THE INTERPRETIVE GESTURE:
HEINER GOEBBELS AND THE IMAGINATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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ABSTRACT

Heiner Goebbels’s *Stifters Dinge* and *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing* are examples of “postdramatic” theatre works that engage with the political by seeking to challenge socially ingrained habits of perception rather than by presenting traditional, literary-based theatre of political didacticism or agitation. Goebbels claims to work toward a “non-hierarchical” theatre in the contexts of his arrangement of the various theatrical elements, in fostering collaborative working processes between the artists involved, and in the creation of audience-artist relationships. I argue that, in doing so, he follows a familiar theoretical trajectory that employs the theatre as a convenient metaphor for the public sphere. Two broad traditions exist concerning this connection between theatre and publicness: first, a line of thought that sets theatre against the rational community of equals; and, second, an opposing tradition which looks in hope to theatre for the possibility of a participatory democracy. In situating Goebbels’s practice within this second tradition, I moreover argue that the metaphor of the theatrical public sphere may also be understood in terms of a negotiation between Kantian sublimity and the notion of the beautiful.
DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this thesis comprises only my original work towards the Masters by Research degree and that due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used. The thesis is 30,249 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Grateful acknowledgment is due to Heiner Goebbels, who responded to an initial research inquiry with generous provision of private video footage and other resource materials and who has graciously granted permission for the inclusion in this thesis of images of his productions. I would also like to express my gratitude toward the three supervisors who have supported this project. Prior to his departure from The University of Melbourne, then Associate Professor Peter Eckersall (now Professor at CUNY) oversaw my entry into the program and offered very helpful suggestions for initial research. Professor Denise Varney subsequently also provided valuable criticism and directed me to new ideas. My most profound thanks are due to Associate Professor Paul Rae, who agreed to take over as supervisor at a difficult point in my candidature and who has since seen this project through to its completion. Paul has been unwaveringly supportive and astonishingly patient and without his formidable expertise and astute guidance I would never have been able to complete this thesis.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ......................................................................................................................... 1  
Declaration ..................................................................................................................... 2  
Acknowledgements ...................................................................................................... 3  
Table of Contents ......................................................................................................... 4  
Abbreviations Used in the Text .................................................................................... 5  
List of Illustrations ...................................................................................................... 6  
Introduction .................................................................................................................... 8  
  The So-called Left Radical Brass Band ................................................................. 8  
Chapter 1: The Theatrical Public Sphere ................................................................. 18  
  (i.) The public sphere contra the theatre ......................................................... 18  
  (ii.) *Theatrum mundi* ......................................................................................... 39  
Chapter 2: “Just listen to me. Everything going to be all right.”  
  *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing* and the Promise of Freedom ................. 46  
Chapter 3: Kant’s Imagination and Stifter’s Things .................................................. 79  
Bibliography .................................................................................................................. 108
ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT


CRN Goebbels, H. and Boris Yukhananov. “Criticizing Representation and Narrativity in Theatre.”


FR Habermas, Jürgen. “Further Reflections on the Public Sphere.”

FT Lehmann, H. “A Future for Tragedy?”

OUT Goebbels, H. “Opening up the text.”

PT Lehmann, H. Postdramatic Theatre.

SF Puchner, M. Stage Fright.

TPS Balme, Christopher B. The Theatrical Public Sphere.


W1 Stein, G. Writings 1903 – 1932.

W2 Stein, G. Writings 1932 – 1946.
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

(p.46) **Figure 1.** “Just listen to me. Everything going to be all right.” Opening sequence of *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing*, dir. Heiner Goebbels, with the Vocal Theatre Carmina Slovenica. Originally produced by the Ruhrtriennale 2012. Melbourne Festival, October 2014. Photo: Wonge Bergmann. © Wonge Bergmann/Ruhrtriennale.

(p.47) **Figure 2.** The “line-up” scene in *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing*. Photo: Wonge Bergmann. © Wonge Bergmann/Ruhrtriennale.

(p.47) **Figure 3.** Performance of Victor Paranjoti’s “Dinana Ditiramb” in *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing*. Source: Clip from video made available by the director.

(p.76) **Figure 4.** Closing scene of *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing*: Gertrude Stein’s “Reflection on the Atomic Bomb”. Source: Clip from video made available by the director.

(p.76) **Figure 5.** “I don’t know whether it was amazement or fear of driving deeper into that thing.” Adalbert Stifter’s “Ice Tale” is projected across the stage in *Stifters Dinge*, dir. Heiner Goebbels. Originally performed at Théâtre Vidy, Lausanne, in 2007. Photograph: Nicolas Pilet. © Nicolas Pilet. Source: [https://www.heinergoebbels.com/en/archive/works/complete/view/4/photos](https://www.heinergoebbels.com/en/archive/works/complete/view/4/photos)

(p.77) **Figure 6.** Paulo Uccello’s *Night Hunt* projected across the stage in *Stifters Dinge*. Details are captured on the hanging screen, which circulates around the space. Source: Photo provided by director.
Figure 7. Paolo Uccello, Night Hunt, circa 1460. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.
Source: <https://www.ashmolean.org/hunt-forest>

Figure 8. Jacob Isaacksz van Ruisdael, Swamp, circa 1660. The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.
Source: <https://www.hermitagemuseum.org/wps/portal/hermitage/digital-collection/01.+paintings/44427>

Figure 9. Ruisdael’s Swamp slowly changes colour in Stifters Dinge. Photograph: Klaus Grünberg. © Klaus Grünberg.
Introduction

THE SO-CALLED LEFT RADICAL BRASS BAND

On 25 October 2014, as part of the Melbourne Festival’s public “Artists in Conversation” series, the ABC Radio National presenter Michael Cathcart interviewed the German composer and director Heiner Goebbels about his piece in the festival, the “musictheatre”\(^1\) work *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing*, created in partnership with the Vocal Theatre Carmina Slovenica. In the course of the interview, Cathcart asked Goebbels to recall an earlier collaboration:

**MC:** Let’s go back and talk about your earlier work. So in the 1970s you were co-founder of a group whose name means something like “So-called radical left-wing orchestra”. Is that right? … Tell us about this group.

**HG:** I was part of a spontaneous movement in Frankfurt in the early seventies which brought up politicians like Joschka Fischer, for example, or Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who founded later the Green Party. But that was in the seventies when we were squatting houses. I lived in a squat house for example with Joschka Fischer in those days, and we tried to create a music which is as engaged as the movement but which also doesn’t denunciate music just as a message-transporting instrument. So we tried to make music with a political ambition. We didn’t try to make political music, if you know the difference… we would never have called ourself “Left Radical Brass Band”, but somebody announced us in a teach-in as “Left Radical Brass Band”—this was before we had a title—so we thought, OK, now we are the “So-called Left Radical Brass Band”.

*(IMC)*

Further information emerges in other interviews and writings. In an interview with John Tusa for BBC Radio 3 in 2003:

\(^{1}\) Goebbels uses both “musictheatre” and “music-theatre” as terms for describing this and similar works. See *Aesthetics of Absence* 13; also [www.heinergoebbels.com](http://www.heinergoebbels.com).
JT But was it entirely serious? Or again, did that [name] indicate a certain distancing from really high ground radicalism?

HG Yes, and from any fundamentalist position, either musical or political, yes.

(Goebbels, “John Tusa Interview”)

And in 1996, Goebbels related the following episode during a forum chaired by Alan Read at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London:

I remember very well when this orchestra—more connected to the spontaneous political scene before the Green Party was formed—played at a demonstration. There was another orchestra coming down the street—from a dogmatic communist faction—and they were really walking ‘straight forward’ they had the note-stands ‘straight forward’ and they played ‘straight forward’ in a strict four/four beat; in contrast we were very chaotic, had more of a ‘free-jazz’ sort of feeling; so we started to undermine their sound a little bit as they were passing by; and they were so pissed off by our way of playing—not by the meaning of our words—that they came and smashed our instruments.

(OUT 54)

In this composite anecdote, one observes the telling of a story by an artist who, at decade-long intervals, returns to the same autobiographical ground in order to express the continuity of his practice. In this tale, certain concerns are clear: the nature of the relationship between performance and political life, the connection between authority and the naming power of language, and the contestation of public space through an opposition of bodily ways of moving. Understood as an artistic origin story, this anecdote may serve, then, to orient an examination of Goebbels’s later works towards a distinction that expresses itself here in the contrast between the two groups: on the one hand, the “chaotic”, “spontaneous” energy of the So-called Left Radical Brass Band and, on the other, the disciplined seriousness of the communist orchestra. This distinction, which lies between “political music” and “music with a political
ambition”, disassociates the political effectiveness of performance from its didactic capacity, its power to act as a conduit or instrument through which messages or truths might be conveyed, and instead locates it in its sheer appearance as a thing. For the “music which is as engaged as the movement”, or the “music with a political ambition”, adjectivally unsupplemented, manifests its own volition, and thus emerges as a political protagonist in its own right. Politics here appears, as I shall show in Chapter 1, precisely in the guise described by Hannah Arendt in her lecture “Freedom and Politics”, where she observes that the presence of freedom in human societies “needed a common public space…a politically organized world, in other words, into which each of the free-men could insert himself” (29). That is, politics appears in the unpredictable moment of engagement between bodies, in the moment in which the So-Called Left Radical Brass Band, spilling into the street, chooses to confront the other, and not as something that, in wishing to deny the living encounter, passes through bodies in the execution of a script written elsewhere and in advance.

Substantially, this distinction registers as a contrast between two procedures for inclusion: to be a member of the communist orchestra, the listener is told, means to conform to the strictness of an ordained rhythm; whereas the more polyphonic inclusion elaborated by the So-called Left Radical Brass Band emerges from the “Sponti” scene of 1970s Frankfurt and gains its motivation, as Goebbels reflects later in the Tusa Interview, from this movement’s ambition “not to exclude anything” but to connect with “the other qualities we try to develop”—ways of living, cultural possibilities, ways of making political protests—and therefore to regard the making of music as an extension of a common spirit. Paul Hockenos describes how the “Sponti turn” in Frankfurt involved rejecting the implicit authoritarianism of party political association in favour of a decentralized ethic:
At no time did the Spontis ever have a party platform, party membership cards, membership lists, an official central organ, or even an organization name… being a Sponti meant, first of all, not belonging to a dogmatic political organization. (112)

If the Spontis viewed traditional political agitation as encouraging individuals to assent *pro tempore* to a hierarchical discipline for the sake of a promised future liberty, they themselves refused this deferment, and instead sought impatiently to achieve this promise in the present. To be a Sponti, therefore, “meant not to be a Trotskyist, Maoist or communist party member” (Georg Dick, in Hockenos 112), but to turn one’s attention to the structures of human relations and to try to find collective modes of interaction which could respect, rather than curtail, the self-determination of individuals and their potential development as whole persons. Likewise, as I shall discuss in Chapter 2, Goebbels expresses a desire to foster, in the development of his works, collaborative and non-stratified relationships among artists and between artists and audiences: ways of interacting which permit participants to step beyond the expectations of their assigned roles—so that, for example, in *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing*, the members of a choir are asked not only to sing, but to act, build sets, or to merely move or sit still. Such relationships of equality, he suggests, are unlikely to be realized within the “centralizing” spaces of “institutions, which are not prepared for these given their gravitational forces and hierarchical structures” (*AA* 58). Goebbels’s artistic practice can thus potentially be traced back to this movement, which, in establishing co-ops and squat houses, and conducting teach-ins and decision-making assemblies on the bases of participatory self-government and the right of everybody to speak, endeavoured to create spaces in which collaborative life might be realized; a project that was not so much a withdrawal from the political
sphere (as violent street confrontations with police over the squats attested) as a recasting of its boundaries—what Jacques Rancière has, as I shall outline in a different context in Chapter 3, termed “litigation”, or the reclamation as “the space of circulating” of “the space of circulation” (“Ten Theses” ¶22).

This points us back to the public sphere and to Arendt, who, despite Rancière’s critique (a critique echoed by Benhabib and others: see “Models of Public Space” 75), does not always envisage the public sphere in terms of a particular political model or “way of life that is proper to those who are destined for it” (“Ten Theses” ¶3), but argues also that the freedom of the public sphere might be thought in terms of the vanishing figure of an “apparition”, a “lost treasure” or a “mirage” that appears only when a social order is challenged (Between 4). Goebbels aligns himself with this reading of Arendt when, in his collection of essays Aesthetics of Absence, he claims “I am interested in the public sphere” (13) and also quotes Arendt’s Vita Activa to assert that “you can consider every performance to be a ‘public sphere, … in which it is necessary not to attack each other’ – neither in the work relations nor in the relation to the audience” (58). Against this conception of politics, the brutality of the communist orchestra can be seen as the actualisation of violence implicit in the will to maintain a certain spatial order: that of forward progress; but also that in which there is a repetition, a doubling or tripling of elements rather than their opening out to mutual visibility. The “straight forward” sound is doubled by the “straight forward” march, and doubled again by the “straight forward” note-stands. It is the potential for disruption of this tight control of the relations between things, this “strict” bodily disposition, that enrages the communists—the “way of playing” rather than “the meaning of our words”.
Finally, one can observe in this episode a suspicion, on Goebbels’s part, of naming, that appears intrinsically entwined with these other concerns. In the very name of the “So-called Left Radical Brass Band” appears an ironic detachment from language, a distrust in its ability to catch the truth of things. Goebbels’s description of his band’s music as “spontaneous” or (tellingly) “more…free” in comparison to that of the “dogmatic” communist orchestra, carries the suggestion that the “forwardness” of the note-stands is the element that disposes all of the others, leading them on, so that the rhythm of the music and of the marching bodies is subjugated to it and put to its use, becoming an illustration or reinforcement in the present of something already written in the past. Elsewhere, Goebbels decries the tyranny of “texts, which above all want to make announcements rather than maintain an artistic reality” (AA 83); but this hegemony of writing and its order is also shown, in this scene, to end in and depend on a pre-linguistic enactment of corporeal force, which seeks to smash all alternative rhythms and means of articulation.

* 

Taken together, this anecdote draws together many of the preoccupations of this thesis, which concerns on the ways in which two of Heiner Goebbels’s much more recent works—When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing and Stifter’s Things—can be regarded as sharing the impulses of a certain tradition that may be loosely described, following Hans-Thies Lehmann’s characterisation, as “postdramatic”. In particular, this thesis examines, via these two examples, how the attempt to elaborate a theatrical mode that is “politically effective” (Balme, TPS 201) but avoids the “dogmatic” pitfalls of earlier, didactic experiments, has involved articulating a relationship between the political and a certain collection of other terms—freedom, democracy, representation, the aesthetic—which have served, in varying shifting configurations,
as its cognates: and which have, together, been often associated with the concept of the public sphere. Goebbels has certain touchstones—J. S. Bach, Gertrude Stein, Hannah Arendt, Adalbert Stifter—to whom he repeatedly returns in both his staged works and his critical writings. Wherever possible I have tried to orient this thesis toward them. But there are other figures with whom it has also been important to engage, either because their positions represent positions from which Goebbels’s practice may be seen somewhat to diverge (Christopher Balme, Jürgen Habermas, Martin Puchner), or because they approach these same touchstones, but from a different angle (for example, in Puchner’s reading of Stein), or because they themselves offer valuable perspectives from which to understand Goebbels’s work (Hans-Thies Lehmann).

The thesis is divided into three sections. In Chapter 1, I offer a study of the ways in which four writers have envisaged the nature of the relationship between the theatre and the public sphere. This section is intended to provide a backdrop against which the subsequent analyses of *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing* and *Stifter’s Dinge* can proceed. These theorists—Christopher Balme, Jürgen Habermas, Martin Puchner and Hannah Arendt—have been chosen because they each engage explicitly, (though in varying ways) with theatre in their theorisations of publicness, but also because they are representative of two opposing strands of critical thought with respect to the interrelation between theatre, politics, freedom and the public sphere. This chapter is thus subdivided to reflect these two traditions. According to the first view, which draws in Balme, Habermas and also Puchner, theatre is understood to be incommensurate with the free society of a rational community of equals. For Balme, and Habermas, the concealment and credulity implicit in the structure of theatricality is incompatible with the post-Enlightenment understanding of the public sphere,
which is conceived in terms of informational transparency and open access to meritocratic debate. Puchner’s articulation of the public sphere in *Stage Fright* appears initially to contradict these accounts, as he overtly associates the public sphere with the theatricality of mass culture and a totalitarian aestheticization of politics. Yet, as I shall argue, Puchner’s position is ultimately reconcilable with the proposition that political efficacy, conceived as the free thought of autonomous individuals, depends on the denial of theatrical gesture.

If Balme and Puchner approach the intersection of theatre and the public sphere from the perspective of the former, inquiring how, if ever, theatre can be politically efficacious, Hannah Arendt, in her writings on politics, approaches this problem from the other side, demonstrating the ways in which the interrogation of the nature and possibility of the public sphere is able to draw on theatrical metaphors. Two distinct characterisations of the theatricality of the public sphere appear and run side by side through Arendt’s work. The first of these aligns with the position advanced by Habermas insofar (and only insofar) as it casts political participation in terms of a retreat or emergence from theatrical illusion. But this characterisation is also described as the emergence *into* a mutual visibility, and gives way for Arendt to a second, in which the public sphere is outlined as having a performative dimension.

My argument, across the rest of this thesis, is that Goebbels aligns himself with the second of these two lines of thought, identifying the political potential of performance with this double move of a retreat from theatricality that is also an emergence into view.

Chapters 2 and 3 each offer an interpretive study of a single work by Goebbels. In Chapter 2, I examine *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing* in light of Goebbels’s own extensive theorisations of his artistic practice, both in his writings
and in interviews and lectures, with a particular focus on the opening scene of this particular musictheatre piece. In doing so, I attempt to show that Goebbels’s work does indeed share the assumptions about the nature of the intersection between theatre, politics and freedom that I have gestured toward in the preceding section on Arendt. Within the process of this demonstration I also indicate the ways in which these driving impulses in Goebbels’s artistic project fall within the scope of what Hans-Thies Lehmann has called the “postdramatic”.

Finally, in Chapter 3, I focus on Stifters Dinge. In looking at this “no-man show” or “performativ installation without performer” (AA 5, 27) I attempt to complicate the positions articulated in earlier chapters by observing the ways in which this work can be seen to participate in a dialogue between Kant’s aesthetic categories of the sublime and the beautiful. The sublime aspect of Stifters Dinge is fairly evident. But by also focusing on the beautiful, I hope to emphasise the manner in which the appeal to a democratic public sphere conforms to the moment in Kant’s Critique of Judgment in which he establishes a community of equals in the mutual acknowledgment of the capacity of each individual for the power of judgment. If this is the case, I suggest, the claims of artists such as Goebbels, who seek to articulate the political efficacy of their practice in terms of an escape from the ideological power of representation, deserves further scrutiny, since in Kant’s aesthetic judgment, the particularity of the imagination’s representations ultimately conform to the requirements of the understanding.

