

Staging the Dark Times:
Contemporary Dystopian Theatre
in the UK 2000-2019

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Abstract

This thesis explores contemporary manifestations of dystopian theatre. Through a detailed analysis of ten carefully selected plays and performances premiered in the UK from the year 2000 onwards, it aims to identify the key traits, mechanisms, and functions specific to the genre. Despite the proliferation of theatre with dystopian thematic concerns in the UK since the turn of the twenty-first century, with a few notable exceptions the critical scholarship on dystopia tends to concentrate on other forms, especially the novel, at the expense of the theatrical medium. My thesis aims to redress this imbalance. By bringing together concepts from Utopian Studies and critical approaches to drama and performance studies, I develop a specialist, innovative framework for the analysis of dystopian theatre.

Each chapter attends to a central feature of dystopia – its narrative structure, its estrangement, and its function of critique – in order to investigate how theatre interprets, transforms, and develops the themes and conventions of the genre. Through the analysis of a range of recent dystopian plays and performances, this project explores the diverse ways in which dystopias in the theatre communicate, affectively and cognitively, with their audiences. This study contends that the current understanding of dystopia can be enriched by the productive encounter with theatre's unique qualities, particularly its materiality, multiple signifying system, and relations to live audiences. The key findings of this dissertation are that dystopian theatre conveys its critique in distinctively theatrical ways, by combining linguistic techniques, scenographic features, and visual, spatial, aural and kinetic signs with the affective elements of performance.

To illustrate my argument, my first analysis chapter examines the scripts of Martin McDonagh's *The Pillowman*, Dawn King's *Foxfinder*, Sam Sneider's *Lemons, Lemons, Lemons, Lemons, Lemons*, and Sam Holcroft's *Edgar & Annabel*. The second considers the scripts and production arrangements of Lucy Kirkwood's *Tinderbox*, Stef Smith's *Girl in the Machine* and Alistair McDowall's *Pomona*. The final chapter focuses on the performances of *Killer* by Philip Ridley, *Golem* by 1927, and *The Wedding* by Gecko.

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In the dark times, will there also be singing?

Yes, there will be singing

About the dark times.

Bertolt Brecht, "Motto" to *Svendborg Poems*, 1939

The world is real and dense and dark.

Roberto Mangabeira Unger, *Passion*, 1986

Introduction – Staging the Dark Times

On the 31st March 2020, at the early stages of the Coronavirus outbreak in most western countries, Alexis Soloski wrote in *The New York Times*:

If you see enough theatre and you have, like me, a fascination with onstage dystopias, certain elements [of this new pandemic order] may feel familiar – restrictions on movement and behaviour, distrust of the environment and each other. *King Lear* and *Endgame*, *Far Away* and *Blasted* are classics of the genre. But you could fill a shelf with plays of the past several decades that have dreamed bleak outcomes for humanity. And then, in a pinch, you could burn that shelf and those plays for warmth.¹

Soloski's provocative prose encapsulates the premises and subject matter of this thesis. First, we are living in particularly challenging times – whose struggles at the time of writing this introduction are being exacerbated by the Coronavirus outbreak – which many news articles and commentaries are labelling (sometimes inaccurately) as 'dystopian'.² Second, an array of plays has been written and produced in recent decades that explore the consequences of similar imagined crises of the near future —so many as to constitute a genre in their own right with some 'classic' examples. Third, the fictional projections that such theatre proposes are not excessively far-fetched; in fact, some of their elements bear an eerie resemblance to the reality of the present-day world-order. These propositions capture the essence of what this study

¹ Alexis Soloski, 'Has Your Dystopian Play Come in Handy?', *The New York Times*, 31 March 2020, section Theater <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/31/theater/dystopian-plays-virus.html>> [accessed 21 April 2020].

² In an interview reported by *Guardian*, dystopian writer Margaret Atwood clarifies that it is inexact to call the lock-down world caused by the coronavirus pandemic as dystopian: 'It's an unpleasant, frightening, disagreeable place you don't want to be, but it wasn't arranged by a government that is in control of you', Atwood explains. Alison Flood, 'Margaret Atwood: Covid-19 Lockdown Is Not a Dystopia', *Guardian*, 16 April 2020, section Books <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/16/margaret-atwood-covid-19-lockdown-is-not-a-dystopia-handmaid-s-tale>> [accessed 21 April 2020].

focuses on: dystopian narratives imagining bleak horizons of possibility for the future of humanity via the theatrical medium, staging estranged versions of our contemporary dark times.

As my extended discussion in the next chapters shows, dystopia as a fictional genre focuses on specific fears and anxieties of its time and extrapolates the consequences of significant trends of the present to construct cautionary portraits of the near future. In 2000, scholar Tom Moylan opened his *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* by claiming that ‘dystopian narrative [was] the product of the terrors of the twentieth century’, adding that ‘a hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease [...] and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination’.³ Twenty years on, he insists that the current global order still ‘threatens humanity and all nature’ on economic, political, cultural, existential, and environmental levels.⁴ As cultural practices profoundly affected by the world that produces them, it is not surprising that dystopias are omnipresent in the tumultuous landscape of the early twenty-first century, which has been hailed as the ‘age of dystopia’.⁵ In fact, dystopia is an established generic category in contemporary popular media, with a myriad of manifestations extending from books to short stories and graphic novels; from films and TV series to stage plays and performances. Concurrently, a wide range of scholarly criticism has

³ Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Cultural Studies Series (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2000).

⁴ Tom Moylan, ‘The Necessity of Hope in Dystopian Times: A Critical Reflection’, *Utopian Studies*, 31.1 (2020), 164–93 (p. 165).

⁵ Cf. Louisa MacKay’s ‘Introduction’ (1–4) to her edited collection titled *The Age of Dystopia*. Louisa MacKay Demerjian, *The Age of Dystopia: One Genre, Our Fears and Our Future* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016).

been produced in recent years, commenting on the latest trends in dystopian works or re-analysing dystopian classics, and often concentrating on dystopia's literary and cinematic manifestations.⁶ But despite the proliferation of theatre engaged in dystopian matters – a claim that this thesis will substantiate – academic discussions of dystopian theatre are scant in number and very few extended studies of the genre have emerged to date. My thesis aims to address this gap by developing a comprehensive framework for analysing the twenty-first century manifestations of dystopia in theatre, with a focus on the UK context from the turn of the millennium to the present. This study aims to develop a clear vocabulary for the identification and analysis of dystopian narratives in the theatre by engaging *both* with Utopian Studies scholarship already being deployed in relation to dystopias in other media and informing that model with theories and methods from drama and performance studies. Crucially here, genre-specific scholarship particularly on dystopias' narrative structure, its function of critique, and its estrangement – is not uncritically applied to theatrical dystopias but rather adapted to and enriched by the productive encounter with theatre's unique qualities: its materiality, multiple signifying systems, and its relationship to a present audience. It is my purpose to identify the specific ways in which theatre interprets, transforms, and develops the themes and conventions of the genre, and to show how theatre can in turn contribute to broaden the field's framing. Thus, my scholarly contribution is not limited to the delineation of key features and

⁶ For a study on dystopian literature from the 'fathers' of dystopia to postmodernism see Keith M. Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* (Praeger, 1994). For essays on dystopian literature, film and drama see Fátima Vieira, *Dystopia(n) Matters : On the Page, on Screen, on Stage* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013). For an example of new perspective on pivotal dystopian literature see *'Brave New World': Contexts and Legacies*, ed. by Jonathan Greenberg and Nathan Waddell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

machineries of dystopian theatre, but aspires to identify the cognitive and affective ways in which dystopian theatre can allow its audiences to participate in the Utopian project of the betterment of society, what I later refer to as the ‘education of desire’.⁷

The questions about the intersection between theatre and dystopia that this thesis addresses originated in Nottingham, in late 2015. Between September and October of that year, the two main performing venues of the city showcased three consecutive adaptations of dystopian novels. Nottingham Playhouse co-produced and staged *1984*, Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan’s reworking of the dystopian classic *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) by George Orwell; while the Theatre Royal presented a ballet adaptation of the same novel (also called *1984*) by Jonathan Watkins, and a new stage version of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* written by Dawn King.⁸ Such density of theatrical dramatisations of literary dystopias prompted me to consider whether dystopia could only be adapted for the stage or if the narrative mechanism of projecting the issues of the present into a dark future could also be found in original plays devised purposely for the stage. Writing in 2014, the theatre critic Michael Billington had admitted that while dystopia was a popular trend in fiction, ‘dystopian drama

⁷ As Darren Webb clarifies the phrase ‘education of desire’ ‘became common currency when E. P. Thompson translated a few lines from Miguel Abensour’s thesis on William Morris’. Now some of the ‘seminal texts in the field define utopia in terms of desire’. ‘Educational Archaeology and the Practice of Utopian Pedagogy’, *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 25.4 (2017), 551–66 (p. 552). For further discussion on the origins of the concept cf. Mark Allison, ‘Building a Bridge to Nowhere: Morris, the Education of Desire, and the Party of Utopia’, *Utopian Studies*, 29.1 (2018), 44–66.

⁸ *1984* was on from 9 to 26 September at Nottingham Playhouse, for production details see the Playhouse website at: <https://www.nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk/whats-on/drama/1984-2015/>; *1984* the ballet was at Nottingham’s Theatre Royal from 29 September to 3 October; *Brave New World* was produced in the same venue just a few days after, from 13 to 17 of October. See the Theatre Royal brochure (September–November 2015) at this link: https://issuu.com/margaretspooner/docs/sep-nov_2015_brochure

[was] much rarer', advancing the hypothesis that the science-fictional echoes in the form were not well suited for the theatrical medium, whose strength – he wrote – 'lies less in futuristic visions than fidelity to the here and now'.⁹ Nonetheless, he proposed a list of five original plays that were the exception to the rule, including among the others the already mentioned *Far Away* by Caryl Churchill (2000) and *The War Plays* (1985) by Edward Bond. From the beginning of my research in 2016, I have collated as many as 60 theatre plays and performances that could be described as a theatrical dystopias, mostly written and performed just before and after the turn of the millennium (see Appendix for what is surely a non-exhaustive list). My thesis analyses a selection of such works staged from the year 2000 onwards and recognises in them a growing genre in contemporary British theatre with specific features and functions, which are worthy of critical engagement. The first contribution of this work is then the important recognition of the existence of a dystopian genre in contemporary British theatre.

Scholars from both Utopian Studies and theatre and performance studies have tended to neglect the connections between dystopia and theatre, with some notable exceptions. Traditionally, scholarly criticism on the fictional manifestations of utopianism is mainly concerned with its literary and filmic expressions. The 2019 European conference of the Utopian Studies Society, the principal annual gathering of scholars in the field, saw only one panel devoted to theatre out of sixty-six, with the majority exploring literature and film as fictional genres, with only three speakers bringing together theatre and utopianism.¹⁰ Recent

⁹ Michael Billington, 'Never Mind 1984: Michael Billington's Top Five Theatrical Dystopias', *Guardian*, 19 February 2014, section Stage <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/feb/19/top-five-theatrical-dystopias-1984>> [accessed 30 April 2020].

¹⁰ Cf. the conference programme here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1rH54dDklU51y-Ev3lhITVLbEzOEzn9jT/view>. The speakers addressing the connections between utopia/dystopia and theatre

published works in the field confirm such trends. Comprehensive introductions to the genre such as Gregory Claeys' *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2017) do not mention theatrical examples of dystopias, and despite the encouraging title of *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the page, on screen, on stage* (2013), Fatima Vieira's edited collection leaves room for only three articles on dramatic dystopias out of sixteen entries.¹¹ Some earlier works constitute notable exceptions to this neglect of drama, especially Dargan Klaić's monograph *The Plot of the Future* (1994), and *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* by Keith M. Booker (1994), contributions that I review in detail in the next chapter.¹² However, no study emerging from the Utopian Studies perspective addresses dystopian theatre since the 2000s as a contemporary genre in its own right, as my thesis aims to do.¹³ On the other hand, theatre and performance scholarship appears to address the 'utopian' or 'dystopian' mainly as thematic strands, thus neglecting the complex generic relationships of these works with the tradition of utopianism as a phenomenon. For instance, Aleks Sierz's *Rewriting the Nation* (2011) contains a section on 'Dystopian Visions' where the plot and setting of some recent plays are labelled as 'dystopian' but no engagement with the form is attempted.¹⁴ Similarly, Vicky Angelaki's *Social and*

were Siân Adiseshiah with her paper 'What about Drama?'; Ian Farnell with his talk titled 'Staging Crisis: Ruined Futures, Climate Change, and Theatre'; and myself presenting on some of the research developed in the thesis as 'Climate Change is in our Future: Dystopian Visions on the British Stage in *Tinderbox* (2008) and *Ditch* (2010)'.

¹¹ Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, 1st edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Vieira, *Dystopia(n) Matters : On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*.

¹² Dragan Klaić, *The Plot of the Future: Utopia and Dystopia in Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991); M. Keith Booker, *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994).

¹³ In the next chapter, I put forward two hypotheses for this neglect: dystopia's origins as a literary genre and a general distrust in theatre's ability to stage non-naturalistic worlds.

¹⁴ Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

Political Theatre in Twenty-First Century Britain (2017) includes a chapter on Martin Crimp's plays titled 'Utopia to Dystopia' which limits its treatment of such categories to examples of 'good' or 'bad' places.¹⁵ Notable exceptions – that will be discussed in the next chapter at more length – are: Trish Reid's latest article 'The Dystopian Near-Future in Contemporary British Drama' (2019), and Siân Adiseshiah's work on the utopian character of several dramatic works since the early 2000s.¹⁶ As Chapter One will demonstrate, my approach integrates the two scholarly traditions of Utopian Studies and theatre and performance criticism, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms and potentialities of dystopian theatre.

In the remainder of this Introduction, I define the key terms of 'dystopia' and 'dystopian' as they are used throughout the thesis. I trace the origin of the words and concepts to the phenomenon of utopianism, of which I explain the roots and main concerns by drawing on utopian scholars such as Lyman Tower Sargent, Ruth Levitas and Lucy Sargisson. I demonstrate how the central components of utopianism are reflected in fictional narratives of *dystopia*, and advance an understanding of the *dystopian* as a cross-medial constellation of features rather than a rigid set of structures. Finally, I argue that dystopian theatre mirrors the fears and anxieties of our time and reimagines the current cultural and affective order (what I will call 'structure of feeling', using Raymond Williams's phrase) in estranged terms. This last section begins to chart the ways in which theatre contributes to such re-imaginings by providing new modalities and artistic registers to investigate the issues of the present.

¹⁵ Vicky Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre in Twenty-First Century Britain: Staging Crisis* (Bloomsbury, 2017).

¹⁶ Trish Reid, 'The Dystopian Near-Future in Contemporary British Drama', *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 7.1 (2019), 72–88; Siân Adiseshiah, 'Utopian Space in Caryl Churchill's History Plays: "Light Shining in Buckinghamshire" and "Vinegar Tom"', *Utopian Studies*, 16.1 (2005), 3–26.

In Search of the Dystopia/n

As my main critique of the treatment of the study of dystopia in theatre is the lack of engagement with the roots of utopianism, I start by briefly describing dystopia's place within such a tradition and by defining my use of the terms 'dystopia' and 'dystopian' across this thesis. In line with the widely accepted position in the field of Utopian Studies, I consider dystopia a manifestation of the broader phenomenon of utopianism.¹⁷ Utopianism takes its name from the foundational text of *Utopia* (1516) by Sir Thomas More, even if the phenomenon arguably precedes this text.¹⁸ More's main opus describes in detail the imaginary island of Utopia, relating its social organisation and practices to the conditions of his contemporary England by way of a twofold structure: the first book reports his contemporary situation, the second the organisation of the imaginary island of Utopia.¹⁹ Famously, the name of such island is based on a pun, which combines the homophonous Greek prefix u- (meaning 'no') and the ou- (meaning 'good'), with the suffix -topos (meaning 'place'): etymologically,

¹⁷ For the purposes of this introduction, I present a brief and inevitably incomplete account of the broad phenomenon of Utopianism. For a comprehensive read summarising and evaluating the various debates of the field, see Chapter 3 of David M. Bell, *Rethinking Utopia: Place, Power, Affect* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 75–97.

¹⁸ Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. by Clarence H. Miller, Second Edn. (Westport, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014).

Many accounts of utopianism consider Plato's *Republic* an early utopia. See for instance Fátima Vieira, 'The Concept of Utopia', in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 3–27 (p. 6). Also see also Lucy Sargisson's account in *Fool's Gold?: Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2012), p. 7.);

¹⁹ For an overview of critical perspectives on More's Utopia, cf. the 2016 special editions of the journal *Utopian Studies* 'On the Commemoration of the Five Hundredth Anniversary of Thomas More's Utopia (Part I and II)', *Utopian Studies*, 27.2–3 (2016).

utopia is the good place that does not exist.²⁰ Consciously building on these roots, and recognising the different strands of utopian traditions that flourished from them, in 1967 Lyman Tower Sargent developed what is now the widely shared definition of utopianism as ‘social dreaming’. In his seminal article on ‘The Three Faces of Utopianism’ (revised in 1994), he describes social dreaming as ‘the dreams and nightmares that concern the ways in which groups of people arrange their lives and which usually envision a radically different society that the ones in which the dreamers live’.²¹ Utopianism as social dreaming is an exercise of the imagination with its roots in the here and now: it entails the infinite ways of conceiving how the world we live in may be different, for good or bad. Following Ruth Levitas, I also incorporate the notion of ‘desire’ at the heart of such imaginative process. For Levitas, utopia(nism) involves the ‘*desire* for being otherwise, individually and collectively, subjectively and objectively’.²² Her intervention places utopianism not as a purely intellectual exercise of the imaging of alternatives but as a project for the betterment of society.²³ As Levitas put it: ‘Utopia is not a dream to be enjoyed, but a vision to be pursued’.²⁴ The various expressions of such vision, Sargent clarifies, can be broadly distinguished as ‘three faces’ of

²⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the word’s etymology see Vieira, ‘The Concept of Utopia’.

²¹ Lyman Tower Sargent, ‘The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited’, *Penn State University Press*, Utopian Studies, 5.1 (1994), 1–37 (p. 3).

²² Here, I use the spelling utopia(nism) to emphasise that Levitas’ use of the word ‘utopia’ corresponds to Sargent’s ‘utopianism’, as noted by Sargent in Sargent, p. 3. ; Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. xi.

²³ Here it is important to notice that Sargent also embraces utopianism’s radical potential to enact change. See for instance his chapter ‘Choosing Utopia: Utopianism as an Essential Element in Political Thought and Action’, in *Utopia Method Vision: The Use Value of Social Dreaming*, ed. Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, vol. Ralahine Utopian studies (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011), 301–18.

²⁴ Levitas, *Utopia As Method*, p. xi.

the multidimensional phenomenon of utopianism: utopian literature, intentional communities, and social theory.²⁵ By focussing on dystopian theatre, this thesis concentrates on the first, ‘literary’ face of social dreaming which, as Peter Fitting elucidates, can include ‘other artistic representations and imaginings of alternatives’.²⁶

A note on terminology before moving on: I prefer to use the expression ‘fictional utopianism’ to refer to the first of Sargent’s fields (‘Utopian literature’) since it is less prescriptive as to the range of fictional expressions that social dreaming can assume. Fictional utopianism in this sense encompasses not only the canonical novels but also short stories, graphic novels, poetry, computer games, film, television series, music, dance, and – importantly to this thesis – plays and performances.²⁷ Such a minor change in the lexicon used to discuss fictions of utopianism here marks a small first step in the work that this thesis aims towards, representing as it does a widening awareness of the less-studied forms (and media) through which utopianism can manifest.

Not only does fictional utopianism incorporate a variety of media including theatre, but the category crucially also includes the particular *types of worlds* that are imagined through such forms. It is under the umbrella term of fictional utopianism that ‘utopia’, ‘dystopia’ and

²⁵ Sargent, p. 4.

²⁶ Peter Fitting, ‘A Short History of Utopian Studies’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 36.1 (2009), 121–31 (p. 125).

²⁷ Cf. examples of the scholarship being produced on utopianism in the less overtly ‘literary’ media. For games see Gerald Farca, *Playing Dystopia: Nightmarish Worlds in Video Games and the Player’s Aesthetic Response*, *Playing Dystopia* (transcript, 2018); for graphic novels Phillip E. Wegner, ‘Where the Prospective Horizon Is Omitted: Naturalism and Dystopia in *Fight Club* and *Ghost Dog*’, in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2013), 167–86; for dance Carter F. Hanson, ‘An Examination of Utopianism in Recent Electronic Dance Pop: An Examination of Utopianism in Recent Electronic Dance Pop’, *Utopian Studies* 25, no. 2 (2014): 384–413.

their variants can be found.²⁸ In her 2012's book *Fool's Gold?: Utopianism in the Twenty-First Century*, Lucy Sargisson clearly expresses how the key elements of the phenomenon are articulated through both its 'positive' and 'negative' manifestations. Accepting Levitas' position (mentioned above) that utopianism and its products all 'articulate the desire for a better way of being', Sargisson offers three components present in all of its manifestations: first, dissatisfaction with and critique of the present; second, engagement in contemporary debates; third, the desire and imagining of alternatives.²⁹ Utopias and dystopias both stem from 'discontent with the now' and 'always contain criticism of the present'.³⁰ It follows that they refer to and intervene in the social, political and cultural contexts of their time, and can be used as illustrative and interpretative tools to understand the intellectual history of the present.³¹ As previously indicated, they also imagine alternatives to the current situation. Sargisson specifies that they do so through a process of 'extrapolation from the now, by identifying core problems with today, stretching these (often to extremes) and placing them in a new imaginary context'.³² While positive utopias envision worlds that are desirable and would present an encouraging vision, dystopias portray dark horizons that people fear may materialise from the current situation. Specifically, dystopia in this thesis is defined as a fictional narrative integrating the components of utopianism (as described by Sargisson, Sargent and Levitas), and functioning as a 'negative narrative machine' in Tom Moylan's sense, thus producing 'challenging

²⁸ Sargent in his 'Three Faces Revisited' mentions in addition to the basic forms of 'utopia' and 'dystopia' other variants including 'eutopia', 'utopian satire', 'anti-utopia' and 'critical utopia', p. 9. Since 2000, Moylan added 'critical dystopia' to the mix. See his *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, esp. Chapter 6.

²⁹ Sargisson, pp. 8–9.

³⁰ Sargisson, p. 10.

³¹ Sargisson, pp. 11–12.

³² Sargisson, p. 13.

cognitive maps of the historical situation’ in the form of ‘imaginary societies that are even worse than those that lie outside their author’s and reader’s doors’ – or in the case of theatre, their audiences’ doors.³³

This said, I contend that there is no universal formula for how to express the ‘dystopian’: there are at least as many options as there are media, and even within the same medium the content, formal strategies, and function of dystopia can vary greatly. Multiple attempts to pin down dystopia’s specific features as a narrative form (especially within the genre of literary fiction) have resulted in an array of normative definitions aimed at highlighting the genre’s boundaries.³⁴ In contrast, literary scholars Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini have identified the recurring features of the genre in the novel, while recognising the permeability of these categories.³⁵ In the introduction to their edited volume *Dark Horizons* (2003), they explain that dystopian texts usually ‘begi[n] directly in the terrible new world’, establishing ‘textual estrangement’ by way of a spatially and/or temporally dislocated setting.³⁶

³³ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, p. xi.

³⁴ For a brief account of definitional disagreements see Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, pp. 273–75. For the evolution of the various definitions see Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, pp. 121–45.

³⁵ Both Moylan and Baccolini championed the permeability of the dystopian genre in individual publications. See for instance the already cited *Scraps of the Untainted Skies* by Moylan, and Baccolini’s multiple articles on the subject: ‘Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katharine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler’, in *Future Females, the next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism*, ed. by Marleen S. Barr (Lanham, Md, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 13–34; ‘Breaking the Boundaries: Gender, Genre, and Dystopia’, in *Per Una Definizione Dell’Utopia: Metodologie e Discipline a Confronto*, ed. by Nadia Minerva (Ravenna: Longo, 1992), pp. 137–46; ‘Journeying through the Dystopian Genre: Memory and Imagination in Burdekin, Orwell, Atwood, and Piercy’, in *Viaggi in Utopia*, ed. by Vita Fortunati (Ravenna: Longo, 1996), pp. 343–57.

³⁶ Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), p. 5.

Frequently the focus is on a single character who ‘questions the dystopian society’ they are immersed in: the text is thus ‘built around a narrative of the hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance’ often enacted by such protagonist.³⁷ My thesis will demonstrate that such features are also consistently present in dystopian theatre, but that here their form responds and is tailored to the theatrical context. On the other hand, my research will also identify features and modes of the dystopian that are recurrent in theatre but that seem to be absent from literature because of their medium-specificity. Therefore, I will loosely define the ‘dystopian’ as a diverse set of traits linked to the expression of negative utopianism which can be found in a variety of cultural media, where they assume different shapes to different effects. In doing so, my approach considers the fictional genre of dystopia as bound by a ‘family resemblance’.³⁸ As Paul Kincaid suggests in relation to science fiction, I argue that the multifaceted features of the dystopian produce a network of family resemblances that do not need to share one singular feature across the board and ‘that might head out in multiple different directions from multiple different origins, and yet still be something that we can talk about sensibly under the one heading’: the dystopian.³⁹ The advantage of such an approach is the promotion of a wider understanding of the forms that dystopian narratives can assume. My aim is to turn the scholarly attention from a limited novel-oriented set of features to discuss the dystopian to a

³⁷ Baccolini and Moylan, *Dark Horizons*, p. 5.

³⁸ Paul Kincaid, who I quote in the next sentence, borrows the concept of family resemblance from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. Cf. *Philosophical Investigations: The German Text, with a Revised English Translation*, ed. Gertrude Elizabeth Margaret Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001). For an earlier definition of genre as family resemblance see David Fishelov, ‘Genre Theory and Family Resemblance—Revisited’, *Poetics*, 20 (1991), 123–38.

³⁹ Paul Kincaid, ‘On the Origins of Genre’, *Extrapolations*, 44.4 (2003), 409–19 (p. 415).

more inclusive generic definition where relations and boundaries among media are permeable and non-hierarchical.

Dystopian Theatre Matters

Having introduced the central terms of this study, the final section of this Introduction now turns to make the case for the importance of the work of the rest of this thesis. The genre of dystopia has been accused (by both its advocates and detractors) of having been ‘reduced to a spectacular commodity’ which has ‘nothing left to tell us that we do not already know’.⁴⁰ The prevailing argument is that the machine of neoliberal capitalism, which subsumes everything under its spell, has rendered the form incapable of imagining alternatives to the present state of things, effectively diluting dystopia’s political charge.⁴¹ In a 2017 essay for *The New Yorker*, historian and writer Jill Lepore captures the essence of these claims:

Dystopia used to be a fiction of resistance; it’s become a fiction of submission [...] It cannot imagine a better future, and it doesn’t ask anyone to bother to make one. It nurses grievances and indulges resentments; it doesn’t call for courage; it finds that cowardice suffices. Its only admonition is: Despair more.⁴²

⁴⁰ Mark Bould, ‘Dulltopia’, *Boston Review*, 22 January 2018 <<http://bostonreview.net/literature-culture-arts-society/mark-bould-dulltopia>> [accessed 8 April 2020].

⁴¹ For a selection of the arguments on the domestication of utopia and dystopia in the last twenty years see: Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, pp. 183–86; Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, ‘Critical Dystopia and Possibilities’, in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 233–49 (pp. 235–37); Darko Suvin, ‘Theses on Dystopia 2001’, in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 187–202; Darren Webb, ‘Educational Studies and the Domestication of Utopia’, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 64.4 (2016), 431–48; Laurence Davis, ‘Introduction: Special Issue on The Domestication of Utopia’, *MediAzioni*, 27, 2020, D1–5.

⁴² Jill Lepore, ‘A Golden Age for Dystopian Fiction’, *The New Yorker* <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/05/a-golden-age-for-dystopian-fiction>> [accessed 8 April 2020].

Commentators from within and outside Utopian Studies not only lament the despairing tone of the narratives of ‘radical pessimism’ as Lepore puts it, but also criticize the standardization and relative uniformity of dystopian tales, which are accused of being ‘unimaginative, monotonous, and also politically wrong’.⁴³ Through the arguments in this thesis, I aim to show that theatre can help dystopia to diversify its narratives and offer a fresh chance to intervene in the debates of its time by providing novel languages and means to engage with the dystopian.

Throughout this study, I suggest that there are two fundamental characteristics which allow theatre to revive the critical function of dystopia: its multiple signifying systems (which draw on theatre’s intrinsic materiality) and its participatory qualities. First, theatre has at its disposal multiple channels of communication, which work together to convey the narratives, messages and functions of dystopia. These languages of the stage, which have been documented by a long tradition of theatre semioticians, include scenographic and material elements, the performers, their bodily appearance, movements and gestures, music, sound, lighting and verbal language.⁴⁴ Such combination of semiotic elements allows for a multivocal

⁴³ Slavoj Žižek, qtd. In Mark Bould’s ‘Dulltopia’ . Also cf. Fredric Jameson’s statement on the same matter. In *An American Utopia* (London: Verso Books, 2016), Fredric Jameson notes the ‘overwhelming increase in all manner of conceivable dystopias, most of which look monotonously alike’; later in the volume claims that the ‘dystopias that abound in recent blockbuster movies and novels [...], although apparently leftist (presenting a postapocalyptic society of extreme class divisions), are unimaginative, monotonous, and also politically wrong’. Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek as quoted in Bould [online].

⁴⁴ Key texts on theatre semiotics which identified the various ‘languages of the stage’ are Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Routledge, 1980); Patrice Pavis, *Languages of the Stage: Essays in the Semiology of Theatre*, (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982); Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989); Elaine Aston and George Savona, *Theatre as Sign System : A Semiotic of Text and Performance* (Routledge, 1991); George W. Brandt, *Modern Theories of Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Anne Ubersfeld, *Reading Theatre* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

production of meaning which, to use Erika Fischer-Lichte's words, is 'ambiguous and polyvalent' and always 'open to most diverse processes of meaning generation'.⁴⁵ Recurring themes and situations of estrangement that are considered exhausted in other dystopian forms (telling in this regard is Lepore's statement: 'Pick your present-day dilemma; there's a new dystopian novel to match it') can be potentially very productive when explored through the multiple signifying systems of drama and performance.⁴⁶ Such variety of modes and channels of meaning-generation enable the production of nuanced versions of dystopian narratives which can express the 'multitemporal, multispatial, multicultural, micro-macro energies' of the utopian impulse.⁴⁷ Moreover, each new production alters a play's semiotic variables and with them potentially the function of a given dystopia, which can always be reworked and renewed to adapt to changing circumstances.

Second, the medium of theatre is ideally placed to interrogate issues of the present and future by 'ethically' relating to the contemporary 'structure of feeling' (or the atmosphere of an epoch in Raymond Williams' sense).⁴⁸ Following Patrick Duggan, I maintain that the live encounter offered by theatrical performance provides a means to engage the current discourses of fear and anxiety, allowing audiences to reflect on their shared collective condition.⁴⁹ Specifically, Duggan suggests that 'as an art form of bodies in relation to each other' theatre and performance 'brings "us" (makers/thinkers/audiences) into an ethical relationship with one

⁴⁵ Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'Sense and Sensation: Exploring the Interplay between the Semiotic and Performative Dimensions of Theatre', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 22.2 (2008), 69–81 (p. 70).

⁴⁶ Lepore.

⁴⁷ Moylan, 'The Necessity of Hope', p. 169.

⁴⁸ Cf. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 128–35.

⁴⁹ Patrick Duggan, 'Unsettling the Audience: Affective "Dis-Ease" and the Politics of Fear and Anxiety in Contemporary Performance', *Key Words*, 15, 2017, 40–54.

another, both with the “staged” images and those represented in them, as well as with the concerns raised by those representations’.⁵⁰ I suggest that the genre of dystopia benefits from the ethical relation among theatre’s subjects, who can interrogate in the shared space of performance projections of their present and future worlds *and* selves. By developing its ‘sociological imagination’ – as Sean Seeger and Daniel Davidson-Vecchione explain – dystopia brings ‘social structure (the “objective”) and individual experience (the “subjective”) together in a way which shows how the two enter into and mutually influence one another’.⁵¹ In particular, dystopian theatre articulates the interplay of the objective and the subjective by confronting its audience with snapshots of negative social dreaming inspired by the current socio-political condition. In drawing from a dystopian structure of feeling, not only does dystopian theatre illustrate something of the social, political, and ideological makeup of its historical conjunction, but it also engages with what Williams described as the ‘specifically affective elements of consciousness’.⁵² As I argue in detail in Chapter Four, the intellectual and affective projections of dystopia are best expressed by theatre, as a medium whose purpose is – to borrow Erin Hurley’s words – to ‘perform crucial and necessary feeling-labour’.⁵³ Thus, this thesis strongly argues that dystopian theatre matters because it makes the exploration of our collective future tangible, and the education of utopian desire possible, by engaging not only our critical minds, but our sensing, feeling bodies.

⁵⁰ Duggan, p. 43.

⁵¹ Sean Seeger and Daniel Davison-Vecchione, ‘Dystopian Literature and the Sociological Imagination’, *Thesis Eleven*, 2019, 45-63 (p. 58).

⁵² Williams, p. 132.

⁵³ Erin Hurley, *Theatre & Feeling* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 38.

An Overview of the Thesis

This thesis aims to lay the foundations for further study on theatrical dystopias by developing a framework for the analysis of the languages, modes, and communicative strategies that dystopia can deploy in the theatre. I concentrate on plays and performances from the turn of the twenty-first century because, as I have argued above, very little critical attention has been given to the growing body of works displaying a shared dystopian sensibility on the UK stage in the past twenty years. Among the many possibilities, I have selected the ten plays analysed in depth throughout this thesis for their ability to demonstrate how key features of the genre have been re-purposed for the medium of theatre, and for their dystopian interpretation of current societal fears. Indeed, each play or performance addresses issues of the contemporary historical conjecture, specific to the time and place of its creators and audiences: from the social and political consequences of climate change, to the dangers of technological transformation, and political issues. Despite the presence of a few relevant Irish and American plays in the Appendix, all the examples examined in the main body of the thesis come from the UK. This delimitation of place allows me to compare the numerous dark re-imaginings of the UK of the near future as a dystopian land, and to compile a map of our societal fears in estranged terms. Crucially this process of mapping is not merely intended to (cynically) provide an awareness of all that is wrong with the current state of things, but also to show the diverse ways in which UK-based playwrights and producing companies are engaging in the utopian education of collective desire. By showing how current societal habits could escalate to the point of non-return, the dystopian theatre of the twenty-first century invites its audiences to consider what changes are necessary to avoid these dark futures.

Overall, this thesis explores how recurring features of the dystopian genre have been reinterpreted and developed for the medium of theatre and identifies the specific ways in which theatre contributes to broaden the genre's framing via its uniquely theatrical qualities. Chapter

One, 'Theorising Dystopian Theatre', investigates the gap in scholarship that I identified above, bringing together the discipline of theatre and the concept of dystopia. I begin by considering the reasons why dystopian theatre has not received appropriate critical attention: I propose that dystopia's origins as a literary genre and a critical bias against the materiality of theatre contributed to the neglect of the form from both Utopian Studies scholars and theatre and performance critics. I proceed to survey key works in Utopian Studies whose focus is on dystopia. While I justify the absence of references to theatrical dystopias in early research from the 1960s through to the 1980s (because the genre's critical terms were still being developed), I condemn the disregard for the form in later scholarship which tends to avoid taking non-literary manifestations of dystopia into account. I also discuss more positive examples of recent edited collections whose polyvocal approach facilitates the understanding of fictional dystopias as a cross-media phenomenon. The second section of the chapter explores how theatre studies have approached the concept of dystopia. The literature presented demonstrates that, despite some notable examples of scholarly engagement with the tradition of utopianism (such as Dragan Klaić and Jill Dolan), theatre research tends to consider the dystopian as a theme or an aesthetic, rather than a complex set of ideas linked to the betterment of society. The concluding part of the chapter introduces the more recent scholarly work that has brought together the complexities of the dystopian form and the mechanisms of the theatrical medium. Here, as I trace the emerging path in criticism which specifically concentrates on dystopian theatre, I begin to argue for the potential of theatrical dystopias to interrogate critically the neoliberal present.

Chapter Two 'Mastering the Word: The Language of Dystopian Theatre' is dedicated to the analysis of how the narrative of dystopian theatre is conveyed through linguistic manifestations of hegemony and resistance. I demonstrate that, similarly to its literary counterpart, dystopian theatre also relies on contrasting narrative strands to express the struggle

between dystopian oppression and rebellion. Since dramatic texts are primarily conversational – in that they are informed by dialogue among characters – one of the key ways in which drama articulates dystopia's narrative tension is by deploying discursive mechanisms of oppression and resistance. In the chapter, I study such structures in detail by examining the dialogic exchanges of four contemporary plays, *The Pillowman* (2003) by Martin McDonagh, *Foxfinder* (2008) by Dawn King, *Edgar & Annabel* (2011) by Sam Holcroft, and *Lemons, Lemons, Lemons, Lemons* (2015) by Sam Sneider. The first two plays allow me to investigate the linguistic mechanisms of oppression, which manifest both in the form of coercive tactics and via the creation of linguistic consent. The latter two, on the other hand, provide examples of how, discursively, resistance can be enacted via the manipulation of the rules and conventions of the oppressive dystopian systems. I complement such linguistic analysis with Antonio Gramsci's theorisations on cultural hegemony and its related ideas of normative and spontaneous grammar, so as to contextualise dystopia's linguistic phenomena in a wider critical perspective. Through its focus on the scripted text, this first chapter functions as a bridge between the current understanding of the dystopian as a series of primarily textual features and my broader theorisation of the dystopian genre as a multi-medial collection of elements.

Estrangement is the focus of Chapter Three titled 'The Estranged Spaces of Dystopia'. It concentrates on the ways in which theatre produces dystopian imaginary worlds of the future. I begin the chapter by illustrating the various elements of Darko Suvin's concept of 'cognitive estrangement', with the aim to explain how the genre of dystopia as a whole promotes reflection on the present via the presentation of a projected future. I argue that the medium of theatre is able to convey dystopian critique via uniquely theatrical modalities of estrangement which are intimately connected to its diverse channels of signification: specifically language, audience positioning, and scenography. Thus, in the chapter, I develop three separate varieties of

estrangement to account for such specificity, which I term spatial, positional and material. I illustrate the functioning mechanisms of each mode through the analysis of three distinct contemporary plays, thus also continuing to showcase the diversity of contemporary theatrical dystopias. First, via spatial estrangement, I explore the textual ways in which a playscript can create the impression of an other-worldly environment connected to the now. Via an analysis of the semiotic indications of place in the script (which, following Manfred Pfister, I call ‘localisation techniques’), I illustrate how Lucy Kirkwood’s *Tinderbox* (2008) estranges its onstage and offstage setting. Second, I use Stef Smith’s *Girl in the Machine* (2017) to delineate the workings of positional estrangement, which is the mechanism allowing the audience to approach the narrative propositions of dystopia from the privileged position of both observers and participants. I deploy Alice Rayner’s model of ‘multiple subject positions’ and Tompkins’s understanding of a theatrical heterotopian space to clarify how this second layer of theatrical estrangement works in practice. Third, I explain the functioning of material estrangement – intended as the effect of the interactions between the spectators and the materialized settings of dystopian productions – via the analysis of the evolving staging arrangements of the first three productions of Alistair McDowall’s *Pomona* (2014). The combination of these three modes – the spatial, positional, and material – constitutes the first framework of estrangement specifically tailored to the particularities of theatre.

Chapter Four, ‘Feeling with the Body: Dystopia in Performance’, is concerned with establishing the affective and cognitive ways in which dystopian theatre conveys its messages and realises its key functions of critique. Concurrently, this chapter explores how audiences connect to live performances of dystopias through their embodied experience. To do so, first I identify the mechanisms (which I term, following Hurley, ‘feeling technologies’) that are able to shape the affective environment of the performance – particularly the modulations of sound, light, colour, and rhythmic movement. Then, I explore how these mechanisms work to

stimulate an affective critique of the cognitive projections that dystopia presents to its audience. I deploy two different frameworks to describe the audience's embodied connection to dystopia, which vary according to the spectating relations afforded by the performance space. In the case of the immersive performance of *Killer* by Philip Ridley (2017), I use Drew Leder's body 'thematization' to describe the internal and external states that arise from the immersion in a feeling environment shaped by darkness and immersive sound. For the end-on performances of *Golem* by 1927 (2017) and *The Wedding* by Gecko (2018), I turn to the concept of 'kinesthetic empathy', as understood by Matthew Reason and Dee Reynolds, to explore how spectators co-create an empathic connection to the languages of the stage from their seats. For each of these performances, I offer an interpretation of their function of critique in relation to the embodiment that they inspire: I suggest that compensation, criticism, and militant optimism (respectively) are the functions furthered by the performances discussed. Overall, this chapter aims to showcase the uniquely theatrical means available to dystopian performance to communicate its functions affectively through the use of theatre's multiple signifying systems.

Overall, this study lays the ground for a comprehensive understanding of the mechanics and key traits of dystopian theatre, and establishes the form as an important manifestation of fictional utopianism. By virtue of its participatory and material qualities, the medium of theatre affords a unique experience to the audience of dystopia: it allows them not just to imagine a different world, but to be transported into a tangible projection of it. The shortening of the distance between the fictional reconstruction of the future and its addressees transforms – for the time of a performance – the audience of dystopian theatre in the citizens of tomorrow, asking them to *think* and *feel* the impending dystopian future. Thus, theatrical dystopias offer an additional layer to the aesthetic experience of the genre, a participatory quality which is unique to theatre and largely absent from other artistic media.

Chapter One –Theorising Dystopian Theatre

1.1 Introduction

The two key components of my research, Utopian Studies and theatre and performance scholarship, have rarely been brought together to create a productive framework to analyse the workings of dystopia in theatre. Such lack of communication between the two fields effectively translates into a scarcity of research addressing the growing body of British plays and performances produced since the 1990s, which can be considered dystopias or at least displaying dystopian characteristics. Plays such as Philip Ridley's *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991), Edward Bond's *Have I None* (2000), and Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) show that even canonical British playwrights have engaged with the dystopian form, albeit in disparate and nuanced ways. Since the 1990s, plays working within a dystopian mode have steadily increased: my Appendix lists only four works from the 1990s, sixteen from the 2000s and forty from the 2010s, confirming a growing interest in estranged forms of theatrical narrations. In light of the abundance of dystopian manifestations in the theatre, the question of the critical neglect of this material is particularly pressing. I propose that dystopia's origins as a literary genre and a critical bias against the materiality of theatre have contributed to the neglect of the form from both Utopian Studies scholars and theatre and performance critics. Thus, before identifying the gap in the literatures, I briefly explicate these claims which (although here only sketched in their contours) will be substantiated and contextualised over the rest of this chapter.

From dystopia's beginnings as a post-Enlightenment exercise in literary satire (exemplified by the proto-dystopian stories of H.G. Wells), to the classic texts of George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and Yevgeny Zamyatin, scholars seem to agree that all the 'great

defining texts’ of the genre ‘have been novels’.¹ Critical efforts have thus tended to concentrate on the analysis of such narrative form at the expenses of other media. As a consequence, notions of what a dystopia could and should be in terms of content, form and function have been profoundly influenced by the shape of its literary manifestations, which are as Adam Stock suggests, ‘highly conventional [and] easy to recognise’.² My thesis argues that dystopian theatre inevitably signifies and communicates differently from its literary counterpart, and that the innovation and strength of staged dystopias rest precisely on such differences. However, theatre’s deviations from the conventional patterns of dystopian literature may also present an obstacle to the recognition of a play or performance as dystopian. By developing an analytic framework which accounts for the varied contents, material and experiential structures, and goals of dystopian theatre, my thesis aims to remove some of the barriers to the identification, and thus the study of, theatrical dystopias.

A secondary and interrelated hypothesis that I want to advance for the lack of critical attention for dystopian drama and performance is that there is an unconscious critical bias against the medium of theatre, specifically toward the perceived limits of its capacity of rendering the ‘estranged’ worlds which dystopias offer and intend as altered projections of our shared future (a term which I will explore in more detail later in this chapter). The argument – exemplified by Billington’s comment reported in the Introduction and echoed by several critical voices that I consider later in this chapter – is that the material constraints of theatre

¹ Booker, p. 301. For a survey of the origins of the literary dystopia see Gregory Claeys’ ‘The Origins of Dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys, 1st edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 107–32.

² Adam Stock, *Modern Dystopian Fiction and Political Thought: Narratives of World Politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 5.

render it unsuited to represent strange worlds, and that futurity and/or its special effects should be left to cinema to avoid ludicrous results.³ I suggest that such widespread prejudice (coming from both theatrical and non-theatrical factions of critics) plays a significant part in preventing researchers interested in dystopia from exploring theatrical expressions of the genre. My thesis works to counteract such bias by highlighting and investigating theatre's kaleidoscopic means of constructing dystopias on the page and on stage. In this light, the materiality and liveness of performance are seen not as limitations but rather as strengths of dystopian theatre.

In essence then, my claim here is that dystopian theatre has not received much critical attention both because of the scholarly predilection for the literary manifestations of dystopia and because of the prejudice against theatre's inherent materiality. My approach proposes to redress such critical imbalance by bringing together the distinct research traditions of utopian studies and theatre and performance studies. To do so, the first section of this chapter surveys influential research coming from the field of utopian criticism and identifies the difficulty in acknowledging the form of theatre in accounts of the dystopian genre. The second segment tackles the issue from the theatre-studies perspective, highlighting the limited engagement with the theories of utopianism when dealing with utopian and dystopian theatre. The third and final section identifies the work of the few scholars who have begun to weave together the threads from the two traditions; it is here that I situate my own contribution in this thesis.

³ See in particular, Billington, 'Never Mind 1984'; Klaić; Susan Gray and Christos Callow Jr., 'Past and Future of Science Fiction Theatre', *Foundation*, 43.117 (2014), 60–69.

1.2 Utopian Studies: The Theatre Gap

Recent scholarly publications about fictional utopianism by Utopian Studies researchers rarely mention theatrical examples of the genre, and even when they do utopian and dystopian theatre only forms a minor section of the overall account. It is perhaps not surprising that the earliest strand of dystopian criticism of the 1960s focussed specifically on dystopian literature, as at the time dystopia was an emerging genre still in search of its own critical terminology and narrative mechanisms. The first studies entirely dedicated to dystopia aimed to distinguish such a novel narrative form from its twin genre of utopia, and to identify its key themes and concerns. The major surveys of the topic driven by this defining effort include Chad Walsh's *From Utopia to Nightmare* (1962), Irving Howe's 'The Fiction of Anti-Utopia' (1963), George Kateb's *Utopia and its Enemies* (1963) and Mark Hillegas' *The Future as a Nightmare* (1967).⁴ These works negotiated the defining features of dystopia as a literary form, grappled with terminological issues (most studies at this point would use interchangeably the words 'anti-utopia', 'dystopia', 'inverted utopia', 'caco-topia'), and struggled to define the relationship between dystopia and science fiction.⁵ Considering such a context, it would be incorrect to speak of a 'neglect' of dystopian and utopian theatre by the scholarship of the time, not because such theatre did not yet exist, but because we need to acknowledge the much narrower reach

⁴ For a survey of scholarship on dystopian literature from its origins to the present see Chad Walsh, *From Utopia to Nightmare* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); Irving Howe, 'The Fiction of Anti-Utopia', 23 April 1962, pp. 13–16; George Kateb, *Utopia and Its Enemies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972); Mark Robert Hillegas, *The Future as Nightmare: H. G. Wells and the Anti-Utopians* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1974).

⁵ For the various uses of the terms and early efforts of definitions see Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, pp. 273–78, in particular note 20 on 278.

of the theatrical play compared to that of the print book, which would justify the wider popular and critical attention given to dystopian literature over dystopian theatre.

Such limitations in the literature, however, continue to persist in later scholarship, with academic discussions from the 1970s to the 1980s – such as Alexandra Aldridge’s *The Scientific World-View in Dystopia* (1978) and Krishan Kumar’s *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (1987) – still privileging the dystopian novel at the expense of other cultural forms.⁶ It is in the 1990s that an awareness of dystopia in other media seems to emerge, with the works by Dragan Klaić (which I discuss in the theatre section) and Keith M. Booker. Booker’s *Dystopian Literature: A Theory and Research Guide* (1994) contributes to establish the place of theatre within the panorama of dystopian scholarship. It includes a section on cultural criticism relevant to dystopian literature and chapters on selected utopian and dystopian novels, dystopian films, and dystopian drama. His dramatic listings are surprisingly numerous, including eleven plays that represent a miscellaneous selection of international texts from the 1920s through the 1980s: Karel Capek’s *R.U.R.* (1921), Bertolt Brecht’s *Roundheads and Peakheads* (1936) and Eugene Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* (1960) are each given a brief section detailing their plot and a short list of further reading. Importantly, the author acknowledges drama’s capacity for a ‘more direct involvement with political issues’ compared to the novel, suggesting this advantage comes from the ‘presence of an audience’ which creates greater ‘potential for a political statement’.⁷ Through these words, Booker shows an appreciation of the communicative power of theatre as a combination of the liveness and embodiment of the

⁶ Alexandra Aldridge, *The Scientific World View in Dystopia* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1984); Krishan Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

⁷ Booker, p. 301.

performance event. However, since it is meant as a research guide, the book approaches all his chosen dystopian works solely via a descriptive account of their plot, neglecting to elaborate on the ways in which dystopian plays may further the genre's political potential through their connection to the spectators. In my own research, I endeavour to highlight the productive relationship between dystopian theatre and its audience. In particular, I investigate how spectating relations built within the text (Chapter 2 and 3) or realised in performance (Chapter Four) influence and alter dystopia's communicative strategies.

