

**BEYOND DOCUMENTARY THEATRES: SHIFTING ITERATIONS OF
DOCUMENTARY PRACTICES**

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis differentiates “documentary practices” from canonical notions of “documentary theatre forms” to demonstrate that the malleability and responsiveness of documentary practices are fundamental traits that underpin their perennial utility within shifting historical circumstances. I make the case that these traits enable the productive re-engagement with aspects of the documentary theatre canon, but also that they facilitate an increasingly expansive mobilisation of documentary practices beyond the confines of established documentary theatre forms. In this way, my thesis uncovers how documentary practices are expansively mobilised within theatrical models that resist neat classification as examples of documentary theatre, particularly within the historical context of what I term digital times. I propose that these expansive new mobilisations inextricably owe a debt to the documentary canon, but that they can be productively engaged in examining how reality and the real are experienced, understood, and communicated in the contemporary moment.

Chapter One examines the productive malleability of documentary practices in the early period of canonical documentary theatres – from Piscator to Weiss. Chapter Two investigates the neo-avant-garde performance practices of the Living Theatre and Spalding Gray to examine how contextual pressures became a focal point for the mobilisation of documentary practices, particularly in work that troubles the cohesive notions of documentary theatre forms. In Chapter Three, I consider the resurgence of documentary theatre in the new millennium. I suggest through examinations of definitions and connotations that certain ambiguities occur between source and notions of fact and fiction. In a detailed analysis of Chris Goode’s *Weaklings* (2015), I then

evaluate how such ambiguities, while seemingly appropriate in respect of the performance of self-online, can be unproductive if mobilised in the process of reflecting modes of communication in digital times. Specifically, I investigate how Goode imbricates documentary and non-documentary practices in the promotion of what appears to be a total collapse between fact and fiction, both online and offline. Chapter Four foregrounds a recent trend in solo documentary storytellers via Complicité's *The Encounter* (2015), Unlimited Project's *Paul Bright's Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (2013), and Chris Thorpe and Rachel Chavkin's *Confirmation* (2014). I examine how the malleability of the documentary practices in these examples creates 'particular relationships' with the spectators, which enables the storyteller to foreground their embodied testimony over and above all other documentary evidence. The positioning of this individual as the fulcrum of trust in these works provokes scepticism not only about what is being communicated, but also by whom, and why, and speaks to an accelerated spectacle of individualised communication in digital times.

I contend that these examples differently but strategically deploy iterations of documentary practices in response to shifting political agendas, social change, and changing appreciations of the real propelled by technological developments. I argue that deployments of documentary practices outside of normative confines of documentary theatre forms provokes thinking about the future of documentary praxis and facilitates an expansive analysis of the social, cultural, and political implications and anxieties that exist in digital times.

DEDICATION

For Emma, Phoebe, Minnie, Charlie, Mary, Peggy, and John.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis champions the malleable and responsive qualities of documentary practices in order to demonstrate that these practices have been mobilised by theatre makers differently in response to technological innovation, political upheaval, and shifts in the wider presentation of the real across the twentieth and twenty-first century. I contend that malleability and responsiveness are foundational traits of documentary practices, which enables the present-day mobilisation of said practices in aesthetic forms that do not neatly cohere with definitions of canonical documentary theatre forms. Identifying the use of documentary practices outside of canonical documentary forms is significant for a number of reasons. Rather than supporting cohesive representations of reality in the present moment, I suggest that documentary practices mobilised outside of documentary theatre forms intervene in almost incongruous ways that question both the representation of reality in performance and the theatrical process of creating that representation. Such mobilisations are new political deployments of documentary practices and, therein, problematize normative political claims made on behalf of documentary theatre forms. Taken together, these eruptions of documentary practices beyond documentary theatre forms can challenge monolithic understandings of documentary theatres.

Documentary Practices, Forms, and Mode: Malleability, Responsiveness, and Politics

In order to examine the expanded mobilisation of documentary practices, drawing on the origins of documentary theatre through to the second decade of the new millennium, this thesis argues for a critical distinction between, what I term, documentary *practices* and documentary theatre *forms* – both of these are part of what I more broadly refer to as the documentary *mode*.

Briefly, my use of the term documentary practices refers to, and focuses upon, the techniques and strategies mobilised within any model of theatre concerned with representing material or narratives which appear to be drawn from real life.

Documentary theatre forms in this study denotes particular models of theatre that have been incorporated within a broadly canonical documentary tradition. As an example of this distinction, verbatim *practice* is the transposing of words drawn from reality into a dramatic performance for a specific purpose but it need not necessarily be the overriding dramaturgical technique that underpins an entire production; the verbatim *form* is a broadly conceived theatrical approach that uses words from reality in its entirety or almost in its entirety. I propose that the distinction between these terms offers a new critical lens with which to examine performance in relation to the communication of the real, the politics of specific performances, wider political implications, and the influence of contemporaneous technological innovations. The documentary mode, for me, is a broad encapsulation which designates any aesthetic forms that incorporate some aspect of documentary practice. I discuss these terms, and others, in more detail shortly.

In order to critically distil documentary practices from documentary theatre forms, I foreground how the historic malleability of documentary practices has enabled practitioners to respond to times of socio-political urgency and technological change. These two considerations are not mutually exclusive but constitute what Derek Paget refers to as the ‘circumstances of necessity’ that can impact perceptions of, and

interactions within, reality.¹ After examining how the malleability of documentary practices facilitates politically energised responses to such circumstances in a range of canonical documentary theatre forms, this thesis then investigates how documentary practices are employed outside of traditional documentary forms in response to contemporary circumstances. The aim is to understand how this impacts on perceptions and representations of the real in the present moment, and evaluate the political currencies of these practices in light of the digital age.

My argument, therefore, has three strands. Firstly, it evidences the productive potential of considering documentary practices as distinct from documentary forms both within historical enquiry and within contemporary critique. As this thesis demonstrates, documentary practices ostensibly establish documentary theatre forms, and therefore, can be critically dislodged from broader documentary forms and associated politics. To illustrate, we can critically evaluate verbatim practice (the theatrical use of words drawn from non-theatrical, real exchanges) as distinct from verbatim form (the deployment of verbatim practice as the central dramaturgical principle in a theatre work) or a presumed political intention or outcome (that is the sense that a “hidden truth” has been uncovered from authoritative testimony based in experience). Secondly, this thesis contends that the malleability and responsiveness of documentary practices underpin the potential of such practices for the theatre artist who is confronted with challenging ‘circumstances of necessity’. In other words, documentary practices are actuated in times of need and amid circumstances of necessity that are contingent upon contemporary political

¹ Derek Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, ed. by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 224–38 (p. 224).

urgency, technological innovation, and ideological shifts in the communication of the real. Thirdly, I propose this malleability enables documentary practices to be engaged beyond the confines of traditional documentary theatre forms. Given the historical alignment of documentary forms and political intentions, the mobilisation of documentary practices outside of documentary theatre forms requires investigation in order to identify the political and ideological efficacies of their strategic deployments in the new millennium.

At the end of the first decade of this new millennium, Paget suggests that the ‘first order experience’ of witness, and the theatrical ‘emphasis on “presence”, continues to have a cultural purchase’.² However, he implies that there is a waning political efficacy in canonical forms of documentary theatre, and he posits that the most acute weaponisation of documentary theatre forms in the contemporary setting is as ‘guerrilla tactic[s]’ against repressive regimes.³ This waning efficacy is consistent with a perennial challenge that Paget suggests each new generation of documentary practitioners must confront – that is, the need to ‘learn again’ how best to marshal documentary practices for contemporaneous conditions.⁴ In response to such a challenge, it is reasonable that a period of experimental “bedding-in” should be expected in order to facilitate this (re)learning. Furthermore, any such period of experimentation must expect both provocative eruptions and more moderate manifestations as part of that process of (re)learning. In light of this, my thesis proposes

² Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, p. 236.

³ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, p. 236.

⁴ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, p. 224.

that in the contemporary moment provocative eruptions occur when documentary practices are transposed beyond the confines of canonical or normative documentary theatre forms. I contend that such transposition is a kind of insurgent ‘guerrilla’ endeavour, to use Paget’s term, wherein documentary practices appear as themselves but within seemingly incongruous dramaturgical contexts. That is to say, documentary practices are visible, but within aesthetic forms that do not neatly reside under a nomenclature of documentary theatre.

Research Questions

The reoccurring research questions of this project are as follows:

- In what ways is it productive to distil and critique documentary practices from canonical notions of documentary theatre forms at different times in the last century?
- How has the malleability underpinning documentary practices enabled their responsive application in light of contemporaneous shifts in political urgency, technological innovation, and the communication of the real in wider society?
- And, taken to its contemporary conclusion whereby documentary practices are employed in a range of aesthetic forms beyond traditional notions of documentary theatre, what new insights and political currencies do such mobilisations offer to understandings of the documentary mode and to discourses of representation in the second decade of the new millennium?

This introduction lays the foundations for my research project by establishing the parameters and context of this thesis. To that end, the next section will define important terminologies in this project, before the literature review establishes the recent

discursive framing of documentary theatre. I then outline the methodological approach of this investigation's theoretical and political inquiries, before establishing three temporal contexts to frame the examples around which the thesis is structured. This introduction concludes with a chapter breakdown.

Terms

Documentary and Documentary Theatre

In its adjective form, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines the word “documentary”,⁵ as contingent upon an ‘official document’ or ‘a factual report’.⁶ The online version of the OED adds a further complexity by stating that in literature or film the term “documentary” refers to works ‘based on real events or circumstances, and intended primarily for instruction or record purposes’.⁷ However, the term “documentary theatre” warrants a definition that both reflects the diverse pliability of its concern with the representation of events and people, and that is less rigidly shackled to the narrow range of meaning contingent on such semantic descriptions as ‘official’ materials, ‘factual’ evidence, and didactic ‘instruction’.

I contend that documentary theatre is not wedded to the objective presentation of history via a range of source materials, but rather documentary theatre is a dialogue with history shown through a demonstrable process of retelling, which impacts on perceptions of the

⁵ In this section on terms, I use speech marks intermittently to highlight terms and phrases of significance that I am discussing.

⁶ ‘Documentary’, *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁷ ‘Documentary’, *Oxford English Dictionary Online* <<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/56332?redirectedFrom=documentary#eid>> [accessed 4 September 2017].

past, understandings of the present, and aspirations for the future. As such, I define “documentary theatre” as a mode of dramatic inquiry which imbricates elements of representation, the real, and contemporaneous context, in the investigation of its contents, its source materials, and the intrinsic performative gesture of showing (elements of) real stories. This definition is not beholden to the demonstrable veracity of source material or to formulaic approaches, which have on occasion garnered the mode a reputation as (according to Timothy Youker) an ‘earnestly scrupulous political theatre primarily concerned with establishing the factuality and urgent importance of its content’.⁸ Instead, this definition is necessarily capacious in order to accommodate the variations of “documentary theatre forms” within the “documentary mode”.

My definition of documentary theatre also allows for the consideration of less-typical historical imbrications alongside the documentary canon, such as those of Max Reinhardt (1873–1943) or the Living Theatre.⁹ This is not to recoup these as canonical omissions, but rather to consider them as influences on contemporaneous documentary trends amid specific circumstances of necessity. In the context of this thesis, these influences feed into what Paget identified as the contemporaneous processes of relearning which each generation of documentary theatre practitioners must undergo. Building on the notion of a ‘broken tradition’ from Richard Stourac and Kathleen McCreery,¹⁰ Paget asserts that this process of relearning leads to a ‘resultant

⁸ Timothy Youker, *Documentary Vanguard in Modern Theatre* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018), p. 1.

⁹ Discussed in Chapters One and Two respectively.

¹⁰ Richard Stourac and Kathleen McCreery, *Theatre as a Weapon: Workers’ Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany, and Britain, 1917-1934* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986).

discontinuity' in the history of documentary theatre.¹¹ This thesis takes up the challenge that such a 'fissured landscape' is open to reinvestigation and reinterpretation in light of contemporaneous schisms.¹² To this lexicon concerning the trajectory of documentary theatre, one which Paget rightly states resists 'evolutionary paths', I offer my own contribution by way of "eruptions" of documentary practices, reflecting an outpouring of practices in response to pressurised circumstances of necessity.¹³ Such eruptions flow from underlying shifts in politics, technological development, and presentations of the real in society.

Documentary Mode / Documentary Theatre Forms

When I use the term "documentary mode", although I am primarily referring to theatre and performance, I also take my emphasis from Paget's note that 'whatever the label, the documentary mode' is less a 'category' as it is a 'debate'.¹⁴ That is to say, rather than a prescribed set of examples or a designated approach, the documentary mode, as I employ the term, is a shorthand that encompasses the expansive and changing uses of documentary across different aesthetic forms. In the case of some later examples, documentary practices are interwoven through artistic products which cannot be neatly defined as "documentary theatre", but that still operate within the documentary mode.

¹¹ Paget, 'The "Broken Tradition" of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance', p. 224.

¹² Paget, 'The "Broken Tradition" of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance', p. 225.

¹³ Paget, 'The "Broken Tradition" of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance', pp. 224–25.

¹⁴ Derek Paget, *True Stories?: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 2.

In this thesis, the phrase “documentary theatre forms” signals the different kinds of theatre incorporated within the canonical documentary tradition, such as verbatim, tribunal, autobiographical, biographical, theatre of witness, living newspapers, and testimonial theatre. While such phraseology is useful, it is not without issue – specifically two issues. Firstly, as Peter Weiss (1916–1982) identified, there is a ‘difficulty of sheltering’ a vast range of forms ‘under a single umbrella’.¹⁵ Despite this accurate concern, such broad discursive categorisations have generally become accepted practice.¹⁶ Following this, the second issue is that complications can arise when there is an assumed acceptance of language and of taxonomic composition. As Tom Cantrell notes, for example, ‘American scholarship does not [generally] use the term “verbatim” as a specific form of documentary theatre, and instead what might be called “verbatim theatre” in a United Kingdom (UK) context, would more readily be termed “documentary” in a North American context’.¹⁷ In respect of this, my broader classification of “documentary theatre forms” is useful: firstly, it semantically corrals different forms together via its plural derivation; secondly, it signifies that there are multiple “ways of doing” documentary theatre; and thirdly, its open-ended quality suggests that new ways of doing, or conceiving of, documentary theatre are possible.

Although the difference of my intended use of these terms may be subtle, I am highlighting them for clarity and for the avoidance of a reductive amalgamation of these distinctions under the monolithic nomenclature of “documentary theatre”. Daniel

¹⁵ Peter Weiss, ‘The Materials and The Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre’, trans. by Heinz Bernard, *Theatre Quarterly*, 1.1 (January-March) (1971), 41–43 (p. 41).

¹⁶ See Carol Martin, *Theatre of the Real* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 5.

¹⁷ Tom Cantrell, *Acting in Documentary Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p. 3.

Schulze, for example, describes what he refers to as documentary theatre as a ‘strand of performances [...] in the various guises of tribunal plays, verbatim theatre, or documentary drama’.¹⁸ The narrowness of this definition is reflected in Schulze’s use of the abbreviation ‘DT’. I suggest that this abbreviation is a reductive trope which ossifies a stable notion of the documentary theatre, despite Schulze’s admission that there are an emerging ‘number of hybrid forms [particularly] in the first decade of the noughties’.¹⁹ It serves Schulze’s argumentation to frame his case studies against a stable ‘DT’, or more normative examples which he defines as ‘authentic documentaries’,²⁰ because his case studies ‘do not adhere to classical strategies of authenticity and the real but rather seek to complicate such notions and to critique their own ontological status’.²¹ My investigation takes a more capacious view of the documentary theatre mode as one that has perpetually been mobilised differently against shifting political, technological, and social contexts. As such, its core stability is not to be found in a siloed sense of monolithic categorisation, narrow deployment, or a binary of “complicated” and “simplified” iterations. Instead, I foreground the perennial malleability of documentary practices and their productive potential to respond to shifting circumstances of necessity.

Early writings from practitioners demonstrates a lineage of resistance to such neat categorisation as offered by Schulze. In 1971, Weiss designated ‘documentary theatre’ as a sub-section of a broader category of the ‘Theater of Actuality’, which began with

¹⁸ Daniel Schulze, *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance: Make It Real* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), p. 189.

¹⁹ Schulze, p. 189.

²⁰ Schulze, p. 208.

²¹ Schulze, p. 190.

Erwin Piscator's (1893–1966) agit-prop performances and continued through the 'didactic' works of Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956).²² For Weiss, the theatre of actuality encompassed 'political theatre', 'protest theatre' and 'anti-theatre'.²³ Weiss's work was a vanguard in the formalisation of documentary discourse in the late 1960s, with contemporaries such as Peter Cheeseman (1932–2010) similarly expanding on what he called the documentary 'fashion', which formed part of a broader theatrical landscape that viewed 'the products of the imagination' with 'suspicion'.²⁴ Alongside practitioner-led discourse, academic interventions were similarly navigating the challenge of balancing multifarious forms under a single rubric of "documentary". For example, Phyllis Hartnoll's standard bearer of theatre definitions first printed in 1951 – *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* – offers no entry under the word "documentary", and although her later compendium *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (1972) does contain the term 'documentary drama', it instructs the reader to consult the 'Living Newspaper' and the 'Theatre of Fact' entries.²⁵

In a pivotal recent taxonomic development, Carol Martin gathers interrelated documentary theatre forms under the rubric "theatre of the real". Her classification includes 'documentary theatre, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre-of-fact,

²² Weiss, 'The Materials and The Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre', p. 41. Throughout this thesis I do not alter the American spelling of terms which appear in quotations, or when used in reference to the naming of a location that someone else has identified, such as during my later discussion of Piscator's work which refers to the Berlin Proletarisches Theater.

²³ Weiss, 'The Materials and The Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre', p. 41.

²⁴ Peter Cheeseman, 'Introduction', in *The Knotty: A Musical Documentary* (Trowbridge, Wiltshire: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1970), pp. vi–xx (pp. vi–vii).

²⁵ Phyllis Hartnoll, *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 139.

theatre of witness, tribunal theatre, nonfiction theatre, restored village performances, war and battle reenactments, and autobiographical theatre'.²⁶ For Martin, these are all forms of 'theatre practices and styles that recycle reality', but interestingly Martin, like Weiss, positions documentary theatre not as an umbrella term, but as a taxonomic sub-category.²⁷ Cantrell also offers an expansion of subcategories by suggesting that 'fact-based theatre' and 'faction' are similarly interchangeable with the term documentary theatre.²⁸ Despite these attempts to endow the term "documentary theatre" with a kind of specificity, either through establishing it as a sub-category or atomising the forms it can encompass, I commonly utilise "documentary theatre" in association with the notion of the canon, in order to reference a recognised lineage of practitioners and plays to which documentary theatre forms and documentary practices are indebted.

In light of these varied definitions and approaches, this thesis contends that the continued atomisation of documentary theatre into an ever increasing plethora of arrangements focuses too closely on specific forms and their content at the cost of the mode and the productive responsiveness of its practices within a necessarily broken tradition. As Paget suggests when musing on the broken tradition, new circumstances of necessity can generate shifting iterations of documentary theatres that come to fruition precisely for their efficacy at specific times. Therefore, I propose that a productive new focus on malleable and responsive documentary practices can be employed to examine

²⁶ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 5.

²⁷ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 5.

²⁸ Tom Cantrell, *Acting in Documentary Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), p. 2. Paget aligns 'faction' with televisual drama, which he suggests encompasses an even greater swathe of formulations pertaining to what he calls 'true stories' (Paget, 1990, p. 2).

canonical iterations of documentary theatre forms, and investigate the work being done by new eruptions of documentary practices in the present day.

Documentary Practices

This investigation is a first foray into the capability of a new focus on documentary practices in contemporary theatre and performance.²⁹ As such, the phrase “documentary practices” does not currently have a scholarly definition from which to build or deviate; therefore, I offer my own.

In a pragmatic sense, documentary practices are techniques, tools, and strategies mobilised within the telling, presentation, and representation of (seemingly) real life narratives. They can include video-recordings of talking-head interviews, written materials from newspapers, diaries, and online blogs, filmed footage, images, legal transcripts, audio recordings, witness and testimony accounts, the retelling of biographical narratives, and autobiographical self-reflection. These are the most pertinent examples for the purposes of this discussion, though others are possible.

In a theoretical sense, documentary practices are a strategic demonstration of, and inquiry into, the truth-claim(s) of the information being communicated in performance, which may or may not already exist in the public sphere prior to performance. In this way, they are ideologically charged aesthetic strategies that can consolidate or problematize the authority, trustworthiness, and world-view proffered by specific source

²⁹ Janelle Reinelt uses the term “documentary theatre practice” to refer to the act of “doing” documentary theatre – I refer to this as documentary praxis. See Janelle Reinelt, ‘The Promise of Documentary’, in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, ed. by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 6–23 (p. 9).

materials, narratives, or individuals. The strategic mobilisation of documentary practices trades on what Janelle Reinelt calls the ‘promise’ offered by documentary theatre.³⁰

Reinelt contends that the ‘minimal claim’ of this promise is that documentary concerns ‘simple facticity’.³¹ Carol Martin concurs that a simplistic summary would state that ‘[t]heoretically, documentary theatre is about the truth’.³² However, beyond facticity Reinelt asserts that the promise of documentary theatre extends to the establishment of ‘a link between spectators [...] and an absent but acknowledged reality’.³³ This reality ‘is examined and experienced differentially’ through each individual, because ‘it is produced in the interactions between the document, the artist and the spectator’.³⁴ As such, the promise of documentary is less a communication of a singular truth as it is a provocation to examine correlations and incongruences between reality as we individually experience it, and (aspects of) reality as it is represented in performance.

This thesis similarly suggests that documentary practices mark out the theatrical construction of historical narratives, and in that way are the dramaturgical conduits which facilitate interactions ‘between the document, the artist and the spectator’. This theoretical underpinning extends beyond canonical documentary theatre forms, to incorporate instances when documentary practices are deployed in the framing of fictional material, such as in Dennis Kelly’s *Taking Care of Baby* (2007). Over the course of Kelly’s play, the seemingly verbatim source material gradually breaks down

³⁰ Reinelt, p. 6.

³¹ Reinelt, p. 10.

³² Carol Martin, ‘Living Simulations: The Use of Media in Documentary in the UK, Lebanon and Israel’, in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, ed. by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 74–90 (p. 75).

³³ Reinelt, pp. 9–10.

³⁴ Reinelt, p. 23.

to reveal its fictional status. Such deployments are discussed in detail later, but I reference them here in order to demonstrate the productively complex tapestries of performance practices that gesture towards the documentary mode.³⁵ Such eruptions of documentary practices are productive because they offer a chance for theatre makers to examine structures or techniques that might become reified or formulaic, as Kelly was doing within a context when verbatim practice was prevalent.

Cumulatively, documentary practices are performance strategies and techniques mobilised across and beyond various documentary theatre forms. The malleability of documentary practices has been an historic trait of documentary theatre that has not only facilitated its adaptation to new circumstances of necessity, but that has also enabled the relearning required by each new practitioner to transpose old practices into new contexts. The mobilisation of documentary practices in contemporary performance outside of traditional documentary theatre forms requires the new critical lens that this thesis proposes, in order to assess performative responses to shifts in the wider communication of the real, technological innovation, and political change.

To conclude this section on the definition of terms, I want to clarify a potential double-bind in my use of the term “documentary practices”. The term is at times employed to investigate how these practices operate beyond stable documentary theatre forms, and yet the term necessarily references and draws upon that documentary tradition. This is not a contradiction. Rather, it solidifies the basis of the critical lens through which this thesis investigates eruptions of these practices, and the choices of scholarship and

³⁵ For my discussion, Kelly’s work becomes a kind of “documentary veneer” because it foregrounds reified notions of verbatim practice and the truth-claim of verbatim text. See Chapter Three, ‘The Ambiguity Turn: Documentary Veneer’.

methodology that are woven into this study. That is to say, documentary practices carry a dramaturgical and political currency, even when deployed beyond traditional documentary theatre forms. Such mobilisations are gaining traction, particularly in contemporary performance in the UK, and I suggest it should be of interest to contemporary performance makers and scholars. Therein, the usage of this phrase in this way resonates with an important, contemporary, critical consideration that Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson define as documentary performance's concern with 'its own discursive limitations'.³⁶

Literature Review

This project is part of and engages with rich seams of scholarship from the past fifteen years (Martin, 2006; Forsyth and Megson, 2009; Cantrell, 2013; Martin 2013; Tomlin, 2013; Schulze, 2017; Lavender, 2016; Carlson, 2018; Youker, 2018). To varying degrees, this scholarship has focused on the different scope and implications of the mobilisation of real-world materials in theatrical performances, the relationship between representation and the real, practices of audience engagement that encourage a sense of actuality, and the increasing influence of technological innovation and global digital interconnectedness in theatre and performance cultures. These seams will be mined throughout this thesis. In this literature review, I focus on three particular areas: the discontinuous history of documentary practices; the perennial problem of canonicity, and recent interventions in the field. As such, this literature review is not concerned with individual definitions of documentary theatre, and instead it considers the

³⁶ Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson, 'Introduction', in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, ed. by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1–5 (p. 3).

discursive framing of documentary theatre to illustrate the already imbricated boundaries between documentary and other modes of performance.

Getting Real with Documentary Practices: Sources and Trajectories

Contemporary scholarship suggests that the varied forms of documentary theatre are increasingly engaged in a dual process of, firstly, an age-old inclination towards the representation of real people or events via artefacts and evidence, and secondly, a more recent problematizing of the notion that any singular documentary intervention can objectively encapsulate the multifarious nature of a person or event. In their 2009 edited collection *Get Real*, Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson posit what has now become a touchstone statement in the discourse – that is, that contemporary documentary theatre is as concerned with ‘emphasising its own discursive limitations, [and] with interrogating the reification of material evidence in performance, as it is with the real-life story or event it is exploring’.³⁷ That is to say, the method of communicating evidence, as well as the evidence itself, has increasingly been subject to debate both within the dramaturgy of documentary theatre forms, and within critical reflections on the documentary mode.

Since Forsyth and Megson’s intervention, digital culture has not only accelerated information exchange, but it has foregrounded concerns around what we might consider as “evidence” when digital communication can easily doctor, multiply, and circulate all manner of source materials. This has amplified the importance of examining methods of communication. As such, this thesis necessarily focuses its investigation on documentary practices in order to investigate their operations within this new context.

³⁷ Forsyth and Megson, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

By examining how these practices are employed beyond the boundaries of traditional documentary theatre forms, the dramaturgical methods of re-presenting apparently real occurrences are foregrounded, and through this my research helps reveal implications for how we tell stories from (and about) reality within this new context.

In their overview of the documentary landscape in the late 2000s, Forsyth and Megson assert that the documentary mode is comprised of an 'eclectic range of current practices'.³⁸ Two years later, in a Preface to the paperback edition of *Get Real*, they state that documentary's continuing diversification 'shows little sign of abating'.³⁹ This Preface signs off by encouraging 'new departures in research' which might raise different questions in light of that continuing diversification. Forsyth and Megson's challenge to address the eclectic range and deployment of practices dovetails neatly with the closing chapter of *Get Real*, wherein Paget reasserts that the history of documentary theatre is 'fissured' with discontinuity.⁴⁰

Paget's argument is that, unlike naturalistic theatre forms, documentary theatre does not traverse 'evolutionary paths', but instead it erupts as new departures in practice which 'confront the[ir] political circumstances'.⁴¹ The differing eruptions in the history of documentary theatre compound this discontinuity because practitioners 'almost always

³⁸ Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson, 'Preface', in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. ix–xv (p. ix).

³⁹ Forsyth and Megson, 'Preface', p. ix.

⁴⁰ Paget, 'The "Broken Tradition" of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance', p. 225.

⁴¹ Paget, 'The "Broken Tradition" of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance', pp. 224–25.

have to learn again techniques that seldom get passed on directly'.⁴² As such, the history of the documentary theatre can be understood as a collection of independent moments, but also as a lineage of responsive iterations. My research advocates that documentary practices are the fundamental components of the dramaturgical reformulations and experimentations that mean documentary theatres can be productively understood for their contemporaneous singularity, as well as for their position within what Paget positively recalibrates as the 'broken tradition' of documentary theatre.⁴³

In the same edited collection, Alan Filewod similarly describes the history of documentary theatre as 'an assembly of experiments and local practices that produce mutually-informing connectivities'.⁴⁴ Filewod's contribution 'suggests that "documentary theatre" as a category, gestures to a fluid cluster of practices that share a concern with strategies of performance effort, working class culture, and work as ethical and political procedure'.⁴⁵ He asserts that the documentary mode is most appropriately examined as a 'rhizomorphic archive of procedures and perceptions rather than a genealogy of forms'.⁴⁶ This encapsulation of a 'rhizomorphic archive', for Filewod, offers a way to confront 'imperial canonicity', which he suggests relegates 'the local and obscure' in favour of the 'metropolitan'.⁴⁷

⁴² Paget, 'The "Broken Tradition" of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance', p. 224.

⁴³ Paget, 'The "Broken Tradition" of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance', p. 224.

⁴⁴ Alan Filewod, 'The Documentary Body: Theatre Workshop to Banner Theatre', in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, ed. by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 55–73 (p. 62).

⁴⁵ Filewod, pp. 62–63.

⁴⁶ Filewod, p. 62.

⁴⁷ Filewod, p. 62.

Similar to my investigation, Filewod seeks a discursive shift from ‘form to practice’ which he states can offer ‘a way through the gaps that fracture the modernist narrative’.⁴⁸ While this resonates with the ‘broken tradition’ that Paget productively reaffirms in *Get Real*, in Filewod’s contribution ‘practice’ refers solely to acting processes.⁴⁹ My research, in comparison, considers practices more broadly, and attempts to balance canonical iterations of the documentary tradition with new mobilisations of documentary practices in contemporary contexts. Although I am aware that reinvestigations of the canon tacitly re-embalm such work, I draw on this history in light of my first research question to distinguish documentary practices from canonical documentary theatre forms. In addressing my other research questions, the ‘discontinuity’ within the history of documentary theatre vindicates this investigation’s focus on documentary practices. This in turn enables my research to broaden out beyond the canonical confines of documentary theatre forms, in order to investigate how the deployment of such practices are informed by, and inform, representations of real events in the contemporary moment.

⁴⁸ Filewod, p. 62.

⁴⁹ Other explorations of the documentary mode that focus on acting include, Cantrell’s monograph (2013), a co-edited collection by Cantrell and Mary Luckhurst (2006), work by Bella Merlin (2007), and an Art and Humanities Research Council of England (AHRC) funded project from 2007–2010 at the University of Reading entitled ‘Acting with Facts: Actors Performing the Real in British Theatre and Television Since 1990’, which culminated in a 2011 special edition of *Studies in Theatre and Performance*. Filewod’s focus on acting in documentary theatre broadly corresponds with the underpinning tension that Reinelt (in her contribution to *Get Real*) highlights between the ‘realist epistemology’ of documentary source material and its dependency on the ‘phenomenological engagement’ of performance (p. 7). Whether this ‘phenomenological engagement’ is a matter of performance (actor), or observation (spectator), or both (as Reinelt argues), the tension remains that the ‘promise of documentary’ is, for Reinelt, the ever-shifting balancing act of providing ‘access or connection to reality through the facticity of documents, but not without creative mediation, and individual and communal spectatorial desire’ (pp. 22-23).

On Canonicity

Timothy Youker's 2018 monograph *Documentary Vanguard in Modern Theatre* is one of the most recent contributions to the discourse that also extensively engages with the documentary theatre canon.

Although Youker advocates for an alternative documentary starting point of Georg Büchner's 1835 play *Danton's Death*,⁵⁰ thereby echoing Gary Fisher Dawson,⁵¹ Youker discusses a broadly canonical range of documentary theatre practitioners and forms with which elements of this thesis are also concerned. From Piscator and the living newspaper, to Weiss and the Wooster Group, the foundation of Youker's argument is built on a parallel synergy between avant-garde visual art practices and their correlation with documentary theatres. Youker argues that 'a common association of avant-garde theatre with hermetic formalism can make *avant-garde* and *documentary* seem scarcely compatible'.⁵² However, his contribution to the discourse brings documentary theatres into conversation with contemporaneous trends in visual art – 'collage, photomontage, chance art, and collective creation' – as a continuance of the avant-garde's 'wholesale reevaluation of artistic professionalism, authenticity, the object, and the everyday'.⁵³ For Youker, these aspects combine to confront the 'socially alienating effects of consumer culture and institutionalized high art'.⁵⁴ To appropriate Filewod's term, the rhizomorphic tendency of Youker's framework suggests that the roots of the

⁵⁰ Youker, p. 25.

⁵¹ Gary Fisher Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1999), p. xiii.

⁵² Youker, p. 1. Emphasis in original.

⁵³ Youker, p. 1.

⁵⁴ Youker, p. 1.

documentary tradition spread beyond theatrical representation and position this mode as an important interlocutor between reality, visual art, and the dramatic form.

Youker's investigation is structured around three specific but overlapping time periods; they are, 'Sordid actuality (1835–1922)', 'Vanguards of revolution and reform (1917–1984)', and 'Documentary theatre after postmodernism (1977–)'.⁵⁵ He claims that each section offers both a 'formalist study of documentary theatre as collage', and an overview of 'documentary vanguards responding to political and technological change'.⁵⁶ This parallel chronology that Youker establishes between dramatic art and visual art (particularly collage) frames these two fields within a synchronous progression – this contrasts the notion of a broken documentary tradition which erupts in moments of necessity, as Paget argues and as this thesis also puts forward.

There are structural and methodological parallels between this thesis and Youker's monograph, and our overlapping periods of research explain this to an extent. However, Youker suggests that his work departs from the majority of recent documentary scholarship because, as he claims, 'a strong contemporary bias' predominates in contemporary discourse, wherein focus is given to performances witnessed first-hand; he cites Martin's *Theatre of the Real* (2013) as one such example.⁵⁷ It is the case though that Youker's own bias is laid bare in his excusing of 'works that are either not, strictly speaking, documentary theatre or not, strictly speaking, avant-garde'.⁵⁸ Within this construction of a canonical legitimacy for "documentary theatres", alternative

⁵⁵ Youker. Contents Page.

⁵⁶ Youker, p. 17.

⁵⁷ Youker, p. 9.

⁵⁸ Youker, p. 18. Emphasis in original.

manifestations of documentary practices are reduced to ‘semidocumentaries’ or ‘paradocumentaries’, and employed loosely by Youker as contexts to his valorised ‘vanguards’.⁵⁹

Therein, Youker’s discussion of collage aesthetics within the documentary tradition elevates and ossifies the canonical legitimacy of certain documentary theatres over others. The effect of his separation between fully-fledged ‘vanguards’ and the half-way-houses of ‘paradocumentaries’ is, at times, a partial re-solidification of canonical hegemony. Ironically, Youker’s association of collage aesthetics with documentary theatre would seem to be a productive framework to discuss ‘semi’ and ‘para’ forms of ‘performances that copy or parody formal and stylistic cues associated with documentary’.⁶⁰ Therefore, it seems illogical that ‘semi’ and ‘para’ forms of documentary be relegated to a level of context in order to elevate the “real” vanguards. My study, in contrast to Youker’s, seeks out contemporary works that might readily be described (in Youker’s terms) as ‘semi’ or ‘para’, in order to investigate how and why documentary practices are mobilised in these performances, how such mobilisations might speak back to cohesive notions of documentary theatres in a contemporary context, and what new political currencies they may inaugurate.

Cumulatively, through my research questions I champion the malleability of documentary practices to demonstrate their responsiveness throughout the history of documentary theatre in Chapters One and Two. In Chapters Three and Four, I test the limits of this malleability and responsiveness by absorbing into the heart of the

⁵⁹ Youker, p. 18. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁰ Youker, p. 18.

discussion examples of documentary practices mobilised beyond traditional forms of documentary theatre. My approach takes up Forsyth and Megson's challenge to investigate the continuation of documentary experiments by foregrounding the rhizomorphic history and productive potential of documentary practices. Rather than limiting or re-calcifying the boundaries of seemingly legitimate documentary theatres, I discuss how new manifestations of documentary practices could only occur in light of contemporary shifts in political urgencies, the communication of the real, and technological innovation. I am not alone in taking such an expanded approach to documentary theatre scholarship.

Recent Expansions: Authenticity, Politics, and the 'Addiction' to the Real

In the second decade of the millennium, amid the circumstances of an increasingly media-saturated, digitally interconnected, neoliberal, and geopolitically turbulent "western" world, a strand of scholarship has foregrounded critical investigations of the real and its ideological significances in relation to performance, with a sustained focus on aspects of documentary theatre. Notable contributions include monographs from Martin (2013), Tomlin (2013), Lavender (2016), and Schulze (2017). This discursive expansion retains a legacy from the postmodern, but also promotes a sense that the postmodern has, to an extent, served its purpose, and that 'within a fuzzy boundary between the postmodern and whatever cultural formation takes shape beyond it', something has changed.⁶¹ While some of these scholarly contributions absorb other modes of performance (such as participatory, immersive, or one-to-one) in order to demonstrate the performative breadth of a thirst for knowing, hearing, seeing, or

⁶¹ Andy Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 10.

experiencing the real in the new millennium, I retain focus on how documentary practices are malleably repurposed for this contemporary cultural and political moment, and how their different mobilisations respond to these circumstances.

In 2009, Helena Grehan asserted that in the new millennium ‘the condition of witnessing what one did not (and perhaps cannot) see is the condition of whatever age we are now entering’.⁶² Adapting this, Andy Lavender states that ‘the condition of witnessing, here [in the digital age] arises from communication systems that can capture and disseminate plurally in close to real-time; along with platforms and spaces for regular reiteration’.⁶³ The perception of an increasing diffusion between the real and representation – what Patrick Duggan calls ‘mimetic shimmering’ – is a concern of Lavender’s 2016 monograph.⁶⁴ Although not exclusively focused on the documentary mode, Lavender invokes the popularity of verbatim practice in the new millennium to evidence an amplification of “real voices” in artistic practice and in the wider public sphere. The popularity of tribunal theatre, as well as the quotidian uptake of mobile digital communication and social media, evidence for Lavender the ‘plethora of new voices, experiences, positions and perspectives’ that abound in the twenty-first century but that also have a traceable legacy back to the counter cultural protests of the 1960s.⁶⁵ He argues that these forums, both real and theatrical, ‘[r]esonate with the urgency of

⁶² Helena Grehan, *Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship in a Global Age* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 172.

⁶³ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 13.

⁶⁴ Patrick Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 9.

⁶⁵ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 38.

having something to say, and they *perform* their speaking as a gestic social act in the public domain'.⁶⁶

Lavender positions the documentary mode as one exemplar of shifting ideological perceptions of the real in the contemporary moment, within an expanded field of performance that concerns the real both inside and outside of theatre contexts. In a similar fashion, Schulze also discusses immersive and participatory performance practices as part of a plethora of performative modes that, he argues, demonstrate a widespread and 'vital preoccupation' in the contemporary moment with a sense of 'authenticity'.⁶⁷ The originality of my intervention in this discursive landscape is the focus upon an expanding potential of documentary practices, rather than the expanding range of performance that concerns the real, or an expanding range of what might otherwise be termed documentary theatre.

Shifts of critical opinion generally reflect on (or against) the most prominent forms of an historic moment, because such forms are the touchstone against which other works are compared. In the recent history of documentary theatre, verbatim drama is that prominent form. In what they call the first dedicated study of drama in the twenty-first century,⁶⁸ Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage note that even a 'truncated' appraisal of theatre in the new millennium, for the UK at least, would pivot around the fulcrum of

⁶⁶ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 38. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁷ Schulze, p. 6.

⁶⁸ Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage, 'Introduction: What Happens Now', in *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now*, ed. by Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1–2.

‘verbatim drama’.⁶⁹ They assert that the ‘formal and theatrical possibilities [of verbatim] have proliferated even into the realms of fiction and musicals, as it challenges us to consider the nature of truth, the politics of storytelling and our relation to the world’.⁷⁰ Liz Tomlin similarly states that this growth in verbatim theatre demonstrates that its ‘strategies were offering something significant to a broad spectrum of artistic production at the beginning of the twenty-first century’.⁷¹ She cites Forced Entertainment’s employment of verbatim material in *Instructions for Forgetting* (2001) – a ‘semi-fictional documentary performance’ according to founding member Tim Etchells – as one such example of the expanded reach of verbatim practice across performance modes.⁷²

Recognition of the popularisation of verbatim theatre extends beyond academia. This trend has fuelled academic and journalistic cross-overs such as Will Hammond and Dan Steward’s collection of practitioner interviews *Verbatim Verbatim* (2008), and cross-medium flourishes such as the cinematic adaptation of Alecky Blyth’s *London Road* (2011) and Clio Barnard’s film *The Arbor* (2010) concerning the life of playwright Andrea Dunbar (1961–1990). While Adiseshiah and LePage rightly point to the significance of other trends in contemporary drama, the ‘abundance, popularity and

⁶⁹ Adiseshiah and LePage, p. 3. In the paragraph where this justified claim is made, the term verbatim is interchangeably coupled with ‘theatre’, ‘drama’, and ‘mode’. Although this thesis does not use such terms interchangeably, I faithfully replicate the authors’ work in this instance. As already noted, my stance is that verbatim ‘practice’ is different from verbatim ‘drama’.

⁷⁰ Adiseshiah and LePage, p. 3 The reference to musicals here most likely refers to Alecky Blyth’s *London Road* (2011); however, Peter Cheeseman’s *The Knotty* (1966) set the musical verbatim precedent.

⁷¹ Liz Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 114.

⁷² Tim Etchells, ‘Instructions For Forgetting’, *The Drama Review*, 50.3 (2006), 108–30 (p. 111).

success' of the verbatim form stands out in the twenty-first century for its manifest correlation with 'a contemporary desire for "real life" to permeate performance, [and] for performance to be situated in the worlds audiences recognize'.⁷³

This contemporary desire for "real life" is a centripetal dramatic force that draws in other popular forms of twenty-first century performance to its cause, from immersive and participatory, to one-to-one, holographic, and virtual reality performance. Such imbrications between performance and reality has also informed marketing and advertising strategies, wherein the promise of experience, agency, and emancipation now readily govern the performative qualities of corporately-endorsed worlds from Disneyland and Apple stores, to escape-rooms.⁷⁴ Academic responses to the resonances between such cultural performances and the real have led to new paradigms of investigation around notions of immersion (Machon; 2013, and, Alston; 2019), engagement (Lavender; 2016) and authenticity (Schulze; 2018), as well as a gathering concern with the practical outsourcing of performance to audiences, participants, and witnesses, as Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford discuss in *Theatre of Real People* (2016).

⁷³ Adiseshiah and LePage, p. 4.

⁷⁴ The critical appreciation of such cultural trends and modes of performance beyond the theatrical or dramatic began with the work of Performance Studies scholars. However, for a seminal study that brings together such cultural and performative turns see Maurya Wickstrom, *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and Its Theatrical Seductions* (New York: Routledge, 2006). A correlative publication that has proved increasingly influential in analysing performance over the last decade, albeit one published from an unrelated discipline, is B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1999). Added to these, performance scholars engaged with notions of the real have also sought to expand the discourse beyond the notion of the real "being done" for a spectator, and focused on what might be termed an "enacted" real which comprises the spectator as part of its ontology. A touchstone philosophical distillation of this recasting of the spectator is, Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009).

Within this discursive landscape, this thesis focuses on Carol Martin's *Theatre of the Real* because, for the most part, Martin adheres to the confines and the canon of documentary theatre. Her equitable intermingling of the personal, the archival, and the performative, sets fundamental parameters that much of the ensuing scholarship takes as central tenets of the documentary theatre discourse. Martin argues that theatre of the real broadens the scope of how and why we tell stories of actuality, and she does this by offering re-examinations of canonical works such as Spalding Gray's (1941-2004) *Rumstick Road* (1977), and investigating distinctive new performances such as Hotel Modern's *Kamp* (2006) – this latter example depicts daily life in a Nazi concentration camp via miniature clay models operated by puppeteers. As Martin summarises:

My aim is to portray a shift in the pattern of understanding the representation of the real as necessarily involving verbatim and documentary sources to one that includes a variety of forms and methods and acknowledges a paradigm, a perspective, a subject and the development of different methodologies.⁷⁵

Theatre of the real is 'born from a sea change in archiving' that Martin argues is a product of 'digitization and the internet'.⁷⁶ Her study, therefore, explores how changing relations to technology and information in the digital age impacts our individually defined perceptions and experiences of the real, and their communication. Although Martin's approach is highly appropriate for contemporary circumstances, I diverge from her taxonomic categorisations and from her justification of an overarching new framework. Instead, my research seeks out performances within which documentary practices intervene and erupt, almost incongruously at times, to provoke questions about how reality is perceived and communicated in the present moment.

⁷⁵ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 5.

While I distinguish my research from Martin's in this way, a key correlation exists in the circumstances of necessity that impact on her work and her methodological approach. As Tomlin summarises in her review, '[*Theatre of the Real*] positions the narratives of theatre and performance as an additional, and politically vital, channel of information, which contributes to the framings and reframings of reality', and which across the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century have become inextricably tied to how 'sophisticated and global mass-media communication and social networks increasingly construct our experience of the real'.⁷⁷ This focus means that Martin's work is not a *symptom* of a casual 'contemporary bias' wherein she simply discusses work she has witnessed in her lifetime, as Youker suggests, but rather Martin focuses on how 'meanings produced by the live works on stage' have been shaped by the conditions within which her perceptions of the real have been modified.⁷⁸ Therein, the subjective focus of Martin's investigation reflects a wider ideological tension between 'a positivist faith in empirical reality' and an 'epistemological crisis in knowing truth'.⁷⁹

This tension is partly a result of the legacy of postmodern scepticism regarding representations of reality, but it is also a result of what Lavender calls the 'ubiquity of plural media' which has gained renewed vigour in the social media age.⁸⁰ Graham Meikle suggests that, via the 'distributed citizenship' of the social media age, '[m]eanings are not just transmitted through networks, but rather they circulate, with

⁷⁷ Liz Tomlin, "'Theatre of the Real" by Carol Martin (Review)', *Modern Drama*, 57.2 (2014), 280–82 (p. 281).

⁷⁸ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 4.

⁷⁹ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 14.

⁸⁰ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 18.

each new moment of sharing sparking a fresh association in a fresh context'.⁸¹ Martin draws explicit resonance between these contemporary circumstances of necessity and her paradigm by claiming that the 'ways in which social media controls information are analogous to the way theatre of the real manages information'.⁸² As such, for Martin, the plurality of meanings capable of being produced between and within individual spectators during theatre of the real performances reflect 'the complexity of the performance's reality', and demonstrate 'the shift away from single-perspective notions of truth toward ambiguity and multiple viewpoints'.⁸³

Martin concludes that the 'transparent theatrical methods' of theatre of the real can go 'beyond what Brecht imagined',⁸⁴ and be a route through this ontological crisis between 'a positivist faith in empirical reality' and an 'epistemological crisis in knowing truth':

What is hidden by social conventions and a limited understanding of how corporations and governments 'theatricalize' their role in the world is being challenged by theatre of the real that asks spectators to take a much more critical stance in relation to the 'information.' The propaganda of governments, businesses, and even academic institutions, often advertises transparency while practicing opacity. [...] Revealing something about the self, society, and politics is deeply connected to the development of a new performance theory and the invention of theatrical techniques.⁸⁵

Alongside the making apparent of information though, Martin's focus on the individual also has an influence on the framing of her paradigm. As such, while theatre of the real

⁸¹ Graham Meikle, *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility* (Oxford: Routledge, 2016), p. 119.

⁸² Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 14.

⁸³ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 9. Scepticism of a totalising notion of truth and a pluralist approach to meaning is embedded in poststructural and postmodern critiques of artistic and cultural production. As such, Martin's foregrounding of the individual perceptions of performance and reality positions her work within a discursive field that has posited a crisis in representation since the late 1960s. See Chapter Two, 'Presence'.

⁸⁴ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 176.

⁸⁵ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 176.

is a taxonomic gathering of forms and practices, it can also be a discursive lens notionally activated when combined with individual perception or experience.

Like Lavender and Schulze who invoke documentary theatres within analyses of wider performance trends, Martin also subsumes documentary within her taxonomy and deploys it as a symptom of a wider ideological thrust. As such, what Martin's focus on the documentary mode suggests is that, in contemporary discourse, the abundance of documentary theatre has shifted its position from a vehicle scrutinised for how it can cause change, into a symptom of change that has already occurred. This position as either a cause or symptom has political implications for the kinds of representations that are proffered, in terms of whether they challenge or reflect the status quo. If popular iterations of the documentary theatre are increasingly viewed as symptomatic of the age, then such iterations somewhat decentre the political urgency that Paget argues is a fundamental precursor to eruptions of documentary theatre. However, this is not the case in the imbrications between performance and culture that Lavender and Martin foreground.

Lavender, for example, explores a wide range of performance practices, often within a Rancierian framework of emancipated spectatorship, to suggest how wider cultural activities borrow from theatre and performance, and vice versa.⁸⁶ This is in order to give visibility and validity to the practice of 'authentic speaking', which he suggests is a 'transactional space of meaning-production where personal experience and perspective

⁸⁶ See Andy Lavender, 'Viewing and Acting (and Points in Between): The Trouble with Spectating after Rancière', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 22.3 (2012), 307–26. Alongside his 2016 monograph, this earlier article is also acutely engaged with these themes.

is meant to valorize the speech'.⁸⁷ Such imbrications between performance and culture, and performance cultures, muddies the water between the framing of documentary as a vehicle of change, or as a symptom that reflects a prior change. As such, documentary theatre's efficacy is not dependant on such binary delineations, but rather it is increasingly judged within the confines of what Martin describes as 'theatre's participation in today's addiction to and questioning of the real as it is presented across media and genres'.⁸⁸ While Youker engages less with this concern precisely because he methodologically focuses on historical surveying and reconceptualization, Martin's focus on 'today's addiction to and questioning of the real' is reflected in the work of Schulze and Lavender.

Schulze's parallel focus on 'the hunger for authenticity [in performance] and authentic experience in contemporary culture' dovetails with Martin's concern, albeit there is a contrasting purpose between them.⁸⁹ In order to examine the potential for social justice via documentary theatre, Martin invokes the personal with particular attention to the Jewish experience in the twentieth and twenty-first century.⁹⁰ Schulze, on the other hand, muses on a post-postmodern landscape and problematizes theatre's ontological tension between actuality and performance. As such, Schulze mobilises an overarching notion of authenticity in order to characterise different performance styles in the early-twenty-first century, whereas Martin's critical lens opens up pathways for individual meaning-making based on different appreciations of the real. Lavender establishes a kind of middle ground.

⁸⁷ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 37.

⁸⁸ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 5.

⁸⁹ Schulze, p. 7.

⁹⁰ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 4.

Although ‘authenticity’ was a marginal concern within postmodern discourse, Lavender concedes that the notion has an elevated currency in the twenty-first century via the pursuit of ‘authentic experience’.⁹¹ He suggests that ‘experiences have become a core commodity alongside goods and services’,⁹² following the hypothesis of B. Joseph Pine II and James Gilmore’s *The Experience Economy* (1999). Utilising the work of Eugene Gendlin, who suggests that ‘[a]uthenticity can become the new “centre” after the decentring of postmodernism’, Lavender similarly puts weight behind the sentiment that the desire of authenticity is a ‘fundamental development in contemporary society’.⁹³ This is an important contributor to the popularity of verbatim practice, or what Lavender more expansively defines as ‘the facticity of authentic speaking’.⁹⁴ However, the desire for authenticity and its mapping in cultural activity is not an endgame for Lavender. Instead, he considers the political and cultural ramifications of this ideological thrust through intersections of ‘encounter, experience and actuality’ in theatre and in wider performance cultures. This marks Lavender’s coalescence with Martin’s concern of ‘today’s addiction to and questioning of the real’.⁹⁵

For Lavender, the western, Anglo-centric cultural moment in the new millennium goes beyond the postmodern paradigm, albeit it is still ‘attuned to continuing postmodern tactics and techniques’.⁹⁶ As such, Lavender asserts that investigating ‘motifs of reality and performance’, both within and beyond traditional theatre, can elucidate ‘underlying features of a broad “reality trend”’ in performance, and reflect on a ‘pervasive

⁹¹ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 28.

⁹² Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 28.

⁹³ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 29.

⁹⁴ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 37.

⁹⁵ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 6.

⁹⁶ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 5.

theatricality’ within wider contemporary culture.⁹⁷ We have, as Lavender notes, become accustomed since the turn of the millennium to ‘reality-orientated performance’, which offers different ways of engaging with social and political issues: ‘the opinionated voice, the feeling body and the notion of people having a stake in matters of social and civic significance’.⁹⁸ However, given Lavender’s interest in the work of Rancière, and Pine and Gilmore, it seems equally important to reaffirm a tenet of performance studies in general, which is that we are also increasingly accustomed to a performance-orientated reality. This growing imbrication between reality and performance, and its implications for ‘social and civic’ matters, means that even with the copious discursive contributions thus far discussed, documentary and the representation of the real continues to be a significant practical and notional concern in theatre and beyond.

Cumulatively, scholarship has established that a discontinuity prevails in the history of documentary theatre forms, which not only leaves open the opportunity to recuperate lost works, but also suggests, as is the focus of my study, that new eruptions of documentary practices can draw on that tradition while also appearing distinctive. This is not, in my contention, a reconsolidation of canonical hierarchies, but rather a timely expansion of the boundaries with which discourse pertaining to the history of documentary theatre can interact. Critical expansions in the 2010s have foregrounded how an increasing desire for the notion of authenticity and what Paget refers to as a ‘rhetoric of witness’ have combined within the neoliberal, late-capitalist, digital age to shift expectations and understandings not only of what constitutes or should be trusted as “evidence”, but of the very modes within which information and representations of

⁹⁷ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 4.

⁹⁸ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 35.

reality are disseminated and understood.⁹⁹ The necessary next step then must be to investigate how this nexus of contributing factors has resulted in the mobilisation of documentary practices beyond the canonical confines of documentary theatre forms – this is where my research takes the discussion forward.

Martin, Lavender, and Schulze position the documentary mode within wide ranging discussions that go beyond the confines of theatre, and demonstrate how contemporary performance can respond to the crisis of representing reality amid the increasingly quotidian integration of digital technologies. As Martin suggests, in the contemporary moment ‘our ubiquitous cultural experience of the real results from both live and virtual performances of the self and others in a variety of media’.¹⁰⁰ Such contemporaneous specificity builds on Paget and Filewod’s assertions of documentary theatre’s interconnected history, in which the mode’s perennial efficacy is not simply in reflecting a cultural moment, but as a critique of the circumstances that generate such work. These productive critiques are enabled, I contend, by the malleability and responsiveness of documentary practices, and this research proffers a timely expansion of the documentary discourse to incorporate contemporary iterations of documentary practices operating outside of traditional forms of documentary theatre, in order to consider their significance for shifting representations of the real in the new millennium, and to postulate how they can speak back to the documentary tradition.

Methodological Approaches

⁹⁹ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, p. 235.

¹⁰⁰ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 5.

In order to argue that documentary practices are malleable and responsive to their contemporaneous pressures, and that this is a perennial facet of the documentary tradition, my thesis begins by examining the canonical history of documentary theatre and investigating how and why certain practices abound. I then draw forward this new lens into productive dialogue with mobilisations of documentary practices in the new millennium. Like Martin's monograph, I have witnessed a number of the contemporary examples I discuss. As such, the contemporary bias of this thesis, if we name it so, is an entirely appropriate methodological choice because one must consider the effect of contemporaneous circumstances on perceptions and communication of the real in order to probe how changes in the documentary mode may offer a rejoinder to those circumstances. In order to expand on the methodological approach this thesis takes, I will consider it in relation to Youker's articulation of three broad 'approaches', or methodologies, with which documentary theatre scholarship tends to engage – they are a liberal, a cultural materialist, and a postmodern approach.¹⁰¹

The liberal approach is 'premised on a sharp distinction between truth and lies'.¹⁰² As such, it explores practices which, in the words of Dawson, layer various 'authenticating sign systems' as part of a collage of veracity.¹⁰³ Therein, the liberal approach refers to a strict form of historicity, which anchors its representations of reality on a belief in objectivity, on the accuracy of its source materials, and on its privileging of 'ethics over artistic agency' in the avoidance of spectacle.¹⁰⁴ Youker states that the cultural materialist critique castigates the liberal approach as one which documents "the way

¹⁰¹ Youker, p. 4.

¹⁰² Youker, p. 5.

¹⁰³ Dawson, p. 31.

¹⁰⁴ Youker, p. 5.

things are”, instead of using ‘Marxism’s materialist conception of history’ to challenge cultural, political, and social hegemony.¹⁰⁵

Under the cultural materialist approach, the documentary mode’s primary function is to ‘demystify dominant representations of the real by looking at reality and its representation *dialectically* – that is, by juxtaposing facts with their representations’.¹⁰⁶ Despite his designation of documentary as ‘reportage’, according to Youker’s example Weiss is allied to the Piscatorian tradition (and its lineage via Brecht) and is thereby keenly associated with the cultural materialist approach.¹⁰⁷ However, if the cultural materialist approach is to challenge dominant representations of reality, then a tension exists in Weiss’s association with it because of his assertion that the documentary theatre should be ‘unaltered in content, [but] edited in form’.¹⁰⁸ Megson rightly refers to this statement as an ‘unremarked contradiction’ in Weiss’s instructions; however, I suggest that Weiss’s sentiments also reflect an aspiration of the cultural materialist approach that was concurrent with critical theory in the 1960s.¹⁰⁹

In *La société du spectacle* (*The Society of the Spectacle*, 1967), Guy Debord (1931-1994) asserted that in the face of increasing mediatised communications, societies were subject to the veneer of ‘an immense accumulation of *spectacles*’ which obscured the

¹⁰⁵ Youker, p. 7.

¹⁰⁶ Youker, p. 6. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁷ Weiss, ‘The Materials and The Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre’, p. 41.

¹⁰⁸ Weiss, ‘The Materials and The Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre’, p. 41.

¹⁰⁹ Chris Megson, ‘Half the Picture: “A Certain Frisson” at the Tricycle Theatre’, in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, ed. by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 195–208 (p. 199).

real.¹¹⁰ Weiss's approach follows this underlying principle of Debord's, which suggests that the real or a kind of objective truth is achievable if the bourgeois systems of control and oppression – what Youker refers to as the machinations of 'pseudo-objectivity' – are 'unmasked and discarded', in favour of 'probing critical/theoretical techniques'.¹¹¹ Therefore, Weiss's assertion that documentary performance should hold firm to the accuracy of content but be malleable in form, means his position is unconsciously situated within, to borrow Olaf Berwald's term, a 'productive juxtaposition' between the liberal approach and a cultural materialist critique.¹¹² The aspiration then, as it appears to be, is a recognition of the coercive power of dominant representations of reality in order to aesthetically challenge them.

The third approach – the postmodern approach – weaponizes poststructuralist, postcolonial, and feminist critiques of 'both the liberal and Marxist theories of art and culture' in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century, in order to argue for a pluralist understanding of reality constituted by the individual.¹¹³ As Youker writes, 'discourses of science, critical theory, and personal narrative, which all purport to merely describe an external reality, are understood [within the postmodern approach] to partly create what we think of as reality through the act of describing it'.¹¹⁴ Youker argues that the postmodern approach is reflected in Reinelt's assertion that documentary is not defined by its source materials, but exists 'in the relationship between the object,

¹¹⁰ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2006), p. 12. Emphasis in original.

¹¹¹ Youker, p. 7.

¹¹² Olaf Berwald, *An Introduction to the Works of Peter Weiss* (Columbia, S. C.: Boydell & Brewer, 2003), p. 22.

¹¹³ Youker, p. 7.

¹¹⁴ Youker, p. 7.

its mediators (artists, historians, authors) and its audiences’, and when considered in this way, documentary ‘is in fact constitutive of the reality it seeks’.¹¹⁵

In her preliminary discursive survey, Reinelt specifically avoids aligning her discussion of “documentary” with the suffix “theatre”, in order to expand her discussion in light of work by film theorists such as Bill Nichols (2001) and Stella Bruzzi (2006).¹¹⁶ With a certain echo of Reinelt’s approach, Carol Martin’s contention that documentary is best understood as a ‘process’, rather than a ‘product’, essentially also removes the necessity of a suffix.¹¹⁷ For Reinelt, a refocusing is required away from a reliance on materials and forms for the designation of “documentary”, and instead towards a recognition that copious forms of information deployed in any medium ‘all can be made to perform’.¹¹⁸ Each of these interventions call for considerations of documentary that go beyond the product or source materials, and that considers the purpose of a documentary’s making and its communication as a cultural artefact that mobilises materials and stories from reality.

In the postmodern approach, any sense of the pursuit of “objective truth” has been jettisoned. As such, Youker states that a ‘key implication’ for the discursive landscape of the postmodern approach is the recognition that ‘privileging any one method or form of documentary representation may have oppressive effects on subjects whose understanding of their own experiences is incompatible with that approach or cannot be

¹¹⁵ Reinelt, p. 7.

¹¹⁶ As such, I would suggest, Reinelt is discussing what I term the “documentary mode”.

¹¹⁷ Martin, ‘Living Simulations: The Use of Media in Documentary in the UK, Lebanon and Israel’, p. 89.

¹¹⁸ Reinelt, p. 6.

expressed within it'.¹¹⁹ Politically, this goes to the heart of Jean Francois Lyotard's seminal summary that the postmodern is centred on an 'incredulity toward metanarratives', in that one's incompatibility within the master narratives of a society should cast scrutiny on those narratives, more than on the individual.¹²⁰

Dramaturgically, Youker's key implication is particularly useful for the range of case studies in this thesis that seek to broaden the confines of how we can discuss the notion of documentary and documentary practices.

Whether we use the term 'postmodern approach' or not, I suggest that Youker's key implication supports an unshackling of documentary practices from cohesive notions of documentary theatre forms because it makes clear that there is no idealised apparatus of objectivity, nor one "correct" 'method or form of documentary representation' compatible with all individually experienced realities. Therefore, a fluid approach to how documentary practices are mobilised is both logical and productive in light of contemporaneous contexts, and in terms of the gathering ideological tension between what Martin's defines as 'faith in empirical reality and an epistemological crisis in knowing truth' in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century. Following Youker's and Weiss's reliance on multiple approaches, I contend that all three approaches may play a part in any discussion if required; this thereby, also refutes the notion that there is a "correct" way to investigate such work.

As such, a cultural materialist approach is common in this thesis, because my argument requires definition and examination of the circumstances of necessity that provoke

¹¹⁹ Youker, p. 8.

¹²⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester University Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

eruptions of documentary practices, often in rebuttal of the verisimilitude and objectivity with which the liberal approach is allied. Youker's framing of what he terms the postmodern approach – as necessarily antagonistic towards the cultural materialist approach due to poststructuralist and feminist critiques of Marxist theory of history – is accurate. However, as Youker's deployment of both approaches testifies to, it is difficult to remove a cultural materialist approach from the critique of documentary theatre because documentary is dramaturgically reliant on materials from reality – be they written sources, verbal testimony, images, video, biographical details, or autobiography. Therefore, the synchronous examination of social, political, cultural, and technological drivers of change that spawn such source materials is a necessary endeavour in order to contextualise the meaning making potential of documentary theatre and documentary practices, particularly amid changing perceptions of the real and its wider communication. Doing so draws into focus the ideological implications of cultural materialism that underpin what stories are told, by whom, and how they represent experiences of the real in performance, while simultaneously fuelling questions around what stories are not told and which voices are not heard.

In light of considering what stories are heard and not heard, I must methodologically justify the examples and evidence I have chosen to include and, thereby, amplify in this research. The contemporary case studies are all works I have witnessed, which explains the bias towards productions originating in the UK. This is a methodological choice that underpins the specificity of this research and enables me to engage as fully as possible with the questions I have established.

