such usage discussed in the previous chapter.

The empty signifier of “theatricality”, then, is discursively “filled”, that is, it is equated with heteronormativity. Keeping these productions as her context, Case reinscribes the
familiar binary opposition of “theatricality” to “performance” by listing, as properties of the former: “excessiveness”, presence, “group gropes” and “object status”; and of the latter: “recessiveness”, absence, “solo shows” and “agency” (192). Case acknowledges Auslander’s thesis, discussed in the previous chapter, and agrees that Fried’s definition of theatricality in “Art and Objecthood” (published in 1967 and contemporaneous with the performances she is critiquing) expressed anxiety over an emerging postmodern consciousness in art, against which Fried was building a fortress of self-contained, masculinist modernism (Case 2002, 193; Auslander 1997, 49-57).

In contrast, as her list suggests, postmodern performance is everything that the late sixties “naked” “theatricality” was not. Performances by artists such as Tim Miller, Carolee Schneeman and Karen Finley also utilised the naked body—in all these cases, their own body, in solo performance (Case 2002, 193-194). Unlike the “group gropes” of the sixties, according to Case, each of these performers critiqued the inscription of social codes of sexuality and gender on their bodies, and the implications of these inscriptions. Once again, performance is positioned as a practice resisting representation, and it is this analysis of how something is done that Case defines as characteristic of “performativity” (196-197).

Theatricality, then, in Case’s analysis, describes certain performance practices that replicated and helped institutionalise heteronormativity, and that lacked the critical reflexivity of later performance works. The politically subversive and liberatory aspect of these latter performances is contrasted with the reactionary “theatrical” sixties performances. Irrespective of the material upon which she bases her claims, Case’s positioning of theatricality contra performance is consistent with the strand of anti-theatricality that I have identified running through writings that seek to promote performance as a discrete and preferred category. In the light of this, there is, what I presume to be an unintentional irony in the title of her essay: “The Emperor’s New Clothes: the Naked Body and Theories of Performance”. The “theories of performance” with which she “dresses” her argument are, in terms of the discourse of theatricality, a rehashing of the discourse of aesthetic modernity as expressed by the avant-garde; the emperor’s new clothes prove to be insubstantial indeed.

In contrast, Susan Leigh Foster’s (2002) essay in the same volume, dealing with a similar history but from the perspective of (post)modern dance, offers a more nuanced deployment of theatricality. Engaging with Féral’s editorial imperative to discuss the relationship of “theatricality” to “performativity”, Foster adopts de Certeau’s notion of a “tactic” as an act of resistance to disciplinary structures as her metaphor for certain theatricalised
choreographic interventions (2002, 129-131). She begins by referring to performances in the early seventies by choreographers Trisha Brown, Meredith Monk, Steve Paxton and Merce Cunningham. These artists, Foster suggests, sought to challenge the separation of art and life by re-assessing the “exclusive right of the theater to house art-dance” and, through site-specific work, “worked simultaneously to enhance our perception of the environment and to deepen our apprehension of physicality” (127).

This particular genealogy of dance, Foster argues, “transported the specialness that accompanies traditional theater to other locales, and in so doing revealed its aesthetic function”; for these choreographers “theatricality [was] a tool with which to see the world differently” (128). Although such events were potentially empowering to “choreographers and viewers”, Foster argues that any historical account of such work must also deal with “the whiteness of the avant-garde that experimented with [such theatricality]” (129). This leads Foster to ask the question that would direct her into her second enquiry into theatricality: “Are there alternative constructions of theatricality that address the histories of oppression of their communities?” (ibid.).

Drawing on de Certeau’s notion of a tactic, Foster argues that the performances by Brown, Paxton et al. could be seen as tactical disruptions of the “strategic assertion of the sacred purity of theater as the site of performance” and had “redesign[ed] theatrical boundaries” (130). In her interpretation of de Certeau, Foster writes that “tactics consist in momentary disruptions to the coercive power of strategic structures” (ibid.), and with these distinctions in mind, she suggests that de Certeau offers “a framework within which to theorize theater as strategy and theatricality as a possible tactic” (131). The binary interpretive logic discussed in the previous chapter is explicit in these formulations. Turning to the contact improvisation movement that began in the seventies, Foster argues that a second genealogy of dance emerged; one that “claim[ed] that its cultivation of agility and spontaneity could make of life a dance” (132). This “magnificently egalitarian” form is claimed by Foster to have “constructed an alternative theatricality, one sustained by a community built on shared alternative values” (135).

As a genre, Foster argues that contact improvisation might be more easily understood as performance. Recognizing that the rubric “performance” covers an “eclectic array of events” that “escape any cohesive structural features”, Foster suggests, that performance might be defined as such by the alternative venue where the performance takes place or by the auto-biographical and highly personal nature of the material presented,
or by the heterodox mixture of speech, action, sound, and citation that the performance consolidates (136).

At this point in her essay, Foster acknowledges that she has built “two distinctive edifices of theatricality”, and from there she intends to “imagine” a “third implementation of theatricality, one that does not transport or deny the effects of theater but rather reflexively comments on them” (138). She subsequently comments on the choreographic partnership of African-American dancer Bill T. Jones and Jewish dancer Arnie Zane, whose work reflexively comments on itself:

Zane and Jones undo theater even as they sustain a theatricality. This theatricality, a combination of exuberant physicality, the problem-solving labor of choreography, and a reflexive commentary of their own presentation, projects a site upon which to perform a new theorization of race (142 [emphasis added]).

In the conclusion to her essay, Foster writes that her “‘walks’ through dance’s recent past . . . have engaged with three distinct versions of theatricality, each resonant with a different historical moment” (144). It is fascinating that, from the point of view of the discourse of theatricality, Foster’s essay neatly encapsulates the discursive articulations of the avant-garde. Version one’s site-specific work, like the Futurists and the theatricalists, sought to dissolve the barrier between art and life—an aesthetic “heritage” acknowledged by these artists (128)—but Foster does not allow her own genealogy to go earlier than the late sixties and early seventies: “[c]ontemporary notions of theatricality may be traced at least as far as this period of choreographic experimentation” (ibid.).

Foster’s second and third versions of theatricality, like the first, gesture towards an emancipatory politics. In all three instances—taking dance to the streets, engaging in a democratic process such as contact improvisation, or the self-commentary of the Jones/Zane collaborations—the version of theatricality she analyses is imbued with the avant-gardist idea of theatricality as a liberatory force; it is a tactic that “disrupts” coercive power structures. Further, in the case of Jones and Zane, their work is aesthetically reflexive, a quality which, as we have seen, is typical of the work of the avant-garde.

Contemporary discourses of theatricality, in the light of the above, replicate the thematic concerns of the avant-garde. Problematically, although individual writers may often have a keen awareness of avant-gardist practices and theories, there is little acknowledgement that these same concerns are inflecting analysis and critique of current work. The field of
interpretational struggle is organised in such a way that this particular angle is not admitted as such, but instead is delineated as simply the ground on which other battles may occur. It is my contention, contrary to this view, that to enter into a discussion of theatricality is to take up a position which is irredeemably avant-gardist. How, then, are we to approach a theory of theatricality without subscribing to the values of the avant-garde when the field itself is defined by those same values? To shift the terms of discourse, as many of the above writers attempted to do, can dangerously risk re-inscribing those same values while the writer was claiming to do just the opposite. In the chapter that follows, I examine a theory of theatricality which uses the term as both a metaphor and a mode of analysis of particular conventions of behaviour. Elizabeth Burns (1972) makes no claims for the theatre but instead is interested in the relationship between theatre and social life and how the conventions of each interpenetrate.
CHAPTER 4: TOWARDS A THEORY OF THEATRICALITY

4.1 Implicit theories of theatricality deny its genealogy

4.1.1 Three articulations of the discourse of theatricality

Underlying the various texts which critically engaged with a notion of theatricality is an interpretive strategy that struggles to maintain itself as truth. A powerful weapon in this struggle is, in fact, the denial that such a struggle is occurring and that the claims being made are not for, or about, or in respect of a putative “truth”, but instead arise from a tacit “understanding”—Féral’s “concrete idea that one can use directly but that one can only describe indirectly” ({1988} 2002, 95). When the interpretive category of theatricality was used in these texts, the writers generally positioned it oppositionally; against it, then, another interpretive category was juxtaposed and a certain authenticity was ascribed to the latter category. To this non-theatrical category, either explicitly or by implication, the status of “truth” was imputed; a truth that was defined as such precisely because it was interpreted as not theatrical. The genealogy of this interpretive strategy, as I illustrated in the previous chapter, had its roots in modernist anti-theatricality which, as Ackerman and Puchner (2001) argued, was a productive force in the development of twentieth century theatre and performance.

Underlying such deployments, according to Puchner, was the re-positioning of theatricality as a value—Fried’s ({1967} 1998) attack, for example, owed more to the supposed “corrupting” influence of a theatrical value than to the theatre as an art form. Fried’s anti-theatricality was explicitly modernist, and his positioning of theatricality was consistent with the discourse of modernism, particularly in the visual arts. In the texts of theatre and performance scholars examined in the previous chapters, the surprising discovery emerged of a similar anti-theatricality through a recurring discourse, a discourse that yearned for an Origin or an Ideal Form of Theatre (described as “presence” or “present-ness”, or as an “impossible” theatre) yet was profoundly disappointed by what the contemporary theatre actually offered.

It was within this context that theatricality was often characterised as ambiguous, problematic, hard to define, or “tricky”, thereby allowing the truth of claims made in its name to pass unchallenged. Contrary to this view, however, I suggest that there is nothing that is ambiguous about theatricality. Theatricality refers to a constellation of ideas and practices associated with theatre as an art form, and can operate either descriptively or as a value. More specifically, the term has a genealogy that is fundamentally grounded in the discourse of aesthetic modernity and, therefore, it is inflected with the values of the
historical avant-garde, defined by their practices and by their theoretical usages. Theatricality is not an “essence” of theatre (pace Féral) but is in fact a discourse, a way of thinking and writing about certain phenomena related to a certain performing art.

To most scholars writing on the subject, such a definition may seem unnecessarily reductive. Joachim Fiebach (2002), for example, carefully lays out a theory of theatricality as a principle underlying most human interactions. However, Fiebach’s deployment of theatricality as a metaphor to describe a range of historically and culturally diverse performance practices, in fact, shares many of the same discursive features as the essays discussed in the earlier chapters. How these are specifically articulated in Fiebach’s essay is examined below.

Generally speaking, then, the discourse of theatricality emerges through three broad articulations. The first associates the term with aesthetic processes of auto-criticism and self-reflexivity, processes that are often exaggerated and self-consciously “composed”. The second articulation, most strongly rooted in modernism and the avant-garde, and also the most pervasive in the writings I have been discussing, is used in reference to the “essence” or to the specific attributes of theatre as an art form—that which makes theatre uniquely theatrical. Closely related to the previous idea is the final articulation, that theatricality is an ontology: reality is understood as being composed, contingent and intersubjective, therefore, theatrical. This idea of a theatrical ontology pervaded the avant-garde, in particular, the writings of Fuchs (Fischer-Lichte 1997), Evreinov (Jestrovic 2002; Feral 2002), and later, Artaud (Innes 1993). Through metaphors of performance (Phelan 1993; Schechner 2002) and performativity (Butler 1990; Parker and Sedgwick 1995) this ontological interpretation of theatricality was given a new lease of life in contemporary discourse.

In considering the collections of writings that have contributed to and shaped the discourse of theatricality, I have been struck by how often writers who display considerable knowledge of the early twentieth century avant-garde, often in the same essay cannot see how their own inquiries are best understood and, indeed, are imbricated within the tradition of avant-garde aesthetic and political discourse. This lacuna manifests itself in part because of the contemporary scholarly imperative to distance current work from the past (Vanden Heuvel 1991; Woods 1989); yet the romanticism of the avant-garde continues to seduce (after all, who does not yearn for plenitudinous union with the One?).

Lacking in these writings is a sophisticated and nuanced theory of theatricality, an understanding of the term that, notwithstanding the claims of various essayists, has been
carefully framed and rigorously worked through. Such an analysis was carried out by Elizabeth Burns in *Theatricality: A Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life* (1972). In *Theatricality*, Burns establishes some solid principles and a strong methodology for analysing notions of “theatre” and “theatricality” which avoid some of the questionable ontological assumptions of later writers. Burns argues throughout her book for the principle that the art form theatre (including its performative antecedents folk dramas and liturgical rites) and its socio-historical contexts are interdependent. If that is the case, in terms of methodology, any study of the art form which does not account for its historical context and social situation will be, at best, incomplete and, at worst, founded on fallacious assumptions. The converse is also true: any social study that seeks to utilise the metaphor of theatre without a historical understanding of the art form is liable to fall foul of the same fallacies (Carlson 1995).

Burns’s study is of additional interest because, written thirty years ago, it is a historical document that marks the impact of paratheatrical performances by artists such as Jerzy Grotowski, the Living Theatre and The Performance Garage, as well as numerous Happenings. Burns is a theatrical traditionalist (in the generous sense of the word, meaning one who has a keen appreciation and knowledge of the traditions and conventions of a particular field) who, several times throughout her study, displays reservations concerning these “new” experiments. Despite her disquietude (and, one suspects, her preference for playtext-based theatre), Burns nevertheless does not exclude paratheatrical performances from her study, and she notes conventional similarities between “modern” performances and their historical antecedents (1972, 118 n. 35). Thirty years later, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see that such experimentation has not brought about the end of theatre as we knew it but has, in many instances, extended our ideas of what constitutes the art form. Such work has even spawned, as Kirschenblatt-Gimblett and Schechner acknowledged, Performance Studies, a new field of scholarly enquiry that actively engages with the methodology of sociology (Schechner 2002, 1-21).

In this chapter I review Burns’s work within the context of contemporary discussions of theatricality. I begin by assessing the sporadic use of *Theatricality* by contemporary writers before moving on to an in-depth examination of the work itself. The scope of *Theatricality* is broader than this review will allow; however, I analyse what I see as Burns’s important contributions to the discourse of theatricality. These are first, her unpacking of the theatrical metaphor, in particular, her emphasis on the importance of the separation of spectators and performers and the interrelationship of theatrical and social conventions; and second, her analysis of the conventions that define a particular social situation and her still useful distinctions of rhetorical and authenticating conventions.
4.2 Contemporary responses to Theatricality

4.2.1 Everything old is new again

As a sociologist writing before the current interest in inter-disciplinarity, Burns has been only sporadically cited in theatre scholarship.\(^3\) In fact, the 2002 SubStance collection is unusual in that Burns is cited by a number of the contributors.\(^4\) Disappointingly, however, Burns’s achievement is under-acknowledged, and in some cases actively dismissed. For example, Féral, in her introduction to the volume, acknowledges Burns’s key insight that “link[ed] theatricality to perception . . . theatricality is widespread in social life, and resides mainly in the eye of the beholder” (2002, 6). Although Féral sees the spectator as “fundamental” to the operation of theatricality (3), she does not explore in any depth the significance of Burns’s insight, but turns to her own concerns as she locates the “true definition of theatricality” in the “duality embedded within the actor, the artificiality of [the actor’s] body” (8). Further, after the philosopher Michel Bernard, Féral claims that theatricality is “at the heart of any artistic work . . . at the heart of any expressiveness” (ibid.). Féral reveals a romantic view of theatre, in which theatricality is understood as being not merely characteristic of but constitutive of human being (at its “heart”) when she exclaims that “because theatricality is the manifestation of an energetic process on the part of the subject, a pulsating dynamics, it is part of human uniqueness” (9). This, as we shall see, is a long way from the precision and careful analysis that characterises Burns’s argument.

Féral draws support for her position from Carlson’s (2002) reading of Burns’s notion of theatricality against Butler’s performativity (6). Carlson argues that the notion of subjectivity in Burns’s analysis, is problematic. In contrast, he writes, Butler theorises subjectivity itself as “performatively constituted” which, he suggests, is an improvement on Burns who

follows the model of much sociological writing of her time in positing a subjective “self” that stands to some extent outside these structures of behavior and utilizes them in a manner Burns characterizes as “rhetorical”—seeking to create certain effects and impressions upon others (2002, 240).

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\(^{3}\) Maria Shevtsova (1989b) discusses Burns’s work in “The Sociology of the Theatre, Part Two: Theoretical Achievements”. Like Burns, Shevtsova is aware of theatre sociology as a discrete field originating in French scholarship, in particular from the work of Duvignaud. In Fischer-Lichte’s 1995 collection, Burns is cited by Fischer-Lichte and also by Michael Quinn.

\(^{4}\) In SubStance, Jestrovič, Gran, Carlson and Féral cited Burns, although the latter’s 1982 and 1988 essays did not engage with Burns.
Carlson, like Barish (1981), is ever on the alert to defend theatre, somewhat chivalrously, against its assailants; thus he misinterprets Burns’s argument by equating it with Jean-Paul Sartre’s in Being and Nothingness, as creating an opposition between “‘authentic’ or ‘meaningful’ expression of the self and the ‘empty rituals’ of theatricality” (240). Carlson argues that Burns’s putative “negative association of theatricality with rigidity and empty repetition” is a rehashing of the same anti-theatricalist prejudice, prevalent since Plato, demonstrated by the modernist art critics, Fried and Greenberg (241). A closer reading, however, suggests that Burns, in fact, does not reinscribe the Platonic prejudice against mimesis. Rather, she observes that in Western society “the moral value placed on spontaneity and sincerity in personal relations has produced a dichotomy between ‘natural’ and ‘theatrical’ behaviour” (1972, 4). In observing this, Burns is not endorsing a “moral [Platonic] value”, simply noting its presence.

Burns fares little better at the hands of other writers in the SubStance issue. Jestrovic simply reiterates the view that Burns’s notion of theatricality was a forerunner of Butler’s performativity (2002, 43), but Gran (2002) erroneously associates Burns’s work with that of Erving Goffman. Although Burns acknowledges the influence of the Chicago School’s micro-sociology on her work, and her debt to Goffman (Burns 1972, 5), her work diverges from that of Goffman (and this is where its true value lies) in its historical understanding of theatre as a performance genre. Therefore, contrary to Gran’s claim, “the cornerstone of Erving Goffman’s and Elisabeth [sic] Burns’s theater metaphors” is not, in the case of the latter, “Naturalist/Realist Theater” (2002, 253-254). Instead, Burn’s study surveys a comprehensive range of English dramatic practices from the early church liturgical “dramatisations” eight hundred years ago through to European and North American paratheatrical experiments of the late sixties and early seventies. The value of her work is in its acknowledgement of historical and cultural contingencies together with its identification of recurring practices, for example, the use of the device of the presentational address or “induction” (see below).

The dismissal, in most cases, of Burns’s text as interesting but now quaintly old-fashioned says less about the status of Burns’s writing and more about the need of contemporary scholarship to assert itself as on the cutting-edge. Indeed, it is difficult to justify a “new” collection of writing on theatricality when much of the territory has already been traversed thirty years earlier. The exercise becomes, in colloquial terms, a matter of teaching one’s grandmother to suck eggs. However, granny, in her funny old way, stumbled across some “truths” but apparently lacked the sophisticated tools (a theory of performativity perhaps?) to really get to the heart of the matter. Therefore, in a collection of seventeen essays dealing with theatricality, not one critically engages in any depth with Burns’s book-length
Indeed, to take one of her key notions, the idea of spectatorial framing of an event as theatrical, but to not engage with how she is considering such notions as the theatrical metaphor, nor to engage with her ideas of rhetorical and authenticating conventions—categories which can still be useful for examining a range of performance events—is an oversight that denies the opportunity for an important re-evaluation of Burns’s work.

4.2.2 Fiebach’s positioning of theatricality as a foundational concept

Joachim Fiebach’s (2002) contribution, although not specifically referring to Burns’s work, nevertheless covers similar territory and is explicitly linked to Burns by Féral in the introduction. Fiebach, according to Féral, sees “theatricality as a mode of expression or behavior” and “culture specific”; interpretations which, she claims, “no doubt Elizabeth Burns’s book can only confirm” (Féral 2002, 7). For Fiebach, “any concept of theatricality” had to be defined according to the “structural essentials of the specific cultural production of theater, in its most comprehensive sense” (Fiebach 2002, 17). Fiebach’s desire for “comprehensiveness” weakens his project from the start. On the one hand he is alert to the cultural and historical specificities of various performance practices—he refers not only to European avant-gardist practices but also to Chinese and Yoruba performance forms (18-19)—but nonetheless, on the other hand, he continues to orient his argument towards comprehensiveness:

Given the fundamental structural characteristics of the vast range of aesthetically dominated theater forms, “theatricality” should be taken, and consequently used, as a concept that relates to virtually any type of socially communicative, constructed (“dramatized”) movements and attitudes of one or more bodies and/or their audio-visual “replicants”—or their representations, such as masks or technologically objectified images (19-20).

In this statement I observe what I like to call metaphoric encroachment, a process in which the metaphor used by a writer (“theatricality”) is allowed to grow to become a foundational concept that defines a broad range of other phenomena. Thus, “socially communicative, constructed” is equated by Fiebach with “dramatized” (although the parentheses might suggest the contingency of such usage). And in case there is any doubt, Fiebach writes a little later that “the notion of theatricality encompasses any societal activities that are theatrically structured” (20). Looking for such “theatrically structured” activities Fiebach, of course, finds them everywhere.
Conceptualising his own work, Fiebach writes that his early investigations sought to challenge the “European literature-fixated, ‘naturalist’, Aristotelian theater” in order to “conceptualize theater in a new way” (23). He turned, therefore, to an examination of European avant-garde practices and theories, and was inspired also by the “radical transformation of accepted cultural practices and thought in the 1960s” (24). Importantly, the third influence was his experience in sub-Saharan Africa—an experience with societies which, he writes, had “different attitudes towards ‘identity’ and ‘authenticity’” and had “different types of performance and theatrical activities” (ibid. [emphasis added]). From such experiences, Fiebach began to formulate a theory of theatricality that equated what he interpreted as “theatrically structured” action with “symbolic . . . behavior, event” (25). Such an association, as Burns argues (see below), is erroneous—symbolic communicative behaviour is not inherently theatrical; it is only so if a particular interpreter chooses to see it as such.

This argument leads to what I see as the fundamental problem with Fiebach’s thesis, a problem shared by all commentators who seek to establish a comprehensive theory of theatricality. Taking his understanding of theatricality as the basis of such interpretation, an understanding that he admits to be culturally and historically specific, Fiebach uses it as a tool to analyse diverse performative phenomena and, in the process, phenomena which might be theatre-like become interpreted as theatrical. Fiebach, however, in a rhetorical move which by now is quite familiar in the discourse of theatricality, refutes such a charge by arguing that “attempt[ing] to discern the fine line between ‘theatrically structured practices’ and other types of ‘real’ life activities—the crucial ways in which the world is not a theater” is, in fact, a “complicated topic” beyond the scope of his current essay; that these “boundaries are extremely fluid” and that “there is indeed a tremendously puzzling ‘sliding scale of reality’” (25). As an ontological category, therefore, theatricality is “complicated” and “puzzling” but, notwithstanding this difficulty, “once we realize that we conduct our face-to-face interactions and realize our very individuality in ‘real’ life by mostly theatrical techniques”, then, writes Fiebach,

(since we know that many sociopolitical processes are theatrically structured and that theatrical “media events” . . . or media constructions of reality are major, often decisive in the making of contemporary histories), it makes little sense to list the practically innumerable cases of everyday and sociopolitical theatricality (25-26).

Fiebach’s primary interest is to study the “historically significant cases of theatricality” in order to criticise how “power structures and blatant social disparities” are maintained
through theatricalised instruments of power and, also, to analyse how theatricality is used in “resisting, subverting, and, perhaps, altering those realities (26).

In this chapter I acknowledge Burns’s work as a key text in the discourse of theatricality. Although sharing the pro-theatricalist bias of many of the other writers (understandably, a scholar generally studies something he or she loves), *Theatricality*, nonetheless, provides a careful and nuanced analysis of how the concept has been taken up by wider cultural discourse. Although Burns does not purport to study theatricality as a discourse—which is the project of this thesis—she does argue a strong case for the way notions of theatricality became installed in quotidian understandings, in Western culture, of human existence and society. Arguably, such understandings underpinned the ontological assumptions of the avant-garde and continue to inform the assumptions of many if not all the writers in the recent *SubStance* collection.

### 4.3 Analysing the theatrical metaphor

#### 4.3.1 The emergence of the theatrical analogy

Burns’s project is remarkably specific, a fact that these writers, in their need to make universal claims for theatre/theatricality, ignore. Burns writes that she intends to “explore the significance and the meaning of [what Goffman called] the ‘mere analogy’” in reference to his use of the theatrical metaphor (Burns 1972, 2), and to

explore what I have called the double relationship between the theatre and social life, “theatricality” itself, by examining the varieties of theatrical convention that can be observed in the development of drama in the English theatre (3).

Burns is specifically concerned with the conventions of Western drama and, in particular, how those conventions formed in England. For Burns, humans exist in a social world comprised of the relationships both between each other as agents, and with their environments, and have devised conventions—subject to change as social contexts change—to manage these relationships. However, such conventions are not simply instrumental, that is, actions performed to create a particular outcome; they also have an expressive aspect. It is this latter element which, through ritual and ceremony, game-playing, storytelling and drama, comprises the material of human performance. Burns’s thesis hinges on two fundamental ideas: first, that social and theatrical conventions are formed by, depend upon, and interact with each other; and second, that the fundamental requirement of theatre (and therefore theatricality) is the separation of spectators and performance. Burns is wary of the theatrical metaphor which, she claims, has been
“exploited as a device for analysing social behaviour” in the social sciences — particularly through the notion of “role” (1). Nevertheless, she is interested in why the analogy between theatre and social life, expressed in theatrical metaphors, is so compelling. Burns proposes that fundamental to the operation of analogy is the “shock of recognition” which in “drama” is “doubled”:

First, drama is a special kind of activity which consists in composing a plausible semblance of human action of an important or consequential kind. Secondly, we use the terminology and conceptual apparatus (the social technology) which makes this special kind of activity possible as a means of understanding human action itself (2).

Burns does not limit this definition to the tradition of Western drama alone, but claims that this “two-way process is a universal social fact” which can also be discovered operating in the ritual processes and myth-making of non-Western cultures (2). These aspects, however, are outside the purview of Burns’s study. For Burns, the “two-way process” upon which “theatricality depends” involves “drama in performance”, which is both formed by and helps to re-form and so conserve or change the values and norms of the society which supports it as against the alternative realities which lie outside the currency of any particular social reality (3-4).

Such a process within theatre, she argues, is a “recognized [sic] creative process”. In the realm of the quotidian, however, the same creativity remains “unrecognised [sic]”, or, when recognised, regarded as bizarre, perhaps disreputable, presumptuous, in any case deviant” (4).38

4.3.2 Relationship of social conventions and theatrical conventions

“Theatricality”, then, is the term Burns uses to describe a group of historically determined processes, operating through conventions, that can be analysed both in “drama in performance” and in social life. Such conventions, working through the dual operations of,

37 The inconsistency of spelling is in the original.
38 Writing on the same phenomenon in terms of the performance of gender, Butler writes
the sight of a transvestite onstage can compel pleasure and applause while the sight of the same transvestite on the seat next to us on the bus can compel fear, rage, even violence ... the various conventions which announce that ‘this is only a play’ allows strict lines to be drawn between the performance and life. On the street or in the bus, the act becomes dangerous, if it does, precisely because there are no theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary character of the act, indeed, on the street or in the bus, there is no presumption that the act is distinct from a reality; the disquieting effect of the act is that there are no conventions that facilitate making this separation (1990, 278).
on the one hand, exclusion and repression and, on the other, experimentation and improvisation, determine and reinforce agreed versions of social reality whilst erasing others. The social institution where this process has been most apparent is the theatre in its many different manifestations (although, arguably, this function has, since the latter half of the twentieth century, been taken over by the cinema and other forms of cultural performance—the theatre as an institution is not nearly as influential as it was in previous eras). Burns does not intend that her chronological historicising of the process of forming theatrical convention be interpreted as progress and that the “history of the theatre is a history of increasing sophistication” (4). Rather, she views this process of “historical change” not as “the replacement of one kind of convention by another but the accumulation of a repertoire of conventions which are themselves related to corresponding social conventions” (ibid.).

The nexus between life and theatre is illustrated by the theatrical metaphor, a “compelling image”, the continuation of which in Western culture, Burns argues, provides the best evidence to suggest “the continuing presence both of theatricality, and of our awareness of it” (8). From its ancient Greek origins, Burns writes, through medieval tropes such as the mirror and the Dance of Death, to its powerful resurgence in the sixteenth century, the metaphor of theatrum mundi functioned as a moral/religious emblem for “the life of man [sic]” (9). As such, Burns continues, it referred both to the “stage as it was seen” and also to “the centuries-old idea of the stage as the paradigm of human life, and of the artificial boundaries placed on feasible behaviour and on the actualities of social existence” (ibid.). Burns writes that although the moral/religious version of the topos did not survive beyond the seventeenth century, the theatrical metaphor persisted in a secular form, and “the idea of the world as a theatre where the drama of human life is acted descended from the transcendental to the social plane” (11). The theatrical metaphor, then, as it is now understood, Burns suggests, is a

commonplace analogy . . . of the world itself as a place where people, like actors, play parts, in an action which is felt obscurely to be designed by “social forces” or the natural drives of individual men [sic] (ibid.).

Burns’s important contribution, unacknowledged by Butler in this essay, is an analysis of just how these conventions emerged and why a spectator distinguishes between “this is only a play” and “life”. I return to a more detailed exploration of the genealogy of the theatrical metaphor in Chapter 5. Again, the implications of this for Butler’s theory of performativity cannot be underestimated. In a well-known formulation, Butler declares that “the act one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene” (1990, 277). Butler’s notion of a normative social “script” can be equated with Burns’s “obscurely ... designed “social forces””. 

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Burns’s important contribution, unacknowledged by Butler in this essay, is an analysis of just how these conventions emerged and why a spectator distinguishes between “this is only a play” and “life”.

30I return to a more detailed exploration of the genealogy of the theatrical metaphor in Chapter 5.

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This transformation of the theatrical metaphor meant that its significance to contemporary society was no longer moral or cosmic. Instead it had been “replaced by the self-consciousness of the actor” (ibid.). How this “self-consciousness” was manifested, writes Burns, could be seen in the experience of those

who feel themselves on the margin of events either because they have adopted the role of spectator or because, though present, they have not yet been offered a part or have not learnt it sufficiently well to enable them to join the actors (ibid.).

Burns notes a number of factors which contribute to someone having the sense of being a “partless actor”, which could include personal neurosis, unfamiliarity with the conventions of a foreign country, finding themselves in an unexpected situation: for example, in hospital or prison, or, more commonly, the experience of starting a new job (11-12). If an individual could have the sense that they are playing a part, then, conversely, a person’s behaviour might be “assessed”, Burns argues, by others in terms of theatrical metaphors:

they are accused of “overplaying” or “underplaying” a part, of making a good or bad “entrance” or “exit”, or of knowing how to hold the “stage” (usually in a pejorative sense) (12).

4.3.3 Theatricality as a mode of perception

Recalling Burns’s earlier identification of the dichotomy between spontaneous “natural” behaviour and theatrical behaviour, we can see, tied to self-identification and identification by others, a belief that there are times when one is acting and times when one is not. Burns, however, is not claiming that there are moments when one is or is not playing a part (corresponding to Goffman’s notions of being “on” or “off stage”); rather, she is suggesting that we have moments of awareness of doing so—moments of self-consciousness—and that we place an ontological value on not playing a part in everyday life. Such interpretations of behaviour lead to what I see as Burns’s key insight into the phenomenon of theatricality, operating through the theatrical metaphor:

Behaviour can be described as “theatrical” only by those who know what drama is, even if their knowledge is limited to the theatre in their own country and period. It is an audience term just as the [theatron] was originally a place for viewing, an audience place. Behaviour is not therefore theatrical because it is of a certain kind but because the observer recognises certain patterns and
sequences which are analogous to those with which he [sic] is familiar in the theatre . . .

Theatricality is not . . . a mode of behaviour or expression, but attaches to any kind of behaviour perceived and interpreted by others and described (mentally or explicitly) in theatrical terms . . . theatricality itself is determined by a particular viewpoint, a mode of perception (12-13 [emphasis added]).

Burns points towards the idea of theatricality as a perceptual process which requires, first, a spectator who is competent to identify and interpret what is being seen as theatrical, that is, a spectator who could activate an analogy with theatre, a metaphorical relationship. Second, this perceptual process requires an intention on the part of the onlooker to place him or herself in a spectatorial relationship to what is being viewed. In other words, a person must know how to, and be willing to, view any action or object in theatrical terms.

The implications of this insight are not fully acknowledged by the contributors to SubStance; Burns is arguing that theatrical interpretation, that is, interpretation that utilises theatrical metaphors is, in fact, impossible without a basic understanding of what theatre is and what it means. Fiebach (2002), for example, has a very sophisticated understanding of theatre, which he brings to bear on his analysis of theatricality in Yoruba performance practices. Burns, however, adds a caveat that could be taken as a warning against deploying the metaphor of theatricality too comprehensively:

The perception of the expressive aspects of ordinary action as significant in themselves and interesting to observe is independent of the realisation of drama as a form of art (1972, 13).

