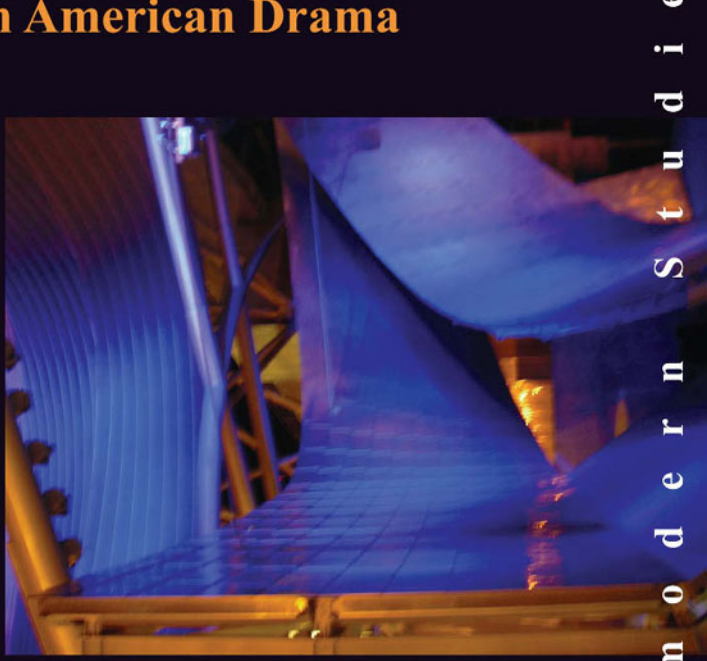
The Theater of Transformation

Postmodernism in American Drama



Kerstin Schmidt

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The Theater of Transformation

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Jay Pritzker Pavilion (designed by F. Gehry), detail, Chicago's public Millennium Park. Photo by Kerstin Schmidt.

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Acknowledgments

"The theater," says Thornton Wilder in "Some Thoughts on Playwrighting," "is an art which reposes upon the work of many collaborators." This condition applies in many ways to a book *about* theater as well. This book grew out of my own personal interest in both theater and theory, but among the first collaborators on the project was my dissertation advisor, Prof. Dr. Manfred Pütz, who, luckily for me, shares both of these interests and whose insightful and critical comments accompanied every stage of the project's development.

Such a book also travels a lot and is, in many ways, a transnational, or at least a transatlantic endeavor. Its journey began as a dissertation at the University of Freiburg's Institute for North American Studies. A two-year research scholarship by the German Endowment for the Humanities and the University of Freiburg ("Graduiertenförderung") enabled me to devote my entire time to the project, undisturbed by the expediencies of making a living. Then the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) helped me set sail across the Atlantic in order to dig into the rich archives of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, particularly the excellent Billy Rose Theatre Collection, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. I would like to thank the staff of these excellent research institutions for their invaluable support, their friendliness, and professional expertise. As for New York City, I am greatly indebted to my friend Sherry Kane who shares my passion for theater and explored with me even the remotest theater locations and vanguard projects. The present project also took many detours that, though important, did not develop into actual chapters of the final book. The superb collections of the W.E.B. DuBois library at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst are such a case in point, and I am grateful to Ute Bargmann, librarian of special collections, whose understanding for the idiosyncrasies of academic writing and whose unconventional ways let me discover a variety of material that will in due time certainly turn into another book project.

I then accepted a position as assistant professor of English and American Studies at the University of Bayreuth/Germany. The intellectual, professional, and personal climate of the University's Faculty of Languages and Literatures—and especially in our depart-

ment—provided a lively and stimulating environment where interdisciplinary research is both discussed and actually carried out. I am particularly indebted to my Bayreuth students whose international background and admirable curiosity provided a variety of often surprising and refreshing viewpoints. Also, a wide range of German and international guest speakers in our Colloquium of Literary and Cultural Studies and in the international conference on concepts of space in American culture triggered many ideas and helped create an intellectually challenging and inspiring environment. In 2003 and 2004, Prof. Patrick Miller (Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago) and Fulbright Professors Tracey J. Boisseau (University of Akron) and Kirk A. Hoppe (University of Illinois, Chicago) joined our faculty. Their expertise, intellectual response, and enthusiasm saw me through crucial stages of research and writing. A special note of gratitude goes to Prof. Dr. Udo Hebel, chair of American Studies at the University of Regensburg, for his untiring enthusiasm for the project, for his unfailing belief in my work, and for opening up a public forum to discuss my ideas.

I would very much like to thank my colleagues at Freiburg and Bayreuth who soon became friends. I am particularly grateful to my friend and colleague from English linguistics, Sandra Handl, for perfect proof-reading skills and for solving many conflict situations between footnotes and paragraphs late at nights. Also, I would like to thank Dr. Norbert Oberauer from Islamic Studies for insisting on proper lunch hours and coffee breaks, even in situations of utter turmoil and creative entropy. In more ways than one, I would like to thank Prof. Dr. Klaus Benesch for sustaining and encouraging me, particularly during the not-so-easy phases of academic life.

In its final stages, the book traveled once more to the United States, when a generous scholarship from Indiana University/Bloomington let me do the book's fine-tuning in their excellent libraries. Finally, my gratitude goes to the editors of Rodopi's series on "Postmodern Studies," Prof. Dr. Hans Bertens (Utrecht University) and Prof. Dr. Theo D'Haen (Leuven University), and to Marieke Schilling of Rodopi.

Perhaps most crucially, I am indebted to my family, Trude, Hans, Karin, Ursel-Goth, Herta, Michael, Daphne and Noam for collaborating and traveling with me before, during, and after this project. It is to them that I dedicate this book.

I Introduction: The Postmodern Condition of Drama

Quite remarkably, drama and theater play ancillary roles at best in many of the classic commentaries on postmodernism, as, for instance, in Jean-Francois Lyotard's *Postmodern Condition*, David Harvey's *Condition of Postmodernity*, or Jean Baudrillard's *Simulations*. Ihab Hassan piles up a lengthy roster of artists from various disciplines, whose names epitomize postmodernism for him; there are, however, very few playwrights on this list: Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Handke, Bernhardt, and only Shepard and Wilson as American dramatists.[1] French deconstruction and poststructuralism do not yield very different results. Jacques Derrida touches only briefly on the Theater of Cruelty and Antonin Artaud, and Roland Barthes mainly discusses *bunraku* and Brecht. "On the whole," as Christopher Bigsby maintains, "theatre has commanded very little interest from the major theorists or those who have taken up their theories."[2]

In his recent study, *Contemporary American Playwrights*, Bigsby once more foregrounds the lack of critical attention given not only to drama in general, but to American drama and theater in particular: "There has been a tendency, perhaps now beginning to change, for American drama to find itself marginalised in academe."[3] But the marginalization of drama, Bigsby claims, is not restricted to the university and the adjunct textbook stores. It has to be conceived in wider cultural terms: "Theatre," he claims, "seemed not quite at the centre of the culture," in contrast to "the Great American Novel [which] shared

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1 Ihab Hassan, "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," *The Postmodern Turn* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1987), 85.

2 Christopher W. E. Bigsby, *Modern American Drama, 1945-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000), 11.

3 Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), vii.

a national hubris."[4] Susan Harris Smith purports that between 1954 and the publication of her article in 1989, no essay on American drama had appeared in *PMLA*. And Jonas Barish covers this disturbing neglect in a book-length study called *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*.[5] The disregard of drama and of postmodern drama in particular becomes even more obtrusive when compared to the abundance of studies on postmodernism and postmodernity in general or on postmodern fiction and poetry in particular.

But why is this so? The very fact that theater is "physical, three-dimensional, immediate," says Bigsby, may have intimidated the critics.[6] He locates a further reason in drama's underlying notion of authorship. Dramatic authorship becomes "disturbingly problematic" because it is the joint effort of many collaborators all of whom leave their marks on the play. Director, actor, designer, lighting engineer and many others involved in the production contribute to the interpretive process. This diffusion of the text by "outside" forces and the complication of the concept of a single author-creator figure result in a "worrying instability" and the necessary incompletion of any dramatic work.[7] And yet, it is precisely because of drama's idiosyncratic notion of authorship that it expresses postmodern concerns so well. Dramatic authorship and other constitutive features of drama invite, even call for a "postmodern" drama. In addition to the unstable notion of authorship, the dramatic concept of self and personal identity readily expresses postmodern concerns. As indeterminable as dramatic authorship, the fragmentation of the self is a given in drama by the actor-character split. The context of a particular performance, the physical space on stage, and the event of the individual show further compli-

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4 Bigsby, *Contemporary American Playwrights* vii.

5 Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981). Susan Harris Smith, "Generic Hegemony: American Drama and the Canon," *American Quarterly* 41.1 (March 1989): 112-122. Other critics assert the significance of drama, as, for example, Martin Esslin who claims that "[d]rama, there can be no doubt about it, has become immensely important in our time." Esslin, however, propagates a very inclusive concept of drama which covers photographic and electronic mass media as well. Esslin, *The Field of Drama: How the Signs of Drama Create Meaning on Stage and Screen* (London: Methuen, 1987), 13.

6 Bigsby, *Modern American Drama* 2.

7 Bigsby, "A View from East Anglia," *American Quarterly* 41.1 (March 1989): 132.

cate the issue. Drama and theater are particularly suited to raise questions about the relationship between text, discourse, and performance, about the transformation of fixed words on the page into an articulation on stage, about presence and representation, about the pluralized and fragmented self, about the role of spatiality, and about drama's own conditions and processes of existence—all of which are major postmodern concerns. Moreover, as Bigsby reminds us, theater is "unique in its silences."[8] The audience has to sit through and endure the silences in a performance. Dramatic silences require theatrical space and time and can teem with meaning. The textual page, by contrast, can be turned quickly.

The following study investigates the forms and functions in which postmodernism has been received by contemporary American playwrights and how postmodernism has influenced and shaped dramatic writing. I will take the disregard of drama by contemporary theory as my point of departure and argue that it is precisely drama that lends itself so well to a postmodern frame of analysis. In which ways has theater responded to the "paradigm shift" of postmodernism and to the problems of representation raised by postmodern discourses? I will argue that there is a specifically postmodern form of drama and discuss theoretical paradigms of postmodernism as they have been adapted and redesigned by postmodern playwrights. In my discussion, I will establish transformation, well-known as a major acting exercise of the Open Theater, as a major technique and metaphor of postmodern American drama. My discussion of the significance of transformative processes in postmodern drama will show that postmodern drama is basically a "theater of transformation."

Transformative practices, as identified in this thesis, ensure that postmodern plays do not rest at simply destructuring dramatic constituents or destroying the communal orientation of theater. They rather evoke these constituents and the notion of a communal ritual while, at the same time, challenging and problematizing their possibility: Postmodern drama disturbs and subverts these features and constituents by transforming them. This postmodern technique of transformation will thus be established as a key movement of postmodern drama. Transformation assumes the role of the connective in postmodern drama, when traditional techniques of making plays are called

8 Bigsby, *Modern American Drama* 3.

into question. In terms of criticism, transformation also expresses the main concern of postmodern drama in that it defies closure. Transformation is postmodern drama's answer to the questions of postmodernism and a major technique in the development of a postmodern language for the stage.

As an acting technique, transformation was practiced most prominently by Joseph Chaikin's Open Theater.[9] It meant the abrupt taking on and dropping of different roles without any accompanying changes in setting, costume, or lighting. The technique itself, however, is said to go back to the famous Chicago workshops of Viola Spolin, renowned theater teacher, whose handbook of teaching and directing was soon to assume quasi-biblical status for theater groups of the time.[10] Playwrights Jean-Claude van Itallie and Megan Terry have intensively collaborated with the Open Theater and are thus preeminent practitioners of transformation in their plays. Jean-Claude van Itallie's plays study the condition of the self in a postmodern mediatized culture, as I will show in my discussion of the three consecutive parts of van Itallie's *America Hurrah*, "Interview" (1965), "TV" (1966), and "Motel" (1965). Because of van Itallie's close collaboration with the Open Theater, I use his work to explain the mechanics of transformation as an Open Theater acting technique. Megan Terry's transformation play *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place* (1965) has responded to postmodernism in a different way. While emphasizing aspects of transformation and their implications for the postmodern sense of self, it also adopts popular culture and examines its role for the constitution of the self. Perhaps more importantly, Megan Terry and Rochelle Owens use transformative strategies to propound postmodern theater as feminist drama. Transformative practices offer a challenging possibility to represent dramatically the postmodern feminist condition. The discussion of Terry's play is thus followed by an analysis of Rochelle Owens's dramatic biography, *Emma Instigated Me* (1976). As we shall see, her dramatic account of Emma Goldman's life is more thoroughly concerned with the conception and "life" of the play than with the life of the historical Emma Goldman. Thus, it may

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9 See, for instance, Robert Pasolli, *A Book on the Open Theatre* (New York: Avon, 1970), esp. 20-22.

10 Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* (1963; Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1977).

well be said to play with the metadramatic and raise the issue of postmodern authorship and textual authority. Finally, I discuss two plays by the African-American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989) and the award-winning *The America Play* (1993). Parks's writing technique of "Rep & Rev," an abbreviation of repetition and revision, captures transformative techniques on various levels and is instrumental in presenting history from an African-American perspective and exploring the postmodern notion of the self as hybrid. My selection of plays and playwrights, from the late 1960s to the 1990s, should bear witness to the continuing significance of postmodern features in American drama.

Terry, Owens, Parks, and van Itallie have particularly adopted and shaped postmodern concerns in American drama, thereby creating dramatic forms that can be called postmodern. In their theater of transformation, they seem to focus on three larger issues that capture best the form of a postmodern theater of transformation: the postmodern sense of self, a problematization of the dramatic text, performance and authorship in postmodernism, and aspects of the theatrical space and its relationship to postmodern mediatized culture. A general caveat seems in place here because the field of postmodern strategies in the contemporary performing arts is vast. Far from declaring the theater of transformation as a norm of postmodern drama, I rather conceive of it as a model of postmodern drama.

Postmodernism, an Assessment for the Theater

Postmodern drama, as Stephen Watt has argued, comes close to being a misnomer: when preceded by adjectives like postmodern, drama is emptied of most of the features that have traditionally defined it, such as character, plot, and agon. As Watt explains, "within postmodernism, drama retains virtually no value."[11] It is hard to believe that Watt

11 Watt, *Postmodern/Drama* 17. Watt bases his argument on Peggy Phelan's meditation on the marked und the unmarked as in the binarisms male/female and colonizer/colonized and argues that drama is in danger of becoming an

would be unaware of previous theatrical attempts to go beyond the traditional concept of character and discernible narrative. Yet he rightly points to the problematics of the phrase "postmodern drama." His own way of putting it, "postmodern/drama," however, does not resolve such disputes.

It may readily be granted that postmodernism challenges theater and drama in many ways. At the same time, postmodernism, as I argue, has in store crucial features for what is to be called postmodern drama. Drama has made ample use of postmodern features that, to different degrees, express transformative practices. And yet, with postmodernism, matters are hardly ever untroubled. Over the past decades, postmodernism has been a concept to be wrestled with; it has been shaped by conflicting opinions and arguments, at times utter denial. Even Ihab Hassan, prominent combatant in the struggle over postmodernism, asked at one point of the discussion whether we can "perceive a new phenomenon in contemporary culture generally, and in contemporary literature particularly, that deserves a name?"[12] Whereas some claim that such a "phenomenon" does not exist, others think of it as a major current of contemporary literary expression. It is perhaps exaggerated to consider postmodernism as a full-fledged paradigm shift, and a more cautious evaluation might be in place. Andreas Huyssen has put it thus:

> What appears on one level as the latest fad, advertising pitch and hollow spectacle is part of a slowly emerging cultural transformation in Western societies, a change in sensibility for which the term 'post-modern' is actually, at least for now, wholly adequate. The nature and depth of that transformation are debatable, but transformation it is.[13]

If postmodernism is such a marked "change in sensibility" and, significantly, a "cultural *transformation*" in Western societies that has affected culture at large, it must have left its imprint on contemporary

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"empty marker" in the phrase "postmodern/drama." See also Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 5.

12 Ihab Hassan, "The Question of Postmodernism," *Bucknell Review* 25.2 (1980): 117.

13 Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," *New German Critique* 33 (1984): 8.

drama as well. For the purpose of this thesis, I will concentrate on those aspects of postmodernism which are constitutive of a discussion of postmodern drama: its conceptual indeterminacy and the implications of its contradictory and fragmentary character. I will show that postmodernism at large displays transformative patterns which are received by drama and, as I argue in the following chapters, combined with dramatic transformation constitute what I call a postmodern theater of transformation.

I will not endeavor to add another definition of postmodernism to the stack of already existing attempts. Apart from an almost generic resistance of postmodernism to such efforts, these definitions feature, as most definitions, a disavowed tautological aspect, or, in Hassan's apt words, they are "telling us what we think we already know."[14] And yet, there is still something to be understood about contemporary culture in these provisional attempts, which may not be carried out along the lines of objective reasoning. As questionable as definitions and lists of characteristic features may be, Ihab Hassan's inventory of postmodern features has become a staple in postmodern theory and includes many of the features pertinent to a discussion of postmodern drama. In his juxtaposition of modern and postmodern features, the postmodern catalogue lists, among others, antiform, play, chance, anarchy, exhaustion/silence, decreation/deconstruction, absence, text/intertext, parataxis, rhizome/surface, and indeterminacy.[15] To these, Linda Hutcheon adds pastiche and irony, John Barth a sense of "exhaustion" and, later, "replenishment," Umberto Eco an aesthetics of repetition, and leftist critics such as Baudrillard, Harvey or Habermas a concern about the constructedness of reality. From a different perspective, Fredric Jameson highlights the commodification of objects, the photographic superficiality, and the "waning of affect" in postmodern culture.[16] Postmodernism and postmodern drama thus clearly comprise a variety of structural and stylistic features, including forms of mass cultural art which had before been excluded from literary scholarship. In its attempt to create a new aesthetics that contrasts with

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14 Hassan, "The Question of Postmodernism" 117.

15 Hassan's list is reprinted in many essays. It is most thoroughly discussed in Hassan's "The Question of Postmodernism" 117-126, as well as in "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism" 84-96.

16 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 29.1 (1984): 55.

forms of high culture, postmodernism, for many critics, is also firmly rooted in the popular and low-brow.[17] Fashion, pop art, television, and media images have become part and parcel of postmodern culture and have changed the idea of aesthetic innovation and experimentation. In contrast to drama, the visual arts have much earlier experimented with pop-cultural art forms. They have also explored other theoretical concepts of postmodern discourses, such as self-referentiality, the autonomy of signifiers, seriality, the aleatory, and anti-representationalism, before dramatists have. Yet, the extent to which postmodernism actually incorporates pop culture is debatable. For the most part, it still remains a thoroughly intellectual enterprise that by no means encourages mass-cultural adoption. Postmodern art draws from mass culture, but does not necessarily become a mass-cultural product itself. An economical estimate of contemporary theater, the number of theatergoers, the ongoing debate on subsidies and the continuous struggle for endowments, can readily prove that the better part of postmodern plays have not been able to attract mass audiences.

Postmodern drama seems to have rather been an experiment on the limits of drama and theater, and postmodernism has offered the tools and theoretical equipment for this attempt. The following description of postmodern contradictions and inconsistencies seems to capture adequately the appeal of postmodernism for drama:

> [P]ostmodernism veers toward open, playful, optative, disjunctive, displaced, or indeterminate forms, a discourse of fragments, an ideology of fracture, a will to unmaking, an invocation of silences—veers toward all these and yet implies their very opposites, their antithetical realities.[18]

Postmodernism is at once indeterminate, anarchic, and disruptive, while it attempts, at the same time, to discover a "unitary sensibility" (Susan Sontag) or "to cross the border and close the gap" (Leslie Fiedler).[19] Postmodernism is not static, but delineates the movement be-

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17 See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 63.

18 Hassan, "The Question of Postmodernism" 125.

19 Susan Sontag, "One Culture and the New Sensibility," *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1967), 296; 293-304; Leslie Fiedler,

tween "making" and "unmaking." This oscillation includes transformative practices because it does not simply reinstate a given feature, but it changes these features in the process of "making" and "unmaking." In other words, these shifts come with a difference. Postmodernism is a critical activity and thus marked above all by its transformative capacity.[20]

Despite such conceptual changes and a general instability of postmodern terminology, postmodern drama takes up the postmodern penchant for the exploration of boundaries and fosters dramatic experiments on the margins of possibility. As Jean-Francois Lyotard puts it:

> The powers of sensing and phrasing are being probed on the limits of what is possible, and thus the domain of the perceptible-sensing and the speakable-speaking is being extended. Experiments are made. This is our

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"Cross the Border—Close the Gap" (1970), *A Fiedler Reader* (New York: Stein and Day, 1977), 270-294.

20 As indicated by the changing trajectory of Hassan's writing, the term postmodern has taken many turns in its vivid history. In his earlier criticism, Hassan has tried to identify an anti-representational, anti-modernist "literature of silence" which, by and large, consisted of modernist texts. In a later, strategically important move he advocates a "new literature" that can still be identified with the topics of silence and indeterminacy but is no longer focused on a modernist canon of texts. As Hans Bertens noted, the debate that has later been called postmodernism took off between 1963 and 1967 as a response to the anti-modernist trend in literature (23). One of the most influential essays in this debate was Hassan's "The Dismemberment of Orpheus." "Indetermanence," as a conflation of indeterminacy and immanence, signifies the interplay between both terms as the episteme of postmodernism, and places Hassan in the vicinity of poststructuralist positions. See Hassan, "Culture, Indeterminacy, and Immanence: Margins of the (Postmodern) Age," 91. In the 1980s, Hassan then seems to adopt the repoliticization of postmodernism. He turns to American pragmatist thinking as brought forth by William James when he calls for "provisional reconstructions, pragmatic remythifications" in his 1987 essay "Making Sense: The Trials of Postmodern Discourse" (451). By the same token, Lentricchia sees postmodernism as the "pragmatic fiction" which enables us to grasp our social, cultural, and political formations more clearly (*After the New Criticism* 208; see also Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance* 5-8).

> postmodernity's entire vocation, and commentary has infinite possibilities open to it.[21]

Lyotard highlights the experimental agenda of postmodernism by calling it a transformative process that is devoted to developing ever new forms. Here, postmodernism is not concerned with postulating a new concept to replace an older one. What matters more is the search for new forms and the concomitant ability to revitalize art. Accordingly, Lyotard sees postmodernism not so much as a chronological concept but more as a state of mind. Postmodernism, for him, is mainly a word without a particular fixed meaning, it is "un mot sans consistance." This "mot sans consistance," Lyotard adds, "n'a d'autre valeur que celle d'un avertissement"; he thus links postmodernism with mass culture, or, more precisely, with advertisement, the epitome of consumerism.[22]

The inherent openness of this "mot sans consistance" invites thinking in paradoxes and contradictions whereas fixed concepts and one-to-one correspondences would possibly thwart such attempts. This "inconsistency" shows when postmodern art is, on the one hand, criticized as a distraction that diverts us from reality, and, on the other hand, is read as a new form of realism, as a valid reflection of the world of multi-national capitalism.[23] If Jameson is correct in calling postmodernism "the cultural logic of late capitalism,"[24] that logic

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21 Lyotard, "Philosophy and Painting in the Age of Their Experimentation: Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity," trans. Maria Minich Brewer and Daniel Brewer, *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 190.

22 Lyotard, "Retour au postmoderne," *Magazine Littéraire* 225 (Dec. 1985): 43. The evasiveness of the concept, of course, has been attacked consistently. Therefore, advocates of postmodernism such as Charles Jencks, who is very critical of Lyotard's concept, have been eager to provide a straightforward definition of postmodernism. Jencks defines postmodern architecture as that which integrates new techniques and old patterns. See Jencks, "Post-Modern und Spät-Modern. Einige grundlegende Definitionen," *Moderne oder Postmoderne? Zur Signatur des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters* (Weinheim: Acta Humaniora, 1986), 205-235.

23 See also Gaggi's discussion of this paradox. Silvio Gaggi, *From Text to Hypertext: Decentering the Subject in Fiction, Film, the Visual Arts, and Electronic Media* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1997), 49-50.

24 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1984; Durham: Duke UP, 1991).

gives rise to a variety of cultural discourses and manifestations. Postmodernism is both a theoretical and historical concept and a set of cultural practices which are complex, contradictory, and caught in continuous transformative processes.

Postmodernism as an activity "on the limits of what is possible" foregrounds the metadramatic orientation of postmodern drama, the reflection on concepts of reality and on its own status in reality. As such, postmodern drama addresses the fragmentation and constructedness of every version of the real. Postmodern drama aims at opening up the (traditional) field of drama and theater and, in spite of all differences, comes close to ideas underlying performance art and the Happening as well as earlier, modernist attempts to cut across the boundaries of the real. But whereas the modernists mainly conceived of reality as extremely complex but nevertheless singular, the postmodernists are interested more in how realities are constructed, shaped or collide.[25] To illustrate the difference, Dick Higgins contrasts two sorts of questions which mark what he calls a "cognitive" and a "postcognitive" worldview:

> The Cognitive Questions (asked by most artists of the 20th century [...] till around 1958): "How can I interpret the world of which I am part? And what am I in it?"
>
> The Postcognitive Questions (asked by most artists since then): "Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?"[26]

In a more critical vein, David Harvey concedes that "modernist sentiments may have been undermined, deconstructed, surpassed, or bypassed, but there is little certitude as to the coherence or meaning of

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25 In many ways, Brian McHale expresses a similar evaluation of the difference between modernism and postmodernism. With regard to postmodern fiction, he observes a shift from an 'epistemological' to an 'ontological' perspective, a "change of the dominant" as he calls it. McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987; London: Routledge, 1993).

26 Dick Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries* (1978); qtd. in McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 1.

the systems of thought that may have replaced them."[27] Fragmentation comes to be a defining trait of postmodern drama and takes on a leading role in postmodern drama's transformative processes. Fragmentation is, of course, not exclusively the intellectual property of postmodernism. One may still contend that the fragmentation of existence and of the sense of self was a prevalent concern in modernism as well. Where, then, is the difference between modern and postmodern fragmentation? Hornung, Hoffmann, and Kunow have argued that the gap between modernism and postmodernism is reflected in the opposition of two epistemes, of subjectivity versus loss of subjectivity.[28] According to Harvey, the difference is not to be found in the question of wholeness or fragmentation but in how the fragment is understood. From a modernist point of view, Harvey contends, fragmentation serves to establish a better whole, still assuming the existence of a "unified, though complex, underlying reality."[29] From a postmodern perspective, "ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity, and the chaotic" are fully accepted.[30] Postmodernism can thus be seen as both a logical extension of modernism and an oppositional reaction to it.

The intricacies of different concepts of postmodernism trigger two final, more general caveats involved in writing about postmodernism and drama. Such a degree of generic instability makes it particularly difficult to evaluate and interpret works of postmodern literature, including postmodern drama. Postmodernism renders hermeneutics problematic, or, as Hassan put it, interpretation becomes "prejudicial, uncertain, suspect."[31] These circumstances have led Jacques Derrida to differentiate between two kinds of interpretations, one of which seeks to discover the truth and the origin of things, whereas the other affirms a playful disposition:

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27 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* 42.

28 Gerhard Hoffmann, Alfred Hornung, and Rüdiger Kunow, "'Modern,' 'Postmodern' and 'Contemporary' as Criteria for the Analysis of 20th Century Literature," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 22.1 (1977): 20. Critics pointing out the independence of postmodernism should also acknowledge, as Hoffmann, Hornung, and Kunow suggest, that this endeavor is based on a modernist argument, namely the belief that there exists a literature appropriate to its age and context (31).

29 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* 30.

30 Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* 44.

31 Hassan, "Making Sense: The Trials of Postmodern Discourse," *New Literary History* 18.2 (1987): 449.

> Il y a donc deux interprétations de l'interprétation [...]. L'une cherche à déchiffrer, rêve de déchiffrer une vérité ou une origine échappant au jeu [...]. L'autre, qui n'est plus tournée vers l'origine, affirme le jeu.[32]

Postmodernism as a playful activity also draws on various sources of literary history and has thus frequently been challenged with methodological plagiarism or lack of idiosyncratic devices and forms of expression. Postmodern drama takes up this predilection for the play with and incorporation of diverse forms of artistic expressions. Drama, again, is particularly suited to express these ideas because drama, involving text and its transformation on stage, is by its very definition a "contaminated art form." The almost proverbial postmodern "tradition of the new" expresses this reproach in a more affirmative way.[33] Postmodern drama draws on a variety of cultural predecessors to involve them into its new and, if you will, its "old" project. Such circumstances render any identification of possibly characteristic features of postmodern drama provisional, if not dubious; they can almost always be related to some earlier trend of writing or performing. Consequently, we have to discuss such features as audience address, the tableau, or distrust in language as cases in point in terms of their significance for postmodern drama while, at the same time, being aware that they can just as well be associated with previous modes of theatrical writing.

This issue also touches upon a more general problem of writing literary history. Postmodernism almost programmatically displays its literary ancestors and thus conceives of periodization both in terms of continuity and discontinuity, attempting to rediscover its predecessors and their continuing influence.[34] Put differently, postmodern drama conceives of literary history in terms of a postmodern palimpsest of past, present, and future traces. Similar problems are encountered by the postmodern combination of theory and practice. Since postmodern theory is not necessarily nourished by an apriori practice, but, rather,

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32 Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), 427.

33 Charles Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?* (New York: St. Martin's P, 1986), 43. Significantly, "Make it New" has been a famous battle cry in modernism, propagated by Ezra Pound.

34 See Hassan, "Postface 1982: Toward a Concept of Postmodernism," *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1982), 264.

generates practice, some critics speak of the "contamination of practice by theory."[35] Postmodern drama, the "generically contaminated" art form, particularly fits this postmodern characteristic. Its emphasis on a play's existence and the reflection on the ways in which a play comes into being intermingles theoretical concerns and theatrical practices, and eventually turns postmodern drama into a "theater of theory."

The Repoliticization of Postmodernism

A "theater of theory," postmodern drama is nevertheless also a decidedly political theater, as the discussion of the plays and playwrights below will amply demonstrate. Quite a few feminist and ethnic playwrights have found postmodernist techniques particularly useful to express distinctly ethnic and/or feminist concerns and have consequently adapted postmodern ideas and shaped their own version of postmodern drama. And yet, the evanescence and conceptual instability of postmodernism, its "indetermanence" and predilection for play, causes, according to some critics, the abandonment of a political stance. Postmodern play and indeterminacy, on the one hand, hold the possibilities for a shifting emphasis in cultural politics and a revival of neglected discourses. On the other hand, they involve the risk of neutralizing such a political agenda or, what is more, of restoring the culturally conservative. A major group of critics equate postmodernism with the depoliticization of art and culture at large, viewing it as antithetical to enlightenment ideas. They warn against the dangers of abandoning the ideals of the Enlightenment, which was designed to improve society, and deplore the return of so-called "neoconservative" forces.[36] Jürgen Habermas, the leading representative of

35 Patrice Pavis, "The Classical Heritage of Postmodern Drama: The Case of Postmodern Theatre," trans. Loren Kruger, *Modern Drama* 28.1 (March 1986): 19.

36 As a case in point, Janet Woolf suggests that "the best kind of postmodern theory and practice is in fact a kind of modified modernism." Woolf, "Postmodern Theory and Feminist Art Practice," *Postmodernism and Society*, ed.

this critique, perceives the following perils in the impending decline of the values of the Enlightenment:

> The Neoconservatives welcome the development of modern science, as long as this only goes beyond its sphere to carry forward technical progress, capitalist growth and rational administration. Moreover, they recommend a politics of defusing the explosive content of cultural modernity. According to one thesis, science, when properly understood, has become irrevocably meaningless for the orientation of the life-world. A further thesis is that politics must be kept as far aloof as possible from the demands of moral-practical justification. And a third thesis asserts the pure immanence of art, disputes that it had an utopian content, and points to its illusory character in order to limit the aesthetic experience to privacy.[37]

According to Habermas, postmodernism thus empties art and society of its political content, fosters an uncritical attitude towards science, and facilitates an easing out of the "explosive" content of modernity. While critics such as Habermas tend to view modernism and postmodernism as oppositional, modernism is for the most part not rejected in postmodernism. Postmodern theoreticians rather draw from various literary and cultural theories, and modernism is prevalent among them.

I will argue that it is precisely postmodernism's indeterminacy and playfulness that promotes the development of a decidedly political agenda in postmodern drama. It is particularly suited to unveiling dominant representational patterns and subverting existing hierarchies and discourses. Its conceptual openness admits those who would be excluded by restrictive and fixed concepts of theory. Consequently, postmodernism has been adopted by playwrights with a decisive political agenda, above all by feminist and/or ethnic writers. In this the-

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Roy Boyne (London: Macmillan, 1990), 205. In an age-old and much abused argument, McLennan confronts "privileged intellectuals" with society's general political-social problems: "the world remains too ravaged by oppression, ignorance and malnutrition [...] for privileged intellectuals to trade in seriousness for the sparkling interplay of language games." Qtd. in Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 3.

37 Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity vs. Postmodernity," *New German Critique* 22 (Winter 1981): 13-14.

sis, Megan Terry, Rochelle Owens, and Suzan-Lori Parks will readily prove this claim.

Even if postmodernism is clearly a theory by and for the Western capitalist world, it also draws attention to those traditionally excluded by, or marginalized from, the cultural dominant. Postmodernism's penchant for the margin compels the critic to be more attentive to the ways in which gender and race are broached by artists. Through Foucault's work on power and Althusser's on ideology and the influences that power structures and ideology exert on the subject, postmodernism also became associated with multiculturalism and feminism. This has led Hal Foster to distinguish between a postmodernism of reaction and a postmodernism of resistance.[38] The latter, with its attempt to change the object and its social context, is thus political, whereas the former is preoccupied with its repudiation of modernism. Postmodern drama has clearly chosen postmodernism as a mode of criticism that de-structures the order of representation in order to reinscribe it, even if such reinscriptions can only be provisional and transformative. This political stance also signals a practice that is cross-disciplinary by definition and rooted in vernacular traditions because cultural forms are considered which deny the idea of a high dominant culture as a privileged aesthetic realm. In the same vein, Craig Owens sees postmodernism in terms of a crisis in Western representation, particularly in its claims to authority and universality. Heretofore marginal or repressed discourses, feminism being among them, announced the crisis and rendered postmodernism a political as well as an epistemological event: political in that it challenges the order of patriarchal society, epistemological in that it questions the structure of its representations.[39]

While some critics accuse postmodernism of rejecting history,[40] its interest in historiographic metafiction, according to Linda Hutcheon, foregrounds the constructedness of our vision and knowledge of the past. Rather than rejecting history, postmodernism criticizes histo-

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38 Hal Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface," *The Anti-Aesthetic* (1983; New York: The New P, 1998), xii.

39 Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (1983; New York: New P, 1998), 57-82; 59.

40 Todd Gitlin, "Postmodernism: Roots and Politics," *Cultural Politics in Contemporary America*, ed. Ian Angus and Sut Jhally (New York: Routledge, 1989), 347.

riography and reformulates the project of history.[41] Suzan-Lori Parks explicitly takes issue with dominant representations of history and challenges them by using, among other devices, postmodern language games. Thus the postmodern emphasis on play and language games by no means implies the abandonment of a political agenda. It is an activity that reconsiders and transforms the foundations of modern thought and thus generates possibilities to employ different perspectives on contemporary culture and society. The play of surfaces and pastiche is not in and by itself politically neutral. As a means of disclosing the situatedness of knowledge and perception, it takes part in the continuous process of questioning power structures and their concomitant ideologies. Even if the history of the relationship between postmodernism and ethnic/feminist discourses may have had its ragged edges, postmodern drama caters to the claims and interests of these groups and provides them with conceptual tools to shape an ethnic or feminist postmodern theater of transformation.

Survey of Selected Secondary Studies

Considering the common ground between drama and postmodernism, it may come as a surprise that postmodern drama has only generated a very limited amount of critical studies. At the same time, one may contend that the phrase "postmodern drama" appears in a large number of titles of secondary literature. In too many cases, however, the term appears almost exclusively as a catchphrase in the works' titles. In other cases, the term is used without much methodological precaution. Generally speaking, the inflationary use of the term "postmodern" in titles of secondary studies seems to say more about the scholarly book market than about the actual books. Thus Hassan seems right when arguing that the frequent (ab)usage of the term postmodernism makes evident a "will and counterwill to intellectual

41 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 105-123.

power," because embracing or discarding the term is contingent upon the "psychopolitics of academic life."[42]

Critical literature on the performing arts seems to be dominated by a growing emphasis on "performance." These studies cover a wide range of topics, from performance in the visual arts, through TV quiz shows and sitcoms, to postmodern stand-up comedy. But they hardly deal with the concept of performance as a form of drama. The editors of a collection of essays on *Performance in Postmodern Culture,* Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello, use the term postmodern drama but do not theorize their doing so. In their introduction, they rightly ask if it is "possible to bring postmodern theory full circle to a reconciliation of the theatrical paradigm, the event still called theater," but they also leave this very question open. And in the "Postface," Caramello discusses "styles of postmodern writing," yet leaves the realm of theater aside altogether.[43] While the collection emphasizes postmodern performance, it bypasses the role of postmodernism in drama.

Philip Auslander has added two elaborate studies to the huge body of general literature on postmodern performance.[44] Whereas Auslander's *From Acting to Performance* dwells on postmodern performance and body politics, his study *Presence and Resistance* explores aspects of mediatized culture and addresses issues of cultural politics and communication. Apart from a discussion of the Wooster Group's *L.S.D.*, the book neglects drama. Hans Bertens' comprehensive history of postmodernism, *The Idea of the Postmodern*, reduces its discussion of drama to Auslander's interpretation of the Wooster Group's *L.S.D.*[45] An article by Patrice Pavis on "The Classical Heritage of Modern Drama: The Case of Postmodern Theatre" features

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42 Hassan, "The Question of Postmodernism" 119.

43 Michel Benamou, "Introduction: Presence and Play" 6; Charles Caramello, "Postface: On Styles of Postmodern Writing" 221-234; both in: *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Benamou and Caramello (Milwaukee: Center for Twentieth Century Studies, 1977).

44 Philip Auslander, *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1997). Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1992).

45 Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1995).

French examples only, and ignores American drama altogether.[46] Pavis' approach differs from that pursued in this thesis, since he is mainly interested in classical literature and its influence on contemporary French drama. His conclusion, however, probably holds true for almost any historical context: it is not possible for any postmodern theater to define itself as a radical rupture without recourse to classical norms.

In 1989, Steven Connor added an almost encyclopaedic study called *Postmodernist Culture* to the postmodern book market.[47] The author covers in his investigation a remarkable variety of fields of cultural expression, from more customary topics such as literature, performance, and architecture to well-informed discussions of fashion, style and rock music as postmodern discourses, but the scope of his analysis inhibits a more thorough discussion of postmodern drama as such. In his 1984 study, promisingly called *Postmodern Drama*, Rodney Simard goes back to the 1950s and discusses Beckett as a turning point in the traditional notions of drama and theater. Yet Simard does not elaborate on the significance of postmodernism for drama, as could be expected from the title. It is only in the conclusion that he defines a common agenda of postmodern playwrights: "They have come to realize that shared reality is a myth and that individual reality is simply a matter of existential choice; this is the essential condition postmodern drama seeks to dramatize and explore." The terminology Simard uses is even more striking when he discerns a "unity of purpose unprecedented since the dominance of the well-made play." He claims that Stoppard, Shepard, Shaffer, and Rabe "direct attention toward the interior quality of postmodern life," a definition of which is still due.[48]

Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn have collected essays on contemporary American drama in *Around the Absurd*, conspicuously subtitled *Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama.* Cohn's introductory essay traces the history of the term "absurd" and the emergence of modern

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46 Patrice Pavis, "The Classical Heritage of Modern Drama: The Case of Postmodern Theatre," trans. Loren Kruger, *Modern Drama* 28.1 (March 1986): 1-22.

47 Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1989).

48 Rodney Simard, *Postmodern Drama: Contemporary Playwrights in America and Britain* (Lanham: UP of America, 1984), 132-134.

drama, and Brater's concluding essay "After the Absurd" delineates the influence of the absurd on later plays. Regrettably, they do not comment on the term postmodern that is prominent in the study's title. Brater's final essay may explain this curiosity when he concludes that the "absurd is all around" and there "is not *after* after [sic] the absurd."[49]

Following a major current of scholarly interest, Jeanette Malkin explores the issue of memory and postmodernism in her book *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama.* She argues that both terms are intricately linked in the plays of Samuel Beckett, Heiner Müller, Sam Shepard, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Thomas Bernhard. Regrettably, she neither discusses postmodern theory with regard to drama nor establishes any theoretical framework for postmodern drama, but dwells on memory as the central motif in the plays.[50]

More recently, two book-length studies were published covering, by and large, common ground. Stephen Watt's *Postmodern/Drama* and Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatisches Theater* appeared on the performing arts bookshelves in 1998 and 1999 respectively.[51] At first glance, both studies seem to deal with the same topic, postmodern drama. Watt and Lehmann also notice the lack of studies on a fruitful alliance between postmodern theory and contemporary drama. Lehmann sees the reason for this neglect in the fact that the forms of the "new theater" show an inherent resistance to categorizing. After elaborate theoretical ruminations, Watt's study takes a different direction and is more generally concerned with postmodern forms of cultural expressions. He includes postcards as well as television shows in his discussion. Lehmann's *Postdramatisches Theater* focuses almost exclusively on the European theater scene with the exception of an in-depth discussion of Robert Wilson and occasional remarks on John

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49 Ruby Cohn, "Introduction: Around the Absurd" 1-9 and Enoch Brater, "After the Absurd" 301; both in: *Around the Absurd: Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama*, ed. Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1990).

50 Jeanette R. Malkin, *Memory-Theater and Postmodern Drama* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1999). Malkin also claims Beckett as a postmodern playwright which is disputable (17).

51 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater* (Frankfurt/Main: Verlag der Autoren: 1999); Stephen Watt, *Postmodern/Drama* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998).

Jesurun. Similar to Ihab Hassan, Lehmann offers a list of playwrights who would qualify as "postdramatic" artists; for the American context, he names Richard Foreman, Robert Wilson, Richard Schechner, and the Wooster Group. Lehmann supports a very restrictive definition of postmodernism, namely as the period which reacts against modernism, and invents the term "postdramatic" to refer to what is elsewhere called postmodern.

None of the above studies extensively addresses the question of postmodern drama. Whereas some of them note and deplore the lack of studies on the subject, they do not provide in-depth analyses of dramatic forms which are informed by postmodernism. In contrast, works on postmodern performance art proliferate and dominate the discussion. Obviously, Bigsby's assessment quoted earlier is correct: drama and theater have been neglected by contemporary theory and by postmodern theory in particular.

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II Theorizing Dramatic Form: Aspects of Transformation in Postmodern Drama

One of the main concerns in postmodern drama is the exploration of dramatic form. Plays to be discussed in this study as well as statements and comments by the respective playwrights will support my argument that postmodern drama is preoccupied with an investigation and subsequent transformation of the form of drama. But since postmodern drama is also decidedly interested in the larger political climate, it conceives of form not as an end in itself but as reflecting and, what is more, as shaping a particular cultural and social context. In their exploration of the boundaries of dramatic form, postmodern dramatists have concentrated on many aspects pertinent to postmodern forms of writing. Most crucially, they have studied the fragmentation and transformation of the self and postmodern variants of character in a mediatized culture. An inquiry into the postmodern notion of text, authorship, and performance also looms large in the theater of transformation, as does the reconfiguration of plot, action, theatrical space, and other constituents of drama.