Key monographs of the 2000s still focus on the novel as the main vehicle for the dystopian imagination, with few exceptions. In his *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (2000), Tom Moylan thoroughly establishes the history, influences and textual mechanics of dystopia as a literary genre, and identifies a new type of 'critical dystopia' of the 1980s and 1990s, which rejects a pessimist closure and maintains a utopian core.⁸ Although theatre is not mentioned in his account, his work provides scholars of dystopias in all media with a roadmap of the formal structure and functions of the genre in its original medium of the novel. My project aspires to provide a similar foundation for the field of dystopian theatre, laying the groundwork for further research into the particularities of dystopias created for the stage. Different is the case of Erika Gottlieb's *Dystopian Fiction East and West* (published just a year after Moylan's work, in 2001) which recognises 'a dystopian impulse compatible with several genres'.⁹ Comparing the Western and Eastern European tradition of dystopia, she maintains that while dystopia is tightly linked to the novel form in the West, Eastern European countries such as

⁸ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, pp. 183–202.

⁹ Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (Montreal ; Ithaca, N.Y. : McGill-Queen's Press, 2001), p. 20.

Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland present a ‘dystopian impulse in drama [which] seems as strong if not even stronger than the novel’.¹⁰ While admitting that the subject would be rich enough for an independent study, Gottlieb dedicates only one chapter to drama, selecting three representatives of the Czechoslovakian theatre of the absurd: Ivan Klima’s *The Castle* (1964), Petr Karvas’ *The Big Wig* (1965), and Vaclav Havel’s *Memorandum* (1965).¹¹ Gottlieb’s recognition of an Eastern tradition of dystopian drama is an important contribution to the scholarship on dystopia, opening up avenues of exploration which, twenty years later, still await further investigation.

In the 2010s, edited collections on dystopia began to demonstrate a growing awareness of the potentialities of the genre beyond the novel. The different viewpoints encouraged by multi-authored collections allow for a more rounded understanding of dystopia as a cross-media phenomenon. Two key collections demonstrate such an opening: *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage* (2013) edited by Fatima Vieira and Louisa MacKay Demerjian’s *The Age of Dystopia* (2016).¹² Discussions of literary texts still represent the majority of the entries in both collections, yet chapters on the forms of film, TV, and theatre are also present. In particular, Vieira’s book contains three articles on theatre (against seven on literature and six on film), and out of Demerjian’s ten chapters only one is dedicated to drama. The plays covered in the two collections are placed in the utopian-dystopian continuum on various theoretical grounds: from the Adornian concept of ‘negative utopia’ (Ian Fraser), and the notions of ‘ecological dystopias’ (Siân Adiseshiah), to the idea of an alternative

¹⁰ Gottlieb, p. 20.

¹¹ Gottlieb, pp. 221–32.

¹² Vieira, *Dystopia(n) Matters : On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*; Demerjian.

performance space created by language (Hande Tekdemir), and the concept of dystopian ‘science plays’ (Jeanne Tiehen).¹³ While Fraser’s essay undertakes a purely literary analysis of Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*, the other chapters show (to different extents) an appreciation of the inherently theatrical features of utopian and dystopian plays. In particular, Tekdemir focuses on the utopian potential of Mark Ravenhill’s language and its interaction with elements of the staging in a Turkish adaptation of *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2007). In Adiseshiah’s analysis, the non-linguistic ‘modes of performance’ of her chosen plays – Caryl Churchill’s *The Skriker* (1994) and *Far Away* (2000) – are fundamental to the expression to their dystopian and utopian qualities.¹⁴ Tiehen makes an important contribution to the conversation on theatrical dystopia by acknowledging the inherent advantage of placing dystopia in a theatrical setting: the possibility of furthering critical enquiry (of the dangers of unlimited science, in her case) ‘by embodying social and political practices, so they are seen, heard, and felt through empathetic connections to the characters on stage’.¹⁵ Such analyses, recognising the specific linguistic, material and embodied attributes of dystopian theatre, begin to trace the medium-

¹³ Ian Fraser, ‘A Negative Utopia? Adorno on Beckett’s *Endgame*’, in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, by Fátima Vieira (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 282–93; Siân Adiseshiah, ‘The Dramatisation of Futureless Worlds: Caryl Churchill’s Ecological Dystopias’, in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, by Fátima Vieira (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 294–305; Hande Tekdemir, ‘Theatrical Utopia in Mark Ravenhill’s *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* and in Its Turkish Adaptation’, in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, by Fátima Vieira (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 306–16; Jeanne Tiehen, ‘Dystopian Drama: Imagining Science without Limitations’, in *The Age of Dystopia: One Genre, Our Fears and Our Future*, ed. by Louisa MacKay Demerjian (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), pp. 59–72.

¹⁴ Adiseshiah, ‘The Dramatisation of Futureless Worlds: Caryl Churchill’s Ecological Dystopias’, p. 294.

¹⁵ Tiehen, p. 70.

specificity of theatrical dystopias and contribute to widen the understanding of the dystopian genre as not limited to the novelistic form.

Given these recent precedents, the sole focus on dystopian literature (and the refusal to acknowledge other dystopian forms) in a comprehensive overview of the genre such as Gregory Claeys' *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2017) is problematic. Coming from a key figure in utopian studies, the monograph claims to be the first 'devoted to the concept of dystopia' and promises to 'redefin[e] the central concepts and the chronology of the genre' while 'offer[ing] a paradigm-shifting understanding of the subject'.¹⁶ Claeys' historically rich analysis in Part I connects the political dystopia to theories of group psychology, while also relating the origins of dystopian environments to 'intensively evil spaces'.¹⁷ Part II of the book examines twentieth-century historical regimes (from Jacobinism to Cambodia's Pol Pot), thus commenting on real-life 'dystopian' totalitarianism. Part III is the most relevant to my analysis, as it concentrates on dystopia as a fictional genre. Here Claeys includes a comprehensive survey of dystopian criticism and a revision of the main socio-political debates that have infiltrated the dystopian novel from 1810 to 1945.¹⁸ This section also has a chapter devoted to the 'Post-Totalitarian Dystopia', charting the literary dystopia's variation in themes and styles across sixty-five years (1950-2015). This chapter in particular represents a useful tool to compare the thematic variation in dystopian narratives in media other than the novel: the thorough plot summaries testify a breadth of motifs around the common thread of 'thick social and political content and historical understanding', from which scholars interested in different

¹⁶ Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, back cover.

¹⁷ Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, p. 57.

¹⁸ Cf. Chapter 5 in Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, pp. 273–355.

forms of dystopia can draw in order to identify genre-specific dystopian trends.¹⁹ The two remaining chapters in this part are reassessments of the dystopias of Orwell and Huxley (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*): these provide insightful critiques of these much-studied masterpieces, but do not hold the ‘paradigm-shifting’ power that the book claims to achieve. I argue that to be truly revolutionary, a study on dystopia would at least need to acknowledge that forms other than the novel are able to make an impactful contribution to the understanding of what the genre is and can become. Instead, Claey’s only mention of non-literary dystopia is in a short appendix on film, whose function he dismisses as being ‘entertainment rather than edification’.²⁰ He concludes that ‘the more serious instances of the genre tend to be literary adaptations’, thus explicitly restating his deeply rooted belief in the primacy of the novel as the legitimate dystopian form.²¹ It is the imbalance in critical positions like Claey’s that my thesis aims to counteract: by exploring dystopia’s features in the arena of theatre, my study asserts that different expressions of the dystopian are not only present and valid, but also able to enrich the broader generic category of dystopia rather than being detrimental to its success.

1.3 Dystopia in Theatre and Performance Studies

The above discussion sought to demonstrate the limited engagement of dystopian scholarship with the theatrical form and hinted at some of the gaps that my approach wants to fill. In the following section, I embark on a similar journey but this time following the theatre and

¹⁹ The issues with such ‘realistic stance’ will be addressed in the final part of this chapter. Claey’s, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, p. 448.

²⁰ Claey’s, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, p. 491.

²¹ Claey’s, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, p. 492.

performance studies path back to dystopia. My review of this literature first analyses the work of Dragan Klaić as an example of theatrical criticism responding to the tradition of utopianism. Then, I draw attention to the tendency of numerous theatre scholars to consider the dystopian as simply a ‘theme’ or an ‘aesthetic’ rather than as a socio-political genre of theatre with its own purposes and features. I conclude with a discussion of Jill Dolan’s and José Muñoz’s works, which consider the vital impulse innate to performance for its utopian qualities. I highlight the advantages and limits of each position, beginning to relate such evaluations to my own scholarly practices to define by way of contrast and comparisons my own critical stance that will shape the chapters to follow.

The only full-length study on theatre and utopianism to date is Dragan Klaić’s *The Plot of the Future: Utopia and Dystopia in Modern Drama* (1991), an ambitious book that my research enters into dialogue with in key ways across this thesis. Klaić’s approach resembles Claeys’ (and Booker’s, who directly draws from him) in its presentation of the works, as he only summarises the storyline of significant dystopian plays. From this perspective, *The Plot of the Future* represents an invaluable reference work that is useful in tracing a genealogy of utopian and dystopian drama: a research objective that is beyond the scope of this dissertation. The over seventy twentieth-century plays from around the world (with a prevalence of Eastern European material) selected by Klaić all share a ‘predictive perspective which goes from the present toward the future, offering a range of utopian/dystopian scenarios’.²² Despite this extensive listing, Klaić is reluctant to define dystopian drama as a genre in its own right, and

²² Klaić includes, among the others, the already mentioned Shaw’s *Back to Methuselah* and Havel’s *Memorandum*, as well as Howard Barker’s *The Good Between Us* (1977) and Edward Bond’s *Lear* (1971). Klaić, p. 5.

instead prefers to identify it as a ‘thematic corpus of ideas, attitudes, and anxieties about the future’.²³ Even so, he engages with dystopian scholarship more thoroughly than most other commentators included in this section, critically recognising dystopia’s fundamental place in the tradition of utopianism when arguing that ‘dystopia has become in our times a *via negativa* to express utopian strivings’.²⁴ However, Klaić’s analysis is weakened by his virtually interchangeable use of the critical vocabulary used to discuss the future, predictive utopia and dystopia. This is a limit also recognised by an early critic of the volume, Peter Müller, who laments the ‘quibble’ caused by the ‘three or four terms used to create two dozen types of drama’.²⁵

More problematic in my opinion are Klaić’s statements regarding the ‘limitations’ inscribed into ‘the dramatic form’ and ‘the medium of theatre’ - especially when coming from a theatre scholar.²⁶ Klaić suggests that the creative possibilities in the portrayal of futuristic worlds are restricted in the case of dramas, as theatre does not benefit from ‘the convenient ambiguity and elusiveness affordable in narrative fiction’.²⁷ In his opinion, theatre can only rely on the actions and the words of the characters to define the estranged setting and timeframe, which are otherwise not ‘directly available to the spectator’.²⁸ The ‘higher degree of concreteness’ of the theatrical event (specifically the presence of live actors, stage space, and lighting) is seen as a constraint by Klaić, who similarly does not trust theatre’s ability to

²³ Klaić, pp. 71, 2.

²⁴ Klaić, p. 4.

²⁵ Peter P. Müller, review of *Review of The Plot of the Future: Utopia and Dystopia in Modern Drama*, by Dragan Klaić, *Theatre Journal*, 45.4 (1993), 566–68 (p. 568).

²⁶ Klaić, p. 45.

²⁷ Klaić, p. 46.

²⁸ Klaić, p. 46.

stage ‘technological fantas[ies]’ of the future.²⁹ Of course, such a position is very different from my own, already expressed, that theatre’s very theatricality opens up the potential for a renewal of the genre. Indeed, the chapters that follow explore the different ways in which drama and performance can articulate the dystopian via the precise use of language, scenographic arrangements, and embodied practices. Klaić, though, is able to identify the ‘primarily sociological and psychological’ aspects of the future that are best handled by theatre, namely ‘people’s interactions, feelings, and the future dimensions of human consciousness’.³⁰ My research builds on such intuition and acknowledges the intimately personal character of some of the nuanced visions of dystopia presented in theatre, as my chapters will articulate. Despite some of its shortcomings, Klaić’s book remains the first and to date the most comprehensive attempt to the systematic study of utopianism in theatre. My research is thus positioned within a small but growing body of works that build on the foundations that Klaić’s volume set.

As already noted, most contemporary discussions of text-based theatre simply regard utopias and dystopias as thematic strands. *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights* (2011) acknowledges ‘the increased number of dystopic visions of the future’ on the British stage, as do the editors of the 2016 collection *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now*, who recognise instances of drama conceived ‘tonally or literally’ in ‘futuristic’ or ‘dystopian’ terms.³¹ Yet the contributors to those collections who refer to dystopia (Ken Urban and Una Chaudhuri, respectively) mostly leave the critical potential of the dystopian

²⁹ Klaić, pp. 46, 47.

³⁰ Klaić, p. 47.

³¹ *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights*, ed. by Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer, and Aleks Sierz (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), p. xv; *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now*, ed. by Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2016), p. 10.

character of the plays untapped, both using the term just in passing.³² A thematic approach is also taken by Aleks Sierz in his *Rewriting the Nation* (2011), a book on British New Writing whose section on ‘Dystopian Visions’ groups plays in which the ‘bleak vistas’ of the future are only categorised as either ‘dystopian’ or ‘post-apocalyptic’.³³ Vicky Angelaki adopts a similar one-dimensional approach in a chapter of her latest book *Staging Crisis*, where she uses the key terms ‘utopia’ and ‘dystopia’ to refer to idealised good and bad places in Martin Crimp’s work.³⁴

In the case of immersive performances, the ‘dystopian’ is often considered as an aesthetic dimension. As Teri Howson explains ‘the use of dystopian worlds is a frequent characteristic of immersive theatre performances, not only where the science fictional narrative is employed, but in their presentation of worlds where there is a sense of decay and lack’.³⁵ In many instances, the ‘dystopian’ is conflated with the aesthetic of ‘decadence’ and ‘ruins’ which is favoured by prominent immersive companies such as Punchdrunk or SHUNT.³⁶ Event

³² Ken Urban, ‘Sarah Kane’, in *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights*, ed. by Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer, and Aleks Sierz (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), pp. 304–22; Una Chaudhuri, ‘Anthropo-Scenes: Staging Climate Chaos in the Drama of Bad Ideas’, in *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now*, ed. by Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage (London: Palgrave Macmillan Limited, 2016), pp. 303–21. Urban engaged with dystopianism more thoroughly in his earlier article, cf. Ken Urban, ‘Ghosts from an Imperfect Place: Philip Ridley’s Nostalgia’, *Modern Drama*, 50.3 (2007), 325–45.

³³ Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, pp. 200–204.

³⁴ Angelaki, pp. 137–58.

³⁵ Teri Howson, ‘Zombies, Time Machines and Brains: Science Fiction Made Real in Immersive Theatres’, *Thesis Eleven*, 131.1 (2015), 114–26 (p. 123).

³⁶For instance, Adam Alston reports that ‘SHUNT’s *The Boy Who Climbed Out of His Face* (2014) guided promenading audiences through a series of discarded shipping containers, each containing a lonesome occupant appearing in a state of disturbing physical decay – a dystopian reflection, perhaps, on the decadence of capitalism.’ Cf. Adam Alston, ‘Immersive Theatre and the Aesthetics of Decadence: On the Ruined Worlds of Punchdrunk, SHUNT and Hammer Film Productions’, *Theatre and Performance Design*, 3.4 (2017), 199–217.

venues and artists are also prone to capitalise on the dystopian aesthetic of a new immersive experience – a glaring example can be observed in the futuristic setting of the British rapper Skepta’s immersive music festival ‘Dystopia987’.³⁷ In these cases, dystopia is no more than a series of aesthetic features: ruins, sleek futuristic designs, dark environments and an overall sense of an anxiety-inducing atmosphere seem to be sufficient for critics and reviewers alike to label a production as dystopian.³⁸ The principal effect of such forms of aesthetic reductionism is the weakening of the form’s potential for critique: a dystopian aesthetic alone cannot signify and ignite the process of social dreaming which, as I suggested, is central to the genre.

While dystopianism has, as I have argued above, been largely neglected or mistreated by theatre and performance studies scholars, more attention has been given to utopianism. In particular, utopianism is placed in a productive relationship to performance studies by scholars Jill Dolan and José Muñoz, who explore (although from different standpoints) the utopian impulse permeating performance, in *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theatre* (2005) and *Cruising Utopia: The There and Then of Queer Futurity* (2009) respectively. In these works, utopia is not characterised as a narrative structure or a theme, but rather as an

³⁷ Cf. Daniel Dylan Wray, ‘Skepta: Dystopia987 Review – Flat Energy in Nightclub of the Future’, *Guardian*, 19 July 2019, section Music <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/jul/19/skepta-dystopia987-review-manchester-international-festival>> [accessed 13 June 2020].

³⁸ See, for instance, a ‘dystopian’ reading of *Macbeth* at the *Globe*, and the immersive experience of a ‘dystopian birthday party’ by Any One Thing. ‘A Dystopian, Post-Apocalyptic World: Staging *Macbeth* in 2020 | Blogs & Features’, *Shakespeare’s Globe* <<https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/discover/blogs-and-features/2020/02/28/a-dystopian-post-apocalyptic-world-staging-macbeth-in-2020/>> [accessed 7 September 2020]; ‘Any One Thing’s Souvenir: Being a Guest in A Dystopian Birthday Party’, *The Theatre Times*, 2019 <<https://thetheatretimes.com/any-one-things-souvenir-being-a-guest-in-a-dystopian-birthday-party/>> [accessed 7 September 2020].

impulse. Indeed, both books draw from Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* (an essential reference in utopian studies) to argue for the hopeful potential of performance (and of other media, in Muñoz's case) to articulate a better future in the present. The prefigurative and projecting core of utopia – what Bloch called its 'anticipatory consciousness' – is considered by the two scholars as essential to fight the normative drive behind the apparent impossibility of seeing beyond the now.³⁹ Dolan coins the expression 'utopian performative' (which Muñoz later adopts) to describe moments in performance

of liminal clarity and communion, fleeting, briefly transcendent bits of profound human feeling and connection, spring[ing] from alchemy between performers and spectators and their mutual confrontation with a historical present that lets them imagine a different, putatively better future.⁴⁰

Utopian performatives thus create affective experiences that can allow audiences to glimpse – collectively – a better future emerging from their shared present. Crucially, the function of this glimpse is in Muñoz's words to 'remind us that there is something missing, that the present and presence is not enough'.⁴¹ My own approach to dystopian theatre – the mirror image of the utopian – shares and adapts Dolan and Muñoz's beliefs in the utopian power of performance to act as a laboratory for the future, where social dreaming can be both cognitively challenged and affectively embraced. My research strongly suggests that the

³⁹ For Muñoz, this fight is particularly important to counteract the pragmatism permeating queer activism, which limits the revivification of queer political imagination. Cf. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), p. 12.

⁴⁰ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor, United States: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 168.

⁴¹ Muñoz, p. 100.

affective experiences generated by the negative narrative machines of dystopias can function as the locus of utopian hope.⁴²

Dolan's work in particular puts great emphasis on the community-building power of utopian moments in performance: the kinship and alliance derived by utopian performatives has the potential to inspire new, more generous ways of being together in the real world.⁴³ Utopian performatives themselves cannot unleash change, but can 'allow audiences to deepen their connection to their political and social lives by rehearsing a depth of feeling that can demonstrate effective and *affective* critical engagement'.⁴⁴ This is another key lesson I bring into my research: by allowing audiences to *feel* the future possibilities that dystopias project, theatre can communicate dystopia's hopeful core to its audiences. Dolan's and Muñoz's contributions draw on the theoretical strand of utopianism to argue for the functional potential of performance to ignite hope. My thesis applies their lessons to specific manifestations of fictional utopianism, theatrical dystopias, and argues that the power of utopian hope can be found even in the most dystopian of the performances.⁴⁵

⁴² A recent Ph.D. thesis coins the expression of 'dystopian performatives' intended as 'negatively valenced experiences that occur in the theatre as a kind of dystopian practice that seeks to critique the present and promote action to adjust the future' (iii). See Scott Knowles, 'Dystopian Performatives: Negative Affect/Emotion in the Work of Sarah Kane' (University of Kansas, 2016) <<https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/handle/1808/21857>> [accessed 13 September 2020].

⁴³ Dolan, pp. 10–12.

⁴⁴ Dolan, p. 162. (original emphasis)

⁴⁵ Cf. Dolan, p. 8.

1.4 Weaving the Threads together: Combining Theatre and Dystopia

The above discussion of the research coming from utopian studies and theatre and performance studies on the topic of dystopian and utopian theatre has shown that each field largely fails to take fully advantage of the other's critical heritage. My thesis argues that much is to be gained from an integration of the two traditions and relative methods of critical enquiry. In doing so, it is placed among a growing body of scholarship working at the intersection of the two fields and runs parallel to the research being produced on science fiction theatre, a related speculative form.⁴⁶ This section thus reviews the works of those scholars who are pioneering a more integrated approach to theatre and utopianism (in both its dystopian and utopian form). I highlight key arguments that demonstrate their integrated vision and identify both similarities to and critical differences from my own approach. Overall, I aim to trace the emerging path in criticism that recognises the two faces of dystopian theatre and begin to define the place of my own research in such a direction.

⁴⁶ Academics in the field of science-fiction studies face similar challenges to those of my project, in that they strive to defend science-fiction theatre from the scepticism about the integration of a speculative narrative and the material medium of theatre. Scholars like Ian Farnell, Susan Gray and Christos Callow Jr. bring together in their analyses central concepts of science-fiction criticism (such as estrangement) and an acute knowledge of the means available to drama and performance with the aim to define the genre of science fiction theatre. For the relationship between science fiction and dystopia see: Peter Fitting, 'Utopia, Dystopia and Science Fiction', ed. by Gregory Claeys, *Cambridge Companions to Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 135–53. For the origins of 'cognitive estrangement' see Darko Suvin, 'On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre', *College English*, 34.3 (1972), 372–82. For examples of the analyses of science-fiction theatre see Ian Farnell, 'Science, Science Fiction, and Nick Payne's *Elegy*: A Conceptual Third Way', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 2019, 1–18 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14682761.2019.1608125>>; Gray and Callow Jr.

Theatre scholar Siân Adiseshiah has been combining the areas of utopianism and theatre for the last fifteen years. She has published extensively on the utopian (and sometimes, dystopian) aspects of twentieth and twenty-first century drama, and has recently shifted her focus to what she defines as ‘proper’ utopian plays, such as George Bernard Shaw’s *Back to Methuselah* (1921).⁴⁷ Her forthcoming monograph *Utopian Drama: In Search of a Genre* (2021) will provide a historical perspective on the development of the form, tracing the generic roots and components of utopian theatre.⁴⁸ My project runs parallel to this research path, aiming to define and investigate the genre-specific characters of utopian drama’s generic sibling: dystopian theatre. There are three aspects of Adiseshiah’s approach to theatre and utopianism that I want to highlight here to explain the significance of her work to my thesis, and to this field of research more generally: the emphasis on generic classification, the theatricality of Utopian drama, and the cognitive and affective potential of Utopian theatre.

First, for Adiseshiah the definition of the genre of utopian drama is not a question of zealous classification but rather a way to promote a better understanding of utopian plays’ scope and mechanisms. In her 2012 article on Howard Brenton’s *Greenland* (1988), she suggests that one of the reasons for the negative reception of the play was ‘the absence of a genre tradition of utopian drama’.⁴⁹ Because the play disrupts the genre-requirements of the stage comedy (in its refusal to return to the initial state of things), Adiseshiah suggests that it frustrates the audience’s expectations, triggering a negative response. In this context, the

⁴⁷ Siân Adiseshiah, ‘Drama and Utopian Forms of Relationality’, *MediAzioni*, 27 (2020), D33–38 (p. D35).

⁴⁸ Siân Adiseshiah, *Utopian Drama: In Search of a Genre* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021) forthcoming.

⁴⁹ Siân Adiseshiah, “‘I Just Die for Some Authority!’: Barriers to Utopia in Howard Brenton’s “Greenland””, *Comparative Drama*, 46.1 (2012), 41–55 (p. 44).

recognition of utopian drama as a standalone genre with its features and history can enable critics and audiences to interpret utopian plays in light of their utopian dimensions. I adopt and promote a similar approach to the definition of dystopian theatre: the classification of plays as dystopian will not only allow for the recognition of dystopian-specific features but also provide an additional lens through which to analyse contemporary plays and performances.

Second, Adiseshiah considers *all* the languages of the stage as essential to the expression of the utopian and dystopian in performance. In her chapter in Vieira's edited collection *Dystopian Matter(s)* mentioned above, Adiseshiah stresses how the various modes of performance in two of Caryl Churchill's plays shape their utopian or dystopian mode, recognising that (particularly in *The Skriker*) 'acting, music, singing, dance and mime all form significant contributions to the event of the play'.⁵⁰ Similarly, in an earlier 2005 article on Churchill's history plays, she praises Churchill's use of a 'plurality of theatrical languages' in the construction of utopian spaces, and incorporates them in her analysis.⁵¹ Adiseshiah's emphasis on the performative, paired with the interest in plays with a utopian content, is thus in contrast with much of the scholarship encountered so far which either neglected the performative aspect of plays in their accounts (Booker), considered the theatrical language as limiting the presentation of dystopia (Klaić), or dissociated the 'performative' from the utopian content of plays (Dolan). It is a similarly combined approach that my thesis aims to promote. My research explores how the various languages of the stage contribute to expanding the

⁵⁰ Adiseshiah, 'The Dramatisation of Futureless Worlds: Caryl Churchill's Ecological Dystopias', p. 294.

⁵¹ Adiseshiah, 'Utopian Space in Caryl Churchill's History Plays', p. 9.

current understanding of the dystopian and challenge accepted notions of how dystopias signify and communicate their message in the theatre.

This brings me to the third and final reflection on Adiseshiah's contribution: her understanding that utopian drama's communication relies on the cognitive and affective sphere. She argues that not only does 'theatre potentially offe[r] more opportunity for a polyvocal, multi-tonal, inter-subjective' experience of utopia, but also an 'affectively (as well as cognitively) estranging encounter with the representation of utopian [and I would add dystopian] worlds'.⁵² Adiseshiah grounds her understanding in Bloch's thinking on the utopian impulse (already briefly highlighted in relation to Dolan's and Muñoz's work in the preceding section), which combines the two streams of Marxism: 'critical rigour' and 'imaginative receptivity'.⁵³ In line with Adiseshiah's position, I suggest that utopian and dystopian projections always require a level of intellectual engagement – as the audience is asked to process the distance between their world and the alternative they are presented – as well as affective investment. Overall, the goal of my thesis is thus aligned to Adiseshiah's project of exploring how utopian theatre (in its dystopian form, in my research) can contribute to widening the generic understanding of fictional utopianism, as well as opening up a new avenue of research in theatre and performance studies which is coherent with such a tradition. Although inspired by the same principles, our research diverges in two directions: her efforts are concentrated on utopian manifestations, while mine are focused on the dystopian side of the

⁵² Adiseshiah, 'Drama and Utopian Forms of Relationality', p. D35.

⁵³ Marx, quoted in Adiseshiah, 'Utopian Space in Caryl Churchill's History Plays', p. 5.

spectrum, and her work (especially her upcoming monograph) covers a large historical span, while mine is focussed on the UK theatre of the twenty-first century.

While Adiseshiah is the only academic who has systematically engaged with questions around theatre and utopianism, in recent years a few other scholars have started to take an interest in estranged forms of theatre beyond purely thematic readings of dystopias. Some have observed a move away from realist modes of dramaturgy in favour of a more speculative type of storytelling, which can be associated with a ‘dystopian’ dimension. In a 2017 article, Dan Rebellato comments on the ‘apocalyptic’ tone and imagery of contemporary British plays; in the same year Merle Tönnies writes of a strand of theatre dealing with ‘abstract representations’ of the political; and in 2019, Trish Reid speaks of a recurring ‘trope of the dystopian near-future’.⁵⁴ Rebellato and Tönnies seem to agree on the features of the emerging anti-realist current: both point to the unreliability of language as a meaning-making structure and an unclear political stance as characteristics of such theatre. Drawing from Jacques Derrida, Rebellato contends that the apocalyptic disrupts ‘the assuredness of language, the unity of meaning, the clarity of expression’, while also identifying an ‘Adornian refusal ‘to make explicit the political affiliation of these plays’.⁵⁵ Tönnies arrives at similar conclusions from a different route, by emphasising the influences from the Theatre of the Absurd on the ‘disintegration of language’ and the absence of ‘concrete references’ to real political contexts of this new dramaturgy.⁵⁶ My research also recognises language and the relation between

⁵⁴ Dan Rebellato, ‘Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Theatre: British Drama, Violence and Writing’, *Sillages Critiques*, 22, 2017; Merle Tönnies, ‘The Immobility of Power in British Political Theatre after 2000: Absurdist Dystopias’, *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 5.1 (2017), 156–72 (p. 156); Reid, p. 73.

⁵⁵ Rebellato, ‘Of an Apocalyptic Tone’, pp. 14, 12.

⁵⁶ Tönnies, p. 167, 169.

content and context as significant aspects of the theatre that I consider dystopian. In particular, I elaborate on the role of language as a driving narrative mechanism in Chapter Two, and on the interrelations of fictional setting and the socio-political reality in Chapter Three.

Despite their anti-realist stance and unclear political affiliation, this growing stream of speculative plays engages with the political, albeit not always directly. As Middeke et al. suggest, even the ‘most experimental plays of the New British Drama have featured recognisable traits of everyday life, language and images and thus have retained a thoroughly political concern’.⁵⁷ As such, they are positioned as a middle ground between ‘self-reflexive modes of drama’ (such as the Theatre of the Absurd, Metadrama, the Postdramatic) and the ‘more overtly political intentions’ of Epic Theatre.⁵⁸ This mixture of the speculative and the political, which translates into an anti-realist style, is interpreted by Rebellato and Reid as a specific response to capitalism’s appropriation of the discourses of reality. So for Rebellato, the (‘apocalyptic’) tone of plays such as Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* (2016) or Alistair McDowall’s *Pomona* (2014) offer ‘images of the end of the world that *are* images of the end of capitalism’.⁵⁹ Similarly, Reid recognizes that plays such as Churchill’s and McDowall’s (which she also analyses) operate a ‘disruption of theatrical realism’ that strives to reflect and comment on ‘the decentralised and dispersed violence of the neoliberal state’.⁶⁰ Although using a separate vocabulary, both scholars see in the speculative mode an effective strategy to ask political questions in the context of twenty-first century capitalism. This thesis corroborates

⁵⁷ Middeke, Schnierer, and Sierz, p. xv.

⁵⁸ Middeke, Schnierer, and Sierz, p. xv.

⁵⁹ Rebellato, ‘Of an Apocalyptic Tone’, p. 15, (original emphasis).

⁶⁰ Reid, p. 86.

such claims, arguing that the dystopian form in particular provides an embodied and estranged standpoint from which to intervene in the social and political issues of the neoliberal present.

Before moving on to survey the remaining literature, including Reid's work, a brief clarification on the relation between capitalism and dystopian theatre is necessary. In the Introduction to the thesis, I have referred to the alleged commodification of the dystopian genre, linked to the ever-increasing reach of the capitalist system, which makes many literary dystopias monotonous and irrelevant.⁶¹ I have argued that the medium of theatre offers an escape route for such neutralisation by providing the opportunity to reinvent the dystopian imagination via theatrical means. In the articles mentioned above, Rebellato and Reid argue that the opposite is also true: the genre of dystopia gives the exhausted form of theatrical realism the chance to intervene once again in the debates of the times, outside the grasp of 'capitalist realism'.⁶² In particular, Reid explicitly recognises that 'the dystopian turn in new writing highlights the inadequacies of realism as a mode for staging neoliberal experience'.⁶³ She argues that the future-world setting of dystopian plays is the means through which theatre can effectively reflect on 'the terrors of precarious living, neoliberal (in)versions of personal freedom, environmental disaster, and the demeaning effects of corporate capitalism'.⁶⁴ Following such reasoning, I argue that the antidote to political irrelevance lies, for both theatre and dystopia, in the distance from the here and now and in the creation of imaginative worlds

⁶¹ Cf. the section of the Introduction 'Dystopian Theatre Matters' and see Lepore; Bould.

⁶² The expression 'capitalist realism' to which both Rebellato and Reid refer was coined by Mark Fisher and describes the 'widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it'. Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism* (New Alresford: John Hunt Publishing, 2009), p. 8.

⁶³ Reid, p. 73.

⁶⁴ Reid, p. 73.

that can demand, once again, the impossible.⁶⁵ In this sense, my thesis identifies in theatrical dystopias one of the key ways through which British theatre is able to engage with socio-political issues in the neoliberal context of the twenty-first century. The project is thus timely in its the exploration of new ways to approach the political in British theatre.

After this brief detour to clarify the political nature of dystopian theatre, I return to the works of Tönnies and Reid, who explicitly classify the speculative plays that they analyse as ‘dystopian’. A fuller engagement with their arguments will facilitate the understanding of the positioning of my own approach in relation to other contemporary perspectives on dystopian theatre. Tönnies’ and Reid’s approaches to dystopian theatre share some similarities, yet differences can also be identified in their theoretical grounding. Tönnies argues that post-2000 political plays such as Edward Bond’s *Have I None* (2000) and Mark Ravenhill’s *The Cut* (2006) can be described as ‘absurdist dystopias’, as they combine the ‘genre markers’ of the Theatre of the Absurd and dystopia to create a new genre of political theatre.⁶⁶ Both modes call attention to ‘unequal power relations’ and a ‘certain degree of abstraction from concrete contexts and social conditions’, while also differing greatly in the ‘didactic aim’ of dystopia and the ‘denial of rationality’ of absurdism.⁶⁷ Combined, these traits give rise to the genre of absurdist dystopias which is characterised by immobility, as in such plays the characters and their world are caught in a (dystopian) system that ‘corrod[es] social cohesion from within’.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ My use of the expression ‘demand the impossible’ is an homage to Tom Moylan’s 1986 seminal text *Demand the Impossible*, defining the renewed potential of the new ‘critical’ utopia. Cf. Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1986).

⁶⁶ Tönnies, p. 158.

⁶⁷ Tönnies, pp. 158, 159.

⁶⁸ Tönnies, p. 168.

Tönnies concludes that the generic mix of absurdist dystopias allows theatre to address (although indirectly) the fundamental questions of unequal power relations in society.⁶⁹

In contrast, Reid is reluctant to define dystopian drama as a new genre, arguing that the differences in content and structure of plays such as debbie tucker green's *hang* (2015) and Rory Mullarkey's *The Wolf from the Door* (2014) are too extensive to be contained by 'a simple mode'.⁷⁰ Rather, she aims to formulate a 'basic taxonomy' to 'distinguish between the types of dystopias at play in contemporary drama' drawing from Raymond Williams' categories of dystopia which include the 'hell', the 'externally altered world', the 'willed transformation', and the 'technological transformation'.⁷¹ Among other plays, Reid analyses McDowall's *Pomona* (2014) in the first category, Stef Smith's *Human Animals* (2016) in the second, and McDowall's *X* (2016) in the fourth before concentrating on Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016) as a representative of the third category, which she identifies as the most popular dystopian trope in contemporary playwrighting. Such narratives concern 'a new but less happy kind of life [that] has been brought about by social degeneration' and are more explicitly political since they focus principally on questions of social agency.⁷² Reid's typology is a useful tool to establish nuance in the varieties of dystopia on the British stage, but I suggest that the wide variation in content should not discourage critics from defining dystopian theatre as a genre with its own recurring features. I argue that the key to a generic classification of dystopian theatre is in the understanding of dystopias not as characterised by thematic or formal features,

⁶⁹ Tönnies, p. 170.

⁷⁰ Reid, p. 76.

⁷¹ Reid, pp. 77, 63.

⁷² Raymond Williams as quoted in Reid, p. 82.

but as a product of the tradition of utopianism, whose aim is to critique the present and imagine alternatives to the current state of things.

Although Tönnies and Reid's positions diverge around the question of genre, their stances on the communicative strategies of theatrical dystopias are much closer and echo both Adiseshiah's and my own understanding. Tönnies argues that 'despite their lack of focal points for identification' absurdist dystopias 'have a haunting quality on stage which holds the audience's minds and emotions far beyond any rational attempts to understand the characters or their interaction'.⁷³ Since such plays cannot be fully rationalised (as estranging settings or character behaviours often remain unexplained), they involve the audience both on an intellectual and on an affective level. Their 'experiential orientation' means that spectators can experience the 'immobilising effects' of unequal power relations through the theatrical process itself.⁷⁴ In a similar vein, Reid explains that the plays that she identifies as dystopian offer 'an affective encounter with, or experience of, the future'.⁷⁵ Not only can the dystopian projection be seen or read, but it is crucially experienced as a complex set of bodily and affective feelings. In fact, her main criticism of Klaić's pivotal monograph is his neglect of the 'affective impacts achieved through staging [which] are at least as important as cognitive messaging'.⁷⁶ Reid's understanding of the communication strategies of dystopian theatre joins Tönnies' and Adiseshiah's formulations in establishing the combined affective and cognitive channels as playing equally important parts in the ways in which theatrical dystopias interact with their

⁷³ Tönnies, p. 169.

⁷⁴ Tönnies, p. 169.

⁷⁵ Reid, p. 74.

⁷⁶ Reid, p. 76.

audiences. Dystopian theatre allows its audience to experience intellectually and feelingly, individually and collectively the future projections of its dark worlds, an aspect which I also explore in Chapter Four of this thesis, 'Feeling with the Body: Dystopia in Performance'.

I finish this review of recent work that brings together dystopian studies and theatre studies by examining the current state of scholarship as shared at key recent conferences. Conferences are where new ideas are tested, debated, and reviewed and it is where scholarship is the most alive, always in progress and always in dialogue. The increasing frequency of talks and panels on utopia, dystopia and other forms of speculative theatre are symptomatic of the flourishing of research on the topic and it is what makes me feel hopeful about the future of the field. In September 2019, at the annual TaPRA (Theatre and Performance Research Association) conference, the Working Group 'Performance Identity and Community' asked its participants to submit proposals on 'utopian and dystopian imaginaries'. Both Reid and Farnell participated in the panel, as well Paola Botham, Katheryn Owen and Chris Green.⁷⁷ Reid built on her 2019 article to analyse more dystopian plays, Farnell discussed the apocalypse in Ann Washburn's *Mr Burns* (2014), Botham tackled feminist dystopias on the British stage, and Owen and Green delivered a joint provocation on the 'slow cancellation of the future'. A few months later, in December 2019, Christos Callow Jr. was among the organisers of 'Stage the Future' 'the first science fiction theatre conference', which touched upon the themes of the *stageability* of speculative theatre, science fiction and dystopian expressions on stage.⁷⁸ Finally, the ZiF workshop 'Dystopian/Utopian Theatre in Britain after 2000 and its Political

⁷⁷ See the abstracts of their talks at: <https://tapra2019.sched.com/event/R7lu/working-group-session-1-performance-identity-and-community>

⁷⁸ The programme can be accessed here: <https://www.cyborphic.com/stage-the-future-2019>

Spaces’ was scheduled for March 2020 at the Universität Bielefeld (Germany), but was postponed to March 2021 due to the Covid-19 crisis. A rich programme of talks promised to ‘reach a comprehensive overview of the various twenty-first-century British plays which make use of characteristic dystopian and/or utopian elements’.⁷⁹ These conversations have been moved online and are now potentially reaching a wider audience who may be interested in the intersection of dystopia and theatre. The workshop was co-organised by Merle Tönnies, and included talks by Adiseshiah, Angelaki, Botham, Reid, and Sierz – all scholars discussed in this review as being at the forefront of the research into theatrical dystopias and utopias.

This chapter has surveyed the literature related to the central topic of this thesis, dystopian theatre. I identified the gap in scholarship dealing specifically with contemporary manifestations of dystopia on the British stage by reviewing separately publications in Utopian Studies and theatre and performance studies. I demonstrated that, although key works such as Klaić’s *The Plot of the Future* laid the ground for further study on dystopian theatre, the field is still in its early development. Indeed, much of the scholarship surveyed still fails to combine the theory of dystopia and the mechanics of theatre in a productive way, with the notable exceptions of Adiseshiah’s, Reid’s and Tönnies’ work. In this context, my thesis intervenes to establish a comprehensive framework for the study of dystopian theatre which will take into account the critical charge of the dystopian genre and the material and signifying dynamics of the theatrical form. My argument, developed in the following chapters, suggests that the critical charge of dystopia in the theatre is intimately connected to its inherently theatrical modes of dystopianism, which comprise the specific linguistic practices that shape a dystopian narrative

⁷⁹ Further information on the workshop can be found here: [https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/\(en\)/ZiF/AG/2020/04-02-Toennies.html](https://www.uni-bielefeld.de/(en)/ZiF/AG/2020/04-02-Toennies.html)

(Chapter Two), the estrangement of its context (Chapter Three), and the embodied quality of the theatrical experience (Chapter Four). The following chapter then begins to substantiate the first element of such framework, as I turn to the analysis of the linguistic mechanisms of dystopian theatre.

Chapter Two – Mastering the Word: The Language of Dystopian Drama

2.1 Introduction

Language control is a key structural feature of the dystopian genre in drama. Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan argue that, in literature, dystopias are built around a narrative of the dystopian hegemonic order and a counter-narrative of resistance generally led by the central character. They suggest that this structural strategy of double narrative ‘most often plays out by way of the social, and anti-social, use of language. Throughout the history of dystopian fiction’ – they say – ‘the conflict of the text turns on the control of language’.¹ I argue that, in text-based dystopian plays, language assumes an equally prominent role as a structural element since dialogue among characters is one of the principal means through which the workings of dramatic dystopias can be grasped.² In fact, as Anne Ubersfeld suggests, ‘the basis of [dramatic] dialogue is the *relation of power* between characters’.³ This means that not only does dramatic dialogue convey what the characters say to each other, but it also gives the

¹ Among the most prototypical examples in twentieth century literature are Orwell’s creation of the fictional language of *Newspeak* in his *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the storytelling routine in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, or the crucial role attributed to language in Huxley’s *Brave New World*; Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan, ‘Dystopia and Histories’, in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2003), 5.

² There are notable exceptions to the centrality of language in dystopian theatre, such as the work of the company Gecko. They create pieces using a combination of multiple languages, and made-up words and rely heavily on movement and scenography to generate meaning and competing narratives. See my discussion of ‘The Wedding’ (<https://www.geckotheatre.com/the-wedding>) in Chapter Four.

³ Ubersfeld, p. 179.

audience crucial information about the ‘the conditions for the exercise of that discourse’.⁴ In the case of dystopia, dialogue among characters signals their social position and their relation to the dystopian structures of power. Via the characters’ conversations, the audience can understand whether they are among the producers of the dystopian order or if they are promoters of the resistance to that hegemony: in other words, whether they contribute to the narrative or counter-narrative of dystopia. This process presupposes an understanding of language as ‘discourse’, as a form of social practice that ‘both *shapes* and is *shaped by* society’.⁵ Therefore, a linguistic analysis of the discourse of dystopian plays can illuminate the power dynamics of oppression and resistance in dystopias written for the theatre, enabling an exploration of how the narrative and counter-narrative is conveyed through language in dystopian drama. To study such structural mechanisms, this first substantive chapter focuses on the *text* of dystopian drama. Chapter Three then combines textual and scenographic analysis, while Chapter Four unites these approaches with a stronger focus on performance and its affective engagement of spectators.

Drama has been defined by Mick Short as ‘the conversational genre’ *par excellence* because it is ‘most like naturally occurring conversation’ and largely focuses on ‘character-to-

⁴ Ubersfeld, p. 161.

⁵ Paul Simpson and Andrea Mayr, *Language and Power*, 1 edn (London ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), p. 51. Of course, there are exceptions to the use of ‘natural’ or ‘conversational’ language in drama. See for instance the non-naturalistic dramatic language of the avant-garde theatre. Cf. Aleksandra Sakowska, “‘The Many Languages of the Avant-Garde’”: In Conversation with Grzegorz Bral of Teatr Pieśń Kozła (Song of the Goat Theatre)’, *Multicultural Shakespeare: Translation, Appropriation and Performance* 11, no. 26 (30 December 2014): 45–63.

character interaction'.⁶ However, the language of drama is not like real-life spoken discourse. As many critics have demonstrated, it exploits the '*mechanics*' (to use Vimala Herman's expression) of ordinary speech in terms of rhythms, pauses, and turn-taking to construct dialogue.⁷ Dramatic dialogue is 'embedded discourse' in Short's definition, as the communication that occurs among characters is enclosed in the exchange between playwright and audience. The embedded nature of dramatic dialogue is significant because 'features which, for example, mark social relations between two people at the character level become *messages* about the characters at the level of discourse which pertains between author and audience'.⁸ I would suggest that such communication is best described as happening between *text* (intended as both script and performance) and audience, and that, especially in the case of dystopian 'texts', the audience has a central role as interpreter of both the conversational dynamics of power and the power relations underpinning the dystopian system. Whilst my analysis maintains an awareness of the extra-dialogical features of theatre, the primarily textual approach of this chapter allows me to explore how the dystopian dynamics of oppression and resistance are expressed through words in the 'conversational genre'. In a sense, this first chapter acts as a bridge between the current understanding of dystopia – the key features of which are generally drawn from the novel – and my wider interpretation of the dystopian as a

⁶ Mick Short, *Exploring the Language of Poems, Plays and Prose*, 1 edn (London ; New York: Longman, 1996), p. 168.

⁷ Among the others, Herman (1995), Short (1996), and Susan Mandala in 'Twentieth-Century Drama Dialogue as Ordinary Talk' (2007), address the differences between 'ordinary talk' and dramatic dialogue; Vimala Herman, *Dramatic Discourse: Dialogue as Interaction in Plays* (London: Routledge, 1995), 6.

⁸ Mick Short, 'Discourse Analysis and the Analysis of Drama', in *Language, Discourse and Literature: An Introductory Reader in Discourse Stylistics*, by Ronald Carter and Paul Simpson (Florence, United States: Routledge, 1988) (my emphasis).

set of qualities originating from a variety of channels. The exploration of the textual dynamics of narrative in dystopian theatre pursued here will allow me to identify a dystopian core in the plays and performances that I analyse and will facilitate further investigation into theatre's interpretation of such dynamics through its multiple signifying systems in later chapters.

My approach to the study of the language of dystopia in drama embraces the proposition of the critical discourse analysts for whom language is a form of social practice (discourse) conditioned by and conditioning social structures.⁹ The dialectical understanding of the relationship between language and society, championed by critical discourse linguist Norman Fairclough, allows for an analysis of the language of dystopia as both a product of the ideological structures of the dystopian society, but also as a practice able to challenge those ideological structures. The central concern of this type of linguistic analysis is the relation between language and power because, as Adrian Blackledge explains, 'it is usually in language that discriminatory practices are enacted, in language that unequal relations of power are constituted and reproduced, and in language that social asymmetries may be challenged and transformed'.¹⁰ As David Sisk suggested in one of the few studies on the language of dystopia, 'we must come to understand that the struggle for mastery of the world boils down to mastery over the word'.¹¹ In dystopias, having control over the means of language means being able to shape the society, as linguistic issues are inextricably linked to questions of power and freedom. In other words, understanding who holds the power linguistically in dystopian plays means to

⁹ Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2014).

¹⁰ Adrian Blackledge, 'Discourse and Power', in *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, ed. by James Paul Gee and Michael Handford (London: Routledge, 2011), (616-627), p.617.

¹¹ David W. Sisk, *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias* (Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 180.

uncover the dystopian dynamics of oppression and resistance. A linguistic approach inspired by critical discourse analysis aims to identify what are the power relations that shape a particular discourse, what elements have an ideological character, and what are the effects of a discourse.¹² Following Fairclough's approach, I complement my linguistic analysis of discourse with critical theory insights on the workings of hegemony (and its related ideas) by Antonio Gramsci. Baccolini was drawing directly from Gramsci when defining the workings of the double-narrative structure of dystopia (especially in her understanding of hegemony and counter-hegemony), and my analysis aims to expand that theoretical basis.¹³ These cross-disciplinary methods will allow me to demonstrate how discursive practices are one of the fundamental means through which the narrative and counter-narrative of dystopia – a key feature of the genre according to Baccolini and Moylan – are expressed through the words of dystopian drama.

This chapter explores how both the narrative of the hegemonic order and the counter-narrative of resistance are conveyed in dystopian plays through linguistic means. I start by analysing linguistically how the dystopian institutions depicted in contemporary plays shape the organisation of the society and its dominant ideology (that is, establish their hegemony) by using both coercion and consent. I will study how in dystopian drama the 'struggle *for* hegemony', intended as the promotion and dominance of a particular set of ideas, 'is played out on the terrain of common sense', in Gramscian terms.¹⁴ To conduct my analysis, I examine

¹² Cf. Fairclough, p. 175.

¹³ Cf. Baccolini and Moylan, 'Dystopia and Histories', 5.