In other words, the act of interpretation that transforms behaviour in the world into imitative action that is “primarily symbolic . . . refer[ring] to something which already has or could have taken place” (14) belongs, of course, to the domain of theatre, but not exclusively so; nor does it depend upon the existence of theatre as an art form. Burns argues that “behaviour” is recognised as “action” (in the sense of “drama”) when it is “recognised as expressing intention” and a meaning could be interpreted or “read into human behaviour in order to give it meaning” by an observer (ibid.). In this way, behaviour in the world, such as, Burns suggests, “a demonstration, a street fight, a wedding or even a family quarrel glimpsed through a window becomes a show for those who watch”; it is transformed into symbolic action by the onlookers (ibid.). Burns offers the tantalising possibility that the instrumentality of the behaviour, the “accomplishment”
of “an immediate objective” by the participants, in fact, depends upon the extent to which “the full meaning and intention of their actions is apprehended by others” (ibid.).

4.3.4 Interrelationship of three levels of reality

In relationship to a theatrical performance, then, assuming that the spectator is theatrically competent, what occurs in the performance space will be interpreted symbolically and be predicated on what Burns identifies as three levels of reality utilised by the performers. The first of these she classes as “pretend” reality that “can be defined by a direct appeal to the audience: ‘Here be I, St George. An Englishman so stout—’ of the medieval mummers” (15). The second, which she associates with late nineteenth century realism, suggests that the reality being presented is a “plausible alternative” akin to and “possibly alternative” to that of the audience’s own lives. The third level of reality Burns defines as “overriding”: it is instrumental, and, as defined by the performance, “is a reality which overrides any other possible reality”. This last level of reality Burns associates with paratheatrical performance such as those of the Living Theatre (ibid.). Each level of reality—or “definition of the situation” (she borrows Goffman’s term)—is an “exercise in illusion” that depends upon consensus between audience and performers (ibid.).

Defining the situation occurs, also, in the quotidian, referring to the process whereby an individual in a social situation attempts to define what is going on by interpreting the consensus of others present and adapting his or her behaviour to conform to or change the definition of the situation (15-16). “Overriding” reality, Burns writes, “denotes a dimension in which irreversible action can take place, action moreover which affects the whole person and his future behaviour”, and, she continues, it is usually “only the biological facts of birth, copulation, and death [that] are regarded by most people as belonging to this concept of the ‘real’” (17).

However, Burns notes, most people draw a “vague dialectical” distinction between those aspects of their lives they define as “real” and those they attribute to the “unreality of ‘make-believe’ or ‘alternative reality’” (ibid.). The other realities defined by Burns as “pretend” and “alternative” realities are played out against this background of “overriding” reality. For example, Burns suggests, the game playing of courtiers to Elizabeth I occurred in the domain of “pretend” reality (its “as if”, or Turner and Schechner’s “subjunctive mode”), but underlining this “elaborate game of love and gallantry, the game of wooing the ‘Faerie Queen’”, was the overriding reality of the power of the queen to “bestow . . . and withhold favour” (18). Similarly, continuing her line of argument, amongst the English upper-classes in the nineteenth century, Burns writes that an “alternative” reality of leisure was constructed by society hostesses. A certain danger attended this construction because
the “public and private domains” could not be kept separate on such occasions. Therefore, “when men in public positions” met, such an alternative reality “could relapse dangerously into the realm of overriding reality” and actions in the alternative reality could have real-world consequences (ibid.).

Burns acknowledges that perceptions of reality are “more complicated and more difficult to identify” than her examples might suggest (19). It does seem clear, however, that she wishes to make the fundamental distinction between overriding reality and alternative realities. Burns enlists the assistance of Edmund Husserl’s notion of the *epoché*, or “bracket”, a term denoting the ad hoc frame put around a particular kind of situation and action and hence the suspension of belief in the reality of the world and events external to the occasion so framed (ibid.).

In the theatre, the distinction is more obvious: the *epoché* of the performance is “declared and temporary”, and the audience interprets “the significance of the dramatic world” it perceives within this frame (ibid.). Although a dramatist such as Pirandello, Burns suggests, might play with this frame, nevertheless, “he is able to express doubt in reality without breaking the illusion of reality because he works always within a world that is bracketed as unreal” (ibid.). In paratheatrical performances, Happenings and their like, on the other hand, Burns argues, “the brackets which contain the unreal world are spaced more widely apart” so that overriding and alternative realities intermingle and blur (ibid.).

Returning to quotidian contexts, Burns observes that the more easily overlooked ceremonies and rituals of ordinary life . . . can suddenly betray themselves as patterns of behaviour that seem to have escaped from their brackets [and appear as] scenes of unreality in the midst of reality, which call for a new hard look at what is commonly regarded as ordinary (untheatrical) behaviour (20).

Such a process is not unlike the Russian Formalists’ notion of estrangement. The distinction between theatrical and untheatrical behaviour, therefore, Burns argues, is not

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41 Theodore Shank (1992) in “Shock of the Actual: Disrupting the Theatrical Illusion” discusses how a number of contemporary performance works played with framing “actual” or “overriding” reality and juxtaposing it with the “alternative” reality of the performance.
simply one of degrees of demonstrativeness but, rather, “depends on the selectivity of moral vision which is conditioned by the process of socialisation in a particular social milieu, at a particular time” (ibid.). This suggests that notions of theatricality and untheatricality are socio-historically determined and contingent upon what is deemed to be true and false, good and bad, right and wrong; which returns us, once again, to Puchner’s (2002) notion of a theatrical value.

Burns is critical of the way “the terminology of the stage” that is “freely used in common discourse” when used in professional contexts, such as journalism, “can become a substitute for analysis” (1972, 20). She acknowledges the problematic adoption of “role theory, an elaboration of the terminology of the stage” by sociology, but argues that because the field recognises that the “self is unknowable”, the concept of “role” describes only that which could be observed in “a meaningful way” (ibid.). “The emphasis put on the concept of ‘role’”, Burns argues, “comes from the fact that it provides the essential link between the social reality of the patterned world of institutions and the changes they undergo on the one hand, and the human reality of the individual consciousness and individual behaviour on the other (21).

According to Burns, then, the theatrical metaphor, although no longer utilised as a religious or moral emblem, nevertheless, has found a home in the discourse of sociology through the use of “role” as a critical term. In addition, its use in everyday discourse describes an ontological separation between “overriding” or “perceived-as-real” reality and all the possible alternative realities of human behaviour and existence. Contemporary usage of the theatrical metaphor simply inverts the old moral/religious version of the topos, so that the world of human experience is not an illusion defined by a greater reality elsewhere but is, rather, the ground upon which all other realities are seen to be “alternative”.

4.4 Conventions of quotidian and staged theatricality

4.4.1 Separation of ritual participants into performers and spectators

After considering the prevalence and operation of the theatrical metaphor in Western culture, Burns turns next to the establishment of certain conventions in Western drama, the most important being the conventional separation of spectator and performance. Describing the origin of drama in medieval church ritual, Burns reminds us of three elements fundamental to ritual: its “efficacy [which] depends on its rightness”, its instrumentality, “which does something”, and its “‘aesthetic communicative aspect’ which
says something” (23). A ritual, therefore, both does something and communicates something, and for it to be effective its rites must be performed correctly. In contrast, aesthetic performance (or drama in this context) is not intended to do something. “Rightness” is less important; the emphasis is instead on showing or communicating something. Unlike ritual, in which all participants contribute to the enactment of its rites, aesthetic performance requires a separation between those who are performing and those who watch.

With the separation of ritual functions in the medieval church into those aspects belonging to the ritual proper and those which were intended to represent aspects of the sacred stories, Burns writes, began “the long slow process of structural division between actors and audience which seems to be essential before drama can develop as a separate art” (24). This division of spectators and performers required the latter to present their performances in a different way. Whereas a ritual performer was still required to “act”, that is, to present a role outside of or distinct from his/her everyday persona in an appropriate fashion, the quality of performance changed once it became representational. In this latter case,

the actor was required not only to realise an imagined character but also to present this character to spectators who did not feel themselves compelled to believe in its existence outside the special occasion of the performance, nor to feel involved in its creation (26-27).

Unlike ritual, in which believability was a given, aesthetic representational performance required the “development of a new set of conventions” that could be distinguished from the conventions of everyday life and religious ritual (27).

4.4.2 Conventions that define the situation

Burns notes that at the time of her writing the literature on convention was considerable, complex and already had a long history. For the purposes of her argument she distinguishes four aspects of convention. A convention is, simply, a mutual understanding or agreement between a group of people, the terms of which are derived “from norms accepted by those involved” (28). Such understandings could be either “tacit or explicit” but do not require from the individual “‘knowledge of intent’ . . . (the infinite regression of ‘I know that you know that I know etc’)” (29). Rather, this awareness is “imput[ed] . . . to the social system of which conventions are a part” (ibid.). The last aspect of convention is that there is no requirement for the individual to realise that he/she has entered into an agreement. Instead, it suffices that the individual
learn[s] by experience or observation that one’s expectations of the expectations of others will result in a “co-ordination of equilibrium” for a regularity of conduct to emerge. It is this regularity of repeated conduct that becomes convention (ibid.).

By definition, as I noted above, for Burns, human social life is “conventional” in the sense that it is governed by shared and agreed upon understandings of behaviour. These conventions, Burns argues, are not “static” but could change, rapidly or slowly and to a greater or lesser extent. However, when behaviour does not adapt to new social contexts, Burns notes, it is also described as “‘conventional’, implying that it is empty of meaning” (29). Another aspect to the operation of conventions in social life can be seen in extra-ordinary situations; in these situations a “special language” of conventions is required and developed that has meaning only in that “specific context” (29-30). The theatrical encounter between actors and spectators is an example of such an extra-ordinary situation, and its “conventional language” requires “consensus” between all participants as to how “the occasion in which they are all involved is defined” (29).

In the theatre, Burns writes, the definition of the “social occasion is explicitly doubled”: first there is the definition of going to the theatre and the conventions governing how all participants would interact; second, there is defining the conventions of the performance itself (31). Burns provides an example of this second operation in the convention, common to traditional theatre, that requires the spectators to see characters in a play whilst the characters interact with each other, supposedly unaware of the audience’s presence (ibid.42 The doubled social occasion of theatre leads Burns to discern two levels of interaction: between spectators and performers, and between performers within the performance; each interaction “making use of different sorts of convention” (31). In the case of the interaction between spectators and performers, Burns calls the conventions that govern how the different groups of participants would fulfil their respective roles “rhetorical” conventions, that is, “the means by which the audience is persuaded to accept characters and situations whose validity is ephemeral and bound to the theatre” (ibid.). Within the second group, which consists of the actors interacting as characters in a fictional world, they are required to “‘model social conventions in use at a specific time and in a specific place or milieu’”; and these interactions must believably be connected

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42Burns’s dichotomy requires a strict separation of spectators and performers, a separation which is problematised, as she acknowledges, when there is audience interaction. McAuley’s tripartite separation, discussed elsewhere, of social reality, presentational reality and dramatic fiction is a more flexible analysis of these same conventions. Whereas Burns is concerned with social reality and dramatic fiction only, it is the third category, presentational reality, which really determines the conventional basis on which a performance can be understood (or not) by an audience (see McAuley 1999, 251-253).
“with the world of human action of which the theatre is only a part” (32). These conventions Burns calls “authenticating” conventions, the purpose of which is to “suggest a total and external code of values and norms of conduct from which the speech and action of the play are drawn” (ibid.).43

A theatrical performance is composed of both rhetorical and authenticating conventions, which together, Burns argues, form the compositional “grammar” of drama. To understand how these conventions function, we can usefully look at two case studies that illustrate their operation by describing their failure. Theatre South, a regional company, based in Wollongong, south of Sydney, experienced a failure of the rhetorical conventions when they toured their 2001 production of “Macbeth” to Sydney. When the severed head of Macbeth was brought in at the end of the play, the moment was described by critic, Stephen Dunne, as follows: “The sheer artificiality of the moment, combined with the shop-dummy appearance of the prop, resulted in a chunk of the audience giggling softly” (The Sydney Morning Herald, 12 March 2001). The problem was not, as Dunne claimed, the “sheer artificiality of the moment” (a more self-consciously stylised production, that is, one in which the rhetorical conventions emphasised the artifice of the event, would not have had this particular problem); rather, the problem was that the rhetorical conventions which asked the audience to accept a “realistic” severed head failed to persuade because the material reality of the prop itself overflowed its representational function.

In the second case study, a dispute over authenticating conventions overflowed into a “real world” industrial dispute. Bethany Halliday, a “heavily pregnant” singer with the D’Oyly Carte Opera, it was reported by London’s Daily Telegraph, claimed she had been “sexually discriminated against”, and wanted to take the company to an “industrial tribunal after she failed to get a part in the production of The Pirates of Penzance in London.” Ian Martin, the company’s general manager, justified the decision not to cast Halliday, as follows:

We were casting the ladies’ chorus, who all play the teenage virginal daughters of Major General Stanley and scream every time they see a man. It would not make sense to have a pregnant virginal daughter (quoted in The Sydney Morning Herald, 19-20 May 2001).

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43This is where the subjunctive “as if” comes into play. The behaviour of the characters has to be believably consistent with behaviour, as understood by an audience, of people in the “real” world in a similar situation even if, for instance, the situation being portrayed bears little resemblance to actual human existence (as is the case with genres of fantasy or science fiction). The reader will recall Stanislavski’s “Magic If”, a technique utilised by the actor to “authenticate” for him/herself the imagined circumstances of the play (Stanislavski 1980).
It was clearly the opinion of the company that a “heavily pregnant” performer would be unable to “authenticate” the role of a “teenage virginal daughter” (if, on the other hand, she was called upon to play Mary, the mother of Christ, *en route* to Bethlehem, this would not be a problem). It is worth noting that this dispute also represents a shift in rhetorical conventions to more “realistic” conventions in casting. The rhetorical conventions of “grand” opera (as opposed to “light” opera or operetta) still allow large middle-aged singers to play young and lithe heroes and heroines. Audiences accustomed to opera have no problem authenticating such castings, although it is always disconcerting to the newcomer.

How an audience interprets action according to the “grammar” of authenticating and rhetorical conventions in the theatre, Burns continues, is also replicated outside the theatre; but because the context has changed, the meaning attributed to behaviour also changes. “It is”, she writes, “when we suspect that behaviour is being composed according to this grammar of rhetorical and authenticating conventions that we regard it as theatrical” (1972, 33). There is, according to Burns, a “double link” between the “socially real world and dramatic performance” (34). Composed behaviour, Burns notes, occurs in many different contexts in everyday life from “judicial proceedings to love-making”, and “tacitly or explicitly we constantly draw on symbolic references and typifications shared by playwrights, actors and audience” (ibid.). That is why, she argues, “dramatic terminology” has been so readily adopted by “social scientists” (ibid.). Yet the reverse is also true: drama presents “interpretations of everyday social behaviour and of consequential action” and, because there are no “consequences of the action”, arising from what is being presented, in the social reality of the audience, the theatre, thus, “provides usable paradigms for conduct” (35).

As Burns noted earlier, spontaneous behaviour is considered to be more (ontologically) “real” than rehearsed or composed behaviour, and the perception of composition in quotidian behaviour can “devalue” that behaviour. This is the fundamental Platonic objection to mimesis which, as we saw in the earlier chapters, emerges in modernist (and postmodernist) anti-theatricality. The reverse, however, also applies: the perception of non-composed elements in a dramatic performance could devalue that performance (36). To illustrate this, Burns quotes an anecdote of Groucho Marx who, at a play, noticed scratches on the legs of the actress Julie Harris. As Groucho wrote to his friend Arthur Sheepman:
At first we thought this had something to do with the plot and we waited for these scratches to come to life. But Arthur, it was never mentioned in the play and we finally came to the conclusion that either she had been shaving too close or she’d been kicked around in the dressing room by her boy friend. Now honestly, could anything like this happen in the movies? Think of it—here you see a girl’s real scratches! It was great fun (quoted in Burns 1972, 36).

This anecdote illustrates how the real and the composed can interact in the theatre. Groucho here adopted the role of naive spectator, apparently unaware of the rhetorical convention in traditional theatre that requires the audience to ignore some things and to notice others. The expectation of composition could, additionally, allow the incorporation of non-composed elements into the rhetorical conventions of a performance: the pause of an actor who momentarily forgot his or her lines, for example, might be interpreted by the audience as a moment of significant thought, deep emotion or some such thing.

4.4.3 Rhetorical conventions

The primary function of rhetorical conventions in the theatre, Burns writes, is to establish the “rules of the game” that govern the interaction between spectators and actors (40). Such conventions set the “boundary between the fictive world presented through the stage actions and the world of social reality” (ibid.). It is a misunderstanding of theatrical conventions that forms the basis of the apocryphal tale of the cowboy who, on seeing a melodrama, is so outraged by the villain that he draws his pistol and shoots him. After the Russian Revolution, according to Konstantin Rudnitsky, a new audience of workers and soldiers, unschooled in theatrical conventions, came to the theatre. Before such an audience, actions similar to the legendary cowboy’s also occurred; such as the following, reported by a journalist in 1918:

In Elisavetgrad [now Kirovograd] two soldiers tried to shoot an actor performing in full dress uniform and wearing epaulettes. In the next act the actor appeared without the epaulettes (quoted in Rudnitsky 1988, 41).

These soldiers, we presume, not understanding the conventions of the theatre, saw a general who was their class enemy; they did not recognise him as an actor playing a general.

It was, however, just this audience and their expectations that inspired a radical revisioning of theatrical conventions by practitioners of the avant-garde after the Revolution. Turning to the rhetorical conventions of the past, for a moment, Soviet directors, of whom
Meyerhold was the principal exponent, envisioned different ways of being in, of, and at the theatre. In responding to critics of his “revolutionary” production of “The Dawn”, Meyerhold declared:

but I am delighted that we got our spectator who says to us: this is our theatre. I don’t think there is much likelihood of the Red Army taking its banners along to *Uncle Vanya* when it can come to productions which it looks on as its own (22 November 1920 in Meyerhold 1998, 174).

Rhetorical conventions that define the situation also operate outside the theatre; they provide, Burns writes, “the ways in which understanding of ‘what is supposed to be going on here’ is set out in the theatre and in social life” (1972, 41).

Determining what was going on was a problem for early dramatists who, because medieval performances occurred in places that were used for a range of other activities, had to find a way to mark a separation of the performance from the flow of everyday life. The rhetorical device used to achieve this was the “presentation”: simply, a proclamation—a ceremonially composed pronouncement introducing this special sort of event and calling for silent, or at least sympathetic attention for its interruption of the flow of the audience’s own lives (ibid.).

The morality plays and interludes of the fifteenth century commonly employed the presenting device of the “induction”, which involved characters who were half in and half out of the play to introduce the drama that was to be performed. The convention of the induction, Burns writes, continued to be used until well into seventeenth century, most commonly in the context of comedy (42-43). In tragedy a similar function was performed by a prologue (44).

By the eighteenth century, Burns continues, presentational devices were not used as much to establish a relationship between the fictional world of the play and the social reality of the audience. Instead, in response to the rowdy and partisan social reality of theatre-going at that time, they were used as metatheatrical devices to direct the audience’s attention to a particular interpretation of the play, or else the dramatist used them as “extratheatrical means . . . [to] boost himself, forestall criticism or make a straightforward plea for a fair hearing” (1972, 44). In a similar vein, Burns notes, the sixteenth century convention of the play-within-a-play could also be seen as an “elaboration” of presentational devices (ibid.). Thus the presentation or induction, a rhetorical convention used initially to redefine a
situation so that a group of people could decide to become an audience to a play, Burns writes, persisted as a convention for three centuries, in one form or another, well after the theatres were built and it was no longer needed to fulfill that original function (45).

In addition to defining the situation and the conventions of behaviour expected in that situation, rhetorical conventions also govern the content of a particular social occasion. In social life, Burns argues, rhetorical conventions regulate the flow of information by “disclosure or concealment of ‘what is really happening’ and sometimes of what happened in the past” (50). It is through the regulation of information, she suggests, that “power hierarchies”, constructed on the control of information, are built “in even the smallest groups” (ibid.). Similarly, in the theatre, dramatists utilise specific rhetorical conventions—commonly known as exposition devices—to regulate what an audience knows and when they know it, and, to allow them “to experience the impact of the dramatic action” (51). Until the late nineteenth century the expository devices used to achieve this were those of the direct address, the aside, and the soliloquy, each of which were used to a greater or a lesser extent by playwrights in different eras (51-54). It was Ibsen, however, who in his play *The League of Youth*, managed to dispense with soliloquies and asides, introducing the “innovation” of providing information only through the “actions and interactions of the characters”, thereby revealing their motivations and intentions (55). Burns observes that exposition devices are not “peculiar to the theatrical occasion . . . but are conventionalised renderings of rhetorical procedures familiar enough in real life”, their function in the theatre is the public disclosure of information which normally would remain private or mysterious in everyday life (62).

Whereas Burns sees the expository device of direct address as little more than “straightforward briefings—[explanatory] memoranda addressed by the playwright to the audience”, and a device that is also employed by the nineteenth century novel, the soliloquy, by contrast, was “peculiar to the drama” (62). Moving “beyond personal disclosure”, Burns argues that the soliloquy, in the hands of Shakespeare takes on in the tragedies a ritualistic mode, a direction in which a modern playwright such as Samuel Beckett, develops with the “implication of ‘other worlds’—of alternative realities—which derives from myth” (63). In the hands of Genet and Brecht, Burns continues, the soliloquy allows alternative socio-political realities to be explored in a rhetorical mode which is not

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4Burns observes that a theatre, like a variety of other types of spaces, declares in general terms “what is supposed to be going on here”, but it is the “authors of the occasion” for which a space is being used who are responsible for a more “specific” definition of the “social situation” (1972, 45). A particular place broadly predefines a situation and suggests the conventions of behaviour appropriate to that place, conventions that can then be either conformed to or subverted (46). Site specific performance in a “found” space is just one of the ways in which the conventions governing the use of a particular place can be formally manipulated to suggest other definitions of the situation.
so far removed from the “elementary didacticism of contemporary Agitprop and the medieval Morality and Miracle plays” (64).

In contrast to the “expository conventions” of the direct address and the soliloquy, Burns writes, is the aside, a rhetorical device the function of which is to give

inside information to the audience . . . give them an understanding of the action which is appropriate to the definition of the situation intended by the author but which needs to be different from, deeper than, that which prevails on stage (ibid.).

The aside breaks the “situational frame” and allows for pleasurable “complicity”, “derived from receiving confidences” and “inside information”, shared between the audience and the characters (64-65). Burns notes that the aside and the related convention of stage eavesdropping are rhetorical conventions that allow what an audience knows to be juxtaposed against what the characters in the play do not, for ironic effect (65).

In addition to facilitating exposition, rhetorical conventions also operate to define the situation in terms of space, setting and time; as Burns observes: “There is a fluctuating line separating public and private places of the social world” (71). In contrast to earlier eras, she argues, modern urban life is largely lived in “privatised” domains: homes, offices and private transport (71-72). This was not always the case; for example, in the seventeenth century, when social life was conducted in the public domain, conventions of dress were used to signify who a person was and his or her place in society (77). The significance of this for a theatricalised mode of social interaction is further examined in the Chapter 6. From the nineteenth century onwards, as a result of the increasing privatisation of space, the function of a particular space in communicating something about its occupant to others, Burns argues, became equally if not more important than how someone dressed. As Burns comments:

Consonant with this shift of threshold between public and private has developed a sizeable change in manners, the emergence of “privatised” conventions of social intercourse as well as pre-occupation with the private, secluded sectors of our lives, and the development of specialised settings for different modes of action—from bedrooms to motorways, from private offices to factory farms, from telephone booths to cinemas (71-72).
The rhetorical conventions of space in the theatre, Burns argues, also changed accordingly, from the relatively unlocalised and emblematic performance area of the medieval and Elizabethan stages to the mimetic stage of the realist theatre and the semiotic/symbolic spaces of most contemporary work of a theatrical and para-theatrical nature (82-87).

The stage reflects the rhetorical conventions of speech, gesture, clothing, as well as those of setting and space, that govern “social intercourse” in everyday life. Citing Alfred Schütz, Burns argues that quotidian environments, as we subjectively understand, are, in Schütz’s terms, “intersubjectively” constructed: “It is not my environment nor your environment nor even the two added; it is an intersubjective world within reach of our common experience” (quoted in Burns 1972, 88). In other words, according to Burns, how we understand and define a “social situation” is through our own actions and our interpretation of the actions of others (88). This “intersubjective world”, Burns argues, “has to be faked” in the theatre because the “contrivance” of the frame of theatre requires the relationships within it be composed so as to “emphasise” or “subdue” “relevances and conditions taken for granted in ordinary life” (91). Theatre, thus, foregrounds the intersubjective constructedness of environments and relationships, an awareness which in turn feeds back into social life so that, Burns writes, “this theatricalisation of public life entails a heightened awareness and manipulation of the frames and settings in which action is staged” (93). In a reflection of her own historical context, Burns cites the examples of public protest demonstrations which displayed an acute awareness of “converting a place into a setting for a specific occasion” (94). Burns argues that the theatrical metaphor—the predominant literary trope of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, “a time of intense public living” and highly visible “royal and civic ceremonial”—re-emerged in the late twentieth century in the “rediscovery of theatricality as a mode of acting out ordinary life. The manipulation of settings and frames is an aspect of this conscious use of rhetoric” (94). Writing in 1972, Burns’s observation is remarkably prescient; the “performative”, indeed, has become the defining metaphor for the age.

4.4.4 Authenticating conventions

Burns begins her discussion of “authenticating conventions” by framing it with sociological and sociolinguistic theories of the social construction of the real. She quotes at length A.V. Cicourel’s notion of “reciprocity of perspective” which, in quotidian contexts, writes Cicourel

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45 An observation that has not escaped more recent scholars. Carlson (1996) writes:

[with] performance as a kind of critical wedge, the metaphor of theatricality has moved out of the arts and into almost every aspect of modern attempts to understand our condition and activities, into almost every branch of the human sciences—sociology, anthropology, ethnography, psychology, linguistics (6-7).
means assuming (i) that each would have the same experience if they were to change places, and (ii) that until further notice they can disregard any differences that might arise from their respective personal ways of assigning meanings to objects and events (quoted in Burns 1972, 101).

According to Burns, people’s “stock of knowledge” is formed by their “known about” knowledge derived from their first hand experience and their “knowledge of acquaintance” or “believed in” knowledge, which is a “much larger stock”. The perceived “physically and mentally actual world” known by each person is structured spatially and temporally: a person can be present at or absent from where they are either mentally or physically, a dislocation in time and space (102). Furthermore, such knowledge formation is related also to personal biography; that is, the relevance of stocks of “knowledge about” and “knowledge of acquaintance” to individuals and their future (102-103). Relevance can be “extended or amended” and is based on a particular action of interpretation: new knowledge is added to what is already known through a process of “typification” which makes the “novelty ‘more or less’ akin to what we knew before” (103). Returning to Alfred Schütz’s work, Burns suggests, that such typification is “iterative” and “implies that every type carries . . . an index referring the type to its constitutive context” (quoted in Burns 1972, 103). Thus our “horizon” of relevant knowledge is extended by adding new types to our existing typifications (ibid.).

This way of working out the “rules of the game”, or what is going on, is followed by theatre-makers through the notion of “as if”, Burns claims, but in such a way that it could be understood by a third party, the audience. The audience must be allowed to extend their “assumed typifications” in the same way as the extensions of the theatre makers (103-104). Burns argues, however, that there is a “clear inconsistency” between “the complex of ‘relevant typifications’ assumed available” to an audience and the “proffered extension of its assumed thematic field by the action and utterances occurring on stage” (104). Such inconsistencies and “unbridgeable gaps” occur also in real life, arising from “dramatic situations which resist strongly any typification in lived-through experience” (ibid.).

The process of knowledge formation through typification occurs through a process which Charles Peirce termed “abductive reasoning”, that is, “reasoning from consequence to antecedent”. In Peirce’s example, quoted by Burns, a man dying of cholera recovers; Peirce termed his recovery the consequence. However, before he recovered he was bled. The bleeding, then, was the antecedent. The conclusion reached by abductive reasoning (in this instance a fallacious conclusion) was that bleeding cures cholera, a hypothesis that
could then be “tested in other cases” (1972, 104-105). Subsequent testing of the abductive hypothesis may result in its confirmation, leading to a typification: a learning. Such “abductive reasoning”, writes Burns, is the process of “‘commonsense’ explanation” that “tie[s] the novel experience or novel social action into the proximate set of typifications” (105). Encountering “unbridgeable gaps or inconsistencies” in the abductively reasoned extension of “assumed typifications”, Burns argues, can provoke a range of responses such as “embarrassed silence, tears, shocked laughter, or anomic terror—a sense of the precariousness of the order of life and our construction of reality” (ibid.).

Burns argues that the “social function” of drama, fiction, films, and children’s games is to provide the means whereby these “social inconsistencies” and “unbridgeable gaps” can be confronted and organised into a “thematically relevant” and composed arrangement of typifications. In other words, the role of such activities is to model what we do not understand in such a way that it becomes comprehensible to us (1972, 105). If drama’s “social function” is this, then the “authenticity” of what is being presented is crucial. The double recognition that Burns argues is necessary for an audience to interpret a theatrical event, discussed earlier, becomes a “necessary precondition” for its authentication. Burns describes this process as follows:

Authenticity becomes “authenticity”—a good enough make-believe of the principles of reciprocity and of ways of tying inconsistencies and unbridgeable gaps which are constituted in the performance. The double occasion of theatrical performance presupposes a readiness to accept, for the time being, the code (the sub-set of generative rules) and the world of social relevance established for the duration of the performance (106).

The authenticity, then, of what is being presented concerns its believability and plausibility:

Authenticating conventions are those same conventions selected and sorted into a coherent *bricolage* of dramatic spectacle, to convey speech, manners and styles of life thought to prevail at the time of the play and appropriate to the *rhetoric of the production itself* (108 [emphasis added]).

Once again, it is useful for us to turn to a case study that illustrates this point. Again, the case study describes an occasion when the processes of authenticating and rhetorical conventions failed, an occasion I witnessed. The Sydney-based Ensemble Theatre produced Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 2000, a production that was
ostensibly realistic but with some expressionist elements. The designer, Jodie Fried, had utilised the rhetorical convention of a partial curtain to signify the curtain screening Blanche’s section of the stage, upstage, from the main living area downstage. When the curtain was first drawn to provide privacy for Blanche and Stella, the rhetoric of the production asked the audience to accept—to authenticate—that Blanche and Stella were now shielded from the rest of the room (although still exposed to the audience’s gaze), and actors in both the upstage and downstage areas behaved as though the curtain actually separated the two areas. However, when the curtain, which was little more than a fringe of material, unable to screen anything, was drawn “closed” by one of the women in a defiant gesture of “shutting out”, the fact that it did not actually do so provoked laughter from the audience who, up until now, had been asked by the rhetorical conventions to accept what they saw as being like a particular version of reality. The sudden shift of the rhetorical conventions from the mimetically realistic to the symbolic produced an inconsistency, a failure to authenticate, that produced mildly “shocked laughter”.

The importance of the authenticating convention to the rhetoric of the production itself suggests that, in the theatre, authenticating conventions are always subordinate to the rhetorical conventions. Thus, Burns makes the important observation that “familiar conventions” from everyday life, when framed or delineated by the stage, automatically acquire quotation marks . . . [r]emarks and action imported for authenticating purposes from social life and governed by its conventions are, in fact, composed into the rhetorical framework of the play (114).

This occurs because rhetorical conventions attach themselves to any action performed while others are present, and expressively thematise such actions. Performed in front of an audience such actions require special emphasis “so that meanings and impressions can be conveyed to non-participants [the audience] as well as to participants [the actors]” (116). Burns sees that what Brecht did with what Walter Benjamin called the “quotable gesture” was simply to make conscious this process of emphasis: Brecht “taught his actors to emphasise [the ‘quotable gesture’] rather than disguise it” (116-117). Ultimately, Burns believes, it is the interplay of both the authenticating and rhetorical conventions that renders action on the stage “convincing and acceptable [and these conventions] arise from the physical confrontation of actors and spectators and the creation of a common world of imagination” (118).

Theatricality, then, according to Burns’s argument, is determined by the rhetorical and authenticating conventions which, together, form the compositional grammar of dramatic
performance. These conventions characterise drama as a performance genre and distinguish it from its ritual antecedents in the medieval church. The fundamental distinction that must be made between medieval church ritual and medieval drama is the separation of the ritual participants into two groups: spectators and performers. Released from the shared exigencies of ritual, the performing group is now required to persuade, through its performance, the watching group (whose personal investment in the performance is not as great) to engage with the process. In this way rhetorical and authenticating conventions are activated. The composition of behaviour to be read and interpreted symbolically (that is, to be seen as “meaningful and affective” rather than as “instrumental and effective” (31), Burns argues, is crucial to the operation of Western drama. Over several hundred years, Western audiences have become inculturated to interpret this particular behaviour in this particular way; indeed, it has provided a root metaphor for behaviour in social reality. Linked to the Western philosophical suspicion of mimesis, composed behaviour, outside of certain extra-ordinary situations where such composition is expected, therefore, is interpreted as ontologically suspect and “theatrical”.