And yet, one may readily object that an interest in dramatic form is not a novelty in the history of the genre. Formal aspects have always been attributed a major role in the process of theatrical signification. The history of modern playwriting, from the historical avant-garde to the political theaters of the 1960s, offers a variety of dramatic forms and suggests that theater is almost always, to varying degrees, concerned with its own form.[1] Even though it may be tempting to draw parallels to previous modes of dramatic writing, postmodern

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1 The term "historical avant-garde" was introduced by Peter Bürger in his *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974; *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984). It covers mainly dadaism, surrealism, and the post-revolutionary Russian avant-garde.

drama should neither be confused with the collective and political theaters of the 1960s nor with earlier experimental modes of dramatic writing such as the historical avant-garde, the Theater of the Absurd, or the Epic Theater. Postmodern drama is often correlated to agit-prop theater and political theater groups of the 1960s. Yet contrary to postmodern drama as presented in this study, the experiments of, for example, Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theater were essentially experiments in communal living and as such more akin to group therapy. The Living Theater and other political theater groups share certain features with postmodern drama, yet their impetus and main objectives differ greatly. Many postmodern dramatists rejected the communitarianism of these theater groups, the reliance on the performer, and their dramatic model of political art.[2] From a historical perspective, Joseph Chaikin's Open Theater assumes a crucial role for the development of postmodern drama and, in many ways, bridges the gap between the political theaters of the 1960s and postmodern drama. Chaikin and the Open Theater have shaped to a considerable extent what I call a postmodern drama of transformation.

Dramatists who are commonly associated with the Theater of the Absurd are frequently addressed as postmodern playwrights. The underlying claim, however, that the Theater of the Absurd can be seen as a precursor of postmodernism or even be considered as essentially postmodern needs to be modified. The Absurdists' attempt to negate meaning and purpose rests on the belief that meaning and purpose exist and that therefore any attempt to deal with them still presupposes meaning. Thus the Theater of the Absurd should rather be considered as intrinsically modernist. As Patrice Pavis argues, "its nonsense still makes sense and recalls an interpretation and conception of the world." Contrary to the Absurdist agenda, Pavis defines postmodern theater as a dramatic "text which [...] can no longer be recapitulated or resolved, or lead to action."[3] Postmodern drama no longer views the decomposition of value systems and ethics as a problem of metaphysi-

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2 On differences between postmodern drama and political theater groups, see also Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* 36-42. The focus of Auslander's study is on the investigation of performance art in the 1980s which he defines as political, although in a different sense compared to the politicality in performance theater of the 1960s and 1970s.

3 Pavis, "Classical Heritage" 7; 8.

cal anxiety, but rather presupposes it as a crucial condition of postmodernity.

In the same vein, the historical avant-garde is often confused with a more recent form of experimental theater. The so-called historical avant-garde, however, remains within the realm of the text and, for the most part, seems to defend the mimetic representation of action and plot. Only if we contextualize seemingly similar theatrical devices, fundamental differences in function and usage of these devices will be revealed. As we shall see, their constellation and arrangement decide whether or not a piece is to be read within the parameters of a postmodern aesthetics of drama. New forms always draw on pre-existing forms, provocation alone does not by itself invent new forms. Yet above all else, the historical avant-garde differs considerably from postmodern drama in its attitude towards so-called mass or popular culture. Contrary to earlier forms of experimental theater, postmodernism by and large purports to embrace popular culture by obliterating the formerly rigid distinction between high and low culture. As Ihab Hassan has claimed, the difference between the historical avant-garde and postmodern literature in general may be defined with reference to McLuhan's terminology: postmodern literature is "cooler," which is to say "less cliquish, and far less aversive to the pop, electronic society of which it is part, and so hospitable to kitsch."[4]

The Epic Theater and postmodern drama also cover common ground in many respects. The Epic Theater shares with postmodern forms, for example, the reflection upon its own constituents and the attempt to unveil theatrical illusion. It cannot be subsumed under the label of postmodern drama, however, for it relies heavily on the fable and frequently aims at conveying a moral. It is thus its pronounced didacticism that is inimical to postmodern concerns.

If postmodern art generally is said to examine the role of representation as a constituent of our sense of the real, postmodern drama is specifically concerned with the importance of representation in the theater. This metadramatic orientation is both formal and political. Following the guiding impulse of postmodern theory and literature, drama increasingly reflects upon itself, its constituents and their respective functions. Self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, deconstruction and critical analysis of the dramatic elements, are

4 Hassan, "Postface" 267.

constitutive for the development of postmodern drama and theater. Its vital interest in self-reflexivity adopts a prime concern of postmodern fiction, since self-conscious authorship and its paradoxical nature characterizes the postmodern novel in general. The fiction of John Barth, Kathy Acker, Richard Brautigan, Donald Barthelme, Salman Rushdie, and several others readily attests to the importance of authorial self-awareness. In John Barth's famous phrasing, one should never forget that art is always also an "artifice."[5] A wide range of playwrights has approached the metadramatic from diverse angles and experimented with it to varying degrees in their works. In Arthur Kopit's *Indians*, for example, the metadramatic is explored by questioning the play's very existence.[6] Dramatist Maria Irene Fornès also investigates the metadramatic, as Susan Sontag claims in the introduction to Fornès' plays of the 1980s. Her plays, Sontag argues, present "both a theatre about utterance (i.e., a meta-theatre) and a theatre about the disfavored."[7] Sam Shepard, Robert Wilson and many others have similarly forayed into the metatheatrical,[8] but they have done so with some reservations, as they are reluctant to actively participate in

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5 See also Hayden White's concept of 'metahistory' (1973) which posits historiography as a poetic construct. As postmodernism rejects any totalizing view of history, it creates an awareness that both history and literature are discourses and not truths. White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973); White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978).

6 Kopit's *Indians* is frequently discussed as an example of epic elements in contemporary drama and thus demonstrates that postmodern devices and epic elements can occur in the same play. It is, however, difficult to see why Ruby Cohn associates Kopit with those playwrights who are "Broadway Bound," which, according to her classification, means that they rarely stray from realism and mostly do not challenge the affluent, vaguely liberal Broadway audience. Cohn, *New American Dramatists 1960-1990* (1982; sec. ed. Basingstoke, London: Macmillan, 1991), 27.

7 Susan Sontag, Preface, *Plays* by Maria Irene Fornès (1985; New York: PAJ, 1986), 9.

8 See, for instance, Manfred Pfister, "Robert Wilson's Metatheatre: Sense and Sensuousness in *The Golden Windows*," *Studien zur Ästhetik des Gegenwartstheaters*, ed. Christian W. Thomsen (Heidelberg: Winter, 1985), 71-90; Herbert Grabes, "Metadrama and the History of Taste: Sam Shepard, *The Tooth of Crime*," *Studien zur Ästhetik des Gegenwartstheaters*, ed. Christian W. Thomsen (Heidelberg: Winter, 1985), 111-126.

the performance as dramatists or to bestow upon their characters an awareness of their own status as constructs.[9]

Postmodern drama investigates the signs that generate its dramatic system. It is thus semiotic in the sense that it questions and deconstructs its own sign systems, not in order to negate them, but in order to self-consciously display and use them in the dramatic work. In this respect, postmodern drama fulfills a dual function: it deconstructs drama in the very process of producing drama and, as a consequence, it generates its own meta-discourse. In postmodern drama, formal features are foregrounded to such an extent that unilateral referentiality is rendered impossible and, in this sense, it becomes a concrete theater in which each (theatrical) sign is purely metatheatrical, only tells itself, and represents itself. By dramatizing the process of dramatic signification, theater exposes itself as theater and hence becomes a theater of perception. In a seminal article on the relationship between filmic practices and postmodern drama, Helga Finter explains the role of metatheatrical practices in postmodern drama thus:

> Dieses Theater ist postmodern, insofern es die Errungenschaften historischer theatraler Praxis nicht negierend im Namen blinder Fortschrittsgläubigkeit und eines Ursprungsmythos zerstört [...], sondern die Konstituenten des Theatralischen selbst in ihrer Zeichen-

9 In the wake of the rampant interest in metadramatic strategies, the scholarly book market has produced quite a number of studies devoted to the exploration of metadrama. These studies cover playwrights from Shakespeare to Gertrude Stein and Tom Stoppard, but none of them has so far discussed the relationship between postmodern theory and metadrama comprehensively. In *Metadrama und englisches Gegenwartsdrama*, Karin Vieweg-Marks concentrates on British metadrama in the plays by Edward Bond and Tom Stoppard while leaving aside its postmodern implications. Beate Blüggel separates metadrama and postmodernism rigidly in her work on Tom Stoppard. In *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, Richard Hornby deals with the metadramatic aspects in plays by Büchner, Shakespeare, Sophocles, Strindberg, Ibsen, and Pinter without showing much concern for a possible theoretical positioning. James L. Calderwood, *Shakespearean Metadrama* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1971); Jane Palatini Bowers, *"They Watch Me as They Watch This"—Gertrude Stein's Metadrama* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991); Karin Vieweg-Marks, *Metadrama und englisches Gegenwartsdrama* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1989); Beate Blüggel, *Tom Stoppard—Metadrama und Postmoderne* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1992); Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (Toronto: Associated U Presses, 1986).

> haftigkeit dramatisiert. Dieser Prozeß der Negativität zerstört also nicht, sondern produziert in einer Bewegung der Dekonstruktion seinen eigenen Metadiskurs mit.[10]

Finter not only draws the connection between metadrama and postmodernism, but also cogently argues that postmodern drama is inherently intertextual. It does not simply deny its predecessors, nor does it try to eliminate the tradition, but it stores and foregrounds cultural references and draws attention to them by means of decontextualization, separation, and repetition. Postmodern intertextuality incorporates and quotes from a wide range of other texts. Postmodern playwrights often resort to classical texts, as, for instance, in the case of Charles Ludlam's *Bluebeard.* At times, they only allude to well-known classical plays, characters or plots and, at other times, engage in the difficult task of writing postmodern adaptations of classical works. Perhaps even more significantly, postmodern drama incorporates pop-cultural works by way of intertextuality. Megan Terry, for instance, quotes from gangster movies or drag queen plots in *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place*, and Jean-Claude van Itallie parodies Doris Day-movies in his so-called Doris plays *I'm Really Here* and *Almost Like Being*. Such intertexts require considerable knowledge of canonical and non-canonical works of art and literature and, due to changes made in the process of adaptation, it can be difficult to recognize them in postmodern plays. Thus postmodern drama does not defy its heritage but rather treats heritage as an "immediately available and reusable memory bank."[11] In most cases, the postmodern reverence for canonical texts and for pop-cultural works does by no means entail a simple mimetic representation of the quoted texts, but rather transforms them by subverting their authoritative status through parody and other strategies of differentiation and fragmentation.

Postmodern cultural expressions often seem to exhibit a sense of nostalgia by evoking "the old" in a radically new context. This penchant mainly derives from the postmodern interest in recombination, permutation, and pastiche of existing cultural works. To delineate the

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10 Helga Finter, "Das Kamerauge des postmodernen Theaters," *Studien zur Ästhetik des Gegenwartstheaters*, ed. Christian W. Thomsen (Heidelberg: Winter, 1985), 47; 67.

11 Pavis, "Classical Heritage" 1.

effort to evoke images we have seen before in surprising new contexts, Charles Jencks has coined the salutary phrase "the shock of the old" and explains it in terms of a typically postmodern paradox, namely, that between continuity and discontinuity: "the tradition of the new made such a fetish of discontinuity that now a radical work of quality is likely to have the shock of the old."[12] Hence, signs do not lose their original signification completely but acquire, in the new context, additional or slightly altered meanings. Postmodern drama thus enters into multifaceted relationships with other texts, which range from the incorporation of cultural and literary traditions, through the mixing of different genres, to the quotation and plagiarization of, or allusion to, different texts or parts thereof. The mixing of heretofore rigidly separated genres, or, rather, the transformation of one genre into another results in a disregard for generic rules.

Such practices are commonly referred to as intertextuality, an ambiguous and overdetermined term calling for some terminological specification. In *Palimpseste*, Gérard Genette makes a more precise distinction when he establishes "transtextuality" as the general term for most interrelationships between two or more texts. He then goes on to define five orders of transtextual systems.[13] Intertextuality, according to Genette, covers the presence of a certain text in another, by means of quotation, plagiarism or allusion. Archi-, para-, meta-, and hypertextuality are types of transtextuality which describe different modes of relationships between texts. Genette's definition of intertextuality is more restrictive than, for instance, that proposed by Julia Kristeva who advocates a wider concept of intertextuality based on semiotic grounds: "The term intertextuality denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign-system(s) into another."[14] In postmodern drama, intertextuality delineates the continuous transformation from

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12 Jencks, *What is Post-Modernism?* 43. As mentioned above, this phrase evokes Pound's famous modernist battle cry, "Make it New."

13 Genette mainly discusses hypertextuality in his study on "littérature au second degrée" and interestingly refers to the process by which a hypotext is turned into a hypertext as "transformation." See Gérard Genette, *Palimpseste. Die Literatur auf zweiter Stufe* (1982; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1993), esp. 9-16.

14 Kristeva, "Revolution in Poetic Language," *The Kristeva Reader*, trans. Margaret Waller, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), 111. See also Kristeva's discussion of intertextuality in *Sèméiôtikè* (Paris: Seuil, 1969).

one genre into another, a practice which eventually frustrates any notion of neat generic classifications.

In any case, the palimpsest provides a pointed model for explaining how layers of different texts and discourses are built upon each other. Roland Barthes points to a horizontally oriented structure when he regards the text as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture."[15] In the same vein, Jonathan Culler concludes that intertextuality/transtextuality

> thus becomes less a name for a work's relation to particular prior texts than a designation of its participation in the discursive space of a culture: the relationship between a text and the various languages or signifying practices of a culture.[16]

Moreover, Susan Sontag has elaborated on the related notion of pastiche, which describes the mixing and adapting of given forms in order to suit the requirements of particular forms of collective discourses. As critic Angela McRobbie points out, Sontag's concept of pastiche clearly emphasizes agency because she "brings the audience, the consumers, the 'camp followers' into the picture without sidetracking into 'empiricism.'"[17] Postmodern theorists like Fredric Jameson disagree and rather attribute a "waning of affect"[18] to postmodern transtextuality; "pastiche" for Jameson "is blank parody"[19] and thus contributes to the inherent depthlessness of postmodern aesthetics.

There is, however, also a pronounced political side to the transtextuality, even to the plagiarism, of postmodern culture. Andreas

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15 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (1968; New York: Noonday P, 1988), 146.

16 Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1981), 103. There are, of course, many equally valid definitions of intertextuality; see, for instance, Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* where she talks about the "inevitable textual infiltration of prior discursive practices" (127).

17 McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* 20.

18 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1984; Durham: Duke UP, 1991), 10.

19 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (1983; New York: The New P, 1998), 114.

Huyssen connects this political agenda particularly with feminist and minority discourses:

> It was especially the art, writing, film-making and criticism of women and minority artists, with their recuperation of buried and mutilated traditions, their emphasis on exploring forms of gender- and race-based subjectivity in aesthetic productions and experiences, and their refusal to be limited to standard canonizations, which added a whole new dimension to the critique of high modernism and to the emergence of alternative forms of culture.[20]

Political implications of postmodernism have all too frequently been considered in rather negative terms, neglecting that they are often an important foundation of minority and feminist discourses. Numerous women and/or ethnic playwrights such as Suzan-Lori Parks, Ntozake Shange, Adrienne Kennedy, Sonia Sanchez, Rochelle Owens, and Megan Terry have not only developed an idiosyncratic postmodern language for the stage, but, in doing so, have also claimed to follow a political agenda.

Transtextuality and plagiarism also raise the question of originality in postmodern drama. What becomes of the creative and innovative act of writing if its production is, to varying degrees, dependent upon references to other texts? As Umberto Eco has shown, the idea of innovation and artistic novelty is part of a modernist aesthetics that highly valued originality and devalued any form of repetition because it is pertinent to craft and industry, and not to 'Art':

> The modern criterion for recognizing the artistic value was novelty. High information. The pleasurable repetition of an already known pattern was considered, by modern theories of art, typical of Crafts, not of Art and of industry.[21]

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20 Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," *New German Critique* 33 (1984): 27.

21 Umberto Eco, "Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics," *Reading Eco: An Anthology*, ed. Rocco Capozzi (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1997), 14.

One should not forget, however, that the modern concept of originality is in itself not an ahistorical category but rather the product of a particular historical period, namely, Romanticism. According to Eco, imitative repetition, in contrast, was already highly regarded in classical theories of art. Classical aesthetics, he maintains, frequently appreciated as beautiful the "good tokens of an everlasting type." Similarly, postmodern mass-media products are based on "repetition, iteration, obedience to a pre-established schema, and redundancy (as opposed to information)."[22] Mass media cultural products, from crime fiction through TV serials to popular movies, thus share crucial features with the classical concept of art and are, to some extent, even based on them.[23]

As we have seen, transtextual practices in postmodernism are by no means new devices in the history of literature. Rather, they self-consciously carry to the extreme, and thus render explicit, the intertextuality of all art. Furthermore, there is variation in repetition, as different types of repetition allow for what Eco calls "organized differentiations, polycentrism, regulated irregularity."[24] Postmodern dramatist Suzan-Lori Parks has developed a model of dramatic repetition that perfectly translates Eco's observations to the stage. Parks's "Rep & Rev" ("repeated and revised") embodies different types of repetition and their ability to create new, "revised" meanings. This transformative model assaults the role of the author as source of ultimate authority and challenges the link between author and originality as well as the concept of originality as such. Above all, the latter is unveiled as always already infested by repetition or a recombination of existing patterns.

As postmodern transtextuality is especially concerned with mass or popular culture, the formerly rigid distinction between so-called

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22 Eco, "Innovation and Repetition" 15.

23 In his analysis of crime fiction and TV serials, Eco notices that the reader enjoys habitual gestures, as, for instance, in the case of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe, when he goes up to take care of his orchids for the nth time or when inspector Cramer threateningly enters his office asserting that this time things will not go smoothly. The seriality, the repetition of well-known gestures and actions, seems to define numerous successful TV serials ranging from *Columbo* to *James Bond* movies and does not seem to inhibit the creation of suspense. Eco, "Innovation and Repetition" 16-20.

24 Eco, "Innovation and Repetition" 30.

"low" and "high" culture becomes obliterated. Postmodern drama in particular seems to suggest that Horkheimer and Adorno's differentiation between art and culture industry is no longer effective. But the blurred boundaries between high and low culture and the merging of an elitist tradition and the marketplace do not simply reduce cultural works to mere intersections: they rather serve as the precondition for creating new, self-conscious forms of art. While earlier versions of postmodernism have focused on modernist texts that can be classified as high-brow, popular culture later became a significant part of postmodern aesthetics, though classical modernists figure prominently in many theoretical texts.[25] The difference between modernism's and postmodernism's relationship to popular culture is the latter's creative appropriation of so-called low art forms. Certainly, both modernism and postmodernism struggle against the dominance of tradition. But contrary to the modernist project that has recourse to an elitist concept of artistic creation, postmodernism rejected all forms of elitism and freely incorporated pop art forms, such as television, film, and others, as valid points of reference. In many ways, Antonin Artaud thus looms in the wings of postmodern drama when he declares: "We must have done with this idea of masterpieces reserved for a self-styled elite and not understood by the general public; [...]. Masterpieces are good for the past; they are not good for us."[26] In his seminal study "Mapping the Postmodern," Andreas Huyssen echoes Artaud by defining the postmodern as essentially rooted in popular mass culture:

> Pop in the broadest sense was the context in which a notion of the postmodern first took shape [...] and the most significant trends within postmodernism have

25 As Andreas Huyssen has argued there "is no doubt that centre stage in critical theory is held by the classical modernists: Flaubert [...] in Barthes [...], Mallarmé and Artaud in Derrida, Magritte [...] in Foucault, [...] Joyce and Artaud in Kristeva [...] and so on *ad infinitum*." See Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern" 39.

26 Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double* (New York: Grove P, 1958), 74. Quoting Artaud can be problematic in this context, as the agenda of postmodern dramatists is, in very general terms, not to make theater for the masses in Artaud's sense. The Living Theater and others experimented with street theater, theater with rural populations, and worked with elements from popular culture that were known to the masses, but, mainly due to its experimental impetus, this kind of theater proved not to be attractive for mass audiences at all.

> challenged modernism's relentless hostility to mass culture.[27]

Yet pop art also encompasses a paradoxical phenomenon: it has been adopted as a vehicle of minority protests while, at the same time, it decidedly remained a mainstream phenomenon. British painter Richard Hamilton, renowned for allegedly having coined the term "pop," defines it as "popular (short designed for mass culture), transient (short-term solution), expandable (easily forgotten), low cost, mass produced, young (aimed at youth), witty, sexy, gimmicky, glamorous, big business."[28] In the wake of the student movement of the 1960s, the notion of pop attracted masses of people in the Western world. It was not only pop art brought forth by Warhol, Lichtenstein, Wesselman, and others, but the phenomenon referred to pop products of all colors, including cartoons, pulp fiction, daily consumer products, and many

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27 Huyssen, "Mapping" 16. In this context, see also Dick Hebdige's book *Subculture*, which has been one of the few books consistently breaking out of the divide between high and low culture. Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979; London: Routledge, 2002).

28 Qtd. in Maribel Königer, "The Pop Art Show," *Kunstforum International* 116 (1991): 356.

more. In this context, Leslie Fiedler was among the first critics to use the concept of postmodernism in order to challenge the elitism of high modernism in the name of pop and to advocate a general reorientation in literature.[29] In terms of drama, the plays of Sam Shepard, above all *Operation Sidewinder* (1970), *Red Cross* (1966), and *La Turista* (1967), reflect the subsequent predilection for popular culture.

29 Leslie Fiedler's essay "Cross the Border—Close the Gap" was first published in *Playboy Magazine* in December 1969 which poignantly exemplifies the postmodern affinity to pop and mass cultural discourses.

II.1 The Postmodern Sense of Self

The postmodern theater of transformation is preoccupied with the self under the condition of postmodernity. The effort to delineate as well as conceive of a postmodern sense of self is intertwined with the metadramatic concern in postmodern drama. In this sense, postmodern drama refers to and reflects upon itself while simultaneously exploring the condition of the self in postmodernity and the concept of dramatic character in postmodern drama. Since the fragmentation of the self is inherent in dramatic form at large, postmodern drama uses and thrives in the space that the actor/character split opens up.

The reflection on the self and its social formation is deeply rooted in American literary and cultural history, and postmodern literature is no exception in this respect. It may, in part, be due to the long history of the concept of the self in Western tradition that its discussion has become a complex, and often contested, terrain. The self as an inherently philosophical, psychological, and sociological category cuts across many disciplines, and numerous related concepts such as identity, subjectivity, person, I, self-definition, self-identity, and ego further confuse matters.[1]

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1 Without going into an in-depth discussion of the complex history of these terms as well as the terminological quandaries involved in them, one can say that they lack unequivocal definition. In order to reduce terminological confusion, though, a distinction will here be made between self and identity, which cannot fully be equated, whereas the terms I, subject, and person will be used as roughly equivalent to self. Manfred Pütz argues that the self primarily denotes an "assumed essential inner being" and is rather "defined by exclusion" meaning one's own person as opposed to others or things outside the self. Identity is taken to be a "set of characteristics or relations that establish an appearance of persistent unity within the flux." See Manfred Pütz, *The Story of Identity: American Fiction of the Sixties* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1979), 29. For a detailed discussion of the self and related concepts, see Pütz, ch. 2. Also, one has to be careful not to conflate the individual with the subject. According to Paul Smith, the individual is supposedly not under sway of outside forces like

Postmodern drama does not deny the idea of the self, but interrogates a concept of self that rests on unity, mastery, and completion, an idea of self as independent historical agent fully in charge of its actions and thoughts. It casts away the Romantic belief in individuality and the genius. In its stead, the postmodern concept of identity is based on the notion that the self is not a given entity but a construct and as such is contingent upon its cultural context.[2] Postmodern drama also treats the self as a sign among others in the process of theatrical signification. The theatrical manifestation of the self, dramatic character, can be fragmented and subverted along the same lines that sign systems are taken apart, reorganized, redistributed, and/or simultaneously developed. In other words, the postmodern dramatization of the self is open to critical investigations and impending transformations. As a consequence of these processes of transformation, a postmodern drama emerges that proffers variations of the decentered self.[3] It is worth noting, however, that to deny a unitary sense of self or to argue that the subject is decentered or inaccessible to unilateral representation is not to deny entirely that it in some way exists. Entangled in a postmodern paradox, the subject exists while, at the same time, as Hassan put it, it is caught in an "impulse of self-unmaking."[4] Lamenting the decline of a stable sense of self and identity could be seen as denigrating the fragment and casting aspersions onto hybrid, partial identities. Politically speaking, advocates of a wholesome sense of self

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language, politics, and social formations in general; the subject, on the contrary, is cast into conflict with those forces. In other words, the individual is determining whereas the subject is determined. On these conflicting terms, see Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988), esp. xxxiv.

2 From a linguistic point of view, Emil Benviste maintains that "[i]t is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a *subject*, because language alone establishes the concept of 'ego' in reality, in *its* reality which is that of the being." Emil Benveniste, *Problems in General Linguistics*, trans. Mary Elizabeth Meek (Coral Gables, FL: U of Miami P, 1971), 224.

3 See here Julia Kristeva's discussion of the concept of subjectivity as exemplified in the theater of Artaud; "Le sujet en procès," *Artaud*, ed. Philippe Sollers (Paris: Union Générale D'Éditions, 1973), 43-108. The neglect of drama is also visible in this particular area: Silvio Gaggi's study *From Text to Hypertext*, subtitled *Decentering the Subject in Fiction, Film, the Visual Arts, and Electronic Media,* discusses painting, photography, fiction, film, and hypertextual systems but drama and theater are left out.

4 Hassan, "The Question" 118.

exclude those marginalized by society and tend to align themselves with the culturally conservative. Derrida, who has often been charged with denying subjectivity itself, thus concedes:

> I have never said that the subject should be dispensed with. Only that it should be deconstructed. To deconstruct the subject does not mean to deny its existence [...]. To acknowledge this does not mean, however, that the subject is what it says it is. The subject is not some meta-linguistic substance or identity, some pure cogito of self-presence; it is always inscribed in language. My work does not, therefore, destroy the subject; it simply tries to resituate it.[5]

The consequences for what Derrida calls the "logocentric subject," the *cogito* guaranteeing its own essence and rationality, are fundamental for its basic elements, logic and rationality, are undermined in postmodern literature. The fragmented subject of postmodern drama, specifically, transgresses the boundaries of these concepts, surpasses the confines of fixed notions of subjectivity and shifts into an "ecstatic" subject, as Richard Schechner suggests in his essay on "The Politics of Ecstasy."[6]

While the split between actor and character is especially constitutive of expressionist/epic theater, postmodern disruption of the self has little in common with the montage of fragments and images employed by Brecht or Piscator. Here, montage attempts to convey a political message. In postmodern drama, on the other hand, character, actor, and role enter into new relationships that articulate different concepts of subjectivity. In the Epic Theater, the actor "quotes" a character rather than becoming one. Whenever outer layers of the character are

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5 Jacques Derrida, "Deconstruction and the Other," *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage*, ed. and trans. Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), 125.

6 Schechner's article, though, follows a different trajectory. He is more interested in a ritualistic, more immediate theater that focuses on the performative aspect only, thus he shifts the focus from the theater of a text and words to that of a mainly non-Western origin. In this context, to "surpass yourself" aims at developing a new pattern in contemporary theater. Schechner also points out the dangers inherent in that concept of theatrical practice, namely its closeness to "ecstatic fascism." Richard Schechner, "The Politics of Ecstasy" (1968), *Public Domain* (New York: Avon, 1969), 238.

peeled off, the actor emerges. Transformative role switching, however, which features prominently in many plays to be discussed in this study, functions in a different manner. Actors take on different roles only to drop them in an instance in order to take up further roles. Eventually, dramatic character is no longer a clearly identifiable category in the theater of transformation. The simultaneous presence of "actor" and "character" on stage, as, for instance, in The Performance Group's *Dionysus in 69* (1968) and in the Open Theater's *The Mutation Show* in 1971, entirely blurs the boundaries between performer and character. This process opens up a new space between character and performer, which is then filled up in an almost endless process of transformation and becomes the topic of the postmodern dramatic text. This can be seen happening, perhaps most crucially, in Rochelle Owens's play *Emma Instigated Me* in which "character" transforms back and forth between actress, role, character, and author figure.

The modern notion of an original unity of the self and of dramatic character as a given entity has been lost in both postmodern drama and postmodern discourses at large. What remains are fragments and parts. As we will see, this process of fragmentation also affects other dramatic categories such as text, stage, and playwright. It allows postmodern theater to go beyond the action performed on stage and dramatize the metadramatic. The fragmentation at issue here, however, is a decomposition that excludes the possibility of reassembling the parts into a new complete whole. A consecutive synthesis of the fragments is impossible and the sense of original unity cannot be recovered. Some postmodern plays may faintly hint at a provisional and limited reassemblage, but usually only to convey a better sense of the conceptual impossibility of a unified subjectivity. Deleuze and Guattari have addressed this loss and the subsequent impossibility of reassemblage. They make a distinction between fragments and "partial objects" since the concept of the fragment, for them, entails the belief in an illusory synthesis:

> Nous sommes à l'âge des objets partiels, des briques et des restes. Nous ne croyons plus en ces faux fragments qui, tels les morceaux de la statue antique, attendent d'être complétés et recollés pour composer une unité qui est aussi bien l'unité d'origine. Nous ne croyons

> plus à une totalité originelle ni à une totalité de destination.[7]

This way, postmodern drama transforms and literally reinvents subjectivity (and the ideology of the subject) by staging polyvocal, nonunified subject positions. In the course of this radical reorientation, postmodern drama also fragments linear narratives and plotlines, replacing them with nonlinear narrative fragments and/or with narrative forms that parody the linear pattern.

In their attempt to present a postmodern sense of self, dramatists have frequently also resorted to masks, adapting a long and rich theatrical tradition to their purposes. Of course, the usage of masks in postmodern drama differs from previous modernist uses. Unlike in expressionistic drama, masks now have ceased to help elucidate hidden inner conflicts of a given character. Postmodern playwrights and directors often claim Artaud as their predecessor concerning the usage of masks and draw on his concept of masking. In his "First Manifesto" of The Theatre of Cruelty, Artaud equals masks and objects to speech on stage; with regard to the argument at hand, it should not go unnoticed that he views both in terms of images, that is, as spatial arrangements:

> Manikins, enormous masks, objects of strange proportions will appear with the same sanction as verbal images, will enforce the concrete aspect of every image and every expression—with the corollary that all objects requiring a stereotyped physical representation will be discarded or disguised.[8]

Artaud carries his ideas so far that he discards any objects that require a "stereotypical physical representation." The larger-than-life size dolls in the third part of van Itallie's trilogy *America Hurrah*, "Motel," are a good case in point for this strategy. Reminiscent of Artaud's idea, these masks as part of larger-than-life size dolls can be used to various ends and are multifunctional in that they signify either the concealment, partial or whole, of an individual face or the impossibility of individuality altogether. They evoke the effect of media presentations on the postmodern sense of self because this concealment is, in part,

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7 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *L'Anti-Oedipe* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 50.
8 Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double* 97.

caused by the way the contemporary media shape the presentation of a particular character or diverse societal norms form and govern a sense of individuality. Masks, in this context, effectively express the illusory nature of the concept of a stable self and reduce the presentation of selfhood to a provisional status that involves continuous transformations. The assumption of provisional masks, none of which can fully represent the self, necessitates the development of yet other masks which also remain provisional. Thus masks become metaphors of possible or probable faces and roles that have taken the place of the unitary individual whose illusory nature is laid bare. The process of the constitution of self and identity is consequently turned into a playful exercise in transformation. And since transformation delineates a movement of continually designing, decomposing, and redesigning representations of the alleged self,[9] postmodern drama, I argue, no longer presents unmistakably identifiable characters.[10]

As an important means of identity construction, contemporary media feature prominently in postmodern drama. Jean-Claude van Itallie's plays, for instance, demonstrate how the media control, shape, and influence our sense of self. The increasing power of the media and the revolution in media technologies of the past two decades make the topic of the self even more compelling. Contemporary media performances have used an array of new technologies in order to fragment, simulate, and play with the subject and have, in this process, contributed to the demystification of the concept of the subject.[11] It is caught in images and fixed on the screen, a process which, in a way, signifies

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9 Gaggi discusses the constructing and deconstructing practices of the subject in film and hypertext and argues that the subject in hypertext decenters itself even more radically than in film, where the mobility of the camera and the power of editing are the main decentering forces. Gaggi, *From Text to Hypertext* esp. chpts. 3 and 4.

10 In a German context, the postmodern theater of Heiner Müller would serve to illustrate this point. In an article on the concept of character and the role of masks in Müller's plays, Genia Schulz argues that "'Personen' bedeutet ursprünglich Masken (des Theaters)" and establishes the importance of masks as central metaphors in Müller's postmodern plays. Genia Schulz, "Abschied von morgen. Zu den Frauengestalten im Werk Heiner Müllers," *Text und Kritik* 73 (1982): 67.

11 Perhaps most crucially, the internet has opened up new spaces that can be navigated without the bodily presence of an actor/character. Contemporary media performances have widely drawn upon this new technology.

the subject's—metaphorical—death. While masking can thus signify a resistance to the power of the media (faces are concealed and images can be put on at will), it can also mean a capitulation to the ideology inherent in a mediatized culture. And there is even a further alternative: masking can create a space removed from the media's influence. This space is, according to Watt, impenetrable to the institutions and images in a mediatized culture and can thus block the media's influence.[12] This idea, though, has an idealistic, if not utopian ring to it, and it is doubtful whether masking indeed can have such immense powers. Rather, I would argue, the different strategies of masking constantly transform and thus possibly subvert the mass media's large-scale influence on contemporary culture.

Any discussion of dramatic concepts of the self also raises the issue of the representation of the actual body of the actor/character on stage. Postmodern drama makes the body a conspicuous appearance by using a variety of devices. A central bodily image is that of the pose in the well-known tableau or filmic freeze in which the action on stage is brought to a halt and characters freeze in a static image. The pose here functions as an interface between theatrical action and performance: it appears to be essentially anti-theatrical and not oriented towards a linear movement of action but used more as a spatial device. The relationship between performance and the body is further characterized by a rejection of illusion in that emotions and fantasies are no longer repressed and hidden in the closed space of the body. Bodily fragments are brought to light and objectified, the (re)presented body is cut up, mostly by using techniques from photography, film, and videotaping, so that each of the parts seems to become an independent whole. In this context, performance art has developed the technique of "lesionism," the deliberate altering, sometimes even injuring, of body parts in front of an audience, to present the body not as a fixed entity or a united whole, but as divided into fragments and parts.[13] The resulting distance between the aesthetic representation of the body and the "real" body is particularly pertinent to feminist performances. In the plays of Holly Hughes, Karen Finley, and Carolee Schneeman, for

12 Watt, *Postmodern/Drama* 165.

13 For a discussion of this strategy in contemporary performance art, see Luciano Inga-Pin, *Performances, Happenings, Actions, Events, Activities, Installations* (Padova: Mastrogiacomo Editore, 1970), 5.

instance, the female body functions as a site of discursive struggles over the concepts of subjectivity and voice as a major expression of subjectivity. To address the "real" body, their performances make visible actual pain of the performer when, for instance, the performer hurts herself in a live event in front of an audience. The experience and representation of actual pain elevates the performance to a higher degree of reality and presence.

The urge to disrupt the theatrical illusion has led to a variety of dramatic means such as provocative audience addressing or, even more radically, the attempt to establish physical contact with the audience as, for instance, in performances by The Living Theater and other performance theater groups. It is precisely in the moment of the breakdown in a performance, that is, when the illusion of the stage as a closed world is denied, that audience participation can take place and the spectator moves into the center of theatrical attention. In postmodern drama, forms of meaning are created by the gaze of the spectator and can thus be conceived as the result of the free movement within what Fischer-Lichte refers to as the "time-space-continuum:" the spectator becomes the "master of semiosis."[14] But still, postmodern theater is not entirely devoted to a subjective paradigm in which semiosis depends wholly on the individual spectator, even if, as Fischer-Lichte emphasizes, performance as event is communal by nature and group collaboration as well as an audience are mandatory in theater. Out of the collective nature of theater performances, Fischer-Lichte claims, arises a new form of humanism because body and language are rediscovered as fundamental values in postmodern theater.[15] Be that as it may, postmodern drama remains a theater of theory, as argued above, with a vital interest in the transformative

14 Erika Fischer-Lichte, "The Return of the Text: Implied Ethics of Postmodern Theatre," *Ethics and Aesthetics: The Moral Turn of Postmodernism*, eds. Gerhard Hoffmann and Alfred Hornung (Heidelberg: Winter, 1996), 299; 300.

15 Fischer-Lichte, "The Return of the Text" 294; 298.

processes of perception, that is, on how drama and theater are created and presented on stage.

II.2 The Dramatic Text, Performance, and Postmodern Authorship

Postmodern writing has often been associated with the proverbial "death of the author," an idea which entails profound changes with regard to text, textuality, and authorship. Without doubt, the postmodern "death of the author" has also left its imprint on postmodern dramatic writing and has had far-reaching implications for the status of playwright and dramatic script. Since authorship and text are almost generically contested in the theater due to the many collaborators involved in any dramatic performance, postmodern drama has become an ideal site to redefine and enlarge our notion of these crucial concepts.

In terms of signification, the postmodern dramatic text is conceived as a series of provisional meanings that mutate, contradict, and answer one another. The theatrical text, as Patrice Pavis argues, can be defined as "signifying matter awaiting meaning."[1] If text and textuality have recently undergone decisive changes that have brought about a new concept of postmodern textuality, this is certainly also true of postmodern drama. Among others, distrust in language and verbal communication as well as an enhanced reliance on non-verbal means of expression have reshaped the relationship between theater and text to the effect that the dramatic text is increasingly replaced as the dominant constituent of theater and drama.[2]

The postmodern dramatic text, by and large, corresponds to new forms of textuality put forth by Roland Barthes since it stresses the processual and transformative dimensions of dramatic action. In his essay on Balzac's story "Sarrasine," Barthes distinguishes between

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1 Pavis, "Classical Heritage" 11.

2 Herbert Grabes has dwelled extensively on these issues in his essay "Performance Theater and the Text" which will be dealt with more thoroughly below.

readerly and writerly texts. Readerly texts, "les textes lisibles," he argues, "sont des produits (et non des productions)." In these 'products (and not productions)' the reader remains passive as the receiver of the text. In contrast, writerly texts, "le scriptible," make the reader a "producteur du texte" instead of a "consommateur."[3] Barthes thus propounds the much discussed contrast between the notion of the work and that of the text, a contrastive relationship that Patrice Pavis captures in the following oppositional pairs:

work	text
classical	modern
readerly	writerly
linear text	spatial text[4]

That a text is characterized as writerly does not collide with the proverbial "death of the author" and, concomitantly, the "birth of the reader." In postmodern drama, the textual positions of reader and writer coalesce in the new textual system. Barthes, who defies any differentiation on the basis of chronology (e.g. that works are classical while texts are avant-garde) explains: "The difference is as follows: the work is concrete, occupying a portion of book space (in a library, for example); the text, on the other hand, is a methodological field."[5] Pavis and Barthes hence seem to agree on the idea of the text as a "field" of forces, a notion that ideally expresses the spatial orientation in postmodern drama and turns it into a central metaphor for the extended concept of textuality in postmodern dramatic writing.

Postmodern textuality increasingly allows outside influences to enter the field of the text. The resulting intrusions upon the text as an immutable given have become a constitutive trait of postmodern drama whereas, historically, they were mainly viewed as unwanted. They draw attention to the fact that a play is a work of the imagination, thereby capsizing the carefully sustained theatrical illusion of the traditional box-stage theater. In postmodern drama, this shift is perhaps most obviously effected when the performer is revealed as a personality of his or her own and, subsequently, is juxtaposed with the

3 Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), 11; 10.

4 Pavis, "Classical Heritage" 3.

5 Roland Barthes, "From Work to Text," *Textual Strategies*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1979), 74.

personality of the respective character. What interested earlier experimental groups such as The Living Theater or the Mabou Mines in this context was the exploration of the life of the actor and not so much that of the character. But again, as we will see, the therapeutic purposes of the performances of such groups differ fundamentally from the general postmodern metadramatic attempt to reflect upon drama and theater itself in the course of a given performance.

This brings up the issue of how the (theater) tradition is treated and how intertextuality has come to be the backbone of postmodern drama. What effect does postmodern textuality have on the mnemonic functions of the dramatic text? As Antoine Vitez explains:

> La scène est le laboratoire de la langue et des gestes de la nation. La société sait, plus ou moins clairement, que, dans ces édifices appelés théâtres, des gens travaillent durant des heures á agrandir, épurer, transformer les gestes et les intonations de la vie courante. À les mettre en cause, en crise. [...] Si le théâtre est bien le laboratoire des gestes et des paroles de la société, il est à la fois le conservateur des formes anciennes de l'expression et l'adversaire des traditions.[6]

Here the authority of tradition is called into question. Vitez argues for the necessity of both change and conservation of forms, in other words, for a transformation of preexisting forms. The proposition that forms would necessarily change has, of course, also profound consequences for the concept of originality. What happens to originality, that of the author and the text but also, for instance, of the dramatic self or the image under postmodern conditions of rampant intertextuality?

Contrary to the visual arts, dramatic performances have rarely solicited discussions of these postmodern strategies. Douglas Crimp, for instance, discusses postmodern influences on contemporary photography that are of interest here since much of contemporary drama has adapted devices from the visual arts by composing staged images in a manner similar to that of the photographer. According to Crimp, the work of postmodern contemporary photographers often

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6 Antoine Vitez, "Le devoir de traduire" (1982), *Le théâtre des idées* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 294.

> addressed photography's claim to originality, showing those claims for the fiction they are, showing photography to be always a representation, always-already-seen. Their images are purloined, confiscated, appropriated, stolen. In their work, the original cannot be located, is always deferred; even the self which might have generated an original is shown to be itself a copy.[7]

Taken one step further, doubt is cast upon the authority of the written word in drama, the text has lost its mastery, and language seems to become an end in itself. The speech heard in the postmodern theater is no longer exclusively the text that is assigned to and associated with a given single character. Dialogue, according to Kristeva, becomes "polylogue."[8] The decomposition or subversion of dialogue obviously brings about a redefinition of the function of the actor, who is no longer considered a mere agent controlled by the director or the dramatist.[9] Speech becomes disconnected and of various origin, turning into what Elfriede Jelinek has called "Sprachflächen,"[10] and thus corroborates the argument that postmodern drama increasingly takes a spatial turn. Postmodern drama subverts communication patterns; dialogue, according to Szondi the backbone of drama, has receded

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7 Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism," *October* 15 (1980): 98.

8 Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977). See also the discussion of "polylogue" with Kristeva in *French Feminist Thought*, ed. Toril Moi (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 110-117.

9 Some playwrights who could in many ways be considered postmodern playwrights are more than reluctant to acknowledge such changes in the status of actors, text, and playwright. Edward Albee, for instance, uses postmodern techniques, as in his recent play *Three Tall Women*, but still firmly believes in authorial control and prescribed dialogue.