¹⁴ Matthew Donoghue, 'Beyond Hegemony: Elaborating on the Use of Gramscian Concepts in Critical Discourse Analysis for Political Studies', *Political Studies*, 66.2 (2018), 392–408 (p. 400).

dialogical interactions in two plays that present complementary aspects of ‘institutional talk’: *The Pillowman* (2003) by Martin McDonagh and *Foxfinder* (2011) by Dawn King. These allow me to discuss how institutions of civil society, the police and education systems respectively, contribute to the shaping of common sense (or rather, a universally shared worldview) in dystopian settings, by combining coercion and consent. I will demonstrate that while in *The Pillowman* the dystopian hegemony is reinforced by coercive discursive practices such as the use of a dystopian discourse type and relative subject positions, in *Foxfinder* the hegemonic narrative is achieved by the creation and diffusion of a dystopian register (that is, specialist language). In the next section, I proceed to consider how the struggle against dystopian powers can be enacted linguistically – how the counter-narrative of resistance is rendered in drama. By drawing from the Gramscian ideas of spontaneous and normative grammars (the instinctive and structured ways in which people speak, respectively) which are connected to hegemonic practices, I explore the linguistic mechanisms of resistance in the plays *Lemons, Lemons, Lemons, Lemons* (2015) by Sam Sneider and *Edgar & Annabel* (2013) by Sam Holcroft. Both plays stage a series of indirect but productive strategies (a Gramscian ‘war of position’) aimed at counteracting the crystallisation of dystopian ideology. While the former resorts to the creation of an antilanguage (a linguistic system alternative to the official one) to cope with restrictions of freedom, the latter adopts reverse discourse (the use of official language for resistant purpose) to attempt subverting the hegemonic order. Such analysis will highlight, in Tom Moylan’s words, ‘the extent to which dystopian narrative (with its proclivity for a self-reflexive awareness of the power of language) is concerned with its own conditions

of production and reception’ and, in the context of the overarching aims of this thesis, show how that awareness is affected by the dramatic medium.¹⁵

2.2 The Language of Oppression

In this section, I explore how the narrative of the hegemonic dystopian order is achieved through a combination of coercive and consenting linguistic practices in dystopian plays. I start by defining key Gramscian concepts concerning hegemony as the basis for my discussion, before moving on to the relevance of institutional discourse and individual analysis of the plays which illustrate dystopian oppression. When discussing the mechanics of dystopian narrative in literature, Baccolini and Moylan maintain that

the official, hegemonic order of most dystopias ... rests, as Antonio Gramsci put it, on both coercion and consent. The material force of the economy and the state apparatus controls the social order and keeps it running; but discursive power, exercised in the reproduction of meaning and the interpellation of subjects, is a complementary and necessary force.¹⁶

I argue that, in dramatic dystopias, discursive power is not only a necessary force, but it is the principal means of the production and reproduction of hegemonic dystopian narratives. Gramsci’s notion of ‘cultural hegemony’ is particularly useful to understand the power dynamics of dystopian plays as he suggests that ‘the supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as “domination” and as “intellectual and moral leadership”’.¹⁷ In this view, hegemony is not simply a matter of domination through coercive practices, but also includes

¹⁵ Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, Cultural Studies Series (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2001), 150.

¹⁶ Baccolini and Moylan, ‘Dystopia and Histories’, p. 6.

¹⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p. 57.

the generation of people's consent via the organs of the civil society (such as the school, the church, the press, et cetera). However, as Joseph Buttigieg reminds us, 'consent is not the spontaneous outcome of "free choice"; consent is manufactured, albeit through extremely complex mediums, diverse institutions, and constantly changing processes'.¹⁸ So as well as securing domination through force, the dystopian institutions of contemporary dystopian drama also must manufacture consent, or what Fairclough calls 'ideological common sense'.¹⁹ While common sense for Gramsci is 'the uncritical and largely unconscious way of perceiving and understanding the world that has become "common" in any given epoch', *ideological common sense* in Fairclough's definition is '*common sense in the service of sustaining unequal relations of power*'.²⁰ It is when the ideology behind a certain common sense ceases to be seen as arbitrary and becomes the 'standard' that ideological common sense has been 'naturalised'.²¹ The plays I analyse as my case studies illustrate the linguistic mechanisms through which hegemony is established and reinforced through the institutions of the political and civil society by using coercion and consent.

The Pillowman and *Foxfinder* offer examples of dystopian 'institutional' discourse, albeit in different contexts. According to Andrea Mayr, institutions (such as the police, prisons, or the educational system) are sites of 'reality construction', in that they have the capacity to create, shape and impose social practices.²² As such, they have 'considerable control over the

¹⁸ Joseph A. Buttigieg, 'Gramsci on Civil Society', *Boundary 2*, 22.3 (1995), 1–32.

¹⁹ Fairclough, p. 107.

²⁰ Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith ed., p. 322; Fairclough, p. 107.

²¹ Fairclough, p. 113.

²² Andrea Mayr, *Language and Power: An Introduction to Institutional Discourse* (London: Bloomsbury, 2008), p. 3.

organising of our routine experiences of the world and the way we classify the world’.²³ Language is the principal means by which institutions create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are. Thus, studying the language – or better – the discourse of institutional talk in dystopian settings is to understand how the dystopian hegemony manifests through its organizations and institutions, how its common sense is internalized in social practices, and how it defines characters’ identities.²⁴ Both *The Pillowman* and *Foxfinder* use institutional talk to convey their dystopian double-narrative to their audiences. The first play, set in an unnamed totalitarian state, focuses on the brutal interrogation of the writer Katurian, who is accused of having a role in a series of child murders inspired by his gruesome stories. The second play centres on the inspection of the Coveys’ farm by a ‘foxfinder’, a government official in charge of discovering foxes’ infestations. In this dystopian setting, the animals are deemed to be the causes of the economic, climatic and moral decline of a near-future England. Both plays’ discursive contexts are examples of institutional talk, as they constitute ‘unequal encounters’ between a powerful member of an institution and a subordinate interlocutor.²⁵ My analysis of the linguistic mechanics of these unequal encounters will reveal how the plays’ societies are constructed discursively as dystopian and how their institutions exercise their oppressive powers on citizens. Thus, this first half of the chapter will investigate the discursive production and retention of dystopian hegemony. In particular, I explore how coercion is the main vehicle for the establishment of dystopian hegemony in *The Pillowman*, and illustrate the

²³ Simpson and Mayr, p. 6.

²⁴ Cf. D. Mumby and R.P. Clair, ‘Organisational Discourse’, in *Discourse as Social Interaction, Vol.2: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*, ed. by T.A. Van Dijk (Newbury, CA: Sage, 1997), pp. 181–205.

²⁵ Jenny A. Thomas, ‘Discourse Control in Confrontational Interaction’, in *The Pragmatics of Style*, by Leo Hickey (London: Routledge, 2014), pp. 133–56 (p. 153).

workings of hegemony as the creation of consent by exploring the gradual naturalisation of ideological common sense in *Foxfinder*. Although this first chapter is mainly concerned with the textual mechanics of dystopian drama, its final section (focussing on the play *Edgar & Annabel*) will begin to show how other non-verbal languages of the stage can act against spoken discourse and function as embodied practices of resistance.

2.2.1 *The Pillowman*

Martin McDonagh's play premiered at the National Theatre (in what was the Cottesloe space) in 2003, and was directed by John Crowley.²⁶ According to Eamonn Jordan, it is the first play by McDonagh not to be 'trapped in some Irish dystopic sensibility', and I would argue, the only one which is to be considered fully dystopian in its themes and tone.²⁷ The play is set in an interrogation room where the writer Katurian is being questioned by two brutal police officers, Tupolski and Ariel, of a totalitarian state. Katurian is accused of being involved in a series of child murders which were staged as re-enactment of three of his short stories, all portraying violence against children. His mentally challenged brother, Michail, is also being held in the next room for interrogation. The play's dramatic present is interwoven with the re-telling of Katurian's stories about murdered or mutilated children: such stories are to be represented in performance.²⁸ Through the course of the interrogation, it becomes clear that

²⁶ The original production starred David Tennant (Katurian), Jim Broadbent (Tuploski), Nigel Lindsay (Ariel), Adam Godley (Michael).

²⁷ Eamonn Jordan, 'War on Narrative: The Pillowman', in *Theatre of Martin McDonagh: 'A World of Savage Stories'*, ed. by Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press Limited, 2006), pp. 174–97 (p. 174).

²⁸ Jordan reports that, in the first production, the interrogation scenario 'was governed by the conventions of naturalism, whereas the alternative spaces [of the murder stories] were guided by a very different stylistic approach' in an attempt to 'break the verisimilitude' of the tales' gruesome content. Jordan, p. 182.

Michail is the author of the murders, for which Katurian (who originally is not aware of his brother's culpability) takes responsibility in order to save his own art from destruction. In the end, Michail is killed by Katurian to save the former from torture and murder at the hand of the policemen, while Katurian is executed by the same agents of the totalitarian regime who eventually decide to salvage his stories.

Reviewers and critics variously describe the play's subject matter as 'the dangerous power of literature' or 'storytelling and the thrilling narrative potential of theatre itself'.²⁹ Despite the importance of the storytelling theme to the play's substance, I propose an alternative reading of the work as a dystopia, whose narrative mechanisms can be unearthed through an analysis of the characters' linguistic practices. The totalitarian setting of the play is explicitly mentioned in the interrogation, but its mixed referents point at a place of the imagination rather than an actual location.³⁰ This spatially and temporally distanced setting (there is no indication of time) detaches the play from realism and brings it into the domain of the speculative.³¹ From this estranged standpoint, the play investigates the effects of

²⁹ Michael Billington, 'The Pillowman, National Theatre, London', *Guardian*, 2003
<<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/nov/14/theatre>> [accessed 15 September 2020]; Ben Brantley, 'A Storytelling Instinct Revels in Horror's Fun', *The New York Times*, 11 April 2005, section Theater
<<https://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/11/theater/reviews/a-storytelling-instinct-revels-in-horrors-fun.html>> [accessed 15 September 2020].

³⁰ At page 18 of the script Tupolski refers to a 'totalitarian fucking dictatorship'. Martin McDonagh, *The Pillowman* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2003), p. 18. For a thorough examination of the play's spatial referents see Ondřej Pilný, 'Grotesque Entertainment: The Pillowman as Puppet Theatre', in *Theatre of Martin McDonagh: 'A World of Savage Stories'*, ed. by Lilian Chambers and Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press Limited, 2006), pp. 214–23 (p. 215).

³¹ Chapter Three of this thesis will develop a specialist vocabulary to discuss the spatial and temporal distancing of dystopian plays through various modes of 'estrangement'.

totalitarianism, whose concrete traits are reinvented and developed in a dystopian vein. Following Jordan, I suggest that ‘the socio/political realities of totalitarianism are not the substantial ingredients’ of the play, rather ‘the psychic territory of threat, mayhem, absence of cause and effect and due process, and the individual vulnerability of all concerned’ form the basis for its dramatic exploration.³² Crucially for my argument, I claim that these tonal elements of totalitarianism are articulated as dystopian through the linguistic exchanges among the characters. In the play, the hegemony of the dictatorial state is enforced and maintained through the characters’ conversation, thus the interactions between Katurian and the policemen during the central interrogation will be the focus of my analysis. In the following section then, I explore the linguistic dynamics of creation and retention of dystopian hegemony through the use of coercion during a police interrogation. I introduce Fairclough’s concepts of ‘discourse type’ (of police interrogation in this case) and ‘subject positions’ to illustrate how the dystopian common sense permeating the conversation influences its practices and outcomes. My analysis aims to highlight how the discursive production of dystopian hegemony is accomplished via coercive linguistic practices.

In his analysis of the play, Jordan maintains that *The Pillowman* dramatises ‘the regimes through which citizens are recruited, indoctrinated, and interpellated by systems and structures. It considers how institutions, totalitarian and democratic, through narratives socialize [and] discipline’.³³ What is described here is a systemic process of oppression, which in *The Pillowman* is translated in dystopian terms. I suggest that this process of subjugation is presented in the play via coercive discursive means, in particular through the use of an

³² Jordan, p. 195.

³³ Jordan, p. 176.

oppressive ‘discourse type’ and ‘subject positions’ based on dystopian common sense. Fairclough explains that any instance of language use in institutional setting implies a certain ‘discourse type’, meaning a set of conventions and practices associated with a category of discursive situation.³⁴ Discourse types involve a relatively fixed set of rules governing linguistic exchanges and non-linguistic factors, and interactions in institutional settings are in most cases organised ‘in terms of question-answer sequences, in which questioning is allocated to the professional (e.g. attorney, interviewer, teacher), and answering to the client (e.g. witness, interviewee, pupil)’.³⁵ Discourse types also involve standardised roles within their interactions, which Fairclough calls ‘subject positions’.³⁶ In his words, occupying a subject position is ‘a matter of doing (or not doing) certain things, in line with the discursual rights and obligations’ of a specific role.³⁷ Examples of a discourse type and relative subject positioning are a doctor-patient consultation, a job interview, or a police interrogation like that of *The Pillowman*.

According to Roger Shuy, interrogators ‘challenge, warn, accuse, deny and complain. [...] They demand and they dominate’.³⁸ The interrogation at the centre of *The Pillowman* is dystopian because it follows the conventions – and, in Gramscian terms, the common sense – of the society where it occurs, in which the censoring of speech and writing are common practices, the manipulation of the truth by those in power is unquestioned, and the use of

³⁴ Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 60-63.

³⁵ Paul Drew and Marja-Leena Sorjonen, ‘Dialogue in Institutional Interactions’, in *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*, by Teun A. van Dijk (London: SAGE Publications, 2011), 225, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/nottingham/detail.action?docID=689451>.

³⁶ Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 68-70.

³⁷ Fairclough, p. 68.

³⁸ Shuy, *The Language of Confession, Interrogation, and Deception*, p.13.

‘excessive force’ on ‘entirely innocent individual[s]’ is always justified.³⁹ In the play, the discourse type of police interrogation is used to show the linguistic power ascribed to the hegemonic figures of this dystopian world and the typical interactional dynamics between a producer of the dystopia and a powerless subject. As discussed above, a police interrogation is generally organised as a sequence of questions and answers controlled by the institutional figure. In linguistic terms, this means that the distribution of turns in a conversation (how often and how much a speaker talks) is guided by the most powerful participant.⁴⁰ In the following passage, early on in the play, detective Tupolski imposes his dominance over Katurian by claiming for himself the subject position of interrogator, with specific discursual rights:

- (1) **Tupolski** Except, the thing is, don’t interrupt me when I’m talking...
- (2) **Katurian** No, I’m sorry...
- (3) **Tupolski** If I ask you something outright, or if I go with my eyes, like, “Go ahead and say something”, like with my eyes, then you go ahead and say something, but if I’m in the middle of something...
- (4) **Katurian** I know, I’m sorry...
- (5) **Tupolski** And you’re fucking doing it again! Did I ask you something outright?! Did I go with my eyes like “Go ahead and say something”?!
- (6) **Katurian** No.
- (7) **Tupolski** No, I didn’t, didn’t I? (*Pause*) Did I? See, that was an outright question and I *did* go with my eyes like, “Go ahead and say something”.⁴¹

³⁹ McDonagh, pp. 7, 28–29, 53.

⁴⁰ Vimala Herman defines a turn in speech as ‘when someone speaks, he or she takes a *turn* in speech, and when speech alternates, turns alternate as well’ (19). In the conversational extracts throughout the chapter turns are numbered for reference whenever turn management is discussed. For a detailed analysis of turn management in drama see: Vimala Herman, ‘Turn Management in Drama’, in *Exploring the Language of Drama: From Text to Context*, ed. by Jonathan Culpeper, Mick Short, and Peter Verdonk (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 19–33.

⁴¹ McDonagh, pp. 13–14.

At turn 1, Tupolski must make explicit the rule that Katurian is not allowed to interrupt him, as his institutional status in the dystopian power structure grants him the position of the most powerful participant in the exchange. In fact, interruption is ‘one common device through which dominant speakers can dismiss or ignore contributions which they consider irrelevant’.⁴² Therefore, to reassert his power in the exchange, Tupolski needs to re-appropriate that role for himself, and he does so by interrupting Katurian at turns 3 and 5. In such utterances, he expresses the strongest kind of linguistic impoliteness, defined by Jonathan Culpeper as ‘bald on record impoliteness’, since he challenges the face (or the public self-image) of his conversation partner ‘in a direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way’.⁴³ Tupolski uses taboo words (‘you’re fucking doing it again!’) to mark his disrespect for Katurian, and there are indications that the actor playing Tupolski is also supposed to use an exasperated tone, as signalled by the non-standard punctuation ‘?!’. By adopting this linguistic behaviour Tupolski imposes himself as the dominant participant, to demonstrate that he as a ‘powerful, high-status speake[r] ha[s] little need to worry about the consequences of face-threats to [his] less powerful, lower-status interlocutors’.⁴⁴ Through such techniques Tupolski makes clear to Katurian the rules and roles of their interaction and establishes his dominant subject position in the context of the dystopian interrogation. In short, this early moment in the interaction between the institutional figure and the suspect clarifies – for Katurian’s and the audience’s

⁴² Simpson and Mayr, *Language and Power*, 12.

⁴³ Jonathan Culpeper, ‘Towards an Anatomy of Impoliteness’, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 25.3 (1996), 349–67 (p. 356).

⁴⁴ Susan Mandala, *Twentieth-Century Drama Dialogue as Ordinary Talk* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 106.

benefit – the typical dynamics of the discourse type of police interrogation in the play’s dystopian context, based on aggression and threat.

The climate of fear and aggression seen in the previous dialogue are crucial ingredients of the common sense of the totalitarian dystopian state in which the play is set. Thus, as the following passage shows, they do not end with the interrogation. Tupolski, as the interrogator in Shuy’s analysis, ‘make[s] ample use of [his] power’ as the representative of the dystopian institution, even when outside of his role of interrogator. This is because, both within and outside the institutional setting, Tupolski’s behaviour is guided by the ideological common sense of the regime based on dystopian principles, which allow for police brutality and physical and psychological torture.⁴⁵ In the extract below, Tupolski has momentarily paused the interrogation to ask Katurian’s opinion on one of the stories he has written. When Katurian naively advises that the ending of Tupolski’s story could have been clearer, Tupolski returns to coercive tactics to reaffirm his dominance:

- (1) **Tupolski** [...] And could I make it more clear that I’m gonna get really angry in a minute and set fire to all of your stories regardless of what promises we’ve made? (*Tupolski picks up the stories and some matches*) Could I make that more clear?
- (2) **Katurian** Please, Tupolski. Your story was really good. ...
- (3) **Tupolski** My story was better than all of your stories.
- (4) **Katurian** Your story was better than all of my stories.
- (5) **Tupolski** And it was clear that the old man wanted to save the deaf little boy.
- (6) **Katurian** It was completely clear.
- (7) **Tupolski** (*Pause*) You only don’t like it because the little deaf boy didn’t *die* at the fucking end!

⁴⁵ See McDonagh, pp. 18–19, 28.

- (8) **Katurian** I *do* like it, Tupolski. And this isn't anything to do with anything. About burning my stories or anything. I really liked your story. I'd've been proud to have written it. I would.⁴⁶

At turn 1, Tupolski makes clear that, contrarily to what he has stated before, there will be consequences to the negative evaluation of his writing. He threatens to burn all of Katurian's stories, accompanying the words with an extra-linguistic action described in the stage direction as '*Tupolski picks up the stories and some matches*'. In performance, such gesture would reinforce the intimidatory power of his words, making tangible – for both Katurian and the audience – the possibility of retaliation. Continuing its verbal intimidation, at turns 3, 5, and 7, the policeman articulates the answer he expected to obtain from Katurian through the use of the device of 'formulation', which according to J.C. Heritage's definition is the practice of 'summarising, glossing or developing the gist' of a speaker's previous statement.⁴⁷ The result is that Tupolski manages to manipulate the following utterances of his interlocutor. In fact, feeling obliged to give in to Tupolski's demands, Katurian repeats Tupolski's words, with only minimal syntactical variations at turns 4, 6, and 8. Such allo-repetition (i.e. repetition of others' words) by Katurian has the function of showing his 'interpersonal involvement' and agreement with Tupolski, in an attempt to repair the damage to the (precarious) discoursal balance of the interaction.⁴⁸ It is important to signal here that, despite the discoursal assent expressed by the scripted text, at the level of performance the actor playing Katurian might choose to let his

⁴⁶ McDonagh, pp. 61–62.

⁴⁷ J.C. Heritage, as cited in Simpson and Mayr, *Language and Power*, 14.

⁴⁸ On the varieties of 'repetition' see Chapter 3 of Deborah Tannen, *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*, Studies in Interactional Sociolinguistics, 26, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: University Press, 2007), pp. 48–101, (see 63–64 for 'allo-repetition').

body ‘speak’ a different outcome. As Ubersfeld notices, the specificity of theatre allows ‘to play various networks [of signs] off against each other and thereby cause the same text-score to produce interplays of meanings with different resolutions’.⁴⁹ In this case, by communicating through theatre’s other signifying channels – such as movement, gestures, facial expressions, and the pace, volume and tone of utterances – a performer could make their Katurian convey bitter dissent even while using submissive language. The section on ‘The language of Resistance’ later in this chapter will offer more detailed examples of the intersections of theatre’s signifying systems, particularly in relation to the practices of resistance which are ‘embedded’.

Jordan explains that in *‘The Pillowman* neither policeman acknowledges the dysfunctionality of his own interrogative routines’, also clarifying that ‘both cower behind the protection offered to them by narratives of justification and by the state’.⁵⁰ This is made explicit – linguistically – in several exchanges, in which the policemen emphasise that their power over Katurian is due to their institutional role in the dystopian regime. At some point, Tupolski explicitly announces: ‘Katurian. I am a high-ranking police officer in a totalitarian fucking dictatorship. What are you doing taking my word about anything?’.⁵¹ Despite these declarations, and the aggressive behaviour of the policeman from the beginning (‘You’ve had a fucking blindfold on. Do you think we do this to our good fucking friends?’), Katurian still finds it difficult to reconcile his idea of interrogation with the conduct of his captors.⁵² In

⁴⁹ Ubersfeld, p. 16.

⁵⁰ Jordan, p. 185.

⁵¹ McDonagh, *The Pillowman*, 18.

⁵² McDonagh, p. 6.

Gramscian terms, this means that the characters' common sense relative to the kind of interaction that should happen between a police officer and an interviewee essentially diverges. In the following extract, Katurian laments a lack of trust in Tupolski. His common sense tells him that as a citizen being interrogated by an institutional figure (the officer) he can expect to be treated with respect and that the promises made to him will be kept. He makes the same assumption in relation to Ariel, the other police officer who throughout the play threatens Katurian with physical violence:

- (1) **Katurian** I don't want to bypass anything. I just want you to keep your word. To go ahead and kill me, and to go ahead and keep my stories safe.
- (2) **Ariel** Well, you can certainly half-trust us.⁵³

In these instances, the policemen are open about their common sense, how they see the rules of the interaction and their grip on power in the situation: as high-ranking officers 'in a totalitarian fucking dictatorship' they can do whatever they like with him. The fact that the officers explicitly state that their powers are a result of a dystopian totalitarian system informs us – the audience – that the hegemony in the play is exerted mainly through coercion, as they do not seek interpersonal legitimation (that is, consent) to act as they do: their behaviour is legitimated by the dystopian institution of which they are a part, whose power is unquestioned. As the policemen's key statements above suggest, the play is transparent with the audience about the dystopian ideology permeating its institutional structures, yet what drives the play's

⁵³ McDonagh, 52.

double narrative forward is precisely Katurian's difficulty to grasp the dystopian dynamics of power at work in his world.

Using Fairclough's notions of discourse type and subject position to study the interactional dynamics of the police interrogation in *The Pillowman*, I have shown how the hegemonic coercive measures of the dystopian system of the play are expressed in drama through language. Because, as Anne Ubersfeld argues, 'theatrical discourse is by nature an enquiry into the status of speech: who is speaking to whom, and under what conditions one can speak', a linguistic approach to characters' dramatic dialogue can reveal the power dynamics informing the relations among characters.⁵⁴ In effect, this means making explicit how, in *The Pillowman*, the narrative of the dystopian order is produced and sustained through language. It is through such an analysis that the play can be read as a dystopia exploring the effects of totalitarianism on institutions and interpersonal relations. If in *The Pillowman* the hegemonic rule of the dystopian regime is expressed mainly through institutional coercion, this is certainly not the only way to impose a hegemonic supremacy in a dystopian context. In fact, according to Gramsci, explicit coercive practices are only used in 'moments of crisis of command and direction when spontaneous consent has failed'.⁵⁵ Rather, the way to achieve an effective and long-lasting hegemony is the production and diffusion of consent through the organs of the civil society.⁵⁶ In the next section of this chapter, I explore how this is accomplished in

⁵⁴ Ubersfeld, p. 168.

⁵⁵ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, p.12.

⁵⁶ Cf. Hagai Katz, 'Civil Society Theory: Gramsci', in *International Encyclopedia of Civil Society*, ed. by Helmut K. Anheier and Stefan Toepler (Springer Science & Business Media, 2009), pp. 408–12.

Foxfinder by analysing the linguistic process of the naturalisation (and diffusion) of ideological common sense.

2.2.2 *Foxfinder*

Baccolini and Moylan suggest that, in dystopian narratives, ‘discursive power, exercised in the reproduction of meaning and the interpellation of subjects, is a complementary and necessary force’ to the material dimension of hegemonic rule.⁵⁷ Such reproduction of meaning happens through what Gramsci calls the institutions of civil society such as religious, professional, educational and cultural bodies.⁵⁸ Brighenti – drawing from Gramsci – explains that ‘before they become operative’, that is, accepted as common sense, ‘critical ideas must make their way into people’s everyday existence’.⁵⁹ In *Foxfinder*, we witness the naturalisation of dystopian common sense promoted by a representative of a dystopian cultural institution. In Fairclough’s linguistic approach, the naturalisation of a discourse follows this pattern:

if a discourse type so dominates an institution that the dominated types are more or less entirely suppressed or contained, then it will cease to be arbitrary (in the sense of being one among several possible ways of “seeing” things) and will come to be seen as natural.⁶⁰

What Fairclough calls naturalisation is, in Gramscian terms, the (linguistic) organisation of common sense. The set of ideas and beliefs of a population are in constant flux, ‘disjointed and episodic’ as Gramsci puts it.⁶¹ If one *forma mentis* or one way of speaking comes to prevail

⁵⁷ Baccolini and Moylan, ‘Dystopia and Histories’, p. 5.

⁵⁸ These social places are also where the challenges to the current order can be advanced, as I shall discuss in the next section on ‘The language of Resistance’.

⁵⁹ Brighenti, ‘Antonio Gramsci’s Theory of the Civil Society’, p. 485.

⁶⁰ Fairclough, *Language and Power*, p.113.

⁶¹ Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, p. 324.

over others so much as to eradicate them, then it becomes the natural way of thinking, it becomes common sense. However, it is important to remember Fairclough's warning that 'what comes to be common sense is [...] in large measure determined by who exercises power and domination in a society or a social institution'.⁶² In *Foxfinder*, a dystopian structure of power controls the institutions of the civil society and determines its common sense.

The focus of *Foxfinder* is the production, naturalisation and diffusion of dystopian common sense. In King's 2011 play, we learn that government propaganda claims that foxes are to blame for the changing weather and the steady weakening of the country's economy, as well as for the moral decline of mankind. To maintain its hegemony, the government not only counts on material oppression and show of force (farmers can lose their farms if they do not meet the government's quotas for food production) but it also needs to disseminate its set of ideas and ensure that they are internalised by the population. To do so, they create specific figures, the foxfinders, who are trained in government ideology and whose official job is to 'discover' fox infestations around the country. The play follows a young foxfinder, William Bloor, sent to inspect the farm of Samuel and Judith Covey as their productivity is in decline. In the time he is there, William goes from being a fervent devotee and promulgator of the government's dystopian ideology, to questioning his own set of beliefs: 'I've never actually seen a fox. Do you think that's... strange?'.⁶³ Samuel's thought process takes the opposite direction: at the beginning he condemns William's indoctrination, but by the end of the play he firmly believes in the lies of the dystopian regime ('Foxes are sly', he replies to William's

⁶² Fairclough, *Language and Power*, p. 113.

⁶³ Dawn King, *Foxfinder* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2011), p. 64.

doubtful question).⁶⁴ As a dystopia, the play dramatizes the dangers of the manipulation of the truth by those in power in times of crisis and illustrates the effects of widespread indoctrination. Through the metaphor of the foxes as culprits for all that is wrong in society, King invites her audience to recognise equivalent mechanisms of scapegoating (towards immigrants and other marginalised groups) that are in place in contemporary Britain. Framing these points in my critical terms, I argue that the drama explores how ideology is generated, reproduced and diffused as common sense to sustain the hegemony of a dystopian elite.

Lacking a detailed account of the mechanisms of dystopian oppression in the society depicted in the play, language provides a vital means to grasp the narrative and counter-narrative of this dystopian drama. My linguistic analysis will draw attention to the ways in which the discourse of the dystopian government – and its ideology – is produced and reproduced through the institutions of the civil society and its functionaries. First, drawing from Asif Agha, I explain how the creation of a specialist register generates asymmetrical relationships of power between the institutional figures of the foxfinders and dystopian subjects. Second, going back to Fairclough, I suggest that the systematisation of such a register within the structures of a book strongly contributes to the endurance of a dystopian-oriented common sense. Third, I demonstrate that, as institutional figures using the dystopian register, the foxfinders contribute to the spreading and naturalisation of dystopian ideological common sense. Overall, my analysis aims to explain how the hegemony of the dystopian structure of the play is produced and maintained through the manufacture of consent – specifically through linguistic means.

⁶⁴ King, p. 64.

Similarly to *The Pillowman*, *Foxfinder* presents discursive asymmetries of power between its institutional characters and the dystopian subjects. In the previous play, the discourse type of interrogation and its relative subject positions were used to impose power differentials; in *Foxfinder* this is achieved by the creation and diffusion of a specialist register through the institutions of the civil society. A register, in Asif Agha's words, is 'a linguistic *repertoire* that is associated, culture-internally, with particular social practices and with persons who engage in such practices'.⁶⁵ The creation and use of a register involves 'a social domain' of people that are 'acquainted with the model of speech at issue'.⁶⁶ Powerful institutional bodies such as medicine, the law, and science all have their own registers which are created and diffused through the civil society. In fact, as Joseph Buttigieg suggests, 'civil society is the arena wherein the ruling class extends and reinforces its powers by non-violent means'.⁶⁷ In the play, the educational organisation called 'The Institute' is where the foxfinders are trained in fox discourse from a very young age. The Institute uses its own register to set its own functionaries apart from the rest of the population and indicate their expertise in fox discourse. By using the register of the Institute, foxfinders can create asymmetries of power between them and the rest of the population and claim undisputable knowledge over fox matters. A good example of this can be found in the short exchange below:

- (1) **William** [...] the beast was... attempting to influence me.
- (2) **Judith** What do you mean?

⁶⁵ Asif Agha, 'Registers of Language', in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. by Alessandro Duranti, 1st edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p. 24.

⁶⁶ Agha, 25.

⁶⁷ Buttigieg, p. 26.

- (3) **William** It is impossible to explain to the untrained. Rest assured, I resisted him, easily. This... incident, the signs I have mentioned and your answers to my questions have led me to conclude that this farm is indeed suffering from contamination.⁶⁸

In the above passage, William expresses his verdict on the infestation of Judith and Samuel's farm by resorting to register-specific terminology. In turn 1, he vaguely claims an attempted 'influence' of the fox. Evidently, in the Institute's register, 'influence' does not have the generic meaning of standard English, since when asked to explain his statement, William reports the impossibility to explain to those who have not received his institutional training. This opacity of register has the effect of the 'creation and maintenance of asymmetries of power' to use Agha's terms, since excluding 'the untrained' from the discussion means avoiding any challenge to the hegemonic version of the truth.⁶⁹ The creation of an institutional-specific register then has three implications: the distinction of foxfinders as elect figures possessing specialist knowledge; the near-impossibility of challenging the discourse of foxes; and the ideological orientation of the language used to perpetuate the idea of foxes as evil-makers in this dystopian world.

Fairclough argues that the standardisation of a language at the expense of other variations plays an important role in the establishment of a class' domination over another.⁷⁰ The central linguistic process through which a variation becomes the standard is 'codification', which aims at attaining 'minimal variation in form through setting down the prescribed

⁶⁸ King, pp. 42–43.

⁶⁹ Agha, p. 29.

⁷⁰ Fairclough, *Language and Power*, p. 85.

language code in written form’.⁷¹ In *Foxfinder*, in order to ensure that the common sense-idea of the dystopian dominant class (the foxes as the source of all evil) becomes the norm, the dystopian register must be codified in written form. The codification of the Institute’s register as a manual for foxfinders ensures that only a certain predetermined language can be used to talk about foxes, thus disseminating the Institute’s official set of beliefs, and maintaining the current asymmetry of power intact. The audience gets a glimpse of such register in Scene 9, when William reads aloud a passage from the book that he always brings with him. An extract from the book is reported below:

The red fox, *Vulpes Vulpes*, is as the name suggests, most usually reddish brown, but its colour ranges to silver and black. [...] The eyes of the beast are a dull yellow-gold with dark, vertically oriented pupils like those of a cat [...]. Many incidences have been recorded of a mother leaving her baby unguarded outside for only a few seconds, returning to find it gone, taken and devoured. The beast’s bloodlust far outstrips its appetite [...] A perfectly evolved killing machine, the beast’s teeth can grow up to ten centimetres in length, and its claws can disembowel a man. Sly in nature, the beast is active mainly at dusk and during the night, when it can go about its deadly work unseen. The beast [...] is riddled with parasites and dangerous diseases to which it is immune but which it revels in spreading about the countryside.⁷²

Simpson and Mayr explain that ‘a text’s linguistic structure functions, as discourse, to privilege certain ideological positions while downplaying others – such that the linguistic choices encoded in this or that text can be shown to correlate with the ideological orientation of the text’.⁷³ In the case of the Institute’s manual above, the text uses various linguistic devices to present a seemingly scientific writing style, which would mask its ideological register as unbiased description rather than prejudiced evaluation. From a grammatical point of view, the

⁷¹ Fairclough, *Language and Power*, p. 85.

⁷² King, pp. 38–39.

⁷³ Simpson and Mayr, p. 5.

passage begins with several ‘relational clauses’ such as ‘The red fox ... *is* ... reddish brown’, ‘It *has* slender paws’, ‘The eyes ... *are* a dull yellow-gold’, whose structure can be said to replicate technical and scientific written registers of English.⁷⁴ Many of the sentences are also cast in the passive voice (as in ‘Many incidences have been recorded’) which is the norm in technical registers in order to ‘render the text anonymous’.⁷⁵ From a lexical point of view, after the first use of the neutral term ‘fox’ accompanied by its scientific name ‘*Vulpes Vulpes*’, the animal and its habits are described in distinctly biased terms: from the third sentence, the fox becomes a ‘beast’, and a ‘killing machine’; its natural instincts are described as ‘bloodlust’ and ‘deadly work’. Finally, the text also relies on stereotypes to facilitate acceptance and legitimisation of the views it presents. Though referring to a very different context, Paul Chilton suggests that a method through which governments try to legitimise their policies is by creating a linguistic ‘compatibility between policies and relatively stable stereotypes [that are] already present in traditional popular culture’.⁷⁶ When saying that foxes are ‘sly in nature’, the book is drawing from popular common sense to corroborate its claims about the overall stance on foxes in their dystopian context. Simpson and Mayr argue that ‘[r]egisters of language are not of themselves insidious, sinister or malevolent; but in the hands of powerful interested parties the linguistic patterns encoded in a text encourage us to see the world in particular ways’.⁷⁷ This is the case with the official register of the Institute, which is clearly ideologically oriented to

⁷⁴ Cf. Arlene Harvey, ‘Relational Clauses in English Technical Discourse: Patterns of Verb Choice’, *Pragmatics*, 11.4 (2001), p. 379–400.

⁷⁵ Simpson and Mayr, p. 60.

⁷⁶ Paul A. Chilton, ed., *Language and the Nuclear Arms Debate*, Open Linguistics Series (London: Frances Pinter, 1985), p. xvii.

⁷⁷ Simpson and Mayr, *Language and Power*, p. 60.

blame foxes for all of England's ills. The book is the principal means through which the fox register and discourse is instilled in the foxfinders, yet they, in turn, are the vehicle for the spreading of the dystopian common sense to the general population.

Hagai Katz, drawing from Gramsci, argues that to be effective hegemony must 'saturat[e] the society to such an extent that it [i.e., its common sense] corresponds to the reality of social experience'.⁷⁸ In this way, Katz continues, 'people contribute to the continued dominance of the ruling class, by accepting the dominant culture's values and assumptions as their own: repression is replaced by inculcation'.⁷⁹ In Fairclough's terms, inculcation is 'the mechanism of power-holders who wish to preserve their power' aimed at '*naturalis[ing]* partial and interested practices'.⁸⁰ In other words, inculcation is a strategy to promote naturalisation of ideological common sense. In the play, the inculcation is enacted by William, the institutional figure, as he introduces the fox register to the farm, thus naturalising the associated common sense for the other characters, Samuel and Judith. To explain how William functions as an actor in the naturalisation of dystopian common sense, I focus on the effects of the naturalisation of the register by comparing two dialogic exchanges between William and Samuel at the beginning and at the end of the play. There are several examples throughout the play of the same mechanism, but this is where it is most evident.⁸¹ The extract on the left is taken from Scene 5, during the first inspection of the two of the farm's surroundings; the one on the right is taken from Scene 17, in the same circumstances, after a week of William's stay

⁷⁸ Katz, 'Civil Society Theory: Gramsci', p. 409.

⁷⁹ Katz, 'Civil Society Theory: Gramsci', p. 409.

⁸⁰ Fairclough, p. 99.

⁸¹ See, for instance pp. 56, 66, 72 in King.

on the farm. Corresponding expressions are highlighted in the same colour to visually emphasise the gradual naturalisation of the dystopian common sense.

Scene 5

- (1) **William** I found... (*he reaches into his bag and pulls out a small animal skull.*)
...this. It was lying in the next field, with its empty eye sockets pointing directly at those trees. Directly. As if it were staring. **Do you see?**
- (2) **Samuel** It's a rabbit skull.
- (3) **William** **It's a message.**
- (4) **Samuel** **(Samuel is totally nonplussed)** What [...]
- (5) **William** I think the rabbits on your farm could be **trying to warn us.**
- (6) **Samuel** You're saying this rabbit... it decided to lie down and die, pointing at that tree, because it knew that you'd come along and find it?
- (7) **William** **Nature is full of symbols,** Samuel. You just have to

Scene 17

- (1) **Samuel** Those white things, like flags. [...] That's sheep's wool. Caught on the wire. [...] **Look.** There's **a pattern.**
- (2) **William** Is there?
- (3) **Samuel** Dot, dot, dot. Dash, dash, dash. Dot, dot, dot. That's Morse code. S – O – S. **It's a sign. A warning.**
- (4) **William** (*William peers at the fence*) No, Samuel. **That's just... wool.** [...]
- (5) **Samuel** I'm telling you. That right there, **that's a sign.** [...] Follow that fence, you get to the woods. The sheep are telling us, that's where they are. And

know how to interpret
them.⁸²

that's where we'll go,
tonight.⁸³

In the two extracts, opposite characters make use of the same register of the dystopian Institute when looking for fox infestation. In scene 5 William, following his institutional common sense, is convinced that the rabbit skull they find on the ground is a 'message' (3) sent by the rabbits that are 'trying to warn' them (5) by indicating the hiding place of the infesting fox. Samuel at that point is clearly sceptical, as his turn 6 and the stage directions at turn 4 suggest ('*Samuel is totally nonplussed*'). His common sense tells him to distrust the words of the foxfinder, whom he still considers just an indoctrinated bureaucrat. However, in Scene 17, we see that the situation has reversed after a week of Samuel being exposed to this discourse. In fact, Samuel now uses lexical and grammatical repetition of William's previous utterances, a sign that he has internalised his discourse and register. In Scene 17 (at turn 7), it is Samuel that draws attention to an alleged warning ('Look. There's a pattern'). Here, William is the doubtful one (turn 4), as the growing feelings he develops for Judith and the conversations with Sarah (a neighbour of the couple, part of the resistance) have shaken his beliefs. Yet, his incredulity does not discourage Samuel who responds with conviction 'I'm telling you. That right there, that's a sign', echoing William's decisiveness in the previous exchange. This reversal of roles signals the final stage of the process of the naturalisation of ideological

⁸² King, pp. 24–25.

⁸³ King, p. 65.

common sense, while also highlighting its fragility: as Samuel absorbs it, William moves beyond its grasp.

Reminding us of the intrinsic theatricality of the scripted text, Ubersfeld argues that ‘physical, gestural activity’ can develop ‘in parallel or indeed even opposite direction to that which might arise from the imaginary of a text’.⁸⁴ In the 2018 revival of the play at the Ambassadors Theatre directed by Rachel O’Riordan, for instance, the reversal of roles that I recognised as evident in linguistic terms was not clearly signalled in performance, at least not in the way I expected.⁸⁵ When William (Iwan Rheon in this production) first arrives onstage, his demeanour is very rigid and serious, so much that, as he begins to speak, the audience laughs at the resolution with which he commands his absurd dystopian beliefs. In contrast, the character of Samuel is portrayed by Paul Nicholls as an ironic and down-to-earth farmer, not easily swayed by life’s adversities or strange inculcated ideas. Having read the playtext beforehand, I had expected to see the naturalisation of the dystopian ideological common sense rendered in performance as a clear reversal of roles: I was imagining that the two actors would mirror the attitudes and mannerisms of each other to signal their changed perspectives. However, my own expectations as a spectator were subverted, as I found Samuel’s discursive commitment to the fox-blaming narrative paired with Paul Nicholls’ performance of psychological instability rather than resolute calm: the reviews of the production praised Nicholls’ portrayal of a deep ‘state of delusion’.⁸⁶ Despite what I think was a missed

⁸⁴ Ubersfeld, p. 112.

⁸⁵ My reflections are based on a performance of the play I saw on 8 September 2018. It was a preview.

⁸⁶ Georgina Varley, ‘Review - Foxfinder Starring Iwan Rheon at the Ambassadors Theatre’, *London Theatre Guide*, 20180917 <<https://www.londontheatre.co.uk/reviews/review-foxfinder-starring-iwan-rheon-at-the-ambassadors-theatre>> [accessed 11 March 2020].

opportunity for a pragmatic parallelism, by accompanying the farmer's adoption of dystopian common sense with a performance highlighting a glaring loss of judgment, the production encouraged its audience to see the play's dystopian common sense as a dangerous tool able to overpower even the most grounded among us. On the other hand, William's abandonment of his faith in the dystopian ideology remains underdeveloped both in the script and in performance, raising questions about the efficacy of the process of inculcation that the play explores.⁸⁷ William's change of heart, although not fully articulated, signals that inculcation of dystopian ideology can be reversed, providing a dim glimmer of hope to an otherwise pessimistic conclusion.

Despite his final loss of belief, throughout the play William acted as a vehicle for the propagation of dystopian common sense. As such, he achieved his objective: to plant in others the seeds of dystopian thought. In Gramscian terms, this can be read as the successful production of 'a functionary' at the service of its own hegemonic context.⁸⁸ Brighenti helps clarify such terminology:

this does not mean that every individual [in hegemony] is a public administration employee, rather that, by operating spontaneously, by developing her or his own individual initiative, she or he also is developing a productivity which ultimately identifies with the productivity of the State.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Reviewing the 2018 production, Sally Hales also laments the poor characterisation of this crucial plot twist. She writes: 'the youthful vulnerability which proves his [William's] undoing doesn't feel well explored, and the falling away of his rose-tinted spectacles of indoctrination feels too sudden as a result' Sally Hales, 'Review: Foxfinder at Ambassadors Theatre', *Exeunt Magazine* <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-foxfinder-ambassadors-theatre/>> [accessed 11 March 2020].

⁸⁸ Cf. Gramsci, p. 12.

⁸⁹ Brighenti, 'Antonio Gramsci's Theory of the Civil Society', p. 487.

The productivity that Brighenti mentions is not only economical in nature but, crucially, cultural. Creating functionaries of the state means to insinuate the dystopian ideology in the population, so that they will spontaneously reproduce a dystopian common sense and not question the grounds upon which the system lies. At the end of this process, a dystopian hegemony can be established that relies not on coercive forces, but on naturalised consent. In this regard, the very ending of the play is telling. Samuel, now blinded by the dominant ideology of the foxes, finds in the dystopian common sense a reason for all that has gone wrong in his farm. In parallel, William grows wary of the legitimacy of his beliefs ('It's all lies, isn't it?' ... 'My mission, my life.') and is left to confront Samuel's absurd claims.⁹⁰ Although the reasons for William's change of attitude are not fully investigated, making the efficacy of the regime's system questionable, his process of inculcation has worked so well with the farmer that his own loss of faith in the dystopian discourse does not discourage Samuel's conviction. Rather, William's newfound hostility toward the discourse of foxes is seen by Samuel as proof that he is complicit in the infestation. In a quick succession of events, he kills William whom he now believes to be a fox in disguise. In the last scene, he and Judith are waiting for new foxfinders, ready to tell them their truth: William was 'A fox in the shape of a boy' and they only did their duty by shooting him.⁹¹ The play ends with this exchange:

Judith What if they don't believe us?

Samuel Course they will. It's the truth, isn't it?⁹²

⁹⁰ King, pp. 74, 75.

⁹¹ King, p. 79.

⁹² King, p. 79.

This closing line shows that the naturalisation of dystopian common sense is complete. Not only have the characters accepted the ideological basis of the fox discourse, but they have also internalised it as their own, so much that it has become their new truth.

In his *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias*, Sisk proposes that ‘language does not oppress or resist by itself but it must be knowingly manipulated to achieve the desired ends. Dystopia’s emphasis on conscious use forces us to confront language as a tool’.⁹³ To appreciate how the mechanisms of manipulation and oppression work in dystopian plays I have carried out a linguistic analysis of the interactions among the characters of my dystopias. My analysis has shown the specific ways in which language is used as a tool in the struggle for hegemony in dystopian plays. I have discovered that in both *The Pillowman* and *Foxfinder* dystopian control is not only achieved by the use of discursive coercive practices, but it also relies on the generation of consent. While *The Pillowman* presents an institutional setting which favours linguistic techniques of coercion (through the use of discourse type and subject positions), *Foxfinder* shows how ideological common sense can be naturalised (via the creation of a register) without resorting to overt force.

Although both are focused on dystopian strategies of oppression, the plays analysed here are not meant to inspire resignation. As Sisk suggests:

by centring attention on language, dystopian fiction refuses to permit the easy escape of simply dismissing repressive measures as “abuse of the language”. [...] Instead, dystopia demands that we look beyond even the most egregious statements and confront their speakers and, beyond, them, the beliefs being espoused.⁹⁴

⁹³ Sisk, p. 179.

⁹⁴ Sisk, p. 179.

In examining closely the discourse of the plays of this section, I have engaged with the ideologies at the heart of the dystopias of *The Pillowman* and *Foxfinder*. While the former play wants us to reflect on the power of language and its connection to one's freedom, the latter uses the foxes as a metaphor for the blame placed on demonised groups of society. When *The Pillowman* was first staged in 2003, the echoes of the Iraq war were strong, but the threat of an anti-democratic rule close to home was not seen as a possibility.⁹⁵ At the time of writing this thesis, twenty years into the twenty-first century, a wave of populist movements with strong anti-democratic currents is sweeping Europe, making a scenario like that of *The Pillowman*'s interrogation not as far-fetched as it was almost twenty years ago when the play was first staged. Similarly, when *Foxfinder* premiered in 2011 on the Finborough stage it was heralded by critic Michael Billington as a parable 'on the danger of fundamentalist certainties'.⁹⁶ Reviewers at the time could not anticipate that that the play's central symbol, the foxes, would assume a very specific meaning in light of the climate of blame of migrants and refugees in (and beyond) contemporary Britain, especially in light of Brexit. Both plays were focused on strategies to produce and maintain a dystopian hegemony through the structures of civil society. In fact, Katz summarises, 'civil society is the arena where the prevailing hegemony in the modern state is constantly being enforced, but also the only arena where it can be truly contested'.⁹⁷ In Gramsci's thoughts, civil society is also 'the locus of impending change. It is the creative space where subaltern groups can coalesce and engage in a counter-hegemonic

⁹⁵ Cf. Jordan, p. 175.

⁹⁶ Michael Billington, 'Foxfinder – Review', *Guardian*, 5 December 2011, section Stage
<<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/dec/05/foxfinder-review>> [accessed 12 September 2019].

⁹⁷ Katz, 'Civil Society Theory: Gramsci', p. 410.

effort to alter society’.⁹⁸ It is these resistant practices and their linguistic manifestations that are the focus of the next section: ‘The language of resistance’.

2.3 The Language of Resistance

Steve Jones reminds us that, hegemony, in the Gramscian sense of the term, is ‘an ongoing form of negotiation’ rather than a static condition.⁹⁹ Since, as Mark C.J. Stoddart puts it, ‘hegemonic power is always contested, always historically contingent and always unfinished’, the struggle between hegemony and counter-hegemony creates a constant state of tension.¹⁰⁰ The genre of dystopia exploits such tension, as the prospect of a counter-hegemonic effort is the basis of any dystopian narrative. Whilst *The Pillowman* and *Foxfinder* both focussed on the building and maintenance of dystopian hegemony, the plays considered in this section concern the linguistic production of a counter-hegemony. I agree with Baccolini that the double narrative of oppression and resistance is a central structural feature to the dystopian genre, not only in literature, but I suggest also in drama.¹⁰¹ In both literary and dramatic dystopias, the counter-hegemonic efforts to undermine a dystopian system tend not to be frontal attacks on the power structures of the political society (the State and its legislative and repressive apparatuses), but small-scale tactics to dismantle the basis upon which the system lies. In Gramscian terms, we could say that rebelling subjects of dystopian systems do not attempt a

⁹⁸ Katz, 410.

⁹⁹ Steven Jones, *Antonio Gramsci*, 1 edn (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 55.

¹⁰⁰ Mark C. J. Stoddart, ‘Ideology, Hegemony, Discourse: A Critical Review of Theories of Knowledge and Power’, *Social Thought & Research*, 28 (2007), 191–225 (p. 202).

¹⁰¹ Raffaella Baccolini, ‘Gender and Genre in the Feminist Critical Dystopias of Katharine Burdekin, Margaret Atwood, and Octavia Butler’, in *Future Females, the next Generation: New Voices and Velocities in Feminist Science Fiction Criticism*, ed. Marleen S. Barr (Lanham, Md, Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 13–34; Baccolini and Moylan, ‘Dystopia and Histories’.

frontal ‘war of manoeuvre’, rather they tend to engage in an indirect ‘war of position’ the aim of which is to prepare the ideological and material foundations for action, on the grounds that ‘setting the agenda is half the battle’, to use Peter Ives’ words.¹⁰² The war of position, with all its intrinsic frustrations and contradictions, is an indispensable step in the resistance to the dystopian order, and it is what is portrayed in both of the plays I analyse below, *Lemons*, *Lemons, Lemons, Lemons, Lemons* and *Edgar & Annabel*.

