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Touching Base: Writing for the Boy in Bartley Green

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This article questions the recent tendency for theatre historiography to focus more on the political context of productions than on the 'stages' themselves. While this trend seems logical it neglects an important, visceral, aspect of the art form that was itself designed to impact and democratize politics. The paper focuses initially on a schoolchild's attraction to strips of foam rubber litter left onstage after a Theatre in Education performance of Edward Bond's The Under Room *(2006) at his school in Bartley Green, Birmingham. It approaches this event using Lacan's rapprochement between psychoanalysis and linguistics to explore the* a priori *and* a posteriori *temporalities of metaphor and metonymy. The paper suggests that charging trivial objects like foam strips with significance confounds the* a priori *logic of* logos*. It explores how Bond bends, but does not rupture, the theatrical boundaries instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus, to position audiences to make meaning during an event* a posteriori *as the boy does. It proposes that when the modernists dismantled these boundaries they destroyed an important metonymic challenge to* logos*. The paper tests this theory by comparing the boy captivated by foam strips with the very different effect achieved by the Royal Shakespeare Company when they confronted their audience with actual human remains, and with the hallucinatory effects of 'bedside theatre' on its vulnerable young audience. It suggests that form is content, that we can read the political impact of a performance through its handling of theatrical boundaries. In conclusion, in the era of artificial intelligence with* logos *more powerful than ever, the paper urges theatre historiographers to put the stages back in the picture.*

In his blog publicizing *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre since 1945* (2024), Dan Rebellato declares he and fellow editor Jen Harvie look 'away from the aesthetic to the material … to the base rather than the superstructure'. The result is a theatre historiography, he says, that talks 'much less' about 'what happened on the stages', and much more about the 'material and discursive shape' of post-war British theatre, with 'a substantial chronology of the period'.[1] This paper suggests that theatre, the most visceral of art forms, is not best served by a historiographic methodology that privileges economic and linguistic signifiers above bodies and objects in space. Can Professors Harvie and Rebellato hope to surpass representation, to touch base beyond superstructure, as he claims, if they foreground logocentric and chronological research paradigms at the expense of metonymy? This paper suggests that we need to reverse our approach to performance if we want to understand its historical impact on politics. In the fifth century BCE, for instance, the performance of tragedies brought experience that resisted signification into the social frame; touching base in this way seems

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to have allowed Athenian citizens to reconstitute their entire social superstructure and institute democratic politics. If we view stages primarily as spaces that are impacted by their 'times', we may obscure the dialectical flip side of the argument: how the 'times' can be impacted by dramatized space. Perhaps, for all this Marxist rhetoric about base and superstructure, when theatre historiographers turn away from the stage it is symptomatic of our cultural failure to grasp drama as an inherently and powerfully political medium. Instead of prioritizing discourse about events that happened outside performance spaces, the paper proposes that theatre historiographers could revitalize their practice by paying more attention to the particular ways space is used inside them.

To this end, this article will compare the use of space in three very different performances that took place in the British West Midlands in the first decade of the twenty-first century. These are a play for young people by dramatist Edward Bond performed at Bartley Green Secondary School in Birmingham, a production of *Hamlet* performed at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, and an iteration of 'bedside theatre' performed at Birmingham Children's Hospital. Instead of reading each performance through the cultural discourse that surrounds it, we will attempt to 'reverse-engineer' current historiographic trends by focusing instead on the way space is used at the heart of the performance itself. Can the way we handle mind, body and performance space really impact society? The wager of this paper is that a metonymic approach to theatre historiography might begin to show us that it can.

After *The Under Room* in Bartley Green

Consider the actions of a schoolboy in Bartley Green. Bartley Green is a deprived area of Birmingham in the UK, where the far-right British National Party gained 12 per cent of the vote in the 2024 local elections.[2]

The boy is about thirteen at a guess, and has just watched Big Brum perform Edward Bond's *The Under Room* (2006) in his school hall. Bond is not flavour of the month in post-millennial British theatre circles; he is not flavour of the year or the decade, come to that. The media and theatre establishment ignored his Arts Council-funded work for young people in Birmingham, although it lasted for nearly twenty years between 1997 and 2016. Apart from a couple of well-meaning *Guardian* articles harking back to Bond's time as *enfant terrible* at the 1960s Royal Court, his work, and especially his post-millennial work for young people, is represented by a resounding silence in most of the cultural discourse. So theatre historiography that pays attention to mediated 'noise' around productions will miss the significance of this quiet, off-grid, event.