10 Anke Roeder, "'Ich will kein Theater. Ich will ein anderes Theater': Gespräch mit Elfriede Jelinek," *Autorinnen: Herausforderungen an das Theater* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989), 153. For a discussion of Jelinek's concept of "Sprachflächen," see Gerda Poschmann, *Der nicht mehr dramatische Theatertext: aktuelle Bühnenstücke und ihre dramatische Analyse* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1997), esp. 197-198. The disconnectedness of speech is also a kernel device in other modes of theatrical representation, as, for instance, in Brecht's street scene, the disconnectedness of the Theater of the Absurd, and the mythic/ritual theater of Artaud.

from the superior position it held in traditional drama.[11] Frequently monological structures subvert its communicative function. In the same way, audience address, as, for example, in Suzan-Lori Parks's postmodern plays, experiences a revival in postmodern drama, either in the form of a single character/actor's monologue or as the collective voice of a chorus.

Even though traditional patterns of communication are generally demoted in postmodernism, postmodern drama is nevertheless concerned with communication and the possibilities of creating and transmitting meaning. Meaning in postmodern drama is intrinsically connected to the play by way of dramatic structures. Postmodern dramatic forms become thus essentially transformative and fluid. By the same token, meaning is often conceived of as transformative as well. Although shifting and transformative, however, there is still some form of meaning that can be extracted at any given moment in a postmodern play. Yet meaning is no longer of major importance in this context and has yielded its previously dominant position to that of form and structure. This, in turn, has led critics to conclude that postmodern drama is characterized by a "new formalism."[12] According to Michael Kirby, semiotics is "not the exegesis of meaning, but the demonstration of how meaning derives from a particular code; unless the code is clear, we have only interpretation."[13] Alluding to the famous Nietzschean dictum that facts are always contingent upon interpretation, Kirby's insight further underlines the metadramatic turn of postmodern drama.

The self-reflexive formal pattern of metadiscourses affects all levels in postmodern drama. It shapes language in general and the characters' speeches in particular. Elements of language are isolated and dissected, fragments of speech are presented in only formally correct sentences. This distancing alienates word and meaning and

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11 Peter Szondi, *Theorie des modernen Dramas (1889-1950)* (1956; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1965), 14-15. When he writes about the centrality of dialogue in classical drama, Szondi refers to Renaissance drama, not to Greek drama.

12 See Michael Kirby's study, *A Formalist Theatre* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1987).

13 Michael Kirby, "Nonsemiotic Performance," *Modern Drama* 25.1 (March 1982): 106. Needless to say that Kirby is not the first literary scholar to draw attention to the fact that meaning is contextual as a whole range of critics from Julia Kristeva to V.N. Volosinov readily indicates.

makes conscious a usually unconscious process: how meaning is created in general and on stage. Language always refers to itself and is presented as an object in an exhibition.

The devaluation of language and dialogue in postmodern drama paves the way for a more improvisational, visual, gestural, and musical theater. Given the discrepancy and, quite often, unconnectedness between the oral/lingual and the visual, it can be argued that postmodern theater this way reinstates theater as ritual. In a process of retheatricalization the dramatic text is not discarded completely but freed from the semiotic constraints of a fixed dialogue. The stage becomes the space of a performance, and not primarily the location for the representation of a preexisting text and its meaning.

Thus drama and theater begin to rely increasingly on visual elements, voice and sound. Open Theater members, for instance, were encouraged to choose words for their musical quality and not just for formal coherence and literal meaning. The voice achieves a considerable status of importance in the signifying process; it is considered the prime medium in a theater of voices which stresses the physicality of voice and frequently alters it by technological means. The aim is the creation of sound as disseminating voices (the Derridean voices "en souffrance"[14]) that cast new light on the concept of subjectivity. The electronic voice, for one, is alienated from its natural body of origin, or, put differently, *locus agendi* is separated from *locus parlandi* and thus, again, attests to the dissemination of the self in postmodern drama. This strategy leads mainly to an independent auditive semiotics, that is, sound produced without discernible bodies from the off with microports and similar devices. Robert Wilson's work illustrates this concept quite well: referred to as 'operas,' his works show a scenic and visually oriented dramaturgy that has become ever more important due to a de-hierarchization of visual devices. In his recent collaboration with the musician Lou Reed, titled *POEtry*, the visual, scenic and aural dramaturgy dominates, even overpowers, the dramatic rendering of Edgar Allan Poe's tales to such an extent that the single actor literally loses himself in and is consumed by the image.[15]

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14 Jacques Derrida, *La carte postale de Socrate à Freud et au-delà* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980).

15 Robert Wilson, *POEtry* (Hamburg: Schauspielhaus, 2000).

Postmodern theater predominantly creates images, not language-generated stories. There seems to be a strong tendency in the postmodern theater to display written texts as images; for instance, speeches are accompanied by words projected onto a screen behind the speaker. Of course, word play and visual forms of textuality are also present in modernist collages and montage. Yet it is important to note that postmodern drama creates its intertexts mostly by pluralistic re- and de-configurations and accepts results that are transformative and as such difficult to determine and beyond control.

In postmodern drama, the changed status of the text and the different concepts of textuality are further stimulated by an emphasis on performance and performance art. In the wake of the happenings of Allan Kaprow and John Cage's experiments in music, performance art boomed in the 1950s and 1960s in America, though theater and performance art have traditionally been viewed as different artistic forms of expression and have consequently been treated separately.[16] Following the postmodern urge to experiment and play with a variety of art forms, postmodern dramatists approached performance art as a valuable resource for their dramatic endeavors. Among others, the influence takes shape most vividly in the attempt to make the theatrical audience reconsider the traditional boundaries between performance and reality, art and life, fiction and autobiography. In its literal meaning, the barriers between the traditional space of the theater and other public spaces are obliterated, starting with street theater and intensified by the theatricalization of political and social events at large.[17] Thus the theater increasingly takes place outside the traditional theater houses. Also, beginning with the 1960s, theater audiences encounter more theater on Broadway and 42nd street than they

16 Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* at the Reuben Gallery, New York, in the fall of 1959 initiated and christened the art form of the happening. According to Kaprow, the term happening was intended to indicate "something spontaneous, something that just happens to happen." Nevertheless the piece was carefully rehearsed prior to its performance in public (RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art* 130). For a detailed discussion of the happening, see Thomas Dreher, *Performance Art nach 1945: Aktionstheater und Intermedia* (München: Fink, 2001), 85-102; and Peter Simhandl, *Theatergeschichte in einem Band* (Berlin: Henschel, 2001), 453-463.)

17 Among several other instances of the theatricalization of politics during the 1960s, it should suffice here to mention the Chicago Democratic Convention of 1968 or the conspiracy trial of the Chicago Eight in 1969.

would in traditional theater auditoriums. "Theater" was simply more likely to happen as soon as one had actually left the theater. Society at large was theatricalized—the media being a prominent helper—which, in turn, resulted in a concomitant de-dramatization of theater proper in the deliberately inarticulate and serial experiments of the Mabou Mines group.

One of the rather deplorable consequences of the rising popularity of performance art is its terminological indecisiveness. Performance is a concept that figures prominently in various contemporary debates and has been (ab)used widely in recent history. The following discussion of performance is based on the definition by Henry Sayre:

> In these terms, finally, performance can be defined as an activity which generates transformations, as the re-integration of art with what is 'outside' it, an 'opening up' of the 'field.'[18]

For one, Sayre describes performance as an "activity" and identifies transformation as its key principle. By pointing to the ongoing, processual character of performance, the term transformation expresses nicely the postmodern rejection of fixity and finality concerning text and meaning. Dramatically speaking, transformation is the key technique to realize such a rejection. Moreover, Sayre conceives of art as a "'field'" and thus uses a spatial metaphor to describe it. What is more, the field of art is to integrate what is outside of its boundaries and hence reflects postmodern drama's intertextual and interactive agenda.

Other critics see performance as a discourse that is rooted in the unconscious and whose traces are perpetually "at the vanishing point."[19] At the heart of such definitions of performance is a de-textualizing impulse to render a different experience of the alleged

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18 Henry Sayre, "Performance," *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1990), 103. For an overview on the history of the term performance, see Sayre. The notion of performance as we think of it today has its roots in the major avant-garde movement of the 1910s and 1920s, the 'manifestations' of the futurists and the dada cabarets respectively, and has been, since the mid-1960s, conceived of as an interdisciplinary, multimedia production. See RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988).

19 The subtitle of Herbert Blau's study *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1982).

real. As a result, new performative forms of knowledge and perception emerge that are not primarily mediated through language. Radical performance apparently works on a meta-level that poses a challenge to the theater and forces it to reflect upon itself and explore its margins and boundaries. Performance, in this view, also renders meaning impossible in the sense that audience participation and improvisation along with the de-textualizing impulse of postmodernism make meaning unstable. Meaning is shown to reside in the perception and interpretation of individual members of the audience.

The assault on mimesis, meaning, and representation by groups such as The Living Theater reflects the performative theatricalization of postmodern culture at large. It is in this context that Artaud assumes a major role in postmodern theatrical experiments, because his Theater of Cruelty radically questions, as Derrida has shown, the notion of representation. The Living Theater's *Mysteries and Smaller Pieces* is in its published form merely a documentation of the performance, i.e., a sequence of exercises and actions that have no prewritten text. The next production of the Living Theater, *Frankenstein 1965*, was also developed collectively and spontaneously. Its script consisted mainly of quotations from Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, from Whitman, Shakespeare, Marx, Bertrand Russell, and various contemporary newspaper articles. And yet, the directors of the group, Julian Beck and Judith Malina, were the decisive factor in the selecting process of the montage. The author's theater of the tradition thus becomes a director's theater, and, as Herbert Grabes has put it, one god-like figure is replaced by another.[20]

The Open Theater did not venture into this terrain as far as the Living Theater had. Joseph Chaikin as the *spiritus rector* of the group relied again on the cooperation with the playwright, although this procedure proved to be strenuous at times, as the collaboration with Megan Terry shows. Terry's first full-length play, *Viet Rock*, was developed in an Open Theatre workshop together with the playwright. Terry explicitly acknowledges the collaboration in the introduction: "*Viet Rock* was developed in my Saturday Workshop at The Open Theater. It grew out of improvisation, combined with the exploration

20 See here Herbert Grabes, "Performance Theater and the Text," *Word and Action in Drama*, ed. Günter Ahrends et al. (Trier: WTV, 1994), 6-7.

of acting techniques discovered and perfected by Joseph Chaikin."[21] The play, though, was published only under Terry's name. She defends herself as creator and owner of the play and asserts that "[o]ut of the material surfacing from this work *I made the play*, and we began to rehearse it" [italics mine].[22] Terry rejected many changes introduced by Chaikin and Peter Feldman and subsequently took charge of the whole production with a new assistant director. The play was originally subtitled "A Folk War Movie," and, as a matter of fact, Terry extensively used filmic techniques such as cuts. In Terry's play, the text controls the performance to a large extent through its extensive scripting of non-verbal action, fixed dialogues, and fully scored rock music songs. The author even specifies the desired acting technique when she writes in the stage directions that "the actors should have worked to free their imaginations before the play begins. What happens in the first ten minutes on the floor should take on the character of group free association."[23] In a way, the play marks the transformation from performance back to text in postmodern drama, which has led Grabes to subsume Terry's play under the category "Performance into Text."[24] At the same time, however, the play moves in the opposite direction and can be seen as an example of the movement from text to performance. This oscillation between both poles, text and performance, makes the play a truly postmodern exercise that takes place in the ambiguous space of transformative processes.

Megan Terry is not the only experimental dramatist with reservations about excessive collective creation and multiple ownership. Open Theater playwright Jean-Claude van Itallie has at times also strongly opposed too much verbal improvisation by actors. He has frequently criticized the aberrations of the performance theater and identified its shortcomings and instead insisted on authorial control. In a letter to a director whose production of *The Serpent* he disliked the playwright wrote:

> Actors are not poets, at least not while they're on their feet in front of an audience. Their concentration had

21 Megan Terry, "Production Notes," *Viet Rock, Plays by Megan Terry* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing 2000), 119.
22 Terry, "Production Notes," *Viet Rock* 119.
23 Terry, *Viet Rock* 29.
24 Grabes, "Performance Theater" 7.

> better not be on the invention of words while they are performing. If it is, then the words are at very best, trite, and performances suffer.[25]

Van Itallie thus defends the traditional distinction between actors, directors, and script writers and, in a way, returns to the old-fashioned idea of the author-creator as a superior single consciousness and agent in control of the play.

Despite such occasional cautious remarks on the dangers involved in performance, postmodern theater by and large welcomes performance among its constitutive elements. Yet the inclusion of performative aspects in postmodern drama has triggered strong opposition as well. Any work with an audio-visual set-up and performative elements is considered a failure by Greenbergian critic Michael Fried. In his well-known essay on "Art and Objecthood," Fried emphatically claims that theater and theatricality are at war with art as such today.[26] Fried believes in and defends a notion of artistic purity that seems at best illusory and informed by a certain degree of naiveté; he views theatricality as a "contamination" of a work of art, by which he means that theater is dependent on conditions and forces outside of itself. What Fried misses in his polemics against "contaminated" art, however, is that theater is by nature contaminated because it takes shape as a collaboration of author, director, performers, and many other agents involved in and contributing to a given performance—not to mention the role of the audience and the actual theater location. Contrary to Fried's charges, theater can, in this respect, be considered the ideal postmodern art form. As Steven Connor has pointed out, contemporary drama is often marked by its "positive refusal of the frozen abstraction of the idea of the work-in-itself in favour of the idea of work-as-process."[27]

Furthermore, critics like Fried overlook contemporary culture's widespread interest in theatricality and all sorts of spectacles. Speculating on the reasons for this obvious phenomenon, Guy Debord identifies a metaphysical anxiety as responsible for the increasing attraction

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25 Jean-Claude van Itallie, A Letter (February 20, 1970), *The Serpent* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1969), 11.

26 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), rpt. *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battock (New York: Dutton, 1968), 139-142.

27 Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture* 142.

of spectacles in modern times: "L'origin du spectacle est la perte de l'unité du monde, et l'expansion gigantesque du spectacle moderne exprime la totalité de cette perte."[28] Fragmentation and loss of unity and coherence, that Debord discusses as reasons for the fascination with spectacles, are also frequently claimed to define the condition of postmodernity.[29]

Despite all notable differences between a society of mass spectacle and the rather elitist and mostly intellectual pleasures of postmodern drama, the allegedly "contaminated" art form proves its suitability for the expression of postmodern concerns in yet another way. By definition, theater is an event in the present which takes place in front of an audience at a given moment in time. Performance narrowly focuses on this particular aspect of theater and strives to enhance an unmediated effect of presence. What is more, performance is actually contingent on this sense of presence. In Chantal Pontbriand's terms, performance "actualizes time and place" and focuses on a present situation.[30] In other words, postmodern performance centers around the issue of presenting instead of re-presenting.[31] In contrast, postmodern drama does not entirely remain within the parameters of either presence or representation, but rather problematizes the very issue by using transformative practices that continuously turn presence into representation and vice versa.

To be sure, actuality, situation, presence, and presentation remain key concepts in postmodern theater. Above all, technical reproducibility has become instrumental in investing art with a proximity, present-

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28 Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (1967; Paris: Lebovici, 1987), 20. Debord continues by emphasizing the social nature of the spectacle, despite or maybe because of the domination of society by media and technology: "Le spectacle n'est pas un ensemble d'images, mais un rapport social entre des personnes, médiatisé par des images" (10). In Marxist fashion, Debord mainly analyzes society in terms of commodity and exchange value and focuses in his analysis on topics such as poverty, the distribution of goods, the relationship between bourgeoisie and proletariat, etc.

29 This attempt at defining postmodernism shows, again, the wide range of the concept as it covers radically different, at times antithetical features: e.g. "linguistic turn" (radical deconstruction) versus "mythical turn" (neoconservatism à la Habermas, Jameson, Eco).

30 Chantal Pontbriand, "'The eye finds no fixed point on which to rest...,'" trans. C.R. Parsons, *Modern Drama* 25.1 (March 1982): 155.

31 Pontbriand, "'The eye...'" 155.

ness, immediacy, and materiality previously unthinkable. One may even argue along the lines of Pontbriand that technical mediation is a necessary condition for performance: the more technical and reproducible the art work becomes, the more present, instead of represented, it is.[32] In terms of the idea of presence, performance can thus be seen as a consequence of mechanical reproduction. However, there is also a paradox here, since it is in the age in which technological reproduction is nearing perfection that one also becomes aware of the non-reproducible and ephemeral nature of theater.[33] Performance remains always "circumstantial,"[34] which means that it stresses the role of the actual performer, the situation, and the audience to an extent unknown in traditional forms of theater: performance is highly context-oriented.

Postmodern drama unveils the illusory character of presence, and as such deviates from performance art in this respect. Yet, the illusion of unmediated action remains a powerful construct in the theater. There is often an awareness of the illusory nature of performance, and, paradoxically enough, theater is nevertheless presented as the truth of illusion, of theater-as-life. Herbert Blau remarks of both postmodernism and performance after the destruction of the theatrical illusion:

> What distinguishes the performative ethos of the postmodern—in a time of recuperation from the illusions of theater-as-life—is not only redouble awareness of what is being restored, but an exponential play around the combinatory sets of stored or past experience, [...] there is utterly no assurance of an uninterrupted present.[35]

Here Blau does not call for a return to a logocentric discourse of unmediated presence, but, on the contrary, rather sees a playful disposition and a reassertion of a dialectical attitude as the more likely way out of the postmodern dilemma.[36]

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32 Pontbriand, "'The eye...'" 156.

33 Pavis, "Classical Heritage" 16.

34 Pontbriand, "'The eye...'" 158.

35 Herbert Blau, *The Eye of Prey: Subversions of the Postmodern* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987), 165.

36 See also S.E. Gontarski, "The Theater of Theory: Herbert Blau Rethinking Representation," *Text & Presentation: Journal of The Comparative Drama*

Theater and presence have always been intricately linked because a theater performance is inherently an original event that takes place in the here and now in front of a particular audience. Theatrical experience therefore cannot be reproduced. As Walter Benjamin has pointed out in his discussion of the visual arts, the aura of an original work of art is irreversibly destroyed in mechanical reproduction since even the most perfect reproduction is lacking in one element: "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be."[37] Benjamin links the concept of the aura of a work of art to authenticity and ritual/myth. The techniques of mechanical reproduction detach the art work from its original context and its authenticity. Mechanical reproduction thus denies the uniqueness of a work of art, thereby erasing its aura. The cult value of a work of art consequently comes to be replaced by its exhibition value. Concerning this argument, one has to keep in mind that, for Benjamin, theater is also a genuine locus of authenticity. In the context of the postmodern theater of transformation, though, Benjamin's observations may help to elucidate the intricate play with presence and absence, authenticity and reproduction that postmodern drama embraces time and again. This theater suitably stresses the transformative play between representation and presentation, as the performative nature of theater can at least sustain an illusion of authenticity while questioning, if not destroying, this illusion at the same time.

In his exhibition "Les Immatériaux," Lyotard also opposes immateriality as such to the materiality of theater.[38] Theater, for him, is the location of "heavy bodies" and of actual communion. Thus it is the ideal location for the postmodern call for "present-ness" or presence. On stage, the desire for ongoing present-ness eventually leads to the desire for unrepeatability and thus entirely banishes the demands of the dramatic script. In this context, the pronounced interest in myth and ritual accounts for the concern with the perpetual present or time

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Conference, ed. Karelisa V. Hartigan, (Gainesville: Maupin House, 1991), 11:52.

37 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 217-251; 220.

38 "Les Immatériaux," Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, March 28-July 15, 1985; under the management of the Centre de Création Industrielle and the curatorship of Jean-Francois Lyotard and Thierry Chaput.

immemorial. One may contend, of course, that two theater performances can never be identical in any case because the context in which they are carried out is always different. But the very moment in which presence offers itself to be performed onstage, it enters the realm of immutable re-presentation. Presentation is thus rendered a fascinating impossibility that eventually leads to the recognition of the quandary of representing the act of representation. A clear distinction, however, has to be made here between the somewhat naive attempts at recreating immediacy by, for instance, contemporary agit-prop theater and the way in which postmodern drama deals with the same issue. In the latter, the naiveté has been replaced by a double awareness of the problematical nature of the attempt itself. Much of the experimental theater of the 1960s with its utopian agenda hinges on mere interruptions of presence as opposed to the more complicated self-referentiality that postmodern drama aspires to.

Postmodern drama navigates the tensions inherent to postmodern anti-representationalism by using media and technology. Its purpose is the disruption and fragmentation of almost all established dramatic categories. The postmodern theater of transformation, in particular, with its emphasis on the performative, represents a radical effort to recuperate the aura of the present moment that was lost in the process of mechanical reproduction. Some theoreticians have argued that, generally, an instance of ultimate presence can only be grasped in moments of horrification and shock. As an epiphany, the moment of being horrified or shocked entails an experience of ultimate presence.[39] In theater this shock is usually directed at the audience. But actors may also share this experience, particularly in the performance theater when they face—without script and a very low degree of control over the given theatrical context—unforeseen troubling situations or audience reactions.

Jack Gelber's *The Connection*, staged by the Living Theater in 1959, is a good example of the effort to "present presence" by way of performance. On the surface written in the form of traditional drama, its innovative features become evident as soon as one takes a closer look at the play and its cast of characters. The playwright and the di-

39 In a discussion of the early work of Ernst Jünger and Romanticism, Karl-Heinz Bohrer analyzes a similar phenomenon as "Ästhetik des Schreckens." Karl-Heinz Bohrer, *Die Ästhetik des Schreckens* (München: Hanser, 1978).

rector of the play are featured as participating 'characters' which is, methodologically, reminiscent of the play-within-play. Since we learn, however, that some of the drug addicts on stage are real addicts who play themselves, we are pressed to forget the fictional status of the play and fall prey to a renewed illusion of authenticity. The audience assumes the role of witness to an alleged real-life spectacle. Put differently, a suggestive degree of presence is achieved even though it is illusory. The play attempts anti-theatricality and yet cannot escape its status as theater for it switches back and forth between authenticity and illusion, and hence shows a marked transformative movement at work in the presentation. In terms of the concept of acting, the objective of the play is anti-acting.[40] But since non-acting as such is impossible, what remains is the attempt to continuously transform one into the other and back.

In a similar attempt, Kenneth Brown's *The Brig* inverts the traditional relationship between dialogue and stage directions. After a five-page introductory note that provides a detailed description of the setting and general instructions, the dramatic text consists of a script that is twice as long as the score. The importance of non-verbal means of expression becomes evident by their sheer quantity. It exemplifies the distrust in verbal language and attempts to create a more immediate theater experience.

Performance art generally aims at creating authenticity and (bodily) presence. Postmodernism, then, on the one hand, unveils authenticity as illusory while, on the other hand, it shows a pronounced interest in presenting the act of representation. Postmodern drama thus plays with the conflict between presence and representation. As it evokes presence, it reveals at the same time the illusion involved in the effort of achieving presence. In a sense, postmodern drama swings back and forth between the actualization of the two concepts, and this transformative process is one of the driving factors of postmodern drama's critical potential: it discloses the flaws involved in the project of performance art and in the Happening as a related form.

While postmodern drama constantly searches for new forms to present the unpresentable, the result of this process is frequently an even stronger sense of the unpresentable. In his discussion of both

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40 For a discussion of the concept of non-acting, see Michael Kirby, *A Formalist Theatre*.

Kant and representational art, Lyotard therefore posits a particularly postmodern form of the sublime that

> puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable.[41]

Lyotard's argument also underwrites the idea of postmodernism as a constant mode of deconstruction, as a continual search for, or process of, in Hassan's famous phrasing, "making" and "unmaking."[42] In postmodern drama, this oscillation between "making" and "unmaking" is revealed in the shifting status of the self and dramatic character as well as in the fragmented notion of the dramatic text and the concept of authorship. Postmodern drama in its transformative processes of "making and unmaking" is characterized by an inherent conceptual instability that is programmatic and thus cannot be resolved.

At the core of the constant search for new forms in postmodern drama is the notion of play. Postmodern drama plays with forms and genres, and thus brings about new constellations and opens up new theatrical spaces. The barriers and frames of reference are continuously shifted and displaced in transformative movements. Postmodern drama plays in exemplary fashion with the concept of the actor and shifts acting into the direction of non-acting and back. A similar game is played with the role of the director and other traditional categories of drama and theater. Thus actors no longer correspond to the traditional function of actor, just as the director no longer enjoys the status of a traditional director, as once clearly assigned roles and functions mingle and shift continuously.

According to Hassan, the so-called "new literature" generally

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41 Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?" *Innovation/Renovation: New Perspectives on the Humanities*, eds. Ihab Hassan and Sally Hassan (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1983), 340.

42 Hassan, "The Question of Postmodernism" 125, and Hassan, "Desire and Dissent in the Postmodern Age," *Kenyon Review* 5 (1983): 9.

> strives for silence by accepting chance and improvisation; its principle becomes indeterminacy. By refusing order, order imposed or discovered, this kind of literature refuses purpose. Its forms are therefore non-telic: its world is the eternal present.[43]

Dramatic signifiers are caught in the play of chance and anarchy, a play that disrupts the notion of immutable order and presence. The play of signs contradicts the idea of a stable center and defies closure. Single signs are thus seen as supplements and as continuously replacing the center that is thought of in terms of absence. Derrida famously describes this permanent activity as a form of play: "Closure is the circular limit within which the repetition of difference infinitely repeats itself. That is to say, closure is its playing space. This movement is the movement of the world as play."[44] Postmodern drama continuously engages the transformation between form and its possible antiforms and thus fits well Derrida's statement of the "movement of the world as play."

The postmodern playful disposition manifests itself predominantly in language games and in an ironic stance. The writing of Suzan-Lori Parks, for instance, is heavily influenced by language games and is permeated by ironic attitudes on all sides. Postmodernism generally tends to ironize through parody, the "perfect postmodern form."[45] According to Richard Rorty, the essence of such irony rests on the idea of autonomy—a surprisingly modernist goal—and he describes the postmodern ironist as one who

> is not in the business of supplying himself and his fellow ironists with a method, a platform, or a rationale. He is just doing the same thing that all ironists do —attempting autonomy. He is trying to get out from under inherited contingencies and make his own con-

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43 Hassan, "The Literature of Silence" (1967), *The Postmodern Turn* (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1987), 10.

44 Jacques Derrida, "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (1978; London: Routledge, 1993), 250; see also "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (1978; London: Routledge, 1993), 278-293.

45 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 11.

> tingencies, get out from under an old final vocabulary and fashion one which will be all his own.[46]

The somewhat essentialist vocabulary notwithstanding, Rorty identifies one of the major objectives of postmodern drama, namely the playful transformation of old contingencies and vocabularies into ever new ones—even if the attempted ownership of the new forms may be illusory and transient. Postmodern drama thus appropriates postmodern play and strives to invent new games for dramatic writing. In this context, the invention of new forms radically transforms existing paradigms and involves the deconstruction and reappropriation of previously established texts and traditions. In a slightly different context, the German philosopher Albrecht Wellmer also identifies transformation as the nucleus of postmodern games of change and as a principal postmodern strategy in order to subvert fixed concepts of meaning, content, and truth, as well as rigorous orders of textual representations:

> Neither art nor philosophy have to do with 'meaning' or 'truth,' but solely with 'transformations of energy,' which cannot be derived from 'a memory, a subject, an identity.' Political economy is transformed into libidinal economy, liberated from the terror of representations.[47]

Stable meaning and truth are thus no longer the main objectives either of philosophy or the arts, including dramatic performance, under postmodern conditions. As Wellmer points out the compelling possibility of escaping the "representation machine," he reveals a liberating effect of a postmodern aesthetics that proved to be attractive not only

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46 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), 97.

47 Albrecht Wellmer, "On the Dialectic of Modernism and Postmodernism," *Praxis International* 4 (1985): 340.

for writers of fiction but also for postmodern dramatists across the board.

II.3 Theatrical Space and Mediatized Culture

In the following, I will argue that a changed concept of theatrical space is instrumental in developing a concept of postmodern drama, and I will present models to describe this new concept and discuss their function in postmodern plays. As we will see, the concept and role of space in postmodern drama is in many ways contingent upon the shaping influence of postmodern mediatized culture. That recent experimental drama is preoccupied with the issue of space becomes evident already when we consider the location in which the plays often take place. Postmodern plays were, most frequently in the 1960s and 1970s, presented in unusual theater locations, ranging from private lofts through cafés and churches to public street corners. Even though economic expediencies more often than not determined the choice of such locations, it was also informed by ideological considerations. Theater on location, in general, represents the attempt to reach the public, to lend a new air to the site where theatrical performance takes place, and to attribute new aspects to everyday spaces otherwise alien to the usage as stage—ideas mainly propagated by performance art and the Happening.[1] The locus of theater is thus reconceptualized and is turned into an important topic itself, a fact that also corroborates the metadramatic thrust of postmodern drama. In addition to the pronounced metadramatic interest in the space of the theater stage, the diversified use of contemporary media has changed the concept of the postmodern stage considerably. As can be seen in contemporary practices, a wide range of media technologies and devices from television, video, and the movies has transformed the theatrical space and its boundaries in order to represent and problematize a thoroughly mediatized culture in postmodern drama.

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1 The use of churches as theater spaces may also well indicate the interest in ritual and community and draws on the fact that theater has its origins in religious rituals.

Talking about space always also involves a debate about time. This issue, however, is not limited to the period of postmodernism alone. In the seminal essay "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," Joseph Frank discusses the significance and function of space and time with regard to modernist literature.[2] He focuses on modern poetry, Flaubert and Joyce, Proust and Djuna Barnes before he engages in an analysis of space in the visual arts, which he views as the model and forerunner of the use of the spatial paradigm in literature. Whereas Frank holds that "modern literature," by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce specifically, "is moving in the direction of spatial form,"[3] a number of other critics would claim that postmodern writing, too, embraces spatiality, and that space is even more pertinent to a postmodernist than to a modernist agenda. I would argue that a crucial difference between modernism and postmodernism with regard to space is that in modern literature spatialization is text-based to a large degree, while postmodern dramatists have invented a host of new, mostly media-related, forms to express a spatial orientation in the postmodern theater of transformation. Spatial paradigms, in this context, endorse simultaneity and synchronicity, whereas time is associated with linear, progressive, and causal paradigms. William Spanos, for instance, discerns an effort among postmodern modes of writing to escape temporality and to attempt what he calls a "spatialization of time."[4] Referring to a variety of writers, critics, and artists including, among others, Barthes, McLuhan, Robbe-Grillet, Kaprow, Oldenburg, and Fiedler, he states:

> These modes of creativity and critical speculation attest to the variety of the postmodern scene, but this pluralism has also tended to hide the fact that, in ten-

2 Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," *The Widening Gyre: Crisis and Mastery in Modern Literature* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1963), 3-62.

3 Frank, "Spatial Form" 8.

4 At the same time, though, Spanos identifies this effort as an essentially modernist strategy, thus pointing out again that both movements cannot always be clearly differentiated and may overlap in certain contexts.

> dency, they are all oriented beyond history or, rather, they all aspire to the spatialization of time.[5]

That space is increasingly conceived of as a governing principle of experimental theater in general and postmodern drama in particular is a claim backed up by many theater practitioners. In an interview, Liz LeCompte of the Wooster Group, for instance, once pointed out that, in their postmodern theater projects, space is supposed to supersede time and that the organizational structural principle of their work is decidedly space, not time.[6]

A number of models and concepts in critical theory further stress the spatial orientation of postmodern writing. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's "rhizome"[7] is as much an indication of postmodernism's spatial surface structure as is Katherine Hayles notion of postmodern parataxis.[8] Such models and theories foreground the surface structure of postmodern writing and identify its aim as that of overturning and transforming hierarchical relationships, replacing them with patterns of simultaneity.

Along with the theatrical space, the function of a scene in drama has also undergone changes in postmodern drama. The scene no longer presents a plot but is conceived of more as a landscape and a spatial image.[9] The predilection for spaces and images is actually an adoption of the visual arts to the theater. The theater of Robert Wilson,

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5 William V. Spanos, "The Detective and the Boundary: Some Notes on the Postmodern Literary Imagination," *Boundary 2* 1.1 (1972): 166.

6 Kiki Martins, "Avantgarde-Theater in New York: Kunst zwischen Chaos und Kommerz," *Theater heute* 10 (1984): 33. LeCompte claims film and TV as main resources for her theater work. Whereas she is able to identify major influences of her work, namely Richard Foreman and The Living Theatre, she admits that an overall definition of contemporary theater has become quite difficult: "Wir wissen nicht, wie wir es nennen sollen. Ich denke, es ist Theater ..." (34).

7 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Rhizome. Introduction* (Paris: Minuit, 1976).

8 Katherine N. Hayles, "Postmodern Parataxis: Embodied Texts, Weightless Information," *American Literary History* 2.3 (1990): 394-421.

9 In drama this often leads to the substitution of ceremony for plot, as, for instance, in the requiem mass of the theater of Tadeusz Kantor. Kantor stresses the topics of memory, death, and the ritual incantation of the past. It is also Kantor who, like van Itallie and Craig, works with puppets larger than life-size and attributes to the puppets the function of the 'self in memory'.

often labeled a "theater of images," readily comes to mind as an example. His audio-landscapes—strongly reminiscent of cinematic practices—with the parallelism of images and speech patterns turn on the destruction of hierarchy. Flat characters or figures show hardly any interaction. All depends on the imaginative abilities of the spectator to compose a collage or montage of the theatrical landscape. It is only through associative processes that an interpretation of the stage presentations can be attempted. With regard to the concept of topic or theme in a given play, Wilson's mythic or pseudo-mythic *Bilderbogen* are demonstratively not interested in presenting a particular character's inner conflict or a dramatic interaction between characters, let alone socio-political problems of society at large. Similarly, postmodern theater in general presents landscapes and turns into what could be called an environmental theater. Borrowed from the visual arts, postmodern drama's emphasis on the 'environment' remains ephemeral and is mostly designed for physical experience. In many respects, this concept of theater marks a movement away from a form of drama that heavily relies on plot, action, character, and the transmission of a moral-didactic message. Here, by contrast, spatial and temporal aspects of drama and theater are highlighted at the expense of causally linked action or plot.[10] Scarcity of stage props, emphasis on the creation of an atmosphere, and stasis in the form of tableaux are among the prevalent characteristics of this new form of theater. The moment of speaking becomes important not so much as an idiosyncratic expression of character and story but as the sound of the word interacting with the space.

Postmodern drama furthermore aims at deconstructing time as a continuum and a linear progressive movement. Time is predominantly rendered as discontinuous and relative. The result is the production of new forms of presentation no longer based on progressive time concepts. The aesthetics of time in postmodern theater is grounded in an effort to present time itself, to exhibit time and trigger a metadramatic reflection on aspects of time. To this end, time is sometimes stretched and slowed down, as in filmic slow motion, and time frames are re-

10 In a European context, the theater work of Klaus Michael Grüber may serve as an example of this environmental-spatial approach to theater. See here Hans-Thies Lehmann's extensive discussion of Grüber's theater in *Postdramatisches Theater* esp. 118-124.

peated to similar effects. Such repetitions also draw attention to detailed differences within the repetitions. Suzan-Lori Parks's plays, for instance, repeat certain gestures or phrases to the point of nausea until all meaning disappears. This metadramatic movement leads away from the perception of a train of action in which time and space serve as mere vehicles to the perception of time and space as such. This also entails a deconstruction of the self that is no longer certain of a coherent sense of time. Following the techniques of video-clip aesthetics, speed, acceleration, simultaneity, and collage are used to such an extent that the temporal identification of realities is lost to an all-consuming sense of simultaneity. Postmodern drama may thus be said to stage the conflict between a given situation, a moment of life, and virtual, electronic surfaces in a fully mediatized environment.

Since we live in what Philip Auslander has called a "mediatized culture," the media are ingrained so irrevocably into everyday life that it no longer seems possible to tell apart lived from mediated experience.[11] By the same token, the postmodern stage has turned into a mediatized space. The significance and impact of media technologies on contemporary culture at large and on theater and drama in particular can hardly be overestimated. It has shaped contemporary dramatic writing and performance, especially with regard to the concepts of self and identity and other formal aspects of drama. Certainly, one may object that forms of communication have always left their mark on art and literature. But what has changed dramatically from the late 1960s and 1970s until today is the ubiquity and pervasiveness of new media technologies in their diverse expressions in life and literature. Therefore, the often proclaimed danger of overrating the significance of the media is probably not as great as the tendency to discern in the new only a variation of the old. Postmodern dramatists employ a variety of contemporary media—most prominently television, film, and video—in order to translate their idiosyncrasies into a language for the theater. This intertextual endeavor frequently challenges the borders between different art forms and dramatizes the relationship between a mediatized environment and the changing sense of subjectivity and self in postmodernity.

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11 Philip Auslander has contributed significantly to the discussion of "mediatized culture," notably in his monograph *Presence and Resistance*.

And yet, it is not so much the impact and influence that the media exert upon drama or society at large that is at stake here. Rather, the central issue is how the media change and constitute the frame of experience in postmodern culture. As Marshall McLuhan has so emphatically pointed out in his writings, the media are not merely vehicles for the mediation and transmission of given messages or ideas, but the media themselves have become a form of experience. In a double function, the media constitute the world that is experienced and act as the vehicles by which it is experienced.[12] They define the experience of reality in Western societies; they are a constant presence to which media critic Paul Virilio attributes such encompassing powers that he comes to the following conclusion:

> Seltsamerweise nehmen die Kommunikationsmittel in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft göttliche Züge an: die Ubiquität (zu jeder Zeit allgegenwärtig sein), Augenblicklichkeit, Unmittelbarkeit, Allsichtbarkeit, Allgegenwärtigkeit. Jeder von uns ist in ein göttliches Wesen verwandelt.[13]

The ubiquity of public images generated by the media is indeed overwhelming. In his dystopian vision of media-dominated forms of the "real," Jean Baudrillard testifies to the incursion of media imagery and communication into spaces which once were private and are now penetrated by the predatory gaze of the media: "Everything is exposed to the harsh and inexorable light of information and communication."[14] The foundations of Baudrillardian media theory are outlined in his early essay "Requiem pour les media" (1972), in which he identifies the mono-directional nature of communication as the major characteristic of the new media: "il y est parlé, et fait en sorte qu'il ne

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12 See also the article by Jens Roselt, "Vom Affekt zum Effekt—Schauspielkultur und Popkultur," *Transformationen*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte, Doris Kolesch, Christel Weiler (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 1999), esp. 112.

13 Paul Virilio, "'Seinen Augen nicht mehr trauen.' Paul Virilio über Zeit, Beschleunigung und (Fernseh-)bilder," *Kunstforum* 114 (1991): 270-271. On the effect of mediatization during the Gulf War, Virilio holds that CNN and its director Ted Turner set up a theater of real-time, of "life events" that led us to consider as truth that which was presented to us on television (270).

14 Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," trans. J. Johnson, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, ed. Hal Foster (1983; New York: The New P, 1998), 130.

puisse nulle part y être répondu."[15] The consequence is the growing social isolation of the spectator, who passively spends hours sitting in front of the TV set without being in the least forced to engage in meaningful exchanges. The power of the media resides exactly in this isolation, in not having to deal with one's environment, or in fully determining the condition of such communicative exchanges.

Arguably, the incursion of media images in our daily lives does not have to be greeted with such foreboding and can just as well be seen as a process of speeding up and intensification. The communication industry shapes consciousness and is able to ease out the real and replace it by its mediatized representation. Viewed with an eye on economical reasoning, the market offers new cultural expressions and attitudes in order to create new markets and outlets to sell products and commodities. It is hence no longer possible to separate image and reality, or media and society, as they are intricately intertwined and continually transformed. By referring constantly to other media images—and not to the real—in a self-referential move, the media create a network of interconnected images. Postmodern drama copies conspicuous strategies from contemporary television whose main thrust lies exactly in the creation of such a self-referential network of images. Concerning such tendencies, Umberto Eco extensively discusses television and establishes the contrasting categories of "paleo-TV" and "neo-TV":

> Its [neo-TV's] prime characteristic is that it talks less and less about the external world. Whereas paleo-television talked about the external world, or pretended to, neo-television talks about itself and about the contacts it established with its own public.[16]

The recurrence and cross-referencing of fictions, images, and characters create an entirely new and vast field of popular knowledge, which shapes and transforms contemporary lives. Again, the simple fact that fictitious images invade our lives can rarely be considered a novelty,

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15 Baudrillard, "Requiem pour les media," *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 200-228; 209.

16 Umberto Eco, "A Guide to the Neo-television of the 1980s," *Framework* 25 (1984): 19.

but it is their abundance and ubiquity, their fluctuation and evasiveness, that seem unprecedented today.

In this context, postmodern drama incorporates the brevity and speed of channel switching and other contemporary media mechanisms. Zapping on TV means switching back and forth between different representations and simulations, and TV evenings proliferate only fragments which are patterned after a randomly structured, multilayered collage. Hence, TV presentations no longer tell coherent stories, but rather evoke an endless flow of images through time.[17] To describe the new television aesthetics, Raymond Williams uses the metaphor of "flow." It encompasses the fluid, illogical transmission of unrelated textual fragments, for example, from ads, TV programs, and diverse promotional material, and merges them into an all-consuming experience that we refer to as watching television. Previously static models of TV have thus been superseded by the model of flow, which is characterized by mobility and evanescence. This shift in TV aesthetics is crucial: "There has been a significant shift from the concept of sequence as *programming* to the concept of sequence as *flow*."[18] Flow, nevertheless, is somehow planned and thus deliberately unspecific. The idiom of "watching TV" or "listening to the radio" is indicative of this tendency: it denotes a habitual and rather vague activity. People refer to it as a general pastime and not as a specific interest and experience. Traditional cultural categories are smoothed out into a continuum of flow as artists and practitioners occupy and merge different positions. With regard to serialization as an important TV-form, Eco speaks of a "'concept of the infinity of the text'," a concept that also has its repercussions on the changed notion of dramatic textuality.[19] By using media technology, the dramatic text turns into an unstable, ever-changing chameleon and textuality comes to be defined by its transformative abilities. The flow, the speeding up as well as the slowing down of theatrical action cut the ground from under the feet of plot. Plot has been replaced, and what has taken its place is the medium itself. In other words, form has superseded content and has

17 See Eco, "A Guide" 25.

18 Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974; Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1992), 83. For a discussion of Raymond Williams' concept of flow, see also Lynn Spigel's introduction to the above mentioned volume.

19 Eco, "Innovation and Repetition" 29.

assumed a role of prime importance: "Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication."[20] A society, however, thus shaped by a uniform media experience runs far-reaching political dangers. The homogenization of society at large and the reduction of plural to uniform viewpoints are ready consequences under such conditions. That contemporary society may develop into the dystopia of a lethargic society in which individuality is suppressed and in which the media have the power to narcotize individuals into a conformist Madison Avenue-stereotype of American society is a widespread concern in postmodern drama. Almost all of Jean-Claude van Itallie's postmodern plays, for example, express this dystopian vision.

The repercussions of a thoroughly mediatized culture on contemporary American theater are manifold and blatantly visible. Media culture and technology have provided dramatists with a variety of devices to stage postmodern concerns in their theater. Self-referentiality, for instance, is increasingly mediated by technological means, and the theater's bodily presence and materiality is contrasted with its medial representation when live actors, for example, are juxtaposed to their video images. Certain media present us with a meta-world where the link to the actual body is precisely its disembodiment in the virtual domain. Media technology at times also serves to make visible the invisible and to make heard the formerly unheard. Technology thus allows for further means to question the concept of representation and the concomitant focus on presence through its ability to create a 'virtual presence'.