To explain how the linguistic processes at the centre of both *Lemons* and *Edgar & Annabel* can be read as tactics in the war of position against dystopian hegemony, I employ the Gramscian metaphors of spontaneous and normative grammars. Ives argues that in Gramsci ‘the structures of language, especially different types of grammar, are metaphors for hegemony’.¹⁰³ He explains that while spontaneous grammar ‘means the patterns we follow while speaking that are unconscious and *seem* natural’ (what linguists now call ‘descriptive grammar’), normative grammar is a prescriptive kind of grammar, ‘meaning the conscious rules that we follow in order to speak correctly’.¹⁰⁴ To appreciate the complexity of Gramsci’s ideas in this case it is worth citing him at length:

Besides the “immanent [spontaneous] grammar” in every language, there is also in reality (i.e. even if not written) a “normative” grammar (or more than one). This is made up of the reciprocal monitoring, reciprocal teaching, reciprocal “censorship” expressed in such questions as “What did you mean to say?”, “What do you mean?”, “Make yourself clearer”, etc., and in mimicry and teasing. This whole complex of actions and

¹⁰² Peter Ives, *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), p. 107.

¹⁰³ Ives, p. 85.

¹⁰⁴ Ives, pp. 90–92.

reactions come together to create a grammatical conformism, to establish “norms” or judgements of correctness and incorrectness.¹⁰⁵

Through the analysis that follows, I argue that the plays of this section *Lemons* and *Edgar & Annabel* can be said to dramatise spontaneous forms of grammar, which are used to achieve small-scale interpersonal goals. Crucially, the characters of both plays enact personal forms of resistance, which are not always explicit, but are often hidden within the oppressive structures of power: this is what I call embedded resistant practices, which become embodied when performed through a non-linguistic signifying channel. In particular, in *Lemons* the characters communicate via a self-imposed normative grammar that allows them to subvert the restrictions imposed by the rising regime. In this context, I argue that Steiner’s two protagonists create a normative ‘antilanguage’ (which is in linguist Michael Halliday’s words ‘language generated by some kind of anti-society’) as an alternative to the dominant standard.¹⁰⁶ This anti-language (and the embedded practices within it) allows them to communicate as the control from the hegemonic powers tightens around them. In the final section, I will demonstrate that the linguistic techniques deployed by Holcroft’s characters in *Edgar & Annabel* seek to imitate the normative grammar of the dystopian system to further the resistance movement within the world of the play. The characters in *Edgar & Annabel* use what I characterise here as ‘reverse discourse’ – first described by Michel Foucault in his *History of Sexuality* – as a resistant practice.¹⁰⁷ Their reverse discourse ‘draws on the very vocabulary or categories of dominant discourses in order to make a case for oppressed groups’.¹⁰⁸ In my

¹⁰⁵ Gramsci as quoted in Ives, 93.

¹⁰⁶ M. A. K. Halliday, ‘Anti-Languages’, *American Anthropologist*, 78, no. 3 (1976), p. 570.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume I*, (London: Penguin, 2019), p. 63.

¹⁰⁸ Catherine Pelissier Kingfisher, as quoted in Simpson and Mayr, p. 119.

analysis, I expand my use of the linguistic category of register, by including the subclasses of ‘field’ (that is, topic) and ‘tenor’ (that is, interactive roles) to account for the characters’ use of reverse discourse.

The overall aim of such tactics in Gramscian terms is to allow for the organisation of the common sense of the subordinate citizens of dystopia, so as to give them the possibility to ‘to develop a coherent world-view, a ‘spontaneous’ philosophy that actually relates to [their] own life and place in society’.¹⁰⁹ An organised common sense will allow dystopian subjects to recognise their common goals and develop concrete strategies to overthrow the dystopian hegemony with a frontal attack in the form of a Gramscian war of manoeuvre. In this case, a close linguistic analysis of the dystopian plays’ discourse illuminates how resistance to dystopian hegemony is enacted in drama in the form of discursive practices, especially when an active form of resistance is not viable.

2.3.2 *Lemons, Lemons, Lemons, Lemons, Lemons*

Lemons by Sam Snider was first performed at the Warwick Arts Centre in January 2015.¹¹⁰

The play comprises a series of non-chronological short scenes between Bernadette and Oliver, a couple whom we see navigating the intricacies of love from their first encounter to the routines of their lives together. *Lemons*, however, does not only portray a love story, but a dystopia in the making: during the course of the play the government of this near-future Britain introduces a draconian law, the ‘Quietude Bill’, limiting the words that each citizen can use to

¹⁰⁹ Ives, *Language and Hegemony in Gramsci*, p. 79.

¹¹⁰ The first production was directed by Ed Franklin, produced by Warlus, with Euan Kitson as Oliver and Beth Holmes as Bernadette.

140 a day (echoing Twitter's limit of 140 characters).¹¹¹ We follow the couple from a time when the law is only a remote possibility up to its implementation. The audience is invited to reflect on the implications of a dystopian attack on free speech from the very personal perspective of the young couple who at times try to fight the 'hush law' and at others try to adapt to it.¹¹²

Lemons portrays the consolidation of the hegemonic powers of a dystopian government via linguistic measures and explores the counter-hegemonic reactions to this process from the perspectives of Bernadette and Oliver. As Ildney Cavalcanti argues, 'linguistic control and the enforcement of strict linguistic normativity symbolically stand in for other forms of social (ideological, political, institutional) control'.¹¹³ In fact, the word-limit imposed on the citizens of such state is only the first step in the transition to an anti-liberal dystopian regime. The society depicted in *Lemons* is a dystopia in the making, whose political leadership recognises the power of discourse and aims to control it. The hush law comes from a legitimately elected political society ('The polls have been the same ... ever since they got in', says Bernadette) which subtly uses its power to reinforce its dominance.¹¹⁴ As Donoghue reminds us, the key to hegemony is that 'the state needs to retain control over its citizens, while also encouraging citizens to freely provide their consent without feeling *directly* coerced'.¹¹⁵ The lawmakers in *Lemons* are careful to give their coercive word-restriction an egalitarian semblance: if

¹¹¹ Sam Steiner, *Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2015), p. 44.

¹¹² Steiner, p. 11.

¹¹³ Ildney Cavalcanti, 'Utopias of/f Language in Contemporary Feminist Literary Dystopias', *Utopian Studies*, 11.2 (2000), 152–80 (p. 152).

¹¹⁴ Steiner, p. 24.

¹¹⁵ Donoghue, p. 395.

‘everyone gets the same / number of... [words]’ it cannot be censorship, Bernadette reasons, after all ‘ You can say anything you like just... concisely’.¹¹⁶ In reality, as Oliver recognizes, the law contributes to consolidate the current relations of power: ‘The powerful stay powerful because nobody’s got enough words to challenge them’.¹¹⁷ However, as Stoddart reminds us, ‘there is never a unified, totalizing system of ideological domination’: hegemony is always in process and always subject to challenge.¹¹⁸ *Lemons* focuses on the countermeasures that can be used to challenge the hegemony when the struggle is in its early stages. The play presents the first steps of a war of position which includes some elements of material resistance to the dystopian oppression as well as discursive strategies of resistance. The play gives a few details of material actions to be taken against the dystopian system (protest marches against the law are being held, for instance), but it mainly focuses on the discursive resisting practices of the characters. Such resisting practices are at the core of my analysis, which starts by describing the characters’ self-imposed normative grammar as an ‘antilanguage’ in Michael Halliday’s terms. I then suggest that while their system allows them to communicate efficiently (fulfilling the transactional goals of their dialogue), when it comes to expressing their feelings (and accomplishing relational goals) they return to a spontaneous grammar.

Anti-languages, as conceived by Halliday, are varieties of language set up as conscious alternatives to the official language of a society, whose aim is ‘to create and maintain social structures through conversation’.¹¹⁹ I argue that, in an attempt to survive the linguistic

¹¹⁶ Steiner, pp. 24, 25.

¹¹⁷ Steiner, p. 24.

¹¹⁸ Mark C. J. Stoddart, ‘Ideology, Hegemony, Discourse: A Critical Review of Theories of Knowledge and Power’, *Social Thought & Research* 28, (2007), 191-225 (p. 201).

¹¹⁹ Halliday, ‘Anti-Languages’, p. 570.

limitations imposed from above, Bernadette and Oliver create a personal anti-language in Halliday's sense, a unique grammar to stop their relationship from succumbing to the linguistic restraints enforced by the dystopian hegemony. As their anti-language must operate within the restricting framework of 140 words per day, the characters of the play need to establish some ground rules to maximise their communicative potential. For the couple to create a range of their own linguistic norms means, in effect, to generate their own normative grammar to bypass the restrictions imposed by the rising dystopian hegemony. According to Ives, who elaborates on Gramsci, normative grammars are always 'produced through the organization, codification and legitimization of certain spontaneous grammars'.¹²⁰ In the play, to express themselves freely the characters need to organise their own spontaneous communication into a normative grammar. Because of this reason, their anti-language can be considered as a first example of an embedded resistant practice, in that a spontaneous form of communication is inserted into a (self-imposed) normative framework. In fact, as we will see, the characters of *Lemons* must hide behind the mask of the normative grammar of dystopian hegemony to enact their linguistic attempts to resistance.

The characters' anti-language needs to accomplish two key goals of conversation to be both an effective resistant practice and a means of communication: the transactional and the relational functions. This means that their anti-language must be able 'to get things done, solve problems and achieve set goals' (transactional function) while also expressing interpersonal goals and attend to 'the way people relate to and present themselves to one another' (relational

¹²⁰ Ives, p. 96.

function).¹²¹ Their linguistic system succeeds at the transactional aspect of language, but it demonstrates its weakness in delivering relational meanings. In terms of the transactional function, the conscious goal for Bernadette and Oliver's anti-language is to sustain communication within the 140 word-allowance. To do so, they employ three main linguistic and non-linguistic tactics, all specific to the 'hush law' context and all responding to practical needs: they create new words; they establish the convention of declaring the words they have left for the day before starting a conversation; they use Morse code to communicate. Below is the beginning of the conversation where the first of these strategies is decided:

- Oliver** Maybe we should like... Maybe we should just create a whole load of new abbreviations? That halves our output.
- Bernadette** Like a code?
- Oliver** Yes. Sort of. So, so instead of 'sort of' we could just say 'sorf'.
- Bernadette** 'Sorf'.
- Oliver** Yeah.
- Bernadette** Or instead of 'instead of' we could say 'insteaf'.
- Oliver** Exactly.¹²²

The first tactic in the production of the couple's linguistic code is the creation of new vocabulary, what Halliday would call 'relexicalization'. According to his framework, relexicalization is the most common process through which anti-languages are produced.¹²³ It consists in the creation of new words, the principle being that of 'same grammar, different

¹²¹ Stephanie Schnurr, *Leadership Discourse at Work* (Basingstoke: Springer, 2008), p. 3; Almut Koester, *Investigating Workplace Discourse* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 23.

¹²² Steiner, *Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons*, pp. 35-36.

¹²³ Halliday, p. 571.

vocabulary'.¹²⁴ In this case, the couple merges word pairs to create portmanteau terms, whose meaning they negotiate in advance, so that the words will be transparent by the time the restrictions come into action. The second strategy the couple agrees on in anticipation of the hush law is also very specific to its context and fulfils a transactional function:

Bernadette Think should announce counts when see each other.

Oliver Waste.

Bernadette Gives us an idea of where the other's at.
[...]

Oliver Say how many left after...

Bernadette After count. Yeah.¹²⁵

The scant formulation of the sentences in this exchange suggests that this rule may have been agreed after the word-limit is enforced. Here, too, the aim is strictly practical: to let the other know how much they can be expected to contribute to the conversation. The third strategy the couple sets up is Morse code. Being a non-verbal technique it serves perfectly the purpose of drastically reducing the couple's word-output, yet its slowness compared to actual talk makes it unpractical (a stage direction reads: '*She taps the floor three times: S*').¹²⁶ The couple's anti-language – with its three key strategies – functions as an embedded resistant practice in that it allows the characters to communicate around the restrictions imposed by the dystopian regime in which they live. However, it is quite clear – to them and the play's audience – that their attempts have little impact on the play's dystopian context: whatever communicative

¹²⁴ Halliday, p. 571.

¹²⁵ Steiner, *Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons*, pp. 49-50.

¹²⁶ Steiner, p. 58.

system they may invent will only offer some personal relief to a much more complex systemic problem on which they, as ordinary citizens, have limited power.

The three ground rules of Oliver and Bernadette's anti-language help the characters maintain the transactional function of communication intact. Through their linguistic code they manage to embed their spontaneous communication within a normative framework. Their resistant practices achieve their 'transactional' goal: to say more with fewer words. However, it is when it comes to communicating feelings and emotional experiences that the system shows its flaws: their 'lovou' is not the same as 'I love you', and the couple soon realises that 'there are things you can't say in one hundred and forty words'.¹²⁷ In real-world conversation, speakers aim to accomplish at the same time transactional and relational goals, yet the fabricated anti-language of the play seems to be heavily oriented toward the transactional aspect of language, to 'ge[t] things done', as Koester would phrase it.¹²⁸ In other words, in aiming for an optimal transactional function for their language, the characters disregard the capacity of their fabricated grammar to convey relational meanings, which in turn causes their inability to express feelings through their code.

During the play, Oliver and Bernadette realise that to be able to communicate their emotions to the other (to convey the relational function of language), their anti-language needs to abandon purely transactional goals in favour of a spontaneous grammar that would convey relational meanings. At different points in the play, they decide to disregard their self-imposed normative grammar and just speak naturally, until they can. For instance, when they realise

¹²⁷ Steiner, pp. 36, 23.

¹²⁸ Koester.

that they both have most of their words left, they decide to ‘Just get it all out’.¹²⁹ At this point, the stage directions read:

***Oliver** begins to sing a song. [In the original production this was the Fresh Prince of Bel Air theme tune.]*

***Bernadette** joins in.*

***Oliver** sings until he runs out of words. **Bernadette** continues alone until she too runs out of words which happens long before the song’s end.*

*Silence.*¹³⁰

Through the rebuttal of their own rules, the characters here are able to accomplish their relational goals: ‘the cementing of social or personal relationships through the building of shared worlds’.¹³¹ In her review of the latest production of the play, Farah Najab suggests that seeing the characters ‘having fun together and flagrantly wasting the precious words they have’ translates in performance into an ‘enjoyable, light moment’.¹³² For a few instants, then, Bernadette and Oliver decide that their relationship should not be limited to a series of transactional goals and bet instead on the bonding potential of singing together.¹³³ The dystopian context around them can take away their words, but not their spirits: even for a brief moment they can decide to speak freely, to not restrict their essence in accord to the impositions of the oppressive system. It is a small way to reclaim their individuality as people in a dystopian

¹²⁹ Steiner, *Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons*, p. 63.

¹³⁰ Steiner, *Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons*, p. 62.

¹³¹ Koester, p. 23.

¹³² Farah Najab, ‘Review: Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons, Barons Court Theatre’, *A Younger Theatre*, 2019 <<https://www.ayoungertheatre.com/review-lemons-lemons-lemons-lemons-lemons-barons-court-theatre/>> [accessed 4 September 2019].

¹³³ This moment could be read as an ‘utopian performative’ in Jill Dolan’s sense. More on this term and its potential for dystopia in my final chapter.

world that would want them obeying and silent. Thus, they choose to use their words for relational purposes rather than merely functional goals. They do so even more explicitly when deciding to abandon their code to be able to speak heart to heart:

Oliver [...] Let's just talk until it goes. Without trying
to...

Bernadette Okay.

Oliver I miss you.

Bernadette I'm here. (Pause)

Oliver It feels like we've both been pretending you're
not.

Bernadette (*smiles slightly*) That's exactly how it feels.
(Pause)

Oliver Okay.

Bernadette I'm running low.

Oliver Okay.

Bernadette I'm sorry for all of... (*she runs out of words*)

Oliver Yeah, me too.¹³⁴

By speaking spontaneously, the couple can finally express how they feel about each other, and commonly assess the impact of the word-restriction on their relationship. Even as they run out of words, by using their spontaneous grammar they manage to genuinely understand each other: 'I'm sorry for all of... (*she runs out of words*)/ Yeah, me too'. The playtext does not clarify how the restriction is enforced: when the characters run out of words simply no sound comes out of their mouth. In the 2019 production at Barons Court Theatre in London, the reaching of the word-limit was visually signified by two hanging box-shaped lights

¹³⁴ Steiner, *Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons*, p. 58.

which would turn red as the characters run out of words.¹³⁵ Their embedded rebellion cannot do anything against the hegemonic word-limit, as the characters have their discursive power (and their possibility to do so through their voice) taken away from them. Although conscious of the limitations that cannot be bypassed, Oliver and Bernadette revert to their spontaneous grammar as soon as they realise that their normative anti-language cannot express feelings, a crucial function to their survival as a couple. Their anti-language succeeded at keeping the communication between them alive in spite of the word-limit, yet it crucially failed at a deeper level. Oliver and Bernadette can now say more with fewer words, but they need to break free of their self-imposed normative frame if they want to nurture their relationship. Hence, in this dystopia, the linguistic resistant tactics of the characters' anti-language are only partially successful as embedded resistant practices. They allow the characters to communicate, yet the dystopian rule has taken away what really matters: the chance to communicate feelings in a meaningful way.

Sisk observes (pessimistically perhaps) that in many dystopias 'language is a means of resistance, but not of salvation'.¹³⁶ This is true of *Lemons*, where despite an articulate linguistic resistance the foundation of the dystopian mechanism of oppression cannot be shaken. The play concentrates on the individual impact of the restrictions in self-expression, but also invites reflection on the effects of the limitations on a societal level: if people cannot convey how they feel, they will be more easily controlled – after a long day of simply trying to survive, few will have words left to talk about revolutionising an increasingly dystopian politics. However, *Lemons* does not end on a bleak note. Paradoxically, the show of an evident abuse of power

¹³⁵ Najib.

¹³⁶ Sisk, p. 169.

from the hegemonic class – the creation of ‘word-sanctuaries’ for the powerful – gives Oliver hope for the future: ‘This is what we needed’ he says, ‘Something to fight’ echoes Bernadette.¹³⁷ What Oliver and Bernadette come to understand is that a few words are enough when there is a common goal towards which the oppressed can combine their limited yet shared language. In the war of position against the rising dystopian hegemony then, small and imperfect linguistic practices constitute the first steps towards an organised resistance. The anti-language that the protagonists create may be flawed, but it is only a small piece of an evolving strategy to contrast the expansion of the dystopian hegemony. In *Lemons* the war of position, which Donoghue reminds us is ‘the struggle for control of civil society, ideological apparatuses and common sense’, must begin from minor and imperfect practices like the couple’s anti-language.¹³⁸

2.3.1 *Edgar & Annabel*

Edgar & Annabel by Sam Holcroft debuted in 2011 in Paint Frame, a converted space at the National Theatre in London, and was staged as part of a double bill together with D.C Moore’s *The Swan*. Holcroft had touched upon dystopian themes in her earlier *Cockroach* (2008), exploring the social effects of a fictional global war and the rule of a restrictive government on the lives of schoolchildren.¹³⁹ However, it is with *Edgar & Annabel* that the playwright fully exploits the potential of the dystopian genre in drama, creating a surveillance dystopia on par with the best literary examples of the field which employs language – complemented by key theatrical signifiers such as gestures, and props – to convey both

¹³⁷ Steiner, *Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons*, p. 53.

¹³⁸ Donoghue, p. 204.

¹³⁹ Sam Holcroft, *Cockroach* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2008).

dystopian oppression and the mechanisms of resistance.¹⁴⁰ The drama interrogates the human cost of freedom from dystopian rule, offering a disenchanted vision of the individual sacrifices necessary for a successful uprising in an authoritarian context.

The play opens in the house of Edgar and Annabel, a middle-class married couple. From the beginning the spectators are presented with a tension between what they see and what they hear: the two characters are openly reading their dialogue from a script, but while their words sound loving, their actions demonstrate awkwardness.¹⁴¹ It is only in the second scene that we are given some context: Edgar and Annabel are identity covers for Nick and Marianne, two members of a resistance movement to the dystopian government who impersonate their obedient characters while secretly trading information and explosive materials for the resistance. They need to closely follow the scripted dialogue provided by Miller, their supervisor, as in their dystopian world all houses have listening devices monitored by the government for signs of insurgence. Over the course of the play, the characters implement a series of tactics to conceal the sounds of their resistant bomb-making and the information-sharing, from loud television to electric knives, and karaoke nights. Their relationship grows as the play progresses, as do the demands on their performance: they need to sound complacent even when hearing over the news that their group's attempts at overthrowing the government have failed, and that their friends have been killed. One after the other, they crack under pressure and are replaced at the end of the play by a new pair of Edgar and Annabel. By the end of the play, it becomes clear that, in this dystopia, the success of the resistance's war of

¹⁴⁰ For a comprehensive study of surveillance dystopias in literature and cinema see Peter Marks, *Imagining Surveillance: Eutopian and Dystopian Literature and Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

¹⁴¹ Sam Holcroft, *Edgar & Annabel. Double Feature: One* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2011), pp. 3–7.

position is more important than the individual dissident. My analysis begins by explaining how the play depicts a war of position, before moving on to describe the linguistic strategy used by the characters as ‘reverse discourse’. I demonstrate that while the normative grammar of such discourse (in terms of idiolect and register) is helpful in maintaining the safety of a cover, the characters need to revert to spontaneous communication to enact their personal forms of resistance. It is in this section that I begin to explore more clearly the potential of non-verbal signifiers as channels to convey embedded resistance, which becomes embodied in performance.

As a dystopia, the play stages a war of position against a repressive government, in that it combines covert material actions (the political assembly of a resistant movement) with discursive practices aimed at challenging the ideological base of its hegemony. As in a Gramscian war of position described by Roger Simon, ‘the hegemonic power exercised ... through the organisations of the civil society has to be increasingly undermined by the countervailing power of the social movements based on the growing activity of the members of these movements’.¹⁴² The rebelling organisation in *Edgar & Annabel* is aware that it is not yet in the position to directly confront the dystopian state. Instead, they aim at causing what Simon calls ‘a decisive shift in the balance of forces in civil society’, since the rebels understand that an ideological war of position is needed to pave the way for decisive material actions.¹⁴³ This is made explicit by the character of Miller, a high-level agent of the movement. When Nick laments his frustration with small-scale action and suggests the use of explosive

¹⁴² Simon, *Gramsci’s Political Thought*, p. 75.

¹⁴³ Roger Simon, *Gramsci’s Political Thought: An Introduction*, rev. edn. (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991), p. 76.

force to combat the dystopian government, Miller replies that ‘the aim is to gain ground’.¹⁴⁴

He continues:

We are a political movement. And for the first time in years, the door is open to us to make political gain. We must be seen to take it. Nobody will support us if we are considered terrorists. If the time comes for action it must be justified.¹⁴⁵

In fact, their organisation is secretly supporting a candidate in the next election (which is likely to be rigged, we are warned) and they must do whatever it takes to avoid the connections between him and their anarchist group. Steve Jones suggests that ‘most revolutions have to proceed via a *war of position* fought out over a long period in the superstructure [i.e., the civil society], in which meanings and values become the object of struggle’.¹⁴⁶ The resistance undercover network understands such dynamic, and seeks to prepare the ideological terrain for a revolution through indirect action and discursive practices, until a frontal attack on the dystopian power becomes feasible. The play presents these efforts through its central characters, whose resistant acts dramatise the dystopia’s counter-narrative by using multiple theatrical languages.

Sarah Grochala argues that ‘Edgar and Annabel’s maintenance of a normal domestic routine is positioned as an act of political resistance’.¹⁴⁷ In order to keep the material actions of the struggle a secret (particularly the bomb-making), the characters impersonating Edgar and Annabel need to act as a happily married couple after mere moments of meeting each other:

¹⁴⁴ Holcroft, *Edgar & Annabel. Double Feature: One*, p. 25.

¹⁴⁵ Holcroft, *Edgar & Annabel. Double Feature: One*, p. 26.

¹⁴⁶ Steven Jones, *Antonio Gramsci*, 1 edn (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 31.

¹⁴⁷ Sarah Grochala, *The Contemporary Political Play: Rethinking Dramaturgical Structure* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 67.

their first interaction consists of a familiar ‘Hi, honey! I’m home!/Hi darling!’.¹⁴⁸ Their routine crucially involves the use of appropriate language, as all the conversations within the house are scanned for signs of anti-government talk. In other words, they need to use what I have identified as a reverse discourse, here defined following Simon Weaver as a discourse that ‘employs the terminology of a pre-existing discourse but aims to develop an opposed semantic interpretation’.¹⁴⁹ Weaver uses the framework of reverse discourse to comment on the resistant practices in comedy, yet his insights are equally valid when paired with the resisting language of *Edgar & Annabel*. Reverse discourse exploits the ‘polysemic potential’ of language and allows people to read different, sometimes opposite meanings in utterances, depending on the context of enunciation.¹⁵⁰ The reverse discourse of the insurgents playing Edgar and Annabel exploits such potential by adopting the same standards of accepted discourse as the hegemonic norm, but manipulating those conversational topics and routines for oppositional purposes. In Gramscian terms, this means that Nick and Marianne need to conform to the normative grammar of the hegemony, which is mimicked in the scripts they must follow, to maintain their revolutionary plans in place. Essentially, in *Edgar & Annabel*, the struggle for hegemony is fought on the ability to effectively engage in reverse discourse: it is a matter of replicating the language of the dystopian system without suffering the naturalisation of ideological common sense that marked the characters in King’s *Foxfinder*.

¹⁴⁸ Holcroft, *Edgar & Annabel. Double Feature: One*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁹ Simon Weaver, ‘The Reverse Discourse and Resistance of Asian Comedians in the West’, *Comedy Studies*, 1.2 (2010), 149–57 (p. 149).

¹⁵⁰ Simon Weaver, ‘The “Other” Laughs Back: Humour and Resistance in Anti-Racist Comedy’, *Sociology*, 44.1 (2010), 31–48 (pp. 32–33).

The actors playing Edgar and Annabel need to learn to reproduce faithfully the normative grammar accepted by the hegemony, as the verisimilitude of their reverse discourse is crucial to the success of their cover. This involves reproducing the register of the dystopia (in terms of accepted topics of conversation and opinions) on a structural level but also maintaining the consistency of the characters' particular ways of speaking (their 'idiolect') when members of the organisation substitute one another as the obedient Edgar and Annabel. I start my analysis by illustrating this second point on the individuality of speech patterns, before engaging in a broader discussion of structural register-replication. Keith Sanger explains that an 'idiolect' is the individual language system of a person, which includes their pronunciation, grammatical forms, and choice of vocabulary.¹⁵¹ It is crucial to the maintenance of the resistance's cover that the idiolects of Edgar and Annabel be consistent so as to deceive the surveillance technology monitoring the resistance's safe houses. This is made clear from the beginning of the play when Nick – having taken over from a previous comrade in the role of Edgar – needs to learn how to speak not only *like* but *as* Edgar. In a meeting with their supervisor, Miller, Marianne complains of Nick's lack of precision in replicating Edgar's way of talking, his idiolect:

Marianne He improvises. [...] He ad-libs, he says 'Yeah' and 'I know'. [...]

When it's not in the script.

Nick That's how normal people speak.

Marianne Edgar doesn't speak like that.

Nick How can a few words matter – ?

Marianne You sound nothing like him.

Nick What? Not posh enough?

¹⁵¹ Keith Sanger, *The Language of Drama* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 34.

- Marianne** No, it's not an accent thing: it's a computer, it can't read accents. It's your rhythm –
- Miller** The computers process the rhythm of human speech, not dialect or pitch, so you can't improvise around –
- Nick** It's not like someone's going to notice a few –
- Miller** It's not the surveillance teams we need to worry about, they're working across God knows how many houses. It's about fooling the computers. Don't underestimate the technology: any deviation from the norm, lack of fluency, shifts in volume, certain words. It's all flagged. And if it shows up on the system, someone will play it back. We've got no choice, we work on the assumption everything said in that house has the potential to be played back.
- Nick** Sure, okay, but the odd word –
- Miller** No.¹⁵²

Since Nick is new to the practice of hegemonic reverse discourse, he struggles to understand how 'a few words [can] matter'. However, in order to trick the monitoring technology, he needs to replicate every detail of Edgar's talk, from the way he interacts with Annabel, to the topics they can engage in, to his rhythm, fluency, volume and use of specific words. In linguistic terms, Nick must learn to reproduce Edgar's idiolect. This is essential because, in this dystopia, the characters' linguistic choices cannot be a matter of purely personal preference. Here, a certain type of language or inflection in spoken discourse can signify a characters' belonging to the hegemonic class or the resistance. Therefore, every word must be carefully weighted (even within the apparent safety of one's home) as there is no neutral language which can abstain from the wider context of the controlling dystopia.

¹⁵² Holcroft, *Edgar & Annabel. Double Feature: One*, pp. 11–13.

Caution must be adopted not only in the use of individual words, but also at a more structural level: Nick and Marianne need to enact reverse discourse by mimicking the register of the hegemonic class through the alter-egos of Edgar and Annabel. The linguistic category of register (which I employed in the previous discussion of *Foxfinder*) now needs to be expanded to include its subclasses of tenor and field, to allow me to give a clearer picture of how variations in register are used in *Edgar & Annabel* for resistant purposes. In Martin Montgomery's words, 'tenor refers to the kind of social relationship enacted in or by the text', while 'field corresponds loosely to what a text is about'.¹⁵³ It is necessary to specify here that I do not adopt the terms in their strictly linguistic sense, but I here expand their reach to include the performative aspects of the language of the play.¹⁵⁴ To ensure the continuity of the fictional *personas* of Edgar and Annabel as their playing agents change, Nick and Marianne need to replicate both the tenor and the field of the hegemonic register the organisation has established for them to avoid discovery. The dialogic exchanges that Nick and Marianne (quite literally) enact need to reflect the tenor of the interpersonal relationship between a content husband and wife. Thus, as Grochala notices, in the play 'the same actions and conversations are repeated over and over again' as in the case of scenes 1, 3, and 11 which all follow the pattern of greeting the other, complimenting their cooking, and asking what is for dinner.¹⁵⁵ This kind of routine, I suggest, aims at sustaining the same tenor between the partners, so as to prove to whoever's

¹⁵³ Martin Montgomery, *An Introduction to Language and Society*, 2nd ed., Studies in Culture and Communication (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 109.

¹⁵⁴ Montgomery gives a narrower definition of the linguistic scope of tenor and mode than mine (107, 109). In my discussion, I use the loose definitions presented above to account also for the non-linguistic aspects of the scripted dialogue.

¹⁵⁵ Sarah Grochala, *The Contemporary Political Play: Rethinking Dramaturgical Structure* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), p. 66.

listening that they are indeed a happily married couple. Similarly, the involvement in ‘adequate’ topics of discussion is also instrumental in directing suspicion away from the safe house. In fact, the register of the couple must include a series of accepted fields of conversation they can engage in, which have the objective of maintaining the normative appearance of their speech. Recycling, for instance, is the defining attribute of Edgar and Annabel. As Miller explains:

Miller Recycling is integral to who they are as a couple and what they tell themselves they stand for. They don’t question the economics. It’s not in their nature. [...] That’s what makes Edgar and Annabel the perfect cover. [...] They don’t question their choices; they just choose them.¹⁵⁶

The consistency of the interactional routine (tenor) and the topics of conversation (field) of the rebels playing Edgar and Annabel avoids any deviation from the normative grammar scripted for them. This guarantees their safety and, in turn, warrants the smooth continuation of the resistance’s war of position against the dystopian hegemony. To maintain their cover, the characters speak and behave as their obedient personas: their act is, indeed, a performance of obedience, which employs theatrical means – such as scripted text and codified behaviour – to reproduce the hegemonic dystopian narrative.

Moving beyond this chapter’s initial focus on language, the analysis of the play makes it clear that Holcroft makes full use of theatre’s theatricality to convey not only the dystopia’s counter-narrative, but also to express the characters’ personal acts of resistance against the restrictive conditions they must endure while fighting for the success of their mission. It is when the characters/actors react to their hegemonic routine that the play makes use of theatre’s

¹⁵⁶ Holcroft, *Edgar & Annabel. Double Feature: One*, pp. 55–56.

multiple signifying languages to convey what I term embedded resistant practices. Since their prescribed use of a normative grammar does not eliminate the need for spontaneous communication, Nick and Marianne embed their spontaneous grammar within the normative framework of hegemonic discourse, as Oliver and Bernadette did in *Lemons*. As Grochala notices, ‘the characters play their assigned roles, but they remain themselves’, and such dual presence creates ‘a dislocation between their words, which are monitored by the authorities, and their actions, which are not’.¹⁵⁷ This is crucial in performance, where the clashing of actions and words creates, according to reviewer David Benedict, both ‘humor’ and an increasingly ‘strong and sad’ emotional undertow.¹⁵⁸ Grochala proposes as an example the opposite direction of the relationship between Edgar and Annabel versus Nick and Marianne’s. She says: ‘while Edgar and Annabel are growing apart, Nick and Marianne are falling in love. While Edgar storms off to sleep in the spare room after a scripted argument, Nick “*silently takes off his shoes and tiptoes back [to Marianne]. They kiss*”’.¹⁵⁹ To express their true selves, the two players act spontaneously, out of character, but crucially they still do so within the normative framework prescribed by their scripts. Their personal acts of resistance are embedded because they do not challenge the basis of their hegemonic performance, and in this case are also embodied because they manifest as actions, movements, and gestures.

Another example of how the characters engage in practices of embedded resistance is when they communicate not as Edgar and Annabel, but as Nick and Marianne via a whiteboard:

¹⁵⁷ Grochala, p. 67.

¹⁵⁸ David Benedict, ‘Double Feature: Edgar & Annabel/The Swan, Nightwatchman/There Is a War, National Theatre’, *The Arts Desk*, 2011 <<https://www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/double-feature-edgar-annabelthe-swan-nightwatchmanthere-war-national-theatre?page=0,1>> [accessed 30 August 2019].

¹⁵⁹ Grochala, *The Contemporary Political Play*, p. 67.

Nick leans across and switches on the television. The screen of the television is not visible to the audience. A generic news programme plays at a low level. Covered by the sound, Nick and Marianne turn to the whiteboard.

Marianne writes: 'Maternal Grandmother?'

Nick writes in response: 'Alice.'

Marianne nods and writes: 'Annabel's degree?'

Nick 'Geography.'

Marianne 'Edgar, circumcised?'

Nick hesitates then nods.

Marianne writes: 'Grounds?'

Nick 'Hygiene.'

Marianne nods and writes 'Nicknames?'

Nick 'Eggers.'

Marianne nods and writes: 'And?'

Nick 'Edmegeddon.'

Marianne nods 'And Annabel?'

Nick 'Hitler.'

Marianne stifles a laugh. She writes: 'It's my birthday.'¹⁶⁰

In this silent conversation, Nick and Marianne exchange personal information ('It's my birthday' says Marianne) as well as testing each other's knowledge of the characters they are playing ('Annabel's Degree?/ Geography'). Such complicity is only made possible by the use of a voiceless yet spontaneous grammar in Gramscian terms. Unbound by the prescriptive rules that dictate what can be said and how, Nick and Marianne can create a connection as their own selves, and not just as their personas. By finding space for expressing themselves while conforming to the rules of their hegemonic frame (they made sure that their communication

¹⁶⁰ Holcroft, *Edgar & Annabel. Double Feature: One*, p. 29.

could not be recorded), they have inserted their personal subversive practices within the framework of routine normative interactions. On a broader level, this suggests that even when dystopian dramas show little prospects of successful resistance, it is worth searching for evidence of embedded resistance in performance. In fact, the potential gap between a character's words and their actions in the theatre opens up countless possibilities for physical and gestural embedded resistant practices: this is, of course, a distinctive feature of dystopian theatre, which can stage both oppression and resistance to dystopian societies in embodied ways that other genre forms cannot.¹⁶¹

However, in *Edgar & Annabel* such spontaneous rebellions can only temporarily alleviate the burden of living according to the hegemonic rules which guarantee the secrecy of the resistance movement. When the spontaneous practices break the normative frame of the hegemonic act, such violations put in danger the very basis of the resistance's war of position, and they are sanctioned accordingly. In this regard, the last scene that the character of Nick is in, before being replaced by a new 'Edgar', is telling. In the conversation below between Edgar and Annabel, Nick and Marianne need to convincingly appear and sound pleased by the news that two of their friends involved in the resistance have been killed and other six arrested, since their external performed personas are fervent government supporters:

Nick I hope they lock them up and throw away the key. (*Nick lowers his script in disgust; Marianne implores him to continue.*) The man who shot those terrorists; I'd like to shake his hand.

Marianne I'd like to shake it too.

Nick I'd like to thank him. All of them. I'd like to thank them all for the great job they are doing in protecting our country. Protecting us from

¹⁶¹ I further develop my argument concerning embodying dystopia in Chapter Four of this thesis.

criminals. Hateful criminal scum. I hope they get what's coming to them. If anything, this is a timely reminder that we are at war with the kinds of people who will use any means to destroy our nation's love of... (*Cannot bring himself to say the words.*) Our nation's love of... No. (*Nick throws down his script in disgust.*)

Marianne Edgar?

Nick No.

Marianne Edgar, finish what you were saying?

Nick No.

Marianne (*pressing the script on him*) Finish what you were saying: 'Our nation's love –

Nick Stop it.

Marianne – of freedom and democracy.'

Nick Stop it. STOP PUTTING WORDS IN MY MOUTH! (*Nick storms from the room*)¹⁶²

Lida Krüger argues that in this scene 'Nick reaches a point where the incongruity between himself and his role as Edgar becomes unbearable'.¹⁶³ In my linguistic terms, Nick at this point in the play cannot reconcile the normative grammar and the hegemonic register he is bound to with his need to react spontaneously not only to the news of the death of his friends, but also to the failure of their collective efforts as a rebellious movement. In this emotional occasion, he and Marianne cannot resort to embedded practices to react spontaneously while staying within the frame of their act. Thus, the only way for him to cast-off the mask of a normative register is by rejecting the normative grammar which is scripted for him ('STOP

¹⁶² Holcroft, *Edgar & Annabel. Double Feature: One*, pp. 50–51.

¹⁶³ Lida Krüger, "'Stop Putting Words in My Mouth!': Undermining the Binary between the Actual and the Fictional', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 32.3 (2016), 244–55 (p. 252).

PUTTING WORDS IN MY MOUTH!') and finally produce his own speech. This frame breaking is not tolerated by the high-ranking members of the resistance movement, as first Nick's and then Marianne's (when she similarly breaks the act) disappearances demonstrate. As Matt Trueman notes in his review of the first production, in the long-term Nick and Marianne discover that if you 'pretend for long enough [...] the pretence becomes real. But step out of that act, even for a second, and you puncture it irrevocably'.¹⁶⁴ Nick's spontaneous 'stepping out' of the hegemonic frame is seen by the senior agents in the resistance as an irremediable puncture. In a later scene, Miller comments that Nick 'was a liability' and that 'he wasn't capable of delivering the results we need'.¹⁶⁵ In this dystopia, acts of spontaneous resistance are only welcome as long as they do not cause a crack in the hegemonic frame of the cover. Miller clarifies in an earlier scene that he will 'do anything, anything, by any means, to make that [the success of their revolutionary plans] happen'.¹⁶⁶ The reaction to Nick's behaviour and Miller's comments highlight the reactionary side of the organisation, which values the overall success of their war of position over its individual members. As Trueman puts it in his review 'the individual's sacrifice here is exploited by the larger political force and those on the front line [...] are shown to be mere pawns, expendable and unvalued'.¹⁶⁷

I have suggested that *Edgar & Annabel* presents a war of position fought with the weapon of reverse discourse. By using the hegemonic language as a cover for their

¹⁶⁴ Matt Trueman, 'Review: Edgar and Annabel, Double Feature, National Theatre', *Matt Trueman*, 2011 <<http://matttrueman.co.uk/2011/08/review-edgar-and-annabel-double-feature-national-theatre.html>> [accessed 30 August 2019].

¹⁶⁵ Holcroft, *Edgar & Annabel. Double Feature: One*, p. 56.

¹⁶⁶ Holcroft, *Edgar & Annabel. Double Feature: One*, p. 27.

¹⁶⁷ Trueman, 'Review'.

revolutionary activities, the resistant organisation demonstrates to understand the importance of discursive power in the constant struggle for hegemony. I also observed that although forms of individual resistance are possible in the form of spontaneous actions and grammars, they need to remain within the normative frame of discourse to safeguard the stability of the resistant movement. The play's premises are among the most classical of the strand of surveillance dystopias starting with Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, yet Holcroft manages to create an original plot by exploiting the specific mechanics of the medium of theatre. By embedding many small acts of resistance in the contrast between stage directions and dialogue (the kiss and the whiteboard mentioned in the analysis are only two examples from a much longer list of embedded acts), the play demonstrates the possibilities of theatre to enrich the genre of dystopia. In this way, the play not only asks its audiences to reflect on the possibilities for resistance in a dystopian world, but it also shows them the cost of that resistance for individual people. The war of position against the dystopian hegemony might be won eventually, but 'at what cost?', the play asks. If the resistant organisation reverts to the same punitive practices as the dystopian structures it is trying to fight, are its actions not losing their utopian core in the process of reclaiming power? The audience is still out.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that, in dystopian drama, the narrative of hegemonic order and counternarrative of resistance are conveyed through linguistic practices. Dramatic language was characterised here as discourse: a social practice conditioned by underlying relations of power, with the potential to either sustain or transform existing social structures. Language in dystopian plays is used as a tool in the struggle for hegemony, both to dominate the less powerful and to fight that subjugation. Drawing from Gramsci, I have suggested that the hegemony of dystopian systems is achieved with a combination of discursive coercion and consent: the dystopian structures establish themselves through forceful imposition, but also

seek to imbue the civil society with their ideological common sense, to limit the challenges to its dominion. Crucial to both mechanisms in discursive terms is the establishment of asymmetries of power between the representatives of the hegemony and dystopian subjects. However, as hegemony is in constant flux and always contested, possibilities for discursive resistance are always open. As the attack on the hegemony originates from discursive practices, so the war of position against the ruling dystopian powers must also be fought on a linguistic battlefield. Characters of dramatic dystopias hide behind normative grammars in order to pursue their official resistant activities against the dystopian power structure. However, when it comes to enacting forms of personal resistance, characters recur to a spontaneous grammar which allows them to break free of hegemonic control, if only for a few fleeting moments. These embedded and embodied resistant practices are unique to dramatic dystopias, as they involve a contrast between speech and action, between the linguistic and the physical sets of signs which is only attainable in performance. The next chapter, which focuses on the spaces of dystopias, moves further into the physical attributes of dystopian plays and performances. It begins to articulate more explicitly how theatre's multiple signifying systems work together to convey the spatial, positional and material qualities of dystopia.

Chapter Three – The Estranged Spaces of Dystopia

3.1 Introduction

Dystopian narratives, whether literary or theatrical, always emerge from the socio-political reality of their creators. The fictional worlds they are set in must relate (to some extent) to such context since, as I have already stated, the overall function of the dystopian genre is to evaluate the tendencies of the contemporaneous moment. This is, according to Tom Moylan, an essential element to literary dystopias as he suggests that

Dystopia's foremost truth lies in its ability to reflect upon the causes of social and ecological evil as systemic. Its very textual machinery invites the creation of alternative worlds in which the historical spacetime of the author can be represented in a way that foregrounds the articulation of its economic, political, and cultural dimensions.¹

I argue that the presentation of 'alternative worlds' with links to the contemporary reality is also crucial to theatrical dystopias. However, the creation of such worlds for the theatre does not rely on purely 'textual' mechanisms but needs to take into account the 'physical' and 'spatial' dimensions of theatre.² In Chapter One, I identified a pervasive critical distrust of theatre's ability to convey worlds of the future through its inherently material means. Such a stance is exemplified by Dragan Klaić's position, which found 'limitations' in the 'degree of specification and physicality' that a theatrical performance requires if 'the world of the future

¹ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, p. xii (emphasis mine).

² Theatre scholar Gay McAuley suggests that theatre's 'primary signifiers are physical and even spatial in nature' in *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000), p. 5.

is to be revealed as a functioning world in the performance'.³ This chapter seeks to demonstrate that such critical bias is unfounded, through the exploration of the diverse means through which theatre can present dystopian worlds. The chapter will detail how theatre uses its multiple signifying systems – specifically language, audience positioning, and scenography – to convey dystopian spaces. In particular, it will concentrate on the different ways in which theatre constructs estrangement, which is the primary mechanism allowing readers and audiences to recognise the fictional projections of the future as different from but connected to the socio-political context of their reality.

Within Utopian Studies, the term estrangement is used according to the specific definition established by Darko Suvin in relation to science fiction in his article 'On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre', published in 1972.⁴ To fully understand the impact of cognitive estrangement on the spaces of dystopia it is necessary to take into account its three constitutive aspects: estrangement, cognition, and the *novum*.⁵ In Suvin's terms, estrangement is the 'formal framework' of the science fiction genre and represents the 'imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment' in which the story is set. Estrangement in this sense is strictly linked to 'a different space/time location' as the spatial basis for the narrative.⁶ Yet, this

³ Klaić, p. 46.

⁴ Cf. Suvin, 'On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre'. For Suvin's own assessment of the relation between science fiction and utopianism see his 'Science Fiction and Utopian Fiction: Degrees of Kinship', in *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988), pp. 33–43 (p. 35).

⁵ When revisiting Suvin's work on cognitive estrangement, Patrick Parrinder uses a similar tripartite approach, the three terms defining its 'necessary and sufficient conditions'. See Patrick Parrinder, 'Revisiting Suvin's Poetics of Science Fiction', in *Learning from Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 36–50 (p. 37).

⁶ Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (London: Yale University Press), p. 18.

is where cognition comes into play to differentiate genres that defy ‘the empirical world and its laws’ (such as fantasy or myth) and properly ‘cognitive’ genres, whose approach to the ‘the imaginary locality [...] is a supposedly factual one’.⁷ Although fictional, the spatio-temporal projection of the future must be developed ‘with extrapolating and totalizing (“scientific”) rigour’.⁸ The cognitive perspective involves the logical rigour of the fictional world, but also necessitates the use of imagination to understand the tendencies of the real world.⁹

In this sense, cognition intersects with Suvin’s idea of the *novum* and its historical reach.¹⁰ Latin for ‘new thing’, the *novum* is a formal element that ‘entails a change of the whole universe of the tale’.¹¹ Elaborating on Suvin’s ideas, Moylan explains that the *novum* is the ‘element that generates and validates all elements of the text, from alternative reality, to plot, characters and style’.¹² The *novum* can manifest as an individual innovation or as a paradigmatic shift in culture and is the point of departure from our empirical reality. The plays discussed in Chapter Two all included a *novum* (the innovations of which were more or less systemic) which clearly set them apart from a realist paradigm while also responding to the fears and anxieties of their context: the extreme police state of *The Pillowman*, the grotesque scapegoating in *Foxfinder*, the surveillance state of *Edgar & Annabel*, and the curbing of free

⁷Suvin, ‘On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre’, pp. 376, 374.

⁸ Suvin, ‘On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre’, p. 374.

⁹ Suvin, ‘On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre’, p. 375.

¹⁰In ‘SF and the Novum’, Suvin expands his theory on cognitive estrangement and maintains that ‘SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional “novum” (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic’. Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. 63.

¹¹Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. 64.

¹² Tom Moylan, “‘Look into the Dark’: On Dystopia and the Novum”, in *Learning from Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition, and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 51–71 (p. 57).

speech in *Lemons*. As these examples help to demonstrate, the *novum* has an ‘ineluctably historical character’ according to Suvin.¹³ In fact, ‘for all its displacements and disguises, [the *novum*] always corresponds to the wish-dreams and nightmares of a specific sociocultural class of implied addressees’.¹⁴ The novelty provided by the alternative paradigm of the *novum* needs to draw on cognitive logic and imagination, as a ‘dialectical force that mediates the material, historical possibilities and the subjective awareness and action engaged with those possibilities’.¹⁵

Cognitive estrangement as formulated by Suvin is thus a multi-faceted concept, encompassing the estranged nature of a fictional world, a cognitive and rationalising approach to its functioning, and a historical connection to the contemporary context. In essence, as Patrick Parrinder aptly summarises, the idea of cognitive estrangement suggests that ‘by imagining strange worlds we come to see our own conditions of life in a new and potentially revolutionary perspective’.¹⁶ This is what happens on the brave new stages of dystopian theatre: they present their audiences with dystopian worlds and offer the opportunity to see their reality from a novel perspective and question the established order of things.

Drawing from this multidimensional set of ideas, I develop three analytical terms to illustrate the specific varieties of cognitive estrangement at play in the theatre. Since the medium of theatre benefits from multiple channels of communication and signification, I propose that the estrangement it creates is best understood as being spread across three different

¹³ Darko Suvin, *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction* (London: Macmillan Press, 1988), p. 76.

¹⁴ Suvin, *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction*, p. 76.

¹⁵ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, p. 49.

¹⁶ Patrick Parrinder, ‘Introduction’, in *Learning from Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition, and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p. 4.

modalities, encompassing the textual, ‘positional’, and material levels. My first term ‘spatial estrangement’ captures the ways in which the dystopian spatio-temporal world is created and how its *novum* is constructed in the script through verbal and non-verbal cues. The second concept is that of ‘positional estrangement’, which describes how audience positioning (as both inscribed in the script and realised in production) can contribute to convey the estranged nature of the fictional world created for the stage. Finally, I use ‘material estrangement’ to describe the cognitive process of apprehending a dystopian materialised world in production.

This chapter draws on this framework for theatrical estrangement to explore dystopian worlds of the theatre through discussion and analysis of three very different plays. The works I consider here are selected for the variety of means that they employ to construct estrangement, and for their attention to the (re)presentation of dystopian space. To investigate how spatial estrangement can be articulated in playtexts, I analyse the script of *Tinderbox* by Lucy Kirkwood, a dystopian comedy first directed by Josie Rourke at the Bush Theatre (London) in 2008. The play is rich in spatial clues and as such presents the opportunity to demonstrate the many textual means through which a play can construct dystopian space-times. Specifically, I perform a semiotic analysis of the fictional places of *Tinderbox*’s dystopia (using terminology developed by Manfred Pfister and Anne Ubersfeld), identifying the verbal strategies (references within the dialogue) and non-verbal means (objects, aural effects, character behaviour) which allow the audience (both as a spectator and as a reader of the playtext) to identify the play as a dystopia. *Tinderbox*, like many other theatrical dystopias, relies on the tension between an external dystopian context and the internal situation presented onstage to create spatial estrangement in its dystopian world.

