Changing the Subject:
Encountering Objects and Objectness in Modernist Plays, 1890s–1950s

Ishita Krishna

PhD

University of York
Arts and Creative Technologies

August 2024

Abstract

This thesis engages in a study of objects in western modernist drama from 1890s to 1950s, looking at their different modes of representation and encounter in text and theatre. I suggest that the relatively understudied field of objects offers a heretofore overlooked lens and subject for theatre, literary, and modernist studies wherein objects become active interpreters offering alternative perspectives that complicate or contradict established readings of early to mid-twentieth century plays. A study of dramatic objects poses a challenge to the largely anthropocentric readings that privilege exclusionary definitions of a subject at the cost of the material vocabulary of a play and its role in meaning-making across text, staging, and reception. Overlooked as invisible backdrops, inert symbols, or arbitrary props, objects offer uncharted modes of reading and attention that are erased within subject-centric approaches to theatre analyses. Exploring both objects and objectness, I attempt to bridge the gap between modernist attentiveness to and critical disregard of theatrical object-encounters.

The thesis reveals both the critical and methodological fertility of objects to contradict established readings and approaches to specific plays and to invite interventions from different fields, synthesising object and nonhuman studies with identity and cultural theories. Each chapter develops three critical frameworks by identifying prominent material presences and orientations in modernist theatre: misbehaving objects, fidgeting with objects, and revolting objects. I use these to analyse works of both canonical and understudied modernist playwrights — Henrik Ibsen, Oscar Wilde, Tennessee Williams, Djuna Barnes, Samuel Beckett, and Boris Vian — uncovering overlooked subtexts, approaches, and layers left unaddressed by established criticism and commentaries on a play. Finally, the thesis establishes the critical and theoretical potential of objects as both subjects and lenses of analysis, redressing the anthropocentricism entrenched in theatre, literary, and modernist studies, and pointing to the wider applicability of such redressals in adjacent fields and contexts.

Contents

Abbreviations

D	Xine Yao, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021)
DD	Sarah J. Ablett, *Dramatic Disgust: Aesthetic Theory and Practice from Sophocles to Sarah Kane* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020)
PD	Ditte Marie Munch-Jurisic, *Perpetrator Disgust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023)

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisors, Katherine Graham and Karen Quigley. I have relied immensely on their unwavering support, constant reassurance, intellectual generosity, and expertise. The move from literature to theatre studies wasn't always easy, and I am lucky to have been given the support to weave the two, to follow my interests and instincts over borders. Thank you for believing that my work had value, for seeing the potential of my ideas, and for encouraging my puns! I am glad I moved to this country to work with them — it was entirely a pleasure and within or outside academia, I will continue to be grateful for their kindness and mentorship.

I am grateful to my Thesis Advisory and Progression Panel members, Louise LePage and David Barnett, for their helpful advice and support. I am also thankful to the people at the Theatre department at University of York. Thanks to Rebecca Benzie, for supporting my growth as a teacher being a brilliant mentor; Mark Love-Smith, Catherine Love-Smith, Strasz, and Christine Weeks for the different ways they supported my time in the department. Thanks to Michael Cordner for helping me find my last case study. I am grateful to the Funds for Women Grant and YGRS for supporting my research activities and living costs. I wish to thank the humanities community at the university, in particular, the Centre for Modernist Studies for allowing me to present my first paper and organise my first conference. Thanks to Caitlin Doley, Aakanksha Singh, Ella Barker and friends from the Humanities Research Centre for the advice, rants, and long lunches.

I am very lucky to have friendships that can withstand long distances and absences. Thanks to Aisha Wahab for her incredibly supportive friendship, for all the conversations about the most trivial and intensely important things that have continued to make me a better thinker and person; Isha, Anjali, Amishaa, and Alisha for helping me feel comfortable about not always having a "p.o.a". Thanks to Rimsha Falak who consoled me for the lack of PhD funding and encouraged me to take the plunge. Thanks also to my first few close friends in this country, Hayley Yocum and Robin Pawlett-Howell, for the moments this place felt like home.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. Beyond the monetary, being away from them has been the most real cost of this research. I haven't been with them to grieve our losses or celebrate new additions and happy moments. To begin with, Ayush, Garima, and little Arth whom I can't wait to meet, for being exceedingly patient with their often absent sister and bua, and for the pictures and calls that brought some sun to my grey and rainy York days. My parents, for encouraging my love for reading growing up, and for the financial and practical support without which this PhD wouldn't have been possible. Thanks to my father, Ravi, for his endless generosity, for constantly reminding me that he is

proud of me and assuring me that things can be fixed. Most of all, thanks to my mother, Vinita, for her unconditional love and care even on days that it wasn't easy, and for breaking certain rules so that I wouldn't have to follow them — thank you for everything. I wouldn't be able to express my gratitude for their support if I tried; the comfort of knowing its always there is a gift, and I hope to be worthy of it.

Lastly, thanks to Aditya for his immeasurable love and encouragement, for sharing the joys and frustrations of slowly making a home in this country, and for being my family here. Thank you for carrying my things when I was too tired and for giving them meaning when I couldn't.

Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references. A portion of the materials presented in chapter two has previously been published by the author in: Ishita Krishna, 'Caring for/with Modernist Playthings: Fidgeting with Objects in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*', *Journal of Medical Humanities* (2024). Part of chapter three is under consideration for publication in *Performance Research* journal.

Introduction

In 1887, André Antoine staged the first production for his newly founded Theatre Libre. Without any funds to afford stage objects for his production of Émile Zola's *Jacques Damour,* he borrowed chairs and other furnishings from his mother's living room, wheeling them across Paris in a hand cart.[1] About thirty years before Antoine staged his mother's used chairs, Adolphe Montigny placed chairs downstage centre for actors to sit and deliver lines 'looking at each other as people do in real life'[2] instead of standing in a semicircle. In 1952, close to a century after the introduction of a real, three-dimensional chair within what was predominantly a realm of painted backdrops, Eugène Ionesco's chairs would be the only things visible at the closing of his eponymous play.

This thesis engages with a study of objects in western modernist drama from 1890s to 1950s, looking at their different modes of representation and encounter in text and theatre. I suggest that the relatively understudied field of objects offers a heretofore overlooked lens and subject for theatre, literary, and modernist studies wherein objects become active interpreters offering alternative perspectives that complicate or contradict established readings of early-mid twentieth century plays. A study of dramatic objects poses a challenge to the largely anthropocentric readings that privilege exclusionary definitions of a subject at the cost of the material vocabulary of a play and its role in meaning-making across text, staging, and reception. Overlooked as invisible backdrops, inert symbols, or arbitrary props, objects offer uncharted modes of reading and attention that are erased within subject-centric approaches to theatre analyses. Exploring both objects and objectness, I attempt to bridge the gap between modernist attentiveness to and critical disregard of theatrical object-encounters.

Synthesising object and nonhuman studies with identity and cultural theories, I craft a taxonomy of theatrical objects and/or object-encounters. I develop and offer three critical frameworks that trace the prominent and varied dynamics of twentieth century theatrical attentiveness to the object world: misbehaving objects (in Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and the objects in and around Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*), fidgeting with objects (in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* and Djuna Barnes's *The Dove)*, and revolting objects (in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* and Boris Vian's *The Empire Builders)*. These frameworks create a theoretical methodology and use it to analyse works of both canonical and understudied modernist playwrights. I am interested in recovering

[1] See Bettina L. Knapp, 'The Reign of the Theatrical Director: Antoine and Lugné-Poë' *The French Review,* 61. 6 (1988), 866–877 (p. 868).
[2] Claude Schumacher, *Naturalism and Symbolism in European Theatre, 1850–1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 68.

(or uncovering) the role of objects in destabilising and even displacing anthropocentric approaches to modernist drama that have monopolised theatre criticism. Furthermore, I propose that engaging with connected ideas of objectness and agency practiced by both human and nonhuman entities in theatre brings attention to the relationship between the self, the non/human other, and the larger processes of othering that circulate within and outside theatre. This expands ideas of what constitutes a subject of critical attention and invites a range of approaches that attempt to dethrone the classical subject. Through this mode of attention, I suggest that objects and object-encounters are methodologically generative lenses permitting interventions from theatre, literary, and modernist studies, and further from cultural and identity theories such as feminist, affect, and queer studies.

In explaining my blended method, it is worth borrowing from Bill Brown's example at the beginning of his work on thing theory. He takes the example of a dirty window in A.S. Byatt's *The Biographer's Tale*, where the protagonist's habit of looking *through* the window is interrupted by his act of looking *at* it. His suggestion of attending to 'occasions of contingency—the chance interruption—that disclose a physicality of things'[3] further points to a central question in object-centric studies: should objects be engaged with as vessels, lenses, or windows for other, invariably human-centric ideas and ends or considered in their own right, not as "pretexts" but as legitimate subjects of study? This is connected to the three main reasons for addressing the theatrical presence and critical obfuscation of objects, which constitute my focal research questions and aims:

- How do objects operate as interpreters, deconstructors or excavators of heretofore overlooked subtexts, approaches, and layers left unaddressed by established criticism and commentaries on a play?
- How can methods be designed for analysing objects across theatrical texts and production?
- To what extent do play objects allow and even demand us to think fluidly across their literary, theatrical, and theoretical presence?

These research questions aim to understand dramatic things as not just subjects or passive vessels of interpretation but also active agents and purveyors of interpretation and (counter)readings. They mine object/encounters for both developing methodologies and analysis, acknowledging the untapped potential of their versatility and pervasive presence to invite inputs from various fields and subjects. Finally, they aim to acknowledge objects' porosity and mobility, to reveal the distinct materialisations of objects from text to stage, and assert their value as vehicles for a parallel study.

[3] Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory' *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001), 1–22 (pp. 2-4).

A Chair on the Stage or a Theatre Chair?: Real Objects on Stage[4]

The above tracing of a specific object, the chair, across theatrical experiments and discourses condenses the growing presence and cognizance of objects in the theatrical imagination from mid–late nineteenth century. The increased engagement with stage objects only progressed with naturalist theatres, both figuratively, with objects' infiltration in theatre manifestos or criticism, and physically, with the small, intimate theatrical spaces orchestrating and demanding increased interaction with stage materiality. This gradual proliferation of "real"[5] materials on stage at the turn of the century was part of a series of progressively radical changes in representation, encounters, and reception of theatrical objects.[6] Real objects 'intruding insolently on this "sacred" space' of grand gestures and great speeches would not have been received simply as signs of the fictional play world but as '*things* imported from the realm of the real', unforeseen on the stage.[7]

The late nineteenth century stage was radically new in the very use of objects that were ordinary, mundane, and used. Stage experiments with real and realistic objects materialised a departure from the 'painted saucepans'[8] and stock, painted sceneries towards a near obliteration of difference between real and theatrical object.[9] These changes spanned from characterising new genres and styles, like Strindberg's encyclopaedia of theatrical devices combining psychosocial complexity and 'real door-knobs on the doors',[10] Robertson's cup-and-saucer drama, and Zola's 'abundance of little objects,

---

[4] I am drawing here from Handke's claim, 'A chair on the stage is a theatre chair.' Peter Handke, 'Nauseated by Language (Interview with Arthur Joseph)' qtd. in Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 1.

[5] Across the thesis, I use double quotes or scare quotes for emphasis or to mark that my usage of the word digresses from its usual sense. When within a quotation, double quotes mark an inset quote.

[6] As Kee-Yoon Nahm argues, real is a philosophically loaded term and in a sense, everything on stage is real. However, in this introduction, I borrow her definition of what I call 'real' or 'real object':

> a preexisting object recognizable from everyday life that theatrically represents a fictional object. Especially in the late nineteenth century of French Naturalism, a piece of furniture or household item that was purchased from a department store or borrowed from someone's home (that is, not built specifically as a stage prop) would have stood out onstage because the proliferation of such real objects was still a relatively new innovation in theatre.

'Props Breaking Character' in *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things* ed. by Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 187–199 (p. 238).

[7] Bert O. States, 'The Dog on the Stage: Theater as Phenomenon', *New Literary History*, 14.2 (1983), 373–388 (p. 384), <https://doi.org/10.2307/468691> emphasis original.

[8] August Strindberg, 'Preface to Miss Julie' trans. Michael Robinson in *The Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance*, ed. by Maggie B. Gale and John F. Deeney (London: Routledge, 2010), 138–146 (p. 144).

[9] For the gradual move away from painted 'stock scene' and blending painted, trompe d'oeil elements with real objects, see Brooks McNamara, 'Scene Design: 1876-1965 Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg', *The Drama Review*, 13.2 (1968), 77–91 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1144412>.

[10] Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (United States, University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 30.

a wide variety of small props',[11] to prompting new stage phenomena like Antoine's rotting beef carcass and live chickens, and *My Friend Fritz* with flowing water and real food and drink. The intense attention to verisimilitude as a way of tracing the effects of biology and environment on character and representing reality "as is" expressed through detailed and carefully curated objects came to be identified with naturalism, becoming the model for experimental theatres across Europe.[12]

These changes meant that turn of the century theatre mobilised objects as never before— as sites responding to theatrical conventions, as bases of new subgenres and modes of representations, and as embodied critique. Modernist theatres that followed can be seen as not just a 'response to, and rejection of Naturalism'[13] as suggested by Rebellato, but also of its closing of the gap between representation and real within stage objects. The influx of and increased engagement with a larger repertoire and clutter of things initiated a creative and perceptual shift in European (and later American) theatres. Furthermore, new experiments in staging and textual representation began to be (and are arguably still) expressed in terms of their adherence to or departure from use of realistic materials.[14] An important question that emerged in the process was 'how does one distinguish between real and theatrical objects?'[15] which in turn informed schools of theatre (objects) scholarship.

Realism's collapsing of the difference between real and represented objects was an animating concern for theatre semiotics and led to important questions and ambiguities raised and addressed by this theory: the process of real object's becoming representations or signs, differentiating a theatrical object from furniture or passive stage matter, and the status of functional objects. Drawing from the chair on Montigny's and Antoine's stages, this quintessentially realist object also finds its place in the theatre theories of Prague school semioticians in 1930s–40s and carried forth later in the century by the second wave of theatre semiotics and critics like Keir Elam, Erika Fischer-Lichte, and Umberto Eco. They held that simply by being placed on stage, a chair acquires invisible quotation marks and becomes the sign 'chair'.[16] The Prague linguists' famous tenet, 'all that is on the stage is a sign'[17] is further

[11] McNamara, 'Scene Design', p. 81.
[12] These include Berlin's Freie Bühne (1889), London's Independent Theatre (1891), the Moscow Art Theatre (1897).
[13] Dan Rebellato 'Introduction: Naturalism and Symbolism: Early Modernist Practice' in *The Routledge Drama Anthology*, 6–24 (p. 6).
[14] Freddie Rokem has argued that the blurry line between fictional and real in the West becomes important for a genre's self-definition, such as for realism, naturalism, and historical fiction. 'A Chair Is a Chair Is a CHAIR: The Object as Sign in the Theatrical Performance' in *The Prague School and Its Legacy* ed. Yishai Tobin (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1988), 275–288 (p. 277).
[15] Nahm, 'Props Breaking Character', p. 187.
[16] Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props,* p. 7.
[17] Jiri Veltruský, 'Man and Object in the Theater' in *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style*, ed. and trans. Paul L. Garvin (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1964), 83–92 (p. 84).

complicated by Petr Bogatryev who argues that stage objects become 'signs of a material object's sign',[18] that is, these sign vehicles represent not just real objects, but the connotations associated with the object, and so are doubly abstracted from the signified. This responds to the question of semiotisation when real and represented object draw close.

The main criticism levied against semiotic approach of the stage sign is that the dematerialising focus on its sign-function continues to 'risk theorizing the material object out of existence'.[19] Sofer further points to the inadequacy of the semiotic lens in differentiating between not only object and subject (the potential *mise-en-abyme* of a seemingly infinite list of props when everything on the stage is considered a sign vehicle), but also objects and other significations, such as lighting, gestures, and sound. Acknowledging a certain porosity of the subject-object boundary is, I hold, necessary for an object-oriented approach. However, within semiotics everything on stage is a dematerialised object or sign, leading to a seemingly endless repertoire and an unnuanced flattening. This first criticism of the much bashed and perpetually rejected approach to theatre objects then highlights first task of object criticism: defining the theatre object and by extension, the limits of the field.

Many criteria have been posited to answer the question, 'what counts as a theatre object?' and the debate owes much to objects' aporetic position as at once textual and material, representations and real, temporal and aesthetic or 'synchronic and diachronic'.[20] Frances Teague suggests 'dislocated function' as the identifying feature, which defines a stage object — or her preferred term, prop/property — as 'an object, mimed or tangible, that occurs onstage, where it functions differently from the way it functions offstage'.[21] Dislocated function, similar to the V-effect or Bertolt Brecht's idea of estrangement and 'disillusion' in the theatre,[22] and Russian formalists' *ostranenie* or defamiliarization, holds as important the idea of functionality, particularly pertinent for realism's blurring of real and represented object. With objects whose significative or performative function is consistent with their quotidian function, this defamiliarization does not occur unless their very functionality is symbolic, or in Sofer's words 'a knife on stage sometimes cuts as well as connotes.'[23] Bert O. States argues otherwise and holds the 'intentional space' of the stage as the very source of semiotisation.[24] Similarly, even in cases of 'iconic identity',[25] that is, where the object fulfils its practical function on stage, Eco claims

[18] Petr Bogatryev, 'Semiotics in the Folk Theater' qtd. in Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props,* p. 7.
[19] Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props,* p. 10.
[20] Jonathan Gil Harris, 'Shakespeare's Hair: Staging the Object of Material Culture', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52 (2001), 479–491 (p. 483).
[21] Frances Teague, *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1991), p. 16.
[22] John J. White, *Bertolt Brecht's Dramatic Theory* (United States: Camden House, 2004), p. 93.
[23] Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props,* p. 209.
[24] Bert O. States *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (United States: University of California Press, 2023), p. 35.
[25] Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Routledge, 1980), p. 22.

that the object is de-realised and stands for the entire class of objects in a process called 'ostension'. He borrows C.S. Pierce's example of a drunken man to suggest that as soon as he is put on stage, he becomes a sign and not a real body. Referring not to *the* drunk man but *a* drunk man, that is, the class of which he is a member, 'there is no difference, in principle, between our intoxicated character and the word "drunk."'[26] Theatre semiotics in different ways then maintains that a functional object only imitates its quotidian function.

Going back to Montigny's downstage chairs, Marvin Carlson has described his techniques in terms of a fundamental change in characters' presence and spatial relationships: 'At the beginning of the [nineteenth] century an actor moved, if at all, almost entirely in relation to other actors. Now [they] moved at least as much in relation to chairs and tables.'[27] Stanton Garner Jr. echoes this, arguing that the development of theatrical realism fundamentally changed how objects inhabited the stage and interacted with human bodies.[28] For both Garner and Carlson, stage realism generates a field of objects through which the human body must navigate. The chair, once introduced on the stage, began to be moved by characters during their speeches.[29] For many theatre semioticians and commentators on dramatic objects, this subject-directed action and manipulation is the defining feature of a theatrical object or 'prop' as opposed to costume, furniture, or passive stage matter. For Sofer, an object must be manipulated or 'triggered' by an actor for it to become an active prop as opposed to a passive object: 'a chair remains an item of furniture unless an actor shifts its position'.[30] Similarly, for Gay McAuley, human intervention activates a stage object, be it by touching it, or simply looking at or talking about it; for Fischer-Lichte it is an actor's intentional gestures or action that makes an object a prop; and for Teague, tangibility or embodied presence does not define a prop as long as it materialises in the collective imagination through the performer's actions.[31] We see here that some of these theories of stage objects, while acknowledging their function as active participants in performance, their materiality, their role beyond the sign function and the reciprocal relationship with actors, nonetheless

---

[26] Umberto Eco, 'Semiotics of Theatrical Performance' *The Drama Review*, 21.1 (1977), 107–117 (p. 110).

[27] Marvin Carlson, 'French Stage Composition from Hugo to Zola' *Educational Theatre Journal*, 23.4 (1971), 363–378 (p. 372). <https://doi.org/10.2307/3205746>

[28] See Stanton B. Garner Jr., *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 91.

[29] 'It was Montigny', Dumas *fils* reported, 'who first had chairs changed in position by characters during their speeches.' For the introduction, developments, and historical journey of the stage chair, see Carlson, 'French Stage Composition'.

[30] 'When Lear sits on a stationary throne, the throne remains a set piece, but when Hamlet knocks over the chair on seeing his father's ghost in the "closet scene" […] the chair becomes a prop.' Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props,* p. 12.

[31] See Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 176; Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Semiotics of Theater,* trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 107; Teague, *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties,* p. 16.

assume that it is ultimately humans who infuse life into objects and that objects serve human intentionality. Other views suggest that while objects may function independently of performers, the final agency rests with the selectors of objects. A gap that arises in these prevalent theories of theatrical objects is that while there has been research on the role of stage objects in the construction of meaning, it has worked on the assumption that 'it is the actor who confers meaning upon the object'[32] eliding autonomous and recalcitrant moments of material meaning-making.

This is one of the gaps that the project aims to address, especially in the first chapter with its specific focus on theatrical objects' misbehaviour against and delimiting of human control and intentions. All three chapters focus on moments of objects' resistance and challenge to control, intention, agency, knowledge, access, and interpretation. These challenges are posed either within the play or outside, either at the moment of creation or reception, either to the object owner, handler, reader, audience, or critic. Many criteria posited for what constitutes a prop retract any power that objects might exhibit on stage, ascribing it solely to human agents like writers, performers, or theatre makers. This further engenders an anthropocentric view of objects that I aim to redress in my project through a less subject-centric understanding of theatre objects. I propose to do so by exploring both how objects in playtexts materialise on stage, and how theatrical objects without textual source appear in performance, thus opening frictions and crevices in singular and absolute subject authority. While my own definition of theatre objects borrows selectively from the above dialogues, I register my divergence from them by rarely using the word prop, using words like objects, matter, and things instead, and by resisting the structuralist subject-object binary reflected in the above approaches and later widely challenged. My digression from these definitions emerges more clearly in my attention to object-encounters and objectness (explored later) wherein I position the object in relation to subjects and explore its status as a set of qualities and interactions.

Making the Stone Stony: Theatrical and Critical Digressions [33]

The realistic, ordinary, and everyday object would have soon 'lost whatever shock value it may have had'[34] becoming a part of theatrical conventions, as seen most evidently in naturalism's development into a catchall for 'reductive, crude, and uninspired' theatre.[35] Given this, it is sometimes supposed that naturalism was not a modernist theatre movement and that 'modernism emerged precisely in reaction

[32] McAuley, *Space in Performance,* p. 205

[33] States, explaining his 'impure perspective' hovering between semiology and phenomenology, quotes Victor Shklovsky's definition of art: 'Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists […] to make the stone stony. […] Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.' Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique' qtd. in States, 'The Dog on the Stage', p. 374.

[34] States, 'The Dog on the Stage', p. 384.

[35] Nahm, 'Props Breaking Character', p. 187.

to a perceived conservatism on the Naturalist stage'.[36] Towards the end of the century, stage settings started rejecting unalloyed naturalism in favour of a modified realism, blending realistic and artificial objects with the resources of a vastly improved stage technology. This incorporated expressionist and symbolist elements, using properties sparingly in an attempt to create 'a sense of the environment rather than to establish it firmly and finally through decorative objects'.[37] This can be figuratively traced in the move from naturalism's transparent fourth wall to the symbolist gauze that separated the audience and the stage.[38] The new directions including symbolism, expressionism, surrealism, and other avant-garde theatres moved towards less mimetic and transparent, and more oblique connections between the object's sign and signified, its materiality and experience, its reality and representation.

Furthermore, much of this critique was both directed at and expressed in terms of objects, specifically their use as apparatus of representing "scientific" and objective truth on stage. Alfred Jarry called the increasing verisimilitude of stage items a 'superfluous duplication' of nature.[39] Similarly, Strindberg, despite being identified as a major naturalist playwright, criticised Zola's emphasis on the role of the environment through objects and mocked, 'If a woman is seduced in a hothouse, it isn't necessary to relate the seduction to all the potted plants you find there and list them all by name.'[40] Mallarme bemoaned 'the solid set and the real actor'[41] of conventional theatre and its restricting materiality that allowed objects to represent and perform cemented meanings, reflecting the symbolist insistence on 'not the object, but the effect it produces'.[42] Some saw the 'arbitrary and trifling' objects as 'the very opposite of theatre'.[43] Willa Cather complained about 'overfurnished' realism deeming its 'cataloguing of a great number of material objects' as 'unworthy of an artist' and asked, 'How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window.'[44] These ideas anticipate what has been termed 'modernist antitheatricality' or 'antitheatrical prejudice'.[45]

---

[36] Rebellato 'Introduction', p. 6.
[37] McNamara, 'Scene Design', p. 88.
[38] This use of gauze appeared in Paul Fort's symbolist Théatre d'Art. See Rebellato 'Introduction', p. 18.
[39] George W. Brandt, *Modern Theories of Drama: A Selection of Writings on Drama and Theatre 1850–1990* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 161.
[40] McNamara, 'Scene Design', p. 82
[41] Mallarmé, 'Richard Wagner: R.verie d'un Po.te Fran.ais' qtd. in Rebellato 'Introduction', p. 17.
[42] Mallarmé, *Correspondance* qtd. in Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 59.
[43] Pierre Quillard 'On the Complete Pointlessness of Accurate Staging' trans. Dan Rebellato in *The Routledge Drama Anthology,* 163–165 (p. 164).
[44] Willa Cather, 'The Novel Demeuble', *Not Under Forty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936), p. 43.
[45] Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981). These terms suggest that the moralizing and suspicion of theatricality, and associated elements of public display, sensationalism, and deception, play a 'constitutive role' in modernist theatre and drama. Puchner, *Stage Fright,* p. 1.

Despite these criticisms of naturalism's reductive and cemented representations of objects, I agree with Nahm's belief that the 'allegedly inartistic conditions' of the naturalist stage ironically constitute a rich theoretical field where 'the materiality and the ontology of theatrical objects sharply stand out'.[46] This material "standing out" is exemplified in the Russian symbolist writer Bryusov's question in reference to the avalanche at the end of Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken* at the Moscow Art Theatre: 'When an avalanche of cotton batting comes crashing down on stage, the spectators ask each other: how did they do that?'[47] Similarly, McAuley observes that the dripping blood from the sides of beef hanging from hooks in Antoine's production of *The Butchers* provoked a response from the audience ranging from 'outrage to gasps of delight', both equally inappropriate if the experience he intended to conjure was that of a butcher shop.[48]

These responses highlight the enduring problem of the reality of the object, or what Nahm frames as a paradox of real objects onstage: their threat to the very theatricality they are employed to serve. She argues that an inherent potential for 'phenomenological departure' harboured by objects on the naturalist stage emerges not from the 'strictures of signification',[49] malfunction or human manipulation, but from the sheer virtue of being real, as seen in Bryusuv's question. In theatre, as compared to other arts, the sign vehicle and content draw unusually close. As Peter Handke puts it, in theatre 'light is brightness pretending to be other brightness, a chair is a chair pretending to be another chair.'[50] Nahm's discussion of how a prop onstage is able to "break character" because of the fact of being a real object echoes Aoife Monks's observation on a real and phenomenologically vivid object 'upstaging' an actor.[51] This paradox reflects the inadequacy of the approach where 'things serve only to the extent that they mean'.[52] Nahm uses the example of the lamp breaking in Strindberg's *The Father* to suggest the overlap between the anthropocentric bias of objects as passive and the long-standing view of naturalism and realism as artistically inferior. She argues that 'recognizing that objects onstage are active, unreliable, and present has important implications for a history of objects as mediators, collaborators, and even competitors in the theatre'. Even the most mundane object as a collaborative performer can 'prohibit and modify human intentionality'[53] by failing, transgressing, resisting, or upstaging subjects.

---

[46] Nahm, 'Props Breaking Character', p. 188
[47] Rebellato, 'Introduction', p. 17.
[48] McAuley, *Space in Performance,* p. 183.
[49] Nahm, 'Props Breaking Character', p. 191.
[50] States, *Great Reckonings,* p. 20.
[51] Aoife Monks, 'Human Remains: Acting, Objects, and Belief in Performance', *Theatre Journal*, 64.3 (2012), p. 360 <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2012.0082>
[52] Elam, *Semiotics,* p. 12.
[53] Nahm, 'Props Breaking Character', p. 199.

The reduction of the object to its sign-function and lack of engagement with its material presence is addressed by the phenomenological approach and discourses associated with the experiential turn or the material turn. Freddie Rokem contends that 'the linguistic approach is not able to cope with the fact that even if the object becomes a sign, it never loses contact with its materiality' getting to the root of Nahm's paradox. The realist chair makes a reappearance in Rokem's insistence on the object's 'affective physicality'. He argues that even when an object is turned into a sign and distanced from its identity and function, we say, '"Look this is no longer a chair" as opposed to "not a table" or "not a man."'[54] The semiotisation process does occur but not at the cost of an object's materiality. So, while he agrees with theatre semiotics in the three levels of object, sign, and sign of a sign, he insists that these be based on the materiality of the object.

Phenomenological theatre criticism foregrounds the problems of overlooking the sensory encounter with the stage event, engaging with experience and perception as processes that are embodied and relational. Phenomenologically viewed, theatrical signs owe their vitality to not just representing the world but 'being *of* it'.[55] States demonstrates that this can be seen with theatrical objects that retain a high degree of *en soi* (like water, fire, and so on), staging an 'upsurge of the real' where 'something indisputably real leaks out of the illusion'[56] and semiotisation. This approach debunks and replaces the referential and dematerialised relationship between the stage and the real object as in semiotics with one that is metonymic and even mutually constitutive.[57] While this approach has long been seen as antithetical to the semiotic and structuralist, critics like States, Rokem, Garner among others suggest complementarity between the two and offer an alternate 'binocular vision',[58] which simultaneously sees the object significatively as well as phenomenally, as representation as well as a thing-in-itself. Semiotics and phenomenology then appear not as opposites dealing with meaning and experience respectively, but instead as complementary and intertwined. As States concludes, lose your phenomenal eye, everything becomes something else, lose the significative eye, everything is nothing but itself.[59]

Turning to this project, I employ a similar hybrid or binocular approach, weaving attentions to sign and materiality, meaning and phenomenal presence of objects to address and overcome the limitations of an isolated methodology. Through these contesting discourses, we see that not only were new theatrical experiments directed towards and defined through specific physical and semantic arrangement of objects but also their use as vessels occasioning critique, theatrical manifestos, and

---

[54] Rokem 'A Chair Is a Chair Is a CHAIR', p. 78

[55] States, *Great Reckonings,* p. 20, emphasis original.

[56] Ibid., p. 31

[57] States observes that theatre is created for the community 'out of the substance of its own body' which resonates with Grotowski's statement that the actor is not there *for* us but *instead* of us. Ibid., pp. 39-40.

[58] Ibid., p. 8.

[59] See ibid., p. 8.

splintering of genres and branches of theatre theory and scholarship. The chapters harness this dual fecundity of objects in using them as both an approach to a play as well as a larger methodological and theoretical vessel.

Death of the Subject: Modernist Theatre Objects

Modernism is a widely delineated field, encompassing many different movements and tendencies, including naturalism, symbolism, expressionism, surrealism, absurdism and so on. The rubric enfolds these often disparate and opposed *isms* or cultural phenomena to name either 'an international movement or an entire historical period.'[60] Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz observe that modernism can work as an 'evaluative and stylistic designation'[61] or a 'neutral and temporal' one applied more globally to incorporate all writing in early to mid-twentieth century. The latter understanding challenges the implication that 'a few experimental works were somehow the only ones authentically representative of their age (as in the familiar sequence Romantic-Victorian-Modernist-Postmodernist).'[62] Despite the wide application of the word and the risk of its reference becoming vague or meaningless, and the various incongruencies and infighting among the works designated as modernist notwithstanding, the word denotes a phenomenon in cultural history which can be stretched 'as far back as the middle of the nineteenth century, continuing at least until the middle of the twentieth.'[63]

My own use extends to include works from the late nineteenth century to mid-twentieth century and designates a wide but marked orientation towards modernity and stability of representation. In this usage, I blend the qualitative and chronological approach to incorporate writers that might be considered contentious modernists on account of either their stylistic or temporal positionalities.[64] I borrow from critics like Rebellato and Lewis among others to recognise in these works a shared response to socio-economic and philosophical shifts as well as to artistic conventions. The former locates the beginnings of modernism within the context of the contradictions arising out of rapid changes in nineteenth century

---

[60] Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. xvii.

[61] This would incorporate works of prominent figures of literature in English like Woolf, Joyce, and Beckett, as well as lesser known women writers, makers of the Harlem renaissance, genre fiction, and artists beyond the anglophone world. Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz. *Bad Modernisms* (New York: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 1.

[62] Ibid. p. 2.

[63] Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*, p. xvii.

[64] For instance, the inclusion of late nineteenth century realism and naturalism within modernism is widely debated. Rebellato argues, 'Most modernist theatres which followed [naturalism] were a response to, and rejection of, Naturalism. For that reason, it is sometimes supposed that Naturalism was not a modernist theatre and that modernism emerged precisely in reaction to a perceived conservatism on the Naturalist stage. In fact, Naturalism was foundational to modernist theatre practice'. Dan Rebellato 'Introduction: Naturalism and Symbolism: Early Modernist Practice' in *The Routledge Drama Anthology*, 6–24 (p. 6).

Europe and America — rise of a substantial middle class, consumerism, class conflict, changes in domestic life,[65] as well as a challenge to the various certainties promised by religion and philosophical modernity.[66] Furthermore, the artistic response registers a 'shared apprehension of a crisis in the ability of art and literature to represent reality'.[67] This thesis blends these definitions, seeing modernisms of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century as a collection of distinct tendencies enfolding the stylistic, the chronological, a shared response to urban modernity, and suspicion towards stability of representation, which I discuss next.

- *Decentring the Subject*

Objects' new defined role in stage composition directed and disturbed creative sensibilities, reception modes, and critical approaches. They expanded theatrical matters to include nonhuman beings, allowing modernist theatre to further extend a 'decentring' of the subject.[68] The "crisis" of modernism involved both representation and meaning, concerning both the appropriate subject matter of art and the apparatus to represent the subject matter, with some later modernists going so far as to argue that art should not represent any subject matter except itself.[69] This recalls what Jameson calls a 'fashionable' theme in contemporary theory, that of the death of the subject. He suggests that the movement from high to late modernism can be traced in the movement from alienation of the subject to fragmentation of the subject marking the 'end of the autonomous bourgeois monad' or individual.[70] This responds to not just 'some new moral ideal' but also 'empirical description'. In other words, the decentring of that formerly centred subject is a matter of both formal, stylistic 'deconstruction of the very aesthetic of expression' along with the widely identified ideological and metaphysical anxiety and alienation.[71] While for modernist prose and poetry, this aesthetic of expression might pertain to language or narrative, in theatre it is the stage matter along with other formal, generic, and aesthetic scaffolds that were being deconstructed and radically reconstituted.

Modernist crisis in meaning and representation filtered into the use of objects as representative and hermeneutic apparatus. Similarly, its widely identified tenets of self-conscious individualism, lack

[65] See ibid. pp. 6–7.
[66] This includes a criticism of Enlightenment faith 'prevalent from Descartes to Kant, in sovereign human reason.' Notably, Friedrich Nietzsche as a staunch critic of Enlightenment reason prominently inspired literary modernists. See Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*, pp. xviii–xix.
[67] Ibid. p. xviii.
[68] Finn Fordham, *I Do I Undo I Redo: The Textual Genesis of Modernist Selves* (Italy: OUP Oxford, 2010), p. 45.
[69] See Pericles Lewis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism*, p. xviii.
[70] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 11-15
[71] Ibid., pp. 11-15.

of moral, religious, or political certainty and/as enduring guarantors of meaning (with the backdrop of technological and political revolutions), scientific, temporal, and moral relativity (through Einstein, Bergson, Nietzsche) meant a stress on a turn inwards towards the individual rather than external factors as the 'source of value and comprehension'.[72] However, in theatre this turn emerged, David Krasner argues, when classical style of direct address was replaced with 'realistic person to person interchange'. We see that interiority ironically materialised with the arrival of external objects onstage; the opening example of the dragging of a real living room chair onstage and resultant cascading changes in acting, reception, and criticism are the very factors through which 'modern drama and theatre arose'.[73] As such, modernism's turn inwards does not replace realism's attention to objects but sublimates it within the initial turn towards and eventual avant-gardist challenge to the 'vainglorious bourgeois individual as an autonomous being.'[74] [75] This, I hold, further decentres the subject to make space for objects.