I utilised multiple sources in researching my contemporary examples: live performance viewings, play texts, accompanying notes, and online videos. In respect of Chris

Goode's (1973–2021) *Weaklings* (2015), Simon McBurney and Complicité's *The Encounter* (2015), and Chris Thorpe's *Confirmation* (2014), I witnessed each of them at least twice and sometimes in different venues. I engaged in post-show discussions and utilised interview materials from media and academic outlets. I have chosen not to formally interview the practitioners because their work is in the public domain, and in that way is available for reasoned interpretation. Moreover, each practitioner has already contributed in part to discussions associating their work with notions of documentary and the real, to the point that it is reasonable to test my investigations against them. James Hudson has highlighted to Thorpe the documentary aspects of *Confirmation*; Goode labels *Weaklings* as a play that owes a debt to the documentary mode; and McBurney regularly asserts that the “real” narrative purpose of *The Encounter* is to highlight the threat to indigenous Amazonian tribes. I have taken forward these partial recognitions without necessarily seeking confirmation of my ideas from the artists.

To summarise, in investigating my case studies I align with much contemporary scholarship by employing both cultural materialist and postmodern approaches. These approaches help examine the contextual motivations of dramatic representations of reality, the implications of poststructuralism and postmodernism in the second half of the twentieth century on contemporaneous work, and the legacy of these discussions for documentary practices in contemporary performance. To fully explore the context of the contemporary moment and the relationship of the examples to that moment, both the cultural materialist and the postmodern approaches are required in order that the changing circumstances are understood for their practical and real-world manifestations, as well as for their ideological significances. To support this methodological approach, I

have structured the thesis around three distinct periods of time, each of which I align with fluctuating circumstances in politics, technology, and the wider communication of the real.

Distinguishing Time Periods

The first time period is, broadly speaking, the first half of the twentieth century and this is discussed in Chapter One. The second period is the latter half of the twentieth century and is discussed in Chapter Two. The third period is the time since the turn of the millennium and is discussed in Chapters Three and Four, with a progression and specific focus towards the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century.

While each period has different issues of political urgency in divergent geographical and social contexts, which are explored in their respective chapters, there is a technological through-line that is useful to highlight, because these govern cultural and theoretical shifts in the appreciation of the real.

In Chapter One, the rise and commercial availability of daily newspapers is a significant marker at the beginning of the mass-media age that makes information about the wider world more available. In the 1960s, in Chapter Two, I consider the new cultural forms of mass-media and television as important influences in the promotion of and resistance to representation as an obfuscation of reality. In Chapters Three and Four, I consider how communication in the digital age has shifted understandings of reality through rapid forms of information sharing and through self-commodification. In light of such differences though, it is important to note that these time periods are not strict – that is to say, aspects of each chapter necessarily overlap in order to consider the fluid exchange between artistic, cultural, political, and technological shifts. This is methodologically allied to the principle that documentary eruptions are not subject to

‘evolutionary’ pathways, as Paget terms it, but are ‘rhizomorphic’ as Filewod states, and as such, these time periods help to illustrate the persistent malleability and responsiveness of documentary practices in different circumstances of necessity. Developments in the cultural, political, and technological circumstances of each period also contribute to three distinct understandings of the real, which in turn are communicated differently.

Early Documentary

The first time period, between the turn of the twentieth century and the mid-1960s, precedes a time in the late 1960s and 1970s when discourse and definitions of documentary theatres were beginning to be formalised.¹²¹ In light of discourse concerning the origins of documentary theatre, I propose a different influence on the inauguration of this early documentary period in the form of Reinhardt, before discussing the now canonical forms that would coalesce under the documentary theatre rubric in the first wave of the twentieth century, including Piscator’s agit-prop theatre, the living newspaper, and work by Weiss.

Each of these examples differently operated as counter-cultural challenges to dominant forms of bourgeoisie propaganda and power structures. The political concerns of such work were aligned with the Marxist argument that the ownership of production led to an

¹²¹ See reference to Hartnoll and others in Introduction, ‘Documentary Mode / Documentary Theatre Forms’. My highlighting of what is and is not included by surveys such as Hartnoll’s is not to condemn scholars for the choices they make because these choices are justified; as Hartnoll states, her choices centred around aspects that were ‘most likely to interest the English-speaking reader’ (1972, p. v). The same justification underpins her decision to foreground actors over dramatists, as Dan Rebellato notes (1999, p. 73). I highlight this to support my assertion that, in the early period of documentary theatre, this formal discourse was in its infancy.

obfuscation of the truth that capitalism operated for the preservation of the status quo and in the service of those who controlled wealth and power. David B. Myers writes that, because Karl Marx's work was always framed against the 'social reality – specifically the reality of capitalist society', the notion of truth in relation to Marx cannot be abstracted or considered 'in isolation from his critique of "political economy" (the theory and practice of capitalism)'.¹²² It follows that a Marxist approach to the notion of truth centres on, in Tomlin's terms, 'the bourgeois ideological illusion of the real [that] was conspiring to conceal the "true reality" of the oppression of the working class'.¹²³ Therefore, for Marxist documentary theatre makers, highlighting this capitalist-sanctioned reality was required in order to expose the "true reality", and thereby 'awaken people's consciousness' in the service of inspiring 'a revolution that could overthrow the current order'.¹²⁴

This Marxist notion that the operative facade of the capitalist society hides "truth", holds sway during different moments of the twentieth century which ideologically and artistically confront the real. In the 1960s, for example, Debord asserted that the experience of reality was in actuality a spectacular veneer 'mediated by images', wherein all lived experience had 'become mere representation'.¹²⁵ *The Society of the Spectacle* reinforces the Marxist notion of a concealed "truth" obscured by the capitalist system in order to maintain that system in favour of those who own the means of production. Confronting the systemic order, as it was found, also flourished in late-

¹²² David B. Myers, 'Marx's Concept of Truth: A Kantian Interpretation', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 7.2 (1977), 315–26 (p. 316).

¹²³ Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions*, p. 3.

¹²⁴ Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions*, p. 3.

¹²⁵ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 12.

twentieth and twenty-first century verbatim and tribunal plays, such as David Hare's *The Permanent Way* (2003) and Richard Norton-Taylor's *The Colour of Justice* (1999), which both focused on investigations of institutional failures and injustices.

Notwithstanding this continued relevance, this thesis associates the Marx-inflected communication of the real with the early-twentieth century, both to make strategic associations with its political undertones, and to reflect its (initial) period of dominance.

Postmodern Times

Shifting perceptions of the real and its effects are broadly the concern of the second time period which underpins the discussion of Chapter Two. The growth in mass communication during the mid-twentieth century is fundamental to Debord's postulation that the spectacular society obscures the real. However, postmodern scholars such as Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) draw from the same well of technological development to argue that the notion of a veiled truth hides the "true truth", that there is no real at all. Instead, as Baudrillard contends, the experience of reality is one of persistent and self-generating simulacra. Baudrillard's escalation of the critique of the real is one strand of an expanded theoretical field that compounds a sense of gathering scepticism in the latter part of the twentieth century and, spurred on by the prevailing winds of postmodern doubt, leads to shifting perceptions of the real and of the ability of artists to represent it. One of the fundamental theoretical instigators of this change were poststructuralist attacks on the notion of original truth.

Jacques Derrida's (1930-2004) deconstructivist project was sceptical of a logocentric, singular, theological notion of original truth, and suggested that the 'purity of the living

present' was a facile notion.¹²⁶ Instead, Derrida argued that only a 'reconstituted' present is ever possible to apprehend, as part of a constant process of deferral.¹²⁷ That is to say, the real is only ever a referent of other referents, or in the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, all presence or appearances of an original thing, moment, act, or word, are inextricably comprised of something that has gone before, 'the trace of something that is not itself'.¹²⁸ Such thinking ushered in an ontological questioning of the nature of art, as it refuted the idea that meaning is ultimately defined by the artist. Poststructuralism was also critical of what was perceived as the self-generated significance and validation of other theoretical positions. For example, Marxism was subject to poststructuralist critique due to its self-heralded claim to "reveal" the "true truth" behind the workings of capitalism. In a poststructuralist sense, the real is a collage of myths wielded spuriously under the misapprehension of originality, and attempting to change such a state of being is almost an impossibility.

This poststructuralist maxim – that the quest for truth was inescapably trapped amid a never-ending process of constant deferral – was the very ground on which its Marxist opposition mounted their defence; as Tomlin states, the Marxist position asserted that 'the destabilising of objective reality might actually be a gift in disguise to the global capitalist enterprise', whose wealth and access to mass communication would only ever reinforce dominant political and social narratives.¹²⁹ Although the Marxist opposition remains, the counter-cultural movements of the late 1960s and 1970s galvanised the

¹²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 212.

¹²⁷ Derrida, p. 212.

¹²⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', in *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. ix–lxxxvii (p. lxix).

¹²⁹ Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions*, p. 5.

poststructuralist scepticism of totalising notions of truth, particularly in the United States (US) and the UK. In the late 1970s and 1980s, synthesising some of the poststructuralist principles within the swiftly changing landscapes of technological and social reform, and amid the burgeoning days of neo-liberalism, came the postmodern.

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984), Lyotard famously summarised that the postmodern centred on cultural and political ‘incredulity’ in the late-twentieth century ‘towards metanarratives’. Such metanarratives encompass, for example, the totalising notions that the personal, social, political, and historical progress of society was always on an upward trajectory, and individuals would benefit from this as a matter of course. The postmodern rejection of such narratives in favour of a pluralist conception of the world and of meaning, a rejection of what Lavender calls the notions of ‘progress, dominating systems, or monolithic political positions’, revelled in the disruptive potential of individual difference against hegemonic power.¹³⁰ This turn towards the individual is a progressive documentary (and wider performance) trait that is discussed in Chapter Two.

Foregrounding the individual intensifies scrutiny on the stability of representation and highlights the contingent nature of the real. However, this critical recalibration is confronted by the political counter-narrative of neoliberalism which, solidifying in the 1980s and 1990s, evangelises for the elevated responsibility of the individual amid the atomisation of government and state institutions. This political ideology decentres public, social, and civic responsibility from authorities who have the power to initiate systemic change, and designates consequences – such as social decline – as the product

¹³⁰ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 18.

of individual failure; such positions can be demonstrably allied with biases such as class, education, location, language, or ethnicity. A dramatic rejoinder, in some respects, to these political and ideological circumstances is the resurgence of the documentary mode at the turn of the millennium, which goes hand in hand with the desire for increased scrutiny of state, religious, and financial institutions.¹³¹ The surge of ‘new voices, experiences, positions and perspectives’ at the turn of the twenty-first century, so Lavender suggests, mobilises familiar postmodern practices but in different ways and for new purposes; this is rightly needed in light of changing times, or more specifically, in light of digital times.¹³²

Digital Times

The technological backdrop of what I term ‘digital times’ contextualises my investigations, in Chapters Three and Four, of how documentary practices are mobilised in contemporary theatre. Digital times concerns the political and social shifts that resonate with the increasingly quotidian integration of technologies that escalate the volumes of information we receive and the manner and speed of that dissemination.

When the “dot-com” bubble – a surge in ownership of internet domains in the 1990s – burst during the first two years of the new millennium, it precipitated the closure and loss in stock value of many global organisations who proliferated in the burgeoning

¹³¹ Beyond theatre and performance, a common touchstone of this resurgence in the documentary mode are the commercial and critical successes of documentary films including Michael Moore’s Oscar-winning *Bowling for Columbine* (2002).

¹³² Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 38.

days of the internet.¹³³ Parallel to this downturn in ownership, was an upturn in a new internet protocol that Meikle describes as both ‘marketing hype and business model’ – Web 2.0.¹³⁴ The Web 2.0 protocol allowed users a greater level of interaction within and over websites, permitting the almost complete populating of websites with user generated content (UGC). For Meikle, the surge in uptake of Web 2.0 ‘captures a particular moment in the first decade of the twenty-first century’, which led to the popularising of ‘a new wave’ of websites who ‘shifted the narrative of what the web was about’.¹³⁵ Facebook, YouTube, Reddit, 4Chan, and Twitter are prime examples of these new digital forums which adhere to what Henry Jenkins calls ‘participatory culture’, which he suggests in 2009 ‘is emerging as the culture absorbs and responds to the explosion of new media technologies that make it possible for average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content in powerful new ways’.¹³⁶ This new ‘era of fluid information-exchange and demotic publishing’,¹³⁷ facilitated by the digital connectivity of the smart phone, marks out the ‘rapid, pervasive and culture-changing growth of digital communications’ according to Lavender.¹³⁸

The instantaneous discovery and dissemination of information afforded by mobile digital technologies leads Lavender to suggest that they have ‘remade the procedures

¹³³ John Authers and Michael Mackenzie, ‘Techs Reflect on Decade Since Dotcom Boom’, *Financial Times*, 9 March 2010 <<https://www.ft.com/content/d66e80b6-2b95-11df-a5c7-00144feabdc0>> [accessed 2 November 2019].

¹³⁴ Meikle, p. 14.

¹³⁵ Meikle, p. 14.

¹³⁶ Henry Jenkins and others, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), p. 8. Many other earlier examples of early social media platforms existed, notably Myspace and Friendster, but the examples I cite are longstanding platforms that continue to be popular.

¹³⁷ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 14.

¹³⁸ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 13.

(both cognitive and technical) by which we expressed our cultural engagement. They [have] *restructured* our experience of and transaction with the real.’¹³⁹ Movements such as Occupy and events such as the Arab Spring are common examples of the efficacy of digital connectivity because of their large scale mobilisations of physical bodies, and because of the impact these movements had on local, national, and international politics and lives.¹⁴⁰ As the literature review suggests, technological developments alongside geo-political events have shifted perceptions and cultural appreciations of reality, as well as the wider communication of the real. Many of the scholars referenced or focused upon in my discussion have brought these issues together, as this project also does, with the discourse of documentary theatre.

To pinpoint the shifts and developments that are specific to the contemporary examples discussed in this thesis, it is important to recognise the historical moment within which this research project has developed. This period of development has been marked by an accelerated cultural awareness of what, when, and how information is shared, and this has increasingly focused debate in the public sphere on the value of facts and truth, and notions of opinion and expertise.¹⁴¹ In one way, this increased cultural awareness evidences the pertinence of this research, as my work critically reflects on topics that have transferred into popular rhetoric. At the same time, the contemporary period with

¹³⁹ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 15. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁰ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, pp. 13–17. Strategies of both Occupy and the Arab Spring included the occupation of outdoor civic spaces in many different countries to demonstrate dissent at ruling powers and to disrupt the normal usage of such spaces, with particular attention given to centres of financial and political institutions. Extinction Rebellion (XR) are another example of such movements, but XR occurs after the main period of research for this project.

¹⁴¹ Henry Mance, ‘Britain Has Had Enough of Experts, Says Gove’, *Financial Times*, 3 June 2016 <<https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>>.

which elements of this vanguard study are concerned needs acknowledging in order to separate the research objects, and this thesis, from being overtaken by history. As such, while I explore examples of contemporary documentary theatre that are discursive touchstones in the new millennium – Kelly’s *Taking Care of Baby* and David Hare’s *Stuff Happens* (2004), for example – I also move forward to the expanded deployment of documentary practices that I contend exists in Chris Goode’s *Weaklings*, Complicité’s *The Encounter*, Untitled Project’s *Paul Bright’s Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (2013), and Chris Thorpe’s *Confirmation*.

I will define the reasoning for these examples in the chapter breakdown and in their retrospective chapters, but I name them here in order to stipulate that I stopped considering work for this project after 2015 for two reasons. Firstly, to allow the historical dust to settle in order to be able to critique the works in a way that did not become embroiled in circumstances and debates that continue to modify and exacerbate with great regularity. And secondly, I contend that 2015 is a pivotal date because it was immediately followed by two events of global significance that set new datum in recent history – those are the UK’s EU Referendum and the presidential election of Donald Trump in the US, both in 2016.¹⁴²

This is not to say, however, that the work I discuss is unconnected to such historic events. The timely nature of this research, and its expanded consideration of how we tell and retell aspects of reality as part of cultural exchange, is reflected in what are now popularised debates concerning truth in digital times; the Oxford Dictionary

¹⁴² See Conclusion, ‘Future Directions – Beyond Documentary’.

international word of the year of 2016, for example, was “post-truth”.¹⁴³ While such debates have increased *during* this research (since 2016), the period immediately preceding this increase is significant in terms of considering how theatre at that time might be foreshadowing this gathering conversation. By highlighting this, my aim is to demonstrate that documentary practices can be examined for their response to the disparate formation of such a cultural zeitgeist, as opposed to only being a reflection or symptom of it. As I have already noted, the three time periods I distinguish across this research project are not exclusive – at times the periods overlap, while at other times there are traces of latent influences from earlier periods. Likewise, although I touch upon this in the thesis Conclusion, I expect that future research would consider how the pre-2016 landscape might influence aspects of performance post-2016, or at least draw links between the two periods.

To conclude this section on the historical time periods of this research, I return to Forsyth and Megson’s note that, even within the narrow passage of the two years from the hardback to the paperback publications of *Get Real*, ‘forms of fact-based-theatre’ continued to ‘diversify and capture the public imagination’.¹⁴⁴ The strength with which Forsyth and Megson make this claim is testament to the value of robust engagement within narrow lapses of time. My research follows this underlying principle by distinguishing eruptions of documentary practices within a confined time period. This is particularly the case in the second decade of the twenty-first century, where on the cusp of historic events documentary practices were already being energised in new ways to

¹⁴³ ““Post-Truth” Declared Word of the Year by Oxford Dictionaries’, *BBC News*, 2016 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-37995600>> [accessed 26 November 2016].

¹⁴⁴ Forsyth and Megson, ‘Preface’, p. ix.

critique processes of communication in the everyday. Highlighting work in such condensed periods helps distil performances which might otherwise suffocate under the weight of discourses propelled into common parlance by recent events. As such, my argument of a shift in the mobilisation of documentary practices is not predisposed to popularised notions of “fake news” and the acceleration of scepticism that accompanies that term. The focus, instead, is on how documentary practices were being mobilised prior to this acceleration, when they were already in the service of problematizing the influence of digital times, particularly in how ambiguously information can be communicated, how this alters perceptions of reality, and what significance this has socially, politically, and ideologically.

Chapter Breakdown

Beginning with the contested origins of documentary theatre, Chapter One examines how, from its early development, the malleable and responsive qualities of documentary practices are a significant part of the heritage of the historical documentary canon and inform its development to the present day. Following Reinelt, Filewod, and Martin, my engagement with iterations of the documentary canon calls for a shift in the perception of such work from a product to a process. As such, I propose rethinking this early development through a consideration of the work of Reinhardt. I demonstrate how Reinhardt’s theatricality is allied to avant-garde practices that expose how representation can reinforce the status-quo through replication. Reinhardt’s overriding concern to dissolve the stage-auditorium divide laid an aesthetic foundation upon which Piscator built his praxis, which integrated materials from reality into politically charged performances.

Piscator's utilisation of technology was prominent in the critical reception of his work, which often reified his productions in light of their technological feats. I highlight examples of such reification in order to make the case, as Piscator did, that this overarching and misplaced simplification of his work fails to engage with the appropriateness of the different technologies he mobilised in performance. From the canonical beginnings of Piscator, malleability is quickly established as a necessary component of documentary practices, because Piscator asserted that his technological practices would alter in response to different circumstances of necessity. Piscator recognised that, as Reinelt articulated, the focus should not be solely on the veracity of the materials that are communicated, but also on the 'relationship' between those source materials and their integration in performance, which is curated by the artist and navigated by the spectator.¹⁴⁵

My exploration of the living newspaper examines how documentary practices are harnessed for their capacity to respond to the politics of specific situations. The living newspaper form jettisoned spectacle in favour of educating and encouraging actions of social and civic significance from its predominantly working class audiences. Usually focused around single-issues of local subject matter, the living newspaper was utilised by amateur troupes to facilitate the documentary practice of staging real people. This was illegal for professional companies but not for amateur groups; however, I suggest that it was emblematic of the subversive quality of the living newspaper form.

The final example of Chapter One is Weiss, who is notable for his centrality to the canon and for his decree that documentary theatre should be fastidiously factual.

¹⁴⁵ Reinelt, p. 7.

However, and significantly for this thesis, Weiss cannot avoid the kinds of ambivalences that riddle the canonical documentary tradition between theatrical spectacle and pragmatic veracity in the communication of real events. I contend that such ambivalences are vital for Weiss to achieve his political ends in *The Investigation* (1965) – a play that appears initially to be a dramatic commentary on the Holocaust. Even if they are not acknowledged by canonised practitioners such as Weiss, moments of ambivalence in documentary theatre forms can demonstrate the malleable and responsive qualities of documentary practices.

While Weiss espoused that “truth” was discernible through close scrutiny of the world, Guy Debord (who published his seminal text soon after *The Investigation*) advocated that “western” societies were subject to an accumulation of spectacular images that obscured the real. This meant that any process to creating change in society had first to unveil this operative façade. Chapter Two begins by considering how Weiss and Debord occupy two shifting perceptions of the real in the late-twentieth century, which logically also take different positions on how to achieve a re-engagement with the real – one through the faithful restoration of evidence (Weiss), and the other through systemic critique (Debord). This opposition establishes a context for how critical appreciations may engage with representations of reality and with the notion of the real itself, particularly within the late-twentieth century’s new circumstances of necessity.

In Chapter Two, I argue that the malleability of documentary practices in the late-twentieth century increasingly oscillates around their responsiveness to contextual pressures over and above the act of recording or reporting the real. Those pressures manifest as both the demand for urgent political change and shifting theoretical appreciations of the real. Expanding out from the opposing perspectives of Weiss and

Debord, I propose that the mobilisation of documentary practices in the second half of the twentieth century begins to shift in response to changing appreciations of the real. This exploration is contextualised by the political and social unrest in the 1960s which, combined with technological developments, begins to destabilise the dominance of metanarratives in support of the status quo. Through two Living Theatre productions, I discuss how such circumstances helped shift thinking around representations of reality.

The Brig (1963) and *The Connection* (1959) are examined as exemplars of how two text-based productions mobilise neo-avant-garde strategies alongside documentary practices in the creation of work that resists reaffirming the status quo of their material contexts. Both productions differently draw attention to notions of time and space (the “here and now”) in performance, as well as to the presence of the performer, in ways that reflect the shifting interpretations of the real that were soon to become central to the poststructural and postmodern paradigms. I argue that in agitating the stable boundaries between performance and reality, through documentary practices and through an ‘air’ of documentary ‘authenticity’, the Living Theatre’s work confronts hegemonic representations of reality in both a performative and a political sense.¹⁴⁶

Drawing forward the shifting perceptions of the real in the twentieth century, Chapter Two then explores the discourse around presence and the poststructural distrust of truth. This discussion sets up a theoretical context for the expansion of autobiographical and biographical documentary practices that populate the late-twentieth century, reflecting pluralist and ultimately subjective perspectives on historical events, but also coalescing with the burgeoning individualism that would help consolidate the neoliberal project.

¹⁴⁶ Youker, p. 132.

Within this context, I propose that unshackling the concept of duplicity from pejorative associations and instead examining what I term “conscious duplicity” (or doubleness) at work in these documentary theatre forms, can help evaluate the malleable and responsive work of documentary practices against this late-twentieth century focus on the individual. I test this via an examination of Spalding Gray’s *Rumstick Road*.

Chapter Three opens by establishing the socio-political context that contributes to a gathering age of distrust, where faith in a range of civic and state institutions is diminished, and trust is placed in the words of those who appear outside of systemic influence. Concurrently, changing appreciations of the real have accelerated in light of theoretical, technological, political, and cultural developments, which include not least the legacy of Jean Baudrillard, the establishment of rolling news and reality television, the fallout from globally interconnected events such as the World Trade Centre attacks of 2001 (hereafter referred to as 9/11) and the 2008 financial crises, and the oncoming democratisation of the internet through social media.

Having established this context, the chapter then focuses on the turn (or return) to tangible source materials and testimony in documentary theatre in the new millennium. While I have already noted that Paget refers to this period as one dominated by the ‘rhetoric of witness’ through the practices of verbatim and tribunal theatre, I argue that the reinvigorated focus on “real words” at this time is allied to an increasing ambiguity in documentary performance. The mobilisation of the documentary practices that I discuss continues to demonstrate their malleable quality and responsiveness to the new circumstances of necessity, but I propose that – seen through the particular lens of the profusion of digital technology – the work of some documentary practices in the new millennium points towards an already collapsed distinction between fact and fiction.

This has troubling resonances for the political potential of documentary practices and documentary theatre to confront the status quo.

After detailing documentary theatre's responses to this period, I discuss how definitions, understandings, and mobilisations of the terms and practices of "verbatim" and "tribunal" have encouraged a conflation between these two documentary practices, particularly through an imbrication of the authoritative status of tribunal (or public inquiry) material into verbatim practice. This discussion is then filtered through prominent examples of this period – *Taking Care of Baby* and *Stuff Happens* – to demonstrate how documentary practices, or the appearance of documentary practices, are mobilised in response to this theatrical trend and the wider socio-political context.

These examples are chosen as they demonstrate the dissolution between the factual and fictional. I draw these ideas forward through a reading of Chris Goode's *Weaklings*, which can be seen as a logical conclusion whereby the difference between the factual and the fictional is not simply one of blurring or dilution, but a complete collapse that mirrors the uncertainty of unattributed authorship in the age of digital social media. The unsettling finding that I evidence throughout this example, however, is that Goode fails to critically reassess the subject matter, or his appropriation of it. As such, he not only re-presents the uncertainty of online engagement and affirms the seeming collapse of a fact-fiction binary, but seems to suggest that a kind of liberation exists in a politically suspect realm where the normative boundaries of behaviour can be expelled because nothing is real or truthful – everything has the potential to be excusable as a fantasy.

Chapter Four examines how, in the second decade of the new millennium, a number of solo performance works have employed autobiographical and biographical practices in

ways that demonstrate the extended malleability of these practices. The chapter asks how, and why, are these practices being mobilised in the twenty-first century. I propose that their deployment, in performances that are not readily considered to be documentary theatre, demonstrates a responsiveness to the accelerated digital culture of the 2010s and has particular resonance for how individual stories and perspectives are communicated in the present day. Chapter Four then, establishes a discursive framework around historic and contemporary engagements with the notion of storytelling. Beginning with Walter Benjamin, this framing considers storytelling in the contemporary moment as an appeal to the notion of authenticity allied to the recent thrust of verbatim practice, and positions the storyteller as the curatorial arbiter of truth responsible for the objective balancing of empirical and embodied forms of evidence.

As such, Chapter Four investigates how the principles of storytelling that emerge from the discursive framing are refracted through the appearance of autobiographical and biographical practice in *The Encounter*, *Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, and *Confirmation*. Each of these productions blends these practices with other aesthetic concerns in ways that demonstrate the enduring malleability of documentary practices. However, I propose that differences between these examples revolve around the practitioners' recognition of their mobilisation of these practices, and their awareness of the discursive heft with which these practices have previously been mobilised. This provokes important questions concerning how (the appearance of) documentary practices are repurposed within contemporary circumstances of necessity, what new critical currencies they forge, and what this means for the traditional boundaries of documentary theatre as well as for their expanded mobilisation going forward.

CHAPTER ONE: EARLY DOCUMENTARY THEATRES AND THE UNDERPINNING OF MALLEABILITY

Argument and Structure

This chapter focuses on specific elements of the documentary theatre canon from the historical avant-garde to the mid-twentieth century. I demonstrate how practitioners have channelled their politics through the instigation and diverse application of a malleable and responsive range of documentary practices. I argue that this malleability has enabled the strategic mobilisation of documentary practices in response to different political, social, and technological circumstances of necessity. In order to discuss how documentary practices are mobilised in the new millennium beyond the confines of traditional documentary theatre forms, which I do later in this thesis, first I must distinguish documentary practices from within documentary theatre forms. As such, this chapter necessarily revisits aspects of the documentary theatre canon to evidence how distinguishing practices from forms can productively contribute to both new engagements with the documentary canon, as well as establishing a critical foundation for evaluating the new mobilisation of documentary practices in the present day.

The documentary practices focused upon in this chapter are framed in two ways. The first is as interruptions of the real in performance, particularly through the mobilisation of filmed footage, photographic images, written statements, and spoken word, taken from real life and transposed on stage. Varyingly, through both technological and dramaturgical innovations, these practices offer a rejoinder to the dominant naturalist and realist forms of the early twentieth century. The second framing is as attempts to promote a sense that certain performances make active interventions within the real life subject matter and politics of the narratives they are retelling. I frame them in this way

in order to help re-think how these practices are mobilised, as opposed to simply surveying a history and identifying their mobilisation at different moments. This lays a foundation for the investigation of documentary practices going forward that resist facile mapping and considers their role and efficacy within different performance aesthetics.

This chapter opens by considering the contested origin of documentary theatre and makes a different contention regarding a discursive starting point. The disputed nature of documentary theatre origins enables me to offer a less common but no less distinctive influence in the history of documentary theatre via staging strategies in the work of Max Reinhardt. Reinhardt's focus on a dissolution of the stage-auditorium divide laid an aesthetic and ideological foundation upon which Erwin Piscator built his politically charged praxis. Turning to Piscator's work, I demonstrate that malleability is a necessary quality of documentary practices from the outset of the documentary canon, when Piscator refuted the stereotyping of his technological theatre by claiming that staging apparatus must modify in response to shifting contextual pressures. In my subsequent discussion of the living newspaper, I examine how documentary practices are harnessed in response to specific and often relatively localised political issues, and consider how their mobilisation within amateur troupes facilitated subversive acts that professional theatre companies could not replicate. Through such instances it is clear that the malleability of its practices not only made viable the living newspaper form but also amplified its political and social efficacy – these two aspects make the living newspaper a pertinent canonical example for discussion. I conclude this chapter by considering Peter Weiss's claim that documentary theatre must be fastidiously factual alongside his dramaturgical ambivalences between theatrical spectacle and an

unobstructed presentation of source material. This is done through the prism of his seminal documentary play *The Investigation*, in order to demonstrate that seemingly incongruous collisions of aesthetic choices (which no less effect Weiss's canonical status) can both solidify the malleability of documentary practices but also help distinguish such practices from within canonical documentary theatre forms.

As these examples denote, this chapter is not a broad survey or an attempt to recuperate lost iterations of the documentary tradition. Rather, I evidence the utility of focusing on documentary practices when revisiting canonical iterations of documentary theatre. Therein, it is a methodological choice to draw on a generally accepted documentary theatre canon in order to articulate these underpinning and interlocking principles of malleability and responsiveness, which help to distinguish documentary practices from documentary theatre forms, and which in turn can help examine the expanded mobilisation of documentary practices in the present day.

Foreshadowing the development of mass-media and digital technologies that contextualises later chapters, it is more than a coincidence that the politically critical contexts of early documentary theatres were synchronous with the development and growth of what Walter Benjamin called the 'information' industry – that is, the commercial circulation of newspapers.¹⁴⁷ The growth of this industry and its influence on how information, narratives, and reality were communicated, was formalised over a prolonged period. For example, in a UK context, the abolition of a stamp duty tax on printed publications in 1855 began to democratise access to newspapers, while the

¹⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 83–110 (p. 88). The importance of the developing newspaper industry for the documentary tradition is addressed later in this chapter.

formation of the Press Association (1868) and a National Union of Journalists (1907) inaugurated a centralisation of local and national reporting. Allied to this context of an increasing centralised mass communication, this chapter considers how varying forms of documentary theatre are motivated by questioning the presentation, representation, and communication of reality within their different circumstances of necessity, rather than within a particular form, and I propose that documentary practices are key to unlocking that understanding.

Where to Start and Why

The origins of documentary theatre are contested. Attilio Favorini suggests that the documentary mode can be traced back to Aeschylus' *The Persians*, first performed in 472 BCE. In the play, a messenger describes the Persian defeat at the battle of Salamis that occurred eight years prior. Favorini proposes that because Aeschylus was a former soldier with experience and knowledge of such events, the playwright 'brought to bear on *The Persians* a passion for research shared by his documentary descendants'.¹⁴⁸ Favorini's argument continues to influence and frame recent discursive interventions on the origins of documentary theatre, with S. E. Wilmer drawing on it in 2018.¹⁴⁹ An alternative origin is argued by Gary Fisher Dawson, who suggests that Georg Büchner's

¹⁴⁸ Attilio Favorini, *Voicings: Ten Plays from the Documentary Theater* (New Jersey: Ecco Press, 1995), p. xiii. Although Favorini is careful not to advocate that a certain length of time between source material and theatrical presentation is a prerequisite of the documentary tradition, he does highlight that Phrynichus (a contemporary of Aeschylus), was fined one thousand drachmas for reducing an ancient Greek audience to tears when his play – *The Capture of Miletus* (492 BCE) – reminded the spectators of a more recent defeat. This, in the context of Favorini's argument, suggests that the dramatization of a real event can be staged too soon after an occurrence.

¹⁴⁹ S. E. Wilmer, *Performing Statelessness in Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 73.

Danton's Death can lay claim to being the first example of documentary theatre because Büchner 'uses verbatim documentation from key agents of the French Revolution'.¹⁵⁰

Timothy Youker's agreement with this assertion – noted in the Introduction – demonstrates the continued currency of Dawson's narrative.¹⁵¹

However, the important distinction between Dawson and Favorini does not lie in the different play text that each scholar distinguishes as the instigator of the documentary mode, nor the extensive period that separates those texts. I contend, instead, that the important distinction is what each scholar defines as the marker of the documentary mode. Dawson anchors his origin narrative to the traceability of archival material which is then integrated into dramatic performance. In contrast, Favorini foregrounds the mobilisation of accounts based on oral tradition, testimony, and experience. These two positions span a notional spectrum which all recognised documentary theatre forms traverse: at one end of the spectrum is a reliance upon source materials wherein an empirical veracity is underpinned by the tangibility, traceability, and status of the evidence deployed (Dawson), while at the other end is a documentary theatre that relies on the subjective, embodied truth(s) of individual witness and interpretation in order to present historical narratives – even if that subjectivity is framed as objective (Favorini). In the late-twentieth century, in the shadow of postmodernism, such a facile distinction between authoritative source materials and subjective interpretation is no longer stable. Chapter Three will discuss this in more depth; however, what is useful at this juncture is

¹⁵⁰ Dawson, p. 2.

¹⁵¹ See Introduction, 'Literature Review: On Canonicity'.

a recognition of the different framings within which documentary theatres have been conceived and discussed since their contested origins.¹⁵²

Dawson's and Favorini's narratives foreground questions around the framing of the documentary mode, such as: what practices constitute the "documentary theatre"? What forms are developed through those practices that become part of an accepted documentary tradition? How do changing circumstances of necessity (political, social, and technological) alter appreciations of the documentary mode? And what narratives or metanarratives might iterations of documentary theatre (particularly canonically enshrined iterations) be in the service of, or rebelling against? In light of such questions, Dawson's and Favorini's assertions retain a critical value that goes beyond historiographic recuperations of lost or marginalised histories, because their opposing origin narratives suggest that it is not only the documentary product that should be focal in the discourse, but also what is conceived of as documentary. The Introduction to this thesis has varyingly noted that a similar focus gathers Janelle Reinelt, Alan Filewod, and Carol Martin together in the call for a shift from considering documentary as a product to considering it as a process.¹⁵³ The different lens that this thesis proposes investigates the malleability and responsiveness of documentary practices as part of the documentary theatre lineage, and highlights their importance not only as component parts of the documentary process, but as components that can be mobilised within the aesthetic of forms that may not be recognised as "documentary theatre"; this is the position I take in relation to the different starting point that I offer of Reinhardt.

¹⁵² See Chapter Three, 'States of Distrust: Theory and Events in the New Millennium', and 'States of Distrust: Contextualising Documentary Responses'.

¹⁵³ See Introduction, 'Methodological Approaches'.

Making the Reinhardt Case

Despite the proposals of Dawson and Favorini, *Danton's Death* and *The Persians* remain as outliers in the documentary theatre canon, which it is generally agreed begins with Piscator in 1920s Germany.¹⁵⁴ This is, in part, because Piscator coined the phrase “documentary theatre”, but also, in part, because of the lineage that can be traced from Piscator to experiments in politicised theatre that represents real life events – such as the work of Brecht, Weiss, and recent trends in tribunal and verbatim theatre.¹⁵⁵ However, Paget also notes a distinctive influence on the beginnings of documentary theatre forms, which were ‘designed to inform and energise the population’, via the figure of Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1940).¹⁵⁶

Paget’s alignment of documentary theatre with Meyerhold establishes a pan-European quality to his study, informing the reader of the Russian influences on documentary theatre forms, from agit-prop to the living newspaper.¹⁵⁷ By foregrounding Meyerhold, Paget highlights broad influences on the documentary mode that enable different interpretations to be drawn at different stages of documentary theatre history. Similarly, my focus on Reinhardt incorporates broader influences on the canonised origins of the documentary tradition, and begins from a pragmatic example of Reinhardt’s coalescence with that tradition.

¹⁵⁴ See Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 15.

¹⁵⁵ Thomas Irmer, ‘A Search For New Realities: Documentary Theatre in Germany’, *The Drama Review*, 50.3 (2006), 16–28 (p. 18).

¹⁵⁶ Paget, *True Stories?: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*, p. 50.

¹⁵⁷ Paget, *True Stories?: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*, p. 55.

In 1916 Reinhardt directed a production of Büchner's *Danton's Death*.¹⁵⁸ For J. L.

Styan, *Danton's Death* offers a link between overt politicisation in theatre and the need for multifarious viewpoints, due to its mobilisation of documentation from French Revolution trials and its dramaturgical structure:

Büchner had alone invented a new stage idiom for a modern political drama, often vividly realistic in language, yet especially unusual in its use of episodic form. With each new juxtaposition of scene, a fresh perspective could be granted the subject of the play [sic], and in this Shakespeare served as the link between Büchner and Brecht, and between Büchner and Reinhardt.¹⁵⁹

Reinhardt's productions influenced Piscator directly, as Christopher Innes notes in regards to the use of light in the 1916 production of *Danton's Death*, which 'anticipated the ability to comment on the action through visual juxtaposition that Piscator gained with his use of simultaneous stages'.¹⁶⁰ While other such direct correlations will be highlighted, Styan's notion of the 'new stage idiom' proposes that, rather than understanding documentary theatre as an inventory of staging techniques, it might be more productive to consider it as a broad approach to theatre and representations of reality in an age marked by artistic and cultural experimentation. This enables an appreciation of the malleable and responsive qualities of the practices that were mobilised in early documentary theatres, while also drawing attention to the wider cultural circumstances within which Reinhardt operated.

¹⁵⁸ While this production can add a particular energy to Dawson's assertion that Büchner's play has a claim on the origins of documentary theatre, J. L. Styan's work is of more importance for this discussion of Reinhardt's influence on (as opposed to his participation within) the documentary tradition.

¹⁵⁹ J. L. Styan, *Max Reinhardt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 46.

¹⁶⁰ Christopher D. Innes, *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 182.

Specifically, these contextual circumstances refer to aspects of the historical avant-garde, within which European documentary theatre developed as a reaction to the dramaturgical dominance of naturalism, as a vehicle of political confrontation, and as a reconsideration of how reality is communicated (and narrated) through forms of mass communication. Kirk Williams suggests that ‘the struggle’ which unified a host of avant-garde experiments – from symbolism and expressionism, to futurism and existentialism – was the pursuit of new idioms, ‘new modes of representation, [and] new aesthetic strategies that seek to usurp the privilege of the old’.¹⁶¹

This avant-garde struggle against the illusory quality of theatrical representation is a principal way in which Reinhardt’s influence on the politically overt documentary theatre of Piscator is established. Although Reinhardt’s approach to theatre-making is ill-suited to narrow categorisation, and his leanings toward overt theatricality do not align with norms of the documentary mode, elements of Reinhardt’s staging practice and his rejection of naturalism do coalesce with facets of the historical avant-garde. It is through this subtle allegiance to the avant-garde – which at the beginning of the twentieth century in Europe sought a rejuvenated engagement between the stage and the audience, and between art and the art viewer – that it is possible to trace an ideological resonance between Reinhardt and the documentary theatre tradition.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Kirk Williams, ‘Anti-Theatricality and the Limits of Naturalism’, in *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*, ed. by Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 95–111 (p. 97).

¹⁶² To be clear, naturalism was of course part of the historical avant-garde and not innately inimical to it. Piscator even admits that ‘for one historical moment, Naturalism did turn the theatre into a political form’ (1980, p. 33). However, with the advantage of hindsight, the opposition between naturalism and later movements within the historical avant-garde is a commonplace contention that my argument takes forward.

According to Peter Marx, Reinhardt's diverse oeuvre differentiated him from contemporaneous avant-garde practitioners and, as such, resists neat reification.¹⁶³ While Reinhardt's work spanned theatre and opera, and incorporated plays from the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare, Schiller, and even realist work by Ibsen, Marx notes that this grand visual aesthetic in the pursuit of a "Theatre of Five Thousand" led to a common accusation that Reinhardt was over-reliant on the choreographing of large crowd scenes.¹⁶⁴ In an attempt to redress the balance, Marx argues that Reinhardt's directorial flexibility was evidenced by this varied approach to staging and, 'unlike many in the avant-garde', his diverse oeuvre demonstrates that Reinhardt 'pursued no exclusive aesthetic vision', but instead was keenly aware that a rejuvenated relationship between the stage and the audience required 'unique atmospheres' to reflect the different circumstances of each production.¹⁶⁵

The rejuvenated theatre that Reinhardt created, according to Martin Esslin, could only be achieved by a move away from the 'dryness and shabbiness of the world that dominated the naturalistic stage'.¹⁶⁶ As such, it was Reinhardt's embracing of theatricality through a multitude of staging elements, such as scale, musicality, experimentations with settings, and the mobilisation of large crowds on stage that

¹⁶³ Peter W. Marx, 'Max Reinhardt', in *The Routledge Companion to Directors' Shakespeare*, ed. by John Russell-Brown (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2008), pp. 374–88 (p. 376).

¹⁶⁴ Marx, p. 376. Marx cautions more broadly, in light of such simplifications, that the discursive differentiation of the 'surge of "isms" at the beginning of the twentieth century' can lead to the reification of each 'ism'; this can in turn diminish the dynamic quality of this wider period in theatre history, and overshadow the imbricated traces that these 'isms' and their associated practitioners might have established beyond their current discursive boundaries (p. 376).

¹⁶⁵ Marx, p. 376.

¹⁶⁶ Martin Esslin, 'Max Reinhardt: "High Priest of Theatricality"', *The Drama Review*, 21.2 (1977), 3–24 (p. 8).

helped to generate the ‘unique atmospheres’ of his productions, but that also dramaturgically blurred the separation between auditorium and stage, which became an important influence on Piscator’s agit-prop performances.¹⁶⁷

Arnold Aronson asserts that Reinhardt’s approach to the separation of the stage and auditorium was ideologically aligned with ‘a litany of avant-garde events in which the frame of the stage was permeated if not entirely dissolved’.¹⁶⁸ As such, Aronson incorporates Reinhardt into a survey of scenographic experimentations by avant-garde practitioners that reject the dominance of naturalism, and the segregation of these two spaces; Aronson’s taxonomy includes (but is not limited to) Oskar Kokoschka (1886–1980), Alfred Jarry (1873–1907), Meyerhold, and Tristan Tzara (1896–1963).¹⁶⁹

Such radical company suggests that Reinhardt’s dramaturgical practices were of significance to the avant-garde challenge levelled at the dominant, “slice of life” stage-world of naturalism. Erika Fischer-Lichte alludes to the political and ideological potential that such a challenge might herald:

The dissolution of the strict separation between stage and auditorium which, from the very beginning of the century, theatre reformers such as Peter Behrens, Fuchs, Reinhardt and Meyerhold never tired of postulating and trying out, was

¹⁶⁷ Marx, p. 376. For a discussion of such staging practices by Reinhardt in relation to a season of Greek plays at the Circus Schumann in Berlin 1910-1911, see Styran, pp. 78–80.

¹⁶⁸ Arnold Aronson, ‘Avant-Garde Scenography and the Frames of the Theatre’, in *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*, ed. by Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 21–38 (p. 29).

¹⁶⁹ Aronson, ‘Avant-Garde Scenography and the Frames of the Theatre’, pp. 32–33. For Aronson, ‘The Synthetic Futurist Theatre’ (1915) manifesto is the definitive clarion call in the movement towards a dissolution of the physical and ideological gap between the auditorium and the stage.

not meant to be just another spatial device but also a principal change in the communicative conditions underlying theatre.¹⁷⁰

This ‘change in the communicative conditions’ goes far beyond the disruptive techniques of entering and exiting through the auditorium, as observed in melodrama and popular performance, or the architectural distortion of the stage-auditorium divide via the installation of audience boxes on thrust stages in the Renaissance. These were mere ‘spatial device[s]’ claims Fischer-Lichte, and therein devoid of an oppositional agenda.¹⁷¹ However, she claims that the experiments towards a dissolution of the stage-auditorium divide, as Reinhardt tested in his 1910 production of Friedrich Freska’s pantomime *Sumurun*, were political acts.¹⁷²

In a production that was ‘unconnected by the logic of action or by psychology’, performers in Reinhardt’s *Sumurun* repeatedly traversed a bridge constructed between the stage and the auditorium.¹⁷³ The narrative reasoning behind these actions was never explicit. However, at such moments the divide between these two spaces was revealed as an abstract construct, and its disruption served to undermine theatrical conventions. Claiming that the whole production ‘was conceived [of] as an experiment’, Fischer-Lichte states that the emphasis was for ‘the performer’s body’ to take prominence, instead of the ‘dominance of language, so typical of Western culture since the

¹⁷⁰ Erika Fischer-Lichte, ‘From Theatre to Theatricality: How to Construct Reality’, *Theatre Research International*, 20.2 (1995), 97–105 (p. 99).

¹⁷¹ The ‘spatial devices’ drew spectators and performers into physical proximity, but were generally in the service of entertaining audiences by enveloping them within the representational structures of the narrative, or of reinforcing social status wherein the attendance (or not) of wealthy patrons could be observed at playhouses.

¹⁷² Fischer-Lichte, p. 99.

¹⁷³ Fischer-Lichte, p. 98. For Fischer-Lichte, this bridge was reminiscent of the *hanamichi* from the Kabuki tradition, and emblematic of the avant-garde resistance to stable western dramatic traditions.

Renaissance'.¹⁷⁴ Destabilising the authority of language and foregrounding bodily gesture meant that in the production, according to Fischer-Lichte, '[w]ords appear as turbulences that do not lead to the perception or interpretation of reality but, instead, to a complete void'.¹⁷⁵ Combined with the dissolution of the auditorium-stage divide, Reinhardt's production subverted the relatively recent but widely adopted staging practices of darkened auditoria, wherein audiences were accustomed to stable representations of recognisable realities neatly framed within a proscenium arch and illuminated by artificial light. In short, such work was the antithesis of naturalism's consolidation of the status quo.

The dominance of naturalism (and later realism) at the beginning of the twentieth century, and its aesthetic propensity for finely-tuned, scientifically observed representations of reality, established a challenging landscape for the burgeoning documentary theatre. Despite its initial roots in the avant-garde, Piscator attacked naturalism as 'not revolutionary, not Marxist', and asserted that it 'never got past stating the problem'.¹⁷⁶ Its dominance made naturalism an emblematic cipher of the political power that coursed through the veins of the ruling classes in capitalist European nations, particularly for practitioners who sought to challenge the status quo. Karl Marx excavated what he called the 'complete mystification of the capitalist mode of production' in an attempt to reveal its systemic subjugation of the proletariat in

¹⁷⁴ Fischer-Lichte, pp. 97–98.

¹⁷⁵ Fischer-Lichte, p. 98.

¹⁷⁶ Erwin Piscator, *The Political Theatre*, trans. by Hugh Rorrison (London: Eyre Methuen Ltd, 1980), p. 33.

reality.¹⁷⁷ For David Goldway, this mystification is ‘a vast and elaborate network of appearances, every one of which in some way or other hides the true nature of the social process which is its essence’.¹⁷⁸ In a theatrical extension of this political critique, Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner argue that ‘the irony of naturalism’s putatively empirical mode is that naturalism is itself an aesthetic strategy’.¹⁷⁹ In this sense, naturalism is guilty of an ideological and practical blindness towards its own theatricality, and as such, the supposed objectivity of the form is negated by the complicity of its operations at the level of systemic repetition. I contend that, against this, an awareness of theatricality and a heightened execution of it, as demonstrated by Reinhardt, was a political strategy.

Reinhardt’s dissolution of the stage-auditorium divide, and his foregrounding of the corporeal nature of the body and gesture, act as external manifestations of internal perceptions and psychologies. While other avant-garde movements such as expressionism and symbolism also traverse these aesthetic concerns, Reinhardt’s engagement with them is part of a process of ‘retheatricalization’, according to Fischer-Lichte.¹⁸⁰ In this process, as Fischer-Lichte states, ‘the subjective conditions of perception and cognition’ are foregrounded after the relegation of language because ‘[b]y restructuring the semiotic systems [...] it [is] possible for each spectator to

¹⁷⁷ Karl Marx, in, David Goldway, ‘Appearance and Reality in Marx’s Capital’, *Science and Society*, 31.4 (1967), 428–47 (p. 442).

¹⁷⁸ Goldway, p. 442.

¹⁷⁹ Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner, ‘Introduction: Modernism and Anti-Theatricality’, in *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*, ed. by Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 1–17 (p. 5).

¹⁸⁰ Fischer-Lichte, p. 103.

perceive the presented material independently and to generate meaning accordingly'.¹⁸¹

The aim, for Reinhardt, was to activate the critical gaze of the spectator, but without necessarily directing that gaze in a didactic manner. That critical gaze was instead encouraged to flex as required by different productions and in response to different circumstances.

Taking these strands of Reinhardt's work together, in relation to the burgeoning beginnings of the documentary tradition, there already appears to be a broad spectrum of practices and approaches able to facilitate an unveiling of realities that are considered to be either systemically suppressed, individually perceived, or both. The dramaturgical strategy to dissolve the separation of the stage and auditorium was one of Reinhardt's 'radical innovation[s]', which encouraged audiences to engage not only with the content of theatrical performance, but with the world beyond the theatre.¹⁸² In this pursuit, the ossified framing of the proscenium arch and the darkened environs of auditoria were being undone, as the activation of differing interpretations of artistic representations of the real, and art in general, encouraged politically vital rejoinders to the dominance of naturalism.

Cumulatively, Reinhardt's experimentation in the pursuit of unique atmospheres for each production attempts to re-situate theatre in relation to everyday life via a rejection of proscenium framing which 'separates the stage from the world'.¹⁸³ According to Esslin, Reinhardt welcomed anything which 'strengthens and widens the effect' of the

¹⁸¹ Fischer-Lichte, p. 103.

¹⁸² Fischer-Lichte, p. 99.

¹⁸³ Esslin, p. 10.

theatre and which ‘increases contact with the audience’.¹⁸⁴ For Fischer-Lichte, this was accomplished as Reinhardt employed practices that ‘opened up new theatrical spaces’, not simply in the expansion of the physical stage area, but also in a broader sense by encouraging new perceptions and scrutiny of institutional, state, and artistic representations of reality.¹⁸⁵ Following Aronson, I agree that Reinhardt’s theatricality can be viewed as allied with avant-garde practices that ideologically confront illusory forms of representation, where the status-quo is reinforced through replication. From such a perspective, Reinhardt’s dissolution of the stage-auditorium divide was part of a rejuvenation of contemporaneous theatre, which laid a foundation for Piscator’s attempts to integrate an audiences’ reality into performance as part of his politically charged praxis.

Contextualising Erwin Piscator

Piscator’s position as the father of the documentary theatre is well established. As Carol Martin asserts, ‘contemporary theatre that stages events occurring in the real world has antecedents in the 1920s epic theatre of Erwin Piscator’.¹⁸⁶ Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford assert that Piscator forms part of the ‘first wave’ of what they define as ‘socially useful art and cultures of authenticity’, via his employment of ‘non-professional performers’ as part of the contemporaneous ‘surge in European political and documentary theatre in the early-twentieth century’.¹⁸⁷ In this regard, so Martin

¹⁸⁴ Esslin, p. 10.

¹⁸⁵ Fischer-Lichte, p. 100.

¹⁸⁶ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 15.

¹⁸⁷ Ulrike Garde and Meg Mumford, *Theatre of Real People* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), p. 25.

states, it is ‘Piscator’s use of new technology to make a socially engaged theatre [which means he] stands at the beginning’.¹⁸⁸

Although I argue on behalf of Reinhardt’s influence, it is not surprising that Piscator attempts to establish the distinctiveness of his own oeuvre. It is the work of scholars to ruminate on such convergences between practitioners, and although they are undoubtedly different, I contend that by Piscator’s own admission he inadvertently avows a certain debt to Reinhardt:

[Reinhardt] probably sensed that the masses had to be reached – but [... a]ll Reinhardt did was inflate the form. Actual involvement of the masses was not a conscious part of his program, and never amounted to more than a few ingenious touches from the director.¹⁸⁹

While this statement exudes a condescension of the “old ways” and a self-confidence in the progressive superiority of the “new”, it also alludes to the temporal political significances – the circumstances – within which Piscator was attempting to establish himself in German theatre, where art was seen as a way to mobilise the ‘masses’ and effect change in the post-war era.

In the shadow of the First World War (of which Piscator was a veteran), and amid the upheaval, growth, and establishment of the Weimar Republic in the 1920s, Innes states that German theatre ‘was characterised by a more radical experimentation, which questioned the premises of drama as well as the nature of society in search for a valid relationship between art and the modern environment’.¹⁹⁰ In the early-twentieth century, such experimentation was also responding to what Filewod calls the ‘narrative of

¹⁸⁸ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 16.

¹⁸⁹ Piscator, pp. 94–95.

¹⁹⁰ Innes, *Erwin Piscator’s Political Theatre*, p. 12.

industrial modernity', where increasingly solidified disparities in wealth, education, and life expectancy cemented the inequality between the proletariat and those who held capital and power.¹⁹¹ Günter Berghaus offers a detailed narrative of this 'period of great upheaval in the political world and of tumultuous changes in the social and economic fields' across the course of "the long nineteenth century" – from the French Revolution of 1789 to the First World War.¹⁹²

For Berghaus, literary and artistic experimentation was responding to swift advances in industrialisation that altered the lived reality for citizens of many European nations caught in a period of 'vast demographic change'; the urban epicentres of these changes became what Berghaus calls 'a new phenomenon: the Big City'.¹⁹³ These new centres of population density reinforced social conditions on a grand scale, solidifying the bourgeoisie as 'the dominant force' in a continental societal shift from a 'feudal economy into a capitalist system of production'.¹⁹⁴ In a foreword to the 1963 edition of his monograph *The Political Theatre* (1980), Piscator confirms that the period following the First World War was 'a time when there was the greatest unrest in all spheres of life'.¹⁹⁵ As such, these circumstances of necessity have an importance within Piscator's practice and, by association, within the documentary tradition, because they demonstrate why Piscator sought to distance his practice from Reinhardt's, and why Piscator wanted to politically distinguish himself from the old order.

¹⁹¹ Filewod, p. 64. Important challenges to such calcified social conditions were evident in moments of political instability, not least due to the 1905 and 1917 revolutions in Russia.

¹⁹² Günter Berghaus, *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-Garde* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 3.

¹⁹³ Berghaus, p. 4.

¹⁹⁴ Berghaus, p. 3.

¹⁹⁵ Piscator, p. v.

In the context of the age of the ‘Big City’, the Marxist *raison d’être* was not to pine for a lost rural idyll, but to highlight the stark inequalities present in the cheek by jowl conditions of these newly engorged urban centres of production. These contemporaneous social conditions were explored in Piscator’s premiere production for the newly opened Berlin Proletarisches Theater in October 1920. According to Rorrison, this production – which was comprised of three short plays, the first of which being *The Cripple (Der Krüppel)* – ‘demonstrated that the limbless veterans who begged daily in Berlin were the discarded victims of capitalist exploitation’.¹⁹⁶ Piscator laid bare his anger at the new social conditions in the programme notes:

The capitalists’ war for which the proletariat has worked and is still working has destroyed millions and left millions begging on the streets. Who helps them? The middle class perhaps, flippant, nasty, oozing charity, each according to type, who walk past these cripples on the other side of the pavement, salving their conscience with remarks about do-nothing rabble, and calling upon the State to remove these offenses to public decency from the streets?¹⁹⁷

The inference common to Piscator’s rhetorical questions – which resonate still in the twenty-first century – is that individuals drained of their usefulness within the capitalist system should expect no help from those in power. Instead, the working classes, whether employed or not, must unite: ‘[t]o you, the workers, we say: Solidarity with your unemployed comrades’.¹⁹⁸ Such words were a rejection of social hierarchy and of the atomisation of the working classes. Piscator’s written note to audiences was attempting to reveal an uncomfortable reality – that metanarratives of class and status are all too often the criteria against which a life is judged as either “successful” or not. Expressions of such underpinning principles and the attempt to reveal, in a Marxist

¹⁹⁶ Rorrison in, Piscator, p. 38.

¹⁹⁷ Piscator, p. 44.

¹⁹⁸ Piscator, p. 44.

sense, the truth of the capitalist dominated reality, were not confined to programme notes for Piscator, but influenced which plays he produced and how he staged them. Piscator's overriding call to action was against the exploitation of individuals in the name of profit and power.

Innes states that, in relation to other practitioners of this time, Piscator's distinctive qualities were evidenced by a broad approach encompassing new writers, the composition of his own works, and the extensive re-drafting of classical texts.¹⁹⁹ In these pursuits, Piscator sought new forms of performance that were appropriate to each play and to the circumstances of its production. In this way, as Innes claims, it is possible to read 'a guideline to the development of German drama' through Piscator's career, but equally, says Innes, his productions raise significant questions around 'the use of evidence (Documentary Theatre) as against imagination'.²⁰⁰

Piscator and the Documentary Theatre

Piscator made his own assertion about the origins of the documentary mode, when he claimed that his 1925 production *In Spite of Everything* was the first 'in which the text and the staging were based solely on political documents'.²⁰¹ *In Spite of Everything* was a cacophony of socio-political events, staged using different kinds of mediums, to broadly surmise the continuation of the social revolution in Germany, in spite of the fact that leading figures in the Communist movement (Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg) were assassinated in 1919:

¹⁹⁹ Innes, *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre*, p. 68.

²⁰⁰ Innes, *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre*, p. 8.

²⁰¹ Piscator, p. 91.

The whole performance was a montage of authentic speeches, essays, newspaper cuttings, appeals, pamphlets, photographs, and film of the War and the Revolution, of historical persons and scenes. And all this was in the Grosses Schauspielhaus that Max Reinhardt had once used to stage classical (bourgeois) theater.²⁰²

Youker claims that the range of material in Piscator's 'historical pageant' was reminiscent of similar Russian works staged by the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) in the 1920s.²⁰³ However, Piscator states that *In Spite of Everything* was actually a streamlining of an earlier project which sought to chart the 'revolutionary highlights of the history of mankind' from Spartacus to the Russian Revolution.²⁰⁴ The final version focused on the German proletariat drive to form a new social order in the ruins of the First World War.

Through his instigation of documentary practices in the depiction and retelling of events which were part of the lived experience of its audiences, *In Spite of Everything* was a significant example of how Piscator attempted to improve upon Reinhardt's 'inflation' of the theatre. The documentary practices of *In Spite of Everything* centred on an interruption of the real into the theatrical – or what Piscator termed the confrontation 'with the absolute reality we knew from experience'; for Piscator, this 'absolute reality' was always already a 'political reality ("political" in the original sense: "being of general concern")'.²⁰⁵ One example of this interruption was Piscator's use of projected film on stage – a practice that he previously conceived of within an earlier production

²⁰² Piscator, p. 94.

²⁰³ Youker, p. 96. This claim is contextualised by virtue of the fact that Piscator's production at the 3,500-seat Grosses Schauspielhaus in July 1925 was performed for a national KPD meeting.

²⁰⁴ Piscator, p. 91.

²⁰⁵ Piscator, p. 96.

Flags (1924), but he had not implemented until *In Spite of Everything*; this new practice, however, garnered mixed responses.

In his essay ‘The Documentary Play’, Piscator dismissed a tendency by critics to focus on his deployment of ‘apparently contrasting art forms’ via the live and the recorded, and instead he highlighted what he thought was being overshadowed.²⁰⁶ This was politically vital for Piscator because, drawing on his Marxist ideology, if the technological aspects of his work became focal, then the potential of what his work might reveal would be obscured. Piscator goes to some length to clarify this, by arguing that this critical reductionism diminishes its ability to challenge the status quo:

[T]his was no superficial game with technical effects, but a new, emergent form of theatre based on the philosophy of historical materialism [... W]hat do I consider the essential point of my whole work? Not the propagation of a view of life through formal clichés and billboard slogans, but the presentation of solid proof that our philosophy and all that can be deduced from it is the one and only valid approach for our time. You can make all sorts of assertions, but repeating assertions does not make them more true or effective. Conclusive proof can be based only on scientific analysis of the material. This I can only do, in the language of the stage, if I get beyond scenes from life, beyond the purely individual aspect of characters and the fortuitous nature of their fates. And the way to do this is to show the link between events on the stage and the great forces active in history. It is not by chance that factual substance becomes the main thing in each play. It is only from the facts themselves that the constraints and the constant mechanisms of life emerge, giving a deeper meaning to our private fates. For this I need some means of showing how human-superhuman factors interact with classes or individuals. One of the means was film. But it was no more than a means, and could be replaced tomorrow by some better means.²⁰⁷

In this instance, the projection of film in Piscator’s work – as part of an interruption of the real in performance – is a documentary practice which establishes from the outset of the documentary tradition that the deployment of such practices – or ‘means’ – must be

²⁰⁶ Piscator, p. 93.

²⁰⁷ Piscator, pp. 93–94.

appropriate. That is to say that, in this example, film is one aspect of the dramaturgical canvas which Piscator constructs in response to particular circumstances of necessity; in other words, a ‘valid approach’ for the time. Any value in the relative newness of film, or a formalist preoccupation with its ability to capture images of real life, was not significant for Piscator. While he implies that critics were beguiled by this new technology, his concern was with what value he could extract from it to show ‘how human-superhuman factors interact with classes or individuals’. The place of such technological spectacle, alongside ‘speeches, essays, newspaper cuttings, appeals, pamphlets, photographs’, created a multifarious tapestry of staged media that demonstrated how such different source materials aided Piscator’s confrontation with the ‘absolute reality’ that is known from experience.

For Piscator, therefore, the significance of the source materials – documents, images, or films – is not granted automatically due to their simulacrum value; as he states, film could easily be usurped by ‘better means’. The value Piscator distinguishes is, in the words of Reinelt, ‘not in the object but in the relationship’ between source materials and their integration into a theatrical context – that is, their deployment as a documentary practice.²⁰⁸

In spite of the critics’ misplaced focus, Piscator contended that the materials he mobilised from reality could still generate ‘the same moments of tension and dramatic climaxes as literary drama’.²⁰⁹ Youker describes the imbrication of documentary materials in Piscator’s work as moments of ‘recognition’, which are ‘simultaneously an

²⁰⁸ Reinelt, p. 7.

²⁰⁹ Piscator, p. 96.

intellectual act of apprehension facilitated by scientific presentation of facts and an overpowering upwelling of affect stimulated by artistic form'.²¹⁰ The significance of these source materials, for Piscator, concerns the ideological intervention that images and words from reality make when placed on the stage, particularly as part of the metaphysical dissolution of the stage and auditorium that he encouraged. This dissolution of the stage and auditorium is both an ideological and practical convergence between the theatres of Reinhart and Piscator, facilitated by the malleability of the documentary practices, which alludes to a closer alignment between the stage world and the real world.