Stifters Dinge was first performed at Théâtre Vidy, Lausanne, in 2007; When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing premiered at the Jahrhunderthalle in Bochum for the 2012 Ruhriennale. I attended the former at the 2010 Melbourne Festival and the latter at the same festival four years later, in 2014. It is primarily for this reason (of
my own attendance) that I have selected these pieces to serve as foci in place of other potential case studies, in case my own “assistance at the spectacle” (as Dennis Kennedy might put it) might perhaps constitute an extra thread in the weave of critical insight: a weave that has, however, been fed also by my reviewing of notes, by video documentary and photographs of the performances, by radio interviews and by recordings of lectures by Goebbels himself, by theatre reviews and audience accounts, as well as by academic analyses—so that the brightness of that remembered “thereness” bears a mix of lights that are difficult to separate. To what extent were these first, clear, bodily impressions ever pure? To what extent in their lingering do they express the colours of who I am now?
Chapter 1

THE THEATRICAL PUBLIC SPHERE

i. The public sphere contra the theatre

Balme, Habermas

One might begin to examine the nature and extent of the connection between theatre and the public sphere by first considering the idea that they are mutually exclusive, or have come to be so. This is the tradition represented, for example, by Christopher Balme in *The Theatrical Public Sphere*, where he draws on the work of Jürgen Habermas to define the public sphere as “a discursive arena located between private individuals on the one hand and state bureaucracy and business on the other”; a “realm where issues are debated and where citizens are, ideally, free to enter and engage in discourse” (4 - 5). As the primary space in which citizens meet for rational deliberation about questions of public interest, the public sphere is “a crucial component of modern democratic societies” (202); Balme, though, diagnoses a “problematic relationship between theatre and the public sphere” (41), a tension that he describes as lying at the moribund political heart of contemporary theatre.

It is worth providing a brief outline of Habermas’s model. According to Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* and subsequent writings, the characteristic form of the liberal public sphere emerged in Western European countries such as Britain, France and the Germanic states in the eighteenth century. As he writes in “Further Reflections on the Public Sphere”, in each of these regions the expansion of a literary and artistic culture, fed by the increasing circulation of printed materials, stimulated a “relatively dense network of public
communication”, which exceeded the scholarly or localised circuits of the past (FR 423). For Habermas, the principal feature of these new networks was their participatory nature, which contrasted with the unidirectional structure of feudal spectacle. Whereas the public space of the feudal world had been constituted through the apportionment between classes of active and passive functions—so that “the people functioned as the backdrop before which the ruling estates, nobility, church dignitaries, kings, etc. displayed themselves and their status” (FR 426)—the new cultural associations of the eighteenth century\(^2\) organised themselves on more egalitarian premises: voluntary and equal membership, the free exchange of views, and meritocratic adjudication of ideas instead of deferment to social rank. The revolutionary period then saw the extension of these practices to political life. In this respect, Habermas outlines feudal (or “representative”) publicness in explicitly theatrical terms, with an audience (the people) attending to staged presentations (ceremonial displays of right) and remaining ignorant of a concealed truth (the reserved sphere of political decisionmaking); but his description of the emerging bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries veers away from the theatrical and towards an alternative model of sociability, which atomises the interplay of display and interiority and disperses it across the whole field of intercourse.

As Balme recognises, Habermas's model of the bourgeois public sphere is “implicitly spatial” (TPS 6) in that, for the rational contest of ideas that is at the heart of the model to occur, enfranchised individuals must have a "real" physical space—of some kind—in which to meet to exchange and critique opinions. Yet although it

\(^2\) Habermas names as examples the chiefly bourgeois societies for enlightenment, reading societies, orders of illuminati and freemasonry lodges.
depends upon the availability of meeting places in this way, the public sphere is not any one place in particular. Nor is it merely the gathered sum of a polity's members: instead, Balme writes, the public sphere “should be understood neither as a collectivity nor a space but as an institution embodied by the people” (TPS 6). Thus, while the physical configuration of the space in which citizens are to meet shapes to some extent the mechanical process of their exchange, the quality of the interaction in approximating the ideals of access, equality and freedom of speech is what counts in determining the existence of the public sphere, rather than the specific features of the place itself.

As well as of space, Habermas’s account of the public sphere also implies a specific organisation of its participants’ consciousness of passing time. The concept of publicness is in itself almost tautological with the experience of an objective rather than a personal temporal measure; for Habermas, though, this shared chronological yardstick is not historically constant, but can change. Hence, in his description of the shift from feudal to bourgeois publicness, the transition from one to the other hinges upon the breaking of the identity between the moment of unfolding of public exhibition and the moment of unfolding of representation. Pre-Enlightenment publicness is “representative” for Habermas because, while politics proper took place behind a curtain, the theatrical ontology of public display ensured that the gathering of the community to enact itself occurred simultaneously with the ideological demonstration of its respective roles: the here and now of the representative public sphere was felt within the experience of representation. With the development of the bourgeois public sphere, however, each of the participants in this quadrille of publicness, politics, representation and time took a new partner. Politics and publicness now coincided; on the other hand, the communal mirror of representation
fragmented and distributed itself for consideration within the personal time of individuals—that is, private reflection. In this sense, the new experience of public time took as its cue less the model of present-ness provided by the theatre and more that fostered by the more geographically extended, print-based networks of “books, journals and papers” and of “a literary culture revolving around novels” (FR 423). Against this background, the corporeal interactions of the “associational life” of clubs, cafés and political societies represented localised comings-together amidst the broader simultaneity of culture, whose meanings could only be gauged in relation to that context (FR 423). The experiential here and now of Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere occurs after the fact of representation, in the moment of its discussion rather than of its thought, and thought is relegated to private space: to “interiority”. In representation’s vacated place, what is exhibited in the public sphere is the political agency of the self—or selves, as everyone present is now a participant whose audience is one another. There is no longer a “separate” audience.

It is this anti-theatricality at the origin of the liberal public sphere that Balme draws on to observe, soberly, that insofar as one can speak of a theatrical public sphere, “its political and social functions [have] become marginalized” (TPS 14). The incommensurability of the public and the theatrical in Habermas's account both provides Balme with a point of intervention (“how can and has the theatre communicated with the public sphere?” (TPS 15)) and also allows him to prescribe criteria for the efficacy of theatre's attempts to shape and respond to society. Balme's bleak assessment of contemporary theatre is, however, that it operates in a “state of enclosure, which pertains equally to the black box of artistic absorption as well as good-night-out-amusement, [and which] threatens to relegate theatre to political irrelevance” (TPS 14).
If Balme follows the contours of Habermas's account in identifying the public sphere as the site of politics, and thus of contestation over the common good (TPS 24), he searches in the example of the Ancient Greek polis for those principles that will allow theatre to intervene significantly in public debate, and hence achieve its social vitality. Balme examines two concepts from the Greek legal universe: *parrhēsia* and *isêgoria*. The first of these, *parrhēsia*, concerns what can legally be said and is roughly analogous to our own "freedom of speech", enabling citizens to freely voice opinions on matters of public interest “without fear of recrimination” (TPS 32); the second, *isêgoria*, determines who may speak and who may not, and so might more aptly be described as a “freedom to speech”, an eligibility to speak and be heard. Of the two, Balme regards *isêgoria* as the more straightforward, describing it as “a fairly accepted right” that permits entry to the public sphere for all citizens—that is, all those people who are “not slaves, women, foreigners, children” (TPS 33).

*Parrhēsia* is more complex, since it is most likely to be invoked precisely in those cases where the credibility of what is said is cast into doubt—either because it verges on libel or slander or because it is spoken by someone of marginal social status who, in demanding to be heard, unsettles accepted social stratification (TPS 34: Balme gives the example of Dicaeopolis's speech to the Athenian people in *The Acharnians*). Because it invites adjudication of whether the speaker speaks from within the law or falls outside its protection, the act of *parrhēsia* amounts to an avowal of truth that exposes its agent to the judgment of the community and, consequently, involves a degree of risk. Balme's argument is that, contra the aesthetic enervations of theatre in the context of modernity, “in Greek theatre the stage was used for *parrhēsia*” (TPS 34) and he offers the example of Aristophanic Comedy which, in daring to criticize prominent figures, pitted the playwright against powerful interests in a struggle over
the limits of the sayable. For this reason, following Foucault, Balme affirms the essential link between *parrhêsia* and courage, as well as between courage and political efficacy. He also points to the epistemological quality of the truth spoken by *parrhêsia*, which gains its status as true by being witnessed (at least in principle) before the entirety of the community (*TPS* 34).

Balme thus ties the political potency of theatre's representations to their illocutionary dimension. The early theatre was most important, therefore, not as fictional drama, but as the framing of that drama in the context of the political body’s self-presentation and self-regulation. Although he acknowledges performance’s ludic and affective qualities (particularly in light of the criticisms leveled at Habermas by Chantal Mouffe: see *TPS* 11-12; 28 - 32), Balme argues that these elements are reconcilable with theatre’s critical and dialogic functions, rather than antithetical: “The most important difference relates to the inclusion of less rationalistic modes of argumentative exchange” (*TPS* 32). The participatory and contestatory emphases of the Habermasian framework remain intact: the truth-telling of Greek performance (the dramatic tale) did not offer a space of *private* reflection, but a locus for collective presence and deliberation. Hence, the festival of the City Dionysia incorporated the public display of tribute from the Athenian allies, and the naming of freed slaves; the catharsis of its tragedies, occurring within the setting of the dramatic competition, represented, as Richard Schechner has observed, a resolution of social conflicts and an exorcism of those impulses that threatened the polis’s coherence (*Performance Theory* 24ff; see also 179, 189 - 90); and, as already mentioned, the satire of Aristophanic Old Comedy, in testing the boundaries of what could be said, provoked arbitration between interests and rejuvenation of the law, including those principles of
inclusion and exclusion which defined the citizenry. In the recent past, Balme discerns a similar connection between theatre and truth-telling in the “theatrical” nature of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission of the mid-1990s, testimony before which was presented as ideally public—that is, symbolically transparent to and witnessed by the community as a whole (TPS 36). Moreover, in some of the artistic responses to the Truth Commission (for example by William Kentridge) he perceives “a textbook definition of a public sphere”, since the overt mission of a number of these works has been to engage with communities to raise awareness about the Commission and to stimulate debate (TPS 36). Yet these examples, both ancient and modern, also make clear that the “theatrical” politics that Balme is searching for does not represent a return to the ontology of Habermas’s representative public sphere. In both cases, the present contest of political life occurs between citizens and remains democratically exterior to the inner frame of the unfolding drama; politics does not occur elsewhere, in a veiled realm, but coincides with the here and now of the theatrical occasion.

One could (though Balme does not) pursue a Ranciérian line of objection here, since parrhésia and iségoria were each, importantly, already legally prescribed specifically as a citizen’s right prior to their exercise (TPS 33): if one was truth-telling then one must be a citizen; if one was not a citizen one could not tell the truth—no witness would apprehend it. Thus the truth-telling of theatrical parrhésia, as a protected discourse, had to leave intact the logic of exclusion that had already divided citizens who had this right to truth-telling from those others who did not; it could not extend so far as to challenge the terms of citizenship itself but served to reinscribe its bounds by discovering their ‘true’ outlines—the ones that were already there, lurking beneath the obscurity of current practice, waiting to be rediscovered. The ‘truth’ of ‘truth-telling’, then, was something cast not as a new discovery, but as a rediscovery; cast not as a new response to new political events, but instead as the judging of these events against a founding and thus unvarying purity.
Nonetheless, if Balme avers that a “theatrical public sphere” might indeed potentially be counted among the many intersecting public spheres of the twenty-first century social imaginary⁴, he suggests that, in most instances, the theatre has become

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⁴ Balme suggests that, today, there are multiple overlapping public spheres of which theatre can constitute one (TPS 7 – 8, 201). Habermas, too, in “Further Reflections on the Public Sphere” (425 – 429) revises his account to encompass plebeian counter-publics as well as the entry of women into the bourgeois public sphere. Habermas’s broad argument is that “bourgeois democracy…from its very inception contradicted essential premises of its self-understanding” (428): despite its emancipatory potential, the bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries maintained de facto social requirements for entry similar to the restrictions on enfranchisement, in that its discourses were broadly directed to the development of freedoms aligned with class interests and patriarchal assumptions. Thus, he writes, “[b]oth women and the other groups [i.e. peasants, wage-earners, men without means] were denied equal active participation in the formation of political opinion and will” (428). This in turn spurred other the development of counter-publics. In the case of the radical left, Habermas observes that the Jacobin phase of the French revolution, as well as the early socialist movements in England, saw the growth of alternative public spheres modelled on, parallel to and interlocked with the hegemonic bourgeois public sphere, but “whose social preconditions had been rendered null” (426). Nonetheless, he also suggests that “[f]rom the very beginning” (429), the fundamentally inclusive principle upon which the bourgeois public sphere was founded—its “universalistic” openness to self-examination of its limits (429)—invited contact with its counter-publics and progress towards the wider extension of civil recognition, initially to workers and subsequently to women. Habermas adds the proviso, however, that the exclusion of women from the public sphere had (and has) an additional function which was unresolved by these processes: the relegation of women to the private domain had a “structuring significance” dissimilar to that of the working class (428). Whereas working people, including women, could be included in public life via an expansion of rights, this expansion proceeded while ignoring those aspects of women’s social experience that were specifically female: their sexual and reproductive status and labour within a private realm that remained patriarchally
so devolved (as “mass entertainment” (*TPS* 14)) or so specialised (“in its progressive art-house or festival variety” (*TPS* 17)) that it has removed itself from effective involvement in public life:

The very achievements of the past century that have successfully transformed the theatre from a rowdy, potentially explosive gathering into a place of concentrated aesthetic absorption have been obtained at the cost of theatre's very publicness. The darkened auditorium has become to all intents and purposes a private space.

(*TPS* 3)

Both the aesthetic development and the limited medial reach of theatre have, in the context of expanding communications, diminished its capacity to interface with public debate. On the one hand, the modernist inheritances of interiority and sustained attention described by Crary have, through the metamorphoses of theatre architecture and lighting, transformed the spectator from a primarily social being into an autonomous “decoder of signs and auto-reflexive observer of self-experience” (*TPS* 27); the intimacy, darkness and silence of the black box rendering the libidinal exchanges between audience and performers analogous to acts performed “between consenting adults”—so that “what goes on in the privacy of a Western theatre is an almost entirely private matter” (*TPS* 17). Originating in such secret sources, Balme asks how aesthetic experience can ever traverse the gulf to other settings and be traced there (“where does it resonate at all?”: *TPS* 17). On the other hand, Balme

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defined in familial or conjugal terms, and against precisely which domain public life achieved its definition. Women “as women” (429) were thus not ever fully able to enter the public sphere; arguably this remains the case. Nevertheless, Habermas contends, this does not diminish the ideals of “unrestricted inclusion and equality” upon which the public sphere is based, “but rather appeals to them” (429).

5 See *Suspensions of Perception*. 

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observes that as a discursive platform which continues to emphasise small gatherings of corporeally co-present participants, theatre is in danger of becoming a “cul-de-sac off the Infobahn” (TPS 14). The publicness of theatre is just not public enough for its localised interactions—whether rational-critical, agonal or ludic—to engage with the electronically live contention of interests and opinions which characterises the public sphere in the age of “mass media, nation states and increasingly transnational configurations” (TPS 24). Thus, although Balme acknowledges that “the” public sphere in actuality comprises a plurality of overlapping subdomains and counterpublics (TPS 7 - 8), the examples he gives of public theatrical discourse—playbills, criticism, protest, institutional debates, internet mash-ups of performance—are those which occupy an outward-facing or liminal position bridging the theatre’s interiority and the present of political life.

Finally, Balme observes that more recent theatrical experiments, which he associates with the “postdramatic” (TPS 177), do offer an alternative to this impasse. Works such as Christoph Schlingensief’s Please Love Austria!, Rimini Protokoll’s Call Cutta and DV8 Physical Theatre’s Can We Talk about This? variously employ strategies of metonymy, extra-theatrical settings, anti-mimetic performance or the juxtaposition of medially dispersed audiences with local sites of staging, in order to open up theatrical performance to audiences navigating the broader informational flows of contemporary (and multinational) communications technologies. In Please Love Austria!—which placed asylum seeker contestants in containers in Vienna’s Herbert von Karajan-Platz and, mimicking “reality” TV show Big Brother, invited

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6 The phrase is borrowed from Dennis Kennedy’s The Spectator and the Spectacle, 154.
viewers to “vote them out” for deportation via telephone or a website (which also carried a live televi
sual broadcast of events)—Balme perceives a "theatrical “event” that transcended its physical space of performance to generate significant discussion across multiple media. In Call Cutta, he notes that as individual audience members were led one by one on tours of their city, directed by instructions given over mobile phones from a call centre located in Kolkata, the skilful performance of rapport by operators “under conditions of extreme spatial separation” (TPS 188) served to highlight how intimacy and authenticity are constructed as part of the economic activity of global telecommunications. Alternatively, Can We Talk about This?, a verbatim theatre piece about free speech and the difficulties of Islamic integration in multicultural Western democracies, used dance, film and photography to comment on and complicate the points of view spoken aloud. Though it was performed in traditional theatre spaces in Australia, Asia and Europe, the complexity of signification in Can We Talk about This?, combined with its “pulsating anger” (TPS 199) was sufficient to provoke stormy online controversy about its merits and the issues it canvassed, indicating for Balme that theatre may still be able to contribute to important social debate through its ability to blend discursively rational and corporeally affective modes, “providing it connects with other media and issues that matter to the public” (TPS 201).

Yet in each of these cases, the precise constitution of the public sphere remains at stake. How can it be possible to conceive of medi ally distributed, potentially transnational discursive spaces as public spheres in any true sense of the term? If the public sphere in its classical iteration drew together the members of a common political body for the purposes of rational argument about matters of common interest, then globalised versions of the public sphere must face a constitutional problem in the
internet age. In floating free of jurisdictional boundaries, cosmopolitan belonging in itself offers no legal enfranchisement: what then, are the political statuses of its participants? How democratically equal can they be? In these circumstances, the long conjunction of politics and the public sphere must be called into question.

Balme attempts to address these issues by looking to the future, especially to the notion of a nascent “global public sphere” outlined by Ulrich Beck (qtd in TPS 175 - 6). Discernable in the responses of “transnational actors, interest groups, protest movements and other NGOs” to global crises such as climate change are the “lineaments of a global public sphere”; such a development, however, remains “virtual” for the present (TPS 176). For Balme, theatre’s role, despite its transformations, remains tied to parrhēsia: “To compete and participate in the public sphere you have to first enter it: run your flag up the pole and see who comes along” (TPS 202).

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Puchner

If I have lingered in some detail over Balme’s account, it is because it presents, in clear profile, a set of assumptions about theatre and politics whose influence I shall trace throughout the rest of this thesis: namely, that the political efficacy of theatre (however strong or weak it is regarded to be) derives from its ontology; and that theatre, in the specific immediacy and impermanence of its here and now, distinguishes itself from more distant and stable media such as print, cinema, television and the internet. This latter belief, which firmly conjoins theatricality with the temporality of a common and exterior world rather than the individual worlds of thought, also receives one of its clearest expressions in Gertrude Stein’s Lectures in
America, where she recounts her early feelings of frustration as a member of the audience:

The thing that is fundamental about plays is that the scene as depicted on the stage is more often than not one might say it is almost always in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience… Your sensation as one in the audience in relation to the play played before you your sensation I say your emotion concerning the play is always either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are listening. So your emotion as a member of the audience is never going on at the same time as the action of the play.