The importance of Burns’s work cannot be underestimated, and it provides the theoretical springboard into the next part of this thesis that examines the emergences of varying kinds of “theatres” in the Renaissance, and explores how an emerging “theatricalised” view of existence was symptomatic of the great ontological shift that occurred in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As we saw in the earlier chapters, there is a distinct discourse of theatricality; it is a twentieth century phenomenon that is imbedded in early twentieth century aesthetic modernism. Fundamental to this discourse is the association of theatricality with the art form theatre. As Puchner (2002) argued, the Wagnerian moment saw a shift from theatricality as a description of theatre as an art form to signifying a value, the properties of which could be attributed, often pejoratively, to a range of phenomena. Burns’s approach, however, does not take for granted the idea of “theatre”. Rather, her notion of “theatricality” suggests that “theatre”, as we understand it, is historically and culturally determined, and the result of the interpenetration of conventions of behaviour in quotidian and formalised performance situations.

Following Burns’s lead, then, in the following chapters I seek an understanding of “theatre”, not from the perspective of it as an art form, that is, after the fact, but by viewing theatricality as a cluster of moments of arising that occurred during the Renaissance. From the examination of these emergences, I bring into focus theatre’s line of descent, its discursive and in-practice affiliations, against which the idea of theatre as art form, seen as an “unique . . . trait or concept”, can be set (Foucault 1977a). In other words, I intend to sever the connection between the ideas of “theatre” and “theatre as an
art form”, in order to see what is there when we no longer think of the practice and discourse of theatre in terms of an art form. In so doing, my aim is to create a clearing, to paraphrase Foucault, in which exist the “myriad events” from which and against which the art form theatre can begin to be determined (Foucault 1977a).

The field or clearing of “theatre” broadens. Indeed, even to refer to “the theatre” is to reify it, and to paper over the cracks of what Foucault terms, a “heritage”. According to Foucault, such a heritage must not be seen as an “acquisition, a possession that grows and solidifies” but, rather, as “an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers” (1977a, 146). Traditional history fails to recognise that the cluster of ideas now known as “the theatre” is, in fact, a “fabrication”, the result of an ongoing process of interpretations involving inclusions, exclusions, misrecognitions,forgettings and false rememberings, and the vicissitudes of discursive (and practical) struggles. Because the etymology of “theatre” can be traced to the Greek “theatron” it is easy to believe that the one word marshals under its banner a range of practices from the ancients to our own time. For example, Nagler, in A Source Book in Theatrical History (Sources of Theatrical History), has as his fundamental premise, the continuity of theatrical history:

Here is a purely theatrical anthology, from the Greeks to the end of the nineteenth century (just before, thanks to Appia, Craig, and Reinhardt, things began to look brighter again in the theater) (1952, ix-x).

In All The World’s A Stage (1984), the book of the BBC series of the same name, Ronald Harwood states in the introduction, “This book covers a time span which reaches from the theatre’s beginnings more than two and a half thousand years ago, to the present day” (8). Even the more scholarly Marvin Carlson writes, in his preface to Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Study, from the Greeks to the Present (1992):

Although theatre has been the subject of speculative inquiry ever since the Greeks, there is by no means a general consensus (perhaps less today than ever) as to just what constitutes or ought to constitute the body of critical theory devoted to this art (9).

On the face of it, Carlson’s statement is unproblematic. However, the assumptions upon which he bases this statement are: (a) that theatre is an art form and (b) that its history as an art stretches back to the Greeks. I am in no way suggesting that the Greeks did not have theatre, but, as I hope to demonstrate in the Part Two of this thesis, what we understand today as “theatre” and what the term was understood to mean in the sixteenth century and
earlier are very different things. Therefore, the terms “ancient theatre”, “Renaissance theatre”, “modern theatre”, for example, suggest that the practice of theatre, although it is chronologically (and often socio-culturally and geographically) distinguishable, nonetheless, is ontologically constant: there simply is the category “theatre”. However, looking at “theatre” genealogically, we begin to understand it, according to Dreyfus and Rabinow, as “the result of long term practices and as the field in which those practices operate. It is this field or clearing which is primary” (1983, 109).
PART II: THE HERITAGE OF THEATRICALITY

CHAPTER 5: THEATRICAL METAPHOR

5.1 *Theatrum mundi*: the metaphor of an age

5.1.1 The re-emergence of the theatrical metaphor in the sixteenth century

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the theatrical metaphor is as ubiquitous as ever. Very simply, the metaphor does one thing—it compares the world of human existence to a fictional world; not a literary fictional world, but one performed upon a stage by actors. Thus the *topos* becomes inextricably linked to theatre; in particular, the theatre’s deliberate artifice and its emphasis on impersonation. The theatrical metaphor, in common parlance, is always ontologically pejorative. We are familiar with common expressions such as “putting on an act”, “drama queen”, “making an entrance” and so forth. In each case, as Burns (1972) shrewdly observed, and as I discussed in the previous chapter, such terms are predicated on a separation between perceived “authentic” behaviour and behaviour that is believed to be “composed”, with the former accorded greater value in Western culture.

The importance of this distinction cannot be underestimated, indicating as it does a certain untrustworthiness. Thus, in two recent examples reported in the press, the theatrical metaphor is deployed as follows. Describing the ex-Lord Mayor of Sydney, Lucy Turnbull, in a feature article, journalist Valerie Lawson wrote: “Like the polished and theatrical window frames, she displayed a glossy veneer” (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, April 12-13 2003, 51). The well-groomed Turnbull, it is implied, is a little too composed, too self-consciously aware of the impression she is having on others. This “theatrical” self-awareness can also have more sinister implications. In the trial of the infanticide Kathleen Folbigg, her ex-husband and father of the four murdered infants used theatrical metaphors when testifying that his then wife “cried on cue”, an action which he claimed was part of her “broken sparrow routine” (Lee Glendinning, “Hear no evil, see no evil”, *The Sydney Morning Herald* 24-25 May 2003, 33). Craig Folbigg’s use of the words “on cue” and “routine” suggested that his wife’s grief over the death of her children was not only insincere, but was a performance “put on” for effect. Clearly, such evidence relied on the competency of Folbigg and the court in interpreting these metaphors and understanding the kind of behaviour they referred to, that is, behaviour analogous to that of an actor on stage.

In a range of interpretations that is explored in this chapter, the theatrical metaphor, from its earliest Platonic usage (Curtius {1948} 1953), as we shall see, has always commented on the contingency and conditionality of human existence in relationship to an idea of an objective and
external “Truth”; whether that “Truth” be God or some notionally authentic behaviour. However, despite its ancient ancestry, the theatrical metaphor re-emerged as the trope par excellence of Western culture only in the sixteenth century; a time when ideas of theatricality were emerging in a range of diverse contexts. It is not, therefore, surprising that dramatists such as Shakespeare or Calderon took what had become by now a commonplace, a literary cliché, and deployed it so successfully in the new playhouses of England and Spain.

The dramaturgical use of the metaphor in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has been extensively studied. Therefore—and also because the purpose of this study is to disentangle different ideas of “theatre” and “theatricality” from the art form which emerged in the late sixteenth century—I refer only marginally to the use of the topos in plays. It is, however, sufficient to observe that when dramatists used the topos, or employed self-reflexive devices (such as the play-within-the-play), the ubiquity of metaphors of life as a play and the theatre of the world was such that their audiences could not fail to understand them as comments on life outside the walls of the playhouse. The dramatic use of the topos was an innovation of the Renaissance. Righter notes that, although the “world as a stage” metaphor had ancient origins, it did not figure to any large degree in the work of ancient playwrights, apart from a few instances when it was employed mainly to add verisimilitude to the playworld being created (1962: 60-61). However in the sixteenth century, just as playing conventions increasingly emphasised the separation of audience and players, and the idea of an illusory play-world was becoming more common, so too was the idea of the theatrum mundi, as a description of humanity’s relationship to the world/God, gaining currency in a range of writings of the period. In addition, as we shall see in Chapter 7, the theatricality of life—that is, existence understood as playing a role before earthly and/or divine scrutiny upon the stage of the world—had become a common ontological metaphor in the sixteenth century.

In this chapter, then, I explore the genealogy of the theatrical metaphor. First, I define the metaphor by distinguishing its structural features; that is, I analyse the components of the metaphor and demonstrate how by emphasising different components, nuances in meaning are created. Next, drawing on the substantial scholarship of Lynda G. Christian (1969–1987), I unpack the ancient deployments of the metaphor and highlight the key themes that were subsequently rehearsed by, first, the Church Fathers, and later, humanist writers, scholars and artists in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the final section of the chapter I examine the medieval scholar John of Salisbury’s use of the theatrical metaphor in his Polycraticus—a work which Ernst Curtius argues was largely responsible for promulgating the metaphor’s use in

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1Righter argues that in the early Greek drama, which was highly ritualistic, there was no place for the theatrical metaphor; it started to gain currency only with the Greek New Comedies and the Roman comedies of Terence and Plautus.
sixteenth century Europe (1948 1953, 139-140).

In a Europe ravaged by wars of religion, God was never far from mind to the thinkers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, by 1600, the influence of two centuries of humanist scholarship had begun to dislodge the idea of God as the architect of existence, and had begun to install in His place the human figure who, in Leonardo da Vinci’s famous diagram, became the measure of all things. In his Oration On the Dignity of Man 3 (1486), da Vinci’s contemporary, the neo-Platonist Pico della Mirandola, had God address Adam thus:

Thou, constrained by no limits, in accordance with thine own free will . . . shalt ordain . . . the limits of thy nature. We have set thee at the world’s center that thou mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world (quoted in Edgeron Jr. 1987, 10).

The positioning of the human as observer and witness to the world created by God signalled an important shift, the emergence of human subjectivity separate from the world. In this thought of Pico’s can be seen the seeds of the later Protestant privatisation of conscience, a process which, as Susie J. Tharu argues, “named”

the individual conscience (seen as the voice of God within the self) as the final moral arbiter, entirely free to choose and decide, for the conscience was the seat of an absolute truth, untouched by the world and unaffected by societal attributes . . .

[According to Martin Luther] [t]he soul was seen as one’s unquestionable (private) property (1984, 8-19). 4

The metaphor of theatrum mundi provided a ready epistemology for Renaissance humanists: it allowed the new, anthropocentric way of knowing the world to co-exist with the theocentric, hierarchical universe of Aristotelianist tradition. Theatrum mundi permitted, therefore, a useful structural reorganisation of theories of existence that, although acknowledging the importance of God, transferred divine agency to humanity. The implications of this, as Agnew argues, were profound:

What made the theatrical metaphor so resilient was no doubt its capacity to evoke

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2 Blair notes the influence of religious civil wars on Bodin’s desire to seek order and stability in all his works including his Theatrum (1997, 12).
3 In the following chapters, I use the masculine pronoun as it appears in the texts quoted and the commentary of scholars upon them. Despite doing so, I acknowledge that “man” is not gender-neutral, and where possible I refer to both genders or use the plural form.
4 Robert White discusses the use of the theatrical metaphor in the writings of another Protestant reformer, Calvin (1994, 309-325).
the sense of a lived abstraction of distinctively human contrivance, a “second nature” whose facticity was best represented by a theater that was itself increasingly detached from any ritual relation to God. Thus, although the outward scaffolding and inward sentiment of the theatrical analogy persisted into the seventeenth century, its meanings changed—changed in response to the transformation of both the theater and the world (1986, 16).

The human being could “act” (in both senses of having agency and performing a role) but, as John of Salisbury reminds us, such acting would still be “marked” by God and the angels and an audience of “sages” (as we shall see later in this chapter).

Despite its ancient origins, the *theatrum mundi* metaphor comes to us today thanks to its revival and development in the Renaissance.\(^5\) In the well-known Shakespearean version of the *topos* (spoken by Jaques in *As You Like It*, discussed below), the agency of the human actor is emphasised while the metaphysical dimension, the celestial audience, it would seem, is missing. Yet the spectator is implicit in the metaphor’s set-up of the world stage peopled by actors; someone must be “marking” this performance just as the actor playing Jaques is “marked” by his audience. The *topos* operated with particular force in the theatre (unlike in literature) because the medium of transmission duplicated the formal structure of the metaphor, lending a reflexive metatheatricality to both the metaphor and to the manner of its articulation. Or to put it another way, when spoken in the theatre, the metaphor would seem to be saying to its audience: “you are in this world just as you are currently in this playhouse, and your actions are watched and judged just as you watch and judge this play.”

Although the Renaissance use of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor preceded the actual playhouses, its use in the drama of the time, along with other metatheatrical devices, reinforced the ontological “truth” of the metaphor. Coupled with anxiety over the crumbling of the fixed hierarchies of the old medieval world order and the emergence of an increasingly mutable social structure—a process discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6—the theatrical metaphor enabled this new “protean” social reality to be contained within a grander metaphysical scheme.\(^6\)

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\(^5\)Some scholars, however, still persist in suggesting an unbroken lineage of the theatrical metaphor back to the Greeks. As David George writes: “the ‘Theatrum Mundi’ topos can be traced in an uninterrupted line back to the Middle Ages and beyond, to Plato—who already disliked the institution from which he derived the image” (1989, 171). Although he cites Curtius (1948, 1953) as a source for this view, he gives greater emphasis to the prevalence of the image during the middle ages than does Curtius. His other source was Barish (1981), which accounts for his liberatory perspective, that is, the theatre as an institution, throughout history, resisting anti-theatricalists such as Plato.

\(^6\)Barish (1981, 99-103) comments on the anti-theatrical use of the metaphor of “Proteus” to condemn the player’s ability to assume different roles, also, as a Puritan injunction against “modification” of God’s design. Agnew (1986), too, argues that
5.2 Defining the theatrical metaphor

5.2.1 A taxonomy of the content of the theatrical metaphor

The most popular and well-known version of the theatrical metaphor (of which Jaques’s speech is an example) provides a commentary on the illusory nature of human existence. Reality, seen as an illusion, is like a stage play; therefore, human beings are like actors, and the world itself becomes both set and stage for the drama of life. Also known as the “dramatic” metaphor and the “play” metaphor (Righter {1962} 1967; Abel 1963), the theatrical metaphor is traditionally underpinned by the metaphysical idea that there is a greater reality, existing outside human existence, and apart from the world as it presents itself to human consciousness and understanding. The theatrical metaphor is also one of Western culture’s oldest tropes, although the idea that existence is illusory occurs, also, in a number of non-Western philosophical traditions (remember Scheckner’s invoking of Indian concepts of maya and lilas, discussed in Chapter 2, to describe this phenomenon). This metaphysical dualism has, for most of its history, centred on the relationship between humanity and a divine ordering principle. However, since the end of the seventeenth century, as Burns (1972) argued, the secularisation of the theatrical metaphor led to a shift of focus on to the relationship of the individual to his/her social reality.

In the first part of the twentieth century, as we saw in Chapter 3, the theatrical metaphor was fundamental to how the European theatrical avant-garde understood their social reality: society was seen as a collection of empty social rituals and mannerisms, and the theatre of the day reflected this. On the other hand, many avant-gardists held the apparently contradictory view that human existence was fundamentally tied to the capacity to create limitless “roles” (and, hence, “realities”) for oneself—“reality” was, therefore, contingent and dependent upon human invention. These ideas emerged, too, in sociological thought in the second half of the twentieth century, most notably in the works of Erving Goffman (1956; 1974, 124-155), but also in lesser known works such as Iain Mangham and Michael Overington’s Organizations as Theatre: a Social Psychology of Dramatic Appearances (1987). Mangham and Overington state that their “purpose is to offer an account of the resources which are available in the theatre when that is considered as a realm of metaphor for describing and analysing social conduct” (1987, 83). However, like Goffman, Mangham and Overington tend to lean heavily on taken-for-granted understandings of theatre, based on contemporary evidence, and do not take sufficient account of historiographies of theatre and performance.

Puritans and their allies sought to reorder English society by purging its culture of its most visible Protean tendencies; in other words, they attempted to resolve the complex problematic of market exchange by repressing its most figurative expression: the stage (104). And Roach (1985, 41-42; 49-50) writes how the metaphor was used to express the awe felt towards certain actors due to their “protean” ability to assume different roles; and also discusses the seventeenth century belief that the person able to change shape was “in danger of losing his own” (30).
In contrast, Dell Hymes’s “Breakthrough into Performance”, an analysis of how North American indigenous folklore is communicated, does not fall back on what I believe is a lazy deployment of the theatrical metaphor to describe “performance” as a distinct analytic category. In his case studies, Hymes considers

the performance as situated in a context, the performance as emergent, as unfolding or arising in that context. The concern is with performance, not as something mechanical and inferior, as in some linguistic discussion, but with performance as something creative, realized, achieved, even transcendent of the ordinary course of events (1975, 13).

He then raises some specific issues which a broad brush metaphorical approach tends to elide. “Performance”, he suggests, “is not merely behaviour, but neither is it the same as all of culture (or conduct, or communication)” (ibid.). Further, Hymes continues, it can be analysed by “degree” in different communities: it is “salient and common” in some communities but “subdued and rare” in others. Finally, he argues, performances can be “distinguished . . . according to the key” in which they occur: “some performances are desultory, or perfunctory, or rote, while others are authoritative, authentic” (ibid.).

When the discourse of theatricality is traced, the theatrical metaphor is constantly present. The discourse of theatricality, either implicitly or deliberately, refers to the notion that existence is like a stage(d) performance. Within this broad frame we can situate Shakespeare’s familiar trope “all the world’s a stage”. Yet there are other versions, and Brian Vickers, in “Bacon’s Use of Theatrical Imagery” (1971), articulated a detailed taxonomy of the content of ancient and Renaissance usages of the theatrical metaphor.

In Vickers’s taxonomy, the different uses of the theatrical metaphor are divided into four major sections and nineteen sub-sections. The first section, “A. GOD AND MAN”, is in turn broken into four sub-sections which organise Vickers’s source material as follows:


His second section, “B. THE WORLD A STAGE”, has six subsections:

5. God as spectator (see 4 above) (197), 6. Man as spectator (197), 7. Life is a play

In the third section, “C. MAN THE ACTOR”, there are a further eight sub-sections:

11. Man’s ability in acting as a sign of skill (see 2 and 3 above) (200), 12. Man’s ability in acting proof of hypocrisy, dissimulation (200-201), 13. At the end of the play mask or costume is removed: death (201-203), 14. Removal of mask: reality destroys illusion (see 8 and 13 above) (203-204), 15. Removal of mask: confrontation, judgement (see 4 above) (204), 16. The player king: a brittle glory (see also 13) (205), 17. Varying roles: the variability or instability of life, 18. The Actor forgets his part (205-206)

And in the final section, “D. MAN THE AUTHOR” there is a single sub-section: “19. Drama—like all literature—is ‘feigning’” (206). In many of the above categories we can see the ambivalence of the theatrical metaphor; to take just one example: Vickers finds instances in which “man’s” ability to act is seen “as a sign of skill”, or, conversely, “proof of hypocrisy, dissimulation”. There is, as Vickers argues, depending on its rhetorical purpose, both a theatrical and an anti-theatrical dimension to the metaphor; which would account for both uses often appearing in the same text by the same writer. This suggests not so much that a particular writer is against plays, actors, audiences as such, but that the metaphor can be deployed pejoratively if the writer’s rhetorical needs demand it (1971, 193-194).

5.2.2 Structural definitions of the theatrical metaphor

Vickers’s listing of the different usages of the theatrical metaphor in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as their classical sources, helpfully provides an overview of the substance of these varied deployments, and also illustrates how they crossed categories. His listing, however, is a little too nuanced for our purposes; therefore I have simplified his categories into what I see as three structural definitions of the theatrical metaphor. In the first of these, the topos emphasises a formalist arrangement in which the organisation of performance space, performers and spectator are the predominant elements. The second structural definition I see as dramaturgical; that is, it emphasises the notion of existence being like a play, and men and women being like actors within it. Both of these are subordinate to the third definition within which the other two are thematised.

My third definition, to borrow Ann Blair’s (1997) category, is the well-known moral version in which the topos is deployed with the intention of teaching a moral lesson. In terms of genre, as I
discuss in the next section, the metaphor is usually deployed pejoratively, either satirically (commenting on the folly of human existence) or tragically (the pointless vanity of existence in the face of a divine Absolute). Another more optimistic version of the moral thematising of the theatrical metaphor, the neo-Platonic/hermetic version, casts the world and all in it as a theatre representing divinity, and humanity’s role is to view, to interpret and by so doing come to know God. None of these definitions, it must be stressed, necessarily excludes any of the others, and from Vickers’s categories, it is apparent that some versions of the theatrical metaphor commonly use all three.

Thomas Heywood’s *Apology for Actors* (1612) is an oft-quoted example of the theatrical metaphor in which all three defining principles are apparent. It is, however, the formalist arrangement that is the predominant element of the poem:

> Then our play’s begun
> When we are borne, and to the world first enter,
> And all finde exits when their parts are done.
> If then the world a theater present,
> As by the roundnesse it appears most fit,
> Built with starre galleries of hye ascent,
> In which Jehove doth as spectator sit,
> And chiefe determiner to applaud the best,
> And their indevours crowne with more then merit;
> But by their evill actions doomes the rest
> To end discrac’t, while others praise inherit;
> He that denyes then theatres should be,
> He may as well deny a world to me
> (quoted in Yates 1969, 164-165).

Although the dramaturgical (“we are borne, and to the world first enter,/And all finde exits when their parts are done”) and moral (“Jehove” rewards “the best” and “doomes” those whose “evill actions” are justly punished) distinctions are undeniably present in the poem, it is, however, the formalist analogy of the world as a theatre space, of humans entering and exiting as actors, and of God as the ultimate spectator, that organises Heywood’s use of the metaphor. The moral theme inevitably emerges, but it does so from the traffic on the stage that takes place under the watchful eye of God and other sages.

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7Heywood’s poem is also quoted by Gillies (1994, 77-78); Burns (1990, 126); Cope (1973, 173); Vickers (1971: 196, 199); Hawkins (1966, 175).
This arrangement is literally depicted in another well-known example that demonstrates the formalist organisation of the *topos*: Theodore De Bry’s emblem in Jean Jacques Boissard’s *Theatrum vitae humanae* (1596). De Bry’s engraving depicts an amphitheatre, in the foreground of which are men and women being captured by skeletons and tortured by a demon. This activity is watched by an earthly audience and a heavenly host. Although the intention of the emblem is explicitly moral, as Boissard’s accompanying verse indicates, nevertheless, its organising principle is in the relationship between the “actors”, those who watch and the space of the theatre/amphitheatre in which this occurs.

The second structural definition emphasises the dramaturgy of what is being depicted; that is, these uses of the metaphor emphasise different human types or roles. The most famous example of this principle is Jaques’ speech from *As You Like It*:

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts (Shakespeare. 1975. II, iv).

Other than the framing analogy of the world stage, the emphasis of the speech is on the roles played by men and women in their lives. This aspect is picked-up in another well-known example, that of Cervantes’s Don Quixote who, when lecturing his man Sancho on human existence, invokes the theatrical metaphor. At first Don Quixote encourages Sancho to “look kindly” on plays and the theatre because “there is nothing that shows us more clearly, by similitude, what we are and what we ought to be than do plays and players” (quoted in Righter {1962} 1967, 11). He then proceeds to expand on this idea by illustrating the different

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8Yates suggests that the confusion of ancient theatre and circus in the emblem was “influenced by Alberti’s comparisons and conflations of the theatre with the circus [in his *De Re Aedificatoria*]” (1969, 166). See also Blair (1997), Gillies (1994), Hawkins (1966) for a discussion of this emblem. Hawkins argues (and Yates and Gillies concur) that the Heywood poem is an articulation of the emblem.

9Miguel de Cervantes *Don Quixote* (1953), Samuel Putnam, London, Part II, Bk iii, 12
characters that appear in a “comedy” and, typically, ranges the full spectrum from “kings, emperors, pontiffs” to “ruffians” and “fools”: “yet when the play is over and they have taken off their players’ garments, all the actors are once more equal” (ibid.).

Elaborating on his theme, Don Quixote continues “the same thing happens in the comedy that we call life”, however, “when life is done, death takes from each the garb that differentiates him, and all at last are equal in the grave” (ibid.). In Don Quixote’s articulation of the metaphor the familiar trope of opposing kings and paupers is invoked, together with the formulaic moral that all are equal in death and before God. Cervantes, however, does not allow Don Quixote the last word; he satirises the pseudo-profundity of Don Quixote by revealing that the sagacity of his thought is simply a reiteration of an overworn cliché. Sancho remarks mildly, after his master’s monologue: “It is a fine comparison . . . though not so new but that I have heard it many times before” (ibid.).

The theatrical metaphor was a “favourite”, also, of Thomas More, the early sixteenth century humanist and Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII (Greenblatt 1980, 27). In More’s epigram, quoted by Greenblatt, the dramaturgical structuring principle is again evident. A “forest-bred peasant”, when watching a royal procession, asks which of the cavalcade is the king:

and one of the bystanders replied, “There he is, the one mounted high on that horse over there.” The peasant said, “Is that the king? I think you are fooling me. He seems to me to be a man in an embroidered garment” (ibid.).

In these examples of the dramaturgical use of the metaphor, the moral principle is again present, but the notion of the theatre space is de-emphasised, and spectatorial presence is only implied (if life is a comedy then it must be watched by someone). From these examples of the theatrical metaphor taken from the early sixteenth century to early seventeenth century, the moral theme is clearly apparent. Although Boissard’s work is deadly earnest in its representations of human misery, in contrast, Shakespeare’s and Cervantes’s uses of the moral theme are comically ambivalent because of the characters who mouth it: the decadently melancholy Jaques and the fantasist Don Quixote. Similarly, More’s epigram seems satirical in nature, puncturing the vanity of great kings. In Heywood’s poem the moral that emerges is simply that God looks at us playing out our lives on the world stage, and He judges us according to how virtuously (or not)

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10See Curtius (1948) 1953,141 and Burns (1972, 9) for commentary on Sancho.
11I have taken the taxonomy of a “moral” theatre from Blair (1997). Blair distinguishes between two kinds of theatres: “moral” and “lament”. The former, by negative or positive examples, hopes to encourage in the reader virtuous behaviour. The latter are basically elaborations of contemptus mundi which, by highlighting the misery of human existence, aim to direct the reader’s thoughts to higher things. However, as Blair observes, the justification for the “lament” is the “edification” of the reader. Since a moral purpose is the motivation for both kinds of theatre I have used the term “moral” in my own taxonomy (1997, 167-170).
we have lived.

Jonas Barish (1981) provides two examples from a late seventeenth century work that illustrate the moral theme, but without setting it in a representation of a theatre space. Nonetheless the dramaturgical principle of roles or types is used to invoke the theatrical metaphor. In the first of a series of three etchings by Giuseppe Maria Mitelli (c.1680), writes Barish, the “impermanence, illusion, and futility” of life are represented by casting men and women as “stock figures from the commedia dell’ arte”. In the third of the series the commedia zanni is shown “tearing off his mask and leaping into the grave” (1981, 310-311) where he is welcomed by Death depicted as a skeleton (picking up the vanitas theme of all being equal before death which Quixote also uses). This action is watched by the female figure of Eternity sitting on a throne flanked by an Angel on her right hand and a Demon on her left: it is the agon of judgement day that the scene depicts. Although both scenes are depicted as occurring in barren open countryside, the theatre of the world is still suggested, but metonymically, through the use of commedia stage figures (1981, plates 6 and 7 between 310-311).

In these brief illustrations of the theatrical metaphor, taken from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, we can see how the three structural features are entwined with each other. Ultimately the Renaissance use of the topos always seems to point towards a moral principle on a scale of moveable intensity. At one end of the scale is the vanitas theme: all human life is a vain show and the “truth” of an individual’s life, here defined as having lived a virtuous life, will be revealed at the day of reckoning. At the other end of the scale, human existence is judged less for its vanity and more for its folly; it is not so much judgement that is emphasised, rather, it is death that is seen as the great leveller and revealer of human folly. This Manichean morality, clearly evident in sixteenth and seventeenth century uses of the topos, achieved its particularly Christian inflection—specifically the notion of life lived beneath the shadow of salvation or damnation—when the topos was used by the Church Fathers in the first centuries of the new millenium.

Barish argues that sixteenth and seventeenth century anti-theatricalism rehashed patristic arguments condemning theatre as idolatrous, false, immoral, or a combination of all three (1981,
Yet even as St Augustine urged his flock to stay away from stage “spectacles”, contrasting such earthly enjoyments with the greater enjoyment of the “spectacle” of Christian worship, the metaphor he uses contrasts the earthly theatre with the *theatrum ecclesiae*—the church in which the glory of God is staged—which, as Robert White argues, was used by Calvin to great effect in the sixteenth century (1994, 318). Augustine writes:

> Contrast . . . that holy spectacle with the pleasures and delights of the theatre. There your eyes are defiled, here your hearts are cleansed. Here the spectator deserves praise if he but imitate what he sees; there he is bad, and if he imitates what he sees he becomes infamous (quoted in Barish 1981, 57).

White argues that Calvin’s “particular fondness for the theatre metaphor” [can be found] “in those passages which have as their grand theme the majesty of God” (1994, 316). It would appear that the formalist model is Calvin’s preferred model:

> Here all the elements of the *theatrum mundi* are to be found: the human actor astride the world-stage; a *mise en scène* which embraces the *fabrica mundi*, the *mundi machina*, the totality of space from hemisphere to hemisphere and from earth to heaven; and a transcendent audience whose presence is unseen but not unfelt: Father, Son, the attendant angels (ibid.).

The role of the church, therefore, is to articulate this vision of the world, continued White:

> By a radical conceptual shift away from the inclusive notion of “world”, Calvin assigns the choicest functions of epiphany to the church, henceforth metamorphosed into the “chief theatre of God’s glory”, “the principal theatre of his providence”, “the great theatre where his fatherly care may be manifested”, “the excellent and most distinguished theatre (*praecipuum et maxime speciosum theatrum*) where he displays the signs of his wonderful power, wisdom and righteousness” (318).

Even without its Christianised morality, the theatrical metaphor had always been “moral” in the sense that, from the outset, it was utilised in metaphysical speculations regarding humanity and the material world’s relationship to a divine, immaterial, ordering principle. This is significant because, even after the theatrical metaphor became “secularised” (particularly in England) in the late seventeenth century, the ontology of fickle human role-playing set against an immutable and immaterial “Absolute” was already firmly established.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{12}\)Burns argues that the “idea did not survive the closing of the [English] theatres”. In the re-opened, secular theatres of the Restoration, “attention was focused less on the fundamental conception of life as a dramatic invention, more
5.3 Foundations of the Theatrical Metaphor\textsuperscript{13}

5.3.1 The emergence of a divine creative principle

In the \textit{Laws} Plato asked: “May we not regard every living being as a puppet of the gods, which may be their plaything only, or may be created with a purpose?” (quoted in Curtius \{1948\} 1953, 138; also in Vickers 1971, 194), thus inaugurating what Ernst Curtius identified as the first use of the theatre of the world \textit{topos} in Western thought and literature (\{1948\} 1953, 138). In this early manifestation of the \textit{topos}, the crucial dichotomy of the illusory nature of life versus a greater “reality”, located elsewhere, was established. Lynda Christian (\{1969\} 1987), whilst acknowledging Curtius, suggests an earlier hint of the \textit{topos} can be found in the work of Heraclitus; particularly in his notion of \textit{logos}, which was defined as “a kind of necessity” ruling over “man and the world”. The Heraclitean deployment of the \textit{topos}, Christian suggests, established the fundamental idea of the theatricalisation of human life, in relation to a divine ordering principle, that would be used by all later writers (\{1969\} 1987, 3). As used by Heraclitus, the concept of necessary \textit{logos} implied that man must play the part assigned him in life; or, if he desired \textit{gnosis} (that is, knowledge of divinity) he could choose to become a spectator. So although necessity compelled man to act, he could \textit{choose} the role of spectator (Christian \{1969\} 1987, 3-4). To the themes of man as actor or spectator, writes Christian, the early fourth century BC “Hippocratic writer” added the metaphor of man the dissembler, who played his roles to deceive others like an actor on the stage (4).

Returning to Plato, Christian argues that his most “profound” use of the \textit{topos} can be found in his comparison of Athenian society to the playing of a “perfect tragedy” (5).\textsuperscript{14} Tragedians would only be allowed into Athens if they represented the “high seriousness” of Athenian society, its ideals and virtues. “Life” was more serious than “art” for Plato, and in this distinction, argues Christian, can be found the basis for Aristotle’s distinction between Tragedy (good, serious) and Comedy (corrupting, basely imitative) (5-6). Plato’s other major contribution to the \textit{topos} (in his \textit{Timaeus}), writes Christian, was the notion of \textit{logos} as \textit{demiourgos} or divine “artisan”, the

\textsuperscript{13}The discussion in this section is indebted to Lynda G. Christian’s scholarship in the first chapter of her book \textit{Theatrum Mundi: the History of an Idea} (\{1969\} 1987). In her careful unpacking of the genealogy of the metaphor she exposes some of the generalisations which other writers have left unexamined (for example, Agnew’s (1986) assumption that the \textit{vanitas} theme underpinned all renaissance usages of the \textit{topos} (see below)).