As his colleagues file out to go and get their school dinner, this one young man has chosen to stop and take a closer look at the detritus that the performance has left onstage. To grasp how the play's action 'charged' these objects we will need to know a little of what had passed before the schoolchildren that morning. The play is performatively complex. A traumatized illegal immigrant who is an ex-child soldier is represented using a Dummy, while a Dummy Actor stands upstage left to speak the immigrant's

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words. The other characters in the play ignore the Dummy Actor and behave as if the Dummy was a living person. But the audience sits in a gap, shifting their gaze between the helpless dummy body and its disconnected voice. In scene ii the immigrant explains his predicament; he tells the young woman he is suffering psychologically because the army forced him to kill one of his parents. As the drama develops, the young woman who had helped hide the immigrant from the authorities in her cellar finds herself betrayed by the people trafficker she enlisted to help: to recoup his 'costs' the trafficker says he will have to pimp her out. In scene vii, minutes before the play ends, the young woman turns on the only person more helpless than she is – and eviscerates the Dummy in a prolonged attack with a knife. In scene ix the Dummy Actor, who did not know he had died, enters to encounter his own foam viscera. He speaks three words in a language we cannot understand, then the play ends.

The strip lighting in the school hall goes back on, and the young man quietly slips away from his colleagues to explore the scenario onstage. He is considering it at first hand, stepping over strips of foam rubber on the oilcloth stage very carefully, engrossed in private thought. He notices me looking at him, gives me a shy smile, but goes straight back to his serious contemplation of the foam viscera. After a minute or two a dinner supervisor hurries him along to catch up with the others, which he does, readily, and happily. She gives me a look and an eye-roll: the play is over, what on earth was he doing?

It is an excellent question! We cannot, of course, tell what the boy was thinking, but we can observe his attempt to pursue something that gained his attention in the auditorium; we can pay attention to his strange attraction to the foam strips, his need to go onstage, to enter the play's reality in some way. His actions allow us to see the path of his thought – a process that was only visible because the stage was an oil cloth in his school hall. This was likely to have been his first experience of live theatre, but the school had a strong drama department headed by Emma Downs at the time, and he would have been used to going into role in his drama lessons. Since actors traditionally inhabit the stage, going into role is tantamount to going onstage if we think about the theatre as a topologically bendable space. The boy certainly was not seeking – or getting – attention, apart from my gaze, which he acknowledged and then ignored. These may be reasons why he did not observe the convention that audiences – much as we may feel drawn to the stage – usually refrain from crossing that boundary with our bodies. It interested me that the boy did not choose to wait and discuss the characters or events in the play he had just seen with his teacher or his friends back in class; he needed to make a direct, personal – active – association with its objects. I wanted to understand their metonymic 'sticky' attraction to the boy. He was not in a confused, or hallucinatory, state where what is real and what is fictional become blurred: challenging as it is, we do not have to modify the play for use in schools. Obviously the boy could see he was in his school hall and the viscera were not real in the literal sense. Even before it was eviscerated the Dummy was barely figurative, suggesting 'stuffed white pillowslips or bolsters'.[3] By the end of the play it no longer even echoes the human form; nor do the loose strips of foam rubber remotely resemble viscera – there is no realistic blood or gore, no *trompe l'oeil*, no attempt at mimesis.

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Metonymy, trivia and drama

Psychoanalysis offers a usefully structural account of metonymy that may help us begin to shed light on the boy's actions. Freud identified two unconscious processes, 'condensation' and 'displacement' in action in his dreamwork in 1919.[4] When analysing his own dream about a woman called Irma, he realized that the name represented his patient Irma; but in the dream the signifier 'Irma' also made him think of his wife, his wife's friend Matilda, his daughter … making 'Irma' in Freud's terms a condensed or 'composite person'.[5] Whereas in Freud's dream about a botanical monograph, botany – 'never among my favourite subjects'[6] – takes on a mysterious emotional significance that it does not hold for Freud in his waking life.

Condensation and displacement open the door to an unconscious world of proliferating, sliding, polysemy; but they do it in crucially different ways. When Lacan read Freud via linguists Saussure and Jakobson he read condensation and displacement in connection with Jakobson's 'metaphoric and metonymic poles'.[7] 'Condensation', like metaphor, makes one signifier carry more than one meaning. For Freud 'Irma' represents many – if not all – women, because they share the similarity of being female. Lacan understood that recognizing similarity means casting our mind back; we need the intellectual faculty of memory to notice the logic of a repeating pattern. This leads Lacan to associate metaphor (condensation) with *logos* because language is composed of patterns whose *a priori* logic requires the same intellectually retroactive manoeuvre. Metonymy (displacement), on the other hand, is neither retroactive, intellectual nor logical, but active, physical and emotional. Displacement metonymically transfers an emotive heft onto signifiers that Freud normally finds trivial, such as images of flowers in a botanical monograph, or Desdemona's lost handkerchief in *Othello*.[8] Empathic and emotional, displacement gives Freud a sense that meaning is on another stage, in a different scene: '*centred elsewhere*'.[9] We can perhaps begin to understand the boy in Bartley Green's attraction to the foam rubber litter onstage in the light of the metonymic operations of displacement. Freud considered displacement to be more primal than condensation, to go 'beyond the pleasure principle', associating it with *pathos*, ludic play and 'the performance of tragedies'.[10]