(W2 244)

For Stein, this discrepancy between an individual’s powers of contemplation and the relentlessly progressing performance of the work “is what makes one endlessly troubled about a play” (W2 244), as “before it had commenced it was over, and at no time had you been ready, either to commence or be over” (W2 258). An audience member, complains Stein, has no time either to think about what has just happened before she has to react to the next development. Nor can she properly consider the details of the mise en scène, since the actor’s costume, voices and movement all demand separate attention from the spectator and assessment of their relation to the dialogue and to one another:

Then I began to vaguely wonder whether I could see and hear at the same time and which helped or interfered with the thing on the stage having been over before it really commenced. Could I see and hear and feel at the same time and did I. I began to be a good deal troubled by all these things, the more emotion I felt while at the theatre the more troubled I became by all these things.

(W2 258)

Martin Puchner, in Stage Fright, refers to these passages in an evaluation of Stein’s plays that places her alongside Mallarmé and Joyce within an anti-theatrical
tradition of modernist closet drama, a tradition whose textual innovations are directed
toward the disruption of the collaborative and collective conditions of theatrical
production and reception. By conflating dialogue with stage directions (“Imagine four
benches separately”, for example, in *Four Saints in Three Acts* (*W* 609)), including
direct speech without assigning it to particular characters (“We had intended if it were
a pleasant day to go to the country” *W* 608), or making it unclear how many actors
should perform particular roles (“Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel” in *Doctor
Faustus Lights the Lights*) or even how many characters there are (“A saint is one to
be for two when three and you make five and two and cover” (*W* 608)—exactly how
many saints are there in *Four Saints in Three Acts*?), Stein in her plays collapses the
traditional distinction between mimetic text and paratext, displacing the drama from
the enactments of human figures on stage to the process of textual composition itself.
Her works thus offer a resistance to being performed theatrically whose magnitude,
Puchner suggests, can be estimated by scrutinising the extent of the measures required
to overcome it: he points to the example of Virgil Thomson who, in staging *Four
Saints in Three Acts* at the Hartford Athenaeum in 1934, found it necessary to rework
Stein’s libretto in significant ways—for example, creating a concrete list of *dramatis
personae* who could be impersonated by live human performers, cutting up the text
into “lines” for the individual singers, and introducing two new characters,
“Commère” and “Compère”, to act as narrators for those parts of the original text
deemed to be diegetic—thus reinstating the demarcation between “primary”
dramatic action on the one hand and the “secondary” stuff of stage directions and
commentary on the other (*SF* 112).

This modernist closet drama, argues Puchner, also found its counterpart in
diegetic stage practices intended to disturb the illusory coherence of a world focused
on the hypnotic presence of the impersonating actor. Puchner concentrates on Yeats, Brecht and Beckett as exemplars of this tradition. Through strategies of estrangement—including the incorporation of film and the projection of text; the intrusion of dance and narrative (Yeats); the disidentification of actor and character through *gestus* (Brecht); or the transformation of gesture, through exacting stage directions, into isolated and ideally repeatable movements (Beckett)—the diegetic theatre mediatises and thus undermines the Benjaminian “aura” of live performance (*SF* 175 - 6).

Before further considering Puchner’s characterization of modernism as intrinsically “anti-theatrical”, or following the logic by which he situates it as antagonistically positioned with respect to the public sphere, it is worth very briefly touching on some of the ways in which Walter Benjamin’s apology for the epic theatre resonates with the complaints mounted against the theatre by Stein. Benjamin, in his preamble to the essay “What is Epic Theatre?”, writes:

‘There is nothing more pleasant than to lie on a sofa and read a novel,’ wrote a nineteenth-century narrator, indicating the great extent to which a work of fiction can relax the reader who is enjoying it. The common image of a man attending a theatrical performance is the opposite: one pictures a man who follows the action with every fibre of his being at rapt attention... The concept of the epic theatre [...] indicates above all that this theatre desires an audience that is relaxed and follows the action without strain.

(*Illuminations* 144)

Here, as in Stein, appears the contrast with literature to accentuate the divergent character of spectating with respect to other modes of narrative consumption: in this case, reading. Notable in each of these passages is the attribution to the stage of the power to create a certain kind of spectatorial body: through the atomisation and recombination of the body’s several powers, to assemble it from parts. In Stein, the
simultaneity of stimuli piling on top of one another calls for an optimisation of the body's perceptual apparatus that she, unlike others, finds herself unable to achieve, and which she registers as a failure of proprioception: “Could I see and hear and feel at the same time and did I.” Contemplating this discoordination in her faculties, she remembers how “I also read plays a great deal. I rather liked reading plays, I very much liked reading plays” (W2 255). Stein cannot achieve the efficiency of sensory processing that the stage demands, and which it achieves by ordering the senses in relation to one another, because she has a reader's body. In the theatre, though, to process one sense is to process the others as “there it was a matter of both seeing and hearing” (W2 258). Likewise remarkable in Benjamin's description is his ascription of agency in marshalling and orienting the body's powers, not to a prior human subject, but to the medium itself: the novel “relaxes” the reader; the theatre “desires” its audience. Contrasted with the novel, the desire of the theatre is the generation of corporeal tension as opposed to relaxedness: a tension that that is also an “attention” born of the mobilization of many fibres, whose multitudinous and disparate vectors in turn are captured, disciplined and aligned for the purpose of a linear pursuit; this is not quite the attention decribed by Crary but an attention that is “rapt”—an adjective connoting the “enrapture” of illusion yet also, synaesthetically, the beating of drums, the rapping-out of a martial rhythm, the four/four march of an orchestra whose playing also moves, in uniform step, “straight forward”.

For Puchner, both of these figures and the strands of modernism he takes them to represent—the modernist closet drama and the diegetic theatre—converge, in their anti-theatricality, on a single strategy: “the construction of the audience as reader” (SF
18)—or, in other words, the remediation\textsuperscript{7} by literature of the stage (SF 175 - 6). This development, moreover, is one that has since been thrown into relief by the intensifying hybridization of theatrical space, so that, he writes, “[w]e might even go so far as to say that the mediatized stage is in fact the continuation of diegetic theater by other, technological means, that our contemporary stage has fully absorbed textual resistance and diegesis into its own technological repertoire” (SF 175).

This same Frankensteinian disincorporation and recombinination of the body's capacities is perceptible, however, in Edward Gordon Craig’s insistence, in \textit{On The Art of Theatre}, that “the people still flock to see, not to hear, plays” (142). He continues:

But what does that prove? Only that audiences have not altered. They are there with their thousand pairs of eyes, just the same as of old.

(142)

Specifically theatrical experience, suggests Craig, depends on a certain disposal of the sensory organs of the human respondent: in this case, the primacy of the eyes. (Elsewhere, Craig describes these eyes as having their own volition, being “keen”, “questioning” or “eager and hungry” (141).) Likewise, in the dedication “God Save the King” (1911), Craig despair the subjection of the senses to “unimaginative

\textsuperscript{7} Puchner adopts Philip Auslander's sense of this term, as outlined in \textit{Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture}, though he extends Auslander's analysis of theatrical mediatization from its focus on the cinematic and televisual to include text as "the first fully reproducible medium" (SF 176). Puchner states: "The difference between writing and other recorded media is only one of degree, since all recordings change what they record. Although a written description may be more indirect, it nevertheless constitutes a form of recreation in a fixed medium" (SF 210ff).
reason” (On the Art xx), which he associates with the subordination of the mise-en-scene to the organizing dramatic text:

we are losing the old power of our eyes and our other senses… So that it comes to this: that we on our part have lost our royalty. Our senses have had the vanity and the impertinence to revolt. This is infinitely disgusting. Our senses, if you please, are permitting themselves the luxury of becoming tired. They want another ruler than the Soul, and expect Jupiter to send them a better.

(xx)

Craig’s target is not merely the realism or naturalism he derides so urgently, but a longer-standing configuration of relations between the senses, reason and the imagination—the parts of the human person—of which realism and naturalism for him represent an apogee. But a reassumption of “the old power of our eyes” must necessarily entail a reorganization of the human body, a reconfiguration of the relations between “the eyes and the other senses” and a reassertion of the royal prerogative of disposal over the rebellious parts. In other words, a power of disassembly and assembly that allows the creation of a new human body—that is to say, a new kind of attention. Mediality, for Craig, is the appeal to this kind of attention.

In reforming the stage, therefore, Stein, Benjamin and Craig sought to re-form the spectatorial body, to reconfigure its capacities to create a new percipient whose powers were not subjected to a hierarchy of sense but were able to function fully in their independence: to, as Stein puts it, “live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present” (W2 251).

For Puchner, the literarisation of the stage espoused by Benjamin and Stein stands in antagonistic contrast to an alternative tradition of avant-garde “theatricalization of the theatre” (SF 45) which, beginning with Wagner, and later
progressing through such figures as Appia, Reinhardt and Artaud, sought in the intrinsic gesturality of theatre a value to oppose to the dissipated energies of the competing *personae* of the nineteenth-century stage: “the greed of theater managers, the vanity of star actors, the hackwork of dramatists, and the vulgar tastes of audiences” (*SF* 9). For Wagner, the immediacy and presence of the actor's mimetic gesture permitted audience members a directness of experience transcending the merely “sayable” of language; this quality, in turn, allowed gesture to serve, metaphorically, as a compositional principle for the other contributing arts, elevating them above simple illustration. It became a “mode of expression” facilitating the director's unification of the diverse elements of the stage into a coherent and genuinely theatrical aesthetic (*SF* 43 - 5).

Yet Puchner also describes in this avant-garde theatricalism a darker impulse, which he traces back to Wagner's affinity for the project of German unification. Wagner, Puchner claims, saw in the theatre a means to achieve spiritually what had failed politically during the 1848 revolution: just as his gestural theatre aims at the repetition across component arts of a single compositional ethos, so the German nation would be realised through the subsumption of individual experience into the unified life of the people. The image, and the expression, of this union was to be found in the collectivity of the audience, so that, writes Puchner, “Bayreuth becomes an ideal political arena epitomizing Germany and the German *Volk*” (*SF* 11). For

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8 Puchner here quotes Wagner directly: “‘Just as gestures express to the eye something that only they can express, the orchestra expresses something correlating to this expression to the ear.’ In Wagner's view, the music of the orchestra should not accompany the melody sung by the singer; rather, it should follow a mode of expression akin to their gestures.” (*SF* 44).
Wagner, then, “the audience is more than just a segment of the general public... it could be seen to represent this diffuse public” (*SF* 47); and hence, of the avant-garde which followed, Puchner observes:

The avant-garde did not simply celebrate theatricality out of an innocent love for the theatre; it chose theatricality—as well as everything associated with it, such as collaborative production, collective reception, distraction, and riotous audiences—as its slogan precisely because theatricality promised to lead art back to the public sphere...

(*SF* 11)

This public sphere, though, is of a particular character. Puchner continues:

Everything Wagner touches is forced onto the stage... He was the first to hide the orchestra, to dim the lights in the audience, to calculate the overpowering impact of the interplay between mythos, music and acting; he initiated a new architecture...[and] removed [the opera] from the banality of modern, everyday life.... In his relentless illusionism Wagner was the precursor of... an art that overwhelms the audience's rationality by unleashing a theatricality which collapses critical distances and disables analytic responses.

(*SF* 45)

It is this anti-rational and anti-critical drive that, Puchner asserts, the modernist anti-theatrical tradition seeks to contain. Modernism's suspicion of the public sphere, originating with its own idealization of “intense concentration” and artistic complexity (*SF* 10), drives it away from theatricality and toward the literary as a means of asserting the value of individual absorption and contemplation over collectivity. As a model of aesthetic consumption, solitary reading offers the advantage of isolating individuals from one another and thus hampering the affective flows that, Puchner follows Adorno in observing, cut across the private time of individual thought to create the conditions for mass politics (*SF* 12, 47 - 8). The mimetic gestures of the actor, he notes, are doubled in Wagnerian opera by the secret
motions of the conductor in the orchestra pit. The one is visible to the public; in the other, hidden from view, one encounters once more the figure who “beats” out a dictatorial rhythm for the movements of others (SF 47): “‘His music is created in the gesture of beating, is governed by images of beating’... it is in the invisible conductor that Adorno senses the totalitarian secret of Wagner's theatrical politics” (SF 47 - 48).

At first glance, then, Puchner’s position seems almost the inverse of Balme’s: whereas Balme regards theatre and the public sphere as antithetical, Puchner views the one as analogous to the other, generating the aestheticisation of politics through the twentieth century. Whereas for Balme theatre's connection to the public sphere, and thus to politics, is maintained through parrhêsia, for Puchner theatricality is connected with the public sphere through the untrustworthy figure of the actor, who lies, and to the credulity of the people, who watch and believe. In this sense, the two accounts are markedly dissimilar: Balme investigates the conditions of possibility for theatrical intervention in politics by first establishing the distance between them that must be bridged; Puchner begins by affirming theatre as “the most social and therefore the most political of the arts” (SF 46).

Yet, in examining the values attributed to the twin traditions of modernist antitheatricalism and avant-garde theatricalism that Puchner outlines, one is confronted once more with an opposition, familiar now, between rationality, individual agency and reflective thought on the one hand, and ignorance, authority and communal movement on the other. One can detect the same wariness of the theatrical in Puchner's account of the public sphere as is present in Balme's and Habermas's description of the feudal or “representative” public sphere. However, the grounds of concern remain constant: theatricality equals illusion and the removal of participatory politics to “somewhere else”. The difference between Puchner's and Balme's
depictions of the “public sphere” is finally a matter of where in this complex of theatricality, rationality, reflective thought and politics these writers choose to apply that term. For Balme, who places his emphasis on the joint project of politics, it is the enfranchised community as a whole, rather than the individual, that processes matters of interest, weighs up logical (or agonistic or ludic) points of difference and arrives a synthesis. For this reason, personal reflection may be thought of as “pre-rational” in Balme; it is the thought process of the citizenry, and not the citizen, that the public sphere embodies—a thought that nonetheless depends on the autonomously generated opinions of private persons to provide it with matter for digestion. For Puchner, the public sphere is neither rational nor pre-rational, but anti-rational; thought remains invested in the individual, and thus the public sphere, which usurps thought for itself, can only be a threat to the autonomy of the individual thinker, who must “withdraw” from it (SF 10). In both cases, what is at stake is not the precise definition of the public sphere but the association of political enfranchisement with an “other time” of personal thought, and the conjoining of theatre with its contrary: the joint time of a communal present.

**ii. Theatrum Mundi**

**Arendt**

Arendt’s references to the *theatrum mundi* are especially evident in *Between Past and Future*, where, in describing the governmental system of the Greek polis, she asserts that it marked the discovery of a new kind of life unknown to others—to the highly civilised tyrannies of Asia or to other, barbarian neighbours. The distinguishing feature of this life was that it was “political” in a particular sense; unfolding between
equals in words and deeds whose aim was remembrance, its affairs were conducted “by means of speech, through persuasion (πείθειν), and not by means of violence, through mute coercion” (Between 22). Such an unfolding implied a space of encounter, which Arendt describes in theatrical terms: it was “a space of appearances where they could act…a kind of theater where freedom could appear” (152). This “theater” was the public realm.

Yet how should one understand the ambiguous meaning of this metaphor, of the public sphere described as “a space of appearances” or as a “theater where freedom could appear”? Arendt herself provides two discrete interpretive paths, which correspond to two lines of thinking about theatre running parallel in her work and surfacing at different moments in her analysis. Firstly, a path in which theatre appears as an obfuscation of reality; here, freedom appears from the theatre and is figured as the overcoming of its inauthentic representations. Secondly, a formulation in which freedom appears itself within a kind of theatricality, connoting fluidity and play.

An example of the former line of thinking appears in the Preface to Between Past and Future, which Arendt opens by quoting the French poet René Char—who, in attempting to distil the experience of his generation’s struggle during the German occupation, reflected on the surprising discovery made by those who took part in the Resistance, that he who ‘joined the Resistance, found himself,’ that he ceased to be ‘in quest of [himself] without mastery, in naked unsatisfaction,’ that he no longer suspected himself of ‘insincerity,’ of being ‘a carping, suspicious actor of life,’ that he could afford ‘to go naked.’ … stripped of all masks—of those which society assigns to its members as well as those which the individual fabricates for himself in his psychological reactions against society…
In ceasing to be actors, Arendt writes, the members of the resistance had begun to act, to “become ‘challengers,’” and to “create that public space between themselves where freedom could appear” (4).

In this passage, Arendt appears to defer to a long tradition of anti-theatrical thought whose impulse, as Jonas Barish argues, can be traced all the way back to Plato, and which repudiates the “inferior world” of theatrical representation as dangerous falsehood (Antitheatrical Prejudice 5 – 6): as ignorance versus knowledge; appearance versus reality; illusion versus truth; surface versus depth; imitation versus being. This anti-theatrical prejudice, which as the preceding section suggests is also discernible in Habermas’s account of the representative public sphere, rests ultimately on a fear of credulity, since the insubstantial forms of the theatre are viewed as dangerous not merely because they are false (which in itself signifies only a lack of plenitude) but because they are misleading. Moreover, as Rancière argues in The Emancipated Spectator, this fear of credulity is essentially antidemocratic, since it claims for itself a superior clear-sightedness in contradistinction to “the people”, whose power of judgment it mistrusts. Such is the case concerning both spectators, who are seduced into ignorance by illusion, and actors themselves, since, as Barish writes, “in Plato’s view, imitation is formative—those who imitate will tend to become what they imitate” (21). In Arendt’s formulation, the fear of credulity inspires the recovery of an extra-theatrical authenticity that contests social control: in taking off those masks “which society assigns to its members” the members of the Resistance “find” themselves, unconcealed, in a truer, wider environment undistorted by fictions of role. The unexpectedness and rarity of this discovery—which Arendt describes as a “mirage”, as an “age-old treasure” of the order of “Unicorns and fairy queens” (Between 4 - 5)—reveals the difficulty of breaking the theatrical spell. But
the fear of credulity is also not complete in Arendt: in her work, the lost treasure of
revolution surfaces periodically throughout history as “the innermost story of the
modern age” (4) and, moreover, is each time discovered afresh by the people
themselves. Thus Arendt emphasizes that the members of the resistance had “taken
the initiative upon themselves” (4) and, in so doing, commenced something new,
namely, the resurrection of the public sphere as an active principle.

There is something incongruous, though, in this description of a “public realm”—
where “all relevant business in the affairs of the country was transacted in deed and
word” (3)—as something so elusive, both as an iteration of a phenomenon that is
hardly perceptible to history and also because it appears, in the nature of its
revolutionary struggle, as something that must be “hidden from the eyes of friend and
foe” (3). For in speaking of something “public” we usually mean that it is visible. In
what sense, then, does this public sphere maintain its connection to visibility—
characterised, as it is, as the concealed and the unnoticed?