\textsuperscript{14}\textit{Laws} VII 817 b-d.
“creator of the world” (7). Later, in the third and fourth centuries, Christian notes, Plotinus and the hermetic writers adapted this to their concept of God; and Ficino, in the fifteenth century, compared “God’s creative work and [man’s] artistic activity” (6-7).\(^{15}\)

5.3.2 Playing a role and the necessity of playing it well

To the historian Polybius (201-118 BC), history was a “record of Fortune’s acts” and Fortune was seen as rewarding or punishing simply “for her own delight” (Christian {1969} 1987, 11). Epicurus (c. 300 BC) responded to this notion by introducing “imperturbability” or the philosophy of “withdrawn contemplation” (11-12). Epicurean man passively contemplated the world and enjoyed the “hard work of another”: a principle of detached spectatorship that, writes Christian, was fundamental to the later Stoics and Satirists (12). In the *diatribes* of two third century BC Cynics, Bion of Borysthenes and Teles, continues Christian, two further ideas were introduced which were also developed by later writers. Bion used the theme of capricious Fortune as the producer of the play of life assigning to each person the role they would play: “Just as the good actor, who performs well whatever role the playwright [poetes] assigns him, so the good man must perform well whatever role Tyche [Fortune] assigns him” (quoted in {1969} 1987, 12). If Fortune, then, was the producer who assigned the role, according to Teles, it was imperative that a man performed his role well:

> Just as the good actor [performs] well the prologue, the middle, and the conclusion [of the drama], so the good man [performs] well the beginning, middle, and end of life (quoted in {1969} 1987, 13).

Stoicism, which, according to Christian, was the “offspring of Cynicism”, in its use of the *topos* “transcend[ed] the passivity of Epicureanism and the negativism of Cynicism” (ibid.). The early Stoic, Zeno (c. 300 BC), “preached *apatheia*, ‘no feeling’” which later Stoics rejected in favour of an active search for meaning in the universe and in human life (ibid.). Ariston (c. 320-250 BC) developed the idea of *apatheia* as “indifference” to life so that one should play, equally well, whatever role that was assigned one, whether it be beggar or king (14). Panaetius of Rhodes (185-109 BC) and his followers, Posidonius and Hecaton, rejected passive *apatheia* and returned to the Heraclitan notion of *logos*, teaching that “the soul of the universe was a divine and fiery substance” (ibid.). Man was believed to have within him the “divine spark” of *logos* and thus must demonstrate “magnanimity and benevolence” (15). Man’s reason was part of *logos* operating within him and virtue could be attained by rationally discovering the workings of *logos*. Thus, to later Stoics such as Seneca, to seek knowledge of *logos* was a “religious duty” that brought the seeker “true freedom to live his life according to the dictates of his reason and conscience” (ibid.).

\(^{15}\)See Cope (1973, 27-28) for a discussion of Ficino’s notion of how divine creativity works through man.
The Stoics, Christian argues, saw man as both actor and spectator but, unlike the Cynics, believed that the stage director of life was not capricious Fortune but Beneficent Providence. The principle of detachment was crucial to Stoic philosophy, since it enabled a man to view life objectively in order to see how he should conduct himself. Since there was a divine plan, man should not question his role, but strive to play it well and quit the scene well: hence the Stoic belief in suicide as a virtuous act (ibid.). So although life was seen to be ephemeral and meaningless, it was also meaningful (even if this was not always readily apparent to the human spectator) because it was directed by divine logos (17). According to Christian, two ideas underpinned Stoicism: “life is fleeting and illusory [and] it is directed by a higher, divine power” (18). Seneca employed the topos to comment on those whose greatness or happiness was an illusion “put on like an actor’s masks. Tear it off, and you will scorn them” (ibid.). Seneca’s phrase “‘hic humanae vitae minus’—this mime we call life”, writes Christian, was later adapted by the Church Fathers in their vanitas and contemptus mundi themes (ibid.). Seneca also brought humanity to the centre of a spectacle performed before God in which a “brave man matched against ill-fortune” was “worthy of the regard of God” (19).

For the Stoic ex-slave, Epictetus (55—c.135), notions of freedom and servitude were principal concerns. Freedom, writes Christian, could be achieved by fulfilling one’s preordained role, and by using one’s reason to see the pattern underlying life, one would come to “know and love logos” (19-20). With such knowledge, apatheia was transformed into a willingness to accept that which could not be changed (ibid.). In Epictetus’s use of the topos, he contributed the idea of decorum, or knowing how to act appropriately and at the right time in life. In other words, humans should not only perform their roles well but should also know their cues so that like “the good actor . . . is saved when he stops at the right time, rather than one who acts out of season” (1969) 1987, 21-22). The last word of the Stoics must, of course, go to Marcus Aurelius who, in addition to emphasising the need to act well and with decorum, also suggested, in Christian’s gloss, that just as we are “called onto the stage of life by a power greater than [ourselves]”, so too did this power dismiss us, and we must be “prepared to leave with equanimity” (22). Aurelius writes of this power, which he compared to a stage-manager or director (“Praetor”):

he was thy composition, so is he now the cause of thy dissolution. As for thyselfe, thou hast to do with neither. Goe thy wayes then well pleased and contented, for so is He that dismisseth thee (qtd in Christian 1969) 1987, 23; also in Vickers 1971).

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16 The translation in Vickers reads:
By him who formerly sanctioned your creation, and today sanctions your dissolution. Neither of those decisions lay within yourself. Pass on your way, then, with a smiling face, under the smile of him who bids you go (1971, 196).
5.3.3 Life as a foolish spectacle or a vanity

Christian observes that the Roman Satirists expanded Cynic-Stoic themes by returning to the Cynics’ notion of fickle Fortune as the stage director. Combined with this was the idea of life as a spectacle played out before the gods who, along with wise men, laughed at the foolish play. It was Horace, Christian writes, who introduced the idea of the “Laughing Philosopher” as the “spectator of the comedy of life” (1969 1987, 24). This latter idea Petronius developed in his Satyricon in which, writes Christian, men were depicted as “hypocrites and always conceal their true motives, even from those whom they call friends” (25). John of Salisbury, in the twelfth century, would develop Petronius’s version of the topos, and it was his work that helped popularise the theatrical metaphor in the Renaissance (see below). However, the principal transmitter of the topos to the Renaissance (along with Seneca), was Lucian, whose “philosophy”, in Christian’s gloss, claimed that

since nobility and high-minded pursuits are merely hypocritical masks for self-serving ends, life is a despicable, if amusing, pageant of greed and lust. The wise man will . . . imitate the gods by laughing heartily at the spectacle (26).

In his various dialogues, writes Christian, Lucian’s narrators were always detached from the foolish and detestable spectacle of life: they were either gods enjoying “the sport of watching men cavort below them”, or else philosophers who “lead detached existences, untroubled by the ludicrous actions of others” (33-34).

These Stoic and Cynical uses of the topos were transformed, Christian argues, in the early Christian era by the Church Fathers: St John of Chrysostom, Tertullian and St Augustine. Like the earlier uses already discussed, the metaphor of life as a play was still used to illustrate the illusory nature of existence, but now life was depicted as a prelude to the greater and more real after-life in Heaven or Hell. In a departure from the beliefs of the Stoics, death provided not just a final exit from stage but was, in fact, the “Great Unmasker” that displayed unadorned humanity for its final judgement. According to Chrysostom:

So then, when we come to the moment of death, having quit the theatre of life, all masks of wealth and poverty will be stripped away—each man will be judged by his works alone: some will be found to be truly wealthy, others will be found poor; some will be honored, others will be scorned (quoted in {1969} 1987, 35).

However Chrysostom also had an optimistic view of this drama. He developed the idea of the agon or struggle, suggested by Seneca, and he believed, writes Christian, that “the life of a good man struggling against adversity is a sight which delights heaven” (36). Tertullian, in
comparison, advocated *contemptus mundi*, contempt for the world, and his use of the *topos*, argues Christian, was “the best introduction to the medieval attitude toward life as a play” (ibid.). Unlike Chrysostom, there was nothing of value in the world for Tertullian; it was a place of sin and misery only. Chrysostom’s Stoic-inspired *agon* of the play of life acted before God was replaced, Christian argues, in Tertullian’s use of the *topos*, by the spectacles of redemption, the Last Judgement, of Christ crucified. In Christian’s account of Tertullian: “the stage of the world has collapsed and the stage of the sky has opened up before the suffering Christian” (37).

St Augustine, like Chrysostom, writes Christian, was also “very influenced by Stoic thought” (38). Again life was seen as a prelude to what was to come, and in his *Commentary on Psalm 12,7*, Augustine introduced the idea of the “ages” of man which Shakespeare would later use in Jaques’s speech.

> But consider when one age cometh, another dieth. When boyhood cometh, infancy dieth; when youth cometh, all age dieth. As many successions of ages as thou wishest for, so many deaths of ages does thou wish for (quoted in {1969}1987, 38).

Ultimately, however, Augustine inevitably returned to the *vanitas* theme: “the whole of life of temptation in the human race is a stage play; for it is said: Every man living is altogether vanity” (quoted in {1969}1987, 39).

**5.3.4 Humanity as witness to the divine spectacle**

Early neo-Platonists also used principally the Stoic metaphor of *teatrum mundi*. The first century Jewish philosopher and neo-Platonist, Philo, was responsible for uniting the Greek concept of *logos* with the Hebrew God. *Logos*, for Philo, was the emanation from God which bridged the gap between the incorporeal deity and the material universe (Christian {1969} 1987, 42). Despite having a number of meanings for Philo, according to Christian, *logos* “always had implications of incarnation” (43). Philo’s use of the *topos* emphasised the role of God as the producer/creator of the “spectacle” of life and the role of man as its spectator. In *De Opificio Mundi* XXV, 78, Christian writes, Philo described how the world had been created by God both to provide for man’s sustenance (it was like a “feast” or a “banquet”) and to entertain him (it was a “spectacle”): “He [God] desired that on coming into the world man might at once find both a banquet and a most sacred display [*theatron hierotaton*]” (quoted in {1969} 1987, 44). In contrast to the God of the Church Fathers, Philo’s Jewish God, argues Christian, like the Stoics’ Providence, was beneficent (ibid.).

The illusory nature of existence in relationship to a divine reality was given impetus in Apuleis of Madura’s (123-c.175) tale, *The Golden Ass*. According to Christian,
the theatrical nature of the life of illusion is a metaphor which spans the books—not in an explicit, Lucianic way—but with great subtlety. The life of illusion is devoid of the providential direction of Isis; it is all pleasure which, when pursued, becomes despair (46).

After suffering numerous indignities, the protagonist, Lucius, who had been turned into an ass for dabbling in black magic, was invited by Isis in a vision to join a religious procession which was filled with types, observes Christian, from “the comedy of life that this book [The Golden Ass] represents” (48). Lucius, following to the letter the instructions provided him by Isis, miraculously regained his human form. Yet the final spectacle of the book occurs when Lucius was initiated into the cult of Isis. “His initiation,” writes Christian, “his birthday of the soul, is the point at which illusion and reality merge, when the life of the spirit becomes the life of the world as well.” Now, she continues, it was Isis, “not Fortune, who . . . commands his life and sets the stage” (49).

The humility and caution “approaching holy matters” required of Apuleius’s protagonist, Christian argues, was also demonstrated in Synesius’s De Providentia II, 8 (50). In an extended use of the theatrical metaphor, writes Christian, Synesius argued that “God has summon[ed man] into the universe as to a sacred contest, to be a spectator of the proceedings therein” (quoted in 1969) 1987, 50). Furthermore, Synesius also suggested decorum in man’s spectatorship, and rather than thrusting himself forward to see that which he could not understand, “it should be he who awaits in his place the things shown him, one by one, as they step forward in order from the curtain” (ibid.).

These Apuleian and Synesian portrayals of man as a spectator to a divine spectacle can be linked, Christian argues, to the neo-Platonism of Plotinus (204-207). Although, she suggests, Plotinus’s use of the topos was “still basically Stoic”—with a stage set by logos upon which “man acts his part”—it was the neo-Pythagorean emphasis of Apuleius and Synesius on

man as spectator, on gnosis, [that] emerges most strongly in his writings. Man and God both contemplate the play of life; for man, this contemplation is the road to union with the divine (61).

Christian hears, in Plotinus’s use of the theatrical metaphor, echoes of its use in Platonic, Pythagorean and Stoic philosophies. Yet what Plotinus brought to the topos, Christian argues, was a profound belief in the reality of “inner man” (54). Unlike the beliefs of the Church Fathers—although Plotinus also shared the Stoic belief in the illusory nature of
existence—Christian suggests this illusory external existence was contrasted to the transcendental reality of the inner soul. Therefore, when Plotinus used the metaphor of man as actor, it was a much more optimistic vision of humanity: the body died and put on a new existence like an actor changing costume; man was an actor not just of the world but of the entire kosmos, he was a transcendental being; the “simile of the actor” distinguished between the “outer man” who suffered the blows of fate and the “inner real man” who remained untouched by life (ibid.).

Stoic logos was still the deterministic force that cast and directed human life, but Plotinus’s philosophy also “emphasizes the beneficence and beauty of its plan for [humanity]” (ibid.). Although there was “resignation” in this determinism, there was also joy in the knowledge that human life had been worked out to be part of a divine plan: the human being had “freedom” within “the constraints of an omniscient Providence” (54-55). Christian observes that for Plotinus the metaphor of the stage functioned similarly to Plato’s metaphor of the cave: “Life is merely the shadow of true existence and being”. Rather than damning human existence, she argues, both metaphors suggested “a greater and better sphere of reality is available to [humanity]” (55).

5.3.5 The human as microcosm and reflection of God
Combining neo-Platonism with Egyptian mystery religions was the series of religious writings entitled the Corpus Hermeticum. Although Christian observes that the theatrical metaphor was not used in these writings, they were suffused with the idea of man as a magus “the molder of his environment” (56). In hermetic thought, she writes, man was a “composite being” made in the image of God: the kosmos was the image of God and, therefore, man, who was a micro-kosmos, was also in God’s image (58). Further, in these writings, man was positioned between God and the beasts, a position which the writings proclaimed: “We must not shrink from saying that man on earth is a mortal god, and that a god in heaven is an immortal man” (ibid.). Positioned in this way, man was both subject and object; he was, the writings continue,

a mortal creature made in the image of an immortal being, to be an embellishment of the divine body. . . For it is man’s function to contemplate the work of God, and for this purpose was he made, that he might view the universe with wondering awe and come to know its maker (qtd in {1969} 1987, 59).

However, in addition to being the spectator of God’s work, man could also be, writes Christian, the magus, a “second demiourgos . . . [the] director of the play of life” (61). The irony of man’s “intermediate station” as spectator and “second demiourgos”, Christian observes, was exploited by sixteenth century and seventeenth century writers who saw the “tragedy” of man’s “creative
powers”, that made him seem to be the “demiourgos, the poeites of the universe . . . [only] to discover that it was a divine and deterministic logos which set the stage for man” (59-60).

In summarising her genealogy of the foundations to the theatrum mundi metaphor, Christian identifies two opposing configurations of the idea which would emerge again in the Renaissance. The first she classifies as the “Stoic-neo-Platonic-Christian form of the idea” (61). Underpinning this idea is the Stoic notion of the stage set by logos and man the actor on it. The human actor is resigned to playing his role, which is “bitter”, but hopes that his life is part of a “larger, meaningful pattern laid out by logos, the director” (60). Death, according to the Stoics, was the final exit from life and one’s death “must be acted well” (ibid.). For the Church Fathers, Stoic “indifference to life was the prelude to fixing one’s hope on inhabiting the kingdom of heaven. Life was a shadow; reality belonged to God alone” (ibid.). Death, therefore, was the “Great Unmasker and the beginning of life eternal” (61).

To the neo-Platonists, the theatrical metaphor was a way of “representing the nature of the created universe” which man as spectator, through contemplation, could come to know, and through his gnosis become one with divinity (ibid.). Lastly, the mystery cults and the Corpus Hermeticum introduced the idea of man as magus and “second demiourgos”: the “director of the play of life” (ibid.). Christian observes that this conception became the “Faustian dream of the sixteenth century in Europe”. In this system Death was not final, merely an “exit from one existence and the entrance to another. It is only a bridge; therefore, man does not have to conquer time, for time poses no threat to him” (60-61).

The second use of the theatrical metaphor identified by Christian, in contrast to the above, derived from the

satiric or Lucianic use of the figure of the world-stage, a use which derives from the pessimism of Cynicism . . . Life is a play of folly, and man the actor is the greatest fool of all (61).

The play of life is seen as a comedy and all of humanity’s hopes and ambitions, pretensions and conceits, when viewed from the perspective of eternity, amount to nothing. Like Sancho Panza’s mocking of Don Quixote, or Thomas More’s peasant’s observation of the king, the satiric use of the topos functions more to puncture pride and pretension than to judge and condemn.

Despite the different emphases of Satiric and Stoic uses of the theatrical metaphor, both types, Christian observes, could be found in the writings of the same author (as is the case with “patristic literature”) (Christian {1969} 1987, 61-62). In Christian’s genealogy of the theatrical
metaphor we can find three motifs threading through the different usages. The first suggests the idea of life as a play cast/directed/watched by either Fortune or Providence, or by a mysterious deity. According to the second motif, if life is a play then the human being must be an actor and this is a position to be endured but performed well, or to be laughed at, or to be pitied or despised. Finally, the third motif represents the world itself as a stage upon which human beings act their roles or, conversely, are positioned as spectators in the theatre of the world; in that capacity, the human spectator’s role is to interpret what the world displays to be seen. These three motifs echo the structuring principles discussed above, in order: dramaturgical, moral, formalist.

5.4 John of Salisbury’s revival of the theatrical metaphor
The human being, then, is central to the metaphor of theatrum mundi as either an actor or a spectator. Such positioning of the human was impossible in a medieval ontology, which accounts for the virtual disappearance of the topos from the early Christian era until John of Salisbury substantially revived it in the twelfth century. Prior to the sixteenth century, the “stage metaphor was less prominent” (Burns 1972, 8) in the literature of the middle ages, which tended to prefer the metaphor of the dream—and also, as Blair (1997) and Grabes ({1973} 1982) write, metaphors of the book and the mirror. In the dream, the dreamer was “both actor and spectator” and the dream itself could be seen as “a rudimentary private drama” (Burns 1972, 8-9). Such a view was consistent with what Anne Righter observes was a medieval ontology, expressed through its drama, that had the Christian sacred stories as the only realities and the lives of its audience having “no more substantiality than the shadow shapes in Plato’s cave” ({1962} 1967, 16). According to Agnew (1986), although the medieval drama did not “employ the theatrum mundi as an emblem, it embodied, as a matter of its formal properties, the emblem’s principle of otherworldliness” (105). Furthermore, he adds, in the medieval mystery cycles, “the numinous reality of God’s invisible cosmos was triumphantly posed against the hollow pretensions of man’s visible existence” (ibid.).

By the sixteenth century, however, the theatrical metaphor was appearing frequently in philosophical and religious writings, encouraged no doubt, as Curtius argues, by the popularity of John of Salisbury’s use of it in his Poliorcaticus (Curtius {1948} 1953, 139-140); and also by the recovery of Vitruvius’s work which finally provided a (relatively) accurate description of ancient theatres. The theatrum mundi metaphor, in all its myriad guises, thus became the organising trope par excellence for the Renaissance from the mid-sixteenth century to the end of the seventeenth century. Curtius identifies the primary transmitter of the topos to the

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17This idea recurred in the early twentieth century in Freud’s use of the metaphor in The Interpretation of Dreams: No matter what impulses from the normally inhibited Ucs [unconscious] may prance upon the stage, we need feel no concern; they remain harmless, since they are unable to set in motion the motor apparatus by which alone they might modify the external world (Freud 1985 {1958}, 722).
Renaissance as the twelfth century scholar, John of Salisbury, through his work on the art of the statesman, the *Policraticus* (1159) (Curtius {1948} 1953, 139-140)\(^8\). According to Curtius, the *Policraticus* achieved wide circulation in the Middle Ages but was also much read during the Renaissance, being reprinted in 1476, 1513 (in Paris and in Lyon), 1595, 1622, 1639, 1664, 1677. The frequent occurrence of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, he argues, would seem to be a result of the “popularity of the *Policraticus*” (Curtius 1953, 140).

In the *Policraticus*, although John runs the standard anti-theatrical argument of the Church Fathers against acting, we again see ambivalence towards theatre. For John the work of ancient dramatists—Plautus, Menander and “our favorite Terence”—was to be admired; he believed that the Greeks and Romans “possessed more respectable actors than ours”. However he adds a caveat to his use of the word “respectable”: “if we may apply the word respectable to that which is regarded as unworthy of any gentleman.” John tends to give with one hand and take away with the other, hence: “I do not, however, assert that the actor is dishonorable when he follows his profession, although it is undoubtedly dishonorable to be an actor” (Pike ed.) 1938, 36). His primary objection, like the later Puritan anti-theatricalists in the sixteenth century, seems to be that playing, along with other kinds of entertainment, is a distraction for “idleness” and thus “inflames its own wantonness, seeking everywhere incentives to vice” (37). In a manner echoing Plato’s injunction against his “Guardians” acting in or witnessing anything inappropriate to their decency and dignity (Plato {1955} 1974, 153-154), so too does John warn that such pleasures are acceptable in moderation but “it is disgraceful to lower personal dignity by excessive indulgence in it” (Pike (ed.) 1938, 38). Ultimately he returns to the “authority of the Christian Fathers” who refused the holy sacrament to “actors and mimics as long as they persist in their evil career.” This danger, however, was not confined to actors, because to be a supporter of actors was to be in a “perilous position”: “perpetrator and confederate are to suffer like penalty” (39).

However, at the end of the seventh chapter of Book III, he brings the theatrical metaphor into his discourse. From polemicising against the corrupting influence of flattery, and the practice of gift giving in order to curry favour, John ends the seventh chapter with a quotation from Petronius’s *Satyricon* on the vagaries of friendship, which concludes with the following lines:

> Behold a troupe upon the stage; one plays  
> The role of son; another that of sire;  
> The third a nabob is. Down goes  
> The curtain and the play is done. The real

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\(^8\)See also Christian (1969) 1987, 63.
Appears as mask is cast aside (171).

The emphasis of this use of the metaphor is dramaturgical—that is, it focuses on the roles played by humans—with the conventional vanitas moral of all being equal (the masks “cast aside”) before death (“the play is done/The real Appears as mask is cast aside”). Of the three motifs I identified above, concerning humanity’s relationship to divinity/life/world, it is clear that the emphasis is on the second of these: acting in the play of life.

In the following chapter John discusses whether the play of life is a “Comedy or Tragedy” swinging from the Stoics’ use of the topos: “Accustom yourself from an early age to the best way to live; practice will make it agreeable to you” (172) to that of the Satirists: “If fortune wills, she makes a consul teach;/She wills again and lo! the teacher takes/The consul’s seat” (173). However, behind the comedy of life is always the tragedy of contemptus mundi. Quoting from the book of Job, and Corinthians, John speculates that “the life of man on earth is a warfare” (171) or else, “if this figure does not appeal to you . . . that life on earth is a trial” (172). Although quite adequate, neither metaphor, for John, expresses the nuanced view of existence offered by Petronius’s metaphor of theatrum mundi:

almost the entire world, according to the opinion of our friend Petronius, is seen to play the part of actor to perfection, the actors gazing as it were upon their own comedy and what is worse, so absorbed in it that they are unable to return to reality when occasion demands (ibid.).

Again an echo of the Satiric use of the topos is audible. However, although the unwillingness of the actors to relinquish their roles may be bitterly laughable, the real tragedy arises, as is conventional, at the agonistic moment of their death and judgement. Returning to Job, John quoted a passage detailing the lives of the “wicked” who, after they have spent “their days in wealth . . . in a moment they go/down to hell” (173).

However, rather than resolving whether human life is a comedy or a tragedy, John shifts from the dramaturgical to the formalist structure of the topos:

It is surprising how nearly coextensive with the world is the stage on which this endless, marvelous, incomparable tragedy, or if you will comedy, can be played; its area is in fact that of the whole world (176).

19Cicero Ad Heren. IV. xviii, 24.
20Juvenal Sat. vii, 197-198.
21Job xxii, 7-13.
From here it is a short step, as Curtius observes, in the next chapter to move finally to a new enlargement—and the last: from earth to heaven. There sit the spectators of the terrestrial play: God and the heroes of virtue. The scena vitæ has thus become a theatrum mundi (1948} 1953, 140).

Thus, from a snippet of Petronius, John builds the fully fledged theatrum mundi metaphor: the moral drama of the play of life, acted in the theatre of the world, watched and judged by a heavenly audience of virtuous sages together, ultimately, with God who watches over all:

They view the world-comedy along with Him who towers above to watch ceaselessly over men, their deeds and their aspirations; for since all are playing parts, there must be some spectators.

[Therefore] Let no one complain his acting is marked by none, for he is acting in sight of God, of his angels, and of a few sages who are themselves also spectators at these Circensian Games (Pike (ed.) 1938, 180).

Through the influence of the Policraticus and the Renaissance humanists’ own recovery of ancient texts, the metaphor of the theatrum mundi became firmly ensconced in the European imagination during the sixteenth century. In a wide-number of variations the topos was used to express different relationships of humanity to God, and of humanity to the world and to itself, utilising a variety of theatrical tropes that included the human as an actor, the human as author, the world as a stage/theatre, God as spectator, and God as author/producer. The theatrum mundi provided the key, the deep metaphysical grounding, for Renaissance belief systems concerning the emplacement of humanity in a world created by God and the relationship of humanity to this divine creator. The positioning of the human being ranged from the neo-Platonist optimism of the human as microcosmos and carrier of the divine spark of logos, whose role in the world was as a divinely endorsed spectator, or as God’s co-producer, to the pessimism of both Catholic and Protestant moralists who wrote only of vanitas, the “empty show”, the vanity of human life revealed at death and final judgement.22

22Agnew (1986) tends to over-emphasise the latter theme by stating that the “theatrum mundi could only mean contemptus mundi” (15). Certainly scholars who drew their inspiration from patristic uses of the topos would tend to emphasise the vanitas theme. However, in Vickers’s (1971) survey of different uses of the metaphor, neo-Platonist optimism is also present. For example, Pico della Mirandola’s Oration on the Dignity of Man states: “On ‘this stage of the world’ man is the most wonderful being” and in Juan Luis Vives’s A Fable About Man it is man who is admired by Jupiter and the other gods for his ability to impersonate anything including Jupiter himself. (Vickers 1971, 200)
It was, however, the emergence of theatre as an art form that provided the most powerful embodiment of the metaphor, as Kent van den Berg (1990) argues:

If we are asked to accept the actors as characters and the stage as their world, we are also invited to interpret the characters as actors and their world as a stage. This superimposition of performance on the dramatic image combines the two modes of reality, man-made and God-made, creative and mimetic, that are symbolically represented by the stage and auditorium as cosmic emblems (52).

It would be too simplistic to suggest that the theatrical metaphor, as a representation of a particular mode of thinking about reality, brought theatre as an art form into being; yet without doubt the existence of theatre as an art form compellingly installed the metaphor in the European imagination. As an idea, the theatrical metaphor simply made sense to minds accustomed to dualist metaphysics. Therefore, when we speak of “theatricality” as referring to an idea of theatre as an art form, the structures of this idea of “theatre” can be found in the various Renaissance humanist “theatres”. Emplacement, spectatorship, role-playing, epistemological systematism all began to operate in the “theatres” of the sixteenth century. Finally it is the paradoxical suggestion of ontological “truth” implicit in the theatrical metaphor itself, richly expressed on the Renaissance stages, that continues to account for its compelling hold over the contemporary, postmodern, “performative” imagination.
CHAPTER 6: THE SIXTEENTH/SEVENTEENTH CENTURY
INVENTION OF “THEATRE” AS A PRACTICE

Early in this thesis I referred to Joseph Roach’s (1985) questioning of just what people in the sixteenth century meant when they referred to “theatre”, if they did not share our understanding of the term. In this chapter I answer Roach’s question by drawing on some of the substantial Renaissance scholarship that seeks to understand how the theatrical metaphor and various theatrical practices operated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. My approach is to divide the field into three interrogative sections which seem generally to cover the range of writings on Renaissance theatricality. I begin by looking at some of the theories of the self that circulated in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, and how a particular discourse of a theatricalised self, reflecting a theatricalised ontology, started to emerge. I link this discussion to sixteenth century anti-theatricalism, itself grounded in the Church Fathers’ resistance to theatre, that frequently focused on the perceived instability of the self represented by and threatened by the actor.

I address Roach’s question in the second section by analysing the phenomenon of elaborate court ceremonies and entertainments, the self-conscious performativity of which reached its zenith in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such events theatricalised everyday space through public rituals of state power—triumphs, royal progresses, entries to cities, and other court festivals—that were designed to semiotically represent the Renaissance monarch’s relationship to his subjects, thereby promoting an ideology of magnificence centred on the person of the prince.

My last field of enquiry, perhaps, is the most direct approach to the issue at hand. In my third section I examine various uses of theatres, before the date of the Burbage and Brayne playhouse, and find that the formalist equation of scripts interpreted by actors for audiences in theatre spaces was not how people in the sixteenth and seventeenth century understood theatre to be. Rather, diverse applications of the term shared the etymology of “theatre” as a “looking place” with the importance accorded by humanist writers, artists and architects to the relationship of seeing to knowing.

6.1 The Renaissance discourse of the self

6.1.1 Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Theories of the Self

Contemporary theories of the self are traditionally predicated on a “topography” (Appadurai 1990) of an inner “reality”—the knowing and aware self—versus an outer surface which expresses that self or, importantly, hides it. According to Arjun Appadurai,
Such ideas . . . are anchored in the New Testament, where, for the first time in Western history, a major normative claim was made about the separation of act and actor, intention and action, “inner states” and “outer forms” (1990, 93).

Appadurai notes, however, that such ideas have “spawned many conflicting intellectual offspring” (ibid.), some of which are discernible in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries theories of the self, and associated ideas of inwardness versus outward expression. Accordingly, the notion of an interiorised self, Robert Hellenga writes, was foreign not only to the Elizabethan (and medieval and Platonic) conception of personality as a hierarchical organization of reason, passions, and appetites, but to Elizabethan reality itself, which was essentially social and public (1981, 36).

In contrast, Hellenga argues, for the Elizabethans:

Reality was ‘out there’, so to speak, in a cosmic order which was reflected in the social and ecclesiastical hierarchies, in public architecture (including theatres), in the institution of the family, and even in the organization of personality (ibid.).

This conception of the self lacked what Hellenga identifies as three historically constitutive elements for the modern theory of self: childhood, privacy and autonomy. Drawing on the work of Phillipe Ariès, he argues that in the sixteenth century, unlike the modern world, there was no differentiation between the world of the child and that of the adult, because “children and adults occupied the same world, shared the same psychological space” (38). Similarly, just as childhood and adulthood were not divided into “separate kingdoms” (ibid.), social space was not divided into private and public realms. Hellenga argues that privacy was an “unattainable ideal” that was foregone by most people due to the density of social life. “There is good reason to believe that, in an age where even the bedding of the bride was a public affair, privacy was not a meaningful concept”(39).

This intermingling of the private and the public, the inner and the outer, was reflected, according to Burns, in the organisation of space in the sixteenth century city, a “mixture of great houses, slums, stables, merchant households incorporating country houses and warehouses, market stalls and ‘ordinaries’ which were packed densely together”, unlike the modern city with its clearly delineated precincts organised according to function and

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socio-economic status (1972, 77). If privacy was “not a meaningful concept”, then neither
was the idea of the autonomous individual within “the Elizabethan concept of the universe
as a system of interlocking hierarchies” (Hellenga 1981, 40). Such hierarchies had a
particularly binding power because, as Hellenga observes, medieval and Renaissance life
was a series of interdependencies based on the idea of “service”, and here he cites Ariès:
“one nearly always ‘belonged’ to somebody . . . Society still appeared as a network of
‘dependencies’” (ibid.)

The social positioning of an individual in sixteenth-century England was indicated,
according to Elizabeth Burns, by the deliberate performative manner in which he presented
himself. In other words, intersubjective relationships were governed by self-conscious
codings of behaviour, of dress, of attitude. “The rank, occupation, relative wealth, cultural
pretensions and interests of an individual who”, Burns writes, “in sixteenth-century
England,

spent the greater part of his waking life outdoors in the presence of people of all
conditions and in indoor places which, in daylight, were accessible to most,
were expressed in the clothes, decorations and accoutrements he carried on his
person, and in his manner of speech, gesture and demeanour (1972, 77).

Hellenga expands upon this idea by arguing that whereas in our modern world social roles
intervene between an authentic interiorised self and reality, in contrast: “Elizabethan
identity . . . was experienced not in opposition to but by participation in social roles; or
rather, social roles were the means not of avoiding but of participating in reality” (1981,
41). Hellenga and Jean-Christophe Agnew (1986) argue that such a public conception of
the self brought distinct parameters with it; it was from the violation of these parameters
that fissures in the social fabric began to occur, cracks that Renaissance society needed to
account for.