- *Functionality*

Modernism continued the attention to objects which spanned art forms, from dictating style for objectivist poets and generic definitions in Pound's Imagist prescription, 'direct treatment of the "thing", whether subjective or objective',[76] to influencing content in the *Dinggedicht,* Breton's *poem-objet,* and Williams's famous maxim 'no ideas but in things',[77] much discussed by object theorists. Similarly, modernist drama specifically extended the challenge to the self-contained subject introduced by the realist orientation to objects, as seen above. Moving from (objects' role in) the fragmentation, alienation, and decentring of the modernist subject, how were the objects themselves being represented and deployed in the increasingly nebulous terrain of fictional worlds? Douglas Mao argues that despite the age's prostration to commerce, modernism's fascination with the object is rooted in its understanding neither as a commodity nor as a symbol but *as* object, with any and all of the word's polysemous complexity and associations. This self-conscious contemplation of the 'object qua object' was until now only sporadically anticipated, with very little in previous fiction resembling 'Woolf's fascination with the eerily proximate distance of physical things or Joyce's obtrusive catalogues of urban detritus and household debris'.[78] He further suggests

[72] David Krasner, *A History of Modern Drama Volume I* (Germany: Wiley, 2011), p. 4.
[73] Ibid., p. 4.
[74] Ibid., p. 18.
[75] Toril Moi argues that the 'true aesthetic antithesis of modernism is not realism, but idealism' *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 5.
[76] Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays* qtd. in Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 15.
[77] Williams Carlos Williams, *Paterson* qtd. in Mao, *Solid Objects*, p. 21.
[78] Mao, *Solid Objects,* p. 13.

> This feeling of regard for the physical object as object—as not-self, as not-subject, as most helpless and will-less of entities, but also as fragment of Being, as solidity, as otherness in its most resilient opacity—seems a peculiarly twentieth-century malady or revelation, […], the open acknowledgment of such a feeling seems one of the minor trademarks of the writing of this period.[79]

The objects' foregrounded lack of functionality disturbs and replaces their deployment as mimetic anchors of a uniform and cohesive reality, a challenge seen across the various object-relations in this thesis such as dysfunction, incomprehensible possession, fiddling, and absurd decay and destruction. The objects exceed or challenge both artistic and commercial utility, the former to the extent that they do not always serve a discernible formal, thematic, or generic function.

> This liberation of the thing, Garner argues, meant that a new "objectness" joined the theatre:
>
> a materiality [became] increasingly freed from the illustrative and the instrumental. As stage objects proliferated and asserted an increasing density, manipulability gave way to an independence from—and eventually, an antagonism toward—the human subject's attempt to appropriate and humanize its spatial surroundings.[80]

He frames this as an emergence of a material field that moved from manipulation and functionality to stepping outside of human control. My own attention to objectness similarly follows this drastically different understanding of how humans and objects relate to each other in theatre. McAuley suggests that objects take on a life of their own when they are 'capable of expressing or representing something independent of the actor's activities.'[81] She gives the example of surreal or arbitrary objects without theatrical or practical function that point only to themselves rather than a signified meaning, severing the link between stage and reality. The attention to objects' affective (over merely significative) presence by critics like McAuley, States, Sofer among others recalls, the latter argues, Samuel Beckett's interest in 'representing "nonlogical" phenomena before they have been "distorted into intelligibility" by the perceiver'. This is represented through the 'nauseating "thereness" of such things as boots, trees, and carrots—items that flirt with but ultimately resist symbolism.'[82] I discuss objects' tenuous relationship with theatrical and extra-theatrical function in detail in the first two chapters. Furthermore, across the chapters, I explore different versions of objects' foregrounded resistance to functionality as they repeatedly pose challenges to reason, meaning, comprehension, at times dysfunctioning to the point

---

[79] Ibid., p. 4.
[80] Garner, *Bodied Spaces,* p. 91.
[81] McAuley, *Space in Performance,* p. 183.
[82] Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props,* p. 15.

of infiltrating the audience (explored in my discussion of Wilde's carnation) or impeding positive critical reception of a play (as in *The Dove*).

- *Subject-Object Difference*

The above questions about agency of objects, matter, and materialisation register a response to what Latour has argued is modernity's artificially-made ontological distinction between inanimate objects and human subjects.[83] As Cuny and Kalck argue, the nineteenth century 'positivist trust in human knowledge (and in the knowability of the world) trained greater and greater proportions of each generation to treat the world as a system of well-circumscribed, well-described objects, quite separate from the observing entity.'[84] The blurring of subject-object borders was anticipated by certain concepts in theatre semiotics that, despite the flattening and dematerialisation of the object, acknowledge the murkiness between subjects and objects introduced by the semiotic process. They pre-empted the assertion of nonhuman agency later theorised by nonrepresentational or post-semiotic approaches. These concepts include Honzl's dynamism of the sign where a single object can convey multiple meanings and conversely a number of objects can play a given role, Veltrusky's subject-object continuum where an actor or prop's 'action force' or independent signifying force beyond functionality accrues them with the status of a subject, and similarly Elam's conception of 'semiotic subjectivity' which raises an object to 'unexpected prominence' independent of the actor.[85]

Phenomenological approaches of critics like Garner and States discussed above also blur the borders modernity had built up between the animate and the inanimate, in retrieving the intrinsic and independent potential within the thing-in-itself. These approaches to theatre draw on Merleau-Ponty's account of perception that have myriad implications for ontologically diverse interactions in theatre. His account of perception which suggests that the viewer is not a distanced observer but experiences the world from within further muddies subject-object borders, creating a nonhierarchical relationship between them. The world being at once perceived and inhabited suggests that the subject is 'caught up in things' and that the 'body is a thing among things' thus negotiating and mediating (albeit not dissolving, as I explore later) modernity's constructed binary between human and thing.[86] The viewer-thing relationship becomes reversible and a kind of an exchange where 'things pass into us as well as

[83] See Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, qtd. in Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 12.
[84] Noelle Cuny and Xavier Kalck, 'Introduction', *Modernist Objects* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2020), p. 12.
[85] Jindrich Honzl, 'Dynamics of the Sign in the Theater' trans. Irwin Titunik, in Ladisalv Matejka and Irwin Titunik eds. *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976), 74–93; Jiri Veltruský, 'Man and Object in the Theater', p. 88; Elam, *Semiotics*, p. 17.
[86] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind' qtd. in Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 4.

we into the things'.[87] Similarly, a more contemporary phenomenological approach that sustains this reciprocity is Sara Ahmed's idea of orientation where she suggests that we are oriented towards 'happy objects' and, at the same time, our orientation makes these objects happy: 'We are moved by things. And in being moved, we make things.'[88] I borrow the phenomenological intertwining and contingency between subjects and objects within perception, specifically in my consideration of body-as-object or the objectness of the body, which appears across the chapters but most overtly in the first and last case studies, exploring Hedda's dead body in Ibsen's play and the schmürz's violated body in Vian's.

- *Ideology and Commodity Fetishism*

Modernist objects can be seen as responding to both the naturalist closing of the gap between real and representation as also to modernity's ontological borders. However, returning to Bill Brown, modernism's 'discourse of thingness' is far from consistent.[89] This can be seen in the various contradictions that the object embodies or metonymizes. On the one hand, the physical matter offered a *beyond,* something away from inward fragmentation and outward disorientation. We see this in the space encroaching on characters of Strindberg or Chekhov, typifying what Raymond Williams calls

> a repeated search for some means of defining the humanity that cannot be lived in these well-ordered rooms – the forces outside, the white horses or the seagull, the tower of the cherry orchard, which have meaning because there are forces inside these people in these rooms, which cannot be realized in any available life.[90]

Similarly, Mao discusses that the object world represented for modernists an 'innocence of an immunity to thinking and knowing […] a realm beyond the reach of ideology'.[91] On the other hand, if the modernist object is a repose from ideology, theatrical objects more specifically also possess the potential to materialise this very ideology, by telescoping past convention on stage, as I will show specifically in the case studies from Ibsen, Wilde, and Barnes. Theatrical objects are either attacked as generic and ideological symbols or themselves pose radical challenges to theatrical conventions. The contradictions embodied in the represented theatrical object in its simultaneous upholding and

---

[87] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1968), p. 123.
[88] Sara Ahmed, 'Happy Objects' in *The Affect Theory Reader* eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 29–52 (p. 33).
[89] Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 12.
[90] Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (NY: Penguin, 1973), pp. 389–90.
[91] Mao further points out that 'the formal characteristics most often associated with modernist art—hardness, coldness, impersonality' were often object-like as with T.S Eliot's comparison of literary work with monuments and Imagists' preference for solid objects over abstractions. *Solid Objects,* pp. 9-10

unsettling or escaping human knowledge, ideology, and fragmentation can be read in the light of Charles Baudelaire's oft quoted definition of modernism, making the object a composite of 'the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable.'[92] Mao explains this contradiction observing that the object at once marks a concrete limit or 'resilient opacity' to subjectivity, will, knowledge, comprehension while at the same time evidencing the troubling extensiveness of human power and limitless transformation of the newly emerging technology.[93]

The modernist object's ideological life is also infiltrated by its circulation as a commodity of production, consumption, and distribution. Sofer argues:

> New historicism, materialist feminism, and cultural materialism have taught us that the playhouse cannot be artificially cordoned off from the symbolic economy of the culture that surrounds it. Just like the offstage objects they represent, props are circulated, fetishized, and commodified.[94]

Beyond signs and representations, theatrical objects are also commodities that embody histories of production and are offered for consumption. Modernism's complex and inextricable entanglement with objects is mediated by the growing 'enthronement of the commodity'[95] or 'commodity fetishism'[96] of the modern capitalist and industrial society. Douglas Mao points out that the embedded assumption of the antipathy between a work of art and 'the age's ignoble prostration before commerce' is most visible in modernism's struggle against the mass-produced commodity in favour of the handcrafted thing.[97] The commodity culture was seen as eclipsing the social character of production, foregrounding networks of commodity circulation over human relationships as it 'robs individuals of agency and grants perverse autonomy to objects'.[98] If modernism often critiqued the culture of commodity fetishism,

---

[92] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays* trans. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1995), p. 13.
[93] Mao, *Solid Objects,* p. 11
[94] Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, p. 17.
[95] Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century' in Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings (eds.) *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings: 1935-1938* (Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2002), 32–49 (p. 37).
[96] Marx contends that the 'social relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour' leading to commodity fetishism. Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1,* translated by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), p. 72.
[97] Mao, *Solid Objects,* p. 11.
[98] Robert Morden, '"Disconnecting Something From Anything": Fetishized Objects, Alienated Subjects, and Literary Modernism' (doctoral thesis, York University, 2021), p. 1. Morden discussing T.S. Eliot's and Ezra Pound's works points out that 'the modern subject is overwhelmed by the unruly disorder of a commodity culture, which, in its "tawdry cheapness," no longer bears the mark of its human author or satisfies genuine human needs'. A similar disconnection between object and functionality or need is reflected across many objects in this thesis — from the gifted fan (chapter 1) to the polished sword (chapter 2). However, the thesis departs

lamenting its interruption of "proper" relationships between subjects and objects, some writers also acknowledged and even celebrated phenomena associated with increasing commodification such as consumerism, popular mass culture, and advertising. Accordingly, critics have attempted to explore more cordial relations between modernism, consumer culture, and commodity fetishism, 'exploding the myth [...] of modernist writers' and artists' absolute disinterest, detachment and contempt for popular and consumer culture'.[99] I retain this tendency in my exploration of Wilde's consumer aesthetics in Chapter 1 and American 'tyranny of things'[100] in Chapter 2.

Despite the culture of commodification that proliferated domestic spaces, the text, the stage, and mediated embodied interactions, Bill Brown argues that subject-object relationships must be recognised as 'irreducible to that [consumer] culture'.[101] While object-encounters and (commodity) fetishism arguably alienate subjects from meaningful relationships across the examples in this thesis,[102] the encounters also paradoxically resist consumerism, creating frictions between use value, exchange value, and personal value. This is particularly visible in the ironic hanging on to trivial, broken, dysfunctional, or disgusting things, evoking a kind of fetishistic abstraction of the object's actual role, function, and economic value, supplanted with a personal one — the gifted fan is a stand-in for Lady Windermere and never used for fanning (Chapter 1), Laura's broken unicorn is turned into a souvenir and not discarded (Chapter 2), Amelia's swords are never used for stabbing, only polished by the Dove (Chapter 2).

These various moments of incomprehensible object-interactions and dysfunctional/non-functional things refuse to be entirely coherent and explainable through the frames of consumerism, commodity fetishism, and replaceability of commodities, further embodying their contradictory

---

from understanding this disconnection or autonomy of objects as necessarily 'perverse' or an 'unruly disorder'. Morden, '"Disconnecting Something From Anything"', pp. 3, 1.

[99] Kathryn Simpson *Gifts, Markets and Economies of Desire in Virginia Woolf* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 1. See also Paul L. Fortunato, *Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture in the Writings of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Routledge, 2007) and Carolyn Lesjak 'Utopia, Use, and the Everyday: Oscar Wilde and a New Economy of Pleasure', *ELH*, 67.1 (2000), 179–204.

[100] Anon., 'The Contributor's Club: The Tyranny of Things' *Atlantic Monthly*, 97 (May 1906) https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1906/05/the-tyranny-of-things/638334/ [accessed 20 Aug, 2022].

[101] Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 13.

[102] While Marxist commodity fetishism denotes the eclipsing of social relations wherein objects are perceived 'merely as exchange values' with 'absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material [] relations arising out of this', fetishism is a broader term with presence in anthropology, psychology, and aesthetics. Marx, *Capital Volume 1,* qtd. in ibid. p. 28. Fetishism derives from the assumption that 'value inheres in objects irrespective of their relation to human history.' It both overlaps with and departs from Marxist commodity fetishism, often describing an aesthetic fascination with objects and 'the projection of an aesthetic value considered to be the property of a thing'. Ibid. pp. 28–31. I explore fetish objects in my consideration of *The Dove* in Chapter 2.

mediation by and irreducibility to the surrounding consumerist and mass-production networks. Despite the fable of abundance that infiltrates characters' daily lives — from Aunt Julle's bonnet and the house Tesman buys in *Hedda Gabler*, the ornate objects in Wildean aesthetics, and the bourgeoise bric-à-brac of the Duponts, Wingfields, and Bergsons — the disillusion with the comfort and happiness promised by these accumulated objects is nonetheless palpable through the destruction and loss of possessions (Laura's broken glass and the Duponts' progressively dwindling possessions) or people (Hedda Gabler, Tom Wingfield, and the Dove).

These vital tensions housed within the modernist theatre object's various contradictions and paradoxes also further point to the complexity and limitations of speaking of 'the modernist object' attempted by scholars used in the discussion above, like Brown and Mao. These discussions and general conclusions often leave underdiscussed or altogether obfuscate the specifics of theatrical objects. As I show above, theatrical objects specifically, while having generative overlaps with the larger rubric of modernist literary object-world, also harbour notable digressions that contradict and make more robust the subject of twentieth century objects. Through this project, I suggest a need for attending to their sensory and semantic particularity to bring theatre into the discourse monopolised largely by modernist novels and poetry.

- *Representation and Agency*

If the modernist object, according to Mao, appeared 'most compelling when it seemed most marked by impermeability to mind'[103] as a solidity beyond the fragmented consciousness and fraying of human subject, it was simultaneously itself becoming fragmented. This can be seen materially in the 'use of incongruous and contradictory ingredients, collage of components taken from a variety of contexts, simultaneity and fragmentation of elements'.[104] The avant-garde modernists, Marjorie Perloff notes, urged 'collage and its cognates (montage, assemblage, construction)' and their practices called into question the 'representability of the sign'.[105] This questioning is also registered in the progressively scant stages of late (and eventually post) modernism, reflecting the post-realist reluctance to represent the (real) nonhuman, discussed above. The uniform totality of representation came to be acknowledged as inadequate for not just the dispersed, contradictory subject but also the similarly fragmented object.

[103] Ibid., p. 9.
[104] Gunter Berghaus, *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-Garde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 33.
[105] Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. xviii.

The naturalist and realist paradox of distinguishing the represented and real object is now replaced by the question of objects' agency and presence. While semiotic and phenomenological approaches acknowledge a degree of independent agency, these are ultimately redirected to a human source, wherein objects are agential only by proxy and similarly objects are read only to illuminate the subject. Phenomenological understanding of objects redirects focus on the materiality of objects rather than their function as signs, however, it highlights a reciprocal seer-seen, subject-object relationship, privileging the perceiver's consciousness without acknowledging the potentialities of objects themselves. Phenomenology grants constitutive primacy to consciousness, positing that 'the world requires a consciousness to experience it.'[106] While acknowledging the 'phenomenal instability of theatrical objects',[107] these accounts insist that the scenic space and the things within it are "objectified" until the actor draws them in to the corporeal field such that the stage as a phenomenal space is 'bodied forth' by the actor.[108] Beyond intertwining, reciprocity, and reversibility, what are objects themselves capable of? This question of independent agency and the above challenge to the stability of representation and language find expression under the contemporary umbrella of the new materialist and/or performative turn.

Critics like Jane Bennett, Karen Barad, Rebecca Schneider, and Diana Coole insist on the power and vitality of matter independent of human agency and challenge the anthropocentric division of (theatrical) entities into passive objects and intentional subjects. Their approach attempts to interrogate the border between animate and inanimate and replaces it with a distributive understanding of agency where all matter (human or nonhuman) is seen as agential. They endorse a view where materials include both human and nonhuman 'actants' with varying degrees of agentive capacities, 'material vitality' or 'thing power'.[109] Going back to the challenge to stable representation, new materialism recognises matter as not only agential but also discursive, 'unsettling the precedent prioritizing of "language" as the sole or primary means to think about meaning-making'.[110] Barad challenges every "thing", even materiality, turning into a matter of language and attempts to 'allow matter its due as an active participant in the world's becoming, in its ongoing "intraactivity"'.[111] Within theatre, this approach

---

[106] Maaike Bleeker, Jon Foley Sherman, and Eirini Nedelkopoulou, eds. *Performance and Phenomenology: Traditions and Transformations* (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2015), p. 2.
[107] Stanton B. Garner Jr, 'Staging Things: Realism and the Theatrical Object in Shepard's Theatre' *Contemporary Theatre Review,* 8:3 (1998), 55–66 (p. 55).
[108] Garner, *Bodied Spaces,* p. 3.
[109] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter,* pp. 8, 17.
[110] Rebecca Schneider, 'New Materialisms and Performance Studies', *TDR/The Drama Review*, 59.4 (2015). <https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00493>, 7–17 (p. 7).
[111] Karen Barad, 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* 28.3 (2003), 801–831 (p. 803).

informs the idea of 'scenographic exchange'[112] wherein the audience is placed not *before* an objectified scenic space but *within* it, disturbing the seer-seen ontological hierarchy. Porloff's earlier argument of modernism's interest in assemblage can be read as a new materialist 'agency of assemblages' or 'contingent tableau' of vibrant matter, affordances, actants, and vivid entities 'not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them'[113] challenging unidirectional, nonrelational agencies.

Schneider observes that theatricality has long rummaged at the subject-object border as matter constantly becomes other matter.[114] Nonrepresentational theories question the structuralist belief in the stability of language and representation which has generative implications for modernist theatre. Furthermore, it fruitfully sustains the inherent contradictions within objects' relation to ideology, at once stubbornly impenetrable to and "always already" mediated by human contexts of knowledge and representation. While new materialism, performativity, and more contemporary theories of matter like Object-Oriented Ontology, Actor Network Theory, and posthumanism challenge essentialist, static, and anthropocentric approaches, there have been very few attempts at theatre analysis that rest squarely within their methodology. In the sole focus on objects' potentialities, these approaches have been seen as eager to 'romantically expand' liveness.[115] This assigns distributive, equal agency across non/human actants, part subjects, or quasi-objects which simplifies complicated power dynamics and histories, performing a flattening different from but reminiscent of semiotic dematerialisation. As Schweitzer and Zerdy point out, action and agency do not occur uniformly across matter and a cognizance of this would create 'an especially apt model for scholars trying to delineate the shifting cultural, socio-economic, environmental, and artistic powers at work in a given theatre production, play text, or performance'.[116]

Furthermore, critics like Mel Y. Chen and Schneider warn against the new materialist 'expansive optimism' and 'life as surplus'[117] model, circumscribing it with the colonial, sexualised, racial, and class politics that lie in every direction. Animacy, Chen argues, is shaped by 'what or who counts as human and what or who does not'.[118] Marginality and, as Bennett herself notes, environmental precarity, adds a significant limit and caveat to her otherwise 'happy musings on everything's vibrant animacy'.[119] I echo Chen's method, which builds on but also addresses the gaps in these postsemiotic

---

[112] Joslin McKinney, 'Empathy and Exchange: Audience Experience of Scenography' in Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason, eds. *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 219–233 (p. 3).
[113] Bennett, *Vibrant Matter,* pp. 20, 5.
[114] See Schneider, 'New Materialisms and Performance Studies', p. 14.
[115] Ibid., p. 13.
[116] Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy, eds. *Performing Objects,* p. 11.
[117] Schneider, 'New Materialisms and Performance Studies', p. 13.
[118] Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 30.
[119] Schneider, 'New Materialisms and Performance Studies', p. 13.

approaches, and agree that the 'purpose is not to reinvest certain materialities with life'[120] but to explore transgressions and how/why subjects and objects become unmoored from fixed positions. Drawing on and departing from Barad's suggestion that matter does not function as a medium or a passive channel for human desire, affect, and action, I look at both objects that do function as passive vehicles along with those that are agential, in order to trace their departures, incompatibility, compliance, or significations for or against subjects.

Handling Objects: Gaps and Methods

Through the above historical and critical contexts, we see that while scholarly attention has been given to theatre's intimate intersection with material culture, and various approaches to the study of the role of things in meaning formation have been created, focused analyses of their role in particular playtexts and the modes of representation in productions have been largely overlooked. The gap that arises in the study of textual and performing things, as seen in the above discussion, is owing to a tendency to conform to the extremes of a focus on objects that serve the subject on the one hand and on objects' potentialities independent of human agency on the other. These leave relatively unaddressed the subject-object encounters which are indispensable in theatre studies. I propose a mode of attention that looks at agential objects in tandem with their material, embodied encounters with characters (and at times with the reader/audience). This mode of attention resists the two extremes that come at the cost of an object's prominent role in meaning-making on the one hand and its materiality and interactions on the other. The chapters borrow concepts from the critical schools detailed above without squarely resting within them. Attempting to navigate the impasse of extremes, my object analysis does not begin from the sign, the perceiving consciousness, or the completely independent object but engages with encounters at various nodes in the lifecycle of a play: text, stage, reception. It acknowledges that an object's thingness does not just lend itself to interpretation but also like a critic, offers (counter)readings as an active conductor and purveyor of the theatrical and hermeneutic current.

The gap is not just theoretical but also disciplinary. As shown above, the discussion on modernist objects tends to neglect the specificity of theatrical objects, absorbing them within the literary material world. This does not do justice to the often disparate affordances of objects in playtexts and on stage, or to their very different reception. Similarly, present approaches to objects within theatre and performance studies betray a preoccupation with contemporary live performance and performance art, leaving underexplored text-based dramatic literature and theatre.[121] There is a tendency to read objects

[120] Chen, *Animacies,* p. 11.

[121] Schneider observes, 'In theatre, dance, and performance studies, perhaps it is the rapid growth of time-based, performance-based, and participatory arts in museums and arts venues generally that makes "animacy" a hot topic today. […] At an astounding pace, that is, everything formerly known as objectbased becomes, in two

as a part of collective and amorphous "stuff" of performance, performance ecology, and scenographic matter. This implies that there are very few studies that use present frameworks to engage with objects from past theatrical traditions and genres, which runs the risk of rendering a short-sighted rear view within present theatre scholarship. While there has been a range of scholarship on objects on stages of the past, specifically for instance on Renaissance theatre,[122] these tend to use a restrictive methodology limited to largely literary lenses, and are reluctant to use anachronistically the current developments in nonhuman studies and performance matter. Within the interdisciplinary crossovers among modernism, literature, and theatre studies, dramatic literatures and text-based theatres get erased at the junctures. I address these gaps in two ways: firstly, by (re)investing specificity to present discussions on more general performance environment and matter, through close engagement with specific object/encounters and secondly, by using a blended methodology synthesising current and established, literary and theatrical critical lenses (discussed above) and readily applying present nonhuman, (new) materialist, scenography, and performance frames retrospectively on the twentieth century stage. In doing so, I emphasise the value of taking a backwards glance prior to the challenge to the text's position within theatre and performance studies. Present developments within the field, I attempt to show, shed new light on past critical and creative modes of encountering objects and allow us to recover playtexts and modernist theatre as worthy of dedicated critical attention, independent of subsuming fields.

I borrow from and blend the literature, contexts, and theoretical approaches discussed above, specifically building on their shared urge to cultivate a more careful and deeper attentiveness to the represented object-world. The plays explored are distinct in how they position objects and, at the same time, representative of the period's shifting sensibilities to the external, solid without. These case studies themselves render a menagerie of objects, from aesthetic to discursive, fragile to dangerous, useless to functional, wild to uncannily non/human, allowing them to take the centre stage. While the late nineteenth century shift in understanding, representing, and practicing of subjectivity and individuality has been abundantly theorised, perhaps second only to the 'emergence of the individual' in the Renaissance,[123] the same attention has not extended to the equally multifarious developments in objects, encounters, and objectness. This delineates the expansive as well as highly specific task of this project. The blended methodology crafted embarks on a balancing act between identifying object-centred agency on the one hand and locating objects within human bodies, scripts, ideas, and networks of power. As mentioned earlier, this informs my choice of using the term 'objects' more than 'things', 'matter',

---

words, live performance. Performance, that is, becomes materialization.' 'New Materialisms and Performance Studies', p. 12

[122] See for instance, *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Lena Cowen Orlin, 'The Performance of Things in *The Taming of the Shrew*' *Yearbook of English Studies,* 23 (1993), 167–188; Frances Teague, *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties*; Monks, 'Human Remains'.

[123] Keith Whitlock, *The Renaissance in Europe: A Reader* (United Kingdom: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 8.

'stuff' and very sparingly, 'props'. The object names at once a thing and a 'particular subject-object relation' as it circulates within and discloses 'history, society, nature or culture'.[124] Objects then toe the line between unspecific, inaccessible things that 'lurk in the shadows'[125] and resist human control (as I discuss in Chapter One) and the functional, dependent props with their largely theatrical presence and connotation,[126] while allowing productive and fluid engagement with real and theatrical, recalcitrant and functional moments. Furthermore, objects unlike the above associated terms, pry open discussions on objectification, object-encounters, and objectness, allowing space for understanding objects as marking both a category and ontologically varied qualities or encounters. With object-encounters, I show that acknowledging objects' potential need not come at the cost of engaging with human interactions and entanglements. With objectness, I encapsulate overlooked forms of agencies and beings. I hold that objects can become unfixed from ontology and specific entities, and come to describe instead a loose set of qualities, affects, relations, and orientations understood as associated with objects, for instance, passivity, lack of agency, inaction, fragility, or silence. In exploring objectness as an unanchored category, I move beyond the critical temptation from around the millennium to expand liveness and mine for human-like agency, life, and subjectivity in all matter.[127] Objectness inverts this subject-centric tendency, allowing a recognition of how object-being, just like subjectivity, can be appropriated, imposed, sought, or rejected by both subjects and objects.

I identify three categories of theatrical objects and encounters: misbehaving objects, fidgeting, and revolting objects, and unpack these in detail through three respective chapters. The categories, I hope to show, occupy the most prominent, unique, pervasive, and critically generative object-encounters within modernist theatre. I have chosen not to engage with "normal", functional encounters that disappear into or get absorbed by the subject. Instead, the focus is on more deliberate and imposing presences that reveal new threads within the play and often within the theatrical and cultural moment. Similarly, the chosen plays, I show, prominently represent the specific object/encounter and its presence in turn invites alternative readings on the play. Beyond the theories, contexts, and blended method detailed above that are used as the broad framing and recurring foundational ideas throughout, each chapter creates an individual critical framework and method through engagement with relevant literature and adjacent scholarship across different fields that the specific object/encounter invites. This underpins my analysis of two plays which is conducted through close reading of the playtext and engagement with and response to literature on the play/genre, using sources like reviews, performance testimonies, recorded productions, theatre notebooks and records, and production materials. The theoretical method used, and analysis conducted can be read not merely as a critical intervention into

[124] Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 4.
[125] Ibid. p. 3.
[126] See Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, pp. 11–13 for discussions on the difference between props and objects.
[127] See Schneider, 'New Materialisms and Performance Studies', p. 13.

established scholarships on objects and modernist plays specifically, but beyond this as a demonstration that can be applied to other plays/literary texts and productions across periods and genres, and equally to identify categories of objects, encounters, and objectness as methods of analysis. The chapters as a whole attempt to offer new critical and analytical vantages to the study of theatrical, literary, and modernist objects. A study of objects, objectness, and object-encounters will reveal their importance as both subjects and lenses of analysis and (counter)readings, constructing I suggest, an alternate parallel understanding of early to mid-twentieth century theatre and western modernisms.

Chapter 1: Misbehaving Objects

INTRODUCTION

Can Objects Behave?

The staging of objects interrupts the usual behaviour of things. Objects are plucked from reality, the circuits of everyday use, possession, and consumption and inserted into the fabric of fiction. Their staging adds another system of codes that might replicate, multiply, or defy the network of rules that underpin objects' performance in everyday life and their role as utilities, indulgences, valuable commodities, or useless clutter. Staged objects are then subjected to another set of rules of the play world relating to narrative, temporality, interpretation, representation, and reception, thus increasing the potential to falter or misbehave. Simply put, more rules imply more ways to break them. Furthermore, theatre depends on ontologically diverse encounters: bodies and materials from across the animate and inanimate spectrum are in physical, visual, sensory, or felt/affective proximity. This dependence on multiplicity and relationality is particularly central to late nineteenth–early twentieth century theatrical experiments with transgressing and breaking various formal and aesthetic borders. This, I argue, filters into objects most visibly on the modern stage given the various innovations in stage composition that increased human encounters with stage objects.

I locate misbehaving objects (and encounters) specifically within modernist theatre to recognise them as both a symptom of and a response to the twentieth-century interrogation of modernity's ontological hierarchies and borders. My use of 'misbehaviour' is not restricted to an object's disobedience against its owner/wielder but covers a range of phenomena including resistance, malfunction, flaws, transgression, failure, or other impulses that challenge or rupture expected behaviour.[1] I deliberately resist "blaming" a single source for this, human or nonhuman, arguing instead that theatrical misbehaviour often elides its own source. I also club accidental and contrived misbehaviours together, to deprioritise the role of intentionality, given its largely anthropocentric connotations. While theatrical elements often possess an intrinsic ability to disturb, misbehaviour by its

[1] The range of associated ideas that I draw on under the umbrella of misbehaviour is connected to the etymological connections of the word, particularly the prefix 'mis-' which is a 'prefix of Germanic origin affixed to nouns and verbs and meaning "bad, wrong," from Old English *mis-*, from Proto-Germanic **missa-* "divergent, astray", perhaps literally "in a changed manner," and with a root sense of "difference, change"' 'Mis', in *Www.Dictionary.Com* <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/mis> [accessed 14 May 2023].

very nature entails a clash, physical or otherwise, with behavioural codes. Looking at material misbehaviours as a specific kind of subject-object relation highlights their capacity to stage the limits of human control. It raises questions about who has the prerogative to police (objects') behaviour. Through this introduction and following case studies of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* and the objects around *Lady Windermere's Fan*, I will show how modernism's singular interest in examining the contours of subjectivity and unsettling expectations is reflected onstage through material misbehaviour. By disrupting habit and expectation, misbehaviour makes visible the operations of controlling forces that hide in plain sight.

The proposition of objects' misbehaviour entails a presupposition that they have the capacity to "behave". In both theatrical and extra-theatrical contexts, objects' behaviour is defined in opposition to distinctly human capacities of agency, subjectivity, independence, animacy, and action. This follows Descartes's dualist ontology that theorised two forms of beings, the subject that is capable of agency and consciousness, and the object that lacks both.[2] When seen simply as the antithesis of the Cartesian subject, objects emerge as passive vessels of enforced rules and meanings. Pacified and domesticated, such objects stand as material proof of human control, capacity of objectification, and successful domination of the (material) world, both physical and ideological. They are the tamed and disciplined alter-egos of unruly and formless nonhuman materials that exist beyond and challenge human ideas. The traces of this domination are invisibilised when objects behave themselves, receding into their meanings and functionality as reliable guarantors of human control. An attentiveness to misbehaviour uncovers the potential of objects to threaten the fictions of human capabilities and competence, laying bare operations of enforced ideas and desires, behavioural and representational codes, functionality, values, and expectations.

Going back to the chapter's opening question, there is a long history of critical debate that can be traced to the post-Enlightenment period around the question, do objects have the capacity to act (or behave)? The responses offered eventually correspond to the different schools of object theories, galvanized around the question of nonhuman agency and ability. The spectrum of responses ranges from the denial of any agency, acknowledgement that objects possess the capacity to organize human behaviour, to the insistence of a material behaviour and agency independent of humans. This chapter takes a different approach, leveraging misbehaviour against ideas of behaviour, proposing misbehaviour as a way in to thinking about object-human, self-other interactions, and the intersections of related ideas of agency, intention, control, and transgression.

[2] See Sara Ann Knutson, 'When Objects Misbehave: Materials & Assemblages in the Ancient Scandinavian Myths' *Fabula* 61. 3-4 (2020), 257–277 (p. 258) https://doi.org/10.1515/fabula-2020-0014

Misbehaviour, I show, is innately dependent on interactions, encounters, and entwining of bodies, materials, subjectivities and the scripts or systems governing them, as a "*mis*-sing" of imposed rules and expectations. In this chapter, I position misbehaviour as an umbrella term, frequently using adjacent words and ideas like defiance, transgression, disobedience, disruption, flouting, mal/dysfunction, and instability. Given that misbehaviour engenders a *going against,* wherein something is amiss, this lens admits a degree of necessary anthropocentricism in interrogating the contours of human control. While it might seem to fall into the trap of subject-centric approaches, given its reactionary as opposed to purely active nature, I propose this as a first step towards an engagement with encounters between ontologically diverse (even oppositional) materials. This stems from a recognition that study of *human*-object encounters will inevitably borrow from subject-centred approaches to agency and action. At the same time, the very study of misbehaviour exposes the inadequacies of the available framework by offering a self-critical exploration of behaviour and agency. This, I attempt to show, opens a door for new frameworks that would allow a less anthropocentric engagement with human-object assemblages, while acknowledging the inability to walk through the door.

Things, Objects, and Malfunction

What I understand as object misbehaviour has often been articulated as the threshold between objects and things. This difference as explained by Heidegger is a way to separate not between two *kinds* of entities, but instead to signal a changed relation to us.[3] Object theorists use a range of terms to chart a difference between things' specific relations to people and the aspect of their being that is irreducible to such relations. Bill Brown argues that things mark an 'amorphousness' and 'anterior physicality' *before* human encounter materialises the object.[4] At the same time, these sensuous and metaphysical presences mark an excess that is irreducible to objects as latent presences *after* or *beyond* objects. Things are then at once *not yet* and *not only* objects. Heidegger explains this threshold with the example of a hammer in his famous tool-analysis: a hammer calls our attention to itself as an object in the moment that it breaks, malfunctions, and obstructs the task at hand. He offers two ways of encountering things: 'readiness-to-hand' where both thing and user disappear in a moment of pure usage and 'presence-at-hand' where we stop being unreflective, stepping back to consciously analyse and observe. The latter happens in specific coordinates of the encounter, say when the hammer breaks and becomes a hurdle, refusing to disappear.[5] Other object theories reach similar conclusions while using different terms: for

[3] See Graham Harman, 'Technology, Objects and Things in Heidegger', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 34:1 (2010), 17–25 (p. 19).
[4] Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28:1 (2001), 1–22 (p. 5).
[5] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), pp. 98-99.

Brown, 'we confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us'[6] and similarly for Leo Stein, 'It is when an instrument ceases to work as an instrument […] that it gets to be an object', something that demands 'our most particular attention'.[7] If thing as opposed to object is seen by what can be called classical object theories as *a priori* to representation and beyond the reach of ideas, the thing emerges as something untenable, apprehensible through objects' misbehaviour. Misbehaviour creates crevices in subject-object relations, allowing space for the upsurge of the thing.