Only in the public sphere, writes Arendt in *The Human Condition*, can
individuals demonstrate their “specifically human quality” of uniqueness (22), of
being able to appear to one another as irreducible to the generality of the species-life
by virtue of a distinct life story:

This individual life is distinguished from all other things by the rectilinear
course of its movement, which, so to speak, cuts through the circular
movement of biological life. This is mortality: to move along a rectilinear
line in a universe where everything, if it moves at all, moves in a cyclical
order.

(19)

In *Between Past and Future*, this rectilinear movement is also the path of thought that
runs transverse to the colliding vectors of past and future, along the “non-time-space”
of which the thinker treads deliberately back and forth, and in which gap alone can he
(sic) appear as “a ‘he’… and not a ‘somebody’… in the full actuality of his concrete being” (12 - 13). Janelle Reinelt sums this up neatly: the public sphere is the space in which the “who” and not the “what” of a human being can appear through her capacity for actions that exceed the conditioning forces of natural necessity or the momentum of human affairs (“Feminism”). In beginning something new, something “which was not given” (Arendt, Between 150), human beings can aspire to the only immortality of which they are capable, namely, remembrance. But because “who-ness” is coeval with its own enactment, it must come as “a revelation and often as a surprise, even to the subject herself” (Reinelt, “Feminism”).

Thus the public sphere is “public” in the sense of being “visible” because, no matter how obscure its province, only within it is there any visibility at all. This, then, is a visibility figured as truth: though, on the one hand, the omnipresent spectacle of the Great Theatre of the World offers its brightness to no particular person, but to an autonomous faculty of unseeing sight which permeates the bodies and forms of a “mere togetherness” (Human Condition 36), in crossing out of this shrouded realm, human beings are able to apprehend one another.

But there is another sense to this “public-ness”, albeit one closely related: those who discard their masks and step into this apprehensible space are no longer hiding. Indeed, everything is visible. They are “naked”; all may scrutinize their choices and courage and, therefore, to act in this sphere entails an acceptance of responsibility for one’s passage through the world. The opportunity for each to act in this “naked” way is, for Arendt, the very essence of democracy. But this is not the case passively, but actively; there are always those who desire to banish citizens from the public sphere and “to deprive them of the time necessary for participation in common matters” (Human Condition 222). The democracy of the public sphere must be claimed by its
members, and sustained, rather than understood as an already open space into which one enters with prior “rights” established.

Yet it is in this activity and becoming-visible that the second sense of Arendt’s descriptions of the public sphere as “a space of appearances” and “a kind of theater” begins to emerge. For the metaphor that Arendt uses for this activity is precisely the virtuosity of the performing artist:

Freedom as inherent in action is perhaps best illustrated by Machiavelli’s concept of virtù, the excellence with which man answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of fortuna. Its meaning is best rendered by “virtuosity,” that is, an excellence we attribute to the performing arts (as distinguished from the creative arts of making), where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in an end product which outlasts the activity that brought it into existence and becomes independent of it.

(Between 151)

Politics, understood as the disclosure of human unicity, implies both an enactment—a claiming—and context of plurality. For visibility demands to be seen; without witnesses to their words and deeds, human beings cannot aspire to remembrance. Moreover, without the presence of equals to disturb the inexorable movement of the individual will to its execution, the special quality of human action remains indiscernible. Arendt distinguishes between the performing and the creative arts in the same way that she distinguishes between the nature of human beings and of the gods: the demiurge, toiling in solitude to shape the substances of the primal world, anticipates no interference with the execution of his designs, which become the living creation; but to religion and the poets, he is veiled behind namelessness, or behind many names, which notify his subsumption into function (Human Condition 22, 23
n1). She writes: “Action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it” (*Human Condition* 22 – 23). Likewise, the creative artist herself disappears behind the completeness of her works, which exhibit an ideal of a perfection of will, and which announce her mastery of her “doings from beginning to end” (*Human Condition* 220). But the performing artist does not so disappear and is not so subsumed by function; rather, she enacts her own special quality unsubordinated to any judgment that respects an end or *telos*. Arendt makes the connection explicit:

Performing artists—dancers, play-actors, musicians, and the like—need an audience to show their virtuosity, just as acting men need the presence of others before whom they can appear; both need a publicly organized space for their “work”, and both depend upon others for the performance itself. (*Between* 152)

Hence, to discard one’s masks and to step forward in one’s nakedness is not to leave the theatre. On the contrary, one still *performs*; only the configuration of the spectacle has changed. If, in their authenticity, Char and the members of the Resistance momentarily abandoned a stage of one kind, they did so only to establish a different “space of appearances” where, regardless, “they could *act*” (my emphasis). In this sense, Arendt’s casting of politics as “a kind of theater where freedom could appear” requires not so much the rejection of theatricality as the reorganising of the theatrical event, and a redistribution of the positions it allows, in order to stage a mutual showing of virtuosity in which everyone participates—or, at least, everyone free. Thus the public sphere is, for Arendt, “a space where freedom as virtuosity can appear” (*Between* 153).
Chapter 2

WHEN THE MOUNTAIN CHANGED ITS CLOTHING AND THE PROMISE OF FREEDOM

Figure 1. “Just listen to me. Everything going to be all right.” Opening sequence of When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing, dir. Heiner Goebbels, with the Vocal Theatre Carmina Slovenica. Originally produced by the Ruhrtriennale 2012. Melbourne Festival, October 2014. Photo: Wonge Bergmann. © Wonge Bergmann/Ruhrtriennale.

“Just listen to me. Everything going to be all right.”

The centre of the stage stands empty save for a few scattered chairs, upended as if in some careless parting. A colourless wash illuminates these chairs and an assortment of other things, debris of an event yet to unfold: clothes on a rack; shoes piled in baskets; more stacked chairs; upturned tables; light stands; modular staging covered in green astro-turf. All of these anticipatory objects cluster around the edges of the performance space, as if indeterminately on the point of entering or leaving. Schönberg’s plays.
Figure 2. The “line-up” scene in *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing*. Photo: Wonge Bergmann. © Wonge Bergmann/Ruhrtriennale.

Figure 3. Performance of Victor Paranjotis’s “Dinana Ditiramb” in *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing*. Source: Clip from video made available by the director.
In these opening minutes of Heiner Goebbels’ “musictheatre” piece, *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing*, three dozen teenaged girls and young women enter this largely vacant space from an upstage corner and, in an irregular column, very slowly cross its diagonal. As they walk, one of their number—it is difficult to see exactly whom—begins what the Melbourne reviewer Cameron Woodhead afterwards describes as a “mantra”: the recurring phrase, “Just listen to me. Everything going to be all right” (Fig. 1). The performer calls it out, and, after a beat, the ensemble does the same. They speak at the same pace as they walk: *larghissimo*. As they continue to move downstage this cycle repeats.

If, as Heiner Goebbels writes in a 2006 essay, “Art can invite humans to experience freedom” (*AA* 72), what to make of this progress and this promise?

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Initially, at least, one might respond to this opening sequence in any number of ways:

*As drama.*

For other details become clear. One soon realises that the performers are blind; their eyes are closed and they are stepping carefully with their feet and feeling with their hands for the arms and backs of their fellows. Taken as interior to a fictional or even a symbolic scene, the mantra could therefore be cast as a reassurance from one to the other in the face of uncertainty and possible danger; one would then witness the formation of a sociality, and the maintenance of its momentum, by means of a shared and deliberate optimism.

And, indeed, Goebbels has, in discussing his work, expressed his interest in the processes of individuation and the tension between the individual and the group. In
the context of a choir—which is what these performers of the Vocal Theatre Carmina Slovenica are—this plays out as a tension between the personal and distinctive eccentricities of singular voices “which cannot be replaced or recast by other voices” and the normalising requirements of harmony based on standard expressive registers, which nevertheless are unable to completely erase each voice’s bodily origin (AA 33 – 34). Thus Goebbels, in working with the members of this choir, has said that he wanted the girls to speak individually in the piece, to offset the trained sound of the Slovenian choir with their untrained voices (as, although they are singers, they are not actors; See CRN). Elsewhere, he writes: “the voice is not an instrument” (AA 35). Yet he also wonders whether it is possible, in concert, to create a different kind of harmony, a “magical voice” of communal expression, deriving from a collective modesty (AA 36). This demands a retreat from individual expressivity. Or, in other words, abjuration of the assertion of individual presence in favour of voices that develop while remaining within the limits of their own character (AA 36). But also, in which each voice has its place. Such polyphony or “autonomy of harmonic voices” is akin in some ways to the “contrapuntal structure of a fugue” (AA 91). Goebbels describes this as a “pre-baroque notion of community” (AA 36).

On the other hand, it also becomes quickly apparent that optimism is far from fully assured. Indeed, that the semantic content of the mantra might not be its most important feature, since these blind peripatetics are not just searching with their hands and feet, but also listening for each other’s voices to discover their own positions with respect to the group. This is most obviously reflected in the tempo of the performers’ vocal articulation, which slows and stretches almost to the point of loss of coherence. As the words degrade and the syllables lengthen in each retarded moment, the voice, in its own echolocational quality as sound, achieves a partial untethering from the
expressivity of speech. But it also appears in additional sounds that break into the scene. Over the speakers one hears breathing, and a male voice: “Listen to me. Everything is going to be all light.” Then a female voice: “Just listen to me. Everything going to be all right.” Thus, a double impact: an acousmatic repetition and spatial removal of these phrases that throws into doubt their source and devalues their “authentic” connection to any thoughts that the young women might have; and a substitution of a single consonant (light/right) that draws attention to the mantra’s existence as sound and to the arbitrary, physical contingency of its meaning.

If this is a drama, then, which story does it tell? For if, in the first moment, one observes the constitution of society through the joint affirmation of a calculated hope, in this second moment, one is presented with echolalia: inclusion as a measurement of proximity, dependent on the reproduction of a specific signature. In other words, on the entry of the hopeful mantra into the ideological. And with this dissolution of its future tense, all sense of forward movement dissipates.

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As parable. That is to say, as a drama of drama. According to this response, the dramatic mantra must be contextualised against the physical situation of the stage and therefore loses its specific target to become a cosmic statement. Whatever the internal character of the drama of social constitution, we in the audience can see that, objectively, this drama itself cannot continue indefinitely; the performers have almost reached the terminal limit of their downstage motion, are running out of stage and heading straight at a stack of chairs, but, still blind, creep linearly onwards as if their trajectory need never experience constraint or alteration. Yet for this drama to be drama, they must remain unaware, or, alternatively, appropriate even these boundaries of the stage itself into their experience. To take this latter course would be to embrace,
in fact, the chief signifying strategy of “normal” theatre, wherein, as Stanton B. Garner writes, “the stage “stands in” for its represented world… [and] the objects, actors, sounds, and lights of the theater evoke the imaginative realm of fiction by pointing at themselves” (xi)—except, in this instance, causality is inverted, and the fiction develops in response to the materiality of the stage rather than the reverse. Yet Garner also notes of such theatre that because the physicality of the stage is “the very condition by which the play is created, it never fully effaces itself in this transformation” (xi). Thus the occurrence now and again in this scene of a curious double spectacle in which a performer, having bumped into an obstacle—another ensemble member or one of a few scattered chairs—stops and raises her hands to her closed eyes, as if to prevent herself from seeing.

This scene of blindness recalls Freud’s description, in “Psychical (Or Mental) Treatments”, of the experiment in which a hypnotised patient is instructed not to see persons or objects which are clearly present in a room. Freud relates how, in negotiating the space, the hypnotised patient treats these objects as though they were “thin air”; nonetheless, he appears to deliberately avoid them. When asked about this conduct, “he will invent some half-satisfactory excuse without remembering the real explanation—namely the suggestion he has been given” (297). From this experiment, Freud derives the concept of negative hallucination.

Interestingly, in the same essay, Freud remarks that, at heart, this phenomenon depends on credulity. That is, on an inequality in power whose foundation is ignorance. The relationship between the patient and the hypnotist, writes Freud, may be compared to that between a child and its parents, as a “combination of exclusive attachment and credulous obedience” that involves “an attitude of similar subjection on the part of one person towards another” (296).
One might therefore accept that to identify with the members of this parade would be to submit to an infantilisation. The spectator is torn between two modes of engagement: simultaneously, as it were, both patient and therapist. Firstly, as patient because, as *drama*, the scene’s maintenance by the singers implies just such a condition of childlike ignorance and constraint. Implicit in the drama of social constitution is limitation of the body’s true capacities to the prescribed actions of a role; as Jacques Rancière notes in *The Emancipated Spectator*, this is the charge leveled against the theatre by Plato, for whom “theatre is the place where ignoramuses are invited to see people suffering…the self-division which derives from ignorance” (3). Yet it is also, in another inflection, the objection Rancière himself makes against Plato’s proposed alternative, that of the “community as self-presence” (5), in which the distance of theatrical mediation is replaced by universal involvement in a precisely choreographed dance—since this rhythm, too, constrains the liberty of the body, and, moreover, in order to ensure its harmony, allocates individual movements “as if” they proceeded from a natural order:

> The human beings who were destined to think and rule did not have the same humanity as those who were destined to work, earn a living and reproduce. As Plato had put it, one had to ‘believe’ that God had put gold in the souls of the rulers and iron in the souls of the artisans. That nature was a matter of ‘as if’; it existed in the form of the *as if* and it was necessary to proceed as if it existed.

(70)

Thus, warns Rancière, the dynamic of credulity does not cease with the abolition of theatre. Hence, in a second moment, to refuse the drama and regard the procession of the singers with a cooler eye involves adopting the adult perspective of the therapist, for whom the tension of the encounter derives from anticipating the moment of the patient’s—of one’s own—development beyond a fiction one has imposed oneself.
The ambivalence of this situation is that in wishing to bring the patient to competence, one also finds satisfaction in the superior position of physician; the pleasure of fiction springs from masochistically turning this authority on oneself. In the jouissance of this internal disunion, one seeks to extend the clinical instant, against oneself, in defiance of the certainty of its eventual failure. Either way, as patient or as doctor, one is implicated in what Rancière describes as “allegories of inequality” (12).

Against this context, the words everything going to be all right rise above the circle of their original denotation to declare faith in continuity and the renewal of the single dramatic moment—of internal motivation. Nonetheless, inevitably, this drama of drama capitulates to the therapeutic tyranny of the outside world—development—and enforces its necessity. The first performer to reach the stack touches it with a foot, stops, pauses, then bends over and shrieks. So do the others, and the moment is broken.

Perhaps this is also why these performers are pubescent girls? In their developing bodies, they perform for us our own uncertainty in our relation to them as sexual, intellectual and political subjects. To what extent are they still children? To what extent do they exceed the “credulous obedience” of childhood?

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As parody. “Just listen to me. Everything going to be all right.” The words could be the script for all didactic theatre of “political” agitation. Here, though, the template is mocked. Those who deliver them do not even know to whom they speak, and can barely look after themselves.

* 

As quotation. To compound the matter: the male and female voices are those of Frank Uwe Laysiepen (Ulay) and Marina Abramović, excerpted from their 1982
sound work Bioguarde. Since Brecht, quotation has been employed to introduce a “certain reserve” or mutual exteriority of the actor and her utterances (Willett 125). All actors speak in quotations all the time, but the actor in epic theatre acknowledges this fact. (Hence, in “The Street Scene”, Brecht compares the epic theatre’s actor to the witness of an accident, who, after the event, replays what he has seen for an audience of bystanders. The words and gestures of the actor, like those of the witness, are “essentially repetitive”: “he is not the subject” (Willett 122, 125).) Goebbels, too, speaks of using quotation to open a “distance” between subject and speech. In an interview with Michael Cathcart during the 2014 Melbourne Festival, Goebbels describes the initial rehearsals for When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing, during which the themes of the piece emerged from a series of improvised monologues by the choristers. Each singer, in turn, “invented stories, or they told stories, or they made them up, very funnily, very creatively… talking about their grandfathers, talking about death, talking about money, talking about education” (IMC). But rather than selecting and transferring these monologues verbatim to the stage, Goebbels replaced them with well-known literary passages touching on similar concerns:

> All these topics were already on the stage. But I didn’t want to re-enact the spontaneity of their inventions. So that’s why I was looking for existing texts, far away in the bigger distance, like texts by Jean-Jacques Rousseau or by Adalbert Stifter of the nineteenth century, by Alain Robbe-Grillet, by Gertrude Stein… So I was looking for texts which are far away because I love theatre to be in distance.

(IMC)

For Goebbels, quotation enables the performers to sidestep the danger of turning their autobiographical stories into just another series of texts that organise and subjugate the stage. The especial hazard—to be avoided—is that the girls themselves should be “fixed” and transformed into characters; that the “authenticity” of these stories should
then demand the manufacture of a living impulse to colonise the unfolding of pure life. Instead, quotation emphasises that, even in the first instance of autobiographical narration, one speaks in a relation of distance to language.

But—such distance granted—what is the relation of this quotation to its original whole? Ulay and Abramović recorded Bioguarde for the Tate’s 1982 Audio Arts event, in which forty-five artists were asked to each create a five-minute piece for the (then widespread) medium of audiocassette. The three-cassette compilation of these works, Live To Air: artists’ sound works, was also distributed by Audio Arts Magazine. In Bioguarde, which exists only as playback from tape, Ulay and Abramović repeat this single phrase, “Just listen to me. Everything going to be all right,” over and over again, with the minor variations (such as the substitution of light for right) already mentioned. Thematically, the work is concerned, along lines similar to those sketched above, with language’s dual existence as signification and sound. On the one hand, the rhythmic, soothing effect of this mantra (the word does now seem appropriate) evokes a meditative timelessness; for listeners, a potential offer of respite from the anxieties of the subject’s foray into time—heard in this way, the substitution of the word “light” for “right” assumes a quasi-spiritual significance. On the other hand, there exist all the tensions already noted: the tendency for repetition and extreme slowness to dilute the denotative function of speech and steer it toward senselessness; for micro-substitutions to highlight its textural rather than signifying qualities; the absence of an evident source, provoking a crisis of attribution. All of these factors might contribute to an opposite impact: to a sense, not of a restorative pause in time, but of being trapped in the recurrence of a single arrested moment.

But Bioguarde also works as a meditation in another sense, on the nature of mediation. Since the mantra is only ever heard as a recording, it is not for the listener
in his or her “now”. Instead, it creates a dissonance between the forward arrow of its content and the material conditions of its dissemination. Strictly speaking, its promise is unlinked from “actual” time (that is, the time of the listener). Rather, it exists in its own present and refers ahead to an indeterminate future; one which, from the point of view of the listener, may already be over, or which might be deferred indefinitely. As the catalogue notes for Audio Arts suggest, this is also a step out of a shared public space (of the gallery) into “parallel” spaces of “audial/technological” distribution and consumption. As such, Bioguarde foregrounds its own physical format to draw attention to the potential, within societies dominated by mass media technologies, for the circulation of merely generic assurances to displace the direct exchange of emancipatory commitments.