Despite Piscator's openness to finding 'better means' when required, the technical innovations he incorporated continued to burden his reputation. As Innes writes, 'critical reaction [...] ignored Piscator's intentions, concentrating instead on the most blatant elements of the production'.²¹¹ This led to a preordained critical impression that in Piscator's theatre, technology was an objective authority detached from human bias. As Paul Kornfeld wrote in a review of *The Merchant of Berlin* (1929), singled out by Innes, '[t]he application [of machinery] is taken for objectivity ... and has been exaggerated into such a cult that it has been transformed into a romanticization of objectivity'.²¹² Kornfeld suggests that Piscator was only showing reality through a 'cult' of technological repetition, and that through such repetition he offered no examination of reality. This critique echoes Piscator's own assertion that the naturalist

²¹⁰ Youker, p. 99.

²¹¹ Innes, *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre*, p. 72.

²¹² Paul Kornfeld, in, Innes, *Erwin Piscator's Political Theatre*, p. 72. Edits as per original, with the exception of my alteration to the opening word.

mode never got beyond ‘stating the problem’, and therein, sentiments such as Kornfeld’s are anathema to Piscator’s framing of his own work.

Ironically, such critical reifications of Piscator’s work are in the service of the ‘technical sensationalism’ that saddled Piscator’s legacy, because such criticism did not examine *how* Piscator was attempting to represent the real.²¹³ This is to say, the burdening of Piscator’s work with such preconceptions meant that critics such as Kornfeld were inadvertently blinded by the spectacle of technology to the different mobilisations of content that Piscator experimented with in each production. As such, the social reality Piscator intended to reveal through his work was stifled due to the perception that his integration of technological elements was an over-reliance on the (presumed) objectivity of machinery as a demonstrative mode of representation. In the face of this critical misapprehension, a Reinhardt-esque desire for unique atmospheres still resonated through Piscator’s approach. Innes claims that Piscator’s intention was that the ‘style’ of each production should ‘vary’, because the ‘grouping and deployment of facts [...] changed with every play’.²¹⁴ However, Innes concludes that the predominance of technological commentary in critical responses meant that ‘[t]he same qualities that made Piscator’s work potentially productive [...] ruled out critical approval for his actual achievements’.²¹⁵

Cumulatively, the critical interpretation of what they saw as Piscator’s reliance on technology as an objective communicator of reality, propped up the entrenched positions of the naturalist and realist forms as the dominant theatrical representations of

²¹³ Innes, *Erwin Piscator’s Political Theatre*, p. 72.

²¹⁴ Innes, *Erwin Piscator’s Political Theatre*, p. 73.

²¹⁵ Innes, *Erwin Piscator’s Political Theatre*, p. 73.

“truth” and “reality”. Rather than an appeal to spectacle, Piscator’s attempt to bring reality onto the stage was to create a ‘montage of authentic’ elements deployed judiciously as a ‘valid approach’ to both the context and subject matter. Innes writes that the increasing importance of the ‘newspaper world’ had a significant part in this approach:

The actual intention of the machinery was to expand the limits of the stage, to bring the street into the theatre and to link drama with the momentary and real events of the newspaper-world. Its purpose was to reveal the broad patterns of history while documenting the action with details, in order to give an objective correlative to the mechanical complexity and technical refinements of the age while at the same time making the fullest use of spatial movement.²¹⁶

The macro and micro considerations that Innes puts forward here speak to the importance of newspapers at this moment in history as a bridge between expansive social and political narratives, and the quotidian reality of the masses. Piscator’s 1929 production of Walter Mehring’s *The Merchant of Berlin* is an example of his appreciation of the influence of newspapers.

Although the production was burdened by ‘over-complex stage machinery’ according to Innes,²¹⁷ a vivid review by Bernhard Diebold describes the fundamental elements of its staging: ‘[C]ontemporary news headlines are thrown by the film onto the familiar gauze-wall ... the historical moments ... the incredible slums, marks numbered in billions, flicker like a blizzard over the “fourth wall”’.²¹⁸ While describing richly the stage image, Diebold also aptly summarises the intent behind Piscator’s foregrounding

²¹⁶ Innes, *Erwin Piscator’s Political Theatre*, p. 72.

²¹⁷ Innes, *Erwin Piscator’s Political Theatre*, p. 222.

²¹⁸ Bernhard Diebold, in, Innes, *Erwin Piscator’s Political Theatre*, p. 72. Edits as per original.

of the newspaper headlines – ‘[t]he newspaper is the chronicle of the present instant’.²¹⁹ This summary points to a dual purpose of reporting and recording reality, which are two aspects the documentary theatre can achieve, firstly through an historical contextualisation of events, and secondly via a retelling of events.

Piscator’s combination of filmic interventions on stage with the projection of imagery and newsprint-like text, combines documentary practices that imbricate both the notional real and the reporting of reality within the theatrical frame. In an act of ontological introspection, Piscator’s vision for an imbrication of the film and the newspaper world into the theatre cements an enduring concern of the documentary tradition with modes of communication. The living newspaper form took forward this introspection by exploring how the mobilisation of documentary practices in performance serves not simply to communicate an occurrence, but to underline its urgency in relation to wider social and political contexts.

Consolidating Variation and the Living Newspaper

The living newspaper is a form of documentary theatre that focuses on pertinent issues of a specific locality, predominantly for audiences familiar with, and often embroiled within, the subject matter. In this way, the living newspaper is one of the earliest documentary theatre forms that, on occasion, “speaks back” directly to the communities that help generate the content.²²⁰

²¹⁹ Diebold, in, Innes, *Erwin Piscator’s Political Theatre*, p. 72.

²²⁰ Speaking back to communities that helped shape documentary theatre performances is a trait now commonly associated with verbatim theatre. See Derek Paget, “‘Verbatim Theatre’: Oral History and Documentary Techniques’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 3.12 (1987), 317–36 (p. 317).

Living newspapers typically employ a range of dramaturgical styles, from short scenes, duologues, and direct address, to songs, film, and mime. According to Stuart Cosgrove, this varied dramaturgical composition enables living newspaper practitioners ‘to respond to the constant flow of information and propaganda’, particularly in the early-twentieth century during an increase in newspaper dissemination and newsreel services such as British Pathé.²²¹ Cosgrove claims that, due to its innate ability to shift in response to contemporaneous circumstances and to adapt the news of the day into a kind of theatrical review, the living newspaper was a responsive form that ‘had to be flexible in ways that the conventional play could not’.²²² Therein, the malleability of the living newspaper’s practices were necessary not only for the viability of the form but also for its political and social efficacy within differing circumstances of necessity. The combination of these aspects make the living newspaper form an important example for this discussion, and one which traverses different geographies.

Originating during the Bolshevik revolution of Russia in 1917, the living newspaper spread through Europe and to the US where it came to prominence in the 1930s, chiefly through its adoption by the Federal Theatre Project (FTP, 1935–1939). Focusing on the living newspaper’s growth from Eastern Europe, John W. Casson highlights that early iterations of the form stemmed from futurist ideology, and then developed through the experimentation of theatre troupes in the Soviet Union and other locations such as

²²¹ Stuart Cosgrove, ‘Introduction’, in *Liberty Deferred and Other Living Newspapers of the 1930s*, ed. by Lorraine Brown (London: George Mason University Press, 1989), pp. ix–xxv (p. ix).

²²² Cosgrove, ‘Introduction’, p. ix.

Vienna.²²³ The varied articulations of living newspaper in these different locales produced diverse examples, some of which integrated spectacular acrobatic displays, while others pursued a more didactic approach in the education of illiterate audiences about specific skills that would be useful to their communities, from disease prevention to poultry breeding.²²⁴ The Russian Blue Blouse Theatre Group is one such early example of how living newspapers attended to the circumstances of necessity in their social and political environments.

As their name suggests, the Blue Blouse Group's costumes were an indication of the troupe's attempt to embody the everyday realities and struggles of their patrons in performance. That is to say, in an effort to show 'solidarity with the factory workers who wore loose blue smocks', the performers wore the same.²²⁵ This simple tactic of aligning the performers with their predominantly working class audiences was emblematic of the political potential of this documentary theatre form to gather large groups of people to its different causes. This alignment was intensified when iterations of the living newspaper contrasted commercial newspaper reports of strike action with responses from workers' unions. Through such tactics, the 'theatrical bulletin' of the living newspaper offered a counter-argument to the auspices of state sanctioned news and propaganda.²²⁶ As John McGrath summarises, the work by the Blue Blouse Theatre

²²³ John W Casson, 'Living Newspaper: Theatre and Therapy', *The Drama Review* (MIT Press, 2000), 107–22 (p. 107).

²²⁴ Casson, p. 109.

²²⁵ Casson, p. 108.

²²⁶ Stuart Cosgrove, 'The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form' (University of Hull, 1982), p. v.

Group ‘specialised in attacks on the stupidity and dangerous nature of Soviet bureaucracy’, and through this demonstrated its political underpinnings.²²⁷

Like Piscator, iterations of the living newspaper also embarked on an unmasking of state-sanctioned propaganda, but it did so at a predominantly local level. The form is distinguished by its singular, issue-focused productions that reflected the specificity of its often regional subject matter. This foreshadowed later examples of documentary theatre such as Peter Cheeseman’s work at Stoke-on-Trent’s Victoria theatre, and it resonates with Filewod’s assertion that ‘the local and obscure may be more historically typical’, and thereby enlightening both at the time and in revisiting, than the ‘metropolitan and canonical’.²²⁸ The capacity to be both a canonical iteration of documentary theatre and loaded with the specificity of its singular local issues, makes the living newspaper a vital component of the documentary tradition because it concerns both micro and macro aspects of that history.

In 1938, Arthur Arent – who wrote and directed numerous living newspaper productions depicting the struggles of US farm workers amid the Great Depression – suggested that such specificity was a fundamental facet of the living newspaper’s engagement with audiences:

The Living Newspaper is a dramatisation [sic] of a problem – composed in greater or lesser extent of many news events, all bearing on the one subject and interlarded with typical but non-factual representations of the effect of these news events on the people to whom the problem is of great importance.²²⁹

²²⁷ John McGrath, *A Good Night Out* (London: Methuan , 1981), p. 27.

²²⁸ Filewod, p. 62.

²²⁹ Arthur Arent, in, Cosgrove, ‘Introduction’, p. ix. In my writing, I have chosen not to capitalise the opening letters of “living newspaper” as Arent and others such as Cosgrove do, in much the same way as I do not capitalise other forms of documentary theatre, such as tribunal, verbatim, or autobiography.

Arent's summary describes how the living newspaper form takes a consistent dramaturgical approach to divergent subject matter. To be specific and effective in this broadly similar approach, the documentary practices must be malleable in order to be appropriated for each new 'problem'. However, the specificity and efficacy of each production are not to be found in the retelling of the 'problem', but in the 'representations of the effect' on the 'people to whom the problem is of great importance'. As such, the mobilisation of 'non-factual representations' is not a watering down of the potential for the form to provoke spectators to action or change. Instead, such non-factual aspects demonstrate the ability of the form to challenge audiences to consider what might happen if the problem is not remedied. Therein, such iterations of the living newspaper demonstrate the productive complexity that is generated when documentary practices move beyond a retelling of that which is known or able to be demonstrated, to combine with non-factual aspects as part of the 'process' of documentary; as Reinelt states, documentary 'is a way of knowing' that is 'produced in the interactions between the document, the artist and the spectator', rather than a stable product.²³⁰

In clarifying the intrinsically local and specific efficacy of the living newspaper, Arent also alludes to the episodic structure of the form. Such structures follow on from the epic tradition instigated by Piscator and reject traditional linear structures of dramatic narratives. Although such techniques were canonically enshrined via the work of Brecht, at this particular moment in history this dramaturgical approach was also allied to the experimental performance practices of the avant-garde. Cosgrove confirms this

²³⁰ Reinelt, p. 23.

when he states that the living newspaper assumed the ‘characteristics of revolutionary performance’ in both its dramaturgy and its politics.²³¹ As he goes on to highlight, it was the ‘flexibility and contemporaneity that distinguished the Living Newspaper from more traditional dramatic forms’ and allowed it to fluidly respond to its subject matter.²³² Extending this, Raphael Samuel argues that living newspapers should also be distinguished from the agit-prop performances of Piscator and the Workers Theatre Movement (WTM) which flourished in the UK in the late 1920s, in order to preserve the singularity of the living newspaper form. According to Samuel, the WTM ‘was devoted to agitation and propaganda, especially the first, rather than to “social significance”’ which he suggests was the primary focus of living newspaper practitioners. Indeed, for Samuel, ‘social significance’ was the ‘watchword’ of the British company Unity Theatre, who extensively utilised the living newspaper form.²³³

‘Documentary Interest’ and ‘Theatrical Effect’

Despite this progressive maxim of social significance, the living newspapers garnered consternation from critics. In an opposite sense to the criticism levelled at Piscator, where it was suggested his technically advanced aesthetic bombarded the theatrical event with pure spectacle, some critics argued that the investigative quality of the living newspaper was bereft of theatrical interest in its entirety.²³⁴ For example, Derek Verschoye’s review of Unity Theatre’s *Busmen* (1938) asserted that the highly specialised nature of the play’s subject matter meant that it was ‘doomed by its theme to

²³¹ Cosgrove, ‘The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form’, p. iv.

²³² Cosgrove, ‘The Living Newspaper: History, Production and Form’, p. iv.

²³³ Raphael Samuel, Ewan MacColl, and Stuart Cosgrove, *Theatres of the Left 1880-1935: Worker’s Theatre Movements in Britain and America* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. ix.

²³⁴ Cosgrove, ‘Introduction’, p. ix.

end in an anti-climax; much of its material has much documentary interest but little theatrical effect'.²³⁵

Verschoye's separation of 'documentary interest' and 'theatrical effect' suggests that the former diminishes the latter. This binary distinction is levelled also at subsequent documentary theatre forms – not least at forms which invoke verisimilitude as an indication of the elevated "truth" of their content, such as tribunal theatre. As Aoife Monks demonstrates, it is a 'recurring critique' that documentary theatre and tribunal plays in particular suffer from accusations of being 'anti-theatrical', being 'profoundly un-theatrical', and on occasion being 'far-from compelling'.²³⁶ Such criticism can undermine the broader political value of documentary theatre because it focuses attention on presentation over the subject matter, as opposed to exploring ways in which the 'un-theatrical' might be an aesthetic choice, not a necessary evil. As such, Verschoye's critique of *Busmen* betrays his allegiance to the status quo, because he cannot appreciate the efficacy of how the production represented the 'effect' of the 'problem' on the people 'to whom the problem is of great importance', as Arthur Arent termed it. Through casting members of the bus-drivers' union to perform in *Busmen*, for example, Unity Theatre created a platform to educate spectators and to demonstrate solidarity with the bus-drivers' and other workers' movements. Through this, the righteous nature of the strike action was embodied and endorsed by such activities within the local community. In the furtherance of understanding this difference between

²³⁵ Derek Verschoye, 'The Theatre: "Busmen": Living Newspaper No. 1. "The Case of the Baffled Boss." At the Unity Theatre Club, Goldington Street, N.W 1.', *The Spectator* (London, 1938).

²³⁶ Aoife Monks, 'This Painful Chapter: Performing the Law in Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 23.3 (2013), 345–56 (p. 347).

‘documentary interest’ and ‘theatrical effect’, or source materials and their theatrical presentation, I return to Reinelt’s ontological distinction.

Reinelt asserts that ‘[t]he value of the document is predicated on a realist epistemology, but the experience of documentary is dependent on phenomenological engagement’.²³⁷

For Reinelt, source materials and their theatrical presentation are not two opposites but rather complementary elements of documentary’s paradigmatic logic of presentation and consciousness raising, in contrast to that of dramatic representation and illusion.

That is to say, as Reinelt notes, that spectators ‘come to a theatrical event believing that certain aspects of the performance are directly linked to the reality they are trying to experience or understand’, and although ‘this does not mean they expect unmediated access to the truth’, it does suggest that ‘the documents have something significant to offer’.²³⁸ As such, Reinelt concurs with Stella Bruzzi’s claim that ‘documentary is a negotiation between reality’ and the ‘image’ of that reality produced on stage (or in film as is Bruzzi’s specialism).²³⁹ Therein, the notion that the reality (the source material) is being objectively reproduced is not foremost in the work, but neither is the requirement to provide ‘theatrical interest’ in its staging in order to seduce the audience through spectacle.

Instead, and significantly so for the amateur, mobile, and frugal nature of the living newspaper, Bruzzi’s assertion that all ‘[d]ocumentary is predicated upon a dialectical relationship between aspiration and potential’ holds weight.²⁴⁰ By focusing on issues

²³⁷ Reinelt, p. 7.

²³⁸ Reinelt, p. 9.

²³⁹ Stella Bruzzi, *New Documentary*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 6.

²⁴⁰ Bruzzi, p. 6.

ranging from hunger marches to unemployed worker demonstrations, living newspaper performances demonstrated both the aspiration and potential to become a site of community action wherein these marginalised stories could be voiced. Colin Chambers asserts that, in Britain particularly, the living newspaper and other forms of documentary theatre ‘appealed as a counter to both the limited nature of and the control exercised over information at the time’, and as such they were ‘regarded as a means to attract a wider audience’.²⁴¹ This was reflected in the groups of workers, women, and the impoverished that gravitated towards the living newspaper form. In light of this, the practices adopted by living newspapers contrasted with the dominant theatre trends of the time, searching instead for new idioms of expression that might register with this disenfranchised spectatorship. One specific practice through which the living newspaper acted as a dramaturgical agitator against the ‘control exercised’ by authorities over information and forms of representation, was the ability to perform versions of real people without fear of legal repercussions at a time when this activity was prohibited.

In a specifically British context, ‘the prohibition on representing public personalities on stage’ was enshrined in theatre censorship laws (until their revocation in 1968) and, therefore, professional theatre companies were bound by it.²⁴² A legal loophole afforded amateur theatre troupes the ability ‘to bypass the prohibition’ and to stage alternative forms of information dissemination, as part of what Samuel identified as their ‘social significance’.²⁴³ This means that the ability of amateur groups to depict real people was

²⁴¹ Colin Chambers, ‘History in the Driving Seat: Unity Theatre and the Embrace of the “Real”’, in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, ed. by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 38–54 (p. 40).

²⁴² Chambers, p. 40.

²⁴³ Chambers, p. 40.

not a privilege willingly granted to such troupes, but rather an indirect reflection of the lack of attention paid to club theatres under the assumption that their level of dramatic scrutiny offered little threat to the real individuals whom they may depict, or to institutions associated with those individuals.²⁴⁴

Although this prohibition was ‘inimical to documentary-based drama’, as Chambers asserts, by depicting real people on stage at a time when such an act was illegal for professional theatres, the living newspaper increased its reputation as an anti-establishment art form.²⁴⁵ Through such actions, the living newspaper hardened a class tension between traditional forms of theatre that propped up the status-quo, and more radical, politically agitating performances to which these early iterations of the documentary canon cohered. Indeed, Chambers argues that, rather than the realist dramatic fodder of the ‘disaffected bourgeoisie’ whose theatrical experiments reproduced hierarchical norms, the living newspaper engaged audiences with its subject matter by ‘interpreting (rather than simply reflecting)’ the issues at stake.²⁴⁶ The showing of real people on stage, and the ‘interpreting’ of them for a production’s political ends, underlined the radical poise of living newspaper productions and highlighted how lawmakers’ assumptions of such amateur groups belied the potency of the work they produced, their proficiency at shifting to incorporate practices that enacted their convictions, and their confronting of authority.

²⁴⁴ The suffix “club” in a theatre troupe’s name denoted a number of factors. Commonly it identified their amateur status, but it also served to reference a fixed premises from which such companies performed, such as a social club, and it alluded to the notion that the productions were intended for a certain “club” or group of people.

²⁴⁵ Chambers, p. 40.

²⁴⁶ Chambers, p. 39.

Cumulatively, the living newspaper aspired through its form and content to unsettle social conditions and to educate its audiences. It sought practical allegiance, direct connection, and cohesion within local communities, and through doing this it solidified what Filewod termed the ‘local and obscure’ in the documentary canon. The sense of direct connection with audiences, such as when Unity Theatre cast local bus drivers in *Busmen*, was arguably more significant than associations based on narrative and costume, as per the Blue Blouse Theatre. This pithy distinction is not to undermine the significance of the Blue Blouse Theatre, but it highlights an important development in documentary theatre that was inaugurated through the development of the living newspaper form – productions began to be done in co-operation with communities, as opposed to simply for communities. As such, the living newspapers’ affinity to local narratives and the specificity of temporal circumstances was a democratisation of the ability to present alternative narratives. Through this format and its social-activist politic, proletariat concerns were able to be voiced as part of a wider leftist taxonomy of theatres because, according to Samuel, ‘as the most public of the arts, [theatre] is second cousin to politics’.²⁴⁷

Therein, the living newspaper’s documentary practices of presenting local events through interpreted reportage, non-factual hypotheses on the effects of issues, the casting of local individuals who were non-actors, and the subversive depicting of real people, are all attempts at consciousness raising. In order to inspire social and political motivation in its audiences and to create change, the living newspaper not only had to present real events, issues, and information that mainstream theatres did not, but it had

²⁴⁷ Samuel, MacColl, and Cosgrove, p. xiii.

to do this in ways that were distinct. As such, critical responses to the perceived anti-theatricality of living newspapers, such as Verschoyle's distinction between 'documentary interest' and 'theatrical effect', say more about the contemporaneous theatrical landscape and subjective impressions of the critic, than they do about the form in a broader context.²⁴⁸

It is reasonable to surmise that the living newspaper form encouraged an emancipation of the proletariat through the presentation of realities that appeared local, recognisable, and thereby, potentially alterable. In mobilising different kinds of documentary practices, from staging techniques to different source materials, the living newspaper mirrored Piscator's admittance that 'what theatre was supposed to do was communicate critical responses' which might be 'translated into practical politics' and thereby lead to social change.²⁴⁹

Distilling documentary practices from documentary theatre forms enables such early iterations of the documentary canon to be seen in both contrasting and comparable light: contrasting in terms of the scale and spectacle of approach, but comparable in terms of what critical responses suggest such work "should" do or look like. As such, consolidating within the burgeoning documentary theatre tradition are eruptions of practices that are mobilised in vastly different formats and spaces, which not only challenge the status quo but that have malleability at their core. They differently respond to circumstances of necessity and enable visions of different futures to be

²⁴⁸ The form's avoidance of theatrical spectacle was also due to the practical reason of monetary and spatial limitations, and the political reason that the rise of mass gatherings in the 1930s mirrored the gathering fascist movements in parts of Europe including Britain.

²⁴⁹ Piscator, p. vi.

hypothesised through their work, such as when living newspapers challenge state-sanctioned propaganda.

This forward-looking foundation of the documentary mode seems somewhat under threat though by the re-centring of empirical veracity in the materials and practices of the theatre of facts some thirty years later, lionized by Peter Weiss and his play *The Investigation*.

Faith in Facts: Peter Weiss and The Investigation

In 1971, Weiss claimed that documentary theatre presented a ‘constant grinding together of opposites’, and could be a rejoinder to the newly dominant manner in which reality was communicated ‘through the mass media’.²⁵⁰ He suggested that ‘through the confrontation of contradictory details’ documentary theatre could ‘show up existing conflicts’ that mediatised communications did not.²⁵¹ For Weiss, the documentary theatre achieved this through its ability to communicate ‘facts for examination’ and present segments of ‘actuality’ that are ‘torn out of [their] living context’.²⁵² As such, for Weiss, documentary is concerned with the substantive over the surface or appearances. Yet in this discussion, I examine how Weiss mobilised artistic flourishes within his documentary work in a tensile manner that productively, but unconsciously, expanded his definitions, and laid a foundation for the expanded mobilisation of documentary practices going forward.

²⁵⁰ Weiss, ‘The Materials and The Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre’, pp. 41–42.

²⁵¹ Weiss, ‘The Materials and The Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre’, p. 42.

²⁵² Weiss, ‘The Materials and The Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre’, p. 42.

Weiss's legacy and prominence in the history of documentary theatre has developed through various manifestos and plays, over the course of which he defines documentary theatre as a form that is marked out by the authenticity and traceability of its source materials and their unobstructed clarity when communicated in performance:

Documentary Theatre is a theatre of reportage. Records, documents, letters, statistics, market reports, statements by banks and companies, government statements, speeches, interviews, statements by well-known personalities, newspaper and broadcast reports, photos, documentary films, and other contemporary documents are the basis of the performance.²⁵³

For Weiss, documentary theatre offers unmediated access and fact-based understanding of the “truth” of events. The subject matter of *The Investigation* manifests this principle through its practice of mobilising witness testimony from court proceedings – specifically the Frankfurt trials (1963–1965) concerning Nazi war crimes. As such, the veracity of *The Investigation*'s content is given credence by virtue of these words being documented, and the currency of that document is elevated due to its status within the processes of officialdom.

The Investigation premiered on 19 October 1965 at thirteen theatres across East and West Germany simultaneously, as well as having a staged reading directed by Peter Brook at the Aldwych Theatre in London.²⁵⁴ The play was produced within a period known in Germany as the *wirtschaftswunder*, which Thomas Irmer explains was a time of nation (re)building within a prolonged moment of national crisis for the post-Second

²⁵³ Weiss, ‘The Materials and The Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre’, p. 41.

²⁵⁴ Peter Weiss, *The Investigation*, trans. by Alexander Gross (London: Marion Boyars, 1966), n.p. Piscator directed one performance in this wide-scale premiere production at the Freie Volksbühne in West Berlin.

World War East and West German states.²⁵⁵ This rebuilding concerned all areas of political, social, and cultural life, although it is primarily annexed in relation to an economic boom that spanned two decades following 1945. Weiss's production in 1965 marked twenty years since justice had been meted out to Nazi officials and collaborators in the Nuremberg trials of 1945–1946. By this time, Irmer claims that the Holocaust had become almost taboo in Germany, and that 'many traces of the war were not yet being debated in public'.²⁵⁶ According to Olaf Berwald, this was in part because the horrific nature of the events, which had become increasingly known to the public, were too traumatic to discuss. Berwald characterises this taboo quality as an unconscious attempt to consign the Holocaust to history, and he contends that it is reflected in 'the popular postwar ideology of selective memory and the widespread refusal of Germans to face their crimes'.²⁵⁷

The consignment of these atrocities to history proved difficult because Holocaust trials continued intermittently across Europe for decades.²⁵⁸ *The Investigation* takes its source material from the Frankfurt trials, which exclusively concerned crimes committed at Auschwitz and which pursued both high and low profile individuals as equally culpable members of the Nazi war-machine. Weiss's production mobilises testimony from these trials to ensure that the subject matter is remembered in detail, in order to prevent the

²⁵⁵ Irmer, p. 17.

²⁵⁶ Irmer, p. 17.

²⁵⁷ Berwald, p. 24.

²⁵⁸ Alongside the Nuremberg and Frankfurt trials, other trials focused on specific concentration camps such as the Belsen trials (1945), the Dachau trials (Germany) (1945–47), and the Majdanek trials which were a series of smaller trials but cumulatively continued for almost forty years. For a comprehensive source concerning these trials see The Jewish Virtual Library, 'Nazi War Crimes: List of Trials' <<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/nazi-war-crime-trials>> [accessed 10 May 2020].

repetition of such heinous crimes. In addition to such aspirations, there was also a pressing practical concern regarding the Statute of Limitations on War Crimes that was due to expire in the same year as the production.²⁵⁹ Therefore, despite the economic miracle of the *wirtschaftswunder*, which might otherwise purport that German life was progressing with renewed vigour and purpose, Weiss's foregrounding of the Frankfurt trials in *The Investigation* was part of a prolonged, cathartic public purging of the Holocaust within the confines of the civic, cultural, national, and international rebuilding of the German state.

For Irmer, *The Investigation*'s presentation of real people and the use of court transcripts as texts within a reconstructed sequence of events, are strategies which 'mark a shift from the poetic drama and the theatre of the absurd, which were dominant during the 1950's, to the overtly political theatre of the 1960s'.²⁶⁰ The political to which Irmer refers not only relates to content but also to form. That is to say, the purpose of the Frankfurt trials – that justice be delivered in the real world performance of criminal prosecution – is retransmitted via the documentary practices of Weiss, which reframed the reality (but also the spectacle) of that judicial performance into a theatrical one. As such, Irmer positions *The Investigation* alongside Rolf Hochhuth's *The Deputy* (1963) within a trajectory of German political theatre which scrutinises the performance of justice, because both works are 'major contributors to the re-politicization of a society that was still recuperating from the Nazi regime and its catastrophic consequences'.²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 90.

²⁶⁰ Irmer, p. 17.

²⁶¹ Irmer, p. 17.

One aspect of this re-politicisation is that *The Investigation* abstains from naming the victims but does name the accused. The simple reason Weiss gives for this is that the accused retained their names ‘during the time of the events under consideration, while the prisoners had lost their names’.²⁶² By utilising accounts where the defendants – ‘representing actual people’ – were named, and yet omitting the names of ‘successively quite diverse and anonymous’ witnesses, the narrative spans different accounts in order to communicate the most horrific aspects of the crimes committed, without calling into question the content of this collaged testimony.²⁶³ Indeed, Robert Cohen suggests that the term ‘composites’ might adequately reflect the status of the witness characters in *The Investigation*, and that such a term is ‘the equivalent, in the literary sphere, of that which [Theodor] Adorno has expressed in the language of philosophy, “that in the concentration camps it was no longer an individual who died, but a specimen.”’²⁶⁴

This composite scripting of testimony is an editorial practice which enables Weiss to metaphorically emphasise the insignificance with which the Nazi defendants viewed their victims; in doing so, *The Investigation* challenges audiences to recognise the persistent significance of these testimonies in the face of the economic revelry of the *wirtschaftswunder*. However, this interlarding of witness statements does not necessarily uphold the notion of ‘reportage’ with which Weiss defines documentary

²⁶² Peter Weiss, ‘Remarks’, in *The Investigation*, trans. by Alexander Gross (New York, NY: Marion Boyars, 1966).

²⁶³ Peter Weiss, ‘Characters’, in *The Investigation*, trans. by Alexander Gross (New York, NY: Marion Boyars, 1966).

²⁶⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, in, Robert Cohen, ‘The Political Aesthetics of Holocaust Literature: Peter Weiss’s *The Investigation* and Its Critics’, *History and Memory*, 10.2 (Fall) (1998), 43–67 (p. 49).

theatre – particularly so because, as Martin notes, there are no explicit references to Auschwitz or to the Jewish people in *The Investigation*.²⁶⁵

Beyond ‘reportage’, in ‘The Materials and The Models’ (1971) Weiss was even more categorical in asserting that ‘[d]ocumentary theatre refrains from all invention; it takes authentic material and puts it on the stage, unaltered in content, edited in form’.²⁶⁶ As already noted, Megson identifies an ‘unremarked contradiction’ in this that what is edited in form is not necessarily unaltered in content.²⁶⁷ The editorial practice of composite scripting then, of blurring ‘authentic persons and stage characters’ as Cohen called it, may similarly be vulnerable to the accusations of contradiction that Megson highlighted.²⁶⁸ I suggest that the breadth of a number of such ambivalences which can be observed within *The Investigation* extends to the point where Weiss has unintentionally but productively expanded the limits of his own definition for documentary theatre.

To clarify these ambivalences and explore their potentially productive work in relation to the documentary practices mobilised, I focus on two areas of tension within *The Investigation* concerning the subject matter and Weiss’s aesthetic choices. I contend that these tensions, though controversial, have an equitable stake in the political efficacy of *The Investigation*. They arise from dramaturgical decisions made by Weiss, but they also underpin the critical framing of *The Investigation* as an exemplar of the

²⁶⁵ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 91.

²⁶⁶ Weiss, ‘The Materials and The Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre’, p. 41.

²⁶⁷ Megson, ‘Half the Picture: “A Certain Frisson” at the Tricycle Theatre’, p. 199.

²⁶⁸ Cohen, p. 46.

documentary canon, and in this way, they support the malleable and responsive quality of documentary practices that this chapter foregrounds.

Tensions at Play

The first area of tension exists between the veracity of the empirical material mobilised in the play, and the poetic structure and metaphorical resonances Weiss employs within *The Investigation*. This area of tension suggests that a theatre of facts is not necessarily diminished or undermined by artistic flourishes, and that documentary practices and metaphor can operate productively in tandem. The second area of tension relates to Weiss's insistence that a theatre of facts should be solely concerned with the reproduction of factual documentation – which in *The Investigation* is manifest in the witnesses' statements of their experience at Auschwitz – and the omission of any explicit naming or details concerning the Jewish identity in relation to the events being staged.²⁶⁹ This tension suggests that the documentary theatre can be about more than its source material or subject matter, but this has caused a critical backlash against *The Investigation* from some quarters, as I will examine.

Weiss's exacting instructions for how the play was to be staged attempt to assuage any concerns that artistic licence could impinge on the factual veracity of *The Investigation*. The playwright called for no reconstruction of the court room setting and instead, in introductory remarks that accompany the published text, Weiss asserts that a production should 'contain nothing but the facts as they came to be expressed in words during the

²⁶⁹ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 90. Martin notes that these omissions also extend to other groups that the Nazi's persecuted, including 'gypsies, homosexuals, specific political affiliations', and other religions and races (p. 90).

course of the trial'.²⁷⁰ Therein, for Weiss the words are the arbiter of truth and nothing visual should detract from them. Yet despite this, the testimonies that Weiss selected are subject to a poetic and metaphorical re-framing through his echoing of Dante's epic poetry.

According to Thomas Tammis, Weiss had a 'life-long preoccupation with Dante's *Commedia* [*The Divine Comedy*]',²⁷¹ which Berwald contends influenced *The Investigation*'s three part structure by echoing 'Dante's construction of Hell [in *Inferno*] in order to address organised killings in the twentieth century'.²⁷² Tammis notes more broadly that:

Many critics have interpreted the play as a Dante-esque descent into hell that begins with the testimony of a railroad employee who pulled the switch that directed the trains to Auschwitz and concludes with testimony that focuses on the gas and cremation chambers.²⁷³

Such preoccupations are evident from *The Investigation*'s subtitle – 'Oratorio in 11 Cantos'. An oratorio is an orchestrally inflected large-scale undertaking bordering on the sacred in content, with 'cantos' forming sections of epic poetry. Such artistic inflections exemplify another element of 'contradiction', to join those already noted by Megson, because they jar with Weiss's definition that the theatre of facts contains 'nothing but the facts'.

However, I contend that such tensions are evidence of the fruitful complexity of Weiss's work. Rather than diminishing the factual imperative of the court proceedings as

²⁷⁰ Weiss, *The Investigation*, p. 10.

²⁷¹ Tammis Thomas, 'The Gray Zone of Victims and Perpetrators in Peter Weiss's "The Investigation"', *Modern Drama*, 53.4 (2010), 557–82 (p. 558).

²⁷² Berwald, p. 22.

²⁷³ Thomas, p. 558.

performances of cathartic justice for the German people and state during the *wirtschaftswunder*, Weiss's artistry also establishes what Berwald describes as 'tensions between the aesthetic form and the thematic concern'; that is to say, between the minimalist staging and the historical documentation.²⁷⁴ Ellis notes a similar tension in the difference between the 'unemotional delivery style' common in performance and the 'heavy emotional weight' of the testimony.²⁷⁵

In a 1966 production recorded for television,²⁷⁶ and in images of other productions from the same time,²⁷⁷ the minimalist staging appears both perfunctory but also theatrical. The eighteen "Defendants" sit in a raked seating bank towards the rear of the stage, with the "Witnesses" either in the front row of this seating bank, or one side of the stage. When called forward to offer testimony, a Witness moves into the middle of the stage to be addressed either by the Judge, Prosecutor, or Defence Counsel who are sat around this central area. During testimony, the Defendants' seating bank mirrors the theatre audience observing the performance of the Witnesses.

Through this restaging of the trial, *The Investigation* cautions against the potential for a repetition of historic atrocity and against a blindness shown towards individuals who co-

²⁷⁴ Berwald, pp. 22–23. As suggested above, the first staging of *The Investigation* was in fact a reading of the play, and therein, stripped back of almost all theatrical appendages.

²⁷⁵ Roger Ellis, *Peter Weiss in Exile* (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1987), p. 46.

²⁷⁶ Peter Schulze-Rohr, 'Die Ermittlung: Oratorium in 11 Gesängen (Peter Weiss)', *YouTube*, 1966 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6M-VpDvAvZI&t=137s>> [accessed 30 April 2020].

²⁷⁷ See images of Hans Perten's 1965 production from the Volkstheater Rostock, in, Roger Ellis, *Peter Weiss in Exile* (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1987), pp. 47, 49, 52; or images from Ingmar Bergman's 1966 production, 'Theatre - Productions - Ingmar Bergman' <<https://www.ingmarbergman.se/en/production/investigation>> [accessed 9 December 2020].

operated with, or profited from, the Nazi war machine. As such, when Witnesses are alone centre-stage, particularly ex-prisoners (because not all the Witnesses were prisoners), they appear vulnerable and as if they are not fully believed. This is not only due to the staging configuration that encircles them – which was exacerbated in Hans Perten’s 1965 production wherein two lighting positions near the top of the seating bank resembled the searchlights of the concentration camps – but also due to the traumatic memories they recall, and the undermining accusations of the Defence, who claims that any silence demonstrates the Witnesses are ‘suffering from a loss of memory’.²⁷⁸

Through such expanded resonances *The Investigation* confronts the ease with which complacency and taboo can overtake historical truths and consign them to the past as “lost memories”. Within the context of the *wirtschaftswunder*, any benefitting from the undermining of certain historical narratives, which the Defence Counsel repeatedly attempts, must be considered to implicate certain businesses as well as individuals. Therein, *The Investigation*’s malleable mobilisation of verbatim testimonies alongside aspects of poetic and metaphorical structure is of importance both for the circumstances of necessity in 1965 and for a wider political critique of capitalism’s potential to profit from atrocities.

This wider political resonance is also evident in the controversial second tension at play in *The Investigation*, which is the fact that in the text, as Weiss states, ““Auschwitz” never gets mentioned, and neither does the word “Jew””.²⁷⁹ Alongside the poetic framing, the verse text, and the metaphorical allusions concerning the contemporaneous

²⁷⁸ Weiss, *The Investigation*, p. 91.

²⁷⁹ Peter Weiss, ‘Peter Weiss’, in *The Playwrights Speak*, ed. by Walter Wager (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd, 1969), pp. 150–68 (p. 162).

German society, this second tension opens up *The Investigation* to pluralist readings beyond the literal words of the Frankfurt trials. However, critics accused Weiss of conflating the Shoah with '[o]ld fashioned concepts of capitalist exploitation'.²⁸⁰ This response has since garnered scholarly support, with Andreas Huyssen reproaching Weiss for subsuming 'the death of six million Jews [in]to a universal Marxist critique of capitalism'.²⁸¹ The issue, for those who suffered most under the tyranny of the Nazi regime, is that Weiss's aesthetic decisions and his allusions to wider political injustices within *The Investigation* undermine the unique nature of the Holocaust.

While not rejecting the observation of such criticism, Weiss was robust in his defence of *The Investigation*. He asserted that it is 'capitalism, indeed the whole Western way of life that is on trial', because capitalism 'benefited [sic] from the experiments in the gas chambers'.²⁸² In attempting to expand beyond the literal confines of the testimony mobilised in *The Investigation*, Weiss is engaging with what he judges to be the macro circumstances of necessity, acutely evidenced by the horrific exploitation of labour at Nazi concentration camps. In doing so, the play performs three actions: it is a detailed depiction of historic war crimes; it is a cultural rejoinder to any whitewashing that the *wirtschaftswunder* may enable; and it is a broader investigation of capitalism's role in this and other atrocities. Through this, Weiss's advocacy of documentary theatre suggests that its political reach should be broader than the lived experience of those depicted in the subject matter – in this case, Holocaust survivors.

²⁸⁰ Peter Demetz, in, Ellis, p. 53.

²⁸¹ Andreas Huyssen, 'The Politics of Identification: "Holocaust" and West German Drama', *New German Critique*, 19.6 (1980), 117–36 (p. 133).

²⁸² Weiss, in, Ellis, p. 48.

Scholarship such as Huyssen's admonishes any act perceived to diminish the singularity of the Holocaust, and such misgivings remain pertinent in relation to *The Investigation*, as Martin summarises in her extended discussion of the play.²⁸³ However, Tammis advocates for the usefulness of Weiss's political critique and highlights a productive kinship between Weiss's play and '[Giorgio] Agamben's assertion that the camp constitutes "the hidden matrix and nomos of the political space in which we are still living";²⁸⁴ this is because of the play's 'emphasis on the persistence of economic and political structures in post-war German culture'.²⁸⁵ Through such a lens, the *wirtschaftswunder* was not a rejuvenation of the (West) German post-war state, but a potentially dangerous re-consolidation of former structures, cloaked in the new, which might lead to the repetition of past injustices. Tammis draws attention to such repetition in the testimony of Witness 3, who states that '[w]e who still live with these images know that once again millions may be waiting in full view of their destruction and that this destruction exceeds the old arrangements many times in its effectiveness'.²⁸⁶ For Tammis, *The Investigation* 'unequivocally asserts that the reality of the camp extends beyond its specific place in time and history',²⁸⁷ and in this way attempts to justify Weiss's Marxist undertones. I concur with Tammis's contention, because the malleable way in which these testimonies and documentary practices have been dramaturgically and poetically interwoven generates the productive tension that positions *The Investigation*'s equal stake in the political efficacy of its important subject matter

²⁸³ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, pp. 89–92.

²⁸⁴ Giorgio Agamben, in, Thomas, pp. 560–61.

²⁸⁵ Thomas, p. 560.

²⁸⁶ Weiss, *The Investigation*, p. 89.

²⁸⁷ Thomas, p. 561.

(which cannot be elided and which Weiss is open about) and its broader anti-capitalist contentions.

Undoubtedly there remains a legitimate concern regarding what Martin summarises as *The Investigation*'s 'double disappearance' of the Jewish people and the atrocities visited upon them by the Nazis, but for Weiss the work is about the 'big machinery' of suppression and extermination.²⁸⁸ The author defends the work as 'built on reality' but also contends that it is 'a piece of art',²⁸⁹ and as such it is 'not entirely a play about the extermination of the Jews' but also a work about the 'suppression of people because of another race or another political view'.²⁹⁰

In these terms, I suggest that while *The Investigation* is inextricably tied to the horrors of the Holocaust, it is also mobilises documentary practices in a malleable manner that goes beyond Weiss's definition of the documentary theatre. The invitation to read *The Investigation* as a metaphor for something beyond the Holocaust suggests that the play does more than contain 'nothing but the facts' – and yet the play is clearly also about the Holocaust, the performance of justice in the Frankfurt trials, and the communication of this distressing history to an expansive audience. Like Bottoms's contention regarding the self-reflexive nature of documentary as simultaneously 'document' and 'play', the explicit omission of the Jewish identity and the Auschwitz setting in *The Investigation* is jarring in a way that destabilises the secure footings upon which much documentary theatre is based. In this way, we see a different mobilisation of

²⁸⁸ Weiss, 'Peter Weiss', p. 160.

²⁸⁹ Weiss, 'Peter Weiss', p. 158.

²⁹⁰ Weiss, 'Peter Weiss', p. 162.

documentary practices which seems to prompt the *wirtschaftswunder* generation to re-familiarise themselves with their history in order to inform their future.

Conclusion

In this chapter, documentary practices have been grouped together in the advancement of two ideas. In the first instance, those practices evidence an interruption of the real in performance which can at times lead to the aesthetic of simulated reality on stage. In the second, those practices foster an active engagement in the social and political reality of the subject matter beyond the performance via varying attempts to dissolve the separation of the stage and auditorium within performance.

This disruption of the separation between the stage and the auditorium is a fundamental way in which Reinhardt's experiments can be considered in relation to Piscator's work, and the beginnings of documentary theatre. Piscator introduced different mediums into his visual stage language, in order to bridge the gap between dramatic performance and the real conditions of life for audiences – in this way, the work was both an interruption of the real and a bringing together of the stage world and the real world. The aim of this was to instigate a site of political debate in theatrical settings in order to provoke reaction that might initiate forms of change; in the words of Gregory Mason, Piscator wanted to 'make of documentary drama a direct political forum'.²⁹¹ For Piscator, the spatial and ideological dynamics of theatre needed to change in order to disrupt the

²⁹¹ Gregory Mason, 'Documentary Drama from the Revue to the Tribunal', *Modern Drama*, 20.3 (1977), 263–77 (p. 264).

‘stage against auditorium’ tension, and to create via this direct political forum, ‘one big meeting hall, one big battlefield, one big demonstration’.²⁹²

Such aspirations course through the living newspaper form which elevated the significance of a local audience’s social conditions as a fundamental and quotidian sphere of investigation and protest. The practice of staging real people, which was hitherto prohibited in some jurisdictions, further enhanced the anti-establishment credentials of such work. This particular example foreshadows what Filewod summarises as the ‘development of worker-centred documentary theatre’, which he suggests ‘has followed the trajectory of labour in the twentieth century with a shifting emphasis away from aesthetics towards the political processes of cultural production’.²⁹³ By staging real people, the living newspaper not only did something generally perceived to be prohibited, but also brought into scrutiny the purpose of such prohibitions in both a cultural and political sense.

The logical and horrific pivot-point of this worker-centred documentary trajectory are the atrocities of the concentration camps that Weiss’s play laid bare. For Weiss, *The Investigation* speaks as much to issues of capitalist exploitation and the recasting of the human as object, as it does to the trauma of those testimonies being retold. The tensions that are instilled via the dramaturgical and literary techniques he mobilised in tandem with the documentary practices, already suggest a loosening of the binds between documentary practices and totalising notions of documentary theatre forms. Via the ‘composite’ characterisations that Weiss edits together, and for which he was criticised,

²⁹² Mason, p. 264.

²⁹³ Filewod, p. 63.

he alludes to a malleable way in which documentary practices can be mobilised for dramatic and political purposes in response to specific circumstances of necessity.

The productive conclusion of distinguishing documentary practices from within documentary theatre forms is an expanded appreciation of the malleable and responsive qualities of documentary practices which have historically enabled documentary theatre forms to engage varyingly with their circumstances of necessity. In subsequent chapters, I argue for how those documentary practices can become further released from cohesive and canonical forms of documentary theatre in order to evaluate the mobilisation of those practices in other theatrical models and within other circumstances of necessity.

The next logical step in this thesis narrative is the mid-twentieth century, when Filewod's identification of a progression in documentary theatre to 'political processes of cultural production' finds overt articulation in the postmodern period and the case studies of Chapter Two, which destabilise a solid separation between the liberal faith in facts and the Marxist notion of a real that exists behind a façade of representation.

CHAPTER TWO: DOCUMENTARY PRACTICES AND CRITICAL THEORY FROM THE 1960S TO THE 2000S

Chapter Two builds upon the foundations of Chapter One to examine the mobilisation of documentary practices in the second half of the twentieth century. The fulcrum between these two chapters is the confluence of rapid social, political, and cultural change in the late 1960s, including geopolitical turbulences, counter-cultural protests, developments in mass-media technologies and new artistic forms, as well as the gathering contexts of poststructuralism and postmodernism wherein perceptions of the real first began to shift significantly.

While the previous chapter's discussion of the historical avant-garde necessitated a focus on European performance, in this chapter I consider documentary practices and their circumstances of necessity within experimental performance practices in the US, before Chapters Three and Four focus on a UK context. This is in part due to the US's centrality within the circumstances I highlight, but also because a documentary trend emerged in the US in the 1960s which drew on the Piscatorian tradition. Therefore, the examples I offer help to examine how documentary practices are adapted beyond that tradition, as opposed to simply reconsolidating it. The examples of this chapter are the Living Theatre productions of *The Brig* and *The Connection*, and Spalding Gray's *Rumstick Road*.

As explained in the Introduction, in a pragmatic sense documentary practices refer to the techniques, tools, and strategies employed within the telling, presentation, and

representation of (seemingly) real life narratives.²⁹⁴ In a theoretical sense, documentary practices are a strategic demonstration of, and inquiry into, the truth-claim(s) being communicated in performance. Their mobilisation in performance represents an ideologically charged aesthetic decision to consolidate or problematize the authority and veracity – ‘promise’ – of source materials, narratives, or individuals.²⁹⁵ In this chapter, I continue to distinguish documentary practices in order to evidence how their malleability enables them to be mobilised within and beyond documentary theatre forms, in response to shifts in political, social, and technological circumstances.

The underlying inquiry straddling each chapter of this thesis is how, and why, are documentary practices mobilised in specific times and places, and by whom. The strategic role of this chapter is to contextualise and expand on the methodological frameworks, which inform the investigations of Chapters Three and Four. These include differing perceptions of the real such as Guy Debord’s postulation of the spectacular society, the poststructuralist critique of original authority by Jacques Derrida’s deconstructivist project, and Jean Baudrillard’s notion of the hyperreal, which is itself an extension of the work of Debord and discussed in depth in Chapter Three.²⁹⁶

Argument and Structure

Framed by two broadly defined “approaches” that I associate with Peter Weiss and Guy Debord, this chapter argues that the mobilisation of documentary practices in the second half of the twentieth century have an increasingly common denominator, which is that they are a response to their contextual pressures *over and above* the act of recording or

²⁹⁴ See Introduction, ‘Documentary Practices’.

²⁹⁵ Reinelt, p. 6.

²⁹⁶ See Chapter Three, ‘States of Distrust: Theory and Events in the New Millennium’.

reporting real occurrences. These contextual pressures can varyingly be technological developments, political shifts, or the wider communication and understanding of the real, or indeed any combination of the three.

I postulate that by the mid-twentieth century shifting perceptions of the real provoke dramaturgical experimentations that resist the notion of a one-dimensional or objective recording or reporting of the real, and instead agitate stable notions of documentary theatre and even stable notions of theatre. As such, this chapter begins by establishing a theoretical basis from which documentary theatre and discourses of the real progress throughout the second half of the twentieth century. In ‘Facts and Facades’, I examine Debord’s theoretical understanding of the experience of the real in the 1960s, and postulate how that might broadly relate to documentary theatre in contrast to Weiss’s instructions for the theatre of facts. I suggest that these two theoretical “approaches” to representations of the real have become increasingly diffused as self-referential and sceptical interpretations of the truth-claims of documentary theatre have, in the words of Forsyth and Megson, gradually placed the ‘discursive limitations’ of the documentary mode centre-stage.

In ‘Technology and Change’, I highlight how ‘the spread and then omnipresence of the *media* in everyday life’, or what Hans-Thies Lehmann describes as the ‘[c]aesura of the media society’, is a fundamental pivot-point in the history of such discourses.²⁹⁷ This involves an exploration of the effects of technological developments within a socio-political context and frames such developments as part of a challenge to the aesthetic

²⁹⁷ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 22.

stability of old mediums in the face of flourishing new mediums. Echoing the importance of the rise of the newspaper in Chapter One and pre-empting the significance of the digital age in Chapters Three and Four, by establishing these contexts for the changing face of performance in the 1960s I position the new cultural forms of mass-media and television as important influences within dramaturgical attempts to evade the ‘mere representation’ that Debord asserted was endemic in the spectacular society.²⁹⁸

These synchronous theoretical contentions, socio-political shifts, and technological developments contextualise the experimentations of the neo-avant-garde group the Living Theatre, which I discuss in “‘Extreme, Documentary Realism” and the Living Theatre’. I examine how the Living Theatre aspired to unsettle the distinction between life and art in order to create productive new forms of artistic expression, specifically through the examples of *The Brig* and *The Connection*. Although neo-avant-garde practitioners are not absorbed within the documentary theatre canon, an appreciation of the imbricated influence of such work as part of a broader framing of documentary history is relatively commonplace in documentary theatre discourse.²⁹⁹ This is because such work sought to avoid the re-centring of dominant ideologies regarded as intrinsically wedded to mimetic representation.

In this chapter, the positioning of this work contextualises the beginnings of the shared poststructuralist and postmodern sense that representing reality objectively is impossible, but balances this with an understanding that an ‘air of documentary

²⁹⁸ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 12.

²⁹⁹ See Martin, 2013; Paget, 1990; Tomlin, 2013; Youker, 2018.

authenticity’ is still a powerful dramatic strategy, and one that has the potential to work through the totalising scepticism of Debord, and the fastidious requirements of Weiss, to create political efficacy in performance.³⁰⁰ In this way, the examples of the Living Theatre reflect aspects of the tension between the Weissian and Debordian approaches. However, my aim is not to resolve this tension in the pursuance of monolithically “truthful” forms of representation, but rather to investigate how documentary practices were mobilised in a response to the contextual pressures of the time, which gravitated towards the commodification of many aspects of life, including art, in an obfuscation of the real.

Following the concerns of the Living Theatre’s work around individually conceived and embodied perceptions of reality, which ideologically and thematically permeate much theatrical experimentation in the late-twentieth century, the next section – ‘Presence’ – examines the poststructuralist critique that the notion of presence is not synonymous with “truth” or original authority. I consider this in relation to the presence of the performer as the subject and object of dramaturgical examination in autobiographical practice, and suggest, through what I term “conscious duplicity”, that there is a productive “doubleness” in work that evades neat categorisation within either the Weissian or Debordian approaches.³⁰¹

As part of the thesis inquiry into the mobilisation of documentary practices beyond established forms of documentary theatre, where ambiguous approaches refocus

³⁰⁰ Youker, p. 132.

³⁰¹ Such practices are indebted to 1960s performance art, the work of Second Wave feminists, as well as black and gay rights activists in the 1970s and 1980s, who popularised such approaches as counter-cultural reactions to hegemonic narratives and metanarratives that elided issues of identity politics.

attention beyond the reporting or recording of real events, these notions of presence and conscious duplicity inform the final discussion of this chapter. In '*Rumstick Road*', I investigate how Spalding Gray employs multiple forms of witness, recollection, and documentation to create a contested tapestry of information in his autobiographical play. Establishing a productive quality to conscious duplicity, I contend that the perception of theatrical performance – as both real and not real – can elide literal concerns of what is accurate, to consider aesthetic concerns around the impulse to create work that simultaneously interweaves seemingly factual and fictional elements, as *Rumstick Road* does. This is particularly appropriate at an historical moment informed by poststructural and postmodern scepticism of monolithic notions of “truth” and the embracing of pluralist perspectives; it is also an early experimentation with such ideas that becomes more commonplace in the examples of Chapter Three and, particularly, Chapter Four.

This dyad between what is real and what is not real perennially occupies the documentary mode, and representations of the real more widely. Therefore, it is productive to establish a framework through which to consider this relationship as not necessarily a binary one, but as one of imbrication.

Facts and Facades

The timely duality between Peter Weiss and Guy Debord at the end of the 1960s parallels the moment when an increasingly Janus-faced quality of documentary theatre begins to crystallise.

Despite the ambivalences I highlighted in Chapter One, Weiss's writings represent (for him at least) an instructional zenith in how to truthfully present reality on stage, because 'however opaque it may appear', documentary theatre asserts that reality 'can be

explained in every detail'.³⁰² Weiss holds that what is seen in everyday life is real, but cautions that mass-media creates a challenge to appreciating it. That is to say, the veneer of mediatised images and communications was a material spectacle that obscured the real, and the absolute requirement for authentic source materials in documentary theatre was a strategy to counter this 'artificial fog' of mass-media communication.³⁰³

While Debord maintains that there exists still a true real to apprehend, which must be done if the powers of capitalist obfuscation are to be countered, he is in opposition to Weiss because Debord suggests that the experience of reality is a spectacular veneer 'mediated by images', wherein all lived experience 'has become mere representation'.³⁰⁴ Beyond the material spectacle of 'collection[s] of images' or 'a product of the technology of the mass dissemination of images' which could be pinpointed and confronted, for Debord the spectacle was also ideological, in that it constituted the 'social relationship between people that is mediated by images'.³⁰⁵ As

³⁰² Weiss, 'The Materials and The Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre', p. 43.

³⁰³ Weiss, 'The Materials and The Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre', p. 41. The popularisation of colour images in mainstream broadcasting completed the visual verisimilitude of this increasingly quotidian medium and broadly coincided with the publication of Debord's *La société du spectacle* in 1967.

³⁰⁴ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 12. My positioning of Debord in this research draws on the totemic position of *La société du spectacle* within discourses of the real. However, Debord's position did shift in the latter part of the twentieth century; see Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Malcolm Irmie (London and New York: Verso, 1990). Rather than arguing that the real is hidden behind the integrated façade of representation, Debord stated that 'reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacle as something alien [... because t]he spectacle has now spread itself to the point where it permeates all reality' (1990, p. 9). In this way, Debord's thinking becomes allied to the Baudrillardian sense of the real being non-identifiable beyond its total assimilation within the technologized experience of reality. For my discussion of Baudrillard, see Chapter Three, 'States of Distrust: Theory and Events in the New Millennium'.

³⁰⁵ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 12.

such, the spectacular society is not only comprised of representations of the real as it is presented through mass communication, but the differing status of individuals' and communities' within that society are articulated and cemented via those mediating images and their associated narratives.³⁰⁶ These social relationships are often dependant on (and defined by) differing levels of power within a given society, which explains how, in the words of Garde and Mumford, the spectacle 'masks the very class division upon which the unity of capitalist production is dependant'.³⁰⁷

The Debordian spectacle, therefore, goes beyond the 'artificial fog' of mass communication technologies and is allied to the Marxist notion of an ideological as well as a practical veiling of the real. Doubly disturbing is that the spectacle not only suggests a totalising shroud of materialism and imagery that obscures the real, but it also pertains to the production and self-propagation of the spectacle itself. This means that the spectacular society commands a 'monopolization of the realm of appearances'.³⁰⁸ Debord's thinking around this is often clarified through everyday artefacts 'from cars to television',³⁰⁹ which elucidate the unsettling quality of this monopolization, because 'the more readily [a spectator] recognizes his [her] own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominate system, the less he [she] understands his [her] own existence and his [her] own desires'.³¹⁰ Against any such monopolization, artistic expression and, in particular, documentary theatre's unique ability to draw directly from reality is futile if they are perceived to operate in co-operation within the

³⁰⁶ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 12.

³⁰⁷ Garde and Mumford, p. 48.

³⁰⁸ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 15.

³⁰⁹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 22.

³¹⁰ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 23.

dominant culture. Indeed, Debord cautioned that art and culture are susceptible to commodification within the spectacular society, and could indeed ‘become the star commodity’.³¹¹ However, Debord’s framing of culture, which he refers to as ‘the sphere of knowledge, and of representations of lived experience’, offers a considered way to think through what intervention documentary theatre may make within this ideological take on the real.³¹²

In the spectacular society, Debord claims that culture has two “tendencies”; the first is ‘the defense [sic] of class power’ and thereby the consolidation of the status quo.³¹³ The second tendency ‘has cast its lot with the critique of society’, and in that way may be described as progressive, radical, or even avant-garde. In the 1960s, Debord cautions that the second tendency risked being eclipsed by a ‘spectacular pseudo-culture’.³¹⁴ This pseudo-culture could be viewed as synchronous with the ‘project of advanced capitalism’, in reframing recognisable elements of the dominant capitalist culture within a ‘neo-artistic environment [reconstructed] out of flotsam and jetsam’.³¹⁵ Debord suggests that ‘urbanism’s striving to incorporate old scraps of art’, as well as the pop-art and photorealist movements fit such pretexts.³¹⁶

To avoid merely supporting the narratives ‘proposed by the dominant system’, Debord states that such movements must do one of two things.³¹⁷ The first is to turn its cultural

³¹¹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 137. He notes some suggestions that this could occur in the US in the second half of the twentieth century.

³¹² Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 130.

³¹³ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 132.

³¹⁴ Debord, p. 137.

³¹⁵ Debord, p. 137.

³¹⁶ Debord, p. 137.

³¹⁷ Debord, p. 23.

artefacts (the ‘flotsam and jetsam’) in on the society itself as a critical lens – as documentary theatre directly does; Debord expresses this through the notion of ‘*détournement*’, which refers to a ‘device’ that restores ‘subversive qualities to past critical judgements that have congealed into respectable truths’.³¹⁸ The second way art can resist reinforcing dominant narratives is to be active in ‘its own disappearance’ and in that way evade commodification,³¹⁹ as was increasingly the case with performance events such as Fluxus and Happenings, as well as with neo-avant-garde performance groups such as the Living Theatre.³²⁰

Cumulatively, the Debordian approach suggests that (in the 1960s at least) the real exists but that it is obscured via coercive, unconscious, and powerful operations that protect and perpetuate that obfuscation in order to solidify the status quo. Under such conditions, it is reasonable to suggest that documentary theatre cannot resist the influence of dominant narratives within the spectacular society because it dramaturgically relies on drawing elements from the operations of that society in order to create performance. And yet, as will be discussed, I propose that the choice to mobilise documentary practices in response to circumstances of necessity also draws attention to theatrical time and space, and in that way offers ‘real’ events up for critical scrutiny within the performance moment.

³¹⁸ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, pp. 144–45.

³¹⁹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 135.

³²⁰ For a commanding overview of the traditions and imbrications between these experimental art and performance practices, see Mike Sell, *Avant-Garde Performance & the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

In contrast to this, the Weissian approach suggests that through examining a wide array of evidence the truth of the real can be understood. As such, *The Investigation* is an enduring touchstone for similar approaches to documentary theatre, and to representations of the real in the second half of the twentieth century; this is particularly true of the new millennium's penchant for verbatim and tribunal theatres – two forms that Ursula Canton claims uphold the 'primacy of the word'.³²¹ Canton's assertion does not vaguely confer importance on the transference of spoken word into source material as a documentary practice, but rather her contention speaks to the power of words even when they are decontextualized. For example, when Weiss creates 'composite' characters from 'fragments of several different sources', he instigates a practice that Paget explains is a common strategy of characterisation in theatre that uses verbatim testimony.³²² Therein, the primacy of the word in Canton's sense supersedes the necessity for exacting, linear repetition of the spoken word. This strategic collaging of words within the drama demonstrates a self-reflective facet of verbatim practice, which Paget describes as 'an awareness of theatricality [that] is ultimately informing the whole operation'.³²³

Despite his call for the documentary theatre to be devoid of invention, Weiss also recognised the importance of the context within which he was working, and as such claimed that documentary should, in part, be a 'reflection of life as we witness it

³²¹ Ursula Canton, *Biographical Theatre: Re-Presenting Real People?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 15.

³²² Paget, "'Verbatim Theatre': Oral History and Documentary Techniques", p. 332.

³²³ Paget, "'Verbatim Theatre': Oral History and Documentary Techniques", p. 324.

through mass media'.³²⁴ This interest in the circumstances of necessity demonstrates that Weiss's documentary theatre was actually partaking in a critical investigation of what Lavender calls the 'growth and ubiquity of plural media' taking shape in the late 1960s.³²⁵ Based on the three-pronged critiques of 'concealment', 'distortion', and 'lies', Weiss conceived of documentary theatre as having the potential to distil the truth of events to the point whereby questions could be answered regarding expansive issues such as, why are certain historical figures 'eliminated from the history books', and what consequences occur in light of 'historical deception'.³²⁶ For Weiss, the real is not only knowable, but it is politically vital to apprehend if the present is to learn from the past in order to critique the power structures that enable the exploitation of those bereft of power – as I argued via the import of *The Investigation* in relation to the contextual pressures of the *wirtschaftswunder*.³²⁷

To broaden out then from the underpinning principles of these different considerations, and establish a broad lens through which the spectrum of documentary practices since the mid-twentieth century can be discussed, I suggest that Weiss and Debord's positions offer two "approaches" to understanding representations of the real which mobilise (or appear to mobilise) documentary practices.³²⁸ A Weissian approach mirrors what Youker defines as a liberal approach, holding that a demonstration of truth through the veracity of source materials can inform individuals in order to enact change. In contrast,

³²⁴ Weiss, 'The Materials and The Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre', p. 41.