The social, intersubjective self described by Hellenga and Burns was determined by fixed
and stable relationships between cosmic, ecclesiastical and social hierarchies, in short, a
medieval conception of self (Hellenga 1981, 36). Agnew, however, argues that with the
rise of the “placeless market” in the sixteenth century, this medieval system of fixed social
relationships started to erode. In its place arose a more fluid set of relationships. Who a
person was could no longer be determined by his or her rank in a social hierarchy which
was, in turn, inscribed in and validated by the grand cosomological hierarchy of the chain
of being.2 Rather, this immutable sense of self began to break down, according to Agnew,

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2See Tillyard ((1943) 1984) for an account of the chain of being.
in the face of an emerging logic of capitalism, within which the self became the prime commodity of exchange (1986, 77).

These arguments for an exteriorised subjectivity are convincing yet, as Katherine Eisaman Maus (1995) observes, they fail to account sufficiently for sixteenth and seventeenth century writings, a recurring theme of which clearly distinguished between an “inner” self and its “outwards” expression. According to Maus, writings of the English Renaissance are suffused with this issue; indeed, it is problematic to writers of the period. The “discrepancy between ‘inward disposition’ and ‘outward appearance’ seems”, for what Maus characterises as a large and ideologically diverse group of people, “unusually urgent” (1995, 13). Their writings on what Maus terms “inwardness” share two “fantasies”:

one, that selves are obscure, hidden, ineffable; the other, that they are fully manifest or capable of being made fully manifest. These seem to be contradictory notions, but again and again they are voiced together, so that they seem less self-cancelling than symbiotically related or mutually constitutive (28-29).

Maus is careful to avoid the charge of anachronistically mapping onto the people of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a later “bourgeois subjectivity” and interiority (2). Instead, she claims that the “distinction between interior and exterior is a very familiar rhetorical tactic” deployed by writers of the period. Thus, the charge levelled time and again against the theatre by anti-theatrical polemicists, writes Maus, “acknowledge[s] the separability of a privileged ‘true’ interior and a socially visible, falsifiable exterior”; and in “decry[ing] that separation” these writers, at the same time, “emphasiz[e] the obligation of [in William Pynne’s words] ‘all men at all times . . . to seem that outwardly which they are inwardly’” (1995, 4-5). For both defenders and detractors of the theatre there is a “rhetorical energy” attributed to the stage which, through example, can either inspire or corrupt (75). “Both pro- and antitheatricalists”, writes Maus, “dwell upon the ways in which persuasion becomes coercion” and the stage is portrayed, similarly, in polemical tracts either defending it or attacking it, as having a power to forcibly change the will of the spectator (ibid.).

In this, polemicists of both sides are following in the anti-theatrical footsteps of the Church Fathers who wrote in declining years of the Roman Empire. For Tertullian (c.155-c.240), the world was a moral universe, a Manichean division of absolute Good and Evil. According to Jonas Barish, “he uncovers a demonic plot to subvert mankind and destroy the authority of the Most High”, the tools of which are the “spectacles” which, although
they may appear innocent, in fact, “lure” the unsuspecting spectator “to the worship of false gods and alienate them from the true one” (1981, 45). Tertullian, in his anti-theatrical tract *Apology, De spectaculis*, writes Barish, was extraordinarily literal and seemed unable to distinguish between the world as it is and a fictive world: this latter was “ignored, or rejected, in favor of a frozen world in which each thing must remain one thing and that thing alone” (47). The concept of the self that emerges from such literalness is one in which “identity, for Tertullian, is absolutely given, as one’s sex is given; any deviation from it constitutes a perversion akin to the attempt to change one’s sex” (48-49). The actor, therefore, is doubly damned: first, for attempting to change that which is divinely given; and second, because in following the convention of male actors dressing as women, he contravenes the biblical injunction against cross-dressing, as written in Deuteronomy:

> The women shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a women’s garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God (22: 5, quoted in Barish 1981, 49)

St Augustine (354-430), rather than simply rejecting the theatre outright, engages in a searching analysis of its attractions: why, he asks, does the spectator in the theatre desire to view miseries that in his life he would otherwise avoid? (Barish 1981, 53). It would seem, writes Barish, that the theatre evokes fictive emotions which mask a true feeling, compassion. Barish argues that such compassion, for Augustine, “becomes an insidious form of self-indulgence; it relieves us of our need to act, and so feeds our passivity and narcissism” (54). The less literally minded Augustine sought to ontologically distinguish between, as he wrote in *Soliloquies*, “that which either feigns to be what it is not, or tends to exist and does not succeed” (quoted in 1981, 54). Whereas Tertullian was unable to conceive of feigned existence at all, Augustine, on the other hand, writes Barish, distinguished two orders of falsehood: the “fallacious” and the “fabulous”. To the former he attributed a deliberate intention to deceive, but the latter he viewed as expressing, simply, an intention to “tell a story” (55). The conventions of poems and jokes and fables, and, importantly, plays too, are such that they “differ from [the rules] of ordinary truth telling” (ibid.). Thus, wrote Augustine, referring to the celebrated Roman actor, Roscius,

> For how could that man . . . be a true tragedian if he were unwilling to be a false Hector, a false Andromache, a false Hercules and others without number? Or how would it be a true picture, if the horse in it were not false? How could it be a true image of a man in a mirror, if it were not a false man? (*Soliloquies of St Augustine* quoted in 1981, 55-56)
Acting, and mimesis in general, is accordsed, in Barish’s analysis, a certain ontological status of its own; it is not simply classed with “lies and delusions”, but is seen by Augustine as being consistent with “its own mode of reality” (56). Augustine’s conclusion, writes Barish, led him to ask why “we should so dread falsehood” (ibid.); and in reply, he argued that to

be true to our own nature, we should not become false by copying and likening ourselves to the nature of another as do the actors and the reflections in a mirror . . . We should, instead, seek that truth which is not self-contradictory and two-faced (Soliloquies, quoted in 1981, 56-57).

This statement of Augustine’s reflects his “residual Manicheism” (60) and like Tertullian, he believed that “theaters are a ruse on the part of malignant spirits to enslave human souls” (62). However, argues Barish, Augustine’s objections to the theatre were on the grounds of “practical morality”—he opposed its indecency and that it turns people away from “more needful pursuits” (such as divine worship) (64). Importantly, for the purposes of this discussion,

Augustine recognizes that human nature is composite to begin with, the self a spectrum of selves. The evil of theater is not that it substitutes a “false” self for a “true” one, but that it licenses the worser self of both players and spectators, and discourages the better (ibid.).

Some ten centuries later, these same arguments are rehearsed by polemicists of the English stages: its detractors decrying its capacity to lead all concerned into perniciousness, and its defenders, equally, advocating the capacity of theatre to bring out the best in human beings. In either case, the self is conceived of as inward yet mutable, susceptible to being fundamentally changed by an outward process of imitation. An additional charge was given to Puritan attacks upon the stage by a broader struggle for the self; a self composed in Augustinian terms as homo interior and homo exterior, which, writes Maus (1995), was enlisted in the sectarian controversies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For commentators on either side, writes Maus, “religious practices they do not share seem superficial, self-evidently fraudulent”. Thus Protestants laid claim to “cultivating internal truths”, and Catholics fostered a belief in the internal workings of the Holy Spirit (15-16).3

3Huston Diehl (1991) in “Observing the Lord’s Supper and the Lord Chamberlain’s Men: The Visual Rhetoric of Ritual and Play in Early Modern England” writes that for Calvin and the English reformers he influenced, the elements of Holy Sacrament, “in the hands of the priests, are perversely turned into theatrical props that beguile the devout with dazzling spectacle and meaningless ceremonies” (154). Such things “must not be confused”, continues Diehl, “with the things they signify, these images are thus vehicles that are
6.1.2 A literature of dissembling selves

Hellenga argues that reality was perceived as social and public; therefore, the presentation of self as a “social role” was keenly analysed because it provided the means “not of avoiding but of participating in reality” (1981, 41). The concept of “role” was closely linked to the honour of an individual, the implications of which, as Berger et al. write, were: “in a world of honor, the individual discovers his true identity in his roles, . . . to turn away from the roles is to turn away from himself” (quoted in Hellenga 1981, 42).4 Agnew argues that the medieval notion of the self expressed as social role was also affected by the new economic exigencies that were transforming sixteenth and seventeenth century social reality. This struggle between contesting interpretations of the self is marked by Agnew in the shifting trope of “copyhold”—a system of land tenure known to be open to manipulation and fraudulent practices—which was transformed into a “more figurative and therefore encompassing sphere of self-representation” (1986, 58). Agnew writes that “to change one’s copy”, thus, became a sixteenth century commonplace describing any sudden change to how a person acted or presented him/herself, a change “so abrupt and startling as to suggest that a person had assumed an entirely new character” (ibid.).

Hellenga also notes the significance of such changes and how, increasingly, the notion of a mutable “identity or role that was “more real than the ‘natural man’ which it supersedes”, was at the “center of important Renaissance works” such as “Vives’s Fable about Man, Pico’s Oration [on the Dignity of Man], [Hoby’s] The Book of the Courtier, and even [Machiavelli’s] The Prince” (1981, 42). Citing Muriel Bradbook, Hellenga argues that “apparel was not thought of as concealing but as revealing the personality of the wearer”, therefore, “as the body revealed the soul, so appearance should reveal the truth of identity” (quoted in Hellenga 1981, 45-46).5 The act of disguising oneself, then, Hellenga argues, was really an act of changing character,

a special kind of role-playing . . . which was particularly suited to the Elizabethan experience of self, not as inner core, shaped by an inaccessible past, but as a dramatic role to be played in the theatrum mundi (46).

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5 Muriel Bradbrook, “Shakespeare and the Use of Disguise in Elizabethan Drama,” Essays in Criticism, II (1952): 165-166,
However, the problems of a mutable self played out in social reality were a cause of great anxiety to the Elizabethans. This was reflected in their literature that, as Agnew observes, reflected an increasingly “theatrical” realism:

theatrical in the sense that such realism took the social world to be so thoroughly ‘staged’ as to make its truths accessible not so much by what those performances claimed to display as by what they unwittingly betrayed (1986, 60).

The old emblematic resonances of the theatrum mundi, Agnew continues, “vied with a newer reference to man’s multiple and all too effective purposes—purposes that invited the penetrating, ‘voyeuristic’ scrutiny of an absorbed yet critically distanced spectator” (ibid.).

Outward appearances could no longer be relied upon: they no longer provided reliable “copy”. In response to this, Agnew writes, a literary genre of popular advice manuals emerged in the late fifteenth century. Early examples of these were “estates” literature which condemned those who would rise above their station in life. Agnew refers to the fifteenth century German typology of fools, Narrenschiff (1494), by Sebastian Brandt, which was translated into English as the Shyp of Folys (1500) by the friar Alexander Barclay (61-62). For Barclay, according to Agnew, “social mobility implied social disfigurement, a donning of masks and a sloughing off of the feudal framework of accountability as ‘eche seruant fayne wolde a mayster be’” (62).

The German publication, Liber Vagatorum: Der Betler Orden (1509), detailed the “tricksterism” of “mendicant monks” and was translated into English by John Awdeley as Fraternity of Vagabonds (1561), becoming the first of the “cony-catching books” and “rogue pamphlets” that succeeded the literature of “estates” (Agnew 1986, 63-67). Agnew describes such pamphlets as follows:

The cony-catching pamphlets . . . enumerated some twenty-four orders of rogues. The list, partially anticipated in Barclay’s earlier inventory of fools, included fraters (proxy beggars), counterfeit cranks (sham victims of falling sickness), dommerers (sham deaf-mutes), whip-jacks (sham shipwrecked sailors), and Abraham Men, the counterfeit madmen later memorialized in Shakespeare’s tragedies . . . The effect of these fictions was to assimilate an otherwise erratic pattern of itineracy and trespass into a more familiar notion of deliberate, if dubious, guild activity: a freemasonry of crime whose arts and mysteries the pamphlets purported to lay bare (65).
Roguery, with its deceit and lies, had an aura of mystery that was shared by usury. In Thomas Wilson’s *Discourse Upon Usury* (1572), Agnew argues, Elizabethan anxiety over the changing socio-economic conditions of sixteenth and seventeenth century England found expression. “Wilson, for his own part,” Agnew writes,

was unable to fathom how a standard of value could become a thing of value, for “moneye was not first devised for thys ende, to bee merchaundize, but to bee a measure and a beame betwixte man and man, for the buyinge and sellinge of weares” (71).

The popularity of cony-catching pamphlets was due in no small part to their promise to reveal the secrets of the “new marketplace” where the traditional emblems of social position—clothes, coats-of-arms—could no longer be relied on to provide “unequivocal” signification of rank (Agnew 1986, 72). Significantly, the self that “rogue literature” suggested and revealed was the *private* self; a shift in conceptions of the self, Agnew observes, in that

> to the readers of these pamphlets, the self existed not just in the measure that it *had* something to hide but in the measure that it *was* something to hide (73).

In a similar vein to “rogue literature”, but dealing with the opposite end of the social scale, was the “courtier manual”, a popular example of which was Baldesar Castiglione’s *Il libro del Cortegiano* (1529) which was translated into English by Sir Thomas Hoby as *The Book of the Courtyer* (1561) (Agnew 1986, 75). Castiglione’s book dealt with the masks worn in the game of courtship which, writes Agnew, “were to be taken as texts, not pretexts; they were figurative expressions of communal ideals, not mere dissimulations of private motives” (ibid.). Whereas Castiglione’s work “attempted to sketch out an aesthetics of society”, according to Agnew, in the Hoby translation, the English anxiety over external appearances and behaviour duplicitously masking private motivations turned Castiglione’s “masterpiece from a model of collaborative meditation to a model of individual premeditation” (75-76).

“These manuals,” in Agnew’s narrative, “offered their owners a mode of divination for a new and perplexing secular realm—the realm of commodity relations where man, not God, lay concealed” (78). Increasingly the self became associated with the mind, and the body became the means by which others could “divine” the intentions of that self. Agnew writes that Francis Bacon saw “that a knowledge of physiognomy could be ‘a great discovery of
dissimulations, and a great direction in business’” (84). Through the trope of “habit”—referring both to a mental state and to clothing—Bacon considered, “If custom could indeed be conceived as a kind of costume—something to be put on and off at will—then man could literally make himself” (quoted in Agnew 1986, 84). However, to do this, the mind needed to trick itself, to disguise itself from itself so as to bring forth “another nature”—a new and improved nature” (ibid.). Expressive behaviour, then, for Bacon, was the “garment of the mind” (Agnew 1986, 85).

Similarly, Stephen Greenblatt (1980) explores the sixteenth century trope of “fashion” that “seems to come into wide currency as a way of designating the forming of the self”; a usage which had not, heretofore, been associated with the term (2). “Self-fashioning”, according to Greenblatt, “acquires a new range of meanings:

it describes the practice of parents or teachers; it is linked to manners or demeanor, particularly that of the elite; it may suggest hypocrisy or deception, an adherence to mere outward ceremony; it suggests representation of one’s nature or intention in speech or actions (3).

The study of cony-catching tracts or courtiers’ manuals, therefore, provided both insight into possible subterfuges as well as advice on how to represent oneself “in speech or action” to others.

There was also, as detailed in the first chapter in Roach’s (1985) study, a genre of scientific manuals that was similarly concerned with how outward expression could be interpreted. John Bulwer’s two seventeenth century treatises on gesture—Chirologia: or the Naturall Language of the Hand (1644) and Chironomia: Or, the Art of Manuall Rhetoric (1644)—writes Roach, “consciously and methodically set out to fulfill Bacon’s program for a modern science of gesture” (33). Bulwer theorised a “universal” language of gesture, which avoided the deceptions and equivocation of spoken language, and whose universality and usefulness was demonstrated, according to Agnew (1986), by its application in trade with “savage” nations (87-89). According to Bulwer, the self expressed through the emotions could be read in the gestural language of the hand and, in this way, the “garment of the mind” could be “stripped away . . . so as to expose the true physiognomy beneath, the muscular infrastructure of all expression” (90).

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6Giovanna Ferrari notes another connection between clothing and the body: a late sixteenth-century Dutch woodcut ... of the new anatomy theatre in Amsterdam [invites people] to attend the lectures in order to ascertain how people really appear beneath their clothing. The passage relied on the dual sense of the Dutch word 'vleesch' [signifying] (flesh) [and clothing] (1987, 99 [emphasis added]).
Agnew argues that Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathan* (1646), expanded on Bulwer’s idea of “motion” as the governing principle of life, through the metaphor of autonomous machines, “automata”, such as mechanical watches, to describe human existence:

For what is the *heart*, but a *spring*; and the *nerves*, but so many *strings*; and the *joints*, but so many *wheels*, giving motion to the whole body, such as was intended by the artificer? (quoted in Agnew 1986, 91)

Although Bulwer later resiled from his earlier work and, according to Agnew, insisted “that all man’s gestures were initiated by the will”, nevertheless, he had put forward a theory of the self in which, writes Agnew, “the mind was compelled to wait on the habitual movements of the body in order to discover its own ‘intentions’” (ibid.).

6.1.3 The protean actor embodying a crisis of representation

From the above it is possible for us to map out the vicissitudes of certain theories of the self, from the fixed, hierarchical and known self of the Middle Ages to the sixteenth and seventeenth century self. This new topography located the self as “a placeless and Protean entity—a liminal being always on the verge of becoming something or someone else” (Agnew 1986, 95). Yet the Protean ability to change the self, to shift shape, as Roach writes, in reference to the Renaissance actor, was not without its own dangers: “for he who can assume any shape is in danger of losing his own” (1985, 49). Agnew argues that the visible symbol of this “crisis of representation” was the commercial theatre. Within the theatre, the physiognomically skilled, Protean and placeless figure of the stage player—as an emblem of this new unreliable self—became the focus of sixteenth and seventeenth century anti-theatrical polemics (1986, 96-100).

Maus (1995) highlights English anxiety over the unknowability of the inward self and the attendant fear that the external appearance and behaviour masked a nefarious purpose. The literate culture that expressed these fears emerged from the highly urbanised environment of rapidly growing London—the writers being well aware of the various scams and confidence tricks that could be played on the unsuspecting gull—and it is not, therefore, surprising, writes Maus, that

self-display and self-withholding should become calculated tactics, or that the art of self-deployment [Greenblatt’s (1980) self-fashioning], though it might seem more naturally at home in courtly circles, should penetrate far down the social scale (26).
Agnew (1986) continually acknowledges and repeatedly stresses the embeddedness of theories of the self within contemporaneous social conditions. For example, he notes, too, the correspondence of the popularity of “rogue literature” with a rise in vagabondage in England (1986, 64). Although my summary has neglected these aspects of his argument, it is important to acknowledge that, for Agnew, the connection between social conditions and theories of the self conveyed in popular literature reflected a generalised crisis of representation, “one wherein traditional social signs and symbols had metamorphosed into detached and manipulable commodities” (1986, 97).

The implications of these analyses of Renaissance theories of the self for the discourse of theatricality are significant. Hellenga suggests that, contrary to contemporary conceptions of the self, the Elizabethan concept of self was located in how one represented oneself to others: one’s social “role”. Within the fixed medieval cosmic, ecclesiastical and social hierarchy, the function and relationship of such roles to each other was widely known. Increasingly, as the eternal and interlocked verities of the middle ages—orthodoxies of the cosmos, religion, society—were assaulted by a range of forces during the Renaissance, from the emerging empiricism of humanist scholarship, religious revolution and counter-revolution, to the emergence of capitalist logics of exchange, so too did the fixed relationships between roles begin to break down. Indeed, as Agnew demonstrated, the notion of role itself started to change: it no longer represented the self, but hid it. Furthermore, a person could now self-fashion his or her self, an action which, popularly, was usually associated with nefarious activity.

Within such an ontology, the figure of the actor stood at the point of crisis. In the older world of fixed roles, the actor’s adoption of a role, whether a vice or a virtue, was relatively straightforward. The Renaissance actor, in contrast, entered into a longer and more ontologically problematic chain of significations. He had an almost magical ability to adopt a role, a facility which, through its association with roguery, was suspect. Moreover, he represented characters who also shared this ability, such as Shakespeare’s Richard the Third. The theatre thus was understood as peopled with dissemblers and representations of dissemblers, and to perform a role was to represent one’s self honourably no longer. For the anti-theatricalists, the ideal was for one’s outward expression to reflect how one was inwardly; yet, as Maus writes, for these writers, although “persons and things inwardly are, . . . outwardly [they] only seem” (1995, 5). Further, as Roach argues, Renaissance medical theory suggested that if the delicately balanced “humours” in the body were disturbed by the actor’s calling upon them in his performance, it might require both time and medical intervention to restore the balance. “This physical threat”, writes Roach, “clouds the image
of the spritely Proteus commanding his body into new shapes at will” (1985, 47). As the theatre as an art form emerged in the sixteenth century, the prejudices and “scientific” theories of the time contributed to discourses of anti-theatricality which approached the theatre with deep suspicion, ascribing to it the potential to disrupt and taint the social, religious, and cosmological—in short, the ontological—order.

6.2 Public Theatricality

6.2.1 Ceremony and Spectacle: The Performance of Power

Nowhere was the relationship between an outwards expressive semiotics and an ineffable being more charged than in the public performances—the festivals—of Renaissance princes. Such performances, as Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly (2002) defines them, took either a ceremonial or a spectacular form. According to Watanabe-O’Kelly, ceremonies “are those events which do not just demonstrate power relations in symbolic fashion but which actually bring power structures into being” (15). Spectacles, on the other hand, were “theatrical events” designed to be “representations of the nature of power” whose theme, writes Watanabe-O’Kelly, was “often the bringing of order out of chaos, whether the chaos is caused by evil forces from without or by the operation of ungoverned passions within the ruler himself” (ibid.). In both cases, these events centred on the person of the prince himself and expressed a relationship of the ruler to his or her subjects; a relationship evocatively described by France’s Louis XIV as a “community of pleasure [société de plaisir]” (2002, 18). As Watanabe-O’Kelly observes, the relationship of ruler to audience at a festival was “the point of the festival”, although the role of the audience differed for ceremonies and spectacles. For festive ceremonies such as a coronation or a royal entry, the role of the spectators was that of witnesses, their presence making the event “legal or binding” (16). The audience for a spectacle, in contrast, was generally the court itself, with courtiers acting out different roles within it; thus, writes Watanabe-O’Kelly, “the hierarchy of court society was enacted and reinforced by the spectacle” (ibid.).

The lives of Renaissance monarchs were open to the scrutiny of others, a fact of which the Tudors in England were highly cognisant and which they actively exploited. The theatricality of her position did not escape Elizabeth I, whose reign demonstrated an intense awareness of the semiotics of power; as the queen was noted remarking: “we princes . . . are set on stages, in the sight and view of all the world dulie observed” (quoted in Montrose 1996, 76; Mullaney 1988, 24). However the ambiguity of the position of the monarch was commented upon by Elizabeth’s successor, James I, who, Maus (1995) notes, “writes that a king ‘can never without secrecy do great things’” before commenting a few pages later that
a king is “as one set on a scaffold, whose smallest actions and gestures all the people gazingly do behold” (29).

Roy Strong argues that the principal performative mechanisms of state power—the royal entry, the tournament and the court entertainment—which were enacted not only in England but across Europe, were “harnessed to the emergent modern state as an instrument of rule” (1984 {1973}, 19). Such events functioned, according to Sydney Anglo, in two ways:

First they were related to a European tradition of the magnificence expected of a potentate, and, more specifically in the reign of [Tudor King] Henry VIII, to a general policy of aggrandisement. Secondly, many festivals were political, either through the desire to enhance great diplomatic occasions, or because they actually included specific comment on an international situation (1997, 2).

The lives of Renaissance princes, lived in a range of courts—imperial and papal, royal, ducal, and the courts of minor dignitaries—were, Anglo writes, intensely theatrical. Thus, in addition to major ceremonial events such as coronations and funerals, there were the daily rituals that ranged from “the morning levée, washing and use of the privy, eating and drinking, and transactions of routine business, to the ceremonial bed-warming and final retiring at night” (1990, 75). Add to these the “regular pastimes of hunting, hawking and jousting; religious observances; polite and impolite conversations; and always a constant changing of apparel as considered appropriate for each activity” and we can see that daily life at a Renaissance court was an on-going round of performances large and small (75-76). In short, what Anglo terms, the “court arts” consisted of “the totality of what the court did” (76).

Stephen Greenblatt (1980), in his chapter on Thomas More at the court of Henry VIII, notes that More’s favourite trope was the theatrical metaphor, corresponding, argues Greenblatt, “to the actual theatricalization of public life” in Henrician society (28). The “tradition of magnificence”, in Greenblatt’s account, was alive and well at the court of Henry, which “valued superabundance, variety, intricacy, and overpowering insistence on cost. The more conspicuous the consumption the better . . . display shades into diplomacy, amorous dalliance into high politics” (29). This connection between ostentatious display and politics, as Nicholas Le Roux (2002) writes in relation to the French festivals of the Valois court in the late sixteenth century, functioned on several levels. First, the lavish and ostentatious festival “reaffirmed” the monarch’s rule over his or her subjects by “re-calling the symbolic foundations of the ‘proto-constitutional’ bond which united them”; second,
foreign visitors to court were reduced to “the role of spectators” to the court’s magnificence; and finally, such festivals “reinforced the courtiers’ sense of group identity through their participation in a distinct cultural event, thus identifying them as participants in the homage due to the prince’s majesty” (2002, 101).

6.2.2 Royal entries and triumphs
The ceremonial procession of the Renaissance drew much of its inspiration from the Roman triumph, the entry of a victorious general into the city of Rome. To the courts of the Renaissance, Anglo writes, “there was no more potent and evocative symbol of ancient grandeur” than the Roman triumph, with its processions, cars, trophies, prisoners, and celebratory arches” (1990, 68). The iconography of such events, according to Anglo, was often confused, reflecting as it did classical imagery (Hercules was popular with Renaissance princes), Christian motifs, and medieval chivalric themes (ibid.). However, unlike its ancient forebear, the triumph as practised during the Renaissance was more a celebration of the fruits of peace rather than of war. Margaret M. McGowan writes that to a contemporary commentator, André Du Chesne, writing in 1609, triumphs fulfilled a dual role for French kings: “they ensured immortality to those for whom they had been created; and they served to inspire future princes to emulate past achievements” (2002, 42). The various royal progresses of Elizabeth, writes Anthony Miller, were “triumphs of peace” that portrayed

a woman conqueror who marches splendidly and unthreatened through her peaceable kingdom, entertained by harmless mock-combats and conquering hearts that are already compliant . . . Instead of displaying models of conquered lands, the Queen displays herself as loving conqueror and, in turn, views her own land on obedient display (1998, 272).

Triumphs were not confined to the Renaissance courts. Miller describes the paradoxical use of “triumphs of peace” in the “annual pageants celebrating the inauguration of the Lord Mayor of London” (277). These celebrations, according to Miller, were politically ambivalent, expressing on the one hand civic disapproval of the excesses of court (particularly in the time of James I), while on the other reaffirming their allegiance to the monarch. The route of the mayoral procession from the city to the court at Westminster for the actual investiture and back reflected this ambivalence. Miller considers that the Lord Mayoral triumphs were distinguished from those of James by promoting the “virtue of industriousness” in contrast to the profligacy of court, but they were also aligned with Stuart policy by their representations of “adventuring across the globe in order to bring home the trophies of peaceful triumphs” (279).
The royal entry was a highly visible example of the theatricality of state power which, from its relatively simple medieval origins, grew during the Renaissance, according to Strong, into a ritual which embraced the whole of the society concerned, together with its institutions. It incorporated in one gigantic spectacle its judicial, economic, political, religious and aesthetic aspects in a format which reflected vividly not only the rise to prominence of the urban classes but also the increasing power of the prince (1984 {1973}, 7).

Although it grew in the elaborateness of its rituals, the basic structure of the royal entry, representing in Strong’s analysis the symbolic conquest of the city, remained largely as it had been since medieval times. The ruler was met at the gate by the civic authorities and gifts were exchanged; in return for entry to the city the prince guaranteed certain rights and privileges. The prince then rode in procession “attended by his principal officers of state” through the city, watched by the populace, to the principal church where the same rite was performed (ibid.). As Strong observes, the royal entry was a medieval form which embodied medieval notions of rank and the reciprocal duty of the “various classes of society” (ibid.).

However, what began as a simple procession grew, from the middle of the fourteenth century, to involve street pageants, and in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries involved a repertory of “archways and street-theatres which presented variants of a remarkably consistent visual and iconographical vocabulary” (ibid.). According to Strong, this “iconographical vocabulary” of motifs and emblems portrayed, inter alia, the genealogical legitimacy of the ruler, the virtues to which he or she should aspire, the benefits that would flow to the realm from these virtues, and allusions to the needs of the particular city.

Such displays, as Gordon Kipling (1977) demonstrates, were not only symbolic but could have an instrumental dimension also. As a direct result of the staging of a triumph for his entry to the city of Bristol in 1486, Henry VII pledged to restore that city’s decaying shipbuilding and clothing industries:

The King comforted theym [the merchants and civic authorities], that they shulde sett on and make new Shippes, and to exercise ther Marchandise as they were wonte for to doon. And his Grace shulde so helpe theym by dyvers Means like as he shewde unto theym, that the Meyre of the Towne towld me they
harde not this hundred Yeres of noo King so good a Comfort (quoted in Kipling 1977, 55).

However, apart from the pragmatics of the administration of power, expressed in this example, the thematics of the royal entry, as Strong writes, combined to express “deeper underlying ideas” that were focused continually on the eternal myths that were essential to the concept of les rois thaumaturges, the mystical sacred rulers who were venerated and regarded as a race set apart in the Europe that preceded the age of enlightenment. In this way the key reference [of the ceremonial entries] becomes the king as Christ entering the New Jerusalem (1984 {1973}, 8).

Strong observes that in Protestant countries such as England, secular spectacles such as the royal entry replaced the old liturgical rituals, and in the countries of the counter-reformation, “ecclesiastical pomp was . . . to be complemented by what can only be called a liturgy of state which centred on the ruler” (19). In what Strong describes as the “medieval inheritance” of such spectacles, the true focus of medieval symbolic pageantry had been religious, the liturgy of the Church, mirroring a world picture which centred directly on God and in which the place of man, whether ruler or peasant, was still basically on the periphery (ibid.).

The centring of such spectacles on the person of the prince, in which the world became a “stage” upon which such princes were “dulie observed”, was yet another expression of the shift from a theocentric to the humanist universe that characterised the Renaissance.

Through such public pageantry the city itself became a stage upon which the acts of rulers and their subjects were performed (the city as theatrum mundi suggested by Queen Elizabeth’s “stage” of “princes”). During the occasion of a royal entry, the place of the city became an idealised space that provided the frame and thus enabled these acts to occur. According to Mullaney,

the ceremonial city was ‘a great Booke-faire’ printed, in the case of royal processions, cum privilegio Regis; it was a text to be inscribed and interpreted, not by historians but by the interaction of ritual process and community, the action of ritual process on community (1988, 13)
Such acts were not empty gestures but carried political weight: the performative exercise of power through ritual, gesture and symbolism had efficacy. In two compelling examples, Kipling contrasts the performances by the Protestant Elizabeth I and the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots in their respective coronation entries into London and Edinburgh. As recounted by Kipling, both monarchs were offered Protestant bibles as symbols of the expected relationship of the monarchs-to-be to the Church of England and the Scottish Reformed Church. Elizabeth was invited by the figure of “Truth” to embrace the English Bible as a symbol of her commitment to the “florishynge commonweal”. The young queen responded to the address, and her acceptance of the bible was described by a witness as follows: “how reuerently did she with both her handes take it, kisse it, & lay it vpon her breast to the great comfort of the lookers on” (quoted in Kipling 1977, 44). Similarly, two years later, a child offered Mary, again, a bible and a psalm book which were, an angel declared, “to be emblems of her defending the Reformed religion”. However, this Catholic queen responded in a very different fashion to her English cousin: “[she] began to frown. For schame sche could not refuse it, but she did no better, for immediatlie sche gave it to the most pestilent Papist within the Realme” (quoted in Kipling 1977, 54).

From these examples, we can see that the ruler functioned either as protagonist or as principal spectator, often combining both roles in the one event, and in the performance of either role, expressed the social and political realities of their rule; or expressed the socio-political reality to which the body politic aspired. The stage of the city was itself “a social production of space”, Mullaney argues, arising from the rehearsals and performances of the artisanal classes and sovereign powers, for whom meaning was always a public event, culture an ‘acted document,’ and power a manifest thing, to be conspicuously bodied forth and located in the urban landscape (1988, 10).

A contemporary commentator, Richard Mulcaster, describing Elizabeth I’s coronation triumph into London observed:

If a man shoulde say well, he could not better tearme the citie of London that time, than a stage wherin was shewed the wonderfull spectacle, of a noble hearted princesse toward her most louing people (quoted in Kipling 1977, 42; also in Mullaney 1988, 11 [emphasis added]).

For Mulcaster, who shrank the theatrum mundi metaphor to the stage of the “citie of London”, Elizabeth was “obliged” to play the role of the protagonist in a drama of a “noble
hearted princesse” and her subjects; a drama, furthermore, staged at the actual site of English political and mercantile power: London. If in England in 1559 there were no playhouses to stage such events, it scarcely mattered because the highly codified role-playing of such occasions was inextricably entwined with the medieval/Renaissance sense of self; a self understood to be a role played out in situ in the public arena of shared social reality.