As quotation, then, this excerpt stands in a tentative relationship to its mode of communication in When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing: its emergence from the live theatrical stage rather than from audiotape. The distance integral to all quotation makes it appear not as coextensive with the horizon of the stage—i.e. as an aesthetic environment—but rather, within it, as an object, whose purpose is to provide a contrast. In this case, between those medial conditions of its original production and reception and those pertaining to its current existence (a juxtaposition reinforced by the inclusion of Ulay and Abramović’s recorded voices). As object, it is dialogic, and therefore even has some of the qualities of a dramatic character. Except, in this circumstance, the drama is—to borrow Martin Puchner’s phrase—a drama of ideas, which marks out its internal time through the moments of a logical progression. The suspense relevant to this drama derives, as does all dramatic suspense, from the process of identification with the character’s fate: a process of delay and intensification in which the spectator’s empathetic imagination considers the partial
view of the character against the inevitable realities of its broader social universe, and ultimately is returned to the comprehensibility of its own social realm, as it were, more deeply in. In this case, we in the audience consider the perspective provided by the quotation—that elements of the performance make it appear like a recording; that, in keeping with this view, the liveness of the stage is also a kind of mediation; that its “present-ness” is contaminated by its desire to repeat itself; that it therefore is part of the realm of reproduction—against the context of this mantra’s inevitable cessation. And with the cessation, the end of perfect repetition, since even the most carefully rehearsed piece must differ, however minutely, between performances. The end of the quotation marks the end of its specific assertion, but also our re-emergence to a comprehension of its wider import, which is the visibility of (theatrical) mediality itself, in the performance of its, and our, presence. The quotation provides a detour, via the aesthetic realm, back to the hic et nunc of ourselves.

* 

As epigraph. Another kind of quotation. Traditionally, the epigraph acts as a heuristic key, shepherding the potentially limitless proliferation of a text’s meanings onto the commons of cultural continuity. By relating the newer text to a set of established concerns, it proposes a strategy whereby it is to be understood, and suggests that between texts, there is complicity. Hence the latter arrival is cast in a double light: both as a continuation of an old conversation, but also as an illumination or bringing-into-the-present of the past in the unfolding of the quoted text’s inner coherence during the course of its historical life.\(^9\)

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\(^9\) It is notable this unfolding should occur through the fragmentation of the text. cf. Walter Benjamin on the word as arcade in “The Task of the Translator”, in *Illuminations*, 70 – 82.
Thus, in an interpretive mode, the cry of “Just listen to me. Everything going to be all right” casts *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing* as a sequel to Ulay and Abramović’s examination of mediality and public space, as already discussed. But also, more literally, it refers the spectator to *Bioguarde*’s other chief feature: that it exists only as sound.

What can one make of this in relation to the newer work? That *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing* is also to be approached aurally? If so, as an instruction this epigraph postulates a causal relation between the mantra’s two halves; if only one correctly disposes one’s apprehensive faculties in approaching the work (in a specific way, giving primacy to one’s power of hearing), one will be able to appreciate the piece fully, and accept that invitation to freedom that Goebbels claims as a motivation. So: *just listen* [and] everything will be all right. Grasped so, the spectacle of the sightless young women becomes a rebuke, a visual command to accompany the verbal one; as long as one can *see* their unseeing, one fails to participate in the spirit of the work.

Goebbels himself describes sound as the most crucial of theatre’s communicative elements. Comparing sound to other sensory sources, Goebbels observes: “sounds include our body in a more intense way, they go through our body” (*CRN*). And again, during a discussion of Rimini Protokoll’s *Call Cutta* (a telephone piece performed via mobile handsets), Goebbels asserts “the basic differences between hearing and seeing”:

> With regard to hearing the question of presence has to be asked differently. This is because in the act of hearing I experience the ‘space of my own presence’…”

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10 The interior quotation is attributed by Goebbels to the philosopher Gernot Böhme.
Sounds, unlike most visual information\textsuperscript{11}, can secede from their origins to be encountered acousmatically, and therefore permit the hearer to experience them, in the absence of an identifiable source, as forces that modify the space of her or his own body. “‘He who hears in that way,’” writes Goebbels, quoting Böhme, “‘is dangerously open, he releases himself into the wideness of space and can therefore be hit by acoustic events.’” But also, such hearing “‘can be an exhilarating experience, to feel that you are actually part of this world’” (AA 56).

Thus the emphasis, in \textit{When the Mountain Changed its Clothing}, on moments of driving percussive rhythm, such as in the performance, towards the middle-point, of the Victor Paranjoti \textit{Dinana Ditiramb} (Fig. 3): a scene which the girls commence, at first, with coats held over their heads as if at the mercy of a sudden downpour, to a recorded soundscape featuring city noises (birds, the blare of a train) and heavy rain. As the “rain” falls, the singers begin the choral piece, softly at first, joining their own beat to its steady throb, as if indeed they were “part of this world”, caught and saturated by its elemental nature, so that its rhythm somehow overwhelmed and permeated them and became their own. As the scene continues, the rain clears away but the \textit{Ditiramb} becomes more and more forceful; the girls, who are seated, begin to sway and to clap with its pulse, visibly energised as the piece moves with increasing strength towards a climax. As are we who are in the audience—it is difficult not to be captured and carried along by this “acoustic event”, to feel its momentum “through

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{11} Goebbels names James Turrell’s \textit{Gasworks} as an exception to this general rule. In the essay, “The Space as Invitation”, he writes: “\textit{Gasworks}, a light-igloo, which the audience member is pushed into on their backs, where nothing is shown, nothing is made visible, in which there is nothing to be seen except the act of seeing itself through unsettling flash sensations on the retina” (AA 40).
our body”. What is this phenomenon, but a transfer of acoustic natures: of the same
d acoustic nature, which passes from the rain, to the girls, and also to ourselves; which
persists and develops even as it leaves one and enters another?

(More subtly, one might also look to the staging of an excerpt from Alain Robbe-
Grillet’s *Project for a Revolution in New York*, a section of dialogue between J-R, a
call girl and revolutionary agent, and Laura, a young girl, whose part is enacted, in
this case, in choric style by the choir. As the dialogue proceeds, in logical spirals that
perpetually return to their point of beginning, a somatic pulse or twitch passes through
the chorus, jumping from one body to another. The collective impersonation of the
fictional character disperses presence and announces the quotation, as already
discussed. But what does this twitch show—that ideas can be catching? That
subjectivity is provisionally located? That “Laura” is enmeshed in a network of
concerns and ideas that exceed the limits of her function in the dialogue?)

But there is also the emphasis on the permeation of the body by sound as breath.
This is evident from the opening moments in the selection of the Schönberg track: a
choral transcription of “Farben” from *Five Pieces for Orchestra, Op 16*, distinguished
by the addition of intermittent gasps and exhalations. Or, to take another instance:
during the “line-up” scene (Fig. 2), a scene roughly fifteen minutes into *When the
Mountain Changed its Clothing* that marks the culmination of its first extended
section, a kind of prelude to the rest of the piece, thematically concerned with
audienceship. (The choreography of this section has the singers move chairs—
metonyms of the audience—in a range of ways around the stage, standing on them,
lying next to them, rearranging them, in an overall chatter and movement like that of
the foyer, before the discipline of viewing quietens it into neat rows; moreover, this
“prelude” is pervaded by a certain pre-theatricality, from the relative emptiness of the
stage to the fact that the girls wear their street clothes; as soon as this section is over the girls change into “costumes”, the lights adopt colours, and all those scenic objects that had been hovering around the edges are dragged onstage and assembled in full view by the singers, in a performance of theatricality: they raise lighting stands and even construct a miniature raked stage, complete with backdrop.) During this scene, the girls line the chairs up along the very front edge of the stage and sit staring into the audience; at first they smile, but over the course of minutes, slowly their expressions fall, first to neutrality, then to angst. Their breathing becomes exaggerated. In these moments—as in the entirety of the prelude—spectators who have come to the theatre to attend to the activities of others find themselves, in the words of one audience member, “thrown back on themselves”, and discover that their own activities and perceptions are the focus of the work (IMC). Goebbels acknowledges that in inventing this scene he was concerned with the gaze (CRN). But, equally, his descriptions of audience responses to the scene during its French performances stress the acoustic dimension. In his Moscow interview with Boris Yukhananov:

[During] our performance in France, in Paris, actually… people started coughing all the time. They just could not accept to hear themselves breathing in the silence.

(CRN)

Or, in Melbourne, with Michael Cathcart:

…in Paris, people had difficulty with the silence. All of a sudden you start to hear your own breath or the one of your neighbour and you feel uncomfortable, and they start coughing all the time12… this is one of my favourite scenes, or images also, because… it confronts you with yourself.

12 At this point in the interview Goebbels fakes a mild coughing fit.
The particular reactions of the Parisians are beside the point, but serve to illustrate Goebbels’s conception, that scene is about the silence and the breath of the girls as much as about the act of watching; about the self-consciousness of the audience member of her own inexorable permeation by sound—which, in the form of breath, moves through her body and is inescapably connected to her very existence.

In his foreword to Goebbels’s recent collection of essays, *Aesthetics of Absence*, Nicholas Till comments on Goebbels’s “musically founded craftsmanship” and describes him as “a composer who composes theatre” (x, vii), a designation Goebbels also accepts throughout his interviews, lectures and essays. If this is so, it is these qualities of musical hearing—the tactility of sound and its rhythmic logic of transition between entities—that preoccupy his compositional orientation, and allow him to present a “drama of perception” rather than a spectacle of representative figures on stage (*AA* 2, 63, 91; also *IMC*). Hence, quoting Stein, Goebbels argues for “Theatre as a ‘thing in itself’, not as a representation or a medium to make statements about reality” (*AA* 2); a “drama of experience” (*AA* 2); “an art form, that like a painting, or like a sculpture, or like an installation…has its secret,… its possible space of imagination for the one who’s looking at it” (*IMC*); and he agrees with Cathcart’s proposition that:

> when we listen to a piece of music we don’t say, ‘Well, now I have a proposition about the world that is demonstrated by that particular key change.’ We just experience the music in and for itself.

(*IMC*)

Nevertheless, why stage the concert at all? Part of the shock of the opening procession is precisely the clash between what we attendees hear (“Just listen to me”) and what we see, an image that appears to have its own independence and which,
having its own fascination, seems to flatly contradict the instruction. Moreover, the carefully planned lushness of the visual field in the post-“prelude” sections of *When the Mountain Changed its Clothing* (which includes vibrantly coloured costumes and lighting as well as large-scale reproductions of paintings, including Henri Rousseau’s *Jungle with Lion*) belies any notion that visuality is unimportant.  

In this context, the slippage between “Everything going to be all right” and “Everything going to be all light” signals a broader, metaphoric understanding of composition, whose birth in the aural nevertheless leaves a genetic inheritance: hearing as more than just a single sense, but additionally as a mode of engagement, a statement of values. The drama of perception intrinsic to hearing is to infuse the diverse perceptual apparatuses of the body. Thus, Goebbels says, in an echo of Edward Gordon Craig or Adolphe Appia, “I am a composer and I compose with all the elements on stage” (*CRN*) 14. Or again:

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13 Other details reinforce this point: Schönberg’s “Farben” is also “Chord-colours” in English, referring to the common musical denotation of timbre with the word “colour”—a metaphoric comparison of the senses; and, though in coming to the performance we may have anticipated listening to the world-famous choir Carmina Slovenica, our expectations are immediately unsettled as, on their first entrance, they are not singing at all, and in fact the singing is being done by someone else, another choir on a recorded track—so instead we must engage with them by looking.  

14 For example, in Craig’s “The Art of the Theatre (1st Dialogue)”: “…the Art of the Theatre is neither acting nor the play, it is not scene nor dance, but it consists of all the elements of which these things are composed: action, which is the very spirit of acting; words, which are the body of the play; line and colour, which are the very heart of the scene; rhythm, which is the very essence of dance” (*On the Art of the Theatre* 137 – 8). To be certain, there is a fundamental opposition between Craig’s directorial absolutism and Goebbels’s commitment to “anti-totalitarian”, co-operative working arrangements; or between Craig’s quest for harmony and Goebbels’s
I use the term composition more in a general way of composing the images, the texts, with the music and choreographies of bodies. You could consider everything as a composition in a wider sense and that’s how I define my work.

(IMC)

To return to the epigraph, it is clear that it needs to be considered in its new context, that is, holistically in the juxtaposition of its linguistic content against the visual. As such, the epigraph unfolds in the new medium as a theatrical proposal about the preference for fugal contrast. But Craig also anticipates many of Goebbels’s preoccupations, especially his challenging of a literary basis for theatre on the grounds that it constrains the natural freedom of the body. In “The Actor and the Über-Marionette”, Craig presents a “comedy of author and actor” in which the playwright is cast as one who is prepared to use other men “as instruments”; the actor, by contrast, is “made a slave or medium for the expression of another’s thoughts” (On the Art of the Theatre 60; emphasis in original). For a recent discussion of the “interesting relation” between Craig’s concept of the Über-Marionette and Goebbels’s stage poetics, see Yaron Abulafia’s treatment of Stifters Dinge in The Art of Light on Stage (178 – 197). For the comparison to Appia, see David Roesner’s Musicality in the Theatre: Music as Model, Method and Metaphor in Theatre-Making: “If we look at composer and director Heiner Goebbels’s works…which take Appia’s notion of the theatre as score into the twenty-first century while being diametrically opposed to other premises of Appia, we can see prime examples of how text, music, lighting, set and movement at times entangle in complementary rhythms, provide sonic punctuation for each other… become co-performers and so on. In short, an awareness of the interplay of scenic elements and theatrical means, which makes use of the wealth of models available in musical voicing and composition techniques, expands the scope for staging theatre…” (37). Goebbels refers directly to Craig and Appia, together with other figures of the early twentieth-century avant-garde such as Marinetti, Stein and Meyerhold, in several lectures and essays: see “The Space as Invitation” and “Organizing Hearing and Seeing” in The Aesthetics of Absence (AA 40, 99) and “The Aesthetics of Absence” (EGS).
relation between the senses: that they work in separate spheres. The drama of
perception therefore becomes a drama of perception: of the encounter, within the
individual spectator, of the competing motions of perception belonging to the
different apprehensive powers.

Thus Goebbels quotes Gertrude Stein’s claim that “nothing is more interesting to
know about theatre than the relation of sight and sound” (qtd in AA 56) and also refers
to Robert Wilson’s idea that “ideal theatre would be a cross between the radio play
and the silent movie” (qtd in Teschke 11), since, as Goebbels puts it, “a silent movie
has an endless acoustic space, and a radio piece has an endless visual space” (CRN): a
separation of visual and aural elements is required in order to preserve both spaces,
and to maintain perception’s somatic, experiential self-focus rather than to allow its
devolution into slumbering instrumentality. For the visual and the aural to illustrate
one another would involve a mutual foreclosure; by not pursuing one another the
senses open up the imaginative spaces of what they are not.

The imagination thus works across the senses, in their “de-synchronization”
(EGS; AA 4). Goebbels summarises the situation thus:

The deconstruction and decentralization of the theatre-senses as well as
translation of narrative modes into a complex coexistence and simultaneity
of impressions, with which to surround an ‘empty’ centre in relation to a
given thematic complex can account for the different rhythms of audience
perception.

(AA 58)

Such a theatre can be contrasted to a traditional theatre of literary dominance, in
which “the intimidating authority and gravity of texts” organises and over-determines
the manifold elements of the stage (AA 1). In such theatre, these diverse theatrical
means double and triple the text, showing again “what has already been mentioned”
or mentioning “what has already been shown” (CRN). The result is a circumscription
of those “endless spaces” of imagination and absence, and a heightened intensity of focus—especially on the figure of the actor, whose aura stems from the fact that all of stage’s machinery reinforces the presence of the character whom she also illustrates, of whom she is the corporeal interpreter. This insistent, centripetal redirection of the spectatorial imagination amounts also to its capture: it allows the individual audience member to discover her own likeness in the figure on stage and to identify with her (*EGS*); but it also makes the actor an instrument, whose own living motion is rendered as service to a textual idea.

Against this imaginative containment and restriction of life, Goebbels proposes a theatre wary of representation and illustration, “in which the actor has to survive, rather than act” because she presents herself in a horizontal, rather than vertical, relationship to text and to the theatre’s other elements (*AA 2; EGS*):

> Being sceptical and mistrusting towards representation accompanies me as a matter of principle. Scepticism not just towards actors, but fundamentally against the theatre: against stage design, which illustrates, against merely functional lighting, against costumes, which comment, and against texts, which above all want to make announcements rather than maintain an artistic reality.

(*AA 83*)

This suspicion, says Goebbels, derives from an “anti-totalitarian” impulse (*CRN*)¹⁵—the desire that theatre provide instead a space for the senses to explore subtlety, to choose what to attend to, away from the pressure of works that act “frontally” (*AA 55*) and especially from the “totalitarianism of the media”, which consists in overwhelming the senses with what is bright and loud, in always directing attention,

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¹⁵ Goebbels refers to “totalitarianism” throughout his lectures and writings. See *AA 2, 29, 44, 55; CRN; EGS*. 
in forcing the spectator to “eat what is up front” (CRN). Totalitarianism in this sense is not a “political” totalitarianism (see CRN) but belongs to the aesthetic sphere as a control of perception and a refusal of the space of reflection. Consequently, freedom from its influence can be characterised as “a mental space, a mental freedom” that inhabits the lacunae between the senses (AA 61)\(^{16}\), hence the focus in *When the Mountain Changed its Clothing* on scenes concerning the repetitive or authoritarian aspects of education (such as in the presentation of excerpts from Robbe-Grillet’s *Project for a Revolution in New York* and Rousseau’s *Émile*), a process ofindoctrination of the body and of occluding that mental liberty.

From the foregoing, then, it is possible to identify several key features of Goebbels’s work and his conception of freedom:

(i) Freedom is freedom from a totalitarianism of the senses—a totalitarian relation of the senses—and emerges through the aesthetic.

(ii) Freedom depends on a particular kind of arrangement of the body, a gestalt that establishes a relation between the independent bodily powers in their autonomy. Goebbels refers to this arrangement temporally and musically as the “rhythm of the senses” (AA 88), and also observes that it develops according to a non-linear, poetical logic:

Friedrich Hölderlin already stressed a “poetic logic” regarding theatre, a poetic logic that for him… lays claim to many of our perceptive abilities… For Hölderlin, “poetry treats the different faculties… so that the representation of these different faculties makes a whole,” and “the connection between the more independent parts of the different faculties” is something that he calls “the rhythm”.

\(^{16}\) Goebbels here again paraphrases Robert Wilson, on the choreography of George Balanchine.
But freedom is also a “mental freedom” that relies on the turning of the senses toward absence.

Freedom is inseparable from a certain kind of space. This is not merely a metaphor. Thus Goebbels writes of Robert Wilson that he “campaigns for the most precious thing we have: our perception and our imagination. This is what the architect and stage designer Wilson builds his spaces for” (AA 64; emphasis added). Such space allows the imagination to work, but is also multiform and refuses to reconcile the voices and impressions it carries (as might a typical concert hall, for example; AA 45, n 19). Instead, it demands an imaginative and perceptual sovereignty of the subject, who must negotiate it by choosing how to deploy his or her attention, since “hardly anyone is able to watch and listen at the same time” (AA 29), and the simultaneity of different impressions does not always allow him or her to apprehend the entire complex of sights, sounds and other stimuli.