³²⁵ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 18.

³²⁶ Weiss, 'The Materials and The Models: Notes Towards a Definition of Documentary Theatre', p. 41.

³²⁷ See Chapter One, 'Faith in Facts: Peter Weiss and "The Investigation"'.

³²⁸ This is not to suggest that all mobilisations of documentary practices must fall into one or other of these approaches.

a Debordian approach adheres to a Marxist cultural materialist foundation that the real is veiled behind an ‘accumulation of spectacles’ and that what is knowable must therefore be viewed with scepticism.³²⁹ Although Debord is not explicitly concerned with the documentary theatre, he rallies ideas to the critique of how dominant narratives are communicated and reinforced in society – a cause associated with the documentary mode.

These two approaches, as I have suggested, exist in a Janus-faced relation because they are not mutually exclusive, but rather they help identify tensions in performance between, on the one hand, the pursuit of verisimilitude on stage, and on the other hand, scepticism of the ability of such approaches to challenge the status quo through representation. Across the course of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century, each approach has various moments of renewed dramaturgical import and currency. For example, the Weissian approach is recognisable in the surge of verbatim practice since the turn of the millennium, which stakes its truth-claim on the “evidence” of individual voices and testimony. Contrastingly, the Debordian approach predominantly finds favour with practitioners who seek to evade normative models of representational drama, which consolidates the imagery and narratives of the spectacular society, and instead unsettle the perceived stability of the boundary between performance and reality; this is a fundamental tenet of collectives such as the Living Theatre, which will underpin my discussion of them and highlight the beginnings of an expanding mobilisation of documentary practices beyond recognisable documentary theatre forms.

³²⁹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 12.

In light of these approaches, I make a final consideration in my discussion of the Living Theatre by way of the different interpretations of authenticity that are identifiable in their work and which can map onto the Weissian and Debordian approaches. I suggest that authenticity (prior to the commodification of it which I discuss in Chapter Four) can be a route through the totalising scepticism of the Debordian approach.³³⁰ This is because a phenomenological understanding of authenticity, as defined within and by the subject in autobiographical practice, offers a way to think beyond the Debordian scepticism of what is told or shown and yet also evade the notion of absolute truth that underpins the Weissian faith in facts. This is later built upon by the notion of presence before I move into a discussion of *Rumstick Road*.

However, in order to contextualise the relearning of documentary practices in the mid-twentieth century, I now turn to the circumstances of necessity and focus on specific facets of society, culture, and technology that were fundamental to the changing nature of performance and the eruptions of documentary practices, particularly in the US.

Technology and Change

From the late 1950s, experimental performance groups – notably in the US – sought to evade traditional representational structures in an attempt to dislodge their practice from the ideological pitfalls of the spectacular society. Groups such as the Living Theatre, the Performance Group (later the Wooster Group), the Open Theatre, and the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, varyingly challenged the representations of reality upheld by the structural workings of capitalism. These workings include consumerism, advertising,

³³⁰ See Chapter Four, ‘The Solo Performer and Documentary Practices’.

and metanarratives of technological progress typified by the new ‘mass dissemination of images’, of which television was a leading proponent.³³¹

Like the Situationists, these neo-avant-garde performance collectives recognised that theatrical realism could be complicit within the system of representations that sustained the hegemonic orders of capitalist societies. However, while the Situationists called for a rejection of ‘anything that could be identified as art, due to its potential for capitalist commodification’, these radical performance groups sought new ways to reinvigorate the challenge that theatre posed to the status quo.³³² Broadly speaking, this was through practices which – akin to and influenced by the historical avant-garde – sought to unsettle the boundary between life and art.³³³ In a theatrical context, these practices questioned the supremacy of narrative, linear structures of time and space, psychologically realised characterisation, and the notion of a separation between performance and reality. This was in order to remake the theatre as a politically vital response to the circumstances of the day, as opposed to depending vicariously on the enduring power presumed of classical drama. This era of the neo-avant-garde had a specific political, social, and cultural context that saw radical reappraisals of many areas of life in western societies.

³³¹ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 13.

³³² Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions*, p. 22.

³³³ Although it is not the task of this thesis to unpack the historical or neo-avant-gardes in detail, it is important to recognise the minutiae of geographical contexts and differences that exist under this broad nomenclature, so as not to be complicit in the monolithic categorisation of such titles; for example, differences exist between the Zurich and the Berlin branches of dada artists and collectives. For a more detailed overview, see Hal Foster, ‘What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?’, *October*, 70. Autumn (1994), pp. 5–32.

In the US, although legislation had dictated an end to racial segregation in the military (1948) and then in schools (1954), the escalation of the civil rights movement throughout the 1950s sought to expedite widespread equality and challenge the racial injustices that persisted. In the next two decades, significant actions propelling this movement included Rosa Parks's act of defiance in 1955, Dr Martin Luther King's Washington Memorial address in 1963, violence inflicted on the marches to Montgomery in 1965, and the Olympic black power salutes and Dr King's assassination in 1968. These well-known events were interspersed with many others that increased national and international support, albeit they were also met with counter-protest and violence. The civil rights movement encouraged demonstrations against other forms of injustice and oppression, such as discrimination on the grounds of gender and sexuality (Stonewall riots, 1969), and large-scale protests against the escalation of the Vietnam War (1955–1975) – a long-running backdrop that framed the propagandist campaign against communism amid the struggle for 'territories and hegemony' between the US and the Soviet Union.³³⁴

Known as the first "television war", the Vietnam conflict was a military, televisual, and ideological spectacle, wherein the media coverage became a staging ground for the cultural and political tensions that persisted during this moment in US history. For example, while nightly broadcasts transmitted harrowing images that galvanised protests against the war, political figures would raise the stakes in justification, such as when President Nixon asserted that World War Three would ensue were the conflict to

³³⁴ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 17. Other specific moments of tension between these superpowers include the Soviet Union violently quelling democratic uprisings in Hungary in 1956, its role in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, and the invasion of the former Czechoslovakia in 1968.

be lost.³³⁵ Mark Poster notes that the mid-century proliferation of television was responsible for ‘providing vital information to the populace’, and ‘humanising images of foreigners’ which served to fuel anti-war and anti-imperialist protests.³³⁶ Alongside the increasing volume of information, Poster also foregrounds the speed of televisual dissemination, which he contends ‘changed the [sic] human society forever’.³³⁷

Technological developments are as important as the socio-political contexts of emerging performance practices at this time, precisely because they instil and consolidate dominant narratives. However, I strategically separate them in light of cautionary advice proffered by Raymond Williams, who argues that facile statements such as “television has altered our world” attract ‘simple cause-and-effect identifications of its agency in social and cultural change’.³³⁸ In *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974), Williams argues that such facile statements encourage an ‘isolation of the medium’, and negate the complex tapestry of social, political, cultural, and ideological influences that also effect change.³³⁹ He asserts instead that television’s significance is, in part, ‘as an ideology: a way of interpreting general change through a displaced and abstracted cause’.³⁴⁰ A decade before Williams’s statement, in the early 1960s, Marshall McLuhan

³³⁵ Andrew L. Johns, ‘A Voice from the Wilderness: Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War, 1964-1966’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 29.2 (1999), 317–35 (p. 323).

³³⁶ Mark Poster, ‘Introduction’, in *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, ed. by Mark Poster, 2nd edn (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 1–12 (p. 8).

³³⁷ Poster, p. 8. For clarity, Poster is writing in response to Baudrillard’s lack of accounting for the positive qualities of mass-media communication. While the 2001 edition of this book retains these comments as per the 1988 first edition, the specific contextualising of the Vietnam conflict in this section of Poster’s writing is the reason why his words are aligned with this time period in my discussion.

³³⁸ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1974), p. 119.

³³⁹ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, p. 119.

³⁴⁰ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, p. 119.

was developing a similar approach which positioned the technological developments of the age within broader contexts. That is to say, not just as vehicles by which the slow shifts of societies were communicated, but as embedded contributors to the workings of these shifts in light of how the real is communicated and perceived.

Explaining his oft-cited phrase ‘the medium is the message’, McLuhan wrote that the ‘personal and social consequences of any medium [...] result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology’.³⁴¹ Rather than being unsettled by a medium’s ability to condense the world, as television could and as the internet does in digital times, McLuhan revelled in the ability of such an ‘extension’ to increase the possibilities of human connection and communication. As such, McLuhan cautions that the “‘content’ of any medium can blind people to the character of the medium’, and therefore he calls for critical analysis to look beyond what is said (the ‘content’), and towards what mediums can do (the ‘character’).³⁴² Taking this forward, the importance of mass-media technologies such as television was ‘not just [as] message-delivery systems’ showing images and sounds of protest, but rather as ways to physically and ideologically connect individuals and societies, as Youker notes.³⁴³

These new physical and ideological connections are pivotal reasons why Lehmann’s recalibration of twentieth century theatre positions the caesura of the media society over and above the ‘commonly held view that experimental forms of contemporary theatre

³⁴¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 2.

³⁴² McLuhan, p. 2.

³⁴³ Youker, p. 16.

since the 1960s correspond directly to examples from the historical avant-garde'.³⁴⁴ The 'spread and then omnipresence of the *media* in everyday life', so Lehmann states, fundamentally altered the medium of theatre,³⁴⁵ with a 'new emphasis on performance in European and North American theatre and art'.³⁴⁶

This new emphasis on the medium of the performance chimes with a twist on McLuhan's famous phrase that Williams suggests, which is that 'the work itself is in "the medium"'.³⁴⁷ If extrapolated out to the argument of this chapter, this notion that the medium is focal suggests that a response to contextual pressures (such as the impact of technological developments on perceptions of reality) over and above the act of recording or reporting real occurrences, is an entirely appropriate mobilisation of documentary practices at a time when newly intensified forms of information dissemination were shifting perceptions of the real.

Cumulatively, the ideological significance of a medium (be that television or theatre) goes beyond the content and productively concerns what the medium does – its 'character'.³⁴⁸ This is partly defined (and regulated) by the circumstances of necessity that inaugurate it. As W. J. T. Mitchell states, after Williams, the medium is not simply an in-between state that links sender and receiver, 'it includes and constitutes them'.³⁴⁹ Within the context of theatre, it is a commonly held axiom that the time, space, and

³⁴⁴ Lehmann, p. 22.

³⁴⁵ Lehmann, p. 22. Emphasis in original.

³⁴⁶ Karen Jürs-Munby, 'Introduction', in *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1–15 (p. 4).

³⁴⁷ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 158.

³⁴⁸ McLuhan, p. 2.

³⁴⁹ W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Addressing Media', *Media Troupes EJournal*, I (2008), 1–18 (p. 4).

liveness of the work includes and constitutes the spectator, but as Reinelt has suggested already, this is somewhat heightened in the documentary theatre which produces its ‘way of knowing’ within ‘the interactions between the document, the artist and the spectator’.³⁵⁰

Within the context of the neo-avant-garde experiments around the representation of reality to which this discussion now moves, it was the very ‘character’ of theatre and art that was up for debate. Groups like the Living Theatre sought new ways in which the medium of live performance could respond to their circumstances of necessity and resist the replication and commodification of capitalist societies, yet still embed their work in a recognisable reality that would not only account for shifting perceptions of the real, but that could also make a political and social contribution beyond the theatre.

‘Extreme, Documentary Realism’ and the Living Theatre

The ‘new historical conjuncture’ of the 1960s, as Paget rightly states, brought about a ‘cross-fertilization of ideas’ in light of changing politics.³⁵¹ Within this context, Hans Bertens claims that neo-avant-garde performance groups were inspired by the ‘sacred theatre of gesture that [Antonin] Artaud [1896–1948] had preached’ in his then recently translated monograph *The Theatre and Its Double* (1958). Through this artists sought to transcend the spectacular society via a perceived spiritual quality of theatrical co-presence.³⁵² Written thirty years prior to its translation, Artaud called for a new kind of theatre that would shatter ‘the idolatry of fixed masterpieces’ and the ‘formal screen we

³⁵⁰ Reinelt, p. 23.

³⁵¹ Paget, *True Stories?: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*, p. 77.

³⁵² Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 75.

interpose between ourselves and the public'.³⁵³ He stated that expression and words 'do not have the same value twice', and called for new idioms to replace stale 'forms that no longer respond to the needs of the time'.³⁵⁴

In the search for new idioms that could respond to and resist capitalist commodification, strategies varyingly adopted by neo-avant-garde practitioners included an abandonment of linear narrative and psychological characterisation, a shift away from traditional performance spaces (proscenium arch theatres), an embracing of improvisational techniques, and an encouragement of audience participation. In their totality, these strategies promoted a sense of immediacy in neo-avant-garde performances, which followed Artaud's distrust of representation. As Tomlin summarises, 'the neo-avant-garde created performances that were built on the imperatives of each performance taking place in the present time and space of the event'.³⁵⁵ The Living Theatre, founded by Julian Beck and Judith Malina in 1947, is a prominent and early exponent of such experimental strategies.

The Living Theatre's direct correlation to documentary theatre is evidenced in Malina's memoirs which recall her training under Piscator at The Dramatic Workshop in New York City in 1940. Malina draws on the influence of this training when reflecting on her 1991 production of Xavier Muhammed Wardlaws's *Echoes of Justice*, which she claims resembles 'a Documentary play', because it utilises trial transcripts to explore the abuse

³⁵³ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. by Mary Caroline Richards (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1958), p. 76.

³⁵⁴ Artaud, p. 75.

³⁵⁵ Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions*, p. 21.

suffered by a prison inmate at the hands of police officers.³⁵⁶ In an introduction to her memoirs, Richard Schechner contends that the Living Theatre ‘internalised the fervid political dedication of Piscator and added [...] a highly poetic strain infused with an avant-garde painterly aesthetic’.³⁵⁷ This influence in their work was also identifiable because, as Paget states, in the 1960s ‘[a]s with the 1920s and 1930s, Documentary Theatre became a way of dealing with crisis’ in different parts of the world; in the US particularly, this was initially via the work of ‘Piscator’s protégés’ – Weiss and Hochhuth.³⁵⁸

This reinvigoration of the Piscatorian tradition within the US inspired new iterations of documentary practices that focused on ‘[e]mergent social movements’; Paget claims that this is evidenced through the Off-Broadway ‘Black, Chicano, women’s and gay theatre groups’.³⁵⁹ The influx of diverse voices and narratives, as well as new forms of documentary theatres such as autobiographical performance, heralded an “opening up” of discussion agendas’ around the inequalities and injustices visited on marginalised communities.³⁶⁰ For Paget’s argument, this was ‘testimony to the enduring ability of the

³⁵⁶ Judith Malina, *The Piscator Notebook* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 188. Capitalisation as per original. *Echoes of Justice* production details supplied by Leonie Ettinger – Artistic Associate and Twitter account manager for the Living Theatre.

³⁵⁷ Richard Schechner, ‘Foreword’, in *The Piscator Notebook*, 2012, pp. xv–xviii (p. xviii).

³⁵⁸ Paget, *True Stories?: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*, p. 77. This is in part due to a strong connection with the events of World War Two within the US, which in turn Paget suggests might explain the relatively poor ticket sales that Theatre Workshop’s *Oh! What a Lovely War* garnered on a 1964 tour – with its focus being World War One.

³⁵⁹ Paget, *True Stories?: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*, p. 77.

³⁶⁰ Paget, *True Stories?: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*, p. 77.

stage documentary True Story to raise the temperature of public debate'.³⁶¹ However, for the Living Theatre, this Piscatorian influence on the raising of social consciousness was only one part of their work, which operated in tandem with the desire to circumvent the falsifications of the spectacular society – an issue with which their productions of Kenneth Brown's *The Brig*, and Jack Gelber's *The Connection* were actively engaged via imbrications of the theatrical and the real, and destabilising the boundary between performance and reality.

In broad terms, the group's significance in relation to discourses of representation, theatrical truth-claims, and the real is well-established because the Living Theatre attempt to invoke the real (as they perceived it) as a performative strategy that resists the falsifications of contemporaneous society. That is to say, in the examples I discuss, the new purposes of the documentary practices they mobilise are to theatrically communicate real experiences via what Youker describes as an 'air of documentary authenticity'.³⁶² In Youker's analysis, this 'authenticity' appears primarily allied to the Weissian approach, in that it is an attempt to enact the "truth" through the faithful restoration of source materials. However, I argue that the Living Theatre's work demonstrates the latter twentieth century shift towards documentary practices being mobilised as a critical response to the circumstances of necessity, over and above the act of recording or reporting real occurrences. This new way of thinking through such work

³⁶¹ Paget, *True Stories?: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*, p. 77. Although the context of this statement is Paget referencing controversy surrounding Hochhuth's depiction of Pope Pius XII in *The Deputy* (focusing on the Catholic Church's inaction and disavowal of knowledge of Nazi war crimes), it merits inclusion in relation to emergent social movements at this tumultuous time in which injustice was being confronted by many different communities.

³⁶² Youker, p. 132.

is made possible by distinguishing documentary practices, and their malleable quality, from documentary theatre forms, because *The Brig* and *The Connection* do not conform to recognisable forms of documentary theatre.

The Brig

Paget claims that *The Brig*'s 'staged documentary realism about life in a US Marine Corps prison' falls within what he categorises as a "true story",³⁶³ that is, a drama (for the stage, screen, or radio) that appeals to a fetishisation of facts in the twentieth century.³⁶⁴ This predilection for facts, as part of the context of the explosion of information through mass-media, helps establish a true story's 'cultural passport to credibility'.³⁶⁵ Theodore Shank calls *The Brig* 'a detailed documentary of routine life', drawing on Kenneth Brown's experiences in a US military prison while serving in Japan.³⁶⁶ While the production's documentary practices focus on the regimented depiction of daily life during military incarceration, and on the actors' experiences in rehearsal as well, *The Brig* also highlights how the quotidian routines of military life have a dehumanising effect on individuals, both physically and mentally. Such issues are one aspect of why Stephen Bottoms describes *The Brig* as 'a kind of extreme, documentary realism'.³⁶⁷

Of particular note in the Living Theatre production, was a sequence when the actors performed a number of repetitive, ritualised, and prolonged exercises, which placed

³⁶³ Paget, *True Stories?: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*, p. 77.

³⁶⁴ Paget, *True Stories?: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*, p. 3.

³⁶⁵ Paget, *True Stories?: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*, p. 3.

³⁶⁶ Theodore Shank, *Beyond The Boundaries: American Alternative Theatre* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 11.

³⁶⁷ Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), p. 30.

their bodies under intense physical strain. During these sequences, theatre-time exertion mirrored real-time exhaustion, and the strain on the actors' bodies was visible (and audible) as it slowly increased. While demonstrating the potential cruelty of military training, *The Brig*'s prolonged display of physical exertion also offers a challenge to the disrupted concept of real time that increasing mediatisation inflicts.

In the new age of mass-media, so Williams contends, an altered experience of time – what he calls 'flow' – is a 'defining characteristic of broadcasting, [...] as a technology and as a cultural form'.³⁶⁸ For Frederic Jameson, 'flow' is conditioned in the viewer via the punctuating 'machine time' of broadcasting's 'hour and half-hour programming'.³⁶⁹ Such changes in the experience of time were also a concern of Debord, who stated that the 'reality of time has been replaced by its *publicity*' in the spectacular society,³⁷⁰ which Jameson develops further in claiming that the irrepressible flow of the mass-media age unsettles the very notion of time and produces instead 'total flow', or 'a kind of imaginary fictive time' wherein 'critical distance seems to have become obsolete'.³⁷¹ Within such framing, the prolonged somatic punishment in *The Brig* highlights how live performance can sever this experience of 'total flow' through its uncertain duration, and reinstate what Tomlin describes as the imperative 'of the present time and space of the

³⁶⁸ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, p. 86.

³⁶⁹ Frederic Jameson, 'Reading Without Interpretation: Postmodernism and the Video-Text', in *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments Between Language and Literature*, ed. by Nigel Fabb and others (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp. 199–233 (p. 207).

³⁷⁰ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 113. Emphasis in original.

³⁷¹ Jameson, p. 207.

event', or what McLuhan might characterise as the 'character' of the medium of live performance in the Living Theatre's construction of it.³⁷²

In tandem with this focus on the immediacy of the event, Shank suggests that the 'acting style' in *The Brig* attempted to avoid representation and achieve "“a state of being” because the performer actually experienced what was being enacted”.³⁷³ For Bottoms, the documentary realism of *The Brig* and its 'visibly real process of physical exhaustion',³⁷⁴ was contextualised by 'a new, body-orientated anti-textualism' that developed out of Happenings and performance art in the 1960s, amid the increasing adoption of Artaudian theories.³⁷⁵ Therein, the 'immediate physical presence of the performer' and their actions in *The Brig* is focal for Bottoms's discussion.³⁷⁶ Youker's analysis and determination that *The Brig* 'is essentially a documentary', on the other hand, follows the liberal methodological approach because he foregrounds the fastidiously 'replicated actions and verbal exchanges that would have actually occurred repeatedly in real life' as evidence of the documentary quality of *The Brig*.³⁷⁷

For Youker, the precision and repetition of both Brown's instructions and the Living Theatre's production are markers of *The Brig*'s 'air of documentary authenticity', because every act which occurs within the locality of the brig is 'dictated by the rules of

³⁷² Jameson, p. 202.

³⁷³ Shank, p. 35.

³⁷⁴ Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*, p. 30.

³⁷⁵ Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*, p. 4.

³⁷⁶ Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*, p. 61.

³⁷⁷ Youker, pp. 131–32.

the brig'.³⁷⁸ That is to say, the “in the moment” authenticity of the Living Theatre’s production buttresses the appearance that what happens on stage is a true-to-life replica of daily life for such inmates. This is because a military orthodoxy governs the quotidian actions from how the inmates ‘wash, shave and dress themselves’, to how they ‘perform chores, eat meals and silently read the Marine Corps Handbook’.³⁷⁹ Even movement is highly restricted in performance, as Youker highlights, with the inmates having to ‘shout their ID number and request [permission] to cross’ the white lines on the floor which demarcate the different rooms in the brig.³⁸⁰

The approach to this production was vastly at odds with the normal working practices of the Living Theatre, according to Heidi R. Bean, because Malina’s direction attempted to mirror this regime of discipline via a set of ‘Rehearsal Regulations’ which dictated strictly the expected actions and attentions of the actors at all times.³⁸¹ The aim of such regulations in the creation of the work was to generate what Youker describes as a ‘gut-punch of phenomenal realism’ in the performance.³⁸² Bean refers to the cumulative effect of these regulations as an ‘enactment inspired by actual experiences’, where the violence inflicted on inmates, the physical exertion they endured, the restrictions and abuse suffered during performance, as well as the physical barriers between the audience and the inmates (such as barbed wire fencing across the front of the stage)

³⁷⁸ Youker, p. 132.

³⁷⁹ Youker, p. 131.

³⁸⁰ Youker, p. 131. For detailed drawing of the set design which shows where these lines were drawn, see Kenneth H. Brown, ‘The Brig’, *The Tulane Drama Review*, 8.3 (Spring) (1964), 222–59 (p. 226).

³⁸¹ Heidi R. Bean, *Acts of Poetry: American Poets’ Theater and the Politics of Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019), p. 117.

³⁸² Youker, p. 132.

cemented the documentary realism of the work – or its air of documentary authenticity.³⁸³

In different ways, the Living Theatre’s production of *The Brig* attempts to recreate a regimented vision of a day in the life of military prisoners. The text is based on and indebted to Brown’s autobiographical experiences, while the performance drew on Malina’s rehearsal regime which ‘aimed at creating similarly cruel conditions’ to those that Brown had described.³⁸⁴ Like *The Connection* that follows next, the documentary practices of *The Brig* are not as explicit as those discussed in Chapter One, or later to be discussed in *Rumstick Road*. Instead, *The Brig*’s ‘air of documentary authenticity’ arises in performance through regimented practices which theatrically communicate Brown’s “real experience” and the actors’ rehearsal environment, in a manner that is particular to understandings of the real in this period. This demonstrates the productive value of foregrounding documentary practices over documentary theatre forms within my discussion of performances that draw on contextual pressures to inform aesthetic decisions and political contributions – in this case, Malina’s disdain is for the cruelty of authoritarian control, which even within democratic societies still finds avenues for institutional normalisation.³⁸⁵

The Connection

³⁸³ Bean, p. 117.

³⁸⁴ Bean, p. 117.

³⁸⁵ Judith Malina, ‘Directing “The Brig”’, in *The Brig; A Concept for Theatre or Film* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965). In the narrative of *The Brig*, the authoritarian control is the military, but it could easily be other institutions familiar in everyday life, as Malina writes: ‘The Immovable Structure is the Villain. Whether that structure calls itself a prison or a school or a factory or a family or a government or The World as It Is’ (p. 83). Capitalisation as per original.

While *The Brig* sought a documentary realism via its regimented ‘re-presentation’ of Brown’s military experiences and the actors’ rehearsal experiences, *The Connection*’s ‘air of documentary authenticity’ exudes from seemingly unscripted, improvisational interventions. As discussed below, these interventions wrestle with the traditional authority of the text and attempt to theatrically create a “real experience” in a way that reflects the opposing tensions concerning the real – that is, as something able to be apprehended and understood via an exacting presentation of evidence (Weissian approach), and as something obscured by spectacle which makes all representation the subject of deep scepticism (Debordian approach).³⁸⁶

As Bottoms noted, a strand of anti-textualism espoused by prominent figures in the 1960s, such as Schechner, suggested that neo-avant-garde practitioners should carve out their own ‘domain’ by ‘overthrowing the writers’.³⁸⁷ Bottoms, however, does not support the ‘neat, binary separation’ that such statements suggest between text-based theatre and ‘a radical, director-led avant-garde’.³⁸⁸ Instead, Bottoms argues that ‘despite the anti-textual rhetoric of some 1960s theorists – dramatic text and “live,” physical performance were in no way incompatible’.³⁸⁹ Although the Living Theatre would, after *The Brig*, move towards Schechner’s position, ‘[w]orking without (or against) traditional scripts’ as Christopher Grobe describes it, their 1959 production *The*

³⁸⁶ Youker, p. 132.

³⁸⁷ Richard Schechner, ‘The Decline and Fall of the (American) Avant-Garde: Why It Happened and What We Can Do about It’, *Performing Arts Journal*, 5.2 (1981), 9–19 (p. 11).

³⁸⁸ Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*, p. 4.

³⁸⁹ Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*, p. 30.

Connection had already begun to explore the productive juxtaposition between text-based and what appears to be improvisational performance.³⁹⁰

Depicting a racially mixed group of New York heroin users, the choice to cast actors of different races in *The Connection* was already ‘a bold political statement’ in light of the political and social circumstances of necessity outlined above.³⁹¹ Alongside this, rumours regarding potentially real drug use on stage, and the ‘use of street culture and street language’, meant that the production’s controversial nature manifested in different ways.³⁹² The metatheatrical opening compounded the impression of such controversies, as it was immediately unclear if the actions and people on stage were real or fictional.

The play opens with one of the producers (Jim) explaining to the spectators that he and the author (Jaybird) ‘have imported a few addicts to improvise on Jaybird’s themes’.³⁹³ This sets the tone that what the audience is about to witness is not beholden to a text, and therein, these interactions between real addicts are framed as a more authentic experience than might otherwise be witnessed in a theatre. The spectators are also informed that cameras in the auditorium are filming the performance for a documentary. Not only does this suggest that what is about to unfold is worthy of being filmed for its dramatic import as well as its value as a kind of social experiment, it also alludes to the commodification of art becoming prevalent at that time; as Jim states, ‘if everything goes right, you will be able to see the film version of this play. It was the only hip thing

³⁹⁰ Christopher Grobe, *The Art of Confession: The Performance of Self from Robert Lowell to Reality TV* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), p. 115.

³⁹¹ Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*, p. 28.

³⁹² Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 27.

³⁹³ Jack Gelber, *The Connection* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 14.

to do.³⁹⁴ Such concern with the commodification of art, as already noted, is not only an aspect of the Living Theatre's political agenda, but also underpins Debordian thinking.

Summarising these opening conceits in the Living Theatre production, Bottoms claims that cumulatively they communicate to an audience 'that they are not watching a fictional situation set in a fictional location, but actual people, actually in front of them'.³⁹⁵ As such, the simulated drug abuse that follows might, in actuality, be real drug abuse and thereby 'illegal', as Jim reminds the audience.³⁹⁶ This suspicion was fuelled by rumours that the on-stage jazz band passed out during performances due to the passive effects of the drug abuse. In short, the suggestion was that events on stage in *The Connection* were not the fictional fare of narrative drama, but rather a disturbance of reality into the theatre.³⁹⁷

The linguistic register of *The Connection* supports this allusion that, rather than a traditional dramatic text being performed, reality is actually being observed in the theatre, particularly at moments of apparent narcotics abuse. One such example, reflecting what Bean refers to as 'druggy speech, which wanders at times into the sounds of agony',³⁹⁸ is when Solly (an addict) laments his inescapable situation: '[w]hen I talk, I'm a pessimist. Yet I want to live. I don't jump into the street against the lights and just miss killing myself a hundred times a day. That's what happens out there.

³⁹⁴ Gelber, p. 18.

³⁹⁵ Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*, p. 29.

³⁹⁶ Gelber, p. 15.

³⁹⁷ Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*, p. 29.

³⁹⁸ Bean, p. 109.

And in here, too.³⁹⁹ This conversational style, which stemmed from the incorporation of ‘street language’, buttressed Jim’s assertion that these were not professional actors but real addicts. By the time they intruded into the auditorium during the interval to ask for cash to support their habit – part of what Youker defines as the play’s ‘rough phenomenal realism’⁴⁰⁰ – Carol Martin asserts that the ‘spectators thought the actors really were junkies’, and that what would normally be witnessed ‘out there’ in the streets, had transferred ‘in here’, to the theatre.⁴⁰¹ Through these actions, as Bean highlights, it is clear that the production ‘combined prewritten dialogue with improvised action to create a version of realism as the performance of actual events unfolding in the present’.⁴⁰²

These seemingly ‘imported addicts’ then are part of the production’s attempt to confront the realities and perceptions of drug use and drug addiction on a narrative and socio-political level. Mike Sell reflects this as he states that Julian Beck was drawn to *The Connection* because he recognised that the play ‘possessed a keen understanding of the problem of revolutionary excess in an affluent society’.⁴⁰³ Through such socio-political and dramaturgical appreciations of the narrative issues, and the foregrounded metatheatrical structure, the authority of the text and the expectations of the audience are simultaneously challenged. As Carol Martin notes, *The Connection* is one example of work at this time which ‘began to play with the border between theatre and what was then understood as the real world’, and reflected this in its seeming departure from text,

³⁹⁹ Gelber, p. 60.

⁴⁰⁰ Youker, p. 129.

⁴⁰¹ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 27.

⁴⁰² Bean, p. 110.

⁴⁰³ Sell, p. 69.

its improvisational action, its 'plotless' structure, and its extra-theatrical framing as the subject of a documentary film.⁴⁰⁴ Indeed, following Sell's suggestion of a 'jazz epistemology' guiding Beck and Malina's approach at this time,⁴⁰⁵ Bean goes further to contend that *The Connection* could be 'characterized as a "deconstructive" performance' wherein the 'live jazz improvisation' in performance marked a 'transition toward the use of nonmimetic performance' in the Living Theatre's later practice.⁴⁰⁶

The 'Air of Documentary Authenticity'

At a time when notions of the real were shifting in light of the representations of capitalist societies in the spectacular age, the Living Theatre's work foregrounded issues which they deemed were ignored within the status quo. In doing so, the work questioned how perceptions of reality are shaped and communicated in order that systemic dehumanisation and substance abuse becomes normalised, while simultaneously reflecting on what forms theatre and performance should develop in order to bring such issues to light. Through the regimented representation of events and realist improvisation, both productions exhibit variations of documentary practices which do not neatly cohere with the documentary theatre forms discussed in Chapter One. As such, the Living Theatre offer important variations on the contemporaneous communication of the real and in doing so are a highly appropriate example for how the divergent yet related Weissian and Debordian approaches begin to crystallise. This is because neither work is categorically a clear departure from these approaches, but rather

⁴⁰⁴ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 27.

⁴⁰⁵ Sell, p. 78.

⁴⁰⁶ Bean, pp. 109–10. *Paradise Now* (1968) is perhaps their best known example.

oscillates between the two in the service of responding to the wider historical and ideologically charged moment.

The Brig takes as its central source material Brown's autobiographical account of life in a military prison, and in this way seems, in part, to rely on a Weissian faith that the "truth" is knowable and achievable via appropriate investigation and communication of "evidence". Yet, the communication of the truth in the Living Theatre production is augmented by the physical exertion and traumas visited upon the actors in performance, which elevates the critical value of the "evidence" by not simply telling but by showing Brown's experience – using the theatrical spectacle of 'phenomenal realism' to underscore violence in society. There appears, in *The Brig*, to be a faith in the facts that Brown offers, yet also a recognition that theatre can explore evidence in complex and detailed ways, as opposed to simply restaging source materials.

While it is accurate to draw a distinction between the improvisational strategies of *The Connection* and the regimented and violent orchestration of *The Brig*, the aesthetic form of *The Connection* goes further in breaking down the separation between stage and auditorium. In doing so, the production relegates the assumed objectivity of the Weissian approach in favour of making uncertain the boundary between the spectacle and the real. As such, the play appears as a living document depicting the reality of its drug addict protagonists who, as Kenneth Tynan notes at this time, 'are beyond the reach of drama, as we commonly define the word', because heroin addicts are 'absentees from the daytime universe'.⁴⁰⁷ In its totality, the unusual source material

⁴⁰⁷ Kenneth Tynan, 'Preface', in *The Connection* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), pp. 7–10 (p. 9).

concerning the little-known and ostracised world of the drug addict, the conversational manner of the work, and the dramatic form explained at the start by the producers, all suggest shades of a Debordian approach which foregrounds unconscious and obscured aspects of a spectator's experience of reality at the time. Therein, the work is a response to the circumstances of necessity over and above a reproduction of real events – this is the underpinning of the work's air of documentary authenticity.

This notion of 'authenticity' is a gathering concern in the next section. As Tom Maguire summarises, there has been a 'recurrent emphasis [in the late-twentieth and twenty-first century] by practitioners and critics alike on "authenticity"' – a 'vexed' yet 'widespread' notion that has stalked historical developments in documentary theatre, as Youker's use of it in relation to the Living Theatre already demonstrates.⁴⁰⁸ For Maguire, there are broadly two senses of authenticity in performance. In the first sense, an authentic 'representation of "real" life is best achieved through forms of documentation that are made present through performance as a means of achieving veracity'.⁴⁰⁹ This first sense is reminiscent of the Weissian approach that equates 'authenticity' with the unmodified communication of evidence. In the second sense, authenticity is generated via 'the relationship set up in the moment of performance', which is something both 'simultaneously powerful and ephemeral, [and] connected to both the teller's presence and a diminution of the impact of that presence in service of the story'.⁴¹⁰ This phenomenological understanding of authenticity highlights the performer as a subjective vehicle of truth-telling who, in their moment of performative

⁴⁰⁸ Tom Maguire, *Performing Story on the Contemporary Stage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 13.

⁴⁰⁹ Maguire, p. 13.

⁴¹⁰ Maguire, p. 14.

presence, draws attention to the content and process of communicating (or claiming to communicate) reality. In this way, Maguire's second sense of authenticity differs from a Debordian approach by highlighting the event and process of communication, as opposed to reducing it to a façade. Such strategies of authenticity, when coupled with autobiographical practice and the presence of the performing subject, hold up their representations of reality for critical evaluation from both subjective and pluralist perspectives, and as comparisons to hegemonic representations of reality; they are highlighted here due to the burgeoning experimentation at this time in history, but also because they foreshadow the mainstay of my later discussion in Chapter Four.

Drawing on the work of Cormac Power, Maguire's concern with the presence of the performer, and the immediacy of the performance event over a text, echoes what Bottoms describes as the neo-avant-garde's characteristic 'explorations of the theatrical "here and now"' over the "'there and then" of representational drama'.⁴¹¹ However, while Bottoms is elevating one over the other in reflection of a broadly conceived neo-avant-garde agenda, Maguire is concerned more with an equilibrium in performance practice between notions of presence, immediacy, and narrative. This is politically vital in resituating the productive capacity of documentary practices as techniques that speak to the present moment and to ongoing concerns, as opposed to being aspects of neatly framed documentary theatre forms that speak "about" the past.

In the remainder of this chapter, I consider how the impact of presence is paramount in troubling the 'discursive limitations' of the documentary theatre, particularly as part of a

⁴¹¹ Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*, p. 237.

response to contextual pressures over and above the act of recording and reporting real events. This contention forms the basis of my analysis of Spalding Gray's autobiographical work *Rumstick Road*, and lays the foundations for my analysis in Chapter Four of how contemporary developments in solo documentary performance draw on the notion of authenticity in the time and place presence of the storyteller. The utility of this particular documentary practice of the individual's presence within autobiographical performance across both cultural moments – in the neo-avant-garde work of Spalding Gray and in the post-verbatim landscape of the 2010s – is as a response to the kind authenticity offered from the Weissian approach that depends on the veracity of evidence, and as a response to the Debordian approach which views all forms of representation with scepticism and, therein, must also be sceptical of the notion of authenticity itself.

Presence

Building towards my discussion of *Rumstick Road*, this section begins by establishing its theoretical context via a consideration of poststructuralist concerns around the notion of presence. This is important because the presence of the performer as a documentary source material is a fundamental facet of autobiographical practice, which Spalding Gray mobilises. After establishing this context, I offer the notion of “conscious duplicity” as a productive lens through which to read autobiographical practice within the context of poststructural and postmodern plurality. Rather than adhering to the simple logic that autobiographical work offers a greater sense of authenticity because it is subjectively informed, I discuss how *Rumstick Road* provokes scepticism of its own claims to authenticity in how it retells Spalding Gray's life narrative.

In the 1970s and 1980s, poststructuralist criticism argued that the notion of presence was not synonymous with the notion of an original. That is to say, the idea that presence offered unmediated access to knowledge through experiences that resisted codification within systems of representation was dismissed by poststructuralist theory. As Derrida stated, ‘there is no purity of the living present’, there is only the ‘reconstituted’ – in other words, there is nothing original that is not beholden to something that has gone before.⁴¹² I explain this in greater depth below, but I want to immediately relate such complex matters to the dramaturgical subject matter of this section, because Deirdre Heddon identifies a similar caution in relation to simplistic associations between autobiography and notions of “truth” in documentary theatre. She contends that experience is not objective but rather it is ‘always already implicated in the structure of language since it is at the level of language that experience is interpreted, determining what, specifically, any event is able to mean’.⁴¹³

In a similar assertion that goes to the ontological core of performance as a mode of communication, Stephen Bottoms contends that ‘[p]laced within the frame of art, the ‘real’ is always already representational, and the ‘self’ always already a characterization, however much we might want to delude ourselves otherwise’.⁴¹⁴

Despite such accurate claims, Heddon extols the significance of presence within the moment of individual experience and interpretation in autobiographical performance, or

⁴¹² Derrida, p. 212.

⁴¹³ Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p.26.

⁴¹⁴ Stephen Bottoms, ‘Authorizing the Audience: The Conceptual Drama of Tim Crouch’, *Performance Research*, 14.1 (2009), 65–76 (p. 74).

what she refers to as ‘the fact the performer is in this space with me’.⁴¹⁵ In this phrase Heddon alludes to the sense that in theatrical performance the notion of presence has two specific facets: the presence of the performer as object and subject in a performance-event, and the co-presence of performer and audience in a specific place and at a specific time – the “here and now” of performance.

Heddon’s political commitment to foregrounding the embodied evidence of a performer is not an ‘assurance’ of factual veracity strategically deployed to ‘buy’ the attention of audiences so they ‘suspend disbelief more easily’, as Paget wrote.⁴¹⁶ Rather, it is to foreground embodied evidence as a truthful reflection of the lived experience of voices which lack access to such platforms. While questions around identity politics, privilege, and power all orbit Heddon’s discussion, in relation to my argument that the mobilisation of documentary practices in the late-twentieth century finds favour in exploring the contextual pressures over and above the recording or reporting of real events, the embodied evidence of autobiographical practice also reflects an increasing sense of ambiguity in twentieth century performance between the real of performance and the real beyond performance.

Alluding to this enduring power of the present time and space of performance, Thornton Wilder claimed that ‘it is precisely the glory of the stage that it is always “now” there’.⁴¹⁷ For Cormac Power, Wilder’s sense of the “nowness” of theatre reflects the classical and neo-classical collusion between actors and audiences in ‘acts of pretence

⁴¹⁵ Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, p. 6.

⁴¹⁶ Paget, *True Stories?: Documentary Drama on Radio, Screen and Stage*, p. 3.

⁴¹⁷ Thornton Wilder, ‘Preface’, in *Our Town and Other Plays* (London: Penguin Classics, 1962), p. 11.

and imagination'.⁴¹⁸ Power contrasts Wilder's classically contextualised concept of "nowness" with the context of multi-media technologies, which Power argues can expand 'that which can be put before us "now"', while also disturbing the 'intimacy of the actor-audience relationship'.⁴¹⁹ For Power, these two contrasting contexts highlight how theatrical worlds are 'shaped and presented' to audiences, and how theatre may be both shaped by, and respond to 'the conditions in which it is perceived'.⁴²⁰ In essence, as Power articulates via the work of Lavender, 'theatre has always traded in nowness', but different moments have inspired new ways in which to 'heighten the spectator's awareness of the present moment'.⁴²¹ According to Elinor Fuchs, Wilder's sentiment wrongly assumes that transcendence is possible for the spectator, that the 'always "now"' of the theatre is always available for metaphysical recognition, and that 'it is within the power of human nature to enter a Now, to become entirely present to itself'.⁴²² Such assumptions, Fuchs notes, are the focus of Derrida's deconstructivist project.

Deconstructivist scepticism of the value of theatrical presence centres on an incredulity towards the idea of original authority; as noted above, for Derrida 'there is no purity of the living present', instead there is only the 'reconstituted'. Fuchs paraphrases this by stating that 'there is no primordial or self-same present that is not already infiltrated by

⁴¹⁸ Cormac Power, *Presence in Play: A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre* (Amsterdam & New York, NY: Rodopi, 2008), p. 5.

⁴¹⁹ Power, p. 5.

⁴²⁰ Power, p. 5.

⁴²¹ Andy Lavender, 'The Moment of Realised Actuality', in *Theatre in Crisis? Performance Manifestos for a New Century*, ed. by Maria M. Delgado and Caridad Svich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 183–90 (p. 189).

⁴²² Elinor Fuchs, 'Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Re-Thinking Theatre after Derrida', *Performing Arts Journal*, 9.2/3 (1985), 163–73 (p. 165). Capitalisation as per original.

the trace’,⁴²³ which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has clarified as ‘the trace of something that is not itself’.⁴²⁴ Viewed through such a lens, the significance of the “nowness” that Wilder highlighted is somewhat diluted. Instead, for poststructuralists the authority of presence is void because any present is always populated (in part or whole) by the trace of something prior, which itself is comprised of another trace, and so on and so forth. In poststructuralist critique then, the constant deferral of an original makes sublime notions such as “truth” vacuous.

This constant deferral is allied to Heddon’s caution that the structure of language codifies all experience, and thereby determines all meaning. That is to say, meaning-making is reliant on the present being filtered through knowledge of the past. However, despite the poststructuralist scepticism of a purity of presence, Heddon argues that there is an important exchange in the moment of performance – the “here and now” – which characterises theatre that draws on personal experience such as autobiography, and underlines the political potential of autobiographical practice:

Though the notion of ‘presence’ or ‘aura’ that adheres to performance and performers might have been thoroughly challenged following Derrida (the performer is not, cannot be, “authentic” or unmediated even if they are “there”), nevertheless, the fact that the performer is in this space with me might well have an impact on my reception of his/her autobiographical stories. That relationship between performer and spectator does set this mediation of experience apart from other modes [forms]. Though it is no less mediated, its different form of mediation enables a potentially different impact that can be capitalised upon strategically.⁴²⁵

For Heddon, there is something distinct about the public sharing of personal narratives as a kind of evidence at a specific time and in a specific place, and that distinction is

⁴²³ Fuchs, p. 165.

⁴²⁴ Spivak, p. lxix. See Introduction, ‘Distinguishing Time Periods: Postmodern Times’.

⁴²⁵ Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, pp. 5–6.

rooted in the co-presence of performer (as documentary source material) and spectator. This ‘different form of mediation’ combines a public act of showing with aspirations of communicating lived experience in order to inform others of the social and political realities that shape perceptions and experiences of the real. For Heddon, this can transform performance into ‘dialogues’, and thereby make it a ‘potentially powerful tool of resistance, intervention and/or reinvention’.⁴²⁶

Such documentary dialogues can use the past to look forward, and in turn agitate the discursive limitations of the mode. Moreover, these dialogues can also be internal – that is, part of a performing subject’s navigation of the ‘contested terrain’ of the self.⁴²⁷ This is because, as Heddon claims, the ‘telling of stories about oneself is part of the construction of an identity for that self’.⁴²⁸ As Stuart Hall writes, ‘[i]dentity is not something which is formed outside and then we tell stories about it. It is that which is narrated in one’s own self.’⁴²⁹ Establishing the relationship between identity and storytelling which concerns the self, Maguire makes a similar point by drawing on Hannah Arendt to argue that, when an individual places themselves ‘into the world through telling stories and, in turn, are placed through the stories told about [them]’, then they are ‘simultaneously a “who” and a “what” as Hannah Arendt (1958) puts it, in dialogue with others around [them]’.⁴³⁰ This is to say that the storyteller, when part of

⁴²⁶ Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, p. 5.

⁴²⁷ Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, p. 4.

⁴²⁸ Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, p. 35.

⁴²⁹ Stuart Hall, ‘The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity’, in *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*, ed. by A. D. King (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 41–68 (p. 49).

⁴³⁰ Maguire, p. 2.

the narrative content, is both a version of themselves and an object of examination within a process of sharing and understanding new knowledge or perceptions.

The poststructuralist critique of the notion of presence is not a biased castigation, but rather it offers productive insights into the imbrication of performance and the real.

Derek Attridge asserts that Derrida's insertion of the 'positive prefix, "con"' into "destruction" demonstrates the 'affirmative nature of deconstruction'.⁴³¹ Indeed, Derrida's discussion of theatrical presence via *The Theatre and Its Double*, so Power claims, explores 'the possibilities of [Artaud's] richly suggestive text'.⁴³² Similarly, Tomlin highlights that Derrida recognises an aspirational quality in Artaud's demands that theatre be 'life itself, in the extent to which life is unrepresentable'.⁴³³ However, while Artaud's pursuit of liveness aspires to evade the trap of imitation – where a prior thing remains superior to a present representation of it – Tomlin explains that, from a poststructuralist perspective, Artaud's practice still operates 'in compliance with the order of mimesis'.⁴³⁴

Ultimately, by striving for a mythical "truth", Artaud's idealised practice is subject to a paradox, as Martin Puchner claims, wherein if a theatrical liveness that resists all forms of repetition were to be achieved, then 'nothing would remain to which [...] we could identify as a theatrical event'.⁴³⁵ Therefore, while the pursuit of presence suggested in

⁴³¹ Derek Attridge, 'Jacques Derrida: The Problems of Presence', *The Times Literary Supplement Online*, 9 November 2018 <<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/jacques-derrida-problems-presence/>> [accessed 1 March 2019].

⁴³² Power, pp. 137–38.

⁴³³ Derrida, in Tomlin, p.55.

⁴³⁴ Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions*, p. 56.

⁴³⁵ Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 202.

Artaud's practice may be an attempt to create something original, that pursuit struggles to be enacted outside of the binds of knowledge and language that inform processes of everyday cognition – the 'structure of language' to use Heddon's phrase. This paradox underlines 'the conceptual oppositions on which western metaphysics has staked its "logocentric" [...] claims to Presence for two thousand years'.⁴³⁶ That is, as has been explained, that any present is perpetually entwined with the traces of that which has gone before it, which is positioned as the superior custodian of knowledge or truth; or as Fuchs calls it, the 'first or originating principle'.⁴³⁷

Cumulatively, this broad scholarship demonstrates that the notion of theatrical presence, which is a fundamental component of autobiographical practice, is a slippery proposal. I agree with Heddon's navigation of poststructuralism, which calls for a hopeful balance between acknowledging the Derridean position of the already mediated subject, and an aspiration to tackle the social and political realities of that mediation through individual recognition and action. That is to say, new 'dialogues' are possible that can resist mimetic representation and the re-centring of the status quo, in order to uncover injustices or to celebrate difference. It is not, therefore, that the performing subject retains some esoterically sanctioned, mystical presence, but rather that the moment of performance and the adoption of specific practices – autobiography, in this case – is a unique meeting ground that 'might well have an impact' on reception. This makes "the here and now" of performance a politically charged time, space, and concept, where the past, the present, and potential futures meet. The notion of conscious duplicity, to which

⁴³⁶ Fuchs, p. 165. Capitalisation in original.

⁴³⁷ Fuchs, p. 165.

I turn next, takes forward this shimmering relation between the real and the performative specifically in relation to autobiographical practice.

Conscious Duplicity

Heddon's proposal that this unique meeting ground between performative presence and autobiography might impact on reception has more than the philosophical discourse of poststructuralism to contend against. Anti-theatrical prejudice, as seminally investigated by Jonas Barish (1981), concerns the pejorative association around ideas such as 'acting, play acting, playing up to, putting on an act, putting on a performance, making a scene'.⁴³⁸ The 'tradition of prejudice' that such negative associations engender is rooted, so Power claims, in 'the perceived duplicity or "doubleness" of theatre [with]in which presence is manipulated or subverted' and thereby undermined.⁴³⁹

Such sceptical notions are ideologically and politically significant for work that mobilises autobiographical practice, because they can diminish the air of authenticity and thereby negate the productive potential of both reframing historical narratives and reimagining potential new futures through performance. In contrast, and allied to shifting appreciations of the real in the twentieth century, I suggest that documentary practices can take on duplicity's semantic meaning of 'doubleness' (or "twofold") as a productive rejoinder to hegemonic narratives and metanarratives, rather than accept pejorative associations with the notion of deceit; this conscious duplicity, as I term it, becomes strategic.

⁴³⁸ Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1981), p. 1.

⁴³⁹ Power, p. 88.

In the context of theatre, conscious duplicity opens up recognition of the simultaneous and overlapping worlds within and beyond performance. In this respect, documentary theatre's invocation of the real amplifies its 'doubleness' in the pursuit of raising consciousness, giving platforms to marginalised voices, showing oppressed bodies, and telling stories of real injustice. When summarising verbatim practice, for example, Tomlin notes that its very 'credibility' relies 'on its alleged relationship to a reality beyond the theatre'.⁴⁴⁰ Through such thinking it is clear that the perceived duplicity of theatre and performance in general becomes a real duplicity in documentary theatre, because documentary theatre claims a direct association to reality, yet in its staging it is still subject to preconceived notions of theatrical "play-acting".

Within documentary theatre, conscious duplicity is a productive juxtaposition that foregrounds both the real and the not-real simultaneously. Or put another way, Power suggests that theatre is 'a medium that reflects on – and engages in – the pretence of presence'; if this is the case in a broad sense, then in a narrow sense documentary theatre engages in, and reflects on, the pretence and presence of the real.⁴⁴¹ This differently energises the ability of documentary practices to agitate specific aspects of real life by mobilising them in performance and framing them for critical analysis.

Conscious duplicity, I suggest, has increasingly become an aspect of documentary theatre as different practices varyingly oscillate between the "here and now" and the "there and then", between forms of representation and a sense of presence, between a focus on the performing subject and the examination of source materials, and between

⁴⁴⁰ Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions*, p. 116.

⁴⁴¹ Power, p. 89.

hegemonic narratives and counter-narratives of individual memory, witness, and interpretation. Varyingly, these issues are at the heart of Spalding Gray's *Rumstick Road* which is a strategically important example for its staging of a plethora of practices and ideologically charged concerns. Gray's play presents personal experience as documentary evidence within a performance that problematizes notions of objective truth, signals the shift towards pluralist perceptions of the real in line with the postmodern, and yet still foregrounds the presence of the performer within a narrative that stages its own duplicitous slippages between imagined material and documentary evidence.

Rumstick Road

Spalding Gray – or “Spud Gray” as he refers to himself at the beginning of *Rumstick Road* – is ‘one of America’s best known autobiographical performers’, according to Heddon.⁴⁴² His oeuvre spans three decades from the 1970s to his death in 2004. I have chosen to focus on *Rumstick Road* because of how its fragmented qualities blend Gray’s autobiographical inquiry into the suicide of his mother (Betty Gray), with the creation of dream-like moments and imagery.⁴⁴³ Such aesthetic doubleness elucidates the progressive slippage between faith in the ability to accurately represent reality through empirical evidence (Weissian approach), and an increasing scepticism of the potential for objectivity in any account due its participation within systems of representation (Debordian approach). The resultant ambiguity is a lynchpin of *Rumstick Road*, which foreshadows characteristic aspects of the mobilisation of documentary practices

⁴⁴² Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, p. 143.

⁴⁴³ *Rumstick Road*, dir. by Elizabeth LeCompte (The Wooster Group, 2013).

examined in Chapters Three and Four. Alongside this conceptual importance, *Rumstick Road* is a canonical waystation in the documentary tradition in its own right, and its development as part of the Wooster Group's "Three Places in Rhode Island" trilogy makes it a logical step forward from the neo-avant-garde sensibilities of the Living Theatre.

The documentary practices of *Rumstick Road* are distinct from examples discussed up to this moment. *Rumstick Road* foregrounds a plurality of accounts, memories, testimonies, and perspectives within its fragmented narrative. This fragmentation informs the subjective quality of its autobiographical practice, meaning that the play is more than simply "about" Gray's relationship with his mother. The various source materials generate a sense that information is being discovered within the documentary process, as opposed to being presented. In short, the play concerns revelation, not dissemination. Comments from the play's creators support this, such as when co-creator and director Elizabeth LeCompte describes *Rumstick Road* as 'part dream, part non-literal imagery, and part factual documentary'.⁴⁴⁴ Gray's own summary of the play highlights the kind of revelation it offered him, because he wanted to 'develop some meaningful structure into which I could place the meaningless act of this suicide'.⁴⁴⁵ Both these statements suggest that through disorder there can be an instilling of order, which might in part rationalise the event of maternal suicide.

⁴⁴⁴ Elizabeth LeCompte, 'An Introduction', *Performing Arts Journal*, 3.2 (1978), 81–86 (p. 83).

⁴⁴⁵ Spalding Gray, 'About "Three Places in Rhode Island"', *The Drama Review*, 23.1 (1979), 31–42 (p. 38).

The play is a composite then, of factual and non-factual elements. The factual elements are comprised of Gray's testimony, letters from his mother, and recorded conversations with his father and his mother's psychiatrist Dr Bradford, amongst other source materials. The non-factual elements range from moments of silhouette within a tent and frenetic dancing in front of images of the Gray family house on the eponymous road, to almost slap-stick chase sequences where performers run through the different spaces of the set. LeCompte advocates that such non-factual elements are required to balance the factual, and to offer a visual way to reconcile the 'romantic, mystical, [and] religious aspects of his [Gray's] mother's personality [...] against the rational pragmatic materialism of his father'.⁴⁴⁶ The imbrication of factual and non-factual elements engenders an ambiguity in both the dramaturgy of the work (what it is doing), and in the sense of accuracy of the source materials. Indeed, LeCompte covets moments of indecipherability wherein 'the literal is indistinguishable from the figurative, the factual from the fictive'.⁴⁴⁷

This embracing of different elements (whether factual or fictive) in the representation of historical narratives, alongside the work appearing to be a documentary process of discovery rather than dissemination, resonates with Martin's proposal to shift 'the idea of documentary from a product to a process'.⁴⁴⁸ This is because a 'process' is ongoing, as is the continuum of experiencing, remembering, and retelling (true) stories. For Martin, this shift towards the understanding of documentary as a process confronts 'the

⁴⁴⁶ LeCompte, p. 83.

⁴⁴⁷ LeCompte, p. 83.

⁴⁴⁸ Martin, 'Living Simulations: The Use of Media in Documentary in the UK, Lebanon and Israel', p. 89.

complicated ways in which oral tradition is embodied in postmodernism'.⁴⁴⁹ That is to say, the telling and retelling of stories is intrinsically subject to, and must be aware of, the shifting frameworks in respect of what is being retold, where, when, and by whom.⁴⁵⁰ As such, the conscious duplicity of *Rumstick Road* is bound by both the 'promise' of authenticity that might be expected of autobiographical practice, and an increasing appreciation that pluralist conceptions of history are informed by shifting perceptions of the real.⁴⁵¹ By mobilising documentary practices which do not adhere to either the Weissian faith in the unbiased presentation of evidence, or the Debordian scepticism that spectacular workings of society conceal the real, the difficulty in establishing what might be real is part of the very process of discovery that Spalding Gray undertakes in *Rumstick Road*.

The production's staging adds weight to this notion that the play's collaged source materials and the plurality of perspectives is part of a process of discovery. Jim Clayburgh's set consists of two square boxes in perspective; that is to say, they decrease in size as they graduate upstage towards their respective back walls – as if moving towards a vanishing point on a horizon. A booth downstage centre links these two spaces while simultaneously obscuring a third room – an interconnecting corridor upstage that links the two box-like spaces on either side of the stage. The inside of this corridor is only visible in fleeting reflective flashes, as the mirrored doors at each end are opened. The centre-stage booth houses a technician who operates sound cues

⁴⁴⁹ Martin, 'Living Simulations: The Use of Media in Documentary in the UK, Lebanon and Israel', p. 89.

⁴⁵⁰ Such frames of inquiry obviously also find particular focus around issues of identity politics, power, and privilege.

⁴⁵¹ Reinelt, p. 6.

throughout the performance, which makes a dramaturgical and aesthetic feature out of the process of orchestrating the historical narrative that is relayed, such as the re-playing of recorded telephone conversations between Gray and Dr Bradford. The scenographic image suggested by these two boxes linked via the technician's booth resembles eyes abridged by a nose, and therein appeals to a metaphorical interpretation that the play concerns memory, perception, inner monologues, and the inner workings of a human head.

Rumstick Road: The Factual, the Fictive, and Conscious Duplicity

The conscious duplicity of *Rumstick Road* is signalled in the processes through which the performances appears as both a construction and a reconstruction in the here and now. Examples include aspects of the staging, such as the visible operations of orchestrating the audio material from the centre-stage booth, and the untidily positioned projector downstage-right. These material aspects signal the operations that enable the theatrical event to unfold, but they are also ways in which personal artefacts of Spalding Gray's life are brought back into the present. As such, the performance foregrounds both what and how Spud remembers, but by extension it also encourages spectators to look inward at what and how they recollect, particularly as the set design places the audience "within" this head-like space.⁴⁵² It is the spectators' task to scrutinise not only what seems to be factual and what appears fictive, but also why those entanglements appear as they do in performance, and identify where similar entanglements might populate the real beyond the performance event. Another example of conscious duplicity at work in *Rumstick Road* is Gray's recorded telephone conversation with Dr

⁴⁵² Spalding Gray and Elizabeth Le Compte, 'Rumstick Road', *Performing Arts Journal*, 3.2 (1978), 92–115 (p. 94).

Bradford – this example pertains to both the staging aspects and the documentary content of the work.

Sitting in the stage right space, speaking into the handset of a telephone, Gray inserts his on stage words between the recorded responses of Dr Bradford as part of a partial re-enactment of their conversation. The visible processes of theatrical reconstruction negate any sense of verisimilitude in this moment. The “evidence” of this conversation’s occurrence, and its content (the discussion of Betty Gray’s condition), is up for debate. On the one hand, the re-enacted conversation has an immediate, unmediated quality of truth in the here and now, through Gray’s on stage agency prompting the theatrical present to make active the recorded past. While on the other hand, the floating vocal signifiers of the absent Dr Bradford, and the decontextualized on stage words of Gray, ostensibly create a suspicion that this event may all be in Gray’s mind. The play text reinforces the conscious duplicity of such suspicions, as it states that ‘Dr Henry Bradford’ is a ‘fictitious name’; this can be seen as an undermining of the factual nature of the words spoken, or as an ethically responsible concealment of the real person.⁴⁵³

In such instances, the fictive and the factual become indecipherable; all that remains in the wake of the slippage between these two poles is a prevailing sense of uncertainty in these people, their circumstances, and their words. This makes *Rumstick Road* seem far from a documentary, despite its deployment of documentary practices, and in many ways the play resists such a neat categorisation. As Gray suggests, the play is not one fixed thing: it is ‘in no way an attempt to enact my mother’s madness or to enact or

⁴⁵³ Gray and Le Compte, p. 92.

recreate the experience I had of that madness'.⁴⁵⁴ As Gray concludes, it is both a form of therapy, and yet it also 'stands on its own' as a piece of art that 'is not about suicide; it is about making ART'; to this I would add specifically that it is about making art at that historical moment.⁴⁵⁵

The uncertainty that *Rumstick Road* cultivates is part of the malleable application of its documentary practices. Indeed, as Shank suggests, the intention of the work is to offer 'no clear distinction' between the 'invented elements [... and] the documentary'.⁴⁵⁶ As such, Gray is right that the play is not about suicide, but rather it is about perspective and subjectivity, because it is a partial reconstruction which can only offer third-party perspectives that inevitably contain biases, which are doubly suspect once refracted through Gray's (and LeCompte's) production.

Allied to this focus on a plurality of potential perspectives, Gray's assertion that *Rumstick Road* is "'impossible to misread'", supports a personalisation of the experience of the play.⁴⁵⁷ That is to say that within a set design that evokes 'the idea of binocularity', the spectators must piece together the partitioned action and perspectives in order to create a whole vision for the information communicated.⁴⁵⁸ For example, when the actress portraying Betty dances frenetically in front of a projection of their home in the stage right space, Spud peers in an upstage window in the stage left space – this not only suggests that he is looking into the interior of the Gray home projected behind his mother, but can also allude to a continuation of life while Betty's mental

⁴⁵⁴ Gray, p. 39.

⁴⁵⁵ Gray, p. 39. Capitalisation in original.

⁴⁵⁶ Shank, p. 170.

⁴⁵⁷ Gray, in, Youker, p. 151.

⁴⁵⁸ Youker, p. 150.

state deteriorates. Youker claims that these interconnected spaces of action on stage shift perspective with each refocus, as the hierarchy of attention fluctuates between the two. Whether an ocular refocusing or a thematic shift of storytelling, Youker offers the term ‘documentary parallax’ to define these shifts, and suggests this can highlight how witnesses’ memories are shaped by their ‘positionality and personal motivations’.⁴⁵⁹ This parallax notion is engendered, so Youker asserts, by the ‘lack of structure’ in *Rumstick Road*, whereby ‘individual spectators [are encouraged] to draw their own associations and have a personalized experience’.⁴⁶⁰

I agree with aspects of Youker’s conclusion regarding the encouragement of an audience to navigate the disparate elements of *Rumstick Road*, but I disagree that the plethora of materials, and the imbrication of factual and fictive elements, are demonstrative of a ‘lack of structure’. I contend that the structure exists via the materials that have helped Gray create his introspective evaluation of how he and his family dealt with his mother’s deteriorating mental health. Therefore, what Youker perceives as a deficiency in structure, I suggest is actually a facet of the dramatic composition that layers aspects of real memories, mis-remembering, rumour, evidence, testimony, and dream-like episodes, in an attempt to give form to the precarious nature of retelling and reconstructing individual perceptions of our own lives. Even the opening monologue, wherein Spalding Gray’s torso is the focus of the spotlight, as opposed to his face – the most identifiable aspect of the human body – demonstrates the structured nature of this skewed recollection of real life that is about to be witnessed.