To recap: the theatricalisation of everyday life in the sixteenth century, understood through a range of different analogies, performatively expressed, began with a sense of self that was externalised and intersubjective. The way in which a social role was performed was important because it was seen to correspond with social identity. Yet there was also a crisis of representation in the sixteenth century, as humanist ideas suggested that a person could be responsible for self-fashioning; indeed, this was an idea that radically proposed that an inner self could be disguised by outward appearances. At the same time, medieval public ceremonials were transformed during the Renaissance into elaborate performances, combining symbolic expressivity and instrumental effectiveness, heightening and reinforcing the actual socio-political realities that underpinned them. The public stagings of the latter in turn affected the metaphorical transformation of the place of social reality, transforming it into an idealised theatrum mundi.

From here it was only a short step to the formalisation of theatricalised space in the building of public, spatially and legally delineated playhouse-theatres in the late sixteenth century. It is tempting to mark this moment as the “birth” of modern theatre but, as the foregoing has demonstrated, social being was already theatricalised, from interpretations of individual subjectivity to lavish court festivals and royal, religious and civic ceremonials. The theatre that emerged at this moment, I argue, was not the unique manifestation for which subsequent generations give credit; it was more a manifestation of a theatricalised ontology that affected all levels of Renaissance being.

On a more prosaic level, as the sixteenth century progressed, the licensing and increasing professionalisation of the acting companies (in England and the continent) brought with them the need to create dedicated spaces with restricted access so that an entry fee could be charged. Michael Anderson identifies the first surviving contract of actors as being in Padua, dated 25 February 1545 (1991, 16). According to Anderson, in sixteenth century Italy, bands of itinerant actors regularly performed indoors and, in addition to performances in the private houses and palaces of nobility, also mounted performances in rented inns and warehouses to which they charged admission. By the second half of the century, many Italian cities had buildings with rooms that were frequently used for theatrical
performances (ibid.). The experience in England was similar, although the licensing of actors arose from attempts to restrict vagabondage thereby introducing the tradition of noble patronage of the players (Agniewski 1986, 66 and 222 n.25). However, it was Renaissance humanism that provided the artistic and theoretical foundations for a theatricalised presentation of self in a range of arenas from the pedagogical use of ancient playwrights (Terence in particular) to the image-making of Renaissance princes. It is from these diverse influences that the theatricalised self of the Renaissance arose, and the art form that best expressed that theatricalised self began to appear in plays and on the stages in the theatres of sixteenth century Europe.

6.3 Physical Theatres

6.3.1 Plays without theatres, and theatres without plays

The categories of play, stage and theatre (including audience space) tend to be conflated in our modern conception of “theatre” as an art form. However, when attempting to draw a line of descent, a genealogy, of theatricality, it is important that they are kept separate.

“Theatre” becomes a universal signifier for a range of practices that combine these elements. Drawing on the form of Roach’s question, referred to in my introduction, we ask: “if theatre as we define it did not exist in the sixteenth century, then the theatre historian is bound to ask, what did people in the sixteenth century mean when they referred to theatre?” To begin to answer this question, then, we must first fracture the unity of ideas, practices and values, that our contemporary minds understand as theatre.

The term “theatre” can be seen as a rubric for what Foucault calls “discursive practices”. Such practices, he writes, are “embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns of general behaviour, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them” (1977b, 200). Traditional theatre history, searching for the origin of the present in the past, can misrecognise past technical processes, institutions, behaviour patterns and, in transmitting those same misrecognitions, “impose and maintain them.” In this way theatre becomes a thing, and the qualities and attributes of that thing—its theatricality—are similarly reified. On the other hand, if we view theatre as a discursive practice, we are then able, as Foucault states, to determine its “delimit[ed] field of objects . . . [its] legitimate perspective[s] . . . and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts and theories” (199).

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8Roach actually asks, in reference to the purported “naturalness” of David Garrick’s acting,

If nature as we define it did not exist in the eighteenth century, the theater historian is bound to ask what Garrick’s critics actually meant when they described his acting as natural (1985, 14).
Of all such norms, the most pervasive in theatre scholarship is the formalist paradigm: that is, the model within which theatre consists, *in essence*, of a performance space, a performer, and a spectator. A well-known example is Peter Brook’s opening to *The Empty Space*

I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst somebody else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged ((1968) 1982, 11)

Gay McAuley observes that the “shadowy presence” of Brook, standing here as the “stage manager or director”, is the agent who transforms the empty space into a stage, it is he who “takes” it and “calls” it into being (1999, 2). In this section, then, I propose a genealogy of such calling into being of “an act of theatre”, an interrogation of the assumptions that allow the “stage”, thus called, to be. Further, it does not take much delving to realise that the parameters of such a definition are so broad that they encompass a range of human performative behaviours, many of which we would have difficulty categorising as “theatre”. One example is an annual general meeting of a publicly listed company, with the directors as “actors”, the shareholders as audience, both in a shared space demarcated into “performance” and “audience” areas.

We can find “everyday” counterparts to such scholarly formalism in “commonsense” formulations: theatre defined as an impersonation of a character before an audience in a common space, or, even more specifically, the performance of a *scripted* role before an audience, and so forth.⁹ It is through such definitions that our epistemology of theatre is formed, that is, how we know the object “theatre” in general terms. Foucault notes that “common sense extracts the generality of an object while it simultaneously establishes the universality of the knowing subject through a pact of goodwill” (1977c, 182). In general, then, the theatres of the Greeks and Romans, of Renaissance Europe, and of our own time are formally similar; *ergo*, the fallacious commonsense claim can be made that they are the same. This formal similarity can be shared, too, by other cultures in which scripted roles are performed before audiences—common sense gives such performances to the Western inculturated mind as “theatre”—and these are thus folded into a Western epistemology of theatre.¹⁰ My concern, however, is not with the application of one culture’s metaphors to

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⁹Such attempts to define theatre are, as we saw in the previous chapter, a function of the discursive practice of modernism. For a succinct overview of twentieth century “minimalist” definitions of “theatre”, see McAuley (1999, 1-4)

¹⁰Appadurai’s (1990) argument concerning the expression of emotion in Hindu India is designed, similarly, to challenge how Western metaphors of emotion and the self are culturally mis-applied.
another culture. Rather, it is to problematise the “universally” and “commonsensically” known object, “theatre”, and to reveal how it is the artefact of a particular discourse.

Taking the problem case of medieval drama, it does not take much to throw such a commonsense view into question. In medieval times, although there were plays and stages, there were not the function-specific spaces that today we would identify as theatres. Yet, people unquestionably impersonated characters, in spaces, with audiences present. In the fifteenth century, writes Peter Meredith,

there was no theatre, or not in our sense of a building set aside for theatrical performances. Anywhere in effect was a potential theatre; the street, the church, the churchyard, private house or public hall; any of these could become a theatre (Meredith, Tydeman, Ramsay 1985, 1).

A “theatre”, Meredith argues, was rather a found space, a quotidian place borrowed for the purpose of mounting a performance. Burns (1972), as discussed in Chapter 4, described a dramaturgy—the convention of the induction—which emerged as a result of this need to redefine social space. Indeed, Meredith continues, the word “theatre” was, in the fifteenth century

clearly an unfamiliar one. But it is not just a question of the word, the concept of theatre does not seem to have existed. Putting on plays was rather one of a variety of ways of telling stories and of entertaining . . . The word “theatre” in England is really one of those that the Renaissance used to recover the lost Classical past; and the idea of “theatre” as a branch of the arts is one that does not develop until the seventeenth century (1985, 2).

So although plays were performed before the sixteenth century, they did not require the specific technology of a theatre for this to occur. Meredith emphasises that, as a concept, “theatre” was an alien idea, related to an activity in antiquity, but bearing little relation to the story-telling and entertainment of the 1400s.11

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11The translation of the obscure term “theatre” into English from the Latin “theatrum” occurred in the Wyclif Bible (1382). Even then the emphasis was on the act of seeing. As West notes, for the original translator, “‘playhouse’ must not have seemed adequate for the connotations of the word” and the word itself was sufficiently obscure to require definition (1999: 247-248). Meredith et al. reproduce the original text: “Et impleta est civitas confusione, et impetum fecerunt uno animo in theatrum” (And the city was filled with confusion and they rushed with one accord to the theatre. Acts XIX, 29) [appeared in the Wyclif Bible] as “Thei maden asawt with con ynwit, or wille, into the theatre, or comune biholdyng place” (Meredith et al. 1985, 2).
Similarly, if we bring our analysis forward to the sixteenth century, we can see that the whole issue of impersonation is quite complex (as I demonstrated in the previous section). The idea of performing a social role, as we saw, was fundamental to sixteenth and seventeenth century theories of the self, and the social reality of that time was expressed through a theatricalised ontology that drew its metaphorical power from performances by “actors” on “stages.” Although royal progresses and court entertainments were at least partly scripted and involved stages, our common sense would not classify them as “plays”, nor their performance spaces as “theatres” (although, again, “plays” performed on “stages” and sometimes even in purpose-built temporary “theatres” were a part of court entertainments). In highlighting such distinctions, it is not my intention to exclude or include certain performance events from a particular interpretation of “theatre”; nor am I suggesting what Erika Fischer-Lichte claims, that there are as “many objects of historical research into theatre as there are concepts of theatre to be conceived” (1997, 341). Rather, I propose that certain discourses of theatre emerged during the sixteenth century; discourses that did not automatically associate the term with particular practices but which, when viewed retrospectively, we might understand as being theatrical.

The Renaissance understanding of this unusual word, “theatre”, revived by humanist scholars from antiquity, was a “place for seeing”\(^\text{12}\) and it is through this idea that an apparently diverse range of applications of the term can be linked. As we will see in the next chapter, a “theatre” could be a particular epistemological tool, but at the same time be quite unrelated to stages and plays—these “theoretical theatres” (Blair 1997) were not physical structures, but rather books. This observation, then, moves us towards an epistemology centred around the idea of a “theatre” (West 1999). The link between, on the one hand, structures used as “places for seeing” for a range of activities, and on the other, books, the contents of which were displayed to be seen, is explicitly revealed in the memory theatres and theatres of anatomy. In both cases the theatres were actual structures: the former functioned as a mnemonic tool that enabled the user to memorise and come to know elements of humanist scholarship; and the latter, again didactic, allowed students and other interested parties to view dissections.

My examination of various accounts of structures, known as “theatres”, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, illustrates the variety of uses to which they were put which included (not exclusively) the presentation of “plays” on “stages”. Through the theatricalisation of public life, and through theatricalised theories of self, together with the

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\(^{12}\)Renaissance antiquarians had an imperfect understanding of how ancient theatres functioned; Anderson argues, for example, that they seemed to over-emphasise the significance of the perspectival scene-changing periaktoi described by Vitruvius (1991, 8-9).
breakdown of the old medieval ways of life and of conceiving of existence, the social conditions of the late Renaissance were such that the emergence of something like “theatre” as an art form was inevitable. Indeed, notions of the “origin” of such a theatre, and what form it took, tend to be redundant when it is seen to be a beginning among a number of beginnings. These other emergences, theatres of varying sorts (and identified as such) used for a variety of reasons, occurred for at least a century prior to the English playhouses, and it is to the context of these that I now turn.

6.3.2 The emergence of theatre structures in Europe

In Renaissance Italy, the work of the ancient Roman architect Vitruvius had been known to humanist scholars since the early fifteenth century.\(^1\) By the early sixteenth century Vitruvius’s De Architettura was accepted as the prime source and authority on ancient architecture, and it was to this treatise that the Italian humanists turned to rescue their “architecture from medieval neglect” (Anderson 1991, 4). Anderson notes, however, that

An interest in the conditions of performance of classical drama preceded the appearance in print of De Architettura. The humanist architect Leon Battista Alberti completed his De Re Aedificatoria in 1452 (the first printed edition was to appear in 1485); the chapter on spectacula reveals a knowledge of Vitruvius (ibid.).

Despite the humanists’ knowledge of Vitruvian principles of theatre architecture, the first permanent space for the performance of plays did not appear in Italy until the Teatro Olimpico was built at Vicenza in 1585. However, as Anderson reveals, there was, prior to this, the best part of a century of experimentation in building theatres according to the sketchy principles outlined by Vitruvius (1991, 4-6). All of these earlier prototypes were purpose-built theatres, often constructed of wood, that were erected for specific festive occasions celebrating significant events in the lives of the ruling families of Italy’s city states. Meg Light, in “Elysium: A Prelude to Renaissance Theater”, describes the celebrations for the wedding of Eleonara of Aragon to Ercole d’Este, Duke of Ferrara, in which performances depicting “Elysium” were presented in a temporary wooden theatre built in Rome in the spring of 1473 (1996, 6-9). Immediately after the celebration, the Neapolitan courtier and guest at the wedding, Porcellio Pandonis, wrote in a Latin poem: “first of all, with strong beams of wood . . . we prepared the tall theater” (quoted in Light 1996, 7).

\(^1\) The principal edition of his work was published circa. 1486 but, according to Anderson, the original manuscripts of Vitruvius had been discovered in 1414 (1991, 4).
This theatre is not recorded in Anderson’s history; Anderson does, however, record that in 1493 a wooden theatre, in which Plautine comedies were performed, was constructed for a state visit in Milan, and that eight years later in Mantua, “three classical plays and a new play” were performed during a carnival in a temporary theatre built in 1501. When Roman citizenship was bestowed on Giuliano and Lorenzo de’ Medici in 1513, Anderson records, a “magnificent theatre” was constructed for the purpose; and Sebastian Serlio in 1539 and Andrea Palladio in 1561 both built temporary theatres in Vicenza. (Anderson notes that Palladio’s theatre is significant to scholars as a prototype for the later Teatro Olimpico.) Vasari in 1542 and Palladio again in 1565 both built theatres in Venice (the latter surviving until destroyed by fire in 1570), and Vasari built another theatre in Florence also in 1565 (1991, 11-12).

The Teatro Olimpico, completed in 1585 in Vicenza, rather than just a venue for “academic revivals of Greek and Roman tragedy” (as van den Berg disparagingly argues (1985, 47) was, according to Anderson, “simply a more grandiose version of the temporary theatre which Palladio had built in Vicenza in 1561” (1991, 15). The temporary nature of its employment, he argues, reflected more the seasonal production of plays in Italy at the time rather than its elite genesis in the Accademia Olimpica.

The term “teatro”, as I wrote in the introduction, while acknowledging its ancient lineage, referred also to the seating arrangements of the audience. A “teatro” was a “place for watching”, and the term was commonly applied to the specific place from which one watched. Anderson observes that many of the sixteenth century Italian experiments with theatre building were often adaptations of existing spaces rather than freestanding structures. Increasingly, Renaissance palaces and villas were hosting performances of Roman and Roman-inspired comedies and, according to Anderson, the architecture of these buildings began to be designed with this particular use in mind. For example, he writes, the humanist, Alvise Cornaro, had a palace in Padua designed by the architect Falconetto in 1524, and the “system of porticoes” of its loggia corresponded to a similar arrangement on an engraving of a scene from a 1518 edition of Plautus’s comedies, thus suggesting the relationship of such architecture to the requirements of the plays (1991, 12).

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1Fernando Rignon describes the amount of effort and rigour that went into Palladio’s research and experimentation in his attempts to recreate the ancient theatre of the Romans (1995, 28).

15The Teatro Olimpico is the only extant Renaissance theatre that is almost contemporaneous with the Burbage/Brayne “Theatre”; although Van den Berg (1985, 47) and Yates (1969, 102-103) considered it a unique aberration. Michael Anderson notes that by the time the Teatro Olimpico was built, numerous other theatres were functioning in London, Paris and Madrid and the design of the Teatro Olimpico seems not to have influenced subsequent theatre design in Italy or elsewhere in Europe (1991, 3).
In the previous section I discussed the theatricalisation of everyday life during the Renaissance, particularly through the staging of state spectacles such as the royal entry, the tournament and court entertainments. Roy Strong, in particular, has argued the case for a direct link between such spectacles and the power of the Renaissance state, usually vested in the person of the prince (an exception being the Venetian Republic which was an oligarchy. However, as Anderson notes, “theatrical performances were correspondingly dispersed . . . [among] the private houses of wealthy citizens” (1991, 16)). According to Strong:

Renaissance festivals focussed on the prince . . . the creation of an ‘image’ of a monarch to draw people’s allegiance was the task of humanists, poets, writers and artists. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, therefore, the most profound alliance developed between the new art forms of the Renaissance and the concept of the prince (1973) 1984, 21).

The implications of this relationship for the architectural design of purpose-specific theatre buildings emerge through the development of artificial perspective scenery. According to Barbara Freedman, the humanist Alberti, in his treatise on painting, took the ancient idea of man as the measure of all things, and developed a theory of ratio whereby all things could be known only by seeing them in comparison to other things (1991, 11-12). The ultimate measure of comparison, writes Freedman, was the human figure: “The use of the ratio redefined both sight and knowledge as human centered, relative, and perspectival rather than God centered and absolute” (12).

Vitruvius, too, had referred to perspective in his description of the three generic scenes of the ancient theatre and, according to Strong, in the Vitruvian amphitheatre “all lines of vision” met at an unoccupied place (1973) 1984, 35). However, Strong notes,

in both temporary and permanent Renaissance re-creations of antique theatres for courts this [unoccupied place] inevitably was appropriated for the royal box, an innovation that had no archaeological precedent (ibid.).

Strong argues that such a development was “logical” because the end point of “the choreographic motivation of any group of characters in space in a [medieval] court entertainment” was to pay “princely homage” at the throne of the prince. In the new perspectival organisation of space, tribute was still paid but now it was delivered optically, and absolute vision was equated with absolute rule (ibid.).
Anderson argues that it was less Palladio’s revival of Vitruvian classicism in theatre design (exemplified by the Teatro Olimpico) than the “sala delle commedie, with its increasingly complex scenic machinery,” providing a spectacle of perspective scenery, that influenced the later development of theatres as discrete structures (1991, 14). Furthermore, writes Anderson, it was the Renaissance court festival (“la festa”) that contextualised and provided the organising principle for the production of plays (usually comedies), usually as part of “a sequence of celebratory events lasting for several days” (ibid.). The social context for dramatic performances within a carnival or a celebratory festival emphasised not only the spectacular aspects of theatre design but also their impermanence:

In a very real sense the impermanence of the theatres was not merely a powerful demonstration of the prodigality of princely patronage, but an aspect of idealised time [that was] at the centre of these festivals. For a limited period of time the spectator steps out of everyday reality to view himself and his community on an eternal plane. The organised space created by the rules of perspective was not simply a background for a relatively trivial comedy, but a representation of an ‘ideal city’ dreamt of by Renaissance architects, while the intermedi could become complex allegorical expressions of the relationship between the ruling family and their subjects (1991, 14-15).

The range of different performances at Italian Renaissance festivals, including plays, embodied an imaginative recreation of social and political realities that were designed to have specific outcomes in the society of the time. Strong argues that the “advent of artificial perspective” in the Renaissance arose from architecture, attributing its invention to the architect Filippo Brunelleschi “who painted the first two documented views of buildings in perspective, seen as from a single viewpoint and based on a geometry of space” (1973-1984, 33). This perspectival organisation of civic space provided a visual metaphor for a humanist social ideal, although Strong observes the “irony” of a style which began as so pure an expression of humanist civic values, soon became a divisive cultural formula in which an enclosed area of the palace was transformed into an auditorium in which an elite few contemplated NeoPlatonic visions re-affirming their right to rule (34).

16In Italy and on the Continent; such ideas did not arrive in England until Inigo Jones deployed perspective scenery in the first court masques at the beginning of the seventeenth century.
17See Freedman (1991,13-14) and Smith (1981, 568) for comprehensive genealogies tracing Renaissance optical theory back to the tenth century. Smith also discusses the “psychological-epistemological basis” of medieval and renaissance optical theories.
From the examples of the royal entry and the festival stagings of comedy, we can see that the ideal representation of the city was as a microcosmic *theatrum mundi*, that is, a particular organisation of specific places that were designed to bring into being idealised space, within which acts of political hegemony could be allowed their full performative power.

6.3.3 The centrality of visual knowing and Camillo’s memory theatre

A number of scholars have noted the pre-eminence given by Renaissance humanists to visual knowledge over the spoken word. According to West:

what is definitive is not what is said, but what is seen, and hence, in this ideology that distinguishes observation from interpretation, what can be taken for granted . . . Along with the possibility of instant and complete knowledge, visual display seems to offer the possibility of being self-authorizing, of speaking for itself, like a hieroglyph or an emblem (1999, 250).

Furthermore, as Douglas Radcliff-Umstead writes, according to neo-Platonic beliefs, “pictures, contained in an hieroglyph or an emblem, were believed to signify an ultimate reality which words formed of ordinary letters could never represent” (1972, 48). Strong, too, demonstrates the centrality of visual knowing in Renaissance court festivals that “stemmed from a philosophy which believed that truth could be apprehended in images”, and which spoke to

the visual sense in a lost vocabulary of strange attributes . . . which, by the close of the sixteenth century, was a perfectly valid silent language within the make-up of the educated Renaissance mind ({1973}1984, 22-23).

This belief in the mystical and mysterious relationship between knowledge and images provided the epistemological foundation for the memory theatre built by Giulio Camillo in the 1530s. From the scanty source material available, it appears that Camillo’s theatre was built twice: once in Venice and again for his patron the King of France in Paris, although the dates of these, according to Yates, cannot be substantiated (1966, 135-138). This theatre was a prototype for another theatre which was to form part of Camillo’s never realised *magnum opus*, the *Gran Theatro delle Scienze* in which, writes Radcliff-Umstead, he
hoped to construct an encyclopedic arrangement of all existing knowledge of his time in such a manner that it could be set to memory through a system of magical emblematic images (1972, 47).

Although this work was never written, and the theatre “never fully perfected” (Yates 1966, 137), Camillo did dictate a sketchy outline of it to his friend and disciple, Girolamo Muzio, who published it in 1550, six years after Camillo’s death, as L’Idea del Teatro dell’eccellen. M. Giulio Camillo (140). It is from this work, and from some contemporary accounts, of varying reliability, from people who reported having seen Camillo’s theatres in either Venice or Paris, that modern scholars have attempted to reconstruct Camillo’s theatre.

Yates placed Camillo’s memory theatre within the Renaissance tradition of the art of memory derived from the ancient rhetorical system. In this system a speaker would memorise specific places within a room of an actual building and attach to these places (in his or her mind) images that would then be recalled as memory stimuli for the points s/he wanted to make in a particular speech s/he was giving (Yates 1969, 12). The building thus acted as an aide-memoire and the speaker would use the architecture of the room itself to structure his or her argument.

Camillo’s theatre, built of wood, was based on the Vitruvian amphitheatre, but unlike a Vitruvian (or any other) theatre, the spectator stood where the stage would be and gazed up into the “seating” (Yates 1966, 141). The five decorated doors on the frons scaenae of the Vitruvian theatre were the inspiration, Yates writes, for “seven gates or doors” which were also “decorated with many images”, and were located on the seven “gangways representing the seven planets” that marked the seven tiers of the theatre (ibid.). The reoccurrence of the number seven was, Yates writes, of course, no accident, as it was intended that “the student of [the theatre] is to be as it were a spectator before whom are placed the seven measures of the world in spettacolo, or in a theatre” (ibid.).

Camillo’s positioning of the spectator in this way was determined by hermeticism, the philosophical writings associated with Hermes Trismegistus and also with neo-Platonism. “For it is man’s function to contemplate the work of God,” stated the hermetic writings, “and for this purpose was he made, that he might view the universe with wondering awe and come to know its maker” (from Poimandres, volume IV, quoted in Christian 1987, 59). Following in the footsteps of the great fifteenth century neo-Platonists Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, who studied, in turn, the mysteries of the Corpus Hermeticum (Allen 1990) and the ancient Jewish Kabala (Radcliff-Umstead 1972),
Camillo turned, writes Radcliff-Umstead, “to Christian, Neo-platonic, Hermetic and Kabalistic sources”, deploying them in a “cryptic language” of hieroglyphic images of which “only the scholarly few would be able to grasp the meaning” (1972, 49-50). In planning his theatre, Camillo rejected the “metaphor of the human body as a microcosm of the universe”, writes Radcliff-Umstead, and instead returned to the ancient *topos* of the *theatrum mundi* as his organising principle (50).

### 6.3.4 Theatres of anatomy

The philosophy of man as microcosm or “little world”, however, was the idea underpinning Renaissance studies of anatomy, adding to such studies a layer of respectability. By looking into the human body, according to Giovanna Ferrari, anatomists could claim that they were studying God’s work: “The anatomist presented himself as the depository of the secrets of the microcosm, and the possessor of an intellectual form of knowledge rather than a practical and therapeutic one” (1987, 58).

In her article, “The Anatomy Theatre of Bologna”, Ferrari writes comprehensively about public dissections performed throughout Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although she focuses principally on public anatomy lessons performed at the University of Bologna, many of Ferrari’s observations can be applied to practices at other universities in Italy and throughout Europe. Ferrari observes that Bologna is significant in the history of anatomy because: “The teaching of human anatomy through dissection is unanimously thought to originate in Bologna itself at the beginning of the fourteenth century” (1987, 53). The teaching of anatomy through dissection spread to the major universities in Europe during the fifteenth century and, by the end of the century, Ferrari writes, it had “assumed new objectives” beyond simply training doctors (55). Renaissance scholars and artists saw the study of anatomy as a “precious instrument that could be used to investigate man, and with man nature”; an interest that was “sustained by the increasing availability of [lavishly illustrated] books on anatomy” that were “designed also to be of use to artists” (ibid.). The practice of anatomy was linked to painting and drawing through the development of more sophisticated printing and engraving technologies, a connection which, Ferrari observes: “remained necessary right up to the present day” (55-56).

In 1530, around the same time that Camillo was designing his memory theatre, Charles Estienne, a Paris-based professor of anatomy, wrote his textbook on the theory and practice of dissection, *De dissectione partium corporis humani*, which was published in 1545, five years before the posthumous publication of Camillo’s work. In one of its chapters, Estienne described an “ideal Vitruvian-style anatomy theatre” and justified the importance of such a structure. According to Ferrari:
Estienne said that anatomy was comparable to any other public show, and a dissected human body to “anything that is exhibited in a theatre in order to be viewed” (quicquid in theatro spectandum exhibetur), which, he wrote, appears a great deal more beautiful and pleasing to the spectators if they are able to see it clearly, from equally good vantage points, and without getting in one another’s way (85).

By this time, as Ferrari illustrates in her essay, public dissection was a popular activity, and what had once been performed in a private home for a handful of students now required a theatre to seat hundreds of spectators.\(^{16}\) That Estienne was aware of the design of classical theatres (via Vitruvius), is evidenced in his statement in De dissectione:

the anatomy table should be arranged in front of the theatre, in the place where the ancients placed the stage (Ante theatrum, quo in loco scenam antiqui constituebant, tabulam anatomicam . . . constituere oportet ) (quoted in Ferrari 1987, 85).

Ferrari notes, however, that Estienne’s semi-circular Vitruvian design was not adopted as the model of anatomy theatres until the “late eighteenth century”. It was, rather, the older design of the full amphitheatre, suggested by Alessandro Benedetti in his treatise Anatomice, sive historia corporis humanii (1497, published Paris: 1514), that provided the default-standard for Renaissance anatomy theatres (1987, 86). Like Camillo’s memory theatre, the demonstrations performed in the theatres of anatomy were underpinned by the unimpeachable authority of the ancients, in particular, writes Katherine Park, by the “Greek medical writer Galen of Pergamon’s” lost anatomical text, which had been rediscovered only in the late fifteenth century (1994, 14).

Benedetti’s treatise on anatomy, according to Ferrari, outlined the principles for the “new practice of public anatomy, which appears as a thoroughgoing ceremony.” The guidelines laid down by Benedetti would, writes Ferrari, provide the foundation for all such activities over the subsequent centuries (56–57). Benedetti’s book, dedicated to the emperor Maximillian I, invited the emperor and other luminaries to attend a public demonstration of anatomy (57). The purpose of “public anatomy”, Ferrari remarks,

\(^{16}\)In the early sixteenth century, Berengario da Carpi, an anatomist at Bologna University, performed a dissection of a placenta from an executed woman “before almost five hundred students of our University of Bologna and also many citizens” (quoted in Ferrari 1987, 61–62). Park discusses the performance of dissections for pedagogical demonstrative purposes in private houses dating back to the early 1300s (1994, 7).
judging by Benedetti’s own account . . . might be characterized as a party thrown by an up-and-coming professional figure as a means of self-promotion, aimed at a very mixed and eclectic community of Renaissance scholars (58).

In addition to stipulating that dissections should be performed at the coldest time of year so as to aid the preservation of corpses, Benedetti also recommended that a “temporary theatre [should be constructed] . . . with seats arranged in a circle, of the kind that are seen in Rome or Verona” (61). In this remark, according to Ferrari, Benedetti was referring to the ruins of ancient Roman amphitheatres, a connection that was commonly made through the nickname “Colosseum”, a name that was often substituted for and understood as “theatre”(84).

From the early sixteenth century onwards, public anatomy lessons were performed in temporary wooden theatres following, in varying degrees, the guidelines laid down by Benedetti. However, from the mid-sixteenth century, permanent anatomy theatres also began to be built, the history of which Ferrari lays out as follows. Anatomy theatres were constructed in Montpellier (1556) and in London in 1557 (nearly twenty years before Burbage’s and Brayne’s “Theatre”), in Ferrara (1588) and Basle (1589), in Pisa by about 1569, and in Padua in 1594, or possibly ten years earlier (1987, 72, n.76). Ann Blair also refers to the anatomy theatre at the University of Leiden, constructed in 1593 (which, she writes, imitated the one at Padua, thus suggesting the earlier date for the Paduan anatomy theatre), to which another educational dimension was added by early professors who, with their “collection of skeletons”, combined

general natural curiosities and antiquities [as well as] a large number of engravings that conveyed basic anatomical and medical information . . . while illustrating variations of the theme of memento mori (1997, 156-157).

The coldest time of year, recommended by Benedetti for dissections, also corresponded, in part, to the January carnival time. Ferrari suggests, taking into account there were a number of cold months when public dissections could be performed, that “it was not therefore the mere study of anatomy but rather the public anatomy ceremony itself that was tied to the carnival” (1987, 96). Although the seasonal link between public anatomy demonstrations and carnival time was followed more closely and for longer in Bologna, Ferrari writes that anatomy demonstrations in various other Italian cities continued to be linked to the periods of Christmas, Lent or carnival from the early sixteenth century and into the eighteenth century (97-98). Furthermore, she notes, regardless of whether they
were held strictly at carnival time or not, “public dissections seem always to have been
festive as well as solemn occasions, and to have attracted an audience of spectators not
themselves engaged in the discipline” (98). Certainly the atmosphere of the public
anatomy lessons was less one of quiet studiousness and more that of carnival revelry, a
situation that was already a problem back when Benedetti wrote his original treatise, and
recommended that “guards” be employed “to restrain the importunate plebs” (quoted in
Ferrari 1987, 98). The spirit of carnival, however, was inclined more to openness than
repression, and university officials in Bologna, despite earlier attempts to restrain carnival
“masking”, recommended in 1616 that the public dissections be open to “whoever wishes
to hear or to see, whether or not they are masked, and whether or not they are armed”
(quoted in 1987, 99).

By ending this chapter with the phenomenon of the public anatomy lesson performed
during carnival time, this discussion of various practices that can be classified under the
rubric of “theatre” has traversed almost a full circle. Beginning with Renaissance theories
of the self, I discussed how such theories presented a theatricalised subjectivity; the self
was a role to be performed, intersubjectively, on the stage of the world. Within what we
can term a theatrical ontology, Renaissance courts presented the activities of the prince (or
papal or secular lord) as performances for the benefit of the court itself or the wider
society. Such performances could be either symbolic spectacles designed to reaffirm the
power of the prince, or more instrumental ceremonies—such as coronations and royal
entries, or state funerals—which, in being witnessed by the population, ineffably bound
the ruler to his or her subjects.

The production of royal festivals was an industry in itself that encouraged humanist artistic
endeavour from which, among other things, developments in staging, in particular
perspective scenery and stage machinery, arose. However, although the word “theatre”
was often used in relation to such activities, it was still a relatively unfamiliar term,
reclaimed from antiquity, and the meaning it carried referred more to a “place for looking”
than it did to an art form involving actors, audiences, a stage and a discrete space
identified as the place where all these things interacted. Nevertheless, from the late
fifteenth century, temporary theatres erected for specific court festivals provided “places
for looking” for a variety of purposes, including the performance of plays.

The “place for looking” provided by a theatre was recognised by Giulio Camillo, and in
his memory theatre, reversing the direction of the gaze back up into the seating, he built an
educational device, based on a special kind of looking, that sought to reveal to the adept
the mysteries of human life and the cosmos. Finally, the anatomy theatres, predicated on
similar educative principles, in practice became venues for theatricalised spectacles: public anatomy lessons redolent with all the excitement and ceremony of non-scientific theatrical performances. In keeping with the “world inside out” (Bakhtin 1984, 11) of carnival time, the theatricalisation of everyday life in the Renaissance included, also and ultimately, the theatricalisation of death. All the theatricalised practices discussed in this chapter point towards certain ways of knowing, an epistemology arising from the great shifts in knowing and understanding human existence that started to occur in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.
CHAPTER 7: THE SIXTEENTH/SEVENTEENTH CENTURY
EPISTEMOLOGY OF ‘THEATRE’

The Renaissance discursive practice of “theatre” embodied the textual authority of humanist scholarship—indeed, to use Foucault’s terms, the pedagogical forms of humanism attempted to maintain and impose a particular discourse of theatre. Through what Foucault calls technical processes (places for watching, perspectivism), institutions (the universities where anatomy was practised, the various stagings of royal power), and patterns of general behaviour (the various “theatricalisations” of everyday life), the humanist theatrical discourse intersected at numerous points with Renaissance society. Many of these intersections were discussed in the previous chapter when I examined the non-art form designated theatres—Camillo’s memory theatre, theatres of anatomy and, just simply, places from which to watch—all of which were nonetheless actual places, physical structures that could be occupied by bodies.