Other features of this space also come to the fore: it is democratic, because in refusing representative drama it encourages a heterogeneity of responses to “what actually happens” rather than deferring an authorised meaning to a “reality outside of it” (AA 98); and because in doing so it distributes presence equally between all the elements of the theatrical event: the actors, the spectators and the various other objects, lights and material resonances of the stage. But democratic also because such a stage has no need of hierarchical working relations, which are only required in order to curtail the independent expression of the various theatrical elements with which individual workers are concerned. Instead, Goebbels suggests, a collective ethos better enables aesthetic and perceptual polyphony (AA 89)—indeed, in performance he cultivates not only collaborations between experts in their separate domains as
specialist performers and technicians, but repeatedly the stepping-outside of specialist identities, so that, as has already been noted, in When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing the members of a famous choir find themselves acting and building sets; or, in the 1996 piece Black on White, the musicians of the Ensemble Modern “discover their own abilities in doing other things beyond their musical virtuosity: writing, singing, sorting things, playing badminton and all sorts of games, hitting the drums with tennis balls or failing to do so… and reading” (EGS).

In this embrace of the whole person (whether spectator or performer) this space resists the economic logic of efficiency that, since Plato, has underpinned political philosophy. In the Republic Plato argues that a healthy foundation of the state must imply specialisation of human activity, since every human being has multiple needs, but a workman who has many occupations will fail to complete any of them satisfactorily, whereas he who devotes himself only to one, which is suited to his talents, will complete his tasks “at the opportune moment” (II.369b – 370c). Society is thus founded on the acknowledgment that interdependence is necessary for survival; that scarcity is inevitable (of material resources but, equally importantly, of time); and that its wealth derives from the distribution of necessary functions amongst its individuals. For Jacques Rancière, as already noted, the cost of this allocation of roles is precisely that the individual should come to accept these designated “talents” as his genuine nature; moreover, that the efficient society should leave him no time in which to explore his complete selfhood. Thus in The Emancipated Spectator, he provides counter-examples of working-class people who, in their responses to the world, exceed the efficient performance of the natures assigned to them: the appearance in a worker’s revolutionary newspaper in 1848 of floor-layer’s diary entry, describing the pleasure he takes as he “stops his arms and glides in imagination
toward the spacious view” from the owner’s window (71); and the correspondence of two French workers of the 1830s who, in their letters, describe their daily experiences of routine and leisure not in reference to their class identities or upcoming working week, but in aesthetic, contemplative and philosophical accounts of strolling, conversation and environment:

By making themselves spectators and visitors, they disrupted the distribution of the sensible which would have it that those who work do not have time to let their steps and gazes roam at random; and that the members of a collective body do not have time to spend on the forms and insignia of individuality.

(19)

But perhaps another point of connection is in Hannah Arendt’s outline, in *The Human Condition*, of the public sphere in the ancient *polis* as a realm defined against "everything merely necessary or useful" (25)—or, in other words, against everything connected to the *conditioning* of human life either by nature, including human physical existence, or the fabricated world. In order to enter this public sphere, which for the Greeks was the political sphere, one had to be prepared to hazard one’s life, since “only in the household was one primarily concerned with one’s own life and survival” (36). Only the courageous could be admitted to a fellowship that was political in content and purpose and thereby transcended the mere togetherness imposed on all—slaves, barbarians, and Greeks alike—through the urgencies of life.

(36)

Political action could only be discerned in deeds commenced without any consideration for mere biological survival. Only in the public sphere, as well, could

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17 Goebbels tends to use the word “politics” differently to both Arendt and Rancière, in a more concrete and limited sense.
one hope to experience relations of equality with others, since only here could one escape the violent inequality implicit in the interdependency of one’s private, economic life. Only in this public space, disregarding of necessity, could one express one’s capacity for freedom.

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Whichever of these responses to the opening sequence one embraces, one encounters a suspicion of politics, in the quotidian sense—an ambivalence expressed, in each mode, by means of an oscillation: between faith and cynicism, in the drama; between ignorance and knowledge, in the parable; in the turn from gravitas to irreverence, in parody; and between medial expectations, in quotation. Or rather, one discovers two competing conceptions of politics—one distinguished by the convergence of the political and the dramatic, and the second by the rejection of the dramatic frame.

If When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing in its opening moments offers for interrogation a progress and a promise of the most naïve and optimistic kind, doubt about the status of such promises also resonates elsewhere. Of the general dependency of political consciousness on dramatic preconceptions, Hans-Thies Lehmann remarks:

I still consider Althusser’s notion useful that our mindset is defined by a kind of ‘melodramatic consciousness’ which constantly seduces us to misread and to re-humanise social processes, to personalise them. Ideology is essentially self-misunderstanding.

*(FT 108)*

Likewise, Lehmann—who includes Goebbels’s work in his “panorama” of postdramatic theatre (PT 23, 68)—regards as “most useful” those parts of Rancière’s argument that refuse “all concepts of the ‘political’ that reduce it to a play of
distribution of political power within a given system” (FT 103)\(^\text{18}\), since such concepts leave intact an agonistic construal of the political subject: the self-told story that insists on the necessity of the other to the creation of the self—of “an adversary with whom strife, argument, war, political decision is possible” (FT 105). This tale entails a limitation of the subject of action (or conditioning, to use Arendt’s term) in dramatic form; against it, Lehmann provides a counterpoint in the dimension of the political… understood in the sense of questioning the fundamental structures of our being together in a *polis*, rather than taking positions on concrete political issues.

(FT 99)

Thus, against a politics understood in the future tense as the bright projection of life—which he denotes as “a ‘promise’, a foreshadowing of a utopia” or as “a promise for an existence beyond bad reality” (FT 99, 104)—Lehmann asserts “the necessity of

\(^{18}\) Lehmann does, however, take issue with other aspects of Rancière’s writings on the interrelation of theatre, politics and aesthetics (See FT). In particular, he opposes Rancière’s understanding of the function of aesthetic autonomy in the Kantian concept of the beautiful and, following Kant, also in Schiller. Rancière, Lehmann argues, places too great an emphasis on the anti-conceptuality of the Kantian beautiful, without properly acknowledging that for Kant aesthetic pleasure—though it responds to objects that remains undetermined—derives finally from a recognition that the sensible world is amenable to rational comprehension. The result, for Lehmann, is that Rancière is too optimistic about the potential of aesthetic autonomy to provide a space for liberty; Lehmann himself, by contrast, argues for the re-imbrication of the aesthetic and political spheres. Ultimately, as shall become apparent in the next Chapter, this dispute rests on a certain amount of discussion at cross purposes: Lehmann tends to use the term “aesthetic” to refer to the maintenance of an artistic world bracketed from ethico-political reality, and thus defined by representation, whereas Rancière tends to approach the aesthetic from a different angle: namely, the equal autonomy among individuals of the power of judgment.
engaging with death, i.e. with the (a)liveness of life” and echoes Heiner Müller’s claim that “the specificity of theatre is precisely not the presence of the live actor but the presence of the one who is potentially dying” (PT 167, 144). That is, the theatrical infuses the political realm not because being a social subject involves playing a role, but because theatre is the venue—that is, the space and material particularity that exceeds the drama and is its condition of possibility. In other words, the public sphere: to step outside of social roles means to disregard the logic of scarcity and necessity that establishes the community, and hence doubly to jeopardise one’s life as biological entity and as individuated social subject; but, in so doing, to step also into a “shared time-space of mortality” in which all roles are revealed as transient (PT 167).

It is this constellation of freedom, theatre, mortality and the public sphere that allows Lehmann to declare: “There can be no private tragedy. Where we find the tragic, we hit upon the political” (FT 90). For Lehmann, tragedy is “essentially the experience of reaching and overstepping for a moment the limits of a given ‘cultural intelligibility’” (FT 97) and, for this reason, far more than just being a genre, is the restless political mode par excellence; anti-authoritarian politics depends on the defamiliarising operation of tragedy, since its transcension of comprehensible categories is a prerequisite for the political activity of “laying bare ideological structures in our everyday way of seeing the world” (FT 108).

Sustaining this understanding is a dualism described by Gilles Deleuze, in another context, as a “duel” between the visual and the articulable, “the two environments of light and language, seeing and speaking”, whose domains, in turn, “open up on to a third: a multiplicity of relations between forces, a multiplicity of diffusion” (83 – 6). For Lehmann, this opening-up is also the moment that generates two mutually reinforcing realms or “spheres”, upon which distributions of social
power depend: the aesthetic sphere (which for Lehmann is also the sphere of representation) and the sphere of ethico-political experience (see FT 99).

Social experience of the world, for Lehmann, is neither natural nor neutral, but entangled with the conceptual categories applied to it: the classifications that allocate order to the sensory manifold and, as an extension, to the pure difference of the social field; the sphere of representation provides this order and these categories. Representation, so to speak, puts the world in place and allows it to be articulable, to enter into the dimension of social exchange—moreover, for this operation to work, representation and the world itself must belong to strictly separate realms, since in order to provide the world with structure, representation must appear to apply to it, from an outside. The paradox therefore emerges that while representation and the experience of the world seemingly have two quite different kinds of existence, they are, nonetheless, after the originary moment of society, always already constituted with respect to one another: the strictly separated sphere of experience is ideologically supported by the sphere of representation, which as part of its ideological operation, appears to arise from it, to “reflect” it after the fact. The operation of tragedy, then, is to return these spheres to each other: to “re-invest the sphere of the real into the aesthetic domain” (FT 100).

As I shall indicate in Chapter 3, it is precisely the presence of the dramatic frame that Lehmann describes as preventing tragedy from accomplishing this reunification—a frame which, as I have shown in this chapter, is constantly disintegrating in When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing, falling apart, being broken or being ignored.
But tragedy also seems, in many ways, an odd choice of genre through which to consider this production. For, looking back over *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing*, one is struck by its joyousness as much as by the tinge of mortality which appears in the contrast between the youthful bodies of the performers and the long cycles of eternity referred to in its title and in many of its scenes. In the wonder with which a young woman performs the magic-trick of making a ball “float”, in the games, in the *competence* of the performers, this piece evinces a vigour and delight that is perhaps not entirely reducible to the tragic ecstasy of self-overcoming. In this chapter, I have shown that the “political” aspirations of this piece can be understood in terms of the entry of its participants into a theatrical public sphere defined by the radical separation of its elements, a separation that also entails a reorganization of the relation between the senses and an opening up of the space of the imagination. In the next chapter, I shall turn first to the final scene of *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing*, before proceeding to examine *Stifters Dinge*, a work in which this tragic orientation and separation of elements is, if anything, even more pronounced. In so doing, however, I hope to indicate ways in which the imaginary spaces of the postdramatic can be understood, not only with reference to transience or the prospect of an eventual loss, but also in terms of pleasure.
Figure 4. Closing scene of When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing: Gertrude Stein’s “Reflection on the Atomic Bomb”. Source: Clip from video made available by the director.

Figure 5. “I don’t know whether it was amazement or fear of driving deeper into that thing.” Adalbert Stifter’s “Ice Tale” is projected across the stage in Stifters Dinge, dir. Heiner Goebbels. Originally performed at Théâtre Vidy, Lausanne, in 2007. Photograph: Nicolas Pilet. © Nicolas Pilet.
Figure 6. Paulo Uccello’s *Night Hunt* projected across the stage in *Stifters Dinge*. Details are captured on the hanging screen, which circulates around the space. Source: Photo provided by director.

**Figure 8.** Jacob Isaacksz van Ruisdael, *Swamp*, circa 1660. The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg.

**Figure 9.** Ruisdael’s *Swamp* slowly changes colour in *Stifters Dinge*. Photograph: © Klaus Grünberg.
Chapter 3

KANT’S IMAGINATION AND STIFTER’S THINGS

In the final scene of *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing*, a teenaged girl enters the stage-within-the stage, which is also a scene of nature: a sloping field of astroturf on wheels, set against a painted backdrop of bare winter branches that emerge indistinctly from a general darkness (See Fig. 4). She is wearing a blue dress and yellow gumboots; her hair in plaits. Standing on the green grass and holding in her hands a loaf of unwrapped brown bread, she speaks to the audience about the end of the world:

They asked me what I thought of the atomic bomb. I said I had not been able to take any interest in it.

I like to read detective and mystery stories. I never get enough of them but whenever one of them is or was about death rays and atomic bombs I never could read them...Sure it will destroy a lot and kill a lot, but it’s the living that are interesting not the way of killing them, because if there were not a lot left living how could there be any interest in destruction. Alright, that is the way I feel about it. [And really way down that is the way everybody feels about it.]19 They think they are interested about the atomic bomb but they really are not not any more than I am. Really not. They may be a little scared, I am not so scared, there is so much to be scared of so what is the use of bothering to be scared, and if you are not scared the atomic bomb is not interesting.

Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense. They listen so much that they forget to be natural. This is a nice story.

19 This sentence does not appear in Stein’s “original”.
The words are by Gertrude Stein, written in 1946 and published posthumously a year later by the *Yale Poetry Review* under the assigned title “Reflection on the Atomic Bomb” (see *W2* 823).

Regarding Stein’s later writings, Goebbels writes in *The Aesthetics of Absence* that there is a “particular quality of hers, which I… try to translate into my work in music-theatre” (13). This quality is the juxtaposition of “seemingly unimportant observations with very severe ones” (*AA* 12), such as appears, for example, in her accounts of wartime France in *Wars I Have Seen*, where she mixes together with equal attention “Such pleasant stories…so many stories” (*Wars* 69 - 70) of all different natures: the story of her dog’s diabetes together with a story of Maréchal Petain or the bombing in Italy, or of the unreported lunar eclipse that is both “an amusement for peacetime” and “more terrifying even than war” (*Wars* 39); stories heard on the radio or told by people she meets, as well as stories she herself tells to others. Goebbels notes that this flattening to equivalence of the mundane and the historic confronts the reader with a “provocative” “balance between humour and cynicism, terror and callousness” (*AA* 12) that is also expressed by the autobiographical voice in her confrontation with the overwhelming spectacles of modernity: “I hate to have lovely places all smashed up and French people killed but what can I do?” (*Wars* 125; qtd in *AA* 12). Moreover, as Paul Stephens observes, in a direct citation of McLuhan’s description of the atomic bomb as “pure information” (134 – 135), for Stein this same physical destructiveness, which begets Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the Holocaust, converges in the society of the spectacle with the sensorial obliteration of information overload (“Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense. They listen so much that they forget to
be natural.” (emphasis added)). The result is a general circulation of anxiety unlinked to any specific origin-point that might be countered or acted-upon (“There is so much to be scared of so what is the use of bothering to be scared”) (134 – 135).

This scene may be compared with two moments in *Stifters Dinge*, during which excerpts from Adalbert Stifter’s “Ice Tale”—a fragmentary piece that describes the abandonment of a journey through a forest due to the onset of immense cold—appear on stage. In the first moment, a recorded voice “reads” the text aloud while, on stage, the audience watches the colours of a projected image slowly change (Fig. 9); in the second, the text of the “Ice Tale” itself is projected across the uneven surfaces of the stage space (Fig. 5), evoking, in its broken whiteness, the snow and ice of the storm:

Now we recognised the noise that we had heard earlier in the air; it was not in the air, it was close to us now. In the depths of the forest it resounded near us and came from the twigs and branches as they splintered and fell to the ground. It was all the more dreadful as everything else stood motionless. Not a twig, not a pine needle stirred in the whole glittering brightness, until after an ice-fall a branch would come crashing down. Then all was silent again.

We listened and stared; I don’t know whether it was amazement or fear of driving deeper into that thing.

(qtd in Program Notes, *Stifters Dinge*)

These are obviously images of sublimity. Johannes Birringer confirms this in his review of *Stifters Dinge* when he writes: “Stifter’s narrative voice evokes the Kantian sublime, the amazement and terror that might grip us when facing the imponderable and abysmal, threatening us to lose ourselves ‘into that thing...’” (6). Yet also in these pieces, counter-intuitively, there appears the presence of something else. For as well as awe and terror, there appear smaller, happier emotions: the persistence, in Stein, of the “pleasant” and the “nice”, which seem to direct attention away from what is “important” (war, nuclear catastrophe) and toward the affirmation of a private taste in
what one finds personally “interesting” (her dog; the mystery stories which she “likes” and of which she “could never get enough”) or what catches one’s attention (a distinction which also seems to validate her preference of one genre over another—of detective stories, which invite one to participate in turning over the details of the plot, over science fiction, which progresses through the imposition of a technological revelation). Or, in the “Ice Tale”, a countervailing domesticity and interest in the particular object:

To keep the fir tree beside my small summer bench from being damaged, someone had knocked down the ice from it with long poles as far as he could reach, and when the top of the tree seemed about to tilt, my other servant, Kajetan, had climbed up to it, carefully knocked down the ice, and then tied around the highest branches two barn ropes which he let down and shook from time to time. They knew this tree was dear to me and also very beautiful, with green branches so thickly bunched together that an enormous weight of ice had been clinging to it which might easily split the tree of at least break its boughs.

(Stifter, qtd in Groth 54)

The tension conjured in this image, between the beauty that inheres in the closeness of the “green branches so thickly bunched together” and the “enormous weight…which might easily split” stems, again, from the expression of a personal preference, which has at its origin a first turning of attention, a direction of the gaze towards a depth which is not open and ultimately enveloping of the subject, but finitely circumscribed, receding within the interior of a defined shape.

And in writing about the scenes in which these texts appear in his works, Goebbels as often invokes feelings of pleasure—of “animation”, “relief”, “delight” or of being “untroubled” (AA 5 – 6; EGS) —as he does of dread, fear, or the strangeness of alterity. What this chapter will seek to explore, then, in drawing the threads of this thesis together, are the ways in which these two works (with a focus on Stifters Dinge
in particular) can be seen to engage with the beautiful as much as with the sublime—not in the encounter with the limitless, but in that which, in being enclosed, still seems to slip its enclosure.