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20 In his classic *Understanding Media*, McLuhan describes the effect the media have on society: "In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message." Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage* (New York: Bantam, 1967), 7-8. Raymond Williams strongly opposes McLuhan's famous dictum arguing that what matters is the way the medium is handled by people. This view, of course, coincides with his more positive view of the "masses," a term, by the way, which he refuses to use as denoting "mob." Williams, rather, argues for a democratization of "mass" media and hence for equal access. In *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, he writes: "Thus whether the theory and practice can be changed will depend not on the fixed properties of the medium nor on the necessary character of its institutions, but on a continually renewable social action and struggle" (128).

Postmodern drama this way increasingly creates interfaces between human beings and the machine. The virtual realm often excludes the material body and is preoccupied with its mediatized immaterial appearance. Video art installations frequently proffer concepts of a mixed reality where the live action of the body is constitutive of the work of art but, at the same time, is present not in its materiality but in its screen image. In the same vein, a tape-recorded voice in the theater alters the concept of theatrical space because its origin can neither be determined nor localized. The virtual expansion of space not only offers new spaces, or a new concept of spatiality that requires different imaginative processes, but it also marks a confrontation with a different sense of materiality. Ihab Hassan has drawn our attention to the fact that the culture of postmodernism largely "derives from the technological extension of consciousness,"[21] and thus has underlined postmodern drama's preoccupation with the mind and with the repercussions of technology on contemporary culture. With the intrusion of screens, video, TV, etc. into the theater, the actual body of the performer seems to disappear as a consequence of its reduction to a mere surface appearance. In this postmodern dramatic concept of space, the precise determination of the origin of voice, of thought, of authenticity becomes futile. Technologically-produced images and distortions turn the dramatic character into a constantly shifting and transforming ghost-like figure. Herbert Blau defined "ghosting" as an "idea of performance concerned, like Derridean theory, with appearance and disappearance and the following of a trace which is the origin of memory through which it appears."[22] Such "ghost" figures are simulations, and can, according to Baudrillard's classification, be attributed to the third order of simulacra, namely that of the differential value of the sign. This is the order of the media as they form and control the code. In his 1981 essay, "The Precession of Simulacra," Baudrillard distinguishes four phases in the transformation of the image, culminating in the hyperreal as the stage in which the image is nothing but "its own pure simulacrum" and bears "no relation to any reality."[23] According to Baudrillard's differentiation, the hyperreal

21 Hassan, "The Question" 124.

22 Blau, *Take up the Bodies* xxvi.

23 Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," *Simulations* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 11. Baudrillard's position is by no means unassailable.

does not include a concept of origin other than its reproduced simulation. The result, in more prosaic terms, is a paradigmatic ambiguity in which it is impossible to identify a real in the realm of the hyperreal. It is this very problem that has come to the fore in much of dramatic criticism, mostly in the form of the contested concept of reality and illusion in theater and the struggle to make believe that the stage —mimetically—represents the world.

Postmodern simulation, however, should not be confused with the familiar notion of mimesis, even though they have some common ground. As the German critic Dietmar Kamper argues, the two concepts differ decisively. He contends that simulation "verläuft in Automation. Sie ist wesentlich technisch organisiert und gehört dem sekundären Unbewußten an, das insgesamt Kultur heißt." Mimesis, in contrast, belongs to "Kunst, die das Ähnliche *als* Ähnliches setzt, die Fiktion *als* Fiktion betreibt und die Illusion *als* Illusion inszeniert."[24] The goal of simulation, then, is the creation of a full identity of image and reality, whereas mimesis will always retain a recognizable difference between the two. Media and media technology, in this context, have added further means to achieve simulation. As soon as actual bodies are replaced by technologically produced images or substitutive machines, Kamper argues, mimesis will cease to exist and will completely be absorbed by simulation: "Insofern Körper durch Maschinen ersetzt sind, gibt es keine Mimesis mehr, ist Mimesis in Simulation aufgegangen."[25]

The pertinent techniques adopted by the postmodern stage turn it into a hybrid which covers the fusion or blending of media as well as juxtapositions of their diverse manifestations.[26] The intertextual use of media in postmodern drama reflects patterns proposed and developed by the so-called intermedia art of the 1960s. Intermedia artists such as

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His dystopic vision smacks at times of the metaphysics that he has rejected and leaves the reader trapped in a hyperreal realm over which we have no control. For a summary of critical commentary on Baudrillard, see Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern* 155-158.

24 Dietmar Kamper, "Mimesis und Simulation. Von den Körpern zu den Maschinen," *Kunstforum* 114 (1991): 87.

25 Kamper, "Mimesis und Simulation" 86.

26 In his preface to *The Field of Drama*, Martin Esslin considers the rigid separation of stage drama from the cinematic media "absurd" and argues for a more inclusive concept of drama, film, and television (10).

composer, fluxus-activist, film-maker, and theoretician Dick Higgins merged different forms of cultural expressions in their works and coined the term "intermedia" for the resulting hybrid entity. Higgins especially uses the Happening in order to demonstrate the concept of intermedia art:

> Thus the happening developed as an intermedium, an uncharted land that lies between collage, music and the theater. It is not governed by rules; each work determines its own medium and form according to its needs. The concept itself is better understood by what it is not, rather than by what it is.[27]

Intermedia artists as well as postmodern dramatists are predominantly interested in the interface between body/human being and machine/medium. Consequently, they have discarded the notion that media and technology are alien, anti-human, anti-artistic forces and inhibit "true" art. Instead, they have reevaluated the possibilities which the different forms of media expressions offer for new artistic creation. For the theater, this means that the media's potential to transform the performing arts is duly recognized and put forth, concretely, in representations of the human body on stage as an object in the same manner as a chair or any other object. The strategy of doubling the body on stage as its movie image or using the body as a projection surface for the electronic image is one example of the mediated spatial simultaneity and the demonstration of the dispersed self in postmodern drama. The material body in this sense vanishes on the screen. As we will see, postmodern dramatists are increasingly concerned with the perception of technologically-induced movements in space and the expansion of space as a possible consequence of new technologies.

To a considerable extent, film has become a model for postmodern drama in this context.[28] Filmic fragmentation and distancing is

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27 Dick Higgins, "Intermedia" (1966), *Horizons: The Poetics and Theory of Intermedia* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1984), 22; 18-28. See also Barbara Büscher, "InterMedia—Material. Zur Verbindung von performativen Künsten und audio-visuellen Medien," *Grenzgänge: Das Theater und die anderen Künste*, ed. Gabriele Brandstetter, Helga Finter, Markus Weßendorf (Tübingen: Narr, 1998), 117-118.

28 If film served to transgress the traditional boundaries of theater, it was at the same time confronted with efforts to expand the boundaries of its own formal

much more distinct compared to its theatrical counterpart. The actor's performance, for example, is more immediate in theater as compared to that in film. In drama, the actor performs directly in front of an audience, whereas in film there is no bodily encounter between actor and audience. They do not breathe the same air and do not share the same context of experience, which makes it impossible for the actor in film to react to the audience. In other words, film features a unilateral pattern of communication. In addition, the actor's performance itself is fragmented in film since it is split up in often disconnected shots. Filmic devices and tricks, such as stunts, montage, etc., may even further distance the actor from the end product to be seen on the screen. Most of all, the eye of the camera acts as an independent formative agent, apart from actors and audience. The camera eye presents and, what is more, controls the actor's performance. Special angles and close-ups, for instance, are movements undertaken by the camera and not by the actor. The camera thus acts as an additional contributor in the process of filmic communication, along with editing and cutting techniques which interfere in the making of a film and thus shape its signifying process.

For the audience, such a process triggers the experience of distance. As Walter Benjamin has perceptively noted, with technically reproduced media such as film the audience assumes the role of critic rather than participant. He argues further that the audience consequently approaches the medium in terms of "testing."[29] And what contemporary film frequently offers, besides formal devices, are ideological ideas associated with popular films, above all the glamour of Hollywood celebrity culture and the dreams associated with it. Thus film not only proffers crucial technical possibilities but carries with them the predominantly mass-cultural connotations which McLuhan rightly identifies as dreams: "The movie is not only a supreme expression of mechanism, but paradoxically it offers as product

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constraints. Experiments such as, for instance, the so-called 'expanded cinema' forayed into the modes and circumstances of perception. They tried to overcome the traditional context of watching movies and to create a different environment instead, as, for instance, in Stan Vanderbeek's "Movie-Drome"-experiments starting in the mid-1950s.

29 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" 228-229.

the most magical of consumer commodities, namely dreams."[30] In the realm of contemporary American drama, van Itallie's so-called Doris Day-plays are centered around such ideas and deliberately evoke the connection between film and dreams.

Finally, filmic slow motion and the freeze—the more recent variant of the traditional tableau—are used to present postmodern images of the human body and the self. If characters pose on the stage, a moment in time comes to a standstill and the participants freeze in a stylized manner. Such techniques supersede time and make a metadramatic attempt to present physicality. They show the body in its material concreteness and, at the same time, situate the play in the tension between the body as sculpture and its transformation into a human object. The focus on the body in postmodern drama thus underlines the emancipation from the domination of verbal discourse which was so crucial for traditional drama in general. Concomitantly, postmodern drama juxtaposes the body with its technological representation, and triggers a transformation of the physical body into mediatized techno-bodies, which is to say, the body turned machine. As we will later see, in van Itallie's "Motel," postmodern cyborgs have replaced, to a large degree, the *dramatis personae* of traditional drama and have thus become expressive of the postmodern concept of self and identity in transformation.

30 McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 291.

III Jean-Claude van Itallie: Mediatized Culture and the Postmodern Self

The plays of Belgian-born American playwright Jean-Claude van Itallie are among the most innovative theatrical forms to have been developed in the second half of the 20th century. Standard discussions of contemporary American drama only marginally consider van Itallie and his plays—despite or maybe even because of his penchant for formal innovation. Mostly, his name and work are listed among a group of lesser known American playwrights of the 1960s, a group devoted to the exploration of dramatic possibilities rather than to writing success-oriented plays. If such classifications are based on commercial success and the number of large-scale Broadway productions, van Itallie, to be sure, remains a marginal figure of contemporary American drama. But it is precisely because the search for dramatic innovation is such a defining trait of van Itallie's theater that it lends itself perfectly to a postmodern frame of discussion and thus makes its author eligible as an exemplary playwright to be considered here.[1]

The marginal position of van Itallie's plays in the established canon is also apparent in the limited amount of secondary literature produced on his work. In the first, and to date only, book-length study, Gene A. Plunka probably captures the essence of van Itallie's theater when he states that "van Itallie's search for form and dramatic struc-

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1 Van Itallie shares, in many ways, the experience of many other experimental playwrights. He has had to pursue his work by means of grants and teaching posts at various universities. He taught playwriting at the New School for Social Research (New York City) in 1967, 1968, and 1972, at the Yale Drama School in 1969, at Amherst College in 1976, and many other colleges. He was a lecturer at Princeton University, received, among other grants, two Guggenheim fellowships for playwriting in 1973 and 1980, and, in 1977, he was awarded an honorary Ph.D. from Kent State University, which also houses his manuscript collection.

ture *is* his theater."[2] In other words, van Itallie is concerned with theater itself, and his plays are predominantly a reflection on drama and its constituents; they are thus metadramatic in a decidedly postmodern sense. The playwright is aware of his experimental agenda; in a letter concerning the production of *The Serpent*, he identifies the play with an "attempt to break some kind of barriers in theatrical form" as well as an effort to "break in the audience's usual notion of what a play is."[3] Van Itallie, though, does more than simply "break" barriers and concepts, he rather transforms them, which is why his theater is a postmodern theater of transformation.

And yet, van Itallie does not believe in art for art's sake. He shows a pronounced concern for social criticism and links it intricately to his interests in formal innovation. His approach combines an investigation of the theatrical arts with a strong undercurrent of social critique; thus there is ample reason to attach the label "political playwright" to him as well. His plays, above all *America Hurrah*, have frequently been read in terms of their political agenda, but his work has hardly been discussed under a postmodern frame of reference.[4]

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2 Gene A. Plunka, *Jean-Claude van Itallie and the Off-Broadway Theater* (London: Associated UPs, 1999), 13. I am indebted to this most recent account of the writer's work, as it represents a comprehensive and thorough source of information on the playwright. However, the aim of Plunka's book is not so much a theorized study of the playwright's work. Rather, Plunka focuses on biographical criticism and, at times, turns to cliché-ridden formulae as, for example, when he labels *America Hurrah* "one of America's outstanding and insightful cultural contributions to modern society" (103). For more biographical as well as bibliographical information on van Itallie, see Beate Hein Bennett, "Jean-Claude van Itallie," *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit: Gale, 1981), 7:290-299; William Coco, "van Itallie, Jean-Claude," *American Dramatists*, ed. D. L. Kirkpatrick (London: St. James P, 1988), 535-537.

3 Van Itallie, A Letter, *The Serpent* 12.

4 See Herbert Grabes on "Möglichkeiten der Gesellschaftskritik im Drama: Jean-Claude van Itallies *America Hurrah*," *Amerikanisches Drama und Theater im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Alfred Weber and Siegfried Neuweiler (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 328-349. In this article, Grabes turns to a detailed, substantial analysis of the aims and techniques of social criticism in the trilogy which leads him to conclude that van Itallie's comprehensive critique falls prey to a historical fatalism and Spenglerian determinism which, in the end, reduce the play's critical potential. In a different article, Grabes investigates *America Hurrah*'s capacity to be both myth-presenting and myth-destroying. He holds that the trilogy is myth-destroying only in its details, but

The three parts of *America Hurrah* ("Interview," "TV," and "Motel")—as well as most of his other short experimental pieces—target contemporary society and unveil it as inhumane and increasingly violent. These plays satirize a society that is dominated by screen images and focus their attack on the trivializing power of the omnipresent media, on contemporary society's ritualized behavior patterns, and its unrestrained consumerism. In contrast to earlier criticism on *America Hurrah*, which has been predominantly devoted to social commentary, this study focuses on the exploration of its formal and theoretical patterns from a postmodern perspective and on the interrelation between the play's ideological agendas and their formal structure.

Even though van Itallie's plays betray a pronounced political commitment and were, as a matter of fact, written during what Bigsby refers to as the "committed decade," they are nevertheless no thesis-driven plays.[5] Van Itallie seems to hold that politics and art can be synthesized effectively but never when content supersedes form. In such a case, political commitment dominates aesthetic experimentation, with the implication that the form of art does not merely imitate but rather helps design the structure of society. Although the dramatist has frequently cooperated with theater groups devoted to political activism, such as the Living Theater, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, or the Bread and Puppet Theater, he sees a certain danger in their theater of commitment, namely that its didacticism can impinge upon creativity. In his seminal article "Should the Artist be Political in His Art?" van Itallie discusses the "artistic peril" that often accompanies thesis plays:

> Because the playwright, for instance, who does meddle in contemporary politics in his plays does so at his

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not as a whole. Nevertheless he locates the play's attack on myth largely within the framework of social criticism. See Grabes, "Myth and Myth Destruction in American Plays of the 60s and early 70s," *Amerikastudien /American Studies* 32.1 (1987): 39-48, See also Phyllis J. Wagner, "Jean-Claude van Itallie: Political Playwright," *The Serif* 9.4 (1972): 19-74. The term postmodernism is also absent from Christopher W.E. Bigsby's otherwise profound and insightful discussion of selected plays by van Itallie in *Beyond Broadway*, Vol. 3 of *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama* (1985; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990), esp. 105-123.

5 Bigsby, *Beyond Broadway* 294. Bigsby identifies the "committed decade" in American theater as extending from 1964 through 1975.

> own peril, his artistic peril. It has been proven again and again that 'thesis' plays are rarely, if ever, good plays.[6]

Even though van Itallie's plays are not thesis plays, they accomplish to be both a substantial critique of society and an exercise in dramatic form. In his work, he focuses and reflects on forms of popular entertainment and the media which dominate contemporary society. In particular, he dramatizes the influence contemporary media exert on the sense of self. To this end, he incorporates popular movies, media celebrities, TV series, game shows, and commercials into his plays, even to the point of making them the primary materials for his plays. Thus his work bears a strong intertextual imprint and blurs the boundaries of formerly rigid generic classifications.

Van Itallie's work is not only intertextual in its many references to contemporary popular culture, the author is equally drawn to traditional forms and features of drama. Unlike other experimental artists of the 1960s, he does not attempt to trade the entire traditional dramatic canon for artistic pop ventures. His oeuvre rather shows a strong interest in canonized European drama. In the 1970s, van Itallie devoted his dramatic work mostly to adaptations of well-known classical plays with the intention of learning more about traditional dramatic forms and structures. Among the major theatrical accomplishments of this period are English versions of Chekhov's *The Sea Gull*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Three Sisters*, and *Uncle Vanya*.[7]

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6 Van Itallie, "Should the Artist Be Political in His Art?" *New York Times* 17 September 1967, sec. 2, 3.

7 Van Itallie explains his interest in the classics thus: "the 1970s were a time of retrenchment; I worked on new versions of classics making contact with my heritage as a playwright, my lineage" (qtd. in Coco, "van Itallie, Jean-Claude" 536). Those adaptations were among his major successes. His version of *The Sea Gull* opened at Princeton's McCarter Theater in October 1973 and had its New York premiere on January 29, 1975, directed by Chaikin at the Manhattan Theater Club, where it played for six weeks. *The Cherry Orchard*, commissioned by Joseph Papp of the Public Theater, was first staged on February 17, 1977, at Lincoln Center's Vivian Beaumont Theater in New York. *The Three Sisters* was produced in 1982 at the Manhattan Theater Club and simultaneously at the American Repertory Theater at Harvard University. Finally, *Uncle Vanya*, then van Itallie's fourth Chekhov adaptation, was produced by Ellen Stewart at the LaMama Annex on September 11, 1983.

But Chekhov is not the sole influence on van Itallie whose work alludes in many ways to the whole tradition of Western theater and drama, and hence bears many references to diverse modes of dramatic writing. "Interview," for instance, reveals expressionistic ancestors in its loose episodic structure (Stationendrama) and in the attempt to express the structure of the human mind in barren sets and black and white images signifying impersonality. However, stream-of-consciousness techniques and subjective distortions of reality, otherwise typical for expressionism, have less of a place in "Interview."[8] Following in part the absurdist tradition, van Itallie's theater frequently conveys an idea of humanity's precarious position in the universe: The playwright readily acknowledges this absurdist influence: "I think all of us writing at the time had to be influenced by Beckett and Ionesco. I don't know how it would be possible not to be. I've always been very conscious of both Ionesco and Beckett."[9]

The formative influence of absurdist and expressionist drama notwithstanding, it is almost impossible to think of Jean-Claude van Itallie without thinking of the Open Theater.[10] The collaboration be-

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8 As regards expressionism as influence on van Itallie, the nameless automatons of Oskar Kokoschka's *Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen* (1907), the dehumanized world of Georg Kaiser's *Von Morgens bis Mitternachts* (1912), and the robots in Karel Capek's play, *R.U.R.* (1920), invite a comparison. From an American perspective, Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* could be named as it depicts automatons in a repressive society where communication is rendered impossible. The lack of communication as displayed in "Interview" might best be compared to scene five of O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* in which some marionettes leave church in mechanical precision. We find a similar scene in "Interview" when the actors, towards the very end of the play, line up and march like mechanical dolls.

9 Qtd. in Plunka, *Off-Broadway* 91. Along the same lines, Coco holds that van Itallie's plays resemble the early one-act plays of Ionesco (Coco, "van Itallie, Jean-Claude" 589).

10 The Open Theater existed as an experimental acting company from 1963 to 1973. Believing in the expressive potential of a performer's creative intervention, the group, under the direction of Joseph Chaikin, was devoted to the exploration of new styles of acting. The renowned Open Theater workshops combined theatrical practice, i.e. acting exercises, with theoretical discussions on the nature of drama and theater. Also, they began to develop ensemble creations with a single writer as, for example, Megan Terry, Susan Yankowitz, and, of course, Jean-Claude van Itallie. See Peter Pasolli, *A Book on the Open Theatre* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill 1970); Eileen Blumenthal, *Joseph*

tween van Itallie and the Open Theater started in September 1963 when the author was introduced to Joseph Chaikin, legendary founder of the Open Theater.[11] For van Itallie, the Open Theater offered the opportunity to test the limits of theatrical representation, and it consequently became the creative environment for him that stressed experimentation and intellectual challenge at the expense of commercial success. In turn, van Itallie as an efficient playwright turned the Open Theater's rambling improvisations and exercises into plays. The process of the collaboration between van Itallie and the Open Theater was reciprocal. At times, the dramatist would design a short play that the actors could explore together, possibly deleting segments that they felt were unfit or adding new elements in their improvisations. At other times, the playwright would watch the actors' improvisations and try to work out a script based on the prevailing mood that he captured during these performances. The process of collaboration had far-reaching consequences concerning the notion of authorship in van Itallie's plays. Mainly it changed the status of the playwright. Formerly seen as the undisputed creator of a given play, the author now had to surrender his previously dominant position and acknowledge the actors' and the director's contribution to the final event or performance. The impact on the status of the dramatic text is also far-reaching. Because of the emphasis placed on theatrical collaboration, the dramatic text no longer occupies a central position in the process of dramatic creation. Van Itallie broaches the issue of the relationship between authorship and the dramatic text, by acknowledging the participation of the actors in the development of a play while, at the same time, exposing a critical attitude towards this participation. "Actors," van Itallie writes, "are not poets, at least not while they're on their feet in front of an audience."[12] On the other hand, a note preceding *The*

Chaikin: Exploring at the Boundaries of Theater (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984).

11 Prior to founding the Open Theater, Chaikin had collaborated with Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theater. However, Chaikin was more interested in theatrical experiments and innovation than the Living Theater and did not share their communitarian agenda and penchant for group therapy. Hence, he gathered a new group of interested theater people and founded the Open Theater in 1963. See Chaikin, *The Presence of the Actor* (New York: Atheneum, 1980).

12 Van Itallie, A Letter, *The Serpent* 11. See also my discussion of this letter in chapter II.2.

Serpent asserts the collaborative nature of the whole enterprise: the author refers to *The Serpent* as "a ceremony created by the Open Theater under the direction of Joseph Chaikin, assisted by Roberta Sklar" and specifies that merely "words and structure [are] by Jean-Claude van Itallie."[13]

Many features testify to the collaborative nature of van Itallie's dramatic work. Of particular importance in this context were the Open Theater's "perfect people" exercises which, as many other ideas and practices of the group, proved to be of prime importance for the author's development as a postmodern dramatist. These exercises were originally designed to explore the ways in which the media control and shape our lives. In their collaborative efforts, Open Theater members attempted to probe the effects of the public inundation of media images showing glamorous men and women in commercials, advertisements, television programs, and movies. In an interview with Richard Schechner, Chaikin explains the purpose of the "perfect people" exercises:

> We ask the questions, "What kind of country is it that is populated by 'perfect people' talking about cigarettes, toilet paper, spaghetti sauce, detergents, and the thousands of other products that we consume?" and "Who are these 'consumers'?" A night watching TV convinces us that they are "perfect people"—and if these are the images of our aspirations, God help us.[14]

The exercises draw attention to the artificiality of the idea of "perfect people" by, for instance, juxtaposing different, mutually exclusive contexts. Often, such an exercise would begin by impersonating a "perfect person" as presented by the media and then the actors would react with deviant responses to the suggested standard of behavior. An actor would, for example, engage in jolly conversation while pretending not to notice that the scene takes place in a funeral parlor, a concentration camp, or a prison. Chaikin generally identifies the aspirations of contemporary culture as dominated by consumerism. For

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13 Van Itallie, *The Serpent* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1969), 5.

14 Schechner, "The Open Theatre: An Interview with Joseph Chaikin," *Tulane Drama Review* 9.2 (1964): 194. For a more detailed description of Chaikin's exercises, see Plunka, "McLuhan, Perfect People, and the Media Plays of Jean-Claude van Itallie," *American Drama* 3.1 (1993): 67-86.

him, the daily television experience acts as the blueprint for the attitude described above. In his book *The Presence of the Actor*, dedicated to both van Itallie and Judith Malina, co-founder of the Living Theater, Chaikin discusses the ways in which U.S. society conceives of television and movie personalities. The idea behind the "perfect people" exercises is that media celebrities are idolized to such an extent that they are turned into icons for daily experiences as well as models for behavior patterns.[15] As a consequence, daily life is devalued and viewed almost entirely in its striking difference to the perfect models presented on screen. The "perfect people" exercises consequently turn into satires on a sanitized version of society, in which the performers depict television or advertising personalities with their slogans and clichés, while using an affected and exaggerated acting style.

As an antidote to the concept of "perfect people," van Itallie designed "The First Fool," a script for writer, director, and actors to experiment with the concept of character.[16] "The First Fool" is a character that is conceived of as utterly guileless, innocent, and newborn into the world. This concept thus stands in strong contrast to the "perfect people" on TV. In his effort to delineate an alternative 'unspoiled' character, van Itallie resorts to the mythical image of the cave as a crucial setting:

> The first fool awoke in a cave. Around him is dark. The fool too is dark at a moment of birth, full of awakening and its sadness, being now seated on the ground. The first fool is amazed at the cave walls. They drip wet with water from the stalactites. The fool touches the droplets with the tips of his fingers. He rubs his tongue against the wet stone.[17]

The author then conjures up an image of a pure, 'uncivilized' character prior to any social or cultural influences and conventions. The image alludes to the notion of *illud tempus*, as developed by Mircea Eliade, which refers to the access to non-historical mythical time and the rec-

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15 See Chaikin, *The Presence of the Actor* 73.

16 "The First Fool" was to serve as the basis for his later play, *The Hunter and the Bird*.

17 Van Itallie, "The First Fool," *Theatre Quarterly* 4.16 (1974/75): 49.

reation of a memory of the first time.[18] In this recreation of a mythic present, van Itallie excludes, above all, the most pronounced character-shaping force of our time, the contemporary media. At the same time, "The First Fool" serves as an ironic comment on the idea of authentic experience and the concept of artistic purity. As regards dramatic form, however, van Itallie fashioned the exercise to reflect upon the constituents of what we see as dramatic character. In this context, it is worth noticing that van Itallie, in his work as a whole, combines two mutually exclusive, paradoxical interests: the ephemeral nature of mediatized pop culture and the penchant for "first times" or mythic exploits of time immemorial. Both, however, are used to explore the composition and decomposition of the self in postmodern culture.[19]

Van Itallie's experiments with, and explorations of, the ideas of character, self, and authorship were carried further by the Open Theater's so-called "inside-outside" experiments. The term already indicates a split in the concept of character and problematizes the fragmentation of the postmodern sense of self. The process was such that playwright van Itallie took responsibility for the "outside" of a given character, whereas the actor, within certain rules and limitations, created the actual "inside" of this character. *Variations on a Clifford Odets Theme*, which was part of the Open Theater's performance of *Aspects*, derived from such an "inside-outside" experiment. Van Itallie explains the rules of the game:

> What I did was the realistic "outside," in what I hoped were well-chosen Odets-type banalities, and set certain rules of the game from the "inside." The rules were as follows: the characters were to remain the same, the basic intent of the scene was to remain the same; the setting was allowed to change, the "language" in which the characters expressed themselves could change as long as no actual verbal dialogue was used that hadn't already been spoken. The rules were gone into in detail in a kind of scenario, but still the "inside" sections remained a game; the actors could do what they wished within the given limitations, and what

18 See Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harper, 1959).

19 See here also Umberto Eco's "mythical turn" in postmodernism. Towards the end of his essay on "Innovation and Repetition," he maintains that "we are witnessing the birth of a new aesthetic sensibility much more archaic " (30).

> they did could, theoretically, change in every performance. The "inside" and "outside" sections alternated, and the last "outside" section was identical to the first.[20]

Van Itallie thus divides the entity formerly known as character into an "inside" and an "outside"; in so doing he expresses the disparity between inner feelings and external appearance and, more importantly, stages the postmodern notion of the fragmented self and adapts it to his plays. These experiments are attempts at what could be called "guided" transformation. Additionally, though, van Itallie supports the idea of improvisational play in that he allows the actors, within certain limits, to improvise and change sections of the scenario. Apart from their emphasis on postmodern playfulness, such experiments also contribute to an altered concept of authorship and originality. As the last "outside" section always has to be identical to the first, the exercises follow a cyclical rather than a chronological time pattern. Even if the actors may alter the scenes, they cannot establish a progressive development, since it is stipulated by the author that the scene should "remain the same." Scenes and characters become mobile in space rather than in time and the result of the exercise is the creation of a spatial construct as a discursive field that was formerly referred to as character.

In playful exercises such as the above, the text is relegated from a dominant to an almost complementary element in a theatrical performance. Looking again at his programmatic letter preceding *The Serpent*, van Itallie's attitude towards the dramatic text seems to be rooted in a distrust in verbal language:

> Words, as you're aware, have become terribly misused, [...]. To simply transfer such words onto the stage (even to mock them) is very unsatisfactory to me.[21]

Van Itallie's *The Serpent* is, of course, not primarily concerned with the effects of the media on society. Yet, it perfectly illustrates how film, here the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination, can leave a

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20 Van Itallie, "Playwright at Work: Off Off Broadway," *Tulane Drama Review* 10.4 (1966): 155-156.

21 Van Itallie, A Letter, *The Serpent* 12.

lasting imprint on the collective consciousness of an audience. Van Itallie seems to underline an argument earlier put forth by the communication theoreticians McLuhan and Fiore: "It was the funeral of President Kennedy that most strongly proved the power of television to invest the occasion with the character of corporate participation."[22] This power of the media in postmodernity is clearly at the center of van Itallie's dramatic work, and the media's pervasive effects on the postmodern sense of self permeates his plays.

As van Itallie's oeuvre amply demonstrates, he is more concerned with dramatic form than with character delineation and/or plot development and prefers the one-act form for his experimental ventures. This predilection might also account for the lack of large-scale commercial success of his work. In his constant striving for formal innovation, van Itallie refuses to be associated with a definitive dramatic technique or mode of writing, which in turn makes it all the more difficult for critics and audiences to pigeonhole the playwright and to draw neat comparisons between his work and that of others. Because van Itallie's work defies preclosing interpretations, it can be a source of confusion and frustration. He rejects the allegedly superior insight ascribed to artists and shuns any form of didacticism. In the same way, he will not bestow upon the audience universal truths and refuses to magically unveil social afflictions, let alone proposing remedies for them. This casts doubts on some of the standard evaluations of the playwright. Critics such as Gene Plunka hold that van Itallie has assumed "the role of a seer gauging the pulse of contemporary society" and further interprets his theater "as a therapeutic cure to heal personal and global afflictions."[23] Moreover, the critic warns us that the "failure to heed these early warnings that van Itallie signals will perhaps lead to the apocalypse," and claims that his "model is the triumph of the human spirit through a spiritual understanding of friends, family, and goodwill, which will ultimately transcend to a planet that is well balanced."[24] When I caution against such teleological and moralistic interpretations of van Itallie's theater, I do not want to deny its political nature. Van Itallie's theater retains a political agenda without assuming

22 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage* (New York: Bantam, 1967), 125.
23 Plunka, *Off-Broadway* 267.
24 Plunka, *Off-Broadway* 268.

a pseudo-prophetic stance. But the plays are political because they offer a critique of existing dramatic representations of world and self while at the same time striving to transgress such representations in order to establish new representations that become the vehicle of the author's genuinely postmodern concerns. This genuinely transformative process underlines once more that postmodern drama is a veritable theater of transformation.

III.1 Transformative Selves in "Interview"

It is the trilogy *America Hurrah* that brought Jean-Claude van Itallie fame as an innovative playwright in the 1960s. Fame, though, is all too frequently accompanied by notorious anecdotes that become amusing only in hindsight. *America Hurrah* is a case in point. The London performance of the play at the Royal Court Theater in 1967 seemed seriously endangered by the Lord Chamberlain's refusal to license the play because of offensive graffiti in part three, "Motel." In order to circumvent the problem, the Royal Court Theater turned itself into a private club and was then able to stage the trilogy. The censorship, however, worked as a free advertisement for the production, and the theater public was intrigued rather than put off by that particular kind of publicity.

The one-act play "Interview" was first performed under the title "Pavane" in 1965 at the Academy Theatre in Atlanta and subsequently became Part One of *America Hurrah* in the Open Theater production of the same year.[1] "Interview" presents the scenario of a formal job interview that is modeled after the structural pattern of a dance. The original title of the play, "Pavane," refers to a formal courtly dance of the 16th century and hence signals the playwright's intention to show

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1 All subsequent references to *America Hurrah* are taken from the following edition of the play: *America Hurrah and Other Plays* (New York: Grove P, 1978). The production history of *America Hurrah* allows for a glimpse of the conditions under which experimental playwrights had to work at that time. Having raised the money for the Off-Broadway production from family and friends, the author assured them they should not expect any profit from the venture. Chaos was the tenor of the rehearsals. Among various problems, the dolls for "Motel" kept falling apart so that, all in all, it appeared as if the plays would never get produced on time. Richard Barr, producer of the Playwright's Unit, left early with the comment "Jean-Claude should be shot." See "Jean-Claude van Itallie," *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series* (Detroit: Gale, 1985), 2:414.

how human behavior in everyday life is conditioned by ritualistic conventions. It was later suggested that the play resembles a fugue more than a pavane, and van Itallie, who had not studied dance formally, changed the title accordingly to "Interview: A Fugue for Eight Actors." By using this particular kind of model for the play, the author unveils both procedures, job interview and dance, as equally following predetermined structures. Ideologically, the presentation of the interview as a ritual questions individuality, even rids each interview of its individual significance, by exhibiting and exaggerating the conventionality of its general frame. Consequently, the interview is not focused on particular details of an applicant's qualification or résumé. It is rather preoccupied with its own ritualized form and thus generates a dramatic metadiscourse.

Accordingly, there is neither plot nor character development in "Interview." As a matter of fact, there are not even characters in the traditional sense in the play. The category of 'character' is ostensibly abandoned in favor of schematic figures and types that are not identifiable by individual personality traits. These 'characters' do not even have individual names. The function of character is reduced to the enactment of depersonalized roles which are referred to as "First Interviewer," "Second Interviewer," "First Applicant," "Second Applicant," etc. This reduction not only renders identification but also empathy with the figures impossible and calls into question the very concept of personal identity and viable self.

The traditional notion of a unity of character and self is further contradicted by the dialogical fragments attributed to the various figures. Repeatedly, sentences in the dialogue of the play are broken up into their component parts which are delivered by the various agents participating in the action. This results in a dispersal of agents which are reduced to the role of interchangeable senders of freely commutable messages:

> FIRST INTERVIEWER. Do you
>
> SECOND INTERVIEWER. speak any
>
> THIRD INTERVIEWER. foreign
>
> FOURTH INTERVIEWER. languages?

FIRST INTERVIEWER. Have you

SECOND INTERVIEWER. got a

THIRD INTERVIEWER. college

FOURTH INTERVIEWER. education? (31)

The reduction of character to an assortment of role fragments and the resulting interchangeability of these roles in "Interview" frequently leads to an abrupt dropping and transformation of assigned parts. The technique which is involved here is that of transformation as it was developed by the Open Theater in its earlier days. Transformation, then, meant that roles could freely be interchanged in the acting process, and it mostly served to subvert the concept of a stable unity of character in changing situations. Van Itallie first experimented with the transformational method when he collaborated with Joseph Chaikin, one of the inventors of the method. Chaikin and van Itallie were interested in investigating the ways in which social roles determine the appearance of individual character. For them, transformation proved an efficient method to demonstrate the possibility of radical changes in identity. In "Interview," van Itallie describes the technique of transformational acting as follows:

> *Each time they [the actors] approach the audience, they do so as a different character. The actor will need to find the essential vocal and physical mannerism of each character, play them, and drop them immediately to assume another character.* (40)

For van Itallie, transformation is not only an exercise in the art and technique of flexible acting but an essential device to undermine the traditional concept of the stable self. In terms of an aesthetics of reception, transformation involves an enormous challenge for audiences because it renders impossible one-to-one actor-character correspondences and, along with this, foils traditional expectations and interpretations of character and identity. The effect achieved by a well-placed transformation is invariably that of a radical defamiliarization and a rupture of the theatrical illusion.

In "Interview," however, van Itallie plays with the idea of postmodern transformation in many sophisticated ways, beyond effects of epic-style defamiliarization and the destruction of the theatrical illusion. In addition to adapting and dropping different roles, actors are supposed to create the specific context and the setting of a particular scene by using their bodies only. Actors have to carry out this task without the traditional use of stage props or any other device to delineate a particular setting. The expressive possibilities of their bodily movements are claimed as the sole means of conveying the impression of a certain situation. In "Interview," transformations substitute for conventional plot when they abruptly, sometimes fortuitously, change contexts and settings and thereby act as connectives between different scenes that are otherwise not linked by a coherent plot line. This happens, for instance, in a fast-paced succession of scenes involving people on Fourteenth Street (39), in a gym class (41), on the subway train (42), in a telephone booth (43), at a party (44), in a psychiatrist's office (46), at a church procession (48), at a dance (49), and in a meeting with a politician (51). All of these scenes are realized only on the basis of transformational role changes by the actors involved. The play suddenly seems to rely on the evocation of the dominant sign systems pantomime and body language. Transitions in the play are achieved by means of a series of prescribed transformations:

> *(The rapid movements of the gym class become the vibrations of passengers on a moving subway train. [...] They make an appropriate soft subway noise, a kind of rhythmic hiss [...]).* (42-43)

Using only rhythm, sound, and body language the actors are supposed to create the impression of a change of setting and actional context. This involves, in part, the shift from an illustrative to a performative sign system, as props illustrate setting whereas pantomime performs setting. The significance of stage props, costumes, and dialogue is accordingly diminished, and their functions are transferred to other performative sign systems.

Van Itallie constantly plays with the combinational possibilities of such fragmented and rapidly shifting scenes and turns them into a discontinuous pattern of mere surface actions. The accelerating pace and the fleeting presentation of the scenes deny the audience any idea of consistent characterization and/or plot development. The speed of

the presentation and its provocative discontinuities imitate and, in part, foreshadow contemporary TV presentations with their fast-paced succession of commercials, video-clips, and self-contained mini-episodes. In "Interview," however, the combinational pattern of the scenes is not entirely random but rather contingent upon the play's underlying musical structure, namely that of the fugue. As its subtitle, "A Fugue for Eight Actors," indicates, the play presents an array of thematic units in the form of a fugue. The fugal structure of the play appears most obviously in the question and answer sections, which emulate a contrapuntal structure materializing in a rapid succession of various thematic motifs in different keys.[2] Each interviewer evokes in his questions a specific theme and adds it to an accelerating succession of quasi-musical components (20). Van Itallie is highly aware of the musical organizing principle of his play, mostly relying on rhythm and polyphonic variation:

> Sometimes I work from an abstract place, almost like a musical form. I did that in my play *Interview*, where you could practically map it out: AB, ABC, ABCD, AABCD, AABBCD, AABBCCD, etc.; it was more or less a fugal structure.[3]

And it is this self-conscious program of musical composition that makes "Interview" a challenging experiment in dramatic form and a metadramatic reflection on formal patterns.

Van Itallie's stress on processes of signification other than verbal/spoken language also points to a different function of language in postmodern plays. As rhythm and musical structure govern performance and presentation, the dramatic text is downgraded to a subordinate element. At the root of this change is a different concept of text in postmodern drama. A typical play in the postmodern vein, "Interview" graphically demonstrates the ways in which aspects of performance have come to dominate textual aspects in drama. Although there is still a rudimentary text in "Interview," as opposed to purely performative pieces, this text has been turned into a printed score loosely prear-

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2 In his *Book on the Open Theatre*, Robert Pasolli identifies in "Interview" eight arias followed by a closing choral with aria motifs and preceded by an oratorio with an opening chorus (89).

3 Van Itallie, "A Reinvention of Form," *The Drama Review* 21 (1977): 69.

ranging and suggesting performative patterns which are the real issue of the play. Consequently, we are faced with an almost paradoxical situation in which the "text is as much the result as the precondition of performance."[4]

The performative patterns of the play are also rooted in the idea of theater as a *present* event taking place in the here and now. Performance aims at present-ation rather than re-presentation, that is, it attempts to stage a present—rather than re-presented—action on stage and thus hinges on the idea of dramatic presence. Van Itallie demonstrably plays with the idea of presence versus representation. One of his devices is to create prototypical situations rather than a coherent story as the result of personal interaction. In "Interview," the traditional function of attributing speech to specific characters is abandoned in favor of an attempt to create specific situations as the result of independent patterns of situational discourse. In order to convey the situative moment, van Itallie problematizes the traditional idea of dramatic presence. Along these lines, the dialogue parts of the play use indirect speech and the past tense to indicate a sense of deferred presence. As the characters employ indirect speech and the past tense in their present dialogues, the very notion of dramatic presence is undercut and revealed as illusory:

> FIRST APPLICANT. Thanks, I said.
>
> SECOND APPLICANT. I said thanks.
>
> THIRD APPLICANT. Thank you, I said.
>
> FOURTH APPLICANT. I said thank you. (30)[5]

Though the applicants speak their lines in a given present moment, their messages refer to an event in the past, namely the moment in which they actually said "Thank you." This constellation highlights certain tensions generally inherent in the postmodern notion of pres-

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4 Herbert Grabes, "Performance Theater" 6.

5 Obviously, such schematic dialogic passages also betray an absurdist influence and are reminiscent of the dialogic patterns established between Estragon and Pozzo in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

ence and its illusory character. On the one hand, the above passage communicates the impression of a present action, namely of something happening at this very moment. On the other hand, the use of the past tense immediately revokes this impression and suggests retrospective narration. Theatrical immediacy is thus invariably challenged. It suggests that theater presents an event of the past, but it does so in terms of a present action. Dramatic performances are thus paradoxical in nature, and it is this very condition which is demonstrated and unfolded on the stage.

Van Itallie also turns to film in his dramatic experiments in order to endorse the spatial orientation of the play. He extensively adapts cinematic techniques like slow motion, close-up, and freeze to the stage. The party scene in "Interview" exemplifies the author's use of the slow motion technique. The actors in this scene play various aspects pertinent to a party, mostly in pantomime and in slow motion (45). The singular moment of a prototypical scene exposes the fragmentary nature of the social encounter and presents it as a spatial exhibit. Van Itallie further underlines the impression of a spatial exhibit when he has the action come to a complete halt in a freeze: the Girl/First Interviewer goes from person to person "as if she were in a garden of living statues" (45). All actors, except for the girl, remain in the position of a given pose. Time seems to have stopped, and the moment is stretched out in space, drawing attention to nothing but its pictorial representation that reflects upon itself. Towards the end of the play, van Itallie again uses the freeze to similar effects. In the middle of a lively, chatty conversation the actors come to a complete stop and freeze in their poses (54). It is as if the action were suspended for a moment and its meaning displayed in a telling tableau. The actors then continue to move, freeze again, and go back to slow motion. In this way, van Itallie dissects movement and then exhibits its fragments as in a museum showcase. The tableau parts of the scene focus on spatial aspects of the play and serve to enlarge theatrical space. At the same time, this process annihilates the motivation of personal gestures and action which can no longer be considered idiosyncratic expressions of a given character but must be conceived of as a product of spatial relations and dramatic sign systems.