Whether articulated as presence versus instrument, instrument versus object, or object versus thing, they engender a similar dialectic of misbehaviour, expressing a similar phenomenon of the chinks in relations of use created by objects' malfunction. While usability is seen as the 'ontological foundation of a thing'[8] in Heidegger's tool-analysis, he does not hold objects to be reducible to their functionality. Sara Ahmed describes this divergence from functionality as 'queer use'. Queer as something 'odd, strange, unseemly, disturbed, disturbing' or 'anything that is noticeable because it is odd' has overlaps with the upsurge of the thing in objects. Giving the example of a sledgehammer that might be used as a paperweight, she argues that use does not necessarily correspond to intended function, describing queer use as a form of 'perversion' or improper use.[9] The fact that objects produce hurdles and surprises implies that there are residues beyond relations of usability. Similarly, Song argues, 'things, even in use, are considered actively in terms of design, aesthetics, symbolic properties and sentimental values'[10] thus engendering corresponding possibilities of malfunction. Objects are never squarely encountered as readiness-to-hand or presence-at-hand, instruments or things, but oscillate between and even cohabit the two modes. Harman reading Heidegger contends:

> Such a reversal is possible at any moment. An entity malfunctions and loudly announces itself; later, the same entity might retreat into the background and be taken for granted once again. Objects can withdraw into their hidden underground action or they can become objects of explicit awareness. In fact, they do both simultaneously: the hammer is faintly felt even when we invisibly used it, and something withdraws in objects even when we explicitly stare at them.[11]

---

[6] Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 4.
[7] Leo Stein, *The A-B-C of Aesthetics* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927), qtd. in Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 75.
[8] Jungmin Song, 'Death and the Anthropomorphic Life of Objects in Performance: Marina Abramović's *Nude with Skeleton* and Other Animations', *Performance Research*, 20.2 (2015), 4–11 (p. 4).
[9] Sara Ahmed, *What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), pp. 197, 201.
[10] Song, 'Death and the Anthropomorphic Life of Objects', p. 5.
[11] Harman, 'Technology, Objects and Things in Heidegger', p. 19.

Since there can be no 'purely everyday, nonreflexive moment'[12] that according to classical object theories, sustains an object's stability, objects and things are two modes of being, wherein they can coexist, alternately withdraw, or burst forth.

As seen from the above discussion, there is a long history of scholarly focus on objects' difference from and potential to become things. The critical focus and even fixation on the object/thing dialectic has led to a stalemate of definitions and semantics. Studies on objects from across disciplines register a need to propound an original, individual understanding of "pure" things and offer arguments to the debate of whether these are tenable. The only way out of this critical standstill, if the aim is not the excavation of the object as a purely philosophical, psychological, or phenomenological entity but a worthy subject and tool of analysis, is to move beyond the matter of object/thing. As Brown suggests, 'only by turning away from the problem of matter, and away from the object/thing dialectic, have historians, sociologists, and anthropologists been able to turn their attention to things.'[13] Furthermore, since objects are possessed by a wide range of other values and meanings beyond use and function, their misbehaviour is not always restricted to malfunction and thus not dependent on their lapsing into things. In other words, thingness is not the only thing threatening objects' stability or "good behaviour". Misbehaviour then seems to at once entrench the discussion within the above deadlock by opening up the matter of object/thing, while also offering a way out by pointing to concerns beyond thingness.

Theatrical Misbehaviours

With theatrical objects, another layer is added to objects' relationship with function. On the one hand within theatrical representation specifically, objects' presence (beyond mere functionality) is heightened as their everyday use is either disrupted or staged.[14] On the other hand, stage objects perform a function, being used for a particular purpose, either different from or the same as their real-world function. Theatre multiplies an object's roles, directing it to serve the functions of semiosis, plot, temporality, genre, to name a few, often along with its real function. Sofer's robust study of 'props' covers a wide range of these functions: props perform, characterise, signify, defy conventions, and betray characters.[15] As such, theatrical representation can be seen as relying on objects' misbehaviour or 'queer use' given that staged things, specifically real objects, are often 'used for purposes other than the ones for which they were intended.'[16] The process of representation and staging of objects can then be seen as

[12] Jungmin Song, 'Death and the Anthropomorphic Life of Objects', p. 4
[13] Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 6
[14] For the debate within theatre semiotics about functional stage objects and the difference/similarity between their real and sign function, see Introduction.
[15] See Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), pp. 21-28.
[16] Ahmed, *What's the Use?,* p. 199.

dependent on their misbehaviour: the playtext might bid an object to be too close to its real behaviour and thus resist the representational basis of theatre, or to be not close enough requiring the impossibility of a disembodied and dematerialised sign, symbol, or idea such that its material presence is always an encumbrance. These two states might and often do coexist in varying degrees, as with the earlier discussion on the coexistence of objects and things. As discussed in the thesis introduction, States offers a solution proposing a binocular vision where a stage object is at once a representation and a thing, its 'thereness' both accepting and resisting sign function.[17] This nonetheless does not tame the misbehaviour but offers a critical approach to navigate it. Similarly, the dependence on misbehaviour is not only representational but also affects reception, as watching a staged object mandates a trust that it will not behave as real (a knife will not really kill, tripping on a banana peel is funny since it does not really break someone's leg). If objects are inherently prone to misbehaviour (as observed above), staging further enhances and at times harnesses their potential to disobey, misbehave, or fail. Theatre as an entanglement among already unstable (human and nonhuman) entities then complicates any attempts at creating a manual of "good" or expected object behaviour. Taking this a bit further, the interactions between ontologically diverse elements complicate a retrospective speculation of the intended or "right" behaviour of theatrical beings.

One way of attempting these speculations is by looking at the playtext as scripting or dictating object behaviour. While the authority of the text has often been questioned within theatre studies, current scholarship around staging and performance design attempts not to dethrone the text but to decentre it, and to see performance as a 'shared act' instead of a 'unidirectional telling',[18] sustaining the friction and divergences between the text and performance. Frances Babbage calls for 'embracing this divergence […] by exposing the distance between the story of the story and the story of the telling'. [19] Seeing misbehaviour as a divergence instead of a *going against* here would mean looking at a stage object's departure from its textual incarnation or scripted behaviour. This can be located at different junctures in a play's lifecycle: before, during, or after the theatrical event. As Karen Quigley has argued, textual materials have a history of refusing to translate into performance or materialise on stage, misbehaving even before tangibly existing. Some examples that she uses range from unstageable stage directions (Shakespeare's '*Exit pursued by a bear*'), theatre's dependence on the technology of the time (the problem of staging ghosts, for instance) to its dependence on social mores and the problem of 'unwatchability' (staging violence, bloodshed, and disgust, explored in my last chapter).[20] Similarly, an

[17] Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (University of California Press, 1987), p. 8.
[18] Frances Babbage, *Adaptation in Contemporary Theatre: Performing Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), p. 114.
[19] Ibid., p. 114.
[20] Karen Quigley, *Performing the Unstageable: Success, Imagination, Failure* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), p. 36.

object can be represented in a way different from what the playtext suggests, making its misbehaviour a performative intervention within the play. For instance, a 2006 Bengali production of *The Master Builder* directed by Kaushik Sen replaced the wreath that Solness places atop the tower in the playtext with a brass pitcher in the production.[21] Here, the misbehaviour is located and forged through the theatre maker's intervention. Furthermore, during the play, an object can refuse to perform as expected, like a wobbly table or a jammed door. Finally, material misbehaviour can also be located at the instance of reception. By inviting culturally, ideologically, or hermeneutically coded readings of a play or by resisting interpretation, objects can make the spectatorial encounter a site of misbehaviour against the text or the requirements of the playworld, undermining the playtext's authority. As I will explore in my analysis of *Hedda Gabler,* for example, the manuscript invites queer readings that disturb the bourgeois-heterosexual fabric of the Tesman home.

Beyond the playtext, an object or object-encounter might go awry and disobey the actor, intentionally (authorised by the text or the demands of the plot) or accidentally. An actor's/character's control of the object is not restricted to physical and functional (for instance being able to dictate its movement, use, presence and so on) but also covers other forms of figurative control like psychological notions of identity and ownership or its meanings and symbolic associations. With intentional misbehaviour, the object instead of disobeying the play or the actor, disobeys the character and perhaps spectatorial expectations (as with Vanya missing his target in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* or the various objects that refuse to behave in Beckett's plays), while with unintentional, the expectations of the actor, production, playtext, and audience can be betrayed. Lyn Gardner in a *Guardian* article relays the experience of watching a revival of *The Importance of Being Earnest* where a teapot-handle broke just as a character was trying to pour tea. She says that 'the moment was *galvanising* for both actors and audience, and we all laughed a great deal more for the rest of the show. It made everyone relax'.[22] An object's misbehaviour, depending on its degree of independence from human agents, can either create splintered loyalties between text, staging, and reception where its obedience to one leads to betrayal of the other (as I show in my discussion of the hand fan in *Lady Windermere's Fan*), or close the play-audience gap in a shared, 'galvanising' experience and betrayal of expectations. The material obedience/disobedience dialectic rarely follows such a simplistic binary and is further complicated by theatre's absorption machinery, which I will explore shortly.

---

[21] See Tapati Gupta, 'Contemporising Ibsen in Bengal' *Academia.edu* <https://www.academia.edu/33338246/Contemporising_Ibsen_in_Bengal_Identity_Modernity_Culture_as_Represented_in_Bengali_Adaptations_of_An_Enemy_of_the_People_A_Dolls_House_The_Master_Builder_and_When_We_Dead_Awaken> [accessed 23 May 2024].

[22] Lyn Gardner, 'Prop Flops: Why I Love It When Things Go Wrong on Stage', *The Guardian*, 3 July 2013, section Stage <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2013/jul/03/lyn-gardner-blog-theatre-mishaps> [accessed 15 May 2023], emphasis added.

Scenographic and Phenomenological Matters

Beyond these examples of the frictions of staging objects, some objects and encounters are especially peculiar and arguably incompatible with theatrical semiosis (briefly discussed in the introduction). Critics like Monks, Alter, and States among others use the examples of the skull, juggling, water, or fire to discuss intrinsically unstable, untameable, rogue, and messy objects/encounters that refuse to be contained by semiosis.[23] They are seen variously as uncanny, performant, nonsemiotic or *en soi* things that resist signification by insisting on their tangible materiality or thingness that leaks out of semiosis. Objects are not always interpreted, "read", demystified, or reified into signs but can be experienced and absorbed as enjoyable, disturbing, or shocking spectacles. This is in part because of the closing of the gap between represented and real object and the resultant potential for the 'upsurge of the real'.[24] Just as Heidegger's hammer becomes an obstacle to the task when it malfunctions, a stage object threatens to disrupt fictionality when it is suddenly *there*, either by refusing semiosis or by being too real. As discussed in the introduction, real objects embody a paradox and a 'phenomenal instability'[25] wherein 'the real objects required to validate the fiction may end up destroying it.'[26] While Nahm claims that this lies beyond the ambit of malfunction and misbehaviour, I argue that despite the lack of human intervention, these paradoxical objects can be seen as misbehaving against the phenomenological requisites of live (realist) theatre. If theatricality is seen as resting on a taming and transformation of the real materiality of the (object) world, objects that resist this taming disrupt the semiotic and phenomenological plane of reception.

Developments in scenography scholarship attempt to challenge a single animating source for theatre objects and thus question a recognisable imposer of behavioural codes, interrogating the centrality of human intentions as the source of the "liveness" of theatrical materials. Such decentring, echoed by ideas of 'thing power'[27] in new materialism or subject-object reciprocity in phenomenology, often circles around the debate of independent material agency, eliding over questions of imposed codes and their flouting by objects. An alternate approach to the scenographic decentring of human intentions

---

[23] See Aoife Monks, 'Human Remains: Acting, Objects, and Belief in Performance', *Theatre Journal*, 64.3 (2012), pp. 355–71; Jean Alter, *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), p. 32; Michael Kirby, 'Nonsemiotic Performance', *Modern Drama* 25 (1982), 105–111; Marvin Carlson 'Semiotics and Nonsemiotics in Performance', *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 3–9, and States, *Great Reckonings,* p. 29

[24] States, *Great Reckonings,* p. 31. An actor's body also occupies a tenuous position between reality and representation, with the classic 'not-not Hamlet' example. This is visible in instances of bodily functions and human errors like coughing, stumbling, forgetting and so on.

[25] Stanton B. Garner, 'Staging "Things": Realism and the Theatrical Object in Shepard's Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 8.3 (1998), p. 55.

[26] Nahm, 'Props Breaking Character', p. 193.

[27] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 17

is the recognition of a distributed potential for both creating rules and breaking them. Critics have argued that theatre, and particularly scenography, is never simply 'an index of the intentions of the Artist' which can simply follow 'cause and effect'.[28] The acknowledgement that it is not just the effect of misbehaviour but also the cause of imposing codes that can be performed by both human and nonhuman elements decentres the subject in ways beyond the mere passing of agency from subject to object.[29] Such murky, distributed, and multifoliate understandings of the source of misbehaviour disturb its simplistic understanding as a cause-and-effect dialectic of domination and resistance, acknowledging the ontological diversity and resultant instability of theatrical materials and encounters.

Objects organise not just our actions towards them, as we see in Heidegger's analysis where a jug demands to be filled/emptied,[30] but also our responses, ideas, and affective orientation towards them as we see with the stage presence of a weapon inciting dread or expectation of a dramatic closure. Sara Ahmed discusses the 'stickiness'[31] of affect as it attaches itself to objects (which I explore in detail in my discussion of *Hedda Gabler*). Equally, misbehaviour too can go beyond functional and phenomenological and become affective, if such ideas, emotions, and expectations are abruptly detached from their host objects, or if objects themselves invite alternate orientations, thus disorienting the subjects. Similarly, if objects can appropriate the ostensibly human capacity to encode behaviour, they can also appropriate a sense of betrayal when their subjects misbehave. A famous example is Chekhov's seagull that provoked 'derisive laughter, hissing, and catcalls at the Alexandrinsky Theatre in Petersburg in October 1896' as opposed to the rapt attention at the Moscow Art Theatre.[32] Given that here it is not the onstage entities but the audience that "break character", this can be seen as a spectatorial misbehaviour against the response demanded by the object, instead of the object's misbehaviour against the play and its expected reception.[33]

---

[28] Tim Ingold, 'The Textility of Making', *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34.1 (2010), 91–102 (p. 99).

[29] A very direct example of this inversion of hierarchy, where inanimate materials organise and direct human performances comes from Indian classical dance. Dancer Meenakshi Sheshadri points out how Indian dance forms like Odissi are derived from the sculptures that influence the postures of this dance, 'since these sculptures are flat, there is little scope to, say, stretch your arms. So, the span of movements is limited in Odissi' (translation mine). Here, materials outside performance are directing body techniques, aesthetics, and choreography, essentially drawing the contours of the dancer's embodied mimesis and performance. 'Baaje Payal Meenakshi Sheshadri ep. 1', Prasar Bharti Archives*,* online video, Youtube, November 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OC3stq_Bno8 [accessed 15 May 2023].

[30] 'The vessel's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds.' Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennical Classics, 2001), pp. 165-167.

[31] Sara Ahmed, 'Happy Objects' in *The Affect Theory Reader* eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 29–52 (p. 29).

[32] Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, p. 209.

[33] Objects' potential to evoke misbehaviour instead of misbehaving themselves is harnessed in Marina Abramovic's live performances. In *Rhythm 0,* the audience is invited to do what they would like to her using the objects on a table, which included needles, a rose, hammer, and a loaded gun, while she stood still for 6 hours.

Theatrical materials are unstable because of their encounters with materials across the animate-inanimate spectrum and because they lie at a cross-section of a network of competing codes. At the same time, theatre posits a degree of tolerance for disruption, instability, and mess. States uses a digestive metaphor to explain theatre's relationship with "untheatrical" substances (he specifically discusses real objects) and argues that theatre can 'incorporate almost anything into its diet'. He explains this using Kafka's parable of the leopards:

> Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial chalices dry; this occurs repeatedly, again and again: finally it can be reckoned on beforehand and becomes part of the ceremony.[34]

Just as here, repeated profanation becomes sacred, so does theatre rehearse the absorption and digestion of misbehaving elements that threaten to disrupt semiosis. This dynamic can be seen in the introduction of real furnishings in nineteenth century French theatre or eating and drinking on stage with the rise of European naturalism (discussed in the introduction). Just as the leopards repeatedly cause disturbance before being ceremonialised, theatre rehearses the theatricalization of untheatrical and/or misbehaving objects. This parable not only captures the ritualistic view of theatre but also its elasticity. In theatre's absorption machinery, the sharp edges are smoothened, incongruity flattened, and shock absorbed as misbehaviour on stage is not always read as such.

While objects jutting out of representation is not unusual, there is a certain phenomenological inertia that engulfs the theatrical event (including reception). An example that demonstrates this more clearly is the performance of the restoration play, Nathaniel Lee's *The Rival Queens*. Sofer discusses:

> Restoration actress Elizabeth Barry used a stage dagger to stab Mrs. Boutel during a performance of Nathaniel Lee's *The Rival Queens* after a quarrel over a veil […] While this rupture of the dagger's sign-function by its practical use as a weapon is an example of "action force" with a vengeance, presumably at least some spectators "read" the action as a gruesomely realistic sign […] the distinction between "acting" as imitation (mimesis) and acting as doing (kinesis) is problematic [and…] erases the line between presence and representation.[35]

The encounter between her still body and the objects' violent potential offered an invitation to the audience that quickly turned aggressive: 'they cut up my clothes, stuck rose thorns in my stomach, one person aimed the gun at my head, and another took it away'. Nevenka Koprivšek, 'Audience To Be', *The Theatre Times*, 2019 <https://thetheatretimes.com/audience-to-be/> [accessed 22 May 2024].

[34] States, *Great Reckonings*, p. 40

[35] Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, p. 207

The misbehaviour here is ironically located in the dagger serving its real function.[36] While here some would have read the mishap as a part of the play, in other instances, accidents are more apparent as with the 1613 performance of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* at the Globe where a cannon was shot and a spark in its thatch led to a fire.[37] These examples are two ends on the spectrum of the semiotic absorption of material misbehaviours. These can range from disruption of fictionality, complete absorption of the misbehaviour, recognition by some while not by others, and even a recognition that ends up supporting the fiction.

The fluidity, countless contingencies, and permutations of live theatre, with its unstable and intrinsically heterogenous phenomena of reception stifles any assertions about the "breaking point" of theatricality and the degree of misbehaviour it might tolerate. Any such speculation is neither possible nor universally applicable. However, this negotiation between the fact of material misbehaviour and the near impossibility of tracing its exact moment of recognition, given the elasticity and malleability of theatricality, reveals reception to be constitutive and indispensable in creating misbehaving theatrical objects. This is particularly significant in the case of what can be called extra-theatrical misbehaviours. While most object-centric disruption can be said to be uncontainable within the bounds of the fourth wall and thus never fully "intra-theatrical", by extra-theatrical malperformances I mean the explicit crossing over of objects between stage and audience (as I will explore in my consideration of the carnation in the first production of *Lady Windermere's Fan).*

Theatre does not take real objects from 'environment to imagery' but parades the process of this transformation 'in transit'.[38] This temporal unfolding and becoming discussed above is the essential difference between textual or fictional objects in general and staged objects of theatre. This also makes theatre not just tolerant of misbehaviour and instability but dependent on it. While object misbehaviours might be disciplined or absorbed by generic, formal, or conventional strictures, this taming happens despite their presence not instead of it. Furthermore, these strictures are dependent on the socio-cultural moment and conventions which are, as I will now explore, themselves constantly interrogated from within in the case of modernist theatre.

Locating Misbehaviour: Modernism

[36] Another example of this phenomenon of absorption comes from a 1970s Bollywood film, *Mera Naam Joker* where the protagonist's (a stage clown's) onstage death is read as a comedy routine by the audience. We as the audience of the film watch audience of the clown's performance (mis)reading the theatrical mishap as fiction. This is a peculiar example where theatrical absorption is itself staged, the process of absorption is itself fictionalised and (cinematically) dramatized.

[37] See Randall Martin, *Shakespeare and Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 84.

[38] States, *Great Reckonings*, p. 40.

From a more general consideration of theatrical misbehaviour, I would like to now move to my specific concern with late nineteenth–early twentieth century theatre objects and misbehaviours located within the itself fraught category of modernism. The particular field of modernist theatrical objects is located at the crossroads of theatre with its reliance on human and nonhuman action and performance, and modernism with, as some New Modernist scholars have argued, its reliance on rebellion and "badness". Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz in the introduction to *Bad Modernisms* outline modernism's 'bad manners' and its antagonism towards established artistic traditions and inherited standards of aesthetic values and 'good' and 'bad' art.[39] They hold that while disobedience of past conventions may not have been new, with modernism, art was more invested than ever before in its relationship with dominant aesthetic standards and values. Bad behaviour then becomes the essence of modernism as a movement. Irving Howe suggests that one of the distinct features (if we admit any unifying characteristic) is a kind of permanent opposition by writers and artists.[40] Such approaches cast modernism as an *enfant terrible*, rebelling against and violating codified artistic styles and behaviours. Mao and Walkowitz draw from early twentieth century scholars like Adorno and Greenberg who note that the new art was most engaging when it 'seemed to turn away' and reject 'the way things are'.[41] This rejection and disobedience include a resistance to happy sentiments and endings, uncritical adaptation of traditional forms, complacency to social order, and moral legibility as an artistic standard. Resistance was not just directed towards tradition, complacent representation and reception, and 'was-ness' but also towards the limitations of its own medium,[42] resulting in experiments in both form and content.

The early twentieth century saw writers' preoccupation with artistic transgressions and border crossing that spanned across stylistic innovations and experiments with intermediality, linguistic and cultural exchange, and traversing of genres and forms. Such encounters emphasise unpredictability, plurality, and variability that make the modernist form dynamic and protean, destabilising inherited artistic manners. The interest in experimentation manifested in the intertextuality and imagism of modernist poetry, surrealism's material bricolage, novelistic ekphrasis and synaesthesia, and was carried forth in mid–late century (postmodernist) engagement with pastiche, collage, kitsch, and play. Within theatre, this emerged through intermedial encounters — for instance use of the screen device, art objects, along with more overt ekphrastic references to other art forms.[43] The disobeying of formal

[39] Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz. *Bad Modernisms* (New York: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 3.
[40] See Irving Howe, 'Introduction: The Idea of the Modern', *Literary Modernism* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1967), 11–40 (pp. 23–24).
[41] Mao and Walkowitz, *Bad Modernisms,* p. 4.
[42] Mao and Walkowitz borrow from Clement Greenberg and suggest, 'art could only find ''new and adequate cultural forms for the expression of [bourgeois] society'' by fixing on problems intrinsic to each artistic medium (the flatness of the canvas in painting, for example)' ibid, p. 4.
[43] One prominent example of this is the tendency in realist drama to refer to "scandalous" books to establish characters morality and relationship with convention. This can be seen in the pastor's disapproval of Mr

stipulations and loyalties, many critics argue, interrogated and disturbed the differences between high modernism, 'low' art, and mass culture (as I explore in my discussion on Wilde's aesthetics).

While the inclusion and celebration of intermedial, experimental, and heterogenous currents can itself be seen as a rebellion against established rules, the constituting materials themselves would have been new for the artists, the encounters leading to novel and unpredictable responses. A particular kind of intermedial encounter was the inclusion of objects in literary works: from the eponymous art object in *The Golden Bowl* to still life paintings and compositions like 'the carefully arranged dish of fruit and a seashell'[44] in *To the Lighthouse.*[45] As modernist writings incorporate nonliterary arts and media, these encounters, Cara L. Lewis argues, mould the modernist form which emerges as dynamic, elastic, and forgiving. Such pluralistic experiments that pit incongruous elements together and fuel unpredictable encounters also leave these works vulnerable to failure. As Mao and Walkowitz observe, '[t]o this day, no other name for a field of cultural production evokes quite the constellation of negativity, risk of aesthetic failure, and bad behavior that "modernism" does.'[46] Nevertheless, critics like Garner, Mao, and Lewis hold that this period saw artists capitalising on the phenomenal instability of the unruly materials of art and intermediality.[47]

Mao argues that 'a persistent assumption has been that badness is at once the essence and the Achilles heel of modernist art.'[48] While this results in a degree of formal self-consciousness, there is also a degree of accepted and arguably even prescriptive bad behaviour in mid-twentieth century European artistic experiments. By the end of the century, modernism came to be seen as continuous with rather than a challenge to a certain conformity and orthodoxy, as it garnered support and patronage from institutional, commercial, and university apparatus, along with the works of new critics that suggested that it was in sync rather than at war with tradition. As it became widely popular, it lost its subversive thrust and thus also its connection with political radicalism, getting confined to a 'highly selective field […] in an act of pure ideology'.[49] With the 'domestication of the once bad',[50] the resistance to absorption into surrounding culture led to a continual 'raising the ante of sensation and shock—itself a course leading perversely to its growing popularity with the bourgeois audience.'[51] The

---

Alving's books in Ibsen's *Ghosts* or Amanda's objection to Tom reading D.H. Lawrence in *The Glass Menagerie.*

[44] Cara L. Lewis, *Dynamic Form: How Intermediality Made Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020), p. 13.

[45] This is also reflected in the collaborative relationship between modernist writers and visual artists: Woolf and Bloomsbury painters, Gertrude Stein and Picasso, Ibsen and Edward Munch among others.

[46] Mao and Walkowitz, *Bad Modernisms,* p. 4

[47] See Ibid; Garner, 'Staging "Things"'; Lewis, *Dynamic Form.*

[48] Mao and Walkowitz, *Bad Modernisms,* p. 2

[49] Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, (London: Verso, 1996), p. 34.

[50] Mao and Walkowitz, *Bad Modernisms,* p. 5.

[51] Howe, 'Introduction', p. 24

questioning of inherited hierarchies and customs was by the middle of the century transformed into institutional security, as postmodernism and avant-garde came to stand for the defiance of the "manners" associated with modernism.

The taming and domestication of modernism's subversion and misbehaviour, its institutionalisation and ironic transformation into an artistic prescription follow the pattern of Kafka's parable and the theatrical absorption of misbehaviour. As newness and flouting of norms by a work of art became the condition for its acceptability, it replayed both the larger cultural materialist analysis of the absorption of emergent culture into the dominant,[52] as well as the more specific acceptance of misbehaviour in/as art that has arguably increased with increased tolerance of artistic nonconformity.[53] We see here that the adoption of newness and subversion as a defining feature by modernist writers turns their creation into an artistic sponge that absorbs (to an extent that, as discussed above, is hard to ascertain) internal or external misbehaviours. That the absorption occurs at the moment of reception is a testament to the fact that modernism was not just "making it[self] new" but also rewriting readerly and spectatorial behaviours and habits. Many new approaches to modernism attempt to reinvest its original misbehaviour and badness that have been critically and institutionally tamed. I draw on Lewis's argument that by aiming to 'recognize modernism's original badness (or to make a goody-two-shoes modernism bad again), the field as a whole seeks to revive modernism's buried histories and suppressed politics'.[54] Reading the misbehaviour of modernist objects then becomes a matter of materially locating, recognising, and recovering modernism's original unruliness.

*

The first case study in this chapter explores three main disobedient objects in *Hedda Gabler*: pistols, manuscript, and Hedda's body. I use the above framework to tap into objects' ability to misbehave against established critical approaches, especially associated with Hedda's psyche, sexuality, and morality. The discussion traces 'sticky' and 'scriptive' material misbehaviours as they collect and coalesce around objects, encounters, and assemblages. It explores misbehaviour as not stemming from a single source but co-emerging through encounters between objects, bodies, and imposed generic,

[52] See Raymond Williams, 'Dominant, Residual, and Emergent' *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121-127

[53] This is not just restricted to theatrical malperformances but can also include, for example, the many instances of people mistaking ordinary or random objects for art in galleries. Elle Hunt, 'Pair of Glasses Left on US Gallery Floor Mistaken for Art', *The Guardian*, 27 May 2016, section US news. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/may/27/pair-of-glasses-left-on-us-gallery-floor-mistaken-for-art> [accessed 15 May 2023].

[54] Lewis, *Dynamic Form*, p. 5

gendered, and behavioural codes. Attempting to intervene in the critical preoccupation with Hedda's interiority, I engage with various forms of misbehaviours performed by the objects: functional, temporal, gendered, and even ontological, where objects misbehave against their objectness and conversely, Hedda's body invites its reading as an object.

The second case study adopts the chapter's spirit of misbehaviour and transgression in following a different approach from the first, and arguably from the other case studies in the thesis by moving both within and beyond the playworld. Here, I explore the misbehaviour of the eponymous fan in Wilde's play, tracing its movement across hands and its splintered and shifting loyalties. I then move on to the carnation, an object that spills from the first production and circulates across time, culture, and ideological affiliations. This is the only object in my work that makes such a long spatial and temporal journey spilling outside fiction, arguably making it the most misbehaving object of the thesis. I explore the carnation's cultural, queer, and commodified life in light of its misbehaviour in the first staging, reading it along with the larger misbehaviour of Wilde's oeuvre against critical disciplining.

IBSEN'S *HEDDA GABLER*

The original productions of *Hedda Gabler* in Munich and Copenhagen in 1891 were famously met with audience laughter and ridicule at Ibsen's 'unnatural woman'.[1] In the English language premiere of the play, Elizabeth Robins who played Hedda recalls an audience member declaring, 'Hedda is all of us'.[2] These famous responses are symptomatic of a larger trend in early scholarship, still prevalent to a degree in current approaches, that betrays a restlessness to reach a universalist and pithy verdict on her character. While some critical approaches go beyond the myth of the *femme fatale*, or the celebration of Hedda's universality,[3] arguing for instance that the play is both about women and about modernity, 'both feminist and universal',[4] most earlier readings attempt to rake the text to explain her character, motives, and morality, and by extension the end.[5] The latter half of the twentieth century saw a move towards interiority in examining Hedda's identity and psyche. These approaches showed an eagerness to put her on the psychoanalyst's couch, to diagnostically explain her discontent, boredom, and eventual death. While these readings have reinvigorated previous scholarship that deemed Hedda a failed New Woman,[6] 'she-devil' and 'cobra-like',[7] or hysterical, often suggesting a certain poetic justice in her end, the argument rarely progresses beyond Hedda's incomprehensibility, her 'complexity and grandeur'[8] and yearning for freedom and beauty as markers of the *fin-de-siécle* modernist condition. I attempt to go beyond these subject-oriented readings to suggest that while Hedda's identity, motive, morality, and personal philosophy leave an indelible mark on the fabric of the play and its reception, these approaches also overlook (Hedda's encounters with) the play's rich material topography, and its role in the continued interest in the play, both critical and creative. I will explore the recalcitrant, resistant, and

---

[1] Christopher Innes, *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2003), p. 47.

[2] Susan Torrey Barstow, '"Hedda Is All of Us": Late-Victorian Women at the Matinee', *Victorian Studies*, 43.3 (2001), 387–411 (p. 394).

[3] These include feminist readings such as Elenore Lester, 'Hedda — Frigid Woman or Life Bearer?', *The New York Times*, 7 March 1971, section Archives [accessed 26 May 2021]; Lior Levy, 'Reading Ibsen with Irigaray: Gendering Tragedy in *Hedda Gabler'*, *Ibsen Studies*, 17.1 (2017), 54-84; Elin Diamond, 'Realism and Hysteria: Toward a Feminist Mimesis', *Discourse*, 13.1 (1990-1), 59–92., Joan Templeton, 'The Deviant Woman as Hero' in *Ibsen's Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 204-229 and existential approaches such as Fred Rush, 'Two Pistols and Some Paper' in *Ibsen's Hedda Gabler: Philosophical Perspectives,* ed. Kristin Gjesdal (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 194–214 and Toril Moi, 'Hedda's Silences: Beauty and Despair in *Hedda Gabler*', *Modern Drama*, 56.4 (2013), 434-456.

[4] Toril Moi, 'Hedda's Silences', p. 438.

[5] Earlier readings that focused on Hedda's psyche and the play's end include Caroline W. Mayerson, 'Thematic Symbols in "*Hedda Gabler*"' *Scandinavian Studies*, 42.4 (November, 1950), 151-160 and Errol Durbach, 'The Apotheosis of *Hedda Gabler'*, *Scandinavian Studies ,* 43.2 (1971), 143-159.

[6] See Jenny Björklund, 'Playing with Pistols: Female Masculinity in Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler'*, *Scandinavian Studies*, 88.1 (2016), 1–16 (p. 1).

[7] Alla Nazimova, 'Ibsen's Women', in Innes, *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook,* 66–69 (p. 68).

[8] Toril Moi, 'Hedda's Silences', p. 436.

unruly objects in the play in an attempt to move the discourse beyond the critical stalemate of examining Hedda's identity and morality under a microscope and to use the lens of objects' misbehaviour to, if not break the stalemate, then to involve more pieces in the game.

My exploration of the objects in *Hedda Gabler* will reveal a degree of distinctly modernist *counting-on* misbehaviour in the play. The misbehaviours, transgressions, and rebellions have at their core the issue of objects going against imposed behavioural codes and their breach of the central rule of object-being as they resist their prescribed functional, ontological, ideological, and semiotic objectness. Beginning with a discussion on the larger material landscape of the play, I will then move on to exploring the specific objects — Hedda's pistols, Lövborg and Thea's manuscript, and Hedda's body — through an engagement with the text, selected productions, reviews, and critical and creative commentaries, placing them within a network of other objects and characters. I will locate misbehaviour within objects and encounters to dislocate its traditional affixation on Hedda, harnessing objects' power to offer counterreadings and betray their wielders, the play, habitual modes of reception, and other subject-imposed codes. Ultimately, applying material misbehaviour as a methodological approach to Ibsen's play, I attempt to uncover its tolerance of, even reliance on unstable and volatile materials.

Ibsen's Material Imagination

Before focusing on the specific misbehaving objects, it is worth exploring Hedda's relationship with her larger material environment. The first act of the play takes pains to place Hedda uncomfortably within a network of objects, mostly domestic. This is contrasted by the easy, effortless, even passionate object relationships of the other characters — be it Aunt Julle's excitement for her new hat or Tesman's obsession with books and the slippers that his sick aunt embroiders for him. When we turn to critical commentaries, both academic and those arriving out of productions, Hedda's relationship with her material environment emerges as a contentious, albeit secondary subject. Blanche Yurka's 1928-29 performance rejected the rendition of Hedda as evil (contradicting Alla Nazimova's influential establishing of Hedda as a vamp, malignant and demoniac in 1906)[9] and saw her instead as a modern woman *out of place* in her era. Laying considerable stress on the character's prehistory, she points out that there is no mention of her mother, concluding that she was a motherless child brought up by an indulgent father. This explains her 'capricious extravagance'[10] with respect to material possessions, be it the villa Tesman buys for her or her father's pistols.

[9] See Alla Nazimova, 'Ibsen's Women', p. 68.
[10] Blanche Yurka, 'Acting Hedda Gabler*'* in Innes, *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook*, p. 70.

This idea of Hedda being out of place in her environment is echoed by several critics and actors. Eva le Galliene in the 1927-28 production played the role with modern costumes and cigarettes to bring her closer to the contemporary audience. Pointing out the contradiction in the modern costumes and the lack of telephones and other modern objects, she argues that while the pistols may be old fashioned, the 'Hedda type' still persists and her reasons for having to die remain 'ageless and universal.'[11] A similar observation was made by William Archer who observed the geographical and temporal distancing of the play, set as it is in a deliberately 'old-fashioned society' apparent through the material environment. He argued that the environment is thoroughly national even though Hedda is an 'international type', a 'product of a civilisation by no means peculiar to Norway.'[12] From the above commentaries we see that Hedda's character and environment (both physical and temporal) stand at odds with each other. This friction is reminiscent of specifically naturalist concerns with the negotiation between inner-outer, psychology-surface, hereditary-environment that often stand for the larger trope of a friction between individual freedom and social obligation. These clashes are expressed by different commentators in different ways: a tussle between 'Will and Circumstance' for Archer,[13] an 'individual caught in a fact' for James,[14] an abyss between ideals and reality for Shaw,[15] and an attempt to impose will on noncompliant reality for Bradbrook.[16] The old fashioned pistols that Galliene brings up then condense the anachronism of Hedda's very presence in her material environment — her modern proto-existential 'ageless and universal'[17] concerns stare down the barrel of a pistol from a generation past.

The Pistols

The pistols are introduced through the idea of ownership from the outset as 'my pistols' and then 'General Gabler's pistols'[18] even before they appear. These material possessions are carriers of visceral phenomenon like murder more than expressions of abstract ideas or a character's identity (such as Tesman's books that define him as a researcher). From their very mention, Hedda's pistols challenge clear ownership:

---

[11] Eva le Galliene, 'Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler'* ibid., 72–74 (p. 74).
[12] William Archer, 'Introduction' in Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler: A Play in Four Acts*, tr. Edmund Gosse and William Archer (The Floating Press, 2009), p. 9.
[13] Ibid., p. 17.
[14] Henry James, 'On the Occasion of *Hedda Gabler*' in Michael Egan, *Henrik Ibsen: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1972), 234–244 (p. 243).
[15] See George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (London: Constable and company, ltd., 1922), p. 124.
[16] See Muriel Clara Bradbrook, *Ibsen, the Norwegian: A Revaluation* (London Chatto & Windus, 1966), p. 116.
[17] Eva le Galliene, 'Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler',* p. 74.
[18] Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler and Other Plays,* trans. Una Ellis-Fermor (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 295. All subsequent references will be from this translation and appear as in-text page numbers.