⁴⁵⁹ Youker, p. 149.

⁴⁶⁰ Youker, p. 151.

Youker's discussion of *Rumstick Road* opens a section of his monograph devoted to documentary theatre after postmodernism, and the production's multifarious source materials supports Youker's argument that a collage aesthetic courses through the veins of documentary theatre in the twentieth century. In contrast, Heddon and others focus on the ethical integrity of *Rumstick Road* through Gray's utilisation of private correspondence and recorded conversations. Heddon pays particular attention to the 'privacy, exploitation and ownership' of the source materials utilised, which are not buttressed by the consent from all parties for their use in public performance.⁴⁶¹ David Savran recounts the *Village Voice* critic Michael Feingold's "vehement protest" against the use of such private materials, while also discussing similar misgivings that were voiced by the Obie Award judges in 1977 – this led to *Rumstick Road* being refused consideration.⁴⁶² Heddon suggests that the wilful transplanting of private conversations into public performance flouts the 'cultural (if not legal) rights' of those people involved, who are subsequently turned from 'subjects into powerless objects'.⁴⁶³ She goes further to critique the dramaturgical validity of this strategy by arguing that, in the pursuance of such actions, '[t]he subject is in danger of disappearing into allegory', as any meaning that is able to be drawn from these source materials is mediated through the lens of the performance narrative, and the performing subject – Gray.⁴⁶⁴

I agree that there is an ethically questionable doubleness in the way Gray and LeCompte reconstruct fragments of source materials within the narrative, and in that way there is a

⁴⁶¹ Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, p. 146.

⁴⁶² Feingold, in, David Savran, *The Wooster Group, 1975-1985: Breaking The Rules* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1986), pp. 94–95.

⁴⁶³ Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, p. 147.

⁴⁶⁴ Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, p. 147.

pejorative sense to the duplicity at work in *Rumstick Road*. However, Youker's positioning of *Rumstick Road* as the canonical instigator of postmodern-inflected documentary suggests rightly that Gray's repurposing of the words of others contrasts the notional stability of documentation as a source of objective truth. In this way, *Rumstick Road* challenges a Weissian faith in the empirical infallibility of documentary evidence. Taken further though, the complex layering of content and form in *Rumstick Road* also suggests that Gray and LeCompte were not simply adopting a Debordian scepticism of all representation. As such, the documentary practices mobilised in *Rumstick Road* exemplify how the Janus-faced relation between the Weissian and Debordian approaches is subject to increasing imbrication in the twentieth century. Gray's and LeCompte's production rejects the facile notion that objective truth arises via the regurgitation of source materials and, although there is a recognition of how the workings of society can conspire to conceal the real, there is still a sense that the here and now of performance can offer moments of revelation beyond the content of Gray's narrative, to the manner in which the real is perceived and communicated in that historic moment.

Therefore, I contend that the dramaturgical structure of *Rumstick Road* is concerned with processes of revelation that appear contradictory, unresolved, and unfinished. In a poststructuralist sense – of which Aronson notes LeCompte was aware – this resonates with the notion that there is no such thing as original truth, and that all knowing is impacted and continually deferred by the matrixed traces of what has gone before.⁴⁶⁵ As part of a documentary process, therefore, self-reflective work such as *Rumstick Road* is

⁴⁶⁵ Arnold Aronson, 'The Wooster Group's "L. S. D. (... Just the High Points...)"', *The Drama Review*, 29.2 (1985), 65–77 (p. 65).

not attempting to evaluate the past in order to draw conclusions about what has happened, but to consider how processes of remembering and retelling might impact the perception of self and, in turn, future actions. This is the particular, critical, and dramaturgical import of its autobiographical practice – the fact that the performer is simultaneously the subject and object of examination in both form and content, and they are present for that public and self-reflexive process of investigating not necessarily what is real or truthful, but what is remembered and presented as such.

In a wider political sense, such acts of individual introspection focus the critical gaze on how reality is communicated and represented, rather than solely on the content of a retelling. This is not to encourage righteous judgements that side with either a Weissian faith in evidence or a Debordian scepticism of all that is presented, but rather to promote subjective reinvestigations of the ambiguities that cannot be neatly resolved by such binaries. This is particularly the case at a time of swift technological change in the latter twentieth century, when socially, politically, culturally, and ideologically, representations and appreciations of reality and the real were swiftly shifting.

Conclusion

In the mid to late-twentieth century, shifts informed by political, social, and cultural changes, but particularly by developments in technologies such as television – which promoted a total assimilation between imagery and reality – altered perceptions of the real and of “truthful” representation. These shifts led to performative experimentations that foregrounded the time, place, and presence of the performance moment, as a response to contextual pressures over and above the act of reporting or recording the real.

In order to evaluate how theatre and performance responded to these challenging circumstances, I established two tensions between opposing appreciations of the real. On the one hand, the Weissian approach contends that the “truth” is able to be apprehended through the scrupulous investigation and reproduction of evidence in the public domain. On the other hand, the Debordian approach argues for a totalising scepticism of all communication because it operates in compliance with the representations of the spectacular society. These approaches represent different methodological ways in which critical attentions can be directed in this era, in order to navigate the technological forms of mass-media that, for Weiss and Debord, corrupt appreciations of reality.

The case studies I have discussed – the Living Theatre and Spalding Gray – take on aspects of both these approaches; they both mobilise, and yet also promote suspicion of, documentary practices. The strategies of both examples are broadly in pursuance of an ambiguity that unsettles the stable boundary between performance and reality; this is achieved via either an ‘air’ of authenticity, or the promotion of a doubleness in respect of performance and the real (conscious duplicity). These productively uncertain performance outcomes demonstrate the continued malleable response of documentary practices. Indeed, they begin the practical work of unshackling documentary practices from cohesive documentary theatre forms, and the value of their contributions returns later, in Chapter Four’s consideration of the storyteller’s authentic presence, and in a broader turn to ambiguous documentary practices in the next chapter.

I contend that the case studies of this chapter are ideologically informed by the gathering poststructuralist critique of original authority and foreshadow aspects of the impending postmodern. The scepticism of technological change and of the totalising

notions of reality that these case studies promote, do two things. Firstly, they encourage an appreciation of the analogue nature of performance in order to activate the critical interpretative capacity of the spectator and to reject the passivity associated with the 'flow' of televisual broadcasting. Secondly, they encourage suspicion of all forms of communication, even performance, and foreshadow a pluralist approach which both neatly brings the postmodern into view, but also prefigures aspects of individualism and neoliberalism.

The historical incongruities of the 1960s then, saw theoretical, socio-political, and cultural shifts propel neo-avant-garde and poststructuralist critiques of representation into conflict with an explosion of mass media and global commercialism, as technological shifts embedded the 'mere representation' of the spectacular society into the everyday. The next logical waystation in this project is the turn of the new millennium, when an equally incongruous but no less interesting parallel of postmodern distrust escalates amid a renewed thirst for facticity.

CHAPTER THREE: FACTS, FICTIONS, AND DOCUMENTARY PRACTICES

Chapters One and Two proposed that the historic malleability and responsiveness of documentary practices are enduring and vital qualities of the documentary canon. I contend that these qualities enable the mobilisation of documentary practices to be isolated from overarching notions of documentary theatre forms when those practices are present in aesthetic forms that do not neatly cohere with canonically enshrined models of documentary theatre. Taking this forward, Chapters Three and Four are concerned with the circumstances of necessity that accumulate in digital times and investigate eruptions of documentary practices beyond the normative confines of canonised documentary theatre forms.

These contemporary eruptions resonate with Paget's contention that a relearning of documentary theatre occurs as new practitioners navigate different contexts.⁴⁶⁶ This process of relearning, I suggest, is also a process of reinvestigating the notional and practical work of documentary praxis – that is to say, not just *how to do* documentary, but also what documentary *can do*. Rather than suggesting an absolute schism, or that a wholly “new” kind of documentary theatre is born in digital times, Chapters Three and Four question the stable and discreet notion of a “documentary theatre” genre in the twenty-first century, promoting instead the value of an expanding mobilisation of documentary practices in a range of theatrical models. I argue that this can expand critical interpretations of reality representations by theatre audiences, practitioners, and scholars, both within and beyond theatre arenas in digital times.

⁴⁶⁶ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, p. 224.

Argument and Structure

This chapter proposes that within an era of ‘fluid information-exchange and demotic publishing’,⁴⁶⁷ which Lavender notes has precipitated a ‘rapid, pervasive and culture-changing growth of digital communications’, the relationship between documentary practices and notions of fact and fiction has shifted.⁴⁶⁸ This shift reflects the sense that a fact-fiction binary has, in some ways, already dissolved within the fluid operations of communication in digital times. This dissolution goes beyond a rudimentary “blurring” of these poles of fact and fiction – albeit that blurring is an important way-station on the trajectory towards dissolution. Rather, by establishing a gathering conflation between documentary theatre forms in the new millennium, particularly tribunal and verbatim theatre, and later considering the contemporary context of online communication, this chapter argues that the mobilisation of documentary practices in digital times reveal how the newly quotidian forms of information sharing (social media and online platforms) can dangerously normalize the dissolution between fact and fiction.

My argument is a first foray into how documentary practices are mobilised in response to such new modes of information sharing, and their impact on representations of culture, society, individuals, politics, and the real. Critical engagements with the representation of online exchanges in theatre have varyingly taken shape since the success of Patrick Marber’s *Closer* (1997), which in ‘its most celebrated scene’, according to Graham Saunders, gave spectators the first ‘onstage representation of two

⁴⁶⁷ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 14.

⁴⁶⁸ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 13. See also Introduction, ‘Digital Times’.

people communicating through the internet'.⁴⁶⁹ Recent interventions in the discourse of theatre and digital communications have rightly focused on the influence of social media, with notable works including Patrick Lonergan's *Theatre and Social Media* (2015), and Bree Hadley's *Theatre, Social Media, and Meaning Making* (2017). Both of these have sought to establish a historical and broadly inclusive theatrical landscape within which the seemingly 'revolutionary changes in the ways artists and their audiences come together to make, and make meaning of, plays, performances, and events' can be examined.⁴⁷⁰ The specific focus on documentary practices within these new circumstances of necessity enables my research to draw out what a dissolved fact-fiction binary means for stable forms of documentary theatre in digital times, particularly in terms of the political traditions of certain documentary practices when subject to repurposing as analogue vehicles to communicate digital content.

The contexts of Chapters Three and Four, then, are primarily concerned with events occurring since the turn of the millennium. As such, both chapters necessarily reference the profusion of verbatim and tribunal theatre in the first part of the twenty-first century, because that is the pressing documentary landscape from which the expanded mobilisations of documentary practices emerge. Further to this theatrical context, both Chapters Three and Four are concerned with an overlapping and incremental range of political and technological developments within the twenty-first century.

Therefore, the structure of this chapter begins by exploring the relevant aspects of that recent history through an examination of geo-political and economic upheaval in the

⁴⁶⁹ Graham Saunders, *Patrick Marber's 'Closer'* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 8.

⁴⁷⁰ Bree Hadley, *Theatre, Social Media, and Meaning Making* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 2.

new millennium, with a particular interest in the UK – the geographical focal point of both chapters. I then establish how shifting understandings of the real relate to the new circumstances of necessity in digital times by drawing on the work of Jean Baudrillard. Through this I demonstrate the increasingly sceptical relationship between states, institutions, and individuals in the new millennium and then explore how documentary theatre has responded to these circumstances in two ways.

The first response is an exercising of “real voices” at the beginning of the twenty-first century, which draws on the Weissian tradition and buttresses the argument that an age of distrust flourished in light of relationships between institutions, the state, and the individuals they serve. Through the Tricycle theatre’s production of *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry* (2005, hereafter referred to as *Bloody Sunday*), and the work of Alecky Blythe, I examine how the Weissian inflected aspects of tribunal and verbatim practice reflect an increased desire for “truth”, and in that way an increased expectation (initially) that such an achievement was possible within the info-saturated landscape of the twenty-first century.

The second response relates to what I term the ambiguity turn in the mobilisation of documentary practices, which ostensibly fosters a documentary veneer. To elaborate on this, I outline discursive engagements relating to the interplay of fact and fiction in contemporary documentary theatre and highlight an expanded currency in the term “verbatim”. I make the case that a sense of conflation between verbatim and tribunal practices creates a false impression of equitable political productiveness between these highly popularised practices – one which begins to problematize the Weiss-like faith in facts with which these forms are commonly associated. In light of this conflation, I

suggest that the documentary veneer, as part of a wider turn to ambiguity, begins to reflect the destabilising of a fact-fiction binary.

The final part of this chapter draws extensively on Chris Goode's 2015 play *Weaklings* to examine how its suggestion of an already collapsed fact-fiction binary, propagated within forms of digital communication, sits uncomfortably alongside documentary practices that are positioned as truthful representations of the real. *Weaklings* attempts to stage the liminal space of an online blog and is based on a blend of documentary material drawn from the internet, documentary materials created for the production, and imagined dialogue. Through the deployment of this ambiguous corpus of sources, the intermingling of imagined dialogue with talking-head interviews and verbatim material, and the overlapping of unattributed, self-authorising online correspondence, Goode's play suggests that this collapse and its implications are seeping into offline realities.

Weaklings activates the malleability of its documentary practices in order to stage imagined dialogue through a documentary aesthetic. However, while this is not the first occurrence of such a strategy, in this instance malleability has potentially negative consequences as it is employed to generate an equivalent authority between all forms of information sharing.⁴⁷¹ Despite Goode's declaration that the play 'disorientingly blurs' the factual and the fictional, *Weaklings* actually suggests that such binaries are already dissolved in the new domain of the digital.⁴⁷² As such, *Weaklings* is an extension of the ambiguity turn in documentary because, while previous iterations "blur" fact and

⁴⁷¹ See discussion of *Taking Care of Baby* and *Stuff Happens* in Chapter Three, 'The Ambiguity Turn: Documentary Veneer'.

⁴⁷² Chris Goode and Company, 'Weaklings', 2015
<<https://web.archive.org/web/20160204122135/http://www.chrisgoodeandcompany.co.uk/show/weaklings/>> [accessed 1 November 2015].

fiction, *Weaklings* suggests that a collapse between these poles has already occurred. I take issue with *Weaklings* as it fails to offer a way to reimagine the world (real or virtual) beyond Goode's stylistic representation. As a contemporary instance of the process of relearning aspects of documentary theatre (Paget), *Weaklings* demonstrates the difficulty of representing virtual worlds and relationships in the analogue setting of a theatre. This is not just an aesthetic problem, but a political one as well. Although *Weaklings* seems in-tune with impending shifts in popular rhetoric around truth and post-truth, and facts and alternative facts, the production blunts the politics of its documentary practices because it offers no clarity regarding what is real or not, and therein, offers no route to redress the spread of online harms and falsehoods, but instead mobilises documentary practices as purely aesthetic vehicles.

To begin to situate shifting understandings and conceptions of truth and the real in the twenty-first century then, we must revisit events from the beginning of the new millennium.

States of Distrust: Theory and Events in the New Millennium

The twenty-first century has heralded a number of significant events which demonstrate how global interconnectedness extends the ripple-effects of political and technological shifts internationally, from the World Trade Centre attacks of 9/11 and the global financial crisis of 2008, to the development of the iPhone in 2007 and the mass mobilisations of protest which were facilitated by such technological developments – the Arab Spring of 2010 being a prime example.⁴⁷³ Although these events occurred in the new millennium, foundations for understanding and assimilating them within

⁴⁷³ See Introduction, 'Digital Times'.

perceptions of reality had already been laid in the late-twentieth century, particularly by Jean Baudrillard.

The era following the countercultural protests of the 1960s and the accelerated proliferation of mass communication was, according to Baudrillard, characterised by a transition wherein ‘production and consumption’ had given way to a ‘narcissistic and protean era’ of networks, connections, and contacts.⁴⁷⁴ Writing in a period of intensified global connectivity, particularly in the interconnected computerisation of financial markets that fused together the increasingly neoliberal western economies of the 1980s and 1990s, Baudrillard asserted that old notions of ‘the scene and the mirror’ had been usurped by ‘a screen and a network’.⁴⁷⁵ While Baudrillard echoed Debord’s sentiments and contended that ‘the perfect object for this new era’ was the televisual image, this was not because he agreed with the Debordian notion that the imagery of the spectacular society masked the real.⁴⁷⁶ On the contrary, for Baudrillard the real was not a thing that imagery could hide, but rather what was perceived as the real was in fact a totality of simulacra that generated and solidified ‘a real without origin or reality’ – a ‘hyperreal’.⁴⁷⁷

For Baudrillard, the hyperreal was sustained by ‘the production and reproduction of the real’ through forms of technological representation, such as the televisual image.⁴⁷⁸ He

⁴⁷⁴ Jean Baudrillard, ‘The Ecstasy of Communication’, in *Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1985), pp. 126–34 (p. 127).

⁴⁷⁵ Baudrillard, ‘The Ecstasy of Communication’, pp. 126–27.

⁴⁷⁶ Baudrillard, ‘The Ecstasy of Communication’, pp. 126–27.

⁴⁷⁷ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simualtion*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 1.

⁴⁷⁸ Baudrillard, ‘The Ecstasy of Communication’, p. 23.

referred to this endeavour as the ‘characteristic hysteria of our times’,⁴⁷⁹ and asserted that it marked the conclusion of the ‘phases of the image’, which began with the Debord-esque assertion of representation reflecting and masking ‘profound reality’, but progressed to a state of ‘pure simulacrum’.⁴⁸⁰ This new state of pure simulacrum sees the ‘operational double’ of the real ‘substituting the signs of the real for the real’.⁴⁸¹ In Baudrillard’s terms, the stakes have risen – it is ‘no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody’, but rather a question of disentanglement.⁴⁸² This is because, in this pure simulacrum, ‘the charm of abstraction’ which offered a ‘sovereign difference, between one and the other’, between the real and the spectacle of representation, has ‘disappeared’.⁴⁸³ Therefore, in a progression from Debord, the Baudrillardian ‘era of simulation’ moves past concerns of the traditional order of appearances where an image masks the real, and points towards the new ‘liquidation of all referentials’.⁴⁸⁴ This ‘transition’, as Baudrillard calls it, ‘from signs that dissimulate something to signs that dissimulate that there is nothing marks a decisive turning point’ in the discourse of the real.⁴⁸⁵

In relation to this thesis, Baudrillard’s work problematizes the political value of documentary theatre and art more generally.⁴⁸⁶ This is because, if it is the case that only the hyperreal prevails, then to what end is documentary theatre a meaningful act of status quo resistance, since the real it purports to present is arguably another spectacular

⁴⁷⁹ Baudrillard, ‘The Ecstasy of Communication’, p. 23.

⁴⁸⁰ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simualtion*, p. 6.

⁴⁸¹ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simualtion*, p. 2.

⁴⁸² Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simualtion*, p. 2.

⁴⁸³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simualtion*, p. 2.

⁴⁸⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simualtion*, p. 2.

⁴⁸⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simualtion*, p. 6.

⁴⁸⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simualtion*, p. 6.

operation that hides the “true truth” that there is no real? This is a kind of nihilist double-bind, because if such sentiments carry the day, then Baudrillard’s work itself must also be complicit within the operations of the hyperreal. In light of the value of Baudrillard’s work itself, modes of critical inquiry must persist even if, as he states, the ‘stage of analysis itself has become uncertain’ – indeed, such uncertainty should readily be investigated.⁴⁸⁷

For Baudrillard, such uncertainty is not the product of a lack of knowledge, but rather a result of informational bombardment. I suggest that this claim underpins Baudrillard’s 1981 treatise *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), that this claim is furthered in his monograph *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995), and that this claim is logically exacerbated in digital times amid the ubiquity of twenty-four hour news and the widespread adoption of the internet in an engorged info-ecology. Baudrillard asserts that ‘[r]ather than creating communication, it [information] *exhausts itself in the act of staging communication*. Rather than producing meaning, it [information] exhausts itself in the staging of meaning.’⁴⁸⁸ To return to the contextual framing of events in the new millennium, Baudrillard’s contention regarding ‘the act of staging communication’ is realised in the oft-cited coverage of 9/11.

In the wake of 9/11, Baudrillard claimed that ‘the tactic of the terrorist model is to bring about an excess of reality, and have the system collapse beneath that excess’.⁴⁸⁹ The difficulty of processing this ‘excess of reality’ concerning the events and coverage of

⁴⁸⁷ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, pp. 160–61.

⁴⁸⁸ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 80. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁸⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002), p. 18.

9/11 is reflected in Carol Martin's recollections of the 'complex layering of live and mediatized perceptions' of the attacks – according to Tomlin, this intricate 'layering' of modes of reception that Martin describes informs 'a sense of the real'.⁴⁹⁰ Indeed, Martin asserts that the ubiquitous television coverage of 9/11 has engendered a common perception whereby 'everyone feels that, whether their experience was live or mediated, they did actually experience those moments, and that day'.⁴⁹¹ To illustrate this she offers a comparison between her memories, the televisual coverage, and a stop-motion animation film of 9/11 called *The History of the World Part Eleven* (2010) by Herman Helle.⁴⁹²

Helle's film stages a crude version of 9/11 using towers made of milk cartons, cardboard aeroplanes, and clay figurines, in contrast to 'the perfect Hollywood-style images on television',⁴⁹³ and later in cinematic dramatizations.⁴⁹⁴ While neither documentary nor theatre, Helle's film exemplifies the tension Martin identifies between 'a positivist faith in empirical reality', and an 'epistemological crisis in knowing truth'.⁴⁹⁵ Focusing more on 'visualizing an imaginary of what happened than on presenting literal verisimilitude', Helle replicates well known images alongside imagined perspectives – such as a point-of-view shot from the inside of one tower just before impact.⁴⁹⁶ Such strategies remind viewers that despite the copious televisual imagery, aspects of 9/11 are unknown and unknowable. That being said, the images that

⁴⁹⁰ Tomlin, "'Theatre of the Real" by Carol Martin (Review)', p. 281.

⁴⁹¹ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 63.

⁴⁹² Herman Helle, *History of the World: Part Eleven*, online video recording, Vimeo, 2010, <<https://vimeo.com/16278905>> [accessed 16 February 2016].

⁴⁹³ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 65.

⁴⁹⁴ *World Trade Centre*, dir. by Oliver Stone (Paramount Pictures, 2006).

⁴⁹⁵ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 14.

⁴⁹⁶ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 67.

Helle images are not implausible – they are in fact convincing. Alongside the unpolished aesthetic, this makes the viewing of Helle’s film an uncomfortable experience – a response that has somewhat diminished from the oft-repeated footage of 9/11 because, as Paul Virilio notes, ‘the image loop has become the signature of contemporary disasters’.⁴⁹⁷

The coverage of 9/11 is a frequent touchstone for critical considerations of how the suffusion of televisual imagery, reality, and instantaneous communication impact embedded notions of the real and reality in the new millennium. Andy Lavender posits that although, within the coverage of 9/11, ‘[t]he real is unassimilable except as a sort of grisly fiction – it is nevertheless real’.⁴⁹⁸ Slavoj Žižek similarly contends that ‘*on account of its traumatic and excessive character, we are unable to integrate it [the imagery and event of 9/11] into (what we experience as) our reality and therefore are compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition*’.⁴⁹⁹ Despite the value of the mass-media coverage as an archive of the event, the stark simplicity of Helle’s representation has the potential to reveal the simulacrum-like quality of the ubiquitous televisual imagery of 9/11. As Martin writes, even though Helle’s images are his ‘imagination and reconstruction of what must have been’, for Martin they are both ‘real and not real at the same time’, and in that way straddle the tension noted above between ‘a positivist faith in empirical reality’ and an ‘epistemological crisis in knowing truth’.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁷ Paul Virilio, *City of Panic*, trans. by Julie Rose (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p. 85.

⁴⁹⁸ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 24.

⁴⁹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 19. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁰⁰ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 65.

Beyond consideration of how the communication of events can impact perceptions of the real, Žižek asserts that 9/11 is one of two global events that bookend the first decade of the twenty-first century – the other is the financial crisis of 2008. According to Žižek, these events had a re-conditioning effect on western societies and marked the final ruination of Francis Fukuyama’s notion of ‘the end of history’.⁵⁰¹ In the shadow of the Cold War and on the cusp of a unified Germany, Fukuyama argued that ‘the universalization of Western liberal democracy [would take hold] as the final form of human government’, instilling an era of relative stability.⁵⁰² Žižek, however, asserted that 9/11 marked ‘the collapse of the liberal-democratic political utopia’, and the financial crisis signalled the failure of the “trickle-down”, wealth-creation ideals of the capitalist free-market – ‘the economic face of Fukuyama’s dream’.⁵⁰³ Rather than crashing into reality via the mediation of televisual images, as per 9/11, the financial crisis trickled into the everyday realities of individuals as a result of illegitimate lending by both large corporations and individual investors – particularly in the US sub-prime mortgage market. The failure of governments and institutions to insulate their populations from the danger of financial ruin was an unsettling marker of systemic corruption which gambled with the wages of society.

Cumulatively, these twin threats to the health and well-being (physical and financial) of individuals, communities, and societies, have loomed large in the first two decades of the new millennium. As such, theatrical and particularly documentary responses to these prominent global events have increased. These artistic interventions help rationalise the

⁵⁰¹ Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History’, *Center for the National Interest*, 16. Summer (1989), 3–18 (p. 4).

⁵⁰² Fukuyama, p. 4.

⁵⁰³ Slavoj Žižek, *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 5.

impact of such events but also help reflect both on the ways in which the real is represented and communicated, and the ways in which systemic operations frame perceptions of how reality functions, both in times of crisis and in relative stability.

States of Distrust: Contextualising Documentary Responses

The well-known contexts and events of the geo-political “coalition” rallied after 9/11, and the economic interconnectivity evidenced in the global financial crisis, were mined by theatre-makers in the new millennium.

Richard Norton-Taylor’s *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Inquiry* (2003), Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo’s *Guantanamo* (2004), David Hare’s *Stuff Happens*, Robin Soans’s *Talking to Terrorists* (2005), and Gregory Burke’s *Black Watch* (2006), all mobilised forms of testimony and witness, or a sense of such practices, in the excavation of events around 9/11 and subsequent military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. At the end of the first decade of the new millennium, Hare’s part verbatim, part autobiographical work *The Power of Yes: A Dramatist Seeks to Understand the Financial Crisis* (2009) was an investigation into the corruptions that precipitated the global economic downturn. In the same year, Lucy Prebble’s *Enron* (2009) foregrounded the 2001 scandal of corporate fraud that bankrupted the eponymous Texan energy company as a counter-point to the contemporaneous financial crisis. Combining these two periods, Lynn Nottage’s 2015 play *Sweat* intercuts between 2000 and 2008 in a manner that offers a reflection on the imminent effect that these two global events will have on an already disenfranchised community of steelworkers in Reading, Pennsylvania – one of the poorest cities in the US. Although the content of *Sweat* is not of a documentary nature, the play is ‘[b]ased on Nottage’s extensive research and interviews with residents of Reading’, from which she created her characters and

dramatization.⁵⁰⁴ *Enron* and *Stuff Happens*, on the other hand, depict versions of well-known events and utilise real-world figures in a manner that seems to ‘authenticate their truths’, and yet in what appear to be documentary-esque works, both texts insert an ‘Author’s Note’ to clarify that they are very much not documentaries.⁵⁰⁵

In her ‘Author’s Note’, Prebble declares that *Enron* is based on true occurrences but that ‘it should not be seen as an exact representation of events’; it is an ‘author’s fiction’ edited for dramatic purposes.⁵⁰⁶ Despite a similar declaration in *Stuff Happens*, Hare’s play has been the subject of much scholarly scrutiny for its intermingling of factual and fictional elements.⁵⁰⁷ The verifiable statements by politicians in *Stuff Happens* are complemented by Hare’s imagined, “behind-closed-doors” representations of the formation and fallout of those statements.⁵⁰⁸ Although both Hare and Prebble distance their works from categorisation as documentary theatre, the respective authors’ notes tacitly recognise that each elicits an impression of documentary theatre. Both works play on, and play with, the practices and appearances of documentary in their depiction of (seemingly) real events in ways that demonstrate the malleable potential of documentary practices at an historic moment when Paget claims that ‘distrust is the default position’.⁵⁰⁹ Therefore, the respective author’s clarifications speak to the

⁵⁰⁴ Lynn Nottage, *Sweat* (New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, 2017). Cover Notes.

⁵⁰⁵ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, p. 235.

⁵⁰⁶ Lucy Prebble, ‘Author’s Note’, in *Enron* (London: Methuen Drama, 2009).

⁵⁰⁷ David Hare, ‘Author’s Note’, in *Stuff Happens* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006). See also, Bottoms (2006), Paget (2009), Schulze (2017).

⁵⁰⁸ These fictional dialogues were created after interviewing people privy to such discussions.

⁵⁰⁹ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, p. 235.

recognisably dubious way in which fact and fiction are being intermingled within these works, and reflect wider uncertainty regarding the communication of reality in culture and society.

For Paget, the new millennium's circumstances of necessity are epitomised by a vacuum of trust between states, institutions, and individuals, which he summarises as a 'yawning credibility gap between governors and the governed'.⁵¹⁰ The structure of feeling produced by this credibility gap led many artists to employ 'witnesses to authenticate their truths' in order to fill this vacuum.⁵¹¹ This age of distrust followed tenets forged under the long shadow of postmodernism wherein, according to Paget, 'documents have become vulnerable' to scepticism invoked by 'postmodern doubt and information-management (a.k.a. spin)'.⁵¹² This 'noticeable trend' towards testimony and the words of witnesses in the new millennium was not the sole preserve of documentary theatre practitioners, but was part of a wider socio-cultural and civic response to the age of distrust.⁵¹³ In the UK, this can readily be perceived in relation to an increase in public inquiries.

Statistics from the Institute for Government evidence that, since the late 1980s and early 1990s, concurrent public inquiries typically increased from two per year to a high-point of fourteen in the year 2000, and the average number quadrupled to eight or more

⁵¹⁰ Paget, 'The "Broken Tradition" of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance', p. 235.

⁵¹¹ Paget, 'The "Broken Tradition" of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance', p. 235.

⁵¹² Paget, 'The "Broken Tradition" of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance', p. 235.

⁵¹³ Stephen J. Bottoms, 'Putting the Document into Documentary: An Unwelcome Corrective', *The Drama Review*, 50.3 (2006), 56–68 (p. 56).

between the millennium and 2017.⁵¹⁴ These figures support the impression that politicians were acutely aware of an enlarged public appetite for excavations of injustices, and for the clarification of circumstances surrounding pivotal geo-political events – such as the accusations of a “sexed-up” UK government dossier making the case for invading Iraq in 2003. This eruption in public inquiries was ample fodder for verbatim and tribunal theatre practitioners in the UK; Reinelt even quipped that it seemed as though ‘one a week’ proliferated in the early days of the new millennium.⁵¹⁵ This trend drew notably on the Hutton Inquiry (2003–2004) concerning the death of Dr David Kelly, the Chilcot Inquiry (2009–2016) concerning the UK’s approach to, conduct within, and post-conflict planning for the Iraq war, and the Saville Inquiry (1998–2010) concerning the circumstances of 26 unarmed civilians being killed in Derry/Londonderry on 30 January 1972 – otherwise known as “Bloody Sunday”.

Within the swathe of documentary theatre responses to the global and local events of the new millennium, I contend that the two broad approaches discussed in Chapter Two remain identifiable, albeit slightly altered in their applicability.⁵¹⁶ Furthermore, I contend they remain productive and important as the issues they help to isolate and interrogate become increasingly complex. Therefore, I summarise them in this context now.

The first is the Weissian approach, in which the political intentions of such work necessitates that source materials from reality be utilised to reveal how events and

⁵¹⁴ Institute For Government, ‘Number of Concurrent Public Inquiries by Month, 1990–2017’, 2018 <<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/charts/number-concurrent-public-inquiries-month-1990-2017>> [accessed 1 September 2018].

⁵¹⁵ Reinelt, p. 13.

⁵¹⁶ See Chapter Two, ‘Fact and Facades’.

circumstances (contextual and systemic) contribute to multifarious forms of injustice. As such, within this Weissian approach there remains a strong Marxist appreciation of the real as an achievable entity. The Weissian approach holds sway in the early years of the new millennium, when what I have defined as digital times was in its infancy; this was during the early days of Web 2.0 and before the increasingly quotidian integration of technologies that increase the volume and speed of information dissemination, with which the second approach is more concerned. The second approach is marked by the ambiguity turn, through which a development of Debordian principles by way of Baudrillard's work, clouds with uncertainty both the documentary source materials mobilised and the very forms of documentary theatre that have become popularised in the new millennium.

The Weissian Approach: Tribunal Theatre

Tribunal plays are a documentary theatre form which mobilises transcribed testimony from public inquiries. They echo the methods of dramatization that Weiss deployed in *The Investigation*; however, they do not generally follow the collaged nature of how Weiss edited the transcripts of the Frankfurt trials. Instead, in tribunal theatre each statement generally belongs to the person who spoke those words during the public inquiry – albeit, some editing within their individual statements still occurs. In another difference, the visual aesthetic of tribunal theatre aims for verisimilitude in the precise replication of the courtroom settings. Despite these differences the intention remains similar, which is that truth and understanding can be uncovered via detailed examination of documentary source materials.

In the 1990s and 2000s, tribunal theatre gained prominence, primarily in the UK, due to a cycle of plays produced by London's Tricycle theatre. Beginning in 1994 with *Half*

the Picture, a dramatization of the Scott Inquiry (1992–1996) – otherwise known as the “Arms to Iraq” inquiry – tribunal theatre came to the fore in 1999 with what Michael Billington calls the Tricycle’s ‘most famous’ tribunal play – *The Colour of Justice*.⁵¹⁷ This play, the fourth in the Tricycle’s tribunal oeuvre, drew on the transcripts of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (1997–1999).

Nicolas Kent, the director of *The Colour of Justice*, stated that ‘[t]he intention of a tribunal play is always, always to try to arrive at the truth, without exaggeration’.⁵¹⁸ This is, however, somewhat of a misnomer, because whatever truth is arrived at, the tribunal play is always already partial. As Sir William Macpherson of Cluny (Chairman of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry) noted in a covering letter accompanying his report,⁵¹⁹ the remit of the inquiry was not to convict criminals through definitive judgements on the facts, but rather ‘to identify the lessons to be learned for the investigation and prosecution of racially motivated crimes’.⁵²⁰ Therefore, while *The Colour of Justice* uses the documents of officialdom to enact such aspirations as to ‘always to try to arrive at the truth’, such plays are not the final arbiter of truth. Instead, mobilising such transcripts as a documentary practice is, I contend, most productive when it

⁵¹⁷ Victoria Brittain and others, *The Tricycle: Collected Tribunal Plays 1994–2012* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2014).

⁵¹⁸ Nicolas Kent, ‘Nicolas Kent’, in *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, ed. by Will Hammond and Dan Steward (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2008), pp. 133–68 (p. 155).

⁵¹⁹ Addressed to the then Home Secretary Jack Straw.

⁵²⁰ William Macpherson, ‘The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry : Report of an Inquiry by Sir William Macpherson of Cluny : Advised by Tom Cook, the Right Reverend Dr John Sentamu, Dr Richard Stone’, 1999, p. 17 <<http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/sli-00.htm>> [accessed 30 July 2018]. The lessons learnt from this inquiry had wide-ranging impacts, including the repeal of the “double-jeopardy” rule in the case of murder. This meant that, when new evidence became available, some of the previously acquitted defendants were subsequently retried and convicted of the murder of Stephen Lawrence.

dramaturgically highlights the pluralist formations of histories through individual narratives, each of which carry with them distinct subjectivities which are themselves calcified through the mechanisms of officialdom – rather than effaced by the formalisation of tribunal transcripts.

Therein, while tribunal theatre may restage the undertakings of such inquiries with minute precision, the process of recording different testimonies in legal perpetuity cannot efface the subjectivities that are given a platform in such work. As such, Kent's optimistic aim to arrive at 'the truth' seems somewhat out of reach. In a more measured tone, which I am in agreement with, the editor of *The Colour of Justice*, Richard Norton-Taylor, suggests that the play will contribute to 'a greater understanding of all the issues involved'.⁵²¹ One of the issues is this subjective plurality of narratives which all judicial examinations must navigate in order to reach a conclusion – or in the case of public inquiries, in order to make their recommendations.

The dramaturgical and ethical concerns 'around the constitution of truth from multiple narratives' in such tribunal theatre is highlighted by Carole-Anne Upton.⁵²² She suggests that, in the case of *Bloody Sunday*, Norton-Taylor's guiding principle that tribunal theatre should give a 'fair, balanced and rounded picture' was problematized by

⁵²¹ Richard Norton-Taylor, 'Editor's Note', in *The Colour of Justice: Based on the Transcripts of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 1999), p. 8.

⁵²² Carole-Anne Upton, 'The Performance of Truth and Justice in Northern Ireland: The Case of Bloody Sunday', in *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, ed. by Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 179–94 (p. 187).

the history of investigations into the events of Bloody Sunday, of which the Saville Inquiry was one part.⁵²³

The Saville Inquiry began twenty-six years after Bloody Sunday and lasted for twelve years. It was established to supersede the Widgery Report (1972) produced from an initial public inquiry, which was completed and published a mere three months after Bloody Sunday. As Upton notes, ‘Widgery’s approach was indefensibly exclusive’, being in almost complete agreement with the narrative given by the British Army, whereas Saville’s approach was ‘unmanageably inclusive’,⁵²⁴ gathering over 2,500 witness statements.⁵²⁵ Due to the breadth of the Saville Inquiry and the intrinsic suspicions regarding the Widgery Report, multiple layers of investigation were at work in the Tricycle dramatization. Not only was the play concerned with testimonies from civilians, soldiers, and ministers alike, but the overarching process and role of the public inquiry was also under scrutiny, particularly concerning its ability to establish robust accounts of events.

This was evident in the very undertaking of producing *Bloody Sunday* at a time that is now known to be only the mid-point of the Saville Inquiry’s timeline. *Half the Picture* was likewise produced over two years prior to the publication of the Scott Inquiry report, and Reinelt highlights that *The Colour of Justice* premiered prior to the release of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry findings. While this last example only pertained to a matter of days, Reinelt contends that this was still purposeful and important because it

⁵²³ *Bloody Sunday: Scenes from the Saville Inquiry* was produced by the same directing and editing team of Kent and Norton-Taylor.

⁵²⁴ Upton, p. 187.

⁵²⁵ ‘Bloody Sunday Inquiry’ <<https://www.bloody-sunday-inquiry.org.uk/report.html>>.

meant that the play was ‘performed while the “jury was still out”’, thereby allowing the edited testimonies to speak for themselves in the court of public opinion, prior to the wider impact of the inquiry’s findings – that same conclusion extends to these other two productions.⁵²⁶

In relation to these examples, and recalling Kent’s aspiration that tribunal theatre must always ‘try to arrive at the truth’, any sense of an objectivity to this notional truth is redundant when these works are not only beholden to the influence of directors and editors, but are also produced prior to the gathering of all the evidence that might inform an inquiry. Therefore, Norton-Taylor’s assertion that ‘understanding’ is the aim of tribunal theatre is the more productive frame through which to consider such works, and an aspiration that is likely rooted in his experience as a journalist. If there is a “truth” that is arrived at via *The Colour of Justice*, it is that, as the title suggests and as the subsequent report confirmed, the Metropolitan Police were institutionally racist in their investigations of the murder of Stephen Lawrence. However, this is still more productively understood not as a monolithic “truth”, but as a symptom of systemic corruption that must be treated within the circumstances of the time. As Macpherson’s letter confirmed, the purpose of the inquiry was to discover the ‘lessons to be learned’, which itself is already a position of understanding that takes forward that learning into practical, productive change.

⁵²⁶ Reinelt, p. 17. This conclusion continues to hold weight in light of 2021’s *Value Engineering: Scenes from the Grenfell Inquiry*, directed and edited by the same team of Kent and Norton-Taylor, and produced prior to the completion of the whole public inquiry, albeit in line with the completion of different “phases” of the inquiry.

Alongside his unwavering aspiration for truth, Kent makes a number of other startling assertions in respect of the tribunal theatre form. Firstly, channelling Weiss's paradoxical assertion regarding unedited content but modified form, Kent states that 'whenever you do anything for dramatic effect [in tribunal theatre] it's wrong'.⁵²⁷ However, it cannot be ignored that the entire endeavour is for dramatic effect, even if that is simply to edit the source materials into a reasonable running time for performance. Secondly, as Upton also notes, Kent makes a dangerous conflation which undermines his assertions about the infelicity of 'dramatic effect' and the ultimate aim of tribunal theatre being truth, by interchanging the term "dramatic" with "important" when he notes that in the Saville Inquiry '[t]he big hitters weren't very dramatic in their testimony'.⁵²⁸

Kent identifies instead that it was 'those people who have personal stories to tell who are enormously important'.⁵²⁹ This is a logical position, in that lesser-known narratives about Bloody Sunday – narratives sorely lacking in the Widgery Report – might add much needed detail to the portrait of events surrounding that day. As such, statements by the former and sitting Prime Ministers Sir Edward Heath and Tony Blair, as well as General Sir Mike Jackson, were not included in the Tricycle production.⁵³⁰

Instead, as Upton summarises, 'the highest authorities' embodied by such figures 'are relegated to printed text, while the "small hitters" amongst the civilians are given full

⁵²⁷ Kent, p. 155.

⁵²⁸ Upton, p. 187; Fran Yeoman, 'The Essence of Tragedy', *Irish Times*, 16 April 2005.

⁵²⁹ Yeoman.

⁵³⁰ General Sir Mike Jackson was head of the British Army during a part of the Inquiry and served in an Officer capacity in Northern Ireland at the time of Bloody Sunday.

embodied life’.⁵³¹ However, despite adding the kind of detail that the inquiry was established to uncover, Kent’s ethical justification of this directorial decision about who is heard and who is not heard in *Bloody Sunday* centres on this notion of the ‘dramatic’ effect of their words, while he later remonstrates that elements of ‘dramatic effect’ in staging should be ostracised from the form.

As such, following conceptually on from Weiss, Kent is firmly entrenched in the position that the texts need only be presented to an audience in order for the “truth” they hold to be revealed. In a similar analysis of the production values and heightened verisimilitude of tribunal theatre staging, Reinelt suggests that the ‘scrupulous reproduction of surface reality in the production style’ buttresses the veracity of the source materials in an attempt to ‘guarantee that the artists have not “sexed-up” the performance’ of tribunal plays.⁵³² Moreover, by giving a platform to witnesses whose statements have previously been neglected and for whom such platforms are a rarity – like the Saville Inquiry – Kent is (in Weissian fashion) seeking to reveal the truth of the events through lesser known narratives.

However, from a different perspective, by highlighting pluralist perceptions of the events from lesser known individuals, and in turn relegating the custodians of officialdom, or the ‘big-hitters’, *Bloody Sunday* can be seen as reflecting the sentiments of this age of distrust as well. That is to say, while the well-oiled cogs of officialdom run smoothly in this staged representation, the narratives that are foregrounded are not those of the status quo, but rather ones which contradict institutionally sanctioned

⁵³¹ Upton, p. 187.

⁵³² Reinelt, p. 16.

narratives. Being staged before the process of the inquiry has run its course, the production suggests it is important to foreground this shift even in order not to be seen as reproducing the institutionally ordained outcomes of the inquiry – as Reinelt suggests, such timing encourages audiences to draw out their own conclusions where possible. In this way, the work can be understood as a response to its time, over and above the act of reporting events.

Cumulatively, although tribunal theatre foregrounds singular testimonies, each endowed with a kind of elevated status for their part in an official inquiry, the testimonies reflect the pluralist structure of this mode of communicating past events, as well as a secondary process of mediation via its editing, direction, and other associated creative processes. In its micro focus on the verisimilitude of the *mise-en-scène*, tribunal theatre is in danger of marginalising the macro considerations of a thirst for deeper understanding. As such, Kent's idealised vision for tribunal theatre to be devoid of all dramatic effect is vulnerable to similar accusations that Ackerman and Puchner levelled at naturalism, which is that it is ironically blind to its 'putatively empirical mode', and unaware that this is 'itself an aesthetic strategy'.⁵³³ In contrast then, and in alignment with Norton-Taylor's aspiration for the form, an increased 'understanding' around the events of inquiries suggests that such plays do not offer the facile notion of a "greater truth", but they do offer a greater plurality of subjective truths than are voiced by the well-rehearsed narratives of state institutions and their sanctioned representatives – the 'big hitters'.

⁵³³ Ackerman and Puchner, p. 5.

The Weissian Approach: Verbatim Practice

Alongside the popularisation of tribunal theatre, iterations of verbatim practice without the substantiation of court records increased in this era, and focused on events beyond, or ancillary to, the headlines of political and social events of the day. In an age of gathering scepticism though, the Weissian approach that the testimony of witnesses needs only communicating in order to reveal “truth” begins to be framed against the foregrounded mechanics of theatrical representation through which such testimony is communicated. One UK practitioner synonymous with verbatim practice in this period, and with the foregrounding of her mechanisms of theatrical representations, is Alecky Blythe and her company Record Delivery (established in 2003).⁵³⁴ Coming to prominence in the first decade of the new millennium, Blythe is contextually well placed for this investigation of how developments in socio-political and performance cultures impacted on the mobilisation of verbatim practice in the twenty-first century, and how such developments spurred debate concerning the imbrication of facts and fictions in documentary theatre.

Blythe is synonymous with a niche practice where actors wear earphones or earpieces in order to listen to the recorded testimony of real people whom they mimic during

⁵³⁴ Chris Megson, ““What I’m Aspiring to Be Is a Good Dramatist”: Alecky Blythe in Conversation with Chris Megson”, *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 6.1 (2018), 220–33 (pp. 221–23).

performance.⁵³⁵ The aim is to imitate exactly the utterances and vocal intonations of the people Blythe has interviewed.⁵³⁶ In *The Girlfriend Experience* (2008), for example, as Cantrell writes, an opening audio prologue enables the audience to hear ‘the actual women’ who are interviewed by Blythe, as well as ‘the actors’ voices’ who perform as those women.⁵³⁷ These layered voices are interspersed with a recording of Blythe explaining the process of gathering the interviews. As this audio recording fades, the actors on stage make a gesture of donning their earphones to signify the mechanics and processes of dramatization that are in operation during the performance.

Taken together, the opening of *The Girlfriend Experience* informs audiences of the processes involved in creating the work, and allows spectators to “measure” the quality of the mimicry in performance. Although the earphones and earpieces are visually subtle and thereby support Blythe’s belief that it is ‘important’ the process should not detract from an audience knowing that ‘this is real and this is what people said’, she also contends that if an audience understands the process involved in a Record Delivery

⁵³⁵ Record Delivery’s work includes *Come Out Eli* (2003), *Cruising* (2006), *Little Revolution* (2014), and *London Road* (2011) – a play about the impact of a series of murders, and the accompanying media scrutiny, on the community of the eponymous road in Ipswich in 2006. Beyond its subsequent cinematic adaptation in 2015, *London Road* is also noteworthy because it is a rare hybrid form of verbatim documentary musical. This hybrid, as already noted, was pioneered by Peter Cheeseman in *The Knotty* (1966) but it is not a prominent style in the history of documentary theatre. That being said, another recent example was the 2017 tribunal musical *Committee ... (A New Musical): The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee Takes Oral Evidence on Whitehall’s Relationship with Kids Company*, produced by the Donmar Warehouse.

⁵³⁶ Recorded Delivery are not alone in using this practice but, in a British context, it is synonymous with this company and with Alecky Blythe, as it is with Roslyn Oades in an Australian context, albeit Oades uses headphones which have a larger visual impact. See Caroline Wake, ‘Headphone Verbatim Theatre: Methods, Histories, Genres, Theories’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 29.4 (2013), 321–35.

⁵³⁷ Cantrell, p. 150.

production then the work has ‘more weight’.⁵³⁸ There is seemingly then, in Blythe’s approach, a desire to foreground the real while simultaneously recognising that a balance is needed in light of the ‘promise’ that documentary theatres offer an audience.⁵³⁹

In an interview with Chris Megson, Blythe is also acutely aware of having to balance her roles as playwright, journalist, and dramatist; she recognises that in ‘dealing with real people’ she must ‘respect’ the individuals and their words, and not ‘play around with it too much’.⁵⁴⁰ Despite this, Blythe also admits that if the work is ‘too journalistic’ then audiences ‘might all fall asleep’, and therefore acknowledges that her source material, on occasion, may need ‘some energy and some life which might not otherwise have been there’.⁵⁴¹ I contend that implicit in Blythe’s balancing of her roles and in her aspiration that the seamless use of earphones will ‘reinforce’ the sense of realism, is the desire to assimilate the real and the representational into the closest proximity possible, in an attempt to endow the representation with a recognition of the real which underpins it.⁵⁴² The visual acknowledgement of the earphones and the recordings brings this act of representation to the fore, but frames it as an act of exceeding loyalty to the real – Blythe is displaying her reality effects to hold the real/representational tension in balance. Therein, the dramaturgical treatment of this source material, in both authorship

⁵³⁸ Megson, “‘What I’m Aspiring to Be Is a Good Dramatist’: Alecky Blythe in Conversation with Chris Megson’, p. 226.

⁵³⁹ Reinelt, p. 6.

⁵⁴⁰ Megson, “‘What I’m Aspiring to Be Is a Good Dramatist’: Alecky Blythe in Conversation with Chris Megson’, p. 223.

⁵⁴¹ Megson, “‘What I’m Aspiring to Be Is a Good Dramatist’: Alecky Blythe in Conversation with Chris Megson’, p. 223.

⁵⁴² Megson, “‘What I’m Aspiring to Be Is a Good Dramatist’: Alecky Blythe in Conversation with Chris Megson’, p. 226.

and performance, seems to be complicit within the notion that, as Bottoms astutely contends, '[p]laced within the frame of art, the "real" is always already representational'.⁵⁴³

Similarly, the director of *The Girlfriend Experience* – Joe Hill-Gibbins – also 'felt that reminding the audience about the artifice of the theatrical event was absolutely integral to the success of the production', according to Cantrell.⁵⁴⁴ Hill-Gibbins claims that strategies such as 'casting against type' (as he recalls in relation to 2003's *Come Out Eli*) demonstrates, through its alienating effect, that the words spoken are 'real people's words'.⁵⁴⁵ However, for Cantrell, such determinations are underpinned by a 'confusion [...] over alienation and its relation to truth'.⁵⁴⁶ Cantrell highlights that, while alienation is used to reveal the 'materiality of production' and in this instance draw 'attention to the process', such strategies 'do not inherently make the process more real'.⁵⁴⁷ Compounding this, Tomlin contends that Blythe's 'selection of material' for *The Girlfriend Experience* – set in a sea-side brothel – creates an explicitly dramatic 'recognisable arc' in her depiction of sex-workers and this, combined with the 'representational acting techniques' of the performers, serves to 'reduce the reality of the testifiers to precisely the media stereotypes the piece might have wished to

⁵⁴³ Stephen Bottoms, p. 74. Bottoms's contention has been mentioned already in this study, but applied in respect of the relationship between the live performer and spectator – see Chapter Two, 'Presence'.

⁵⁴⁴ Cantrell, p. 149.

⁵⁴⁵ Joe Hill-Gibbins, in, Cantrell, *Acting in Documentary Theatre*, p. 149.

⁵⁴⁶ Cantrell, p. 149.

⁵⁴⁷ Cantrell, p. 149.

undermine'.⁵⁴⁸ Such challenges demonstrate that Blythe's desire to assimilate the real and the representational is a different task in relation to staging as it is in relation to writing. Cantrell's argument that Hill-Gibbins's claim is 'spurious' appears correct because theatrical strategies of alienation reaffirm the theatrical quality of performance, while Tomlin highlights the relative ease with which sex-workers can be stereotyped through editorial decisions, precisely because the voices and narratives of these workers are so often marginalised.

In gathering such challenges together, I suggest that they correlate with Reinelt's broader assertion that the term "verbatim" 'needlessly ups the ante on the promise of documentary', as seemingly offering a heightened sense of actuality or "truth".⁵⁴⁹ Reinelt's assertion is important because, over the course of the new millennium thus far, it remains the case that this heightened promise of truth seemingly proffered by theatre which mobilises verbatim practice is an enduring and attractive quality for audiences and practitioners, even beyond the timeline of this study. For example, after the initial field work of this thesis, the National Theatre's 2017 verbatim play *My Country: A Work in Progress...* attempts to give form to the conflicting political narratives, personal stories, and national myths surrounding the UK EU Referendum of 2016. The combination of verbatim interviews mediated through the vestiges of mythical standard-bearers for the component parts of the United Kingdom (Britannia, Caledonia, Cymru, East Midlands, North East, Northern Ireland and the South West) reaffirms the notion that verbatim testimony retains an extra-theatrical power to help unravel truths from

⁵⁴⁸ Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions*, pp. 126–27. Tomlin notes that newspaper reviews varyingly commented on the individuals portrayed as 'the tart with a heart' and 'warm hearted hookers' as further evidence of this contention.

⁵⁴⁹ Reinelt, p. 13.

within the complex differences propelled into the public sphere by the referendum.⁵⁵⁰ In light of the mythical framework, this pseudo state-of-the-nation play is a high profile example of increasing divergence from earlier models of verbatim theatre. In this way, the National Theatre's treatment of material resonates with Blythe's contention (published in the same year) that verbatim (as she perceives it) 'shouldn't necessarily just be the trial play', but it should be malleably folded in with 'other forms'.⁵⁵¹

It appears then that Blythe strives to achieve something akin to the source material's 'aura' (to use Walter Benjamin's term) in her mobilisation of verbatim, by seeking to communicate the 'weight' of the issues she investigates while demonstrating the realness of the testimony and virtuosic labour of the performers.⁵⁵² As such, there is a purposeful paradox in showing the process of headphone verbatim, because rather than the definition laid out by Paget (following Rony Robinson) that verbatim 'is firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews [... Which are]

⁵⁵⁰ Carol Ann Duffy and Rufus Norris, *My Country: A Work in Progress* (London: Faber and Faber, 2017). It is notable that this unravelling of truth appears still to be the 'promise' proffered by even this most recent and large scale iteration of verbatim practice and yet, in a post-show discussion at Warwick Arts Centre on 25 May 2017, Norris reflected that a potentially important opportunity was missed during this project, because the interviewees, who were all asked the same questions, were not asked from what sources do they take their information, which obviously informs their opinions and, in the case of the EU referendum, informed their vote.

⁵⁵¹ Megson, "'What I'm Aspiring to Be Is a Good Dramatist': Alecky Blythe in Conversation with Chris Megson", p. 232. Blythe suggests the musical is one such form that might be folded in with verbatim practice; however, Jess McCormack suggests that dance might also offer a productive entwinement. In light of work such as DV8's *Can We Talk About This?* (2011), McCormack argues that dance offers a way to 'explore bodies of verbatim verbal language in relation to [actual] bodies in movement' – see Jess McCormack, *Choreography and Verbatim Theatre: Dancing Words* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 27.

⁵⁵² Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), pp. 217–52 (p. 221).

then transformed into a text',⁵⁵³ Blythe's demonstration of the 'mechanical reproduction' of testimony at work in headphone verbatim attempts to reinvigorate the realness of that testimony in performance, as opposed to letting it 'wither' by stripping the interviewees of their idiosyncratic singularities.⁵⁵⁴

The belief in the importance of an audience knowing that the content of her plays are taken from real-life interviews and that they are presented exactly as they were spoken, reflects Blythe's concern for the contaminating effect that mediation can have in blunting the factual authority of testimony. That is to say, if the testimony is (or perceived to be) learnt by an actor, it takes on the status of an authored script, and in that way, appears more akin to a drama than to reality. Indeed, Blythe aspired to 'recreate the dynamic of situations' and place the audience in the position of the interviewer (Blythe), so that the audience can 'really feel it' – or put another way, so it feels less scripted and rehearsed.⁵⁵⁵

Cumulatively, it appears that to be simply verbatim is not "real enough" for Blythe – she believes in pushing the boundaries of verbatim practice beyond 'the trial play', and reimagining how this practice can be mobilised. Although operating within this age of intensifying distrust and scepticism, a prevailing '*rhetoric of witness*' dominates the

⁵⁵³ Paget, "'Verbatim Theatre': Oral History and Documentary Techniques", p. 317.

⁵⁵⁴ Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', p. 221. A similar kind of oscillation between the appearance of authentic testimony and its appropriation in performance has already been touched upon in relation to *Rumstick Road*. See Chapter Two, "'Rumstick Road'". Such concerns continue to resonate with investigations of lip-synching techniques in theatre and other mediums – see Lib Taylor, 'Voice, Body and the Transmission of the Real in Documentary Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 23.3 (2013), 368–79.

⁵⁵⁵ Megson, "'What I'm Aspiring to Be Is a Good Dramatist': Alecky Blythe in Conversation with Chris Megson', pp. 226–27.

documentary landscape, as Paget highlights. This is because, according to Paget, ‘witness’s claims to authenticity can still warrant a credible perspective’.⁵⁵⁶ This rhetoric of witness is equally suffused in tribunal theatre and in verbatim practice, but there are differences between the two. While Paget rightly claims that the power of the rhetoric of witness stems from the ‘legalistic and spiritual component in Western notions of witness, [...] that powerfully charge the theatrical experience’,⁵⁵⁷ the rhetoric of witness in tribunal theatre benefits from an elevated status granted by its participation within processes of officialdom – despite it still being an iteration of verbatim practice.⁵⁵⁸ I contend that this creates a conflation between these similar examples of verbatim practice which falsely elevates the authority of wider iterations of verbatim. This elevation then leads to sceptical examinations of verbatim practice and encourages an ambiguity turn – as discussed in the next section – because the difficulty in untangling the real from the fictional becomes more commonplace in models of theatre, but also in the wider society of digital times.

The Ambiguity Turn

While the Weissian approach upholds the perceived veracity of documentary source materials, I suggest a second approach is characterised by an indeterminacy between the differing authority of source materials, and by an imbrication of factual and fictional

⁵⁵⁶ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, pp. 235–36. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁵⁷ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, p. 236.

⁵⁵⁸ This is in spite of the fact that some public inquiries do not require testimony to be given under oath – a fact that may be lost on some observers.

components; this second approach marks an ambiguity turn in the mobilisation of documentary practices in the twenty-first century.

Within a distinctly UK context, Cyrielle Garson suggests that ‘hybrid’ works of British new writing combine the appearance of factual material of ‘verbatim origins’ with ‘imagination processes’ to create plays which reside ‘at the nodal point between verbatim theatre and non-verbatim theatre’.⁵⁵⁹ For Garson, such strategies mean that the ‘familiar boundaries between genres’ are ‘beginning to crumble’.⁵⁶⁰ While I agree with Garson’s contention because it promotes a more expansive investigation of how documentary theatre can be understood, her work seems still to cling to overarching notions of documentary theatre forms – be they verbatim or ‘non-verbatim’. Instead, even in what she might call ‘theatre experiments’ such as *Taking Care of Baby* and *Stuff Happens* which I discuss shortly, my research distinguishes documentary practices from overarching notions of documentary theatre forms in order to examine the mobilisation and politics of these practices within different dramaturgical contexts.⁵⁶¹ Although I highlight contributors from the early-twenty-first century in order to make my case, I suggest that the ambiguity turn gains particular traction amid the more recent widespread adoption and appreciation of social media and mobile digital connectivity in western societies, as I demonstrate later in relation to *Weaklings*.

Within the context of this second approach, I contend that the increased scepticism in western societies has moved past Debord’s Marxist notion of a hidden real, and

⁵⁵⁹ Cyrielle Garson, ‘Verbatim Theatre and New Writing in Britain: A State of “Kindred Strangers”?’ , *Études Britanniques Contemporaines [En Ligne]*, 48, 2015.

⁵⁶⁰ Garson.

⁵⁶¹ Garson.

gravitated towards the Baudrillardian position of a ‘liquidation of all referentials’.

Within such a landscape, any perceivable real is part of the deeply enmeshed operations of late capitalist societies that propagate narratives, metanarratives, and perceptions of the real which solidify the systemic order – this systemic order is not a conspiratorial notion, but a self-producing and self-serving ecology. Everyday traces of such an environment are increasingly visible in the impacts of instantaneous, self-authorising, and anonymous forms of digital communication that promote fluid and uncertain perceptions of fact, fiction, truth, and reality. Within this environment, the deployment of documentary practices can be examined as reflections on, and responses to, these changing circumstances of necessity.

At the same time as the technological apparatus now most synonymous with the advanced days of digital times – the iPhone – was invented in 2007, Christopher Innes noted that the ‘radically rejuvenated factual and topical form of drama’ that is documentary theatre had ‘done much to define the contemporary [UK theatre] scene’.⁵⁶² The theatrical examining and communicating of moments from reality had since the 1990s, remarked Forsyth and Megson, been witness to a ‘remarkable mobilisation and proliferation of documentary forms’,⁵⁶³ and this once marginal mode had now become ‘firmly established as a mainstream British theatre tradition’, according to Cantrell.⁵⁶⁴ For Youker, the flourishing landscape of journalistic revelation in documentary theatre had a digital foil in the shape of online “data-dumps” epitomised by organisations such as WikiLeaks and individuals such as Julian Assange, Edward Snowden, and Chelsea

⁵⁶² Christopher D. Innes, ‘Towards a Post-Millennial Mainstream? Documents of the Times’, *Modern Drama*, 50.3 (2007), 435–52.

⁵⁶³ Forsyth and Megson, ‘Introduction’, p. 1.

⁵⁶⁴ Cantrell, p. 1.

Manning; amid this clamour of digital information, the ‘relatively bare verbatim style’ that prospered represented ‘a sense of urgency’,⁵⁶⁵ and evidenced the need to ‘get the stuff out there’, as Christine Bacon claimed.⁵⁶⁶

Within this context, I suggest, the term “verbatim” is subject to an expanded currency in its meaning and deployment, which leads to conflations concerning its distinguishing qualities, and an almost assumed veracity in terms of the source material that is conveyed.

The Ambiguity Turn: Conflations

In 2009, Paget refers to Alan Rickman and Katherine Viner’s play *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* as a ‘true verbatim’ play.⁵⁶⁷ Yet, in the same publication, when clarifying the difference between verbatim practice and tribunal theatre, he stipulates that ‘aural testimony’ is the fundamental source material of verbatim practice.⁵⁶⁸ This appears contradictory to the gathered written materials that comprise the dramatic representation of Rachel Corrie. Cantrell makes a similar point when stating that because the play is ‘based entirely on written rather than spoken testimony [... it] falls within the wider field of documentary theatre’ as opposed to a verbatim play.⁵⁶⁹ Blythe’s reference to an expansion beyond ‘the trial play’ attests to this general dilution of what might be termed “strict verbatim” theatre, and its overlapping with other forms of documentary theatre, particularly tribunal plays. The synchronous timing of these two models and a similar

⁵⁶⁵ Youker, p. 182.

⁵⁶⁶ Christine Bacon, in, Canton, p. 51.

⁵⁶⁷ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, p. 233.

⁵⁶⁸ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, p. 232.

⁵⁶⁹ Cantrell, p. 3.

sense of heightened authenticity – offered through words taken from real life – encouraged a conflation between the authority of official documentation that marks out tribunal theatre’s source materials, and the subjectivity of individual testimony from other iterations of verbatim practice.⁵⁷⁰

In his review of Gillian Slovo’s *The Riots* (2011), Michael Billington demonstrates such conflations when he claims that the production ‘steals a march on officialdom’ because it was staged before any public inquiry into the 2011 civil unrest witnessed in the UK.⁵⁷¹ Indeed the promotional material for *The Riots* acknowledged this conflation when it asserted that ‘[t]he Government has so far refused a Public Inquiry into the riots that shook our cities this Summer, so the Tricycle is mounting its own’.⁵⁷² The Tricycle production assumes the status of the inquiry that it suggests is required, and while Billington’s sentiment is in reference to the speed with which *The Riots*’ testimonies are propelled into the public sphere, he also suggests that the play ‘offers us the evidence’ needed to form opinions about the causes and fallout of the unrest.⁵⁷³ The parallel

⁵⁷⁰ It is worth recalling that this is a particularly UK-centric notion – for example, the prominence of tribunal theatre was not replicated in the US, and the term verbatim as a sub-sect of documentary theatre does not hold the same currency in the US as it does within a UK context. See Introduction, ‘Documentary Mode / Documentary Theatre Forms’.