It comes as no surprise that dramatic references creep into Freud's discussion about the psyche. We know that psychoanalysis always leaned on drama; after all, Freud named the major psychological complex he identified in his troubled patients after Oedipus in Sophocles' play. Normally this association is understood via Aristotle, in terms of the literary themes, plot and characters in *Oedipus Rex*.[11] It may surprise us, however, that drama comes up for Freud specifically in connection with metonymy, suggesting that in addition to their thematic commonalities, drama and psychoanalysis may share a formal, metonymic, dimension that has not yet been explored. As we attempt to shift our focus from the logocentric to the more visceral, metonymic, aspects of the art form demonstrated by the boy in Bartley Green, we may find that psychoanalysis can help us grasp how dramatized space can metonymically radicalize the objects that operate within it.

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Reading the sign with the psyche

Freud identified condensation and displacement as very different psychic processes that together made communication less of a straightforward, logocentric exchange of meaning, and more a matter of flux, positionality, co-construction, intersubjectivity and – above all – interpretation. Lacan then made the relationship between metaphor and metonymy graphic. He did this by loosening the immutable connection between word and concept in Saussure's algorithm of signifier and signified, and converting its single unifying 'bar' into a graph with four axes of movement. This allowed Lacan's 1957 Graph of Desire to figure projections and introjections in the intersubjective space between people as movements up and down, while temporal movements left and right showed Jakobson's condensing metaphors and displacing metonyms.[12] The graph demonstrated how words and bodies can shift in relation to each other, but without rupturing their relationality to lose communicable meaning altogether, as in psychosis. The Graph of Desire was enormously influential, arguably inaugurating the post-structuralist move. Initially, post-structuralists were preoccupied with semiotics, but as they searched for meaning that evaded the *a priori*, repetitive nature of *logos*, post-structuralism focused ultimately on the propulsive energy of desire itself . It was a path that echoed Lacan's own process: 'I began with the Imaginary, I then had to chew on the story of the Symbolic … and I finished by putting out for you this famous Real.'[13]

As we have seen, Freud's condensation and displacement already show the move from linguistic retroactivity to the more active, desirous, metonymic move made by the boy in Bartley Green. Lacan's three registers seem to leave Freud behind, but they are in fact semiotic elaborations of condensation and displacement that will prove very useful to us as we analyse Bond's disintegrating Dummy. Fortunately, to understand Lacan's Imaginary, Symbolic and Real registers we do not have to stay faithful to the history of their theoretical development, or to the sometimes convoluted means with which Lacan explained them. Like many twenty-first-century readers of Lacan I take a synchronic approach, and offer here my own straightforward interpretation.

We can understand Lacan's rapprochement between psychoanalysis and linguistics if we read Lacan's three registers in combination with semiotician Charles Peirce's three types of sign and Freud's tripartite topology. Peirce's iconic signifier resembles, mirrors and makes a recognizable visual or sonic image of its object; semblance also governs Lacan's 'Imaginary' register and Freud's ego. Peirce's symbolic signifier has no logical connection with its object other than the arbitrary name that culture gives it to legitimize the connection; Lacan's 'Symbolic' register and Freud's super-ego are both socially regulated and personally internalized in the same way. According to Peirce, iconic and symbolic signifiers stand in for their objects 'according to a rule' or 'a habitual connection'.[14] This means that they require the mind to make a retroactive manoeuvre to recognize the *a priori* logic of pattern or habit that characterizes *logos*. Peirce's indexical signifier, on the other hand, 'depends on association [with its object] by contiguity, and not upon association by resemblance or upon intellectual operations'.[15] We can see this desire for contiguity rather than discussion in the move made by the boy from Bartley Green. I propose its indexical stickiness to be associated the Lacanian Real and Freud's

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id. Perhaps, in spite of a social trend to demean actors as 'luvvies', what we cannot help but value is their ability to inhabit the active register of the Real. I suggest that it is here that they 'touch base' with their audiences; here that the retroactive, repeating, Symbolic and Imaginary registers can be contested and changed.