> HEDDA [*crossing the room towards the back*]. Well, anyhow, I still have one thing to kill time with.
> TESMAN [*beaming with pleasure*]. Thank heavens for that! But what is it, Hedda? Eh?
> HEDDA [*at the centre doorway, looking at him with lurking contempt*]. My pistols, Jörgen.
> TESMAN [*anxiously*]. Your pistols!
> HEDDA [*with cold eyes*]. General Gabler's pistols. (295)

Tracing their movement through the textual and theatrical space reveals their increasingly evasive nature. They stand as counterpoints to other objects introduced in the first act: the stifling, prosaic domesticity of Aunt Julle's hat or Tesman's slippers and books are rejected and even mocked by Hedda in favour of the morbid drama of her father's pistols. Muriel Bradbrook contends that Hedda is ruled by her 'militant blood'[19] and Ibsen himself said, 'Hedda is to be regarded rather as her father's daughter than her husband's wife.'[20] For Hedda, the pistols are a time machine, something 'to kill time with' as souvenirs of her past and heirlooms of a masculine, chivalric, militant tradition she both inherits from her father and appropriates as an emblem of her own female masculinity (as Jenny Björklund puts it).[21] How do pistols themselves misbehave once introduced?

Act One ends with the dramatic eruption of 'those dangerous things' (295) within a dull domestic environment, only through words but with a promise of an accompanying spectacle. The beginning of the second act delivers this, with a melodramatic portrait of Hedda loading a pistol. This image does not do much to cushion the shock when she takes a shot at Brack through the glass door, missing him. While the play is unclear on the intended trajectory of the shot, it can be taken as implied to be an intended misfire, given Hedda's playful warning to shoot Brack for taking the rear entrance and her later exclamation, 'Dear me! I didn't hit you, did I?' (296). Furthermore, given the point at which this shot is taken, the shock of the shot is short lived since a death at this point would be premature. The effect of the melodramatic shot is then ameliorated by an awareness that this is in fact a realist play that does not jump the gun. The shot reveals the reader's/audience's familiarity with theatrical and generic codes and competence of deciphering those codes. This is what Robin Bernstein terms 'performance competence', wherein a competent performer understands how a thing 'scripts broad behaviours' and is able to decode 'a thing's invitation to dance'.[22] In the 2016 Ivo van Hove

---

[19] Bradbrook, *Ibsen, the Norwegian,* p. 117
[20] Susan L. Feagin, 'Where Hedda Dies: The Significance of Place' in Kristin Gjesdal *Ibsen's Hedda Gabler,* 48–70 (p. 69).
[21] See Björklund, 'Playing with Pistols', p. 2.
[22] Robert Bernstein, 'Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race' Social Text 27.4 (2009), 67–94 (p. 75).

production,[23] Brack stands behind the audience when Hedda points her pistol. The audience stares down the barrel of the gun; any misfires at Brack are then direct aims at the audience. This further embeds the audience's competence and trust as the impotent pistol shot evokes surprise only to mock it. The scripted dysfunction of the pistol demystifies the sensational object and ruptures only to repair both the generic and domestic fabric. In other words, this moment functions as a dramatic trustfall where the object's misbehaviour ironically forges a belief in its obedience to the character. While saying that the threat of death is eliminated with this misfire would be a stretch (and also perhaps inaccurate, given the shadow of the Chekhovian gun looming large), the threat of the gun disobeying its wielder is paradoxically omitted with its functional misbehaviour.

Beyond playing with functionality, the pistols further mediate the reader's/audience's trust and expectations by playing with temporality. Before Brack's arrival, Hedda plays with the pistols in the inner room. Andrew Sofer argues that here, Hedda's gun freezes time into a 'pictorial mise-en-scène' highlighting the friction between her 'pictorial strategy' to create something of 'spontaneous beauty' and the linear momentum of the play.[24] This attempt to 'spatialise time'[25] is echoed in a *Daily Telegraph* review that called the play a 'ghastly picture beautifully painted.'[26] Playing with the pistol gives her a time out from the chronological action of the play, to 'temporally break the action and produce arresting visual images.'[27] She casually rests its muzzle on her belly as if to arrest any growth, biological or narrative, that might turn a static two-dimensional painting into a progressing story with linear action and momentum. Guns on stage specifically have the potential to rupture and distort stage time as an 'insult to mortal time'.[28] Their very presence on stage gives rise to the paradoxical simultaneities of stage time versus real time,[29] provoking in the audience an anticipation of closure. As noted above, the pistols help arrest action as Hedda plays with them, breaking away from the unfolding plot. They also carry the opposite time signature, that of a plot device anticipating and insisting on the denouement, as they embody the Chekhovian imperative to go off. Sofer further argues, 'a gun often kills protagonist and play with a single shot'[30] observing that with its presence the spectator becomes aware of the play's end, and this expectation of dramatic closure makes the play self-aware.[31] Guns disturb theatricality

[23] *Hedda Gabler* by Henrik Ibsen, National Theatre, London, December 2016, dir. by Ivo van Hove.
[24] Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props,* p. 201.
[25] ibid., p. 201.
[26] Qtd. in Christopher Innes, *A Sourcebook on Naturalist Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 115.
[27] Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, p. 178.
[28] Ibid., p. 171
[29] According to Brian Richardson, in every play three different clocks are set in motion- story time, text time, and stage time- that do not follow a single chronology but are 'independent and often battling forms.' '"Time Is Out of Joint": Narrative Models and the Temporality of the Drama', *Poetics Today* 8 (1987), 299–309 (p. 308).
[30] Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, p. 169.
[31] Many critics have observed the paradoxical relationship between theatrical realism and the linear trajectory of a play: Henry J. Schmidt argues that as the dramatic closure approaches, the work becomes more 'self-

through an insistence on real time, affecting awareness of an impending death of perhaps a character but undoubtedly the play. In *Hedda Gabler,* the pistols embody a lost past (inherited from her father) and a lacking future, but for a brief moment they are the locus of Hedda's creative energies, her distorted *joie de vivre* and her muses that assist (and sabotage) her aesthetic project.

Hedda then sees arresting time into a picture as the only way to apprehend beauty but just as 'the ridiculous and the sordid lies like a curse' on everything she touches (359), so is her idea of beauty inevitably bound with death. She attempts to orchestrate Lövborg's death:

> HEDDA. And what are you going to do, then?
> LÖVBORG. Nothing. Only make an end of the whole business. The sooner the better.
> HEDDA [*a step nearer*]. Ejlert Lövborg, listen to me. Could you not see to it that – that it is done beautifully? (344)

Although she hands over her pistol to Lövborg, the ownership of the 'souvenir' is clear (435). The pistol's allegiance and loyalty has been put to the test in the second act, where it obeys Hedda in its ostensible misfire, as discussed above. Despite this, Hedda's aesthetic project to orchestrate Lövborg's death beautifully fails with his unintended emasculating shot.[32] Her script is replaced by the object's as it (mis)arranges Lövborg's wound and body in defiance of her directions. Bernstein explores the power of objects to 'script' behaviour, action, performance, and even resistance.[33] In this light, the gun's misbehaviour is not just a flouting of its owner's script, but also transgressing its own prescribed position by moving from an obedient possession to a scriptive thing, appropriating the anthropomorphic faculty to 'have power over a human being's fate.' (324)

The object's misbehaviour involves not its 'thing power'[34] or an absence of passivity but a human imposition and a material disobedience thereof. Lövborg's use of the gun is further reminiscent of an earlier narrative presence of not just the object but this particular configuration or 'assemblage'[35]

---

conscious' while June Schlueter points out that all plays are suicidal in that a play's 'energies are directed toward its own destruction.' Henry J. Schmidt, *How Dramas End* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 1; June Schlueter, *Dramatic Closure: Reading the End* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995), p. 22.

[32] There is an interesting discussion about the translation of the word *underlivivet* where Lövborg shoots himself. While it has been translated in English as the stomach (as in Rolf Fjelde's and Una Ellis-Fermor's translations) it literally means 'below the waist' and, as critics like Jenny Björklund argue, the genitals. 'Playing with Pistols' p. 12. This is made explicit in Ivo Van Hove's production, where Brack gestures towards his genitals when giving an account of Lövborg's death.

[33] Bernstein, 'Dances with Things', pp. 68-69.

[34] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter,* p. 17.

[35] Ibid., p. 21.

of the object and misfire: Hedda pointing a pistol at Brack. There is a crucial difference between these two gestures, Hedda's being an intended misfire, and Lövborg's clearly accidental:

> BRACK: […] Did he try to pull the pistol out of his pocket to threaten her? And is that how it went off? Or did she snatch the pistol out of his hand, shoot him and put it back in his pocket again? (361)

While it is made clear that he did intend on taking the shot, a degree of ambiguity due to it being offstage notwithstanding, the accident here is the aim of the shot, which in defiance of Hedda's prescriptions, ends up being farcical rather than tragically beautiful.

The offstage object-encounter of Lövborg's death is then materially intertextual in that it evokes the same nexus of object and idea as Hedda shooting at Brack. While many theorists and thinkers have described this material intertextuality in different terms, from Carlson's 'ghosting' to Monks's 'relics' (which I will explore later),[36] Brecht's 'quotable gesture' and beyond theatre, Butler's bodily 'citationality' or Somnath Hore's *kshatachintā,*[37] I suggest the intertextual misfire lends itself to its reading as an affectively 'sticky' gesture. Sara Ahmed understands affect as 'what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects'.[38] The pistol's misbehaviour is beyond merely citational: it does not just evoke its earlier presence but also *sticks to* the wielder. While it disobeys Hedda's script and becomes scriptive, Lövborg too defies Hedda's directions and ends up in Mdm. Diana's boudoir. The misbehaviour can be seen as sticking to the pistol and then rubbing off on Lövborg, suggesting that resistance and disobedience are not only phenomena stemming from the object but that co-emerge through the particular affective configuration of the object, idea, and human encounter. Reading the misbehaviour of this configuration allows material affect to reinvigorate new materialist agency and assemblage of bodies and objects by including 'sticky' ideas into its thinking on embodied object-encounters.

After Lövborg's death, Brack comes to control the truth about the pistols' ownership, indirectly holding power over Hedda. The control of the object is both literally (who possesses it) and

---

[36] Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 7; Monks, 'Human Remains', p. 358.

[37] Lindsay Reckson, 'Gesture', *Keywords*, 2015 <https://keywords.nyupress.org/american-cultural-studies/essay/gesture/> [accessed 24 February 2023]; Shlomo Gleibman, 'Bodily Citationality and Hermeneutical Sex: Text, Image, and Ritual as Tools for Queer Intimacies', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/ Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*, 48.1 (2021); Shaon Basu, 'The Quotable Gesture', *ASAP Art,* January 2023, <https://www.asapconnect.in/post/527/singlefiction/the-quotable-gesture> [accessed 24 February 2023].

[38] Sara Ahmed, 'Happy Objects', p 29.

epistemologically (who possesses knowledge of it) distributed across the play through its varied wieldings, posing a challenge to the owner and to the very idea of ownership. This challenge as seen above, comes from the pistol's disobedience to Hedda's aesthetic directions, its anthropomorphic scripting of the scene, as well as its affective stickiness to misbehaviour. This reading dislodges misbehaviour from Hedda's character, understanding it as a mode of affective entanglement between objects, subjects, scripts, and resistance. This dislodging does not (aim to) clear Hedda of the responsibility of handing Lövborg the pistol, but instead leverages material misbehaviours to move beyond the critical impasse of fixation on Hedda's motives and morality.

The Manuscript

At the end of the third act, Hedda declares her driving desire 'for once in my life to have power over a human being's fate' (324). When Thea asks her about her control over Tesman, she dismisses him as an unworthy subject for her to exercise control.[39] This desire takes various forms and tries various subjects out for size: Hedda briefly considers pushing Tesman into politics, orchestrates Lövborg and Thea's encounter only to disturb it by (re)inserting herself as his ally in Thea's place, manipulates Lövborg (a recovering alcoholic) into drinking and attending a party, and repeatedly threatens to burn Thea's hair, which eventually culminates in her burning of Lövborg and Thea's manuscript. Lövborg's death is preceded by this equally dramatically charged scene often read by critics in the "monstrous woman" camp to justify their stand.[40] Seen as the point of no return for Hedda, this codified critical approach to the scene fixates on the 'why' overlooking the 'how'. Going back to Hedda's desire to have control, this is expressed through her abundant material entanglements, seen to a degree with the pistols and more overtly with her burning of the manuscript.

Hedda's largely uncomfortable material relationships (established in Act One) extend to Lövborg and Thea's manuscript as she adopts a similar attitude of refusal to understand (or feign

[39] J. R. Northam points out the original connotations of names in the play: Tesman is reminiscent of the word 'tess' having, in Norwegian, ironic connotations of worthlessness : 'Han er ikke noe tess' – 'He's not worth much'. *Ibsen's Dramatic Method* (London: Faber & Faber, 1953) qtd. in Errol Durbach, 'The Apotheosis of *Hedda Gabler'*, p. 143.

[40] Many critics and actors have followed an approach of vilifying Hedda, which has created what I call the "monstrous woman" camp. For similar critical views see Bernard Shaw, 'The Lesson of Ibsen's Plays' in Innes, *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook* and Caroline W. Mayerson, 'Thematic Symbols in *Hedda Gabler'*. Errol Durbach observes that Joan Greenwood in Minos Volonakis's 1964 London production played Hedda as a 'wittily sardonic bitch who kills herself in a moment of pique' in 'The Apotheosis of *Hedda Gabler*', p. 144. Similar views are shared by actors playing Hedda such as Alla Nazimova (as discussed above) and Ruth Wilson. The latter says the character is 'not very forgiving' or 'not particularly nice'. Ruth Wilson 'An Interview with Ruth Wilson' qtd. in Olivia Gunn, 'Leaving the Theatre of Suffering: Two Endings—and a Color-Conscious Future?—for *Hedda Gabler'*, *Theatre Journal,* 73.2 (2021), 189–207 (p. 200).

interest) towards it. It might not be a stretch to claim that Hedda's "out of placeness" is characterised by apathy (and even to a degree hostility) to the surrounding objects in a world of passionate and loving object-relations. These are for her an attack on her own object-orientation and way of being, one that is interested in objects only as a window to a subject. I argue that the manuscript burning scene is a pivotal moment of crisis for Hedda, inciting a shift in her material approach and by extension, her way of being.[41] The manuscript's misbehaviour fuels a transformation in Hedda's (object) orientation, from anthropocentric (objects *as means to* a subject) to anthropomorphic (objects *as* subjects). Borrowing from Bill Brown's example (discussed in the introduction), by the end of this scene, she begins moving from *seeing through* the window of objects to *looking at* the window, as it stubbornly resists transparency.[42]

The manuscript's creation can be read through Elenore Lester's discussion on 'emotional cannibalism' or the parasitic preying on others' creativity and spirit that affects every character— Hedda and Thea depending on men, Brack and Aunt Julle leeching off of the vulnerable to feel needed and important, Tesman feeding off Lovberg's work who in turn uses women. This preying can be seen in the last act where Tesman and Thea attempt to rebuild the manuscript and are 'feeding off of Hedda's spirit for she is Lovberg's muse.'[43] However, with the manuscript, this cannibalism becomes particularly gendered, reminiscent of the idea of the 'anxiety of authorship'[44] with its connections with shame, hiding, and appropriating what is essentially, I suggest, women's creation.

If Hedda is the muse, Thea too is not merely a scribe. When Hedda asks if the nature of her relationship with Lövborg is one of student-teacher, Thea refuses, preferring the term 'comrade' instead (288). She further challenges Lövborg when he claims to have torn up the manuscript, 'After all, I had a share in the child, too' (342). Lövborg himself admits, 'Thea's whole soul was in that book' (344). The personal value and irreplaceability of the manuscript is highlighted in its constant description as a child. Seeing Hedda as the inspiration and Thea as the executor of Lovberg's life work reframes the manuscript as a stolen *écriture féminine* and its burning at the stake an effigy of a bond between women that cannot be in the Victorian bourgeois home. Hedda and Thea are pitted against each other from the outset, their descriptions show a lack and an abundance respectively of the traditional markers of

[41] Sara Ahmed suggests that orientation towards objects correspond to ways of being: 'orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as "who" or "what" we direct our energy and attention toward.' *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 3.

[42] See Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', pp. 2-4.

[43] Elenore Lester, 'Hedda — Frigid Woman or Life Bearer?' n.p.

[44] Anxiety of authorship is the idea proposed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to encapsulate a woman writer's radical fear that she is unable to compare to the male canon. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, (United Kingdom: Yale University Press, 2020).

femininity, particularly hair (272, 278). Hedda continually threatens to burn Thea's hair. This obsession and her generally volatile behaviour towards Thea have been seen by Ellen Mortensen as grounded in homosexual desire.[45] If we take this further, Hedda the muse and Thea the writer can be seen as the surrogate parents of the textual offspring. Here, Lövborg essentially comes between these two women and is killed off. Coming back to the manuscript-child, these contesting claims over and relationships with the object pave the way for its misbehaviour. As a symbolic child, it misbehaves by inviting a queer reading that uncovers the homoerotic Hedda-Thea subplot, becoming what Davidson and Rooney call a 'queer object' that can 'illuminate, affect, and animate queer modes of being'.[46]

Blanche Yurka has talked about her different staging choices in the manuscript burning scene where, instead of placing the manuscript on the desk upstage as Ibsen directs, it was placed in a large box on the centre table. As Hedda lifts the lid to return to Lövborg his manuscript, his mention of Thea changes her mind and she lets the lid fall 'with a soft dull thud, a sound which […] "was like a closing of a coffin lid."'[47] Yurka uses the fireplace instead of a stove to burn the manuscript, observing that 'one could almost smell the burning flesh as Hedda whispered, "I'm burning your child, Thea! […]"'.[48] The murkiness of the animate-inanimate, subject-object categories or continuum becomes pronounced in these encounters between the living characters and the anthropomorphised thing. The manuscript's prominence within the play is not owing to its material, sensory properties, or its (mal)function as with the pistols, but due to its role first as Lövborg's prized possession and then as a symbolic child. Before its eventual death, it changes from merely a symbolic thing to an anthropomorphic manuscript-child and essentially a quasi-subject. Beyond rupturing the heterosexist fabric of the play, it further misbehaves by defying and hence questioning clear categories of thing, symbol, extended self, possession, or a child with unclear parentage.

Hedda expresses her scepticism and resistance to the manuscript's shift from a passive object, symbolic of the characters' relationship and creation to an anthropomorphised thing, complaining, 'when all's said and done, this – well, this was only a book.' (343)[49] As seen earlier with her desire to have control over someone, objects then come across as inadequate subjects of attention for Hedda, who uses them as tools to objectify and have control rather than as worthy subjects in themselves. This

---

[45] See Ellen Mortensen 'Feminine floker i ibsens *Hedda Gabler*.' *Edda* 93 (4) 2006, qtd. in Björklund, 'Playing with Pistols', p. 5.
[46] Guy Davidson and Monique Rooney, *Queer Objects* (New York: Routledge, 2019), p. 3.
[47] Blanche Yurka, 'Acting Hedda Gabler', p. 71.
[48] Ibid., p. 71.
[49] Glenda Jackson (who played the role in a stage and movie production in 1975) similarly echoes Hedda's scepticism, observing that for someone actually pregnant (as she claims Hedda to be), the comparison between some paper and a baby would be a 'monstrous absurdity.' Irving Wardle, 'Glenda Jackson Meets Hedda Gabler' in Innes, *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook*, 95-98.

anthropocentric conception of material reality begins to fray with the loss, recovery, and eventual destruction of the manuscript. Lövborg drunkenly loses the sheets which are recovered by Tesman and then locked safely in his writing desk. The manuscript is recovered only to be destroyed in a different way by burning. Burning not only places the object within the same category as quasi-subjects like effigies, it also marks an ontological transformation. To burn something is to completely obliterate it, from something to nothing, from matter to ash. The act refuses to encounter the book as a book, seeing it instead as a *thingified* person. (While there is a historical precedent for burning books, these acts too are aimed at killing the subject behind the object, the idea behind the thing). The stage manuscript is designed to defy its usage, a book written not to be read but for the sole purpose of being destroyed. Instead of enacting its everyday use, the manuscript embodies an imagined child, symbolic at first, and eventually exorcised by fire. Symbolism rests on the difference between the object and idea, but as the play progresses, these draw closer in their affective significations. This marks a change from symbolic to anthropomorphic, as shown by Thea and Lövborg's emotional reactions to its loss, and actors' and reviewers' descriptions of the smell and sound evoked by the scene, discussed above.

As Hedda finally refers to the manuscript as a child — 'Now I am burning your child, Thea' (345) — it marks her own move away from anthropocentric imagination, one that is incapable of conceiving a different mode of approach to objects than to look at subjects *through* them, and use them as instruments of control, rather than look *at* them as subjects of love, personal value, projected selves, and creativity. It is only through the ontological misbehaviour and transgression of the manuscript, from a valued creation or identity object to a symbolic child and finally to a subject(-ified thing) that Hedda begins this move from anthropocentric to anthropomorphic imagination, from objects as means to a subject, to objects as subjects. This move further escalates when Hedda discovers the reality of Lövborg's death, as the pistol's functional and the manuscript's ontological misbehaviours reveal to Hedda that the 'objects were no longer a reliable positive outward manifestation of successful subjects dominating the world'.[50] The manuscript is not 'only a book' (343) neither is the pistol an instrument that obeys her dictates. The manuscript's ontological misbehaviour incites a shift in Hedda's material approach and makes a chink in the fabric of heterosexual bourgeois domestic drama for a queer reading to enter. Acknowledging its pre-existent instability, being an object designed to be destroyed, and its ontological shifts and misbehaviour through its destruction within the play allows its reading as a 'queer object',[51] one that prompts a shift in Hedda's object-relations that is sustained till the end. As a misbehaving object, it reveals limitations of both Hedda's and critics' approach, namely, Hedda's anthropocentric material imagination and the critical elision of queer affordances in the play.

---

[50] Kyle Gillette, 'Poor Things: Naturalistic Props and the Death of American Material Culture in Sam Shepard's Action'. *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre,* 25.2 (Spring 2013), p. 4.

[51] Davidson and Rooney, *Queer Objects,* p. 3.

Hedda's Body

- *Doing it Beautifully: Hedda's Aesthetic Project*

The closing gunshot has been seen by critics as a cliché inherited from nineteenth century melodrama where it was a device to eliminate the "fallen woman" and reinstate bourgeois patriarchal morality.[52] As this figure becomes mythologized in the Victorian imagination, it turns the dead woman's body into an aesthetic object — a pacified muse of the male artist and/or a beautiful commodity for visual consumption. In drama, this image of the tragically beautiful woman's death was canonised in what critics like Margaret Higonnet and Elaine Showalter understand as the female suicide narrative.[53] Through the gunshot, the play raises the question of whether Hedda succumbs to or resists not just nineteenth century gender roles but gendered generic conventions.

Hedda's last act extends her attempt to fulfil her 'aesthetic project of creating "[s]omething irradiated with spontaneous beauty"',[54] to rectify Lövborg's botched attempt, and finally ensure that it is 'done beautifully' (344). The text retains a degree of possibility of a beautiful death for Hedda by placing her act behind curtains and only partially revealing her dead body. The connection between concealment and beauty is made explicit in a 2016 production directed by Yury Urnov, where Hedda was partially veiled by semi-sheer curtains.[55] The emphasis on beauty is also suggested, or rather baited, in Bergman's version where Hedda rehearses doing it beautifully in front of a mirror, removing her shoes for a more graceful fall.[56] Some productions overturn this possibility of aesthetic death by displaying it in full view as a gruesome gesture. In Bergman's production, Hedda's rehearsal fails in her final performance as she is shown 'lying there with her rump in the air'.[57] Ivo van Hove's production

---

[52] Bernard Shaw in 'Author's Apology' to Mrs Warren's Profession complains: '[t]here is an unwritten but perfectly well understood regulation that members of Mrs Warren's profession [i.e., prostitution] shall be tolerated on the stage only when they are beautiful […] also that they shall, at the end of the play, die of consumption to the sympathetic tears of the whole audience or step into the next room to commit suicide.' George Bernard Shaw, 'Preface to Mrs Warren's Profession,' *Complete Plays with Prefaces,* volume 3 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co, 1963), p. 9.

[53] Margaret Higonnet observes that since the 18th century, 'this performative utterance [i.e., suicide] has been interpreted as a set of increasingly feminine symptoms,' and that the nineteenth century 'feminised suicide.' Similarly, Elaine Showalter argues that the Victorians deemed suicide like madness, to be a 'female malady'. Margaret Higonnet, 'Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century,' *Poetics Today* 6 (1985), 103–108 (p.105); Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

[54] Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props,* p. 172.

[55] See Olivia Gunn, 'Leaving the Theatre of Suffering', p. 197.

[56] See Frederick and Lise Lone Marker, 'The Airless World of *Hedda Gabler'* in Innes, *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook,* 88–92 (p. 92).

[57] Ibid., p. 92.

similarly challenges the dying beautifully trope. The audience is forced to watch Hedda's final act which occurs in full view of the characters and audience alike. When she shoots herself, there is no attempt to direct the gesture aesthetically and she fires the shot suddenly at her forehead. Ruth Wilson's performance is gruesome and bloody, rather than tragically beautiful as she writhes in pain, emitting sounds like a wounded animal.

In this light, the last scene can be read as at once 'transcending and fulfilling the telos of the female suicide play'.[58] Critics in the "monstrous woman" camp see Hedda as a 'coward' in her 'exhibitionistic gesture', someone who doesn't face consequences.[59] This reading downplays or completely overlooks not just the nuances of nineteenth century bourgeois gender ideals, but also the overt blackmailing by Judge Brack, and by extension, the implied inability of the law to protect women. This is made overt in Ivo van Hove's production where Brack holds a mock court interrogating Hedda. Here, Hedda's victimhood is made into a spectacle, where Brack's hold over her is not merely psychological or suggestive but overt, almost torturous as he humiliates her, physically dragging and jostling her around the stage. The association with a displayed powerless female body and violence, dehumanisation, and objectification is not relegated to a mere implication but made graphically explicit. Brack aggressively interrogates Hedda about the lost pistol; he spits on her face with a blood-like liquid creating a metaphoric bloodiness that pre-empts the end. He rubs Hedda's face in the tomato juice that he nonchalantly pours from a can on the floor and then on her lap, which eventually runs down Hedda's legs 'suggesting miscarriage or sexual violence'.[60]

These productions that go against Hedda's vilification or aestheticization of her death misbehave against realist representation of female suicide trope that often cloaks the structures that produce it.[61] My framing of Hedda's body as a form of misbehaving object ironizes the sexist historical tradition of objectifying women, suggesting that a careful attention to her recalcitrant objectness counterintuitively challenges the gendered trope that locks dead women into aesthetic pictures. Reading the misbehaviour of Hedda's dead body and of the closing tableau against gendered aesthetic and generic codes reinvigorates the critical commentary that has long been stuck on Hedda's motives and

[58] Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props,* p. 172.
[59] Mayerson, 'Thematic Symbols', pp. 158-9.
[60] Gunn, 'Leaving the Theatre of Suffering', p. 199.
[61] For the analysis of realism's reproduction of dominant (gender) ideology, even as it appears to challenge it, see Jeanie Forte, 'Realism, Narrative, and the Feminist Playwright – A Problem of Reception', *Modern Drama*, 32.1 (1989), 115–27; Varun Begley, 'Objects of Realism: Bertolt Brecht, Roland Barthes, and Marsha Norman', *Theatre Journal*, 64.3 (2012), 337–53; Catherine Belsey, 'Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text', in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change* ed. Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Newton (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 45–64.

psyche, ultimately to the end of passing a verdict on whether she is a victim or a villain, a proto-feminist or a coward.

- *Weird Object: Muddying Ontology*

The functional and ontological misbehaviours of the pistol and manuscript confront Hedda with the materially circumscribed limits of human agency, weakening her conviction to the idea of objects as mere tools and hence unworthy subjects of control. In other words, if it is the intrinsic human unpredictability that draws Hedda's desire to tame it and have 'power over a human being's fate' (324), given that she chooses the volatile Lövborg over the predictable Tesman to control, the material misbehaviours reveal that this unpredictability is not only a human prerogative. This makes objects equally tempting subjects of taming. As Kyle Gillette contends, 'the matter of the physical world always threatens the fictions of human subjectivity'. [62] With the pistols defying and misbehaving against the aesthetic fiction of Lövborg's death scripted by Hedda, and the manuscript against its prescribed ontology, Hedda and to a degree the play come face to face with what Veltrusky has called the 'dialectic antinomy' between character and object. He argues that both have a degree of activeness, replacing the dichotomy of human-live, object-dead with a continuum.[63] In the last scene, we see Hedda's transformation in death, as she slides down Veltrusky's subject-object continuum. Framing her body as a misbehaving object highlights how subjects and objects become unmoored from fixed positions.

The presence of the dead body onstage is similar to that of other theatrical objects that play with instability and flout this demarcation, like skulls, skeletons, or human remains. Since these objects, quasi-objects, or thingified subjects misbehave against labels because of their very nature or being, I refer to them, particularly the dead body, as 'weird objects' using the category 'weird' to mark their inherent slippage beyond (or before) categorisation.[64] Critics like Phelan, Carlson, and Bernstein have

[62] Gillette, 'Poor Things', p. 4

[63] Jiří Veltrusky, 'Man and Object in the Theater' in Paul L. Galvin (ed. and trans.) *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary, and Style* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1964), 83–92 (p. 90).

[64] I use the term 'weird' in a colloquial sense, meaning 'strange and unusual', and not entirely in the sense of the literary categorization of 'weird fiction' associated with fantasy, supernatural, and science fiction. 'Weird' in *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/weird> [accessed 22 November 2024]. However, there are productive overlaps between my use of 'weird object' and understandings of 'the weird' in weird fiction, which underpin my choice of this term, in particular, its elusiveness, defiance of categorisation, misbehaviour against conventions and quotidian reality, and a sense of disorientation. As Roger Luckhurst defines, 'The weird exists 'in breach' […] it inheres in perversity or *transgression*. It twists or veers away from *familiar frames and binary distributions*' (emphasis added). Luckhurst not only connects the weird with the Freudian uncanny, which also informs my reading of Hedda's body (as I explore later), but also with the idea of transgression or misbehaviour that Hedda's body as a weird object performs. If weird fiction marks the very unfixity and 'recalcitrance of texts that might be fixed as 'Weird'', here I use the category of weird object to mark the ontologically unfixed state of Hedda's body. Roger Luckhurst, 'The Weird: a Dis/orientation',

argued from different directions that theatrical confrontations with death, mortality, and ghostly presences are crucial propellors of drama, not only insofar as they drive the action but also in their capacity and *thereness* as perceptual and sensory phenomena.[65] The onstage dead body is both a 'relic of life and an anthropomorphism of death'.[66] Rebecca Schneider goes so far as to claim this nebulous border between live and dead as the very 'stuff' of theatre:

> The instability of the divide between life and death, or liveness and deadness, is, as so many have noted, something of a theatrical thing. Onstage, the lack of resolute demarcation between the live and the dead is the very stuff of the art.[67]

Two ideas emerge on theatrical misbehaviours against categories of live and dead that correspond to two post-semiotic approaches to theatre: one that sees theatre as a co-presence among ontologically varied entities, live bodies, and materials and the other that sees it as a mode of haunting, ghosting, or inhabiting time. The latter view even claims theatre to be 'dead'; as Schneider observes, it stages an elsewhere and elsetime, it is constantly threatened by other media, and its modern practitioners— Zola, Artaud, Stanislavsky — often note the self-sabotaging tendency of theatrical conventions. The dead theatre is made live night after night and is thus a 'haunted' medium, reanimating dead times, places, and people as also the ghosts of previous productions.[68] The theatrical dead body then seems to embody these two contemporary approaches to "liveness" in theatre and performance, namely, theatre's co-presence and its hauntedness. In its ontological ambiguity, the dead body embodies material entanglements and co-presence between the human and nonhuman (and the once-human); as a relic of life, it is haunted by its past (stage) life. As a former subject and now object, the dead body has a foot in both worlds and rehearses, in its very non/being, the co-presence and haunted liveness that are the bases of theatre and live performance. The dead body as a misbehaving object is then at once haunted by Hedda and co-present with Hedda.

Coming to the specific rendition of this misbehaving, weird object in the play, death in Ibsen's last acts, Shaw remarks, are a 'sweeping up of the remains of dramatically finished people.'[69] Ironically

---

Textual Practice, 31:6 (2017), 1041–1061 (pp. 1052, 1042). See also Benjamin Noys and Timothy S. Murphy, 'Introduction: Old and New Weird', *Genre,* 49.2 (2016), 117–134.

[65] See Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Carlson, *The Haunted Stage* qtd. in Bernstein, 'Toward the Integration of Theatre History and Affect Studies' *Theatre Journal* , 64.2 (May 2012), 213–230 (p. 214).

[66] Song, 'Death and the Anthropomorphic Life', p. 6.

[67] Rebecca Schneider, 'It Seems As If…I Am Dead: Zombie Capitalism and Theatrical Labor', *TDR/The Drama Review*, 56.4 (2012), 150–162 (p. 150).

[68] Ibid., p. 150.

[69] George Bernard Shaw, 'The Lesson of Ibsen's Plays' in Innes, *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook,* 56–57 (p. 57).

for Hedda, it is these very remains that ensure that while she might be physically finished, the dramatic vitality outlives the physical body. Hedda's body is not merely an object, weird only insofar as it was once a living being. It is at once a subject and object, self and other, not least because the act of shooting herself has made her an *object of killing* by the self. Aoife Monks has argued that staging of human remains makes visible the 'dialectical relationship between subjects and objects; it makes concrete the frailty and fragility of subjectivity.'[70] Hedda's self-imposed frailty of subjectivity prompts Brack's closing remark, 'One doesn't *do* that kind of thing' (364, emphasis original). This expresses a denial of something that is already done, betraying an inability to understand her death as much as portraying the ontological muddling of *doing* and *thinging* of death. She is at once an active agent and a dead object, a doer and a thing that is done, and (as seen earlier) an object co-present with and haunted by a subject. As such, the body and its relationship with the closing words highlight the fragility of the distinction between *being* and object-*becoming*. Eunjung Kim discusses the idea of 'object becoming' and asks, can unbecoming human or becoming a 'quasi object' by 'embodying objecthood, surrendering agency, and practicing powerlessness' reveal the 'workings of the boundary of the human?'[71] If we read Hedda's premature resignation, 'I will be quiet in the future' (363) in this light, we see that she has already begun 'embodying objecthood' and practicing 'unbecoming human' before her final silencing. Objecthood here comes across as independent of, or at least not completely aligned with, the matter of physical reality, making the subject-object boundary all the more tenuous and the transgression even more volatile and unpredictable. Hedda's object-becoming can then be read as an embodied acknowledgement of other modes of being beyond the subject-centric, where self and objects are neither "well behaved" categories nor extremely loyal to ontologically separate spheres. The network of words, objects, and body misbehaves against and reveals the limits of Hedda's former anthropocentric approach, where objects are mere projections of humans' successful taming of the world, eventually forcing her to abandon it in a self-effacing shot.

The nebulous status of a weird object evokes responses that can be read through Freud and Jentsch's idea of the 'uncanny' and Kristeva's 'abject'. In both cases, the (ostensibly) ontologically self-assured subject encounters a category-defying object, thus casting a doubt over her own mastery over the categories. The idea of the uncanny encapsulates 'the dark feeling of uncertainty' as to whether an object is alive or dead.[72] Kristeva's abject is more concerned with the threatened disturbance of meaning that a breakdown between self and other causes as while facing a dead body, 'I am at the

[70] Monks, 'Human Remains', p. 359.
[71] Eunjung Kim, 'Unbecoming Human: An Ethics of Objects', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 21.2–3 (2015), 295–320 (p. 302).
[72] Ernst Jentsch, 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny' in J Collins and J Jervis, eds. *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 216–228 (p. 224).

border of my condition as a living being'.[73] These approaches highlight the *encounter with* the weird object as enhancing its ambiguity and murkiness. Coming to its theatrical presence, as discussed in the introduction, Freddie Rokem uses the example of a stage chair to discuss a simultaneity of two "identities" of an object. This I think has resonances with the idea of the abject, if applied to the thing-world. He argues, 'one could say that it is not merely a chair when used on the stage—we will [...] be able to say about it: '"Look, this is no longer a chair" as opposed to "not a table" or "not a man."' [74] Hedda's body can then be seen as at once Hedda and not-Hedda. If we read this with Richard Schechner's ideas of acting, seeing the performance of death as a stage object makes it an even more pronounced entwining of 'not me' and a 'not-not me'[75] (given that objects are arguably the ultimate 'not me' for a subject). Through these approaches, the weirdness and misbehaviour of the object is located in its muddying of self-other, live-dead, subject-object, and me-not me categories, enhanced further by a character's (or audience's) encounter and response.