⁵⁷¹ Michael Billington, ‘The Riots’, *Guardian*, 23 November 2011
<<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/nov/23/the-riots-tricycle-review>> [accessed 11 April 2018].

⁵⁷² Tricycle Theatre, ‘The Riots’, 2011
<<https://web.archive.org/web/20111124025827/http://www.tricycle.co.uk/current-programme-pages/theatre/theatre-programme-main/the-riots/>> [accessed 18 December 2017]. Capitalisation as per original. Ultimately, despite the riots leading to the deaths of five people and costing millions of pounds in public money as well as in damages to business and property, there was no public inquiry from which recommendations could be drawn. With the advantage of this hindsight, the Tricycle’s work seems even more important.

⁵⁷³ Billington, ‘The Riots’.

proliferation of verbatim and tribunal theatres in the new millennium led to a critical refocusing on, and conflation of, verbatim practice and tribunal theatre – a tendency highlighted by scholarship at the time.

In 2008, Paola Botham asserts that ‘the name “verbatim” has become the metonymical denomination for all contemporary documentary theatre in Britain’, suggesting that a certain rigour in distinction between iterations of documentary theatres was lacking.⁵⁷⁴

In 2009, Paget reflects on the sense of closeness between verbatim and tribunal theatre, and alludes to a propensity for imbrication between the authority of their respective source materials. In particular, he asserts that unchecked journalistic conflations between these forms could induce ‘the tendency to forget previous work’;⁵⁷⁵ such a charge is anathema to the political impetus of documentary theatres which attempt to foreground that which is already, or is at risk of being, forgotten, unheard, or marginalised. In an effort to right the potential wrongs of such conflations, Paget highlights the formal, aesthetic, and dramaturgical distinctions between tribunal and verbatim theatre.

For Paget, tribunal plays are ‘edited transcripts (“redactions”) of trials, tribunals and public inquiries’, and verbatim plays are edited ‘interviews with individuals’ wherein ‘aural testimony constitutes the basis of theatrical representation’.⁵⁷⁶ While tribunal theatre pursues a ‘realist’ aesthetic, *mise-en-scène*, and acting style, the verbatim mode

⁵⁷⁴ Paola Botham, ‘From Deconstruction to Reconstruction: A Habermasian Framework for Contemporary Political Theatre’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18.3 (2008), 307–17 (p. 316).

⁵⁷⁵ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, p. 233.

⁵⁷⁶ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, pp. 233–34.

can echo previous iterations of documentary theatres ‘in terms of their more fluid use of stage space and more flexible expectations of actors’.⁵⁷⁷ In essence, tribunal theatre aims for verisimilitude in its mobilisation of source material in order to emphasise its veracity, whereas verbatim can deploy its transcribed words within less rigid parameters providing these are ethically and politically robust.

The significance of this for my discussion of the imbrication of fact and fiction in theatre is not necessarily that a “fiction” is elevated to the realm of fact, but rather that the “seal of approval” which comes with tribunal theatre due to its use of recorded transcripts is carried over to verbatim theatre which has no such authoritative basis; this is especially the case when the boundary between these two practices is deemed porous. As such, although the factual accuracy of reporting words from real life does not legitimise the content of those words, the factual nature of that reporting does lend all such testimony a platform that continually gestures towards (and amplifies) its own seal of approval.

Despite Paget’s self-appointed task to rebut the ‘apparent determination of theatre journalism to conflate’ the receptions of, and responses to, verbatim and tribunal theatre,⁵⁷⁸ the repetitive underlining of the factual nature of the source materials in each bleeds into the wider perception that such content offers ‘a (relatively) uncontaminated

⁵⁷⁷ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, p. 234.

⁵⁷⁸ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, p. 233.

truth', in Billington's terms.⁵⁷⁹ Indeed, in his pseudo-encyclopaedic intervention, 'Michael Billington's A to Z of Modern Drama',⁵⁸⁰ the stalwart theatre critic interchangeably refers to the 'raw information' of formal court transcripts and the 'personal testimony' of informal interviews.⁵⁸¹ He suggests that the '(relatively) uncontaminated truth' of verbatim theatre prospered due to a context of 'enormous public scepticism not only about politics but about the media' – as already highlighted.⁵⁸² Yet Billington's notion of 'uncontaminated truth', even in a relative sense, does not distinguish between the fact that something was said, and the notion that what was said was factual or truthful. Therefore, when summarising that 'verbatim theatre offers us the bracing stimulus of fact', in a society 'drowning in opinion', Billington is complicit in the very conflation that Paget sought to expunge. As such, Billington highlights how a sense of ambiguity permeates perceptions of what constitutes factual evidence within these two distinct forms of documentary theatre predicated upon different source materials. Although those differences are subtle, as Paget's delineation suggests, they are nonetheless important.

Beyond journalists, other stakeholders have succumbed to this conflation. Will Hammond and Dan Steward's *Verbatim Verbatim* (2008) – an edited collection of essays and interviews from practitioners, directors, and playwrights – is described by Cantrell as one of '[t]he two most significant recent publications on documentary

⁵⁷⁹ Michael Billington, 'V Is for Verbatim Theatre', *Guardian*, 8 May 2012 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/may/08/michael-billington-verbatim-theatre>> [accessed 1 March 2018].

⁵⁸⁰ Michael Billington, 'Michael Billington's A to Z of Modern Drama', *Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/series/michael-billington-s-a-to-z-of-modern-drama>> [accessed 1 March 2018].

⁵⁸¹ Billington, 'V is for Verbatim Theatre'.

⁵⁸² Billington, 'V is for Verbatim Theatre'. See Chapter Three, 'States of Distrust'.

theatre'.⁵⁸³ Yet the specificity suggested by the title of Hammond and Steward's collection (so specific they named it twice) is problematized by aspects of its contributions. In the opening line of Norton-Taylor's chapter, for example, he states that despite the 'Tricycle theatre's acclaimed pioneering of verbatim theatre', he prefers to call his work 'tribunal plays'.⁵⁸⁴ Norton-Taylor's personal preference reflects an interchangeability that can become commonplace when vanguard exponents do not clearly delineate the specialisms of these forms – as applies to Blythe's suggestion that verbatim theatre is epitomised by 'the trial play'. Specific to the proliferation of these forms in the 1990s and 2000s, Norton-Taylor claims that *The Colour of Justice* 'gave a real boost to the resurgence of verbatim theatre' at that time.⁵⁸⁵ This not only linguistically conflates the two practices but also alludes to a widespread sense of this conflation because, logically, *The Colour of Justice* could only 'boost' a resurgent verbatim theatre if such a conflation was already widely held by a range of stakeholders, from directors and actors, to critics, playwrights, and audiences.

Cumulatively, under the auspices of what Billington refers to as the new millennium's 'bracing stimulus of fact', the perception of an equal factual authority between different source materials reverberates through perceptions of tribunal theatre and verbatim practice at this time. However, this conflation somewhat diminishes the sense that the fact something was spoken does not correspond directly with the notion that what was spoken was factual. This tension exists in both tribunal theatre and verbatim practice

⁵⁸³ Cantrell, p. 4. The other publication being Forsyth and Megson's *Get Real*.

⁵⁸⁴ Richard Norton-Taylor, 'Richard Norton-Taylor', in *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2008), pp. 103–31 (p. 105).

⁵⁸⁵ Norton-Taylor, 'Richard Norton-Taylor', p. 109.

inflating the promise of truth in both models, but there is a legal weight to words spoken in tribunal theatre as processes of officialdom seek to verify them – this strongly distinguishes tribunal testimony from random and uncorroborated interviews.

The Ambiguity Turn: Documentary Veneer

This conflation between these different documentary models is echoed in the conflation and imbrication of factual and fictional material within the ambiguity turn. I suggest that this can generate a documentary veneer, where the appearance of documentary practices or the fluid interchange of factual and fictional materials seemingly inflates the promise of truth in such work, but ultimately leads to an increased scepticism in all forms of communication. The political work of such endeavours can be the postulation of new futures or different understandings of past events. However, it can also be a politically fraught endeavour wherein documentary practices are mobilised to either shore-up the apparent authenticity of fictional material, or to reflect reality as it is experienced without offering a critique. A brief consideration of how the documentary veneer can be observed in prominent works in the 2000s, by Dennis Kelly and David Hare respectively, will also help explore this interchangeability between fact and fiction, and will aid my investigation of the collapse between fact and fiction in digital times, as expressed later in *Weaklings*.

Kelly's *Taking Care of Baby* explicitly challenges the truth-claim of the documentary mode, and specifically verbatim practice, to present a critique of how verbatim trades on the "realness" of its source material; or as the marketing material states, the play

explores ‘how truth is compromised by today’s information culture’.⁵⁸⁶ The narrative focuses on Donna McAuliffe, a young mother who is convicted of killing her two infant children. The play stages interviews undertaken by an invisible author with Donna and others. The audience is aware that this is the dramaturgical structure of the play from the outset, because a notice is shown at the start of each scene to this effect: ‘The following has been taken word for word from interviews and correspondence. Nothing has been added and everything is in the subjects’ own words, though some editing has taken place. Names have not been changed.’⁵⁸⁷

However, as Tomlin explains, *Taking Care of Baby* is ‘an entirely fictional drama that uses the appearance of verbatim strategies to structure its critique’ of the verbatim form.⁵⁸⁸ Indications of this exist in the two ways that the notice highlighted above changes slightly with each new scene. In the first way, the syntax of the notice increasingly deteriorates with each re-appearance, ultimately to the point of incomprehensibility. In the second way, through the seemingly random nature of this collapse of comprehensibility, opposite meanings are identifiable in the different iterations of this notice, such as in the last line of the final notice which, at a glance, reads closer to the statement “all names have been changed” – ‘all nas havece been chaed’.⁵⁸⁹

⁵⁸⁶ Dennis Kelly, *Taking Care of Baby* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2007). Sleeve Cover.

⁵⁸⁷ Kelly, p. 15.

⁵⁸⁸ Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions*, p. 137.

⁵⁸⁹ Kelly, p. 97. The complete final notice reads, ‘Te foling has beelown takhen wormed for wspoord frondrm intews and cughorreviceence. Nothything has been odded and evering is in the subjts’ awn wongrds, tho sam editing hoes keplan tace. All nas havece been chaed.’

In its totality, *Taking Care of Baby* is an introspective examination of associated assumptions concerning what Tomlin describes as ‘the role of the writer and audience in their consumption of other people’s stories’.⁵⁹⁰ The fact that these are not other people’s stories though, but are instead fabrications, threatens to blight the political efficacy of the verbatim practice. This is because, in Tomlin’s terms, such pursuits risk a ‘totalising poststructuralist self-referentiality’, through which there is no recourse to the real and, therefore, no agitation of ideological narratives that shape perceptions of reality.⁵⁹¹ I agree with Tomlin’s observations – particularly if, as she cautions, Kelly’s play were to be considered a ‘benchmark of sophistication’ in verbatim critique.⁵⁹² However, it is the case that Kelly had to replicate the workings of verbatim practice in order to critique it and, in doing so, he was at least ethical in not using real-world testimonies and ‘play[ing] around’ with them, in Blythe’s terms, in order to examine the truth-claims of verbatim practice.⁵⁹³ I argue then that *Taking Care of Baby* employs a documentary veneer to create the appearance of a recognisable form so that it can interrogate the extra-theatrical claims of that form, and the assumed truth-claims of verbatim practice when such practice is deployed beyond clearly defined iterations of “verbatim theatre”. Kelly’s unpicking of verbatim practice raises productive questions concerning the role of authorship and the assumptions of reception, particularly in relation to the dominant documentary theatre form of the new millennium in the UK. In contrast, David Hare’s

⁵⁹⁰ Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions*, p. 137.

⁵⁹¹ Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions*, p. 138.

⁵⁹² Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions*, p. 138.

⁵⁹³ Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions*, p. 138.

Stuff Happens blends documentary material with imagined dialogue (like *Weaklings*) and has received much critical scrutiny due to this muddling of fact and fiction.⁵⁹⁴

As noted earlier, *Stuff Happens* charts the decisions taken by the administrations of George W. Bush and Tony Blair after 9/11, which led to military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁵⁹⁵ The play blends transcribed speeches and interviews with imagined ‘behind closed doors’ dialogue that Hare composed.⁵⁹⁶ In his ‘Author’s Note’, Hare asserts that *Stuff Happens* is ‘a history play’, that ‘[n]othing in the narrative is knowingly untrue’, and that its events are ‘authenticated from multiple sources’.⁵⁹⁷ He states that scenes of direct address are taken ‘verbatim’ from words spoken in public, but goes on to explain that ‘[w]hen the doors close on the world’s leaders and on their entourages, then I have used my imagination’.⁵⁹⁸

There exists a sense of embellishment between Hare’s forthright assertions that ‘[w]hat happened happened’ and his interweaving of imagined dialogue between verbatim sections.⁵⁹⁹ Hare’s deployment of the term ‘verbatim’ serves his pseudo-promise that ‘what happened happened’. However, the play’s oscillation between imagined and verbatim sections continually conjures the historic moments as reality caesuras, seamlessly splicing sections of fictitious dialogue together. In this way, *Stuff Happens*

⁵⁹⁴ See Bottoms, 2006; Klein, 2013; Paget, 2009; Sierz, 2011; Schulze, 2017.

⁵⁹⁵ The play’s title refers to a blasé remark made by the then US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld (1932-2021), in reference to widespread looting in Baghdad after its liberation from Saddam Hussein’s regime; the remark speaks to a nonchalance in the coalition’s post-war planning.

⁵⁹⁶ Stephen J. Bottoms, ‘Putting the Document into Documentary: An Unwelcome Corrective’, p. 60.

⁵⁹⁷ Hare, ‘Author’s Note’. n.p.

⁵⁹⁸ Hare, ‘Author’s Note’. n.p.

⁵⁹⁹ Hare, ‘Author’s Note’. n.p.

structurally shores-up its fictional elements via a reality framework that appears to confirm Hare's assertion. Yet, as Stephen Bottoms suggests, 'when upwards of 80 percent of *Stuff Happens* takes place "behind closed doors"', then Hare's assertion that 'the events depicted are all "true"' must be subject to scrutiny.⁶⁰⁰

Although on its London premiere, *Stuff Happens* was lauded by reviewers as a 'totally compelling play',⁶⁰¹ and heralded as 'a new theatrical form',⁶⁰² Cantrell calls it a 'pseudo-documentary'.⁶⁰³ Hare's claim that there is nothing 'knowingly untrue' in *Stuff Happens* is a conscious denial that the imagined dialogue might contaminate (in Billington's terms) the verbatim sections.⁶⁰⁴ Or vice versa, that the veracity of those verbatim sections might suggest an added sense of authenticity to the imagined dialogue – similar to the conflations discussed above between tribunal and verbatim practice. This opposition, which seems unregistered for Hare, resonates with what Megson identifies as Weiss's 'unremarked contradiction'.⁶⁰⁵ In both of these examples, recognition by the playwrights of their dramatic construction is subdued. Weiss seeks an objective documentary theatre which embodies an unfiltered sense of truth, while Hare asserts that his work is 'not [even] a documentary', and yet not 'knowingly untrue' – a

⁶⁰⁰ Stephen J. Bottoms, 'Putting the Document into Documentary: An Unwelcome Corrective', p. 60.

⁶⁰¹ Michael Billington, 'Stuff Happens', *Guardian*, 11 September 2004 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2004/sep/11/theatre.politicaltheatre>> [accessed 26 March 2018].

⁶⁰² Dominic Dromgoole, 'Reality Check', *Guardian*, 23 October 2004 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2004/oct/23/theatre.politicaltheatre>> [accessed 26 March 2018].

⁶⁰³ Cantrell, p. 2.

⁶⁰⁴ Billington, 'V Is for Verbatim Theatre'.

⁶⁰⁵ Megson, 'Half the Picture: "A Certain Frisson" at the Tricycle Theatre', p. 199. See Introduction, 'Methodological Approaches', and Chapter One, 'Faith in Facts: Peter Weiss and "The Investigation"'.

phrase that seems to be its own caveat.⁶⁰⁶ Hare's lack of admittance is troubling because his blend of factual and fictional material melds the single-author "state-of-the-nation" play – with which he is synonymous – with the popularisation of verbatim practice, and this suggests a reinforced credibility to his imagined version of events.

Gathering *Stuff Happens* with Hare's earlier work *The Permanent Way* into his investigation of the new millennium's "'verbatim theatre" trend', Bottoms suggests that such plays can be 'worryingly unreflexive regarding the "realities" they purport to discuss'.⁶⁰⁷ For Bottoms, self-reflexivity 'is required of documentary plays if they are to acknowledge their dual and thus ambiguous status as both "document" and "play"'.⁶⁰⁸ Self-reflexivity coheres neatly with Carol Martin's call for a re-framing of documentary theatre as a process, as opposed to a product epitomised by its content or veracity. In a broader sense, Tomlin states that 'self-reflexivity' is the political basis on which '[r]adical practice [... can] destabilise its own particular claims to authority, wherever these may lie'.⁶⁰⁹ Therein, the 'worrying' quality of *Stuff Happens* is that it offers no sense of a schism or destabilisation between the factual and the fictional content it mobilises or between its verbatim practice and its imagined dialogue.⁶¹⁰ In the age of an increasingly engorged and nebulous quality of digital communications, this is also a

⁶⁰⁶ Hare, 'Author's Note'. n.p.

⁶⁰⁷ Stephen J. Bottoms, 'Putting the Document into Documentary: An Unwelcome Corrective', p. 67.

⁶⁰⁸ Stephen J. Bottoms, 'Putting the Document into Documentary: An Unwelcome Corrective', p. 57.

⁶⁰⁹ Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions*, p. 12.

⁶¹⁰ This is particularly so within the context of a military campaign spearheaded by "sexed-up" claims concerning the Iraqi capability to launch weapons of mass destruction.

pressing and contentious aspect of *Weaklings*, yet one that is still evident despite a certain degree of self-reflexivity in the production – as the next section will discuss.

Drawing the above argument to a conclusion, the proliferation and expanded currency of the term verbatim is clearly visible in the wider public discourse of the documentary theatre in the new millennium. This expansion, however, creates a conflation between verbatim and tribunal, and the different source materials they mobilise. A sense of the seal of approval that buttresses tribunal theatre bleeds into the perception of verbatim practice when they are conflated; this inflates the promise of both practices. Such conflation has led to dramaturgical critiques of verbatim theatre in the case of Kelly's play, but also to the diminution of the practice's political potential in Hare's case, when other techniques such as fiction writing are imbricated without a sense of self-referentiality that might help an audience disentangle the real from the imagined, or fact from fiction.

Such embracing of ambiguity, while in line with some tenets of the postmodern, is also a problematic context in relation to *Weaklings*. This is because Goode's play presents its source materials as already indistinguishable in terms of their factual or fictional quality, due to their participation within the new landscape of digital communication. Mobilisations of documentary practices within the contemporary landscape of engorged information exchange marks another pivot within the ambiguity turn. However, in the case of *Weaklings*, I suggest this is discomfiting because of how the work replicates as opposed to resists the status quo of digital times. In this way, as with *Stuff Happens*, I suggest that there is a diminishing of the political potential of the documentary practices that are mobilised.

Weaklings and the Collapsing of Fact and Fiction

The proliferation of digital platforms in the second decade of the new millennium marks out the contemporary moment as ripe for a reconsideration of how digital communication impacts on representations of reality. When the content of such platforms is deployed as source materials within a performance that utilises the appearance of documentary practices, then such productions warrant investigation as contemporary examples of the expanded mobilisation of documentary practices in digital times, as Goode's *Weaklings* does.⁶¹¹

To briefly summarise, the documentary practices mobilised in *Weaklings* are twofold. The first are talking-head interviews, and the second is the verbatim regurgitation of various “found” documents, in manner reminiscent of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*. However, in *Weaklings* these documents are a mixture of written materials drawn from online message boards, blog comments, emails, and other instant messaging services. These documentary practices are then interwoven with imagined dialogue to create an uncertain distinction between the factual and fictional elements of the work. I argue that this ill-defined blending of digital materials, recognisable documentary practices, and imagined dialogue suggests that there is already a collapse of difference between fact and fiction in digital spaces which might bleed into reality. As such, *Weaklings* makes it difficult for spectators to identify aspects for change both online and offline.⁶¹²

The Play

⁶¹¹ My investigation of *Weaklings* is based on two viewings at the Warwick Arts Centre on 7 and 8 October 2015, and a final working script generously provided by Goode.

⁶¹² In order to clearly discuss the dissolution of a fact-fiction binary it is necessary to utilise the language of that binary. I recognise that such language incongruously reinstates a distinction that thereby resists dissolution. However, this act of naming is required in order to differentiate *Weaklings* from iterations of documentary theatre that perpetuate a stable fact-fiction binary, or that suggest a more rudimentary blurring of it.

Weaklings stages the interactions that occur through DC's blog – an online platform created, maintained, and added to six days a week by American cult novelist and poet Dennis Cooper.⁶¹³ The promotional material for the production states that DC's blog is a space where 'fans gather to interact with their hero – and each other'.⁶¹⁴ Goode's play constructs a narrative around a range of documentary materials related to DC's blog, including blog posts by Cooper, emails from blog users, emails between Cooper and Goode, instant messages, comment board entries, images, GIFs, and videos. Many of these materials are seemingly drawn from DC's blog by Goode and redeployed in performance alongside two distinct types of talking-head video interviews.

Of these two types of talking-head videos, which are projected on stage at specific moments, the more commonly used are interviews with devotees of DC's blog. These are edited together for specific purposes which are described in the stage directions: 'montage of talking-heads: How did they come to find the blog? What were their first impressions?'⁶¹⁵ The second type of talking-head interviews are rehearsal video diaries with members of the production team, who offer reflections on their experiences of using the blog as part of devising and rehearsing *Weaklings*. These documentary practices of talking-head interviews and the verbatim presentation of online materials

⁶¹³ See www.denniscooperblog.com. The first iteration of the blog established in 2005 was called "The Weaklings", and named after a collection of poetry by Cooper. The reinvented version of it is now called "DC's", and for clarity here I will refer to it as DC's blog. The blog name and its location on the internet changed in 2016, when a complaint was lodged with Google (who hosted the original blogspace) that paedophilic content was present. The potential presence of such material is emblematic of the controversial territories with which Cooper's blog flirts. After denying this accusation, Cooper sought a legal intervention and Google returned access to the original content as a data file, but they did not reinstate the original site. Cooper has been solely responsible for rebuilding the archive of that original blog on his new site.

⁶¹⁴ Chris Goode and Company.

⁶¹⁵ Chris Goode, '*Weaklings*': *Working Script*, 02/10/15 (Unpublished, 2015), p. 3.

are interwoven with imagined elements to create a narrative that revolves around four characters – Boy, Writer, Dennis, and Muse.⁶¹⁶

Boy (Nick Finegan) and Writer (Christopher Brett Bailey) are regular users of DC's blog and, for each of them, it is a vehicle to gain access to, and affirmation from, Dennis (Karen Christopher). A performance conceit of *Weaklings* is that the dialogue spoken by Boy, Writer, and Dennis is almost always accompanied by that character typing at the same time, to demonstrate their perpetual engagement with each other (and the world) through technological means: Boy uses a smartphone, Writer uses a laptop (which makes them both mobile on stage), and Dennis uses a desktop computer within his separated office setting. Muse (Craig Hamilton) is a silent, ethereal figure who drifts between scenes altering his persona in response to the words of Boy and Writer.



Figure 1: *Weaklings*, dir. Chris Goode, 2015. Photo: Meg Lavender

⁶¹⁶ I refer to Dennis when discussing this character as this is the name given in the script, but I refer to Cooper when discussing the real person that the character is based on.

The online interactions between these characters are staged within a sparse set wherein four movable gauze screens establish semi-translucent walls that demarcate different spaces. These translucent walls operate as frames that focus attention (almost voyeuristically) on actions which might normally be hidden, and they double as surfaces upon which video, text, and images are projected. A static, loosely configured domestic space denoting Dennis's office sits on an elevated level. From this vantage point, web-camera close-ups of Karen Christopher's face are sporadically projected onto the gauze screens (Figure 1), as her character, Dennis, surveys the interactions within his curated digital domain.

The plot of *Weaklings* centres on Boy's anxieties concerning socially expected levels of attractiveness, masculinity, and body image, as he explores ways to express his sexual identity and manage his online performance of self. Thematically these concerns resonate with public sphere discourses regarding the influence of the internet and social media in popular culture and social policy.⁶¹⁷ Boy's pursuit of affirmation from Dennis does not quell his anxieties, which are in fact exacerbated by the highly sexualised material that Dennis regularly posts. In particular, Boy fixates on Dennis's monthly "International Male Slaves of the Month" segment – a compilation of online advertisements where young males pose as vulnerable individuals intent on selling themselves as sex slaves for acts of bondage, domination, and sadomasochism

⁶¹⁷ Such issues are highlighted in the UK government's *Online Harms White Paper* which focuses in part on 'growing concerns about the potential impact on [...] mental health and wellbeing' of individuals, particularly young people; see *Online Harms White Paper* (HM Government, 2019), CP57 (p. 5). At the time of writing the subsequent Bill and legislation is pending.

(BDSM).⁶¹⁸ Increasingly anxious and isolated, Boy begins to self-harm and explore this world of BDSM, assuming that the reality will not be as extreme as the fantasies suggested online. In the denouement, Boy dies in an extreme BDSM encounter.

Structurally, Goode's play balances two strands. The first is the staging of internal activity that occurs over DC's blog in what I refer to as the live-action strand. The second are external reflections on the blog which offer context to these digital interactions – I refer to this as the talking-heads strand. These two strands complement each other in that the talking-head interviewees denote an offline reality that gives credence to the online blog contributors, who are only discernible through the traces of DC's blog that Goode has transcribed. This interplay of offline and online within the dramaturgical structure of the play encourages an uncertainty between what is fact and what is fiction, and reflects a deterioration between distinctions of offline realities and online fictions in digital times (or vice-versa). Commonplace acceptance of this deterioration can have tangible and dangerous effects in reality, as at least Goode's narrative seems to suggest. However, the lack of an apparatus to unpick such uncertainty, or the lack of challenge to the increasingly status quo nature of such deterioration, is an important omission within *Weaklings*. Despite this, critical appraisals of *Weaklings* praise Goode's attempt to give form to such digital spaces.

For Natasha Tripney, *Weaklings* demonstrates that Goode is conscious of 'the ache for connection and the capacity for anarchy' that the internet enables, and she describes the

⁶¹⁸ In a post-show discussion (Warwick Arts Centre, 7 October 2015), Goode commented (with a hint of scepticism) that Dennis Cooper explained these monthly adverts were chosen for their interesting and humorous use of language.

work as an ‘experiment in making the blog physical’.⁶¹⁹ Examples abound of plays that have attempted such an experiment, from Tim Price’s *Teh Internet is Serious Business* (2014), to Jennifer Haley’s *The Nether* (2014), and James Graham’s *Privacy* (2014). However, I suggest that *Weaklings* is less an attempt to bring the online world on stage, or a musing on the ache for connection in virtual space, but rather it highlights the danger of a dissolution between fact and fiction in the age of digital communication. That is, when uncertain and unverifiable information is not scrutinised but taken either as truthful or merely playful, then either of these can have personal as well as political ramifications.

I contend that Goode’s play actually promotes such uncertainty and suggests an already dissolved equivalence between fact and fiction in online spaces that can bleed dangerously into offline realities. In this way, while *Weaklings* may stage an ‘anarchic virtual community of queer punks and lonely teens, paranoid artists and wannabe slaves’, I suggest that such communities do not find a ‘strange refuge together in dangerous times’, as the promotional material states, for two reasons; firstly, because danger intrudes on this ‘delirious space’ via the act of Boy’s death and Dennis’s ethically-questionable use of potentially exploitative images as artefacts of pseudo-intellectual intrigue, and secondly, because Goode offers no way to unpick or to counter that danger.⁶²⁰ In order to evidence this collapsed distinction between fact and fiction, I will now examine how *Weaklings* mobilises the malleability of documentary practices

⁶¹⁹ Natasha Tripney, ‘Weaklings’, *The Stage*, 8 October 2015 <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/weaklings-at-warwick-arts-centre--hypnotic>> [accessed 10 October 2015].

⁶²⁰ Chris Goode and Company.

to portray this digital blog, its content, and its community, in the service of bridging reality and the digital.

Staging the Blog and Bridging Reality

In the opening video montage of *Weaklings*, talking-head videos highlight three reasons why devotees continually return to DC's blog. One reason is that the blog's content spans high, low, and popular culture, ranging from fine art to graffiti, dramatists to comedians, and the obituaries of social theorists to photography of abandoned amusement parks. Another reason is that elements of DC's blog also gravitate towards transgressive topics where identity politics and sexuality come to the fore; such subject matter is familiar territory for fans of Cooper's novels, and resonates with Goode's dramatic oeuvre.⁶²¹ However, the most common reason, so the interviewees contend, is the sense of community that DC's blog fosters. *Weaklings* foregrounds this not only because the talking-head devotees hold it up as important, but also because they eulogise about one aspect of DC's blog that exemplifies it – the so-called 'PS section'.

The PS section is more than a post-script to Cooper's daily entries, as the name would normally denote – it is a dedicated space at the bottom of each post where Cooper responds publicly to every comment from the previous day. This section encourages

⁶²¹ Examples of similar subject matter in other works by Goode include *Men in the Cities* (2014), Goode's adaptation of Derek Jarman's *Jubilee* (2017), and his now disbanded all-male physical theatre ensemble Ponyboy Curtis. It is worth noting that Goode has previously engaged with documentary practices through *Hippo World Guest Book* (2007) where, as the performer, he read verbatim from the online comments section of a hippo enthusiast webpage. For a discussion of *Hippo World Guest Book* that gives some indication of Goode's longstanding fascination with how communities share thoughts through digital platforms, and the difficulty of staging such undertakings, see Catherine Love, "'Hippo World Guest Book'", Caryl Churchill Theatre', 23 January 2014 <<https://catherinelove.co.uk/2014/01/23/hippo-world-guest-book-caryl-churchill-theatre/>> [accessed 18 January 2020].

dialogue between Cooper and his online followers, and between the different members of this community. As such, the PS section has become a daily expectation of the blog readership, which Dennis understands as he admits that ‘if I took the PS away no one would like the blog anymore’.⁶²² Although it is commonplace for exchanges to occur between users in the comments section of any website, the interviewees attest to Cooper’s unerring dedication in replying daily to every contribution.

While Goode’s dramatization of DC’s blog attempts to replicate the sense that it is a community space, DC’s blog is (as most blogs are) generally focused upon the author’s contributions. In performance, Cooper’s blog entries are signposted by the projection of the date and time of their upload. This staging technique is a simple way to seemingly distinguish the verbatim presentation of documents drawn from the blog, from the imagined dialogue created by Goode. However, Goode establishes another dramaturgical trope which makes it difficult to draw such neat distinctions. At regular intervals, commonly with a change of scene, a voiceover relays the names and times of contributions by other users of DC’s blog, who are referred to as ‘commenters’ in the working script; these names and times are also projected onto the gauze walls:

1.47am. JW Veldhoen said ...
1.52am. steevee said ...
2.13am. SypHA_69 said ...
2.55am. JC Penny said ...⁶²³

The projection of these details mirrors the strategy used to denote the verifiability of Dennis’s contributions, and in doing so begins to suggest an equivalence in provenance between these different contributors, despite there being no details regarding what was

⁶²² Goode, p. 9.

⁶²³ Goode, p. 9.

written by these commenters. This trope is also a dramaturgical conceit which performs the sense that the blog continues apace while other actions unfold on stage. These voiceover lists commonly end with Writer's screen-name 'JC Penny', and are then followed by a contribution from Writer; as such, it is unclear if Writer's contributions should be viewed in the same light as Dennis's.

Such uncertainty between elements of imagined dialogue and documentary source materials reflects concerns of the digital age, such as how usernames enable un-attributable information to be exchanged in online spaces, and how the prevalence of online bots further complicates the uncertain distinction between real engagements and the actions of virtual ciphers. Even Writer's idiosyncratic scepticism towards the contributions of others, which he calls 'a load of snake oil' at one moment, is presented as a singular character trait as opposed to a strategy to combat online falsehoods.⁶²⁴ Through these repetitive tropes, Goode solidifies an ambiguity in the veracity of all contributions voiced in *Weaklings*, and yet suggests no route to navigate such troublesome terrain.

Instead, as Goode states in a post-show discussion, drawing source materials from the blog and utilising talking-head interviews was a way for the production to "bridge" reality and the blog.⁶²⁵ Along such lines, repeatedly voicing and showing the name and time of blog contributions creates an impression that the documentary practices at work enable strategic moments of reality-bridging. This is further consolidated by Goode's

⁶²⁴ Goode, p. 14.

⁶²⁵ Post show discussion, Warwick Arts Centre, 7 October 2015.

own intervention, when in performance one commenter is named as ‘Chris Goode said ...’, highlighting how the director joined this community in order to research it.⁶²⁶

As Goode’s comments and the programme notes attest to, *Weaklings* ‘disorientingly blurs’ its layers of ‘fiction and documentary, fact and fantasy’ within its mobilising of documentary practices, in order to support this dramaturgical strategy of ambiguity.⁶²⁷

Due to the mirroring of tropes between how Dennis’s uploads are demarcated and how these other ‘commenters’ are introduced, it is unclear in performance which materials are drawn from DC’s blog and thereby are a documentary practice, and which are imagined dialogue with the appearance of a documentary practice. As such, precision about where scepticism should be directed is not possible because there is no consistent distinction in *Weaklings* between what is real and what is fictional.

By structurally underlining its ambiguous treatment of source materials in this way, the dissolution between fact and fiction in *Weaklings* is both a means and an end – that is to say, Goode’s play mobilises uncertainty in order to perpetuate it. Rather than being a problem to be “solved” though, it could be argued that this dissolution demonstrates how documentary practices retain their malleability when mobilised in light of the contemporary digital moment, to achieve a kind of self-reflexivity. Such an argument would draw on elements of what Kelly and Hare have already created, because documentary practices are recognisable within the veneer of the work, but the veracity of the content remain ambiguous. In such circumstances, however, I would contend that malleability is not in and of itself justifiable if a politically productive outcome is almost

⁶²⁶ This naming of Goode as a commenter was not in the working script but occurred in both performances that I witnessed.

⁶²⁷ Chris Goode and Company.

abandoned in favour of the replication of new forms of communication which dilute appreciations of the real.

This is where, I suggest, Goode's dramatic imbrication of documentary source materials and imagined dialogue is particularly troubling in relation to perceptions of the real. As Baudrillard contends, the real has become usurped by mediatised reproductions of reality, which perpetuate themselves *ad infinitum* to the point where what was once envisaged as the real is now incomprehensible – the real has been entirely altered to the point that '[i]llusion is no longer possible because the real is no longer possible'.⁶²⁸ Goode's articulation of a dissolution between fact and fiction that is already embedded in digital times appears to hold on to this notion of a loss of illusion as well as reality. This is because any sense of either within the world of *Weaklings* is redundant when one cannot distinguish between 'fiction and documentary, fact and fantasy'. Such imbrication is the business model of the digital age.

According to Graham Meikle, social media unsettles 'distinctions between the different contexts of our daily lives'.⁶²⁹ He claims that the assimilation of online and offline personas characterises the thinking behind digital platforms, and highlights Mark Zuckerberg's assertion that people have 'one identity', and that '[h]aving two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity'.⁶³⁰ This collapse of distinctions between online and offline spaces, which sees the untimely demise of Boy for trusting that real-world BDSM would not mirror the extreme content he viewed online, has resonances with the fact/fiction collapse that underpins *Weaklings*. Consideration of the

⁶²⁸ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simualtion*, p. 19.

⁶²⁹ Meikle, p. 99.

⁶³⁰ Mark Zuckerberg, in, Meikle, p. 45.

narrative and dramaturgical ways that this collapse is staged and its import in relation to documentary practices is discussed next.

Staging the Collapse and Documentary Practices

As Goode suggested in his post-show discussion, the talking-head strand enables audiences to “meet” real blog users. However, it does more than this. The talking-head strand buttresses the “reality” of the live-action scenes. That is to say, the live-action scenes profit from the repeated interjections of the talking-heads because the interviewees corroborate the blog’s existence, the nature of its subject matter, and the kinds of interactions that occur there. Such deferral to videoed content is a common practice in documentary theatre and can be traced back to Piscator’s use of film on stage.⁶³¹ In this instance though, the use of video is an inversion of the normative logic associated with such a practice.

Usually, video recordings in documentary theatre buttress the “reality” of live-action exchanges; however, the live-action exchanges of *Weaklings* are representations of digital conversations – as such, the screen world is actualised, and the actual world is represented through screens. Through this inversion, there is already a conflation between the mediation of the real, the relationship between online and offline activity, and the real of performance. This reflects the Baudrillardian sense that mediation saturates all modes of communication, as the performers enact digital conversations and

⁶³¹ See Chapter One, ‘Contextualising Erwin Piscator’.

the recorded interviewees are supposed to enable audiences to meet “real” blog users.⁶³²

The reflection of this mediated saturation in *Weaklings* furthers the sense of a lack of distinction between digital and real-world activity, and a collapse between fact and fiction.

The content and purpose of the lesser-used rehearsal video diaries are different because they signal the work undertaken to produce *Weaklings*. Interviews with the production team highlight the constructed quality of the documentary practices in the production, and self-reflectively signpost the uncertain veracity and representative quality of the performance itself. Through such self-reflexive strategies, irrespective of whether the source is online or offline material, the staging of *Weaklings* signifies a closure of the gap between the real and the virtual, and a collapse of difference between these two worlds.

Although, this fluid imbrication of factual materials and imagined dialogue has a timely significance for concerns around un-attributable authorship in the digital age, the difficulty in unravelling fact from fiction and the real from fantasy within the communicative operations of digital times is made impossible if markers are not drawn from which to distinguish veracity from falsehood. As such, *Weaklings*’ reflections of the increasing uncertainties that prevail within the contemporary digital economy offer

⁶³² Such contentions underpin much of Baudrillard’s work but are perhaps distinctly present in his treatise on the first Gulf War. In his introduction to that publication, Paul Patton offers an interesting example of the saturation of mediation not only in reporting but in experiencing reality, as he describes a moment when CNN reporters stationed in the Gulf, admitted on air that they were watching CNN on television in order to discover information for their report. Paul Patton, ‘Introduction’, in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. by Paul Patton (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995), pp. 1–21 (p. 2).

little in the way of critical examination or questioning of the political consequences of a collapse of difference between fact and fiction, particularly beyond Boy's narrative denouement. The exchanges that occur between the characters in *Weaklings* are further demonstrations of my contention that the work operates in compliance with a collapsed distinction between fact and fiction.

Interactions between characters in *Weaklings* are staccato endeavours; much of the subject matter of each contribution is tangential to that which occurs immediately before or after, mirroring the somewhat random "feeds" of social media platforms. Within this dramaturgical structure, the intercutting of live-action scenes with recorded testimony means that an already fragmented landscape of communication is further atomised. As a result, *Weaklings*' structure contradicts the characteristics of 'dialogue' and 'collaboration' that the blog users stress are indicative of DC's blog and that Goode's play suggests are fostered by this online community.⁶³³ In light of such a contradiction, which stresses fragmentation and individualism over community, it is logical to scrutinise both the opinions of DC's blog proffered by Goode's dramatization and the political undertones of this contradiction. Such scrutiny then not only concerns the source materials of *Weaklings* but extends to the characters, their actions, and the framing of the relationship between the production and this online community, as one particular sequence highlights.

⁶³³ 'Chris Goode & Company: "Weaklings"', *Axis Arts Centre* <https://axisartscentre.mmu.ac.uk/?ai1ec_event=chris-goode-company-weaklings&instance_id=835> [accessed 22 March 2018].



Figure 2: *Weaklings*, dir. Chris Goode, 2015. Photo: Meg Lavender

Centre-stage, within a three-sided gauze-lined box and dressed in only his underwear, Boy takes selfies while posing in a full-length mirror; he is engaged in his perpetually unaccomplished task to capture the perfect image of himself. Projections of these images are relayed onto the gauze screens. Downstage centre in a low light, Muse begins an intense cycle of exercises that repeats for the entire scene, ranging from sprints to sit-ups and press-ups. Reminiscent of the Living Theatre's production of *The Brig*, the audience observes the toll that this period of prolonged exertion takes on Muse, as his breathing increases and he begins to perspire.⁶³⁴ While Muse continues to exercise, a video fades up on a screen and the audience are shown a projection of Muse 'running around the rehearsal room. At a certain point the footage snags and we see a gif-like repetitive loop.'⁶³⁵

⁶³⁴ See Chapter Two, "'Extreme, Documentary Realism" and the Living Theatre'.

⁶³⁵ Goode, p. 8.

Even before Muse's video 'snags', the performer's cycle of short, alternating exercises visually references a GIF (Graphic Interchange Format) due to its clipped repetitive quality. Developed in the 1980s, GIFs mobilise images from pop-culture in lieu of a written or spoken response. They have become popularised in the advanced days of social media and frequently populate DC's blog – which is why Goode utilises projections of them repeatedly during *Weaklings*. According to Meikle, GIFs are part of 'remix culture' in the digital age, wherein 'creative strategies that were once considered radical or *avant-garde*, from collage and Situationist *détournement* to digital sampling, have now become some of the basic cultural practices of everyday social media interactions'.⁶³⁶ Although this digital remix culture is concerned with decontextualizing and re-contextualizing images, Meikle cautions that it is important to consider the agency that underpins this visual practice, because rather than the passive metaphor of 'viral content' which "infects" social media interactions, the visual practices of remix culture are 'something that people do'.⁶³⁷

In this instance, the repetitive actions of Muse and the looping rehearsal room video could easily convey a narrative concern with the physical and psychological labour that people exert in their online performance of self. As a dramatic composition, there is a clear relationship in this scene between the actions of Boy and Muse, which revolve around questions of masculinity and body image, as well as issues of self-commodification. However, in light of Meikle's highlighting of the agency within the visual practices of remix culture – the fact that such imagery are cultural artefacts which people take the time to create and enact – I contend that this experiment in form, which

⁶³⁶ Meikle, pp. 49–50. Emphasis in original.

⁶³⁷ Meikle, p. 50.

imbricates digital fantasies with documentary practices, requires examination as an action by Goode that demonstrably contributes to the collapse between fact and fiction in *Weaklings*.

The dramaturgical choice to mirror the live-action exercises of Muse with a GIF of rehearsal room footage puts the character and the actor in tension; Muse is the persona on stage, while Craig Hamilton is the actor in rehearsal. In this moment, the real-world rehearsal footage bleeds into the dramatization of DC's blog and appears susceptible to technical failure as it 'snags', GIF-like, to become part of the operations and language of this online space. Yet, simultaneously, this rehearsal footage coheres with the standards that Goode has established for a documentary practice – all previous recorded footage in *Weaklings* belongs to the talking-heads strand. It is not clear then, if this is supposed to be a digital-doubling of Muse's exercises, or a self-referential, quasi-documentary comment on the performativity of online selves. Equally, it could be a reality effect reminiscent of Blythe highlighting the earphones in her work, suggesting that this is all rehearsed, or perhaps more pressingly, that nothing should be taken as real. When a total saturation of mediatization appears to encompass both the narrative representation and the documentary practices, then representation and the real do not simply "blur" in *Weaklings*, but rather the shorthand of the image-loop demonstrably highlights the collapse between the factual and fiction in the production as a whole.

To begin to conclude, the uncertain distinction between source materials, documentary practices, and imagined dialogue means that it is as difficult to prove the factual aspects of *Weaklings*, as it is to highlight the fictitious elements. The exception of this axiom seems to be Dennis, because his uploads are prefaced by a title and date, which promotes a greater confidence in their veracity because of this apparent traceability.

Despite the explanation that DC's blog is a space where 'fans gather to interact with their hero – and each other', the talking-head interviewees gradually allude to a questionable influence that Dennis's stewardship exerts over the blog community. This is particularly in reference to his recurring fascination with adverts for male sex-slaves. The first live-action words of the play give a hint to this transgressive facet of Dennis's stewardship when, in a moment of direct address, a projected close-up of Karen Christopher's face on the centre-stage gauze screen stares into the auditorium and says 'Well. You all look very fuckable.'⁶³⁸ This opening statement positions the audience as both the subjects of a voyeur, and potentially as voyeurs themselves. The dramaturgical implication that the audience becomes part of the blog community is Goode's multimedia attempt to bridge the real world of the performance with the digital (but still real) world of the blog. However, by refraining from what becomes the normal structure of highlighting the date and time of Dennis's statements in this opening instance, this unattributed sentence suggests that it is up to the audience to decide which impression of Dennis to trust – the 'hero' or the voyeur. In this way, elements of the character of Dennis similarly straddle the uncertain distinction between him as a vehicle for the communication of documentary source material or as a vessel of imagined dialogue.

In its totality, *Weaklings* mobilises an ambiguous imbrication of source materials, imagined dialogue, and documentary practices to cultivate an aesthetic of uncertainty. This is continuously played out in the fluid staging of the play as the folding gauze walls create semi-permeable, cubed playing areas between Boy, Writer, and Muse. When these gauze walls rotate, there remains a reverberation of their previous positions

⁶³⁸ Goode, p. 2.

because their translucent quality makes the spaces they shape perpetually intermingle. This sense of physical imbrication generates uncertainty about the time and place of each space. Projected into these spaces, the talking-head videos notionally lift the performance out of DC's blog, and instead reflect on the exchanges that occur there. While the porous gauze walls help theatricalise DC's blog as a space that elides distance and, in that way, offer what Marshall McLuhan calls an 'extension' to the interconnectivity of human society, the layering of documentary projections onto these translucent structures points towards an imbrication of these separate spaces and temporalities, and a collapse between the facts and fantasies that populate them.⁶³⁹

Cumulatively, the visual overlaying and narrative interweaving of *Weaklings*' two strands – the live-action and the talking-heads – accentuates the collapse between fact and fiction within how its materials are presented alongside its mobilisation of documentary practices. This imbrication between form and content is part of Goode's dramaturgical strategy to promote ambiguity. However, to what end does Goode pursue this ambiguity of documentary practices and fictional material? Moreover, what might this contribute to wider discourse concerning the role of, and the challenges to, documentary theatre in the context of the digital age? Goode's impression of his own work gives an insight to these questions, and help to shape my conclusions concerning his work and this chapter as a whole.

Conclusion

In a 2020 episode of his long-running podcast *Thompson's Live*, Goode refers to DC's blog as an example of 'community formation without heavy authoring', and states that

⁶³⁹ McLuhan, p. 2. See Chapter Two, 'Technology and Change'.

‘Dennis [Cooper] was making online the kind of space that I really wanted to be making in my theatre work offline’.⁶⁴⁰ Reflecting on his work, Goode describes *Weaklings* as a ‘narratively fractured’ piece that resembled a ‘thriller’, and although he admits it was not well received (in part due to an uncomfortable mix of ‘sex and violence’ Goode suggests), it is work of which he remains ‘very proud’.⁶⁴¹ Such responses, five years after the production, make clear Goode’s personal affinity for *Weaklings*, for Cooper, and for the community of DC’s blog within which he has witnessed friendships, collaborations, and even deaths being “shared”. For Goode, then, DC’s blog and its community have generated relationships that bridge the digital and real worlds.

This bridging between reality and the blog underpins Goode’s ambiguous deployment of documentary practices and fictional materials. As such, within the community that *Weaklings* presents, authoritative questioning of dangerous, false, or exclusive forms of communication is almost evacuated. Even the lone critical voice of Writer, whose sardonic tone lambasts the ‘bullshit detector[s]’ of some individuals on DC’s blog, still only mocks the gullibility of other users rather than helping matters.⁶⁴² Similarly, the relative foreboding of Dennis’s influence is a tangential issue for the talking-heads, and one that is not challenged in *Weaklings*. Therein, ambiguous and potentially harmful materials – such as the sex-slave fantasies which purport to represent offline realities – are positioned simply as part of a panoply of information that exists in such spaces. However, on DC’s blog such things do not simply exist – they are curated (with little discernible irony) by Dennis, and they can have a dangerous influence on a readership,

⁶⁴⁰ ‘Thompson’s Live: S6 Ep6 (17th April 2020): Dennis Cooper’, *Thompson’s Live* <<https://chrisgoodeandco.podbean.com/>> [accessed 30 April 2020].

⁶⁴¹ ‘Thompson’s Live: S6 Ep6 (17th April 2020): Dennis Cooper’.

⁶⁴² Goode, p. 14.

as shown by Boy's death. An expansion of Meikle's caution regarding remix culture to the wider social media environment seems fitting in this context – these are things 'that people do', not just things that exist, or that are simply 'done to people'.⁶⁴³

Worryingly, Goode offers little rejoinder to this potentially harmful collapse of fact and fiction. Indeed, it is almost a selling point of the production as the programme notes state – 'it's hard to know what's scarier: that a lot of what happens here isn't really real – or that some of it is'.⁶⁴⁴ It is interesting then that a sense of 'removal from the blog' comes from within the production team, when in a talking-head interview assistant director Jennifer Tang alludes to a disparity in the communication that occurs on DC's blog – a disparity which I claim is reflected rather than critiqued in Goode's production.⁶⁴⁵ As one of the few female voices in *Weaklings*, the blog's tendency towards explicit male homosexual content prompts Tang to describe her 'feeling of removal from the blog, as a straight woman'.⁶⁴⁶ For Stewart Pringle, Tang's comment demonstrates that *Weaklings* 'knows its weaknesses', but I contend that this is not enough to absolve the production of concerns around its male-dominant narrative and the estrangement of females within this digital space and within this production. As such, Tang's comment, the un-problematized casting of Goat Island's Karen Christopher as the troubling figure of Dennis, and Goode's resolute affinity for the work, all suggest that *Weaklings* is a production which seems to prioritise aesthetic considerations over political agitation.

⁶⁴³ Meikle, p. 50.

⁶⁴⁴ Chris Goode and Company.

⁶⁴⁵ Stewart Pringle, 'Weaklings', *Exeunt*, 9 October 2015

<<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/weaklings/>> [accessed 30 October 2015].

⁶⁴⁶ Pringle, 'Weaklings'.

Goode's attempt to make the blog physical, as Tripney referred to it, fosters dramaturgical blind spots in how the boundaries between fact and fiction, and documentary and fantasy, are collapsed in *Weaklings*. In such troubling territory, the historic malleability of documentary practices is wielded for expedient effect in the establishment of a documentary veneer. Although *Weaklings* appears allied to the principle underlying Baudrillard's techno-infused argument that '[i]llusion is no longer possible because the real is no longer possible', I suggest rather that ambiguity abounds for ambiguity's sake in *Weaklings* because the work purposefully collapses the boundaries between the factual and fictional. In this way, it is not only unclear what the characters could have done to help Boy, but it is ultimately uncertain what spectators can or should do beyond the performance to guard against or challenge the encroachment of digital mistruths in the real.

Weaklings can be described as a reflection of the increasing integration of digital space in everyday life, which is threatening offline reality's position as the dominant sphere of social engagement. This increased integration is a result of, as Meikle summarises, 'the rapid and pervasive development of information technology, the shifting alignments of both capitalist and statist systems, and the rise of new social movements'.⁶⁴⁷ In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the lauded social qualities that are a defining aspect of technological developments, particularly forms of social media, are generating new discursive fields for performance scholars. However, in one of the first monograph studies devoted to the relationship between social media and theatre, Patrick Lonergan

⁶⁴⁷ Meikle, p. 9.

argues that the digital age need not necessarily be seen as a ‘radical new departure’.⁶⁴⁸

Lonergan suggests that the frameworks to scrutinise it already exist: ‘we need to draw on theatre histories to help us to understand the performance of identity, gender, power and sex over long periods of time – not only in social media but also in the theatre’.⁶⁴⁹

This resonates with Paget’s assertion that documentary techniques ‘seldom get passed on directly’, but are re-learned during ‘circumstances of necessity’.⁶⁵⁰ As such, I would add to Lonergan’s list that understanding the performance of real words, real events, and real people also benefits from drawing links through the histories to which the development of such work is indebted in order to propose contemporary ways forward, rather than suggesting “everything has changed” because of shifts in technology.⁶⁵¹ I contend that, in relation to this study, those histories concern documentary theatre forms and documentary practices as have been discussed throughout Chapters One and Two, and as are explored in relation to recent history in this chapter and the next.

The resurgence of documentary practices discussed in this chapter has primarily focused on the political and ideological underpinnings of verbatim practice, which has in varying guises dominated the theatre landscape since the turn of the millennium. These varying guises and deployments range from a Weissian approach that believes truth can be uncovered through the unbiased communication of factual evidence, to the increasing difficulty in disentangling fiction from the real, which categorises a gathering amalgam of theatre approaches in the new millennium. This amalgam is not consigned to

⁶⁴⁸ Patrick Lonergan, *Theatre & Social Media* (London: Palgrave, 2016), p. 48.

⁶⁴⁹ Lonergan, p. 48.

⁶⁵⁰ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, p. 224.

⁶⁵¹ See Williams’s discussion regarding the facile “cause and effect” argument of television’s influence in Chapter Two, ‘Technology and Change’.

canonically recognisable iterations of documentary theatre forms, but can be productively expansive when considering the mobilisation of documentary practices as the hallmark of works that warrant examination – as *Weaklings* has shown.

Goode's production, as noted, could neatly sit alongside other works that attempt to “stage the internet”, because the mirroring qualities, of which I have been critical, could be productively employed in narrative explorations of the convergences between online and offline realities. Indeed, in a conclusion that embraces theatre's ability not just to assimilate the new but to aid an understanding of it, Lonergan is steadfastly hopeful that the theatrical form can ‘begin to accommodate the existence of social media and its impact on our lives, our ethics, our ability to receive and analyse mediated information, and our public performances of who we think we are’.⁶⁵² However, I propose that a divergent way of understanding the ‘impact on our lives’ of technological change is to consider embedded influences on perceptions of the real. For me, this can also be achieved by investigating how documentary practices erupt in work that appears less materially wedded to the technologies and platforms of the digital age.

As such, the final chapter of this thesis moves away from detailed representation of digital worlds and the ‘new aesthetics of the virtual’, to foreground how we represent the self, other people, and events from reality in new or different ways in digital times.⁶⁵³ In Chapter Four, I investigate how eruptions of autobiographical practice within storytelling frameworks take forward (or not) some of the techniques, strategies, and underlying politics of this practice. By addressing the single-person perspective in a

⁶⁵² Lonergan, p. 52.

⁶⁵³ Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006), p. 61.

range of contemporary performances which mobilise documentary practices, the focus is less on the source materials that are communicated, and more on the mediation of those materials through the imbrication of documentary practices with solo storytelling.

CHAPTER FOUR: STORYTELLING AND DOCUMENTARY PRACTICES

Building on the previous chapter, the focus of this chapter is an increased preoccupation with individual stories and perspectives in the new millennium, which has been fuelled by the neoliberal economic model, the distributed authorship of social media, the self-commodification of digital platforms, and the centrality of the individual in the wider experience economy, which has been mirrored in the growth of immersive theatre practices.⁶⁵⁴ As such, this chapter focuses on documentary practices in solo performances of storytelling, specifically, Complicité's *The Encounter* (2015), Untitled Projects' *Paul Bright's Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (2013 and 2015), and Chris Thorpe and Rachel Chavkin's *Confirmation* (2014).

Argument and Structure

Central to each of these productions is the figure of the storyteller – Simon McBurney, George Anton, and Chris Thorpe – who all play versions of themselves. These storytellers facilitate the representation of purportedly real past events, make a dramaturgical and ideological fulcrum of the real time and place of performance, and self-reflexively demonstrate the constructed nature of both the documentary practices in each works and each performance event as a whole. In short, while Forsyth and Megson note that shifts away from an 'unimpeachable and objective' view of 'the documentary form' have positioned 'historical truth as an embattled site of contestation', this chapter suggests that contrasts and imbrications between *embodied* and *empirical* evidence are also sites of contestation in solo documentary performance during the second decade of

⁶⁵⁴ See Introduction, 'Literature Review: Recent Expansions', and, Chapter Three, 'States of Distrust'.

the new millennium.⁶⁵⁵ Such contestation is playing out within an age of distrust when truth beyond the individual seems precarious and, as such, these storytellers invoke the authenticating mechanisms of documentary practices as aesthetic strategies within the wider context of a cultural milieu that places a heightened value, both personally and commercially, on the appearance of authenticity.⁶⁵⁶ This is not to say that these mobilisations of documentary practices are devoid of political rigour or a cynical endeavour, but rather, as this thesis proposes, that those politics are shifting in digital times, as the malleability of documentary practices continues amid new circumstances of necessity.

In relation to these circumstances, Charlie Gere states that the term “digital” does not simply refer ‘to the effects and possibilities of a particular technology’, but it ‘defines and encompasses the ways of thinking and doing that are embodied within that technology’.⁶⁵⁷ That is to say, the parameters of digital platforms (from search engines to social media) go beyond the algorithmic procedures that govern the operation of any ‘particular technology’, and instead concern their broader cultural and ideological significances. Gere develops this notion by reversing the normative logic that suggests technologies embed their purposes in society, and rather, via the words of Gilles Deleuze, Gere contends that ‘the machine is always social before it is technical. There is always a social machine which selects or assigns the technical elements used.’⁶⁵⁸ In short, societies develop the technologies that they are already leaning towards, which

⁶⁵⁵ Forsyth and Megson, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

⁶⁵⁶ See Chapter Three, ‘States of Distrust: Theory and Events in the New Millennium’.

⁶⁵⁷ Charlie Gere, *Digital Culture* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2002), p. 13.

⁶⁵⁸ Deleuze, in, Gere, p. 13.

means that traces of the shifts associated with digital times exist in societies before the crystallisation of them through technological developments.

Such ideological underpinnings resonate with the contention that late-capitalist thrusts of globalisation and neoliberalism are markers of an empowered individualism, propelled by practices of self-commodification, that manifest in the drive towards what Marshall McLuhan called an increasingly networked ‘global village’.⁶⁵⁹ The works discussed in this chapter mobilise analogue techniques of storytelling alongside the appearance of documentary practices to evaluate the creation and mediation of narratives in digital times – be those narratives real or otherwise. The mobilisation of documentary practices suggests that the significance of these works concerns how audiences see, represent, and act within the reality that they perceive. However, as I discuss, the political contributions canonically associated with various documentary practices can be complicated when those practices are repurposed for storytelling ends within this context.

As such, this chapter begins by establishing a discursive framework around historic and contemporary engagements with the notion of storytelling. Beginning with the work of Walter Benjamin, this framing considers storytelling as a form of oral and rhetorical prowess, and the storyteller as the embodiment of that artform. I then focus on the performance of the storyteller in theatre that deals with source materials from reality. Rather than discussing ‘the actor’, because for Carol Martin ‘acting occurs when a person stands in for someone else’, the blurred relationship inaugurated when the person

⁶⁵⁹ Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

on stage is not ‘acting’ as someone else means that, for me, “performer”, “author-performer”, and “storyteller” are more appropriate terms to utilise in this chapter.⁶⁶⁰

In this chapter I propose that, varyingly, the performer, author-performer, or storyteller (terms which for the most part I use interchangeably) is the central mediating presence who, rather than being equally ‘valorized’ and ‘castigated’ for their virtuosic deception in performance, should be considered as a curatorial entity who encourages spectators to oscillate in their appreciation of the real time and place of performance, and the purported reality of the events described.⁶⁶¹ This, I suggest, reflects the vacillating relationship with trust in late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century, which places the spectator and the storyteller into a ‘particular relationship’, to borrow Tom Maguire’s term.⁶⁶²

For Maguire, a ‘particular relationship’ offers the possibility of ‘altering the spectator’s relationship to the world around them so that they experience it somehow differently’.⁶⁶³ The particular relationships in the examples of this chapter revolve around the positioning of the storyteller as the fulcrum of trust in the performance, or in other words, as the battleground where the *embodied* evidence of this performer trades on the canonical underpinnings of the documentary practices to suggest that any *empirical* evidence proffered cannot discount the authenticating mechanism of their presence and testimony in the time and space of performance. I suggest, in digital times,

⁶⁶⁰ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 10.

⁶⁶¹ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 10.

⁶⁶² Maguire, p. 115.

⁶⁶³ Maguire, p. 115.

that this is a political rejuvenation of the analogue, because it encourages critical thinking from a spectator regarding contemporary modes of communication.

To investigate these three productions, this chapter follows two strands of inquiry, which broadly align with two of the overarching thesis questions. Firstly, to what degree can documentary practices (or the appearance of them) be repurposed anew within the contemporary circumstances of necessity? Secondly, do those practices retain the political fervour with which they were established, or is a new critical currency forged when they are mobilised beyond the traditional boundaries of documentary theatre?

In the documentary landscape of the new millennium, which Youker claims is marked by a ‘resurgence of the real after decades of postmodern scepticism about the idea of objective truth’, the notion of the “individual’s truth” is a compelling aesthetic concern that resonates with socio-cultural and political trends.⁶⁶⁴ The examples of this chapter, as laid out below, broadly concern how individual perspectives and documentary practices varyingly operate within these circumstances of necessity. An important difference between these examples is the extent to which the practitioners recognise – or not – their mobilisation of documentary practices, and therein the extent to which they demonstrate an awareness – or not – of the discursive and political heft with which these practices have traditionally been mobilised in the documentary canon.

In my discussion of *Complicité* and Simon McBurney’s *The Encounter* (2015), I evaluate how documentary practices are mobilised within its storytelling of a partly biographical, partly autobiographical, partly fictionalised narrative. Critical reaction to

⁶⁶⁴ Youker, p. 181.

The Encounter has thus far largely ignored the play's documentary elements and focused instead on the immersive accomplishments of its audio technologies. My discussion explores how Complicité's intermingling of documentary practices within the context of the digital moment and the drive towards "immersive" experience, seems to supersede the documentary practices in favour of commodifying the here and now of the theatre event. I consider if there is an evacuation of the political emphasis of these documentary practices when they are deployed as dramaturgical strategies in work that operates beyond the normative confines of documentary theatre forms.

In *Paul Bright's Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, storyteller George Anton biographically and autobiographically recalls the life of Paul Bright, a recently deceased and largely forgotten Scottish theatre director. The combination of Anton's autobiographical narration with letters, images, and videos has all the hallmarks of documentary theatre. However, Anton's memory progressively appears untrustworthy, which casts doubt on the facticity of the narrative, on the authority of archival source materials, and on the figure of Bright himself. Although it is not made explicit during performance, Bright is indeed a fictional creation, meaning the work cannot be categorised as documentary theatre. Nevertheless, the performance takes time to explain away contradictions by foregrounding the storyteller's embodied testimony over and above his curation of seemingly empirical evidence. I evaluate how the appearance of documentary practices in the performance singles out the figure and presence of the storyteller as an authenticating mechanism over and above the circulation of information within the digital age, yet politically cautions that such individual voices of wisdom must still be subject to critical scrutiny.