Simultaneity of speech and spatial presentations of meaning have drastic consequences for the usage and significance of dialogue in drama. In "Interview," van Itallie consequently goes beyond dialogue

as a vehicle of meaningful communication between characters. Dialogue only occurs in a disjointed fashion that confronts the audience with the unrelated fragments of a communicative situation. Lack of communication between characters adds but another instance to their disconnectedness. Efforts at communicating with each other are also sometimes rendered in the visual terms of pantomime. Evoking patterns from the choreography of dance, some applicants are seen jumping on interviewers' backs (33) or leap-frogging them (35). In such scenes, the audience is confronted with a dramatic sign system (pantomime) that was formerly at best a secondary sign system of drama but is now foregrounded and assumes a primary role in the suggestion of meaning, even if meaning as a viable concept is called into question.

The party scene of the play provides more examples of the impossibility of dialogue and valid communication. It is not only that nobody listens carefully to the girl's tragic story, she is not even noticed by the other party guests and consequently treated as a blank (45). The girl resigns and proclaims her own—metaphorical—death as the ultimate expression of her existence. As a comment on the postmodern condition of human beings, the party scene thus demonstrates the radical effacement of individual existence in an environment dominated by medial patterns.

The subsequent scene at the psychiatrist also demonstrates the emptiness and meaninglessness of communication and reveals it as a clichéd babble of ritualized pseudo-dialogic fragments. As a parody on a specific form of idiosyncratic discourse, the psychiatrist's response to the patient/third applicant reads:

> Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, HOSTILE.
>
> Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, PENIS.
>
> Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, MOTHER.
>
> *(holding out his hand)*
>
> Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, MONEY. (47)

Communication here consists exclusively of clichés, stereotypical phrases, catchwords, and blanks, as expressed in the empty marker "blah." The idea of the blank is also mirrored in the setting of the scene which is described as equally white and impersonal as are the detached reactions of the players in the scene. The blank, in this context, signifies the absence of any depth of character or authenticity of self on the part of the figures involved in this episode. As there is neither character, self, nor meaning in "Interview," the following task will remain impossible:

> FIRST INTERVIEWER. Fill in the blank space, please. (15)

Apart from the play's setting and dialogue, the masks worn by some figures signify impersonality and express the concept of the blank signifier. The interviewers are seen wearing plastic masks during the employment agency scene. The mask here veils a character's supposed personal identity and creates an artificial image instead. Moreover, masks render the figures involved in the action replaceable and also indicate an ethical attitude, for instance, when the subway passengers "form their faces into frozen masks of indifference" (43). Masking in "Interview" thus creates the impression of an artificial, inhumane environment underscored by alienating effects, such as impersonal speech patterns and the reduction of characters to interchangeable role performers. Curiously enough, though, the masks in "Interview" are described as translucent. This might be read to indicate that somewhere there are still residues of character which we notice when we manage to see through the surface of the masked appearance of people in a postmodern world.

Equally important, masking helps to create an image of the "perfect people" of the Open Theater's exercises in van Itallie's play. The "perfect people" of the media are frequently seen as wearing masks and thus suggest models of appearance to be imitated by others. Without the guidance of such models, the fourth applicant claims to feel "lost," even though he seems to get a fair amount of advice in this matter: "The paper said—the television said—they said" (40). In "Interview," people are shown to be modeled after popular media celebrities, which entails wearing their respective masks. The goal envisioned becomes that of simulating the behavior of such media celebrities:

> GYM INSTRUCTOR. You wanna look like the guys in the movies, don't you, I said to the fellahs. Keep it up then. You wanna radiate that kinda charm and confidence they have in the movies, don't you, I said to the girls. [...] You're selling, selling all the time, that right, miss? (41-42)

The charm and confidence people display in the movies is, of course, largely illusory and sheer make-believe. Moreover, their simulation is motivated by the aims and presuppositions of a rampant consumer culture: What finally counts is "selling all the time." In this context, any presentation of the self is to be guided by effective transfiguration and posing, as the preceding stage direction informs us:

> *(The Gym Instructor is trying to help his students mold themselves into the kind of people seen in advertisements and the movies. As he counts to four the students puff out their chests, smile, and look perfectly charming. As he counts to four again, the students relax and look ordinary.)* (41)

The process of molding students into celebrities corresponds to the Open Theater's acting technique of transformation. The students in the gym practice scene pose as if they were on camera. In an imitation of TV spots, they emulate celebrities who habitually assume a role on command, only to drop it as soon as they are not on camera any more. Hence, the role models of the media are shown as deceptive and implying a constant manipulation of appearances at the expense of authentic being.

In "Interview," even people's desires seem to be predefined by what they see on the TV screen. The pervasive power of a commercialized media culture to determine our needs shows when the Third Applicant admits: "I like to have a can of beer in my hand when I watch the beer ads" (46). The TV programs of all available channels sicken him, however, and this sickness is described in terms of a panic attack which makes the applicant lament that there is nothing

> to grab on to, something to look at [...]. I tried to get a hold of myself. [...] I've had little moments like that before, Doctor, I said, panicky little moments like when the earth seems to slip out from under, and everything whirls around and you try to hold onto some-

> thing, some object, some thought, but I couldn't think of anything. (47)

In such scenes, "Interview" graphically presents the postmodern condition of society and individual self as dominated by the ubiquitous influence of the media. The postmodern media, in whatever form, shape and design contemporary lives and provide blueprints for an artificial sense of self while, at the same time, being able to conceal their pervasive power. But van Itallie's dramatic experiments in "Interview" relentlessly expose the spectacle of a thoroughly mediatized and thus dehumanized society in rapid decay and, in doing so, turn the playwright's art political in every sense of the word.

III.2 "TV": The Screen Takes Over

The second part of *America Hurrah* is the one-act play "TV." As "Interview" and "Motel," this part of the trilogy offers a biting critique of postmodern society under the pervasive influence of the electronic media and the reign of an ubiquitous entertainment industry.[1]

"TV" portrays the television researchers Hal, Susan, and George whose job it is to supervise television programs.[2] On stage, their workplace is located downstage right. They sit at a control console of a television viewing room with the console facing the audience. Above this console, also facing the audience, is a screen which initially displays the logo of a television station. The stage in "TV" is split: at the back of the stage we find five actors who portray what appears on television. While they refrain from making any costume changes, their acting style is described as "cool, not pushy" (64), having at their disposal a very restricted repertoire of expressions, "facial masks, such as 'cute', 'charming', and 'serious'" (64). Their behavior appears to be channeled into a limited and simplified set of basic categories devoid of individual nuances. The detached behavior of these figures is further supported by the setting of the play which is reminiscent of "Interview" in its whiteness and impersonality.

The five figures enacting various television programs at first occupy a separate and closed space, as do Hal, Susan, and George downstage right. The separation of the figures on TV from the people in the control room signals two clearly demarcated worlds or levels of reality projected in the play, the fictitiously re-presented world of the screen and the actually present world of the control room. This particular

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1 "TV" originally premiered as part of *America Hurrah* at the Pocket Theatre in New York City on November 7, 1966.

2 All further references to the play are taken from the following edition: van Itallie, "TV," *America Hurrah and Other Plays* (New York: Grove P, 1978), 57-134.

setting becomes instrumental for van Itallie's radical problematization of the assumed split between the two worlds, which are gradually seen merging in a movement that apparently cannot be avoided.

As the play progresses, the original dividing line between the two worlds is gradually obliterated and the "People On Television" begin to occupy more and more of the stage. A closer look at this process reveals the many forms their invasion assumes. The contestation of space first turns into a bodily occupation of the television viewing room: the TV actors trespass the barrier between the two worlds and crowd around the control console of the viewing room. They become actual physical obstacles for Hal, Susan, and George who are increasingly forced to maneuver around them (64-65). It is at this point that the play first suggests that media creations are prone to usurp any environment or reality which naively invites them to its own confines.

The invasion of the one world by the other also takes the form of a verbal and ideological contestation. In the beginning, the actors on TV remain mute, and the audience only listens to the dialogue between Susan, Hal, and George. Occasionally, the actors are "turned on" for a given television segment, but then they fall silent again and freeze until the next segment. As soon as they are "turned on" for their respective presentations, the audience is confronted with two simultaneous sets of action. This parallel structure of events is also clearly marked in the play's script. The text is printed in two columns; the left column features the lines and stage directions for those in the control room, the right column provides the text and directions for those on the TV screen. The contestation of different realities, stories, and spaces is thus typographically embodied in the dramatic score. Yet a closer look at the situation reveals that the realities and stories on TV and in the viewing room are not entirely different after all. In many instances, they correlate as far as content is concerned. The two TV characters named "He" and "She," for instance, talk about getting together in their apartment in much the same way Hal and Susan talk about going out together and meeting in Susan's apartment. Both couples display an equally hopeful attitude at the end of their conversations (113-115). They model their own fragmentary communication after what is displayed on the screen. The play "TV" and the TV program presented in it are thus a perfect case in point of Umberto Eco's media theory as discussed above. The TV program epitomizes a constant flow by presenting a fragmented and fast-paced succession of

advertisements, news items, interviews, and particles of sitcoms or popular TV shows. Thus, it resembles the structure of a movie trailer. And as this program invades the "real" world of Hal, Susan, and George, it also shapes their views, dreams, and concerns. Gradually, the actors on television occupy more and more of the stage and thus encroach upon the lives of Hal, Susan, and George by dominating their topics of communication, their attitudes and views, and finally even their dialogue patterns. It is another case of "perfect people" prescribing the shape and course of other people's lives. Susan, for one, seems constantly concerned with her weight and looks for reassuring comments from Hal and George. On this foil, Hal's reply to Susan's concern is highly ironical when he exclaims: "Just let nature take its course" (63). After all, it is the idea of nature that is contested in the advertising world of the perfect people and then superseded by a second or simulated nature offered on TV as the perfect substitute for the real thing.

The perfect people of the American media culture thus become role models for "ordinary" people like Hal, Susan, and George who are irresistibly drawn into the fictitious world of the media. For example, when a TV celebrity appropriately named Lily Heaven appears on the screen, George and Hal find themselves mesmerized by this glamorous figure (104). In another instance of striking parallelism between the two worlds, the TV series "My Favorite Teenager" delivers the model scenario for the reactions of the three TV watchers. As the TV family ponders the question of the perfect companion for their daughter's prom night, the observers in the control room engage in a parallel discussion of the issue. The dialogue sequences of the correlating scenes echo one another or are verbatim the same:

	MOTHER
	What about Johnny Beaumont?
HAL	
What about George?	
SUSAN	DAUGHTER
What about him?	What about him?

HAL	MOTHER
Well, I guess it's	Well, I guess it's
none of my business.	none of my business.
GEORGE *(returning)*	FATHER
What's the matter?	What's the matter?
	(Slide [...])
SUSAN	DAUGHTER
Nothing.	Nothing. (130)

In the end, van Itallie's play seems to suggest that it is impossible to tell media images apart from their real-world equivalents. But more than this, a third level of presentation is introduced in the course of the play, which features slide projections that function as extensions of the world displayed on stage. In the final scene of "TV," Hal, Susan, and George are literally doubled: We see their images on a slide projection side by side with their real appearances, and a stage direction describes the slide as showing "Hal, Susan, and George with the same facial expressions they now have on stage" (134). According to the stage direction, their faces are frozen into laughing masks, which suggests the soundless appearance of a ghostly image. The present performance on stage is thus juxtaposed with its redoubled image that duplicates it in an act of competitive simulation. Even after the curtain call, we see the performers in the same position they occupied during the play. The acquired masks remain, having superseded any natural image. In general terms, the medium of theater is appropriate to demonstrate the involved tensions between authenticity and simulation, presence and representation. Van Itallie uses the method of transformation to its full potential and reflects a process which leads to the superimposition of simulation on authenticity and reality, of the represented on the presented.

In "TV," Hal, Susan, and George finally become mere duplicates and imitations of media images. Consequently, they speak and think like standard situation-comedy characters at the end of the play. In

figurative as well as literal terms, they have lost the distance necessary to distinguish themselves from, let alone to deal critically with, the TV programs they scrutinize. The experiences of Hal, Susan, and George visually demonstrate how people are drawn into the encompassing system of the media world and made to abandon their own identities. Group icons effectively replace individuality.[3] The result is their conversion to a 'closed system' which van Itallie describes in his play and Marshall McLuhan diagnoses in the epigraph. This epigraph is a quotation from McLuhan's *Understanding Media* and it reads:

> The youth Narcissus mistook his own reflection in the water for another person... He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system. (57)[4]

Like the legendary Narcissus, Hal, Susan, and George see their reflections in the television presentations they were originally meant to supervise, and come to view these reflections as veritable extensions of themselves. Thus they are unable to defend their personal space against the intrusions of their media-controlled reflections and fall victim to artificial creations they have themselves helped to empower.

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3 See also Marshall McLuhan's discussion of the effect of the media on the individual in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* esp. 230.

4 McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 57.

III.3 "Motel": Cyborgean Visions of American Motel Culture

Part three of *America Hurrah*, "Motel," is a startling play of postmodern transformation in many ways.[1] If the characters of "TV" are gradually turned into mere copies of media images, "Motel" only features artificial dolls from the beginning. What was formerly known as the cast of characters now consists of the Motel-Keeper doll, a Man and a Woman doll, and the disembodied Motel-Keeper's voice. These dolls function as mechanical agents in the play's orgy of destruction and violence: in the course of the action, the Man and Woman dolls will destroy both the motel room and the Motel-Keeper doll. The dolls themselves are mute, accompanied only by the soliloquy of the Motel-Keeper's voice and by different kinds of non-verbal noise.

The play's subtitle, "A Masque for Three Dolls," not only draws our attention to the conspicuous cast of characters but also introduces the play's structural pattern, namely that of the courtly masque. As a Renaissance form of entertainment, the courtly masque combines poetic drama, music, song, dance, elaborate costuming, and stage spectacle.[2] From a contemporary perspective, the masque could, in many ways, be referred to as a multi-media show offering a pattern that van Itallie adapts to "Motel." Similar to the courtly masque, "Motel" con-

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1 "Motel" was written in 1962 and premiered at Ellen Stewart's Off-Off-Broadway LaMama Experimental Theater Club on April 28, 1965. All references are to the following edition of the play, *America Hurrah and Other Plays* (New York: Grove P, 1978), 135-143. For a detailed account of the process of writing and producing "Motel," see Plunka, *Off-Broadway* Ch. 2.

2 On the function and structure of the court masque, see David Lindley, Introduction, *The Court Masque* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), 1-15; David Bevington and Peter Holbrook, Introduction, *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 1-19.

sists of more than its textual script and attributes a significant role to spectacle and dancing, both of which were considered the main events in the Renaissance model. The characters of the courtly masque wore masks which they doffed for the final dance of the performance. This dancing element is taken up in van Itallie's play by the Motel-Keeper doll who is described as "fuss[ing] about the room in little circles" (136) and by the Man and Woman dolls who, in the process of demolishing the motel room, twist to loud rock-and-roll music (142).

But it is precisely the grotesque violence and the ludicrous action that puts "Motel" in the vicinity of yet another traditional form, the so-called anti-masque. Developed by Ben Jonson, the anti-masque depicts both characters and action as equally unruly and grotesque. With its broad humor this particular variant of the courtly masque acted as a foil to the orderly and ceremonious character of the masque proper.[3] For Jonson, the anti-masque provided a "space in which [he] could give expression to what he saw as unruliness in court politics."[4] Van Itallie's postmodern masque follows a similar agenda. The play "Motel," written in 1962 and performed for the first time in 1965, delineates and foreshadows the political climate of the turbulent 1960s and the high degree of violence prevalent in this particular decade. By the time of its first performance, the civil rights movement had gained momentum and the public protests against the Vietnam War were escalating. The assassinations of political leaders John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr., the student revolt and the occurrences at Kent State University, as well as the violent upheavals of the counter-culture contributed largely to the turmoil of the decade. The violence in van Itallie's play seems to have been at least partly instigated by the political and social events of this time. Written as early as 1962, however, "Motel" rather reflects the growing disposition for violence and the high degree of latent violence typical for the political and social climate of the early 1960s.

As a matter of fact, the very beginning of the play conjures up an image of war, destruction, and death when the Motel-Keeper's voice evokes

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3 See Hugh Craig, "Jonson, the antimasque and the 'rules of flattery,'" *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque*, ed. David Bevington and Peter Holbrook (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 176-196.

4 Bevington and Holbrook, Introduction 12.

> [a] Roman theatre where cheers break loose the lion; a railroad carriage in the forest at Compiègne, in 1918, and in 1941. I have been rooms of marble and rooms of cork, all letting forth an avalanche. Rooms of mud and rooms of silk. This room will be slashed too, as if by a scimitar, its content spewed and yawned out. (137)

Van Itallie's "Motel" depicts a "savage" vision appropriately expressed in the play's original title, "The Savage God."[5] Only later was the play retitled "America Hurrah" and then, eventually, "Motel." In addition to outside social and political impulses, the motivation for this "savage" vision lay partly in the author's personal frustration over the negative reception of his earlier plays, partly in the attempt to disrupt the confines of conventional theater. In hindsight, van Itallie classifies "Motel" among his angriest plays:

> Years ago I wrote the play *Motel*. I started with a feeling of great anger. I was really angry, angry that nobody had been liking my three-act conventional plays that were trying to please everybody. [...] All of me was involved in wanting to tear down, wanting to break through.[6]

The powerful effort to "tear down" and to destroy theatrical conventions as well as societal norms came as a shock to a mostly middle-class audience, horrifying them by the blatant demonstration of America's potential for violence and destruction. The play's orgy of deliberate cruelty vividly expresses van Itallie's anger, and at the same time betrays Antonin Artaud's Theater of Cruelty as theatrical ancestor. A catalyst for generations of playwrights, Artaud had advocated a form of total theater which was meant to appeal to all senses and, through its immediacy, effect a complete physical, mental, and moral upheaval

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5 The original title "The Savage God" was taken from W. B. Yeats's *The Trembling of the Veil*. Van Itallie uses the very last lines of book four, "The Tragic Generation," as an epigraph to the play. Curiously enough, Yeats wrote these lines after having been to the first performance of Alfred Jarry's epoch-making *Ubu Roi*: "[...] after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm, after the faint mixed tints of Condor, what more is possible? After us the Savage God" (135). W. B. Yeats, *The Trembling of the Veil*, *Autobiographies* (1955; Basingstoke, London: Macmillan, 1977), 107-382; 349.

6 Jean-Claude van Itallie, "Reinvention of Form" 67.

among the audience. And indeed, "Motel" comes as an extremely unsettling agitation of the spectators' minds. Van Itallie explicitly directs his attack at the "the sensory nerves of the audience," which are, as the stage directions prescribe, "not to be spared" (136).[7]

In "Motel," the atmosphere of threat is intensified by the provocative appearance of the three figures on stage. Their features are exaggerated and grotesque; they are larger than human size, particularly the dolls' heads are supposed to be at least three times as large as would be normal, and the Motel-Keeper doll is clad in a grotesque costume: she is entirely gray, wears a "large full skirt which reaches to the floor," "has squarish breasts," "the hair curlers on her head suggest electronic receivers," and she wears eyeglasses which function as mirrors (136). The costume of the Man and Woman dolls, which they will take off in the course of the play, reflects the coloring of the room with its "violent combinations of oranges, pinks, and reds" (136). Whereas the Motel-Keeper doll's movements are restricted (the actor inside it can only move the doll's arms or its entire body), the Man and Woman dolls enjoy more mobility. Significantly, there is "no rapport" between the Motel-Keeper doll and the Man and Woman (138). "Motel" destroys the illusion of the presence of living human beings. Rather, the masking is complete in this play; we only see dolls on the stage. Dialogue is absent from the play and there is only the continuous soliloquy of the disembodied Motel-Keeper's Voice. The human body is concealed and replaced by its simulations.

Even though the dolls are not machines proper, the restricted movements, the electronic voice, the lack of interaction and emotion, the expressionless bodies and the mechanically stylized acting convey the impression of inhuman, machine-like mutants. Van Itallie has effectively transformed the concept of character into a version of the postmodern cyborg. The cyborg is commonly defined as a "cyb(ernetic)org(anism)" or a "hypothetical human being modified for life in a hostile or alien environment by the substitution of artificial organs and other body parts."[8] Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto"

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7 All conceptual differences notwithstanding, the similarities between van Itallie and Artaud are striking. Artaud also wanted to "attack the spectator's sensibility on all sides" and aimed at waking up the spectators' "nerves and heart." He also laments the theater's loss of "immediate and violent action." See Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double* 86; 84; 84.

8 See "Cyborg," in *Webster's New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed. 2000.

further specifies that the cyborg is "a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as of fiction."[9] The notion of the cyborg thus focuses on the interface between the body and technology, crossing the boundaries between both, and the dolls in "Motel" reveal themselves as genuine cyborgs in this respect.[10]

The cyborgean dolls in van Itallie's play, however, are not only updated copies of pre-existing models such as the automaton, but, rather, their exaggerated, manipulated features express a postmodern fascination with what Gabriele Schwab has referred to as the "grotesque body."[11] The fragmented and grotesque body deliberately draws attention to its artificiality. This disembodiment is able to transcend the confines of the body, and contemporary technology, above all media technology, makes these bodily transformations possible. The figures in "Motel" are hybrids, comprising the natural as well as the non-natural. Van Itallie's hybrid characters thus question the idea of human identity and encapsulate a version of the technological Other. Above all, the Man and Woman dolls display the blatant markers of restrictive and simplified notions of femininity and masculinity and correspond to the "highly gendered" cyborg as described by Schwab. Such "plastic cyborgs" are, according to Schwab, role and behavior models, they are "soldiers that transform into guns, cars that convert into robots, voice-transformers that change the human voice into a robot voice."[12] In this sense, van Itallie's "Motel" might even have been a major inspiration for Schwab's observations on the postmodern cyborg. Van Itallie's cyborgs reflect the "cyborgization" of contemporary society at large, and this "cyborgization" has to be conceived of as a process of transformation in which characters are con-

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9 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (New York: Routledge, 2000), 291.

10 More precisely, Gabriele Schwab argues that the "cyborg is a descendant of the human automaton" because the latter is "a product of the mechanical age" whereas the former "is a product of the new age of electronic technologies and computers" (200). See Gabriele Schwab, "Cyborgs and Cybernetic Intertexts: On Postmodern Phantasms of Body and Mind," *Intertextuality and Contemporary Fiction*, ed. Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989), 191-213.

11 Schwab, "Cyborgs and Cybernetic Intertexts" 193. Schwab, in turn, reverts to Bakhtin's concept of the "grotesque."

12 Schwab, "Cyborgs and Cybernetic Intertexts" 195.

verted into versions of the cyborg. And yet, this process does not end at the fragmentation and dispersal of a sense of self, it rather foreshadows a new cyborgean variation of self which allows a reassemblage of fragmented parts and the reconstruction, however evanescent, of what Schwab has called "a holonomy of the subject."[13] This new concept of cybernetic 'wholeness' does not entail the return to a unified origin and sense of self; it means that the blurring of boundaries between the human and the technological can lead to an extension and transformation of the human realm.

Viewed from a slightly different perspective, van Itallie's cyborgean dolls function as masks which do not simply reproduce human features but draw attention to their deformations by means of exaggeration; the masks rather quote human features.[14] By thus quoting the human and the natural, the mask emphasizes sameness as well as difference and, in the case of femininity and masculinity, is able to expose the constructedness and artificiality of such concepts.

The play involves the audience in these issues by designing a form of audience address. The Motel-Keeper doll has mirrors as eyeglasses which may, depending on the doll's movements and position on stage, offer a mirror image of the spectators in the audience. Van Itallie is aware that the "audience may occasionally catch a glimpse of itself, or be bothered by reflections of light in the mirrors" (136). This particular contrivance draws the audience into the spectacle, as in the traditional masque when it would join the players for the concluding dance. The mirror image comprises both differences and similarities with regard to the original self and is a site where identity formation and transformation can take place in the ongoing game of sameness and difference.

It is within this game of difference and sameness that, at the end of the play, the actor working the Motel-Keeper doll slips out of the costume before the Man and Woman doll tear off the head. It is at this point, too, that the split between actor and character is clearly made visible. In "Motel," the actor puts on a deliberately distorted costume

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13 For Schwab's detailed argumentation, see "Cyborgs and Cybernetic Intertexts" 204-205.

14 See Boris Oguibenine, "Mask in the Light of Semiotics—A Functional Approach," *Semiotica* 13 (1975): 5. Even though Oguibenine focuses on ritual masking, his observations are conducive to understanding theatrical masking as well.

to express the fragmented nature of the concept of character and, by analogy, of the self. The schism between voice and movement in "Motel" enforces this notion of the fragmented self. The dolls themselves are mute, and the talking in the play is done by the Motel-Keeper's Voice which comes from loudspeakers on stage. The technologically produced voice enhances the perception of a cyborgean atmosphere as it produces a strong sense of alienation and suggests the inability to communicate. The voice as the epitome of the self is severed from the body, and speech in the play is generated by an electronic voice from the off. The body is hence alienated from its function of producing speech. The dramatic character as a former entity has largely disappeared and, instead, it is split up into a disembodied voice and an artificial body bereft of human expressive qualities.

The co-presence of live actor and puppet on stage creates a tension between the theatrical and the metatheatrical level and evokes as a further theatrical ancestor the puppet theater tradition of the Japanese *bunraku*.[15] It is the specific use of puppetry in van Itallie's "Motel" that most clearly points to this tradition: the co-presence, even confrontation, of puppet, operator, and narrator is held to be characteristic of *bunraku*. As Jan Kott observes in his very perceptive examination of *bunraku*:

> Bunraku is simultaneously a theatre in which the puppets act human drama [...] and a metatheatre, whose protagonists are the manipulators operating the puppets, the narrator and the samisen; metatheatre, whose dramatic action consists of revealing the theatrical illusion.[16]

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15 Even though the separation between voice and movement may very well originate in *bunraku* traditions, Frank Proschan argues that examples of it could easily have been found much closer to home, as, for instance, in traditions of French drama, particularly fairground performances of 18th century Paris. Proschan, "The Semiotic Study of Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects," *Semiotica* 47 (1983): 20.

16 Jan Kott, "Bunraku and Kabuki, or, about Imitation," *Salmagundi* 34 (1976): 100. In contrast, Roland Barthes places more emphasis on the separation of puppet, operator, and narrator. Barthes, "Lesson in Writing," *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (1968; New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 170-178. For an introduction to the study of puppets and masks in performance, see Frank Proschan, "The Semiotic Study of Puppets, Masks, and Performing Ob-

The former unity of actor and character along with the notion of a unified self dissolves and splits up into manipulator, protagonist, and puppet. At the same time, this metatheatrical reflection underlines van Itallie's pronounced interest in developing and transforming dramatic form.

The postmodern notion of the self, open to dissemination and copying, influenced and designed by the media, is not conducive to a dynamic dialogic relationship. These circumstances are at the root of the predilection for monologue in "Motel." Without going into the details of the history of monologic speech in drama, suffice it here to say that in traditional drama monologue was mainly used to focus attention on the single speaking subject, mostly suggesting introspection, voicing interior feelings or thoughts, and, at times, involving a revelation. The famous psychological soliloquy of Shakespeare may readily come to mind when the topic of monologue is broached.[17] In "Motel," however, monologue is adapted to the postmodern sense of self and thus equally disturbing, dislocated, and fragmented. This Voice's monologue does not express the idiosyncrasies of a character and, rather, remains within the idiom of advertising and describes in some detail the furnishings of the motel room. The room is described in hackneyed clichés as "anonymously modern" with "'homey' touches" and its colors are "violent combinations of oranges, pinks, and reds against a reflective plastic background"; the TV set, moreover, is described as "glar[ing] viciously" (136). Particularly the "'homey' touches" appropriately express the mediated, simulated homeliness of a postmodern world.

The play's setting and lighting enhance the cyborgean nature of "Motel." They stress the "sensory nerves" of the audience, and van Itallie extensively and self-consciously uses the expressive qualities of lighting in the play. In the initial stage directions, van Itallie specifies that the lights come up on the Motel-Keeper doll and will increase in intensity in the course of the play (135). The very beginning targets the audience's sensory nerves: when the back door of the stage opens,

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jects" 3-44. John Bell also provides an extensive overview on this area of research. See Bell, "Puppets, Masks, and Performing Objects at the End of the Century," *The Drama Review* 43.3 (1999): 15-27.

17 For a more detailed overview of forms and functions of monologue in drama, see Ch. 1 of Deborah Geis' study *Postmodern Theatric[k]s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993), 7-28.

headlights will shine into the eyes of the audience and the Man and Woman will appear in silhouette in front of the headlights (137).

The dolls and the set underline that this theater focuses on sign systems other than verbal language; the play, one could argue, even takes place in these sign systems. Towards the end of the play verbal language is superseded by a non-signifying general noise which eventually overwhelms the litany of the Motel-Keeper's voice (143). Various kinds of sound as, for instance, a siren and music, become overpowering and drown the Motel-Keeper's voice. "Motel" ends in the utter havoc of a doomsday-scenario as the Man and Woman, having destroyed the room, tear off the Motel-Keeper's arms and head and throw the body aside:

> *(The rock and roll music gets louder and louder. A civil-defense siren, one long wail, begins to build. The Man and Woman dolls proceed methodically to greater and greater violence. They smash the TV screen and picture frames. They pull down the remaining curtains, smash the window, throw bits of clothing and bedding around, and finally tear off the arms of the Motel-Keeper doll.)* (142-143)

The difference between the human and the material world is entirely obliterated in "Motel" when the Motel-Keeper is destroyed along with the material objects in the room. This action is almost literally announced by the Voice in the beginning of the play when it claims: "I am this room" (137). The voice thus asserts the interchangeability between objects and human subjects, or, the collapse of the distinction between subject and object in the notion of the cyborg.

Eventually the play's nightmare of violence and destruction evokes the notion of a cleansing ritual that is directed towards the audience. Van Itallie redesigns the traditional form of the audience address when he has the stage lights shine directly into the audience's eyes, adding fans that blow air onto the audience. The audience cannot elude its involvement in the action, even less so when the play ends on an "instant more of excruciatingly loud noise" (143), followed by a blackout and silence. The horrifying action on stage fulfills an important function for the audience as it achieves a moment of presence in the actual performance in the theater.

The focus on different theatrical sign systems also affects the concept and function of plot. In this context, van Itallie reconfigures

the idea of plot development in drama. Even though "Motel" follows a climactic model of drama, it does not follow the concept of plot as, for instance, developed in Szondi's classical model of drama. Plot development in "Motel" mostly takes place on the non-verbal plane. As the violence of the Man and Woman dolls increases, the light grows harsher and brighter as does the Motel-Keeper's tone of voice, which takes on a "patronizing and petty" ring (136).

There is a striking correlation between the condition of the motel room at a given time in the play and the Voice's sentence structure. Both language and material environment are gradually being taken apart in the play. Language, setting, and the bodies of the dolls are dismembered and reduced to mere fragments. Towards the end of the play, the Voice no longer utters complete sentences but instead produces short advertising slogans and then continues to simply list items from a mail-order catalogue:

> MOTEL-KEEPER'S VOICE. Complete Security, Security While You Sleep Tight, Bury Your Troubles At This Motel, Homelike, Very Comfy, and Encased In Lead, Every Room Its Own Set, Fourteen Day Emergency Supplies $ 5.00 Extra,
>
> [...]
>
> MOTEL-KEEPER'S VOICE. Self-Contained Latrine Waters, Filters, Counters, Periscopes and Mechanical Doves, Hooked Rugs, Dearest Little Picture Frames for Loved Ones—Made in Japan —through the catalogue. Cat-a-logue. You can pick items and products: cablecackles—so nice —cuticles, twice-twisted combs with corrugated calisthenics, meat-beaters, fish-tackles, bug bombs, toasted terra-cotta'd Tanganyikan switch blades, ochre closets, ping-pong balls, didies, Capricorn and Cancer prognostics, crackers, total uppers, stick pins, basting tacks... (142-143)

This enumeration of commodities from a mail-order catalogue consists mostly of silly, often entirely nonsensical gadgets with a deliberately homey touch and creates a crass, insensitive environment of unrestrained consumption; all in all, it is merchandise to be discarded

quickly. This world of consumer culture culminates in the superficial cleanliness of American motel culture and subsequently comes under attack in van Itallie's play. Language, communication, and material culture (the motel-room) along with human experience in general are as fragmented and cut-up as the presentation of the word "cat-a-logue" in the script of the play (143).

The room as well as the dolls are reduced to the status of objects. In fact, the Motel-Keeper doll postulates the identity of her self with this room.[18] The self has merged with the commodity cultural artifacts and appliances. The material as well as the supposedly human is destroyed as the latter category is superseded by an artificial replica of the human. The relationship between the 'characters' in the play leads Bigsby to conclude that "each character in the play relates to the other only as an object."[19] This objectification is also expressed in the play's predetermined structure, the masque, which is analogous to the fugue in "Interview."

All in all, the dystopian slant to the notion of the cyborg sets the tone for the play as a whole. The cyborg, as Haraway has it, does not "dream of community on the model of organic family [and] would not recognize the Garden of Eden."[20] The image figures as an indication of the arrival of a posthumanist culture as predicted by Hassan over twenty years ago. In "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?" he claims that

> [w]e need first to understand that the human form —including human desire and all its external representations—may be changing radically, and thus must be re-envisioned. We need to understand that five hundred years of humanism may be coming to an end, as humanism transforms itself to something that we must helplessly call posthumanism.[21]

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18 She says "I am this room" (137), see also the above discussion of this quotation.

19 Bigsby, *Beyond Broadway* 113.

20 Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto" 293.

21 Ihab Hassan, "Prometheus the Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?" *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, ed. Michel Benamou and Charles Caramello (Milwaukee: U of Wisconsin P, 1977), 212; 201-217. Curiously enough, Hassan's article is, similar to "Motel," subtitled "A University Masque in Five Scenes." Hassan approaches the lineaments of an emergent

The transformation of society into what "we must helplessly call posthumanism" seems to inform van Itallie's "Motel" as well. The play voices the grotesque discrepancy between the sanitized cleanliness of American motel culture and the violence prevalent in the same society. Accordingly, the image of the keeper, of order in general, is symbolically disembodied and eventually destroyed. "Motel" presents a cybernetic mirror in which we see not only a reflection of ourselves but also an image of our anxieties in a society with a considerable destructive potential. Hence the cyborgean dolls in "Motel" can be perceived as a foil onto which we project our anxieties associated with mediatized culture.

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Jean-Claude van Itallie shows one way of responding to the gripping influence of postmodernism on the American cultural scene. In his plays, he dramatizes the sense of self in postmodernity, focusing on the impact of mediatization on culture at large and the self in particular. He uses transformation both as an acting technique and as a vehicle to express the larger concerns of his postmodern dramatic agenda. Epitomizing the postmodern concern with self-referentiality, van Itallie's plays constitute a metadramatic reflection upon drama and its constituents. Dramatic form expresses the condition of postmodernity and investigates its effect on the postmodern sense of self. Van Itallie's postmodern theater of transformation depicts character and self as unstable and ever transforming residues of a formerly unique selfhood.

The method of transformation becomes a central organizing principle and metaphor for the postmodern theater as a whole. The concept of character has dissolved into mere role-playing. These roles

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culture in a performative way as different voices reflect upon posthumanist culture which, as the voice "Metatext" suggests, is mainly concerned with the relationship between "Imagination and Science, Myth and Technology [...] two realms tending to one" (207).

continually—and hazardously—transform into again other roles. The effects are visible in the notion of a self that is fragmented and dispersed, its alleged unity lost in postmodern play. A postmodern self mostly exists in simulated versions, which indicates how the media technology and the surface structure of the screen have influenced and shaped contemporary life. The concomitant concept of the voice as the epitome of the self is equally split as it is bereft of a body and mostly heard in its disembodied form leaving its origin unclear.

In the same way that van Itallie's postmodern plays obliterate a formerly rigid distinction between popular and high culture, they blur the boundaries of generic classifications. Postmodern drama is vastly intertextual as it incorporates patterns from TV shows, serials, commercials, popular movies, and other cultural expressions of contemporary consumerism. The prevalence of technological media in contemporary society, informed by mass and pop cultural art forms, is dramatized in its pervasive ideological as well as formal influence. It is, above all, the screen, nearly ubiquitous in contemporary society, that extends space, projects simulated realities, and destroys the illusion of a closed representable reality.

The postmodern plays discussed here are characterized by fragmentation in terms of narrative, plot, and character. They challenge and subvert the audience's notion of a "play," and evoke it only to destroy it again in a transformative move. Postmodern theater increasingly takes place within its own theatrical sign system, be it sound or movement, and playfully reflects upon its confines and restrictions. The postmodern play is no longer centered around a linear story line but, rather, around other criteria as, for instance, rhythmical or repetitive patterns.

The action on stage is separated into its elements. Van Itallie dramatizes the constituents of theater as dramatic signs and thus emphasizes the process of signification. What holds the plays together is rather an audio-visual rhythm and no longer unitary actants, in other words, characters. Put differently, the driving agent of action is no longer psychological but semiotic: the effects of visual or oral/aural sign systems.

In this context, the mediatization of culture produces the somewhat paradoxical situation of both an expansion and an implosion of space. Media technology overcomes physical limitations, which makes for the expansion of theatrical space. But also, it becomes in-

creasingly impossible to locate the body in these new, virtual spaces. The sense of self as well as that of corporeal reality and experience have collapsed; they have, to use Baudrillardian terminology, imploded.

The same holds true for the borderline between the (re)presented world and reality, which is not so much perceived but constructed through the camera and the screen image. Characters in the plays, mostly in "TV," are unable to distinguish between the real and the electronically mediated world; all are leveled to one stratum of mediated and continually transforming experience. The media are no longer addressed as media but have come to be accepted as reality itself. They do not have a concept of self at their disposal which enables characters and audience to recognize the conflict. Characters are at a loss for words and appear as "hollow," as blank signifiers in a discourse emptied of meaning. The sense of self is presented as decentered and conceived in terms of a space that is delineated by a disembodied voice, dissected movement, and the eye of the camera.

Van Itallie's plays and the postmodern theater of transformation in general reflect as much as create the condition of postmodernity to the effect that former distinctions between theory and practice collapse. Its most crucial features are located in the loss of a stable concept of reality and orientation, both of which have disappeared in an aesthetics of simulation and surface as much as endless transformations of accelerating speed. The idea of a unitary self has fallen prey to a postmodern medial aesthetics and thus becomes equally unstable and caught in continual transformations. The ideological effects of this paradigm shift are twofold: on the one hand, one might argue that this leads to a welcome de-hierarchization, even to liberalism; on the other hand, though, the outlook is bleak as it encompasses conformity and synchronization in a society rigidly dominated by the mechanics of consumer capitalism. Consequently, postmodern theater in the hands of practitioners like van Itallie transforms our notion of drama and theater as such and, along with it, the larger cultural-societal context and this way hopefully contributes to a reflection of the postmodern condition as the constitutive condition of our time.

IV Megan Terry and Rochelle Owens: Transformation and Postmodern Feminism

The so-called classical postmodernism of the 1960s in America appears to be a predominantly male movement. John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Ronald Sukenick, Robert Coover, Richard Brautigan, Ihab Hassan, Leslie Fiedler, along with many others, readily prove this suspicion—and Susan Sontag would probably be an exception to the rule. The French poststructuralist scene does not bring forth very different results. Even though the situation has changed considerably since then, this explains in part why the relationship between postmodernism and feminism has been rather problematic. Both movements, however, could benefit greatly from a reciprocal influence: Postmodernism would, among many other things, acquire very concrete political goals and thus be better equipped to meet the frequent challenge of its supposedly apolitical nature, whereas feminism would benefit from postmodernism's extensive theoretical framework. Feminism and postmodernism meet precisely at the intersection of the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodern critique of master narratives.[1] And yet, if feminism adopts the anti-foundationalist impulse of postmodernism, it also runs the risk of cutting the ground from under its basis in political action, that is the foundation of a politics based on difference of gender. Ultimately, a postmodern feminism is thus in danger of eradicating itself.[2] Many critics have tried to com-

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1 In the essay "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," Craig Owens investigates the frequently contested relationship between postmodernism and feminism. He corroborates the view that feminism and postmodernism cover common ground to a large extent and argues that their conjunction would bolster up both. See Owens in Hal Foster's seminal collection *The Anti-Aesthetic*.

2 A number of critics of the alliance between feminism and postmodernism have brought up this argument. Suffice it here to mention Meaghan Morris'

bine, if not to reconcile, feminism with its attempts at political action and postmodernism with its by and large philosophical agenda. Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson discuss the possibilities of a postmodern feminism trying to integrate "their respective strengths while eliminating their respective weaknesses."[3] They conclude by calling for a "postmodern-feminist theory [which] would be pragmatic and fallibilistic."[4]

This debate raises the question of the ways in which the "crossing" of postmodernism and feminism can be fruitfully put into—theatrical—practice. In this context, the French critic Hélène Cixous makes an interesting observation with regard to women, feminism, and the contemporary theater. In "Aller à la mer," Cixous deplores that she stopped going to the theatre long ago. "It was," she says, "like going to my own funeral."[5] A better theater, according to Cixous, would require "one woman who stays beyond the bounds of prohibition, experiencing herself as many, the totality of those she has been, could have been or wants to be."[6] Cixous' requirement could be met most productively by using transformation as an adequate method for a postmodern feminist theater. As has been shown in the preceding chapter on Jean-Claude van Itallie, transformation as developed by the Open Theater serves a seminal postmodern concern and proves a most effective theatrical method of transferring postmodern issues to the contemporary stage. Transformation becomes even more significant for the specific concerns of postmodern feminism. It provides a method of reacting against the dominating representational system which admits only one vision, namely that of the constitutive male subject who bases his authority on the claim to universality. This claim is in turn applied to the respective aesthetic form used for artistic representation. Transformation challenges both the artistic form and the ideological concept of the subject and fixed identities by con-

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study, *The Pirate's Fiancée: Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism* (London: Verso, 1988).

3 Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, "Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism," *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 415.

4 Fraser and Nicholson, "Social Criticism Without Philosophy" 429.

5 Hélène Cixous, "Aller à la mer," trans. Barbara Verslake, *Modern Drama* 27.4 (1984): 546.

6 Cixous, "Aller à la mer" 547.

tinuously transforming them. Transformation is thus able to cause both an implosion and an explosion of a formerly stable sense of self, character, and identity.

In order to show in which ways postmodern transformation and postmodern feminism have met, I will discuss selected plays by two feminist playwrights, Megan Terry and Rochelle Owens. Whereas Terry is praised as the "mother of American feminist drama,"[7] Owens is probably more renowned for her large oeuvre of poetry which unduly relegates her dramatic work to second rank. The two playwrights met in 1972, and together with Maria Irene Fornès, Rosalyn Drexler, Julie Bovasso, and Adrienne Kennedy, they formed the Women's Theater Council. Even though the Council was short-lived, it helped to make American feminist drama known to a larger public as it supported a number of other feminist playwrights and encouraged productions of new feminist plays.