Following the direction indicated by William West (1999) and Ann Blair (1997), in this chapter I examine what I have called “theoretical” or “literary” theatres. Such theatres were books that appeared, as Blair describes Jean Bodin’s Universae Naturae Theatrum (1596), “as a kind of table (tabula) presenting a vast and complex subject matter in a clear and synthetic order” (1997, 7). These books represented in two-dimensional form a purer version of the humanist ideal of seeing–knowing, unlike the physical theatre structures—although this was an ideal which Camillo aspired to make manifest in three-dimensional space. By returning to Heidegger’s notion, referred to in the Introduction of this thesis, that the world was “conceived and grasped as a picture” (1977, 129) we can begin to understand that the discursive practice of “theatre” that emerged in the Renaissance—whether in the form of “physical” or “theoretical” theatres—was an effect (in Foucault’s sense) of shifting relations of power–knowledge. The emergence of a “theatre” as a technology of knowing was symptomatic of a greater ontological transformation: the human subject shifted from its immutable place within an Aristotelian cosmic order to another, imagined locus, separate from the world; from this imagined place, the fantasy of mastery over that world through seeing-knowing emerged.

In the first section of this chapter, I survey the epistemologies of Aristotelianism and neo-Platonism—the first concerned with a material quality of the universe, the second with humanity’s relationship to divinity—that together formed the basis of the medieval sense of being. From here I turn, in the second section, to consider the ontological shift, marked by Heidegger, that occurred during the Renaissance, when being began to be theorised as somehow separate from the world. According to Heidegger, therefore, consciousness
pictorially grasped the world, leading to what Helmar Schramm, in relation to Galileo, termed the scientific “dream of the total overview” (1995, 115). Renaissance theories of perspective and the emerging discipline of cartography each contributed to the conceptual abstracting of the world into relative measurements of ratio, quantity, size, shape and distance. Within such a context, the metaphor of *theatrum mundi* re-emerged and was deployed in a range of texts whose authors sought, in various ways, to present “views” of the world.

These texts are as far from contemporary understandings of theatre as an art form as we can get. However, as Blair (1997) argues, their pedagogical function was leavened by an entertainment function. The final section of this chapter, drawing on Blair’s scholarship, briefly surveys the types of textual theatres that a range of writers published from the mid-sixteenth to the beginning of the eighteenth century. Although some of these books, drawing on the metaphor of *theatrum mundi*, were morally themed, others provided a systematic and comprehensive presentation on a particular topic. Thus a theatre, in this latter sense, referred less to *theatrum mundi* and more to a particular way of organising knowledge. Although such books might entertain their primary purpose was educative, and readers interpreted them not as performed representations but as collections of knowledge(s) informed by an epistemology of seeing–knowing.

7.1 The medieval sense of being

7.1.1 The medieval theory of everything

In his essay, “The Age of the World Picture”, Martin Heidegger writes:

> Metaphysics grounds an age, in that through a specific interpretation of what is and through a specific comprehension of truth it gives to that age the basis upon which it is essentially formed (1977, 115).

The metaphysical “ground” upon which the medieval sense of being was built comprised the “truths” of the ancient philosophers, moulded by subsequent commentators into a Christian ontology. “The highest knowledge and teaching”, writes Heidegger of this medieval paradigm,

> is theology as the interpretation of the divine word of revelation, which is set down in Scripture and proclaimed by the Church. Here, to know is not to search out; rather it is to understand rightly the authoritative Word and the authorities proclaiming it (122).
The epistemological basis of medieval thought was *a priori* knowledge based on scripture, the teachings of the Church Fathers, and the doctrinal interpretations of Aristotle and Plato—an understanding that encompassed all knowledge of being from the realms of angels to those of humanity and animals. This combination of discursive systems formulated a medieval theory of everything, that included Judeo-Christian, neo-Platonist and Aristotelianist discourses. At the risk of over simplification, neo-Platonism (derived from the works of Plato) was concerned with metaphysical speculations into the nature of God, whereas Aristotelianism (derived from Aristotle) was concerned with the organisation of the physical universe. In the Middle Ages, both systems were synthesised with Judeo-Christian ontologies.

The first century Jewish philosopher, Philo Judaeus, synthesised Plato’s world of ideas and the mind with the Jewish God, interpreting God as a transcendent principle from which ideas/mind manifested as the word or *logos* (Audi (ed.) {1995} 1999, 451). In the third century, neo-Platonic philosophers, Plotinus and Proclus, according to Liana Cheney, “fus[ed] Platonic forms with Aristotle’s concept of an ordered and hierarchical universe”—everything existed on different levels but emanated from a single divine transcendent principle called the “One” (Cheney: accessed 24/3/04). It was, according to Ernst Cassirer, a “metaphysical world of transcendence” (1963, ix). The Renaissance neo-Platonist, Nicholas Cusanus, adapted this idea, arguing that since mathematical knowledge was always certain it was a higher form of knowledge. Cusanus’s speculations, according to Cheney, “eventually became the basis of a new kind of science . . . the physical world was fundamentally mathematical and that a knowledge of mathematics would provide access to the divine mind” (Cheney: accessed 24/3/04).

Aristotelianism, on the other hand, as Edward Grant summarises it, was a philosophy “composed of the physical, logical and biological works of Aristotle, along with the late Greek and Arab commentaries thereon” (1978, 93). Cheney argues that the “Islamic [neo-Platonist] tradition . . . preferred Aristotle over Plato”, and when this tradition “intersected” with European thought in the twelfth century, the European preference for Plato “began to fade” (Cheney: accessed 24/3/04). According to Grant, medieval Aristotelianism was less concerned with the core works of Aristotle himself, focusing instead on the Latin commentaries of subsequent scholars and theologians, which generated a scholastic industry allowing Aristotelianism to become “the dominant, and, for some centuries, the sole intellectual system in western Europe” (1978, 94). The hierarchical arrangement of the Aristotelian cosmos comfortably reflected and divinely endorsed a similar organisation by rank and degree of feudal society. This immutable and hierarchical system of interdependent cosmic and social relations was the “truth” upon which the medieval age
was “essentially formed,” and although it was threatened by the discoveries of the Renaissance, it prevailed as an epistemology until well into the seventeenth century.

7.1.2 The Aristotelian Universe

Medieval Aristotelianism, according to Grant, “had two fundamental, but interrelated aspects” (Grant 1978, 94). The first was concerned with the basic structure of Aristotle’s cosmology, a structure that remained unchallenged for the best part of 450 years. It was the second aspect, “the details of cosmic operations”, however, that could not be agreed on by the “Aristotelian scholastics, who were the principal architects of the medieval world view” (95). Grant suggests that lack of consensus ensured the “longevity” of Aristotelianism as an epistemological system (95-96). Aristotelianism, according to Grant, had along the way been “infiltrated at certain points with Christian ideas of the deity, angels and soul” (93, 94).

The structure of the Aristotelian cosmos, however, was “remarkably simple”. The cosmos, Grant writes, according to Aristotle’s schema, was a sphere that was material and finite, and filled with matter which was itself divided into two parts, the celestial and the terrestrial. The celestial section began with the lunar sphere (the moon) and was filled with “perfect, incorruptible ether”, stretching past the stars to the limits of the “empyrean sphere”—the primum mobile or prime mover of the universe—itself. This incorruptible ether moved in a “perfect, uniform circular motion” and from it were formed the celestial spheres. In contrast to the perfect uniform circular motion of the celestial spheres was the constant movement and change of the terrestrial realm, which began below the lunar sphere and descended to the “geometric centre of the universe”. Terrestrial bodies were composed of four elements: earth, water, air and fire, each of which had its “natural place” and the “innate capacity for natural motion toward that place” (94).¹

In the Aristotelian cosmos the higher level always governed the levels below it. In the perfect unchanging realm of the celestial region, the only change possible was one of position; however, the terrestrial region was “characterized by incessant change as the bodies within it came into being and passed away” (ibid.). Everything in the terrestrial realm was associated with the elements of fire, earth, air and water and was positioned between heaven and earth. Fire was the element which was closely associated with the celestial realm; therefore, fire (and “fiery” things) always strove upwards to its natural place. In contrast, earth was associated with the centre of the universe, believed to be at the

¹The microcosm of the human body, like the macrocosm, consisted also of these four elements, manifested in the body as four “humours”: dry (earth), wet (water), cold (air), hot (fire). These humours produced the fluids of black bile, phlegm, yellow bile and blood, which were in turn responsible for melancholic, phlegmatic, choleric and sanguine temperaments (Aston (ed.) 1996, 224).
centre of the earthly globe, and hence things associated with earth were heavy and sank down towards that. In between was air, which was closer to fire, and water, which was closer to earth.

Aristotle’s account of the physical universe, Cassirer argues, was his attempt to refute Plato’s philosophy of the Forms which separated “the realm of existence and the realm of ideal ‘meaning’” (1963, 17). The problem for Aristotle, writes Cassirer, was that if reality was “one”, then how was it possible to grasp it with two mutually opposite ways of knowing? Aristotle argued that Plato’s dichotomy between “matter” and “form” could only be grasped if there was a way of moving from one to its opposite; an important distinction, as Cassirer explains: “Thus, for Aristotle, the concept of development becomes the basic category and the general principle for the explanation of the world” (ibid.). Therefore, Aristotle argued, within the “self-enclosed sphere” of the universe there was continuous motion emanating as “force” from the “divine unmoved mover of the universe” to the celestial region, and so on down to the sublunar region, with “no break, no absolute ‘starting’ or ‘stopping’ point in the path from the one to the other” (Cassirer 1963, 18).

Medieval and Renaissance “natural philosophy”, up until the seventeenth century, accepted a priori Aristotle’s world view until the weight of empirical evidence to the contrary—from astronomers such as Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo, and natural philosophers like Francis Bacon—proved it ultimately unsustainable. Similarly, neo-Platonism, which was ostensibly concerned with metaphysical speculations, contributed to the emergence of a way of thought that searched for abstract, reasoned explanations for observable phenomena.

7.1.3 Neo-Platonism

If Aristotelianism provided an account of the physical cosmos, then neo-Platonism was its metaphysical philosophical counterpart. Just as Aristotelianism divided the cosmos into higher and lower realms, a “graduated cosmos”, neo-Platonic thought posited a spiritual connection between “the domain of absolute form” to “matter as the absolute-formless”. According to Cassirer, the infinite passes over to the finite on [the “unbroken path of mediation”] and the finite returns on it back to the infinite. The whole process of redemption is included in it: it is the Incarnation of God, just as it is the deification of man. In this conception, there is always a “between” to be bridged; there is always a separating medium that cannot be jumped over but must be traversed step by step in strictly ordered succession (1963, 9).
Neo-Platonism, in Cassirer’s analysis, was a hybrid of Aristotelianism and Platonism (18). Lynda Christian (1969 1987, 41), however, not only argues that neo-Platonism is “hard to define” for contemporary scholars, but doubts that it in fact existed as a “clearly defined philosophy” before the writings of the late fifteenth century/early sixteenth century Christian neo-Platonist Marsilio Ficino. Cheney argues that the “instinct” of Italian Renaissance philosophers was towards “synthesiz[ing] thought systems”, and that the greatest Renaissance “synthesizer” was the neo-Platonist Pico della Mirandola (Cheney: accessed 24/3/04). Prior to this, Christian notes an earlier instinct to synthesise in the “Platonizing movement during the first centuries of the Christian era” that embraced, in addition to its Aristotelian and Platonic elements, elements of stoic, hermetic and neo-Pythagorean philosophy (1969 1987, 41).

It was, Christian writes, the first century Jewish philosopher, Philo, who “culled the best from both systems of thought” and synthesised Hebrew scripture with classical philosophy (42). According to Josef Stern, using “allegorical interpretation”, Philo “transformed biblical narratives into Platonic accounts of the soul’s quest for God and its struggle against passion, and the Mosaic commandments into specific manifestations of general laws of nature” (Audi (ed.) 1995 1999, 666). Philo thus, combined the “loving, just” Hebrew God with the “eternal One” of Platonism and Pythagoreanism (ibid.). Philo further posited the crucial concept of logos, described by Christian as “the emanation of God” that bridged the gap between “incorporeal God”, unknowable and absolute, and the “corporeal universe” (Christian 1987, 42). Stern adds that for Philo, logos was, variously, the “first-begotten Son of the uncreated Father”, “Second God”, “idea of ideas”, “archetype of human reason”, “pattern of creation”. Nevertheless, he agrees with Christian that logos had a bridging function and, additionally, “serve[d] as the unifying law of the universe, [and] the ground of its order and rationality” (Audi (ed.) 1995 1999, 666).

Philo, in a sense, anticipated neo-Platonism. The primary transmitter of neo-Platonism to the Renaissance, however, was the second century philosopher, Plotinus, via his student Porphyry (Audi (ed.) 1995 1999, 604-605). Cassirer writes that Plotinus held “emphatically” to Platonic “transcendence” and the fundamental Platonic dichotomy between the abstract realm of the forms and sensible matter (1963, 18). However, Plotinus also postulated an originary principle which he called “the One” (Audi (ed.) 1995 1999, 605). Reality, as understood by Plotinus, was

a series of levels (One, Intelligence, Soul), each higher one outflowing or radiating into the next lower, while still remaining unaffected in itself, and the
lower ones fixing themselves in being by somehow “reflecting back” upon their priors (ibid.).

Plotinus’s “mating” of Platonic transcendence to the Aristotelian idea of graduated development produced what Cassirer termed a “bastard concept of ‘emanation’” (1963, 18). In this account, the absolute, from its super-self, produces “super-abundance” which flows through the universe, multiforming it, “down to formless matter as the extreme limit of non-being” (ibid.). Despite the “dialectical tension” of the Platonic system being resolved through the Aristotelian concept of development, Cassirer notes, neo-Platonism maintained the Platonic notion of the absolute which “remains as the super-finite, the super-one, and the super-being, pure in itself” (ibid.).

The shift in the sense of being that began to occur during the Renaissance was due, in no small part, to the activity of humanist scholars “searching out” knowledge (as Heidegger (1977) put it) from the ancient thinkers and integrating it with the changes in society occurring around them. E.M.W. Tillyard, in The Elizabethan World Picture, observes that the old cosmic order was already in a “precarious” state by the mid-sixteenth century, having suffered from the assaults of thinkers such as Machiavelli, “to whom the idea of a universe divinely ordered throughout was repugnant”, and from the pressures of the “new commercialism [which] was hostile to medieval stability” ({1943} 1984, 16). Despite these pressures, Tillyard refutes the view that the medieval theocentric sense of being surrendered before secular humanism. He notes that the educated Elizabethan, despite having access to new ideas such as Copernican astronomy, was nonetheless “loath to upset the old order by applying his knowledge” (ibid.).

Similarly, Edward Grant (1978) argues that the old order, the medieval world view, persisted for so long because of the longevity of Aristotelianism as a theory of physical reality. The long reign of Aristotelianism, Grant explains, was attributable to its capacity to absorb “new” developments into its “operational substructure”, the “confused and fragmented” order of which “served inadvertently to protect the well-ordered macrostructure from critical scrutiny and enabled the medieval cosmos to retain its firm hold on the European mind” (103-104). It seems that both Tillyard and Grant are suggesting a certain duality in Renaissance thinking about the world: on one side was the orthodoxy of Aristotelianism, and on the other, the beginnings of experimental science and a whole new paradigm of reality.

These ideas, in different ways, folded back into Renaissance notions of theatricality. Most obviously, notions of a hierarchically ordered universe and the concept of emanation were
used to reinforce Renaissance doctrines of the absolute rule of princes. Rulers were constantly associated by artists and in court entertainments with the “One” from which all within the realm emanated, or else with the primum mobile—the container and mover of everything in the realm (Tillyard {1943} 1984, 16). Yet, apart from the fertile vocabulary of metaphors provided by these systems, greater significance lay in the tension between the doctrine of what was and the possibility of what could be. Reconciling the old with the new, Renaissance thinkers adopted theatrical metaphors to account for their ambivalent positioning both within but somehow separate from the world. What we might now understand as a proto-scientific consciousness, in its emergence was, in fact, theatrical consciousness. In the next two sections I explore how, why and in what circumstances this was the case.

7.2 The Renaissance “world view” and the emergence of “theatricality”
7.2.1 A “dream of the total overview”
Drawing on Heidegger’s notion of the Renaissance conception of the “world as a picture”, Barbara Freedman argues that such a notion

depends upon what we might term a spectator consciousness, an epistemological model based on an observer who stands outside of what she [sic] sees in a definite position of mastery over it (1991, 9).

This distinction, the idea of a separate observer whose gaze has mastery over all he or she surveys, is crucial to understanding the humanists’ use of “theatres” to achieve such an end. There is an important etymological pun, frequently commented on by theatre scholars, which knits the word “theatre” closely to the word “theory”, and it is the implications of the latter term which will inform our understanding of the former.2 Both “theory” and “theatre”, in their Greek forms, share the same stem, “theaomai”, which literally means “to look at.”3 In his essay “Science and Reflection”, Heidegger unpacks this etymology in detail, and his definition warrants quotation in full:

The word “theory” stems from the Greek verb theorein. The noun belonging to it is theoria. Peculiar to these words is a lofty and mysterious meaning. The verb theorein grew out of the coalescing of two root words, thea and horao.

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3This is how Ann Blair defines it (1997, 154). West, also, simply glosses it as “look” (1999, 248), and the Concise Oxford Dictionary (7th ed.) defines it as “behold”. This last definition links the term also to Heidegger’s etymology of “theory” when he spoke of the Greek “bios theoretikos, the way of life of the beholder” (1977, 164).
Thea (cf. theater) is the outward look, the aspect, in which something shows itself, the outward appearance in which it offers itself. Plato marks this aspect in which what presences shows what it is, eidos. To have seen this aspect, eidenai, is to know [wissen]. The second root word in theorein, horao, means: to look at something attentively, to look it over, to view it closely. Thus it follows that theorein is thean horan, to look attentively on the outward appearance wherein what presences become visible and, through such sight—seeing—to linger with it (1977, 163; quoted also in Freedman 1991, 48).

In the verb form, theorein, Heidegger finds two senses which cut directly to the heart of the Renaissance humanist use of “theatre”: first, “the outward look, the aspect, in which something shows itself, the outward appearance in which it offers itself”, and second, “to look at something attentively, to look it over, to view it closely”. If these senses of theorein are applied to “theatre”, then the latter term can refer to any “place for looking” in which anything that is being beheld offers itself to careful scrutiny by the beholder. This etymological connection between “theory” and “theatre”, as Helmar Schramm notes, originates “in the idea of an observer who actively watches” (1995, 115 [emphasis added]). West notes, also, that the terms “theory” and “theatre” were confused in some early English texts, thus: “an English text on the liberal arts from the late fifteenth century substitutes the word theoric for theatric in its discussion of the various mechanical arts” (1999, 248).

Implicit in the “showing itself” and the “looking at something attentively” of Heidegger’s etymology is the spatial operation, discussed in the previous chapter, of separating and distancing. Epistemology depends upon the viewing subject having a position separate and at some distance from the object of his/her knowledge. Schramm, referring to Galileo’s 1588 lecture at the Florentine Academy on “the surveying of Dante’s hell”, identifies this address as signalling an epistemological shift from the medieval theological conception of the theatrum mundi to the more scientific view of the Renaissance:

Dante moves through the cosmos of knowledge condensed into a heaven and a hell as an active, participating player. His is a wanderer’s description. But Galileo observed the geometric, spatial structure of Hell from a well-calculated distance. His representation of it is the record of an observer who has a clear, overall view of the object from a fixed vantage point (1995, 115).

From the Galilean vantage point, the scientific “dream of the total overview”, as Schramm calls it, is evoked (ibid.). To “theorise” becomes a “theatrical” activity: one establishes
oneself as an observer (or active beholder) of a thing that presents itself to be observed and known in its entirety.

Returning to Heidegger, “theory” in its ancient Greek taxonomy is the “beholding that watches over truth” (1977, 165). Heidegger also discusses how the world could become an object to the scientific “beholding” of “theory” (in its modern, post-Renaissance, sense). First, he marks how the Roman translations of theoria and theorein became contemplatio and contemplari, the latter term meaning “to partition something off into a separate sector and enclose it therein” (ibid.). Next, he examines the root of these Latin words which gives him templum, originally meaning the sector of the sky marked by the movement of the sun: “It is within this region that diviners make their observations in order to determine the future from the flight, cries, and eating habits of birds” (165-166). In a translator’s footnote, William Lovitt explains the significance of templum: it names “the place which can be seen from any point”, and also the place “from which any point can be seen” (166).

West similarly notes this etymology of contemplatio and templum. Taking as his source the “Roman etymologist Varro”, West argues that contemplatio is active seeing that creates the clearing for this particular kind of observation. According to Varro:

Whatever the place the eyes had gazed on [intuiti] was originally called a templum, from “to gaze” [tueri] . . . On the earth, templum, is the name given to a place delimited by certain formulaic words for the purposes of augury or the taking of auspices (quoted in 1999, 251).

The space of the templum was not simply found, Varro suggests, but needed to be created (through the utterance of “certain formulaic words”). As the above etymology illustrates, a special kind of space is “carved out” (Heidegger 1977, 165) for and by the gaze, a process which is both “theoretical” and “theatrical”.

7.2.2 Putting the world in perspective
This “theoretical” and “theatrical” mode of viewing the world reflected what Samuel Y. Edgerton Jr. terms a “metamorphosis of the imagination” that had been occurring since the thirteenth century (1987, 38). In the thirteenth century, the Franciscan scholar, Roger Bacon, argued to the pope for Christians to learn geometry as laid down by Euclid:

For without doubt the whole truth of things in the world lies in the literal sense . . . and especially of things relating to geometry, because we can understand nothing fully unless its form is presented before our eyes (quoted in 1987, 30).
From the introduction of Ptolemy’s *Geography* into Western Europe in 1400 (Edgerton Jr. 1987, 32), Renaissance scholars and artists began to see that the world could be surveyed, gridded and mapped, operations that were all predicated on the principle of a spatially separated observer. In the *Geography*, Ptolemy introduced the idea of the “cartographic grid” that enabled him to map longitude and latitude taking into account the perspective distortion brought about by the curvature of the earth. As Edgerton comments, it was not that he was interested in the illusion of perspective for its own sake, rather he was trying to find a way for the viewer to know that distances between the latitudes and longitudes are always the same no matter how distorted they appear on the curving globe (1987, 36-37).

Edgerton suggests that Ptolemy’s interest in framing his illusion of perspective was inspired by the manner in which scenic artists painted perspective scenery for the Greek theatre (37).

The recent introduction of Ptolemy’s *Geography* influenced the use of the perspective grid—particularly in early paintings that needed to depict perfectly perspectival curved surfaces—in fifteenth century European art (Edgerton Jr. 1987, 39). Initially through mapping, and then through perspective painting, the visual organisation of the world for the “view” of the detached spectator was created: the world, thus, was able to be “conceived and grasped as a picture” (to return to Heidegger’s characterisation of this shift, quoted in my Introduction (1977, 129)). With the world now able to be “pictured”, perspective painting literally put the world in the picture. For Ptolemy, the aim of geography had been to “survey the whole, in its just proportions” (quoted in Freedman 1991, 13), and in the fifteenth century, through the Ptolemaic matrix, the world could be abstracted into measurable distances and quantifiable proportions. Edgerton described the Ptolemaic gaze in explicitly theatrical terms:

Ptolemy’s system depended not on divine revelation, however, but on the quantifying eye of the human observer, who was now able to imagine himself detached from the world as if looking at it on a stage (1987, 38).

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Based on the work of Erwin Panofsky ( *Perspective as a Symbolic Form* {1924-25} 1992 ), it is a cliché of Renaissance perspective studies that perspective was used to unify pictorial space. As such, perspective imposed a spatial hegemony on representation. In a revisionist essay, James Elkins argues that textual and pictorial evidence demonstrates the use of multiple perspectives, and that unified perspective was used as an “embellishment” within an already existing “fictive space” (1992, 209-230).
It was, however, the fifteenth century Florentine humanist, Leon Battista Alberti, who was most responsible for putting the world into the picture. Not only had Alberti mapped Rome according to Ptolemaic principles in 1430, but in his treatise, On Painting (1435), he advocated “the cartographic grid as a means . . . of organizing pictures”, and advised painters to set up a velum or grid through which they could “observe and copy the natural world beyond” (Edgerton Jr. 1987, 39; Freedman 1991, 14). According to Edgerton, Alberti believed that such a device “trained both artist and viewer to ‘see’ the underlying geometry of nature, the truth of visual reality established by God at the Creation” (1987, 39).

As we saw in the previous chapter, Alberti’s chapter on spectacula in his later work, De Re Aedificatoria (1452), demonstrates that he was familiar also with Vitruvius’s work. It is therefore plausible to conclude that for Alberti, seeing the world perspectivally matrixed, was to see it theatrically. However, it was Sebastian Serlio who, nearly a century later, articulated a theory of perspective scenery, derived from Vitruvius, in the second volume of the five books of his Regole generali di architettura published in 1545 (Nagler 1952, 73). Serlio’s ideas of perspective reinstalled the Renaissance “dream of the total over view” in the theatre, conceived here as a place for presenting plays. Therefore, a world which had been conceived of both as a stage (theatrum mundi) and as a (world) picture was represented in a theatre, and pictorially positioned for a spatially separate spectator.

In this and the previous chapters I have been attempting to follow several pathways to this moment. First there is the archaeological/scholastic route: Renaissance humanists learned, from ancient texts and surviving ruins, of a structure in the ancient world called a “theatre”; an unfamiliar word, the meaning of which was understood by them as a “looking place”. As such, a theatre could be any place that was created for looking, and the events created for such places deliberately emphasised the visual (hence the Italian word spectacula). A second pathway is epistemological and derives from the shared etymology of “theatre” and “theory”. As Heidegger demonstrated, the etymology of “theory” contains within it the senses of the “outward look” of something and “to look at something attentively”. The act of looking, as articulated by medieval and Renaissance optical theories, was a physical and a metaphysical activity, and medieval and Renaissance perspectivists believed it was possible to see, and hence to know, things directly. Therefore as used by Renaissance humanist scholars, the term “theatre”, combining in its etymology senses of seeing and

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3Generally it is the Florentine architect Fillipo Brunelleschi who is credited with first demonstrating the laws of artificial perspective in painting (Edgerton 1987, 39). Alberti acknowledged this by dedicating On Painting to Brunelleschi (Freedman 1991, 14 n.16).


knowing, suggested a place for truthful seeing and knowing. Commenting on the longevity of metaphors of books, mirrors and theatres, Ann Blair observes:

to the pessimists these metaphors illustrated the need for proper interpretation, and the difficulty of finding “true spectators” or undistorted reflections; for the optimists, they expressed the ease of deriving clear instruction, direct representations, and true images of divine activity in the world (1997, 165).

7.2.3 Mapping the theatre of the world

Nevertheless, it was how one saw that directs us to a third pathway, that of the distanced “cartographic” observer. The cartographic observer, exemplified by Galileo, took up a position, a vantage point, from which to survey, measure and quantify; it was, by definition, a necessarily distanced position. Renaissance cartography was strongly influenced by Ptolemy’s grid which allowed him to transform the irregular topography of the world into a regular abstracted representation, the geographic map. However, as John Gillies argues, this did not nullify the older ideological representation of the world, a testament to which was the long publishing history of Abraham Ortelius’s Theatrum Orbis Terrarum (1570 - c.1612) which also spawned numerous imitations (1994, 202 n.32). Ortelius’s Theatrum took Ptolemy’s technical “god’s-eye view” of the world and combined it with the ancient topos of the theatrum mundi (in its Cynical/Stoical version) so that the reader was placed in a privileged position, gazing (from heaven it was implied) down at the earth. Such positioning was reinforced by Ortelius’s printing of a quotation from Cicero: “For what can seem of moment in human occurrences to a man who keeps all eternity before his eyes and knows the vastness of the universe?” (quoted in Gillies 1994, 80).

Ortelius’s Theatrum which, Gillies argues, set the standard and genre conventions for subsequent atlases, took as its guiding metaphor the ancient topos of the theatrum mundi. The frontispiece of the Theatrum depicts a stage upon which four emblematic female figures representing Europe, Asia, Africa, America and a bust for the yet undiscovered “Magellanica” (Australia) are posed. The figures of the four continents (reflecting the Aristotelian “cosmographic” hierarchy, with Europe enthroned atop the arch, and America reclining in her barbarity at the base), writes Gillies, were perhaps inspired by “Anverian pageantry”. Gillies speculates that Ortelius, who was a native of Antwerp,

may have first encountered the “Continents” in a theatrical milieu—that of the Anverian pageant-stage, where the female personification of “America”, along with various new geographic “sisters”, such as Magellanica, were added to the classical sisterhood of “Europe”, “Asia” and “Africa” (1994, 74).
The conceit of Ortelius’s *Theatrum*, according to Gillies, was that it was intended to replace the large map rooms of “a very large & wide house . . . a Princes gallery or spacious Theater” (qtd in 1994, 72) with a handy book-sized collection. The frontispiece, described above, Gillies argues, functioned as a kind of “doorway” inviting the reader to enter the *Theatrum* (73). According to Gillies, the decline of *theatrum* as a “generic for the atlas” in favour of the term *Atlas*, was linked, from the early to mid seventeenth century, to the disintegration of the ancient metaphysical system [that is, the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic system] which had the world at its centre (84). Nevertheless, the old imagery persisted, and Gillies notes that, despite Galileo’s telescopic observation of the “corrupted” surface of the moon, which appeared in a pamphlet in 1613, thus making a mockery of the immutability and incorruptibility of celestial bodies claimed by Aristotelianism, a version of the Mercator *Atlas* could still be published as late as 1636 with an intact “chain of being” as its centrepiece (84, 86).

As Gillies’s discussion of the Ortelius *Theatrum* demonstrates, these three pathways—the archaeological/scholastic, epistemological, and cartographic paths—were not separate but intertwined with each other. Alberti, as we have seen, wrote on architecture (based on Vitruvius), artificial perspective (inspired by Brunelleschi) and experimented with map-making based on Ptolemaic principles. Similarly, Serlio took his principal inspiration from Vitruvius but his technique of scenographic perspective undoubtedly derived from fifteenth century theories of painting, a prime exponent of which was Alberti in his *On Painting*.

Underlying all of these was the attempt to reconcile ancient and medieval Christian, neo-Platonic and Aristotelian ontologies with the new discoveries and re-discoveries of the Renaissance. These attempts to reconcile ancient and modern epistemologies led to
curiously contradictory outcomes, such as, the 1636 edition of the Mercator Atlas, which combined within its pages scientifically accurate (for the time) geography and a depiction of the old Aristotelian cosmic hierarchy. The old systems of thinking did not surrender without a struggle many surviving until well into the seventeenth century, and some even into the early eighteenth century. 8

7.3 Theoretical theatres
7.3.1 Theatres of Nature
Our modern idea of theatre emerged, in a sense, from the fissures created by the epistemological and social changes that occurred during the Renaissance. It did not emerge, as the date 1576 suggests, as a single moment of arising, but as multiple moments. If the 1576 Burbage and Brayne playhouse marked a beginning of theatre, then so too did another date, 1550, when Camillo’s L'Idea del Theatro—the deathbed testimony of a man who built prototypes of his vision of a theatre, twice, some time in the 1530s—was published, and subsequently spawned an industry of publications with theatrum in their titles (Blair 1997, 156; Bernheimer 1956, 230). In this genealogy so far, other dates, other beginnings have arisen, but our concern in this chapter is not with them, nor even with Camillo, but with what his work engendered. As Ortelius’s cartographic Theatrum, referred to above, demonstrates, and as Gillies argued, there was a close relationship between the imagery of the Theatrum and the iconography of public spectacles, the merchant pageants of sixteenth century Antwerp. Furthermore, Ortelius’s Theatrum “staged” the metaphor of theatrum mundi by presenting the world as though in a “theatre”. Finally, this “theatrical” presentation of the Theatrum represented an epistemological statement of Renaissance humanism; according to West, a “theatre” “authorised” the knowledge contained within it. “Along with the possibility of instant and complete knowledge”, writes West,

visual display seems to offer the possibility of being self-authorizing, of speaking for itself, like a hieroglyph or an emblem . . . The theater as a “place for looking” suggested the possibility of a knowledge based on a shared sensual experience, prior to any reflection or interpretation (1999, 250).