If spatial estrangement is present in all dystopian plays, although with different levels of detail, my second term – positional estrangement – is a supplementary technique providing an additional lens through which to experience theatrical dystopias. I argue that dystopian plays

deploy positional estrangement when they inscribe in the script (or realise in performance) an intermediate placing of the audience as both within and outside a dystopian narrative. By being both addressees and witnesses to the *novum* of the play, spectators are given the opportunity to evaluate (cognitively) dystopia's propositions from a privileged standpoint. To illustrate such technique, I analyse the script of Stef Smith's *Girl in the Machine* (2017). The play interrogates contemporary concerns around technology and virtuality, and lets its audiences contemplate the intricacies of such questions by introducing them to the split subjectivity of the virtual. In the section, I explain how the play allows a mindful cognitive validation of its technological *novum* via a combination of subject positioning (in Alice Rayner's terms) and heterotopic spatialities (with the features defined by Joanne Tompkins).

The third section of the chapter concentrates on material estrangement, intended as the process of interaction between spectators and the materialised dystopian worlds of performance. I argue that, when creating a dystopian world for the stage, theatre-makers endeavour to construct an environment which would allow the audience to perceive its *novum* as an estranged physical reality. They do so through the actualisation of scenographic choices and the careful arrangement of the performance and audience space. In this section, I explore how various combinations of staging arrangements and spectating relations, invite different readings of the materialised worlds of dystopia. I use Alistair McDowall's *Pomona* as my example since, as a play approaching the postdramatic (as theorised by Hans-Thies Lehmann), it is ambiguous in the presentation of its *novum* and invites multiple readings of it in performance. By considering three productions of the play directed by Ned Bennett, I argue that, despite the variation in the staging, the interpretation of the material signs of theatrical dystopia is in the hands of the audience who must connect what they see to their own experience, as 'emancipated spectators' in Jacques Rancière's terms.

3.2 Spatial Estrangement

Lucy Kirkwood's *Tinderbox* is entirely set in a derelict Bradford's butcher's shop of the twenty-first century – in the near future from the date of its first production in 2008. The play was described by critics as a 'strenuous dystopian comedy' (*The Guardian*), as a 'dystopian farce' (*The Telegraph*) and a 'dystopian revenge comedy' (*CurtainUp*).¹⁷ Although the production was criticised for its length and over-stretched metaphors, all reviewers noted the prominence of its dystopian features as well as its satirical intent.¹⁸ As a dystopia, the play places the action in an estranged setting to reflect on the issues of its contemporary world: it warns of the dangers of climate change by setting its events in a future UK living through the environmental and social costs of the climate crisis, and it shows the extreme consequences of unbridled nationalism through the farcical rendering of its main character, Saul Everard.

The cruel Saul runs the butcher shop as his 'Empire' with the help of his cowed wife Vanessa, a woman in her thirties who used to be an actress in 'party-political pornographic films'.¹⁹ They sell whatever rotting meat they can get hold of – mostly human remains in such terrible times for business. As readers of the playtext, we enter the lives of these characters together with Perchik, a fugitive painter from Scotland who is co-opted into working in the

¹⁷ Michael Billington, 'Theatre Review: *Tinderbox* / Bush, London', *Guardian*, 2008, section Stage <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2008/apr/29/theatre4>>; Charles Spencer, 'Tinderbox: Clapped-out Comedy', 29 April 2008, section Culture <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/drama/3673011/Tinderbox-clapped-out-comedy.html>> [accessed 14 July 2020]; Charlotte Loveridge, 'Tinderbox, a *CurtainUp* London Review', *Curtain Up*, 2008 <<http://www.curtainup.com/tinderboxlond.html>> [accessed 14 July 2020].

¹⁸ Criticising the play, Billington writes that 'Kirkwood ends up devoured by her own metaphor', while Loveridge notes that the play is 'running at a slightly over-long extent and feeling taxing where it should be hilarious'. Billington, 'Theatre Review'; Loveridge.

¹⁹ Lucy Kirkwood, *Tinderbox* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2008), p. 22.

shop as Saul's assistant. Over the course of the play, Perchik goes from being a helpless victim of Saul's harassments to becoming the oppressor himself, as he manages to get rid of Saul and take possession of his shop and wife. However, this new order of things does not last for long as Vanessa, tired of the abuses from both men, finally stands up for herself, sets fire to the shop (with Perchik inside it) and leaves in search of a new beginning. Throughout these onstage happenings, we learn that the outside world is going through extreme climatic events and tumultuous socio-political upheavals. Although staged over ten years ago, *Tinderbox*'s estranged commentary on the climate crisis and the dangers of nationalism continue to be relevant to the panorama of contemporary Britain, where political discourse has been dominated by nationalistic arguments (at the expense of other socio-political and environmental issues) since the lead up to the Brexit referendum in 2016.²⁰

As I highlighted above, the play's action develops entirely within the butcher shop (which is the only location visually available to the audience): we only hear about the dystopian world outside. Such a restricted setting may raise questions as to the classification of the play as a dystopia, since the genre relies on the representation of the socio-political structures of a particular world for its effect. In fact, in Suvin's definition, a fictional dystopia is 'a community where sociopolitical institutions, norms and relationships between its individuals are organized in a significantly less perfect way than in the author's community'.²¹ Because we see so little of the functioning of *Tinderbox*'s imagined society in terms of its institutions and norms (in

²⁰ Cf. Emma Bell, 'Post-Brexit Nationalism: Challenging the British Political Tradition?', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 0.0 (2020), 1–17.

²¹ Darko Suvin, 'Utopianism from Orientation to Agency: What Are We Intellectuals Under Post-Fordism To Do?', *Utopian Studies*, 9.2 (1998), 162–90 (p. 170).

contrast with *The Pillowman*, for instance) an easy classification of its dystopian nature appears, at a first glance, problematic. Such an issue is common to many theatrical dystopias, as the setting of the onstage action rarely offers detailed background information or contextual explanations.²² As Klaić rightly noted, ‘in the text of drama, descriptions of the action and setting remain scarce [...] and they are not directly available to the spectator’.²³ I suggest that this scarcity of ‘reflexions, comments, and explanations (as in a novel)’ should not lead us to disregard *Tinderbox* (or similarly structured plays) as something other than a dystopia; rather, it should prompt us to acknowledge the need for a different, theatre-specific model to analyse estranged spaces in the theatre.²⁴ To this end, I propose a detailed semiotic analysis of dystopia’s theatrical spaces: a framework for spatial estrangement.

Spatial estrangement allows me to investigate the semiotic mechanisms that theatre deploys to create dystopian worlds from a combination of various ‘fictional places’ estranged from the contemporary reality.²⁵ I take *Tinderbox* as my chosen example through which to explore the functioning of spatial estrangement in dystopian plays since the script offers a vast array of examples of how theatre can signify a fully estranged world via its textual clues. I argue that the *novum* of dystopian plays is consistently established through a combination of onstage and offstage fictional places, which in the case of *Tinderbox* correspond to the interior of the butcher shop, and the torn United Kingdom outside. It is the co-presence of these two

²²For instance, Edward Bond’s dystopian trilogy grouped under the collective name *The Chair Plays* only indicates 2077 as the year of its happenings, instead seeding textual clues of its dystopianism throughout the text. Cf. Edward Bond, *The Chair Plays* (London: Methuen Drama, 2012).

²³Klaić, p. 46.

²⁴Klaić, p. 46.

²⁵Following Gay McAuley’s use of the term, I use the expression *fictional places* to refer to ‘the places presented, represented or evoked onstage and off’. Cf. McAuley, p. 29.

contexts that allows the play to be read as a theatrical dystopia: such spatialities complete each other by giving the audience a glimpse of the dystopian developments in the private life of (relatively) ordinary citizens and in the wider society. To establish these fictional places dystopian plays use what Manfred Pfister frames as ‘localisation techniques’, strategies used to present space in the dramatic text that can be articulated through verbal and non-verbal channels.²⁶ In particular, the play offers the opportunity to demonstrate that the dystopian in theatre can be consistently expressed through the interplay of theatrical discourse (cf. Chapter Two) and other forms of theatre-specific communication (such as stage objects, indications of setting, and character behaviour). For *Tinderbox*, I consider separately the onstage and offstage fictional places of the play, to best identify how each element contributes to the overall impression of an estranged theatrical world.

3.2.1 Fictional Places: *The Dystopia Inside*

The degree of spatial estrangement of a play – what makes an audience perceive it as set in another world – depends on what Suvin terms the ‘magnitude’ of the *novum* and its potential impact on an estranged narrative. He claims that

the postulated innovation can be of quite different degrees of magnitude, running from the minimum of one discrete “new” invention (gadget, technique, phenomenon, relationship) to the maximum of a setting (spatiotemporal locus), agent (main character or characters), and/or relations basically new and unknown in the authors’ environments.²⁷

Tinderbox’s script spatially estranges its fictional places by employing several of such devices to construct the play’s *novum*. To estrange the onstage fictional place of the butcher’s shop the

²⁶ Manfred Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 267.

²⁷ Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. 64.

play relies mainly on non-verbal localisation techniques, in particular spatial clues, stage objects and the estranging behaviour of its characters (or agents, in Suvin's terms). On the other hand, to convey the estrangement of the outer dystopian context, *Tinderbox* uses verbal localisation techniques and sound cues. Below, I explore in turn the specific devices used to create each set of fictional places.

The script conveys the estrangement of the onstage fictional place of the shop through non-verbal localisation techniques: stage directions describing space, significant objects, auditory cues, and character behaviour all contribute to depict the onstage space as estranged and distinct from the audience's world. Stage directions are the most obvious way of describing the spatiality of a given set in any play. Although clearly appearing as linguistic signs, stage directions are to be considered as non-verbal localisation techniques since they contribute to the presentation of dramatic space by describing the set as imagined by the playwright.²⁸ *Tinderbox*'s initial stage directions do not depict Saul's butcher shop as particularly other-worldly. Yet, the antiquated version of the reality that it presents will look unfamiliar to many spectators within a contemporary audience. The playtext reads:

An old-fashioned butcher's shop. Tiles, marble slabs, a display counter covered with a sheet. A desiccated feel to the place. A yellowing blind on the window. Straw on the floor. Three dead pot plants and a thriving cactus.²⁹

The appearance of the shop does not immediately signal a dystopia: common tropes of futuristic surveillance or technological advancements of contemporary dystopian fiction and

²⁸Cf. Pfister, p. 270.

²⁹Kirkwood, p. 5.

film are not present, here.³⁰ Rather, the shop evokes a nostalgic atmosphere which is connected, as Saul makes clear throughout the play, to the past – and long-lost – glories of the British Empire: “An Englishman’s home is his castle, but an Englishman’s shop is his Empire”.³¹ Through the dialogue of the play, the audience soon discovers that the ‘old-fashioned’ butcher’s shop is neither an empire nor a modern rendering of a vintage corner-store: its dilapidated look reveals instead a rotting reality. Stage directions throughout the text disclose the full extent of the shop’s dilapidation: the display counter is described as showcasing ‘*a pathetic show of sad-looking cuts*’, the walls are covered with ‘tatty’ banners complete with spelling mistakes (‘*MEET for sale*’), and ‘bloody tea towels’ are scattered around the place.³² The combination of these non-verbal elements signal the playwright’s deliberate intention of conveying this aesthetic of decline to the audience: the shabbiness of the set is marked as a deliberate choice. To some extent, the overall appearance of the shop helps to establish some distance between the play’s and the audience’s world. However, the aesthetic choices inscribed in the playtext do not necessarily point directly at its dystopian nature (although, as I noted in Chapter One, an aesthetic of decline is often associated with this term). A key stage object helps placing this estranged setting into a wider context and unmistakably signals the play’s spatial estrangement as bearing dystopian features: a map.

As a crucial non-verbal localisation technique, the map in question illustrates the overall geography of the dystopian world of *Tinderbox*. It is an element of décor that assumes a

³⁰ Popular dystopias of the same year included *The Hunger Games* book series by Suzanne Collins, and the animation film *Wall-e*, directed by Andrew Stanton.

³¹ Kirkwood, p. 10.

³² Kirkwood, pp. 15, 63, 11.

‘referential’ function, to use Anne Ubersfeld’s term: it works as an index to signal a particular order of reality.³³ At a key moment in Act 2, the yellowing blind on the window (mentioned in the opening stage direction reported above) is revealed to be a map on which the butcher Saul has marked out the slow death of Britain and its Empire. The script reads:

On the blind is an enormous world map, like those found in Victorian schoolrooms. Britain is a small lozenge-shaped pink blob with two protrusions at the bottom right (Central London) and left (Cornwall). The rest of it is either eroded by sea (blue) or shaded in a different colour. Scotland is an island separated from England by Hadrian’s Channel.³⁴

The Victorian-style map indicates that, in the future represented in the play, most of the UK’s land has been consumed by water. The different shades suggest that a great portion of what is left has become foreign territory: indeed, the map is displayed here so that Saul can mark out the loss of Cornwall (“Sold! I mean, it’s been sold, you little tumour!”).³⁵ The style of the map itself is coherent with Saul’s imperialistic yearnings, yet the times when Britain could exert its control all over the globe seem to be long gone in the play’s own contemporary moment. Nonetheless, through the map on display here, the audience is visually made aware that the shop and its onstage events are set in a strange version of our world. The map may refer to a different socio-political order of reality (to paraphrase Ubersfeld’s words), yet however different in its geography and history, it is still the UK that is portrayed on it. The map’s content displaces the spectators from their own time and place and asks them to accept this mutated geopolitics as the actual space of the play. While the wider functioning of the play-world is detailed by verbal localisation techniques throughout the play, the changed environment of

³³ Ubersfeld, p. 122.

³⁴ Kirkwood, p. 65.

³⁵ Kirkwood, p. 66.

Tinderbox – its *novum* – is expressed visually onstage via this rhetorical object which explicitly connects the estranged world of the play to the reality of the audience.

Another key object acting as a non-verbal localisation technique is the sack through which key objects – and people – are transported in and out of the shop: it fulfils the fundamental function of connecting the offstage environment with the onstage situation, linking context to action. The sack works both as a ‘concrete presence’ and as a ‘rhetorical’ object in Ubersfeld’s terms.³⁶ As a concrete presence, a material object, the sack represents a means of movement in and out of the shop: Perchik first enters the shop hidden in the sack, together with the week’s supply of meat for the store; the sack is also the way through which human meat is smuggled in and out of the shop; Saul’s body is eventually carried out within the sack, marking the end of his reign of terror and the beginning of Perchik’s. In all these iterations, the sack represents the main way of journeying through the fictional places of the play. Rhetorically, it connects the estranging mechanisms inside the shop with the dystopian reality outside its doors. It is, materially and metaphorically, the means through which the relation between the onstage and offstage is shown.

The connection between the onstage fictional place and the offstage estranging context is also signalled in the script via another non-verbal localisation technique: aural signs. In *Tinderbox*, the offstage locations contiguous to the onstage space, what semioticians call the ‘localised off’, are conveyed not through the words of the characters, but via aural signs emerging from the opening and closing of the shop door.³⁷ The script reinforces the

³⁶ Ubersfeld, p. 122.

³⁷ I use Gay McAuley’s term here, as its meaning is easily intuitive: the localized off are ‘places that are contiguous with those onstage, immediately accessed through a door or stairway or partially glimpsed through a

estrangement of the fictional world outside by signalling disturbing noises when the shop door is propped open. Early on in the play, for instance, the text reads: ‘*The sound of a riot; angry crowds, sirens, dogs barking, glass smashing*’.³⁸ The indications of sound effects in the script coming in from outside causes ‘the invisible’ to ‘invad[e] and overcom[e] the visible’.³⁹ The auditory space of the immediate vicinities of the shop enters for a moment the onstage space, imposing its presence and marking its significance to the audience of the play. Before the map is shown and the characters have the chance to disclose more details on the external context of the play, such aural signs make clear that what lays outside the shop is not all peace and quiet. Although the significance of the riotous sounds offstage may not be immediately clear to the audience, these will soon complement the picture (painted by the characters’ words) of an estranged version of the UK.

To convey the estrangement of the fictional place of the shop, not only does *Tinderbox* rely on stage directions, significant objects, and aural cues, but also on the odd behaviour of its characters. When discussing estrangement in novels, Suvin suggests that to create a convincing estranged world, a fictional universe needs to embrace the *novum*’s totalising reach, and that its innovations need to integrate ‘crucially important aspects’ of the narrative, including the ‘agents’ of the story.⁴⁰ This is also applicable to the spatial estrangement of plays: the presence of characters whose behaviour is atypical and somewhat ‘estranging’ can contribute to convey

window’, while the unlocalized off ‘includes those places that are part of the dramatic geography of the action ... but which are not placed physically in relation to the offstage’. McAuley, p. 31.

³⁸Kirkwood, p. 7.

³⁹Here, I borrow Michael Issacharoff’s words describing a similar aural effect he noticed in Eugene Ionesco’s *Les Chaises* (1952). See Michael Issacharoff, *Discourse as Performance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), p. 61.

⁴⁰ Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. 64.

the play's difference from the contemporary reality and hint at their dystopianism. In the case of *Tinderbox*, the organisation of the fictional place of the shop and the character behaviour taking place within it are coherent with the norms of the wider society of *Tinderbox*, thus reflecting its contextual dystopian arrangements. In this regard, Moylan reminds us that 'crucial to dystopia's vision in all its manifestations is this ability to register the impact of an unseen and unexamined social system on the everyday life of everyday people'.⁴¹ In *Tinderbox*, the lives of ordinary citizens are impacted by the effects of a climate crisis which has caused the structures of communal living to break down. Indeed, the social dynamics at play inside the shop clearly indicate that the characters of the play live according to different social conventions than the ones of the audience. The most striking estranging practice within the shop is the trading of human meat. During the course of the play, we learn that when animal meat is not available, Saul resorts to the killing and selling of humans. The first instance of this behaviour is introduced comically when Saul and Vanessa offer Perchik to eat with them and present their guest with 'a stew of indistinguishable fleshy lumps' topped with 'a pair of NHS spectacles' belonging to their previous assistant.⁴² The play does not normalise such behaviour (Perchik still finds the practice abhorrent 'Whose are they, Saul? Are they – They're not – Jesus./ They're Frankie's. Aren't they, Saul? Saul? Saul?') but asks its audience to situate the practice in the context of a disintegrating Britain.⁴³ Additionally, the estranging nature of the onstage happenings is signalled by the normalised use of violence inside the shop. Like the police force operating outside which is reported to use extremely violent means to impart order

⁴¹ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, p. xiii.

⁴² Kirkwood, pp. 25, 26.

⁴³ Kirkwood, p. 28.

(Saul informs us that the police have ‘physically peel[ed] an Irishman’s kneecap off with just [their] bare hands and just because he didn’t have a passport!’). Saul and Perchik threaten and hurt each other and Vanessa in an endless cycle of power-games and violence: Saul repeatedly ‘smacks her [Vanessa] hard’ and sexually harasses her; he shoots Perchik and ties him up; Perchik eventually places him in the sack to be killed.⁴⁴ Such descriptions of character behaviour further convey the idea of the onstage setting of the play as estrangingly different from the audience’s contemporary situation. Together with the other non-verbal localisation techniques mentioned above, such textual clues express the strangeness of the onstage situation, but it is through the characters’ dialogue that we as audience come to realise the full extent of the play’s dystopian context. In what follows, I describe how the details of the play’s spatial estrangement is communicated via this dialogue.

3.2.2 Fictional Places: *The Dystopia Outside*

In the section above, I explained how non-verbal localisation techniques of stage directions, stage props, sound cues and character behaviour are used to convey the estrangement of *Tinderbox*’s onstage fictional place. I have also started to suggest that it is the interplay of those non-verbal strategies and of other verbal modes of localisation which firmly establish the dystopian nature of the estranged world of the play. Verbal localisation techniques are, quite simply, ways in which ‘the spatial context is portrayed or referred to in the figure’s utterances’: how characters describe to the world of the play.⁴⁵ Pfister, whose term I borrow for my analysis, warns that the characters’ spatial accounts can be subjective, as they are linked to each

⁴⁴Kirkwood, pp. 12, 31, 30, 77, 86.

⁴⁵ Pfister, p. 267.

speaker's unique perspective.⁴⁶ The danger in trusting the characters' descriptions is that they may provide a biased account of their context, and that such descriptions lack the 'objective external involvement' of a novel's author which Klaić's analysis praised.⁴⁷ However, since it is the overall functioning of the society outside that we are interested in, and given that the version of opposing characters seems to match up, there is no reason to suspect that what is described by the characters of *Tinderbox* is a false representation of what is happening in its dramatic universe.

In *Tinderbox*, verbal localisation techniques are used to refer to the fictional places offstage, which represent the outer context of the play's fictional world. The geographies and temporalities of the fictional places offstage create spatial estrangement by clearly distancing the world of the play from our current reality through the establishment of a coherent and sustained fictional *novum*. Suvin taught us earlier that the *novum* is supposed to represent the dreams or (more appropriately for our context) nightmares of its implied addressees. Via the characters' words, the script expresses the shared fears that the playwright targeted with her writing: the social consequences of climate change, including the effects of unbridled nationalism. Through an early exchange between Saul and Perchik, for instance, the audience learns more of the geographical arrangement of the UK. In Saul's words: 'Essex [is] underwater and Dorset [is] dissolving into the sea like sherbet'.⁴⁸ Furthermore, he suggests that as the water level raised the 'arse—end of London proper [was] flooded so that more salubrious

⁴⁶ Pfister, p. 268.

⁴⁷ Klaić, p. 46.

⁴⁸ Kirkwood, p. 26.

postcodes should be saved'.⁴⁹ From these few words, the audience can begin to fathom the exacerbation of inequality which followed the unspecified climatic events. Through such conversations, it also becomes clear that the face of Britain's society has also been dramatically transformed in other ways: people are "hungry" the delivery man tells Saul, to the point where carrying the bleeding sack of meat to the shop "S' like trying to carry a sugar cube through a sea of ants out there!".⁵⁰ "There's nae jobs anywhere" according to Perchik, who is extremely surprised to be offered the position of assistant at Saul's shop.⁵¹ The picture painted by the characters' verbal accounts of the social challenges in the aftermath of the main climatic event leaves room for little doubt in the audience of the estranged dystopian context of *Tinderbox*.

To complement the spatial estrangement established via the description of the spaces of *Tinderbox* and give full force to its *novum*, Kirkwood also provides indications of the play's temporal distancing from our world. Adam Stock noted that, in literature, dystopian narratives typically project their chosen issues of critique 'forward into a narrated future to look back critically toward the (authorial) present in fragments littered throughout the story'.⁵² I suggest that an equivalent strategy is also adopted in dystopian theatre. In plays, too, the audience must collect the historical fragments scattered throughout the narrative, which, following Stock, I term 'future histories'.⁵³ In a theatrical context, audiences are also able to access hints of future histories visually and aurally, as an estranged temporal placing can also be expressed via non-linguistic systems (such as the map). However, there are undeniable challenges in representing

⁴⁹ Kirkwood, p. 19.

⁵⁰ Kirkwood, p. 6.

⁵¹ Kirkwood, p. 11.

⁵² Adam Stock, 'The Future-as-Past in Dystopian Fiction', *Poetics Today*, 37.3 (2016), 415–42 (p. 417).

⁵³ Stock, 'The Future-as-Past in Dystopian Fiction', p. 417.

time in the theatre, which can, for the most part be ‘designated as a referent but cannot be shown’ directly.⁵⁴ This is especially true for overall indications of temporal setting. For instance, the printed version *Tinderbox* alerts the reader to the fact that its action is set in Bradford ‘sometime in the twenty first century’, but this information cannot not be easily accessed by the audience in performance, unless it is purposefully inserted in the stage design.

Other than assessing and reviewing the visual and aural elements of the set, the audience of a dystopian play needs to seek for clues in the dialogue that make more explicit the dystopia’s future histories. In semiotic terms, the verbal localisation techniques indicating the chronological placement of a play in performance may be termed, borrowing Anne Ubersfeld’s expression, as ‘temporal indices’.⁵⁵ A few clear temporal indices are scattered throughout the dialogue. Saul mentions losing his and Vanessa’s children during the ‘2012 attacks on Stratford’.⁵⁶ The details of this event are not revealed (we are not even sure that the account is truthful, as it is a verbal localisation), but what is of interest nonetheless is the mention of the year 2012 as in the past – a date which was yet to come when the play premiered in 2008. Later in the text, Perchik refers to the year 2008 as the past when speaking to Vanessa: ‘So. Imagine it’s the past. Imagine it’s the year... 2008’.⁵⁷ These ‘temporal anchors’, as Ubersfeld also calls them, situate the present and the near future in the past, and place the here–and–now of the play sometime in the close future of the audience.⁵⁸ Ubersfeld speaks of temporal anchors exclusively in relation to past events, as her examples range from Shakespearean drama to

⁵⁴ Ubersfeld, p. 134.

⁵⁵ Ubersfeld, p. 139.

⁵⁶ Kirkwood, p. 21.

⁵⁷ Kirkwood, p. 73.

⁵⁸ Ubersfeld, p. 139.

Romantic plays. In these traditions, she argues, ‘temporal indications can have the effect of “presentifying” the historical past’.⁵⁹ As far as contemporary dystopian drama is concerned, I argue that these signs usually ‘presentify’ the future instead. Such mechanism has the power to estrange temporally the audience and bring in the historicising character of the *novum*.

As Moylan reminds us ‘the *novum* is meaningful only to the extent that it effectively intervenes in the author’s historical context’.⁶⁰ Indeed, the predictions of the play are clearly grounded in our present: neither climate change, nor the rising inequalities and calls to nationalist ideals are a fantasy sprung from Kirkwood’s imagination. Therefore, Britain’s catastrophic state must be understood as products of our times, which Kirkwood blends together in order to create her grim parody of a unambiguously English dystopia which, in addition to what already mentioned ‘attacks the familiar target of myopic Little Englandism’, to quote Michael Billington’s words.⁶¹ The differences in the temporal and geographical setting offstage between the audience’s reality and the play’s dystopian context create the necessary spatio-temporal estrangement that allow the audience to reflect on the tendencies of their own time, which are brought to their extreme consequences in the play.

Through the analysis of *Tinderbox*’s playtext, I have highlighted the possibilities for theatre to spatialise dystopian worlds. I have used *Tinderbox*’s example to illustrate the verbal and non-verbal localisation techniques available to theatre to convey spatial estrangement. The framework of spatial estrangement intends to capture the multiple ways through which the play-world is designed as separate from the contemporary reality while maintaining a

⁵⁹ Ubersfeld, 139.

⁶⁰ Moylan, ““Look into the Dark”: On Dystopia and the Novum’, p. 57.

⁶¹ Billington, ‘Theatre Review’.

‘historical’ connection to it. For most theatrical dystopias what is shown onstage in the form of a set is not sufficient to clearly establish a play’s *novum*. Instead, dystopian playtexts and performances often rely on the interplay of the on- and off- stage context to explore and justify the extent of their innovation. This can be conveyed both through the characters’ dialogue and via theatre’s other visual, aural, and material signifying systems.

3.3 Positional Estrangement

In the previous section, I developed and applied the framework of spatial estrangement, distinguishing among the complementary elements contributing to the composition of a scripted dystopian world. However, the spatial cues dotted within a playtext are not the only means through which a theatrical dystopian world can be conveyed. Positional estrangement is an additional layer of estrangement which involves one of theatre’s fundamental components: the audience. In fact, as Helen Freshwater writes, ‘the relationship with the audience provides the theatre event with its rationale’ and is therefore ‘indispensable’ to theatre itself.⁶² Positional estrangement harnesses such relationships: it consists in placing the audience in a paradoxical position to the play’s narrative, as both observers and addressees of the cognitive propositions that the dystopia advances. In this way, it functions as a means of ‘cognitive validation’ in Suvin’s terms, facilitating the critical process of associating the dystopian innovations presented in the play to the audience’s own circumstances.⁶³

Cognitive validation is one of Suvin’s criteria for the evaluation of the *novum*, one that shifts the critical process of apprehending its propositions outside the text.⁶⁴ In an article co-

⁶² Helen Freshwater, *Theatre and Audience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 2.

⁶³ Suvin, *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction*, p. 38.

⁶⁴ Cf. Moylan, “‘Look into the Dark’: On Dystopia and the Novum”, pp. 59–60.

written with Marc Angenot, Suvin clarifies that the critical validation of estranged realities must necessarily incorporate the reader, viewer or critic into ‘the structure of what is being beheld’ thus permitting ‘the provisional method situated within it to be integrated into social practice and to become self-corrective on the basis of social practice’.⁶⁵ By involving the reader into the work, the *novum* is made tangible and its propositions can be considered as valid alternatives to the current social practices, which are revealed as changeable. What I call positional estrangement favours an equivalent process in the theatre, as it enables the incorporation of the audience into the dystopian narrative and allows the spectators to engage with the social propositions that dystopia presents. This section investigates such process through the example of Stef Smith’s *Girl in the Machine* (2017) by detailing how, through the presentation of its *novum*, the narrative posits the audience as a ‘you’ in Alice Rayner’s framework of ‘multiple subject positions’.⁶⁶ The spectators experience such ‘you’ positioning from fleeting onstage spaces, which following Joanne Tompkins I call heterotopic: these are locations that ‘when apparent in a performance, reflec[t] or commen[t] on a site in the actual world, a relationship that may continue when audiences leave the theatre’.⁶⁷

Girl in the Machine (directed by Orla O’Loughlin) premiered at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh in 2017. I take the play as my chosen example to explore positional estrangement since such effect is crucial to the contemplation of the play’s dystopian propositions. The central ‘gadget’ (using Suvin’s term) of the story signifying its *novum* is a technological device

⁶⁵ Suvin, *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction*, p. 49.

⁶⁶ Cf. Alice Rayner, ‘The Audience: Subjectivity, Community and the Ethics of Listening’, *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, VII.2 (1993), 3–24 (p. 6).

⁶⁷ Joanne Tompkins, *Theatre’s Heterotopias: Performance and the Cultural Politics of Space*, Contemporary Performance InterActions (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 1.

called Black Box. Black Box is an electronic headset connected to the internet which is initially meant to relax its users and remove them from the troubles of their daily lives via a combination of ‘brainwaves’, heartbeat synchronisation, and ‘visions’.⁶⁸ As the story develops Black Box shows its darker side: the device is linked to a faceless corporation (‘There is no known maker of Black Box. We can’t find a trace of it ever existing before it... existed’) pushing its users to leave their bodies behind and ‘upload’ their consciousness online, resulting in mass suicides.⁶⁹ This dystopia set ‘not too far into the future’ is presented via the struggles of a young married couple, Polly and Owen.⁷⁰ Initially, Owen gifts Black Box to Polly to help her manage her stressful life. However, as the play progresses, Polly comes to rely heavily on the device to cope with her depression and anxiety (‘I just want... wanted to be better’), until the technology absorbs her entire existence: by the end of the play she chooses to pursue a body-less life, uploads her consciousness online and leaves Owen alone to fight for an analogue future.⁷¹

Trish Reid describes the play as a dystopia of ‘technological transformation’ which depicts a world in which technological developments have worsened the conditions of life.⁷² Indeed, as a dystopia the play engages in contemporary debates on technology and virtuality and interrogates these contemporary issues by developing an alternative paradigm highlighting the dangers of our addiction to tech devices. In exploring what the *Guardian* termed ‘the dilemmas of digital dependency’, however, Smith does not stop at presenting the ‘exclusionary relationship humans have with their smartphones’ which Andrew Edwards noted in his review

⁶⁸ Stef Smith, *Girl in the Machine* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2017), p. 5.

⁶⁹ Smith, pp. 31, 28.

⁷⁰ Smith, p. 4.

⁷¹ Smith, p. 38.

⁷² Reid, p. 81.

for *Exeunt*.⁷³ Through her writing (and subsequent production arrangements), Smith lets her audience peek into the virtual world of the Black Box, allowing them to understand its allure and potential dangers. In fact, when Black Box is activated the audience can exclusively witness Polly's interactions with the machine, which other characters cannot hear. Spectators can intimately observe the sense of calm and 'bliss' that the device brings to Polly's mind, while also clearly recognising the destructive effects on her corporeal life.⁷⁴

In theatrical terms, such a double placement of the spectator can be fruitfully analysed using Alice Rayner's model of the 'multiple subject positions' of an audience.⁷⁵ Rayner maintains that dramatic forms 'construct a position for an audience, whether by a mode of address, by aesthetic practices (such as darkening the theatre), or by discursive practices'.⁷⁶ She uses pronominal forms ('I', 'we', 'it/they', 'you') to describe different audience subject positions. These can change within a play as well as operate simultaneously; as audience members 'can occupy multiple positions in the same way that a pronominal subject can occupy various positions'.⁷⁷ I argue that the subject position inscribed in the playtext of *Girl* establishes the audience's position as a 'you', in Rayner's terms. In the 'you' position, 'the audience acknowledges the separate, distinct subjectivity of the performer not as a mirror but an

⁷³ Mark Fisher, 'Girl in the Machine Review – the Dilemmas of Digital Dependency', *Guardian*, 2017 <<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/apr/06/girl-in-the-machine-review-traverse-edinburgh-stef-smith>> [accessed 7 August 2020]; Andrew Edwards, 'Review: Girl in the Machine at Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh', *Exeunt Magazine*, 2017 <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-girl-machine-traverse-theatre-edinburgh/>> [accessed 7 August 2020].

⁷⁴ Smith, *Girl in the Machine*, p. 41.

⁷⁵ Rayner, p. 6.

⁷⁶ Rayner, p. 6.

⁷⁷ Rayner, p. 6.

alternative version of a subject'.⁷⁸ The spectators of *Girl* share Polly's experience of being in Black Box as they can access Polly's interior monologues and sensations. Yet they also retain the ability to observe Polly's gradual embracement of a virtual existence as a separate subject, as they cannot respond to Polly or influence her choice of abandoning her physical life. In dystopian theatre, this double viewpoint can enable positional estrangement.

Interestingly, in the case of *Girl*, positional estrangement simulates the experience of interacting with the virtual. In her *Virtual Theatres* (2004), Gabriella Giannachi explains that at the level of perception, the principal characteristic of virtual reality is its 'dichotomy'.⁷⁹ She suggests that viewers are 'both immersed within the virtual (in the sense that they are part of it) and interacting with it (and so they are separate from it)'.⁸⁰ Through the ambivalent positioning of the spectator in the dystopian narrative, Smith refuses to provide an uncomplicated value judgment on our relationship with technology and instead allows the spectator to assess such relationship through the viewing of the play. The cognitive validation of the play's *novum* is, in *Girl*, not only positional but experiential, in that it allows the audience to experience vicariously the state of 'in-betweenness' represented in the play. Indeed, virtual reality in Giannachi's words, is 'able to *double* the viewer's sense of location and experience, *and* accent it, to make a narrative of it'.⁸¹ Such blurring of place and positioning as multiple, virtual 'yous' causes the audience to occupy an abstract standpoint and spatiality in performance, which I define following Joanne Tompkins, as heterotopic.

⁷⁸ Rayner, p. 13.

⁷⁹ Gabriella Giannachi, *Virtual Theatres* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 123.

⁸⁰ Giannachi, p. 123.

⁸¹ Giannachi, p. 123.

When Black Box is turned on the virtual and the physical combine onstage, generating a temporary spatiality (which the audience inhabits with Polly) bearing the characters of a heterotopic space. In her *Theatre's Heterotopias* (2014), Tompkins explains that heterotopic spaces in the theatre 'enabl[e] audiences to discern some hint or inkling of another world, even one that it is otherwise invisible'.⁸² When a heterotopia manifest at the level of the plot of a play, it does so in the form of transient spaces, as in 'the isolation of the world in Tom Wingfield's memories in *The Glass Menagerie*' or the 'temporary alternative court in the Forest of Arden in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*'.⁸³ In *Girl in the Machine*, the heterotopian spatiality stems from Black Box, which when activated produces an acoustic fictional place accessible by Polly and the audience. The heterotopic space of the play is what allows positional estrangement to occur. In fact, when the virtual space manifests through the AI voice of Black Box, the audience hears both its instructions to Polly ('Welcome to Black Box'; 'We have automatically selected our relaxation mode') and her responses ('The rush. The flush. The glide of leaving it all behind').⁸⁴ This strategy permits audiences to follow the narrative arc between Owen and Polly, Polly's depression and Owen's attempts to keep her grounded in physical presence ('Because freedom isn't digital. [...] Freedom is you and me').⁸⁵ At the same time, it also allows them to understand the effects that the device has on Polly ('The other side is bliss'), which Owen cannot comprehend.⁸⁶ To paraphrase Suvin, through these

⁸² Tompkins, p. 6.

⁸³ Tompkins, p. 4.

⁸⁴ Smith, pp. 7, 20.

⁸⁵ Smith, p. 54.

⁸⁶ Smith, p. 41.

arrangements, the audience is included into the ‘structure’ of the work and can engage with the cognitive propositions of the present that the dystopia raises.

3.3.1 Cognitive Propositions

Thus far, I have defined positional estrangement as an effect which can convey (in addition to spatial estrangement) the dystopian nature of theatrical worlds. In particular, by placing the audience within the narrative (of the virtual, in the case of *Girl*), positional estrangement favours the cognitive validation of a play’s *novum*. Indeed, as Suvin maintains, the *novum* of any story must ‘be judged by how much the new insight into imaginary but coherent and this-worldly, that is *historical*, relationships it affords and could afford’.⁸⁷ In other words, the elements which make the plot estranged must stimulate reflection on the cognitive propositions of dystopia. Through their *novum*, dystopias propose an alternative order of things which is meant to make its audience look back at their present to evaluate its presuppositions. This process of cognitive validation, at the core of positional estrangement, is now explored through *Girl*.

As the *novum* of *Girl*, Black Box encourages the contemplation of our relationship to technology and its gadgets. The auditory space radiating from it assumes the quality of a heterotopic spatiality which, in Tompkins’ terms, allow for ‘a deeper exploration of the structures of power and knowledge’.⁸⁸ Crucially, Tompkins argues that when audiences perceive heterotopia in the theatre

they are presented with a sample of what spatial, structural, and political options might be tried out for evaluation, whether or not they are accepted as actual possibilities. Even

⁸⁷ Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. 81.

⁸⁸ Tompkins, p. 5.

rejecting selections affords the opportunity for audiences to decide which options are a step too far.⁸⁹

Girl presents to its spectators critical interrogations on the shifting nature of the relationship between humans, technology and its virtual spaces. By showing the interactions between Polly and Black Box, the play asks audiences to probe their own real-life approaches to smartphones, computers and AI devices. The play dramatizes such dilemmas through an extreme proposition, asking to choose definitively between virtual or corporeal life. Indeed, the dystopian narrative's turning point occurs when Black Box puts its users at a crossroads. Polly reports that the device asks

“Do you want to live forever – Yes? Or No?” And if you say yes – apparently – it begins to scan your brain, capturing not just the shape of your brain but the content too... somehow. Then your mind gets reproduced on a network and you leave behind your body... your mind, soul, consciousness digitally lives on... a new way of living, a type of consciousness that is unimaginable to us.⁹⁰

This question is not only addressed to Polly, but to potential audience members too, as, in the ‘you’ position spectators and characters ‘are partners in dialogue’.⁹¹ Through the double lenses of internal subjects and neutral observers, spectators are asked to assess the viability of the hypothesis put forward by the alternative organisation of Black Box’s virtual heterotopic space. Effectively, the audience are involved in Polly’s thought process since they can consider the issue from her point of view, while retaining the critical ability to discern the dangers inherent in her choices.

⁸⁹ Tompkins, p. 7.

⁹⁰ Smith, p. 28.

⁹¹ Rayner, p. 13.

The participation in Polly's decision-making process can be disturbing, as it stems from heterotopian spaces which, for Tompkins, 'unsettl[e] the world as we know it'.⁹² *Girl* challenges the established order by asking whether virtual presence is to be valued more than physical presence. In 'a relation of "second persons"' – as Rayner also calls the 'you' position – spectators are encouraged to empathise with Polly's draw to a new type of consciousness.⁹³ Viewers are encouraged to consider the prospect of a body-less and space-less life, in exchange for the physical existence that Polly cannot bear any longer ("Everything hurts. / Everything. / Everything is too bright and too loud and too ... much. Everything is just too much").⁹⁴ The play's proposal of the possibility of leading a completely virtual existence is disturbing because it places its audiences as someone in between participant and spectator: they too are asked to split their sense of presence between the virtual and the physical environment. In Rayner's terms, 'when the audience is a "you" the performer [and character] is also a "you" and this relation recognises a simultaneous subjectivity in which each subject is also an other'.⁹⁵ This being an 'other' while watching someone 'other' is potentially destabilising, and a consequence of dystopias' positional estrangement.

Positional estrangement, in the form of a temporary disruption of audience subjectivity, contributes to enrich the experience of dystopias in performance. From the vantage point of within and outside the narrative, the spectators are encouraged to reflect on the connections between the fictional propositions of dystopia and their own reality. As the in-between

⁹² Tompkins, p. 22.

⁹³ Rayner, p. 13.

⁹⁴ Smith, p. 44.

⁹⁵ Rayner, p. 13.

spatiality inhabited by the audience is constructed heterotopically, it fosters links with the audience's socio-political circumstances. In fact, according to Tompkins, heterotopias' power 'is derived from being read *against* a context of the real or actual world'.⁹⁶ Reading *Girl*'s estranging spatial proposition against our own context makes us reflect on the current use of technology and the effects it can have on real social and political systems. In his *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture* (2006), Matthew Causey advances the 'hope that new technologies might offer new ways of constructing subjectivity or of glimpsing or glancing beyond what is knowable'.⁹⁷ However, he also warns against the false belief that 'the phantasms of human consciousness that haunt our psyches can ever be erased, escaped or undone' by resorting to the virtual.⁹⁸ *Girl*'s narrative arc stimulates similar reflections. The play debates the validity of the virtual as a realm for consciousness, and Polly's final decision to 'upload' herself points exactly at the desire to escape from her own self. When engaging with this set of questions in the 'you' position, members of the audience are asked to ponder on their own relationship with the digital. They are not encouraged to look at *Girl* as a mirror, as the spatialised *novum* of the story estranges the play's world from the audiences', yet as 'yous' the spectators are directed to look back at their contemporaneity and question their choices in relation to their own virtual relationships.

3.4 Material Estrangement

My analysis so far has covered two of the three key varieties of theatrical estrangement: the textual techniques to convey the details of a scripted dystopian world (spatial estrangement),

⁹⁶ Tompkins, p. 7.

⁹⁷ Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 54.

⁹⁸ Causey, p. 54.

and the positional strategies that further the reflections on dystopia's cognitive propositions (positional estrangement). In this final section, I discuss the workings of material estrangement, defined here as the effects of the interactions between the audience and the materialized settings of dystopian productions. Suvin maintains that when faced with an estranged narrative, readers experience a 'feedback oscillation' which

moves now from the author's and reader's norm of reality to the narratively actualised *novum* in order to understand the plot-events, and now back from those novelties to the author's reality, in order to see it afresh from the perspective gained.⁹⁹

In theatre, such feedback oscillation does not only involve text and reader, but rather a more complex network of signifiers including the *novum* as expressed in the text, the realisation of that *novum* in performance as *mise-en-scène* by the production team, and the interpretative capabilities of the spectators. Crucially this process, which is as much cognitive as it is creative, requires the cooperation of artists *and* audiences in the interpretation of theatrical dystopias.

I suggest that for the audience to experience the material estrangement of dystopia, dystopian productions need to facilitate an emancipated spectatorship as defined by Jacques Rancière. Rancière claims that the 'emancipation [of the spectator] begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting', when we realise that 'spectators see, feel and understand something as much as they compose their own poem, as, in their way, do actors or playwrights, directors, dancers or performers'.¹⁰⁰ If, according to Rancière, all audiences assume a productive role in the 'refashioning' of performance, the spectator of dystopian

⁹⁹ Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. 71.

¹⁰⁰ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott, Paperback (London: Verso, 2011), p. 13.

theatre not only ‘observes, selects, compares, interprets’ the signs of the stage, nor does she exclusively link what she sees to ‘other things she has seen on other stages, in other kinds of place’.¹⁰¹ She will need to piece together the estranging signs of the dystopian stage and relate them to her own world. Crucially, an estranged production, like estranged fiction in Patrick Parrinder’s analysis, ‘needs to change our view of our own condition, and not simply momentarily dazzle us with a superficially unfamiliar world’.¹⁰²

Material estrangement can be achieved through the pursuit of a scenographic presentation of the world of the play which points at significant referents of the play-world but leaves interpretative autonomy to the emancipated spectator. Indeed, when materialising a dystopian space in production, theatre-makers must account for what Rancière calls ‘aesthetic efficacy’.¹⁰³ Creatives should not ‘assume that what will be perceived, felt, understood is what they have put into their dramatic art or performance’, rather they should accept that the meaning-making process resides in the interaction between their art and the audience.¹⁰⁴ What occurs are ‘processes of dissociation: a break in a relationship between sense and sense – between what is seen and what is thought, what is thought and what is felt’.¹⁰⁵ The implications of this aesthetic break for dystopian theatre is that audiences and theatre practitioners are complicit in the negotiation of how the *novum* of the production is interpreted and how it is related to the contemporary world.

¹⁰¹ Rancière, p. 13.

¹⁰² Parrinder, ‘Revisiting Suvin’s Poetics of Science Fiction’, p. 40.

¹⁰³ Rancière, p. 63.

¹⁰⁴ Rancière, p. 14.

¹⁰⁵ Rancière, p. 75.

3.4.1 *Pomona as a Resistant Text*

Pomona (2014) by Alistair McDowall is the work that I have chosen through which to explore material estrangement in this chapter. Its text is deeply ambiguous in the presentation of its narratives and spaces, leaving the interpretation of the *novum* open for directors, scenographers and spectators. In its unfixed form, *Pomona* approaches the postdramatic mode which, in David Barnett's words 'aims to suspend linearity or at least to make it highly problematic in performance so as to mediate a rich and unprivileged flow of material that is concerned not with action but with a circumstance or a condition'.¹⁰⁶ Such ambiguity in the presentation of setting and narrative (the details of which I illustrate below) complicates the play's classification as a dystopia, since the genre's typical function of critique and intervention in contemporary issues is not foregrounded as obviously as in the *dramatic* dystopias encountered so far. However, in its refusal to represent one stable narrative, *Pomona*'s playtext potentially allows for multiple readings of its *novum* and of its relationship with the now. This makes it an ideal work through which to investigate material estrangement, since it allows me to illustrate how different staging arrangements and spectating relations are able to convey various interpretations of a dystopian *novum*, whose meanings and functions are to be negotiated by emancipated spectators during performance. To do so, after exploring the postdramatic qualities of the play, I analyse the scenographic arrangements of the first three productions (2014-2015) each of which was directed by Ned Bennett, and reveal the possibilities for material estrangement – and its effects on the audience – of a postdramatic dystopia.

¹⁰⁶ David Barnett, 'When Is a Play Not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 24.1 (2008), 14–23 (p. 16). The postdramatic was first theorised by Hans-Thies Lehmann in his *Postdramatic Theatre* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

Pomona's narrative structure makes it a 'resistant' text, rather than a dramatic one.¹⁰⁷

The former term pertains to the postdramatic mode, a term popularised by Hans-Thies Lehmann at the end of the 1990s to describe a key shift in a theatre form that was steering away from drama intended as a unified narrative of crisis that could attempt to represent the world, and was proposing instead a 'rejection of the mimetic in search of the solely performative'.¹⁰⁸ Lehmann maintains that the dramatic mode 'does not reflect structures of reality but imposes a certain model and framing' onto it.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, drama proposes an ordered version of the world which does not reflect the complex, unfocused and nonlinear aspects of the everyday. In contrast, as David Barnett elegantly expresses, the postdramatic offers a 'theatre beyond representation' which does not aim for a single message, and that is fluid in the presentation of the external world and its temporal dynamics.¹¹⁰ In postdramatic theatre 'referentiality starts to break down' and 'the link between the world of the stage and the world around us becomes strained and, on occasion, snaps completely'.¹¹¹ Crucially, the spectators are left to interpret such connections in the arena of performance, combining clues from the dialogue and the materialised scenography to construct their own version of the postdramatic dystopian play.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Karen Jürs-Munby, 'The Resistant Text in Postdramatic Theatre: Performing Elfriede Jelinek's Sprachflächen', *Performance Research*, 14.1 (2009), 46–56.

¹⁰⁸ Marvin Carlson, 'Postdramatic Theatre and Postdramatic Performance', *Revista Brasileira de Estudos Da Presença*, 5.3 (2015), 577–95 (p. 583).

¹⁰⁹ Hans-Thies Lehmann, 'Word and Stage in Postdramatic Theatre', in *Drama and/after Postmodernism*, Contemporary Drama in English (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2007), XIV, 37–54 (p. 46).

¹¹⁰ Barnett, 'When Is a Play Not a Drama?', p. 15.

¹¹¹ David Barnett, 'Performing Dialectics in an Age of Uncertainty, or: Why Post-Brechtian ≠ Postdramatic', in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political. International Perspectives on Performance.*, ed. by Karen Jürs-Munby, Jerome Carroll, and Steve Giles (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), pp. 47–66 (p. 65).

As a dystopian text approaching the postdramatic, *Pomona* defies a clear presentation of its narrative and spatiality, offering instead a ‘riddling structure’, as Dan Rebellato termed it, which allows for multiple readings of its dystopian *novum*.¹¹² The play is composed of two strands whose characters, spaces and temporal planes intertwine, encouraging in the spectators an impossible pursuit for the ‘real’ dystopian core of the *Pomona*. The first narrative follows the character Ollie’s quest for her missing twin in the depths of Manchester, while the second is centred on the narration of a Role Playing Game (RPG) by Charlie, a security guard working at the gates of Pomona. Pomona is the semi-fictional place where the two journeys converge and is the first locus of ambiguity of the play. In fact, Pomona is both a real site in Manchester – an abandoned strip of land in between tram tracks and the canals – and a fictional location in the play, which hosts the horrific underground hospital where organs are harvested to be sold. Pomona is described by characters as a ‘concrete island’ in Manchester, an obscure ‘hole in the middle of the city’ that ‘looks like what the world’ll be in a few thousand years’.¹¹³ Pomona’s contours are only sketched: ‘there’s one road in and out and it’s gated at both ends’; a powerful criminal is paid to leave it empty and out of sight, and the place often comes up in conversations ‘about people disappearing’.¹¹⁴ Thus, Pomona’s status as a place is largely left undetermined, adding a layer of uncertainty to the dystopia.