Into the Real: Bond's disintegrating dummy

How could Bond's disintegrating dummy have instigated the boy's active (actor's) move into the Real? My friend and colleague Bobby Colvill was the actor teacher with Big Brum who instigated their work with Edward Bond in 1997. When Edward died in March 2024, Bobby wrote to me with this extraordinary quote from Edward's early days working with the company:

> The first humans saw their footprints in the ground were a drawing of a hand and part of a journey, so they went on to paint the first images in dark caves and act their lives in front of the images.[16]

Although we have scant evidence to explain what the first humans did with their image making, Edward's speculative ideas were often full of dramatic insight. Normally it would take me months, or even years, to make sense of his remarks. However, in the context of thinking about the semiotic structure of metonymy for this paper, the dramatic connection that Edward had made between cave art and human bodies was immediately helpful. I thought about the stencilled hands Palaeolithic people sometimes left next to their cave paintings.[17] In chronological terms this may come as a vertiginous step back in time for theatre historiographers. But I was struck by how these prehistoric signs challenge the binary between past and present; it made me wonder why the people who made them chose to juxtapose images of animals with their own handprints in this way. I began to grasp how, when we focus on dramatized space and the bodies and objects within it, we can open up a temporal depth and a radicalism that lengthy discussions of social, economic and discursive context cannot hope to provide – however broad their scope.

The images of animals in ancient cave art are iconic; that is to say, they resemble the creatures they represent well enough for us to recognize them today. The hand mark, though, like the footprint Bond imagined, indexes the painter's body as it stood close to us in the cave space, but separated from us by tens of thousands of years. We can understand the juxtaposition between icon and index made by the Palaeolithic people as a prototype for the two sides of the *skene*, the wooden wall that divided visible and invisible aspects of the ancient stage at the Theatre of Dionysus. To Aristotle, drama is mimetic; that is to say, it represents and reflects life as we recognize it.[18] But he, and subsequent theorists of drama, do not as we do here, and consider the obscene invisible aspect of the stage, where, according to John Gould, violent acts took place in Greek tragedy.[19] This may be one reason why we do not have much of a metonymic understanding of the theatre. While the visible *proskene* operates mimetically, its invisible aspect does not. Neither do the strips of foam rubber left onstage at the end of *The Under Room*, because they do not resemble anything. Before evisceration the Dummy was considerably less

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figurative than a cave painting; it is described in the stage directions as 'a basic human effigy: trunk, arms, legs, head. It has no other features'.[20] Following its evisceration the Dummy has transitioned from an icon to an index. Like the shadow of a palaeolithic person's hand on a cave wall, or the unseen death cries of Agamemnon, these commonplace strips of foam litter are cathexed by, and indicate, an uncanny and intimate personal presence – just beyond our reach.

The transition from icon to index, from the Lacanian Imaginary to the Real, transports us from a world which represents things we feel we know *a priori*, to one that involves us personally because we have to piece it together *a posteriori*. This is how we can become emotionally invested – and so physically entangled – in the lives of fictional characters like Agamemnon and Bond's immigrant, or people who are long dead like the Palaeolithic person. Object remains not only conjure, but entangle us physically with, the bodies of people who are no longer there, or people who we know perfectly well never existed. When we experience icons that articulate into indices and back, we find we can live in two worlds, gain the sort of double vision that allowed the boy in Bartley Green to encounter the murderous fictional world of the play, safe in the knowledge that he was at school. As we shall see, the semiotic mechanism that indexes and engages the boy in Bartley Green may be the same one that the ancient Greeks used to generate comic and tragic *jouissance* when they invented their dazzling new art form in the fifth century BCE.

Sign, psyche and stage: the Greeks' dazzling new art form

We have seen how Charles Peirce's indexical sign gives us insight into Lacan's metonymic register of the Real. But when we read Peirce in conjunction with the two gods who personified time in ancient Greek mythology, we can see how well the ancients understood the difference between active and retroactive temporalities. The stories of Kairos and Chronos suggest that the ancients knew precisely what they were doing with the two sides of their theatrical *skene*.

Chronos is often depicted in the iconography of the time as a callous old man with a thick grey beard, often seen clipping Eros's wings. According to Cicero, in mythology he eats his children because it is foretold that in time they will usurp him.[21] Chronos personifies the inexorable, quantifiable, march of linear time which is measured in days, months, the passing of seasons, years.[22] Measurement establishes pattern, whose retroactive move (looking back to notice the way it repeats) can help us predict the future. So there is an *a priori*, cyclic, repetitive, predictable aspect to chronological time that we can now associate with *logos*. This is how icons operate, in the Lacanian Imaginary register, using the logic of semblance. To recognize something it has to reflect or echo something you have seen or heard before; as Peirce puts it, icons 'excite analogous sensations in the mind'.[23]