In the curtained inner room, Hedda plays a 'wild dance tune' (363) on the piano only to be silenced by Tesman for the sake of the recently deceased:

> TESMAN [*running to the doorway*]. But, Hedda, my dearest – don't play dance music this evening. Think of Aunt Rina! And of Ejlert, too!
> HEDDA [*putting out her head between the hangings*]. And of Aunt Julle. And of all the rest of them. I will be quiet in future. [*She pulls the curtains to again after her.*] (363)

This is our last encounter with Hedda, not with her whole body but only a head which pops out 'like a grand guignol puppet'.[76] These fragmentary, disembodied encounters where the characters and audience hear a sourceless noise and then see a bodiless head precede the final revelation of the 'lifeless' body (354). This creates a sense of fragmentation of Hedda's subjectivity, the self has begun splitting off from the body, which is now concealed. At once Hedda and not-Hedda, the Schrodinger's cat-like body is in the process of becoming an object. Some productions even literalise this ongoing process by having Hedda/actor get up after the death in full view of the characters and audience, to either walk off the

---

[73] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, tr. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 3.
[74] Freddie Rokem, 'A Chair Is a Chair Is a CHAIR: The Object as Sign in the Theatrical Performance', in *The Prague School and Its Legacy* ed. Yishai Tobin (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1988), 275–288 (p. 278).
[75] Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), p. 110.
[76] Elin Diamond, 'Realism and Hysteria', p. 76.

stage or continue onstage as an observer.[77] Ivo van Hove's production ends with Ruth Wilson/Hedda getting up and leaving, while the characters look on at the "body"— the space that functions as its proxy. Wilson/Hedda leaves the assemblage inviting audience's focus away from the dead body/empty space to the live actor/character. The assemblage sans the weird object then becomes a symbol for the theatricality of Hedda's death which will always be survivable. Furthermore, as Wilson/Hedda leaves her dead body behind, the abandoned space continues to be materially significative only by virtue of the surviving characters' encounter with it, who keep looking on. Hedda's body transforms once again, this time not to an object but instead an emptiness, or rather the characters' encounter with emptiness. The misbehaviour then arises as much out of the dynamic groupings of ontologically ambiguous and semiotically challenging materials, bodies, and weird objects as it does out of the theatrical and extratheatrical *encounter with* these groupings. The staging of Hedda's weird objecthood and its refusal to be a "well behaved" dead body/thinged subject then further ensures that there is no clear separation between pre- and post-object status of the body, and that the play culminates night after night in collapsing and misbehaving against these borders.

The commentaries on encounters with ontological misbehaviours across different contexts, from abject and uncanny responses to the contradictory simultaneity embodied by acting objects and bodies, highlight the peculiar characteristics of Hedda's body as a specific kind of misbehaving object — one that transforms (or is perpetually transforming) from Hedda to not-Hedda, subject to weird object. They also reveal the potential of encounters with and responses to the object to further entrench its misbehaviour and muddling of subject-object categories. The ambiguity of Hedda's dead body and the closing tableau with its interplay of objects, subjects, responses, and encounters, brings to the fore its ontological as well as hermeneutic misbehaviour, to which I now turn.

- *What Hedda Saw: Interrupting Meaning*

Hedda's body defies not just categorisation but also comprehension and meaning. We see this hermeneutic challenge in Brack's (and Tesman's) utter inability to make Hedda's body *mean*. We are left with a fragmented image of the body and with Brack's metadramatic words that are as much a comment on the theatrical gesture as an echoing of reader/audience's interpretive limits. Beyond charting the body's misbehaviour against clear categories and its refusal to "behave", the closing scene with its interrupted image that belongs to Ibsen's 'anti-poetry'[78] of evasion and unfinished sentences

[77] In the 2016 Cutting Ball Theatre Production directed by Yury Urnov, Hedda's dress is treated as her corpse after she gets up to 'take a tour of the seating areas while smoking and looking back at spectators'. Gunn, 'Leaving the Theatre of Suffering', p. 190.

[78] Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama* (London: Methuen & Co, 1965), p. 96.

points outwards to a material misbehaviour against meaning-making, and by extension the realist illusion of objectivity.

After Brack's blackmail and faux assurance that he will never abuse his newfound power over Hedda, and her failed attempt to interrupt Tesman and Thea's project to reconstruct the manuscript, Hedda exits the visible space for the first time. Elin Diamond reminds us that this is not the final exit: Hedda has 'drawn the spectator's eyes to the vanishing point, the stage within the stage, a space present but out of sight.' [79] In the text, she kills herself behind the curtain that she draws in the back room, blocking the audience's access to her. The curtain covers the act and is then opened to reveal the body 'stretched out on the sofa' (364). While Hedda attempts to play director of other characters' lives, she refuses to theatricalise herself. The resistance to become a spectacle, Toril Moi observes, registers a self-referentiality, a modernist acknowledgement of the 'failure of human expression'.[80] We remain outsiders looking in at the act that is, as Camus put it, 'prepared within the silence of the heart' and inherently unknowable.[81] The unintelligibility of the act is expressed visually through a *mise-en-scène*. The configuration of the act, spectatorial encounter, the body, and the material environment impede meaning, embodying a misbehaviour at once material and hermeneutic.

Beyond the objects themselves, it is the reception (on stage or audience) of the object and assemblage that can be seen as the site of misbehaviour against meaning-making and fixed categories. Mary Kay Norseng gives an account of Robert Egan's 1986 production that 'shows us what Hedda saw', to the immense satisfaction of an audience member who he overheard saying 'Thank god someone has finally shown me what Hedda saw in the back room!'.[82] While this production shows the textual offstage, it does so by first concealing it and then lifting up the back wall of the set to reveal the 'tableau vivant of shock and beauty'.[83] This interruption of access *before* delivering transparency provokes an 'intense desire to see', the visual obstruction 'emphasising our deprivation'.[84] The tableau of Hedda's death then seems to invite and emphasise a disobedience of the codes of the playworld from the spectator. The initial concealment stages a suggestion that the audience is not meant to be peeping behind the curtain, and the spectacle is not meant to be seen. The production establishes these codes (through the concealment) only to break them (by later delivering the spectacle), and by extension foregrounds the misbehaviour of the spectator-body encounter. In playing with concealment and

[79] Diamond, 'Realism and Hysteria', p. 75.
[80] Toril Moi, 'Hedda's Silences', p. 448.
[81] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1991), p. 4.
[82] Mary Kay Norseng, 'Suicide and Ibsen's "*Hedda Gabler*"' (The Seen and the Unseen, Sight and Site, In the Theater of the Mind)', *Scandinavian Studies*, 71.1 (1999), 1–40 (p. 3).
[83] Ibid., p. 2.
[84] Thomas F. Van Laan, 'Not Just Visual; Not Just Illustrative; Performance in Ibsen.' *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen*. Ed. Björn Hemmer (Oslo: Norwegian UP 1990), 51–63 (p. 54).

exposure, it makes the audience confront the unacknowledged desire to witness the violent assemblage of pain.

On the other hand, Ingmar Bergman's and Ivo van Hove's versions fully display Hedda's final breath. Bergman's famous surrealist rendition of the play allows the audience a complete visual access to the closing scene. His staging was consciously anti-realist, with a minimalist stage stripped away of details and conveying an 'oppressive sense of enclosure and lifelessness'.[85] At the same time, the uninterrupted visibility of the last scene emits a realist illusion of semiotic transparency, permitting the tableau to signify in limited, pre-ordained, and disciplined ways. Showing Hedda's body makes it behave in accordance with classical realism's ideology of spectatorial omniscience. [86] So, while the play of exposure and concealment (as in Egan's production) allows the body to elicit a degree of spectatorial disobedience, a complete display of the body tames such affordances in both the object and the instance of reception.

The directorial move to increase the exposure to Hedda's suffering has also been credited with an explainability that its concealment denies. Talking about the scene in the Ivo van Hove production where Brack physically humiliates Hedda, a review says:

> The scene – like watching a spider torment a trapped fly – serves *a real purpose*, because for Hedda it destroys the last shreds of dignity she has left. I've often watched Hedda Gabler and never really understood why in the end she kills herself. Through this depiction of Brack, and with that appalling final scene, Van Hove *makes us understand* completely why she believes that pulling the trigger is her only option, her one last, misguided, chance to find beauty.[87]

The explainability of Hedda's death means that there is no 'double ending' of concealment and revelation,[88] no failure to anticipate the act. This allows for nothing other than a distant, anticlimactic spectatorship from the surviving characters, so that Brack's 'One doesn't *do* that kind of thing' (364) is emptied of shock or denial, and becomes a passive and impotent pronouncement, spoken almost obligingly as if only for the demands of the script. Hedda, already a 'lifeless' body since her humiliation,

---

[85] Frederick and Lise Lone Marker, 'The Airless World of *Hedda Gabler'*, p. 89.

[86] Here I draw from Varun Begley's suggestion of the link between illusion of spectatorial omniscience and ideological reproduction: 'realism flatters the spectator's sense of de-historicized omniscience through orchestrated disclosures and revelations. Such narrative organization stifles ambiguity in favor of causal clarity and ideological restoration […] Objects are permitted to signify only in severely limited ways that reconfirm the text's official meanings and promote the illusion of semiotic transparency.' 'Objects of Realism', p. 339.

[87] Lyn Gardner, 'We Need to Talk about Hedda: Why The National's Ibsen Shocker Isn't Sexist,' *Guardian*, January 17, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2017/jan/17/hedda-gabler-national-ibsen-sexist [accessed 24 February 2023], emphases added.

[88] Diamond, 'Realism and Hysteria', p. 76.

inserts herself like an obedient object within the assemblage. Like the call of the void or the material 'hail',[89] Hedda-object can be seen as dutifully responding to the call of the ending tableau once she has been utterly objectified and drained of any liveness that might be called distinctly human. Olivia Gunn says that while watching the scene 'the metatheatrical looking-together inspired defiance in me—a desire to look away, to be allowed a feeling of horror and repulsion rather than apathy'.[90] Here Gunn points to the potential of the onstage characters' apathetic response to dictate or parallel the audience's reception. While this very complacence prompts in her a defiance, it comes too late as the spectacle of obedience and Hedda's reason (following Brack's humiliation) has already been displayed with complete transparency and explainability. The possibility of hermeneutic misbehaviour is squashed — there are no hidden or ill lit corners where interpretation might run into walls, no reflection on imposed codes and their breakage, or on the inherent unintelligibility of the act. The exposure to both Hedda's reason and the closing shot then seems to smoothen over both staged and spectatorial misbehaviours: it at once pacifies Hedda as also the audience into detached reception, one that is complacent with the realist illusion of omniscience.

If we read this figuratively, the nineteenth century character from a naturalist play can be seen as being publicly humiliated and punished in a postmodern rendition not just because she is 'not particularly nice'[91] but because she creates an impermeable and unintelligible tableau. The explainability is then a kind of catharsis in watching the death of that which has long misbehaved against meaning and frustrated any deliverance from the question 'why'. At the same time, the displayed death stifles any spectatorial hopes for an aesthetic death, ensuring that any curiosity to see what Hedda sees is either transformed into revulsion or apathy, as Gunn's critique suggests. For if these productions 'make us understand' this comes at a cost, showing us something 'painfully uncomfortable to watch'.[92] As Gunn suggests, putting Hedda's 'death throes on full display, heighten[s] realistic suffering and ask[s] us (yet again) to diagnose or identify with Hedda as "hysteric".'[93] This showing of the unseen, ironically, enforces a 'terrible silence on things' by squashing the potential for hermeneutic misbehaviour.[94] It further tames the potential of misbehaving objects as markers of hermeneutic limits to embody the inherent unexplainability of self-destruction. Through these productions, the body's resistance to or serving of meaning and interpretation, and the hermeneutic misbehaviour of the closing act emerge as dependent on the degree of concealment and revelation of Hedda's body. As exposure and access to the weird object modulate meaning, interpretation, and realist omniscience, the encounter

[89] Bernstein argues that 'scriptive things' have the capacity to 'hail' human action and 'demand a bodily response' in 'Dances with Things', p. 73.
[90] Gunn, 'Leaving the Theatre of Suffering', p. 199.
[91] Wilson, 'An Interview with Ruth Wilson' qtd. in Gunn 'Leaving the Theatre of Suffering', p. 200.
[92] Gardner, 'We Need to Talk about Hedda'.
[93] Gunn, 'Leaving the Theatre of Suffering', p. 190.
[94] Begley, 'Objects of Realism', p. 339.

of reception emerges as a player in determining how obedient or unruly, transparent or illegible, graspable or ineffable the play's material misbehaviours become.

Conclusion

The pistols, Lövborg's manuscript, and Hedda's body in the playtext and on stage mediate and embody varying types and intensities of misbehaviours, dictating, defying, and demarcating the characters' agency and control. They both break generic, ontological, aesthetic, and hermeneutic codes and emerge as scriptive things, organising action and flouting ascribed passivity. Objects in the play challenge imposed theatrical and functional rules, and threaten the extent of human control. Attending to the specific moments as well as the larger phenomena of material misbehaviours in the play foregrounds subject and object relations that are either taken for granted or overlooked, notably highlighting, among other things, the queer undercurrent in the play. Furthermore, this lens breaks scholarly stagnation by introducing a new object-led approach to both the play's various materials as well as Hedda's body. The latter paradoxically disturbs the critical and creative tendency to objectify women's bodies into aesthetic pictures in death. These readings speak to the potential of the lens of misbehaving objects to offer feminist and queer interventions into established ways of reading canonical plays as well as women's bodies.

Looking at misbehaviour of objects and encounters in the play allows critical interventions against "obedient" subject-centric readings that are reluctant to go beyond Hedda's character and morality. An attention to material misbehaviours makes an intervention into largely psychoanalytical and heterosexual readings of Hedda, and by extension, establishes the potential of this lens to recover other "monstrous women" from critically complacent and disciplined readings. Disturbing this codified approach uncovers the complex entanglements of objects, subjects, and scripts by acknowledging the material recalcitrance and misbehaviours that disturb and dictate, script and stick to, belittle and become the subject(s) of the play. Through this reading, misbehaving objects emerge as fertile mediums to reinvigorate, transgress, and misbehave against codified scholarship on canonical plays.

WILD(E'S) OBJECTS

On 20th February 1892, Oscar Wilde appeared in front of the audience at St. James's Theatre with a lit cigarette after the curtains fell on the first production of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, allegedly wearing a green carnation in his lapel. Ben Webster as Cecil Graham — the play's dandy and Wilde's mouthpiece — wore a similar green carnation in the last act. Wilde had also arranged for his friends in the audience to stand up and reveal that they were wearing identical boutonnieres. When asked for a meaning behind his plan, Wilde famously declared, 'Nothing whatever, but that is just what nobody will guess.'[1] The carnation has gained a legendary, almost mythical reputation, shrouded in a myriad of reports, commentaries, fanciful accounts, and sensationalism. There is no real evidence that the audience members (or even Ben Webster) actually wore carnations. The only sources that stoke this green ember are anecdotal and more on the lines of gossip than reliable reports.[2] Nonetheless, its presence in the cultural imagination of the play and playwright is undeniable.

I argue that Wilde's own image as a literary *enfant terrible*, the historical moment that cast itself as a 'youthful rebel, rudely discourteous to the styles, hierarchies, and customs that it inherits'[3] and the disobedient and transgressive objects in and around *Lady Windermere's Fan,* all reflect an underpinning of misbehaviour. The objects' misbehaviour, I argue, condenses the paradoxical nature of Wilde's relationship with commercial theatre and consumerism, his playful (at times antagonistic) relationship with Victorian audiences, and his uncomfortable position within modernism. I start by looking at the objects within the play, particularly the fan, in relation to Wilde's negotiation with the well-made theatre tradition and the late-Victorian public sphere. The scripted disobedience of the fan allows an exploration of material misbehaviours within commercial and dominant theatrical conventions. Going back to the opening anecdote from the first production of the play, I explore the move from fictionally contained misbehaviour of the fan to the rogue green carnation as it reframes the role and experience of the *fin-de-siècle* audience. I connect this to Wilde's consumerist aesthetics and its bearing on the commodification of the carnation as a queer symbol, arguing that the carnation's theatrical misbehaviour is retained in its circulation within cultural imagination. By engaging in an object-led exploration, I attempt to show that the objects do not just symbolise or perform material misbehaviour

[1] Twigs Way, *Carnation* (London: Reaktion Books, Limited, 2016), p. 125.
[2] Karl Beckson observes that the most blatant account of this orchestration occurs in the costume designer W. Graham Robertson's 1931 memoir, *Life Was Worth Living.* However, his account is inconsistent, and no other memoir or letter has confirmed it. 'Oscar Wilde and the Green Carnation' *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 43.4 (2000), 387–397 (p. 387).
[3] Cara L. Lewis, *Dynamic Form*, pp. 4-5

but evoke and even demand a critical approach that is necessarily challenging to conventional readings of the play and critical disciplining of the playwright.

'A useful thing a fan, isn't it?': The Fan's Managed Misbehaviour[4]

Until the 1970s, Wilde's comedies were seen as having 'too mass cultural a context to bear much study'.[5] Even after their reclamation as worthy subjects of critical study, the approaches largely focus on mapping the overlaps and divergences with Victorian mores, theatrical conventions, and mass culture. Such studies often end up situating the plays in the 'subversion from within' rubric, suggesting that they 'challenge the world [they] seemed to endorse'.[6] I draw from Paul Fortunato in suggesting that the overemphasis on the critical, subversive, and even socialist strains of Wilde's drawing room comedies subscribes to a scholarly disciplining of Wilde that registers a critical discomfort with his embrace of consumerism and mass culture. On the other end of the spectrum, the critical dismissal of his comedies might suggest a scholarly reading of his mass-cultural appeal as a symptom of artistic frivolity or apathy. However, Wilde's constant writing and rewriting of his plays (often even after the first staging, as in the case of *Lady Windermere's Fan*), the multiple drafts, his critical essays, and the often-heated discussions with George Alexander (the theatre manager) about staging, plot, and set design reveal the artistic seriousness with which he approached his plays. At the same time, his consideration of the public sensibilities and tastes that influenced his writing as well as his turn to fashionable West-end playhouses and established actor-managers situate him closer to the commercially oriented plays of Pinero rather than to Ibsen's social criticism or the Shavian 'great Celtic' school.[7] Instead, Wilde's serious treatment of the trivial, the surface, the stylistic, and the aesthetic is what resists his critical taming as either a social commentator or a flippant churner of commercial entertainment. A critical approach that bears this in mind then pushes us out from substance to surface rather than drawing us in and redirects us to the material anchors of Wilde's surface imaginary: the objects that embody this serious triviality.

The most prominent object in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the eponymous fan, remains unmentioned in the opening stage directions. Ian Small observes that the earlier drafts specifically

---

[4] Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere's Fan* ed. Ian Small (London: A & C Black, 1999), p. 35. Subsequent references will appear as in-text page numbers.

[5] Paul L. Fortunato, *Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture in the Writings of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p 89.

[6] Joel Kaplan, 'Wilde on the Stage', in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 249–275 (p. 249).

[7] T.F. Evans notes that Wilde called a Shaw play a part of 'the great Celtic School.' Along with Wilde's own plays. 'Shaw and Wilde', *The Wildean*, 8 (January 1996), 31–36 (p. 32).

mention it placed on the table where it remains present throughout the first act (5). While the fan is eventually eliminated from the opening stage directions, we learn of its presence as the characters discuss it at length over the course of the play. It is drawn from being a mere set dressing, furnishing, or background prop that presents a picture of the way of life of the characters into the main action of the play and intermittently the central subject of conversation. The play opens in the Windermere living room with Lord Darlington calling on Lady Windermere in her husband's absence. The fan is first introduced by her as a gift from her husband, while Lord Darlington inspects it with detached curiosity as he flirts with her. The gesture is accompanied by Darlington's masked suggestion of Lord Windermere's ostensibly illicit relationship with Mrs Erlynne. Mrs Erlynne, as the reader finds out in the second act, is in fact Lady Windermere's mother who was ostracised from society and has returned to find a place in it under a new identity. Darlington uses the rumours about Lord Windermere and Mrs Erlynne as an excuse to invite Lady Windermere into a similar relationship. The fan becomes attached to his advances and the idea of adultery that envelops their conversation. As Darlington handles it, he moves from trivial flirtation to overt disturbing of innocence, revealing the fragile morality underneath the smooth veneer of social rituals and manners. He is shunned by Lady Windermere whose sexual purity and unyielding puritan morality are contrasted with the morally corrupt world in which she moves. The contrast is starkly presented in this opening confrontation between the dandy and the moralist, with the fan as a plot device in the middle.

The object serving as a shorthand for ideas of adultery, secrets, and competing moral codes would not have been new to late-Victorian readers and audiences. The familiar trope of the mislaid object that serves as evidence of an adulterous relationship was a stock dramatic device in society comedies and melodrama, bringing about a reversal, discovery, or resolution. While contemporary reviewers saw the fan in Charles Haddon's *The Idler* as Wilde's direct source,[8] the device had a long tradition in nineteenth century drama and particularly in recent French plays (as in Sardou's works). Wilde would himself recycle this trope in his later plays, with the incriminating diamond brooch and letter in *An Ideal Husband* and the handbag as a proof of identity in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Going back to the fan, from the first act itself it latches onto the ideas of infidelity and concealment that are required to fulfil the assigned role of a stock mislaid object. What troubles this conventional triangle formed by the Windermeres and Darlington is that both the object and the characters' relationship with it seem to betray, in their own way, the demands of the stock roles, tropes, and behaviour that the genre imposes on them. In this reading, the play emerges as an allegory of late-Victorian theatrical conventions' (and to some extent, Wilde's) progressive loss of control over the artistic material.

[8] For the long lineage of women's folding fan on stage, see Sofer, 'The Fan of Mode', *The Stage Life of Props,* pp. 117-165.

The ostrich-feather fan with Lady Windermere's name inscribed in diamonds is one of the many luxurious objects that furnish the Winderemeres' table. 'A useful thing a fan, isn't it?' (35), Lady Windermere comments in the second act. Throughout the play, the object is drawn in two (often opposite) directions: its fictional ontology as an object of luxury, a gift with little to no functional value and thus essentially "useless" in a practical sense, and its narrative ontology as an object serving as a plot device, with an assigned function. As the former, it is a personalised token of love, unique and irreplaceable. While it does serve a function as a hand-fan, a staple accessory for women at the time,[9] it is essentially an ostentatious and expensive ornament, selected and gifted not because of its functional value but because of the aesthetic and symbolic surplus beyond that. As a prop with a narrative function, it is a plot device replaceable with other such devices. Looking at the fan as a gift, we see that Lord Windermere's act of gift-giving insists on its ornamental presence over its utility and function. The gift as a guarantor of taste, pleasure, class, and cultural capital reflects Wilde's attention to consumption and the 'seductions of commodity fetishism'.[10] At the same time, the gifted fan engenders a different approach to the object-world, one that does not relate to objects only in terms of utility. It expands the notion of use to include pleasure and offers an intervention into the 'late-Victorian valorisations of utility'.[11] Lesjak's argument about collected things is also applicable to the gifted object as both offer simultaneously 'a recognition of the temptations of commodity fetishism and a resistance to it.'[12] So while the desire to acquire extravagantly is dictated by modernity's various offerings, the form of possessing and gifting as a counter to using and circulating poses a resistance to the utilitarian basis of this desire.

The fan as a gift rejects the homogenisation and interchangeability prompted by commodification, but as a plot device it is entirely functional. Much like stock tropes and characters, the object vanishes into its role as a plot device or a function rather than a thing, making the fan itself immaterial. The only thing that saves the replaceability and immateriality of the fan as a device is the crucial detail belonging to its gift-ness: Lady Windermere's name inscribed on its body. Bearing her 'Christian name' Margaret, it invites conclusions about its ownership and loyalties — it either belongs to the named, Lady Windermere (and as we later find out, her mother Mrs Erlynne with the same first name who ends up with the fan), or the namer, Lord Windermere, as his way of materially "marking the territory" through a gift that she always carries. The eponymous title itself points to neither solely the object nor 'the good woman' (the former title of the play) but instead to a mode of object-encounter,

[9] Interestingly, a fan is used for fanning only once in the play, not by Lady Windermere but by Duchess of Berwick.
[10] Carolyn Lesjak 'Utopia, Use, and the Everyday: Oscar Wilde and a New Economy of Pleasure', *ELH*, 67.1 (2000), 179–204 (p. 181).
[11] Ibid., p. 186.
[12] Ibid., p. 186.

particularly that of possession. Furthermore, Lady Windermere's name itself suggests a mode of "ownership" that late-Victorian institution of marriage enabled.[13] The title then points us to the play's interest in ideas of possession, ownership, and object relations as they circulate within the domestic, marital, and commercial contexts. The fan also draws links between the mother and daughter that grow progressively more overt, culminating in a closing act of gift-giving from the daughter to her mother. As the fan is inserted within marital and matrilineal networks, it materialises ties of (dis)loyalties, power, and to a degree ownership across, most overtly, the triangle formed by Lady Windermere, Lord Windermere, and Mrs Erlynne but also to some extent across the fraction of London society that the play displays.

> The first act ends with Lady Windermere's threat:
>
> I propose to begin tonight. *(Picking up fan)* Yes, you gave me this fan today; it was your birthday present. If that woman crosses my threshold, I shall strike her across the face with it. (27)

As the gift is turned into a potential weapon, the fan's presence gains dangerous associations with confrontation, dramatic intensity, concealment, and discovery.[14] It performs its main role as a stock mechanism at the end of the third act, channelling a long tradition of mislaid objects used as evidence of a woman's presence.[15] The fan is left abandoned on Lord Darlington's couch, momentarily unwitnessed and unattached to its owner (it is worth noting that a hand fan would have been somewhere between a prop and an accessory, since it is usually on a woman's person. I explore this in-between position in my discussion of the buttonhole below). As a fan independent of a body, it is only read as a sign of a woman's presence in general until recognised by Lord Windermere. While it serves the stock function of pointing to a woman's presence in a man's chambers, it also offers an excuse for ambiguity about its ownership as Mrs Erlynne claims to have taken the fan by mistake. It is this very ambiguity that disrupts or at least delays the mechanism of revelation and confrontation. Mrs Erlynne's claiming of her daughter's possession does not just derail this potentially serious end but also reinstates the comedic genre of the play. The fan's near betrayal of Lady Windermere then is a staunch fealty to the genre. It also reflects a loyalty to Lord Windermere as the gift-giver and the limited control of possessions Lady Windermere has, independent of her husband. In another view, the potential infidelity

---

[13] Lord Darlington suggests this idea of naming as possessing and controlling in his declaration, 'when you no longer bear his name, when you bear mine, all will be well' (42).

[14] The fan's association with hiding and revealing is made explicit in Peter Hall's 2002 production where a huge cloth fan was used as a curtain for the stage 'through which the spectators could spy on the characters.' Marianne Drugeon, 'Aestheticism on the Wildean Stage' *Études anglaises*, 69.1 (2016), 88–99 (p. 94).

[15] Much like Desdemona handkerchief in *Othello* or Thomas Griffith's strychnine-filled ring in Wilde's 'Pen, Pencil, and Poison', the fan might either bring about a resolution or undo it, having the potential to be as deadly as these other literary objects-as-evidence.

and betrayal of her husband severs any bond of loyalty that the gift might have towards Lady Windermere or any control she has over her possession. Despite the inscription, the object belongs to Lady Windermere, not Margaret.

The fan's betrayal of Lady Windermere comes at the cost of a confrontation that is set up by its very presence. At the same time, if Lady Windermere like Ibsen's Nora leaves her husband's home, it is important to note that she is a Nora who finds herself inside a comedy. The nineteenth century literary device of revelation of secrets, adultery, and blood ties would have to be relegated to the last act, accompanied by a reconciliation and a comforting closure. So, while the fan's misbehaviour against Lady Windermere subverts the formulaic device of concealment, reversal, and discovery by orchestrating and then interrupting a dramatically charged scene of confrontation, it also upholds the plot function by holding a promise of the *scène à faire* of reconciliation between the Windermeres and recognition between mother and daughter, reserving these for the last act. The fan's near misbehaviour and tattling against its owner is thus an obedience of its plot function. In other words, being a bad possession is integral to being a good plot device. Additionally, Mrs Erlynne as a stock woman with a past or fallen woman from Victorian melodrama uses the fan to prevent history from repeating in her daughter's story. As seen in the discussion on *Hedda Gabler*, a common end for the fallen woman ostracised from polite society for disobeying its rules was death or suicide. Mrs Erlynne can then be seen as the victim of conventional melodramatic narratives coming back from the dead to rescue her daughter from the brink of destruction, by claiming the object and the resultant shame. In this reading, the fan's misbehaviour makes it a revenge weapon for the fallen woman, or a sword she falls on to prevent history from repeating (exposing the issue with this trope). The fan's bad faith against its owner then is not a disruption of the plot function and can be seen as tolerated and even authorised by the generic conventions.

The mislaid object does not find its way back to the owner till the last act. It intrudes, ironically, a conversation between the Windermeres which baits an expectation of dramatic intensity and discovery:

> LORD WINDERMERE. (*Rising*) Margaret, if you knew where Mrs. Erlynne went last night, after she left this house, you would not sit in the same room with her. It was absolutely shameless, the whole thing.
> LADY WINDERMERE. Arthur, I can't bear it any longer. I must tell you. Last night –
> *(Enter PARKER with a tray on which lie LADY WINDERMERE'S fan and a card)*
> PARKER. Mrs. Erlynne has called to return your ladyship's fan which she took away by mistake last night. (74)

The fan delays the revelation till the fourth act only to stifle it in the end. While the audience is privy to the full truth — about both Mrs Erlynne's identity and Lady Windermere's whereabouts the previous night — the play subverts the received trope of discovery in the last act as Lord Windermere never finds out about his wife's whereabouts and Lady Windermere never discovers Mrs Erlynne's identity. The object's opportune arrival prevents confession; it disrupts not just the transparent closure in the vein of the well-made play but also its own earlier promise of a dramatically charged end that it deferred in the third act, inviting expectations only to frustrate them.

The fan's competing loyalties are not just to the plot and the owner but also, I suggest, to its own contested roles as a gift and a plot device. As observed above, these two respond to opposing and contradictory relations to the object-world, utilitarian and use-less, functional and decorative. Furthermore, Mrs Erlynne keeps her daughter's fan as a souvenir, rescuing it from the functional role as a plot device, 'an immobilising badge of sexual shame'[16] that seals the fate of fallen woman, and absorbs it instead into a matrilineal circuit of gift-giving, care, and gratitude. Equally, this circuit is also not incompatible with the traditional, patriarchal formula as it still has no space for Mrs Erlynne, who is essentially banished and purged. While these alternating and antithetical ontologies, loyalties, and behavioural codes of the fan lead to frictions and misbehaviours discussed above, nonetheless I argue, subversion of some expectations does not necessarily translate to a subversion of either the generic conventions as a whole or its loyalties to the patriarchal narrative of the play: the contents of the container bubble without spilling over.

The fan's misbehaviour against the daughter is also a commitment to the mother's protective project, one that desires to bring an end to the conventional trope of the fallen woman not so much through an indictment of the hypocritical rules of English class structure but by ensuring that her daughter avoids this fate and observes the rules. Despite being an outsider, a victim of social exclusion, and causing disorder and scandal by returning to society, Mrs Erlynne polices her daughter and disciplines her behaviour to conform to a system that once eliminated her. Similarly, while the fan frustrates expectations and misbehaves alternatively against its owner and its role as a melodramatic device, there is almost no effect on the end. Both the stock character and the stock device misbehave and cause a slight digression from the discovery-reconciliation trajectory by truncating full revelation, but they eventually conspire to bring about an end that is conventional and generically authorised: the marital unit prevails, the disorder is smoothened, and while the fallen woman is not punished through suicide or death, she is removed from society along with the fan. The conventional end arrived at regardless of some unconventional elements and misbehaviours then retrospectively tames and legitimises any dissent by these unruly elements, material or human.

[16] Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props*, p. 164.

The contained misbehaviour of the fan can be seen as a material symptom of the limits of challenging dramatic conventions from within at the turn of the century rather than of the elasticity of the conventions themselves to accommodate self-critique. The repeated stubbing of the fan's subversive encounters with its handlers and with the dramatic container is reflective of Wilde's own strategy of representing challenges to fictional trends,[17] English leisure class, and popular culture using the materials and representational mechanisms of these very institutions. This proclivity further dictated his pleasure in mocking the hypocrisy of Victorian audiences, whose desires, tastes, and fashions were nonetheless both the source for and target of his literary worlds.

Going back to the fan, its tamed unruliness registers within it the momentary disturbance to the social routine caused by secrets, sexual transgressions, moral dilemmas, parvenus among other misbehaving elements of the drawing room play that are resolved in a manner that reconfirms and advances the conventional trajectory. The fan is then a quintessentially *fin-de-siècle* object whose contained misbehaviour registers the fact that challenging conventions from within is no longer viable or "new enough" with nascent modernism around the corner. Whether seen as a failed resistance or a strategically installed pose of misbehaviour by the plot itself, the fan's narratively orchestrated misbehaviour shows the limits of challenging prevailing theatrical traditions while participating in them, and the need for a new (material) vocabulary at the turn of the century.

The Dandy and his Boutonniere

Returning to the opening anecdote, the playtext does not mention the carnation but its prominent presence in the first production has secured its position in the staging and adaptations of *Lady Windermere's Fan* as well as those of Wilde's wider oeuvre. As the carnation intertheatrically passes from lapel to lapel, it invariably finds a place on the coat of a specific type of character, namely, the dandy. This connection between the dandy and the floral buttonhole reaches its apotheosis in *An Ideal Husband* (1893). Lord Goring enters in the third act 'in evening dress with a buttonhole' and discusses the 'fopperies of fashion',[18] while his butler helps him change from a morning buttonhole to an evening one. The dandy's encounter with the trappings of contemporary fashion, epitomised in the regularly changed boutonniere, point to the seriousness with which the stock character and the play treats the

[17] Mrs Erlynne voices Wilde's mockery of contemporary literary trends in her disdain for the oversentimentality of 'silly modern novels' (81).
[18] Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband,* ed. Russell Jackson (London: A&C Black, 2003), p. 86.

trivial.[19] The dandy-boutonniere encounter can be seen as materially reifying the importance of the trivial in Wildean imagination.

As with the gifted fan, the ornamental flower does not belong to the world of utilitarian or functional objects. But beyond that, the flower is not just owned or had, but also *worn.* I would like to touch on the idea of fashion objects, reading them through Ellen Sampson's distinction between 'being in', 'being with', and observing from outside.[20] This departure from having to wearing offers the carnation the necessary underpinning of identity and self-fashioning. She sees wearing as a performative act where both 'identities and outfits [are] composed and constructed through practice and things'.[21] She attempts to move beyond the structural reading of fashion objects typified by Barthes's assertion that 'the tendency of every bodily covering [is] to insert itself into an organized, formal, and normative system that is recognized by society.'[22] If we see the boutonniere as an insertion within a formal system, this would undoubtedly be the dramatic structure of the genre that produces the dandy. It distinguishes the dandy, making him identifiable and inserting him within a particular tradition. This idea of insertion upholds a neat distinction between clothes and the body, the clothed body and the system, or the buttonhole-dandy encounter and the dramatic container. Sampson argues for a more embodied and 'felt' approach to the act of wearing as a fashioning of accessories as well as the self.

Using her discussion for my purposes, I suggest that the act is not just performative but also sheds light on certain phenomena underpinning performance and theatricality. Sampson argues that the worn object mediates the border of the self, asserting that 'this idea of an object which is both "me" and "not-me" is applied both to the relationship between wearer and garment and between artist and artwork.'[23] The me/not-me nature of the worn object brings the dandy's donning of the carnation close to the phenomenon of an actor 'being in' character. Furthermore, the act of wearing as an emblem of the artist-artwork relationship has important resonances with Wilde's handling of his artistic materials. He periodically closes the gap between himself and his work, using objects to mediate this distance. The floral buttonhole, like his most shocking epigrams, is usually assigned to the dandy who is Wilde's stage image. While most prominently present in the first production of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the

---

[19] It is important that the dandy maintains a delicate balance between seriousness and triviality, as we see in this exchange:

> Lord Darlington: This woman has purity and innocence. […]
> Cecil Graham: My dear fellow, what on earth should we men do going about with purity and innocence? A carefully thought-out buttonhole is much more effective. (65-66)

[20] Ellen Sampson, *Worn: Footwear, Attachment and the Affects of Wear* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), pp. 107, 41.

[21] ibid., p. 41.

[22] Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967) qtd in ibid., p. 5.

[23] Sampson, *Worn,* p. 9.

carnation reappears on Lord Goring's coat in many productions including Oliver Parker's film (1999), in many photographs of Wilde, and on Cecil Graham, most famously in the Peter Hall production (2002). The effect of these percolating and carefully picked out ornaments is that a sense of material as well as theatrical artificiality and constructedness envelops the plays and their productions. Drugeon contends that as reality and fiction, creator and creation, actor and spectator 'merge and exchange identities […] the image of Oscar Wilde as author and aesthete, and what is known of his life, inherently mingles with the characters he invented in his works, and their various embodiments on the stage'.[24] The encounter between the stock character and the worn object then stands as a perfect emblem of Wilde's own relationship with his creations: the two often collapse into one another, mediated through objects. The worn object like his works demonstrates both Barthes's insertion within a dramatic tradition as well as a merging with the dandy-creator so that the author, character, symbol, and dramatic conventions all bear traces of each other.