Apart from the Women's Theater Council, Joseph Chaikin's Open Theater had a significant and lasting influence on contemporary playwrights. Together with van Itallie and others, Megan Terry was closely associated with the Open Theater and collaborated with Chaikin's group on the development of many Open Theater techniques, above all the exercises in transformation. Both Owens and Terry use transformative practices extensively in their plays to give shape to their feminist critical agenda. Terry was, in many ways, more deeply involved in generating and applying this particular technique. Her best-known transformation plays were developed from 1963 to 1968, when she was collaborating with the Open Theater. Based on Viola Spolin's instruction, Open Theater members trained in transformation exercises and helped Terry to develop a dramatic vision which stresses the transformative abilities of the performer's body, voice, and imagination as the decisive means of dramatic expression.[8] In the first years with the Open Theater, Terry wrote three one-act plays that relied

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7 This particular praise refers to an article by Helene Keyssar on Megan Terry, entitled "Megan Terry: Mother of American Feminist Drama." Keyssar, *Feminist Theatre* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), 53-76.

8 The transformation exercises by the Open Theater were originally created by Chicago teacher and artist Viola Spolin, whose book *Improvisation for the Theatre* assumed almost biblical status for transformational training in the 1960s and 1970s. Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1963).

heavily on the method of transformation: *Calm Down Mother*, *Ex-Miss Copper Queen on a Set of Pills*, and *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place*, all of which were first performed by the company at the Sheridan Square Playhouse in 1965. Whereas *Ex-Miss Copper Queen* betrays a transitional status between a more realistic mode of writing (as in Terry's *Hothouse*) and a fuller development of transformation, *Keep Tightly Closed* is a full-fledged transformation play. Character, time, and place shift rapidly and mostly without prior notice in *Keep Tightly Closed* as well as in *Comings and Goings* and *Calm Down Mother*.

Even though Terry has been a prolific writer and regular contributor to American drama for many years, her name has become most closely associated, almost synonymous, with *Viet Rock*. Subtitled *A Folk War Movie*, *Viet Rock* is mainly discussed against the backdrop of the Vietnam war and the reaction to that war. At the same time, this highly sophisticated theater piece displays a number of features of experimental drama such as transformation. After the play's opening, in which the actors and actresses experiment with the image of the circle, there is an "instant transformation" scene: male actors become baby boys and female actors become mothers.[9] By using transformation Terry makes it very plain how quickly women become mothers and their baby sons may one day become soldiers in a war. Death as a result of war and the anxiety of losing one's child are thus impending topics. Terry does also not fail to notice the sexism that often characterizes the military context: the Sergeant, for instance, deliberately addresses his men as "girlies" when he wants to designate them as weak. In the same vein, the word "Mom" is used to evoke derogatorily the rather sentimental aspects of certain gestures.

The musical score of *Viet Rock* is one indication of Terry's interest in intertextuality. As she draws from various different genres using diverse techniques, intertextuality becomes one of the writer's trademarks: it characterizes *Viet Rock* as well as her later play, *Babes in the Bighouse* (1974), which was written during her time as a resident writer at the Omaha Magic Theater. As *Keep Tightly Closed*, *Babes* is set in a prison, this time a prison for women only. Subtitled a "documentary musical fantasy," *Babes in the Bighouse* incorporates songs,

9 Terry, *Viet Rock*, *Plays by Megan Terry* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing, 2000), 124.

stories, and documentary material from prison interviews and visits.[10] In the productions of the play, Terry and director Jo Anne Schmidman would repeatedly cast men as well as women in the roles of the female prisoners; this transformation process invariably leads to an enhanced inquiry into the conditions which define women's sense of self and identity. Terry also follows these tracks in her Obie-winning play, *Approaching Simone* (1969-70). Even though the central character, Simone, remains the same, the rest of the ensemble keeps transforming into characters from Simone's life. *Approaching Simone* is a biographical drama about the French writer Simone Weil and added considerably to Terry's reputation as a feminist playwright.

Terry establishes transformation as a central technique for the concerns of feminist drama: it transforms fixed notions of female identity and the structure of women's lives. Interestingly, though, Terry refuses to limit herself to the representation of female characters and issues of a gender identity that is essentially conceived of as female. Crossgendered casting practices as in *Babes in the Bighouse* or plays such as *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place* indicate that feminist drama, for her, is not exclusively concerned with female identity but rather deals with problems of gender fixation in general. She thus plays with stereotypical notions of gender ascriptions and provocatively challenges them in her postmodern theater of transformation. In an interview with Helen Keyssar, Terry thus asserts that "[t]ransformation reveals to us an efficient universe. Nothing is lost —it is just transformed."[11]

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10 Terry's intertextual interests do not rest at the inclusion of music into her plays. Terry would later venture into the domain of video and television and produce one of her most intriguing scripts, *Home* (1968), in which television and media control are the central issue.

11 Keyssar, "Megan Terry: Mother of American Feminist Drama" 54.

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Rochelle Owens shares many of Terry's presuppositions concerning gender and transformation despite considerable differences in dramatic style and in the sheer scope of their dramatic work. Owens is also devoted to the feminist cause and equally uses the method of transformation for staging her postmodern feminist concerns. In a commentary on her work, Owens explicitly acknowledges the creative freedom her work suggests and relates it to the significance of theatrical collaboration and transformation:

> I am interested in the flow of imagination between the actors and the director, the boundless possibilities of interpretation of a script. Different theatrical realities are created and/or destroyed depending upon the multitudinous perceptions and points of view of the actors and director who share in the creation of the design of the unique journey of playing the play. There are as many ways to approach my plays as there [are] combinations of people who might involve themselves.[12]

Thus Owens not only acknowledges, but explicitly calls for an openness of the dramatic text, which ultimately challenges the authority of the writer. And it is this challenge of authority that describes the main thrust of her feminist plays. Owens identifies herself as "proto-feminist" in an interview[13]; by this term, she indicates that she sees herself as part of a generation which brought the feminist movement on its way. She confirms time and again that writer and work are thoroughly rooted in a feminist context:

> My writing is feminist because it has much to do with my personal and social identity as a woman in a patriarchal culture, and because it resists both the form and the idea of absolute power of organized doctrine, prin-

12 From Rochelle Owens's commentary on her work in Elaine Shragge, "Owens, Rochelle," *Contemporary American Dramatists*, ed. K.A. Berney (London: St. James P, 1994), 452.

13 C. B. Coleman, "The Androgynous Muse: An Interview with Rochelle Owens," *Theater* 20.2 (1989): 20.

> ciples, and procedures. One ought to question the assumptions of the culture which created the social role of women.[14]

Apart from documenting Owens's feminist agenda, this passage indicates a thorough interest in postmodern playwriting: it emphasizes the continual search for new forms and a critical attitude towards traditional art while focusing on the relationship between artistic modes of expression and the status of women in society. In other words, Owens writes as an act of resistance. Dismantling established discourses in the sense of Lyotardian master narratives, Owens "questions the assumptions," the "absolute power" of traditional writing, be it in form or in "doctrine" and "principles." Owens's postmodern feminist theater displays pronounced political concerns and defends the political and social objectives that feminism shares with other so-called minority discourses.

With regard to much of contemporary theater, Owens deplores that feminist concerns are expressed in culturally approved conservative modes instead of in a spirit of "re-definitions and experimentation."[15] She continually stresses experimentation as a prime means to challenge dominant literary forms of expression. Like van Itallie and many other postmodern writers, Owens defends that content and form are contingent upon each other and cannot be separated, which explains the emphasis she puts on the development of dramatic form. She describes writing as a process of continuous assembly, destruction, transformation, and re-assembly of subject matters by multiple voices—a strategy that characterizes both her poetic and dramatic oeuvre.[16] Meaning, for Owens, is "non-linear, transmitted, placed and displaced, scattered, textured and re-textured in an endless, complex system of designed irregularity."[17] Her postmodern and metadramatic agenda comes out most clearly when she holds that "[m]y business as

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14 Coleman, "Interview" 20.

15 Coleman, "Interview" 21.

16 This description of Owens's writing seems a direct answer to the request by Cixous as discussed above. In "Aller à la mer," Cixous calls for "one woman [...], experiencing herself as many" (546).

17 Coleman, "Interview" 21. In this interview, Owens refers to her series of poems called "Discourse on Life and Death." However, the passage seems an equally valid description for most of her dramatic works.

a playwright, therefore, means challenging the established categories of theater."[18]

Owens as a dramatist can be counted among the experimental artists of the 1960s who devoted their creative energies to developing novel forms of theater rather than to producing Broadway hits. The outrageous satire, *Futz* (1965), was to launch her career as a dramatist. It centers around issues of violence, repressed sexuality, and double morality in small-town, middle-class society. Her oeuvre covers a great variety of topics. Whereas *Kontraption* (1970) thematizes the negative aspects of technology, *Istanboul* and *Homo* dramatize cultural clash and class struggle respectively. Owens's 1974 play *He Wants Shih!* delineates the quest for selfhood and thus takes us closer to the topic under scrutiny here, the postmodern sense of self. The play's protagonist, Lan, is gradually transformed into his feminine ideal, and his amorphous sexuality exemplifies what Owens calls "the unlimited pronoun, the pronoun with ten thousand faces."[19] In other words, the play presents the boundless transformative possibilities of self and gender identity. With *The Karl Marx Play* (1973), a musical play, and with *Emma Instigated Me* (1976), Owens ventures into the domain of historical biography. Furthermore, her experimental play *Chucky's Hunch* (1981) is an epistolary drama and consists of monologues from letters, other texts, and a taped narration. *Chucky's Hunch* features minimal theatrical action, and as it also discards dramatic dialogue, it thematizes the fissures in dramatic representation and communication.[20] Owens has also written for radio and TV, as, for example, in her inter-media video *Oklahoma Too: Rabbits and Nuggets* (1987). In its juxtaposition of poetry and images, this work explores the effects of the structural combination of the verbal and the visual and thus attempts a more spatial, postmodern concept of art. This brief overview of her work may suffice to convey an idea of the

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18 Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, "Rochelle Owens," *Interviews with Contemporary Women Playwrights* (New York: Beech Tree Books/Morrow, 1987), 344.

19 Coleman, "Interview" 21.

20 Timothy Murray provides an insightful reading of *Chucky's Hunch* with due consideration of its experimental aspects in his essay "The Play of Letters: Possession and Writing in *Chucky's Hunch*," *Feminine Focus: The New Women Playwrights*, ed. Enoch Brater (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), 186-209.

thematic, formal, and stylistic variety characteristic of Owens's writing and should duly substantiate her claim to be an "innovative artist, an avant-garde writer."[21]

21 Coleman, "Interview" 21.

IV.1 Megan Terry's *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place*: Transforming the Prison House of the Self

Megan Terry's play *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place* is among her first and most successful one-act transformation plays of the sixties. It was developed, like *Viet Rock* and many others, in collaboration with the Open Theater. The play premiered at the Sheridan Square Playhouse on 29 March 1965, on a double bill with *Calm Down Mother*.[1] It revolves around Jaspers, Michaels, and Gregory, three cell-mates imprisoned for the unresolved murder of Jaspers' wife. In my discussion, I will first concentrate on the method of transformation, popular culture, and their significance for the postmodern sense of self and then situate this discussion in the larger context of postmodern feminism. Even though there are only male characters in the play, it nevertheless expresses crucial concerns of postmodern feminism and gender theory and presents subversive strategies pertinent to a feminist theater. My approach is not based on a restrictive concept of feminism that radically excludes men from theoretical consideration. I will rather argue from a gender-based point of view and investigate the relationship between gender roles and societal roles as they apply to both men and women.

The three characters of the play are in some ways connected to the murder of Jaspers' wife, but it remains vague who committed the murder and to what degree the other two inmates were involved in the crime. Terry concedes that she deliberately created this limbo because it allows for a higher degree of creative collaboration on the part of those involved in the performance of the play, above all director, actors, and audience. In the production notes, she puts it thus:

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1 All quotations from the play refer to the following edition: *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place*, *Four Plays by Megan Terry* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 153-198.

> [t]here are as many ways to approach this play as there are combinations of four people who might involve themselves in it.[2]

The "many ways" to access Terry's play not only result in a considerable freedom for the actors as well as the director but, at the same time, alter both the status of the playwright and the text. The latter is reduced to a mere skeleton to be complemented, possibly by rearranging parts, and thus creating the piece anew in each performance. Terry is aware of the implications of these creative liberties, she makes room for basic changes in the play's production notes when she concedes: "the play can be directed literally or as a fantasy or dream," thus pushing aside any consideration for the play's mimetic capacity.[3] The performative thrust of the play alters the status of the dramatic text, relegating it to one among many others. This particular relationship between performance and the dramatic text is rooted in the play's process of creation. As the script undergoes frequent changes in the course of the play's collaborative development, the printed version follows rather than precedes the performance. Peter Feldman, director of the Open Theater production, remembers that "[b]y the time *Keep Tightly Closed* opened, I could no longer tell where the inventiveness of the director left off and that of the actors had taken over, or where the script inspired us and where we enriched it."[4] Feldman's apprehensive choice of words, that "the script inspired us," underlines the changed status of the text and, by analogy, that of the text's original creator. Megan Terry as the writer defends this collaborative method of creative production to the extent of propagating it as a new challenge for playwrights. In an article for the *New York Times*, she writes:

> Lending one's abilities to theater artists who have excellent theatrical ideas but who don't write themselves, is another way of challenging oneself as a playwright. [...] A playwright is not an original God. He is only lately down from the trees.[5]

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2 "Production Notes," *Keep Tightly Closed* 155.

3 "Production Notes," *Keep Tightly Closed* 155.

4 Peter Feldman, "Notes for the Open Theatre Production," *Four Plays* 200.

5 Megan Terry, "'Who Says Only Words Make Great Drama?'" *New York Times* 10. November 1968: 3. Elsewhere, Terry expresses her idea of the play-script

The thus dethroned playwright, "lately down" from the superior position on "the trees," is now immersed in a larger theatrical environment which includes, among several others, players, stage designers, technicians, directors, and, of course, an audience. The former author-God is reduced to the status of a contributor among many others in what could be called a "total theater" game. Terry appeals to concepts of total theater as proposed by Antonin Artaud, Jean-Louis Barrault, and others and clearly links her theater to the total theater-movement in an article poignantly called "Who Says Only Words Make Great Drama." There, she calls upon the vivacious history of the idea of a total theater, propagating mainly the return to a more original, sensual theater experience.[6] Terry's idea of "total theater," however, does not naively attempt to recreate an original unity of experience, as even a cursory reading of *Keep Tightly Closed* reveals. Rather, the play consists of cut-up scenes that are connected only by means of transformation. The play starts off with a quintessential image of transformation in which the three actors join together in order to become a machine:

> MICHAELS: Press here . . .
>
> GREGORY: Tear back . . .
>
> JASPERS: To replace . . .
>
> TOGETHER *(Locking arms)*: Insert lip. But we may be opened. But we may be opened. But we may be opened for . . .
>
> JASPERS: For inspection. (157-158)

The language used in this sequence imitates the sound and working rhythm of a machine; it follows the short, cut-up sequences that Cecelia Tichi has associated with the literature of the so-called ma-

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thus: "I like to think of the play as a trampoline for actors and director" ("Production Notes," *Comings and Goings* 114).

6 Terry, "'Who Says Only Words Make Great Drama?'" 1-3. With regard to collaboration and the status of the playwright, her position seems slightly different from that of Jean-Claude van Itallie. Whereas he asserts that "actors are not poets," Terry more openly praises and welcomes their collaboration.

chine age.[7] In the play, too, the language expresses and mirrors a society that is increasingly dominated by advanced technology, and the characters' short utterances resemble torn-off parts from an instruction manual. The three bodies on stage act as parts of a kinetic network and transgress the limitations of the body in order to form a single cyborgean organism. This organism, however, can be opened, for purposes of "inspection," as the beginning scene informs us. The concept of an organism as a closed entity and, by analogy, the idea of a stable, contained selfhood is revealed as illusory. Instead, we are confronted with a scene that imitates the internal workings of a machine as if it were an assembly of component parts that is presented on stage. Hence, this scene is much less *about* a machine than attempts to *be* a machine.[8]

This opening scene sets the tone of the whole play and serves as a guideline for the actors to the play's following transformation sections. In her production notes, Terry requires that the actors "come to understand that they are connected with one another by muscle, blood vessels, and nervous structure—impulses felt by one member may be enacted by another."[9] If this is particularly true for the machine image, it also applies to many of the play's other transformation scenes, which range from the enactment of gangster movies (180; 184), drag queen and vaudeville sequences (177) through religious ritual (194) to enactments of historical events such as an episode from Jamestown (173) or the General Custer-Indian plot (163-164).

Terry's transformations in *Keep Tightly Closed*, though, are not entirely arbitrary, they evolve around a nuclear trio of figures and fulfill precise narrative functions: frequently, transformations elucidate a particular trait of a character's personality by transferring it to a different, but parallel plot episode. In doing so, they translate an aspect of the relationship between the three characters into a different setting which mirrors the power politics between the participants. To give an example, Jaspers, Michaels, and Gregory respectively trans-

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7 Cecelia Tichi, *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1987).

8 When Tichi discusses the fiction of, for instance, Dos Passos and William Carlos Williams, she comes to the conclusion that their writing not only resembles a machine, but, rather, that "[t]heir fiction and poetry, instead, *is* the machine" (16).

9 Terry, "Production Notes," *Keep Tightly Closed* 156.

form into General Custer, a "bluecoat," and an "Indian Chief" (163-164) in one episode, without any accompanying changes in costumes or setting. The power politics become evident when the short character sketches of the cast of characters are compared to the new roles: Jaspers who is described as an "intense, intelligent, and arrogant lawyer" becomes Custer; the "burly, coarse" Michaels impersonates a "bluecoat"; and Gregory, the "handsome, well-built young man with a bewildered mouth," is assigned the role of the "Indian Chief" (157). Read against the backdrop of Jaspers' attempts to convince Gregory to sign a confession (so that he and Michaels may be released from prison), the General Custer incident gains additional momentum. Both in the historical scene and in the present enactment, Gregory/the Indian Chief is forced to sign a treaty to his disadvantage. Yet Terry goes beyond simple historical parallels in this context; she attempts to foil the entire notion of historicity by inserting full-fledged anachronisms which disturb and undermine traditional plot development and character outlines:

> GREGORY: I'll never sign the treaty. This is our land. Cut me. Shred me into pemmican, but a hundred historians and *Life* magazine will tell the world of your cowardly crimes.
>
> [...]
>
> JASPERS (*Drawling*): Save his song for Ruth Benedict and the *National Geographic*. (163; 164)

History as a concept is problematized not only in the cases of the larger political and cultural spheres. The problematization of history, or more precisely of historical truth and accuracy, also targets the local history of Jaspers' family and the story of the murder of his wife. As the play's central story, the murder case is transferred and reenacted on similar, yet different planes. Terry presents us with the possibilities of different versions of story and history and of changing, transformative versions of the self. Jaspers, for instance, coerces Gregory to alter his subjective version of the murder story: "You just say that your story is a lie" and forces him to make the police believe that it is "your murder. It belongs to you alone" (172). Jaspers imagines a detailed ac-

count of his own version of the murder, and, after having described it to Gregory in some detail, he concludes: "That is the murder that you are going to confess to" (173). Later in the play, Jaspers invents yet another version of the murder story, this time with Michaels as the major culprit: Michaels should sign a confession admitting that he committed the murder and then dragged his companions into the plot to save himself from the electric chair. Gregory's reaction to this new plan is cautious and wary; he hesitates and has his doubts about the feasibility of the plan: "How can we do that? He's worked for you. He knows he worked for you. How can you convince him?" But Jaspers believes in his notion of fake historical accuracy: "The same way I convinced you. Come, I'll show you how" (194). The notion of a single truth is thus subverted and split up into provisional truths that are contingent upon a certain power distribution which is based on the rhetorical and argumentative skills of one participant. The murder plot at the center of the play is loosely reconstructed numerous times, and each of these repetitions of the story revises the plot and the assigned roles of the characters to some degree. With each version of the story, a different pair of cellmates would be released from prison.

In addition to structures of repetition and revision, the plot is complicated by a variety of intertextual allusions to contemporary popular culture. As one of the few postmodern artists who in fact incorporate pop cultural elements, Terry has some well-known heroes and celebrities of pop speak on the characters' behalf and transfers the action into different yet structurally similar sequences from the world of pop. The following scene shows a typical instance of transformation, from the drag queen milieu to a gangster movie sequence, both of which serve as parallels to the play's main plot:

> GREGORY: Don't you say anything against . . .
>
> MICHAELS: She did it for money and you do it for candy and cigarettes.
>
> GREGORY *(Abruptly changes from drag queen to movie gangster)*: What's with you? Get off my back. I thought you was my friend.
>
> MICHAELS *(Abruptly changes to movie gangster also)*: Shows how crazy you really are. I was never your friend. (180)

The sequences serve the double function of quotation and parallel. Characters quote familiar gangster or drag queen jargon and thus evoke well-known images from pop culture, only to drop them after little more than a few lines in order to switch to a different context. The audience can never fully immerse themselves in a given image from pop culture but is expelled from comfortable identification patterns quite abruptly. The power constellation that determines the story and the relation among its characters is transferred into the parallel world of pop. Jaspers, the self-assured and arrogant lawyer, shows that he is in charge of the situation, and expresses this superiority by switching to a Bogart-impersonation:

> JASPERS: *(... He talks like Bogart or Cagney)*: Hey. Hey. There, there, big boy. What is it? That's no way to do. Hey. Someone get your goat? Here. Let me see. Look at me. That's a boy. (184)

The sequences evoking the world of pop and mass culture raise the issue of the implications that contemporary media and the proliferation of media images have for the postmodern self. Terry deals with this issue by using examples from popular movies, such as the gangster movie and screen icons like Bogart, or by playing on a romanticized idea of American history, as in the play's Jamestown and American Indian episodes, or by evoking the vaudevillian world of drag queens. *Keep Tightly Closed* thereby dramatizes the question to which extent a postmodern sense of identity is contingent upon models in popular culture and the entertainment industry.

In terms of dramatic form, the quotations and the accompanying transformations cut the dramatic narrative into fragments and disturb any smoothly progressing story line. The arrangement of these fragments shows little if any respect for narrative causality and leaves them motivationally unconnected, which leads Schechner to call them "action-blocs [sic]."[10] But still, each scene enhances the audience's understanding of the three characters and the crime. The story requires associative processes and imaginative abilities on the part of the spectator that link the separate "action-blocs" and turn them into a possi-

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10 Richard Schechner, "Megan Terry: The Playwright as Wrighter," *Public Domain: Essays on the Theatre* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 125.

ble, but never definitive story. In many ways, this process is an exercise of "making sense." Even though these "action-blocs" are not entirely arbitrary, the play's overall structure and ordering of the narrative fragments mainly follows a random pattern. *Keep Tightly Closed* builds on the idea of the game of permutable elements as its structural principle. In fact, the three characters spend their time in prison by playing games with "reality" versions and their parallels in other worlds, and writer, actors, and director do the same when they play the metadramatic game of dissecting and reassembling the constitutive parts of the play.[11] All collaborators, in turn, join to play games with the audience's expectations. The rules of this game of transformation are described by Peter Feldman, director of the Open Theater production:

> It [the transformation] is an improvisation in which the established realities or 'given circumstances' (the Method phrase) of the scene change several times during the course of the action. What may change are character and/or situation and/or time and/or objectives, etc. Whatever realities are established at the beginning are destroyed after a few minutes and replaced by others. Then these are in turn destroyed and replaced. These changes occur swiftly and almost without transition, until the audience's dependence upon any fixed reality is called into question.[12]

Following these rules, the characters in one episode transform into Jaspers' small boy and his wife in order to enact the scene immediately preceding her death (186). In their effort to imagine the events leading to the murder, they present a possible version to themselves and to the audience. At the same time, they try to experience the criminal acts and to cope with their collective guilt, which is enhanced by the enactment of a religious ritual in the play. It is a purification ceremony in which Jaspers becomes a preacher accompanied by his two cell mates now turned into altar boys (194).

It could be argued that such transformations serve to illuminate the hidden inner nature of a given dramatic character, which would

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11 The comparison to a game is not farfetched when we consider that Terry's play *Comings and Goings* is subtitled "A Theatre Game."

12 Peter Feldman, "Notes for the Open Theatre Production" 200-201.

add transformation to the repertoire of expressionistic devices. Transformations in Terry's theater practice may indeed enhance an understanding of character and motivation, but, in contrast to expressionistic techniques, they do not yield any deep revelations about the inner world of a particular character. They are far too light-hearted and evanescent in style and intention for that purpose; they merely emphasize movement, and not deeper meaning, or, in Schechner's words, they "make no attempt to 'represent the mind'."[13]

The transformation "blocs" of Terry's play do not only change the notion of dramatic plot but they also thoroughly affect the more technical and formal considerations of making plays. Making plays resembles quite literally the work of *building* plays, that is, of assembling parts and arranging them in order to give the structure a particular shape. Terry thus pursues an architectural approach to playwriting, which has led Richard Schechner to speak of Terry as a "playwright as wrighter."[14] The playwright is thus increasingly viewed as a craftsperson, making, constructing, even repairing a work of art.

Similar to van Itallie's plays, rhythmical structures rather than narrative ones connect the transformation "blocs" and govern the progression of *Keep Tightly Closed*. Apart from associative processes, recurring motifs such as the transformation into machines take on the function of a major structural connective in the play. They also add a cyclical component to the play, as they dominate its beginning and its end.[15] Terry has thus shaped as well as followed the tracks of postmodern playwrights and has changed dramatic form in order to express and stage a transformative sense of self in postmodernity.[16]

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13 Schechner, "Megan Terry: The Playwright as Wrighter" 125.

14 Schechner, "Megan Terry: The Playwright as Wrighter" 121. In this article, he argues that Terry returns to her original profession as dramatist, to the "basic mode of theatre" which he holds to be performance. He points to theater history and stresses that, until the Renaissance, plays were written not primarily by writers but by theater people: "plays," he says, "were for playing, and books for reading" (121).

15 Pages 157 and 198 respectively; see also the machine sequence on page 170.

16 Terry, though, claims not to give much consideration to form, as opposed to playwrights such as van Itallie. In an interview, she relegates formal concerns of her works to a subordinate position: "It doesn't matter what the form is as long as you're telling the truth. The form is the least important thing." Dinah Leavitt, "Making A Life in Art: Megan Terry Interviews," *Women in American Theatre*, ed. Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins (1981; New

Transformation in Terry's play vividly expresses aspects of a postmodern sense of self. For one, the three actors/characters of the piece express single aspects of the same person; they can, as Terry specifies in the production notes, "also be seen as aspects of one personality" (156). Additionally, the actors/characters transform into various other versions of the self. The notion of character as a distinct set of features collapses when they repeat each other's lines, as Gregory and Michaels do, and thus make obsolete any differentiation between the characters (183-184; also 159).[17] Hence, *Keep Tightly Closed* is not so much about a particular person, his motifs and inclinations, it is not about in-depth psychological characterization, but about the multiple perspectives and possibilities of the appearance of the self. Accordingly, characters and situations keep changing and transforming in Terry's play.

This has also far-reaching consequences for the actor-character relationship which eventually exceeds the principle of one-to-one correspondence. And these changes in the concept of character, brought about by transformative practices, then become instrumental in dramatizing the self from a feminist perspective. As June Schlueter astutely observes, in none of the transformations of Terry's play is it the character who assumes a different role, but always the actor.[18] So the actor's identity, traditionally excluded from the theater, is drawn into the play and thus becomes a significant constituent in the play's exploration of the anatomy of the postmodern sense of self. The play

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York: Theatre Communications Group, 1987), 329. This statement should be taken with a grain of salt, though. Not only the plays betray a preoccupation with dramatic form, but Terry herself virtually dedicates *Comings and Goings* to the exploration of formal and technical aspects. In the "production notes" to *Comings and Goings* she writes: "This play is meant for both actors and audience to be an enjoyment of technique" (113).

17 Terry's play *Comings and Goings* takes this strategy of character presentation further in that it has entire scenes played by different actors/characters three times in a row. See Terry, *Comings and Goings, Four Plays* 116; 122; 147.

18 June Schlueter, "Megan Terry's Transformational Drama: *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place* and the Possibilities of Self," *Modern American Drama: The Female Canon* (London: Associated U Presses, 1990), 161-171; 165. Schlueter perceptively analyzes the transformations in the play, but does not at all make any connection to a postmodern agenda. The lack of a theoretical framework becomes evident when she instead associates the play with "New York's alternative theatre" (162).

literally takes the self apart—"for inspection," as the beginning machine transformation announces—and at the same time brings up consecutive images which are added to one another in a layering process. With regard to the postmodern sense of self, transformation serves as the method to motivate and carry out the process of generating multiple, changing, and fragmented selves. It then depends on the imaginative and perceptive abilities of a given spectator how the characters and the situations of the play are seen. Postmodern drama in Terry thus turns into a "drama of perception,"[19] in which the audience is required to become an active participant in the semiotic process. Additionally, the audience is directly involved by audience addresses (190; 198) which accrue additional significance when the play ends on such an address:

> JASPERS: This side
>
> MICHAELS: Should face
>
> GREGORY: You!
>
> TOGETHER: And you and you and you and you and you and you and you AND ROLLER AND ROCKER. THIS SIDE SHOULD FACE YOU. AND ROLLER AND ROCKER. (*The wheel stops with* JASPERS *facing audience*.)
>
> JASPERS: This side should face you!
>
> CURTAIN (198)

The end of the play again evokes the image of a machine wheel ("*the wheel stops*") and evokes the language of an instruction manual for handling machines ("this side should face you"). Instead of encouraging empathy with a particular character and his fate, the play emphasizes de-humanized action patterns and focuses on process rather than on product. It thus induces an openness of the text that generates multiple meanings while restraining from ready compartmentalization and stereotyping.

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19 Schlueter, "Megan Terry's Transformational Drama" 163.

The "mother of feminist theater," Megan Terry thus presents a conception of character and identity that focuses on the social constructedness of gender roles rather than on nature or any other pregiven determinant. Terry admits that "the audience's eye is focused on the action and behavior rather than being asked or coerced into taking gender sides."[20] In an interview with Dinah Leavitt, the playwright explicitly acknowledges the feminist potential inherent in the principle of transformation: "If feminism is going to really move ahead, it's got to explore the possibilities of what a woman could be. We don't know what a woman could be like because we've had so many outlines and definitions forced on us. [...] That's the true frontier."[21] Terry thus defines the new and "true frontier" in America as the exploration of the possibilities of gender identity. This identity is to be liberated, among other things, from the prison house of enforced definitions of femininity. Transformation is, for Terry, one of the most effective theatrical means to overcome such enforced definitions. In a conversation on the issue of gender and difference, Terry has argued that "gender is attitude,"[22] and it is transformation that poignantly demonstrates this claim on the stage. The above-mentioned prison as metaphor reflects the compartmentalization and confinement of women in this respect and deals with the issue of how to maintain sanity when other people impose their will on you. The play shows the confinement prescribed by compulsory and rigid gender models. Both are analogous to the confinement in prison.

Transformation and the prison metaphor loom large in Terry's work. Her later play, *Babes in the Bighouse* (1974), delves into the issue of women in prison and uses transformation for similar purposes. Many of Terry's plays connect the feminist agenda with postmodern transformation. In her play *Calm Down Mother,* the players are called "Woman One," "Woman Two," and "Woman Three." While this play is a much less successful and thorough exercise in dramatic transformation, it nevertheless makes its significance for feminist concerns explicit in one particular scene in which "Woman One" trans-

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20 Megan Terry, Jo Ann Schmidman, and Sora Kimberlain, "Gender is Attitude," *Gender in Performance: The Presentation of Difference in the Performing Arts*, ed. Laurence Senelick (Hanover: UP of New England, 1992), 310.

21 Dinah Leavitt, "Making A Life in Art: Megan Terry Interviews" 328.

22 Megan Terry, Jo Ann Schmidman, and Sora Kimberlain, "Gender is Attitude" 300.

forms into Margaret Fuller and says: "I know I am because from the time I could speak and go alone, my father addressed me not as a plaything, but as a lively mind."[23] Interestingly, some transformations are rendered as a tableau which holds the end of a scene for a moment, only to release it into a new one. By halting transformation this way, it draws even more attention to itself and makes its impact even stronger. *Comings and Goings* also explores the relationship between gender roles and social roles. It is the roles we have defined for men and women that constitute the power relationship between the two. A notable scene between waitress and customer in a restaurant exemplifies this claim very convincingly. A waitress and a customer encounter each other many times in a row (122-130), each time based on a different power relation: it is either a matter-of-fact way, or the customer is master and the waitress the servant and vice versa, or played with "quiet warmth and secure joy" in a "symbiotic ecstatic relationship" (128). The stage directions of *Comings and Goings* require that any performer of the ensemble be prepared to play any role at any time during the performance, and their transformations move the play forward. In various episodes, actors are sent into the play to replace their colleagues. Terry writes: "We played it with a small card on which all the actors' names were printed. A wheel was spun by a disinterested party at intervals of thirty-five to ninety seconds. A name was called out and one actor ran into the play and another actor ran out."[24] This method makes *Comings and Goings* a telling and very precise title for the transformational activities of the play.

Thus, in *Keep Tightly Closed in a Cool Dry Place* as well as in so many of Terry's other plays, transformation is used as a constant revision process in order to defy any generalized, fixed, and stereotyped images of the individual, be they women or men. The ubiquity of the prison metaphor, also used both for men and women, expresses this concern. Transformation functions as the ceaseless occupation of different and ever changing positions of the self. It can thus be conceived of as a poignant dramatic expression of the postmodern "flow" of dispersed selves, as discussed in the theoretical section of this study. Transformation, however, does not lead to an apolitical attitude or

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23 Terry, *Calm Down Mother*, *Plays by and about Women*, ed. Victoria Sullivan and James Hatch (New York: Vintage, 1973), 279.

24 Terry, "Production Notes," *Comings and Goings* 113.

Jamesonian "depthlessness," which is based on the claim that radical fragmentation and perpetual change would move towards an aesthetics of disappearance. By "neutralizing fixed assumptions," as June Schlueter perceptively notes, postmodern drama can be located exactly where transformation is used to liberate women (and men) from prescriptive and coercive roles and from the prison house of an enforced sense of gender and identity.[25] Thus postmodern drama as a "theater of transformation" is eminently instrumental in staging the political agenda of feminist playwrights.

25 Schlueter, "Megan Terry's Transformational Drama" 162.

IV.2 *Emma Instigated Me*: Rochelle Owens's Play "in the process of becoming"

"Instigated" by the life of Emma Goldman, famous anarchist, feminist, and revolutionary, Rochelle Owens wrote the play *Emma Instigated Me*, whose matter-of-fact title clearly explains its source of inspiration and alludes to the play's main concern.[1] Published in 1976, the play focuses not so much on the presentation of a finished piece for the theater; rather, it thematizes the process of dramatic production and the act of writing a play, in other words, the play demonstrates the "instigation" that prompts the finished work. In a metadramatic movement, it stages the tension between product and process and the transformative processes from one to the other. As the conditions of a play's existence have become the play's major topic, this self-referential metadramatic thrust characterizes Owens's *Emma Instigated Me* more than anything else.

With *Emma Instigated Me*, Owens turns to historical biography, a genre that she had treated earlier in *The Karl Marx Play* (1974).[2] However, the term "historical biography" in its traditional sense may be misleading here since Owens's play does not present a straightforward account of Emma Goldman's struggles and tribulations adapted

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1 All quotations from the play refer to the following edition: *Emma Instigated Me*, *Performing Arts Journal* 1.1 (1976): 71-94. The play has received almost no critical attention, which explains the scarcity of further references to critical articles on the play. Even general accounts of Rochelle Owens as a writer neglect the play to the extent of ignoring it altogether, as in, for example, Tina Margolis, "Rochelle Owens," *American Women Writers* (1983), 2:118-120.

2 Owens's *The Karl Marx Play* deals with the biography of Marx, but unlike conventional historical plays, it deviates from traditional drama as the characters do not relate to each other by the traditional means of dialogue and story. It is mainly music and imagery that lends coherence to the play and expresses its ideas. Owens, *The Karl Marx Play and Others* (1973; New York: Dutton, 1974).

to the stage by using the traditional language of plot development and dialogue. Rather, Owens develops an alternative, experimental concept of staging a woman's life and, at the same time, elaborates on theoretical aspects of dramatic writing.

Even though *Emma Instigated Me* takes place on a bare stage, the play's costumes are designed to evoke the idea of an authentic historical setting that is "stylized to the end of the 19th century" (71). The play thus gives us hints at a historical contextualization without thwarting, in any grand gesture, the idea of cultural and historical accuracy: "the events, social circumstances and relationships set out in the play," Owens maintains, "are founded upon history and current and observed fact" (71). Within the frame of its postmodern setting, Owens seems to insist on a historical contextualization which, given this particular topic, entails a politicization of the play as well. Both Rochelle Owens and Emma Goldman lived in highly politicized periods of time. Around the turn of the century, the Progressive Era had challenged entrenched assumptions on what was held to be the woman's sphere, as women became active and joined forces on many fronts. The Progressive Era witnessed, for instance, the suffragists' fight for the right to vote, Margaret Sanger advocated birth control, and women like Mary Talbot, Alice Hamilton, Florence Kelley, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, the leading feminist intellectual of the time, entered the political scene.[3] The feminist movement gained momentum that would in Rochelle Owens's time frequently be called upon as an important historical legacy.

Russian-born Emma Goldman had emigrated to the United States in 1885 and, heavily influenced by European anarchist ideas, found a hospitable soil for her political and social agitations in New York City. She crisscrossed the country delivering ardent lectures on politics, feminism, and, notably, the issue of modern drama while co-

3 The historical Emma Goldman, however, viewed the suffragist movement with a critical distance, arguing that the right to vote alone would not be able to contribute significantly to the liberation of women. She saw it as bourgeois in nature and argued that it would therefore fail to achieve its objectives. In her essay "Woman Suffrage," Goldman subsumes the first modern mass movement among women under "fetch worship [sic]," and held it to be a "parlor affair, detached from the economic needs of the people." See Goldman, *The Traffic in Women and Other Essays on Feminism* (Novato, CA: Times Change P, 1970), 51; 60.

editing a radical monthly, *Mother Earth*. Goldman's political awareness was shaped by factory work as well as the Haymarket riots, the Homestead strike, and the long prison term served by her lover and comrade, Alexander Berkman. At the same time, the depression of the 1890s, the strike-related conflicts in New York City, and her own imprisonment on Blackwell's island influenced her thoroughly.

World War I and its aftermath seriously affected the cultural climate of the time and marked a decisive break in political attitudes prevalent in U.S. society. The anti-radical paranoia of the so-called "Red Scare" expressed these changed political-societal conditions pointedly. In some sense, these changes were institutionalized in the countersubversion division of the Department of Justice (headed by Edgar J. Hoover), the later Federal Bureau of Investigation. This division employed an arsenal of well-known strategies to silence, if not to expel, so-called radicals. One of their measures did not bypass "Red Emma": in December 1919, she was one of the deportees on the USS Buford, nicknamed the Red Ark, whose mission was to force "radical suspects" out of the country.

The play *Emma Instigated Me* repeatedly refers to Goldman's writings, to her autobiography and numerous political essays and lectures. Owens's historical biography of Emma Goldman thus also centers on the notion of writing and (auto)biographical writing in particular. More precisely, it puts the issue of authorship center stage and problematizes (textual) authority. As a consequence, the itinerary and particular details of Goldman's life figure only in passing in this play which nevertheless is about Emma Goldman. Pieces of biographical information pervade the play but never constitute its main thrust. They are treated as mere tools to explore more theoretical aspects of writing the story of a life.

The figure of "The Author" is central to the play's exploration of writing, transformation, and authorship. In a statement preceding the play, Owens introduces author and play thus:

> *This play is about a play in the process of "becoming." The line of the play follows the author who is writing a play about the life of Emma Goldman, the 19th century revolutionary and anarchist.* (71)

Owens consciously writes a metadramatic piece for the theater, and the play's plot is determined by the author's train of thoughts as s/he is

in the process of writing. In that same statement Owens also propagates transformation as the prime technique in which "the play unfolds" (71). By using transformation, Owens writes, "[p]eople change from one character to another, from character into actor into bystander and back to character" (71). This transformative principle does not exclude the author in the play who as an active player joins in the action on stage.

In accordance with the patriarchal discourse of male control, the author takes great pains to uphold and defend his position of authority, thereby acting as a father to the text, or, to the story of this woman's life. The Author's voice chronologically precedes that of the (textual) child which entitles the Author to intervene in the story as soon as it does not follow the path he has carved out:

> AUTHOR: Stop. This is the creator. The maker of your adventure. I'm speaking. Stop. Stop. (75)

The Author as creator and God-like ontological founding principle asserts his voice and his command, and maintains his epistemological superiority.[4] The recorded voice of the Author also leaves no room for doubts:

> RECORDED VOICE - AUTHOR: I'm the author. I know best. (74)

Importantly, in this passage, it is not the Author's live, natural voice that asserts his position of superiority, but a pre-recorded voice. Owens here posits a relationship of antecedence: the moment when the voice of the author made this utterance has passed, and the authorial assertion is nothing but a pre-recorded 'thing of the past'. The play thus expresses a deferred sense of presence, which is also taken up in the following section:

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4 In an interview with Kathleen Betsko and Rachel Koenig, however, Owens betrays a quite firm belief in authorship and textual authority, even in truth. Asked about her motivation for writing, she replies: "It was a way to take upon myself a great sense of spiritual authority as a writer. To claim the authority as a benevolent and just right to express truth." See Betsko and Koenig, "Rochelle Owens" 352.

> AUTHOR: I am father. All of you, say, Father! Dear Father! We never meant to disobey you or disappoint you.
>
> RECORDED VOICE and ALL: Father, dear Father, we never meant to disobey you or disappoint you. (87)

As much as the above passage seems to corroborate authorial superiority, the recorded voices firmly announce at the beginning of the play that:

> RECORDED VOICE 1: This is a short dramatic piece.
>
> RECORDED VOICE 2: By Judith the Brazilian. (73)

Any effort to identify clearly the author of this play is thwarted by such contradicting assertions that in the end allow for only one conclusion, that authorship is an ambiguous notion and ostensibly contested in *Emma Instigated Me*. In the play, Emma Goldman insists on the "facts of my life" which are for the Author to be retrieved from her autobiography, and, accordingly, she repeatedly commands the Author to do his duty, namely "authentic research" (79). The issue of authenticity is already introduced in the play's prologue: The actors walk up to the Author, who is on stage, and say key phrases such as: "NO AUTHENTIC RESEARCH. WHAT IS IT ABOUT? [...] THIS IS NOT A REAL PLAY ABOUT EMMA GOLDMAN. I HATE THE PLAY. I HATE THE PLAY. THIS IS SOLIPSISM" (72). This issue of historical accuracy and historiography features prominently as a recurrent structural principle throughout the play. The author contends in several passages—with Lyotard clearly in the wings—that grand narratives are an illusion. This illusion is then equally characteristic of the concept of truth and of the masternarrative called Anarchism, even though the latter seeks to overturn prevailing power structures in society:

> RECORDED VOICE - AUTHOR: As an anarchist you presume to uphold and defend the truth. This is a gigantic deception. Airplane sound. (73)

The subject of gathering authentic information on a historical person is frequently broached in the play, as, for instance, in the following section:

> AUTHOR: Vacuum Cleaners! And did you ever use a vacuum cleaner? *(Sobbing.)* I don't know anything about me---you! I mean you---Emma Goldman.
>
> EMMA GOLDMAN: Read about me.
>
> AUTHOR: I haven't any book. I have no book.
>
> RECORDED VOICE 2: She gotta no book. Let her buy one.
>
> EMMA GOLDMAN: Steal one from the capitalists!
>
> [...]
>
> RECORDED VOICE 1: Is it two n's, G-o-l-d-m-a-n-n? But were you born in the country, lass?
>
> EMMA GOLDMAN: I was born in Russia. In 1869.
>
> AUTHOR: And were ye red of cheek lass?
>
> EMMA GOLDMAN: I had curly blonde hair and blue eyes.
>
> (77)

Emma's phenomenological approach to history clashes sharply with the Author's. The following passage exemplifies the battled terrain:

> EMMA GOLDMAN: When you've done the proper research on my life.
>
> AUTHOR: Proper research--on your life! This play *is* the life of Emma Goldman. It is as real as the instinct of smell--you wooden flower! (77)

In such passages, author and 'real-life character' fervently contrast mutually exclusive views on art and representation, on reality and its simulation. Whereas Emma, in this context, defends the idea of art as mimesis and the truthfulness and objectivity of historical scholarship, the Author holds that the simulation has long superseded and replaced reality, leaving Emma as nothing but a "wooden flower," a mere unanimated copy that resembles Emma only on the surface. Emma exemplifies the confusion between supposed original and copy: The play features Emma Goldman as Actress but also Actress as Emma Goldman. To add to the confusion, the position from which the supposed historical Emma Goldman might speak remains obscure. Is she the actress, the character on stage or the historical Emma, the imaginary foil onto which the author projects his or her ruminations? On closer scrutiny, we see that Emma occupies many subject positions in the play which challenge and counteract her own claim to be a historical personality fully in charge of her life.