Kairos, on the other hand, is shown in ancient iconography as a sprinting youth. His hair is long at the front and shaved at the back, showing that he cannot be caught retroactively by chasing after him. To seize him, to seize the opportune and unpredictable moment he represents, we must confront him head-on. If Chronos is about

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measurement, order and logic, Kairos represents sensation, hapticity, the chaotic and qualitative, *a posteriori* nature of lived experience.[24] His precarity has much to do with drama; with comic timing, and the way, as Simon Critchley puts it, 'tragedy twists the linear conception of time out of joint'.[25] There is no repetition where Kairos is concerned, only a single critical moment that demands immediate action, if we are to grasp its transformative potential. It is this material immediacy, this contingency, that we associate here with the indexical sign and Lacanian Real; like Kairos, they demand our immediate attention. According to Charles Peirce, 'anything that focuses the attention is an index. Anything which startles us is an index.'[26]

The ancients instituted a stage at the Theatre of Dionysus that would allow them to use the temporalities of chronological order and kairotic chaos. The visible, painted aspect of the *skene* shows us scenarios we recognize, while its invisible aspect sends out shocks and micro-shocks,[27] the sounds and events we cannot immediately identify that focus our attention and generate affect: laughter, pity and fear. The painted side of the *skene* operates retroactively, like a mirror, whose reflection puts us in front of ourselves, and so separates us from our body. The dark side of the *skene* operates in the moment, like a sound that makes us jump, a sudden realization that makes us laugh, our physical response connecting us unequivocally to the fictional situation. Instead of presenting us with a disembodied image as icons do, indices drag us into their space, structurally entangling us physically and imaginatively.

How do indices do this? As Charles Peirce puts it, indices 'direct attention to their objects by blind compulsion'.[28] Indices trigger our desire for the 'other' by getting under our skin, as it were; indices decentre us, they interrupt our sense of physical unity. Charles Peirce tells us that an indexical sign is like 'a fragment, torn away from the object'.[29] The resulting stickiness, or attraction, is a phenomenon that Lacan terms Desire – charged by lack or loss. The handprint is torn apart from, but still emotionally charged or cathexed by, the body that made it thousands of years ago; just as Bond's Dummy and Dummy Actor in *The Under Room* have been split apart to represent a person dissociated by the metonymic legacy of trauma.

Bond's Dummy and Dummy Actor act on their audiences like the sound of a baby's rattle, a rattlesnake or a sound that wakes us at night, in the sense that they split us apart. They do this by interrupting our audiovisual synchrony – which makes us anxious. As adults our eyes and ears ground each other and help us orient ourselves in time and space. When this audiovisual synchrony is interrupted, to feel safe we need to reunite them as a matter of urgency. Once they are reunited we can identify the source of the sound and separate ourselves from it. This is not only because there may be an external threat, but also because without a sense of physical unity it is difficult to draw a dividing line between what is internal to us and what is external. As Mladen Dolar puts it: 'Voices may be all in the head, without an external source, because we always hear the voice inside the head, and the nature of its external source is always uncertain the moment we close our eyes.' As Dolar suggests here, sound penetrates the skull through the ears: 'if we want to localize it, to establish a safe distance from it, we need to use the visible as the reference'.[30]

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From *a priori* to *a posteriori* temporality

To take stock before moving on: this exploration of a young man's response to Bond's eviscerated Dummy in Bartley Green has taken us on quite a journey already. Bond's Dummy starts out as an iconic sign, which crudely resembles the man it represents. When eviscerated, however, it loses its human form; its foam entrails no longer resemble the Dummy Actor, but they nonetheless retain what Peirce terms a 'direct physical connection' with him – that is to say, they index him.[31] It may be this indexicality that draws the boy into the Dummy's space. We have noted other instances where icons relate to indices in similar ways, taking us from a world we recognize at a distance to one that involves us personally. The figurative art in cave paintings, juxtaposed with stencilled handprints, is another example of this topology, as are characters from ancient Greek mythology Chronos and Kairos, who personify *a priori* (iconic and symbolic), and *a posteriori* (indexical) temporalities. Similarly, the two sides of the *skene* at the Theatre of Dionysus allowed ancient Greek dramatists to articulate between icons on its painted side and indices on its dark side, where their characters go to suffer and die. With the help of Jacques Lacan and Mladen Dolar we can see how, without their iconic and symbolic counterparts to ground them, indices may decentre us; they may make us unsure where the boundary between interiority and exteriority lies.