In the third and more substantial discussion, I examine the deployment of autobiographical and verbatim practices in Chris Thorpe and Rachel Chavkin's *Confirmation*. Although not readily described as documentary theatre, in this solo performance there is a suggested mirroring of the storytelling persona with the co-author Thorpe. This dramaturgical commodification of the author-performer cultivates an ambiguity between the different personas or characters of *Confirmation*, making it uncertain who is speaking and the politics of their words. Through the blending of documentary practices with storytelling and participatory techniques, questions concerning the solidification of identity are probed on a narrative level while, on a dramaturgical level, the authenticating mechanism of autobiographical practice in the new millennium is problematized. The political contribution of the work is a valorisation of the contingent and sometimes contradictory nature of the self amid the accumulations and competing narratives of reality in digital times.

Central to all these examples and the associated research questions is the figure of the storyteller, who informs and encourages listeners to understand narratives, people, and events – real or otherwise – in a certain way. As Seda Ilter notes, when writing in the same period as these examples, 'even in the absence of technology, through a shared socio-cultural consciousness', performance and theatre reverberates with the influences of an increasingly interconnected and media saturated society.⁶⁶⁵ In a similar vein, I propose it is in such work that is tacitly engaged with the developments of digital times, that the acute ideological tensions of the age can be agitated. The different ways in which these works engage their storytelling techniques with blended documentary

⁶⁶⁵ Seda Ilter, 'Rethinking Play Text in the Age of Mediatization: Simon Stephens's *Pornography*', *Modern Drama*, 58.2 (2015), 238–62 (p. 239).

practices not only offers ways of reading how reality is experienced and represented in a specific period of the new millennium, but also suggests different political qualities to those practices in light of the new circumstances of necessity and the ‘particular’ relationships created with spectators.

As such, Chapter Four builds on the broader influences of the digital age in the expanding mobilisation of documentary practices, but also focuses on a convergent trend around the storyteller and solo performance – a prevalent strand of performance in the UK and elsewhere at this time. It does this by first examining the storyteller as a theoretical and dramaturgical consideration.

Storytelling and Solo Performance

Storytelling as Practice

The historical circumstances of Walter Benjamin’s 1936 treatise ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, leads him to famously argue that it is ‘the authority of the object’, or what he terms the ‘aura’, which ‘wither[s] in the age of mechanical reproduction’.⁶⁶⁶ He claims that ‘[e]ven the most perfect reproduction is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be’.⁶⁶⁷ Illustrations of such ‘unique existence’ are the ‘changes [...] in physical conditions’ which give credence to an artefact’s claim of authenticity – the degradation of a painting’s colour or the aging of a canvas being two examples.⁶⁶⁸ As such, for Benjamin authenticity is resistant to commodification, because ‘[t]he whole

⁶⁶⁶ Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, p. 221.

⁶⁶⁷ Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, p. 220.

⁶⁶⁸ Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, p. 220.

sphere of authenticity' lies outside of technical reproducibility, and encompasses the 'prerequisite' of an original and 'the history to which it [the original] was subject'.⁶⁶⁹

Published in the same year, Benjamin suggests in 'The Storyteller' that 'the art of storytelling is coming to an end'.⁶⁷⁰ He asserts that 'less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly', and he mourns this loss because '[i]t is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences'.⁶⁷¹ Benjamin postulates many reasons for this decline, including a resetting of perceptions 'not only of the external world, but of the moral world' after the First World War, when he claims it was 'noticeable' that men who returned from battle had 'grown silent'; for Benjamin, these men were 'not richer, but poorer in communicable experience'.⁶⁷² Although this generational silence precipitated a wealth of war novels a decade later,⁶⁷³ Benjamin argues that 'the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times' was an early 'symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling'.⁶⁷⁴ I suggest that this dyad Benjamin establishes between the storyteller and the novelist can be productively expanded in terms of a distinction between speech and text to convey the pertinence of Benjamin's critique for discourses of theatre and performance.

⁶⁶⁹ Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p. 220.

⁶⁷⁰ Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p. 83.

⁶⁷¹ Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p. 83.

⁶⁷² Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p. 84.

⁶⁷³ Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p. 84.

⁶⁷⁴ Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p. 87. Benjamin makes no mention of war poets and their focus on linguistic imagery over narrative. This is, perhaps, because it does not suit the trajectory that Benjamin is plotting. However, the visual images that such poetry creates, and the literary "gaps" it permits because of that imagery, can also be seen as allied to Benjamin's suggestion of a shift in the style and modes of communication post-war.

Benjamin draws a fundamental distinction between the oral transmitting of stories and the ‘solitary individual’ of the writer.⁶⁷⁵ One of these distinctions is that ‘the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers’,⁶⁷⁶ and for Benjamin ‘[c]ounsel woven into the fabric of real life is wisdom’.⁶⁷⁷ Underlying Benjamin’s sentiment is the suggestion that storytelling – like the oral tradition – is part of the cultural and social fabric of societies because it documents, adapts, and instructs in an inclusive sense rather than in a mono-directional fashion, as the novel does. As Benjamin states, ‘the storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.’⁶⁷⁸

Benjamin also draws out a further distinction between the storyteller and newspapers – this ‘information’ industry was a ‘new form of communication’ industrialising in Benjamin’s time.⁶⁷⁹ As an early form of mass-media, the newspaper industry (like the novel) was reliant on the printing press – an ‘important instrument’ of capitalism which aided the synthesising of narratives and facilitated the curation of responses to events.⁶⁸⁰ While this information industry brings ‘news of the globe’ every morning, Benjamin argues that, due to journalism, ‘we are poor in noteworthy stories [...] because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation’.⁶⁸¹ As Richard White summarised, ‘we are losing our ability to integrate or exchange personal

⁶⁷⁵ Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 87.

⁶⁷⁶ Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 86.

⁶⁷⁷ Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, pp. 86–87.

⁶⁷⁸ Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 87.

⁶⁷⁹ Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 88. The importance of the developing newspaper industry for the documentary tradition has been addressed above; see Chapter One, ‘Contextualising Erwin Piscator’, and ‘Consolidating Variation: Living Newspapers’.

⁶⁸⁰ Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 88.

⁶⁸¹ Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller’, p. 89.

experience, and we no longer understand anything *except* information and the explanation of facts'.⁶⁸² David Hare expressed similar misgivings when defending verbatim theatre as a vital dramatic form and not a synonym for journalism during his 2010 lecture to the Royal Society of Literature: '[j]ournalism is life with the mystery taken out. Art is life with the mystery restored.'⁶⁸³

Cumulatively, Benjamin's critique of the newspaper industry is concerned with how changing forms of communication can diminish an innate sense of human connection that goes beyond the relaying of information. For Benjamin, journalism pales in comparison to the ability of storytelling to provoke critical interpretative capacity. This is because the storyteller uniquely offers information, advice, and real life evidence. Taken together, this can generate wisdom and create a sense of the experience of others in order to empathetically enlighten the listener through an active, social, and democratic exchange.

The influence of Benjamin's ideas leads White to claim that 'The Storyteller' is 'particularly relevant for discussions of digital culture' by way of its focus on themes such as '*understanding, community, and embodiment*'.⁶⁸⁴ This is because, according to White, 'the culture we live in is an extension of the culture he [Benjamin] knew'.⁶⁸⁵ Maguire's work on performance and storytelling is also influenced by Benjamin's concerns of 'a shift from oral to print culture and from [the] sharing of experience to

⁶⁸² Richard White, 'Walter Benjamin: "The Storyteller" and the Possibility of Wisdom', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 51.1 (2017), 1–14 (p. 6). Emphasis in original.

⁶⁸³ David Hare, 'Mere Fact, Mere Fiction', *Guardian*, 17 April 2010 <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/apr/17/david-hare-theatre-fact-fiction>> [accessed 11 October 2018]. This is an edited version of Hare's lecture.

⁶⁸⁴ White, p. 6. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁸⁵ White, p. 6.

[the] sharing of information'.⁶⁸⁶ Although solo documentary theatre also shares information in order to authenticate truth-claims, the process of communicating that information in performance draws on the oral tradition, and through this appeals more readily to a sense of "truth-telling" as opposed to "truth-showing"; that is to say, reliance is placed on the processes of communication, rather than the displaying of evidence. The virtuosic performances of Anna Deavere Smith in her testimonial tapestries, which Jill Dolan referred to as 'monopolylogues', might readily be considered the standard-bearer of such truth-telling, where the performer's embodiment of the evidence and personas of her interviewees underpins the truth-claim of the storytelling.⁶⁸⁷ In such instances, storytelling becomes what Maguire describes as 'a form of doing: a means of affecting another human being and, as a teller, to establish yourself in a particular relationship with them' – essentially, storytelling becomes a practice.⁶⁸⁸

⁶⁸⁶ Maguire, p. 155.

⁶⁸⁷ Jill Dolan, "'Finding Our Feet in the Shoes of (One An) Other": Multiple Character Solo Performers and Utopian Performatives', *Modern Drama*, 45.4 (2002), 495–518 (p. 498). While this is the case, I would suggest that even Smith's well-honed model shifted slightly in *Notes From the Field* (2016) to accommodate the characteristic abundance of information in digital times, because the production displayed videos of police violence shared via online communities prior to the associated testimony being performed by Smith. The specificity of personal reflections that Smith re-enacts in performance seem to reveal another aspect of contemporary notions of authenticity. When the footage that these testimonies are associated with is not the media-sanctioned imagery that is well-known publicly, such as in the images of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, but rather viral images of citizen journalism which authenticate the testimony that follows, these testimonies are not only revelatory to certain groups and individuals, but appear urgent because they operate outside of state-sanctioned forms of media. In a manner, the videos and the associated testimonies appear 'guerrilla-like', to recall Paget's assertion. See Introduction, 'Documentary Practices, Forms, and Mode: Malleability, Responsiveness, and Politics'.

⁶⁸⁸ Maguire, p. 115.

In relation to documentary theatre, particularly in an era which Paget claimed was characterised by a ‘rhetoric of witness’ (as previously noted), storytelling which foregrounds the real-world basis of its content can call into question the authority of empirical evidence.⁶⁸⁹ Carol Martin suggests this in her articulation of theatre of the real, which she describes as a ‘disruption of aesthetic authenticity, documentary certainty, and unassailable truth’.⁶⁹⁰ For Martin, such disruptive qualities are in tension with Benjamin’s ‘aura’ because, although reproduction ‘destroyed what was then [at Benjamin’s time] the accepted notion of authenticity based on the existence of an original’, Martin contends that ‘theatre of the real often calls the [authority of the] original into question’ through its demonstrable praxis of reproducing source materials.⁶⁹¹

Bringing these ideas together, Benjamin’s concerns about the authenticity of artworks in the age of mechanical reproduction places value on an artwork’s ‘presence in time and space’, and on the ‘prerequisite’ of an original.⁶⁹² For Martin, theatre of the real ‘also claims authenticity based on an original source’, but ‘exploits and disrupts notions of authenticity’ through its process of ‘recycling’ source materials in performance.⁶⁹³ I suggest that, when a performer invokes stories that are understood to have happened in real life, they embody the art of storytelling in the time and space of performance as an authenticating mechanism that draws spectators into a particular relationship with the storyteller’s subjective perspective, while simultaneously preserving and promoting the

⁶⁸⁹ See Chapter Three, ‘The Weissian Approach: Verbatim Practice’.

⁶⁹⁰ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 19.

⁶⁹¹ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 10.

⁶⁹² Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, p. 220.

⁶⁹³ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 10.

notion and value of the original – that is, the story being told. Through this, the performance reflects the vacillating relationships with trust in the new millennium, as spectators are encouraged to fluctuate in the faith they bestow on the empirical evidence and the embodied testimony. This is not to establish an opposition between these forms of communication, but rather, I contend, to activate an audiences' awareness of their own subjective relationship to the notion of truth and the performance of telling.

This foregrounding of the storyteller's subjectivity, and by extension the audience's, has a particular energy in respect of the continuing influence of the 'caesura of the media society' (Lehmann), the poststructural critique of original authority, and the postmodern distrust of representation, which embraces 'the rhetoric and practices of facture, detachment and irony' to counteract hierarchically sanctioned norms.⁶⁹⁴ As seemingly real events are framed within the storyteller's subjective perspective, the status of the performer can oscillate between, firstly, being the lone voice of 'wisdom' (Benjamin) operating within a hierarchical system and, secondly, being an embodiment of actions that manipulate the operative facades of stable representation – that is to say, the storyteller's subjective lens mobilises recognisable forms of communication to encourage scrutiny of such forms beyond the performance. This encourages focus on processes of mediation and representation beyond the theatre, which purport to communicate the real amid the saturated mediatisation of digital times.

Within this context of a highly mediatised landscape, Martin invokes Baudrillard to suggest that there is 'a collapsing of the two traditional poles [of media and the real, for example] into one another' when forms of media (video, image, audio) are mobilised in

⁶⁹⁴ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 18.

documentary theatre.⁶⁹⁵ This collapse between ‘media and the real’ is described by Baudrillard as the ‘*implosion*’ wherein ‘*simulation begins*’.⁶⁹⁶ For Martin, the ““implosion” of the real in the digital age destabilises traditional conceptions of material “evidence” in documentary forms’, because it complicates ‘the idea of documentary and the real’.⁶⁹⁷ In challenging the empirical authority of source materials – mediated or otherwise – and yet not simplistically validating the analogue, the storytellers of this chapter offer a challenge to the ubiquity of mediation. Indeed, as curatorial entities who mobilise source materials while seemingly also engaging in an active process of documenting, the documentary storyteller is a vital vehicle for exploring this cultural landscape through the mobilisation of documentary practices.

As such, I contend that the time and space of the storyteller in performance can stand apart as a real time and place of action, which refracts narratives – real or otherwise – through the foregrounded lens of subjective perspective, and in this way troubles the ‘already troubled categories of truth, reality, fiction and acting’.⁶⁹⁸ The dramaturgical strategies mobilised by *The Encounter*, which attempt to bring spectators into “proximity” with McBurney and the narrative, operate in compliance with the new millennium trend of immersive practices and, therein, repurpose its documentary practices as aesthetic components to support this. On the contrary, Anton and Thorpe’s journeys of research promote critical distance through complex subjectivities that

⁶⁹⁵ Baudrillard, in Martin, ‘Living Simulations: The Use of Media in Documentary in the UK, Lebanon and Israel’, p. 75. Additions by Martin.

⁶⁹⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simualtion*, p. 31 Emphasis in original.

⁶⁹⁷ Martin, ‘Living Simulations: The Use of Media in Documentary in the UK, Lebanon and Israel’, p. 88.

⁶⁹⁸ Martin, ‘Living Simulations: The Use of Media in Documentary in the UK, Lebanon and Israel’, p. 88.

encourage scepticism between empirical and embodied evidence to forge new critical currencies within their documentary practices. In different ways, these storytellers encourage recognition of both the real and a representation of the real in the time and space of performance.

In summary, the storyteller foregrounds a real-time analogue contestation between empirical and embodied evidence in an age of distrust. By refracting narratives – real or otherwise – through their subjectivities, these storytellers simultaneously challenge the presumed authority of empirical evidence and encourage scrutiny of their own position as a vehicle of truth. I contend that storytelling acts both as confirmation of a ‘real’ *and* a voice of permitted scepticism. This reflects the vacillating relationships with trust in digital times, while also extending the parameters of how documentary practices are mobilised far beyond a binary distinction between fact based and non-fact based theatre. The next section draws forward these ideas in light of solo performance in order to complement the dramaturgical imbrications between storytelling and documentary practices.

The Solo Performer and Documentary Practices

Jonathan Kalb’s 2001 call for a ‘loosening’ of the definition of documentary as a ‘product of field research’ aimed to encompass a range of solo performances within which ‘the reality of the performer-researcher has been made an active part of the art’.⁶⁹⁹ For Kalb, the disparate range of solo practitioners he surveys – of which some ‘don’t acknowledge their ties to the idea of documentary’ – are bound together by their

⁶⁹⁹ Jonathan Kalb, ‘Documentary Solo Performance: The Politics of the Mirrored Self’, *Theater*, 31.3 (2001), 13–29 (p. 16).

ability to ‘steer the discussion of solo performance away from its usual emphasis on identity politics and toward a more elementary debate about the public’s receptivity to politics and critical thinking per se’.⁷⁰⁰

This is a double-edged remark. On the one hand, Kalb lauds the work of the case studies he evaluates, while on the other hand he relegates identity politics to a kind of second order politics, which is beneath more ‘elementary’ concerns. Although it is right that the need to ‘question and challenge’ a public’s ‘receptivity’ and ‘critical thinking’ is valuable, this need not necessitate a binary wherein identity politics is marginalised. Indeed, identity politics is no less fundamental than the debates with which Kalb is interested.

In the late 1990s, amid the convergence of an age of individualism with the neoliberal political paradigm of western democracies and a trend in solo and autobiographical performance, Marvin Carlson seems similarly to fall into the trap of stereotyping autobiographical performance. Carlson states that ‘an interest in autobiographical performance’ should not have been surprising within ‘a society with a passionate concern with the self, self-expression, self-fulfilment, and the relation of the self to society’.⁷⁰¹ According to Heddon, such summations of the autobiographical, which border on the accusation of ‘self-indulgence’, have blighted this documentary practice.⁷⁰² Indeed, within such a context, autobiographical inquiry offers a way to analyse an individual’s relationship to their society and vice-versa. In Carlson’s case

⁷⁰⁰ Kalb, pp. 13–14.

⁷⁰¹ Marvin Carlson, ‘Performing the Self’, *Modern Drama*, 39.4 (1996), 599–608 (p. 599).

⁷⁰² Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, p. 4.

though, he does recognise that ‘the “identity” articulated by autobiographical performance was discovered to be already a role, a character, following scripts not controlled by the performer, but by the culture as a whole’.⁷⁰³ However, in the stirring conclusion to her monograph, Heddon articulates it more explicitly when she calls for a recognition and ‘return’ to the lineage of ‘resistant’ solo performance stemming from second-wave feminism, and an appreciation that ‘[t]he politics of the personal is that the personal is *not* singularly about me’.⁷⁰⁴

The issue of the personal pertains to both solo and autobiographical performance, and although Kalb recognises distinctions between them, he utilises the terms almost interchangeably. This is because Kalb is concerned with the ‘choice and handling’ of ‘individual stories’ in both forms, and he contextualises this concern through social philosopher Zygmunt Bauman’s examination of the age of individualism. Kalb suggests that both forms of performance reflect Bauman’s notion that how ‘individual people define individually their individual problems’ and try to resolve them by ‘deploying individual skills and resources’ is the ‘remaining “public issue” and the sole object of “public interest”’ at the end of the twentieth century.⁷⁰⁵ However, Kalb rightly identifies an irony in Bauman’s assertion of this ‘public interest’: how is it, in an age of individualism, that other people’s stories are a prominent vehicle of interest? I suggest that one attraction is the seeming authenticity of the individual life experience story in

⁷⁰³ Carlson, ‘Performing the Self’, p. 604. In making this point, Carlson acknowledges the work of performance artists in unravelling the pervasive influence of culture on identity.

⁷⁰⁴ Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, p. 161. Emphasis in original.

⁷⁰⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 72.

an age of “fakeness” – what Kalb refers to as the ‘fact of their [the performer’s] authentic individuality (or that of their stories)’.⁷⁰⁶

Daniel Schulze contends that in the new millennium ‘the perceived fakeness in everyday culture gives rise to practices of authenticity’,⁷⁰⁷ or what he later refers to as ‘mechanisms of authenticity’, which have replaced ‘the postmodern age of simulation and fragmentation’.⁷⁰⁸ Drawing out an etymological history of “authenticity”, Schulze argues that, in the contemporary moment, authenticity represents a ‘counter-movement’ to ‘profound feelings of uncertainty and instability’,⁷⁰⁹ which are calcified ‘by social media, global interconnection and an ever-faster moving media environment’.⁷¹⁰ For Schulze, then, the notion of authenticity marks a hopeful search for ‘a tangible outside and essentialist reality’,⁷¹¹ that admits to the ‘constructed’ qualities of ‘everything around us’, from ‘the subject’, to ‘the world’, to ‘the languages we speak’.⁷¹²

Coupled with the latent scepticism of the postmodern and the new millennium’s expanded sense of distrust in states and institutions,⁷¹³ the thirst for authenticity, differently articulated by Kalb and Schulze, resonates with the assertion that people are drawn to other ‘people’s individual stories as possible keys to our own individual

⁷⁰⁶ Kalb, p. 16.

⁷⁰⁷ Schulze, p. 8.

⁷⁰⁸ Schulze, p. 13.

⁷⁰⁹ Schulze, p. 23.

⁷¹⁰ Schulze, p. 6.

⁷¹¹ Schulze, p. 6.

⁷¹² Schulze, p. 25.

⁷¹³ See Chapter Three, ‘States of Distrust’.

development’ – a truthful story of ‘the other’ that can be relied on, and a potential release or escape from the status quo of one’s own self.⁷¹⁴

I agree with Kalb’s assertion that there is a curious interest in the stories of others in an age of individualism. However, such a curiosity should not marginalise the social and political efficacy of the personal, as Heddon suggests. Indeed, Heddon insists that the personal is ‘never only personal since it was always structural and relational’.⁷¹⁵ In an interview with Anna Deavere Smith, Carol Martin asserts that the ‘enormous critical success’ of *Fires in the Mirror* (1993) is not simply due to the performer’s ‘technical virtuosity’, but also because of the ‘fictional and yet actual convergence of presences that gives Smith’s work its power’.⁷¹⁶ To draw this out in relation to my critique of Kalb, it is not simply the collection of individual stories that resonates in Smith’s work, but rather the implicit structural and relational ways in which the politics of the personal expand on the circumstances that contributed to ‘a very turbulent set of events’ in Brooklyn and New York in 1991.⁷¹⁷

In light of this, Kalb’s ‘authentic individuality’ and Schulze’s framing of authenticity as something to be achieved – not dissimilar to the real hidden behind the Debordian spectacle – appear narrow and logocentric. They do not foreground the wider nexus of social and political circumstances that shape the ‘authentic individuality’ of the narratives shared. Instead, I contend that a sense of authenticity is activated in experiential reckonings between individuals and the circumstances of their lived

⁷¹⁴ Kalb, p. 16.

⁷¹⁵ Heddon, *Autobiography and Performance*, p. 161.

⁷¹⁶ Carol Martin and Anna Deavere Smith, ‘Anna Deavere Smith: The Word Becomes You’, *The Drama Review*, 37.4 (1993), 45–62 (p. 45).

⁷¹⁷ Martin and Smith, p. 45.

experience – hence the importance I place on the time and space of a storyteller’s performance. A sense of authenticity is not a singular response to a singular stimulus, but a networked, intangible connection made between the subject and a moment of experience, or what Lavender describes as a performative ‘act of centring amid separations of digital culture and in the wake of postmodernism’.⁷¹⁸

While this understanding of authenticity as a network of influences provoking a response re-focuses attention away from individuality, this is not a total rejection of Kalb’s contention that a culture of individualism and a ‘burden of self-invention’ weighs heavy in the new millennium.⁷¹⁹ Indeed, Kalb’s notion has an increasing currency within the economy of self-commodification that is prevalent in neoliberal and digital times. However, that burden is not, as Kalb contends, the overriding justification for the growth in solo work that he pinpoints, as the examples of this chapter show relative to the second decade of the new millennium and the circumstances of necessity in digital times. Alongside the relatively frugal production values of solo work, its growth can be considered an ideological inversion that attempts to foreground individuals for their inherent value, as opposed to their economic viability or conformity within the neoliberal paradigm. Similarly, what Lavender calls the ‘centring’ of the individual within the ‘separations’ of digital times is not a foregrounding of *individualism*, but an appreciation of the individual as part of the wider nexus of technological, cultural, and socio-political shifts.

⁷¹⁸ Lavender, *Performance in the Twenty-First Century: Theatres of Engagement*, p. 30.

⁷¹⁹ Kalb, p. 16.

Cumulatively, rather than an exaltation of solipsistic tendencies, solo documentary performance can be a performative repositioning of the relationship between a (potentially representative) individual and a society. In the discussions that follow, I examine how the solo documentary storytellers repurpose documentary practices to suggest that it is the authenticating mechanism of the storyteller, in that time and space, that should be trusted over and above empirical evidence. Any ambiguity that arises between the empirical evidence and embodied testimony are moments when spectators are, through different but particular relationships, encouraged to engage critically with what is being communicated. As such, the political contributions of these works can be seen as both a productive analogue confrontation with the circulation of information in the digital times, and a cautionary conflation of the many streams of information that tacitly shape and re-shape experiences and perceptions of the real in the twenty-first century, particularly in the UK.

‘Particular Relationships’

The Encounter

My examination of *The Encounter* focuses on the diminished political returns of documentary practices when they are assembled as aesthetic addendums to a performance’s other dramaturgical strategies, which in the case of Complicité’s production refers to its immersive strategies.

Of the few critical discussions thus far concerned with *The Encounter*,⁷²⁰ the documentary mode has seldom been invoked.⁷²¹ The sparse recognition of documentary practices in this globally heralded production suggests a widespread normalisation of their expanded deployment across different theatrical modes – this demonstrates the discursive gap addressed by this thesis. The clearest recognition is Fiona Wilkie’s examination of the production as a piece of ‘voyage drama’, within which a claim to ‘authenticity’ is commonly subject to a ‘requirement for the writer-performer actually to have done the travelling her/himself’.⁷²² Indeed, Wilkie argues that, ‘on the face of it’, *The Encounter* ‘does not have the autobiographical basis common to most travelogues’, but she admits that ‘the show layers the actor himself’ onto the narrative.⁷²³ She is correct that the ‘basis’ is not an autobiographical travelogue – the basis is a biographical retelling of someone else’s journey, but this does not preclude the appearance of autobiographical or other documentary practices in the work, which I contend exist.

The narrative of *The Encounter* concerns the purportedly true events of an Amazonian expedition to document the Mayoruna tribe by National Geographic photographer Loren

⁷²⁰ This discussion of *The Encounter* is based on the published text, numerous viewings of the production through its various periods of online streaming, and two performances that were witnessed at the Warwick Arts Centre on 11 October 2015, and HOME Manchester on 16 March 2016.

⁷²¹ Three other discussions of the work include, Lourdes Orozco, ‘Theatre in the Age of Uncertainty: Memory, Technology, and Risk in Simon McBurney’s “The Encounter” and Robert Lepage’s “887”’, in *Risk, Participation, and Performance Practice: Critical Vulnerabilities in a Precarious World*, ed. by Alice O’Grady (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 33–55; Liliane Campos, ‘Wired Brains and Living Networks: Simon McBurney’s Micropoetics, from “Mnemonic” to “The Encounter”’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 27.4 (2017), 497–511; and, Ramona Mosse, ‘Thinking Theatres beyond Sight: From Reflection to Resonance’, *Anglia*, 136.1 (2018), 138–53.

⁷²² Fiona Wilkie, “‘It’s a Big World in Here’: Contemporary Voyage Drama and the Politics of Mobility”, *Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 5.1 (2017), 10–23 (p. 20).

⁷²³ Wilkie, pp. 19–20.

McIntyre in 1969. The production is an adaptation of Petru Popescu's *Amazon Beaming* (1991), a novelisation of this expedition for which Popescu interviewed McIntyre.⁷²⁴ Despite what Popescu refers to as the 'integrity' of McIntyre's testimony, *Amazon Beaming* also compiles a 'fragmented' assembly of documentation including letters, images, books, and 'stories published in the *National Geographic*'.⁷²⁵ As such, Popescu's novel balances first person perspective with third person narratives in order to faithfully communicate McIntyre's experience. *The Encounter* dramaturgically translates these two strands of the novel into two modalities of storytelling, which are inextricably tied to Simon McBurney, the creator, director, and sole on stage performer, who plays both a version of himself and creates the voices for most of the other characters.⁷²⁶

The first modality of storytelling in *The Encounter* is a technical attempt to alter a spectator's first person experience of the performance event through immersive audio technologies. Each audience member is given headphones to wear during the performance, which in tandem with multiple on stage microphones, including a binaural

⁷²⁴ Petru Popescu, *Amazon Beaming* (London: Pushkin Press, 1991).

⁷²⁵ Popescu, p. 17. Emphasis in original.

⁷²⁶ The play text, and by extension McBurney, claims that *The Encounter* is actually performed 'by one actor and two sound operators', because the sound operators must respond differently to McBurney's nightly performance and coordinate their audio cues in time to his actions (p. 3). The role that McBurney plays is officially designated as 'Actor' in the dramatis personae of the published text (p. 4). I have already suggested that performer or storyteller are more appropriate terms for this discussion and this textual designation does not change that. This is particularly because the dramatis personae names McBurney's infant daughter 'Noma McBurney' as a character, rather than Actor's Daughter, which would be the more consistent designation. For me, these two acts of naming contradict each other and so I have established my own consistent approach not to use the term 'actor', but to consider the storyteller as a version of McBurney. Similar issues are discussed later in relation to *Confirmation*; see Chapter Four, 'Clarifying Thorpe, Chavkin, and "Chris": Namings'.

one, enable the movement of sound in performance to be replicated for the spectators.⁷²⁷ That is to say, when a sound is generated next to the binaural microphone on stage, the spectator experiences that same sound emanating from next to them, instead of from the stage. Through this, *The Encounter* manipulates the sense of proximity between the spectator and the storyteller, ‘so [that] they [the audience] feel they are onstage next to Simon’.⁷²⁸ According to the sound designer Gareth Fry, this binaural soundscape is a ‘new theatrical way’ of telling a story, because the audio technology ‘becomes invisible [... and] indivisible from the process of telling the story’.⁷²⁹ The second modality of storytelling requires little explanation, because it is a conventional third person narrative retelling of McIntyre’s expedition via McBurney.

Within these two modalities of storytelling, which overlap, three temporalities similarly intercut each other. The first temporality is the retelling of McIntyre’s Amazonian expedition. The second temporality is McBurney’s period of research for the production that is often interrupted by Noma, his daughter – this period involved an expedition to the Amazon and interviews with Popescu, neuroscientists, and physicists to investigate notions of memory and time. The third temporality is the time and space of the performance itself – that is, the being together of an audience in a space to experience *The Encounter*; this is self-referentially signified via McBurney’s direct address in a

⁷²⁷ Other audio techniques, which include the layering of foley sound effects via a plethora of on stage microphones and looping pedals, enable the suggestion of 360-degree environments, such as the landing of a plane on the Amazon river, or the cacophony of animal noises at night in the rainforest. Specially configured microphones also enable McBurney to engage in swift vocal exchanges between characters and shift between first and third person dialogue. These vocal shifts are the primary differentiation between characters.

⁷²⁸ Gareth Fry, ‘Gareth Fry - Sound Designer’, in *The Encounter* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2016).

⁷²⁹ Fry, 16.n.p.

lecture-style performance at the beginning of the production, and again in an epilogue. In notes accompanying the published text, McBurney also identifies three temporalities – the first is ‘this time, [the] present’ of the performance, the second is McBurney ‘remembering stuff’ which occurred ‘[s]ix months ago’, and the third is ‘a year ago when I recorded my daughter’.⁷³⁰ McBurney delineates his temporalities in relation to his recorded materials, as opposed to the structural temporalities that I distinguish. Therefore, while a distinction between the present time of the storytelling and that of the past is common in both our delineations, McBurney omits the biographical practice he activates in the immersive retelling of McIntyre’s narrative as another temporality.

It is through these different temporalities that the documentary practices of *The Encounter* converge. The biographical account of McIntyre’s narrative is the overarching structure of the production. The documentary interviews that McBurney conducts as research, and the semi-autobiographical recordings with Noma, interrupt this overarching structure.⁷³¹ Rather than offering evidence to enhance McIntyre’s narrative though, the documentary practices disrupt the linearity of the storytelling to dramaturgically illustrate non-linear models of time, which are discussed by the scientists and which the Mayoruna are later revealed to believe.

This mobilising of documentary practices to rupture the distinct temporalities positions these interviews and recordings as exemplars of the storyteller’s assertion that perceptions of reality are shaped by ‘fictions’ and ‘stories’ that form a ‘collective

⁷³⁰ *Complicité*, p. 12.

⁷³¹ Recordings of the interviewees are replayed in performance via McBurney’s iPhone, but Noma has no such physical signifier on stage: the audience hear her voice through their headphones and McBurney turns to address the direction from which that recording emanates.

imagination'.⁷³² These 'fictions' and 'stories' – which enable societies to form 'narratives we can all agree on' – include macro concepts such as time, nationhood, and human rights, as well as micro considerations such as shifts in the documentation of events and everyday life.⁷³³ Such shifts, including the outsourcing of memory to digital archives and an overreliance on technological appendages for recording and recalling the real, constitutes the circumstances of necessity within which this storyteller contextualises his concerns. This context is addressed in the opening manoeuvre of *The Encounter*, where these 'stories' are framed alongside the authenticating mechanisms of documentary practices.

The Encounter's pre-show state is designed to appear 'prosaic to the point of dullness'.⁷³⁴ Four large black speakers demarcate the corners of a notional square space, around the perimeter of which copious bottles of water are placed. Downstage right is a table and chair adorned with two microphones, an angle poise lamp, and a collection of small props. The entirety of the visible back wall is covered in anechoic soundproofing. In the middle of the stage is a microphone stand with a binaural head mounted on top – it is set to mimic McBurney's height. McBurney's entrance into the space, and the beginning of the performance, is purposefully unmarked by changes in lighting.

Emerging as a non-matrixed performer from the downstage left wing, McBurney asks spectators to turn off their mobile phones and to check the orientation of their

⁷³² *Complicité*, p. 7.

⁷³³ *Complicité*, p. 7.

⁷³⁴ *Complicité*, p. 6. Michael Levine is credited as the designer.

headphones.⁷³⁵ He assures them that the show has not started yet because they are waiting for other patrons to arrive “from the bar”.⁷³⁶ The published text states that the ‘conversational manner’ of this opening act of distraction ‘draws the audience into another kind of attention, through the description of how the evening will unfold’.⁷³⁷ This other ‘kind of attention’ not only centres on the time and space of the storytelling, but performs a gestural affirmation of the storyteller’s trustworthiness, as he appears to operate “outside” of the performance. Stephanie Convery accurately surmises that this ‘unnoticed slide between truth and story, is just the beginning of a deeper interrogation into the slipperiness of reality and perception’.⁷³⁸

This slipperiness is ruminated upon by McBurney as he takes a picture of the audience on his iPhone (a much-used prop) to prove to Noma that he is at work. The ease of documenting and archiving that smart phones and cloud storage enable is contrasted with the fragility of obsolete forms of media when McBurney explains how he recently lost a Super-8 recording of his father walking as a child. Although he transferred this to a VHS cassette years earlier, he accidentally breaks that cassette on stage.⁷³⁹ This routine is revealed to be a “gag” when he pulls streams of VHS ribbon from a small box next to

⁷³⁵ See Michael Kirkby, ‘Acting and Not-Acting’, in *A Formalist Theatre* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987), pp. 3–20.

⁷³⁶ This comment is drawn from the live stream version of the play. *The Encounter* livestream is intermittently available on YouTube at Complicité’s discretion. Elements and dialogue identified as being from this version were transcribed by myself during multiple viewings of the recorded performance and as such are replicated within speech marks.

⁷³⁷ Complicité, p. 6.

⁷³⁸ Stephanie Convery, ‘The Encounter’, *Guardian*, 31 January 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/jan/31/worth-the-hype-the-encounter-its-more-than-just-an-aural-masterpiece>> [accessed 12 February 2017].

⁷³⁹ Complicité, p. 6.

his table.⁷⁴⁰ Such manipulations of an audience's expectations concerning what is truthful are strategically deployed in this conversational opening in order to condition spectators to be sceptical about what they see and hear, but also to position this curatorial storyteller as the trustworthy arbiter of what is real and what is not.

As he ruminates on the copious images stored on his iPhone, McBurney's preoccupation is that digital archives are usurping memory and that such archives speak to a cultural malaise centred on a confusing substitution of artefacts for the real. This opening focus propels McBurney's concern that his children may 'mistake' such images 'for reality, just as we all mistake stories for reality'.⁷⁴¹ In a Benjaminian sense, the images to which McBurney refers are already 'shot through with meaning', not through a form of journalistic mediation, but because the abundance of such imagery is now taken as the curatorial usurpation of life as it was when, in actuality, as McBurney states, 'it's not their lives, it is only a story'.⁷⁴²

While *The Encounter* is seemingly underpinned by the Baudrillardian contention that technological developments have shifted perceptions of the reality to the point wherein 'simulation is inaugurated' because the real has been substituted for 'signs of the real', the totalising reappraisal of documentary source materials (like photos) as 'stories' is unsettling, as it diminishes routes to political engagement with the past, present, and future.⁷⁴³ Within this cultural and technological moment, demarcated by a 'liquidation of all referentials', McBurney suggests that reality and stories have become inexorably

⁷⁴⁰ The term "gag" appears in the live stream, not in the published text.

⁷⁴¹ *Complicité*, p. 6.

⁷⁴² *Complicité*, p. 6.

⁷⁴³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simualtion*, p. 2.

entwined, as demonstrated by the production's imbrication of immersive strategies with documentary practices. The production compounds this imbrication when narrative temporalities are disrupted.

In one such moment, when the storyteller assumes the persona of McIntyre lost in the rainforest and hallucinating from eating exotic plants, documentary recordings discussing the western exploitation of the Amazon are heard amid a cacophony of noises and reverberation. These fragments of recorded interviews from McBurney's research interject in McIntyre's temporality, but are not part of his narrative. This dramaturgical splicing and aesthetic repurposing of documentary practices in moments of hallucination, cultivate uncertainty about the cohesiveness of what is seen and heard in the performance – from the sounds of McBurney talking near the beginning that are revealed to be a recording to which he is lip-synching, to the very facticity of McIntyre's narrative.⁷⁴⁴

In another moment, soon after this hallucination, McIntyre is witness to a Mayoruna ceremony during which they burn all their possessions to purge material objects from their society. For McIntyre, the possibility of western societies destroying their possessions and '[b]urning the past' is something that would only happen in a wave of violence.⁷⁴⁵ His imagining of this leads to a frenzied act of destruction on stage, as he tries to destroy the '[f]ucking plastic' he is surrounded by to '[g]et rid of the past'.⁷⁴⁶ Unable to do this, he smashes a glass bottle, destroys the VHS of his father's childhood,

⁷⁴⁴ Stephen J. Bottoms, 'Putting the Document into Documentary: An Unwelcome Corrective', p. 65.

⁷⁴⁵ *Complicité*, p. 48.

⁷⁴⁶ *Complicité*, p. 48.

throws a speaker across the stage, and taking a hammer he ‘manically destroy[s] the desk’. As this occurs, ‘purifying flames’ from ‘some affluent American street’ are projected onto the anechoic cladding upstage, representing ‘[a]ll of a culture, the most materialistic and leisure-minded in the world, [going] up in flames’.⁷⁴⁷ At the climax of the scene, the storyteller takes out his iPhone, the object ‘[t]hat’s got all the fucking past in it’, and places it on the table declaring that “[i]t’s all in the fucking cloud”.⁷⁴⁸ His accent has shifted from McIntyre’s American to McBurney’s English one and his shouts are in unison with a crescendo of riotous noises as he lifts the hammer above his head to smash the device – but then the phone suddenly rings. All other sounds are silenced and the flames disappear. The lighting returns to a state suggestive of moonlight flooding through a window. The phone call is revealed to be part of an accidental recording as the audience hear Noma once more interrupt her father while he is undertaking late night interviews – she cannot sleep, and we hear McBurney comfort her and take her back to bed.

These interruptions of documentary practices within the linearity of the storytelling create moments of self-reflexivity in the work, which as Bottoms states (and I have previously noted) can help navigate the dual nature of such work as encompassing both the real and a representation of the real. By virtue of the fact these documentary recordings all orbit the embodied life of the storyteller – McBurney – the audience are encouraged to see him as the fulcrum of truth within the work. However, this analogue instigator of an unremarked blending between immersive strategies and documentary practices creates a sense that everything in *The Encounter* is both real and not real at the

⁷⁴⁷ Complicité, p. 48.

⁷⁴⁸ Complicité, p. 49.

same time. While this may be a useful reflection of McBurney's opening concern that 'fictions' and 'stories' populate all aspects of everyday life, this self-reflexivity is unproductive because the repurposing of documentary practices as aesthetic addendums means they cease to be a clear eruption of the real. Therefore, the veracity of such documentary practices may be recalibrated as simply another story within a story. This threatens the political potential of mobilising documentary practices beyond the stable confines of documentary forms.

Although, for me, the next two examples of this chapter mobilise their documentary practices to more productive ends, I contend that it is important to evaluate the less productive ways in which the increasing normalisation of documentary practices can be seen beyond the confines of documentary theatre forms, particularly in light of the activation of the storyteller across these examples. I suggest this less productive potential is clearly expressed by McBurney's didactic coda to *The Encounter*.

There is no epilogue in the published text, but after taking his applause for the performance and standing alone in the centre of the stage with the house lights on, McBurney tells the spectators unequivocally that "the Mayoruna exist" – they are real. McBurney states that a Mayoruna tribesman asked him to make this clear declaration during his expedition to the Amazon. Although honouring a request, this closing act of the performance event coalesces with my contention that, while the unremarked imbrication of the immersive soundscapes, documentary practices, and storytelling may seem apt for the contemporary circumstances of necessity, it can diminish the political potential of the documentary practices. This is because the aim to raise awareness of the threats to indigenous tribes is undermined by the triggering of uncertainty around the authenticity of what audiences are witness to. That is to say, if there is no anchor of

truth regarding this presentation of the injustices inflicted on Amazonian tribes – except what one western white male tells an audience while repeatedly displacing their trust in what they see and hear – then the politics of this solo documentary storytelling experiment become confused and, instead, requires a blunt finale to ensure audiences get the “message”.⁷⁴⁹

Cumulatively, the immersive strategies designed to increase the sense of proximity, the honesty of this curatorial storyteller who exposes the mechanics of performance, and the destabilisation of documentary practices, all foster a particular relationship wherein the spectator is encouraged to place their trust in McBurney first and foremost. This relationship is underpinned by the apparent authenticity of the work, the contemporary desire for which is fuelled by the perception that ‘constructed’ qualities permeate ‘everything around us’.⁷⁵⁰ On the contrary, for me, the undermining of documentary practices as potentially just another ‘story’ obscures routes to combat the socio-political realities in and beyond the narrative of *The Encounter* – such as the commercial exploitation of the rainforests – necessitating, therefore, the performance’s didactic coda.⁷⁵¹

More worryingly, the destabilisation of documentary practices as ‘fictions’ or ‘stories’ opens up potentially dangerous routes to false narratives and misleading histories, with little space for contradictory debate. McBurney seems to suggest that technology is part of the problem due to the sheer volumes of information, and indeed, as Matthew Causey

⁷⁴⁹ This aim is stated in the performance epilogue, though this is not included in the published script.

⁷⁵⁰ Schulze, p. 25.

⁷⁵¹ *Complicité*, p. 6.

contends, through the work of Bernard Stiegler (1952 – 2020), ‘bequeathing memory to machines’ has engulfed individuals in ‘consumerist technical systems’, which puts at risk ‘the capacity for critique, and [...] the capacity for historical reflection’.⁷⁵² Yet *The Encounter* relies on multiple forms of technology to envelope audiences in its proximity altering, immersive audio experience.

Therefore, I suggest that, rather than volumes of information or the outsourcing of memory and critical capacity, the problem is a storyteller who promotes not simply an ambiguity between different kinds of information, but a more general lack of acceptance of things beyond an individualised position. While Wilkie makes a similar point in relation to the sense of ‘authenticity’ that the production cultivates, she contends that a ‘side effect of achieving such integrity, though, is paradoxically to reinforce the emphasis on the individual’.⁷⁵³ This sense of the individual is not simply each spectator locked into a subjective experience mediated via their individual headphones, but it also pertains to this stalwart of international and particularly British theatre, with access to funding, venues, and commercial networks that cannot be easily replicated. In another kind of diminishing, of the political potential of autobiographical practice specifically, the privileged single-person narrative of this white male storyteller mobilises documentary practices in ways that speak for his individual agenda (as righteous as it may seem), but that do so in the service of the aesthetic (immersive) repurposing of the real.

⁷⁵² Matthew Causey, ‘Postdigital Performance’, *Theatre Journal*, 68.3 (2016), 427–41 (p. 439).

⁷⁵³ Wilkie, p. 21.

In the next section, *Paul Bright's Confessions of a Justified Sinner* subtly brings forward the imperfections of memory and recollection in an age of digital technologies to propose a clash between the analogue storyteller and the accumulation of empirical "evidence" but does so in such a way that the content, the structure, and the individual storyteller are revealed to himself as well as to spectators.

Paul Bright's Confessions of a Justified Sinner

Paul Bright's Confessions of a Justified Sinner (hereafter referred to as *Confessions*) is a documentary memoir about a near-forgotten Scottish theatre maker – Paul Bright.⁷⁵⁴ A joint production between Untitled Projects and the National Theatre of Scotland, it was originally 'reconstructed' in 2013, but it was restaged at the 2015 Edinburgh International Festival alongside *The Encounter*.⁷⁵⁵ *Confessions* is a solo performance by 'lecturer, historian, mourner and defendant' and real-life actor George Anton, who recalls Bright's life and work before his death in 2010.⁷⁵⁶

The performance of truth in *Confessions* begins even before the spectators enter the auditorium, as the audience are given access to an exhibition of artefacts tracing Bright's life and work. It is from such beginnings that *Confessions* establishes its

⁷⁵⁴ This discussion is based on a copy of the performance available to watch online, 'Paul Bright's Confessions of a Justified Sinner', *Vimeo*, 2013 <<https://vimeo.com/70922614>> [accessed 24 September 2016].

⁷⁵⁵ 'Edinburgh International Festival 2015 Brochure', 2015, p. 21 <https://issuu.com/edintfest/docs/eif_brochure_2015__single_pages_> [accessed 15 December 2016]. These two productions were also staged alongside Robert Lepage's 887, which is another documentary memoir that points towards a trend at least at this festival, if not beyond. See Lourdes Orozco's chapter 'Theatre in the Age of Uncertainty: Memory, Technology, and Risk in Simon McBurney's "The Encounter" and Robert Lepage's "887"', noted earlier in this chapter.

⁷⁵⁶ Martin Hoyle, 'Paul Bright's Confessions of a Justified Sinner', *Financial Times*, 21 August 2015 <<https://www.ft.com/content/521ea6ee-4721-11e5-af2f-4d6e0e5eda22>> [accessed 7 January 2019].

‘particular relationship’ with audiences, because the empirical evidence proffered by this exhibition, and later through recorded interviews, is put into tension with the embodied testimony of Anton, the storyteller. Alongside Anton’s testimony, which he augments with various archival materials that Bright bequeathed to him, the performance also mobilises interviews from theatrical luminaries, such as Katie Mitchell and Tim Crouch, to evidence the significance of Bright’s contribution to recent British (specifically Scottish) theatre. Through these strategies, the production frames Bright with almost mythical hyperbole in an attempt to convince audiences of his significance.

In actuality, Bright is a fictional creation and the production itself is described by Trish Reid as ‘a deliberate, elaborate lie’.⁷⁵⁷ Although there is no point in the performance where this is made explicit, Heddon suggests that the ‘cues to the game at hand are there to be read’, particularly through Anton’s numerous reminders that as an actor, ‘his trade is one of duplicity’.⁷⁵⁸ In light of the fact that the narrative of *Confessions* is untrue, the dramaturgical structures within this production still resonate with my focus on documentary practices, or perhaps what might more accurately be described as the *appearance* of documentary practices, which nevertheless, as Reid states, still carry ‘a vital charge of explanatory power’.⁷⁵⁹

⁷⁵⁷ Trish Reid, ‘Return, Revisit, Re-Enact: Re-Staging the Confessions for a Contemporary Audience’, in *Paul Bright’s Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2015), pp. 136–37 (p. 137).

⁷⁵⁸ Deirdre Heddon, ‘Making It Up’, in *Paul Bright’s Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2015), pp. 150–51 (p. 150).

⁷⁵⁹ Reid, p. 137.

Anton's lecture-performance focuses on Bright's attempt to adapt James Hogg's 1824 novel *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* into a six-part performance; this is framed as Bright's radical opus. Hogg's novel centres on a Scottish religious fanatic called Robert Wringhim – the titular 'sinner' – and is a complex narrative entanglement between two conflicting versions of the same events. The first version comes from the 'confessions' of Wringhim's memoirs. The second is the editor's narrative, which narrates alternative versions of Wringhim's life and various unsavoury acts from 'folklore and rumour'.⁷⁶⁰ In performance, *Confessions* similarly offers two perspectives on Bright's work: the first is Anton's mediated presentation of Bright's writing, images, and other personal ephemera which was bequeathed to Anton, and the second is the recollections of Anton and various other talking-head interviewees. In a faithful 'refiguring [of] Hogg's novel', by the end of the performance, Anton's recollection of events also diverges from the materials gathered within his presentation and contradicts earlier testimony.⁷⁶¹ The fraught relationship between the narrative that Anton relays and the source materials he presents in performance suggests an uncertainty to the information and hints at the fictitious nature of the eponymous director. Like the two-stranded composition of Hogg's novel, the storytelling fulcrum of *Confessions* is also 'an unreliable narrator' who stages complex narrative entanglements between alternative versions of truth, reality, and fiction.⁷⁶²

The narrative contention of *Confessions* is that Bright is such an influential figure that spectators should be aware of him. Alluding to this, Mark Fisher notes that the

⁷⁶⁰ Reid, p. 136.

⁷⁶¹ Reid, p. 137.

⁷⁶² Pamela Carter and Untitled Projects, *Paul Bright's Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2015), p. 21.

performance provoked some patrons to believe they did actually know of Bright, but Fisher remarks that even ‘[b]efore the end of the show, people who had claimed they could vaguely remember Bright were pulled up sharp. It was all a hoax.’⁷⁶³ For me, Fisher overplays this because there is no ‘sharp’ moment when *Confessions* makes it clear that Bright is a fictional creation. Rather, as Heddon notes, over the course of the performance, Bright ‘is revealed – to most at least – as a clever construction’.⁷⁶⁴ In light of this, I suggest that *Confessions* is not about deception *per se*, but rather it is about modes of informing and the shaping of narratives. It may be the case that some audience members were duped into thinking they knew of Bright but, equally, some spectators will have been attuned to the dramaturgical strategies that hinted towards Bright’s fictional status, and some will have been aware of Hogg’s novel and its structural ambiguity.

As such, Bright’s status as a fictitious creation is not a narrative device designed to offer a thrill of revelation, similar to a cinematic reveal. Instead, the detailed construction of the persona of Bright, realised in part through Anton’s self-reflexive positioning of himself within this partly biographical and partly autobiographical narrative, enables an analysis of how stories are remembered and retold, and for what purpose. As Fisher rightly suggests, the production leaves open to debate the ‘lingering doubts about the

⁷⁶³ Mark Fisher, ‘Best Theatre of 2013, No 10 (Joint): “Paul Bright’s Confessions of a Justified Sinner”’, *Guardian*, 18 December 2013
 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/dec/18/best-theatre-2013-paul-brights-confessions-of-a-justified-sinner>> [accessed 7 June 2019].

⁷⁶⁴ Heddon, ‘Making It Up’, p. 150.

nature of memory, the power of narrative and the borderline between the real and the imagined'.⁷⁶⁵

In an info-saturated age, the notion that a pivotal figure such as Bright could be unknown – like Donna McAuliffe in *Taking Care of Baby* – and that audiences would invest in Bright's narrative, denote a willingness to recoup stories that may have fallen through archival cracks. As such, the questions at stake are not only introspective ones about the real versus the imagined and the corruptible nature of memory, but also practical questions about what stories are heard, who is telling them, and why? Such questions are agitated by the documentary practices of *Confessions*, particularly in the first instance by talking-head interviews with theatrical luminaries such as Katie Mitchell.

Mitchell's name accompanies the video of her testimony, which is projected on a screen positioned behind the table where Anton sits for the majority of the play leafing through his gathered artefacts. Like Tim Crouch's contribution, such recognisable theatre figures scaffold this apparent 'reconstruction' of Bright's work, and support the promise that Bright is a real person; as Heddon confirms, '[k]nowing the talking heads from real life only adds to the sense of veracity'.⁷⁶⁶ Mitchell's testimony is one of an opening montage that establishes a sense of Bright. The trustworthiness of Mitchell's contribution is elevated because she is sceptical of Bright and his work; she suggests that Bright's practices bordered on the abusive. While this correlates with Anton's recollections of working with him, Anton also tries to qualify this accusation (and

⁷⁶⁵ Fisher.

⁷⁶⁶ Heddon, 'Making It Up', p. 150.

contradicts Mitchell) by highlighting how Bright was following Artaud in trying to create a theatre which ‘rejects the illusions of surface realities in favour of something more authentic’.⁷⁶⁷

Mitchell’s performance of a version of herself resonates with Carol Martin’s identification from *Rumstick Road* that ‘the actor playing the real person is the real person’.⁷⁶⁸ In such ‘complicated’ fusions, Martin suggests, ‘splendid unplanned harmonies’ can be generated in the collapse of ‘boundaries between the real and the fictional’.⁷⁶⁹ This is also resonant in Crouch’s recollections of a promenade performance by Bright, which ended in a pub but continued to have performers acting in the streets outside. According to Crouch, this work seemed to embody ‘the possibility in the theatre to present us with a truth, what we acknowledge to be a truth and then to subvert what we think is the truth’.⁷⁷⁰ This summary appears to reflect Anton’s storytelling, which mobilises documentary practices as authenticating mechanisms to buttress the fictional artefacts that represent Bright’s life and work, from grainy video to interviewees’ testimony and from photographic images to Anton’s autobiographical reflections.

Anton’s storytelling mobilises these documentary practices to produce an aesthetic of reality within which his curation of artefacts and testimony articulates a purportedly real narrative. While this distinguishes *Confessions*’ mobilisation of documentary practices

⁷⁶⁷ Reid, p. 137. Such issues resonate also with my discussion of the Living Theatre, see Chapter Two, “‘Extreme Documentary Realism’ and the Living Theatre”.

⁷⁶⁸ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 10.

⁷⁶⁹ Martin, *Theatre of the Real*, p. 10.

⁷⁷⁰ Carter and Untitled Projects, p. 53. This kind of oscillating sense of the real and scepticism of the content is mobilised in Crouch’s 2014 work *Adler and Gibb*. See Chapter Four, ‘Conclusion’.

from that of other examples of this chapter, which seemingly have a basis in reality, even this purportedly real narrative is punctured by Anton at specific points to create a particular relationship with audiences through which, in the face of uncertain sources and inconsistent narratives, the storyteller can still claim to be the fulcrum of truth.

At one such moment, when this storyteller produces a picture of Bright kissing another man, which is simultaneously projected onto the screen, Anton runs into the middle of the auditorium to hand that photo to a random spectator. At this moment, seemingly taken aback by some revelation in the image, audiences are given a glimpse of Anton's uncertainty about his recollections. The image prompts him to move away from the surety of his artefacts, to converse without amplification, almost secretly, with one spectator. Anton asks the spectator 'how does anyone know anybody? it's all a show, one performance after another ... we're always managing our masks, and the possibility there's nothing underneath.'⁷⁷¹ He explains that those are Bright's words, but initially it appears as though Anton is going "off-script".

While this moment narratively and thematically reflects what Reid describes as the 'distinctions between the "inside" and the "outside" of the self', that both the play and the novel are concerned with, it also represents a crumbling of authority in the autobiographical contributions of this storyteller.⁷⁷² In performance, this sequence's subtitle – 'character' – is projected on stage as Anton returns to his table.⁷⁷³ He foregrounds its relevance when he declares that the duty of an actor is to 'make a

⁷⁷¹ Carter and *Untitled Projects*, p. 71. The lack of capitalisation, in this and subsequent quotes, is repeated from the published text.

⁷⁷² Reid, p. 137.

⁷⁷³ Carter and *Untitled Projects*, p. 71.

character, who's not me, live and breathe. [to] make him real.'⁷⁷⁴ In stressing the innate contradictions of that duty, Anton recalls Bright once telling him 'you are the ultimate liar, Anton. the über-liar ... how could anyone ever trust you.'⁷⁷⁵ While Anton continues to assert that 'i'm not a liar', in this sequence when the documentary aesthetic is briefly ruptured, his personal reflections on the construction and performance of self in everyday life suggest that everyone lies in some fashion.⁷⁷⁶ By physically moving to the space where spectators are questioning what is real and what is not, and by bringing the photograph with him to show spectators, the authority of this curatorial storyteller is not only unsettled by the different information revealed during performance, but also by his wavering confidence in his recollections, and in how they shaped his self-perception.

In such examples, the documentary practices mobilised in *Confessions* initially appeal to a Debordian sense that the truth of Bright resides behind the images and testimony that Anton curates. However, the truth is that there is no Paul Bright; therefore, Anton appears as a theatrical vestige of the 'unreliable' voice of the editor in Hogg's novel. The fabricated nature of the play's content actually points to the Baudrillardian sense that the real is only perceivable in relation to representation and thereby is beyond apprehending. This cyclical exchange between representation informing perceptions of the real is epitomised in Fisher's note that some spectators claimed they knew of Bright. While this sense of cyclical exchange becomes increasingly persuasive amid the digital age's enhanced circulation of information, Reid highlights two other circumstances of necessity that confirm why *Confessions* is 'especially important in this second decade of

⁷⁷⁴ Carter and Untitled Projects, p. 71.

⁷⁷⁵ Carter and Untitled Projects, p. 71.

⁷⁷⁶ Carter and Untitled Projects, p. 71.

the twenty-first century'.⁷⁷⁷ The first is a local one concerning how the production's examination of memory and cultural narratives can help Scottish audiences carve out new 'non-threatening' forms of 'nationalism', amid the growth of the Scottish National Party and the Scottish independence referendum of 2014.⁷⁷⁸ The second reason, and the more relevant for my conclusion regarding the politics of *Confessions*, is that the narrative period of Bright's 'fictional experimentations' brings the 'significant' spectre of 'Thatcherism' and neoliberalism into view.⁷⁷⁹

The context of Thatcherism, for Reid, marks a kinship between *Confessions* and 'the historic moment when the divergence in political aspiration that dominates our contemporary moment began to become really apparent'.⁷⁸⁰ That divergence in western democratic political orthodoxy in the 1980s is referred to as the 'stabilization' period of neoliberalism by Astrid Séville,⁷⁸¹ during which Thatcher-era policy propelled free market economics and limited government intervention under the auspices of her famous phrase '[t]here is no such thing as society'.⁷⁸² Reid's invoking of a neoliberal orthodoxy resonates with what she describes as Anton's 'self-serving and mildly

⁷⁷⁷ Reid, p. 137.

⁷⁷⁸ Reid, p. 137.

⁷⁷⁹ Reid, p. 137.

⁷⁸⁰ Reid, p. 137.

⁷⁸¹ Astrid Séville, 'From "One Right Way" to "One Ruinous Way"? Discursive Shifts in "There Is No Alternative"', *European Political Science Review*, 9.3 (2017), 449–70 (p. 450).

⁷⁸² Margaret Thatcher, 'Interview for "Woman's Own"', *Margaret Thatcher Foundation*, 1987, pp. 29–30 <<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>> [accessed 30 October 2019]. This particular concern focuses on the UK, which is the context for *Confessions*, but the stabilization of this political orthodoxy was, in a wider sense, solidified by the concomitant political ideals of Ronald Reagan's presidency in the US.

narcissistic' tendency.⁷⁸³ I would go further to suggest it also resonates with the notion of self-commodification that Anton foregrounds in his position as the credible witness, the autobiographical storyteller, and the curatorial entity who alone can piece together Bright's history. The fundamental fallacy in all this though is that the history relayed by Anton is a falsehood and, thereby, so is Anton's authority. The self-commodification of Anton the storyteller, which reflects both the valorisation of the individual in neoliberal and digital times, as discussed earlier in this chapter, only serves to reveal uncertainties in Anton's memory and in this totemic figure of Bright.

Combining empirical and embodied evidence that contradicts each other is one way in which *Confessions* 'deliberately deconstruct[s] representational practice', by highlighting both the fabricated nature of performance and how the unreliability of memory can impact on the communication of histories.⁷⁸⁴ The pre-show exhibition initially establishes a particular relationship with spectators through which a sense of reality is invested in the figure of Bright through artefacts, but in performance Anton's repetitious foregrounding of his role as an actor focuses scrutiny on how he represents that "reality". Although, as Reid defines it, documentary theatre normally 'eschews fiction in favour of something supposedly more authentic or "real"', *Confessions* exposes the 'mechanics of documentary theatre' and mobilises documentary practices in the storytelling of a fictitious history to provoke critical questioning on the audience's part into the validity of documentary practices as the carrier of truths.⁷⁸⁵

⁷⁸³ Reid, p. 137.

⁷⁸⁴ Reid, p. 137.

⁷⁸⁵ Reid, p. 137.

Cumulatively, the specious testimony of recognisable figures and the fabricated artefacts of the pre-show exhibition all demonstrate that the producers of *Confessions* are acutely aware of the traditions of documentary theatre, as they activate the authority with which the authenticating mechanisms of these documentary practices are endowed, in the service of provoking the critical interpretive capacity of spectators. As Carol Martin notes, the use of video testimony, interviews, and archive footage have a currency within the history of documentary theatre, operating as relatively stable signs of the real and often as a ‘key arbiter of truth’ within performance.⁷⁸⁶ However, their ultimately fictitious nature in *Confessions* suggests caution regarding the perceived veracity of documentary practices and any additional authority that empirical or embodied evidence may seemingly exert over the other.

Unlike the dramaturgical sleight of hand ‘between truth and story’ and the encouragement towards immersion which enables McBurney to lead spectators into *The Encounter*, from the outset of *Confessions* the particular relationship that Anton cultivates is a painfully honest truthfulness around both his role and the information he is communicating.⁷⁸⁷ In his opening explanation of how *Confessions* came into being, Anton exposes for an audience the unusual nature of this performance when he states that ‘standing here in front of you tonight ... and having to be myself ... having to introduce myself by my own name ... it’s a very strange feeling indeed, believe me’.⁷⁸⁸ While the role and information that Anton performs in order to tell “the real story” of Bright is uncomfortable, the openness of his uncertainty about what he is doing is

⁷⁸⁶ Martin, ‘Living Simulations: The Use of Media in Documentary in the UK, Lebanon and Israel’, p. 74.

⁷⁸⁷ Convery.

⁷⁸⁸ Carter and Untitled Projects, p. 20.

strategic – it performs, like the documentary practices, an apparent retreat from the realm of representation into an honest dialogue with the spectators and with the performance event itself.⁷⁸⁹ Recalling Bottoms’s assertion, this seeming self-reflexivity operates as part of *Confession*’s apparent work as ‘both “document” and “play”’.⁷⁹⁰

The political contribution of *Confessions* is a cautionary one, which suggests that even in the age of information overload, truth is a slippery proposal. Contextual framing, empirical evidence, and the embodied testimony of seemingly credible witnesses all require critical appreciation because the authenticating mechanisms of documentary practices are corruptible. When such appreciation is activated, then the analogue nature of performance and the individual lens of the storyteller foster new critical currencies by encouraging thinking to move beyond content – real or otherwise – and towards practical questions concerning what stories are remembered, how, by whom, and why. Such a critical currency may indeed be a productive direction for the mobilisation of documentary practices outside of documentary theatre forms in the future.

While Anton appears to introspectively trouble the ontological premises of what it means to be an “actor” within the consciously duplicitous presentation of Bright’s narrative, and McBurney somewhat relies on the privilege and status of his persona to endow the credibility of his testimony in *The Encounter*, the final example of this chapter – *Confirmation* – purposefully foregrounds the author-performer Chris Thorpe as a dramaturgical commodity through its different mobilisations of documentary practices.

⁷⁸⁹ This is something that all three storytellers of this chapter do in some shape or form.