> EMMA GOLDMAN: This play is about Emma Goldman--not the author! [...] I detest my lines! (80)

The stage directions accompanying Emma's lines here explain that "*Emma had to say this because she was made to by the Author*" (81). Alternatively, in other passages, the Author muses on his work and is uncertain of the direction it should take:

> AUTHOR: I don't know whether I want you in my play or not! (81)

The indecision and uncertainty that are part of the process of writing a piece of literature have been included into the final script as a metadramatic comment. Beyond delineating the typical problems of composition, such passages communicate a high degree of textual openness which deliberately confuses actress, character, and identity. In the following exercise of transformation, Emma speaks as actress and character in the beginning of the play and her words are repeated verbatim towards the end:

> ACTRESS as EMMA GOLDMAN or EMMA GOLDMAN as ACTRESS: Almost everything in the way of correspondence, books and other material that Emma Goldman had accumulated during the thirty-five years of her life in the United States had been confiscated by the Department of Justice raiders and never returned.
>
> [...]
>
> ACTRESS as EMMA GOLDMAN or EMMA GOLDMAN as ACTRESS: I suspect that it was something other than the desire to earn money that made me want to be an actress. (72; see also 93)

While the matter-of-fact, objective voice of the first quotation sounds as if it was taken from a scholarly source, a newspaper article, or from an introduction to the collected works of Emma Goldman, the second quotation leaves the subject of Emma Goldman's life entirely and delves into the mind of a particular actress who muses on past professional decisions. To add to the confusion, the Author (as recorded voice) wonders, between the two statements: "Why did I come to New York City?" Transformation leads abruptly from one context to an entirely different one and seems to subvert major rules of traditional structure and composition in drama.

In the course of the play, the battle over authorship intensifies and aggravates by using the technique of transformation. At times, the Author simply interferes in Emma's life-story, not unlike the stage manager in the Epic Theater, at other times, the Author will actively and aggressively reshape the story and exert his textual dominance. The following lines show the Author as intervening in the play, calling on Emma to accelerate her story:

> EMMA GOLDMAN: Two soldiers balancing billiard balls--walking on a steel path.
>
> AUTHOR: Yes, yes, yes, quicken the tale. Emma. Wag it, girly. Get goin' shmuckess. (77)

The debate between Emma and the Author culminates when she threatens to kill him, as the following section shows. The Author makes it clear that he sees Emma as his creature, property, and invention and that, consequently, he can instill her with life or destroy her:

> EMMA GOLDMAN: I want the cause, Anarchy--my ideals, honored--or I'll kill you with my bare hands. [...]
>
> AUTHOR: Don't antagonize me.
>
> EMMA GOLDMAN: I'll dismember you!
>
> AUTHOR: Emma, do you want to be merely a sardine in a tin can? I'll put you in with all the other small accidents of fate. In the unfinished plays file. [...]
>
> EMMA GOLDMAN: Capitalist. You are my enemy.
>
> AUTHOR: You are my invention. (78)

The Author threatens his creature with oblivion and eventually with dissolution. Emma, in turn, menaces him with mutilation and dismemberment.[5] If Emma intends to punish the author by *dismembering* him, she at the same time appeals to a related penalty, the loss of memory and ability to *remember*. The two combatants eventually engage in a physical struggle (93) which results in a blending of Emma's and the Author's identity. The two formerly separate entities have collapsed and have become interchangeable. A given line by a player can thus no longer function as an idiosyncratic expression of a particular character. Rather, the dramatic dialogue has been turned into a shared text that can be appropriated at will by any figure in the play:

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5 In the play, Emma Goldman even desires a bomb in order to rid herself of the despised Author: "The so-called author. I longed for a bomb to destroy her" (86). Notably, the Author is here finally addressed as female.

> RECORDED VOICE: You insufferable lunatic. Stop this farce.
>
> EMMA GOLDMAN: You insufferable lunatic. Stop this farce. (93)

It is thus the concept of separate and stable characters that falls apart in Owens's play. The alleged Author of the play prepares the ground for this dissolution when he states that he longs to transform into the figure of Emma and begs her: "Let me play you, Emma!" (85) At other times, Emma and the author even complete each other's sentences, thus obliterating the barriers between two formerly separate entities:

> EMMA GOLDMAN: Sasha was my lover and an idealist. I have the hatred . . .
>
> AUTHOR: . . . for the conditions that compel idealists to acts of violence. (90)

The bond and interchangeability between Author and Emma grows stronger during the play as the "author" insists that "[w]e are contemporaries glowing together" (94). Interestingly, the recorded voice of the Author points out that "[f]or thirty-eight years I researched this play in the life of Emma Goldman" (94). This time span, roughly, covers the life time of Rochelle Owens at the time of writing this very play. Hence, a further category, the actual author of the play, is added to the process of contesting and transforming notions of authorship and identity.

In a metadramatic commentary, Emma Goldman repeatedly attacks the Author and argues with him about technical aspects of writing:

> EMMA GOLDMAN: The characters you write have fuzzy edges! They constantly threaten to explode out of character . . . your voice also . . . hysterical . . . inappropriate . . . you avoid linear structure . . . a cohesive rational method of writing a play . . . Stick to one thought and carry it through! (73)

Emma challenges the author in his very own field, that of writing. She attacks him for violating major traditional principles of composition, such as "linear structure" and "cohesive rational method." Characters, she says, "explode" in his writing, thus the concept of a stable character itself and, by analogy, of a viable self fall apart. The play deconstructs these very categories and replaces them with concepts of text and language that increasingly act as performers, assuming the function of traditional characters. Put differently, identity increasingly gets lost in writing, which brings to the center the notion of the text as a "tissue of quotations," a "multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash."[6] This concept of the text is literally a weaving together of more or less obvious quotations and allusions, mostly from the life of Emma Goldman. But the Author in *Emma Instigated Me* also resorts to other literary figures such as Poe,[7] or to Owens's *The Karl Marx Play* (80).[8] Stage directions, for instance, prescribe that Emma Goldman "*implores and sounds like Vivian Leigh in* Streetcar Named Desire" (81), or Policeman Breslin advises to "just take the streetcar named Anarchy" (92). Often, references bring up Goldman's writings, at times explicitly so:

> AUTHOR: Often young lean men would kneel before me holding out bunches of red roses. From your own biography, Emma. (89)

Pulling the threads together, *Emma Instigated Me* suggests that writing and dramatizing lives is to a considerable extent an exercise in composition, in fiction-making, which is subjective, provisional, contested, and imaginative. Significantly, Emma realizes:

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6 Barthes, "The Death of the Author" 146.

7 The "Recorded Voice" quotes from Poe's *The Raven* when it says "Quoth the raven nevermore" (84).

8 In *Emma Instigated Me*, Emma Goldman reproaches the Author for ridiculing "the great man" in this play, and Amy and Mercedes subversively contend that "[t]he play was psy- -cho- -log- -i- -cal- -ickle- - -ickle- - -ickle." (80) Rochelle Owens was indeed heavily challenged for *The Karl Marx Play*, and critics like Walter Kerr mainly attacked her for her "free associations;" as the title of Kerr's review clearly indicates, he thought "It's No Way to Write 'Das Kapital'" (*New York Times* 8 April 1973).

> EMMA GOLDMAN: I am composed . . . quiet . . . (74)

By saying that she "composed," Emma calls on a double meaning. Whereas this connotes, on the one hand, that she is calm and self-possessed, it also means that Emma Goldman is a creation, an invention, "composed" by an author figure. The double meaning draws attention to the process of writing this play as well as to literature in general, namely that it is a deliberate composition. Emma's recognition reminds us strongly of John Barth's short story "Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction." As Emma in the play, the autobiographical voice of Barth's story is conscious of the following task: "I must compose myself," and Barth plays on the double meaning throughout the story.[9]

The Author of Owens's play is also self-conscious about composing the fiction of Emma's life. His unstable and shifting status as author goes beyond minor inconsistencies in the dramatic script or the performance. The whole play, as he concedes in an extensive statement before scene one, was originally not even meant to be about Emma Goldman, but about the American religious leader and colonizer of the West, Brigham Young, and the process of changing the subject is described thus:

> AUTHOR: [...] Then I struck out with a black pen wherever the name Brigham Young appeared and I put in its place the name of Emma Goldman. As I continued to write the play, the strength and the thing it was fused into the memory of my own origin and life. [sic] I began to squirm, exist, and appear between the gaps, intervals, and spasms of the play itself. I was writing my own life. Emma and I the author were together in the order of creative perception. And so this is how the play, *Emma Instigated Me*, was first created--out of the carcass of Brigham Young. (72)

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9 Barth, "Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction," *Lost in the Funhouse* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1969), 36.

The story of a person's life is, as this statement suggests, largely interchangeable with another, effected by a mere crossing out and substituting of names, be they Brigham Young, Emma Goldman, Rochelle Owens or the Author. The blending of different life-stories, which is at issue here, is also characteristic of the following scene in which Amy and Mercedes, probably two working women, are seen talking to each other. A post covered with placards of Emma Goldman and the word "Anarchist" written across is displayed as well. In the ensuing scene, Owens interweaves the life-stories of the two women with each other and additionally blends in metadramatic commentaries by the participants of the scene:

> AMY: I was depressed. I'd peer out from the corners blind like a newborn rat in hell.
>
> EMMA GOLDMAN: Free association! Not linear. Weak tactic.
>
> DIRECTOR'S VOICE: *(on microphone)* What the hell is linear!
>
> MERCEDES: Logical! Western concepts of logic!
>
> AMY: I was being Chinese! There's a difference between a cold room and a fire! Paradox! (79)

In a crucial move, Emma seems to intrude upon this particular setting by commenting on, rather than partaking in, the women's conversation and by entering into an argument with Mercedes and the director on principles of linearity and logic dominant in Western philosophical discourse. Whereas a realistic mode of playwriting remains within the parameters of linearity and logic, experimental writing such as *Emma Instigated Me* ventures into a different direction. Its metatheatrical thrust is pointed out at a very prominent position in the opening stage directions: The play, Owens says, is "about a play in the process of 'becoming'" (71). Emphasis is thus placed on process and the implications of "becoming" in contrast to "being." In other words, Owens attempts to put on stage not a final product as the result of a writer's efforts but rather the dynamic and creative process eventually leading to this result.

Refusing to pay due respect to the Author as grounding principle of the text, subverting the 'law of the father'—even if the father, subversively, turns out to be a mother in this case—as well as struggling for a voice not controlled by the author reveal the play's feminist agenda. Transformation as a technique most vividly serves to express these feminist concerns. It functions, among others, as a means to escape the limitations imposed on the text by an alleged author and thus defies closure: "To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing."[10]

Along the lines of her transformational programmatics, Owens has the actors change not only from one role to another, but also lets them oscillate between the functions of actor and character. Actors, Owens specifies, can "*double or triple in roles*" (71) and, in Emma's case, the play offers the further possibility of "ACTRESS as EMMA GOLDMAN" or "EMMA GOLDMAN as ACTRESS" (72). Nevertheless, the prescriptive power of the Author remains wide-ranging in this context, as Emma painfully experiences in some scenes:

> AUTHOR: Emma . . . has . . . something . . . a gentle manner . . . and a strong will . . . and a handsome bearing. I think that I'll make you join the army!
>
> EMMA GOLDMAN: I am of the army of the people. There is nothing in me but the thick stump of resolution! *(She is outraged because it was not her intention to use the phrase. But it was someone else's.)* (76)

From a slightly different perspective, this struggle over authorship in character fixation is a power struggle over the right to one's own voice and identity. In the play, this struggle extends to the smallest details of the mise-en-scène:

> DIRECTOR: Why aren't these women wearing airplane hats! A shining star! An enlarged liver!

10 Barthes, "The Death of the Author" 147.

> EMMA GOLDMAN: The entire house goes wild! *(Recorded house applause.)*
>
> AUTHOR: You don't give the stage directions, Emma Goldman!
>
> EMMA GOLDMAN: I love the theatre! It can be useful for social change! Awakening, awakening--! (82)[11]

According to Owens's introductory stage directions, the play is designed to "manifest the reality of theatre as a part of life" (71). Based on this claim, the shifting of personalities in the play, acted out in frequent transformations, suggests that personal and social identities are not immutable entities or natural givens. That women should enjoy the ability of imponderable change, that they may transform themselves at will without prior notice is expressed in the following lines:

> RECORDED VOICE 1: The texture changes before our tongues. Emma Goldman is a blacksmith!
>
> EMMA GOLDMAN: I'm a blacksmith. Call me the maker of transformation. The woman of revolution. (75)

Emma Goldman here explicitly situates herself in a revolutionary, feminist realm which she clearly associates with self-directed transformation. Transformation as ultimately serving the feminist cause also surfaces in Dora's call to "[m]ake it new. Make it new" (82),

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11 As a matter of fact, the historical Emma Goldman frequently lectured on the theater as a means for social change—even though these talks on theater and drama may have served as unsuspecting vehicles to promote contraband lecture topics such as anarchy, feminism, and abortion. Goldman's lectures on drama covered a wide range of Scandinavian, German, French, Russian, English, and Irish works, but she remained cautious as regards American drama. For her, "America has so far produced very little worthy to be considered in a social light" because it is "lacking the cultural and evolutionary tradition of the Old World" and would still have to "prepare the soil out of which sprouts creative genius." See Goldman, Foreword, *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* (1914; New York: Applause, 1987), 2.

which, in turn, echoes the paradigmatic modernist battle cry by Pound that the later postmodern "tradition of the new" (Jencks) resorted to.[12]

The battle over textual authority equally concerns the issue of voice or, more precisely, the question of substantiating and negotiating the claim to one's own voice. In *Emma Instigated Me*, recorded voices have, along with strange agents such as "The Plant," become foregrounded members of the cast of characters. At times, voices function as independent contributors, at times a given character, be it Director or Author, appears as a recorded voice associated with its bodily representation. Sometimes unspecified voices are also called upon to help communicate messages a character seems unable to transmit himself/herself:

> EMMA GOLDMAN: ... Voices! Explain to the author my meanings! (79)

For the most part, Emma's call remains futile in this play which does not represent an epistemological exercise in the transmission of meaning or a conclusive explanation of her particular life. The play is demonstratively located elsewhere:

> RECORDED VOICE 2: This play happens between gaps, intervals, spasms. A pick on the ole heart-string. A contraction of the vocal cord. Speak, Emma Goldman! (73)

That the play happens between "gaps" shows in the script of *Emma Instigated Me* which leaves ample freedom for individual performance, and the play's particular structural pattern has far-reaching consequences for the relationship between text and performance. The recorded voices in particular are largely unspecified. Owens neither prescribes that they should be associated with a particular character/actor nor does she specify whether the voices are to be accompanied by a bodily appearance or simply transmitted electronically, possibly to the extent of being defamiliarized. Nevertheless, the re-

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12 For references to Pound and Jencks on this issue, see the introduction and chapter II of this study.

corded voices are mostly individualized and retain their idiosyncratic traits of character and personality. "Recorded Voice 1" will, for instance, drop out of its dehumanized role when it spreads the rumor of the unpremeditated and accidental nature of writing before the first scene has even begun:

> RECORDED VOICE 1: There is an implication that the author will follow the suggestions of anyone and write a play about anyone. Oh, I'm sorry, I thought the machine was off. (72)

Relieved of an arguably burdensome bodily existence, Emma Goldman in this sense longs "to be a voice alone" (77). It seems as if a disembodied voice alone would still enjoy a sense of completion and selfhood. Not unlike the function of the stage manager in the Epic Theater, the "Recorded Voices" often announce scene changes and shifting contexts:

> RECORDED VOICES: Scene change. Scene change. Factory Scene. Fight in a factory. Breathing hard. Vigor. Clash sardine cans! Bring out the Italian immigrant women, Maria and Dora. (81, also 83)

Here, Owens evokes the impression that the recorded voices could, at least to a certain extent, balance the play's lack of narrative order and logical cohesion that is so frequently deplored by Emma Goldman.

The play's continuous attempts to create anti-hierarchical structures reveal a paratactical mode of writing. This organizational principle is firmly rooted in the postmodern discourse, according to Ihab Hassan, who has observed that postmodern writers prefer the paratactical to the hypotactical.[13] The connecting elements between fragments are missing, which prompts Emma Goldman to remark that "[n]othing connects in this play" (82). The paratactical order creates a mere sur-

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13 For the role and function of postmodern parataxis, see Hassan's famous list of postmodern features in "Toward a Concept of Postmodernism" 91. See also Katherine N. Hayles, "Postmodern Parataxis: Embodied Texts, Weightless Information" 394-421, and the theoretical section of this book.

face structure rather than a progressive, climactic order. In this context, the ruptures in the play are notably indicated by bombs that explode after each scene, thus literally ripping apart the narrative and whatever remnant of logicality it may still retain.

Emma Instigated Me is not informed by a conventional plot pattern; at times, the play seems to be modeled on a musical structure, not unlike the one used by Jean-Claude van Itallie. Certain phrases occur repeatedly during the play like a leitmotif, at times slightly altered or spoken by different figures and voices. This structural principle is already highlighted in the very beginning of the play when the recorded voice of the Director tells us that

> RECORDED VOICE - DIRECTOR: [...] As lights begin to dim we hear a general din of human voices. Silence. Sound rises bit by bit and we hear clearly various key phrases: NO AUTHENTIC RESEARCH. WHAT IS IT ABOUT? I DON'T UNDERSTAND ANYTHING. I CAN GET IT ON WITHOUT HYPNOSIS. THIS IS NOT A REAL PLAY ABOUT EMMA GOLDMAN. I HATE THE PLAY. I HATE THE PLAY. THIS IS SOLIPSISM. THIS IS SOLIPSISM. (72)

The musical structure is then made explicit in scene two when, in accordance with the stage directions, the lines of Amy and Mercedes "*build up until it's like a resounding Bach cantata until it's almost too much in repetition and obsession*" (80):

> MERCEDES and AMY: Wordy wordy. Simplicity. Simplicity. Amy. Mercedes. Amy. Mercedes. Amy. Mercedes.

Stage directions of the play thus frequently describe a soundscape that develops as a climactic structure and turns words into mere noise by their repetition 'ad nauseam'. In the given example, the musical structure, the "Bach cantata," is reminiscent of the fugal structure in Jean-

Claude van Itallie's "Interview" or in Edward Albee's *Box and Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung*.[14]

Despite such organizational and structural redefinitions, the play is concerned with "solipsism" (72), with the self that is conceived as real and aware of nothing but its own existence. Both the historical and the fictional Emma as well as the Author seem to believe in this concept of the self and the possibility to represent truthfully the life of a person. From this perspective, the play constitutes a monologue of the author as he/she is writing a play. It is thus solely about the Author and, in particular, about the Author's aspirations to immortality that may be part of his/her motivation for writing. The play as a fixed product can sustain the illusion that the story of a life is not lost but that it has triumphed over mortality and transience. As soon as the text becomes independent and escapes the control of an authorial figure, however, the writer/author/character is turned into an absence of a supposed presence, a condition that John Barth has elsewhere called a "defect."[15] In this context, transformation proves to be an ideal method of oscillating between absences and presence. In *Emma Instigated Me*, transformation serves to defy the closure of masternarratives, of a definitive version of a person's life-story. It points out that every reading is a writing that composes the text anew, produces itself and turns itself against the ultimacies of Emma Goldman's story and the claim to originality. "It is," to use Barth's description of Borges' *Tlön*, "a real piece of imagined reality in our world."[16] The deliberate paradox, the "imagined reality," vividly informs Owens's play, and transformative strategies help to present what Owens calls the "shifting realities of experience" (71). In this sense, *Emma Instigated Me* represents an effort of supplying alternative texts to a traditional masterwork. As such, it challenges the established status and traditional prestige ascribed to the individual that is, as Roland Barthes has it, "tyrannically centred on the author, his life, his tastes, his passions."[17]

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14 In an interview, Owens argues that, for her, soundscapes of words are of prime importance in the writing process. She explains that when she writes language becomes "like a pattern of beats and breath sound, physical, very internal." See Betsko and Koenig, "Rochelle Owens" 351.

15 Barth, "Autobiography: A Self-Recorded Fiction" 38.

16 Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967), *The Friday Book* (New York: Perigee, 1984), 71.

17 Barthes, "The Death of the Author" 143.

It is only at the end of the play, one could argue, that both the play and Emma are born, and the author recognizes: "all night I watched you struggle for life, Emma" (94). "Emma" as a text is born when the playwriting is finished, and the writer's task is completed, if only provisionally. According to Barthes, the reader is born in the instant in which the traditional distinction between author and reader collapses and the rigid binary opposition between historiography and fiction, character and actor is dissolved. A certain belief in authorship, though, persists throughout the play and, at the very end of the play, a recorded, unspecified, and nameless voice asserts its own existence:

> RECORDED VOICE:
>
> I sits and looks across the sea
>
> Until it seems that no one's left but you and me.
>
> *(repeat twice.)*
>
> I knew that the characters were right. For propaganda purposes and for the swirling chemical directions of my brain. My cause, my duty, my propaganda, my private selfish aims. I'd given myself the right to create an anarchist play around the life of Emma Goldman the 19th century anarchist. Red Emma! (94)

After all, Emma Goldman seems right when she concludes: "Your writing causes discomfort in us" (94). This discomfort derives to a large degree from the play's processual character as it is a transformative and self-reflexive exercise in writing. The metadramatic thrust of this process casts doubt on traditional concepts of authorship and textual authority and unveils them as transformative. Owens's historiographic metadrama parodies the writing of someone's life and of writing history in general. *Emma Instigated Me* thus represents an attempt at "anarchic" postmodern writing in dramatic form and, in pursuit of this program, creates a life-story which, after all, is much in line with the actual life-story of the historical Emma Goldman.

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Megan Terry and Rochelle Owens, though different from van Itallie in many respects, are also engaged in creating a theater of transformation in their own way. Terry, the "mother of feminist drama," and Owens, identifying herself as "proto-feminist," both express their versions of postmodern feminism, though in quite different ways. Terry effectively challenges the metaphor of the prison house of the self in general and the female self in particular by using dramatic techniques of transformation. Transformation here destructures master discourses and fixed gender ascriptions. Both Terry and Owens conceive of plays in terms of their possibilities of combination and thus assert the notion of the text-in-flux as opposed to the author-centered work as a finished product. Terry's plays consist of so-called action-blocs that are connected not by plot or conflict development, but rather by rhythmic patterns and transformations. These action-blocs are mostly drawn from intertextual sources of popular culture, at once using their formal structures and their gender-identified descriptions. Through transformations, so-called male and female identities are unveiled in their constructedness and artificiality. In this respect, Terry's theater surpasses the "true frontier" of the concept of gender and self, just as Rochelle Owens's plays do. Owens's continuous transformations ("Actress as Emma Goldman or Emma Goldman as Actress") make Emma Goldman's warning in the play, that the figures "explode out of character," a most wanted effect. In dramatizing the quarrels and tribulations over the process of writing a play Owens delineates, among other things, the struggle "from work to text." What is thus borne out in *Emma Instigated Me* is a "tissue of quotations" in the Barthesian sense, a genuinely anarchic text that is true to the life-long goals of the historical Emma Goldman.

V Suzan-Lori Parks: "Rep & Rev" Postmodernism

Praised as the "year's most promising playwright" by Mel Gussow in the *New York Times* in 1989, Suzan-Lori Parks's career took a head-start during the late 1980s. Since then, she has become a shaping influence on the New York and American theater scene.[1] An experimental playwright and an African-American woman, Parks finds in postmodern drama both a penchant for formal innovation and an emphasis on those marginalized in society; she is a postmodern playwright with a double agenda. Despite its alleged apoliticality, postmodernism has contributed considerably to a shifting focus in literature and literary studies and to a rethinking of the literary canon. In her essay "Possession," Suzan-Lori Parks develops her view on the relationship of history and theater from an African-American perspective:

> So much of the discussion today in literary criticism [...] concerns how the African-American literary contribution should be incorporated into the canon. The history of Literature is in question. And the history of History is in question too. A play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature. Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to 'make' history—that is, because so much of African-

1 Parks has received grants from numerous agencies, including the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations and the National Endowment for the Arts, from which she received a playwriting fellowship twice. She was awarded a McArthur Award in 1986, and her full-length play *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, which will be discussed below, won the Obie Award for the best Off-Broadway play of 1990. Apart from her large body of work for the stage, she has worked for radio productions and wrote the screenplay for Spike Lee's *Girl 6*. A graduate from Mount Holyoke College and the Yale Drama School, she lives in New York City and teaches as a writer-in-residence at the New School for Social Research in New York City.

> American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright is to—through literature and the special relationship between theatre and real-life—locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, hear the bones sing, write it down.[2]

Viewing theater as an "incubator for the creation of historical events,"[3] Parks draws our attention to the absence of African Americans from American History. As she rewrites single historical incidents and experiences, she leaves an African-American imprint on American History. By focusing on the processes of writing history, she has developed a historiographic metadrama analogous to the historiographic metafiction of the postmodern novel.

And yet, Parks cannot easily be pigeonholed into the category of ethnic writing, which is mainly devoted to telling the story of oppression with the familiar pattern of separation and reintegration into the respective culture of origin. Parks not only conceives of different ways to dramatize the African-American experience and, above all, its effect on African-American consciousness, she also goes beyond an ethnic perspective to locate a more general crisis in American dramatic writing. She sees her task as a playwright in defending dramatic literature against what she calls the "Theatre of Schmaltz" which "threatens to cover us all, like Vesuvius, in our sleep."[4] Parks targets a tendency discernible in contemporary theater to pull all possible strings in order to write plays about fashionable, hotly-debated topics, leaving any consideration for the craft of playwriting aside; she calls it the

> play-as-wrapping-paper-version-of-hot-newspaper-headline [...] so uninterested in the marvel of live bodies on stage. Theatre seems mired in the interest of stating some point, or tugging some heartstring, or

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2 Suzan-Lori Parks, "Possession," *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 4. The 'digging for bones' mentioned in this quotation will, along with the 'digging the (w)hole of history', develop into the central metaphor of Parks's *The America Play* as discussed below.

3 Parks, "Possession" 5.

4 Parks, "Elements of Style," *The America Play and Other Works* 6.

> landing a laugh, or making a splash, or wagging a finger. In no other artform are the intentions so slim![5]

The question of intentionality, though, does not depend on the content of the work alone. Parks calls it a "bald fact" that "form is an integral part of the story."[6] Form is an active participant in the semiotic process, and structure and ideology are viewed as interdependent. Form, viewed from the angle of cultural studies, responds to and expresses a specific cultural climate. Parks explains this central tenet of her theory of drama thus:

> [Y]ou can never talk about something that's outside of that, that's off that well-made play map because form and content go together. Some people say, "Oh, you can say anything, great idea, but put it in a structure that we can understand so that we can get this stuff." And I think, there's no way that this stuff that I'm trying to say is going to fit into that structure.[7]

Form and content cannot be separated because form, too, is semiotic as it creates and carries meaning. Thus, the form of her plays *is* "this stuff" she is "trying to say," and meaning resides in the dramatic structure. Based on the belief that dramatic form is semiotic, Parks's plays are a reflection on drama and theater, they are metadramatic writing. The metadramatic aspect is among Parks's prime incentives to write plays: "the most exciting thing about theater is that it's about theater."[8] And yet, most critics are reluctant to see Parks as a formally innovative writer.[9] She is mostly labeled an ethnic playwright, which means that her plays are expected to foreground what she calls "'black-on-black violence.'"[10] Theoretical concerns and formal innovation are, by and large, not what ethnic writers are primarily associated with. Speculating on the reasons for this attitude, Parks says: "it has some-

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5 Parks, "Elements of Style" 6.

6 Parks, "Elements of Style" 7.

7 Drukman, "Doo-a-diddly-dit-dit: An Interview by Steven Drukman," *The Drama Review* 39.3 (Fall 1995): 64.

8 Shelby Jiggetts, "Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks," *Callaloo* 19.2 (1996): 313.

9 Steven Drukman addresses this issue in an interview with Parks and Liz Diamond; see Drukman, "Doo-a-diddly-dit-dit: An Interview" 61.

10 Drukman, "Doo-a-diddly-dit-dit: An Interview" 61.

thing to do with what we […] allow black people to do and one of them is not theory."[11]

Parks grounds her form of writing in the concept she has termed "Rep & Rev," short for "repetition and revision." This concept constitutes the central element of style and orientation in her work. Adapted from the Jazz aesthetic, "Rep & Rev" means that a particular phrase is followed by numerous concomitant repetitions. Such repetition, though, is never identical to itself. A phrase is always repeated with a difference, in other words, it is always revised. This principle reveals sameness as a fiction. Repetitive structures, however, are more likely to be considered anti-dramatic in the classical model of drama which is based on climactic conflict. Umberto Eco has shown that repetition and innovation are not mutually exclusive, a view that Parks corroborates in her theoretical essay, "Elements of Style," when she argues that, in her model of repetition and revision,

> [c]haracters refigure their words and through a refiguring of language show us that they are experiencing their situation anew. [... A] text based on the concept of repetition and revision is one which breaks from the text which we are told to write—the text which cleanly ARCS. [sic][12]

Repetition in Parks's sense, then, does not foil the idea of forward progression; rather, the very idea is reconfigured. Parks defines "'climax'" as "the accumulated weight of the repetition,"[13] that is, as the effect words themselves have on character and audience. The strategy to repeat and revise forsakes linear time concepts, and this rejection of linearity defies a sense of closure. "In such plays," says Parks, "we are not moving from A → B but rather, for example, from A → A → A → B → A."[14] Such plays can consequently be challenging for all involved in the performance: actors and actresses, director and audience alike.

Parks's "Rep & Rev" takes up an aesthetic principle deeply rooted in the African-American tradition. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry

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11 Drukman, "Doo-a-diddly-dit-dit: An Interview" 61.
12 Parks, "Elements of Style" 9.
13 Parks, "Elements of Style" 10.
14 Parks, "Elements of Style" 9.

Louis Gates discusses the concept of repetition and revision, which he calls repetition and difference, and links it to the black vernacular:

> But black formal repetition always repeats with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use. And the repository that contains the language that is the source—and the reflection—of black difference is the black English vernacular tradition.[15]

Parks makes extensive use of black vernacular that often does not differentiate between present and past tense, thus counteracting a linear movement in time. For Parks, language is a physical act and involves the entire body. She alters the spelling of words based on black vernacular and thus compels the actor/actress to alter his/her manner of speech, which requires a different physical effort. The difference between "the" and "thuh" illustrates this point: the production of a "thuh" forces the actor to employ a different physical, vocal, and emotional effort than compared to a "the." Therefore, Parks has included a brief dictionary of "foreign words & phrases" in her collection of plays and essays. Beyond black vernacular speech patterns, Parks also plays in other ways with language, spellings, and sounds in her theater. She creates onomatopoeic soundscapes and sometimes even mere noise. The noise which may, at a first glance, seem deliberately non-semiotic will, on second thought, acquire semiotic qualities. Parks makes a conscious effort "to get the sounds on the page" because these sounds are meaningful, are semiotic. In general, the goal of Parks's particular spelling of black vernacular and of creating a spelling for sound effects is "to try to be more specific" in order to explain "what's going on emotionally with the character."[16]

The conventional approach to being "more specific" in this respect would use parenthetical stage directions. Parks, however, puts precision into the speech of her plays in other ways. She stresses language and speech to such an extent that the stage directions in her plays are reduced to a minimum. All action is drawn into the drama proper, she wants "the words [to] hold the emotion."[17] Her plays are,

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15 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (New York, London: Oxford UP, 1988), xxii-xxiii.

16 Jiggetts, "Interview" 311.

17 Jiggetts, "Interview" 312.

then, an attempt to re-theatricalize the theater, to emphasize again verbal and sound language on the stage. She writes:

> The action goes in the line of dialogue instead of always in a pissy set of parentheses. How the line should be delivered is contained in the line itself. Stage directions disappear.[18]

And yet, this is not a somewhat naive effort to recur to theatrical immediacy and to recover an original notion of dialogue. Parks, rather, alters the concept of speech on stage and places more emphasis on language itself.

Beyond all extensive formal experimentation, the question of Parks's ideological agenda remains cruical. More often than not, African-American cultural works have displayed a preoccupation with the African-American experience. Parks pursues a politics different from the thrust of traditional African-American literature. Her theater does not predominantly tell the story of racial oppression. Quite often, it does not even tell a story at all—even though topics such as an African-American identity and sense of self as located 'in-between' cultures and the concomitant problematization of a sense of belonging and community feature prominently in her work.[19] Parks's focus is elsewhere: her theater takes place in the mind and, as such, is a theater of consciousness, as Solomon puts it:

> That's not to say that Parks gives stories of conventional characters struggling with that familiar assimilationist identity crisis—searching at once for their roots and for the road out of the place where they're rooted. Instead, she stages that consciousness itself, pulling apart language and image, pointing at their innards, and sometimes, reconstituting them anew.[20]

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18 Parks, "Elements of Style" 15-16.

19 This issue has been treated thoroughly in Jeanette R. Malkin's discussion of memory in contemporary theater.

20 Solomon points to one of the most crucial paradoxes of most ethnic literatures, that is the search for a place of origin which is, most often, accompanied by a desire to escape that very place as soon as possible. See Alisa Solomon, "Signifying on the Signifyin': The Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks," *Theater* 21.3 (1990): 74. Remshardt also acknowledges Parks's modernist ancestors when

The "reconstitution" from anew marks a major trait of Parks's work. The process of reconstitution, however, is not based on the assumption that a lost unity can be recovered. It is not the unique connection of language and image suggesting a single meaning, a specific message, that Parks is after. "I think that the playwright provides the map," she says, but "a bad play only has a one-way road [...]; one idea, one message, one way of doing it."[21]

In her programmatic essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent"—with the obvious allusion to T. S. Eliot—Parks identifies her agenda as operating on three planes: embracing the great tradition, working with the individual talent, and constructing the "next new thing," that is, the future through innovation.[22] Hence Parks does not reject the literary canon, on the contrary, she embraces it and, at the same time, changes it by adding her personal experience and cultural context as a major force in the body of work which, as a whole, has a significance for the future. This attitude obviously echoes the postmodern 'tradition of the new.' As for the literary tradition, she claims Beckett, Adrienne Kennedy, and Faulkner as the major influences on her work, with Faulkner the writer most to her personal liking. She explains the fascination with these writers by the degree of artistic freedom they enjoyed in their writing.[23] This reason may also explain her admiration for Virginia Woolf whose stream-of-consciousness technique seems to have served as a model for Parks's style.[24] The

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he concludes that her plays are "joyceanisch-verrätselte Theatertexte mit Jazzstruktur." See Ralf Eric Remshardt, "'History is about to crack wide open': Kushner, Parks und die Geschichte im amerikanischen Theater der neunziger Jahre," *Transformationen. Theater der neunziger Jahre*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte, Doris Kolesch, and Christel Weiler (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 1999), 164.

21 Jiggetts, "Interview" 312.

22 Suzan-Lori Parks, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Theater* 29.2 (1999): 26-31.

23 In this respect, Parks discerns a tradition in which writers enjoyed the liberty to do "whatever you want" arguing that lines by her such as "diddly-did-did the drop" are rooted in that very tradition. As for the critics, let alone the audience, Parks's attitude reads: "'Here it is! You Mr. and Ms. Critic, you guys go away and think about it and exercise your brains and come up with something thrilling!'" In Drukman, "Doo-a-diddly-dit-dit: An Interview" 72.

24 Parks admits Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* to be the literary work that directed her inclination towards literature instead of natural sciences. See Jiggetts, "An Interview" 310.

theater critic and director Robert Brustein has admiringly—and provocatively—called Parks a "writer with more on her mind than race" and concedes that "she is as much a product of Western postmodernism as of black consciousness."[25] It is indeed a political postmodernism, the so-called postmodernism of resistance, that has contributed to the re-evaluation of minority discourses and helped to bring their writing to the attention of the public. Such statements underline the necessity of reading Parks's work not only as an example of African-American literature, but as an innovative postmodern literary project written by an African-American dramatist with a political agenda.

25 Robert Brustein, Review of *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, *New Republic* (April 13, 1992): 29.

V.1 *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*: "Histironical Amendments" and the Third Space

In one of the first essays on Suzan-Lori Parks's theater, critic Alisa Solomon describes the four separate but thematically connected playlets of *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* as "so abstract in form and language as to make any attempts at interpretation provisional at best."[1] The play, which premiered at the BACA Downtown in Brooklyn, New York, in 1989, thematizes African-American history and experience, but, as in many postmodern plays, it thwarts any attempt at giving a brief introduction to the play's topic. *Mutabilities* does not offer a straightforward narrative of, say, a revised version of African-American history. Rather, it stages the issue of the representation of this history by dwelling on the photographic image as a major form of representation.[2]

The play consists of four unrelated sections and a "Reprise" that takes up "Part 2: The Third Kingdom." Other than that, the four parts of the play are fragments and each one of them presents different characters. A respectable degree of narrativity can only be found in the last part called "Greeks (or the Slugs)," which introduces the Smith family to the audience. The characters of "Part 2: The Third Kingdom" and the section's "Reprise" are types, mere allegorical figures drawn from images of African-American history and experience: Kin-Seer, Us-Seer, Shark-Seer, Soul-Seer, and Over-Seer.

In the opening scene of "Part 1: Snails," the characters Molly and Charlene appear on stage, each of the two doubled: huge slides of both women dominate the stage whereas the characters are concealed in

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1 Solomon, "Signifying on the Signifyin'" 73.

2 References to the play are taken from the following edition: Suzan-Lori Parks, *Imperceptible Mutabilitites in the Third Kingdom*, *The America Play and Other Works* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995), 23-72.

semi-darkness. We hear their voices and see their photographs, that is, their stage presence is established through technological representations. The connection between voice and body is severed and, instead, the technologically reproduced image substitutes for character. The slides demonstrate the conventional representation of African Americans in historiography. Not the person or character is presented—they are hardly visible on the semi-dark stage —but the technologically produced image looms large and entirely dominates the scene. The African-American presence on stage is rendered in shadows.[3] History is similarly presented as the shadow of the photographic image, that is, the technologically reproducible representation. Through the contrast between the fixed huge projections on screen and the tiny half-hidden characters unable to change their image or even to design one of her or his own, the powerlessness of the individual against established stereotyping and representation is dramatized.

In part 1, dialogic scenes featuring Molly and Charlene alternate with scenes in which the Naturalist or Verona give their respective lectures. The Naturalist, a physical anthropologist, talks to his imaginary students, in this case the audience, about methods of nature studies and anthropology. He explains the "fly" as an anthropological method which enables the naturalist to observe his "objects of study" while remaining unnoticed himself. The fly, of course, is a spy. The observing camera is carried, tellingly, by a cardboard cockroach which is used to monitor the scientific "objects," i.e. Molly and Charlene. He explains: "In our observations of the subjects subjects [sic] which for our purposes we have named 'MOLLY' and 'CHARLENE' subjects we have chosen for study in order that we may monitor their natural behavior" (27). He objectifies Molly and Charlene by virtue of naming them, even though they address themselves as "Mona" and "Chona." By thus gazing at and naming them, the Naturalist creates the two women, as if he were taking pictures, and admits them into existence.[4] Molly and Charlene are thus "ghettoized" in alleged natu-

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3 Existence and the conditions of survival are recurrent topics in almost all ethnic literatures. Similarly, the Native American novelist and critic Gerald Vizenor has developed the concept of "shadow survivance" for the American Indian cultural context; see Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1994), esp. 63-106.

4 By watching the two "objects of study" closely, the Naturalist also assumes a truly theatrical position, posing as an audience would while watching a play.

ral environments, which means they are classified according to someone else's patterns of perception, and a sense of self and identity is imposed on them. The reduction of the women to a status of scientific objects is enhanced by a concomitant evocation of wild animals and images of the savage in the jungle. The Naturalist poses as if he were watching wild-life, which does not go unnoticed by the "objects" of observation:

> MOLLY: Uh--the-cockroach-is-watching-us,-look-Chona-look! (28)

In the play, the Naturalist addresses the problem of how the presence of such "objects/subjects" can be reconciled with the white world. Or, how can one incorporate what is fundamentally different into one's established system of perception and knowledge. His lecture is pointedly concerned with this issue:

> An obvious question should arise in the mind of an inquisitive observer? Yes? HHH. How should we best accommodate the presence of such subjects in our modern world. That is to say: How. Should. We. Best. Accommodate. Our. Subjects. (29)

In staccato fashion, the Naturalist splits up his sentence into its component parts, which he treats as separate entities by means of punctuation. The structure of the sentence thus mirrors that of the women who are also split up and ghettoized as a fixed image.[5]

The slides in the play express a tension between reality and appearance, between the presence of the actors on stage and their technologically reproduced representation. Parks's approach to representation is deliberately theatrical. A gap opens up between preconceived images of people and their real-life correspondences whereby the copy, the simulation, may not only be easily mistaken for its real-life counterpart but dominates it to a considerable degree.

For Parks, this gaze constitutes a defining trait of theater; see Jiggetts, "Interview" 313.

5 For "ghettoization" in *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, see also Frieze, "The Shared Struggle to Perceive" 526.

Parks presents the women in the play as telling their life-stories in the third person. It is precisely the external gaze of others, here of white male reason, which constructs them as subjects/objects and forces them to tell their own stories in the third person. What is more, the women address themselves in the third person, which even more strongly expresses the distance that is created by the process of external observation. Molly refers in this context to the difference between a "me" that is constructed and held by the gaze and a different "me" that is yet to be known:

> MOLLY: Once there was uh me named Mona who wondered what she'd be like if no one was watchin. (27)

The women are known, and know themselves, by "names that whuduhnt ours" and are, by the same token, identified "from picture that whuduhnt us" (28). Charlene is also aware of the connection between naming and place of origin when she tells the story of an African man she once befriended:

> CHARLENE: [...] I asked him his name. He didnt answer. I asked him where he comed from. No answer tuh that neither. He didnt have no answers cause he didnt have no speech. Verona said he had that deep jungle air uhbout im that just off thuh boat look tuh his face. (26)

Narrating one's life in the third person, on the one hand, points to the gap between a supposed self and its other; on the other hand, those who possess the narrative authority to tell their lives are also in control of history. Hence, in this case, the women are in control of the imagination of their life-stories, thus reclaiming the power of life-writing from other people as, for instance, the Naturalist and white dominant discourse.