A fresh look at theatrical boundaries

The Theatre of Dionysus gives us boundaries that release us into states of metonymic entanglement without dismantling us psychologically. The conventions governing the boundary between stage and auditorium repress and activate bodies on each side in different, yet complementary, ways. The audience gaze and the stage speaks, but the audience may not return the voice and the stage may not return the gaze in kind. During the performance the boundary unifies each side, which takes in the projections of the 'other' to form a single, looking, speaking, body. This unifying split is very reminiscent of the spherical humans that Aristophanes jokes about at Plato's symposium – split apart by Zeus in a jealous rage – but unified by their sexual attraction to each other.[32] As with the myths of Kairos and Chronos, this is another clue that the ancients were more than aware of the metonymic dimensions they had built into their art form. The theatre unifies the bodies of its citizens in the fictional space of the drama, attaching them metonymically so that each indexes the other in the Lacanian Real. The process releases comic and tragic energy or *jouissance*, but, like the skin between two bodies engaged in intercourse, the boundary between stage and auditorium defines the limit of their unity and stops them from collapsing into each other. The foam strips hold this boundary for the boy in Bartley Green when he crosses onto the stage; this allows him to go off happily afterwards to get his lunch.

The other liberating boundary at the Theatre of Dionysus is the fixed wooden *skene*. If the boundary between stage and auditorium divides the Imaginary gaze of the audience from the Symbolic voice of the stage, the *skene* separates both from, and at the same time engages them with, the metonymies of the Lacanian Real. For the ancient Greeks the *skene* marked the limit between public and domestic space. It is an

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interesting paradox that when a character enters the palace through a door in the *skene*, the boundary between interiority and exteriority for their audience is challenged. The boundary is not challenged to the extent that the audience cannot differentiate between themselves and the drama; obviously, like the boy in Bartley Green, they can differentiate between stage and auditorium, between viscera and foam strips. But the audience is challenged to the extent that if the character does not speak, they are denied the grounding reassurance of *logos* to help them understand what is happening in the private space beyond the *skene*, and even if the character does speak the audience cannot verify what they say visually. Bond makes this boundary between iconicity and indexicality plastic. His Dummy and Dummy Actor already stretch the relationship between the *prosopon*, iconic facade of a character, and the voice it indexes. When eviscerated, the Dummy's foam strips have dispensed with *logos*, yet they remain visible onstage. Occupying this space between iconicity and indexicality is a strategy that Bond had developed over time. In his 1971 play *Lear*, for instance, the dead and dying are covered and uncovered by tarpaulins, dragged up and dumped back into wells, swaddled in bloodied sheets. These screens may be more malleable than the ancient wooden one, but, far from dismantling the *skene*, they seem to revitalize it, still denying us the audiovisual synchrony we need to identify what is happening. And although we can differentiate ourselves from the dramatic situation, we may find ourselves like the boy in Bartley Green, physically drawn to it in spite of its obvious unreality.

Reversing the *a priori* dominance of mirror and lens

For Lacanian psychoanalysts the relationship between index and icon mediates a crucial stage in child development which Lacan termed the mirror stage.[33] The work is speculative rather than empirical and is often criticized as such, but it is of particular interest to us here – primarily because Lacan characterizes it as 'a drama',[34] and it happens when the child begins to recognize themselves as they are reflected in the eye of the 'other'. It describes a move from a world primarily dominated by sensation into a world that will be increasingly dominated by pattern; a move in which the active *a posteriori* Real begins to overlap with the retroactive *a priori* Imaginary register. Prior to this Lacan claims that the child experiences their body as a fragmented and uncoordinated entity – a state of 'motor impotence and nurseling dependence'. Entry into the Imaginary register unifies this state, because, like a 'selfie', the specular image provides the child with a complete version of themselves: a 'statue onto which man [*sic*] projects himself', in order to construct their ego.[35] But unity comes at a price. For Lacan the ego is a carapace, an armorial 'alienating identity that will mark [the] entire mental development with its rigid structure'. Its rigidity puts an end to the porosity between internality and externality that, as Mladen Dolar notes above, affects us 'the moment we close our eyes'. As Lacan puts it, the mirror stage shatters 'the *Innenwelt* to *Umwelt* circle'.[36]

In the context of our discussion here it is striking how notions of 'motor impotence' and the projecting gaze echo the position the ancients, seemingly deliberately, gave the audience at the Theatre of Dionysus. Seen in this light the two boundaries we have explored at the Theatre of Dionysus appear to have been constructed to reverse

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the dominance of *a priori* signs and reinstate the '*Innenwelt* to *Umwelt* circle'.[37] We can understand this topologically using a Möbius strip, which appears to have a two-sided surface but in fact has only one side. This takes us from subject to object without crossing any boundary. This projecting move locates the subject outside itself as an image – like a mirror. But the topology also allows the reverse manoeuvre from object to subject, figuring introjection: putting the strangeness of the other at the heart of our subjectivity. Aristotle understood this Möbius *peripety* as the reversal of fortunes experienced by the tragic protagonist. But we can see it here as a far wider reversal, taking place inside the entire theatre space, one that has the potential to challenge the rigid alienating identity of each person in the theatre's community.