Objects become a medium for Wilde to infiltrate both his fictional selves and worlds, as well as the late Victorian fashions and public sphere. The first production of *Lady Windermere's Fan* featured two prominent objects, the fan and the carnation. The play could then be seen as moving from the contained and managed misbehaviour of the fan to the spillage of the carnation bursting from the container that is the stage drawing room. The play's production circumstances rewrite its textual approach to the object-world, switching from possessing or (be)holding to 'being in' or 'being with' as the dominant mode of object-encounter. The fan then embodies the growing inadequacy of contained and authorised misbehaviour that sends out ripples but leaves undisturbed the larger surface of dramatic conventions of the time. This reflects the limits of Wilde's own control over his materials as he fails to challenge or escape the various institutions that are attacked in his plays (Victorian mores, consumerism, generic cliches, marital unit among others) using objects and artistic materials (stock character, dramatic closure, mislaid objects) that are firmly lodged within these institutions. Symptomatic of *fin-de-siècle* theatre at large, we can read within the trajectory of misbehaviour a move away from challenging conventional strategies of drawing room comedies and society drama using its own objects, towards a more overt disturbance of theatrical and representational apparatus through uncontained and transgressive objects. Material misbehaviour allows an alternate reading of the first production as a movement from the fan to the carnation, from the dramatically contained object to the post-performance object, to which I now turn.

The First Production

[24] Marianne Drugeon, 'Aestheticism on the Wildean Stage', p. 98.

The first production incorporates within it the return of the carnation to the real world (or reality to the carnation). It does not just render the fictional object real but fictionality itself rubs off on everything the object touches. One can imagine Wilde instructing his entourage to wear the carnation "like Cecil Graham".[25] It is the fictional object's (re)turn to reality as also its smearing of fictionality onto people that allows one to speak of real people as characters and the character as part of the group. Put more imaginatively, the carnation's fictionality colours the bodies it touches and in turn keeps losing its own pigment, turning progressively more faded and real (it is worth noting that the carnation was artificially dyed green, which I explore later).

I read the carnation's movement beyond the stage as a mode of performance in itself, borrowing from scenographic approaches to theatre materials.[26] This production of the play staged as a traditional and formulaic drawing room comedy adheres to the strict compartmentalisation and detachment of the performance and audience. The audience both expects this mode of representation, given their familiarity with convention, and is conditioned into this detachment from the performance by the staging and the nature (genre, form, plot, tropes, resolutions) of the play. The carnation, by spilling over the play's closure, causes a disruption of the imposed and invited expectations. But the play is already over. What then does the object disrupt?

- *Disturbing Passivity*

The carnation defies the play's closure, thus unsettling the coexistence of the end of the play and the end of the theatrical event. Even if we refuse to admit that this was more than a frivolous gimmick that did little to radically rewrite the perceptual basis of the production, since this was a post-performance occurrence, there is nonetheless an undeniable degree of change in audience's absorption into performance. Here I am using the ambiguity of the word 'absorption' consciously to mark both the audience's engagement with the play as well as the spongy absorption machinery of theatre (as discussed in the introduction to this chapter). I would like to expand on the difference and even the inverse relationship between the audience's absorption *with* the play (the audience's undisturbed attention) and *by* the play (the play's employing of audience members in its post-performance orchestration) and the carnation's complicity in it. The carnation as a fictional object in a conventionally

[25] I speculate this based on a report that suggests that green carnations were 'distributed to all the men in the audience'. Joseph Bristow, 'Introduction', *Oscar Wilde: 'The Importance of Being Earnest' and Related Writings* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 20.

[26] I draw from McKinney's understanding of scenography and performance environment as 'a mode of performance itself'. Joslin McKinney, 'Empathy and Exchange: Audience Experience of Scenography' in *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices* ed. Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 219–233 (p. 221).

structured melodrama is tasked with upholding fictionality and preserving the audience's absorption with the play. At the same time, when it juts out of the play and finds its place on "real people's" buttonholes, it absorbs them into if not the play then the metastructure of the theatrical event.

From the above, the carnation fits the category of misbehaving object: it defies behavioural expectations (emerging both from the particular production and the larger context of *fin-de-siècle* drama) and its own ontological allegiances as fictional and then (observably) real. But, unlike other real objects on stage, the carnation does not just switch roles from fictional to real but also prompts a shift in the spectator's roles. For Wilde's clique who sported the carnation, the play-watching would have been underpinned by a sense of knowing and waiting (perhaps not very unlike the actors waiting in the wings for their parts). These latent actors would have been "activated" as participants by the carnation, either before the play as a part of a small social group called on to wear the flower, during the play while noticing a character mirroring their adornment, or after the play when they display this mirroring. This activation marks an inversion of the human intervention, manipulation, or 'triggering' that critics see as the defining feature of a stage prop.[27] The object's intervention then turns some of the spectators into theatrical entities in its own image.

The carnation thus places spectators *within* rather than *before* the performance environment,[28] thus eliciting a misbehaviour against the established norm of detached spectatorship. This stratifies and redefines the audience into participants, latent participants, proto-participants, or non-participants (people who are not wearing the carnation). The carnation moves from a sign that a spectator reads to a material presence that a participant bears and experiences. While this movement from reading to experiencing is usually a receptive or hermeneutic labour, with many critical efforts to recover objects' materiality from the web of semiosis,[29] here it is spoon-fed to the audience by the object itself. We (audience/readers/critics) are not the ones reframing the role of the object, the object is reframing us.

Stanton Garner points out that the scenic space is 'given as spectacle to be processed and consumed by the perceiving eye, objectified as field of vision for a spectator who aspires to the detachment inherent in the perceptual act.'[30] While this shift from being spectators of the objectified

---

[27] See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Semiotics of Theater*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 107; Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props,* p. 12.

[28] Here I borrow from McKinney's idea, 'spectators placed within (rather than before) the scenography should also be considered as participants' 'Empathy and Exchange', p. 222.

[29] This 'labour' can be seen in the various 'calls for' and turns in (theatre) criticism—the call for a non-semiotic approach or a 'binocular vision', the affective turn, the new materialist turn etc. (discussed in the introduction) that speak in terms of re-evaluating our own approach without crediting the shift in the object of study itself.

[30] Stanton B. Garner Jr., *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), p. 3.

scenic space to becoming participants incorporated within that space is clear for the people wearing the carnation, the non-participants' relation with the spectator-spectacle exchange is less obvious. These other members would arguably find themselves broken away from the participants. At the same time, the sense of 'something's happening' would prompt an alertness to the shifting intensities and interactions between space, bodies, and materials. Here I draw on McKinney's ideas on kinaesthetic awareness and 'scenographic exchange' between the spectator/participant and the performance. She argues that the engagement and response to scenography can be seen as a reciprocal process of meaning formation, and more importantly, exchange. The exchange is literalised and leaves a material and tangible trace in this production with the movement of the carnation. She further points out that an active observer is 'alert to "constancies" and changes in their surroundings.'[31] The carnation, I argue, creates a kinaesthetic alertness in the audience who would find themselves pulled into the 'volumetric totality' of the experience if only by virtue of the shifting mode of engagement demanded by the breaking of expectations. Watching their neighbours or people presumed to be mere audience members become participants and 'co-creators'[32] in Wilde's orchestration would affect not only the participants' mode of engagement but also the other audience members compelled to switch from earlier detachment to active spectatorship. The affective and kinaesthetic response would modify the earlier 'something's happening' to 'something's happening *to me'* or 'something could happen *to me'*, further blurring the line between spectators and materials of performance. This invites the audience's attention to the object, its out of place-ness, and a consciousness of their own now-unsettled position within the performance-spectator spectrum, cuing if not self-awareness then at least disturbance that comes from being at once the subject and object of perception. Another mode of active attention, albeit retrospective, is the potential prodding of the memory-object, the remembered image of the carnation from the play. The carnation's unstable status within and beyond the fictional world, and its now prominent presence would potentially encourage conjuring the object from the memory of the play, thus also a re-engagement with the play itself. This disobedience of the earlier theatrically ordained passivity is prompted by the change in the kinaesthetic relationship between the carnation, bodies, and the stage.

The post-performance orchestration on the play's opening night thus transformed audience members into pseudo-participants and active spectators. The carnation disobeys and inverts fiction's appropriation of reality by tangibly and observably returning to reality and being posthumously absorbed by reality. Tracing the potential and affordances of the carnation to elicit varying affective engagement from the first night audience elucidates how the shifts and flows in the mode of attention impinges on the present life of the object. I will now turn towards the carnation's real life as a cultural

[31] McKinney, 'Empathy and Exchange', p. 224.
[32] ibid., p. 221.

commodity and a queer symbol to explore what happens when we telescope the carnation's misbehaviours against expectations, closure, and theatrically and socially contracted roles into reality.

- *Overstuffing Theatricality*

The green carnation's misbehaviour against theatrical norms replays the questioning, suspension, and moulding of dominant norms outside theatre. Additionally, this extra-theatrical performance is lost in time and impossible to reproduce. The subversive potential of the ephemerality of performance has been subject to much critical debate but a common argument rests on its resistance to commodification. Notably, Peggy Phelan discusses the enactment of disappearance as the very basis of performance.[33] She argues that this thwarts the reproduction, storage, and availability that turn representation into a commodity circulating within global capitalism. Torsten Graff similarly argues that performance, by insisting on a presentness, resists commodification of art and interrupts the capitalist system of circulation of goods. Since performance cannot be identically reproduced, it resists absorption into the dominant cultural system, unlike text.[34] Kistenberg holds that it is this quality of ephemerality that makes performance economically subversive and a useful strategy for political intervention.[35] With Wilde's carnation, we see that the post-performance event further asserts the ephemerality and transitoriness of performance. While all performance is irreproducible, the carnation event made that production singularly so — the carnation, like the etched fan, being like a signature marking the original from the reproductions. Its unrepeatability can then be seen as materially obstructing and resisting the production's commodification by enhancing the impossibility of reproduction. Seen in this light, the extra-theatrical object is a performative intervention into and misbehaves against the theatrical institution at the turn of the century which was increasingly determined by a consumerist sensibility and permanence asserting tradition of canonisation.

Furthermore, as a metatheatrical strategy, the carnation can be read as subversive in that it queers the theatrical event and the play itself. Feminist and queer theatre theories have argued that dramatic representation and mimesis work in concert with dominant heterosexual and patriarchal ideology, both fictionally and formally. As Belsey, talking about classical realist plots argues, 'the story moves inevitably towards closure [and] the re-establishment of order, recognizable as a reinstatement or a development of the order which is understood to have preceded the events of the story itself.'[36]

[33] See Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 118.
[34] See Torsten Graff, 'Gay Drama / Queer Performance?', *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 46.1 (2001), 11–25 (p. 14).
[35] See Cindy J. Kistenberg, *AIDS, Social Change, and Theater* (New York: Garland, 1995) qtd. in ibid., p. 14.
[36] Catherine Belsey, 'Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text', in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change* ed. Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Newton (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), p. 53.

This is broadly the structure that Wilde's comedies follow, where challenges to Victorian values in the form of playful, mocking witticisms and momentary lapses in judgement are eventually absorbed into an exaltation of marital happiness and re-establishment of (the heterosexual) order in the end. By pulling theatricality beyond the stage and rewriting the role of the audience (as discussed above) the carnation offers a queer interference into the ideological reproduction that underpins conventional mimetic drama. Disturbing passive spectatorship, it reveals the constructedness of theatre and the behavioural expectations and norms it elicits. This is metatheatrical not only because it "theatricalises theatre" but also because it supplants a theatre object onto "real" bodies, transforming them into participants. By theatricalising this very transformation, the production exposes the necessary theatricality of the natural, the authentic, and the well-behaved.

The carnation further embodies queer metatheatricality through its spillage beyond the dramatic container, which I argue, engenders an excess and an uncontainability. Graff discusses this 'overstuffing' in reference to Tony Kushner's plays which, while belonging to late twentieth century American drama, has resonances with the carnation's closure-defying excess. He discusses the 'pretentious fabulousness' of Kushner's plays drawing from the playwright's claim that 'a good play, like a good lasagna, must be overstuffed.'[37] This is very relevant to Wilde, whose floral 'overstuffing' was seen as just as egotistical and pretentious as it was popular.[38] Graff concludes:

> the overstuffing of a play that cannot contain all that it is supposed to contain […] breaks up any conventional form and generates an excess which must be understood to be an exposure of the theatrical.[39]

By breaking free of the fictional and diving (back) into the real, the carnation breaks the borders of the conventional form, reframing the heterosexual closure and dissolution of disorder as not the only objective closure. Furthermore, the flower's inverse trajectory has resonances with Wilde's own idea of anti-mimesis. He famously proclaimed that it is life that imitates art and seizes its materials for its own purposes, turning the conventional logic of artistic mimesis on its head.[40] The characteristic reworking of the art-life relationship casts the spillage of the carnation as not just a questioning but an

---

[37] Tony Kushner, 'On Pretentiousness,' *Thinking about the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1995) qtd. in Graff, 'Gay Drama / Queer Performance?', p. 22.
[38] When the play opened in New York in 1893, a critic in the *New York Daily Tribune* said more about Wilde than the play, 'The achievement was personal. It probably pleased the writer. It is of no consequence to anybody else.' Karl Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1970), p. 11.
[39] Graff, 'Gay Drama / Queer Performance?', p. 22.
[40] See Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', *In Praise of Disobedience: The Soul of Man Under Socialism and Other Writings* (London: Verso Books, 2020), p. 69. The green carnation itself is seen as a source of inspiration for nature in Robert Hichens's novel *The Green Carnation* that fondly satirises Wilde and the decadents.

inversion of the dramatic ideology of closure: the carnation does not just exceed or stretch the closure but makes it an exposition, starting point, or instigator of another story where reality appropriates fiction, as we see in its life as a queer symbol and inspiration for works of fiction (which I explore later).

We can see that the carnation occupies two main positions as an object that misbehaves against dramatic convention and ideology: it sustains the subversive ephemerality of performance and it defies/inverts closure as a fictional remnant invading reality. Put together, these appear to be contradictory, mutually cancelling roles. As a commodified object, it is not just a metonymic emblem of the play but also citational with the potential to essentially reproduce it in its intertextual lives. We see this in its circulation as a queer commodity as also in the various creative reproductions. This citationality, not to the widely available playtext but to the lost first production, can be seen as standing at odds with what Phelan understands to be the ontological basis of performance.[41] So, while as an unrepeatable image of Wilde's tricking of Victorian audiences, it retains and amplifies an anti-commodified ephemerality, as a physical remnant of performance, it finds itself circulating as a commodity. What is interesting here is that these two positions are both antithetical and causal: the carnation is commodified *because of* its original misbehaviour against commodification of art. I now turn to this commodified position.

The Carnation and Wilde's Consumer Aesthetic[42]

The cultural legacy of the carnation continues to be present and felt in its circulation as a symbol and expression of queerness. At the same time, much like Wilde, his successful West-end comedies, and the aestheticism movement more generally, the carnation evokes ideas of and has a tenuous relationship with commodification (of art), cultural institutionalisation, and consumerism. On the one hand, it is born in the realm of aesthetics from which it metatheatrically steps out, revealing the artifice of theatricality and resisting commodification. On the other hand, this misbehaviour leads not to a return to its "real state" as a mere flower but instead to a plunge into another set of behavioural codes, being widely reproduced, popularised, commodified, and absorbed into dominant cultural institutions. This complicated love-hate relationship with the commodification of the aesthetic is perhaps the reason for

[41] Phelan contends, 'Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology.' *Unmarked,* p. 146.

[42] I borrow this phrase from Fortunato who uses it to describe Wilde's 'desire to impact a large audience— in other words to *market*' that is inseparable from his desire to create art. Paul L. Fortunato, 'Wildean Philosophy with a Needle and Thread: Consumer Fashion at the Origins of Modernist Aesthetics', *College Literature*, 34.3 (2007), 37–53 (p. 38).

its, and by extension, Wilde's continued allure and for the narratives that they both prompt (the many creative works written on them) and collect (as favourite subjects for fanciful anecdotes and literary gossip).

Wilde's complicated relationship with consumer culture has been a subject of much critical attention. His society comedies in particular often advertised, reflected, and produced expensive fashion and taste. Fortunato argues that while he criticises consumer culture in his essays like 'The Soul of Man under Socialism', with *Lady Windermere's Fan* he turns to 'the genre most oriented to the mass audience, and most implicated in consumer industries like entertainment, decoration, and fashion.'[43] Kaplan and Stowell point out that these theatres were prime locations for advertising fashions, supplied as they were with elaborate and ostentatious sets and props.[44] He viewed art as neither immune to nor separate from commodification and consumer culture, but instead located them on the same continuum, something that most modernists were unwilling to do. This absorption of art into mass culture and refusal to cordon off the two is traced in the carnation's injection of theatricality into reality, as it transformed from an elusive art object to a mass cultural commodity and a vehicle for self-expression.

Despite his commitment to the necessary commodification and marketability of art, Wilde expressed reformist and anti-capitalist stances in his prose as well as in the marrying of popular comedies with morality-questioning melodramas on stage. Fortunato articulates Wilde's 'comingling of high and mass culture, of detached aestheticism and engaged reformism' in the opening question of his book, 'How did a bohemian anarchist find himself writing West-end comedies about elite society?'[45] The consumerist aesthetic of Wilde's artistic vision could be cast in reformist terms within the modernist imagination, in its opposition to the ills associated with Victorian society. Despite this shared opposition, Wilde nonetheless occupies an uncomfortable position within modernism which tried to distance itself from both the economics and aesthetics of consumption. The acceptance and even embrace of commodified art and the continuum established between the art object and commodity is either dismissed or repressed under the modernist suspicion of consumption. Mao argues that:

> modernism defines itself in part by rejecting aestheticism's foundational claim that a life well lived can be oriented primarily toward consumption, where such an orientation could mean

[43] Ibid., p. 38.
[44] See Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell, *The Theatre and Fashion: Oscar Wilde to the Suffragettes* cited in ibid., p. 51.
[45] Fortunato, *Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture,* p. 1.

> anything from devotion to the sheer experience of the fleeting present (Pater) to professions of self-realization through flamboyant acquisition (Wilde).[46]

Commercialisation is generally understood as marring if not destroying art for high modernism. Although, as observed above, Wilde's approach to objects is 'non-utilitarian', both recognising and resisting commodity fetishism,[47] nonetheless this attention to consumption is often seen as the reason for the critical 'ghosting'[48] of Wilde within modernist studies as well as his 'bad modernism'.[49]

The Carnation as a Queer Commodity

The carnation's misbehaviour as it defaults from a sign in and of the play world to that of cultural capital, from an aesthetic object to a commodity, materially embodies Wilde's desire for his art to influence bourgeois culture as also his own status as a misbehaving modernist. I will now explore the carnation's present life and transformation into a (queer) cultural commodity, arguing that its original misbehaviour is both retained and rewritten as it circulates in society and cultural imagination. This discussion can also be seen as making an inadvertent argument for the misbehaving carnation's fertility as a metonym and symbol for Wilde and aestheticism, and thus as a new material approach to the saturated dialogues on them. These discussions often attempt to smooth over the incongruencies in Wildean aestheticism and its position within (late nineteenth century and present) cultural institutions and modernist studies.[50] I suggest that reading the carnation's misbehaviour allows us to productively retain the paradox and inconsistencies inherent in this relationship.

While floral symbolism has a long literary and cultural association with queerness,[51] the carnation as a queer symbol embodies the specific contradictions of aestheticism and Wilde's own relationship with mass culture, fashion, entertainment, theatre industries, and consumerism. Following

---

[46] Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 18.
[47] Lesjak, 'Utopia, Use, and the Everyday', p. 186.
[48] Ann Ardis devotes a chapter of her book to 'Inventing literary traditions, ghosting Oscar Wilde and the Victorian *fin de siècle'*. Ann L. Ardis, *Modernism and Cultural Conflict: 1880-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 45-71.
[49] Mao and Walkowitz, *Bad Modernisms*.
[50] Fortunato points out the 'disappointment' of some critics when Wilde does not turn out to be the 'anti-consumerist' they wished he was. 'Wildean Philosophy', p. 38.
[51] Sarah Prager lists several flowers that have been 'decidedly queered' over history: from Sappho's association with violets, Whitman's with the calamus, the 'pansy craze' that led to the use of the flower's name as a slang for queer men, to the 'evening botanist' as another antiquated term. 'Four Flowering Plants That Have Been Decidedly Queered', *JSTOR Daily*, 2020 <https://daily.jstor.org/four-flowering-plants-decidedly-queered/> [accessed 4 June 2023].

his floral stunt, the carnation became a '*sina qua non* for the well-dressed man about town'.[52] It began to gather queer associations in its various literary incarnations. In Victoria Hunt's story 'The Green Carnation' (published days after Wilde's entourage wore the flower) it is a homoerotic *'gage d'amour'* (pledge of love) between two men, associated with an 'unnatural sin', undefined but sufficiently obvious to the readers.[53] A 1929 musical by Noel Coward further harnessed the flower's queer symbolism as a covert gesture of coming out by including a song called 'We All Wear a Green Carnation'.[54] Twigs Way observes that 'the green carnation has even more firmly become associated with the "outing" of homosexuality in the 1930s than it had been in the 1890s'.[55] At the same time, some argue that the queering of the carnation pre-exists its literary adaptations. Regenia Gagnier remarked that the stunt was orchestrated to give Wilde 'the pleasure at the premiere of watching straight men unwittingly bearing the emblem of homosexuality.'[56] In either case, the literary life of the carnation has outlived the production and acquired (or kindled) queer connotations that continue to possess its real-life presence.

While in its theatrical manifestation, the carnation's misbehaviour is characterised by its alterity and challenge to the exclusionary forces of the heterosexual-dramatic nexus (as discussed above), its increasing circulation as a queer commodity creates its own 'cult of the green carnation'.[57] This commodification capitalises on (and thus to a degree tames) its original rebellion against prevailing aesthetic standards and theatrical codes, such that misbehaviour against established artistic values is itself canonised/commodified.[58] The flower's associations with a famous playwright prosecuted for 'gross indecency' as well as its planting into the soil of aestheticism that acknowledged (if not celebrated) art's potential to market and dictate consumer culture or the creativity behind consumption,[59] is what made it not just an inarticulate confession of 'a love that dare not speak its name' but also a commodity of (re)production, consumption, distribution, and marketing.[60]

---

[52] Way, *Carnation,* p. 111.
[53] V. H. 'The Green Carnation', *White and Black*, 3 (12 March 1892) qtd. in Beckson, 'Oscar Wilde and the Green Carnation', p. 389.
[54] Way, *Carnation,* p. 126.
[55] Ibid., p. 129.
[56] Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986), pp. 163-64.
[57] In Robert Hichens's *The Green Carnation* a character also asks if the flower is 'a badge of some club or some society', *The Green Carnation* (New York: Dover, 1970) qtd. in Beckson, 'Oscar Wilde and the Green Carnation', p. 393.
[58] This proliferation into mass culture inevitably comes to be associated with a degree of monetisation and commercialisation. The Green Carnation Prize for LGBT literature further reflects Wilde's unstable legacy. Here, a sign of commodification of the aesthetic is appropriated as a symbol for artistic merit, intermeshing high and mass culture.
[59] See Mao, *Solid Objects*, p. 40.
[60] This line from Wilde's lover, Alfred Douglas's poem 'Two Loves' was famously used in his trial. Qtd. in Michael S. Foldy, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde: Deviance, Morality, and Late-Victorian Society* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 7.

I would like to momentarily go back to the body of the carnation itself. It is important to note that the carnation was artificially dyed green. The deliberate choice of this colour that does not occur naturally paints a particular picture of the surface of Wilde's material imagination and his assertion that nature imitates art. Fortunato argues that 'Wilde defends the seductiveness of surface and proposes that the ornamental is more substantial than the substance.'[61] His commitment to the surface, ornamental, trivial, and artificial further infiltrates the carnation which is emptied out of meaning (as it means 'nothing whatever').[62] It stands as stubbornly decorative, a mark that surprises and connects people rather than a sign that means or represents. Conversely, through its commodification, this ostensibly meaningless trinket is injected with and used in political,[63] ideological, and symbolic realms, going against Wilde's aesthetics of uselessness.[64] As an ideological and economic commodity, it is made to betray Wilde's surface imaginary and its own aesthetic materiality that is stubbornly superficial, pointing only to its unnatural colour. At the same time, the two are inseparable, as unnaturalness and the aesthetics of surface are arguably always already queerly commodified. Halberstam reads Wilde's cleaving of nature and aesthetics ('The more we study art, the less we care for nature'[65]) and borrows from Sontag in linking this with the 'emergence of homosexuality'. They argue that, 'To the extent that the newly formed regime of heterosexuality staked its claim to dominance on the bedrock of the natural, the homosexual must invest in all available antinatural terrain.'[66] Queerness for Halberstam depends on the split between aesthetic/unnatural and natural; the former in the late nineteenth century is turned from a 'sin into indulgence'.[67] The artificial and meaningless green carnation is then not in opposition to the queer ideological and commodified symbol. Its unnaturalness points to ideas of the surface, decadence, artificiality, and a resistance to meaning and use but these very ideas also lead to its commodification and use as a symbol of unspeakable and illegible desires. Halberstam argues that the 'natural and the antinatural entered the twentieth century together, tethered at the waist or connected in some more

---

[61] Ibid., p. 42.
[62] Way, *Carnation,* p. 125.
[63] The flower has also come to be associated with St. Patrick's Day. Twigs Way points out that this has led to some political confusion: 'In 2015 the organizers of the New York St Patrick's Day Parade were divided over the inclusion of gay and same-sex groups at the Irish celebrations – a shame as the celebrants could otherwise have claimed the right to wear two green carnations' *Carnation* p. 129. Dyed carnations were also sported in the buttonholes of members of a Parisian political party, that came to be known as 'the party of the Green Carnation' in 1891 Charles Nelson, ''Beautiful Untrue Things': Green Carnations and the Art of Dyeing', *The Wildean*, 48 (2016), 96–103 (p. 97).
[64] Beyond the famous conclusion to the Preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 'All art is quite useless' Wilde also concludes 'A work of art is useless as a flower is useless. A flower blossoms for its own joy.' Qtd. in Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man: A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tale, 1988), p. 46.
[65] Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying' qtd. in Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), p. 16
[66] Halberstam, *Wild Things,* p. 17.
[67] Ibid., p. 17.

intimate way'.[68] The artificially dyed flower on Wilde's coat then embodies this intimate tethering of empty and symbolic, aesthetic object and commodity, meaningless and queer such that 'A really well-made buttonhole is the only link between Art and Nature.'[69]

Conclusion

The phenomenon of misbehaviour emerges as an imposing presence in discussions of Wilde, the various contradictions of his 'consumer modernism'[70] and by extension, the uncomfortable position of late nineteenth century aestheticism within/as modernism. It is not coincidental that an anthology of Wilde's prose was named *In Praise of Disobedience* with a green carnation on the cover, or that the reviewer Clement Scott chastised Wilde for his 'bad manners' in his opening night antic, for puffing 'cigarette smoke into the faces of ladies' and disregarding theatre etiquettes and behavioural expectations.[71] The wild carnation is at once an empty fictional ornament meaning 'nothing whatever' and a real cultural commodity, a punctum of dramatic ideology and a material proof of its queering, a commercial art object and a remnant of a lost performance. Regardless of its own uncertain status as a queer object, its theatrical and ideological misbehaviour enacts a queering of its several fictional and real encounters. The incongruencies between the carnation's theatrical and real ontologies offer new approaches and critical possibilities to Wilde's plays and aesthetics. It is this tenuous and paradoxical mode of misbehaviour performed by the carnation that makes it a fitting symbol of Wilde, aestheticism, and their uncomfortable position between Victorian and modernist sensibility as well as Wilde's distinct modernism.

Tracing the lost gesture of the carnation's movement from stage to audience in St. James's Theatre in 1892 from the lens of misbehaviour allows it to emerge as an emblem of the productive antinomies recognised and celebrated in Wildean aesthetics. The dyed carnation triangulates theatre, queer culture and consumer aesthetics, and the corresponding behavioural codes of ephemerality, commodification, meaning, and use. These networks of contradicting (mis)behaviours that underlie Wilde's plays and their position within culture, theatre, and modernist studies are not unknotted but radically and generatively sustained by the carnation, which replaces the better-behaved and tameable object, the fan. Its various lives continue to write and rewrite, assert and assuage their own misbehaviours in the encounters with theatrical and real ontologies, ideological loyalties, cultural

---

[68] Ibid., p. 17.
[69] Oscar Wilde, *Epigrams: Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* (London: A.R. Keller, 1907), p. 141.
[70] Fortunato 'Wildean Philosophy', p. 38.
[71] 'Clement Scott on *Lady Windermere's Fan'* in Beckson, *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage,* p. 137.

circulation, and critical approaches. Its present life embodies and echoes the misbehaviour of its theatrical afterlife. Its original misbehaviour then is not just a performance or a symbol but a demand for a mode of attention that challenges the disciplining inherent in current methodology and approaches to Wilde's theatre. Misbehaving objects further emerge as at once reflections of and productive vessels for navigating the bad behaviour and contradictions of turn-of-the-century aestheticism and modernism, moving the scholarship beyond the critical discomfort with the asymmetry inherent in the period's distinct marrying of aestheticism and consumer modernism.

CHAPTER 1: CONCLUSION

This chapter offered the methodology of misbehaviour as a specific mode of subject-object encounters encapsulating adjacent ideas of behavioural and representational codes, functionality, expectations, agency, control, and transgression. Misbehaviour of objects allows us to interrogate the limits of human control and an attentiveness to this uncovers the potential of objects to threaten the fictions of human capabilities and competence. Given that the staging of objects interrupts the usual life of things, misbehaviour as a theatre methodology is particularly fertile. Theatrical representation of objects is rooted in misbehaviour, wherein staging further exaggerates and even harnesses their potential to disobey or fail. This can be located at different junctures in a play's lifecycle: from text to staging and reception. While certain objects are bad actors, breaking character and misbehaving in their assigned roles, some can disobey ontological hierarchies by transgressing their object status or puncturing representation and semiosis. Misbehaviour emerges as a particularly generative lens in navigating modernism's capitalising on the phenomenal instability of the unruly materials, given its very basis in "bad manners" and its interest in incorporating cross-ontological encounters. I proposed an attention to misbehaving theatre objects as an antidote to the critical and institutional taming of modernism's "badness" and a vehicle for materially locating, recognising, and reinvesting its original unruliness.

Misbehaving objects in Ibsen's and Wilde's plays unseat habitual, subject-centric modes of criticism and reception, and evidence the tolerance of, even reliance on unstable and volatile materials. By taking as starting point a bit of possibly fictional gossip in the second case study, I drew on the carnation's spirit of "serious triviality", driving the chapter to misbehave against the entrenched modes of reading Wilde. These case studies of canonical plays establish the potential of material misbehaviour as a framework to make significant interventions within established scholarship, as it reveals the imposition and breaking of various codes on and by theatrical objects that usually recede into the background and are taken for granted. A closer attention to objects' multifarious disobedience reveals both the prominence and the various articulations of this phenomenon, from objects misbehaving against ontological, functional, or theatrical codes to objects as vehicles of scripting, disrupting, and queering. By disrupting codes and expectation, misbehaviour makes visible the operations of their imposition and the networks of power and control that hide in plain sight. Examining material misbehaviour as marking the extent and limits of anthropocentric control reinvigorates and even debunks disciplined, well-behaved readings as inadequate and subject-centric. The attention to material misbehaviours demonstrates how an object encounter or category can not only reflect a theatrical tendency but also come to influence critical engagement with plays and play objects. This chapter establishes the potential of applying misbehaving critical methods and approaches to established plays while also demonstrating a way of identifying object-encounters that come to influence our own critical

encounters with the work, unseating entrenched methods. Finally, theatrical objects do not just symbolise or perform material misbehaviour but evoke and even demand a critical approach that is necessarily challenging to conventional readings and critical disciplining within present scholarship.

Chapter 2: Fidgeting with Objects

INTRODUCTION

> Can you never like things without clutching them as if you wanted to pull the heart out of them? [1]
>
> —D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*

Modernist literature and theatre on both sides of the Atlantic is replete with examples of a particular kind of relationship with objects, namely, the touching, collecting, and grasping of often personal and ostensibly quotidian objects — from John's glass collection in Virginia Woolf's 'Solid Objects', Peter Walsh's stroking of his pocket-knife in *Mrs. Dalloway,* to Garcin's obsession with the bronze ornament in Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* and Miriam's frenzied absorption with flowers in the epigraph quotation. Fidgeting, as seen in the above examples and as explored through this chapter, constitutes a significant and frequent gesture in modernist writing, and brings up questions of action, intent, corporeality, agency, productivity, and reader/audience attention that have long been the concerns of theatre and modernist studies in general. I attempt to acknowledge an orientation towards fidgeting in modernism, how this was espoused, and its ramifications for the specific plays — Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* and Barnes's *The Dove* — and their established readings. While this gesture is in no way the domain or discovery of modernists alone, I intend to delineate the unique status of the gesture that makes it an important critical and experiential lens to study the representation of and encounter with objects in modernist drama. I conceive fidgeting as an umbrella term encapsulating a wide range of impulses and orientations towards objects to cover both physical and figurative forms of preoccupation and even obsession with objects, including impulses like fondling, caressing, constant fiddling, grasping, collecting, at times frenzied, unrestrained or desperate clinging on to objects, along with narrative, textual, or performative absorption or a character's overwhelming fixation on an object. I propose that fidgeting allows cross-genre, cross-form comparisons and use this mobility afforded by the object lens to explore the encounter in playtexts and productions. I offer fidgeting as an important lens for modernist object-encounters to draw attention to the breadth of its occurrence, unveil its complex operation, and propose the need to engage in its study to rescue it from relative discursive neglect as a methodology and mode of attention in theatre.[2]

---

[1] D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (London: CRW Publishing, 2005), p. 306.

[2] While scholarly attention has been given to touch, sensory experience or habit in literature and drama—see Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), James Krasner, *Home Bodies: Tactile Experience in Domestic Space* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010), and Joe Moshenska, *Feeling Pleasures: The Sense of Touch in Renaissance*

There is a long history of fidgeting as a literary gesture (be it Penelope's weaving and unweaving of tapestry in *The Odyssey*, Harriet Smith's obsession with objects associated with Mr Elton in *Emma* or Trina's constant rubbing of gold pieces in *McTeague* among many others)[3] which precedes and arguably bears upon its incarnation on the modernist stage. But when we come to the twentieth century, this chapter aims to show that fidgeting with things gains a particular colouring, owing to the drastic changes in production, both industrial and artistic. This caused a perceptible shift in material culture, its representation and concomitantly, its role in people's lives. As I will explore, many portrayals of fidgeting from the turn of the century defy clear logic, motive, rationale, and intelligibility, often emerging as deliberately ambiguous and absurd. While some modes of its presence on the modernist stage and texts can be discerned and clubbed together under an identifiable schema,[4] many renditions of fidgeting in the early to mid-twentieth century often resist alignment with an easily discernible symbol, projected abstraction, or external signifier. The self-reflexivity that makes its entry on the modernist stage seems to trickle down to objects and object-encounters as meaning short-circuits and eludes easy bracketing. Drawing from this friction between fidgeting and meaning, I argue that this gesture in modernist plays, demonstrated through *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Dove,* is informed by, and combines two of the most fundamental ontologies of objects — the sensory and the ideological. By the former, I argue that fidgeting draws from the materiality of the object, the character's corporeality, and sensory, tactile experience. By its ideological presence, I mean the life of an object in relation to identity, as a possession, and as a commodity of production, consumption, and collection, wherein the subject-object relation mediated through fidgeting is underpinned by ideas of productivity, function, utility, and modernist conceptions of artistic and economic production.

Sensory Fidgeting

- *Touch*

England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014) among others— they tend to overlook the specific subject of fidgeting and its twentieth century theatrical renditions.

[3] While it is not possible to chart a literary history of fidgeting here, many examples can be found in works of Bill Brown, Stanton Garner, Sara Ahmed, Andrew Sofer among others (along with the books mentioned in footnote 2). While these consider fidgeting tangentially or as a subset of other forms of interactions with objects, they speak to the breadth of its representation.

[4] For instance, the early to mid-twentieth century delivers many examples of what can be called memory objects: characters fidgeting with concrete tokens of their memory – from a very literal portrayal like Krapp's repeated playing of tapes from his past in *Krapp's Last Tape*, or the anthropologist in Muriel Sparks's *Memento Mori* who compulsively records intimate details of his friends' lives on index cards, to a more subtle fiddling with material memories as with Proust's famous madeleine episode.

As a physical act, the gesture of fidgeting engenders a mediating of one's material environment through the haptic and tactile senses. Touch triggers and questions a wide range of associated ideas like sensuality, comfort, healing, intimacy, pain, pleasure, sexual or physical danger and so on. With its obvious connections with emotion (to paraphrase Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, touch+emotion=feeling),[5] it also touches a network of concerns beyond the bodily encounter in its manifestation as an intersubjective encounter. An important extra-bodily question it raises is who has the prerogative to touch or access the material world, to which I will turn later in my discussion of objectification.