¹¹² Dan Rebellato, ‘Pomona’, *Dan Rebellato* <<http://www.danrebellato.co.uk/spilledink/2014/11/22/pomona>> [accessed 28 May 2019].

¹¹³ For an article celebrating the real Pomona see Hayley Flynn, ‘Pomona: The Lost Island of Manchester’, *Guardian*, 7 August 2014, section Cities <<http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/aug/07/pomona-lost-island-manchester-dockland-wasteland-oasis>> [accessed 22 January 2021]; Alistair McDowall, *McDowall Plays: 1: Brilliant Adventures; Captain Amazing; Talk Show; Pomona* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 317.

¹¹⁴ McDowall, *McDowall Plays*, pp. 317, 318.

The Manchester of the play is semi-fictional too: the cityscape that hosts the events is mostly anonymous, with scenes variously set in a ‘phone box’ (Scene 2), ‘under a bridge’ (Scene 4), in an office (Scene 11), a brothel room (Scenes 9, 13) or just ‘underground’ (Scene 14). There is an urban quality to the locations, conveyed through indications of sound (as in the stage direction ‘*Wet, dark, cars overheard*’), or dialogue (as in ‘They said to wait on that flyover at night and you’d pick me up’), but nothing gives it the substance of the real Mancunian cityscape.¹¹⁵ Furthermore, the game scenarios narrated by Charlie in his RPG overlap with this already vague spatiality, complicating its semi-fictional status. Being the RPG’s Dungeon Master, Charlie is in charge of inventing the worlds and challenges of the game: he effectively creates the world of the game through his narration.¹¹⁶ Crucially, the spatiality he produces is not material but auditory. Yet, the uncanny links with the missing girl storyline mean that some of his descriptions are essential for the understanding of the urban geography of the city. Indeed, the setting of the game closely resembles that of the fictional version of Manchester which is presented throughout the earlier scenes. In line with the postdramatic dissatisfaction with representations of the external world, the ambiguity in the presentation of the setting of the play contributes to establishing *Pomona*’s world as other, instilling in the spectator the sense of an alternative reality, subject to other rules.¹¹⁷ The setting is not Manchester, nor Pomona. It may be that of a game or it may be reality: in fact, it is all of

¹¹⁵ McDowall, *McDowall Plays*, pp. 324, 309.

¹¹⁶ For an overview of the rules and roles in *Dungeon & Dragons* see Paul La Farge, ‘Destroy All Monsters’, *Believer Magazine*, 1 September 2006 <<https://believermag.com/destroy-all-monsters/>> [accessed 19 March 2021].

¹¹⁷ On the problem of representation in postdramatic theatre see Barnett, ‘When Is a Play Not a Drama?’, pp. 14–15.

these at once. Instead of transforming the real Manchester into something clearly alien, *Pomona* works to confound the perception of its locales, estranging the spaces of its dystopia through an intentional ambiguity.

The indeterminacy of *Pomona* as a postdramatic text continues in the puzzling presentation of its narratives, which are open to multiple readings of the play's dystopianism. The first scene of the play establishes the premises of what I call the 'quest' narrative: Ollie's sister is missing after being embroiled in unspecified 'bad stuff' in Manchester.¹¹⁸ Ollie's goal is clear: 'I have to find her – / Because she's – She's my sister....I can't just – Abandon her – I can't stop thinking about it. About where she is. Or what happened, or – I have these nightmares about it. About things happening to her'.¹¹⁹ As the play progresses (albeit in a non-chronological ordering of scenes), the audience realises that Ollie's nightmares about her sister's fate are indeed very real: the missing twin is witnessed going through a terrifying underworld of prostitution (Scene 5), violence (Scene 9, 13), murder (Scene 3), and organ trafficking (Scene 19).¹²⁰ In its twisted and haunting vision, the themes and attitudes that permeate this strand of the play point at our own culture and time. As Rebellato puts it, the motifs of 'drugs, faddish religions, faceless corporations, pervasive capitalism, school shootings, pornography, prostitution, gaming and body horror' populating the play are 'a vision of us now'.¹²¹ I argue that by proposing a bleak version of the (sub)urban everyday, *Pomona*'s *novum* aims to expose the thin layer of normality separating its spectators from the underground

¹¹⁸ McDowall, *McDowall Plays*, p. 310.

¹¹⁹ McDowall, *McDowall Plays*, p. 113.

¹²⁰ The non-chronological order of the scenes is another sign of the postdramatic nature of *Pomona* and of its rejection of mimesis. See Barnett, 'When Is a Play Not a Drama?'

¹²¹ Rebellato, 'Pomona'.

criminal world that the play dramatises, reminding them of their closeness to their own urban dystopia. Indeed, in David Ian Rabey's words, the play's horror springs, 'from its manifest incorporation (and projection) of immediate tensions and details which can be identified in dysfunctional forms of urban community'.¹²² If what happens in *Pomona* (the inner-city location) is real and not just a game story, then this strand of the play sets the dystopia at our doorstep: the world it portrays is not just an extreme product of the imagination, rather a grim reinvention of dysfunctional forms of dystopian community already existent. If *Pomona* is not a game, there's no *novum*, no difference with our now. Moe, one of the characters, puts it best: 'It's all *real*. All of it. Everything bad is real'.¹²³

The second narrative has at its core the RPG 'Cthulhu Awakens' dungeon-mastered by Charlie, who is playing with Keaton, a mysterious character who may (or may not) be the mastermind behind most of the criminal activities of the quest narrative.¹²⁴ The game begins from the same premises of the quest story: a girl has disappeared 'under mysterious circumstances' and her twin sister is looking for her in a 'cold and lonely city'.¹²⁵ This second quest is set in a parallel supernatural world, where there is a cult trying to reawaken an octopus-headed mythical creature, Cthulhu, with the intent of 'begin[ning] a new dark reign of chaos'.¹²⁶ Cthulhu is a monster born from the American writer H.P. Lovecraft's imagination, who Charlie describes as an 'evil god'— representing 'a metaphor for the universe's apathy

¹²² David Ian Rabey, *Alistair McDowall's Pomona* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 72.

¹²³ McDowall, *McDowall Plays*, p. 399.

¹²⁴ Scene 15 seems to confirm her role in the criminal happenings, Scene 8 seems to deny it. Cf. McDowall, *McDowall Plays*, pp. 392–96; 345–52.

¹²⁵ McDowall, *McDowall Plays*, p. 340.

¹²⁶ McDowall, *McDowall Plays*, p. 339.

for us and the meaningless nature of life'.¹²⁷ Cthulhu embodies the *novum* of the game strand of the play, permeating with its darkness and uncanny incongruity the story narrated by Charlie. It expresses in monstrous form the dystopian anxieties permeating the suburban version of *Pomona*: drugs, prostitution, violence, and pervasive capitalism are all present in the game world like they are in the quest narrative. Even when dealing with a fictional rendering of his 'reality', Charlie cannot avoid acknowledging the dystopian qualities of his world. However, there is a clear difference to the interpretation of this strand of the play: if it is all a game the story is a cautionary tale of an alternative future, but it bears no real consequences for the world of today. It testifies to our ability to imagine evil, but it overall gives us the comfort to know that it is not real. It is the emancipated spectator in Rancière's sense that must make the decision about the significance of *Pomona*'s warnings: through an 'interplay of associations and dissociations' between what they see and their own experience, they will decide what *Pomona* really stands for, whether it is a dystopian game or an altered (but very tangible) reality.¹²⁸

The combination of the familiar and unfamiliar, of the fictional and the real, generates the estranged grounds from which this postdramatic dystopia presents its complex heart to the audience. As Marvin Carlson explains, the postdramatic is best described as 'blurring the lines between representation and reality', and this is exactly what *Pomona*'s entangled narratives and spatialities achieve.¹²⁹ The two strands intersect several times during the play, so much so that at points they merge and become indistinguishable. This is particularly marked in Scenes

¹²⁷ McDowall, *McDowall Plays*, p. 339.

¹²⁸ Rancière, p. 17.

¹²⁹ Carlson, 'Postdramatic Theatre and Postdramatic Performance', p. 593.

7 and 17, where what starts as Charlie narrating his RPG soon transforms into Ollie's journey into the depths of the underground Pomona; the script indicates that throughout the two scenes, unassigned dialogue is to be split among the characters 'as the director sees fit'.¹³⁰ The result, in performance, is a shared narration of the quest by Charlie, Ollie and the other characters: the tale is simultaneously game and reality, horror story and dystopia. Moreover, Cthulhu (which visibly signals the supernatural nature of the RPG world) is also spotted in the quest narrative: in Scene 1, Ollie is asked to pass several Rubik's cubes to a '*figure in a Cthulhu mask*' quietly sat in the back seat while driving around the city with a man giving her information about her sister's location.¹³¹ The presence of the figure is not questioned nor explained, adding an ambiguous layer of supernaturalism to an otherwise plausible quest. Therefore, what happens in *Pomona* is both game and reality, its urban space both fictional and material. Its enigmatic structure means that we will never know what is happening for sure at any one point, whether the story of the two twins is real or if it is just the product of the RPG created by Charlie. As 'a postdramatic theatre-text' in Barnett's definition, *Pomona* 'refuse[s] to represent and leave[s] all possible readings open'.¹³²

Pomona's indeterminacy of narratives and spatialities is closely bound to its postdramatic form. In short, the play is puzzling precisely because it does not try to reorder the world that inspires it. Different interpretations of the two narrative strands may lead to changing understandings of the dystopian message of the play: it does matter whether it is all a game or not, as the answer can tell us what to make of the play's warnings, or even what such warnings

¹³⁰ McDowall, *McDowall Plays*, p. 296.

¹³¹ McDowall, *McDowall Plays*, p. 307.

¹³² Barnett, 'When Is a Play Not a Drama?', p. 21.

really mean. However, despite the (necessary) literary analysis of its abstract meanings, the real negotiation of *Pomona*'s dystopian vein must take place in the theatre where it will be inevitably mediated through the material elements of the stage. Indeed, in the process of staging *Pomona* any production team will need to make choices which restrict the indeterminateness of the postdramatic text and decide what to re-present onstage. In the arena of performance, the audience is confronted with the materialised dystopia, and it is here that the material estrangement – the specific meaning-making process of theatrical dystopia – happens. In dystopian theatre, production arrangements such as audience positioning and scenography must promote an emancipated spectatorship which rejects the role of the audience as passive receivers and instead encourages a co-negotiation of the functions of theatrical dystopias. In the final section of this chapter, I illustrate this mechanism by taking *Pomona*'s first three productions as an example.

3.4.2 Materialising Dystopias

In my definition, material estrangement is the effect of the interaction between spectators and the materialised world of theatrical dystopias. I selected *Pomona* as a key play through which to explore this process because, as a text approaching the postdramatic, it generates ambiguities which open different avenues for the presentation and interpretation of its dystopian *novum*. It follows that the outcomes of the interaction between spectators and the theatrically materialised world of dystopia will differ at each exchange, depending on the choices of scenography and the implicit subject positioning of the audience.¹³³ Even though the first three productions of

¹³³ It is necessary to note here that the individual understanding dystopia's meanings is, of course, variable and is dependent on the affective quality of the theatrical experience. I further explore these themes and claims in the next chapter.

Pomona — at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama (2014), Orange Tree Theatre (2014), and the National Theatre (2015) — were all directed by Ned Bennett, the variations in budget, cast and particularly in the performance space meant that the three shows approached the ambiguity of the text in significantly different ways. Crucially for this thesis, I argue that this affected the nuances of the dystopianism conveyed by each of the productions of the same postdramatic play, or, in other words, the attributes of its material estrangement. In what follows, I analyse the changing attitudes towards the postdramatic *Pomona* concentrating on the scenographic presentation of its spaces, with the aim of exploring the various possibilities for material estrangement of a dystopian play. To do so, I combine scenographic analysis of the productions with reflections on their power to facilitate an emancipated spectatorship; I describe the qualities of these experiences by returning to the model of subject positioning theorised by Rayner and deployed in the previous section.

When asked to reflect on his first approach to the staging of a play ‘as strange as this’ in a 2015 post-show interview, Bennett illustrated his journey toward *Pomona*. He said:

Cardiff [Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama] became for me a way of ... slowly understanding the story. [...] What became very clear in Cardiff was the importance of atmosphere and the importance of creating a feeling in the room. What we refined between Cardiff and the Orange Tree and then here [National Theatre] is how much we let it breathe as a puzzle.¹³⁴

In my critical terms, what Bennett is describing here is his experimentation with different modes of material estrangement. Letting the play’s puzzle ‘breathe’ necessitates not imposing a definitive interpretation over the play. In the case of *Pomona*, this means making sure that

¹³⁴ Ned Bennett and Alistair McDowall on *Pomona*, 2015 <<https://www.mixcloud.com/NTTalks/ned-bennett-and-alistair-mcdowall-on-pomona/?play=fb>> [accessed 28 January 2021].

the production preserves the distinctive indeterminacy of the text by placing on the same level the quest narrative and the RPG chronicle. Such an effect can be pursued through a series of directorial choices about scene blocking (How is the space used in different moments?), casting decisions (Are the twins played by the same actor?), and particularly in terms of scenography. Indeed scenography — intended here as ‘the manipulation and orchestration of the performance environment’ — plays an important role in creating the ‘atmosphere’ and the ‘feeling in the room’ that Bennett commends above.¹³⁵ In an effort to preserve the ambiguity of the play, Bennett and designer Isa Shaw-Abulafia opted for what critic Vincent Longman calls a ‘floating stage’ in all three productions.¹³⁶ In Longman’s terms, a floating stage is a neutral stage which is ‘made to represent a number of specific places within [a] general locale’, in this case the semi-fictional city of Manchester and its darkest corner, Pomona.¹³⁷ By having an undifferentiated urban space as the background to all onstage action, all three productions situated the narrative in a metropolitan world in-between fiction and reality, an uncanny cityscape whose spatial and temporal boundaries could constantly fluctuate. However, each production realised the performance space according to distinct organising principles, placing emphasis on different aspects of the narratives, and offering dissimilar spectating experiences for their audiences. I consider each of these arrangements in turn, and examine their effects on *Pomona*’s dystopia.

¹³⁵ Joslin McKinney and Philip Butterworth, *The Cambridge Introduction to Scenography*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 4.

¹³⁶ Stanley Vincent Longman, ‘Fixed, Floating and Fluid Stages’, in *The Theatrical Space*, ed. by James Redmond, *Themes in Drama*, 9 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 151–60 (p. 138).

¹³⁷ Longman, p. 158.

Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama (2014)



Figure 1- Photograph of the stage at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama designed by Isa Shaw-Abulafia. The picture (by Kirsten McTernan and Isa Shaw-Abulafia) shows the asphalt-like flooring and the urban style of the performers' costumes. Source: <http://isashaw-abulafia.com/designed/pomona/>.

McDowall was originally commissioned to write *Pomona* by the Royal Court and the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama in 2014.¹³⁸ Its first run was thus a student production directed by Ned Bennett, staged in the Richard Burton Theatre in Cardiff.¹³⁹ I argue that, in semiotic terms, this first staging signified as an 'image' in that it aimed to mirror 'the appearance of the things to which [it] refer[red]'.¹⁴⁰ Crucially, the urban qualities of the play were the main things evoked by the staging, which placed great emphasis on *Pomona*'s

¹³⁸ McDowall and Bennett.

¹³⁹ The playtext of this first version is also slightly different from the final script now available in print, as McDowall explains in an interview. The interview is available to listen on Mixcloud, McDowall and Bennett.

¹⁴⁰ McKinney and Butterworth, p. 159.

physical spatiality as a cityscape. Indeed, the city setting was signalled scenographically through the cracked, asphalt-like floor, enclosed in a small black box space (Figure 1). To borrow from Erika Fisher-Lichte's terminology, as an image *Pomona*'s stage aimed to 'stylise the location', rather than represent its details.¹⁴¹ Indeed, the stage space in this first production signified a generic version of a run-down landscape, with no particular connection to the fictional places of the play. In line with the non-specific indications of place in the script – a dystopian trope for postdramatic plays – the set decoration was 'intended merely to suggest th[e] place in vague terms' rather than 'to characterise it specifically'.¹⁴² The costumes also worked within this stylising logic to convey the sense of an urban environment: sneakers, bomber jackets, beanies and backpacks were used as common signifiers of city life. At a first glance, then, the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama stage was supposed to indicate the urban placement of the play to the audience, thus drawing an implicit connection to the urban quest narrative evolving in such fictional environments.

The only way in which the scenography signified the RPG storyline was through the figure in the Cthulhu mask, present onstage from the first scene but silent throughout the show (Figure 2). This troublesome character was the sole indication of the supernatural strain of the play in this production's scenography. Shaw-Abulafia, who created the set and the mask, explains the connections between the character and the urban setting of the play:

¹⁴¹ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Semiotics of Theater*, trans. by Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 103.

¹⁴² Fischer-Lichte, *The Semiotics of Theater*, p. 103.

I wanted the colours and textures of the Cthulhu mask to reflect the urban dystopian wasteland depicted in the play, as though the creature had risen up from cracks in the damaged concrete island; as though Cthulhu was born out of Pomona.¹⁴³

In Shaw-Abulafia's intentions then, the two competing spatialities of the play were to be connected by an iconic resemblance relying on 'outward appearance'.¹⁴⁴ Again, with the assistance of semiotics we can interpret the effects of such choices: as an image icon, the set combines a generic idea of an urban environment with the key element of the game narrative, thus 'encourag[ing] the spectator to perceive the performance as a direct image of the dramatic world'.¹⁴⁵ I suggest that the combination of the two narratives via the presentation of an 'image icon' set contributed to the creation of dystopian estrangement in two ways. On one hand, a clearly urban setting allowed the audience to recognise the world of the play as familiar and close to real-life experience. On the other, the presence of Cthulhu onstage as a character born from Pomona aimed at generating uncanny feelings in the audience, mixing the familiar with the unfamiliar. Despite the attempt to merge the estranging figure of Cthulhu with the landscape of the stage, the effect of this first scenographic arrangement was that of privileging the urbanity of the quest narrative at the expense of the fictional spatiality of the RPG game. In other words, through its staging choices, the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama production materially created a version of the world of the play whose material estrangement was biased toward the more realistic interpretation of the dystopian *Pomona*.

¹⁴³ Isa Shaw-Abulafia, 'The Making of the Mask', *Exeunt Magazine*, 2014

<<http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/the-making-of-the-mask/>> [accessed 28 May 2019].

¹⁴⁴ McKinney and Butterworth, p. 159.

¹⁴⁵ Elam, p. 24.



Figure 2 - The Cthulhu mask used in all three productions. In this picture it is worn by the actress playing Keaton (Sarah Middleton) in the National Theatre production. Photograph by Kirsten McTernan and Isa Shaw-Abulafia. Source: <http://isashaw-abulafia.com/designed/pomona/>.

It is worth remembering here that the interaction between the material environment of the stage and the audience is at the core of material estrangement. The negotiation of the meanings and messages of dystopia not only involves the physical appearance of the scenography as described above, but also the positioning of the audience within and in relation to it. The variations in the spectating relations – physically in relation to the stage, and theoretically as ‘subject positions’ – lead to different forms of the emancipated spectatorship governing the interactions between stage and audience, with consequences for the interpretations of theatrical dystopias. In the case of *Pomona* at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama, the performance space was *physically* arranged as an intimate end-on stage (see Figure 1) and, I argue, *theoretically* oriented to position the spectators as ‘I’s in Rayner’s model of subject positioning. Rayner describes the first person singular as a ‘consuming’ position in that as ‘I’ the audience member ‘views the stage from outside its self-imposed “fourth wall”’.¹⁴⁶ In this position, the spectator is ‘an eye and an ear’ that considers the

¹⁴⁶ Rayner, p. 8.

performance its ‘object’ of attention.¹⁴⁷ This position should not be assimilated to passivity, because as Rancière reminds us, audience members are always simultaneously ‘distant spectators and active interpreters’.¹⁴⁸ However, the strong contraposition generated by the single-point perspective in the stage organisation can encourage a voyeuristic attitude and a less interrogative relation with the ambiguities of the *novum* of the play. This, combined with a scenography which, as explained above, is designed to privilege one of the strands of the play (the urban quest) resulted in a production that tended to answer the central question of *Pomona*’s dystopia on behalf of its audience. Rather than letting the audience probe for themselves the central ambiguity of the play as emancipated spectators, this first production made its own interpretation almost explicit to the audience. Indeed, there were only tentative material hints of an additional layer to the play, leaving to the Cthulhu mask the onerous task of conveying alone the weight of the RPG narrative. Through its scenographic and spectating arrangements, this production said to the audience: this is real, the play is telling a sinister yet conceivable story which has little to do with a game. The tales of sex work, drugs and organ trafficking are the real monsters, not the mask-wearing characters. The dystopia, in this production, abandoned the realm of the fictional and presented itself as ‘somehow necessary, urgent, inevitable, and about us now’, as Rebellato put it in his review.¹⁴⁹

Orange Tree Theatre (2014) and National Theatre (2015)

As Barnett reminds us, ‘the (potentially) postdramatic text suggests itself as a relativized element for performance from the outset and points to its own indeterminacy and status as

¹⁴⁷ Rayner, p. 7.

¹⁴⁸ Rancière, p. 13.

¹⁴⁹ Rebellato, ‘Pomona’.

uninterpreted material’.¹⁵⁰ If in its first production *Pomona*’s postdramatic ambiguity was not reflected in its performance, the two subsequent renderings of the play allowed for a greater integration of the two narratives, and a freer interpretation of its own dystopian form. In the two professional productions of the play in London (first at the Orange Tree Theatre and then at the National Theatre) the complexity of the play was allowed to ‘breathe’ through both the scenography and the subject positions enabled for the spectators. These shows were still directed by Ned Bennett, but this time the set designs were realised by Georgia Lowe. Both of Lowe’s designs rejected a univocal interpretation of the relationship between the quest and the RPG narratives, while using different signifying strategies to convey their rapport. This, in turn, had the effect of creating complex intersections between the potential readings of the *novum* of the play and of favouring an interactive exploration of the material estrangement in *Pomona*’s dystopia.

I deploy semiotic terminology once again to characterise the aesthetic qualities of these stages, arguing that the Orange Tree’s stage signified as a ‘diagrammatic’ icon, while the National Theatre’s as a ‘metaphoric’ icon. Joslin McKinney and Philip Butterworth explain that a diagrammatic icon bears ‘a schematic likeness to the things to which they refer’, while a metaphorical icon would ‘operate by proposing conceptual rather than physical similarities between things’.¹⁵¹ On the Orange Tree stage, the main acting area comprised a rectangular sunken pit resembling a big dirty drain. Its surface was lined with stains of grime converging into the central sewer, giving the perspectival impression that everything onstage would eventually end up into this central point. Through key structural features of the stage,

¹⁵⁰ Barnett, ‘When Is a Play Not a Drama?’, p. 16.

¹⁵¹ McKinney and Butterworth, p. 159.

particularly the levelling of the acting platform and the drain, the scenography visually pointed at the underground narrative of the play, thus working diagrammatically (through a ‘rational relation’, in semiotic terms) to convey the cityscape *and* the subterranean layer of the quest narrative.¹⁵² The RPG narrative strand was also incorporated into the production design as a diagram, particularly through the deployment of a large printed image of Cthulhu, laid down to occupy most of the pit during the RPG description in Scene 6 (Figure 3). By integrating the complexity of the narratives of *Pomona* in its staging, the Orange Tree’s production allowed the dystopian uncertainty characterising the play to emerge from the scenography.



Figure 3 - The Orange Tree Theatre stage designed by Georgia Lowe. The characters of Keaton (Sarah Middleton) and Charlie (Sam Swann) are onstage playing the RPG. Staring at them from the edge of the stage is Zeppo (Guy Rhys). Photograph by Manuel Harlan. Source: <http://isashaw-abulafia.com/designed/pomona/>.

¹⁵² McKinney and Butterworth, p. 159.

The National Theatre stage retained the drain motif as well as the urban textures and colours of the OT production, while implementing some key strategies to integrate the RPG strand. Crucially, the National Theatre stage was modelled as a flat heptagonal area, evoking the contours of the multi-faceted dice that are used in role playing games (Figure 4). As a metaphor, the heptagonal shape of the stage ‘suggest[ed] likeness between themselves and the things to which they refer’, thus closely connecting the materialised environment of the play bearing explicitly urban features to the game motif and narrative.¹⁵³ In this production, during the game narration of Scene 6 there was nothing on the floor, because, as the character Charlie says: ‘Ah, you see, this isn’t like a normal board game, yeah? The board is actually our *imagination*’.¹⁵⁴ Thus, this set realised the central assumption of the play as the stage becomes the board, and the board becomes part of the urban ‘dystopian battleground’ (as one reviewer called it) on which all the narratives interact.¹⁵⁵ The structural integration of the two narratives of *Pomona* in the National Theatre staging arrangement facilitated a material estrangement that clearly reflected the ambiguity of the play: like the script which does not resolve the uncertainty of *Pomona*’s *novum*, neither does this materialised version of the play. The question of the relationship between *Pomona*’s world and ours is left open – the nature of its dystopianism is to be negotiated by the (emancipated) spectators in performance.

¹⁵³ McKinney and Butterworth, p. 159.

¹⁵⁴ McDowall, *McDowall Plays*, p. 339.

¹⁵⁵ Lee Anderson, ‘Pomona’, *Exeunt Magazine*, 2015 <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/pomona-2/>> [accessed 28 May 2019].



Figure 4 - The heptagonal set designed by Georgia Lowe for *Pomona* at the National Theatre. Once again, Keaton (Sarah Middleton) is onstage, this time with Ollie (Nadia Clifford). The other characters are onlooking, as indicated in the script. Photograph by Richard Davenport. Source: <http://isashaw-abulafia.com/designed/pomona/>.

The choice of preserving the ambiguity of *Pomona* in the staging of both the Orange Tree and the National Theatre productions was accompanied by a more explicitly inclusive design in terms of spectating relations. In fact, both productions opted for an in-the-round stage, which, according to McDowall, was ‘inherently built into the writing’.¹⁵⁶ In an interview, McDowall expands on the intended effect of such choice:

Sitting in the round in the theatre feels immediately more populous because you can see the rest of the audience. There’s an increased feeling of intimacy, and an increased

¹⁵⁶ Alistair McDowall, *Pomona* writer Alistair McDowall in discussion with Literary Associate Guy Jones, 2014 <<https://www.orangetreetheatre.co.uk/whats-on/pomona/education>> [accessed 5 February 2021].

sense of culpability, too. Actor and audience enter the space together, and they're in it together for the duration.¹⁵⁷

Indeed, according to the script, actors are to remain at the edges of the stage throughout the play.¹⁵⁸ McDowall's comment above suggests his intention to engender a strong sense of community in its audience during the experience of the play – both among participants and with the performers. The in-the-round format of the two productions enabled a creative participation in the co-creation of *novum*, affording an experience of emancipated spectatorship. Indeed, both set ups granted the audience the Rancièran power to 'learn and teach, act and know, as spectators who all the time link what we see to what we have seen and said, done and dreamed'.¹⁵⁹ In dystopian theatre, such reflective and relational thinking is inevitably directed at social dreaming: drawing from the individual and collective experience of the now, the audience of dystopia can learn to desire a better future.

The combination of the integrated scenography of the productions and of the intimate spectating relations favoured an emancipated spectatorship which was communal, which I describe by returning to Rayner's subject position of 'we'. The 'we' represents the 'collective community, the position of community ritual'.¹⁶⁰ As 'we's, meaning is generated simultaneously by spectators and performers, who 'jointly participat[e] in the ritual form'.¹⁶¹ The ritual, in *Pomona*, involves the negotiation of the meaning of the onstage happenings —

¹⁵⁷ McDowall, 'Pomona Writer Alistair McDowall in Discussion with Literary Associate Guy Jones'.

¹⁵⁸ According to the script 'there are no entrances or exits unless stated. They just/ Are'. McDowall, *McDowall Plays*, p. 296.

¹⁵⁹ Rancière, p. 17.

¹⁶⁰ Rayner, p. 9.

¹⁶¹ Rayner, p. 10.

which are at times game, at others reality. After all, in this position, the spectators' role is no different from that of the performers hanging around the stage: they are also waiting for their turn to co-create the narrative. They can put their 'experience into words and [their] words to the test' when confronted with the materialised worlds of *Pomona* and construct their own versions of the postdramatic dystopia.¹⁶²

It is important to observe, here, that the collective experience of dystopia does not exclude the individual processing of the signs of the stage. As Rayner suggests, the 'we' position 'recognises the joining together of multiple individuals as another possible dimension for human action in which the group has more force than the individual'.¹⁶³ The group of spectators in this sense participates jointly to the interpretation of the *novum*, but without leaving their individuality behind. Indeed, Rayner also points out that 'if this requires a suspension of myriad individual differences, it does not eliminate them'.¹⁶⁴ In the case of the two productions of *Pomona* under analysis, this means that the spectators will confront the materialised *novum* of dystopia together, as a community of spectators united by the same performative experience. Yet, crucially, the interpretation and meaning-making of what they see and think is mediated by their experience as individuals. In practice, for instance, an audience member who is not familiar with RPGs such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, will enter the performance space of the National Theatre regarding the heptagonal shape of the stage as a purely aesthetical choice. Their process of material estrangement is unlikely to factor in the shape of the stage as significant. On the contrary, an experienced D&D player entering the

¹⁶² Rancière, p. 11.

¹⁶³ Rayner, p. 12.

¹⁶⁴ Rayner, p. 12.

performance may readily recognise in the seven sides of the stage the faces of a dice used to play the game. Both of these imaginary spectators would participate in the performance's collective ritual of material estrangement, trying to identify through every twist and turn of the play its definitive meaning. However, the audience will also have widely different interpretations of the same scenarios and images, as they – as emancipated spectators – individually 'venture into the forest of things and signs' with their own previous knowledge and personal sensibility.¹⁶⁵ Each spectator's idea of the dystopian message and significance of the play will derive from the understanding gained by their participation in the collective ritual of performance, as well as from their extremely personal interaction with the production. If, to some extent, this process is common to all theatrical experience, in the case of dystopia this allows the interplay of the individual and collective perspective, fundamental to the critical consideration of our estranged shared future. In the final chapter, I will explain that the cognitive perspective must be accompanied by an affective evaluation of dystopia, if the education of collective desire is to be truly effective.

In this section, I have explained the functioning of material estrangement, as the process of interaction between audiences and the materialised worlds of dystopia onstage. I have argued that it is a cognitive and creative process, requiring the cooperation of theatre makers and audiences. Indeed, for audiences to contribute to the co-creation of the material *novum* of dystopia productions must facilitate emancipated spectatorship. This means that audiences must be put in the position to spontaneously draw their own interpretations of what they see onstage, and freely compare their own experience to what is presented to them. My case study

¹⁶⁵ Rancière, p. 11.

to exemplify this process was the play *Pomona*, selected for its postdramatic qualities and inherent ambiguities. I looked at the first three productions of the play to show how the variations in scenographic arrangements and in the distribution of the audience in the auditorium has the potential to influence the productions' material estrangement and the consequent co-creation of dystopia.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have developed a composite framework of estrangement which allows us to analyse the manifold aspects of theatrical dystopia. Starting from Suvin's understanding of the process of cognitive estrangement, I elaborated a model that attempts to reflect the 'totalising' [...] paradigmatic shift caused by the *novum*' in Suvin's words, thus able to account for 'a change of the whole universe of the tale, or at least crucially important aspects thereof'.¹⁶⁶ Through what I called spatial estrangement, I am able to explain how the spaces of dystopia can be constructed in a play's script, taking *Tinderbox* as a key example. Indeed, my model accounts for the creation of dystopia's spaces in the playtext, distinguishing between verbal and non-verbal localisation techniques. Positional estrangement builds on the insights of spatial estrangement and identifies how the point of view of the spectator can also be inscribed in the script of a dystopia. By critically analysing the ways in which a play such as *Girl in the Machine* situates a potential spectator in relation to its narrative, I am able to explore how dystopia defines the subject positioning of its audience in order to allow the consideration of the cognitive propositions of dystopia from unexpected perspectives. Finally, with the concept of material estrangement (explored through *Pomona*) I shifted my attention from dystopian texts

¹⁶⁶ Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*, p. 64.

to their realisation in production, specifically concentrating on the co-production of the materialised worlds of dystopia by spectators and theatre makers. My search for the estranging qualities of dystopian drama and theatre has evidenced that, at all levels, the spectator heavily contributes to the production of the theatrical worlds of dystopia through the intellectual interpretation of its signs and messages. Such a contribution is fundamental when it comes to dystopia, as the critical propositions that it furthers must be evaluated and assessed by the sensing audience. The next chapter will complement such research with the investigation of the affective components of such cognitive work, which are crucial to the realisation and comprehension of dystopia in performance.

Chapter Four – Feeling with the Body: Dystopia in Performance

4.1 Introduction

Throughout this thesis, I have stressed that dystopias, though showing projections of the future, always focus on issues of the present.¹ Like their ‘positive’ counterpart, utopias, dystopias work from an estranged standpoint to address contemporary socio-political frustrations and anxieties. Yet, as Ruth Levitas proposes, dystopias and utopias are not simply thought experiments; they represent a concrete effort ‘not just to imagine, but to make, the world otherwise’.² To do so, they must ‘operat[e] at the level of *affect* as well as *intellect*’.³ This proposition is echoed by Tyson Lewis who suggests a cognitive and an affective function for the genre: the cognitive works as the ‘critique of the present through the imaginative reconstruction of the future’, whilst the affective represents ‘opening up the possibility for hope, for desiring differently’.⁴ Theatre is fertile ground for this dual intellectual-affective experiment, since, as Erin Hurley suggests, it ‘intervenes in how we as a society come to understand ourselves, our values, and our social world’, and it does so in the context of a shared social experience in most instances.⁵ This occurs through what Hurley terms ‘feeling-labour’

¹ Indeed, even a contemporary adaptation of Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* will inevitably comment on the modern implications of the story for our times Cf. ‘1984 – Review’, *Guardian*, 2014

<<http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/feb/16/1984-review>> [accessed 10 February 2021].

² Levitas, *Utopia As Method*, p. xiii.

³ Levitas, 218.

⁴ Tyson Lewis, ‘Messianic Pedagogy’, *Educational Theory*, 60.2 (2010), 231–48 (p. 234).

⁵ Hurley, p. 10.

which is ‘the work that theatre does in making, managing and moving feeling in all its types’.⁶ By ‘doing things with feeling’, theatre uses affective means to involve its audiences in the cognitive world of the performance.⁷ In particular, dystopian performance uses the feeling-labour of theatre – its ‘affective economy’ to use Sarah Ahmed’s term – to stimulate an affective critique of the cognitive projections it presents. It is precisely such combination of the cognitive and the affective that makes theatre the ideal means to explore the societal questions that dystopia advances. After having explored the intricacies of content and form in dystopian drama and theatre in the previous chapters, this final chapter will consider the reception (or better, perception) of dystopian performance and explore how the affective potential of performance stimulates the critical function of dystopia.

Hurley maintains that theatre uses specific mechanisms, which she terms ‘feeling technologies’, to mobilise feeling-labour in performance. She mentions ‘lighting, architecture, and audience control’ among the theatrical means able to ‘direc[t] sense perception, increas[e] or dampe[n] emotional response in the audience, create[e] a mood, and so on’.⁸ Through the use of theatre’s diverse feeling technologies, dystopia in performance conveys its message using affective means, offering additional nuances to the dystopian worlds generally presented in literary form.⁹ I will illustrate how the feeling technologies analysed in this chapter – especially lighting, sound, scenography and rhythmic movement – contribute to developing the

⁶ Hurley, 9.

⁷ Hurley, 4.

⁸ Hurley, pp. 28, 40.

⁹ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 7.

feeling environment of dystopian performance and shaping audience response.¹⁰ However, it is crucial to clarify that no specific affect is attached to any dystopian feature or feeling technology and unilaterally transmitted to an audience. Following Ahmed, I suggest that ‘affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is an effect of the circulation between objects and signs’.¹¹ The subjective processing of affects (as non-signifying sensations) into emotions (as conscious recognition of such sensations) happens at the level of the individual body, as our subjective responses to affects are shaped by our past instances of contact, cultural histories, and personal memories.¹² This means that dystopian performance in particular provides an affective experience which, if comparable for all participants at the level of stimuli, is nonetheless felt and cognitively processed as an individual embodied process. This approach – which stresses that it is the ‘contact’ between people and objects (as theatrical mechanisms in our case) that determines our conscious feelings – appoints the individual’s body as the *locus* where the intellectual-affective engagement with the dystopian projection can take place.

Dystopia in performance places the audience in direct contact with their possible estranging future, not only by showing them what it might look like, but by allowing them to perceive with their body what it may *feel* like. Such a process necessitates an understanding of what Phillip B. Zarrilli would summarise as ‘how our relationship to the worlds we inhabit is constituted by our inter-sensory and inter-subjective engagement with those worlds’.¹³ It

¹⁰ Note that while in the previous chapter scenography was considered ‘statically’ for its effects on the audience’s cognitive powers of emancipated spectatorship, it is here intended as a feeling technology impacting the affective qualities of performance.

¹¹ Ahmed, p. 45.

¹² Ahmed, p. 7.

¹³ Phillip B. Zarrilli, *Psychophysical Acting: An Intercultural Approach after Stanislavski* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 46.

requires, I propose, a theory of embodied perception which is ‘enactive’, in the sense proposed by philosopher Alva Noë: ‘perception is not something that happens to us, it is something we do’.¹⁴ Again borrowing from Noë, I contend that perception, especially in a theatrical context, is a ‘skilful bodily activity’, one that combines active bodily and conceptual understandings.¹⁵ Crucially, according to Noë, ‘what we perceive is determined by what we do (or what we know how to do); it is determined by what we are ready to do’.¹⁶ Enactive perception allows audiences of dystopian theatre to discover the functioning of a dystopia via their ‘capacities for action and capacities for thought’.¹⁷ In other words, by perceiving dystopian performance in the ‘bodied space’ of theatre (to use Stanton Garner’s term) audiences can experience the consequences of their shortfalls as a society, and, in the best possible outcome, learn to desire better.¹⁸ Since, as Levitas established, the ‘desire for a better way of being or living’ is the essence of utopias and dystopias, the embodiment of our successes and pitfalls can help to articulate ‘who we are and who we might and should be’.¹⁹

This chapter explores what it means to have an embodied understanding of dystopia in performance and how the critical enquiry at the heart of the dystopian form can be felt through

¹⁴ Alva Noë, *Action in Perception* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: MIT Press, 2004), p. 1. The theory of enactive perception draws on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, James Gibson’s ecological theories, and cognitive science.

¹⁵ Noë, pp. 2, 33.

¹⁶ Noë, p. 1.

¹⁷ Noë, p. 1.

¹⁸ Stanton Garner, *Bodied Spaces* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994). For Garner, ‘Theatrical space is “bodied” in the sense of being comprised of bodies positioned within a perceptual field, but it is also “bodied” in the more fundamental sense of “bodied forth”, oriented in terms of a body that exists not just as the object of perception, but as its originating site, its zero-point’, p. 5.

¹⁹ Levitas, *Utopia As Method*, pp. xiii, 196.

the body in different performative contexts. It does so by exploring the performances of three very different dystopian works: the immersive performance of *Killer* written by Philip Ridley and staged at Shoreditch Town Hall (London) in 2017; the mixed-media performance of *Golem* by the production company 1927 at Oxford Playhouse in 2017; and the physical-theatre piece *The Wedding* by Gecko at Nottingham Playhouse (2018). The enactive perception of the spectators of such performances is guided by the interaction of two key elements of performance which directly impact the conditions under which the embodied understanding happens: first, the distribution of the audience in the auditorium (what the previous chapter called ‘spectating relations’); second, the various feeling technologies employed to structure the feeling environment. It follows that the feeling experience of theatrical dystopias will vary at each production and performance, as well as for each individual participant. To account for such variety in the perceptual experience of dystopian performance, my analysis deploys two related yet distinct frameworks of embodiment: the ‘thematization’ of the body as theorised by Drew Leder and the concept of ‘kinesthetic empathy’ as jointly conceived in Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason’s edited book *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*.²⁰ Both frameworks are useful to describe how the audience’s body interacts with the affects circulating in dystopian performance and its potential responses, but while Leder theorises an analytic distinction between internal sensations (‘the visceral body’) and external perception (‘the surface body’), kinesthetic empathy involves an integration of the two, as it implies an embodied knowledge rooted in the internal understanding of others’ physical and affective sensations. The former framework supports my analysis of the immersive performance of

²⁰ Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, ed. by Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason (Bristol: Intellect, 2012).

Killer at Shoreditch Town Hall (2017) by untangling the web of sensations and affects caused by the experience of being surrounded aurally by a dystopian environment, with limited possibilities for action dictated by the feeling technologies of light and sound. This promenade performance had audiences wearing headphones through which the live performer would tell his dystopian stories, while leading the spectators through three darkened tunnels, one for each episode. In such a setting, the audience could literally enact their perceptual experience and understand – through what Leder terms their surface and visceral bodies’ sensations – the effects of the social atomisation of dystopian environments on the self. Through my detailed analysis of these effects, I argue that the result is a dystopian experience that is only compensatory, in that it offers a thrill and a sense of relief for the safe overcoming of the projected future scenario.

On the other hand, I deploy the idea of kinesthetic empathy to analyse the two concluding case studies of the thesis, the 2017 performance of *Golem* by 1927, and *The Wedding* by Gecko in 2018.²¹ Because both productions were staged on a proscenium stage (the one in Oxford Playhouse and Nottingham Playhouse, respectively), they granted the audience an enactive perceptual experience of dystopia which is qualitatively different from the immersive performance of *Killer*. Spectators of such productions could not physically interact with the dystopian performance, yet their embodied understanding was enabled by kinesthetic empathy. Starting from the polyhedric examinations of the concept of Reynolds and

²¹ My account will mainly refer to *Golem*, by 1927, directed by Suzanne Andrade, Oxford Playhouse, Oxford, 13 June 2017; *The Wedding*, by Gecko, directed by Amit Lahav, Nottingham Playhouse, Nottingham, 3 February 2018. As well as my personal notes of these live productions, I used recordings of two other performances of the same run kindly provided by the companies. My thanks go to them for allowing me to access such material.

Reason's edited book on the subject, I use the term to mean the perceptual experience of connecting to other people's (and objects') physical and emotional sensations through the appreciation of their motor actions and rhythms.²² The concept is aligned with a phenomenological understanding of the dynamics of performance, but it places particular emphasis on the physical and emotional attunement to the movement of others.²³ I will argue that the affective cognition of the dystopian worlds of *Golem* and *The Wedding* passes through an empathetic understanding of its performance's dynamics, particularly the effects of the feeling technologies of scenography and music (in *Golem*), and rhythmic movement (in *The Wedding*). By analysing selected scenes/episodes from each performance, I demonstrate how the dystopian narratives of the plays communicate their respective functions of 'criticism' and Blochian 'militant optimism' through affective means. Overall, this chapter aims to highlight the specific ways in which theatre can enable critical enquiry of the present via its feeling-labour and how it can help (or hinder) the audience's potential to desire better futures.

4.2 Killer

Philip Ridley's *Killer* (directed by Jamie Lloyd) premiered in February 2017 at Shoreditch Town Hall (London) as a double bill with the revival of Ridley's debut play, *The Pitchfork*

²² Reynolds and Reason, *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*.

²³ For recent perspectives on theatre phenomenology see Stanton Garner, *Kinesthetic Spectatorship in the Theatre: Phenomenology, Cognition, Movement*, Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Maaïke Bleeker, Jon Foley Sherman, and Eirini Nedelkopoulou, *Performance and Phenomenology: Traditions and Transformations* (Routledge, 2015); Stuart Grant, Jodie McNeilly-Renaudie, and Matthew Wagner, *Performance Phenomenology: To The Thing Itself* (Springer, 2019).

Disney (1991), also a dystopian work.²⁴ The three dramatic monologues that form the play were staged in different rooms in the basement of the building ('the Ditch'), left for the most part bare to expose the derelict walls and bricks. The monologues are recounted by a single actor (John Macmillan in this first production) portraying different characters; his voice is transmitted to the audience via binaural headphones. Such technology, as one of the sound engineers of the production explains, allows to 'represen[t] sound as you hear as an individual in real life' and to 'hear in three dimensions.'²⁵ In line with most of Ridley's plays, the stories have dystopian undertones, but could not readily be classified as dystopian in the sense of being socio-political projections of the future with the aim of critique. I include them in the thesis since I believe that they can be productively analysed within a dystopian framework and that as such they expand the understanding of what we consider dystopian, especially in the theatre.²⁶ The first monologue, *Killer*, tells of a young man's violent initiation into a neo-fascist gang; the second, *Sledgehammers*, narrates – from the perspective of a posh butler – the descent into chaos of a town as people start attacking each other with sledgehammers; the third piece, *Vesper*, is about the life on the run of a magic albino ostrich and his owner, trying to escape a

²⁴ For the details on the creative team behind the production and a few explicative images see 'Killer by Philip Ridley & Directed by Jamie Lloyd', *Shoreditch Town Hall* <<https://shoreditchtownhall.com/whats-on/killer>> [accessed 27 January 2020].

²⁵ Ben Ringham, 'Ben Ringham Interview', *Vimeo*, 2017 <<https://vimeo.com/209880184>> [accessed 21 November 2019].

²⁶ *Mercury Fur* (2005) is the more 'canonically' dystopian of Ridley's plays. Set in a close future in which the social order is breaking down, it raises questions about what happens to a society when its memory is erased. Cf. Philip Ridley, *Mercury Fur* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005). Although this is the play which is nearest to the current understanding of a dystopian narrative, I argue that all of Ridley's work could be interpreted as dystopian, and indeed studied as manifesting its own particular form of theatrical dystopianism. This is a project that would take another thesis to explore, thus I must leave it undeveloped, for now at least.

vicious killer.²⁷ While the stories themselves are estranging in different ways, projecting as they do troubling snapshots of our world, what they all have in common is the isolation of their characters as a consequence of the breaking down of societal bonds resulting from a dystopian context. I argue that – via the feeling technologies of sound and darkness – the first production of *Killer* made tangible for the audience the dystopian atomisation portrayed in the play. By creating an immersive environment that made the participants embody the dystopian killers/subjects (through visceral and ecstatic sensations), the production realised the text's dystopian potential as a commentary on the present from the standpoint of the future. However, I will suggest that the embodied experience of *Killer*'s dystopia promotes only 'compensatory' effects, as it does not further the audience's potential to desire better.

Josephine Machon argues that 'immersive experiences in theatre combine the act of immersion – being submerged in an alternative medium where all senses are engaged and manipulated – with deep involvement in the activity within that medium'.²⁸ Following this definition, *Killer* can be classified as performance which deploys 'immersion as absorption' in that it engages its audience aurally and physically – 'in terms of concentration, imagination, action and interest' – in the projected world of the dystopian monologues.²⁹ Machon adds that 'immersive practice is and *must be*, an embodied event', in which the 'participant's physical

²⁷ Two of the monologues were published in print a few years before this first performance. *Killer* can be found in *Dark Vanilla Jungle and Other Monologues* (London: Methuen Drama, 2014) by Ridley, pp. 57-63; *Vesper* was published in the 'Documents' section of Aleks Sierz's *Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s, Decades* (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), pp. 189-198.

²⁸ Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Basingstoke: Macmillan International Higher Education, 2013), pp. 21–22.

²⁹ Machon, p. 62.

body responding within an imaginative environment ... is a defining feature'.³⁰ *Killer* afforded an intense embodied experience to its audience, as the feeling environment of the performance (structured by the use of targeted binaural sound and of deliberate darkness) encouraged the awareness of one's sensual responses to the various elements of the work and encouraged a fully enactive perception. Previous discussion of Ahmed's work taught us that the affective impact of an environment on the self is dependent on one's personal history, thus the embodied responses to *Killer*'s environment will vary for each individual participant.³¹ In analysing the dystopian performance of *Killer*, I take my own embodied experience of participating in the event as a starting point for a critical evaluation of its use of feeling-labour to arouse critical reflection. Since I argue that the affective economy of *Killer* was openly aimed at making each participant feel like the protagonist of their own dystopian nightmare, the subjective bodily sensations and reflections that I report – although not universal – constitute a central factor in understanding how the dystopian individual experience was created and to what effect.³² Below, I report my immersive experience of *Killer*.

After being led down the stairs by the staff of Shoreditch Town Hall, my fellow audience members and I are handed over to the performer, John Macmillan, who is waiting for us in the first room of the basement. There is enough light to discern the wooden chairs arranged in a square facing the walls and a concrete column in the middle of the room. We are instructed to take a seat, pick up the headphones, and put them on. After a brief testing of the equipment, the lights go off, and we – I – are immersed in complete darkness. A few moments later, Macmillan's voice emerges from the abyss, in between my ears: 'A killer! That's what I am. And if I'm not very much mistaken ...

³⁰ Machon, pp. 83, 67–68.

³¹ Cf. my mention of Ahmed's work at the end of the second paragraph of this final chapter.