'Reverse-engineering' theatre historiography

Having understood how the boundaries at the Theatre of Dionysus operate, it may be possible to offer their topology as a tool to theatre historiographers who wish to 'reverse-engineer' current trends and put the theatre back in theatre historiography. Can the way performance space is used tell us anything about its social context?

Compare our boy in Bartley Green, captivated by strips of foam rubber, with audiences watching David Tennant's Hamlet holding the human remains of Holocaust refugee André Tchaikowsky. Historically speaking, the two productions were almost contemporaneous; and they both occurred in the British West Midlands just a few miles apart. One, at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, was very much on the cultural radar; the other, a school in Bartley Green, very much off it. Edward Bond's Dummy, as we have noted, operates initially iconically; it resembles the human form just enough to reference the Dummy Actor who speaks on its behalf, before it disintegrates to index him instead. The skull also operates as both icon and index. It only operates indexically, however, if the audience is aware of its provenance, which according to André Tchaikowsky's website was not always the case:

> From July to November, 2008, the skull used in the graveyard scene in the Stratford Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production of Hamlet was that of André Tchaikowsky, but the use of the skull was a secret. When the production moved to London in December, 2008, the secret got out and the RSC announced they would not use the skull for the London run. However, this was not the case and the RSC continued to use André's skull right through to the last performance on January 10, 2009. Thus, André had his time on stage and was returned to a box in the RSC prop room, but for only for a short while because the BBC decided to make a TV dramatization of the RSC production with David Tennant, and to once again use André's skull.[38]

If the audience members are not aware they are looking at a real skull because the RSC is keeping it a secret or is actively lying to its audience, it operates iconically as objects onstage do – by resembling the outside world mimetically and representing fictional character Yorick's skull. If the audience members are aware that they are looking at the skull of André Tchaikowsky, obviously it indexes him, and by extension the Nazi Holocaust. This is likely to eclipse Yorick, and undermine the production's

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entire scenographic attempts at 'worlding' Elsinore onstage. This certainly seems to have been the case for *The Guardian*'s Johnathan Bate, who wrote: 'the skull, not the prince, has made it into the headlines'.[39] The boundary between stage and auditorium is important for its porosity, but also because it allows us to distinguish between what is real and the Lacanian Real of the performance. Putting any object (let alone human remains) cathexed with meaning from real-world events into the fictional space would seem to destroy this interface between real and imagined worlds in such a way that the imagined world collapses. However, commonplace strips of foam, cathexed during the performance, open up the interface to allow the boy in Bartley Green a powerful, safe, imaginative portal into the Real of the performance.

Compare the boy in Bartley Green again with a child experiencing the apparently well-meaning practice of 'bedside theatre' in a hospital in another part of Birmingham. Like the television dramatization of *Hamlet* using André Tchaikowsky's skull, this project was also funded by the BBC – in this case by BBC Children in Need. In her 2016 book documenting this practice, Persephone Sextou looks into 'what a rather experimental, unconventional actor–audience relationship can tell us about theatre in hospital'. Playfully exploring 'how the hospital space works as a "stage"', Sextou's actors engage the bed-bound child 'in an intimate one-to-one performance', which she films 'for the needs of the study'.[40] Although this practice looks interestingly avant-garde, and claims to be compassionate, in effect turning the hospital into a stage and filming the performance again ruptures the delicate fourth-wall interface between real and imagined worlds that we have been investigating here. But it does this in a radically different way to the RSC rupture we have just looked at. While André Tchaikowsky's skull eclipses the fictional world of Elsinore onstage, Sextou's expanded stage eclipses the safe space of the auditorium for the child. A theatre audience may be physically immobile, but they are normally afforded privacy from being looked at, and individuals are free to leave the theatre at any point. We should bear in mind that this is not the case for the lone bedbound child, whose already fragile privacy on a hospital ward is further invaded by the gaze, voice and physical intrusion of the actors, the person filming and whoever watches the film subsequently. But perhaps the most alarming feature of Bedside Theatre is that, by superimposing the stage onto the auditorium, the stage controls the boundary between the fictional reality of the performance and the literal reality of the hospital. This means that the boundary is obscure to its audience and puts the child in the hallucinatory position of someone who is unsure where reality ends and imagination begins. Small wonder that in practice the children often tried to hide behind their bedsheets.