Fidgeting as a sensory and tactile practice draws resonances and productive overlaps with sensory studies and phenomenology. Abbie Garrington in her book *Haptic Modernisms* proposes to trace modernism through the sense of touch or 'haptoglyphics', claiming that 'the adventures of the human hand and related sensations of touch and the tactile constitute a substantial tranche of the literature of the modernist period.'[6] Talking about the skin as the instrument of touch, she further holds that the skin is at once something we inhabit, and as such 'constitutes a border vital to the notion of an individuated self' as also an 'interface with the environment into which its sense experiences extend.'[7] Similarly, Kate Flint considers the distinctive status of touch in literature in her study of the pocket-knife in *Mrs Dalloway*, arguing that 'touch […] moves in two directions at once: outward and inward. To touch a thing, an other, is also to be aware of one's physical sensation as a toucher.'[8] In other words, touch is at once a feeling rooted in the body and a way of perceiving the world outside the body. Matthew Ratcliffe explains this idea in his study of the phenomenology of touch:

> the phenomenology of touch does not respect the distinction between bodily feeling and world-experience. Touch is a matter of relatedness between body and world, rather than of experiencing one in isolation from the other. In touching something, a bodily feeling is also a perception of something other than the body.[9]

Phenomenological discourses on sensory perception and the self argue for a reciprocal, mutually constitutive relation between the body and its perception of the world. This is particularly marked in the case of touch more than the other senses. Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues that vision is more detached and thus objectifying than touch as the object remains untainted by the body while 'as the subject of touch, I cannot flatter myself that I am everywhere and nowhere; I cannot forget in this case that it is

---

[5] See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 17.
[6] Garrington, *Haptic Modernism,* p. 2
[7] Ibid., p. 18
[8] Kate Flint, 'Peter Walsh's Pocket-Knife' *Times Literary Supplement*, 5262 (2004), p. 12.
[9] Matthew Ratcliffe, 'The Phenomenology of Touch', *Feelings of Being: Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 77.

through my body that I go to the world'.[10] Using the example of touching one hand with the other, he argues for the two dimensionality of the hand as at once subject and object, conceiving it as a 'chiasm' or a combination of 'subjective experience and objective existence'.[11] In presenting his ontology of the 'flesh' of things, Ponty delineates an intertwining or 'intercorporeity'[12] between the sensing body and the sensed thing. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick also asserts the capacity of touch in meddling with the subject-object boundary: 'Even more evidently than other perceptual systems, it seems, the sense of touch makes nonsense out of any dualistic understanding of agency and passivity.'[13] Touch, by being a medium of reaching out and bringing in, then engenders a seemingly contradictory simultaneity by asserting the limits of the self and the threshold of where the self ends and the object begins, while at the same time transgressing and hence closing this gap that is its very precondition. These different theories on tactile object-encounter agree on its status as a vehicle for at once asserting and transgressing the borders of the self, for simultaneously reaching out and drawing in. Touch creates a concurrent, contingent encounter (a hybrid ontology?)[14] between the body and the object, while relying on their separate ontologies girdled by distinct materialities.

The phenomenological approach to sensory perception has particularly interesting associations for corporeal presence and encounters in theatre. Stanton Garner argues that the 'phenomenological approach—with its twin perspective on the world as it is perceived and inhabited, and the emphasis on *embodied* subjectivity […] is uniquely able to illuminate the stage's experiential duality.'[15] He explains this duality through his idea of the 'phenomenal space' of theatre — at once a spectatorial, objectified space, detached from the observer and simultaneously subjectified by actors who bring forth the embodied space. His idea of *bodying* of theatrical space — where the body is both the object of [visual] perception and the 'originating site, zero point' of the space — challenges the visual primacy associated with theatrical experience. Additionally, the audience does not watch a space severed from their own

---

[10] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 330.

[11] Thomas Baldwin, 'Introduction: The Intertwining – The Chiasm', *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 2004), 247–270 (p. 247).

[12] I use this term very loosely informed by Ponty's conception of a mode of interaction between the self and the world. Scott L. Maratto, *The Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), p. 9.

[13] Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling,* p. 14

[14] One example of such a hybrid ontology are the 'bio-objects' in Tadeusz Kantor's theatre, where 'performers [were] bound to objects worn like costumes, produced a hybrid actor-object, each constituent part affecting and affected by the other'. Joslin McKinny, 'Vibrant Materials: The Agency of Things in the Context of Scenography' in *Performance and Phenomenology: Traditions and Transformations*, eds. Maaike Bleeker, Jon Foley Sherman, and Eirini Nedelkopoulou (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 124.

[15] Stanton Garner, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca NY.: Cornell University Press, 2019), pp. 3-4, emphasis original.

but instead embodies a 'phenomenological continuum' of the space 'bodied forth' by the actors.[16] This idea demystifies the medusa-like objectifying visuality taken as the basis of the theatrical event. The idea of theatre as a phenomenal space moves towards its understanding as an encounter that, while not tactile in its usual sense, carries the oxymoronic properties of the somatic experience, namely, a simultaneous 'exploration of the external environment' and 'registering of its stimuli on the body's surface.'[17] This idea further evokes the dissolving of subject-object borders and questioning of the visual primacy shared between embodied approaches to theatre and phenomenological approaches to the sensory.

- *Habit*

This two-way or circular (il)logic of reaching out and bringing in also emerges when we see the specific act of fidgeting as informed by intent, agency, and habit. The repetitive, habitual gesture might be aimed at stimulating a soothing and comforting sensation and can be seen as almost ritualistic and close to a verbal repetition, like a mantra.[18] It is often read as a character's expression of internal turmoil, anxiety, boredom, or a desire to escape the present. Furthermore, the word *fidgets* is also colloquially used to mean tics, stirrings, twitches, and squirming of and within the body, both wilful and involuntary, in response to these feelings. Fidgets can thus pertain to both tics within the body and the overwhelming urge to transcend the body by directing these stirrings to an object, as something one *has* as well as *does*. Bill Brown and Andrew Sofer connect habitual, repetitive interactions with objects with the passage of (fictional) time. Brown argues that these moments both 'mark[s] time and allow[s] us to escape from time.'[19] Sofer, calls these interruptions 'fondled moments' specifically in relation to the stage gun, using examples like Jessie cleaning Daddy's gun in *Night, Mother* or Hedda loading her pistol in the inner room in *Hedda Gabler* (discussed in chapter one). He goes further than Brown suggesting that these moments, besides providing 'time out' or interrupting 'the relentless trajectory of the plot', often also 'retard the action by providing breathing spaces for actorial improvisation between lines of dialogue'.[20] While such moments might only occupy brief stage directions in a playtext, in performance they come to more overtly mediate temporality, sensory and affective reception, and extended characterisation. As at once a character's response to stillness (out of boredom, silence, or anticipation) as well as an imbibing of stillness (in pausing the temporal progression and action of the play), fidgeting at once inhibits and inhabits stasis. As one synesthetically watches this gesture, there is

[16] Ibid., p. 4.
[17] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, qtd. in ibid. p. 116.
[18] See Flint, 'Peter Walsh's Pocket-Knife', p. 12.
[19] Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p. 64.
[20] Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 170.

a transference of the pause from the performance to the audience; we can imagine it crossing over from the stage to the real space, perhaps contagiously making the audience fidget in their own anticipation (or boredom).

Beyond a temporal continuity, fidgeting as a repetitive encounter with often ordinary, domestic objects gains another layer within the context of turbulent changes in the period. Liesl Olson illustrates the role of quotidian things and activities in absorbing the shock of the outside in modernist writing. With reference to the backdrop of war in these works, she argues:

> The ordinary becomes a means by which the unprecedented magnitude of the war can be managed. Mouldy books are minor in comparison to the destroyed libraries of Europe, but they are objects that can be mourned over, cleaned, and repaired.[21]

I similarly explore repetitive polishing and cleaning as a form of fidgeting in *The Dove.* The tangible domestic object is then more manageable and approachable than the abstractions and horrors of the unknown outside. Against the backdrop of the war in European modernism or the levelling capitalistic machinery in American realism, repetitive sensory, habitual, and comforting encounters with domestic objects offset the turbulence outside by establishing continuity and security. The comforting (interactions with) objects stand for something that will endure longer and is less replaceable than the characters who are disposable to the homogenising capitalistic or war machinery. A character's repetitive and routine object-encounters then often embody something that offsets, forestalls, and insulates against oppressive ideology. Fidgeting as an absurd, unintelligible yet ordinary gesture creates a respite from oppressive, levelling normativity even as it is mediated by various ideological forces of identity, possession, and productivity, which I discuss below. It establishes at once a comforting continuity for the fidgeter, and as I will show in the case studies, causes discomfort and frustration in other characters who are mouthpieces of outside forces, and arguably in the audience who, as observed above, might become impatient watching the static act.

While fidgeting as habit might 'bring one dangerously close to stasis', [22] it also inserts one into a certain trajectory of continuity and temporality, not least due to the object having been touched, created, and possessed by others before. Repetition and habit further asserts the object's status in this continuity as a vessel "ghosted" by the past iterations of the gesture, allowing the character to *touch*, while ostensibly attempting to escape, time. It makes the character lose touch with the present and the ongoing action while paradoxically also anchoring them firmly in the present through the self-givenness

[21] Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 82
[22] Flint, 'Peter Walsh's Pocket-Knife', p. 12.

of the object activated by fidgeting. Furthermore, studies on the psychology and phenomenology of habitual acts suggest that such gestures 'develop outside awareness' and are 'performed almost automatically, virtually non-consciously.'[23] Read in the light of habit, the intentionality of the act of fidgeting and the agency of the subject grow suspect, as the gesture can be construed as one *invited by* the object as well as *acted upon* it. While every instance of fidgeting considered in this chapter might not (or not always) be dictated by habit in its technical, neuropsychological sense, the very nature of touching a thing, as explored above, also entails being touched by the thing, rendering uneasy the subject-object, agency-passivity binaries taken for granted.

The question of agency in fidgeting is also inevitably entwined with that of objectification. While it might be tempting to see the act as itself objectifying, allowing one to assert their status as the subject or the fidget-*er* and the object of the act (human or nonhuman) as the fidget-*ed*, this reading emerges as reductive when the subject is a woman. The plays considered in this chapter focus on women's fidgeting with objects. The gendered history of objectification informs and complicates women's bodily encounters with their nonhuman environment, thus restructuring the instance of touch, caressing, and fiddling along gender lines. Simone de Beauvoir's ideas about women's limitations of opportunities and experiences due to their position as the inferior other to men, or the "true human" are relevant to the gendered aspect of the subject-object dynamic. As Ann J. Cahill argues, '[f]or Beauvoir, objectification is the primary means by which woman becomes defined as inessential other, and thus as inferior.'[24] As women and objects both occupy the position of the inferior other to *man*kind, a minefield of associations, links, and affinities emerge between women and objects that should not be left unobserved when considering the specificity of women's interaction with objects. Beauvoir posits man's opportunity to transcend his flesh — the opportunity to access, respond to, and most importantly, transform his material environment — as a counterpoint to women's entrapment in a bodily prison. Women's possibilities are defined and circumscribed by 'her materiality, and the materiality of others, which conspires to keep her confined to the world of flesh.' This distinctly bodily prison, Beauvoir argues, 'compel[s] her to assume the status of the Other […] to stabilise her as object'. Furthermore, like an object tamed, handled, and imposed with meaning and function, 'her transcendence is to be overshadowed and forever transcended by another ego'.[25] While this idea of women as objects on account of their shared position as the other to men is echoed by many feminist theorists, what Beauvoir's ideas on objectification offer to a study of theatrical fidgeting and objects in general is the idea of subjectivity promised by 'the transcendence of flesh and the adopting of an active position vis-

[23] Christian Tewes, 'The Phenomenology of Habits: Integrating First-Person and Neuropsychological Studies of Memory', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9 (2018), 1–6 (p. 2).
[24] Ann J. Cahill, *Overcoming Objectification: A Carnal Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 3.
[25] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. xxxiii-iv.

a-vis the world.'[26] If we cast the act of fidgeting in terms of Beauvoir's notion of the transcendence of flesh, the very act can have liberating implications for a woman-fidgeter. As I will explore in my analysis of Laura's fidgeting in *The Glass Menagerie*, the gesture helps reinscribe women's subjectivity denied to her by patriarchal (and narrative) structures.

The act of fidgeting brings to the fore modernism's engagement with the haptic and tactile senses, habitual and ordinary object-interactions, their role in testing, reiterating, expanding, denying the border of the self, and in the stimulation of bodily and aesthetic response. If we zoom out and look at the ideological forces underpinning the gesture, such as the possession of, and indulgence in material things, it helps contextualise fidgeting within the larger historical debate on art's relationship with identity, production, function, and aesthetics. This context is heavily informed by the tenuous relationship between artistic production and economic production metonymized by the relationship between an artistic object of beauty and creativity and a functional commodity for economic circulation, consumption, and possession.

Ideological Fidgeting

Modernisms' approach to objects is lodged within an era of unprecedented changes in manufacturing, consumption, distribution and the resultant transformation, I argue, in the role of the object in human life. While the touching of objects draws the reader/audience inward to the present physical moment or the emotional inner life of the character, their relationship with identity, productivity and ownership points outwards — to potential symbolic, allegorical or ideological significations of the object, to the economics of accumulation, and the socio-cultural rhetoric surrounding production, use, and posession. With this exploration of possession, productivity, and identity as ideological underpinnings of the drive to fidget, I attempt to offer two main (re)framings: first, possession or consumption as an active and even creative pursuit for high modernism and second, possession as not exclusively the prerogative of the subject.

- *Identity and Possession*

> I am what I have.[27]
>
> —Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*

[26] Cahill, *Overcoming Objectification,* p. 3.
[27] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Sarah Richmond (New York: Routledge, 2022), p. 399.

Modernist theatre and literature are peppered with instances of not just characters' possession *of* things but also their possession *by* things. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, with an increase in mass-production, consumerism, purchasing power, industrial employment, expanding markets and exponential increase in the number and kinds of manufactured goods, there is an inevitable corresponding increase in possession and accumulation of things. This cultural pathology of possessing and being absorbed with objects is also assured by the promise of the American dream of everlasting economic prosperity and termed by an anonymous article in *The Atlantic* as 'the tyranny of things'. As Americans are 'overwhelmed by the invading hosts of things', [28] there is a sense of a myth of abundance that rewrites personal ambition, desire, and ideas of productivity and by extension success as either a running after an object of desire or an obsessive accumulation of objects as concrete symbols or guarantors of that success. While here identity and personal values are being reframed in relation to objects, objects too are being infused with personal value. The manufactured object coded with the wave of consumerism, human want, utilitarian function and even stamps of class, taste, and cultural capital finds itself irreducible to these macro systems of value within the arena of possession. In other words, possessing things "saves" the object from its monetary and functional contexts as it rewrites, recodes, and arguably even replaces the established universal value of an object with a personal mythos.

A possessed thing is then at once a commodity and not (only) a commodity. As Bill Brown argues, 'the human interaction with the nonhuman world of objects, however mediated by the advance of consumer culture, must be recognized as irreducible to that culture.'[29] To explore this irreducibility, I borrow from the fields of psychology and philosophy and their understanding of possession as a means of encounter with the material other. In the epigraph quote of this section, Sartre argues, 'The totality of my possessions reflects the totality of my being. I am what I have.' He arrives at this conclusion by understanding possession as a form of appropriation, as a *making mine*. This relation with the object both stamps the object with my "mark" while presupposing an independent existence distinct from myself, 'in order that it may be mine but not me.'[30] William James arrives at a similar conclusion about the sense of appropriation in ownership in his psychological discussion of 'material self' which includes tangible objects and people that carry the label of "mine". [31] As aspects of the self, they are prized not for their material value, which might be negligible, but for a larger symbolic role of self-definition, enlarging, crystallising, and representing this sense of self. James's argument carries an echo of Sartre's when he concludes 'a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his'.[32] Taking from Bill Brown's

[28] Anon., 'The Contributor's Club: The Tyranny of Things' *Atlantic Monthly*, 97 (May 1906) https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1906/05/the-tyranny-of-things/638334/ [accessed 20 Aug, 2022]
[29] Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things,* p. 13.
[30] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* trans. Sarah Richmond, pp. 390-391.
[31] William James, *The Principles of Psychology, Vol. 1* (New York: Henry Hold & Co, 1890), pp. 292-3.
[32] Ibid., p. 291.

suggestion of possession 'infusing manufactured objects with metaphysical dimension',[33] this subject-object encounter can be reimagined as a fusion and divergence of idea and materiality, of sensing and sense-making. From Sartre, James, and to some extent Brown, possession comes across as an imbuing or injecting of something of the self, a fusion of the self and not-self, but one that is directed by the subject.

Sartre and James overlap in suggesting to some degree that possession engenders projected identities that spill over from the borders of the self and transform things into *something more*. But this excess is not a quality conjured from thin air and derives instead from 'the appropriation of a *pre-existing surplus*, the material object's own excessiveness.'[34] While possession might "save" objects from being reduced to their function or monetary value, there is something that is saved from the ambit of possession as well — a material stubbornness, opacity, or inarticulateness that lies outside even the personal value system and meaning imbued by the possessor. This evasive excess has been explained in different ways by philosophical and phenomenological ideas of noumenon, thing-in-itself, and nonidentity.[35] It is then more fruitful to see the two-way subject-object encounter that is possession as a meeting point between ontologically different entities rather than a projection or infusion of a brimming subjectivity into the material other. In other words, just as possession points to an object's refusal to be subsumed by its life as a commodity, and supplants the inscribed utilitarian, economic, and cultural ideologies with a personal one, so is there a material residue beyond the reach of identity and relation of possession. Similarly, just as the entirety of a possessor's identity cannot be projected onto their possession, so is the object never entirely a possession.

In my consideration of the plays in this chapter, fidgeting as underpinned by possession does not completely respond to the idea of possession as a projection or extended self, wherein the object is invaded by character's identity. Here, possession is not only an invasion/occupation of the object by a projected identity or extended self, but also a productive and artistic occupation or work. Possession can be a continuous engagement, a *making mine* through 'constantly renewed emanation'[36] evoking the continuity and repetition underlying fidgeting. One example of an encounter forgotten by the possession-as-projection idea is an object becoming a catalyst for a subject or an act, or what Jane

---

[33] Brown, *A Sense of Things,* p. 4.

[34] Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things,* p. 14, emphasis added.

[35] The idea of things-in-themselves or noumena entails objects that exist outside and independent of experience as opposed to things-for-us. Kant denies access to thing-in-itself as 'objects of consciousness were already construed as representations'. Nicholas Reynolds, 'Introduction: What is a Thing?' *Konturen*, 8 (2015), 1–7 (pp. 1-2). Adorno similarly proposed a 'nonidentity' between concept and reality, representation and thing. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* qtd. in Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of* Things (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 13.

[36] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* trans. Sarah Richmond, p. 390.

Bennett sees as responding to an object's 'call' by those 'preternaturally attuned to the call of things'[37]—both of which we see in the two plays I consider in this chapter. Bennett suggests that such relations of possession can be seen as artistic. This absorbs possession within the sphere of occupation and creativity, rewriting it as productive and artistic. Furthermore, insofar as fidgeting underpinned by possession revises universal myths and inscribes a personal myth on the object, it allows us to entertain the possibility that the encounter is a form of (re)creation and thus a way of not just *occupying* the object but also of *keeping oneself occupied*.

The intimate relation with identity and the personal meaning that an object might hold for an individual within fidgeting-related encounters (entailing both physical and non-physical absorption) explains the confusion that the bond elicits from an outsider or a reader. From Garcin's preoccupation with and stroking of the bronze ornament in Sartre's *No Exit* to Krapp's obsessive replaying of his tapes in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, there seems to be a deeply personal relationship between the character and thing that is inaccessible to the audience or reader. One way I imagine this relationship is a material language shared only by the subject and object that is lost in translation, so to speak, to anyone outside the encounter. Another discursively richer way of envisaging this is as a hybrid meeting point between the human and nonhuman entities, between ideas and materiality. If possession is only seen as a projection of surplus subjectivity as suggested by Sartre and Williams, it fails to incorporate other modes of encounters that are less one-sided injections of meanings and values and more a merging of responses and the things that elicit them. If personal human ideas (re)script the object against established ideology and value systems, there is something that still remains out of reach or unscriptable. While possessions are immensely entwined with identity, it is important to resist stretching identity to engulf things that lie outside its circumference, the very things that mark its limits both physically and metaphorically. It is perhaps this stubborn out-of-reach material facticity that allows us to think of objects as 'tyrannous'[38] and ultimately admit (even if figuratively) that they possess us just as we possess them.

- *(Artistic) Productivity*

> I find it harder and harder everyday to live up to my blue china.[39]
>
> —Oscar Wilde

[37] Jane Bennett, 'Powers of the Hoard: Further Notes on Material Agency', in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics of Objects,* ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Brooklyn NY: Punctum Books, 2012), 237–270 (p. 241)
[38] Anon., 'The Contributor's Club: The Tyranny of Things', n.p.
[39] Oscar Wilde qtd. in Richard Ellman, *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage, 1988), p. 45.

> any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it. [40]
>
> —Virginia Woolf

Between the extremes of either infusing the object with interiority and subjectivity of the possessor as symbols or metonyms of abstract ideas or writing them off as mere surfaces that 'overfurnished'[41] fictional spaces, the modernist (re)turn to objects works against the post-realist mistrust of representing the nonhuman, as discussed in the introduction. We see this in comparing the representation of possession or consumption in the two quotes above — as flamboyant acquisition in Wilde and as an active and even artistic recreation in Woolf's 'Solid Objects'. Wilde's complaint reflects an approach to objects as symbols of taste and self-fashioning, a tendency that is ironized by Woolf's protagonist John's enchantment with a piece of discarded and unusable china. There then seems to be an acknowledgement of the demand placed by objects to treat them as neither mere surfaces nor abstract symbols of human desires. As such, with the move from turn of the century to high modernism, the subject-object relation cannot be explained away as consumerist or through the 'paradigms of consumption' as seen in the aesthetics of abundance in society comedies.[42] The object instead merges with the 'stuff of thought',[43] rendering murky if the primary focus is character's desire to fidget or the thing's desire to be fidgeted. Admitting this merging poses a hermeneutic challenge as it mocks our attempt to find the subject in the object, the *point* or *use* of fidgeting to render transparent the stubborn opacity of the object-relation.

Just as all art becomes 'quite useless' under aestheticism and modernism,[44] shedding moral and functional imperatives of its realist and naturalist predecessor, so are objects represented less as utilities (in terms of the function of the object both within and outside the work) and more as adventures of experience and aesthetic pleasure. This raises questions not just about the status of aesthetic indulgence in objects within the rhetoric of productivity but also about the position of art itself as a form of production which was an animating concern for high modernism. As leisure class consumption comes under scrutiny post war, it marks modernism's interest in making and creating over consuming, acquiring, and indulging. This was driven by an effort to 'justify the artist's activity as a part of society's

---

[40] Virginia Woolf, 'Solid Objects' in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick (London: Hogarth Press, 1989), p. 104.
[41] Willa Cather, 'The Novel Demeuble', p. 43.
[42] Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things,* p. 25.
[43] Woolf, 'Solid Objects', p. 104.
[44] Oscar Wilde, 'A Preface to "Doran Gray"' *Fortnightly Review*, 49.291 (March 1891), 480-481.

total work',[45] and the guilt and discomfort with nonproduction and consumption among the leisure class that constituted a majority of modernist writers. Mao points out that despite a deep mistrust of the imperative of production, modernists found it 'as profoundly suspect as seductive'.[46] This moralising of production by modernists both within and outside their works meant that they stopped short of a decadent indulgence in material pleasures celebrated by their counterparts in the art for art's sake movement. In this light, I show, object-encounters like fidgeting understood as "unproductive" within dominant definitions come to reflect the increased interest in art's tenuous relationship with and its ever-uncomfortable status as work, creation, and production.

The discussion of modernist negotiation between indulgent and non-utilitarian encounters like fidgeting on the one hand and the guilt of nonproduction on the other has resonances with aesthetic discourse that began to heavily inform representations of the nonhuman. Martin Jay discusses the separation of aesthetic experience from the art object, arguing that from the nineteenth century attention shifted from the idea of beauty assumed to reside in the objects themselves to the experiences and responses they elicited. In other words, the question emerged: is aesthetic experience an 'active intervention in the world' or merely a passive perception?[47] Is it productive, creative, artistic *work* beyond aesthetic enjoyment? Theatrical representations of fidgeting similarly reflect the enduring question within the cultural moment of art's contested position as valuable, productive work. In the two plays, especially in Laura's object interactions, the reception of fidgeting (by other characters and audience) as passive aesthetic indulgence reveals and critiques narrow and exclusionary understandings of productivity.

The question then emerges, is the performance of fidgeting an embodiment of the modernist guilt of nonproduction or a means for purging this guilt in the unapologetic renunciation of functionality and signification for the aesthetic? Despite overturning Victorian functionality, the act emerges as less decadent hedonistic renunciation of the world for sheer indulgence and more a practice of inspired albeit misunderstood creativity, preserving something of the world. However, this also comes underlined with self-criticisms and doubts about the legitimacy and validity of art as important or "useful" to society. Laura may choose objects without exchange value and withdraw herself from the obligatory sense of production as the primary means of contributing to society, but her creator can only fictionally purge his doubts about artistic indulgence in and possession of beautiful objects as valuable contributions. Possession as simultaneously celebrated and seen as passive and unproductive, bogged down by guilt

[45] Ibid., p. 40.
[46] 'The relationship between art and wealth, once taken for granted, becomes the object of a fascinated mistrust, and under which leisure-class consumption in general becomes guilty and suspect as it has never been before.' Ibid., p. 31.
[47] Martin Jay, 'Drifting into Dangerous Waters: The Separation of Aesthetic Experience From the Work of Art', *Filozofski Vestnik*, 20.2 (1999), 63–85 (pp. 65-67).

in the modernist sensibility, injects similar resonances in the act of fidgeting as an exercise of stasis, respite, and pause from the rhetoric of productivity. The Dove and Laura's passivity and refusal to participate in the production imperative emerges, I show, as at once a mirror of and a resistance to this modernist guilt.

*

The various theoretical and critical approaches enfolded within the gesture of fidgeting such as touch, habit, possession, creative production, and modernist material sensibilities in the above discussion inform my engagement with the two case studies in this chapter: *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Dove.* In both the plays, I highlight the opacity and unexplainability of the gesture as performing and supporting a specific kind of resistance by the women who fidget — a resistance to legibility, prescribed action, productivity, and (thus) oppressive narratives of normalcy.

The first case study engages with Laura's glass objects in *The Glass Menagerie,* tracing their fidgeting and eventual shattering across the playtext and some productions. I explore the relationship between fidgeting and the gendered and social scripts that circulate within and outside the theatre in mid-century America. I posit fidgeting as an (un)action to locate Laura's peculiar response to the imperatives of (re)productivity and absorption into Tom's memory. Reading the play through textual and staged object-encounters, I attempt to reveal the limitations of scholarly approaches to the play that deem Laura an object of pity or dismiss fidgeting as an escapist gesture.

My consideration of theatrical fidgeting leads me to Barnes's *The Dove,* a play largely overlooked within theatre scholarship. I leverage fidgeting to reflect on and redress the scholarly obsession with Barnes's fraught personal life and increased psychologising of her and her characters. I engage with the collected and fidgeted objects in the play and the potential of the absurd object-encounter to conduct the hermeneutically challenging theatricality and sexuality in the play. I explore the Dove's polishing of the sword as fidgeting, underpinned by theatrical and gendered ideas of waiting, boredom, violence, and action. Fidgeting in the play coalesces drives like fetishism, voyeurism, and objectification, with the potential to offer a queer intervention into both normative theatricality and sexual representation.

WILLIAMS'S *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*

Tennessee Williams pointedly situates his play *The Glass Menagerie* during the Great Depression, after the economic crash of 1929. This post-Gatsbian landscape harboured suspicion towards the myth of the American dream and the promise of never-ending economic prosperity. This backdrop of the din of mass production and consumerism of early twentieth-century America, paints the act of fidgeting in a different colour, one that is symptomatic of a rapidly changing relationship with material reality and objects both within and outside theatre. The sense of realisation of the unsustainability of the consumerist, mass-production model, I will show, was also accompanied by a transformation in American drama's relationship with reality. We see a deliberate change not only in the abstract conception of dramatic representation's approach to the real but also a material and physical evidence of this transformation; the latter becoming both the symptom of this change and also writing a material manifesto of a new kind of theatre.

The Material Manifesto of American Realism

To explore this, I would like to briefly look at the opening stage directions of the two archetypal plays of American realism, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*:

> *Before us is the Salesman's house. We are aware of towering, angular shapes behind it, surrounding it on all sides. […] the surrounding area shows* an angry glow of orange. *As more light appears, we see a solid vault of apartment houses around* the small, fragile-seeming home.[1]
>
> —Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*

> *The exterior of a two-story corner building on a street in New Orleans […] The section is poor but, unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm. The houses are mostly white frame,* weathered gray, with rickety outside stairs *[…] invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the* atmosphere of decay. *You can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river beyond the river warehouses with their* faint redolences of bananas and coffee. [2]
>
> —Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*

[1] Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc, 1980), p. 5, emphasis added.
[2] Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays* ed. Martin Browne (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 115, emphasis added.

If we compare these to the opening stage direction of *The Glass Menagerie*, patterns and resonances emerge:

> *The Wingfield apartment is in the rear of the building, one of those* vast hive-like conglomerations *of cellular living units […] symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity […] and function as* one interfused mass of automatism *[…] The apartment faces an alley and is entered by a fire-escape, a structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all of these huge buildings are always* burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation.[3]

We see that a description of the material, physical condition of living seamlessly blends into a comment on the life of the working-classes, the rhetoric of productivity, and qualms with the current economic climate. These descriptions reproduce the claustrophobia of early to mid-century America where the material trap becomes at once the cause, symptom, and extension of the psychological and filial trap. The material layout is not just an abstract symbol of the living conditions but a direct effect and product thereof, and thus a comment on its own mode of production. While physical topography also functions as a metaphor for the claustrophobia of disillusionment with the trappings of bourgeois life like marriage, social mobility, and self-improvement, its semiotic dimensions are not exhausted by its metaphoric meanings. The material landscape symptomatic of the economic context is similarly infiltrated by the poetics of the psychological and the sensory — visual, olfactory, and tactile reflections that allow the text to seep into the psyche, creating a landscape that blends the material with the economic, somatic, and poetic. These examples will inform my reading of the particular mode of fidgeting that *The Glass Menagerie* toys with, which I suggest characterises a larger trend in American drama of the period, and even more broadly, in modernist theatre.

It is worth looking at the backdrop of American theatre to trace how dramatic realism of the period found itself infiltrated by and worked in tandem with the tumultuous economic and social climate and the resultant shift in people's (writers', readers', audience's) approach to material reality. The disbanding of the Theatrical Syndicate in 1916 led to a move away from the commercialisation and "mass production" of plays as also from certain formulaic genres like melodrama, the well-made play, and light comedies, associated with the idea of theatre as a commercial activity as opposed to an artistic

[3] Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie,* ed. Payal Nagpal (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2016), p. 9, emphasis added. Subsequent references from the play will appear as in-text page numbers.

undertaking.[4] This created a space for what Toten Beard calls 'American Experimental Drama'[5] that reflected European influences — from Pirandello's self-reflexivity to Strindberg's experiments with dreams. But even more noteworthy is its cultivation of emphasis on the internal and external reality (a quintessentially modernist tendency). The new drama reflected a response to the impact of war on ordinary people that was sharp, often cynical but at times hopeful in its effort to retrieve an interior world within the home and the self that attempted to forestall the external political and economic turmoil. This modernist stress on interiority found a distinctly American expression in the context of the specific contradictions of American life and coloured not just the thematic and structural preoccupations of American experimental drama but also its visual and material topography.

Williams conceives his 'plastic theatre' against this backdrop of both abstract and sensory changes in American drama. In his production notes to *The Glass Menagerie,* he posits this against the 'exhausted theatre of realistic conventions' that relies on surface realism or what he calls the 'photographic in art'. While this rejection of 'genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice cubes' (5) might ostensibly seem diametrically opposite to late nineteenth century European realism's emphasis on 'real doorknobs on doors',[6] it does not come at the cost of representing reality or 'things as they are' but instead imagines reality as an 'organic thing', representable only through transformation (5). We see in Williams and his contemporaries a reluctance to inherit unchanged both the themes and subjects of the pre-war drama and the material objects that conjure and scaffold these themes onstage. Against this backdrop of a reimagining of textual and theatrical materials within American theatre and the post-Depression suspicion of the rhetoric of progress, consumerism, and materialism outside the theatres, we can (perhaps boldly) infer a social and artistic anxiety leading to a change in the bourgeois American's relation with objects and the nonhuman.

It is in this economic, political, social, and theatrical context that *The Glass Menagerie* situates itself and it is this nexus of forces that refract and reflect from the fragile, ephemeral but firmly present objects and materials that litter the textual and stage space of the play. Offered as a memory, the different elements of the play, both human and nonhuman, fight back or cave in not only against the outside forces of the period, but also against the forces of narrativizing itself and absorption into Tom's memory. If a text's relationship with reality dictates genre, in this play the relationship has as its fulcrum the 'delicate or tenuous material' (5) of memory that constantly questions itself, thus forging a second-guessing, self-doubting brand of realism that stops short of self-reflexive. Williams bends realistic

[4] See Payal Nagpal, 'Introduction' in ibid., xi–xlv (pp. xv-xvii).
[5] Toten Beard, 'American Experimentalism, American Expressionism, and Early O'Neill' in *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama* ed. David Krasner (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 53–68 (p. 53)
[6] Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (United States: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 30.

dramatic conventions without breaking them through his transparent but not invisible fourth wall, his undisguised narrator, and his use of the screen device.[7] The play fits broadly into realism's ambit while drawing from expressionism and epic theatre.

The play's tenuous relationship with reality and its generic preoccupations, I argue, have much to do with the network of objects that layers, often uncomfortably, the Wingfield's family network. The generic battle is then played out in the quintessentially realist domain, the living room of the Wingfield house, with the prominent objects, mainly the glass animals but also flowers and the victrola, as the weapons. While I will trace fidgeting through the play more generally (broadly as I conceive it in the introduction to this chapter), I will pay particular attention to Laura's relationship with glass and the moment of its shattering, using these to weave together the textual presence and staging possibilities of fidgeting. The thematic, psychological, and sensory implications of the alternative fidgeting of these objects are by no means only generic but also structural, visual, affective, and even hermeneutic, challenging established readings of the play, particularly those of its ambiguous ending. I offer fidgeting as an important lens for modernist object-encounters by unveiling its complex operation in Williams's play, and in so doing, propose the need to engage in its study to rescue the specific encounter and phenomenon from relative neglect in the approaches to the play. Through the exploration of fidgeting in the play, I hope to propose its overlooked centrality as a *subject* of analyses, tracing how this object-encounter allows Laura to withdraw from imposed narratives of compulsory (re)productivity, normalcy, and male storytelling. Looking at fidgeting as a mode of refusal, I attempt to show, problematises critical approaches that dismiss Laura as a passive object, allowing us to reposition her as an agential subject instead.

Laura('s) Objects

The dramatic action of *The Glass Menagerie* is sparse, as Harold Bloom argues, with only two main lines of thought — Tom's desire to escape and Amanda's fixation on finding Laura a husband.[8] The arrival of the gentleman caller is the central dramatic event against which the structure of the play is organised: Part One 'Preparation of the Gentleman Caller' and Part Two 'The Gentleman Calls'. In both these conceptions of the play's structure, Laura emerges as a passive recipient of others' desires, decisions, and actions or in other words, the *object* of an action rather than an agent thereof. Laura is described through her relationship with fragile objects — she toys with her glass collection, skips

[7] There are two versions of the play, the 'reading version' and the 'acting version', the latter based on the version staged by Eddie Dowling in 1945. The acting edition does away with screen device and is still preferred for most productions. Lori Leathers Single, 'Flying the Jolly Roger: Images of Selfhood and Escape in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie'* in Williams, *The Glass Menagerie,* 185–205 (p. 187).

[8] See Harold Bloom, *Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie* (New York: Facts On File, 2007), p. 20.

business college to look at tropical flowers, and winds the victrola in moments of intensity and doubt. Her absorption with glass evokes frustration in others who are eager to find her a place within the familiar scripts of the conventional marital plot and (reproductive or marketable) productivity. Amanda's frustration is clear in Scene Two. She chastises her daughter backed by the screen image of a 'swarm of typewriters' and asks, 'So what are we going to do the rest of our lives? […] Amuse ourselves with the glass menagerie, darling? Eternally play those worn-out phonograph records your father left as a painful reminder of him?' (20). This echoes critical approaches to Laura that equate her passivity to victimhood and inability, as I discuss later. Laura's resistance to the world of typewriters with its promise of a business career, and attraction to objects that mark absences, the transparent glass and records left by an absent father, comes with the looming threat of becoming one of the 'little birdlike women without any nest - eating the crust of humility all their life!' (20).