⁷⁹⁰ Stephen J. Bottoms, ‘Putting the Document into Documentary: An Unwelcome Corrective’, p. 57.

Confirmation

Chris Thorpe and Rachel Chavkin's 2014 play *Confirmation* mobilises elements of verbatim and autobiographical practice within a work which, like *The Encounter*, is not generally considered an example of documentary theatre.⁷⁹¹ It is, though, another work which purports to tell true events via documentary practices, which self-referentially refers to the mechanics of its presentation as well as to the time and space of its performance, and which foregrounds the apparent authenticity of the storyteller to evidence its truth-claims. Therein, *Confirmation* foregrounds the sometimes contradictory nature of the self through what Thorpe refers to as ambiguities in performance, as part of an introspective investigation of how perception is influenced. However, by purposefully destabilising its documentary practices, particularly its overarching autobiographical practice, any presumed truth-claims are revealed to be contingent on the subject. As such, *Confirmation* appears, reluctantly, to place focus and trust back on the individual in an age of information overload.

Confirmation is a monologue performed by Chris Thorpe, in which he recounts dialogues he has had with people whose political beliefs are anathema to his self-defined liberalism. Thorpe undertook these dialogues in order to understand how oppositional beliefs are formed and maintained, and what unconscious influence these viewpoints can have on an individual's worldview. As such, *Confirmation* is largely comprised of interviews and conversations from Thorpe's research and this leads James

⁷⁹¹ This discussion is based on three performances of *Confirmation* that I witnessed. The first was at South Street Arts Centre in Reading on 25 April 2015 and the other two were at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, in *The Door*, on 1 and 4 December 2015.

Hudson to describe the play as ‘quasi-verbatim’.⁷⁹² While I agree that verbatim practice is an important part of the work, I would go further to suggest that *Confirmation* is also, to appropriate Hudson’s phrase, quasi-autobiographical. This is because, in discussion with Hudson, Thorpe asserts that he is performing himself in the play through the persona of ‘Chris’,⁷⁹³ and that the discussions are truthful: ‘[i]t’s true [...] there’s no “acting” in this for me’.⁷⁹⁴ Thorpe’s claims that the performance truthfully depicts real occurrences persist in post-show discussions,⁷⁹⁵ and in interviews with journalists.⁷⁹⁶ These persistent assertions buttress the documentary practices that are mobilised, and resonate with the play’s narrative concern around the influence of confirmation bias.

Social and cognitive scientists Charles G. Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper first posit the notion of confirmation bias in 1979. They characterise it as an internal process that influences what information individuals agree with, and what information individuals dismiss.⁷⁹⁷ In Thorpe and Chavkin’s words, confirmation bias is an innate process through which individuals ‘see in the world evidence that supports the point of

⁷⁹² James Hudson, ‘The Extreme Right and the Limits of Liberal Tolerance in David Greig’s “The Events” and Chris Thorpe’s “Confirmation”’, *Comparative Drama*, 51.3 (2017), 306–37 (p. 306).

⁷⁹³ Hereafter, I use ‘Chris’ to refer to the protagonist in the play, and ‘Thorpe’ to distinguish the writer/performer from the onstage persona.

⁷⁹⁴ Chris Thorpe and James Hudson, ““Confirmation”: Chris Thorpe in Conversation with James Hudson’, *Performing Ethos: International Journal of Ethics in Theatre and Performance*, 7.1 (2017), 3–12 (p. 8).

⁷⁹⁵ Post show discussion, *The Door*, at, Birmingham Repertory Theatre, 1 December 2015.

⁷⁹⁶ Lyn Gardner, ‘Chris Thorpe: Theatre Is a “Laboratory for Thinking About How We Think”’, *Guardian*, 7 April 2015
<<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/apr/07/chris-thorpe-theatre-confirmation-nations-theatre>> [accessed 30 July 2016].

⁷⁹⁷ Charles G. Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper, ‘Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence’, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 37.11 (1979), 2098–2109.

view [they] already hold'.⁷⁹⁸ Therefore, in order to engage in an 'honourable' and productive discussion with his political opposites and with his own confirmation bias, *Confirmation* must (appear to) be a real narrative concerning this storyteller – hence Thorpe's consistent framing of the events as truthful.⁷⁹⁹ These honourable discussions that Thorpe engages in are described as opportunities to understand 'how we come to believe what we believe', and instances wherein opposing politics can be tested in search of common ground and understanding.⁸⁰⁰ Therefore, awareness of how confirmation bias influences worldviews is not solely a narrative concern relating to how Chris examines the information offered in support of extremist beliefs, but it is also a structural concern that reflects back on the documentary practices that this storyteller mobilises in support of his performance.

In order to test the limits of this understanding of his political opposites – what Hudson surmises as the 'limits of liberal tolerance'⁸⁰¹ – Chris decides to meet people with whom he disagrees 'in quite an extreme way'; therefore, he seeks out members of the far-Right British National Party (BNP), Holocaust-deniers, and people who defend the actions of Anders Breivik.⁸⁰² These interviews, predominantly with 'a proud National Socialist'

⁷⁹⁸ Chris Thorpe and Rachel Chavkin, *Confirmation* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2014), p. 12.

⁷⁹⁹ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, p. 23.

⁸⁰⁰ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*. Cover Notes.

⁸⁰¹ Hudson.

⁸⁰² Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, p. 23. On 22 July 2011, Breivik detonated a bomb in Oslo which killed eight people, before shooting dead 69 teenagers and young adults at a Norwegian Youth Labour Party summer camp on the island of Utøya. He uploaded an internet manifesto on the same day justifying his attacks in the face of what he perceived to be the negative effects of multiculturalism on European countries, and espousing militant, extremist, white supremacist ideology. Breivik's sentence was 21 years "preventive detention" (similar in Norwegian law to a life sentence) for the crime of mass murder.

who is given the pseudonym ‘Glen’, form the bulk of verbatim practice in *Confirmation*.⁸⁰³

The verbatim excerpts between Chris and Glen take two forms. In the first form, Chris retells and re-enacts verbatim extracts within his monologue, shifting between the interviewer and interviewee as required. There are no perceptible shifts in voice, physicality, or costume during these re-enactments, which means that, as Liz Tomlin describes, ‘the “character” of Glen’ frequently became ‘a shadowy figure that morphed in and out of Thorpe’s own “characterized” persona’.⁸⁰⁴ In the second form, audience members become part of the staging by taking on the role of either the interviewer (Chris), or the interviewee (Glen). In this second form, Chris prompts the spectators by giving them written dialogue to speak into his microphone. During these re-enactments, Chris becomes the required respondent; that is to say, when the spectator speaks as Glen, Chris responds as Chris; but when a spectator acts as the interviewer, then Chris replies with Glen’s words.

The duality of personas that Thorpe adopts at such moments in performance reflects the narrative sense that Chris and Glen are more alike than Chris might imagine – as Glen remarks, they might be ‘surprised’ at how much they have in common.⁸⁰⁵ As such, this author-performer and storyteller represents the battleground between opposing political persuasions where an uncomfortable imbrication is imagined and tested, but he also

⁸⁰³ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, p. 30. In the spirit of an ‘honourable discussion’, all the interviewees knew of Thorpe’s intentions to transpose some of their discussions into a play.

⁸⁰⁴ Liz Tomlin, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen, 2019), p. 165.

⁸⁰⁵ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, p. 27.

represents the site of contestation between the authorities of empirical and embodied evidence. The curatorial intervention of verbatim practice, which in its precise deployment of language offers a rational quality to interview sections, is contrasted by bouts of irrational anger concerning the views that are expressed – at these moments it is difficult to ascertain if it is Chris or Glen erupting in anger.

The layering of such complex entanglements, combined with moments of audience participation, generate a particular relationship between spectator and performer, wherein the different personas that are perceivable within the performance of this storyteller, some of which are outsourced to audience members during verbatim sections, promotes a sense of what Thorpe calls ‘destabilizing ambiguity’.⁸⁰⁶ This ambiguity not only pertains to the performative concerns regarding who is speaking at certain moments, but extends to the veracity of the documentary practices that are mobilised. As such, I suggest that *Confirmation* mobilises verbatim and autobiographical practices as authenticating mechanisms to buttress the veracity of this storyteller’s narrative, but simultaneously encourages a questioning of the biases that underpin both their content and their appearance in performance.

In the remainder of this chapter, I explore the informal staging, the almost implicit nature of the documentary practices (particularly the autobiographical), and the legal ownership of the text to argue that *Confirmation*’s author-performer-storyteller becomes a dramaturgical commodity that is mobilised in narrative and extra-theatrical fashion to highlight how the ambiguity between reality, performance, and representation can

⁸⁰⁶ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 8.

unsettle stable knowledge of the self. This knowledge underpins individual interpretation of information and, therein, perceptions of what is real.

Staging Confirmation and Confirmation Bias

The stark and simple staging of *Confirmation* demonstrates an avoidance of theatrical spectacle and a ‘straightforward’ quality to the production. In co-operation with the documentary practices of the play, this gestures towards the truthfulness of the narrative.⁸⁰⁷ The stage area of a square ‘5m x 5m performance space’ is fenced by a seating bank on each side.⁸⁰⁸ These four seating banks, which do not meet in the corners, each comprise two rows of chairs, capable of seating between fifteen and thirty spectators depending on the venue. The unconnected corners function as entrance and exit routes, except for one where a microphone stand remains for the duration of the performance.⁸⁰⁹ Combined with moments of dialogue that take place in these corners, and the soft white lighting that spills over into the seating banks, this simple, flexible, and intimate staging subtly gathers the audience into the physical performance area. In conjuncture with the participation thrust upon some spectators, when they became intermittent placeholders for Chris or Glen, this staging also gathers the audience into the performance event as representatives of each local community within which it is performed.

⁸⁰⁷ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 11.

⁸⁰⁸ Chris Thorpe and Rachel Chavkin, ‘Note’, in *Confirmation* (London: Oberon Books Ltd, 2014).

⁸⁰⁹ The published text credits Ben Pacey as ‘Design Consultant’.

The practicality of this simple staging means that *Confirmation* is ‘performable as much in a community centre or a room above a pub, as in a theatre space’.⁸¹⁰ For Hudson though, because the play’s function is ‘to portray conflict’, he suggests that the staging ‘has more associations with competitive sport than theatre’.⁸¹¹ I disagree with this analysis because, while confrontation is an element of the political balancing act between agonism and antagonism in *Confirmation*, Chris’s goal is dialogue rather than victory. Even his political opposite Glen suggests the same, when he states that he does not expect his scepticism of the Holocaust, for example, to convert Chris to his perspective: ‘I don’t think that’s the way it works. I couldn’t convince you of anything.’⁸¹² Therefore, rather than viewing these dialogues through the filter of competitive sport, I contend that the intended intimacy of the performance space speaks to a preoccupation with introspection between different facets of the self, as well as to dialogues between different communities, and different ideological groupings.

Thorpe’s aspiration that *Confirmation* should be performable in pubs and community centres as much as in traditional theatre spaces reflects this sense that *Confirmation* ‘is not a “play”’, but rather a cascade of dialogues with himself, with those who hold opposing opinions, and with audiences of vastly different demographics.⁸¹³ This aspiration, and its political underpinnings that seek to expand the reach of such dialogues beyond traditional theatre demographics, was aptly demonstrated in one of the last UK performances of *Confirmation* by Thorpe in 2018; the performance took place at Theatre Absolute’s Shop Front Theatre – a disused fish and chip shop in a Coventry

⁸¹⁰ Thorpe and Chavkin, ‘Note’.

⁸¹¹ Hudson, p. 320.

⁸¹² Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, p. 49.

⁸¹³ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 9.

shopping centre. This location speaks to the discourse of social decline in traditional working class areas, which is partly attributed with fuelling a rejuvenation of far-Right ideologies in the twenty-first century, on which Hudson elaborates.⁸¹⁴ While Thorpe states that such narratives are not necessarily true, he does suggest that the ‘idea of political views that we find threatening coming from a sense of deprivation or loss of entitlement is really common’.⁸¹⁵ It is possible, therefore, that non-traditional staging locations can activate such different dialogues in a way that helps explore them through art, and potentially include people who cannot, or choose not, to access more conventional theatre spaces.

Resistance to the normative trappings of a theatre space is embedded in Thorpe’s aim to establish a ‘sense of liveness’ and to remind audiences ‘that they are here, that we are all here’, in order to further establish the notion of dialogue.⁸¹⁶ While advocating for this though, I suggest that Thorpe is also promoting a *specificity* in terms of the time and place of each performance, because the inclusion of local voices suggests that similar dialogues can occur within each community where the play is staged.⁸¹⁷ A number of dramaturgical techniques foreground these aspects of dialogue, a ‘sense of liveness’, and the specificity of each particular performance, and they are established through the early sections of the performance via strategies of audience conditioning. Indeed, similar to *The Encounter* and *Confessions*, such strategies are activated even before the play has begun.

⁸¹⁴ Hudson, pp. 308–13.

⁸¹⁵ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 11.

⁸¹⁶ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 9.

⁸¹⁷ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 9.

As spectators enter, Chris stands casually in the middle of the stage and informally greets them with welcoming words, smiles, and gestures. He encourages spectators to sit where they please and engages in various conversations with different people across the space. It is clear from the attention Chris pays to the auditorium entrance, to the ushers, and to the stage management position, that he is awaiting clearance for the play to begin.⁸¹⁸ When it does begin, this gathering of these people, in this space, at this time, for the purposes of hearing this storyteller's testimony is clearly marked by a lighting change – unlike *The Encounter*'s slippage between the pre-show and the show. *Confirmation* opens with a short scene that mirrors the gathering of a select group of people in a small space:

ON MIC [*Stage Direction*]

In the British Legion Club, in the
upstairs room, we are talking about
what to wear for the demonstration.

And one man won't shut up.

One man is saying, that the Pakistanis
are cowards.⁸¹⁹

This scene establishes a number of narrative and dramaturgical aspects. Firstly, the subject matter of the work is going to address, in frank terms, language, ideologies, and preconceptions of a racist and nationalist nature. Secondly, when Chris closes this first scene by saying that 'as research for this show [...] it really wasn't worth going to BNP meetings anymore', it is clear that the performance is based on the research and testimony from this person on stage and that there is a self-reflexive quality to the play's

⁸¹⁸ This performance pre-set is not called for in the text but it occurred at each of the three performances I witnessed.

⁸¹⁹ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, p. 5. I have transcribed the formatting exactly from the published text in order to demonstrate its specific layout in longer quotations.

use of documentary source materials.⁸²⁰ And thirdly, there are suggestive moments of place-holding thrust upon the audience, wherein they will be made to feel as though they are implicated in the performance narratively, practically, or both. That is to say, the patrons of this in-the-round performance oscillate between the gathered audience of the play, the gathered individuals in the British Legion Club, and various other characters whom individual spectators are later chosen to stand in for, such as Glen.

After Chris's recognition that he needed to 'speak to someone one to one', the play shifts tone to initiate a number of exchanges designed to involve spectators in the performance's subject matter of confirmation bias and political extremism.⁸²¹ Lyn Gardner suggests that these exchanges resemble 'a glorified, extended TED talk', in the sense that group learning is being undertaken through conversational explanation.⁸²² In the first exchange, Chris asks spectators to complete a mathematical problem designed to prove how individuals create rules to justify outcomes; spectators who comply with Chris's overarching rule earn a boiled sweet. After expanding on the logic of confirmation bias that underpins this mathematical exercise, in the second exchange each spectator is given a printed copy of the lyrics to a heavy metal song called 'Guilty For Being White' by Minor Threat; the song is played loudly in its entirety while Thorpe is off stage.

Upon his return, 'Guilty For Being White' is explained from the opposing perspectives of a far-right advocate and a liberal. In what he perceives to be a 'sarcastic' song, the

⁸²⁰ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, p. 8.

⁸²¹ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, p. 8.

⁸²² Lyn Gardner, 'Confirmation', *Guardian*, 1 August 2014
<<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/aug/01/edinburgh-festival-2014-confirmation-review-chris-thorpe>> [accessed 9 July 2017].

far-right advocate claims affinity with the song-writer and asks ‘why he has to feel sorry’ for being white.⁸²³ After listening to a part of the song again, the liberal persona asserts that ‘the guy who wrote the song is on record – on fucking record – saying people who interpret the song your way [the far-right perspective] are wrong’.⁸²⁴ The clarity of opposition in these exchanges encourage spectators to examine ‘how the same cognitive processes can lead to different conclusions’.⁸²⁵

These interactive techniques, the simple, non-traditional staging, and the informal opening framework add dramaturgical weight to the documentary practices in *Confirmation*, because they establish an impression that this author-performer is rejecting artifice and instead offering the spectator a truthful narrative. This impression is furthered by the uncomfortable words of the play’s verbatim practices – spectators are not being presented with a sanitized version of events.

Verbatim Practice and Confirmation Bias

Thorpe asserts that the dialogues between Chris and Glen are simply a regurgitation of ‘the things that were said to me’ in real life.⁸²⁶ However, this iteration of verbatim practice is complicated by its performance and by the content of the material. Firstly, in performance, it is not only Thorpe speaking these words but members of the audience as well, and at times they switch roles. Secondly, the content of some of the material blurs the expected differences between the liberal position of Chris and assumptions of his political opposite Glen, such as their agreement on issues including re-nationalised

⁸²³ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, p. 18.

⁸²⁴ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, p. 19.

⁸²⁵ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 8.

⁸²⁶ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 10.

public services and the casual demonization of the working class.⁸²⁷ While these shared beliefs are confirmed during the verbatim sections, in a scene immediately prior to the first verbatim conversation between Chris and Glen, an ambiguous imbrication between these two individuals is set in motion.

In prepping himself, and the spectators, for what he expects to be confronted with by Glen, Chris relays an extensive set of worldviews which comprise what he refers to as a ‘White Supremacist Heuristic’; Chris states that he will probably be subject to racist, fascist, and nationalist tropes such as ‘[w]hites are genetically superior to non-whites’ and ‘[i]mmigration is a social cancer’.⁸²⁸ While explaining this, Chris patrols the stage and picks individual spectators to whom he directs these statements. As Chris expresses increasingly uncomfortable sentiments that he expects (and hopes) Glen will pose to him, the storyteller’s voice builds to an aggressive crescendo, which culminates with him shouting that Muslims should be ‘killed and burned. And then deported.’⁸²⁹

The ambiguity of this aggression can be perceived as either support for these ideas from a far-right advocate, or as the liberal disgust with such beliefs. In performance, it is unclear which of these potential types of aggression is being aired, and which person – Chris or Glen – it may belong to. Demonstrating this ambiguity, audience members have occasionally interrupted this moment and challenged Thorpe’s justification for vocalising these views.⁸³⁰ The published text offers no definitive clarity concerning how such statements should be taken or spoken because, although the names Chris and Glen

⁸²⁷ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, pp. 28–29.

⁸²⁸ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, pp. 25–27.

⁸²⁹ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, p. 26.

⁸³⁰ Thorpe and Hudson, pp. 9–10.

designate the verbatim material in the published text, much of the rest of the text flows without character designation. Of course, the overarching conceit is that the whole text is the writer-performer's testimony, but moments such as this demonstrate how Thorpe sought to maximise the potential for such ambiguity in performance.

The first scene to demonstrably mobilise verbatim practice immediately follows this aggressive crescendo. The scene opens with Chris calmly standing in the middle of the performance area explaining the provenance of the dialogue that follows: 'At the start of my conversation with Glen, he said:'.⁸³¹ Chris then places a chair in the middle of one seating bank facing a spectator. As he sits down, Chris hands a card to the spectator and invites them to read Glen's words before responding to them; he repeats this with each of the four seating banks:

ON MIC (Audience member.)

I'm going to tell you some things about
myself, and just let me know if you
agree.

OFF MIC (CHRIS.)

And I thought – oh – is that a tactic
he's learned? Is this him, trying to
sell me something? That's the basic
psychology of the salesman after all.

Then he said:

ON MIC (Audience member.)

I think we might be surprised at how

⁸³¹ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, p. 27.

much we agree on.⁸³²

The hyperbolic aggression of the previous scene is undercut by this calm exchange where the two individuals are clearly distinguished. With each move of Chris's chair to a different seating bank, and each new card given to a spectator, short dialogues are created to buttress the scene's opening statement that these are Glen's words. The specific nature of this verbatim practice is less obvious to Thorpe though, until it is suggested to him by Hudson, whereupon he agrees that '[y]es, it *is* verbatim actually. I'm saying the things that were said to me.'⁸³³

This recognition suggests that Thorpe was unaware he was mobilising verbatim practice, and thereby, less likely to be considering the canonical traditions and more recent manifestations of this practice. When he recognises it in conversation with Hudson, Thorpe quickly asserts the partial status of verbatim practice within *Confirmation*, because he cautions that 'if the whole thing' was verbatim, then 'it would go too far into the territory of confirming the prejudices of the audience'.⁸³⁴ That is to say, if *Confirmation* was wholly "verbatim theatre", then it could potentially reify Glen into a stereotype. This would confirm a spectator's preconceptions about racist extremists, and thereby make *Confirmation* vulnerable to accusations that it triggers the very biases it aims to interrogate. Seemingly, for Thorpe, the cross-fertilisation of verbatim and non-verbatim material enables the performance to suggest things that documentary source materials alone cannot communicate, such as the influence of confirmation bias on how we process information. Through this, Thorpe implicitly

⁸³² Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, p. 27. Underlining in original.

⁸³³ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 10. Emphasis in original.

⁸³⁴ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 11.

confirms the value of the strategic and expanded mobilisation of documentary practices, as this thesis proposes.

Confirmation, therefore, is indebted to what Thorpe calls ‘an element of verbatim’, but the play is not beholden to canonical traditions of verbatim theatre. Hudson’s term ‘quasi-verbatim’ seems to reflect this; however, his invocation of “verbatim” trades on the notion of a stable “verbatim theatre” in order to create a shorthand descriptive of the play. That is to say, Hudson’s categorisation is, as Thorpe explains, a way of saying that at moments ‘it is verbatim’ because the words are ‘things that were said’ to Thorpe. I suggest this reification of the verbatim practice in *Confirmation* misses an opportunity to examine its potential political contribution.

If verbatim theatre is, in a rudimentary sense, offering the real words of others to enlighten a spectator about some “true truth”, then when placed alongside and within a piece about confirmation bias, verbatim not only remains part of documentary’s wider questioning of its own ‘discursive limitations’, but the context of confirmation bias further unsettles any possibility of “truth” that this practice (and others, such as autobiography) might offer. This is because all such contributions within *Confirmation* are framed as the products of, and subject to, confirmation bias – as such, any “truth” is both partial and skewed. Therein, the contribution of the verbatim practice within *Confirmation* is to highlight the contingent nature of the real beyond the theatre, which then impacts on what kinds of representations of reality are crafted in performance.

The second documentary practice in *Confirmation*, the overarching framework of autobiographical practice, performs a different function.

Destabilising Autobiographical Practice

The autobiographical practice in *Confirmation* enables the retelling of Thorpe's interactions with his interviewees; as Thorpe states, 'it's me. It's the "performance" version of me obviously, but it's me.'⁸³⁵ Placing Thorpe into the story echoes Anton's retelling of his friendship with Paul Bright, and McBurney's musing on the photographic records of his children's youth. In each of these examples, there is a currency cultivated around the figure of the storyteller and their testimony, which suggests that, above all else, the audience can trust them. However, this does not in fact mean that the audience can trust them, but it is the dramaturgical and aesthetic conceit that is cultivated. Within *Confirmation*, the ambiguity that is created between the personas of Thorpe, Chris, and Glen suggests at points that they occupy different facets of the same person. As such, the autobiographical practice of *Confirmation*, like that of McBurney and Anton, is an implicit navigation of the self and an 'investigation of thought processes', rather than an explicit confrontation with systemic norms that have shaped the lived experience of an individual or community – this is what links these examples of autobiographical storytelling at this time and distinguishes them from the canonical tradition of this practice.⁸³⁶

As noted earlier in relation to Kalb and Carlson's discussions, the canonically enshrined politics of autobiographical practice commonly foreground issues of identity politics or an increased visibility of marginalised voices as counter-cultural correctives to the established narratives of white, male, heteronormativity. Although such political

⁸³⁵ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 8.

⁸³⁶ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 10. Albeit, such norms still inevitably shape all lived experience and, in that way, have a stake in the development and sustaining of an individual's confirmation bias, which is not innate in its leanings but formed within (or against) such norms.

standards are commonplace, in line with Benjamin's notion that storytellers translate experience into wisdom, Lisa Kron explains that autobiographical practice can generate recognition of wider insights in the personal because 'the details of your own life' can offer a meaning that is 'more universal' than your own history.⁸³⁷ Similarly, Maguire notes that the representation of 'individual experience to multiple others' is an important aspect of how autobiographical practice establishes 'social relations with others within which the identities, both of the teller and of the listener, are constituted in relation to each other through the act of telling'.⁸³⁸

In combination, the telling of experience and a relationship of mutual exchange with an audience appear as broadly fundamental tenets of autobiographical practice.

Consideration of such tenets helps identify how autobiographical practice can be repurposed anew within the contemporary circumstances of necessity, and what critical currencies such new iterations may inaugurate. I contend that this is particularly important when new iterations trade on kinds of privilege, as McBurney somewhat does, and as Thorpe implicitly does in light of the fact that a white supremacist is willing to engage in civil dialogue with him.

When challenged that the play serves as a platform for extremist opinions, Thorpe acknowledges his privileged 'luxury' in not suffering 'automatic prejudice because of who I am', and recognises his responsibility in mobilising extremist voices on behalf of those whose everyday experience of such extremism is one of victimisation.⁸³⁹ As part

⁸³⁷ Lisa Kron, *2.5 Minute Ride and 101 Humiliating Stories* (New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, 2001), p. xi.

⁸³⁸ Maguire, p. 59.

⁸³⁹ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 10.

of addressing such difficult terrain in line with Chris's self-imposed challenge to interrogate his own confirmation bias, Chris attempts to see the world how such extremists do. This action creates an uncertainty between the characterised boundaries of Thorpe the storyteller, Chris his on stage persona, and Glen the proud national socialist. For Thorpe, the combined interrogation of confirmation bias via this multi-rolling re-enactment, the partial status of verbatim practice, and the involvement of spectators in the dialogue, combine to create the 'destabilizing ambiguity' wherein the fluidity of character as well as the staunchness of political positions comes under scrutiny.⁸⁴⁰ As a dramaturgical conceit, such ambiguity is practised in both McBurney and Anton's roles, but the difference in Thorpe and Chavkin's work is the active role it has in the performance narrative.

By this I mean that McBurney's storytelling concerns the technological outsourcing of memory and an individual's ability to recognise the difference between 'stories and reality'. Anton's storytelling deals in false pretences and, in this way, highlights an ambiguity between fact and fiction which is increasingly difficult to unpick within the digital age's circulation of information. In Thorpe and Chavkin's production though, the destabilising ambiguity of personas is a dramaturgical translation of confirmation bias as a practice which actively confronts the ability to "tell" truth, because confirmation bias not only impacts what individuals see and hear, but also what they do, say, and believe as well.

The challenge, in relation to this discussion of *Confirmation*, is not to distinguish between memory and evidence, fact and fiction, or testimony and truth – as Glen says,

⁸⁴⁰ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 8.

he could never change Chris's thinking in such matters anyway. Rather, the challenge is how to understand documentary practices, particularly such implicit autobiographical practice, when – unlike its canonical forebears – this iteration of autobiographical practice commodifies the storyteller first and foremost without necessarily defaulting to the position that their testimony or lived experience is trustworthy. This valorising of the individual over evidence is concurrent across the examples of this chapter. It reflects the zeitgeist of individualism that has, since Bauman, only intensified amid the paradoxical states of 'postdigital culture', which Angela Butler articulates as the increase in 'physical isolation' alongside the popularisation of diverse digital platforms, each of which is 'designed for an individual user who joins a diffused interactive community'.⁸⁴¹

Confirmation pivots narratively and structurally on its destabilising ambiguities of this individual storyteller and the personas of Thorpe, Chris, and Glen. Narratively, while Thorpe asserts quite simply that he is 'trying' to be himself in a play which is 'as straightforward as possible',⁸⁴² these ambiguities lead Chris to declare near the end that 'I don't know which one of us is talking any more', during a fantastical description of Chris and Glen exchanging eyeballs in order to see the world as the other sees it.⁸⁴³ Chris decides to end his exchanges with Glen because he believes that he is in danger of 'diluting' himself.⁸⁴⁴ Through such narrative challenges to his stable sense of self, confirmation bias comes into proximity with the more traditional autobiographical issue

⁸⁴¹ Angela Butler, 'Simon McBurney, Theatrical Soundscapes, and Postdigital Communities', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 37.1 (2020), 58–70 (p. 67).

⁸⁴² Thorpe and Hudson, p. 11.

⁸⁴³ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, p. 57.

⁸⁴⁴ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*, p. 58.

of identity, because such biases align with Stuart Hall's suggestion (previously noted) that identity is constructed and 'narrated in one's own self', as opposed to being imposed via external forces.⁸⁴⁵ Structurally, the destabilised ambiguity between Thorpe, Chris, and Glen not only provokes spectators to question their own bias as they decide for themselves who is speaking and why, but it also displaces any facile notion of "truth" because the basis of the testimony or evidence is equally ambiguous.

As discussed in Chapter Three, a tendency towards ambiguity is encroaching in documentary theatre.⁸⁴⁶ I would suggest this is a less commonly associated with autobiographical practice, because it dramaturgically gestures towards the stripping away of artifice to reveal an authentic presentation of self; as Thorpe asserts, at all times he is 'trying to tread the line of being "me"' but also performing that version of himself.⁸⁴⁷ As such, Thorpe clearly recognises that *Confirmation*'s destabilising ambiguity may lead audiences to question the 'slippery meta-theatrical deconstruction of who I [Thorpe] am being at any particular moment', yet he states he is 'less interested' in such issues.⁸⁴⁸ I suggest that this is problematic because it is incongruous to invoke an ambiguous iteration of autobiographical practice and then declare 'less interest' in the resultant persona or identity created on stage, particularly when the ambiguous persona channels extremist beliefs that cause real-world harm beyond the

⁸⁴⁵ Hall, p. 49.

⁸⁴⁶ See Chapter Three, 'Fact, Fiction, the Ambiguity Turn, and the Documentary Veneer'.

⁸⁴⁷ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 11. For example, a common trait of UK based Ursula Martinez's autobiographical performances, such as *Free Admission* (2016) staged at a similar time to the works I am discussing, involves a moment of complete nudity through which Martinez embodies this removal of artifice and the presentation of an authentic self. Traces of such strategies have roots in the Live Art movement of the 1970s and the work of performance artists such as Carolee Schneemann.

⁸⁴⁸ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 11.

theatre, to the point that (as Thorpe highlights) some audience members feel the need to interrupt and speak out during performance.

Although Thorpe's discussion of these interruptions acknowledges the harm that racism causes in the real world, he cannot outsource the thinking around the destabilizing ambiguity of his on stage personas solely to audience members. Thorpe has a stake in what this ambiguity is doing, partly because he repeatedly reinforces the veracity of these events both during and after the performance, and partly by virtue of the fact that, as Liz Tomlin notes, 'a black, Asian or Jewish, actor would clearly have been an unacceptable dialogue partner on Glen's terms'.⁸⁴⁹

There is, therefore, a political commodification of self and a privilege exerted in the instigation of these dialogues that somewhat undermines any description of them as 'honourable', because it is by virtue of what Glen would see as Chris's "tolerable" characteristics that these conversations took place. It may very well be the case that Thorpe does not want to "explain" his art to Hudson, but the appearance of autobiographical practice in *Confirmation*, in light of its canonical trajectory, means Thorpe should recognise the importance of his stake in the ambiguity he suggests is created, because that ambiguity means that the appearance of autobiographical practice in *Confirmation* oscillates between '[the] real and [the] imagined', when the trauma inflicted in the support of such views is very real.⁸⁵⁰

Within this context of the certainty of self that is unconsciously formed and reformed through processes of confirmation bias, the duplicitous act of mirroring the

⁸⁴⁹ Tomlin, *Political Dramaturgies and Theatre Spectatorship*, p. 162.

⁸⁵⁰ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*. Cover Notes.

protagonist's name with Thorpe's first name also marks a structural tension within *Confirmation*'s performance of truthfulness and its mobilisation of documentary practices. This issue is explored varying in the remainder of this chapter for what it provokes in terms of critical responses, in respect of what the legal ownership of the text suggests about such actions, and the demands made of future productions by this act of naming.

Destabilised Autobiography: Responses and Legal Ownership



Figure 3: *Confirmation* Published Script Front Cover

The logical affiliation between Thorpe and Chris in *Confirmation* is reflected in reviews but complicated by an understanding of the legally enshrined ownership of the text. As stipulated on the front cover of the published script (Figure 3), *Confirmation* is a play 'written by' Chris Thorpe, and 'developed with' Rachel Chavkin.⁸⁵¹ This front cover shows the play title separated into four sections, with Thorpe's face visible through the

⁸⁵¹ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*. Cover Notes.

bold print lettering.⁸⁵² This image and its luminous yellow hue also formed the promotional materials for the 2014 production. Although such considerations may be minor aspects of what Ric Knowles calls the ‘conditions of reception’,⁸⁵³ they are still aspects of performance analysis that help to decode what Carlson refers to as ‘the entire event structure of which the performance is a part’.⁸⁵⁴ In respect of my decoding of *Confirmation*, this imagery demonstrates an inextricable relationship between the on stage character of Chris and the writer-performer Thorpe, even before the performance begins.

This relationship, which has a pivotal role in establishing the perception and appearance of autobiographical practice in *Confirmation*, is reflected in reviews of the performance.⁸⁵⁵ Lyn Gardner refers to Thorpe repeatedly as the ‘writer-performer’, suggesting an unregistered entwinement with the on stage storyteller Chris.⁸⁵⁶ Similarly, Matt Trueman does not mention the character name Chris once, preferring instead to recall the performance entirely through the prism of ‘Thorpe’.⁸⁵⁷ In an antiquated fashion, Ben Brantley unflinchingly refers to ‘Mr. Thorpe’ throughout his review of a

⁸⁵² Even if spectators do not know what Thorpe looks like, this is immediately discernible in performance.

⁸⁵³ Ric Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 19.

⁸⁵⁴ Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 164.

⁸⁵⁵ Of the promotional material I have observed from subsequent productions of *Confirmation* outside of the UK, and not performed by Thorpe, the individual performer’s face has not formed part of the marketing imagery. Such examples demonstrate that, subsequently, the autobiographical practices are not a significant part of the dramaturgical ambiguity at work in the performance.

⁸⁵⁶ Gardner, ‘Confirmation’.

⁸⁵⁷ Matt Trueman, ‘Review: Confirmation / Men in the Cities’, *Matt Trueman: Theatre Critic and Journalist*, 14 August 2014 <<https://matttrueman.co.uk/2014/08/review-confirmation-men-in-the-cities.html>> [accessed 24 July 2016].

performance in New York.⁸⁵⁸ Such logical focus on the writer-performer-storyteller though, leads a number of reviewers to relegate the role of Rachel Chavkin; this is important because the apparent autobiographical practice of the work is complicated by the front matter of the published script, wherein both Thorpe and Chavkin are identified as ‘authors’ and copyright holders.⁸⁵⁹ I suggest there is critical value in clarifying and considering this legal division of ownership because, firstly, the published script is a separate entity preserved in posterity beyond the staging endeavours of Thorpe and Chavkin’s 2014 production, and secondly, because it shows how autobiographical practice is strategically mobilised beyond the confines of stable iterations of autobiographical theatre.

Even with the script being purchasable at performances, few reviewers allude to an equal distribution of authorship between Thorpe and Chavkin.⁸⁶⁰ This is understandable because the phrase ‘developed with Rachel Chavkin’ is difficult to clarify within the constrained word-count of a review, and the role of director more readily befits the norms and expectations of a journalistic review and its readership. However, there were discernible distinctions between reviewers concerning the authorship and ownership of *Confirmation*, which demonstrate how the creative team’s designated roles influenced the perception of *Confirmation*’s autobiographical practices, and the ambiguous entwinement of personas in performance.

⁸⁵⁸ Ben Brantley, ‘Review: “Confirmation” Asks You to Please Stop Thinking Like Yourself - The New York Times’, *The New York Times*, 15 January 2016 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/15/theater/review-confirmation-asks-you-to-please-stop-thinking-like-yourself.html>> [accessed 24 July 2016].

⁸⁵⁹ Thorpe and Chavkin, *Confirmation*. Without details of any other arrangement, this legal clarification must be assumed to reflect an equal division of ownership between the two parties.

⁸⁶⁰ Scripts were purchasable at the earliest performance I attended in 2015.

Stewart Pringle's *Exeunt* review names Chavkin as the director but only within a perfunctory 'Show Info' addendum.⁸⁶¹ Similarly marginal references include Trueman's note that *Confirmation* was 'created with' Chavkin,⁸⁶² Brantley's reference to her 'talented' direction and contribution to the play's development,⁸⁶³ and Andrew Haydon's note on the 'brilliant' nature of Chavkin's work with The TEAM.⁸⁶⁴ Contrastingly, female written reviews discuss in clearer terms the 'collaboration', as Catherine Love calls it, between Thorpe and Chavkin.⁸⁶⁵ For example, Duška Radosavljević names both authors in the title of her review and highlights 'Thorpe and Chavkin's non-threatening but conceptually necessary involvement of the audience'.⁸⁶⁶ Gardner and Love, albeit once each, similarly mention both artists together in sentences. Within the context of a restricted work count, and in comparison to their male counterparts, such reviews reinforce the collaboration that produced *Confirmation*. While acknowledging Chavkin's contribution to development and direction, even Hudson's discussion of this 'one man show' does not articulate (in an ongoing sense) that the

⁸⁶¹ Stewart Pringle, 'Confirmation', *Exeunt*, 18 August 2014

<<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/confirmation/>> [accessed 24 July 2016].

⁸⁶² Trueman.

⁸⁶³ Brantley.

⁸⁶⁴ Andrew Haydon, 'Confirmation – Northern Stage', *Postcards from the Gods*, 2 August 2014 <<http://postcardsgods.blogspot.com/2014/08/confirmation-northern-stage.html>> [accessed 29 July 2016].

⁸⁶⁵ Catherine Love, 'Confirmation (Edinburgh Fringe) | WhatsOnStage', *WhatsOnStage.Com*, 1 August 2014 <https://www.whatsonstage.com/edinburgh-theatre/reviews/chris-thorpe-confirmation-review_35249.html> [accessed 29 July 2016].

⁸⁶⁶ Duška Radosavljević, 'Total Theatre', *Total Theatre*, 9 August 2014 <<http://totaltheatre.org.uk/chris-thorpe-rachel-chavkin-confirmation/>> [accessed 29 July 2016].

performance and the text are products of both artists, as Gardner, Love, and Radosavljević do.⁸⁶⁷

By highlighting these different approaches to the issues of authorship and ownership, I am not arguing that *Confirmation* be discussed as a Thorpe/Chavkin play, although their parity is legally enshrined. Indeed, because I discuss how the play invokes autobiographical practice, I position *Confirmation* primarily as a Thorpe play in order to retain focus on that practice. Therefore, at stake in my highlighting of these different responses is how the *framing* of *Confirmation* promotes the sense of slippage between the on stage Chris and the off stage Thorpe. For me, this slippage cultivates the appearance of autobiographical practice and is part of the play's political contribution.

In the advanced days of a neoliberal capitalist society, where Baudrillard contended that signs of the real are substituted for the real, Thorpe and Chavkin implicitly invoke autobiographical practice in order to appear “authentic” and “trustworthy” in an age of distrust. The individualised framing of a jointly owned and developed artistic product, foregrounds the ‘aura’ – as opposed to the real life – of this writer-performer-storyteller (Thorpe) and, within the context of confirmation bias, the play ‘ups the ante’ in terms of postmodern scepticism of information, because all we see and hear in *Confirmation* must, by its own logic, be shot through with the mediation of these two creators.⁸⁶⁸ This issue of authorship and ownership suggests that the autobiographical practice in *Confirmation* is both a legitimate practice (because Thorpe repeatedly contends the events are true) and an aesthetic that is cultivated because more than one person

⁸⁶⁷ Hudson, p. 319.

⁸⁶⁸ Reinelt, p. 13.

contributed to its development but they are not referenced in performance. This uncertain balance between legitimate practice and cultivated aesthetic is also furthered in the play's acts of naming.

Destabilised Autobiography: Acts of Naming

While the destabilizing ambiguity of characters in *Confirmation* is reflected in multiple moments and yet complicated by the legally enshrined ownership of the work, the demands placed on future productions adds a further complication to the appearance of autobiographical practice in this production.

The most rudimentary correlation between the storyteller and the author is the mirroring of the protagonist's name with Thorpe's first name. A staging 'Note', which accompanies the published text, states that '[t]he performer is referred to as Chris but the name could be changed. "Glen" is a fake name and should not be changed.'⁸⁶⁹ These directions reflect how the play was performed in 2014, but they are also guidelines for future iterations, specifically in terms of characterisation. Glen's name is fixed, his persona is secure, and his words are unchanged; through this there is the appearance of an ethical commitment to the words (or sentiments) of the real person who is depicted as Glen. However, the potential to change the name "Chris" can be viewed as undermining the autobiographical practice in *Confirmation* because the premise that the dialogues are real, as Thorpe has repeatedly asserted, can no longer be upheld in future productions.

⁸⁶⁹ Thorpe and Chavkin, 'Note'.

In being the product of the 2014 staging, the published text operates as both a partial record of that production and a blueprint for future ones. As such, the potential to change the protagonist's name raises the question of who this storyteller is if they are a changeable entity, and what this means for the apparent autobiographical practice. It may be explainable for Thorpe as another facet of the 'destabilising ambiguity' he cultivates, around which he voices a disinterestedness in navigating the 'slippery meta-theatrical deconstruction' of character and persona at any specific moment. However, for me such claims matter to the narrative conceit of the play, and to its political contribution.⁸⁷⁰

The implication in this act of naming is that, because Thorpe and Chavkin mirror the first name of the storyteller with the writer-performer, any future production should follow this precedent and substitute the performer's name for the protagonist's. As such, this option to alter the protagonist's name is a gesture towards future iterations of *Confirmation*. Documentary theatres tend to prioritise contemporaneous efficacy and the faithful restoration of past events amid specific circumstances of necessity, above such gestures. When the content or form of documentary theatre is almost inextricably tied to a certain person or people, then future iterations are changed in light of new performers. For example, in a review of Nina Bowers's 2018 version of Anna Deavere Smith's *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1994) at London's Gate theatre, Michael Billington states that 'one is bound to ask what this revival of Smith's piece can hope to

⁸⁷⁰ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 11.

achieve’.⁸⁷¹ Smith, famed for the virtuosity of her idiosyncratically diverse performances of interviewees, states that she was ‘not interested in [...] social commentary’ but was focused on ‘experimenting with language and its relation to character’.⁸⁷² For Billington, Bowers’s version serves as an ‘important reminder’ that ‘racial injustice’ is still as ‘achingly pertinent’ as it was in 1992. Although such sentiments were provoked by Smith’s original, this 2018 version is almost wholly a social commentary, whereas Smith’s performance brought different perspectives to the work through her embodiment of the speech patterns and demeanours of the interviewees.

Allowing for future iterations of *Confirmation* to change the protagonist’s name supports the narrative underpinning of confirmation bias, because any future production would suggest it was bringing to light the biases of that new performer. However, the play and the issues at stake in the narrative are established, so at such a point the work would become a text to be learnt and repeated, not the ambiguous assemblage of embodied and empirical evidence that Thorpe gathers in order to restage his

⁸⁷¹ Michael Billington, “‘Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992’ Review – Voices Ring Out From Rodney King Riots’, *Guardian*, 16 January 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/jan/16/twilight-los-angeles-1992-review-gate-theatre-london-riots-rodney-king>> [accessed 1 June 2020]. It is reasonable that similar questions might be asked of other examples of documentary theatre that are reproduced. A notable exception would be Tectonic Theatre’s *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*, which after initial staged readings of new interviews with residents of Laramie, Wyoming (eleven years after they were propelled into the public sphere due to the murder of Matthew Shepherd), this updated engagement with the subject matter was produced in rep with the original play, *The Laramie Project*, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Harvey Theater in 2013. See, ‘The Laramie Project Cycle’ (Brooklyn Academy of Music) <<https://www.bam.org/theater/2013/the-laramie-project>> [accessed 13 May 2019].

⁸⁷² Anna Deavere Smith, *Fires in the Mirror* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), p. xxiii. She interviewed over three hundred people

‘honourable’ dialogues. Therein, an unresolved tension exists between the production and the published text. Future iterations of *Confirmation* would necessarily alter the play beyond Thorpe’s stated aims for the work, because in conversation with Gardner he stipulates that there should be ‘no acting’ in the work, in case an illicit, representational quality seeps into the performance, dilutes the truth-claim of his testimony, and draws the audience’s attention away from the exchanges of the performance event, of which they are a part. If this occurs, then the politically charged provocation about preconceived beliefs, and actions that solidify those beliefs, becomes what Thorpe was afraid of – simply ‘a pub story about some interesting times you’ve had with unsavoury people’.⁸⁷³

Conclusion

While *Confirmation* is not a recognisable example of documentary theatre, I have argued that documentary practices clearly appear within the work, and that the deep-seated politics of those practices are open to being altered and differently mobilised in new circumstances. While the recognition of verbatim practice appears revelatory for Thorpe, he suggests that *Confirmation* sits within a ‘real tradition’ where artists are ‘very consciously “themselves” in their work’, citing examples such as Tim Crouch, Chris Goode, and Selina Thompson; albeit, within this chapter, George Anton and

⁸⁷³ Gardner, ‘Chris Thorpe: Theatre Is a “Laboratory for Thinking About How We Think”’.

Simon McBurney can readily be added to that list.⁸⁷⁴ For Thorpe, this is a trend in contemporary work; for me, the examples of this chapter show that the mobilisation of documentary practices, or the apparent mobilisation of them, is a specific facet of this trend within the contemporary circumstances of necessity.

In neoliberal times, and amid the suffusion of the digital age where the speed and abundance of information suggests increasingly that the potential to know and understand any subject matter is possible, the position of the storyteller and the commodification of their ‘aura’ and experience are foregrounded by the examples of this chapter. These storytellers create, orchestrate, and curate elements of empirical evidence for their associated narratives. However, aware as they are of the operations of the theatre event, they subsume such information under their assumed authority, status, and privileges as storytellers, and offer their embodied evidence as an extra-theatrical seal of approval which means that, above all else, they should be believed.

From its mobilisation of documentary practices – for example, Chris’s greeting of audience members before the performance starts, and Thorpe stating that the person on stage ‘is me’ – *Confirmation* attempts in different ways to perform its authenticity, to generate a particular relationship with the spectators, and to valorise the position of this individual storyteller. The staging strategy to include spectators in the retelling of dialogues, and to invite them into direct conversation with Chris during the performance

⁸⁷⁴ There are ways in which Thorpe’s work aligns with that of practitioners he cites, such as the dramaturgical playfulness of Crouch’s work (of which *Adler and Gibb* (2014) is pertinent because it also mobilises the appearance of documentary practices), but there are also ways in which Thorpe’s work seems separate, such as in Thompson’s focus on her lived experiences and the post-colonial legacy of life as a black British woman (see *Salt* (2018)).

event, generates an appearance of authenticity as it suggests a certain providence to these verbatim words, while also ‘preserving that sense of liveness’ of the event.⁸⁷⁵

Preserving the sense of liveness is another element that links all three examples of this chapter and suggests that part of the shift in the mobilisation of documentary practices within the contemporary circumstances is that the documentary imperative is no longer focused on the mediation or translation of the past, or focused on the abundance of information that can be communicated to buttress the veracity of narrative content. Instead, the focus is on the vitality of the storyteller, and the examination of the present time and space of the work, both politically and performatively. This goes beyond what Forsyth and Megson articulated as a self-reflexive ‘emphasising’ of documentary theatre’s ‘discursive limitations’, and instead traverses uncertain terrain where practices are differently deployed in situations that do not neatly cohere with documentary theatre, but are still codified against the canonically enshrined standards of such practices; in this way, such practices appear in an almost ‘guerrilla’ fashion, to re-state Paget’s term.⁸⁷⁶

In these examples, storytelling is a form of dramaturgical curation and mediation through which documentary practices and their associated politics can be separated from their canonised stability, and re-situated in an examination of the vacillating relationships with trust in the contemporary moment. Considering the embedding of documentary practices within a framework of storytelling helps recognise diverse strategies wherein documentary practices are no longer primarily forms of “evidence”,

⁸⁷⁵ Thorpe and Hudson, p. 9.

⁸⁷⁶ Paget, ‘The “Broken Tradition” of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance’, p. 236.

but part of a curatorial arrangement of empirical source materials and embodied testimony. This cultivates a particular relationship through which a spectator's appreciation of source materials informs a sense of the reality of those materials – be the content of those materials real or fictional. In this way, the applicability of documentary practices beyond stable documentary theatre forms is vast, but it can be problematic if practitioners are not engaged with the canonical politics of how those practices represent the real and the debates they initiate, because even outside of documentary theatres, those practices still carry with them the traces of their malleable histories.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has distinguished and established the critical worth of documentary practices over totalising notions of documentary theatre forms. This resonates with Paget's articulation of different cycles of documentary theatres where practices are not repeated as before but *relearned* in order to speak for (and to) new circumstances of necessity.⁸⁷⁷ This project's focus on documentary practices has generated ways to reconceptualise aspects of the documentary theatre canon, as evidenced in Chapters One and Two, and expanded the discourse to encompass contemporary iterations of documentary practices outside of the normative confines of "documentary theatre", in Chapters Three and Four. Through this, my analysis offers new insights driven by circumstances of necessity that orbit technological innovation, political significances, social change, and the communication of the real.

Consolidating Outcomes

Although the content of a documentary may, by common definition, be 'for instruction or record purposes' as it necessarily looks to the past,⁸⁷⁸ documentary theatre mobilises the past within a praxis that looks forward – this in turn can alter perceptions about the past, the present, and the future, as well as the materials that are presented as "evidence", and the very 'discursive limitations' of the mode itself.⁸⁷⁹ This broadly speaks to an epistemological scrutiny of what stories and voices are given platforms for communication, and provokes questions about how we remember, retell, and reframe

⁸⁷⁷ Paget, 'The "Broken Tradition" of Documentary Theatre and Its Continued Powers of Endurance', p. 224.

⁸⁷⁸ 'Documentary'.

⁸⁷⁹ Forsyth and Megson, 'Introduction', p. 3.

specific events, people, and narratives. The fusion of various source materials from reality with dramatic representation makes the documentary theatre a vital crucible within which to consider imbalances of political power in the everyday, and within which to question legacies of marginalisation that calcify hegemonic forms of knowledge sharing.

Drawing on this tradition, my investigation has advocated for the significance and critical worth of distinguishing documentary practices both within and beyond normative documentary theatre forms. I have illustrated that the mobilisation of documentary practices outside of documentary theatre forms is a burgeoning trend which acts as a curatorial re-examination of how narratives and metanarratives populate quotidian spaces of knowledge, and through this how reality is perceived and represented.

Chapter One focused on early documentary theatres in the first half of the twentieth century to demonstrate that, since its canonised beginnings, malleability is fundamental to the critical value and responsiveness of documentary practices. This not only looks again at elements of the accepted canon, but offers Reinhardt as a different contributor to the beginnings of documentary theatre. Working through the resonances between technological developments and political urgency, this chapter concludes with Peter Weiss's demonstration of an increasing faith in facts and the potential for objective evidence in the mid-twentieth century. This progression in the early documentary theatre has a strong kinship with the Marxist notion that the real is masked by the alienating effects of the systemic capitalist structures, and suggests that resistance to this, in art and in society, can offer a way to confront the "true truth" that forms of oppression are propped up by those with power for the maintenance of the status quo.

Chapter Two extended this focus on the malleable quality of documentary practices in the second half of the twentieth century, in light of the new paradigms of poststructuralism and postmodernism. In this chapter, I examined how rapidly changing contexts and perceptions of the real impacted on the way in which documentary practices were mobilised in work by the Living Theatre and Spalding Gray. I demonstrated that the malleability of documentary practices was recognised as part of the ideological and dramaturgical debate about how best to represent reality in art and performance. As such, experimental work at this time was characterised as a response to contextual pressures, *over and above* the act of recording or reporting real occurrences.

Chapter Three exemplified how the documentary practice lens offers a different perspective on the resurgence of documentary theatre in the UK during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. It is clear that the new millennium has seen a vibrant, nebulous, and complex period of growth and experimentation in documentary praxis. While the volume of documentary theatre significantly increased, so did the conflation of certain practices and terminologies – tribunal and verbatim in particular. Such confluences multiply when practitioners endorse them, when journalists embed them, and when works destabilise their traditional truth-claims by creating a documentary veneer. In this context, a tension exists between pluralist approaches which destabilise the sense of a logocentric, theological “truth” in line with poststructuralist critique, and the increasing scrutiny of information communication in many spheres of public life that are newly saturated in digital times.

The turn to ambiguity in documentary theatre is tied to this increased access to information, and Chapter Three elucidated this in relation to a gathering age of distrust in the twenty-first century. I asserted that this context propelled postmodern scepticism,

such as that voiced by Jean Baudrillard, into the new millennium but inextricably coupled it with the increased speed and volumes of information communication to further estrange individuals from sources which they could claim to trust. The turn to ambiguity, I suggested, was mobilised in work such as *Taking Care of Baby* and *Stuff Happens*. However, in the second decade of the new millennium, with an increased integration of the digital in everyday life, Chris Goode's *Weaklings* troublingly suggests that the turn to ambiguity has morphed into a collapse between factual materials and fictional content, particularly in light of the dual lives that can be performed through digital platforms. For me, the problematic aspects of *Weaklings* unconsciously ask new questions around the politics and truth-claims of documentary practices not simply in digital times but, with hindsight, at a moment in history on the cusp of major shifts in popular rhetoric around truth and post-truth, and facts and alternative facts.

After Chapter Three's focus on the ambiguity of source materials, Chapter Four is centred on the individual in documentary performance, and the commodification of the curatorial storyteller who proposes that, irrespective of source materials, they should be trusted. As such, the chapter highlights how embodied testimony and empirical source materials can be put into tension within a storytelling framework in order to raise the spectre of what political currency each form of "evidence" wields. The 'particular relationships' that are forged within each of the works highlighted both the documentary practices at work but also a focus on the time and place of the performance, and its engagement with an audience. Therefore, Chapter Four is less focused on the events relayed through the storytelling, and more on the ways in which the trusted teller frames themselves as the arbiter of truth within a cultural logic of self-commodification that has accelerated in digital times. It was not engaged in a delineation of the storyteller as

either a conjurer of immersive representations of the real (McBurney), or as a playful archivist of empirical evidence (Anton), or as an unimpeachable witness to the events they are recalling (Thorpe), but continued the exploration of vacillating relationships with trust in the twenty-first century.

By foregrounding this new critical lens on how twenty-first century performance mobilises documentary practices beyond forms that would neatly reside under the rubric of “documentary theatre”, I contend that this provokes questions concerning how these different deployments might alter the political efficacy of documentary practices, and documentary theatres, in the twenty-first century. In short, questioning rather than truth-telling is quickly becoming the *raison d'être* of the documentary mode.

Revisiting Research Questions

This thesis has shown that, in the dominant era of documentary theatre (the twentieth and twenty-first century), the critique and distillation of documentary practices foregrounds the malleable and responsive qualities of these practices. This not only propels individual iterations into conversation with contextual pressures, but also interweaves the canon together in ways that reflect what Paget suggests is the perennial relearning of documentary theatre that each new practitioner must undergo in relation to their circumstances of necessity. I defined documentary theatre as a dialogue with history shown through a demonstrable process of retelling which impacts on the present and the future, and I have steadfastly maintained focus on the three core principles around which the learning and relearning of documentary practices have orbited over the course of the past one hundred years – those are the contemporaneous shifts in political urgency, technological innovation, and the communication of the real in wider society.

In relation to my first research question concerning the distinguishing and critiquing of documentary practices, I have argued that documentary practices are not wedded to the objective presentation of history, but operate both within and beyond documentary theatre as authenticating mechanisms employed in a range of aesthetic forms for both productive and questionable ends. The distinguishing and critiquing of documentary practices opens up channels not only to investigate different manifestations of art that engage with the real, but to also consider the pressing socio-cultural shifts that alter how the real is perceived.

This pertains to the second research question of this thesis, which asks how the malleability of documentary practices has enabled their responsive application in light of differing contextual pressures. Documentary practices have a stake in the consolidation or confrontation of the status quo, whether mobilised in cohesive iterations of documentary theatre forms or beyond. This is because, as I have argued in alignment with Carol Martin, documentary is best understood as a ‘process’ rather than as a ‘product’. That is to say, documentary theatre is not, in a facile sense, about the past, but it is an active record that demonstrates contemporary influences in its narrating of past events. As such, the past, the present, and the future are all implicated and impacted by iterations of documentary theatre, and documentary practices are the operational means wherein such acts are enacted because they can be mobilised within different contexts and enable different social, political, or technological issues to be agitated. Specifically, in light of the issues of digital times in the 2010s, documentary practices are frequently subject to mobilisation beyond the confines of stable documentary theatre forms, and this invokes the third research question of this thesis concerning what new insights this might offer.

Opening up the lens of documentary practices through which to view the work of documentary theatre forms and dramaturgical forms that would not normally be categorised as “documentary theatre” offers two insights. Firstly, a focus on documentary practices enables different questions to be asked of stable documentary theatre forms. These questions can help to recalibrate historic examples of documentary theatre and evaluate the myriad of different practices that abound within certain types of “documentary theatre”, such as the living newspaper format, which as I have shown, was comprised of an array of practices that had different political emphases. For example, the biographical performance of a known figure was, in the case of the living newspaper, less concerned with the faithful restoration of that person to the stage, and more concerned with mobilising the present time and space of that documentary practice in order to appear to confront theatre censorship, and in that way perform an act of defiance toward authority.

The second insight concerns the mobilisation of documentary practices beyond the canonical confines of documentary theatre forms, particularly in the digital economy of the 2010s. Documentary practices operate as an analogue foil to the new speeds and volume of communication in the digital age. Rather than valorising individualism or commodifying the notion of the authentic, documentary practices have a strong bearing on perceptions of, and relationships with, reality and the real in the contemporary moment. These new circumstances of necessity indicate that, rather than being learned again, as Paget suggests, contemporary practitioners may find it even more productive to “learn afresh” new ways of mobilising documentary practices beyond the documentary theatre, in order to define new contributions they can make to performance in the contemporary moment. This can lead to radical repurposing of documentary

practices, including as aesthetic addendums on occasions, which help contextualise representations of reality.

Future Directions – Beyond Documentary

A number of historically important political events have occurred during this project which are important to highlight – notably the UK’s EU Referendum of 2016 and the US Presidential campaign of the same year resulting in Donald Trump’s single term administration. Although obviously significant internationally for numerous reasons, these events have increased popular rhetoric around notions of “post-truth”, “fake news”, and “disinformation”.⁸⁸⁰ The increased prevalence and targeted usage of personal data has also been a source of continuing scrutiny during and after each of these events. The fallout from this scrutiny has echoed through commercial, political, and broadcasting spheres: an investigation of British firm Cambridge Analytica led to its closure for the illicit targeting of individuals based on personal data gathered on behalf of political organisations; the CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, was subpoenaed to a public inquiry by the US Congress; and a new-found media currency and practice of “fact-checking” has been enacted by many organisations in an attempt to demonstrate the truthfulness of their coverage.

These events require acknowledging in a discussion about contemporary performance, particularly one that concerns documentary theatres, because documentary theatres mark out real events or traceable source material as part of their distinguishing dramatic composition. Many areas of contemporary culture and politics have been dominated by

⁸⁸⁰ “Post-truth” for example was the OED’s Word of the Year for 2016. ‘Oxford Word of the Year 2016’, *Oxford Languages*, 8 November 2016
<<https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>> [accessed 3 August 2017].

these events, and they have become touchstones for understanding the power of digital technologies in affecting political change and influencing representative democracy. In light of the fact that these events occurred after the examples of this thesis had been finalised, and considering the swiftness with which the intersections of digital technologies and everyday life in western liberal democracies seems to change, I chose to omit these events from this study. However, I recognise that they are important for thinking forward from this study.

For example, a discussion of *Confirmation* could be energised by the debate surrounding the UK's vote to leave the European Union. Indeed, some of the rhetoric that *Confirmation* touches upon, such as far-Right scepticism of liberal-leaning mass-media or the undermining of widely acknowledged facts, foreshadows now infamously debunked claims from the Vote Leave campaign during the EU Referendum.⁸⁸¹

During this research, I continued to see and consider other case study examples. However, work that I observed after the events of 2016 seemed, at least in that cultural context, inextricably linked to those events and their nebulous narratives, so much so as to detract from the narrow but important period immediately prior to these political events with which this thesis is concerned. For example, Thomas Ostermeier's 2017 adaptation of Didier Eribon's autobiography *Returning to Reims*, developed for the Manchester International Festival (MIF) during the period after the UK's Brexit vote, utilises autobiographical and biographical practices to retell aspects of Eribon's early

⁸⁸¹ Jon Stone, 'Nigel Farage Backtracks on Leave Campaign's "£350m for the NHS" Pledge Hours after Result', *Independent*, 25 June 2016
<<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/eu-referendum-result-nigel-farage-nhs-pledge-disowns-350-million-pounds-a7099906.html>> [accessed 7 July 2018].

political life, tracing events years before (and unconnected to) the Brexit referendum. The production is a useful example of an expanded mobilisation of documentary practices because it blurs the different practices of biography and autobiography, by weaving aspects of the performer's real-life into Eribon's narrative. In this way, it mingles factual information from different lives to dilute the singularity of this adapted autobiography. However, Eribon's depiction of a 'French working class that now seems to have deserted the left'⁸⁸² reflected the post-Brexit conditions of the political Left in the UK, where 149 Labour seats voted to leave the EU, while 83 voted to remain.⁸⁸³ Such tumultuous events spur their own shifts in culture and performance, which may be noted in nascent ways in the immediate aftermath and then in different ways with the passage of time.

Therefore, there are many potential ways to think-forward in light of these important occurrences in order to re-examine the work in this thesis, or to reflect on new dramatic interventions, but I reserve such thinking for future research. I reference this example here to clarify the parameters and reasoning for what is, and what is not, part of this thesis.

Other future branches of research that sprout from this project would need to diversify the range of practitioners currently considered. Occupied as this project was with a narrow time period, the prevalent works that appeared to utilise documentary practices in different ways are noticeably white males with a certain amount of status and

⁸⁸² Steven Poole, "Returning to Reims" by Didier Eribon', *Guardian*, 3 August 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/03/returning-to-reims-by-didier-eribon-review>> [accessed 6 August 2018].

⁸⁸³ Chris Hanretty, 'Areal Interpolation and the UK's Referendum on EU Membership', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 27.4 (2017), 466–83.

privilege within the UK's theatre landscape. It stands to reason that such practitioners would be accessible, but clearly other collective and individual works warrant investigation, and importantly so if the rethinking of canonicity that documentary practices offer is brought to bear on the present moment. From important new ensembles such as Breach Theatre, to the solo performances of Selina Thompson and poet Lemn Sissay, or the work of Lola Arias and Milo Rau, many practitioners and theatre-makers are acutely aware of the rapidly changing ways in which reality is shaped, perceived, and represented in the digital age. The mobilisation of documentary practices in different ways offers avenues to rethink, experiment, and challenge the apparent stability that maintains the status quo of those in power, and the stability that suggests, in a dramaturgical sense, documentary theatre forms are how you engage real source material in performance. This is because the malleability of documentary practices enables such aims to be achieved in many different ways through diverse dramaturgical forms.

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