Ann Blair argues that the word “theatrum” in the title of a book or pamphlet suggested to the reader that the writer was attempting a “global” approach to the subject (literally so, in the case of the geographic theatres discussed above), and that the information contained

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8 However not without a certain tension, as Tom Conley argues:
It can be said that the NeoPlatonic configuration of the microcosm and macrocosm or the concordia mundi did not continue to hold as it had since the beginning of the sixteenth century. Or, if Platonic figures were used, they had to be changed in view of a world whose finitude was becoming evident (1992, 61).
therein would be systematically organised in some manner. Used as a book title, Blair writes, “theatrum” “announces encyclopedic ambitions to treat a vast topic in a concise and systematic way, and graces all kinds of works that try to accomplish this elusive goal” (1997, 153).

Yet the ontology that underpinned such a usage was founded on the medieval epistemology of the universe as a divinely ordered place. Thus, within the ordered harmony of nature, the astute observer could read signs of divinity. A “theatre”, as a place that demanded and allowed attentive observation, provided the space for such observation. Blair notes that in addition to the “encyclopedic” uses of “theatre”, the metaphor had two other uses: the theatrum mundi which had the world as a stage, humanity as the actors, fortune as the producer and the heavens and fate as spectators (or variations thereof, as discussed in Chapter 5), and a “natural philosophical” use (ibid.).

Natural philosophy, as the term suggests, was the study of things in nature, but not in a modern empirical manner. Rather, Blair writes, it was study inflected by Aristotelianist scholasticism that

consisted primarily, for over two thousand years, in the transmission and criticism of authoritative texts and their successive commentaries. To make natural knowledge was to transmit, sort, explain, and modify the definitions, facts, and arguments accumulated previously, producing texts that following generations of scholars would process in much the same way (1997, 4-5).

According to Blair, within a theatre of nature, it was the human who spectated, rather than acted, and who looked upon the world as if it were a stage upon which “God displays his skill and providence as author and producer” (153).

The metaphorical precedent for the “theatre” of nature was the medieval notion of the “book” of nature. The book of nature, according to Blair, was “written by God, alongside the Bible,” and the “creatures” of the world were “the letters or pages that spell out divine wisdom and bounty for the human reader” (154). It was this particular way of looking at the world, writes Blair, which made the later use of “theatre” in the book titles and prefaces of natural philosophical works a fairly uncontroversial and obvious choice. “Books” and “theatres”, together with the other medieval metaphor, the “mirror”, Blair argues, coexisted and were used to reinforce the arguments of various writers in their works on nature and theology from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance (165). The particular attraction of medieval and Renaissance writers to metaphors of theatres and
mirrors, she suggests, arose from their belief that theatres and mirrors portrayed an undistorted image of nature.

Herbert Grabes, in *The Mutable Glass*, his work on mirror-imagery in texts and titles of works of this period in England, notes the importance to the medieval and Renaissance mind of “imitatio, the principle of analogy, in accordance with which the whole cosmos was regarded as being structured” (1973 1982, 228). Imitation, Grabes argues, was superior to interpretation because it represented in an undistorted manner what was believed to be “pre-existent”, already there:

Central here was the re-creation of the pre-existent: in aesthetic theory, imitation of *natura* by the *artes*; in the earlier neoclassical theory, imitation of models . . . Important was a gnosiological position shared by art and science: in understanding nature and the world, it was necessary to reflect objective knowledge in language *secundum modus recipientis*, yet without undermining its ontological basis. The ideal metaphor for this was the mirror—no matter how often it is confronted with an object, it behaves as a reflector with absolute circumspection preserving that object’s ontological essence (1973 1982, 228).

However, Blair argues that the “theatre” of nature had a unique appeal that was not shared by “mirror” nor by “book” metaphors:

the “theater of nature” in Renaissance natural philosophy emphasized especially the vastness and grandeur of nature, its varied and complex harmonies laid out all at once for human contemplation—stressing the same kind of encyclopedic themes as the “theater” as [book] title. More specifically than the book, the theater was also associated with moral edification and the twin goals of pleasing and instructing (1997, 154).

Most Renaissance authors of natural philosophy, writes Blair, emphasised the “static qualities” of the “theater of nature” which, in its “vast expanse, intricate order, and elaborate construction”, presented to the spectator a “complete and coherent view of the world in one gaze” (155). Blair argues that the beauty of the theatre of nature lay in the “sympathetic” bonds that connected the disparate elements within it, and these synergetic links suggested the metaphor of a theatre to Renaissance authors. According to Blair, for these authors: “the *theatrum mundi* is less a dramatic sequence requiring a stage director than a vast ordered construction revealing a divine builder” (ibid.).
Although the “theatre of nature” co-existed with other metaphors such as that of the “book” and the “mirror”, Blair emphasises that it was the theatrical metaphor that “especially conveyed the encyclopedic ideal of bringing a vast topic under a single, all encompassing gaze” (157). However, this theatrical “all encompassing gaze” was not yet Schramm’s (1995) “dream of the total overview—although it was moving towards it—because the spectator was still situated within an Aristotelian cosmic hierarchy. But with Bodin’s use of the theatre of nature metaphor, Blair identifies a new placement of the human spectator: the student Theorus and his guide Mystagogus have entered into the “theatre of the world” and thus, she suggests, although “the role for humans . . . is not to act out a role, but to watch and contemplate, the spectator is still part of the scene, ambiguously both observer and participant in nature” (154 [emphasis added]).

7.3.2 The human as spectator of divine theatricality

The idea of the human as spectator of God’s divine works arises principally in hermetic philosophy and the neo-Platonicism of Philo. According to hermeticism, the human was first among God’s creations and was placed upon the earth to admire God’s works and, through knowing such works, to know God (Blair 1997, 157; Christian {1969} 1987, 59). Similarly, Philo’s notion of logos—the not easily defined conduit and mediating principle, between the absolute infinitude of God and the material universe—is the force that has “created the world as a lovely spectacle for man” (Christian {1969} 1987, 43). Logos, according to Philo, as discussed above, could alternatively be an emanation from God, or an incarnation of God, therefore, Christian writes, in the spectacle created by logos for humanity: “the creator is revealed in his creation; to observe the passing show is a step toward gnosis” (ibid.). To look thus upon the world was an act of piety. In Philo’s philosophy, recounted by Christian, “the Ruler of all things” provided, for humanity’s “enjoyment” the world as “a feast and a great spectacle”, and “desired that on coming into the world man might at once find both a banquet and a most sacred display [theatron hierotaton]” (quoted in Christian {1969} 1987, 43-44).

These ideas informed the epistemology of Camillo’s memory theatre, which presented, in their entirety, the complete works of neo-Platonic, Cabbalistic and Hermetic philosophy, in a mnemonic form. Camillo hoped that the user of his theatre would need only to see in order to remember, and thus to know (Yates 1966, 140). Knowing, for Camillo, was itself “divine” because, according to Yates, “the intellect is drawn from the very substance of God” (151). Camillo’s proposed theatre presented theory as a tangible object, allowing its user to have the ultimate viewpoint from which to observe a world made in the image of God.
Based on his belief in the divinity of man, writes Yates, Camillo made “the stupendous claim of being able to remember the universe by looking down upon it from above, from first causes, as though he were God” (151-152). This claim was not, however, as blasphemous as it might first appear. According to Hermetic belief, God created in man a second God who was, himself, a *demiourgos*, or second creator, and in the image of God; thus, writes Yates, “hermetic man is created in the image of God in the sense that he is given the divine creative power” (150). But this divinity in man exists only in his intellect, from which he has fallen into his body. Fortunately, although he has fallen, he does not lose the divinity within himself, and he can still recover “his full divine nature . . . through the Hermetic religious experience in which the divine light and life within his own *mens* [intellect] is revealed to him” (ibid., and also following pages to 155). “Theory” in Camillo’s “theatre” was, recalling Heidegger’s definitions, both “lofty” and “mysterious”, and presented itself to an attentive beholder. Camillo’s “imagined transformation”, according to Paula Findlen, was “that scholars should become spectators” (1994, 208).9

Despite such positionings, it must be remembered that the human observer was not separate from the *theatrum mundi* and was available for observation (and here we see, for example, the metaphorical underpinning and logic of the “theatres of anatomy” discussed in the previous chapter). According to Blair,

> the human spectator thus examines himself alongside the rest of nature with the same detached analysis of physiological and psychological functions. In the theater of nature the human spectator does not become an actor with a moral dimension, or the object of the spectator’s compassion (1997, 158).

Blair also notes that for the sixteenth century scholars François Baudouin and Phillipe Duplessis Mornay, the “divine agency” operating in nature was also working in human affairs, and it took on a historical dimension through Baudouin’s notion of a “theater of all the centuries” (158-159). In this way, Blair argues, “the cosmic theater of divine providence” was extended from its “usual spatial definition in nature to the temporal dimension; but in this temporal extension to the metaphor humans are not just spectators but also actors under divine direction” (159).

The subject of Blair’s study, Jean Bodin’s *Universae Naturae Theatrum* (1596) combined within its pages lists and explanations of “facts” which were, she relates, “largely drawn

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9Erasmus, in “The Godly Feast” (1522) referred also to the “attentive” observer: “Nature is not silent but speaks to us everywhere and teaches the observant man many things if she finds him attentive and receptive” (quoted in Findlen 1994, 155).
from books”; and which “incorporated ‘experience’ of various kinds” (1997, 3). In a Europe wracked by religious and civil wars, Blair writes, Bodin hoped also to
demonstrate for the agreement of all the greatness and providence of God . . . [and] to restore much-needed order in society and to stem a rising tide of impiety, notably by inspiring everyone to worship the Creator (ibid.).

In his *Theatrum*, writes Blair, Bodin not only used the metaphor of the theatre of nature in its content, but by using it in the title, “easily conflate[d]” his subject (nature) with its study (natural philosophy), and “conflate[d] the material he will discuss, nature, with the book itself which discusses it” (159-160). Mirroring what he saw as the “synthetic” order of nature, Bodin organised his book as a “*tabula*” (“table”), as he and his French translator, François de Fougerolles, described it (160-161). This “tabular” organisation of Bodin’s *Theatrum*, according to Blair, had three functions. First, it was designed to be easily followed and understood; second, it covered the material in its entirety; and third, it established the links between the different subjects (163). To the French translation Fougerolles added a kind of index which he also described as a “table” (“*tableau*”). The reader was thus invited by Fougerolles to

use these tables like a door or a board [*planché*] to enter the *Theater* and to take his place according to his ability or according to the nature of the subject which he wants to contemplate and with great contentment (quoted in Blair 1997, 162).

The human spectator *entered into* the theatre of nature, and in a similar fashion he was invited to enter Bodin’s “theatre” of nature’s theatre. Blair comments that Fougerolles’s term, “*planché*”, was also associated with the “theatre” as a place for performance: “Fougerolles’ *planché* may be a signboard assigning seats or a program of sorts; it helps the viewer find what he has come for” (163). The connection with a performance theatre continued, Blair notes, in Bodin’s use of “*tabula*”, which, she suggests, may have had additional metaphoric resonance by referring to a “*tabula picta* or painting such as might be used as the backdrop on a stage” (ibid.). Indeed, the term could even “denote the stage

100 “Experience” to Renaissance natural philosophers, as Findlen notes, “encompassed a wide range of activities in scientific discourse.” The terms *experientia* and *experimentum*, in medieval usage, “emphasized experience as common knowledge that supported the universal laws of nature without any necessary verification”. However, in “early modern” usage “experience” was defined as the “specific description of the behaviour and appearance of natural phenomena. Experience became *evidence*, thereby taking an active role in the construction of axiomatic principles.” Findlen warns that, as always, the distinctions between the medieval and Renaissance senses of experience were not so clear-cut, and Renaissance natural philosophers could use either sense interchangeably (1994, 203-204).
itself” with its Serlian scenery receding in orderly perspective (ibid., and 286 n.47). These interpretations of *tabula* notwithstanding, Blair returns to the way Bodin himself understood his work, which was as a “Theater of Nature which is nothing other than a table of the things created by the immortal God” (quoted in 1997, 163).

7.3.3 *The book of everything: a “theatre of theatres”*

In all the books and pamphlets published between 1550 and 1700 with the word “theatre” in their titles, Blair argues, “none . . . closely resembles Bodin’s *Theatrum* in subject matter and form” (166). Disregarding those sixteenth and seventeenth century works concerned with the architecture of the ancient theatres or anti-theatricalist polemics, Blair claims that all those publications with “theatre” in their titles, whether or not it was ever referred to again in the text itself, “rest[ed] primarily on one or both of two major themes”:

a moral theme, which draws either on the canonical metaphor of the theatre of human life or on the association with the theater of the ancients which combined edification with entertainment; and a formal theme, in which the book as “theater” aims, regardless of its actual success, to provide global treatment of a large subject in the form of a “tabula,” a concise, clear, and structured if not graphically tabular presentation (166-167).

Neither theme excluded the other, and from Blair’s categories we can see that these different “theatres” either shared the formal characteristics to which she refers, or else their content referred to “the canonical metaphor of the theatre of human life”; frequently they employed both themes. The first of Blair’s “theater of ‘theaters’” (166), the “Laments and Moral ‘Theaters!’”, were specifically concerned with the *theatrum mundi* metaphor (167-170). As such they dealt particularly with human existence which, in the first case, exemplified by Jaques’s speech from *As You Like It*, was portrayed as a series of miseries. In the second instance, the works sought to teach an exemplary moral lesson, either as a warning or as an inspiration. Despite their subject matter, Blair comments, the authors of these theatres sought to entertain as much as to edify. The popular emblem books of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, books that combined an image with a written homily, were frequently entitled “theatres”. Blair argues that this titling reflected “the common perception of the ‘theater’ as the ideal combination of entertainment and moral edification”, thus, it well suited the entertainment and instructional purposes of the emblem books (169).

Blair’s next group of “theatres”, the “Illustrated and Tabular ‘Subject Theaters’” (170-172), were books which either conveyed information, primarily through carefully drawn and beautiful illustrations, botanical “theatres” being the most well-known example (170); or
followed a historical theme and, seeking to present a comprehensive overview of the subject, laid it out in a “table” that showed the various interconnections (171). Related to these theatres of history were the equally common “‘theaters’ of famous men” (172) that were organised in a similar fashion.

Another category of “theatres” were those Blair calls “Pedagogical ‘Theaters’” (172-174). These were, she writes, in essence either “tabular study guides” or else the term was used to describe academic “disputations”. Regarding this latter usage, Blair remarks

Perhaps in these cases the metaphor refers to the public staging of a disputation; or perhaps it is meant to glamorize a routine scholastic exercise by associating it with a contemporary trend with broader appeal (172).

Blair also creates a separate category for “Geographical ‘Theaters’” (174-176), of which Ortelius’s *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (1570) was an example. In fact, she argues, Ortelius’s work generated a new genre, “a title and an expression that, from only two occurrences in Roman literature, soon grew to become a cliché” (174). Ortelius’s handily sized collection of maps set the standard for subsequent imitators who wrestled with the problem, shared by many creators of theoretical theatres, of how to comprehensively deal with a subject without reducing it (174-175). “Theatres”, like Ortelius’s *Theatrum*, also organised their information in a tabular form, and alternated their visual representations with “textual descriptions of the physical and human geography” (174). Geographical theatres, notes Blair, were “not exclusively collections of maps”, but were more commonly “defined by place”, that is, they were of “cities taken together or singly, of European countries or provinces (from France to Denmark), of exotic places and peoples (from Mexico to the Orient), of battlegrounds and fortifications” (175).

The other dimension to the different sort of “theatres” in Blair’s taxonomy is that of the “Theater as Collection” (176-178). Blair writes that often the systematicity of how material was arranged in a “theatre” was sacrificed in favour of heterogeneity of content: the writer’s desire to assemble a “massive” amount of material on a particular subject outstripped his capacity to organise it coherently (177). These “theatres” were, Blair, writes, forerunners of the encyclopædia, a word which was also coined in the sixteenth century from ancient sources, an etymology that is now acknowledged as “spurious” (176). The “theatre as collection”, in other words, was little more than an “anthology”. In the introduction to *Theatrum chemicum* (1602), writes Blair, this anthologising was made explicit:
these [texts] brought into one volume in this way offer the complete, or at least the greatest extent of the whole art [of alchemy], as in some most beautiful theater, for the pleasurable viewing and observation of the studious . . . I took great care that the works of these men, as many as could be obtained, gathered from everywhere at great expense and effort, were collected [digeri] and arranged in one body in a kind of theater (quoted in 1997, 178).

However, collecting was an activity in its own right. As we saw in the previous chapter, medical professors collected medical specimens, antiquities and curiosities from nature, and displayed them in the same anatomy theatres in which dissections were performed. The metaphor of the “theatre of nature” which underpinned Bodin’s book also underpinned collections from nature: specimens from nature’s “theatre” were displayed by collectors in their proto-museums called “theatres”. According to Paula Findlen,

collecting provided an important mechanism to facilitate the transition of natural philosophy from a largely textual and bookish culture, difficult for all but the most learned to access, to a tactile, theatrical culture that spoke to a multiplicity of different audiences (1994, 9).

Although Findlen’s use of “theatrical” alludes more to the performative aspect of collection on display, nevertheless, the collection—whether in physical or book form—was by definition a “theatre”.

From the foregoing we can see that during the Renaissance there were long-established metaphysical principles underlyng the metaphorical uses of the “theatre of nature”. The world was believed to be God’s handiwork. Therefore, the hand of God could be discerned in nature by the observant human, a spectator who had been placed in the world, it was believed, by God, for the express purpose of witnessing His work and thus coming to know God. As an epistemological system, a way of knowing the world, the “theatre” offered the human spectator the possibility of seeing, in one view, the great expanse and interconnectedness of God’s divine creation—the world. In addition, the theatrical metaphor also positioned the human observer within the theatre. The spectator chose to enter into the theatre within which he or she then became the observer and the observed. Despite its ancient lineage, the metaphor of the “theatre” was a late addition to the metaphors employed by scholars in the medieval and early modern eras. Blair argues that, unlike the medieval metaphors of books and mirrors, the metaphor of the theatre had the added attraction of offering the possibility of pleasurable instruction.
The Renaissance world picture did not replace the paradigm of a medieval sense of being; rather, it functioned as kind of palimpsest through which the traces of the older system were still discernible. Indeed, the creators of the epistemological “theatres” that I have described in this chapter attempted to combine such older knowledges with the emerging sense of a separate, distancing and abstracting overview. The notion of watching, and through such seeing, coming to know, was philosophically grounded in neo-Platonist and hermetic ideas, and was also implicit in the etymology of “theatre”. Late fifteenth century taxonomies of the arts, following Hugh St Victor’s twelfth century categorisation of the “mechanical” arts, repeated his classification of *ars theatrica* as the seventh art covering all activities performed, principally, for *spectators*: “The name “theatrica”, writes Tatarkiewicz, “seems to indicate that the spectator is an essential factor of this art” (1965, 266). The emphasis of *theatrica*, therefore, was concerned less with what was done (or performed), and more with the fact that it was watched and interpreted by spectators. This relationship of theatricality to spectating did not even require action—an image or text could suffice—but it was the single element shared by a diverse range of activities that, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were embraced by the rubric of “theatre”.
EPILOGUE

I am sitting in a meeting room with a group of colleagues who teach with me in the Bachelor of Performance Theory and Practice course at the University of Western Sydney (UWS). Due to funding cuts, the university as part of its Academic Program Review (APR) has decided to halve the total number of subjects taught across the university, and this has meant that our old degree is being “deleted” and replaced with a new Bachelor of Performance. It is the third restructuring exercise that some of the staff present have been involved in, in the last five years. Our task is to create the new degree with a drastically reduced subject load.

The Bachelor of Performance Theory and Practice course is institutionally located within the School of Contemporary Arts (SOCA) and, as part of the restructuring exercise, the School has been encouraging those responsible for our course and for the courses in Music, Fine Arts and Electronic Arts to find opportunities for inter-disciplinary collaborations. In principle, most staff support this, but tensions arising from different work practices, ideologies and territorial boundaries are present and need to be negotiated. Listening to such discussions and reading suggestions for “Graduate Attributes” and “Binding Qualities” for the School, together with the mission and vision statements for the university itself, I notice a surprising familiarity in the discourse that is emerging.

To the wider, non-academic, circle of my family and friends, I have been engaged in what seems to be a Talmudic-style exercise, concerning myself with an obscure corner of an academic conversation that does not appear to relate in any significant way with so-called “real world” concerns. However, the topic that I have been worrying at and about for the last four years is very much alive, and indeed informing “real world” decisions in the institutional context of yet another UWS restructure. So how do the events occurring at UWS relate to this critical genealogy of theatricality?

The question that has continued to announce itself urgently to me when writing this thesis is: “What is theatricality?” This is a question which “naturally” seems to suggest that “theatricality” is the appropriate object of interrogation. However, the question itself is profoundly flawed; theatricality is not a thing to be discovered/ uncovered, to be analysed and have attributes assigned to it. Rather, it is a term, a particular discursive marker that stands for attributes, qualities or values that can be associated with the art form, theatre. As such, theatricality circulates in discourse as a kind of shorthand, “one size fits all” notion, the meanings of which can be assumed and therefore allowed to pass without comment. Such commonsense usages, in everyday and non-critical contexts, are relatively
unproblematic. Theatricality, in these quotidian settings, is invoked as a metaphor in order to comment on particular behaviours and to distinguish them from other kinds of behaviour. As Burns (1972) observed, in a Western cultural context spontaneity is valued whereas behaviour that is seen as composed is ontologically suspect. Theatre is associated with highly conventionalised and composed behaviour; therefore, commonsense interpretations of behaviour which the interpreter associates with theatre is deemed theatrical and less than authentic (because such behaviour lacks spontaneity).

However, when we turn to more specialised uses of the term, the unstated assumptions, tacit meanings and shorthand definitions associated with it come into play. I began this enquiry with another case study, Keith Gallasch’s review of my production of Customs, and noticed a particular discourse in operation; a discourse based on an interpretive premise in which certain practices understood as “theatrical” were considered less than desirable than certain other practices interpreted as “performance”. The putative “truth” of Gallasch’s assertions was of little interest to me. I was more interested in the interpretive construction of “theatre/performance” and the discourse within which it was imbricated. This led me to a wider academic conversation within the fields of Theatre and Performance Studies, to the edge of a battleground where opposing claims to the Truth fought for interpretive dominance. My need to delineate “Theatre” and “Performance” Studies indicates a victory of sorts—at least in English-speaking countries.

In the early 1990s the field of Theatre Studies in the US and Australia, and to a much lesser extent in Europe, engaged in its own wars of Reformation in which a fiercely “Protestant” Performance Studies struggled to overthrow a “Catholic” Theatre Studies. I use these metaphors advisedly. Like a latter-day Luther, Richard Schechner at various conferences and from the pages of TDR attacked the “string quartet of the twenty-first century” a project with which, as Stephen J. Bottoms (2003) argued recently, he had been involved since the early sixties. “American theatre” Schechner thundered in 1962, “. . .has been too long the call-girl of money and ambition. In some sense we hope to restore [its] virginity” (quoted in Bottoms 2003, 176). Schechner’s reformist zeal was shared by Peggy Phelan and Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, for whom theatre was, as Bottoms writes, “the acting out of dramatic literature in a purpose-built building, whereas performance is taken to encompass pretty much anything and everything else” (2002, 173).

The purported plurality of performance (and by association, Performance Studies) emerged from another discourse: a set of articulations grounded in early twentieth century modernism that valorised cutting-edge and avant-gardist work, and in so doing enacted its own hegemony. Within the field of Theatre Studies, as Woods (1989) and Vanden Heuvel
(1991) observed, this privileging of the avant-garde was a defining feature of the discipline in the twentieth century; but it was also a response to what Ackerman (2001) and Puchner (2002, 2001) described, after Barish (1981), as modernist anti-theatricality. In historical terms prior to the twentieth century, anti-theatricality was simply opposition to theatre, usually on moral grounds, but also for ontological reasons: theatricality was deceptive, it could mask or hide the truth. For a variety of ideological reasons, most springing from what Fischer-Lichte (1997) termed the “culture crisis” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the historical avant-garde positioned itself in opposition to so-called bourgeois culture (even though the majority of avant-garde artists were themselves scions of the bourgeoisie). Avant-garde theatre artists, therefore, rejected the theatre of their day and searched for the “essence” of their art, which was understood by them as its “theatricality”, or, as Barthes (1972) later described it: “theater minus text”.

This avant-gardist discourse in the US is mapped by Bottoms through TDR from when Schechner “took over the editorial reins” in 1962 (2003, 176). Nailing his manifesto to the church door, Schechner, according to Bottoms, attacked the commercially successful Edward Albee play *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* “The lie of his [Albee’s] work”, wrote Schechner, “is the lie of our theatre and the lie of America. The lie of decadence must be fought” otherwise it would “have an infective and corrosive influence on our theatre” (quoted in 2003, 177). Although Bottoms’ essay is specifically concerned with analysing the homophobic aspect of such discourse, the gendered positioning of theatricality as “feminised” or “homosexual”, contra “virile, heterosexual” avant-garde performance, points toward the interpretive binarism of “authentically efficacious” performance and “emptily ostentatious” theatre (174).

The anti-theatricalism of the statements by Schechner and others in the early sixties reflected traditional anti-theatralist concerns: ontological anxiety, moral panic, and the conviction of rightness. The theatre, once again it would seem, became a convenient whipping boy for various writers. Bottoms’ text, however disturbing it may be, must be seen within the context of a battle for the truth—a ground which Bottoms declares from the outset:

the expansion of Performance Studies over the last couple of decades seems both to have exponentially expanded the potential field of study for theatre-trained scholars, and to have contracted the field of Theatre Studies itself, by imposing a curiously limited and limiting definition of that which constitutes “theatre” (2003, 173).
Similarly, at UWS another battle for the truth is also under way. On the one hand there is a Foucauldian disciplinary process in train: systemic restructuring is forcing and producing certain effects, the whole philosophy and rationale of a number of degrees are being transformed through “structural” reform. The Academic Program Review (APR) has recommended that the old Bachelor of Performance Theory and Practice, which currently comprises three key programs in Acting, Dance and Theatre-making, become a single Bachelor of Performance. With the number of subjects on offer drastically reduced, it will no longer be possible to keep these programs distinct within the new degree. The conversations in which the staff from the program areas are engaged centre around a single question and its ramifications: What are the graduates from this new degree going to represent?

In the University’s vision statement is the declaration that “As a new generation university, UWS is inspired by the promise and challenge of the future, unencumbered by the orthodoxies of the past”, and further, UWS aspires to be a “21st century institution . . . at the forefront of new generation universities around the world” (2004, 5). In an email to performance staff, our Head of School, Julian Knowles, provides a list of “Graduate Attributes” and “Binding School Qualities”. At the top of his list of Graduate Attributes are the following: “familiar with new practices and new technologies and contexts (screen, electronic media, site specific work etc)” (Knowles 2004). A little further down the list he suggests a “performance skill base which is flexible and able to be applied to contemporary performance contexts. Equipped with skills to extend one’s skill base through independent study” (ibid.). The Binding School Attributes that he considers desirable for our graduates to share are as follows:

    Contemporary, risk taking, collaborative, cross-disciplinary, flexible, progressive, innovative, aware of cultural and community contexts, independent/self-directed arts initiators, aware of, and experienced in new performance and presentation contexts (electronic media, internet etc) (ibid.).

Potentially, what is being proposed could be very exciting; we have the possibility of training new generation creative artists. However, it is disturbing that in this rhetoric neither theatre nor acting rate a mention. In the rhetorical universe of the APR, that which is deemed “contemporary, or risk-taking” must be defined by that which is not, in this case,
those programs relating to acting and theatre. As Bottoms writes performance “sound[s] ‘cool’: it sounds cutting-edge, contemporary, vaguely scientific even, thanks to its implicit association with ‘high performance’ computers or jet engines”; whereas, in contrast, theatre seems “olde worlde” and being interested in it is “like wanting to wear clogs instead of high performance Nikes” (2003, 174).

Even as I write this, I feel an atmosphere of “fuddy-duddiness” descend upon me; I am becoming irredeemably conservative, a reactionary dinosaur. And yet I must protest. If this genealogy of theatricality has taught me anything, it is that discourses are context-specific. What theatre and theatricality meant to people in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was very different to the way the avant-garde understood these ideas, and their understanding, in turn, differed from how we understand such ideas today. In the sixteenth century, no-one would confuse playgoing with bear baiting but, at the same time, court entertainments consisted of a range of activities—including hunting, jousting, dancing, plays—with no distinction between them. Similarly, we can distinguish between, say, performance art and a naturalist play, between a football match and a work by Brecht. So will the new Bachelor of Performance be training performance artists and athletes? No, this is not being suggested—we are still in the business of producing people who, through utilising a combination of story-telling and/or spectacle, and putting their bodies on the line, will attempt to re/present our culture’s dreams, fears, aspirations and concerns for us.

Returning to the course restructure at UWS, I am advocating that we keep acting on the table—but within the discursive regime of UWS and the School of Contemporary Arts, we cannot call it that; it will become “performance”. It is my hope that although we will no longer be training actors, dancers and theatre makers, we can still train performers. Behind these performers are a number of histories, only two of which I have examined in this thesis, informing not only what and how they are to perform but also, why they are performers at all. A genealogy of theatricality is not about theatricality but about practices and ideas and how they are discussed, what is at stake in these discussions, and what claims to truth, ultimately, are being made in the name of theatricality.
APPENDIX

Review of *Customs*, written by Keith Gallasch.

For those within the contemporary performance milieu who believe that attempts to delineate “performance” are unnecessary and that in the end it’s all theatre, Josephine Wilson’s *Customs* is an interesting phenomenon. The director (Glen McGillivray) was attracted to the writer when he saw *The Geography of Haunted Places* in 1996. Recognising the performative possibilities of Wilson’s writing, he approached her to collaborate on a work about travel and nomadism. They agreed on a critique of Bruce Chatwin’s Eurocentric position on Indigenous culture but instead of a biodrama, opted for a work built around three character positions— “the explorer”, “the airhostess” (Josephine Wilson’s mother had been one in the 40s) and a more nebulous third character, “the consultant”. In the way of many performance texts, other ideas emerged as the work developed including narratives of travel, ideas of place and placelessness and of the theatrical space which the director defines in the program as “less an empty space and more a place which is being constantly rewritten, in which the bodies of the performers are transient and an audience experiences them only in passing in the act of performance.”

From the outset, the production appears to be on a performance tack with some recognisable motifs—repetition, minimalist architectonic staging, video monitors relaying earlier versions of the performance, slide projections and recurring sequences of airport lounge music, spare movement patterns verging on dance, and disjunctive actions eg apparently calm dialogues realised as wrestling matches. However, as you listen to the actors delivering of Wilson’s mix of sophisticated and calculatedly naive texts (including instruction manual advice to airhostesses) and her shifting ground of 50s airtravel culture and 90s politics, you sense that the actors’ voices are in the wrong place. Meaning is wrung out of every word, knowing looks are beyond knowing— as Spike Milligan once put it, “He gave me a meaningful look, the meaning of which I did not know”. What is potentially a strong performance veer into conventional theatricality, in other words, too loaded, too little distanced from itself, “hot” when it should be “cool”.

This overcalculated response to verbalising the text pushes *Customs* in the direction of camp which makes much of the material unfunny when it should be a least drily humorous. Rhythmically the whole work remains pretty much in the same locked pulse which means that its mannerisms are, once again, strained. The few occasions when the performers (notably Paul Cordeiro and Briony Williams) relaxed their intonation were some of the
most effective. Kay Armstrong in the airhostess role remained vigorously static, locked in some other era. The only suggestions of another dimension came in a slightly twee ballet sequence en pointe and a moment of panic in which she popped uppers and was for a moment not herself. Cordeiro and Williams without any attempt at psychological realism evoked a travel writer (declared late in the piece not-Bruce Chatwin) and the woman (a mysterious consultant) and were thankfully allowed some moments of detachment.

*Customs* is in need of some serious dramaturgy. Unfortunately, the tyrannies of limited funds and distance (Wilson lives in Perth), meant that the creative interplay between writer, director and performers was sorely restrained, let alone offering any third eye objectivity. Requiring sustained attention is the text’s shifts between the parodied 50s and 60s and the hard reality of the 90s. It’s not at all a bad thing for a performance audience to lose sight of where they are, just as this trio of lost souls can’t escape the airport terminal. But too often in *Customs* this gear-shifting is left for the audience alone to handle and appears to have little to do with the people on the stage (are they in-flight or in the terminal?) or the overall dynamic of the production, and yet it offers some of the most potent and eerie, and amusing material. As for the Chatwin connection . . .

Although clearly an admirer of Robert Wilson and his like, Glen McGillivray is unable to give Josephine Wilson’s text the tone, voices and bodies it needs. The performances are conventionally theatrical and the time-out-of-kilter conceit remains just that. Among the strengths of *The Geography of Haunted Places* beyond its text, were its direction by Nigel Kellaway and its collaboration with the performer Erin Heffron. Both had strong dramaturgical input yielding a strong imagistic, performative and intellectual structure, taking its audience through iconic Australian history in a simple but unnerving trajectory, with Heffron intoning her lines, rarely underlining text that could already speak for itself without any doubling. McGillivray deserves praise for instigating this project. For all its inadequacies, *Customs* nonetheless offered us another glimpse of a significant writer and reminded us of the singular challenge of transforming text into performance. At the very least McGillivray is to be praised for his support of Wilson.

http://www.rtimearts.com/~opencity/rt28/customs.html
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