One can observe that the debate over the status of the beautiful in Kant’s aesthetics follows precisely the trajectory outlined over the preceding two chapters of this thesis. I shall proceed in this chapter, therefore, by outlining certain aspects of Kant’s analysis of beauty as it appears in Book I of The Critique of Judgment, the “Analytic of the Beautiful”—aspects which have informed subsequent discussions of the links between aesthetic experience, publicness and the notion of freedom. Having completed this sketch, I shall then turn back to look again over the territory just covered, drawing attention to the ways in which the competing traditions of thought about theatre’s relationship with the public sphere can be understood to participate in a historical working-through of the implications of Kant’s account. My argument, toward which this thesis has been moving, is that any attempt to locate a resistive theatrical politics in the dissonance between representation and the anti-ideological particularity of the choric, or the mute autonomy of gestures, must tread with caution. The appeal to a democratic public sphere that has been concealed by fiction—whether it is explicitly called this or not—is itself premised on ontological assumptions about the presence and present of its participants, the contingent “here” and “now” that they inhabit consolidating from the generality of space and time only so far as they are extracted from and set against an “elsewhere” and an “elsewhen”—a process, as I have indicated, that entails a dismemberment and reincorporation of their bodies and their organs of perception. Insofar as any medium can be understood as an appeal to a certain kind of attention rather than an identifiable collection of mechanical processes, these ontological assumptions must have an influence on the medial profile
of theatre. Particularity, or the irreducible specificity of the world—what Deleuze calls “the existent” (Difference 13)—has an intimate complicity with representation in Kant’s aesthetics, a complicity that, as I shall show, originates with the faculty of imagination and its role in referring the world’s contents to the subject’s cognition. The quality that Kant ascribes to the multiform diversity of material existence as it appears to the subject is “spontaneity”, or the obdurate persistence of things in apprehension even “without…a determinate concept of an object” (CJ §22.241); another word for this quality is “freedom”. As “the originator of [the] chosen forms of possible intuitions”, Kant describes the imagination as manifesting a creative capacity that in some ways anticipates Arendt’s natality: it is a power “not taken as reproductive… but as productive and spontaneous” (§22.240); and its products reflect this generative impulse in those aspects of themselves that seem superfluous to definition or function. Yet Kant also makes it clear that the imagination is an inferior faculty in cognition, whose “freedom” is of a subsidiary kind; its presentational powers are, like the phenomenal subject itself, circumscribed by their entry into space and the passage through time and thus unable ever to entirely compass the infinity and universality that reason and understanding urge upon them. Kant characterises the relation between the imagination and these other parts of the mind in terms of a meeting of forces, during which “a principle of subsumption” subordinates the free action of one faculty to the authority of another:

[T]his subsumption is not one of intuitions under concepts, but, rather, one of the power of intuitions or exhibitions (the imagination) under the power of concepts (the understanding), insofar as the imagination in its freedom harmonizes with the understanding in its lawfulness.

(§35.287; original emphasis)
The “spontaneity” of the imagination is thus ultimately constrained and therefore unlike the grander and genuine freedom of the noumenal subject, which for Kant issues from the supersensible realm. If this is so, then against this context, I will suggest, any turn toward spontaneity as a compositional principle holding out the hope of democratic equality and freedom from rule deserves further scrutiny. The street scene with which this thesis began, in which the “spontaneous” and decentralised motion of The So-Called Radical Brass Band confronts the “dogmatic” forward movement of the communist orchestra, can be read as a drama of subversion; but, like any drama, it can also be understood as an invitation to identify with a perspective that is simultaneously shown to be merely partial by the encompassing frame. The public thoroughfare of this anecdote presents not one, but two agglomerate bodies moving through space, each according to its own principle of constitution, or “way of playing”. Might not this scene be recognised as a parable expressing a historical moment of transition between two ideals of progress? Between one whose singular march is organised in advance by reproducible print (as it appears on the note-stands) and another whose “chaotic” tempo flows from a different source of order: namely, the repetition across bodies of an imperative to perform the self as distinctive? Within this parable, one ideal triumphs over another, whose era has not quite yet arrived. Yet within the form of this narrative what one witnesses is hardly a neutrality but rather an ideological preference and an evocation of the future: the suspense that carries one through this story is the anticipation of a personal transfiguration, as one sees reflected in these two composite bodies a journey from a soon-to-be-abandoned present state to a desired destination of selfhood.

*
Kant accepts a distinction between public and private in §8 of *The Critique of Judgment* where, in establishing grounds for the appreciation of beauty, he distinguishes between the beautiful and that which we find merely sensorially agreeable:

For as to the agreeable we allow everyone to be of a mind of his own, no one requiring others to agree with his judgment of taste. But in a judgment of taste about beauty we always require others to agree. Insofar as judgments about the agreeable are merely private, whereas judgments about the beautiful are put forward as having general validity (as being public), taste regarding the agreeable can be called taste of sense, and taste regarding the beautiful can be called taste of reflection, though the judgments of both are aesthetic (rather than practical) judgments about an object, [i.e.,] judgments merely about the relation that the presentation of the object has to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure.

(§8.214)

For Kant, aesthetic reflective judgment (judgment about the beautiful) occupies a halfway space between the conceptual and the sensory. In describing something as beautiful, the subject does more than merely refer to its pleasant stimulation of her “tongue, palate, and throat… eyes and ears” (§7.212), which kind of direct excitement of the animal organism, in its immediacy, does not require the obtrusion of language. Yet the judgment of beauty also cannot be entirely subsumed into the search for the abstract and reproducible in the somatic or particular: the feeling of liking for the beautiful is neither reducible to the recognition in the object of an immanent idea (such as a mathematical form or the presence of an ideal type) nor to the respect compelled by its materialisation of a universalisable maxim which “holds for every rational being as such”, as in the case of the good (§5.210; see also *The Moral Law* 84). Rather, if the judgment of beauty retains a tenuous connection to any of these factors, it is in the idiosyncrasy of its approximation toward these concepts, rather
than in its fulfilment of them, that the beautiful object demonstrates its aesthetic value. We talk about beauty, Kant notes, as if it were “a property of things”; it is the “thing” (CJ §7.212; emphasis in original), in its irreducible specificity of detail, that demands universal acknowledgment of its worth. The “thing” of beauty thus seems to gesture towards the existence of a higher perspective from which one could encompass the infinity of phenomenal particularity within a comprehensive explanation of its telos; just as any object appears purposeful in relation to a concept abstracted from it (see §10), so it is possible to conceive of a purposiveness in objects that remains unsublated to any definite purpose: a “purposiveness...without the representation” (§17.236). The experience of beauty, therefore, while it perpetually promises to resolve into conceptuality, never quite gets there, and remains staunchly attached to the realm of sensory phenomena. Yet it is because of the hope held out by this promise, Kant observes, that “[w]e linger in our contemplation of the beautiful” (§12.222). This strangeness (§8.214) of the beautiful object, which is at once resolutely particular and aspirationally universal, moreover corresponds to a peculiar variegation of human consciousness which, in the appraisal of beauty, places two independent powers in relation to one another: the imagination, which combines the diverse impressions of the sensory manifold and represents them coherently to the subject; and the understanding, which applies concepts to the world. In aesthetic reflective judgment, writes Kant, this relation takes a specific form. In the absence of a definitive concept, these two powers combine in cognition to allow the mind to range over the terrain of phenomena without arriving at an articulable summation, a process that permits the harmonious orientation of these powers toward

20 Pluhar renders Kant’s Vorstellung as “presentation”; I have retained the more familiar translation of “representation”.

87
one another to become apparent. The “free play of the cognitive powers” (§9.217; original emphasis) discloses the amenability of the imagination’s representations to the understanding’s ordering grasp. What is uncovered in the contemplation of the beautiful, then, is not the content of a universally communicable proposition, but the very interplay of thought and perception that exists prior to any given utterance as the condition of its intelligibility—the subjective substratum of interpersonal communication. The Kantian pleasure in the beautiful thus arises, surprisingly, not from the object itself, but from the discovery by the individual of a quality of her own mind: its ability to make statements about a world whose complexity initially appears beyond its reach. The subject recognises, to her delight, that the world is comported in such a way as to be comprehensible; yet the very indeterminacy of the beautiful object—what Kant describes as its “subjective purposiveness (§24.247) or the “free lawfulness” of its appearance (§22.240)—refers the subject to a superior faculty within herself capable of encompassing the given, a faculty whose course of action with respect to the particulars of nature is nevertheless not prescribed from without but rests within the jurisdiction of her own agency.

Judgments of beauty, in this sense, are not so remotely different from the experience of sublimity as critics such as Jean-François Lyotard have suggested (see, for example, Lessons 52). The difference is rather one of emphasis. Whereas the sublime begins in terror as the subject confronts overwhelming magnitudes or vastly powerful forces, and the beautiful engenders a gentler feeling of harmonious accord, both conclude with—as Sianne Ngai puts it—a “serene, self-ennobling admiration for the…object” that confirms the self’s ultimate independence from nature (Ugly Feelings 269). The route is different, but the destination is the same.
Having come this far, it is possible to return to those theories of the public sphere and their relationship to the theatre that this thesis has previously examined, and to assess them from a new angle. For between the tradition that sets theatre against the rational community of equals (see Chapter 1, Section i., above) and its opposite, which looks in hope to theatre for the possibility of a participatory democracy (Chapter 1, Section ii.), one can hear echoed the step from one moment to the next of the description of the aesthetic after Kant. Alain Badiou in *In Praise of Theatre* describes theatre in terms of a “between-two” (48, 54): that is, as having to negotiate a subjective position between the pure unfolding of being (which he associates with dance and the body’s exploration of its own capacities) and the eternal self-sufficiency of ideas (which he finds in the cinematic image) without being captured entirely by either (48 - 52). For Badiou, the publicness of theatre consists in the unresolvable nature of the tension between these two poles, which perpetually confront and seek to transform one another in the “improbable taking-place” of the theatrical performance: “It is only in the taking-place”, he writes, “that one can really grasp the relation between immanence and transcendence from the point of view of the idea. In this sense, the theatre is the site of the idea’s living appearance” (63).

Likewise, the aesthetic exists in the “between-two” of the encounter between concepts and the plenitude of the sensory world. Two distinct responses to this ambivalent position are possible; each finds its articulation in one of the divergent traditions of thinking about the political potential of theatre that I have outlined above.

1.

First, there is the suggestion that the aesthetic, because it primarily involves a *private* judgment, can never intervene in the formation of public knowledge: whereas for pre-Kantians the appreciation of the beautiful constituted an incomplete form of
rational understanding, apprehended through the action of imperfect senses (for example, in Leibniz), or was reason’s analogue (in Baumgarten: see Hammermeister, *The German Aesthetic Tradition* 5 – 13), Kant effected a separation of beauty from notions of formal perfection and—as I have indicated above—established aesthetic judgment upon its own, independent grounds of legitimacy, absolving matters of taste from application to the court of universal conceptuality. Yet this disaffiliation of the judgment of beauty and the objectively conceptual provoked its own question: could any relation be established between aesthetic experience and articulate truth? This is the problem that concerns both Balme and Puchner. The modernist crisis ushered in by the sequestering of art from political life (described by both of these writers) expresses this moment in Kant’s aesthetics in which the ambivalent status of the beautiful with respect to knowledge is brought under interrogation. Hans-Thies Lehmann notes “how completely we have achieved the separation of the aesthetic sphere from the rest of our experience (ethical, moral, political, religious)” (*FT* 99); Puchner argues that for Brecht, the solution was to “introduce something of the act of reading into the theater” (*SF* 149), cutting across the illusory stage world with diegetic *gestus* and the interruption of text itself, so as to refer the event back to the shared ideal of language; Beckett, by contrast, sought through his constrictive dramaturgy, meticulous stage directions and authoritarian interventions with actors to exert so complete a control over the mimetic space of the stage as to reduce the possibility of interpretation to virtually zero (see especially *SF* 170 – 172). And despite his positive valuation of theatre as a site for the public appearance of ideas, another expression of this moment appears in Badiou’s insistence on the text as the symbolic reservoir of the ephemeral theatrical performance. For Badiou, the text is “the eternity of the theatre”; from it, “that which indeed disappears - the performance,
the production, the negotiation - can be recommenced, resuscitated” (In Praise of Theatre 54). Recalling his early enthusiasms, Badiou remembers being confronted by a choice between theatre and philosophy:

The theatre satisfies that part of myself for which thought takes the form of an emotion, of a pivotal moment, of a kind of engagement with what is given immediately to see and hear. But I had - I still have - a need of a completely different order: that thought take the form of irresistible argumentation, of the submission to a logical and conceptual power which concedes nothing when it comes to the universality of its question. Plato had the same problem: he was also persuaded that mathematics proposed an unrivaled model of fully realized thought.

(6 - 7)

This same contrast between the generosity of “what is given immediately” and a guardedness that “concedes nothing” is likewise patent in the distinction that follows between the theatrical and the literary text: the former, Badiou writes, is “frontal, tied to the immediate presence of that which it pronounces”, whereas the literary text “is insinuating, tied to an extended and secret temporality” (55). Badiou thus repeats the ontological gesture of Benjamin, Brecht, or Stein, proposing, like them, that whereas “a theatre text, whatever its source, is intended for, addressed to, a public… this situation is quite opposite that of reading, which is the silent confrontation between a subject and a text, a kind of intimate capture” (55). Conspicuous in this comparison of the theatrical and the literary is the slippage between the material institution of theatre and its use as a metaphor for appearance itself. In asking, “what is the nature of the theatre text?”, Badiou answers himself by defining it as that which lives in the interpretive gesture: in “the music of the voice which resounds in an auditorium”, in contrast to the reclusive rigidity of that which keeps itself in reserve, appearing only (in this case) as “the silence of black symbols on the white page” (55). This slippage
leads, as it does for Puchner, to the conclusion that theatricality must ultimately triumph over any attempts to resist it. Surveying the state of performance at the conclusion of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, Puchner observes that postdramatic productions such as Robert Wilson’s *The Day Before: death, destruction and Detroit III* (which incorporates extracts from Umberto Eco’s novel *The Island of the Day Before*) mark the reintegration by the stage of the modernist strategies of anti-theatrical diegesis and literarization: “If even a novel can be accommodated by the theater [he writes], then no dramatic text, no matter how novelistic its stage directions, can ever hope to resist the theater” (*SF* 174); likewise, Badiou offers fellow-philosophers some advice: “never attack the theatre”, which “is the greatest machine ever invented for absorbing contradictions” (*In Praise* 31). Badiou delivers this verdict in a celebratory tenor; Puchner is more equivocal. Nonetheless, in both writers the transitory consensus of an accidental community is opposed to the “irresistible argumentation” of a universal logic, which brings all equally within its jurisdiction.

2. But the particularity of the aesthetic, its refusal to be subsumed under determinate judgment, also leads to a second line of thinking, in which what is emphasized is the resistance of the particular to the category, or the opposition of being to an ideological distribution of the sensible world that reproduces itself through representation. Sianne Ngai in *Ugly Feelings* draws attention to Lacan’s insistence on “thingness”, on “that which in the real suffers from the signifier” (279); this “thingness”, which is reflected in both the title of *Stifters Dinge* and the non-name of the So-called Left Radical Brass Band, is an important *topos* in Goebbels’s work and of postdramatic theatre generally. Ngai recalls the anecdote from Lacan’s 1959 seminar in which he describes
visiting the home of a friend and discovering there a collection of match boxes (279-80): this vast collection, which Lacan describes as forming “a continuous ribbon that ran along the mantelpiece, climbed the wall, extended to the molding, and climbed down again next to a door” (qtd in UF 279), is taken by Lacan to expose in its proliferation (beyond any sense of actual use) the capacity of objects to exceed the classifications imposed upon them. Hence he writes: “a match box isn’t simply something that has a certain utility… it isn’t even a type in the Platonic sense, an abstract match box…[but rather] all by itself is a thing with all its coherence of being” (qtd in UF 279; my emphasis). For Ngai, this winding line of iterated yet profusely particular things stands as a figure of the resilience of the existent in Deleuze, according to his definition of repetition as “difference without a concept” (qtd in UF 252). While Ngai’s reading of this anecdote is organized by Lacan’s aside that “I don’t say that it [the collection] went on to infinity” (qtd in UF 279; my emphasis) and thus is oriented toward the Kantian sublime—which she reworks as “stuplimity” through a focus on the minor affect of boredom and the plodding resistance of being to “large but finite” systems such as language or capitalism (274)—one might equally emphasize within the same passage Lacan’s laudation of the arrangement as “extremely agreeable” and “extremely satisfying”: the harmonious nature of which feelings points toward the beautiful.

This same “ecstasy of things” (Fischer-Lichte, passim) which, undirected by utility’s arrow, appear “all by themselves”, is apparent in the decelerated motion through which Goebbels, in Stifters Dinge, slowly reveals to the audience small
glimpses of Paolo Uccello’s *Night Hunt*\(^{21}\) (see Fig. 6). This painting, which bends all of its figures toward the vanishing point of a great chase, is projected in a late scene by Goebbels across the otherwise darkened space of the theatre, catching the surfaces of some of the objects it contains: tree branches, mechanized pianos, water, light-stands, speakers. Here and there a fragment of Uccello’s image is reflected indistinctly back, but for the most part the work remains invisible until a small screen, suspended from two wires and a pulley system, descends and begins a crawling circuit of the visual field. As this opaque screen travels around the projected image and catches the projected light, some of the *Night Hunt*’s features become visible: first, animals running—apparently directionlessly—deer and dogs moving along jumbled and seemingly purposeless vectors; then other bodies, which quickly disintegrate into a series of impressions—a head, a tail, a torso, legs, a tree stump, flowers, a hand clutching the shaft of a spear, the eye of a horse. Notable in this movement is the fact that the screen, and thus the implied gaze, circles around but never arrives at the vanishing point of Uccello’s perspectival composition, the goal of the chase—and yet, when one examines the original (see Fig. 7), it is not clear what this goal is. Is it a deer? For in the centre of Uccello’s picture the animals recede amongst the trees until it is uncertain whether the furthest figures are deer or dogs; following this line back to the foreground, one finds both species mingled together and now also intermixed with both men and horses, so that again it is not clear who is chasing whom. There is no final figure that leads and thus gives order to the hunt. Deer, dogs, horses and men all appear before and after one another, yet all equally

\(^{21}\) Also known as *The Hunt in the Forest*, c. 1460. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. “*Night Hunt*” is the name given to the painting in the program notes for *Stifters Dinge*.
streaming toward a quarry that remains undefined; it is not hard to imagine this line extending forever, a continuous locomotion of bodies in pursuit of a purpose, which would allow them finally to cease all of this exertion and rest in an authoritative determination of their connection to one another—a purpose towards which each body moves but always just falls short of achieving. Figured in the spectacle of this painting’s great hunt, then, is the restless motion of being’s inequivalence to its concept: a motion arrested by Goebbels, who, in unmooring the image from the referential anchor of its visual focal point, allows the flotsam of its details to float free. Untethered from the gestalt of the whole, things lose their relation to one another: deer and dogs; but also body parts, which become animated in their independence, yet also inscrutably desiring—so that the fist holding the spear seems to do so for no other reason than to grasp it eternally. The spear, too, shorn of utility, ceases to be a spear; the trees of the forest loose themselves from the regimentation of their mathematical espacement and emerge promiscuously from the background, no longer holding to their function as a perspectival grid against which the movement of agents can be measured, but asserting themselves as things in themselves which, as the screen moves across them, gather our attention just as much as those other objects that we now attend to: an ear, a blade of grass, a face—or even the lines and colours of the brushwork itself, which, too, shake themselves free of the shapes that they make up, to appear in the unique complexity of their textures, liberated from the demand to represent something other than themselves.