³² The venue's website advertised it as 'an intimate journey within the bowels of Shoreditch Town Hall and the depths of your psyche', thus emphasizing the interaction with the environment and the personal nature of the experience as the highlights of the performance. Find the webpage at <https://shoreditchtownhall.com/whats-on/killer>.

yes! *You* could be too! And *you*! In fact *all* of you!'.³³ At first, he seems to be speaking right in my face, he moves to my left, then right, now he is walking away, coming back closer: he is everywhere yet nowhere to be seen. After some time staring into the blackest blackness, with a self-proclaimed killer's voice channelling through my ears, I start doubting my own instincts: I feel the story's voices coming from inside me, in the space where my inner thoughts usually resonate. My body enters a state of high alert. I become aware of my accelerated heartbeat and consciously try to bring it back down with a few deep breaths. I accidentally touch the hand of the person to my right, and the tension is high again. I feel tickles up my spine as Macmillan introduces his character's initiation ritual, involving the killing of a white rabbit with a hammer. They turn into a tight knot in my stomach as I hear the hammer hitting the animal's flesh again and again, the blood splattering, the character screaming. I open my hands in front of me to make sure they are not covered in blood, but of course I cannot see. As the first monologue comes to a close, the darkness is slowly lifted from my eyes, and I am reminded of my spatial placement: I can see the wall I faced when I sat down, the person sitting next to me, the open archway on my right. I can finally breathe. The other two monologues are narrated in adjacent rooms, in dull lighting – enough to discern the other spectators and the actor. I can move and look around here, the performance does not curb my perception anymore. I sit on a wooden bench in a tight corridor listening to *Sledgehammer*, while trying to catch a glimpse of Macmillan, who is around the corner. I find a standing space in the last room, while following *Vesper*, my attention divided between the aural storytelling and the objects and people around me. Before I realise it, I am outside on the streets of Shoreditch, walking away in the chilly evening.

What I have just described is an account of the sensations and the semi-conscious thoughts that I felt while being engrossed in *Killer*'s dystopian world. I critically interpret these impressions by referring to Leder's notions of embodiment, its 'recessive' and 'ecstatic' stances, in order to unravel the experience of my individual journey into a dystopian nightmare. Leder argues that the experience of our own bodies is characterised by absence, suggesting that the body is rarely the 'thematic object of experience'.³⁴ This means that we tend to forget our bodies (or parts of them) when immersed in everyday activities, like reading or driving.

³³ Ridley, *Dark Vanilla Jungle and Other Monologues*, p. 189.

³⁴ Leder, p. 1.

However, different contexts and situations – a theatrical performance, in our case – can cause the body to come into focus: ‘thematization’ can derive from pain, discomfort or by an intense affective encounter.³⁵ When linked to the affective sphere, the experience of thematization can assume both ‘recessive’ and ‘ecstatic’ stances. The recessive body is the ‘visceral’ body, constituted by our internal organs and sensations, over which we have little control.³⁶ In my account, the pace of my heartbeat, my breathing, the sensations coming from my stomach are all visceral sensations which I could not suppress. In Leder’s theory, the ecstatic body is the ‘fleshy’, surface body, the sensory (and enactive) systems which interact outwards with the world.³⁷ In my experience, my ecstatic body was engaged particularly in the second and third rooms, when my perceptual faculties allowed me to interact with my surroundings and move around the spaces. So, while the affective economy of *Killer*’s first room stimulates ‘recessive’ embodied responses, the second and third spaces evoke more ‘ecstatic’ stances. This sequence of embodied states allows participants first to identify viscerally with the killers whispering in their headphones, then to experience through ecstatic embodiment the isolating dynamics at play in the aural narratives. By making the participants submit to sensations directed inwards at their ‘visceral’ body and outwards at their ‘ecstatic’ mechanisms of perception, the performance effectively crafted an experience that would allow the audience to understand (through their bodies) how living in a dystopian world may *feel* like from within.

³⁵ Leder, pp. 84–86.

³⁶ Leder makes this point through an example: ‘I cannot ... shut off an adrenaline-charged fear in the same way in which I can shut my eyes’, in Leder, p. 136.

³⁷ Cf. Leder Chapter 1 (‘The ecstatic body’) and Chapter 2 (‘The recessive body’).

4.2.1 The Dark Room

In the first room, through the combination of the feeling technologies of darkness and binaural sound, the ‘visceral’ bodies of the audience are thematized and become the centre of the affective experience of dystopia. These inward-looking sensations contribute to establishing the audience’s embodied experience as first-person killers within a dystopian context.³⁸ In particular, the darkness of the first room prepares the audience’s body for the experiential immersion into the dystopian narrative of *Killer* by compromising its perceptual faculties. As critic Martin Welton maintains, in our gleaming consumerist society ‘darkness is an uncanny and oddly unnatural state to find oneself in’.³⁹ Since ‘it is through vision that we are mostly aware of the materiality of the world around us and the objects in it’, when plunged into total darkness, the body cannot rely on vision as its main perceptive focus.⁴⁰ In darkness, we deploy our senses differently, as the non-visual systems have to work harder to compensate for the ‘breakdown of sensorimotor synergy’, as Leder calls it.⁴¹ Such an imbalance in our sensory ecstatic perception provokes a destabilising effect: in Welton’s words the audience is ‘wholly subject – willing or otherwise – to darkness’.⁴² In these perceptual conditions, participants in *Killer* lose control over their bodies as they are compelled to sense their unruly visceral

³⁸ There are interesting links between this performance experience in the ‘first person’ and the theoretical subject position of ‘I’ in Rayner’s model discussed in the previous chapter. Although the identification with the pronominal form of the ‘I’ may seem obvious, the spectator of *Killer* is indeed critically constructed as a ‘you’ since ‘the actor/character is not an object for desire and the gaze but is a “you” that is engaged in choice and invites rational, or at least conscious, apprehension, not unconscious identification’. Cf. Rayner, p. 14.

³⁹ Martin Welton, *Feeling Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 53.

⁴⁰ Martin Welton, ‘Seeing Nothing: Now Hear This ...’, in *The Senses in Performance*, ed. by Sally Banes and André Lepecki, *Worlds of Performance* (New York ; London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 146–55 (p. 148).

⁴¹ Leder, p. 88.

⁴² Welton, *Feeling Theatre*, p. 72.

phenomena, while also being unable to use their enactive perception to understand the space through vision and movement. In other words, the complete absence of light in *Killer*'s first room is likely to increase the vulnerability to the dystopian environment structured around them. It is in such a precarious state that the performer-killer, speaking to the participants via binaural sound, can hope to 'immerse' them in his aural narrative and lure them in as dystopian accomplices.

Rosemary Klich maintains that recent headphone productions – such as *Killer* – 'use binaural and surround sound techniques to ... se[t] up an encounter for the audience with a sonic virtual reality that emphasises corporeal sensation, affect, and embodiment'.⁴³ I have just explained how the darkness of the first room puts the audience in a position of enhanced affectivity, in which sensations of vulnerability come to the fore. Building on such embodied status, the feeling technology of binaural sound in *Killer* produces a three-dimensional soundscape which involves the participants in the sonic dystopian narrative and provokes a destabilising estrangement effect which allows them to *feel* the dystopia. Ben Ringham, one of the sound designers of *Killer*'s production, explains that binaural sound is

typically done by using a microphone called binaural head, where you have microphones in a mannequin-style head with a microphone in each ear.⁴⁴

The result of the use of such technology is an immersive three-dimensional experience which places the audience viscerally within the dystopian narrative of *Killer*. Klich argues that binaural sound 'renders the realistic illusion of physical surroundings, tricking our haptic and

⁴³ Rosemary Klich, 'Amplifying Sensory Spaces: The In- and Out-Puts of Headphone Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 27.3 (2017), 366–78 (p. 366).

⁴⁴ Ben Ringham, 'Ben Ringham Interview'.

proprioceptive systems into responding to an imagined environment’.⁴⁵ This means that via binaural headphones the performance of *Killer* allows the audience not just to imagine the dystopia, but to experience it with their bodies: through its spatial dimension, binaural sound effectively makes the world around the participant ‘otherwise’, thus physically estranging the spectator.

However, I argue that the relation between such dystopian sonic setting and the position of the audience in it is ambiguous: while creating the illusion of the spectator’s centrality in the aurally-constructed world, the binaural feeling technology can also generate the impression that the sound – or voices, in the case of *Killer* – is a product of one’s own consciousness. The result is an unsettling estranging effect (which includes the spatial, positional and material nuances described in Chapter Three) which blurs the boundaries between internal and external sensations and gives the audience a glimpse into the embodied experience of dystopian subjectivities. On the one hand, binaural technology targets the individual spectator by making them the direct recipient of the narrative. This focus is evident from the way binaural sound is recorded. Ringham explains that in *Killer* ‘we have a head in the space and John, the actor, acting around the head. So, when you’re sitting in a room on your own you can hear John like he’s speaking to you’.⁴⁶ In Klich’s critical terms, the effect of direct address caused by binaural technology functions by unfolding the sonic environment ‘*around the individual audience member*’.⁴⁷ In this sense, the aural worlds of *Killer* are built for the benefit of the individual participant, who is the addressee of the confidences of killers inhabiting dystopian worlds. On

⁴⁵ Klich, p. 370.

⁴⁶ Ben Ringham, ‘Ben Ringham Interview’.

⁴⁷ Klich, p. 368, (emphasis mine).

the other hand, *Killer*'s binaural narrative has also the ability to trick the audience's instincts into questioning the source of the storytelling. Stephen Di Benedetto suggests that binaural sound can also give the impression that 'the recorded sound is inside you, sharing your own interoceptive processes'.⁴⁸ Such a remark clearly resonates with my own embodied experience of *Killer*: I, too, felt that the voices were so intimately connected to myself as to doubt their external origins. The irreconcilability of these two positions, the voices as addressed to the audience members and the voices coming from the audience members, provokes an uncanny estranging effect which characterises the embodied experience of the participants in the performance of *Killer*'s dystopia.

Charles Stankieveh proposes that the kind of sonic ambiguity deriving from binaural sound can be best understood by recurring to Jacques Lacan's *l'extimité*, a term that combines *exterior* and *intimacy*: 'something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me'.⁴⁹ In *l'extimité*, 'the difference between *container* and *contained* dissolves, as does the difference between you and me'.⁵⁰ This estranging mechanism impacts viscerally the audience's experience of *Killer*, and its implications for dystopian performance are profound. If what I hear is my inner monologue, then it is *I* who have joined a fascist gang and am dismembering a rabbit, *I* who am escaping sledgehammer maniacs, *I* who am on the run from a dangerous killer. If these are my thoughts then I am immersed in an estranging reality, where I have no choice but to follow the next step in the story. If this world is inside *and* around me, the

⁴⁸ Stephen Di Benedetto, *The Provocation of the Senses in Contemporary Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 157.

⁴⁹ Jacques Lacan as quoted in Charles Stankieveh, 'From Stethoscopes to Headphones: An Acoustic Spatialization of Subjectivity', *Leonardo Music Journal*, 17 (2007), 55–59 (p. 59).

⁵⁰ Lacan in Stankieveh, p. 59.

performance has not only catapulted me into a three-dimensional dystopia but has made me – the audience – embody a killer. Such kind of first-person participation in the narrative proves to be revolutionary for dystopia, as it gives the audience the exceptional chance to journey within the dystopian world as a character.⁵¹ Such an experience has the potential to stimulate deeper ethical considerations of the reasons for the dystopia, since it puts the spectator in the position of making the decisions that shape the fictional world. This is, in a way, an embodied version of the positional estrangement discussed in Chapter Three: here the audience is not only encouraged to consider the cognitive propositions from the perspective of a character, but to think and feel *as the character* – it is an embodied exercise of the imagination.

I have argued in this section that the first room of *Killer* used the feeling technology of darkness to render the bodies of the audience viscerally vulnerable to the estranging effect generated by binaural sound transmission. This resulted in the participants having to experience the dystopian performance directed by Lloyd in the estranging role of the killer. The feeling technologies operating in the first room contributed to setting up the audience's experience as dystopian killers, but it was in the ecstatic engagement with the second and third rooms that the dynamics of social atomisation (the key dystopian feature in the aural narratives) could be materialised and cognitively understood by the audience. In the next section I explore how the changes in feeling conditions in the remaining performance spaces of *Killer* are crucial to the understanding of the compensatory function of dystopia.

⁵¹ The only other medium affording the possibility of the first-person participation in dystopia is perhaps that of the videogame. Through first-person player settings or immersive VR environments players can impersonate characters. Cf. Farca's discussion of player agency in Part III of his *Playing Dystopia*.

4.2.2 Toward a compensatory dystopia

In the second and third rooms of *Killer*, the darkness gives space to dim lighting, which allows for the audience's ecstatic engagement with the spaces of the performance and, crucially, its other live 'inhabitants'. The sensory imbalance caused by the lack of vision in the first room is here resolved, and the spectator's body can resume its ecstatic functions of perception which are, to Leder, the 'most prominent in shaping the experiential field'.⁵² The feeling environment of the last two rooms affords ecstatic possibilities for free movement and direct contact with its surfaces and objects. Aided by soft lighting, participants are – to some extent – free to roam the space, to find their place in the physical environment enclosing their dystopian experience. Most importantly, the ecstatic embodiment brought on by light affords possibilities for interaction (both voluntary and involuntary) among members of the audience. The dystopian embodied experience as killers that was so personal to each participant in the dark room (due to the combination of darkness and binaural sound) is now included in a network of parallel dystopian journeys. In other words, I am not the only one to embody a dystopian killer: my fellow audience members have received the same perceptual stimuli from the environment, and I can expect them, too, to be 'absorbed' in comparable dystopian journeys.

Anna Fenemore argues that in immersive performances in which audiences go through the experience as a group 'each individual has a heightened awareness of the other individuals occupying the space and a heightened awareness of the activity of their own (whole) group, as well as a heightened awareness of their own physicality'.⁵³ As the above analysis of embodied

⁵² Leder, p. 37.

⁵³ Anna Fenemore, 'Body', in *Performance Perspectives: A Critical Introduction*, ed. by Jonathan Pitches and Sita Popat (Basingstoke: Macmillan International Higher Education, 2011), pp. 20–51 (p. 42).

states has suggested, this is likely to be true for *Killer*'s performance, too: participants go through the underground rooms of *Killer* as individuals intensely aware of their own visceral states, while also being in contact with other spectators who are experiencing a similar (yet necessarily unique) practice. Crucially, even if audience members are mindful of others immersed in the same performance environment, the binaural narrative coming through their ears – via what Michael Bull describes poetically as ‘technologies of solitude’ – keeps them locked into their individual dystopian bubble.⁵⁴ Participants go through their embodied journeys together, but are never meaningfully in contact with each other. In this way, the affective economy of the performance precludes the productive possibility of creating moments in which the temporary community of spectators could join together their affective experiences to engage with the dystopian premises of the work. Thus, such a performance, rather than stimulating what Jill Dolan calls ‘utopian performatives’ which are ‘moments in which audiences feel themselves allied with each other, and with a broader, more capacious sense of a public, in which social discourse articulates the possible’, folds back into a pessimistic stance that articulates ‘the insurmountable obstacles to human potential’.⁵⁵ Such dynamics reflect the isolation and the breakdown of societal bonds that are portrayed in the aural narratives of *Killer*'s dystopia. The stories all aim to depict, if in an absurd and exaggerated manner, the consequences of the social atomisation of our contemporary world. By situating the participants as the protagonists of such isolating narratives, *Killer* provided the opportunity for an embodied understanding of life in an atomising dystopian context.

⁵⁴ Michael Bull as quoted in Myers, ‘Vocal Landscaping: The Theatre of Sound in Audiowalks’, 79.

⁵⁵ Dolan, p. 2.

However, since the ‘embodied killers’ were not given the chance to enact any change in the dystopian interactional dynamics of the performance, I argue here that their experience fulfilled a purely ‘compensatory’ function.⁵⁶ Teri Howson describes a compensatory effect when commenting on the function of other recent immersive performances with dystopian or science fictional elements. She says:

In placing audiences in visceral environments, the distance of the screen is removed and with it a sense of safety. Having been “experienced”, these performances provide a sense of belief that the audience can apparently face such troubles and (optimistically) overcome, or at the very least survive them – the voyeuristic audience presented as hero.⁵⁷

Similarly, the journey of the audience of *Killer* engenders in its audience embodied responses that make them feel like they have endured the dystopian troubles channelled through their ears and survived. The emphasis on pleasure and relief emerging from the production’s reviews reinforce such reading. Sierz concludes his by writing: ‘it was also 90 minutes of an exhausting heater-skelter [*sic*] ride through some of our deepest fears: fear of violence, fear of deformity, fear of persecution; fear of loss of control. It’s a *relief* to survive it; a pleasure to enjoy it’.⁵⁸ Franciska Éry, writing for *A Younger Theatre*, similarly comments: ‘I walk out of *Killer* with *relief*, a huge grin, and a lingering chill down my spine. Above all, I want more’.⁵⁹ Rather than

⁵⁶ My choice of the term ‘compensatory’ here is meant to hint at Bloch’s understanding of the ‘compensatory’ type of utopia Cf. Ruth Levitas, ‘Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia’, *Utopian Studies*, 1.2 (1990), 13–26.

⁵⁷ Howson, p. 122.

⁵⁸ Sierz, ‘*Killer*, Shoreditch Town Hall, Review’, (my emphasis).

⁵⁹ Franciska Éry, ‘Review: *Killer*, Shoreditch Town Hall’, *A Younger Theatre*, 2017

<<https://www.ayoungerttheatre.com/review-killer-shoreditch-town-hall/>> [accessed 14 November 2019], (my emphasis).

channelling the affective power of the audience into a communal edifying experience, which would have made it into a militant dystopia (more on this term in *The Wedding*), *Killer* thus seems only to provide what science fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson calls the ‘vicarious thrill of comfort’, making it compensatory.⁶⁰ This means that the individual dystopian experience grants a sense of ‘indulgence, and creation of a sense of comparative safety’ once the performance has come to a conclusion.⁶¹ Such kinds of dystopias make us realise that ‘however bad our present moment is, it’s nowhere near as bad as the ones these poor characters are suffering through’.⁶² By choosing to afford the audience only individual journeys in the affective economy of *Killer*, the performance renounced the possibility to channel the audience’s common affectivity into the dystopian projection. As audiences were not encouraged to think of themselves as a feeling community, it was hard for them to confront the critical enquiry of the performance’s distressing future as a shared issue. Instead, by encouraging parallel yet individual performance trajectories, *Killer* simulated (paraphrasing Robinson) the ‘heroic struggles of our afflicted protagonists’ while producing a dystopia which only represents ‘our all-encompassing hopelessness’.⁶³

By studying the embodied states provoked by *Killer*’s feeling-labour, in the form of visceral and ecstatic stances, I gained a clear understanding of the internal and external mechanisms of embodied cognition in dystopian immersive environments. While ‘absorbed’ in the affective economy of dystopian performance, audiences have the chance to experience

⁶⁰ ‘Dystopias Now | Kim Stanley Robinson’, *Commune*, 2018 <<https://communemag.com/dystopias-now/>> [accessed 21 October 2019].

⁶¹ ‘Dystopias Now | Kim Stanley Robinson’.

⁶² ‘Dystopias Now | Kim Stanley Robinson’.

⁶³ ‘Dystopias Now | Kim Stanley Robinson’.

the narrative as first-person killers. In contrast to what I have described in the previous chapter, this estranging effect does not concern the representation of the dystopian environment, yet it targets audience experience in order to make it understand, feelingly, the functions and goals of dystopia. Since the individual dystopian journeys of the participants of *Killer* were never put in contact with each other, the performance did not provide meaningful spaces for the interaction of such journeys, thus denying the possibility of finding ways to demand a better future together. The function of such an experience was, in the end, only one of compensation. In the next sections, I study the embodied cognition encouraged by dystopian performance through a different framework of embodiment: kinesthetic empathy. When the staging of dystopian performance imposes distance between audience and the performance environment, the spectator's body is not directly immersed in the feeling environment. However, this does not imply a less intense affective economy: the feeling-labour of the performance simply works with different means to affect the audience's body. By providing the critical vocabulary to describe how we empathise with the movements and rhythms of others, kinesthetic empathy allows us to understand the effects of the circulation of affect in the end-on dystopian performances of *Golem* and *The Wedding*.

4.3 Feeling the Stage via Kinesthetic Empathy

At the beginning of the chapter, following Levitas, I suggested that dystopias aim not only at imagining undesirable versions of our shared future, but involve an attempt to influence that future, to make the world 'otherwise' via cognitive and affective means. Levitas further observes that within utopian studies, such transformative potential has been usually associated with intentional communities, groups of people endeavouring in the practice of small-scale

utopian world-making.⁶⁴ In this thesis, I want to suggest that theatrical performances of dystopian narratives similarly function as transformational practices, as embodied laboratories through which to experiment with alternative ways of being. Like utopian pedagogy in Darren Webb's definition, I argue that the goal of dystopian theatre is to 'develop subjects equipped to *create* and *inhabit* this new world'.⁶⁵ I have maintained that in the case of *Killer*, the performance's participants were physically immersed in the dystopian environment and were encouraged to play the role of dystopian killers, thus viscerally experiencing being otherwise. When performance arrangements do not afford physical immersion in a dystopian world, as is the case for end-on productions, I suggest that audiences can still experience dystopian projections enactively, only under different perceptual conditions. In these cases, Noë's enactive perception is activated through 'skilful looking'.⁶⁶ The activity of skilful looking is comparable with the condition of emancipated spectatorship (considered in the previous chapter) but it specifically involves a 'touch-like' exploration of the environment around us and an understanding of 'the effects of movement on sensory stimulation'.⁶⁷ It is precisely at the intersection between the perception and enaction of movement that kinesthetic empathy comes into play, as a framework of embodiment that allows one to explain how audiences can vicariously inhabit performance – and the performance of dystopia, in particular – via an empathic connection with its movements and rhythms.

⁶⁴ Levitas, *Utopia As Method*, p. xiii.

⁶⁵ Webb, 'Educational Archaeology and the Practice of Utopian Pedagogy', pp. 552–53.

⁶⁶ Noë, p. 73.

⁶⁷ Noë, p. 1.

According to Garner, the stage is a ‘kinetic/kinesthetic medium, one defined in terms of movement, movement perception, and the kinesthetic experience that integrates these’.⁶⁸ While the term kinetic refers to motion ‘as an objectively describable phenomenon’, kinesthesia denotes ‘the experience one has of one’s movements’.⁶⁹ When, through performance, we endeavour to understand what the lived experience of another may feel like, we engage in an act of kinesthetic empathy. Dee Reynolds helps clarify the process by describing it in the first person: ‘For a fleeting moment, perhaps, I simulate your action, and in so doing, I imagine that I occupy your place, that I am the vicarious agent for your movement, your experience, your utterance’.⁷⁰ Kinesthetic empathy in end-on dystopian performance allows audiences to inhabit, if vicariously, the dystopian world presented on stage and connect, cognitively and feelingly, with its propositions. Not all experiences of kinesthetic empathy will be the same, since, as Garner suggests, ‘our ability to apprehend and empathise with others is conditioned by variables of culture, history, gender, race, and embodiment’.⁷¹ So while kinesthetic empathy does not claim to provide universal access to the experience of others, it can put us in contact with their embodiment on the basis of our ‘sensorimotor resonance’ with one another.⁷² Kinesthetic empathy is an innately interdisciplinary concept, with links to phenomenology, theories of embodied cognition, and cognitive research (particularly on

⁶⁸ Garner, *Kinesthetic Spectatorship in the Theatre*, p. 22.

⁶⁹ Garner, *Kinesthetic Spectatorship in the Theatre*, p. 2.

⁷⁰ Dee Reynolds, ‘Kinesthetic Empathy and the Dance’s Body: From Emotion to Affect’, in *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, ed. by Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), pp. 123–36 (p. 125).

⁷¹ Garner, *Kinesthetic Spectatorship in the Theatre*, p. 10.

⁷² Garner, *Kinesthetic Spectatorship in the Theatre*, p. 12.

‘mirror neurons’).⁷³ Its composite approach to movement perception allows me to explore spectatorship of a dystopian performance as a ‘kinesthetic phenomen[on]’ and consider audiences as enactive participants in the theatre’s ‘sensorimotor field’.⁷⁴ While in the previous chapter I focussed on the theoretical placement of the spectator in dystopian productions in terms of their ‘emancipation’ (the ability to co-create and cognitively interpret the dystopian *novum*), I now consider spectatorship in terms of its capacity to attune with the dynamic movements of performance and understand the dystopia feelingly. Thus, in what follows, I study how the dystopian performances of *Golem* and *The Wedding*, via the feeling technologies of music, scenography and rhythmic movement, encourage their audience’s embodied cognition of dystopia in the form of kinesthetic empathy.

4.4 Golem

Golem is the third show by British theatre company 1927, founded in 2005 by animator and illustrator Paul Barritt, and writer and performer Suzanne Andrade.⁷⁵ It is a dystopia which functions as a critique of consumer culture and whose intent is, in the words of Andrade, to

⁷³ For an overview of kinesthetic empathy and its influences cf. Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason, ‘Introduction’, in *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), pp. 123–36. And Garner, *Kinesthetic Spectatorship in the Theatre*, pp. 145–80. For the phenomenological approach closer to kinesthetic empathy see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1962). For theories of embodied cognition see Francisco Varela, Eleanor Rosch, and Evan Thompson, *The Embodied Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991). For an often quoted study on mirror neurons see Vittorio Gallese and others, ‘Action Recognition in the Premotor Cortex’, *Brain*, 119.2 (1996), 593–609.

⁷⁴ Garner, *Kinesthetic Spectatorship in the Theatre*, p. 26.

⁷⁵ See 1927’s website for more information on the company and past shows. 1927, ‘About 1927’, 1927 <<https://www.19-27.co.uk/1927-1>> [accessed 11 February 2020].

‘problematis[e] progress’.⁷⁶ Like the company’s other productions, *Golem* combines hand-drawn animation, live music and performance to provide its audience with a distinctive multi-media theatrical experience. Many reviewers have observed that 1927’s aesthetics are reminiscent of silent film visuals, blended with different artistic styles from Surrealism to Dada, and complemented with a highly stylised acting technique.⁷⁷ Their production of *Golem* also adds Claymation to the mix, as its titular character is an animated clay puppet which is integrated in the high-definition projected background (Figure 5). In *Golem*, live actors and projections are seamlessly incorporated, in what Caitlin Vincent et al. call a process of ‘full-synthesis’, thus creating a ‘theatrical experience in which the live performing body is permanently and inextricably linked to the digital components’.⁷⁸ In performance, this translates into ‘causal interplay’ between the 2D projected setting and characters and the 3D live actors: the scenography seems to actively interact with the performers, and vice versa.⁷⁹ I will argue that the kinetic nature of such inter-medial interaction is at the basis of the kinesthetic

⁷⁶*FestspielFenster: Suzanne Andrade Über „Golem“* <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jz2Gmq0fAis>> [accessed 11 February 2020].

⁷⁷Cf. the reviews of Catherine Noonan, ‘1927 on Cultural Influences, Multi-Platform Theatre and Their Success’, *A Younger Theatre*, 2012 <<https://www.ayoungertheatre.com/1927-on-cultural-influences-multi-platform-theatre-and-their-success/>> [accessed 11 February 2020]; Charles Isherwood, ‘Review: “Golem,” a Visually Dazzling Fable for the Digital Age - The New York Times’, *The New York Times*, 2016 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/28/theater/golem-1927-lincoln-center-festival.html>> [accessed 15 February 2021]; Maxim Boon, ‘Review: Golem (1927, Adelaide Festival)’, *Limelight Magazine* <<https://www.limelightmagazine.com.au/reviews/review-golem-1927-adelaide-festival/>> [accessed 15 February 2021].

⁷⁸ Caitlin Vincent and others, ‘The Intersection of Live and Digital: New Technical Classifications for Digital Scenography in Opera’, *Theatre and Performance Design*, 3.3 (2017), 155–71 (p. 160).

⁷⁹Vincent et. al described the process of ‘full-synthesis’ and its attribute of ‘causal interplay’ in relation to another of 1927’s co-production, ‘The Magic Flute’. Vincent and others, p. 160.

processes of empathy between the dystopian stage and its audience. Moreover, the ‘full-synthesis’ of the live and digital, together with the non-naturalistic aesthetic of the production, contribute to establishing the play’s spatial estrangement. Set in such an estranged world of the future, the play’s recognisable commentary on everyday consumerism is turned into a dystopian parable on how the ‘needs’ of our society are crafted and manipulated by those in power.



Figure 5 - A picture from the production of Golem: the physical actor playing Robert is contraposed to the ‘claymated’ Golem projected in the background. Photograph by Tony Lewis. Source: <https://www.19-27.co.uk/cl-golem>.

First, a brief introduction to Golem’s narrative arc. Loosely inspired from the Jewish myth of golem and Gustav Meyrink’s rendition of it in his novel *Der Golem* (1913-14), the performance follows the (mis)adventures of Robert Robertson, an ordinary man whose life is turned upside down by the purchase of a ‘Golem’, a device which its creator defines as ‘a man

made of clay, with no free will who can only obey'.⁸⁰ Golem (Version One) is a goofy-looking gadget which follows Robert around, doing whatever he commands. After the patent is sold to Go-Corporation – a capitalist enterprise presented as deconstructed floating faces – Golem's Version Two becomes a powerful tool of social control influencing the trends, tastes and personal lives of the characters. Indeed, it encourages them to buy things they do not need, to shun friends, family, and romantic relationships in favour of things and services which will give them a higher perceived social status. The only site of cultural resistance to the changes seems to be the punk band headlined by Robert's sister, Annie, 'Annie and the Underdogs', whose aim is to undermine the social system that is perceived as oppressive. Toward the end of the performance, Annie attempts a one-woman rebellion against Golem but fails, and with her disappears any hope of stopping the rise of the corporation behind the device. The production ends on a sour note, with the advert for Golem Version Three – which is now directly implanted in people's brains – steering the choices of what has become the 'high-definition human race'. Through the analysis of three key episodes from the performance, 'Courtomatic', 'Knit-quick-o-matic', and the 'band practice' scenes, I will show how the production constructs the dystopian experience of *Golem* kinesthetically via different uses of the feeling technologies of scenography and music. In particular, the deployment of increasingly fast-paced musical and scenographic rhythms in Courtomatic, the differences in scenographic scale in Knit-quick-o-matic', and the distinctive choices of colour and musical arrangements in the band practice scenes offer audiences the chance to connect empathically

⁸⁰All textual references from the play's script are taken from the video recording of a performance that 1927 kindly let me access for research purposes: 1927, *MASTER GOLEM LOW RES SPACE GRADED FILE*, 2018 <<https://vimeo.com/259931116>> [accessed 17 October 2019].

with the characters' experiences of dystopia, both in its seductive capitalist forms and as resisting practices. My contention is that by tapping into the audience's capacity for kinesthetic empathy, the performance allows audiences to recognise through *Golem* the dystopian qualities of their present.

As noted in Chapter One of this thesis, Trish Reid argues that 'the dystopian turn in new writing highlights the inadequacies of realism as a mode for staging neoliberal experience'.⁸¹ She maintains that playwrights are turning to the dystopian mode to be able to unravel the effects of life under capitalism. Drawing from Jim McGuigan's book *Cool Capitalism*, she argues that because late capitalism has appropriated the discourses of 'reality', realism as a narrative mode is struggling to voice dissent.⁸² In such conditions, the dystopian filter allows audiences to grasp the 'horrors of the present' by showing them in an estranged manner.⁸³ I suggest that in the case of *Golem*, the process of recognition of the dystopian world's similarities with the audience's is driven by the kinesthetic signals coming from the scenographic and musical elements of the production, which transfigure practices of 'cool capitalism' in affective theatrical terms. Spectators are encouraged – via the careful management of feeling technologies – to connect empathically with the experience of the characters living in dystopia, and to recognise patterns and emotions of their own lived neoliberal experience. It is worth noticing here the differences with the feeling environment of *Killer*, which allowed for an introspection of a different kind. In that production, audiences were asked to look inward and feel themselves against the performance's ecology. Here,

⁸¹ Reid, p. 73.

⁸² Reid, p. 75.

⁸³ Cf. the modalities of estrangement described in Chapter Three of this thesis.

spectators are asked to project their empathy outwards to connect with the affective environment produced onstage. In particular, I suggest that the performance articulates affectively what McGuigan terms the ‘seduction of the cool’—the capitalist promise that our every desire can be satisfied in consumption –while also presenting examples of resisting practices to such ideological assumptions.⁸⁴ In what follows, after a short synopsis of the play for context, I analyse how the feeling technologies of scenography and music devise a feeling environment that simulates the range of affective sensations of living in a capitalist dystopia. By analysing selected scenes from the performance, I aim to show how the embodiment of dystopia’s feelings via kinesthetic empathy facilitates the cognitive and affective connection between the fictional neoliberal system and the contemporary one in which the audience is immersed.

4.4.1 Cool Capitalism: A Dystopian Adaptation

To define the concept of kinesthetic empathy, Reynolds and Reason proceed to isolate the two terms before joining them back together. While ‘kinesthesia can be understood to refer to sensations of movement and position’, empathy is used in Robert Vischer’s sense as ‘projecting oneself into the object of contemplation’.⁸⁵ The object of contemplation can be animated or inanimate, in movement or static: one can connect with anything through an act of kinesthetic empathy with the body. They also clarify that although originally kinesthetic empathy was an idea strictly linked with the empathic connection to other people’s movements in dance, the concept has now expanded to include ‘interactions with the material environment as well as

⁸⁴ Jim McGuigan, *Cool Capitalism* (London, : Pluto Press, 2009), pp. 108–16.

⁸⁵ Reynolds and Reason, ‘Introduction’, pp. 17, 18.

direct intersubjective relations'.⁸⁶ Importantly for my discussion, scenography can also be the source of kinesthetic attention and provoke strong reactions in the audience. Indeed, Joslin McKinney (writing in Reynolds' and Reason's edited collection) explains that 'kinesthetic empathy in the context of scenography emphasises the body as a means of detecting and locating ourselves in relation to an environment, to other objects and to other bodies'.⁸⁷ This means that the dynamic encounter with scenography allows the audience to access (to some extent, at least) the sensations deriving from occupying the performance's environment with all its physical and emotional pulls and pushes. Such experience can help spectators connect the feelings of the dystopian projected environment to their own contemporary reality: the dynamic contemplation of scenography can, as I will explain, favour the dystopia's function of critique.

The Courtomatic episode sees Robert using a Go-Corporation service (the Courtomatic) with a similar format to contemporary dating apps to find romantic partners. I argue that this scene illustrates a romantic variation of the 'seduction of the cool' by proposing a fast-paced array of love choices fit for the 'modern man'. McGuigan explains (drawing from Bauman) that it is essential for the seduced subject to 'feel free to choose, even though the scope of the choice may in fact be very limited, outmanoeuvred by the surreptitious machine of capital'.⁸⁸ This mechanism is manifested in the Courtomatic scene, which deploys scenography and music as feeling technologies to convey the cool seduction of *Golem* kinesthetically. In the dating

⁸⁶ Reynolds and Reason, *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, p. 31.

⁸⁷ Joslin McKinney, 'Empathy and Exchange: Audience Experiences of Scenography', in *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, ed. by Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), pp. 219–35 (p. 233).

⁸⁸ McGuigan, p. 114.

episode, Robert is placed in the middle of the stage, while around him is the projected structure of the Courtomatic with a moving indicator of his likability from ‘adorable’ to ‘unlovable’



Figure 6 - A screenshot from the Courtomatic episode. In the scene, the hearts and lines above the character of Robert are in motion, and the women’s costumes are also constantly changing. Source: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/video/2015/apr/02/golem-young-vic-trafalgar-studios-video>.

(Figure 6).⁸⁹ On either side, and notably downstage to him, are his disproportionately tall ‘potential partners’, in the shape of patchwork women whose projected outfits and stance change promptly with the rhythm of the music. The live actors emerge on top of these bodies giving the characters a face and voice. Racing among the three static figures are a series of speedy arrows and hearts in constant flux, signalling the rapidly changing selections potentially available to the cool consumer.

I suggest that such a dynamic and markedly high-speed scenographic setting encourages the audience to sense, kinesthetically, the freedom of choice of the cool consumer as overwhelming and crippling. As McKinney explains, ‘considering scenography, bodily response might be stimulated by scanning the patterns (or rhythms) created by architectonic

⁸⁹A short clip from the scene is available to watch at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/video/2015/apr/02/golem-young-vic-trafalgar-studios-video>

structures, colours, textures and sounds, shifting intensities of light or movement of fabrics.⁹⁰ Indeed, kinesthetic empathy does not only work with static objects, but with moving sources, too. In such cases, the process of bodily understanding involves projecting oneself onto a moving scene and adjusting to its changing paces. The frenzied visual rhythms of the Courtomatic scene will promote embodied responses which recognise the pressures put on everyday consumers and relate them to their own affective experiences. This is not a cognitive process, but rather an affective one: by paying attention to the rapid exchanges between performing bodies and their environment, audiences can be drawn into the tense affective economy of the scene and vicariously experience the same pressures as the characters. The feelings experienced in this way are often beyond articulation but invite an unconscious connection with the frenzied nature of capitalist culture. Importantly, the auditory component of the performance contributes to this process, too. Stephen Di Benedetto suggests that sound ‘communicates to us about the world around us’, and thus has the ‘potential to evoke emotions and feelings’.⁹¹ Crucially, sound ‘shapes our physiological response through its beats and rhythms’.⁹² Indeed, a combination of live beats and recorded music whose tempo increases with the movements of energies on stage has the potential to stimulate the audience’s embodied experience, as listeners’ bodies can attune with the escalating pace of the scene through their *eyes* and *ears*.⁹³ The increasing visual and musical rhythm of the scene offers audiences the

⁹⁰ McKinney, ‘Empathy and Exchange: Audience Experiences of Scenography’, p. 224.

⁹¹ Di Benedetto, p. 125.

⁹² Di Benedetto, p. 133.

⁹³ In music research, the process of attuning to different rhythmic systems is called ‘entrainment’ and describes the harmonisation of internal and external pace that I include under the umbrella term of kinesthetic empathy. Cf. Martin Clayton and others, ‘Interpersonal Entrainment in Music Performance: Theory, Method, and Model’, *Music Perception*, 38.2 (2020), 136–94; Jessica Phillips-Silver, C. Athena Aktipis, and Gregory A. Bryant, ‘The

opportunity to empathise kinesthetically with the pressure put on the consumer – in dystopian guise – to exert their right to choose, especially when the commodity is nothing less than their love partners.

In the Knit-quick-o-matic episode, the seduction of the cool shows its darker side: the scene highlights how the boundary between seduction and coercion is volatile in consumer culture. In the episode, Grandma Robertson is pushed by Golem to watch an advertisement for a timesaving knitting device (the ‘Knit-quick-o-matic’) that she does not need but ends up buying anyway. As with Courtomatic, the scene’s kinesthetic signals derive from the feeling technologies of scenography and music (although the music here plays a smaller role than in the previous example) and have the potential to convey the sensations of a dystopian pressurised environment inspired by consumer culture. Indeed, this scene mainly exploits differences in scale between live characters and scenography to deliver its affective message. McKinney, drawing from Vischer’s original understanding of (aesthetic) empathy, explains that ‘the structure, scale and composition of objects finds a correspondence in our bodies and that aesthetic encounters with objects occur when we imaginatively inhabit them through the operation of empathy’.⁹⁴ In other words, when confronted with a large object one’s feeling can imaginatively stretch thin in an attempt to reach all of its surface and conceive how it would feel to be as big and extended as the large object. On the contrary, while confronting a small object, the opposite process will be in place, one of compression and constriction of our own

Ecology of Entrainment: Foundations of Coordinated Rhythmic Movement’, *Music Perception*, 28.1 (2010), 3–14; G. Varni and others, ‘Emotional Entrainment in Music Performance’, in *2008 8th IEEE International Conference on Automatic Face Gesture Recognition*, 2008, pp. 1–5.

⁹⁴ Joslin McKinney, ‘Scenography, Spectacle and the Body of the Spectator’, *Performance Research*, 18.3 (2013), 63–74 (p. 67).

self to fit inside the reduced volume of the thing observed.⁹⁵ In *Golem's* Knit-quick-o-matic episode, this second process can be experienced, feelingly, by the audience. In the scene, Grandma is at the centre of the gigantic projected television which is screening the advert for the novelty knitting device, from which all movement radiates (Figure 7). In this case, the substantial disparity in scale between the projected architecture of the scene and its central character is what is most likely to incite a kinesthetic response in the spectators. In fact, the audience can see that the character of Grandma is only a small figure compared to the (projected) gigantic hands, mouthed telephones and circling numbers pushing her to buy the 'cool' commodity of the moment. The audience is put in the position to feel that she is physically overpowered by the 2D elements of the scenography which appear to bully her into making the purchase: she is poked, tickled and pushed from all sides, facing forces disproportionately stronger than her. Grandma seems also overwhelmed aurally, by the insistence of the advert's voice, which repeats at the rhythm of upbeat music: 'Place your order! Place your order! Place your order!' before increasing the pressure with a countdown 'One minute remaining!'. In an act of kinesthetic empathy, spectators can try to inhabit Grandma's embodied experience, drastically affected by the scale and structure of the projected background interacting with her. By tapping into their previous embodied experiences of feeling small, or under pressure, spectators can try to imagine what it would be like to be subject

⁹⁵Cf. Robert Vischer's own words to describe the process: 'When I observe a stationary object, I can without difficulty place myself within its inner structure, at its center of gravity. I can think my way into it, mediate its size with my own, stretch and expand, bend and confine myself to it. With a small object, partially or totally confined and constricted, I very precisely concentrate my feeling. My feeling will be compressed and modest.... When, on the contrary, I see a large or partially overproportioned form, I experience a feeling of mental grandeur and breadth, a freedom of will'. as reported in McKinney, 'Scenography, Spectacle and the Body of the Spectator', p. 67.

to the same scales and rhythms as the character. In doing so, the dystopian nature of consumer culture oppression will manifest and potentially become clearer, if only at the level of embodied cognition: the great corporations that, in McGuigan's words, strive to 'service our every need and desire' can be unmasked as actually insistently seducing their consumers into the logic of consumption.⁹⁶



Figure 7 - A frame from the Quick-Knit-o-matic episode of *Golem* which shows the difference in scale between the physical character and the projected background. Source: <https://vimeo.com/259931116>.

The scenes examined so far show examples of how consumer culture in the performance of *Golem* is depicted in dystopian vein and of the how feeling technologies of scenography and music can be employed to communicate kinesthetically the oppressive and pressurised environment of this transfigured cool capitalism. Such scenes show, to borrow McGuigan's words, how 'consumers are, in effect, seduced by the delights of high-tech and "cool" commodities, promising to satisfy their everyday desire'.⁹⁷ By imbuing the episodes

⁹⁶ McGuigan, p. 85.

⁹⁷ McGuigan, p. 124.

with visual and aural kinesthetic signals, the production facilitates an embodied understanding of the critique of the seduction of the cool: before we rationally connect Courtomatic with a contemporary dating app, or Knit-quick-o-matic with today's pervasive targeted advertising, we empathically recognise the pressures to which the characters are subject and we feel for them. In the movements and reactions of the onstage characters to the dystopian fictional oppression, we recognise our own world and challenges. We feel not only for them, but *with* them, when we – as individual members of the audience – realise that both Robert and Grandma are victims of the same capitalist system in which we are immersed.

As I anticipated earlier, not only does the performance of *Golem* offer audiences the possibility to experience vicariously the dystopian oppression of the projected capitalist world, but it also presents kinesthetically the operations of resistance to such a system. The scenes focussing on the punk revolutionary band 'Annie and the Underdogs' deploy the feeling technologies of scenography and music, but this time with the aim of enabling spectators to empathise with the resisting characters, who under capitalism are marginalised individuals. McGuigan warns us that 'those who do not make it as successful consumers are marginalised and at least potentially troublesome'.⁹⁸ This is the case for the members of the band, formed by people 'who got mercilessly bullied' at school, and are, in their own words 'a band of revolutionary outlaws whose aim is to strike fear into the heart of our oppressors!'. However, they are far less menacing than they sound: the group has never played in front of anybody due to 'crippling stage fright' and write political songs that will at most 'ruin your Christmas!'. Rather than being an actual threat to rise of the Go-Corp, then, the band sardonically represents

⁹⁸ McGuigan, p. 115.

an attempt at cultural resistance to mainstream capitalism. Kinesthetically, this is signalled by the contrasting colour scheme of the scenes and the distinctive soundscape. Commenting on the scenographic importance of colour in theatre, Simon Donger writes that ‘a change of colour is a change in sensation, emotion and meaning’.⁹⁹ While the palette colour of *Golem* uses yellow shades throughout the performance (reflecting the dominant colour of the Go-Corp’s branding), the band scenes take a different direction, and use red hues to signal a break with the other spaces portrayed (Figure 8). Such choice of colour is clearly marked and has the effect of creating a closer relationship between characters and audience. Donger suggests that colours can produce the ‘illusion of depth’, influencing how distantly things and people are perceived. In particular, warm colours and especially reds are ‘advancing’ in that they ‘give the illusion of proximity and closeness’.¹⁰⁰ The red projected spotlights focussed on each band member thus work as a mechanism furthering kinesthetic empathy, contributing to establishing a sense of intimacy with the characters of such scenarios, who through this stratagem are encouraged to be seen as people with individual traits, and not just copies of consumer culture. Similarly, the soundscape of these episodes contrasts with the rest of the performance, signalling a different feeling atmosphere. While the production has an overarching set of upbeat melodies and sequences which remain constant across the majority of scenes, the punk rhythms of the band clearly mark these episodes as separate from the corporate-sounding scenes of Courtomatic or Knit-quick-o-matic, for instance. Through their rhythms, as well as their colours, the band asks to be identified by what they produce rather than what they consume,

⁹⁹ Simon Donger, *Scenography* (Ramsbury: Crowood Press, 2018), p. 28.

¹⁰⁰ Donger, p. 28.

denying the seductive machinations of capital.¹⁰¹ By providing alternative patterns of actions and rhythms to the standardised consumerist culture of the rest of the play, the scenes offer the audience the opportunity to identify – kinesthetically – with the difficult business of resisting the widespread appeal of cool capitalism.

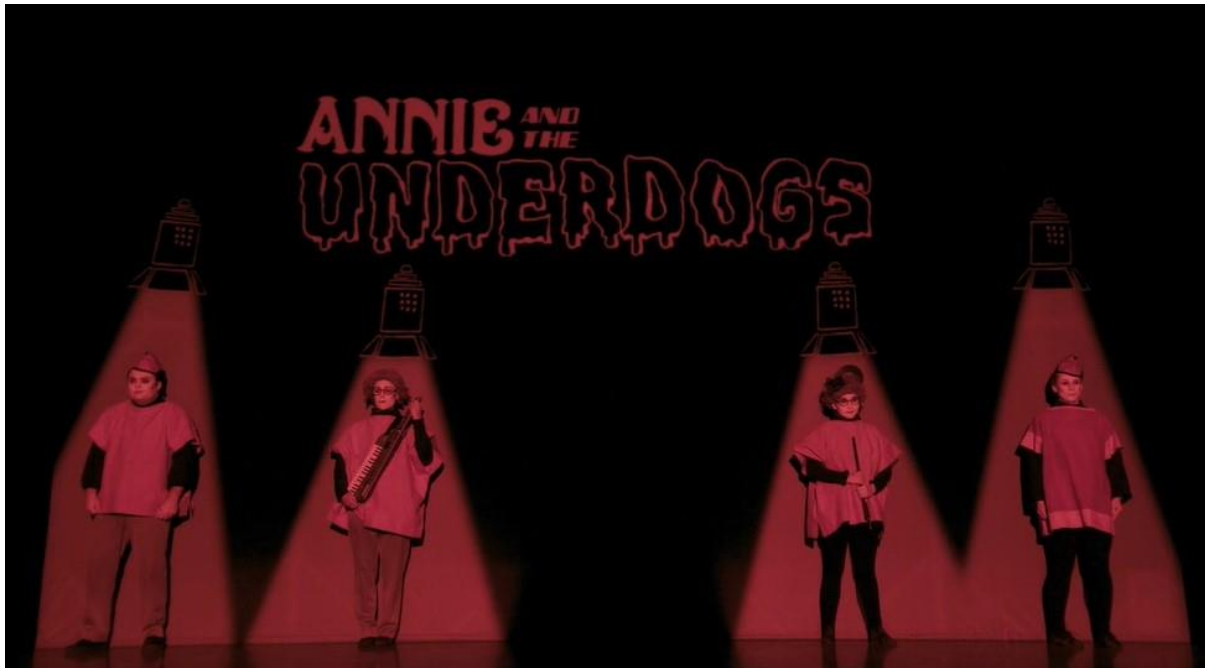


Figure 8 - A frame from the first ‘band practice’ scene. The prominently red background is in contrast with the colour scheme of the rest of the production, whose hues are mainly yellow. Source:

<https://vimeo.com/259931116>.

Throughout the performance of *Golem*, audiences are presented with opportunities to empathise with the characters in alternating episodes of oppression and resistance to the dystopian consumerist culture. Through careful deployment of the feeling technologies of scenography and music, the production allows spectators to inhabit all variants of embodied experience in the dystopian world: they can vicariously feel what it is like to be seduced by the

¹⁰¹ Cf. McGuigan’s statement ‘Several commentators have argued that self-identity has shifted from work into the sphere of consumption – that people realise themselves in what they consume, and, moreover, that this is experienced as freely chosen’. McGuigan, p. 114.

pressures of cool capitalism by kinesthetically empathising with scenes like Courtomatic and Knit-quick-o-matic, as well as experience resisting practices to the system via the episodes of band practice. In other words, the affective economy of *Golem* allows audiences an embodied understanding of the dystopian projection from all angles and subject positions. However, in its final moments, the performance seems to take a drastic turn in the type of experience it allows its audience to inhabit just before leaving the theatre: its final narrative scene is permeated with a resigned pessimism, which would seem to categorise *Golem* as only a closed parable on the inevitability of ‘cool capitalism’, rather than a dystopia able to warn of the dangers of the present. Exploring this apparent contradiction, this final section will discuss the function of *Golem*’s dystopia, and its potential to further embodied cognition of the dystopian qualities of our present.

4.4.2 A Resigned Pessimism? Feeling with Golem

Tom Moylan, writing about literary fiction, classifies as ‘pseudo-dystopias’ those texts that present a resigned pessimism, and a closed structure with regards to their narrative trajectory and ending.¹⁰² This means that pseudo-dystopias, or as I prefer to call them ‘resigned’ dystopias, are irredeemably negative about the possibility of an alternative better future to the one they present, and that their ending reflects such a resigned stance with a closed structure ‘wherein revolts are decisively crushed, with no slippage or surplus of dissent or opposition left in the society’.¹⁰³ In these terms, *Golem*’s final scene would put the play among the theatrical resigned dystopias. In fact, the last narrative episode of the play sees Annie attempting to destroy Robert’s Golem, in the hope that all the changes that it has brought to her

¹⁰² Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, p. 157.