When the women tell their lives—fragmented as both narration and lives are—they make an attempt to re-member their lives and to re-assemble parts of their African-American experience and the concomitant narratives. However, Parks deviates from an all too simplified process of dis- and rememberment in her play. Rather, she

presents the elusive nature of this effort, since the re-membered parts do not easily fall into a coherent pattern. The fragmentation of both form and content matter, narrative and experience, becomes apparent in the women's talking at cross-purposes in the very beginning of the play:

> CHARLENE: How dja get through it?
>
> MOLLY: Mm not through it.
>
> CHARLENE: Yer leg. Thuh guard. Lose weight?
>
> MOLLY: Hhh. What should I do Chona should I jump should I jump or what?
>
> CHARLENE: You want some eggs?
>
> MOLLY: Would I splat?
>
> CHARLENE: Uhuhuhnnnn...
>
> MOLLY: Twelve floors up. Whaduhya think?
>
> CHARLENE: Uh-uh-uhn. Like scrambled? (25)

The section provides a good impression of the play as a whole. It is almost impossible to extract a story, even a short coherent narrative pattern from this episode. The play frequently demonstrates its concern with fragments of communicative situations, in the above example when Charlene's preparation of breakfast is interrupted by dissociative phrases and sounds. There is none of the usual interaction between characters, which we expect in a traditional play. Molly/ Mona here introduces a recurrent theme of the play when she repeatedly asks, "Would I splat?" (25), without getting an answer, probably even without expecting one. A dispersed sense of self seems to inhibit the engagement in meaningful conversation and hence in straightforward narrative.

The fragmented self is also discussed by the allegorical figures, the "seers," in "Part 2: The Third Kingdom." Figures seems a more adequate term for these participants in the action, because they display

no sense of individualization and are not involved in a sequential story.[6] Rather, they function as subconscious mythical voices from the repository of African-American tradition. Accordingly, most productions of the play presented the seers as disembodied voices on tape and without live actors on stage.[7]

In "Part 2," the seers discuss the process by which the world was cleft in two by invoking images of the water in-between, the Middle Passage. Analogous to the split world, the sense of self is represented as split, as the following section illustrates:

> Soul-Seer: Duhduhnt he duhduhnt he know my name?
> Ssblak ssblak ssblakallblak!
>
> Over-Seer: Thats you self youre looking at! Wonder #1 of my glass-bottomed boat.
>
> Kin-Seer: My uther me then waved back at me and then I was happy. But my uther me whuduhnt wavin at me. My uther me was wavin at my Self. My uther me was wavin at uh black black speck in thuh middle of thuh sea where years uhgoh from uh boat I had been—UUH!
>
> Over-Seer: Jettisoned.
>
> Shark-Seer: Jettisoned?
>
> Kin-Seer: Jettisoned.
>
> Us-Seer: Uh huhn.

---

6 Parks's play *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* features similar roles which Parks explicitly refers to as "figures" in the play; they are not individualized but are types with clichéd attributes as, for instance, "Black Man with Watermelon" or "Old Man River Jordan." Often, their names allude to African-American cuisine, as in "Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork" and "Yes and Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread."

7 This was the case, for instance, in Liz Diamond's 1989 production of the play; the stage was dark except for black-and-white slides projected onto a black screen; see James Frieze, "*Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*: Suzan-Lori Parks and the Shared Struggle to Perceive" 528. See also Solomon, "Signifying on the Signifyin'" 77.

> Soul-Seer: To-the-middle-of-the-bottom-of-the-big-black-sea.
>
> Kin-Seer: And then my Self came up between us. Rose up out of thuh water and standin on them waves my Self was standin. And I was wavin wavin wavin and my Me was wavin and wavin and my Self that rose between us went back down in-to-the-sea.
>
> Kin-Seer: FFFFFFFFF.
>
> Us-Seer: Thup.
>
> (38-39)

In this passage, Kin-Seer is fragmented and dispersed as "Self," "Me," and "I" while the "Self" that was jettisoned surfaces on the water and all three selves are imagined as waving at each other. Parks's image here is a figurative representation of the post-colonial concept of the "Third Space" as developed by Homi Bhabha.[8] This section of *Mutabilities* particularly evokes the Middle Passage as the location for much of African-American experience. The middle of the "big-black-sea" embraces the hybrid self and locates it literally in the waters in-between the two continents. Parks thus overcomes a Manichean model of binary oppositions and conceives of a third possibility that corresponds to the in-between-ness of African Americans and that is described as emerging from the waters, i.e. from the space in-between the world split in two:

> Shark-Seer: I dream up uh fish thats swallowin me and I dream up uh me that is then becamin that fish and uh dream of that fish becamin a shark and I dream of that shark becamin uhshore. UUH! And on thuh shore thuh shark is given shoes. And I whuduhnt me no more and I whuduhnt no fish. My new Self was uh third Self made by thuh space in between. And my new Self wonders:

8 See here Homi K. Bhabha, "The Commitment to Theory," *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 19-39.

> Am I happy? Is my new Self happy in my new-Self shoes? (39)

Shark-Seer in this context expresses a seemingly endless transformation of the sense of self, in other words, infinite mutations of the self.

The imagery of water, waves, and the Middle Passage also figures prominently in Parks's play *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*. As in *Imperceptible Mutabilities of the Third Kingdom*, the ubiquitous water metaphor is linked to the idea of writing one's life:

> QUEEN-THEN-PHARAOH HATSHEPSUT: An I am Sheba she be me. Youll mutter thuh words and part thuh waves and come uhlong come uhlong.
>
> AND BIGGER AND BIGGER AND BIGGER: I would be tuh fit in back in thuh storybook from which I camed.
>
> BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: My text was writ in water. I would like tuh drink it down.[9]

The figure "And Bigger and Bigger and Bigger" considers the storybook as her origin, as the place of her roots, and the "Black Man with Watermelon" explicitly associates the text of his life with water, thus alluding to the ways in which the Middle Passage has been instrumental for African-American history. When all participants in the play intone the collective call to "hold it," they emphasize the necessity to keep and treasure the stories of their African-American heritage:

> ALL: Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it. Hold it.[10]

Parks answers this call to "hold it," that is, the past, the experience, and the story, when she thematizes slavery and emancipation in "Open House," part 3 of *Mutabilities*. This part begins with Aretha's last day

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9 Parks, *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* 116.
10 Parks, *The Death of the Last Black Man* 131.

of work, probably as a slave, in a family with the telling name "Saxon:" father Charles and the children Blanca and Anglor. Pictures of Aretha, "Mr. Anglor," and "Miss Blanca" dominate the scene in a double-frame slide show on a semi-dark stage. Copying slow motion from film, the figures shown in the slides are at first described as expressionless, then smiling, and eventually increasing the width of their smile. Camera clicking sounds underline that they are constantly photographed, with an ever-increasing, wide smile to be caught in a fixed image. The image possesses them, as did the slave owners before. The exaggerated continual photo session here works as a ritual, and the reenactments serve as a cleansing procedure for those who are traumatized by the image and by its external fixation of their selves.[11] When asked about her plans for her newly achieved freedom, Aretha answers that she is "[g]oin uhway tuh live, I guess" (42). Parks juxtaposes this assertion of actual life with Blanca's preoccupation with an inanimate doll: "Live? Get me my doll" (42). Without Aretha, the children of the Saxon family find themselves clueless as to how they are going to perform the tasks of daily existence such as cleaning, laundry, and cooking. Without their housekeeping slave they are lost. In an attempt at reverse racism, Aretha then forces the children to smile towards the end of the section. While the children cry in dismay, Aretha explains that taking pictures is necessary for her record: "Dont matter none. Dont matter none at all. You say its uh cry I say it uh smile. These photographics is for my scrapbook. Scraps uh graphy for my book. Smile of no smile mm gonna remember you. Mm gonna remember you grinning" (54).

Section B of "Open House" shows Aretha counting the people, the "kin," fitting in a slave ship while the character with the telling name Miss Faith does calculations on how to transport the slaves overseas. The scholarly footnotes that are integrated into the play provide technical details on the history of slavery and generally purport to document scientific accuracy. They are given by Miss Faith:

> MISS FAITH: Footnote #1: The human cargo capacity of the English slaver, the *Brookes*, was about 3,250 square feet. From James A. Rawley, *The*

11 For a more detailed discussion of trauma in African-American experience, see Malkin, *Memory-Theater* esp. 163-164.

> *Transatlantic Slave Trade*, G.J. McLeod Limited, 1981, page 283. (43)

Miss Faith takes recourse to the alleged clarity of mathematics and statistics. What counts for her are facts and figures in which she firmly believes: "Very nice. 32.5, 19-6-65. By the book. As promised" (49). By insisting on doing everything in "accordance with the book" (44), she defends the authority of the written word and correct records because there will be "[c]haos without correct records" (48). Miss Faith has learned from the book that Mrs. Saxon has an "expiration date," with a footnote, as in a scholarly paper, giving the historical explanation:

> MISS FAITH: The book has let us know for quite some time that you expire 19-6-65, do you not, Mrs. Saxon. You expire. (Footnote #5: "Juneteenth," June 19th in 1865, was when, a good many months after the Emancipation Proclamation, the slaves in Texas heard they were free.) (47)

Being obsessed with mathematical accuracy is not only Miss Faith's concern. Parks, in a mock effort to adapt the methodological approach of the so-called hard sciences to the humanities, has expressed the workings of her plays in terms of mock-mathematical equations.[12] She explains the relationship between mathematics, plays, and meaning thus:

> bad math
>
> x + y = meaning. The ability to make simple substitutions is equated with *clarity*. We are taught that plays are merely staged essays and we begin to believe that characters in plays are symbols for some obscured

12 These equations are rendered as drawings in her theoretical essay. See Parks, "Elements of Style" esp. 12-14.

> "meaning" rather than simply the thing itself. As Beckett sez [sic]: "No symbols where non intended."[13]

One-to-one correspondences, however, are "bad math" for Parks, and equations only suggest a clarity which is illusory at best. The above passage evidently questions the idea of accurate representation, disavowing the concept that a sign stands for a particular meaning.

In *Mutabilities*, unambiguous meaning collapses as do both the notion of fact and the possibility of clarifying kinship relations. Charles seems to be both Anglor and Blanca's father and Aretha's owner, but could also be Aretha's absent husband; Aretha could thus equally be the mother of Blanca and Anglor. Anglor and Blanca, in turn, are siblings, but appear to be a couple just the same and introduce their children as Anglor and Blanca (50). Due to doubled or transformed unstable characters, the audience is hard-pressed for definitive conclusions and is thus forced to rethink what has previously been presented and taken as indisputable fact and knowledge. By the same token, this strategy serves to destabilize notions of "race" in the audience. In analogy to a snake shedding its skin, "the characters shed their ingrained ways of knowing: they begin to unlearn."[14] Similarly, the extraction of Aretha's teeth assumes the function of a cleansing ritual, the "shuck[ing] off" as a sign of the new life that lies ahead of her (44-45). Also, the teeth are needed, as Miss Faith explains, for the record and for purposes of documentation (46). In the dreamed of new life with the new imagined self, Aretha is seeking a place in the kingdom of God, constantly wondering whether there might be a place for her in this realm. The extraction of teeth and the shedding of the snake metaphorically express the possible transformations of the self that mutates and takes shapes in multiple identities.

By undermining the authority of the written word and the possibility of linear, teleological narrative in *Mutabilities*, Parks suggests the impossibility of stable meanings in the third kingdom. Rather, they mutate out of necessity—even if such semantic instabilities and mutations, or mutabilities, are largely imperceptible, as the play's title suggests. Mona ponders linguistic mutations in the shift of /sk/ from 'ask'

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13 Parks, "Elements of Style" 14-15.

14 Frieze, "The Shared Struggle to Perceive" 529.

to 'ax' (25; 28; 33). Similar to Mona's queries, Mr. Smith wonders about the intricacies of language and inaudible differences in meaning. He stepped into a mine during the war and lost his leg. While a "mine is a thing that dismembers" (64), he is concerned with remembering when he sees his children again after the war and wonders: "You one uh mines?" (70) Molly equally struggles with semantics. Having been dismissed from a job, Parks has her explain the incident thus:

> MOLLY: You lie down you lie down but he and she and it and us well we lays down. Didnt quit. They booted me. He booted me. Couldnt see thuh sense uh words workin like he said couldnt see thuh sense uh workin where words workin like that was workin would drop my phone voice would let things slip they tell me get Basic Skills call me breaking protocol hhhhh! Think I'll splat? (26)

Molly does not understand her boss, she cannot see "tuh sense of words workin like he said." Their different concepts of language seem to have collided here; and hers is more playful, alliterative, and semiotically subversive.

In the above quotation, Molly/Mona also mentions the issue of "splatting" again, which appears repeatedly throughout the play and thus provides thematic as well as structural coherence. Parks's concern with repetition looms large in her play in many instances. In one case, she postulates a time long ago which was organized according to a repetitive cyclical pattern. She refers to a time before Columbus who epitomizes the entry of white people into a black universe. With the advent of white people, the cyclical time pattern came to an end. Parks renders this process in terms of a language game reminiscent of a well-known deconstructionist dictum:

> QUEEN-THEN-PHARAOH HATSHEPSUT: Before Columbus thuh worl usta be *roun* they put uh /d/ on thuh end of roun makin roun*d*. Thusly they set in motion thuh end. Without that /d/ we coulda gone on spinnin forever. Thuh /d/ thing ended things ended. (102)

This passage contrasts linearity and circularity as diverging concepts of history. Before Columbus, "they," i.e. the white people, lived under the assumption that the world was flat, evoking a linear concept of beginning and end. Black people had always known the truth, that is, they had been aware of circularity, and hence of the roundness of the world. With Columbus, the white people, or, "they," figured out the truth, which not only allowed them to go out into the world but also put "us" in our place (103). The letter /d/ put a stop to the spinning of the world and thus terminated its transformative thrust.

The "spinning forever" of the previous quotation, however, has not entirely become a thing of the past for Parks. The concept of time in her play points to endless cyclical repetition, simultaneity, and fragmentation of time and lets linear time collapse. Mr. Smith, for instance, is thoroughly confused as regards the time concept:

> Mr. Smith: Time for somethin noble was yesterday. There usta be uh overlap for four hours. Hours in four when I'd say "today" and today it'd be. Them four hours usta happen together, now, they scatters theirselves all throughout thuh day. Usta be uh flap tuh slip through. Flaps gone shut. (74)

Today can no longer be distinguished from yesterday, and the "four hours" do not follow a linear temporal logic: they happen simultaneously or are spread over the whole day. Based on Parks's concept of "Rep & Rev," Mr. Smith's confusion over the sense of time challenges linearity in general. The simultaneous speech at the end of Part 3 further illustrates this process. The Seers speak their chorus-like lines simultaneously and intone them as musical motifs when singing a round:

KIN-SEER:	SHARK-SEER:
Wave wave wave wave.	Should I jump […]?
Wavin wavin	Should I jump should I jump
Wavin wavin	shouldijumporwhut?
[...]	

KIN-SEER:	SOUL-SEER:	SHARK-SEER:	US-SEER:
Wavin wavin	Rock.Thuh boat.	Shouldijump	thuh sky
Wavin	Rock.	Shouldijump	was just
Wavin	Thuh boat.	or whut?	as blue!
			THUP!

(56)

This particular arrangement of lines on the page clearly indicates the spatial orientation of the play as a whole and expresses ideas of simultaneity, possibly even paratactical structures. Linear and progressive time has collapsed, as Mr. Smith also observes and as the "Black Man with Watermelon" confirms in *Death of the Last Black Man*. He claims to be located both in a "Then" and a "Now" which are inseparable:

> BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: We sittin on this porch right now aint we. Uh huhn. Aaah. Yes. Sittin right here right now on it in it ainthuh first time either iduhnt it. Yep. Nope. Once we was here once wuhduhnt we. Yep. Yep. Once we being here. Uh huhn. Huh. There is uh Now and there is uh Then. Ssal there is. (I bein in Now: uh Now bein in uh Then: I bein, in Now in then, in I will be. I was be too but thats uh Then thats past. That me that was-be is uh me-has-been. Thuh me-has-been sits in thuh be-me: we sit on this porch. Same porch. Same me. Thuh Then thats been somehow sits in thuh Then that will be: same Thens. I swing from uh tree. You cut me down and bring me back. Home. Here.[15]

The collapse of linear time corresponds to an equally disintegrated concept of the self: the Black Man cannot tell the "me-has-been" and the "was-be" from the "be-me," all of which sit on the same porch. By

15 *Death of the Last Black Man* 126.

the same token, "Black Woman with Fried Drumsticks" seems unable to fix the death date of the "last black man" according to a familiar linear time scheme. For her, time no longer unfolds in a gradual movement from past through present to future:

> BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICKS:
> Yesterday today next summer tomorrow just uh moment uhgoh in 1317 dieded thuh last black man in thuh whole entire world. Uh! Oh.[16]

"Black Woman with Fried Drumsticks" here also suspends grammatical rules, such as the rules specifying the use of grammatical tense. Her unorthodox design of tenses further supports the idea that familiar rules and regulations are at a loss to decide when the black man "dieded" or "done dieded," or when one is left to wonder if "[l]ater oughta be now by now huh?: melon mine?"[17] At times, the effect of this experimental play with the extensions of time is utter alogicality and confusion: "In the future when they came along I meeting them."[18] Parks plays with the grammatical construction of tenses and with the way in which they suggest a linear-progressive time concept. Her experiments eventually lead to a subversive transformative game of sounds, words, and meanings: "Comin for you. Came for you: that they done did. [...] I didnt do diddly" and "Do in dip diddly did-did thuh drop? Drop do it be dripted? Uh huh."[19]

The experiments with language, sound, narrative, time, character, and silence raise the question of what holds the play together. Certainly, on the plane of content, the topic of African-American experience functions as a connective, if a rather vague one. But Parks also conceives of formal devices to connect the segments of her dramatic text. There is, for one, the rhythmic structure of the play which is also hinted at in the reprise of the play. Moreover, the in-between segments (e.g., 43; 44-46; 49) function as a connective that is later replaced by the sound of an airplane.[20] Apart from noise and recurrent sound as

16 *Death of the Last Black Man* 102.
17 *Death of the Last Black Man* 107; 108.
18 *Death of the Last Black Man* 104.
19 Parks, *The Death of the Last Black Man* 105; 116.
20 In Parks's play *Death of the Last Black Man*, a bell takes on that connective function.

structuring principles, reiterated phrases that are taken up by different figures in different contexts serve a similar function. Mona's question, for instance, is echoed by Kin-Seer who asks: "Should I jump? Shouldijumporwhut?" (40)

In *Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*, Parks claims to make "histironical amendments" which concern historical, ironical, and histrionic aspects of the play. Through this process of transformation, she changes established patterns of perception, and thus brings about the possibility of correcting errors and faults, and of making revisions and amendments to African-American history.

> ARETHA: […] We're makin us uh histironical amendment here, K? (53)[21]

Following this concept, Parks dramatizes African-American experience and history in the shadow of stereotypical, photographic images, that become their representations. She thus contributes to the evocation of an African-American cultural memory though she refrains from presenting it in the manner of a 'grande histoire'. Different memories and ideas concerning history occur in different contexts of the play at different times, but they are, nevertheless, suggested by diverse black people who all draw on the same collective archive of such memories. It is the clash between recall and record, the shaking of faith in the majority culture's alleged fact and exact figures that lends itself to a postmodernism of political and cultural resistance. *Mutabilities* thus becomes an example of postmodern drama turned political, though its dreamlike qualities and formal experimentations might at first suggest otherwise.[22] With regard to the audience, the play's intentions are difficult to decipher, but its vast deconstruction of established assumptions and expectations concerning black people in America serves as a exemplary subversion of white majority convic-

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21 Amendment XIII abolished slavery in the United States.

22 As a matter of fact, sections E and G of the play are subtitled "dreamtime." Critic Solomon calls the play a "dreamscape" and refers to its mode of writing as "engaged expressionism." See Solomon, "Signifying on the Signifyin'" 75. At the same time, "dreamtime" is a historical concept in Aboriginal Australia and could, by analogy, be a reference to a "native"/non-Western concept of history.

tions, and transforms them into something that can truly be called "historical amendments" on the large scale.

V.2 *The America Play*: Playing America

The America Play takes its title literally and, as a matter of fact, plays history, plays America. More particularly, it enacts one of the most important incidents of the *grande histoire* of America, namely the assassination of Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865. Parks wrote *The America Play* from 1990 to 1993 in commission for the Theatre for a New Audience.[1] It consists of two major parts, "Act One: Lincoln Act" and "Act Two: The Hall of Wonders," which comprises seven sections.[2] Act One is a long monologue by a character named "The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln," also known as the "Lesser Known." The Lesser Known resembles Abraham Lincoln so distinctly that he is easily mistaken for him. In the play, the Lesser Known as Lincoln look-alike re-enacts the historical assassination of the Great Man in a vaudevillian mock shooting scene.

In Act Two, the Lesser Known is gone and his wife and son embark on a search for their lost husband/father and are shown digging for their father/husband's history and legacy. Scenes featuring Lucy, the mother, and her son, Brazil, alternate with scenes presenting parts of a performance of *Our American Cousin*, the play the historical Lincoln was watching on the evening of his assassination.[3]. The America

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1 *The America Play* was given workshop productions at Arena Stage and Dallas Theater Center in 1993. It received its premiere in New York City at the Joseph Papp Public Theatre as a co-production between the New York Shakespeare Festival, the Yale Repertory Theatre, and the Theatre for a New Audience in February 1994.

2 All references to the play are taken from the following edition: Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play*, *The America Play and Other Plays* 157-199.

3 The name "Lucy" takes reference to Africa and human biological genesis: in the late 1980s the earliest known fossil evidence of hominids, *Australopithecus afarensis*, was found in the Middle Awash region of Ethiopia and dated about four million years ago. A specimen (AL 288-1) was commonly called "Lucy." It was the most complete early hominid skeleton yet recovered.

Play may have a higher degree of narrativity compared to plays such as *Imperceptible Mutabilities* or *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, but this rather 'skeletal' story can, at best, be considered as one aspect of the play.

At a first glance, *The America Play* defies notions of traditional American history and drama. Most visibly, the historically 'white' incident of the assassination of Lincoln is played in blackface. Most importantly, the setting of the play almost blatantly sets the tone for its agenda and interpretation and expresses the play's central concerns. Parks emphasizes that the play takes place in a

> Great Hole. In the middle of nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of the Great Hole of History. (158)

This particular setting introduces the play's major preoccupation: the representation of history as play and simulation. Subversive play with words and mutable meanings is the preeminent means to convey this idea. The pun on "hole/whole" shows how history as a "whole" has rather been a "hole" for African Americans, a discourse in which they were stuck. Parks coins the term "fabricated absence" for the ways in which American history has been constructed disregarding the African-American presence, or merely the negative presence of African Americans. The play's location signifies the emptiness and the gap, even the defect, of the "hole" for the "whole" in American history. Interestingly, the great "whole/hole" only exists in its simulated version, as the replica of a supposed original.[4]

The Lesser Known/The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln uses his resemblance to make a living by repeatedly posing in a vaudevillian mock shooting scene which imitates the historical assassination of Abraham Lincoln. A typical scene runs like this:

> *(A Man, as John Wilkes Booth, enters. He takes a gun and "stands in position": at the left side of*

4 Parks here parodies the concept of origin and turns power relationships upside down when she locates an alleged original of the great hole of history in the East, whereas the Western one is a replica (178-179). The Eastern hole is, additionally, a popular spot where spectators can watch celebrities appear in the great hole (180).

the Foundling Father, as Abraham Lincoln, pointing the gun at the Foundling Fathers head)

A MAN: Ready.

THE FOUNDLING FATHER: Haw Haw Haw Haw

(Rest)

HAW HAW HAW HAW

(Booth shoots. Lincoln "slumps in his chair." Booth jumps)

A MAN *(Theatrically)*: "Thus to the tyrants!"[8]

(Rest)

Hhhh. *(Exits)*

THE FOUNDLING FATHER: Most of them do that. Thuh "Thus to the tyrants!"—what they say the killer said. "Thus to the tyrants!" The killer was also heard to say "The South is avenged!"[9] Sometimes they yell that. (164-165)[5]

In such scenes, Parks thematizes the theatricality of American history, and her approach is not far-fetched in the given context. The historical incident under scrutiny was thoroughly theatrical. During a performance of *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theatre, the unemployed pro-Confederate actor John Wilkes Booth entered Lincoln's booth and shot him in the head. Waving a knife, Booth then leapt onstage shouting the Virginia state motto, "Sic semper tyrannis" ("Such is always the fate of tyrants") and subsequently escaped, despite a broken leg.[6]

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5 Footnotes 8 and 9 in this quotation are part of Parks's dramatic text. Their usage and function will be discussed below.

6 The repetition and thus significance of the shooting scene in the play actually has its historical correspondence. In a recent study on American attitudes towards death, Gerry Laderman points out the exceptionality of Lincoln's death

We find the historical shooting scene repeated time and again in the play. Following Parks's principle of "Rep & Rev," however, most of the repetitions involve slight variations. The Lesser Known makes a business of the shooting incident, and his customers come each week to aim at the Lincoln-replica. Not only the shooting scene, but also the very line Booth shouted is repeated time and again, at times with slight differences or variations that depend on and cater to the individual customer's tastes (e.g. 170-171).

The "Lincoln Act" with the re-enacted shooting scene comes in various disguises. In the scene "The Great Beyond" of "Act Two: the Hall of Wonders," a TV set—in Brazil's words: "Huh: uh Tee-Vee" (193)—shows the Foundling Father's face (194). Lucy and Brazil then watch a replay of "The Lincoln Act" on TV. They discuss the proceedings of the shooting, maintaining that Lincoln is only faking his death (195), and the phrase "Howuhboutthat" is repeated like a structuring principle of their dialogue. In another enactment, Lucy urges The Foundling Father to "[d]o you Lincoln for im" (198), and we witness another shooting when we hear echoes of a gunshot.

In this context, the original has been replaced by its simulation, by "do[ing] the Lincoln." Ironically enough, the very moment of perfection, of near-identity between original and copy, is linked to the topic of death. It is only "when someone remarked that he played Lincoln so well that he ought to be shot it was as if the Great Mans [sic] footsteps had been suddenly revealed" (164). Ultimately, the parody is thus seen to be only successful if it includes an actual shooting and an actual death. However, this postmodern version of death is not final, but is doomed to endless repetition in the play. Repeated ad lib, the historical assassination can be reenacted as if it were an endless spiral, a historical trap without escape. It is the continual transformation of

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and its significance for the restoration and redemption of the nation as a whole. New practices of embalming could disguise the signs of death and especially prepare the dead body for public presentation. Lincoln's corpse was taken on a funeral train from Washington toward Springfield, making stops in several northern cities where ceremonies were held and people were allowed to actually see Lincoln's body. They could thus witness that the dead live long even after their death. The new preservation techniques and the public visibility took away part of the finality of death and thus principally made death repeatable. See Gerry Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Towards Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996), esp. 157-163.

the historical incident which denies the past finality and acquiescence and obliterates the point at which the past *is* past and can rest. Also, the seemingly endless repetition of the moment of death serves to take the historical seriousness out of the assassination, trivializes and, in the end, erases it by putting it into the hole of history.

The aim of Parks's larger concept of history as "Rep & Rev" is playful variation of bits and pieces of the grand narrative. When she imagines deviating histories, in this case possible variations of the story of Lincoln's assassination, she suggests the instability of alleged historical facts. Historical truth is thus mostly unveiled in its pretentiousness and dependence on a particular discourse. The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln thinks about different possible directions the story could take when he reasons: "It would be helpful to our story [...]" (160). To the same end, he ponders deviating developments of the narrative in the repeated question without question mark: "Howuhboutthat" (161). Apart from drawing attention to the indeterminacy of history, the "Howuhboutthat" is also a reminder of the play's metadramatic agenda. The play itself, too, could take numerous roads, and it here reflects on itself and on the different directions it could choose.

Moreover, a closer look at the Lincoln copy reveals that the simulation of the original is only nearing perfection, and deliberately so. The Foundling Father has to make up for the shortcomings of nature and add to his natural resemblance to the Great Man with the help of certain artificial aids as, for instance, a false beard, a replica made from purchased hair. He treats the beard as if it were his own: "since the procurement and upkeep of his beard took so much work he figured that the beards were completely his. Were as authentic as he was, so to speak" (159-160). He alters his body according to Lincoln's appearance and shapes it into a simulation of The Great Man himself, even to the point of attaching a false wart (163). Hence, he does not only manipulate the historical and immaterial, but also the biological and material conditions of his role model's appearance.

The America Play theatricalizes the historical shooting scene and popularizes it as mass entertainment in the form of vaudeville. The vaudevillian quality of the shooting is underlined in exemplary fashion when The Foundling Father admits that "some inaccuracies are good for business" (168) and talks about "faux-historical knickknacks" (169), suggesting a commercial motivation for his show. In other telling episodes, a newly-wed couple wants to shoot together (169), and,

in a private mock-revolutionary effort, a woman keeps shouting "lies" as she aims at the Lincoln replica (167-168). Thus an actual historical tragedy is presented in pop cultural terms. What is seemingly at stake here are historical parades and pageants, in popular terms, "a theme park" (162) and "Reconstructed Historicities" (163). History is turned into an artifact of consumerism, and Parks is the playwright to stage what could be termed the postmodern disneyfication of history.[7]

As in *Mutabilities*, *The America Play* also mockingly assumes an attitude of historical scholarship. Parks occasionally uses footnotes in the manner of a scholarly paper to give details on the historical context of the characters' lines. There are some footnotes which indeed correspond to historical facts. After shooting the Lesser Known, for example, a woman shouts: "'Strike the tent',[10]" and footnote 10 at the bottom of the page then explains: "The last words of General Robert E. Lee, Commander of the Confederate Army" (167).[8] These footnotes, however, are juxtaposed with footnotes whose content is clearly invented. Footnote 12, for instance, purports to explain that The Foundling Father's narration of the night of Lincoln's death is more what "Mary Todd Lincoln, wanting her dying husband to speak to their son Tad, might have said that night" (168). By inserting such mixed footnotes in her play, Parks, on the one hand, deliberately displays an objectivist attitude towards history while, on the other hand, she clearly emphasizes its fictionality. She thus blurs different genres of writing and parodies what is commonly called scientifically approved historical truth. The purpose of staging that 'truth' is to shake it and to expose the absurdity of the concept of historical accuracy. This also suggests the innate, though repudiated, theatrical nature of "scientific" knowledge and suggests, vice versa, that the theater may better impart this particular kind of knowledge.

On a formal plane, the repeated and revised shooting scene lends structural coherence to a play that forfeits climactic narrative development. Apart from the re-enacted assassination scene, reiterated phrases function as a structural connective in the play. Shortened

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7 Parks's idea of exposing history's theatrical nature and presenting it as play, farce, and vaudeville has its predecessors. Not without postmodernist leanings, Arthur Kopit takes a similar approach to presenting Anglo-Indian history as well as the Vietnam War in his play *Indians*.

8 Footnotes 8, 9, and 13 are also examples of this kind.

phrases such as "Whatchaheard" or "Howuhboutthat" are scattered throughout the play without having a particular narrative function. Coherence between the two acts of the play is established by the same means: Act 2 quotes extensively from Act 1—single phrases or entire sections—which are, based on the concept of "Rep & Rev," sometimes repeated with a difference. The goal of "Rep & Rev," however, is not only to lend coherence to an otherwise fragmented dramatic presentation. Some of the revised repetitions disturb the action rather than knitting it together. For instance, one repetition of the shooting scene is rendered as an inserted narrative by The Foundling Father/Lesser Known. He gives a summary of the assassination scene in terms of a dramatic script:

> And now, the centerpiece of the evening!!
>
> *(Rest)*
>
> Uh Hehm, the Death of Lincoln: --. The watching of the play, the laughter, the smiles of Lincoln and Mary Todd, the slipping of Booth into the presidential box unseen, the freeing of the slaves, the pulling of the trigger, the bullets piercing above the left ear, the bullets entrance into the great head, the bullets lodging behind the great right eye, the slumping of Lincoln, the leaping onto the stage of Booth, the screaming of Todd [...]
>
> (*Applause*) (188-189)

The dramatic frame here offers a staccato-like, telegram-style account of the historical event at issue. The Foundling Father denies any residual tension or thrill the repeated reenactment of the killing may still have (189). The event is hence as endlessly transformed in its presentation as is the main character. Using the acting method of transformation, The Foundling Father switches, for instance, into the role of Mrs. Mount in the play-within-the-play, *Our American Cousin* (188). The concept of character reveals itself thus as unstable and transformational as the representation of history in Parks's play.

Parks has, furthermore, designed a dramatic script that poignantly expresses the fragmentation of the play. As many of the above exam-

ples have shown, the lines of The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln are frequently interrupted by a "*(Rest)*" or pause in between sentences. At times, Parks's script even indicates a double or triple "*(Rest)*" (e.g. 183). By calling these pauses "*(Rest)*," Parks seemingly refers to music, which is in line with the musical allusions in her theory of "Rep & Rev." As a matter of fact, the playwright describes the "*(Rest)*" as a sign to "[t]ake a little time, a pause, a breather; make a transition."[9] The "*(Rest)*" thus breaks up the section, halts the narrative development, forfeits empathy, and fragments theatrical illusion. At times, the dramatic script even lists characters as if it were their turn to speak, but they are actually given no lines. Such unoccupied spaces of dialogue function as so-called empty markers which are to be filled by means of non-verbal systems of signification on the part of the actors, or, more importantly, to be replenished by the audience whose imaginative abilities are thus required in the play:

> A MAN *(Theatrically)*: "Thus to the tyrants!"
>
> *(Rest)*
>
> Hhhh.
>
> LINCOLN
>
> BOOTH
>
> LINCOLN
>
> BOOTH
>
> LINCOLN
>
> BOOTH
>
> LINCOLN
>
> BOOTH
>
> LINCOLN

9 Parks, "Elements of Style" 16.

(Booth *jumps)*

A MAN (*Theatrically):* "The South is avenged!"

(Rest)

Hhhh.

(Rest)

Thank you.

(171-172)

Parks calls such verbal absences "spells" and defines them, in one of her essays, as "elongated and heightened (rest). Denoted by repetition of figures' names with no dialogue."[10] The blanks abound in the play and stand, among other things, for what is perhaps too well-known to need representation.[11] By the same token, what the characters actually say is not of prime importance any longer: Parks's play consequently becomes a drama of silences. Yet even more significant is the "architectural look"[12] that these spells lend to the play. They indicate that postmodern drama often takes place in a newly created visual space and is no longer dependent on verbal communication and the exegesis of definitive meaning.

The scripts alone suggest that plays such as *The America Play* and *Imperceptible Mutabilities* pose a number of problems for those involved in their production and staging. Apart from the variable speech patterns, actualizing and staging "spells" will certainly challenge directors, actors, and audiences alike. Liz Diamond has worked with Parks on many occasions and has directed many of her plays. Being asked how to actualize and to communicate the ellipses and dashes in Parks's plays, Diamond answers:

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10 Parks, "Elements of Style" 16.

11 See, for instance, pages 174, 175, 177, 178, 182, 187, 189, 194, 196, 197, 198 in *The America Play*.

12 Parks, "Elements of Style" 16.

> Well, that's just learning how to read the play as a musical score, determining that every thing on the page is there for a reason. Again, it's like reading it formally, the way you would try to decode a map or the way you would read a poem. I think that periods and commas and semicolons and dashes and the distance between the heading and a line of text and the way it is written on the page are all full of clues for the director.[13]

Beyond the musical influence on the play's structure, Diamond here emphasizes the spatiality of Parks's plays. The script with all its formatting clues is to be read as a "map." The formal arrangement of the lines on a page, their spacing and punctuation, are emphasized and taken as clues ostensibly carrying meaning beyond what is commonly associated with punctuation marks.

Generally, language games are of prime importance in Parks's postmodern plays, and she uses them for subversive purposes. By inserting just the simple letter *l*, Parks turns a "Founding Father" into a "Foundling Father" in *The America Play*. In this subversive pun a single letter is responsible for an entirely different, less than respectful meaning. Wordplay further transforms the Found(l)ing Father then into a "foe-father" (191; 178) or a "faux-father" (184). Through wordplay Parks thus demonstrates the questionable significance of the nation's cherished Founding Father for the African-American community: for them, the Founding Father has simply been a "faux-father."

The other highly significant and equally subversive pun of *The America Play*, the "whole/hole" of history, also inspires the play's recurring metaphor of digging. Brazil and Lucy dig for their father/husband's inheritance in Act 2. This effort is, however, turned into a farcical act. The "Great Man's legacy" is reduced to stock quotations to pass on to the next generation: "Malice toward none and charity toward all" or "Cheat some of thuh people some of thuh time" or "'Uh house divided cannot stand!'" (192) The heritage is presented as a collage of quotations from Lincoln's most famous speeches, which, when assembled in such a random way, sound hollow.[14] The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln stands thus contradicted when he

13 Drukman, "Doo-a-diddly-dit-dit: An Interview" 69.
14 See also Malkin, *Memory-Theater* 179.

says: "'He digged the hole and the whole held him'" (159). The hole of history, on the contrary, proves unable to hold. The inaudible but visible difference of the hole/whole functions as an empty marker. History, Parks seems to suggest, is nothing but "this whole hole" (187).

The "hole" and the "whole," though, are intertwined in the play to such an extent that telling one from the other can be difficult. In Act II, part A "Big Bang," Lucy keeps pushing Brazil to go on digging for the reason that "I need tuh know thuh real thing from thuh echo. Thuh truth from thuh hearsay" (175). History, in its African-American version, is described as coming in echoes and whispers which have to be dug up in due time and which "travel different out West than they do back East" (178).

Parks's story of African-American heritage exhumes past stories and creates them anew. She plays upon the different meanings of "digging" when Brazil says: "I'd say thuh creation of thuh world must uh been just like thuh clearing off of this plot. Just like him diggin his Hole. I'd say. Must uh been just as dug up. And unfair" (184). The characters attempt to find out the truth, they long to understand, but, at the same time, they get stuck in their efforts more often than not. The metaphor of digging also implies an effort at creating the world; the characters may thus "dig a plot," creating it from a different perspective in which historical lies have been dug up. In another effort at exhibiting historical inaccuracies, Lucy discovers the lifts in Bram Price Senior's shoes, which let him appear taller than he really was (177). Price's height was a fake, and "digging up" allowed for the discovery of those kinds of secrets, of the truths behind appearances. The dug-up objects are exhibited in the "Hall of Wonders," ascribing things, people, and experiences a place they had so far been denied. In the last scene of *The America Play*, the latest wonder is displayed in this museum-like setting: "One of thuh greats Hisself!" (199). In the play, the digging up functions as a ritual that needs to be repeated and that is carried out each time in similar action and wording, almost like an incantation.

As has been pointed out in the discussion of Parks's theoretical essays, her theater is a conscious effort to make history in the sense of simulating it, transforming it, and going through its undiscovered possibilities. An archaeologist of the past, Parks digs up its remnants and assembles them in diverse orders. She thus raises history to a metahistorical and self-reflexive level, ironically concluding that "This

hole is our inheritance of sorts" (185). Parks claims to still ponder the meaning of her play: "I'm still thinking about what the *American Play* [sic] is about."[15] Unambiguous meaning, however, may not precisely be what the play is after, even if the process of "digging up" yields bits and pieces of knowledge about histories that are provisional and transformative. Parks's play, in this respect, definitely does not grant us the pleasures of closure.

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Suzan-Lori Parks presents herself as a major proponent of the postmodern theater of transformation. Her concept of "Rep & Rev" embodies a transformative movement as it delineates a loop of continuously transforming and altering aspects of history and the self. She makes "histironical amendments," which means that she does not posit a new, encompassing theory or is simply content with a so-called rewriting of history; she rather transforms history and changes it by continuously adding amendments or revising existing versions of historical "fact." History, non-Western history in particular, is caught and fixed in the photographic image. Parks sees her task as a dramatist in challenging the order of these representations. History mutates into "Rep & Rev" variations of histories in *The America Play* which simulates the historical incident of the Lincoln assassination. It is turned into a postmodern metadramatic game generating a number of versions. Parks elaborates on the idea of history as play and theme park where simulations enact history ad lib and whose motivating force is consumer capitalism. The perfection of the simulation has achieved quasi-realistic status and thus makes it impossible to tell apart the copy from its original. Parks's play may also suggest that the copy pretends to refer back to an original that never existed.

Repetition is not only crucial in terms of the plays' ideology but also assumes the role of the organizing principle in drama. Parks's

15 Jiggetts, "Interview" 315.

model of "Rep & Rev" redefines the idea of dramatic structure in postmodern terms and supersedes the model of dramatic conflict. The replacement of a story by "Rep & Rev" structures does not foil the idea of development in narrative, but it reconfigures that idea. Each repetition comes with a revision implying a change in the perception of a particular incident or experience. As in music, "Rep & Rev" establishes a certain rhythm in *The America Play*. In order to indicate this particular rhythm as precisely as possible, Parks developed a dramatic script based on the notational script of musical composition. Her concepts of spelling, punctuation, and pauses in the script, as well as the spatial arrangement of the text on the page, provide clues as to how the play should be performed. Characteristic of postmodern plays, theatrical semiosis is shifted from the purely verbal to the visual and aural.

Parks's plays are dreamscapes, rooted in the forgotten experience of African-American history and culture. The Middle Passage assumes a crucial role in the dramatization of the sense of self and symbolizes the process by which the self was split and dispersed between the continents and the water in-between. The third space of hybridity is the metaphorical expression for the sense of self in Parks's work. Like history and truth, narrative and meaning, the self is unstable and mutates, out of necessity, and a sense of closure is denied.

Parks's theater of transformation allies itself with other media, such as photography in *Mutabilities of the Third Kingdom*, and different genres as, for example, historiography and lexicography in *The America Play*. In the same vein, she invests her theater with historical quotations that, assembled in new ways and juxtaposed with different contexts, transform the notion of historical truth and perspective. Frames of different discourses and art forms not only inform each other, they also collide. Parks questions the frames and boundaries of drama and theater and asks what function drama and theater can still assume in contemporary society.

All in all, the transformation of dramatic structures appears to be the central aesthetic category to describe Parks's postmodern theater. The transformative aspect in Parks becomes manifest in the lack of fixed points on which to rest the eye.[16] Continuous transformation

16 This expression refers to Chantal Pontbriand's essay "'The eye finds no fixed point on which to rest....'" as discussed in the theoretical section of this thesis.

causes a degree of uncertainty that raises the question of what frame of reference this theater might envision. With Victor Turner, the theater of transformation corresponds to a state of "liminality," to a permanent questioning and surpassing of barriers. But this also touches upon the problem of defining postmodern drama: there is a limit to postmodern dramatic experiments since they do not provide a fresh point of departure from where to go next. And yet, Parks's *Death of the Last Black Man*—as bleak as the title may sound—also contains the potential for change:

> BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICKS:
> Somethins turnin. Thuh page. (128)

As the page keeps turning, Parks's postmodern drama offers nothing, in short, on which to rest. It is a theater of transformation.

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