Theatre without boundaries

In both RSC and 'bedside' examples, the democratic balance of power established at the Theatre of Dionysus between stage and auditorium has been ruptured – albeit in radically different ways. These ruptures arguably reveal a great deal about the cultures that produced them, demonstrating an unconscious aggression towards their audiences that the funders and practitioners themselves may likely wish to disavow. This realization allows us to identify the modernist project of dismantling the topological features of the

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Theatre of Dionysus as a landmark in theatre historiography. Antonin Artaud calls for practitioners to 'abolish the stage and auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind', to immerse audiences in the performance.[41] Brecht's Street Scene formulates political performance as that which challenges the 'fictive cosmos' of the play using the 'direct audience address', where the actor returns the audience gaze.[42] According to Lehmann, these are the moves that inaugurated post-drama, moves that rupture the porous boundaries instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus. These boundaries had remained intact through the ages at the Globe and Rose theatres and even into the era of the proscenium arch. It is perhaps an irony that theatrical boundaries can generate the profound, metonymic relationality with the 'other' that the boy in Bartley Green experienced, while rupturing those boundaries, as in the RSC and BBC Children in Need examples, generates the traditionally authoritarian relationality that modernism supposedly sought to eradicate.

Hidden boundaries

Boundaries, then, can provide a useful tool for theatre historiographers who want to understand the extent to which different societies past and present could and can 'touch base' with themselves. We have seen how juxtaposing icons with indices in Palaeolithic caves, at the Theatre of Dionysus and in Bartley Green allows audiences to pivot between *logos* and the bodies and objects in space that can challenge it metonymically. On the other hand, when the boundary between icon and index is removed or made obscure, fiction can eclipse reality, as in hallucinatory 'bedside theatre', or reality can eclipse fiction, as it did when, at the RSC, the skull, not the prince, made it into the headlines. The boundary brings the possibility for unity with 'other' experience, as Aristophanes at Plato's symposium suggests. Removing the boundary, on the other hand, does not seem to bring the audience autonomy, as one might expect. To put a finer point on it, we cannot actually remove the boundary between icons and indices. As we saw earlier, looking at condensation and displacement, because they are retroactive and active, icons and indices are structurally irreducible, although, on account of icons' similarity to the things they represent, they are easily confused. Controlling the boundary would seem to be the yardstick that theatre historiographers need to determine the difference between an authoritarian approach to an audience and one that gives its audience autonomy. 'Bedside theatre' superimposes the stage onto the auditorium and in doing so it controls the boundary. And if the RSC lies to its audience about using André Tchaikowsky's skull, it too controls the boundary. Whereas when the boy in Bartley Green goes into role in his classroom in a drama lesson, or crosses the Rubicon onto the stage after a Theatre in Education performance in his school hall, he superimposes the auditorium onto the stage; in doing this *he* controls the boundary. This puts creativity into his hands. Understanding who controls this boundary can tell historiographers a great deal about the culture informing the performance practice they are investigating.

What is at stake?

A metonymic approach to theatre historiography puts the shared, intersubjective, space between performing bodies and their audiences very much back in the picture. We have

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seen how theatre's boundaries can bend, stretch and deform, much as Lacan's Graph of Desire stretches and bends the bar in Saussure's sign, allowing movement between signifier and signified without rupturing their connection. This model of limited plasticity is known to mathematics as topological space, or 'rubber-sheet geometry'.[43] If we want to stay in touch with ourselves politically, these boundaries can move, but they cannot lose their limits, connectedness and continuity. Understanding drama's topology means that it does not have to lose its uniquely balanced intersubjectivity (it does not have to become post-dramatic) when it leaves the bounded confines of the theatre space. As we have seen, when performance does rupture these boundaries, stage and auditorium cannot communicate, and the creative imagination cannot function.

When theatre historiography neglects objects and bodies in space it extends and exacerbates our current cultural malaise. In our highly mediated age the repetitive, *a priori* signifier is more powerful than ever – particularly now that it is supercharged by artificial intelligence. Taking our eye off the things that happen on stages castrates the art form we profess to value and blinds us to the abuses that get perpetrated in its name by revered national institutions like the RSC and the BBC. I leave the last words here to the dramatist who wrote for the boy in Bartley Green:

> The core problems of Greek drama are inherent in our species, in the relation between individual and society, infancy and adult responsibility. The problems must be reformulated and answered in new ways as society's practical circumstances change. Drama and human society can't exist apart from one another. It is not a matter of society being able to cultivate drama to ennoble itself. Politics and drama are intrinsically and causally related . There is no choice. The consequences of the interrelations are logical, they create civilization or barbarism.[44]

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