¹⁰³ Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, p. 156.

family and her world will disappear with it. However, as she kicks the device, a stream of various objects springs from it before transforming into a giant disassembled man, to which all the faces and voices linked to the Go-Corporation belong. The enormous figure takes hold of Annie, and eventually devours her. This final scene adopts all of the strategies mentioned above – variants in pace, scale and music – to express the performance’s resigned pessimism through kinesthetic means. Such a closed ending presents a resigned stance, in which the projected consumerist system of cool capitalism has successfully managed to absorb and weaponise its opposition.

The scene mentioned above is the last one that has narrative continuity with the main storyline, and it is technically the finale of *Golem*’s tale. After a brief blackout, a series of frames appear on the screen illustrating the aftermath of Annie’s defeat: a world in which Golem has triumphed and evolved to a Version Three, which is now implanted in people’s heads, and is ‘making all those difficult choices for you’. All is shaded in the corporate colours of yellow and black; the high street which was initially populated by quirky shops is now displaying only Go-Corp brands; work and entertainment is completely automated, with Golems taking care of every need. Even the punk band signifying resistance is now branded in name and clothing, and totally subservient to the capitalist regime (Figure 9). As resigned as this ending may seem, I suggest that the definitive defeat depicted in the last frames has the potential to inspire hopeful empathic responses in the audience. While throughout the performance the estranged dystopian mode is the means by which we understand the horrors of the present (in line with Reid’s initial observation), the concluding frames show where the dystopian projection diverges from the contemporary world, bringing hope for a different future for us.



Figure 9 - A frame captured in the last moments of *Golem*'s performance. It shows visually, particularly through the use of the yellow colour, that the band has been co-opted by the capitalist system now governing the world of the play. Source: <https://vimeo.com/259931116>.

In an interview, the director Andrade explains that the company did not expect to devise such a resigned finale. She says:

At a certain point in this rehearsal process for *Golem* we realised the show was kind of ... heading towards this dystopian ending, and really there was nothing that we could do to bring it back, which was quite an interesting experience when really you stop making the show and the show starts making you.¹⁰⁴

Such a comment points at a resigned stance on the part of the production company, as it suggests the impossibility of devising an alternative scenario in which things could head in a different direction for Robert and his friends. Interviewed for the world premiere of the show, Barritt (the co-founder of the company and its animator) links the basis of the show's pessimism to the source for its inspiration: our world. He claims:

¹⁰⁴ Andrade Suzanne, 1927: *Directing/Suzanne Andrade*, 2018

<<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2185970678392748>> [accessed 13 February 2020].

Everyone can see what is wrong with the world. It is not a difficult thing to pick apart the problems with the way industrialised consumer driven democracy doesn't work, what is difficult is finding a solution. Something that generations of people brought up on the sickly-sweet heroin of market driven popular culture are finding impossible to even comprehend, let alone do anything about.¹⁰⁵

Golem ends on a resigned note because, according to its creators, it reflects our own incapacity to challenge consumer culture. Since, as McGuigan writes, cool capitalism 'translates disaffection into acceptance and compliance', there is no room left for a positive finale.¹⁰⁶

These positions imply that *Golem* is a direct – if estranged – translation of our own world, which is hopelessly governed by a capitalist system. However, such observations neglect the impact of the last frames of the performance on the audience's embodied cognition. By inhabiting, via kinesthetic empathy, the concluding projections of *Golem*, spectators have the opportunity to *feel* the difference between the dystopian world they have experienced throughout the performance, and their own present. As McKinney suggests, in attuning with the scenographic structure of the performance 'the spectators find themselves pulled into the "volumetric totality" of the experience through paying close attention to the dynamic interaction of body, space and objects'.¹⁰⁷ The experience of spectatorship in this sense becomes more than mere observation of the aesthetic elements of scenography and involves the enactive perception of the dynamic interactions between them. The body of the spectator acts as one of such elements, participating in the ecology of movement and feeling created onstage. Such a kinesthetic process allows audiences to inhabit an affective position that they are able to understand but not necessarily recognise as closely to their experience as the rest of

¹⁰⁵ Paul Barritt, 'I already have a Golem, many of them', 2014.

¹⁰⁶ McGuigan, p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ McKinney, 'Empathy and Exchange: Audience Experiences of Scenography', p. 224.

the performance's episodes. For instance, in following the projected surgical implanting of Golem Version Three in people's brains, spectators are granted access to the affective impact of that action on a fellow human, but can cognitively realise that the experience is outside the realm of the possible in their world. Such final dissonance between *Golem*'s world and the audience's opens up a glimmer of hope in an otherwise resigned dystopian arc. What until the end seems like a faithful transposition of the present in an estranged form is still able to function as a warning. *Golem* tells its audiences that the contemporary world is structured around a system which is in many ways dystopian, but also that the worst consequences of such system have not yet materialised. Ultimately, it is up to the individual spectator to decide what to make of the embodied understanding gained via the feeling-labour of *Golem*'s production.

In this section, elaborating on McKinney's application of kinesthetic analysis to the elements of scenography, I argued that audiences of *Golem* can empathically connect with its dystopian world by scanning the patterns of scenographic movement, and noting differences in scale, colour and sound. The embodied understanding of the play as a resigned dystopia with a hopeful potential is enabled by the kinetic and kinesthetic elements of the stage for this production, and by the way they interact with individual spectators. In the concluding case study of the thesis, I explore how the physical theatre dystopia of *The Wedding* facilitates the embodied cognition of its narratives and function by furthering opportunities for a kinesthetic engagement with the effort rhythms of their work. With its non-cognitive use of language, this performance presents an extreme example of how the dystopian theatre can communicate its message of critique affectively and cognitively, by using the body and its rhythms as the principal means of communication.

4.5 The Wedding

In their promotional material for *The Wedding*, the devising company Gecko describe their seventh touring production as being

inspired by the complexities of human nature: the struggle between love and anger, creation and destruction, community and isolation. In a blur of wedding dresses and contractual obligations, our extraordinary ensemble of international performers will guide audiences through a dystopian world in which we are all brides, wedded to society.¹⁰⁸

The show revolves around the central metaphor of the wedding to explore and question the contractual relationship between the individual and the state. The performance opens with the on-stage birth of adult characters, which are initiated into the story's society via a wedding ceremony, joyously celebrated by those who are already citizens of this world.¹⁰⁹ Once admitted, the characters are allocated a briefcase and placed in a stylised office, where they spend all of their time doing repetitive tasks under enormous pressure. The performance presents its world to the audience through three interlocking narratives: Robin's painful dissatisfaction with, and his divorce from, the society, Khalid's attempt to fit into the society as an immigrant, and Sophie's inspiring rebellion against the system. Through these individual yet interconnected stories, the performance conveys to the audience the full narrative spectrum of dystopian oppression and resistance which, as I have discussed at length in Chapter Two, is a central feature of dystopia across genres.

Gecko present their dystopian vision 'combining movement, imagery and provocative narratives' in a unique style of physical theatre which artistic director, founder and performer Amit Lahav has often referred to as 'total theatre'.¹¹⁰ Nick O'Brien and Annie Sutton define

¹⁰⁸ 'The Wedding', *Gecko* <<https://www.geckotheatre.com/the-wedding>> [accessed 24 February 2020].

¹⁰⁹ A clip documenting the birth of the characters is available to watch on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myJhzTrefF0>

¹¹⁰ 'The Wedding'; Cf. Lahav explaining what he means by 'total theatre' at *Amit FAQs | Education | Gecko*, 2015 <<https://vimeo.com/131561429>>.

Gecko's total theatre as 'a combination of design, choreography, lighting, sound and character-driven scenes sharing the responsibility of conveying the narrative'.¹¹¹ Gecko also use multiple languages in their shows, which act as a form of unintelligible communication among the characters. Lahav explains that this use of language is 'a tool for it [e.g. the performance] not being mime and it not being dance, and yet it being very human'.¹¹² In *The Wedding*, the characters speak to each other in nine different languages, yet their dialogue does not deliver the performance's narrative, but rather the emotional charge of a scene.¹¹³ While conscious of the miscellaneous factors contributing to Gecko's theatrical communication, I will here concentrate my critical analysis on two key feeling technologies employed in *The Wedding*: rhythmic movement and sound. Lahav in an interview admits: 'So much of a Gecko show is about rhythm, it's about feeling ... the sensation of performing it. The performers have to feel their way through the show'.¹¹⁴ Inevitably, the performance's rhythmic spine will not only be felt by the performers, but it also will be sensed by the spectating audience. This, I argue, happens through kinesthetic empathy. Reynolds contends that the perception of rhythm is grounded in kinesthesia and 'through kinesthetic experience the receiver can participate actively in performing the work'.¹¹⁵ By attuning to the fluctuations in movements and sound

¹¹¹ Nick O'Brien and Annie Sutton, *Theatre in Practice: A Student's Handbook* (Milton: Routledge, 2018).

¹¹² Amit Lahav on Gecko's Use of Language <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdHz_78nbyw> [accessed 23 February 2020].

¹¹³ 'The Sound World of The Wedding', *Gecko* <<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d011a758e5fd900016ea06a/t/5d35a4dd7c63da000124e84d/1563796710284/The+Sound+World+of+The+Wedding.pdf>> [accessed 24 February 2020].

¹¹⁴ Amit FAQs | Education | *Gecko*.

¹¹⁵ Dee Reynolds, 'Kinesthetic Rhythms: Participation in Performance', in *Rhythms: Essays in French Literature, Thought and Culture*, ed. by Elizabeth Lindley and Laura McMahon (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 103–18 (p. 103).

of the performance, audiences of *The Wedding* can gain an embodied understanding of Gecko's dystopian narrative and its critical message. Following Reynolds' critical example, I study the rhythmic movements of the performance – which are tightly interconnected with its rhythmic sounds – by deploying Rudolf Laban's 'effort analysis'. This investigation allows me to explore how the performance expresses its dystopian oppression, strategies of resistance, and its message of 'militant optimism' in the Blochian sense of materially grounded hope, as I explain in more detail later.

4.5.1 Effort Rhythms of Oppression and Resistance

The physical effort of moving bodies onstage in a physical theatre piece such as *The Wedding* is the primary factor contributing to the feeling-labour of the performance. Hurley would say that it is what allows us to connect emotionally with the characters, what 'draws us in, compel us to return, and most capture our imagination'.¹¹⁶ Reynolds explains that 'effort analysis takes as its starting point the behaviour and experience of moving subjects' to identify the qualities of movement.¹¹⁷ Depending on how the 'motion factors' of weight, space, time and flow are modulated, actions will carry different effort qualities and potential meanings.¹¹⁸ As I explain throughout my analysis, use of weight can be strong or light; space direct or flexible; time can be sustained or sudden; flow can oscillate on a scale from free to bound. Crucially, modulations in effort intensity and qualities produce different 'effort rhythms', described by Laban as 'an alternation of stresses or more intensive effort-qualities with less intensive ones'.¹¹⁹ The fluctuating effort rhythms of *The Wedding*'s performance convey the narrative of oppression

¹¹⁶ Hurley, p. 9.

¹¹⁷ Dee Reynolds, *Rhythmic Subjects* (Alton: Dance Books, 2007), p. 6.

¹¹⁸Cf. Rudolf Laban, *The Mastery of Movement*, 4th ed. (Plymouth: Macdonald & Evans, 1980), p. 20.

¹¹⁹ Reynolds, 'Kinesthetic Rhythms: Participation in Performance', p. 105.

and the counter-narrative of resistance to the dystopian world, as well as the dystopia's function of militant optimism. Even in this case, the mechanism of kinesthetic empathy allows the audience to engage actively with the rhythms of the performance and to feel its power as an embodied event.

The scenes portraying the repressive aspects of life in *The Wedding*'s dystopian world are characterised by a distinctive effort rhythm, which I name the 'oppressive rhythm' (Figure 10). Such rhythm is strongly defined by its propensity for a 'bound flow' of movement and sound, which I argue in this context indicates the tightly controlled existence of the characters of the dystopian world. Flow is the motion factor which 'establishes relationship and communication', and in its bound expression refers to 'movement which is broken up and jerky with the quality of "starting and stopping"'.¹²⁰ When staging office scenes, the performers' movements are mostly bound, both in individual and coordinated movements. After the wedding ceremony, each citizen is dressed in standard grey-scale office clothes and assigned a desk from which they frantically type and answer the phone. When in these confined spaces, the movement sequences of individual workers tend to be strong in weight (which here means performed with a visible, intentional force), and sudden in time with performers gesticulating vigorously, punching the air, transitioning from crouched stances to standing positions in brief and rapid moves. As Laban explains 'when combined with other effort elements' bound flow gives 'movement a quality of restraint'.¹²¹ It is as if the performers could not indulge in the full range of movement but were limited by some invisible force to twitching moves. These actions are accompanied by drumming sounds and percussive accents which are used, in Gecko's

¹²⁰ Jean Newlove and John Dalby, *Laban for All* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2004), p. 127.

¹²¹ Laban, p. 76.

words, to ‘suggest the rigidity of the system the characters are swept up in, with choreography tightly set to the musical beats’.¹²² In another instance of the same office setting, jerky individual movements are paired with the sound of phones ringing at irregular intervals and a background noise of chatter which is similarly interrupted. The result is a fractured sequence of movements, which has the power to convey kinesthetically to the audience the effects of the mechanism of dystopian control of the individual body. In fact, as Reynolds reminds us, through kinesthetic empathy ‘the spectator imaginatively participates in the perceived action’, and is able to grasp, feelingly, what the characters are experiencing.¹²³ This process does not only consist in apprehending ‘virtual’ movement but also in the embodied recognition of similar patterns in our own routines. A kind of muscular memory is stimulated by the rhythms of the dancers, which potentially allow the spectators to awaken the internal (visceral, as Leder would say) sensations felt by the spectators in other somatic circumstances. The goal of such exchange is not necessarily identification with the characters or their states, but rather a bodily understanding of their oppressive situation as expressed by their bound performance flow. If audience members so desire, they can attune themselves to the oppressive rhythm of individual dystopian subjects and vicariously experience the restraining sensations of dystopia in their bodies.

¹²² ‘The Sound World of The Wedding’.

¹²³ Reynolds, ‘Kinesthetic Rhythms: Participation in Performance’, p. 107.



Figure 10 - A picture capturing the angular movement of one of the office's sequences. On the right the rebellious characters oppose the conformity of the others. Photograph by Richard Haughton and Rich Rusk.

Source: <https://www.geckotheatre.com/the-wedding>.

The influences of the dystopian power structures on the characters – and the potential kinesthetic impact on audiences – are even more evident in movement sequences where several performers are involved. In a later scene, eight citizens, all wearing their wedding dresses, perform a choreography in the darkness while being only illuminated by small torch lights attached to their chests and directed at their upper chest. Here, too, the prevailing motion factors are strong in weight and sudden in time, with the addition of a clear preference for a direct attitude to space. In Laban's words, 'the effort element "direct" consists of a *straight* line in direction and of a movement sensation of *threadlike* extent in space, or a feel of narrowness'.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Laban, p. 73.

Laban's threadlike metaphor to define direct use of space offers a fitting image to describe the effect of the choreography. Performers move angularly in semi-darkness, contracting and expanding their bodies as if controlled by invisible threads from above which steer their direction. The 'thrusting effort' of each movement is complemented by a swishing sound, similar to blades forcefully cutting the air, adding to the impression of a marionette-like setting.¹²⁵ In this dystopian dance, the invisible threads are held by the society's rich and powerful, who at key moments emerge as faceless figures lavishly banqueting on an elevated platform above the stage. In this particular sequence, we cannot see the rich, yet we can *hear* their influence: the ominous presence of the dystopian elite is signalled through classical opera music, associated throughout the performance with their raised world. This aural relationship of similarity connects the bound flow of movements to its cause, which is here revealed as being the people benefitting from the dystopian system of oppression, symbolically placed above the rest of the scene in a controlling position. Overall, the repressive nature of the dystopian system of *The Wedding*'s performance is signalled by an oppressive effort rhythm, characterised by a bound flow of movement and an equally fragmented musical score. Since, in Reynolds' words, 'kinesthetic empathy mobilises boundaries between subjects', in the act of looking and listening spectators can cross the boundaries of their subjectivities and experience what the oppressive rhythm of *The Wedding*'s dystopia may feel like with their own bodies.¹²⁶ Again, the identification with the other is not the goal: approaching sensorially and

¹²⁵The combination of strong, sudden and direct elements form one of the eight 'basic efforts' identified by Laban and called 'thrusting' or 'punching'. Cf. Newlove and Dalby, pp. 138–39.

¹²⁶ Reynolds, 'Kinesthetic Rhythms: Participation in Performance', p. 107.

feelingly the experience of the other is yet another way of understanding kinesthetically the constricting mechanisms of dystopian oppression.

Audiences are encouraged to empathise with the counter-narrative of resistance to dystopian oppression, via the ‘resisting rhythm’ of *The Wedding* (Figure 11). The resisting rhythm of the performance is characterised by an increasingly free flow of motion. Flow is free when ‘it is entirely unimpeded and difficult to stop suddenly’.¹²⁷ The character of Sophie is the first to show her discomfort with the oppressive rhythm of life in dystopia. Soon after her wedding ceremony, she seems to be unwilling to fit in with the bound flow of her society. In fact, in the early office scenes which I have described, she moves out of sync to the rest of the workers, unable to follow the society’s constrictive rules of motion. After a few failed attempts at conforming with her context, she and her friend Stephanie move downstage and start devising their own resisting practices. In the beginning, their moves retain most of the qualities of the oppressive rhythm of the dystopian setting: they are direct in space, and relatively strong and sudden in time. Their flow is still bound, but in a tentative rather than constricted way. Laban explains that ‘when the sensation of flowing on is reduced one could eventually speak of “pausing” in which, although still, we have the feel of a continuation but of a withheld one’.¹²⁸ The pausing between movement sequences in this developing stage represents the transition from the bound flow of oppression to a liberating flow of resistance. In fact, as the performance goes on, the two grow more confident in their moves, which slowly reach free flow qualities. Free flow generally follows ‘an outward direction from the centre of the body

¹²⁷ Newlove and Dalby, p. 127.

¹²⁸ Laban, pp. 75–76.

through the articulations'.¹²⁹ The movements of the revolutionaries are 'scattering', as Laban would call them, characterised by expanding, opening stances of the arms and feet: Sophie and Stephanie beat their chests in a liberating manner, raise their left arm and hand wide open above their heads, stomp their feet to the ground.¹³⁰ The intensity of their actions is still strong but now sustained in time and mostly flexible in space. They now take the time to find the gestures and movement trajectories that feel right *to them* and are not externally driven by the uneven rhythm of the soundscape. The soundtrack accompanying the development of their free flow rhythm is a background presence, a mix of wind instruments such as horns, flutes and the harmonica. Such sounds do not dictate the nature of their moves but contribute to unifying their flowing choreography. Strident notes and distorted voices can be heard throughout, perhaps an attempt to indicate the procedural nature of their search for the resisting rhythm. As their choreography becomes more codified, their sequences are marked by deep drumming beats, the significance of which will be clarified in the discussion of the last scene. Even in this case, audiences are encouraged to engage through kinesthetic empathy with the resisting rhythm of the performance. Keeping in mind Reynolds' view of 'kinesthetic empathy as a movement across and between bodies', the developing resisting rhythm of *The Wedding* allows spectators to inhabit the resisting characters' subjectivities and feel, through their bodies, the kinesthetic energy deriving from the resisting rhythm of the choreography.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Laban, p. 19.

¹³⁰ Newlove and Dalby, p. 113.

¹³¹ Reynolds and Reason, *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, p. 88.



Figure 11 – A production picture showing the rebellious characters building their resisting rhythm.
Photograph by Richard Haughton and Rich Rusk. Source: <https://www.geckotheatre.com/the-wedding>.

Reynolds reminds us that ‘effort rhythms are experienced kinesthetically, through movement sensations of weight, space, time and flow’.¹³² Through kinesthetic empathy, spectators of *The Wedding* can recognise differences between the oppressive and resisting effort rhythms, which combine sound and movement to convey the dystopia’s narrative development. In particular, I suggested that the oscillations between bound and free flow are crucial to allow audiences empathic identification with different dystopian subjectivities, which gives them an insight into the diverse lived experiences of dystopia. However, the categorisation of bound flow as ‘oppressive’ and free flow as ‘resisting’ must admit exceptions. In fact, the performance also presents episodes that use a free flow to convey oppression. For instance, the depiction of one of the named characters’ suffering (Robin) at the hand of the

¹³² Reynolds, ‘Kinesthetic Rhythms: Participation in Performance’, p. 106.

dystopian system is shown with a prevalence of free flow sequences, as it is an office dance meant to explore how social cohesion is created in the dystopian system. Such cases provide nuance and three-dimensionality to the dystopian world depicted in *The Wedding*. As explored in Chapter Two, oppression and resistance are complex mechanisms that exploit each other's key strategies in the struggle of hegemony. By refusing a clear-cut codification of the rhythms of oppression and resistance, Gecko escaped the oversimplification of its themes and created a nuanced, complex, and inclusive kinesthetic experience of dystopia for its audience.

The Wedding's struggle for hegemony is presented on stage by showing the clash between the two effort rhythms of oppression and resistance. Laban wrote that effort rhythms 'are created through the repetition of [...] effort configurations as are characteristic of the community'.¹³³ In *The Wedding*, the way in which the characters move symbolises their belonging to the hegemonic group or the rebellious minority on a socio-cultural level. When, towards the end of the show, their oppressive and resisting rhythms come into direct contact, the two factions engage kinesthetically in the world-changing struggle for hegemony. The last section of the performance focuses on the cultural and ideological battle over how *The Wedding*'s dystopian world should be run. The citizens in their wedding dresses and briefcases are faced by the revolutionaries headed by Sophie. The rebels encircle the citizens with their revolutionary rhythm, powerfully executing their resisting choreography in free flow and reclaiming their space in society. While this happens, a deep drumming sound of battle is pumped onstage. The revolution is deemed complete when citizens either run away or join in the revolution, helping to literally take down the faceless powerful sitting above them all. By

¹³³ Laban, p. 15.

watching the clash between the two effort rhythms, audiences are given access to a physical and affective representation of the struggle for hegemony in dystopia. The complex interaction between the contrasting groups of characters stimulates what Reynolds calls an ‘affective kinesthetic engagement’ in which the encounter ‘with the dance’s body takes precedence over emotional, empathetic engagement with the “dancer”’.¹³⁴ Rather than promoting a temporary relation of identification with the characters’ subjectivities, the choreography of revolution encourages feeling the struggle as a process whose affective energies can be embodied by the audience. Of course, to some extent, the oppressive and resisting rhythms also have individual affective qualities, in that the audience’s focus is often directed toward more than one character, who stands for the wider (hegemonic or resisting) cause. However, when the company comes together in the revolutionary struggle, the spectators’ kinesthetic engagement is not limited to a fluid sense of intersubjectivity but, as Reynolds would say, is ‘invested as subject and object in the shared materiality and affective flow of choreographed movement’.¹³⁵ This is accentuated in the final moments of the performance, whose kinesthetic composition is designed to deliver – in the form of a utopian performative – the performance’s message of militant optimism.

4.5.2 Community-Building Rhythms: Militant Optimism

At various points in my discussion, I have suggested that *The Wedding*’s performance, with its rhythms and kinesthetic signals, presents a dystopia whose function is one of ‘militant optimism’. I borrow the expression from Ernst Bloch, for whom militant optimism is the

¹³⁴ Reynolds, ‘Kinesthetic Empathy and the Dance’s Body’, p. 132.

¹³⁵ Reynolds, ‘Kinesthetic Empathy and the Dance’s Body’, p. 123.

‘materially comprehended hope’ which gives utopia its transformative power.¹³⁶ As Levitas clarifies, for Bloch utopia must involve ‘not merely wishful thinking but will-full thinking’: one must not only imagine how the world may be different but strive to make it otherwise.¹³⁷ Militant optimism then, as I use the term here, is an attitude to the future that expresses not only a desire for change, but a materially grounded hope that change is possible and within reach. *The Wedding* develops such a militant function with kinesthetic means throughout its narrative arc: it starts with the rhythmic rendition of an oppressive regime whose ideological base is challenged first by an expression of desire and then realised as grounded hope in a successful revolution. After the revolutionary clash between the oppressive and resisting effort rhythms and the taking down of the powerful, the rebellious characters endeavour to devise a new rhythm to represent the spirit of militant optimism of their newfound community. It is a tentative, and often painful process which is however necessary to find new ways of being together. The revolutionaries initially reproduce some of the moves of the resisting rhythm, but go on to experiment, as individuals and as a group, with fresh combinations of weight, space, time and flow. The result is an original heterogeneous rhythm that emphasises the value of an inclusive and cohesive community, via kinesthetic sequences that favour harmonized efforts executed in synchrony.

¹³⁶ Cf. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1986), I, p. 200.

¹³⁷ Levitas, ‘Educated Hope’, p. 15.



Figure 12 - The final moments of the performance during which all characters are chanting and moving in unison, a moment of utopian performative. Photograph by Richard Haugthon and Rich Rusk. Source: <https://www.geckothetre.com/the-wedding>.

To reiterate its commitment to grounded hope at the end of the performance, *The Wedding* devises a final affective choreography of intense militant optimism which can be best described as a ‘utopian performative’ in Dolan’s terms. I mentioned Dolan’s concept earlier in the Chapter when discussing *Killer*, to contrast the concept’s hopeful core with *Killer*’s ultimately resigned stance. The isolation of the spectators in that immersive experience greatly differs from the utopian unity promoted by *The Wedding*, which is analysed below. Before scrutinising such experience, it is useful to remember that Dolan defines utopian performatives as moments in performance that ‘persuade us that beyond this “now” of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different, one whose potential we can

feel as we're seared by the promise of a present that gestures toward a better later'.¹³⁸ The attitude of militant optimism running throughout *The Wedding* culminates in its last scene as a powerful moment of utopian performativity, which is able to 'make palpable [to its audience] an affective vision of how the world might be better'.¹³⁹ As the characters dance ecstatically in their newfound rhythm, one by one they leave the central dancing space, pick up a chair from the wings and sit at the front of the stage (Figure 12). As each one sits down, they gradually initiate a symphony of rhythmic clapping patterns with their hands and feet. The weight and time of their movements and their resulting sound grow in intensity as more members of the company take a seat facing the audience. The mounting energy of the physical and aural choreography (which is effectively a seated dance) can be perceived kinesthetically within the audience's bodies, which can attune themselves to the rhythmic crescendo of the scene. Such rhythmic sound patterns impact the viewing experience of the audience, opening up, as Reynolds would put it, 'an affective, reflexive space within the body'.¹⁴⁰ When all performers are sat down, a final song is intoned by the whole company, with the clapping, stamping and shouting 'building to an all-encompassing crescendo', as Gecko described it.¹⁴¹ The result is a beautiful moment of utopian performativity of dystopian resistance which, to borrow Dolan's words 'lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense'.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Dolan, p. 7.

¹³⁹ Dolan, p. 6.

¹⁴⁰ Reynolds, 'Kinesthetic Empathy and the Dance's Body', p. 130.

¹⁴¹ 'The Sound World of The Wedding'.

¹⁴² Dolan, p. 5.

As a theatrical dystopia, *The Wedding* expresses an attitude of militant optimism throughout its course. The central metaphor of the wedding ceremony generates the estrangement necessary to the dystopia, while the alternating rhythms of oppression and resistance, and the clashing of these in the revolution episode convey kinesthetically to the audience its narrative. In its final moments, the performance produces an intense expression of militant optimism in the form of a utopian performative, allowing the audience not just to imagine but to experience, via a kinesthetic connection with the stage, a renewed sense of community. *The Wedding* then makes the embodied cognition of its message possible by providing moments of increased affectivity throughout its narrative and in its finale.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that theatre offers its audience the unique experience of a cognitive *and* affective understanding of dystopia. Theatre as a medium requires ‘feeling-labour’: its power comes from mobilising its audience’s feelings and from creating emotional connections and disconnections between its narratives and its spectators. Dystopias in the theatre will necessarily incorporate these meaning-making strategies into their theatrical form, and adopt novel, affective ways of signifying their critique of the present. Following Hurley, I have defined as ‘feeling technologies’ those techniques specific to theatre (such as light, music, scenography and rhythmic movement) which shape the performance environment and communicate sensorially dystopian narratives. Crucially, feeling technologies have the power to influence the experience of the audience by shaping the ecology of feelings in which they participate. The combinations of the modalities of spectatorship that the productions enable (immersive vs proscenium staging) and the different uses of feeling technologies will facilitate diverse modalities of embodied understanding of dystopian critique. Through the analysis of *Killer*, I showed how dystopian performances can provoke strong visceral and ecstatic bodily reactions in the audience, which was allowed to experience – through their bodies – the social

atomisation depicted in the play's dystopian narrative. However, I deemed such experience as only compensatory, in that it did not grant any agency to the participants to influence the dystopia's outcome. Dystopia in the theatre can also be staged in more conventional end-on settings, yet their capacity to communicate feelingly is not hindered. In such cases the mechanism of kinesthetic empathy comes into play and allows spectators to connect empathically to the movements and rhythms onstage. The examples of *Golem* and *The Wedding* clarified how the combination of scenographic elements and onstage movements allowed the audiences to communicate their respective messages of critique and militant optimism, and allowed them to experience, if vicariously, what such dystopian worlds may *feel* like. Importantly, in this chapter I have demonstrated that dystopia in performance signifies not only cognitively via linguistic and aesthetic signals, but also affectively. In theatre, the audience is afforded an embodied understanding of dystopia's functions and dynamics and is given the opportunity to experience, affectively and cognitively, the nuances of social dreaming.

Conclusion – Brave New Stages

I began this thesis by arguing that, despite the lack of critical attention to them, contemporary theatrical dystopias were high in numbers and varied in content and form. I proposed, first of all, to showcase a sample of the material being produced, in order to be able to identify the dystopian as a contemporary genre of theatre. To this purpose, I analysed in depth ten plays written and produced since the beginning of the millennium that are diverse in style, function, and subject matter. I included dystopias whose theatrical structure was fairly conventional in format (such as *Foxfinder*, or *Tinderbox*), physical theatre pieces (*The Wedding*), immersive performances (*Killer*) and multi-media shows (*Golem*), plays employing an episodic non-chronological structure (*Lemons*, *Pomona*, *The Pillowman*) and covering topics as varied as political freedom (*Edgar & Annabel*) and technological advancements (*Girl in the Machine*). These works represent only a fraction of the dystopian theatre created and staged in the past twenty years, whose diversity I attempt to capture in the listings contained in the Appendix. As I explain there too, this catalogue needs to be considered inevitably incomplete, as a starting point for establishing the genre. The pandemic has contributed to renewed interest in dystopian narratives, and it is likely that much more theatre (in both live and online form) is being created and will emerge in the aftermath of the crisis.¹ However, my goal was not merely to establish the existence of a dystopian current in contemporary theatre, but rather to understand what such dystopian theatre looked like and what could it do. In particular, my aim was to delineate the

¹ Cf. Nyshka Chandran, ‘Why Do We Find Comfort in Terrifying Stories?’, *BBC Culture*, 2020
<<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200508-why-depressing-dystopia-stories-are-popular-during-covid-19>>
[accessed 16 February 2021].

key features and machineries of the genre and provide a clear vocabulary to identify and engage with dystopian narratives in the theatre. Through this, I aimed to comprehend how dystopias in the theatre could contribute to widen our understanding of dystopia as a genre through their interpretations of the generic conventions of dystopias in other media. I also argued that dystopian theatre conveys its messages by using inherently theatrical means and that through such means is able to communicate both cognitively and affectively. In other words, I suggested that the intrinsic theatricality of theatre – with its materiality, multiple signifying system, and relation to a present audience – represents dystopian theatre’s greatest strength.

I started my study of theatrical dystopias by seeking to understand whether one of the fundamental features of literary dystopias, namely its double-narrative structure, could be found also in dramatic dystopias, and if so, what form would it take. Such an analysis has not been undertaken before in relation to theatrical dystopias, and only a small group of studies focussing on dystopian literature have deployed a comparable approach, although not with the same emphasis on linguistic mechanisms and analysis.² My analysis demonstrated that the narrative of the hegemonic order and the counter-narrative of resistance first identified by Baccolini in dystopian novels (as a key ‘structural strategy’ of the form) is also a central mechanism of dystopian theatre, where it principally manifests through dramatic dialogue.³ Indeed, drawing from Ubersfeld, I have explained that, in the ‘conversational’ genre of theatre,

² Of the studies mentioned in Chapter Two, the ones to approach dystopian language in novels from a linguistics point of view are Sisk. and Julie Millward, “‘Words That Are Lost’: Obsolete Language in Dystopian Fiction”, in *Dystopia(n) Matters: On the Page, on Screen, on Stage*, by Fátima Vieira (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 96–114. For all her ground-breaking work on dystopian language, Baccolini did not take a strictly linguistic approach to language in dystopia.

³Baccolini and Moylan, ‘Dystopia and Histories’, p. 5.

dialogue indicates a relation of power between the characters which emerges not only through the words they say, but also from the pre-conditions of their exchanges, in social, political, and hierarchical terms. Such reading of the function of dialogue presupposes an understanding of language as discourse, particularly in the critical discourse analysts' sense of a social practice which, at the same time, shapes and is shaped by the society in which it occurs. It follows that when the society in question is a dystopia, as in the case of the fictional ones depicted in dystopian theatre, the *discourse* among characters can indicate their participation in the hegemonic dystopian regime of the plays or their resistance to it. From such critical premises, I proposed to explore in detail the linguistic mechanisms employed in four dystopian plays – *The Pillowman*, *Foxfinder*, *Lemons*, and *Edgar & Annabel* – so as to bring to light the ways in which the narrative of the dystopian hegemonic order and the narrative of resistance are realised in theatrical dystopias. An analysis of dystopian language grounded in linguistics had the advantage of being able to show the minutiae of the structures used to establish dystopian hegemonic and counter-hegemonic power dynamics in dystopian theatre. I complemented the results of my linguistic investigation with Gramscian ideas on the workings of hegemony, so as to interpret purely structural findings with critically grounded cultural theory. I discovered that dystopian oppression in theatre is always based on an asymmetry of discursive as well as material power. Such power can be exerted in linguistically coercive ways via the use of selected 'discourse types' and 'subject positions' designed to strengthen the linguistic standing of institutional representative of the dystopia. Alternatively, in a more subtle way, dystopian oppression can be exerted through the creation of linguistic consent, which operates via the dissemination of a 'specialist register' assigned to the hegemony and via its 'codification' in written form. I also examined discursive strategies of resistance in dystopian plays, discovering two main systems of opposition to the reigning dystopian regime: the mirroring of the language of the hegemony for enacting resisting practices undetected (what I called a 'reverse

discourse'), and the generation of an alternative language (an 'anti-language' in my critical terms) as a reaction to increasingly oppressive dystopian rule. Although the research in this chapter offered important findings on the ways language shapes dystopian dramatic double-narratives, a bigger sample of plays could have revealed additional strategies overlooked by this study and evidenced wider patterns relating to the functioning of dystopian language.

The key finding of this chapter was the delineation of the embedded (and embodied) modes to convey resistance in dystopian plays. Beyond the primarily linguistic strategies used to deploy and develop theatrical dystopias' double narrative, I identified non-linguistic practices of 'embedded resistance' which are unique to the theatrical form because they take advantage of theatre's multiple channels of communication. Such practices flourish from the gap between the written word and the physical, gestural, kinetic power of performance. They are techniques that can be employed by the performers to convey resistance to the hegemony via the modulation of actors' performance: the ironic delivery of a line, gestural communication among characters, a movement sequence are only a few examples of what could constitute embedded resistance. These are inherently theatrical, in that they harness theatre's multiple signifying systems to complicate dystopia's double-narrative system. The identification of such practices was a necessary first step to understand the interplay of verbal and non-verbal systems in conveying dystopia's double narrative and future research could usefully explore and enrich this critical avenue.

In the second chapter, I continued to explore how fundamental features of dystopias in other genres (particularly literature) can be adapted and developed for the medium of theatre. I embarked on an in-depth rethinking of the role and functioning of estrangement for theatrical dystopias by considering three more plays, *Tinderbox*, *Girl in the Machine*, and *Pomona*. After demonstrating the importance of the mechanism of 'cognitive estrangement' first theorised by Suvin to the genre of dystopia and reiterating its critical components (estrangement, cognition

and the *novum*), I developed a framework that would account for dystopian theatre's specific signifying strategies. I argued that estrangement in the context of theatre is articulated via three modalities, which I termed spatial, positional and material. Spatial estrangement in my definition consists in the textual strategies which convey the alterity of the world portrayed onstage. Drawing from the semiotic terminology of Pfister, I identified verbal and non-verbal localisation techniques that would suggest via a specific set of signs that the onstage and offstage environment had dystopian influences.⁴ Aural signals, unusual character behaviour, and significant objects suggesting time and/or place are among the features that can indicate an estranged world without the use of the word. However, estranged localisation can also transpire from verbal signs, such as stage directions, characters' dialogue, and indications of time (in the form of 'temporal anchors'). I found that by reading the script of a dystopian play in such terms it is possible to detect the level and quality of a theatrical dystopia's spatial estrangement before the play is even staged. The second type of estrangement which I identified as specific to the theatre was the 'positional' mode. This concerns the ways in which the audience is placed, theoretically, in relation to the narrative, which in turn determines how the spectator engages with the cognitive propositions presented by the play. This level of estrangement potentially allows the audience to experience the events of the play from the perspective of the characters, and to consider, if for a fleeting moment, the presuppositions and questions raised by the dystopian context as their own preoccupations.

If with positional estrangement I began to reflect on the role of the audience in the interpretation of dystopian plays in theoretical terms, with material estrangement I took into

⁴Cf. Pfister.

account the relationship between audiences and theatrical dystopia in material terms, too. My intention was to investigate how different scenographic arrangements would impact the audience's perception of the dystopian messages of critique across different productions of the same play: Alistair McDowall's *Pomona*. I argued that the combination of scenography and audience positioning affects the way in which the spectators perceive the *novum* of dystopia and that, for the cognitive process of interpretation to take place, productions need to favour what (following Rancière) I called 'emancipated spectatorship'.⁵ Only when the spectators are put in the position to interpret creatively what they see onstage and compare it to their own experiences can they truly make the most of the multiple possibilities offered by the estranged spaces of dystopia. Overall, my composite framework of estrangement contributes to the understanding of the mechanics of theatrical dystopias by identifying the different yet interconnected ways in which dystopias of the theatre signify their distance from our world. At the same time, each mode of estrangement provides the instruments to bridge the gap between the estranged reality and our world, thus favouring the development among spectators of reflections on the stage worlds of the future. Crucially, I discovered that in all its forms, theatrical estrangement requires the contribution of the audience, who must make a cognitive and creative effort to imagine the 'third thing' generated by the staged dystopia.

In my final chapter, I shifted my attention toward the performance of dystopian theatre and its affective ecology to articulate further the centrality of the audience to the process of co-creation of onstage dystopias. I began from Levitas' intuition of the inextricability of the cognitive and affective when it comes to utopian manifestations to seek to understand how

⁵Cf. Rancière.

theatrical dystopias could harness the affective powers of theatre to convey their critique.⁶ Following Hurley, I established that via feeling labour theatre mobilises feelings of all types which in turn interact with the spectators' bodies to create intellectual and corporeal understandings. Specifically, the theatrical mechanisms which make the distribution of affects possible are called feeling technologies: the use of light and darkness, sound, colour, onstage movement, and rhythm can all be employed to convey dystopian meanings affectively and cognitively. Different staging arrangements such as an immersive set up or an end-on performance also influence the experience of the audience and with it the modality of embodied cognition. I employed the separate frameworks of body thematisation (Leder) and kinesthetic empathy (Reynolds and Reason) to explore the diverse encounters with the affective qualities of dystopia in altered spectating conditions. I found that immersive environments are more likely to engender an inwards focus on individual bodily sensations, while a more traditional end-on setting can prompt our attention to shift outside ourselves and into the embodied performance. My case studies evidenced a conservative attitude toward the changeability of the projected future in the immersive performance (*Killer*), and an increasingly hopeful stance in the proscenium performances (of *Golem* and particularly *The Wedding*). However, I have not attempted to identify a univocal connection between the type of staging and the function of the affective experience of dystopia, since variations in the feeling technologies employed could have easily altered such results. No matter what the staging arrangements, the spectators of dystopian performance assume a fundamental role in the affective interpretation of dystopian

⁶Cf. Levitas, *Utopia As Method*.

critique in the theatre, since they contribute with their own felt experience to the co-creation, in intellectual and affective terms, of the projected dystopias of the future.

This project is the first full-length investigation of contemporary dystopian theatre and as such it aims to establish the critical foundations for the recognition and evaluation of the genre. However, it is important to acknowledge that, for all its critical contributions, this study is merely a starting point into the investigation of the features and functions of dystopian theatre. Further research into the field may identify additional elements important to the understanding of theatrical dystopias by taking into account a more diverse sample of plays. In fact, one of the limitations of this study is the fairly conservative choice of the selected primary material. When scouting for the works to include in the thesis, I wanted to find a set of plays with a ‘hard’ dystopian core which I could easily reconcile with the current understanding of dystopias in other media. This led me to select plays and performances (such as *Foxfinder* or *Girl in the Machine*) whose structure and signifying mechanisms on the page were very close to those of literary dystopias. As I gained confidence in my understanding of the dynamics of theatrical dystopias, I made bolder choices and introduced more imaginative types of dystopias such as *Killer* or *The Wedding*. I recognise that this might have been an inevitable step in my own process of discovery, but I would invite other scholars to be bolder and dream bigger about the kinds of dystopias that theatre can produce. I would also suggest diversifying the sample of playwrights and companies to include in the study. In my search for the features of dystopias I did not include the work of Black or minority artists, whose perspective on what is to be considered dystopian would have certainly widened the results of this research. Since dystopia reflects the nightmares of a society, the picture that my study paints cannot be complete without the fears and anxieties of all sections of the British social milieu.

By bringing together key research in Utopian Studies and fundamental concepts in theatre scholarship I have sought to establish theatrical dystopias as yet another manifestation

of fictional utopianism, widening the understanding of the genre as a whole. I have shown that the dialogue between the two disciplines can produce advantageous results, and I trust that my experiment will encourage more scholars to venture into the combined fields of theatre and dystopia. In particular, I hope to have persuaded those convinced that dystopia was only a thematic strand of narrative to believe that it is indeed a complex generic form, and those suspicious of the prospect of successfully presenting dystopia via the theatrical medium that it is possible and indeed desirable to do so. Through my analysis, I have developed a specialist vocabulary to discuss theatrical dystopias in terms of verbal and non-verbal narrative strategies, varied types of estrangement, and material and affective signifying techniques. I demonstrated that, in contrast to the literary manifestations of dystopia, theatrical dystopia does not necessarily need language to express its core (although as Chapter Two proved it can be an important part of it) because it can rely on the multiple signifying systems integral to theatre. Moreover, I concluded that dystopian theatre benefits from the contribution of the audience in ways that other media cannot: the co-presence of performers and spectators in the feeling environment of the theatre allow for an embodied understanding of dystopian critique which is difficult to achieve in other types of interactions with dystopian narratives.

My study demonstrates that dystopian theatre allows its audience to engage productively with contemporary discourses of fear and anxiety by using the estranged perspective. The distance between the theatrical dystopian projections and the spectators' present offers the chance to interrogate our future worlds and selves. How do we stop our collective nightmares from becoming a reality? How do we shape a future in line with our collective dreams and values? In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, asking these questions in the arena of performance is essential for thinking collectively about what comes next. Dystopian theatre matters today because it enables our social dreaming through an embodied experience of the future, allowing us not only to learn what to fear, but how to desire better.

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Appendix

Selected List of Dystopian Plays and Performances in UK from 1990-2019

The works listed are a selection of the dystopian theatre produced between the 1990 and 2020 in the UK. I have included pieces that fit my definition of dystopia, as well as plays and performances working more loosely in a dystopian sensibility. The present list does not claim to be an exhaustive record, rather a starting point for anyone interested in the field of theatre and dystopia. Its goal is to demonstrate the breadth of dystopian manifestations in the theatre and to facilitate further research in the field. For a similar directory comprising speculative theatre more generally (Science Fiction, Horror, Contemporary Fantasy and the Weird) see Dr. Christos Callow's *The Internet Science Fiction Theatre Database* at this link: <https://www.cyborphic.com/database>.

The majority of the plays and performances listed is from British playwrights and companies, with the exception of a few key works from US or Irish authors that have received a UK premiere, or which have been reviewed by the British press. I have indicated the title, playwright or producing company, premiere location and year. In line with my research focus, the list does only include works in English but does not want to deny the potentially numerous dystopian manifestations in other traditions. My hope is that many equivalent records are being compiled in universities around the world and that one day these will be collated together to paint a fuller picture of dystopian theatre in the early twenty-first century.

In alphabetical order by company name/playwright/artist:

Golem by 1927. Salzburg Theatre Festival, Austria. 2014

Animal by Kay Adshead. Soho Theatre, London. 2003

Souvenir by Any One Thing. Undisclosed location, London. 2019 (immersive performance)

The Divide by Alan Ayckbourn. Edinburgh Fringe Festival, Edinburgh. 2017.

Dismaland by Banksy. Weston-super-Mare, Somerset. 2015 (temporary art exhibition)

13 by Mike Bartlett. National Theatre, London. 2011

Chair by Edward Bond. Avignon Festival, France. 2006

Have I None by Edward Bond. Castle Vale Artsite, Birmingham. 2000

The Under Room by Edward Bond. Brig Brum Theatre, Birmingham. 2005

Escaped Alone by Caryl Churchill. Royal Court Theatre, London. 2016.

Far Away by Caryl Churchill. Royal Court Theatre London. 2000

The Skriker by Caryl Churchill. National Theatre (Cottesloe), London. 1994

Nativities by Zoe Cooper. Live Theatre, London. 2012.

The Sewing Group by E.V. Crowe. Royal Court Theatre, London. 2016

Instructions for Correct Assembly by Tom Eccleshare. Royal Court Theatre, London. 2018

Pastoral by Tom Eccleshare. Soho Theatre, London. 2013

Institute by Gecko. Pulse Festival, Ipswich. 2013 (work in progress)

The Wedding by Gecko. New Wosley Theatre, Ipswich. 2017

Always Orange by Fraser Grace. The Other Room, Stratford Upon Avon. 2016

The Lifesavers by Fraser Grace. Theatre503, London. 2009

The Nether by Jennifer Haley. Royal Court Theatre, London. 2014

How to Hold your Breath by Zinnie Harris. Royal Court Theatre, London. 2015

Marjorie Prime by Jordan Harrison. Center Theatre Group Mark Taper Forum California (US). 2014

Edgar & Annabel by Sam Holcroft. National Theatre (Paintframe), London. 2011

Blasted by Sarah Kane. Royal Court Theatre, London. 1995

Cleansed by Sarah Kane. Royal Court Theatre, London. 1998

After the Blast by Zoe Kazan. Lincoln Centre Theater (US). 2017

Another Paradise by Sayan Kent. Contact Theatre, Manchester. 2008

Foxfinder by Dawn King. Finborough Theatre, London. 2011

Dystopia987 by Dawn King and Skepta. Manchester International Festival. 2019
(immersive rave dystopian experience)

The Children by Lucy Kirkwood. Royal Court Theatre, London. 2016

Tinderbox by Lucy Kirkwood. Bush Theatre, London. 2008

If You Don't Let Us Dream, We Won't Let You Sleep by Anders Lustgarten. Royal Court Theatre, London. 2013

Lungs by Duncan Macmillan. Crucible Theatre, Sheffield. 2011

The Pillowman by Martin McDonagh. National Theatre (Cottesloe), London. 2003

Pomona by Alistair McDowall. The Royal Welsh College of Music & Drama, Cardiff. 2014

Pity by Rory Mullarkey. Royal Court Theatre, London. 2018

The Wolf from the Door by Rory Mullarkey. Royal Court Theatre, London. 2014

Interference (trilogy). National Theatre of Scotland. Glasgow. (immersive performance)

The Drowned World by Gary Owen. Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh. 2002

The Cut by Mark Ravenhill. Donmar Warehouse, London. 2006

Killer by Philip Ridley. Shoreditch Town Hall, London. 2017

Mercury Fur by Philip Ridley. Drum Theatre, Plymouth. 2005

Radiant Vermin by Philip Ridley. Soho Theatre, London. 2005

The Pitchfork Disney by Philip Ridley. Bush Theatre, London. 1991

The Phlebotomist by Ella Road. Hampstead Theatre Downstairs, London. 2018.

Dystopian Dream by Nitin Sawhney, Sebastien Ramirez And Honji Wang. Sadler's Wells, London. 2018.

Grasses of a Thousand Colours by Wallace Shawn. Royal Court, London. 2009

The Ruins of Civilization by Penelope Skinner. Manhattan Theatre Club, US. 2016

Girl in the Machine by Stef Smith. Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh. 2017

Human Animals by Stef Smith. Royal Court Theatre, London. 2016

Ditch by Beth Steel. The Cut, Halesworth (Suffolk). 2010

Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons Lemons by Sam Steiner. Warwick Arts Centre, Warwick. 2015.

You Stupid Darkness by Sam Steiner. The Drum, Plymouth. 2019

hang by debbie tucker green. Royal Court Theatre, London. 2015

Arlington by Enda Walsh. Leisureland, Salthill, Galway. 2016

The Small Things by Enda Walsh. Menier Chocolate Factory, London. 2005

Mr. Burns, a post-electric play by Anne Washburn. Almeida Theatre, London. 2014

The Contingency Plan (double bill) by Steve Waters. Bush Theatre, London. 2009

Nine Foot Nine by Alex Wood/ Sleepless Theatre Company. Bunker Theatre, London. 2018