This excision of the centre which bends everything else towards it (observed here on the level of the image) becomes a principle of much of Goebbels’s work: the diffusion of attention over the entirety of the sensory field, rather than its capture by a single organising element. Goebbels says: “Literally, an empty centre stage [means]
the absence of a visually centralised focus, but also as the absence of what we call a clear theme, topic, of a play, or a message” (*EGS*; cf *AA* 5). Thus, in the “staged concert” *Eislermaterial*22, Goebbels arranges the orchestra around three edges of the stage, leaving the centre vacant and asking the musicians to play without the guidance of a conductor (the conductor’s position is occupied by a small statue of Eisler, as if to emphasise his absence; see *AA* 3); a similar moment occurs in *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing* when the Carmina Slovenica choir, in order to sing the *Las Huelgas Codex*’s “Benedicamus Domino”, likewise positions itself along three sides of the performance space, behind a ring of white tables, leaving the interior unoccupied. The empty centre also figures in *When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing* in the lush, hand-painted reproductions of well-known artworks that serve as backdrops to many of its scenes—suggesting, with their differing tones, the changes of season alluded to in the title—but from which significant features have been omitted: the lion in Henri Rousseau’s *Jungle with Lion*; the deer in Ivan Generalić’s *The Deer Wedding*. In each case, abundant masses of “background” foliage come to the fore. And the empty centre is, of course, the generative premise of the “no-man show” or “performative installation without performer” that is *Stifters Dinge* (*AA* 5, 27). Writing about the origins of this piece, Goebbels observes that “[t]he starting point of these experiments was initially to attempt an absence of performers onstage” (*AA* 28). Elsewhere, he writes of the “narcissistic” disposition of theatrical spectators who look to find themselves reflected in the human figures of actors or other performers, or even in constructed anthropomorphic objects that, because they “move in a human-like manner” are able to serve as “projection surface[s] for our… desire”

22 First produced in May 1998 in Munich as part of the *Musica Viva Festival* and Hanns Eisler’s one hundredth birthday commemorations.
(AA 6, 31, 32). Instead, Goebbels states that Stifters Dinge arose “from an experimental desire to develop something on stage which we cannot use as a mirror… to assemble things on stage which remain strange to us” (AA 32):

Hence, Stifters Dinge became a ‘no-man show’, in which curtains, lights, music and space— all the elements that usually prepare, support, illustrate and serve a theatrical performance and its performers, become (in a kind of justice long deferred) the protagonists, together with five pianos, metal plates, stones, water, fog, rain and ice.

(AA 5)

Instead of a human performer, in the middle of the theatrical space in Stifters Dinge is a rectangular pool, divided into three sections roughly the size and dimensions of cinema screens, around which the forest of all of these other “protagonists”—the tree branches, pianos, pipes and plates—are arranged. But this reflective surface does not, like Narcissus’s pond, throw back the image of the viewer who bends towards it, but rather is angled obliquely away from the audience and, over the course of the performance, casts up its own secrets, in shapes that insinuate the indifference of a de-anthropomorphised world: blocks of light that pass over it, almost but not quite like clouds; the illuminated puckering of “raindrops” hitting its surface, which, side-lit in the darkness, look quite like the reflected twinkling of stars; fog that bubbles up from dry ice pellets in popping spurts and seems to thicken the water, nearly resembling a liquid marsh belching gas from its depths. These impressions, in their “nearly-ness” and “quite-ness”, seem to point to the strategy in Goebbels’s work that Corey Wakeling (following Todorov23) has identified as “signification but not representation”: the recollection of absent things by present things, which evoke them without being reducible to them. Yaron Abulafia, in The Art of Light on Stage, has

23 See Tzvetan Todorov, Genres in Discourse, 69.
also called attention to the “powerful tension” that exists in Stifters Dinge between what is actually apparent to the spectator’s perception and what she thinks of; the “centre” of this piece, he writes, “is not an embodied one but rather associative and imaginative, created mentally by the addressee” (195). In Aesthetics of Absence, Goebbels writes of “a confrontation with an unseen image or an unheard word or sound” (6) and the possibility for the spectator of “an artistic experience [that] does not have to result exclusively from a direct encounter, but can also be thought of as a triangular, indirect, non-immEDIATE relationship with a mediatized third-party” (85). In this aqueous central void (which is not one) then, one discovers encapsulated the sink into which representation falls—the fluid inexactitude of being vis-à-vis what is supposedly missing. The pool does not reproduce the world as it might appear in the absence of human beings (which action would involve the illogicality of regarding the spectator’s gaze as the absence of a gaze), but introduces things (squares of light, droplets, bubbles) that, because they cannot be anything other than what they are, are able to stand as symbols, not of what is missing, but of the thought of absence itself.

This scenic arrangement of water amidst a forest of things is subsequently doubled with the appearance (via projection onto a gauze curtain) of Jacob Isaaksz van Ruisdael’s Swamp24 (Fig. 8). Like Night Hunt, Swamp similarly features trees which perspectivally encircle an emptiness (in this case a marsh); just discernable near—but not quite at—the vanishing point of this painting is a tiny human figure. With this doubling, the noises that pervade Stifters Dinge—humming wires, a scraping stone, the sharp snap of a light shutter closing, the deep blat of a flap hitting

24 Circa 1660. Listed by the alternative title of Marsh on the website of the The State Hermitage Museum, St Peterburg. “Swamp” is the name given to the painting in the program notes for Stifters Dinge.
a pipe-end, trickling water, discordant piano phrases—suddenly resonate as the
unheard sounds of deep nature—of nature by itself. Even the recognisably human
music of a Bach piece (the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue*), playing on one of the
five automated pianos, registers a sense of loss as the keys visibly move up and down
by themselves, revealing the invisibility of the player, her disappearance from the
present. It is clear that this painting synechdochically reciprocates, on the level of the
image, *Stifters Dinge* itself. *Swamp* is more overtly evocative of sublimity than
Uccello’s scene—an overwhelming and foreboding vastness of space within which a
single individual vanishes into the grotesqueries of the landscape—and yet in writing
about the compositional method of *Stifters Dinge*, Goebbels uses vocabulary that
refers more clearly to enjoyment than to terror:

> When there isn’t anyone on stage any longer… when nothing is being
> shown, then the spectators must discover things themselves. The audience’s
delight in making these discoveries is enabled only by the absence of the
performers, who usually artfully fulfil the task of demonstrating and focus the
audience’s attention on themselves. Only their absence creates the gap, which
renders this freedom and pleasure possible.

*(AA 5 – 6)*

“Delight”, “freedom”, and “pleasure” in discovery are exactly the terms used by Kant
to describe the subject’s apprehension of the beautiful: a pleasure only possible in the
roving motion of perception over objects where “no determinate concept restricts
them to a particular rule” (*CJ* §9.217). This *rule*, which measures out the length of the
streaming line of the chase in of *Night Hunt*, and thus posits its endpoint, also
determines the exact placement of the “pure line of the horizon” (indistinguishable in
the image) towards which, as The State Hermitage Museum’s website informs
viewers, the lost traveller in *Swamp* “seems to be trudging in search of firm ground”.
In “Ten Theses on Politics”, Jacques Rancière associates this restricting rule with
archein, “i.e., the power to rule” (¶7), which legitimates itself via a “vertiginous short-cut” passing back and forth between “the properties of [a] specific order of being” and “the accomplishment of a way of life that is proper to those who are destined for it” (¶6, 3). Along the constrained finitude of this course between property and destiny, whose end is predetermined in its beginning, Rancière notes that arche “always precedes itself” (¶10)—so that this short-cut may also be seen as a passage carved between the poles of a division of natures, between the nature of those who are born with “a particular disposition to act” and that of those who manifest “a particular disposition to ‘be acted upon’” (¶6, 8). Where this attenuated way exists—along which “if there is one who walks at the head, the others must necessarily walk behind” (¶7)—Rancière (like Goebbels) witnesses the narrowing of space to the dimension of a line, and a controlling direction of what is available to be seen and what is available to be heard. Hence, in making his distinction between “politics” and “the police”, he writes that the latter is not that law interpellating individuals (as in Althusser's "Hey, you there!") … It is, first of all, a reminder of the obviousness of what there is, or rather, of what there isn’t: “Move along! There is nothing to see here!” The police says that there is nothing to see on a road, that there is nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space of circulating is nothing other than the space of circulation.

(¶22)

Democracy, by contrast, figures in the “void” or the “nothing” of the people, who subsist in but are not reducible to “the sum of the parts of the social body” (¶15). Democratic politics thus consists for Rancière precisely in the seeing of this “nothing to see”, in interrupting the peremptory linearity of the road with other vectors that open it up to a volume, allowing the phantasm of this “empty supplementary, part” (¶15) to solidify. He concludes:
Politics… consists in transforming this space of 'moving-along' into a space for the appearance of a subject: i.e., the people, the workers, the citizens: It consists in refiguring the space, of what there is to do there, what is to be seen or named therein.

(¶22)

Deflecting from this rule, the subject discovers that the line was never really “just” a line, but—as Rancière writes in The Emancipated Spectator—part of a space through which she sees other individuals moving, “plotting their own paths in the forest of things, acts and signs that confront or surround them” (16).

Finally, as Hans-Thies Lehmann reminds readers of Postdramatic Theatre, the restricting rule also appears in the “mathematization” that seeks to enclose the imponderable sources of human fate within the “beginning, middle and end” of the Aristotelian dramatic frame (173-4). Lehmann describes how already, in ancient tragedy, there appears the thought that a perspective must exist from which the seemingly erratic turns of human life, shaped by error and accident, might be seen to resolve into a coherent pattern: a perspective which was identified as belonging to the “gods” (173). Consequently, in his analysis of the postdramatic, Lehmann refers to those moments of anagnorisis in Greek tragedy in which the protagonist confronts her inability to understand how the course of her life has led her to the current horror: “(‘You are my brother Orestes!’, ‘I myself am the son and murderer of Laios!’)” (40)—moments in which the protagonist comes closest to sharing the point of view of the audience, but falls short of grasping the whole matrix of cause and effect that encompasses her. These moments, in which the hero encounters the workings of fate, disclose fate to be incalculable from the standpoint of the person enmeshed in it, but also expose its double nature: as being comprehensible “in a different sphere” (173), which is that of the audience. This affirmation inhering paradoxically in the
recognition of fate’s mystery, that a vantage point exists capable of reconciling all those actions and circumstances that otherwise manifest as chance, surprise, revelation and reaction, is termed “representability” by Lehmann, a quality he identifies as revealing itself in the bodies of theatrical performers in all those aspects that register as irreducible to the acquittal of their roles and the performance of the text: in the choric sonority of the voice\textsuperscript{25} or the Agambian “gesture… which remains unsublated in any purposive action” (164). Within this evasiveness of the body’s “representability”, Lehmann espies the possibility of “returning to… human actors the experience of ‘thing-ness’ that has become alien to them” (165), but the preservation of “representability”, or the distant promise of fate, he argues, requires counter-intuitively that it never be actualized in representation: “human reality can only be dealt with under the premise that it remains unrepresentable” (173). In spite of this, he states, traditional dramatic theatre has constantly sought to foreclose this openness. The Aristotelian injunction that an effective tragic plot should have a “beginning, middle and end” (that is, a point from which all action generates with “no presuppositions”, its continuation, and a point toward which all action converges with “no consequences”) is “nothing but the abstract formula for the law of all representation” (173); it is a hermetic “frame” (173) that attempts to isolate the depicted span from the continuity of biological life, and to present as a complete inner logic a merely partial set of interior resonances, which obscure living reserve of all other potential meanings. Here, Lehmann writes of representation as “a mathematization that is in principle limitless”, which reduces the inaccessibility of appearing being to “existent givens, plain evidences… [to] information” (174). But, he argues, the idea that there can be an action that commences without reference to

\textsuperscript{25} Lehmann here refers to Kristeva’s concept of the \textit{chora}: see 146.
prior conditions or decisions, or an “end” or closing action beyond which all consequences cease, is unsupportable. In order to resist this sublimation to information, he writes, postdramatic theatre turns away from the drama which has “relegated fate to the frame of a narration, the course of a fable” (173) and back to the mortality of the body: “fate speaks here through the gesture, not through myth” (173).

The tragic orientation of the postdramatic, which appears in Lehmann’s survey as a concentration of works that entail self-mutilation, feats of endurance, risk-taking, or the presentation of damaged or grotesque physiques—for example in performances by La Fura dels Baus, Jan Fabre, La La La Human Steps or Societas Raffaello Sanzio—points toward the confrontation by the individual of the transience and limitation of her own life within a continuity of time that traverses it and exceeds it infinitely. In “A Future for Tragedy?” Lehmann identifies the tragic with a tradition, originating with Nietzsche, that articulates its impulse in terms of a drive towards transgression, wherein the human agent embraces her own destruction so as to escape the bounds of individuation and realise the fullness of her nature (see FT 92 – 95). Likewise, in When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing and Stifters Dinge, one is constantly faced with the inhospitable vista of non-anthropocentric time, realised (from the point of view of the spectator) as incremental change so impeded as to be virtually imperceptible. In the crawling inertia of Adalbert Stifter’s prose, which “completely lose[s] sight of the human being” (Friedrich Hebbel, qtd in AA 27); in the “drastically decelerated process” through which the projection of van Ruisdael’s painting “slowly, very slowly changes its colours over the course ten minutes” (AA 27; see Fig. 9); in the long stillness of the “line-up” scene in When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing (Fig. 2), during which the faces of the young women of the Carmina Slovenica choir pass from happiness, through neutrality, to anger or fear (but in which this motion is
so delayed that one cannot pinpoint any moment when it is happening); in the bodies of these girls themselves, whose growing up this production thematises; in the slow progression of seasons—in all of these encounters, one meets a movement whose resolution into a whole action seems forever postponed, deferred instead to a far future of geologic time spans, cycles of time that eclipse merely human dramas, or (as is gestured toward by the inclusion in When the Mountain Changed Its Clothing of traditional Slovenian “folk” tunes) the messianic time in which history unfolds. Pain, self-overcoming, or the vast expanse of futurity into which the subject gazes in the encounter with fate—all of these point to the sublime. Yet, once again, in describing the resistance offered by the theatrical performer to representation, Lehmann invokes the image of a centripetal motion around the smallness of what appears as a “void” (PT 174) or nothingness:

[T]he [theatrical] ‘image’ is about ‘the experience of an insurmountable powerlessness to dispose’ over reality… Inherent to the curious gaze in theatre is the expectation that it will ‘at one point’ see the other. But this gaze does not reach for ever more distant unreal spaces but circles inside itself, pointing inwards, towards the clarification and visibility of the figure that nevertheless remains an enigma. Therefore this gaze is accompanied by a sense of lack instead of fulfilment. Naturally, this hope cannot be fulfilled because plenitude only persists in the question, in the curiosity, in the expectation, the non-appearance, the memory, not in the ‘present’ reality of the object. The figure of the other in theatre always has a reality only of arrival, not presence.

(PT 172)

What is missing in Goebbels’s “adaptation” of Swamp—and what connects his adaptation back to the “delight”, “freedom” and “pleasure” of the beautiful—is the human figure near the centre of the image. As if to underscore this emptiness, Goebbels, in casting van Ruisdael’s painting onto the gauze curtain, enacts a similar
denial of the receding centre as he does later in his treatment of Night Hunt: not, this
time, via the strategy of excising the focal point from the visual field, but, as I have
alluded to above, through a very gradual manipulation of the colours of the projected
image—a cycling of its light through supersaturated blues, reds, whites, and yellows
that sequentially drowns all other hues (Fig. 9). As this gradual colour-phase
transformation continues, the journey of the human figure who trudges toward the
horizon in the hope of finding solid ground (on which he may stand without sinking)
is absorbed into a larger drama that cuts across it and dissipates its momentum: a
drama in which the compositional element of colour declares its presence and shows
itself as the elemental substrate of all visual representation. As the colours of the
projected image change, its representations merge. Even sharp lines, which rely on the
distinction between shades to be visible, become indistinct—so that each colour
progressively disentangles itself from its subsistence in the form of van Ruisdael’s
scene, and achieves its acknowledgement.

What one witnesses, then, in both this scene and the later one involving Night
Hunt, is a double dissolution: the disappearance of a disappearance that therefore also
marks a re-emergence to view. On the level of content, the denial of the vanishing
point causes the image to break down into its minutest details. The hunt ceases,
bodies and textures shake themselves loose, the infinite line expands to a volume. But
as each image flattens out, it also becomes impossible to ignore that aspect of the
representation that reaches out into space to become a thing amongst the landscape of
branches, stones, water, and ice. Or rather, two things, which now also separate from
one another: for the projected image is also a “screen”, which catches the “light”.
Notably, in their intersection, each renders the other visible: the small screen,
stumbling brightly around the features of Uccello’s composition, reveals the hidden
presence of the projection of the work, reflecting its light partially back to the viewer; reciprocally, the flux of the projection illuminates the screen itself and reveals it to be a surface inequivalent to the forms that pass across it. Light, here, is disclosed in its double nature: just as the details of the image separate from one another, so one observes—in the intense monochromaticity of the modulated Swamp, or in the transience of those impressions from Night Hunt that, appearing, soon slide back into darkness as the screen moves on—light separated from the information it carries. Light in its mediality: as that which enables objects to be seen, but is in itself invisible. Or rather (like all mediality), as that which is the only thing that can be seen: to use Lehmann’s phrase, as “the phenomenality of visibility that is blinding” (PT 164).

Is it not possible to discern, in this appearance of things that cannot show anything other than themselves—cannot achieve anything, and yet which still gesture towards “an unseen image or an unheard word or sound”—a certain uselessness? One is reminded, suddenly, of those other figures who, in Ngai’s Ugly Feelings resist the “large but finite” systems in which they are enmired, by “going limp and falling down” (UF 274, 287): the crawl of the two old men, who, in Beckett’s How It Is slide towards each other in the mud (UF 273)—or, alternatively, the performance piece, No Time For Art, which asks the audience to stand and read a demand for justice for the victims of a political massacre, and yet which, Lehmann notes, names no specific accused, and therefore “has no legal status” (FT 89).

Additionally, though, in the roving motion of the screen around the theatrical space, is it not possible to see reflected the wandering motion of the eye itself: a gaze that, as if it were tracing the lines of thickly clustered branches from the comfort of a summer bench, winds anfractuously inward from the limit of a circumference?
Goebbels describes how, with the separation of elements, the audience is granted a “freedom of perception” (AA 11) that enables “the onlooker’s eyes [to] wander from left to right, from background to the front, from this scene to the next” (AA 11). Thematised here, then, is aesthetic judgment itself. For just as things reappear “in themselves” in this dissolution of content, this appearance is described by Goebbels in terms of pleasure and a reprieve from authority: “Audience members [he writes]… often let me know afterwards with some relief: ‘Finally, nobody on stage to tell me what to think’” (AA 6). It is this obstinate refusal to capitulate to the repetition of a concept but to maintain one’s own autonomy of judgment that is also perceptible in Hannah Arendt’s depiction, in the preface to Between Past and Future, of the public sphere as a gathering of equals around a table, at the head of which an empty place has been left. Quoting the men of the European resistance, she writes: “At every meal that we eat together, freedom is invited to sit down. The chair remains vacant, but the place is set” (BPF 4). The empty chair is itself an invitation to agency that consists precisely in there being “no-one at the head” – to which Goebbels adds that such “table parties”, which he stages quite literally in the opera Landscape with Distant Relatives, “are hence also invitations to the audience to figuratively find their own seat at the table” (AA 14). In the presence of this absence or void, which Arendt also figures as a “mirage”, a “fata morgana” or “an apparition of freedom” (BPF 4) those gathered must create “that public space between themselves where freedom could appear” (BPF 4); this can occur to the extent that each gazes upon the invisible and describes, in his own terms, how this lost treasure appears.
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---. Program Notes for Stifters Dinge.