Laura's relationship with the glass menagerie has been read variously as liberating or restrictive, a sign of her difference, anxiety or debilitating shyness,[9] a metaphor for the trap of modern existence,[10] a biographical detail from Williams's life,[11] a representation of the repressed 'quasi-incestuous and doomed love' between Tom and his sister, [12] or an expression of her (and the play's) romanticism.[13] Critics list a number of negative sources and implications for Laura's incessant fidgeting of the glass animals or the victrola, arguing that it forecloses the possibility of action and becomes an instrument of difference or escapism.[14] Pragya Gupta contends that the play asks, 'is the glass menagerie a canvas for Laura to fashion herself as an artist? Or is it merely an alibi for beautifying and embroidering a victim complex?'[15] While these critics often agree that the play's commentary is directed against the systems that victimise Laura and the emissaries of those worldviews, there is nonetheless a tendency to see the play as a story of a 'woman's wasted life' casting Laura in the mould of 'the poor crippled girl—forever

[9] See Granger Babcock, '*The Glass Menagerie* and the Transformation of the Subject' *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 14.1 (1999), 17–36 (p. 24).
[10] See Nagpal, 'Introduction', p. xxxv.
[11] The origins of the play lie in Williams's 1941 short story, 'Portrait of a Girl in Glass'. Both have characters based on his sister, Rose. C.W.E. Bigsby, 'Entering *The Glass Menagerie'* in *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams* ed. Matthew Roudane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 29–44 (p. 36).
[12] Bloom, *Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie,* p. 7.
[13] See Bert Cardullo 'The Blue Rose of St. Louis: Laura, Romanticism, and "*The Glass Menagerie*"' *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, No. 1 (1998), 81–92 (p. 81).
[14] See for instance Bigsby, 'Entering *The Glass Menagerie'* and Deborah Kent, 'In Search of a Heroine: Images of Women with Disabilities in Fiction and Drama,' in Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch (eds.), *Women with Disabilities: Essays in Psychology, Culture, and Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 90-110.
[15] Pragya Gupta, '*The Glass Menagerie* and Mirrored Identities' in Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, 161–167 (p. 161).

a child playing with her glass animals',[16] overlooking that we are reading Tom's narration of her. This Laura-as-victim critical camp reproduces the image of Tom's articulation of Laura and fails to read through the gaps and splinters in Tom's memories that are largely inaccessible through a subject-oriented lens. By exercising inactivity within the dramatic form, which is based on action and temporality, Laura's object-encounters create an alternate space away from Tom's narrative, allowing us to access the gaps and slippages in Tom's memory and problematise her critical and narrative victimisation.

Laura's glass animals have been seen as the reasons for her 'inadequacy, self-indictment, and aversion… [due to her] commercial and biological unproductivity'.[17] The stage directions describing her interaction with the glass animals — 'She reaches quickly for a piece of glass' (21); 'Laura takes the glass uncertainly' (66), 'turns [a piece of glass] in her hands to cover her tumult' (74) — portray an uneasy, frenzied gesture that precedes the grabbing and fidgeting of the little objects, reflecting more the restlessness of a parent separated from their infant and less inadequacy and victimhood. It might be easy to argue then that the glass is her surrogate self as a fragile yet beautiful, cared-for object exhibited for others. Williams himself makes Laura's identification with the glass animals clear, as she is 'like a piece of translucent glass touched by light, given a momentary radiance, not actual, not lasting' (50). This view equates agency to action, resistance, and voice, eliding over Laura's own brand of agency that she performs *through* objects and not *despite* them (discussed next). While the very things that preserve her creative impulses might seem to insulate her from meaningful connections with others and the present, they do not make her inert. Gupta argues, 'while she is crippled and dependent in the world outside, she is the guardian and nurturer in at least this one relationship. She is the artist figure here'.[18] This idea resonates with the ability to respond to 'call' of things discussed in the introduction to this chapter. Jane Bennett sees this ability as artistic, a sign of a 'special sensory access' to 'thing power'.[19] Laura thus seems to invertedly reproduce her relationships with Tom and Amanda where she is forever frozen in an infantile state of a delicate object of care. With her glass objects, she appropriates the role of the carer/artist and also the agency of one. The tactile act of fidgeting then emerges for Laura as a vehicle for occupying an agential subject position, or in other words, the objectifying nature of touching allows her to occupy the space of a subject heretofore uninhabitable.

The (Un)action of Fidgeting

[16] Ann M. Fox, 'Reclaiming the Ordinary Extraordinary Body: Or, The Importance of *The Glass Menagerie* for Literary Disability Studies' in *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama* ed. Kirsty Johnston (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 129–151 (p. 137).
[17] Gupta, '*The Glass Menagerie* and Mirrored Identities', pp. 164-5.
[18] Ibid., p. 165.
[19] Jane Bennett, 'Powers of the Hoard', p. 244.

A person like Laura would find herself alienated not just from the bourgeois patriarchal morality but also the American 'national myth'[20] and its rhetoric of unrelenting consumerism and progress. Fidgeting becomes a portal to the interstitial space away from the demands of action, bourgeois realism, productivity, and time. It acquires specifically American valency, lodged as it is within the context of the American dream of perpetual progress and material success. Beyond being an expression of the inner landscape of a character, a thematic, generic or narrative metonym or a gesture inherited from past theatrical/literary traditions, the personal gesture is also invaded by economic and political inflections and the kind of commodity fetishism that characterised the mass-producing, industrial economy. Laura ruptures this fetishistic approach to objects by developing a deeply personal relationship with her glass animals that stands in stark contrast to, say, Tom and the shoes he produces at the factory. Furthermore, Laura's fidgeting evokes ideas of gendered care, invisibilized and unrecognized as valuable or productive work within systems of compulsory economic productivity. Along with the modernist guilt of nonproductivity discussed earlier, it rehearses the gendered 'everyday form of inaction, inscrutability, and non-productivity'[21] that emerge from a refusal of productivity. The material stubbornness of this object-encounter defies clear logic, motive, or rationale within existing structures and resists alignment with an easily discernible symbol, projected abstraction, or external signifier. By refusing intelligibility or hermeneutic closure within outside structures (economic and semantic), the gesture reveals the inadequacy of these systems, as I will explore later.

Laura's fidgeting registers a refusal to work by someone who has been refused *as* a worker or an agent of action. Objects become a mode of doing agency for Laura as she alternatively occupies the position of an intentional subject and a passive object. She plays with the subject-object dichotomy to exercise a brand of agency that leaves her vulnerable to patronising advice, paternalistic dismissal, critique, and even derision from the ambassadors of the world of action — Amanda and later Jim. At the same time, this allows her to turn away from the industrial-patriarchal nexus and the bourgeois social scripts of marriage, love, and productivity. While she ostensibly seems to be inert, ineffectual, and a passive recipient of other's demands and wishes for her life in her Hamlet-like resistance to action, I suggest that she snatches the reins of agency by reframing the very idea of agency where it is no longer reliant on action. She then turns to a world not of stasis, inactivity, or lack of action but a deliberate absenting of action, or what I call rebellious (un)action or unproductivity — the interim moments and liminal spaces of stasis, silence, and respite from the rhetoric of productivity and the unfolding of time, narrative, and the conventional closure of realism. Performing unaction allows Laura to resist the outside forces, both dramatic forces of absorption into narrative and real forces of absorption

[20] Bigsby, 'Entering *The Glass Menagerie'*, p. 33.
[21] Lilian G Mengesha and Lakshmi Padmanabhan, 'Introduction to *Performing Refusal/Refusing to Perform*.' *Women and Performance* 29.1 (2019), 1–8 (p. 2). https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2019.1574527

into marriage or the production imperative. The reason I call this unaction and make a distinction with inaction is that while the latter is clearly the opposite of action, a lack or non-existence thereof, the former I suggest is marked not by a lack but by a refusal, a withholding, a resistance, or a marked absenting of action, where action is not merely missing but its absence felt and to a degree acknowledged. Action and unaction here are not opposites but corollaries, two similarly felt presences, just as a shape cut from a page can be gleaned not just from the cut out itself but also from what is absent on the page.

For this idea of Laura's fidgeting as unaction and the slippages that her relationship to objects (particularly the glass menagerie) introduces, I draw from Jack Halberstam's idea of shadow feminism. He conceives shadow feminism as:

> a feminist politics that issues not from a doing but from an undoing, not from a being or becoming women but from a refusal to be or to become woman as she has been defined and imagined within Western philosophy […] This feminism, a feminism grounded in *negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence,* offers spaces and modes of *unknowing, failing, and forgetting* as part of an alternative feminist project, a shadow feminism which has nestled in more positivist accounts and unraveled their logics from within.[22]

The rebellious potential of discontinuity, stillness, interruptions, caesuras, and 'radical passivity'[23] underpins Laura's object-encounters, with the unaction of fidgeting challenging the pragmatic world of typing courses and gentleman callers. These interruptions reach a crescendo with the shattering of glass, breaking generic, theatrical, and narrative action and eventually fraying the closure, as explored later.

Objects afford her a space to become the carer, subject, the gazer of an exhibit of glass animals or tropical flowers, player of music on the victrola, and creator of romantic myths with unicorns as opposed to a beautiful, fragile exhibited thing, a commodity of exchange in the marriage market, gazed by and at the mercy of gentleman callers. Fidgeting as an affective gesture also creates moments of stillness, pausing dramatic action and the linear momentum of the play. Through the unaction of fidgeting, there are breaks, commas, and finally ellipses in the relentless unfolding of the plot that would inevitably repeat the fates of Laura's literary foremothers and end in either marriage like the heroines of Victorian sentimental novels or in death like those of European realism. Along with the symbolic and formal implications of the gesture, its sensory, material, and performative aspects also embody this resistance to time. The gesture on stage would anchor our gaze to the object, the act of touching, and

---

[22] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 124, emphasis added.
[23] Ibid., p. 123.

the materiality of glass. We might think about the nature of glass itself, what it conceals, shows, refracts, and its two-wayness — both material in its transparency, trapping and refracting light from elsewhere, and metaphoric in the play's modernist emphasis on inner and outer reality.[24] The object then both physically and figuratively resists the bleeding of the past into the present and eventually the future, where Laura's fate replicates that of Amanda's, where her obsession with glass might become a reiteration of Amanda's obsession with the flowers from her (perhaps manufactured) past.[25]

Returning to the central question I have been exploring: what exactly is Laura doing when she is fidgeting? While there are moments where she polishes and toys with the objects, unseen by other characters and untainted by an emotional or psychological stirring, there is no denying that many fidgeting moments are reactive, where the gesture is a frenzied response to the diatribe of "do something". Laura winds up the victrola when her mother finds out about her typing class, 'darts' to it and 'winds it frantically' (55) when asked to open the door, and reaches for a piece of glass when confronted with the prospect of marriage. The gesture has materialised in a wide range of staging, from distracted to attentive, childlike toying to careful and serious. In a 2013 Everyman Theatre production, Laura plays with her objects like a child creating a story out of the figurines by moving them around on a table.[26] In a 2016 production directed by Julia Rand, Laura's interaction with the objects are entirely distracted — she fiddles with them without looking, as if counting prayer beads.[27] On the other hand, the 2019 Gate Theatre production stages a different version of fidgeting, where Laura inspects her objects like a scientist, turning them around carefully in her hand, exceedingly and inexplicably fascinated with something she has interacted with innumerable times.[28] Through these productions, we see that this (re)action, where technically she does something — *occupies* herself, uses her hands, appears busy, perhaps soothes herself, and clearly possesses knowledge of the *occupation* of how to care for the objects — is a withdrawal from intelligible action, an action that progresses or usefully produces. The two logical reactions to the pressure to act would be to either remain defiantly inactive or to succumb and act. Fidgeting on the other hand is an action that is short-circuited, rhetorical, and tautological. It does not undo and while it is reactive, it does not react in the sense of standing up or fighting against. This action that frustrates causality, progression, and intelligibility is what constitutes

[24] The inaugural scenography of the play designed by Jo Mielziner used gauze portieres. This not only reflected ideas of dream and illusion present in the play but more importantly, its visual properties, oscillating between transparency and opacity, would be *glass-like*. The glassy translucence of the scenography makes Laura's glass not only the central object or symbol of the play but also the dictating image that drives both literary and aesthetic decisions.

[25] Amanda 'clinging frantically to another time and place' (3) describes her Southern belle past as one 'flooded' with jonquils: 'Jonquils became an absolute obsession' (52).

[26] *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, Everyman Theatre, Baltimore 2013, dir. by Vincent M. Lancisi

[27] *The Glass Menagerie* by Williams, Bradley Beach Arts Council, New Jersey 2016, dir. by Julia Sandra Rand.

[28] *The Glass Menagerie* by Williams, Gate Theatre, Dublin 2019, dir. by Tom Cairns.

Laura's unaction, which is rebellious not because it drives her to actively rebel but because it changes what it means to act or rebel.

Bigsby has pointed out that, within the play, 'there is a powerful sense not merely that the animating myths of America have failed those who look for some structure to their lives, but that those myths are themselves the root of a destructive materialism or deceptive illusion.'[29] The Wingfields' desires and demands for Laura's life reflect at least partly the narratives circulating in 1930s America. These comforting myths of unending progress are not only based on the homogenization and standardization that render everything and everyone interchangeable (people are reduced to consumers and objects to commodities) but also alienate and persecute what Babcock terms the 'freaks', that is, anyone who resists their role in the rhetoric of productivity.[30] Laura's character reflects how she has been failed by these myths of normalcy that perpetuate compulsory productivity and heteronormativity. Fidgeting as a material resistance to these myths then becomes an embodied expression of this failure. Ann M. Fox argues:

> the play looks not only to the system which sees her as extraneous, but particularly embodies her experience as a disabled woman in a society obsessed with compulsory ablebodiedness. It is an experience that is inextricably intertwined with the compulsory heteronormativity that seems to more obviously oppress her in the shape of her mother's constant matrimonial "plans and provisions" for her.'[31]

The national myths of productivity and normalcy then further alienate Laura whose 'childhood illness has left her crippled, one leg slightly shorter than the other, and held in a brace' (3). Amanda voices the prescriptions of normalcy that infiltrate the Wingfield living room in her frustration and desperation to "standardize" her children: 'Why can't you and your brother be normal people?' (55). The compulsory heteronormativity here is inseparable from compulsory ablebodiedness within the cultural urgencies to "be normal." Fox further argues that 'Williams is damning those myths of normalcy circulating at the time, ones that particularly singled out both disabled and queer bodies for persecution.'[32] These forces then not only alienate resisting bodies but systematically overlook, eliminate, and redefine outliers: the disabled, unproductive, or queer.

---

[29] Bigsby, 'Entering *The Glass Menagerie'*, p. 35.
[30] Babcock, '*The Glass Menagerie* and the Transformation of the Subject', p. 18.
[31] Ann M. Fox, 'Reclaiming the Ordinary Extraordinary Body', p. 137
[32] Ibid., p. 135.

While it might be reductive to claim that reading fidgeting of Laura's glass animals makes the end a triumph of her mode of being, it becomes evident that this lens undoes established readings of the play, especially with regard to the end, as I show later. Laura's touching and collecting of glass then is not redemptive, it is not a lifeboat pulling her out of her unfortunate circumstance, giving her purpose or saving her from the fate of 'birdlike women without any nest' (20). It is the opposite — it further anchors her to her embodied experience. Instead of lifting her out of her passivity and otherness, it entrenches her within it, allowing her to resist canonised myths of both economic and heterosexual production and practice an alternate way of being. While I argue that Laura finds rebellious potential in her unaction, it by no means follows that she reframes productivity or changes its meaning to claim her own "action" as productive. Instead, she supplants the idea of compulsory productivity with an absence or a shadow thereof, committing what Babcock calls the 'sin of inefficiency.'[33] She does not introduce a new brand of productivity, or merely reverse the negative value assigned to passivity. Her unaction is not a celebration or a reclaiming but a refusal, withdrawal, negation. The sin remains a sin and does not become a heroic act; the structure that moralises activity and passivity also remains intact, as is evident through the end that does not provide closure and remains open to the possibility that the plot is only a segment of a Sisyphean repetition, going on endlessly till Tom's escape (explored later). What is different is that Laura's continual fidgeting registers resistance to the compulsion of efficiency, normativity, legible femininity, and the guilt of nonproduction that troubled Tom and seeped into many modernist texts as discussed in the introduction to the chapter. The "rebellion" of her unaction is then not located in her establishing a redemptive, subversive utopia of glass in the face of oppressive narrative and economic forces: instead of doing the opposite or undoing, Laura's unaction engenders a not doing, rebellious in the very fact that her rebellion (and arguably, agency and subjecthood) is not reliant on action.

The scenes of the play cast as encounters between two characters at a time,[34] can be read as oscillations, negotiations, and clashes between two objects and their associated philosophies, ideologies, and myths: the glass animals versus the typewriter, the victrola versus the offstage flowers, or the television and telephone versus the unicorn. Jim believes in the 'future of television' and machines, his chosen instruments of social mobility (76), Amanda has never stopped gathering the jonquils of her past, Tom resists the present of his shoemaking, preferring the timelessness and fantasy of adventure, while Laura buries her feet almost stubbornly in the sands of the present, firmly and defiantly holding on to the glass animals. In a world where men are marked by absence, where fathers and sons abandon the home for quixotic adventures and gentlemen callers come and go, the presence-asserting objects that anchor women in an alternative *now* or transport them to a more accepting *then*

[33] Babcock, '*The Glass Menagerie* and the Transformation of the Subject', p. 18.
[34] See Bloom, *Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie,* pp. 7-11

and there through interruptions, ellipses, and splintering within male storytelling, become antidotes to the taming flow of time, narrative, and progress.

The 2013-14 Broadway production directed by John Tiffany materialises this *elsewhere* through an object. During Tom's opening monologue, Laura is pulled out from the couch by her brother; in the end, she sinks onto the same couch, exiting as she appeared.[35] This unusual entry accompanied by Tom's 'I have tricks up my sleeve' (10) monologue casts her in a certain light before we are properly introduced to her: Laura here becomes a magician's prop, a rabbit pulled out of a hat. This reading of Laura as Tom the narrator's property — a magical, fascinating thing but a thing nonetheless — is available to the reader as well. But in performing the couch trick, this production creates a link, explicit from the outset, between Laura and objects and declares that the encounters between the two are not merely descriptive, incidental appendages to the play but demand attention. There is a crucial difference between the two uses of the couch — while Tom pulls Laura from the couch to mark the beginning of the play's action, Laura heads to the couch herself in the end. In withdrawing from visibility, as before with her offstage indulgent walks, she eludes not just the audience's and Tom's gaze, but also their access to her. As opposed to being conjured like a magician's object by Tom's memory, in sinking into the couch at will she controls and regulates her availability as an exhibited thing. Ultimately, by controlling when and by whom she can be seen and articulated, she commands who can *know* her. This regaining of epistemological control and ownership of self can be seen as an ultimate sign of her subject-being. Laura moves from being a conjured memory-object on display, a plaything, a possession, or a commodity of exchange to a possessor, a fidgeter of her menagerie, a gazer of tropical flowers, and arguably a wilful subject. The couch in this production can be seen as bookending this trajectory from possession to possessor or self-possessed. This Laura-couch encounter taps into an already present current in the play, that of her otherness, being outside the stifling narrative and marital scripts, and materialises it from a latent thread to a bodied interaction with stage matter. Her slithering back into the couch channels an *elsewhere* on stage, perhaps utopian, perhaps the same, but different insofar as it is a freely bodied space with no Tom to pull her out of the couch on the other end. This is a similar elsewhere opened up by fidgeting of glass, as explored above: an alternate space of interruption and pauses splintered off from the conventional realist trajectory.

Coming back to the playtext, Laura's fidgeting and withholding from different objects brings to the fore her negotiation with traditional models of femininity as also her negotiation with being a woman in a text written and narrated by men (Williams and his surrogate Tom, respectively). Responses

[35] For this discussion of the 2013-14 Broadway production, I draw on Andrzejewski's account and commentary. Alicia Andrzejewski, 'Blue Roses and Other Queer Energies in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie'*, *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, 16 (2017), 37–57 (pp. 53-54).

to Laura's character both within and outside the play romanticise and pedestalise her into an unearthly beauty too good or pure for this world. This romanticisation that conforms to traditional aesthetics of the female body gains spiritual and mystical inflections in the religious symbolism that surrounds Laura's descriptions and presence. Williams in his production notes delineates that the 'light upon Laura should be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pristine clarity such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints and madonnas' (7); Laura comes to be described in increasingly mystical, otherworldly terms like 'a piece of translucent glass touched by light' (50); her favourite glass piece is the mythical, otherworldly unicorn; Jim furthers her affinity with the transcendent by naming her 'blue roses' which do not occur naturally and symbolise her 'yearning for both ideal or mystical beauty and spiritual or romantic love'.[36] In Scene Six, Amanda ritualistically dresses Laura as she stands with lifted arms reminiscent of classical paintings of Mary, made overt by the playing of Ave Maria in a previous scene. But the question then arises, does Laura's fidgeting with delicate objects conform to or subvert her traditionally feminine, virginal, and unearthly depictions by Williams and Tom and readings by critics that are overgrown with flowers and flooded with ephemeral light? Williams writes, 'the horrid war has eroded the whole fabric of American life.. the destruction in America of the idea of beauty is one of the most apparent and depressing things of all.'[37] The observation suggests that America's participation in the war and more generally the political, material, and economic circumstance have infiltrated not just morality but also matters of aesthetics and the idea of beauty. This gives new meaning to the equation of (Laura's) beauty and innocence to a fragile, delicate object in the play that unconsciously proffers an invitation to be broken, breached, and invaded. Keeping this in mind, romanticisation of Laura's fragility by other characters, playwright, and critics bears within it the anticipation of destruction and must be read in conjunction with what Bigsby calls the American national myth.[38]

Tom's Elusive Memory-Objects

Tom and Laura share their qualms against the production imperative. Tom finds himself unwillingly absorbed in the national myth of progress, producing shoes instead of poems, till his rebellious gesture of inscribing his art on a shoe box, a metonym of the very forces that frustrates his creative impulses, eventually gets him fired. The play is his memory, but the slipperiness and untameability of his memory materials are evident from the very beginning as 'memory takes a lot of poetic licence' (9). On the other

[36] Cardullo, 'The Blue Rose of St. Louis', p. 83.
[37] Tennessee Williams, 'Playboy Interview' by C Robert Jennings in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams,* ed. Albert J Devlin (London: University P of Mississippi, 1986), p. 248.
[38] Bigsby explains Williams's qualms with 'the Cinderella story, with its account of moving from rags to riches, as a primary and destructive American myth, for it is the fate of his characters […] to miss life's party, to be left with no more than the ashes of a once-burning fire.' 'Entering *The Glass Menagerie'*, p. 32.

hand, Laura is adept at controlling the signification of her materials, making the semiotic possibilities of the glass and the flowers "behave" in accordance with her will, and thus becoming a subject through the objectifying act of fidgeting, as observed above. Tom is desubjectivised not only by virtue of the dehumanising forces that reduce him to a cog in a machine but also by virtue of his inability to make his materials, his memory narrative, behave. While both Tom and Laura attempt to preserve their own romantic myth of creativity which is pit against the national myth of productivity, Tom fails to sustain his resistance.

Laura's act of fidgeting, when rescued from its reading as a mere anxious or escapist tic and recast as a practice of refusal, punctures Tom's attempt to pedestalise her and cast her as a victim or a scapegoat at the altar of conventional narratives of a good life and legible femininity. This can be seen in the arresting moment in the end of Scene Three. After an argument with Amanda, Tom storms off and accidentally knocks over Laura's glass animal, to the shock and dismay of the characters and audience alike. It might be tempting to read this moment as the object's rebellion against Laura (as with the pistol's disobeying Hedda explored in the first chapter) but ironically, this furthers their role as instruments of Laura's resistance to the taming forces of Tom's memory. The objects dictate the terms on which Laura becomes an object — of pity, of Tom's memory of her, of Amanda's schemes, and of the marriage market. They allow Laura to regulate the pity, sympathy, and sentimentality that the play might evoke. This scene then charts the misbehaviour not of Laura's objects but instead of Tom's narrative materials, making her the object of our sympathy and Tom that of our derision. Gupta contends that 'other characters forge their own relationships with the reader/audience unencumbered by Tom's perception of them [who] comes to be judged to the same degree as he is judging them.'[39] As the other characters become the "materials" of Tom's narrative, they do not recede silently into Tom's memory without leaving a remainder.

Laura's fidgeting allows her to at times be an object of pity and at times become a subject by taming the objects, thus resisting the debilitating effects of victimhood and oversentimentality. Her silence is seen as, Andrzejewski argues:

> an invitation to narrate a more pleasing, intelligible narrative of femininity, one that is fragile, vulnerable, and dependent. Although men undeniably name and narrate throughout the play, Laura and Amanda articulate memories and cast worlds that reenvision flowers, glass, and other pretty objects.[40]

[39] Gupta, '*The Glass Menagerie* and Mirrored Identities', p. 162.
[40] Andrzejewski, 'Blue Roses and Other Queer Energies', p. 47.

Both Amanda's anti-narrative of memory where she frequently recounts her romanticised past as a Southern belle collecting jonquils, going against Tom's representation of her as a caricature, and Laura's use of objects as instruments of resistance to social and fictional forces of taming reveal Tom's inability to control his narrative materials. Tom's subjecthood is as tenuous as his grasp on his materials, and he continues to be a part of the 'interfused mass of automatism' (9) till his final escape.

In the 2012 Hans Fleischmann production, glass exceeds its position as the stuff of Laura's menagerie and comes to embody this challenge to Tom's control over his narrative materials. Replacing the merchant sailor with a tramp as the narrator-Tom, the production further embeds his position as an outsider (suggested in Williams's text with his sexuality, estrangement and eventual abandonment of the family, and his distance from society as a sailor). He is portrayed as a 'homeless alcoholic, still poetic, but living in an alleyway where he has amassed an enormous collection of glass bottles'.[41] While this reframing of Tom's position might bring in obvious resonances with Laura, making the glass a connecting metaphor for the siblings' othering, there is a crucial difference between their glass objects: Tom's glass bottles are a *hoard* unlike Laura's *collection* of glass animals. The glass bottles are more incidental than possessions acquired through choice. They lack any real meaning: they are a tramp's hoard simply because tramps have hoards. While both siblings surround themselves with glass, the difference is between an artist's creation of a narrative and a tramp/sailor's desperate attempt to anchor himself through solid objects.[42] Reviews of the production use the glass bottles to draw a new affinity between Laura and Tom as reflections of their fragility, too good, transparent, and delicate for this world, recognising that the bottles have meaning in relation to Laura's collection.[43] However, I suggest that the implication of difference also demands attention. The two presences of glass facilitate comparisons between their owners, inviting us to think of Laura as more of a creator-narrator than Tom, given her chosen collection as opposed to Tom's happened-upon hoard. This further points to the idea

---

[41] Hedy Weiss, 'Words of "*The Glass Menagerie"* Like You've Never Heard Them Before' qtd. in Stephen J. Bottoms '*The Glass Menagerie* Commentary' in *A Student Handbook to the Plays of Tennessee Williams* ed. Katherine Weiss (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), n.p.

[42] Lobdell suggests, 'collectors collect with a view of linear narrative, whereas hoarders hoard without such linearity.' Similarly, Didier Maleuvre argues that the collector's 'interests are always narratively inclined as they abide in the traditional discourse that binds—or fails to bind—isolated objects into a series'. Nicole Catherine Lobdell, 'The Hoarding Sense: Hoarding in Austen, Tennyson, Dickens and Nineteenth Century Culture' (doctoral thesis, University of Georgia, 2013), p. 8; Maleuvre, 'A Cabinet of Curiosities: Encyclopedism and the Collection in the Nineteenth-Century French Novel' (Doctoral thesis, Yale University, 1993) qtd. in Peter Schwenger *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 143.

[43] A review suggests that the glass bottles are to preserve Laura's memory, 'In memory of his lost sister Laura, Hans Fleischmann's bearded and reclusive Tom has collected hundreds of bottles and other brittle pieces. These remind him of his […] sister's fragile collection of crystal animals.' Lawrence Bommer, 'Chicago Theater Review: THE GLASS MENAGERIE (Mary-Arrchie at Theater Wit)', *Stage and Cinema*, 2013 <https://stageandcinema.com/2013/05/31/glass-menagerie-mary-arrchie/> [accessed 17 October 2022].

that the play is not a success story of Tom's triumph as a writer, who tames his memory and its characters into a work of fiction. Instead, it becomes a testament to the ability of Laura's fidgeting to resist Tom's author-ity through her collection-as-narrative. A review states that at one point, 'Tom's glass museum literally glows with Laura's unexpected joy'.[44] This further highlights the tenuous grasp and ownership Tom has on his memory-materials and his inability to completely tame the subjects and objects of his narrative.

Shattering of Glass

> When you look at a piece of delicately spun glass, you think of two things: how beautiful it is and how easily it can be broken.
>
> —Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (6)

The other character besides Tom who breaks Laura's glass animal is Jim, the 'emissary of the world of reality'. He is the 'the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for' (11) the Godot who finally arrives only to leave. He is the perfect mouthpiece (or victim) of the American dream of self-improvement and an ardent follower of Amanda's refrain of 'try and you will succeed' (33). When Jim arrives in the last scene, he has forgotten Laura till she narrates the minute details of their past encounters etched in her memory. He has extinguished her from memory till he exclaims 'Aw, yes, I've *placed* you now!' (70, emphasis added). Laura is a figure narrated and memorialised by three men — Tom, Williams, and Jim. The only modes available to represent her then seem to be pedestalising her as a beautiful thing, infantilising her as a fragile, defiant child or diminishing her as an absent, misplaced object elided from memory altogether. Jim nicknames Laura 'blue roses', a mishearing of pleurisies. This nickname brings to the fore the gendered nature of naming, narrativizing, and language itself, wherein 'the act of naming' emerges as 'a male prerogative'.[45] This act further mistakes Laura's silence for an invitation to rewrite and pen/iterate her identity. Jim extends her alienation from narrative and language by giving her a name that has no place in the real world. Laura's earlier associations with the perpetually deferred offstage flowers, the mythical unicorn, otherworldly light of virginal angels, and now her misnaming as transcendent 'blue roses' that do not occur naturally, further trap her in an identity that deems her a misfit, an anomaly, or leaves her altogether obfuscated. She is subjected to, alienated by, and *placed* within legible versions of femininity by Jim's misnaming or Tom's memorialising.

---

[44] Ibid., n.p.

[45] Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), n.p.

She resists this name and by extension submission to men's image of her, this time by speaking out rather than fidgeting, 'but blue is wrong for – roses' (81). Andrzejewski further argues, 'like the Wingfields and audiences, Jim is eager to place Laura and her beauty, when Laura is in fact narrating a more complicated version of her own identity.'[46] She then risks being an object of reproach by resisting conformity to these linguistic acts of taming and chooses fidgeting of tangible objects over the world of unreal blue roses, abstractions, and language. These attempts to articulate Laura through conventional patriarchal scripts where she is but a romantic ideal, an abstraction, and a lack then stand in opposition to Laura's world of tangible objects and fidgeting. As Jim comes into the house, looks at the exhibited commodity in the marriage market, plays with it and leaves, Laura inverts this through her relationship with the glass animals, where she is the looker, player, and fidgeter.

Jim diagnoses Laura and offers her a cure, suggesting that she need only to think of herself as superior, a blue flower among weeds. His ableist rhetoric deems perspective as the antidote to Laura's self-consciousness. His clear disinterest in her glass indirectly places blame on her personal relationship with objects for her alienation rather than her objective, structural circumstance. His dismissal of everyone as 'common as weeds' is not without irony, considering his complacence with the levelling system and his dream of material success, of '*Knowledge* - Zzzzzp! *Money* – Zzzzzzp! - *Power*!' (76, emphasis original). The inclusion of knowledge brings up questions of not only the emotional and structural harm of the opportunist world of material progress on someone like Laura and her world of unaction, but also the epistemic harm thereof. The refusal to listen to Laura articulate an identity through objects which does not fit into Jim's 'cold optimism',[47] the invalidation of her reality, and the forceful naming subject Laura to epistemic and linguistic harm and leave no room for alternative ways of being. Jim's perpetration of this harm is only a symptom of the larger system of standardisation and homogenisation outside the microcosm of the realist living room where other ways of knowledge and being are placed under erasure or worse, systematically dismantled.

This dismantling is materialised in the play through Jim's breaking of the glass unicorn. His reckless 'operation' of Laura's unicorn transforms it from the stuff of fables and magic to ordinary and earthly, 'just like all the other horses.' (79) The unicorn is replete with connotations that make it an extension, symbol or site of Laura's identity: like blue roses, it is otherworldly, magical, and romantic, its breaking points to Laura's own 'little defect' (21) as also the attempt of others to organise, manage,

[46] Andrzejewski, 'Blue Roses and Other Queer Energies', p. 45.

[47] Lauren Berlant argues, 'A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.' She calls this optimism 'stupid' in its faith that 'adjustment to certain forms or practices of living and thinking- for example, the prospect of class mobility, the romantic narrative, normalcy, nationality, or a better sexual identity- will secure one's happiness.' *Cruel Optimism* (Durham N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 126.

and arrange her body (physically demonstrated in the scene where Amanda dresses Laura) to fit the mould of a commodity in the marriage market, effectively bending her till she breaks. But less overtly and perhaps more importantly, as Bigsby argues, the snapping of the unicorn's horn 'stands for something more than the end of a private romantic myth. It marks the end of a phase of history, of a particular view of human possibility.'[48] For some critics, the snapping of the horn heralds the outside levelling world into the Wingfield living room, asserting that 'the national drama of progress albeit denied by the national reality of Depression is one which has no place for the fragile, the poet, the betrayed, the deserted'.[49] Read as a fidgeting *of* Laura, this conjures an image of gripping an object till it snaps. Seen from the lens of objects, however, the breaking of the horn perhaps points to a breaking of the spell where the audience is complicit with Amanda, Jim, Tom and to some extent Laura herself in thinking that she cannot desire more than the prescriptions of societal and play scripts. As Andrzejewski argues:

> *The Glass Menagerie* depicts this kind of desire for another way of being in the world, depending on how Laura and her beauty are read. […] It is hard for audiences not to share Amanda's desire for Laura to fit into conventional narratives of the good life and wish for her the only happiness offered by a poisonous, insolvent present.[50]

Laura's fidgeting of glass remains stubbornly unintelligible and opaque, refusing to mean and be translatable or legible within conventional codes and normative modes of being. Amidst the levelling forces of standardisation and mass-production that homogenise men in the workforce, women in the marriage market, and objects as commodities, Laura's fidgeting and caring for objects defy this economy of interchangeability, if only through a refusal to mean and be comprehensible within it. Jim and Tom's destruction of glass (albeit accidental) attempts to render transparent, intelligible, and in so doing demystify the audacious opacity of the Laura's materials.

Laura's constant dismissal by her family into the stock disability stereotype of the 'asexual, dependent, a perennial child'[51] brings another layer to her toying of her menagerie and its eventual destruction: it evokes the image of a child's toy breaking. Baudelaire in his essay 'A Philosophy of Toys' explains that the 'overriding desire of most children is to get at and see the soul of their toys', calling it the 'first metaphysical tendency'.[52] If read in this light, it is Jim and Tom instead of Laura

---

[48] Bigsby, 'Entering *The Glass Menagerie'*, p. 36.
[49] Ibid., p. 41.
[50] Andrzejewski, 'Blue Roses and Other Queer Energies', p. 44
[51] Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy from Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (New York: Norton, 2008), p. 3.
[52] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays* trans. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1995), pp. 203-4.

whose actions can be seen as an (albeit accidental) attempt to 'see the soul' of Laura's menagerie, to draw the curtain from and make sense of her fascination and even love of her objects, making them the infantile breakers of toys. This destruction would inevitably give rise to 'melancholy and gloom' which Bill Brown connects with the 'human response to the soullessness of modern life [and] the insufficiency of the desired object.'[53] Much like the shoes that Jim and Tom consider inadequate objects of creation or productive and artistic sustenance, leading them to a path of self-improvement and self-destruction respectively, the glass too proves unsatisfactory in their search for *more.* The two men's destruction of the glass animals reveals an absence of meaning or the idea it holds for Laura as it is 'everywhere and nowhere'.[54] Laura's unaction of fidgeting conducts her impulse to remain unexplainable, the gesture stubbornly refuses to make sense or be accessible and reflects not her inability but the lack of desire to 'standardise herself'.[55] While the position of shoes and the glass unicorn in the play is quite different, they share their role as objects that reveal the two men's misguided quest for a source of meaning. Meaning for them is something that emanates from a source which they can aspire to reach or acquire rather than something that is mutually created, fostered, and toyed with but forever deferred.[56] Their tendency to demystify and thus possess the elusive dictates their own lives in their ambition to conquer and tame the great unknowns of technology and the sea.

While the first moment of breakage is described only as 'a tinkle of shattering glass' (27) the second is more specific — Laura calls it an 'operation' (80) as only the unicorn's horn snaps. In terms of the logistics of staging, this would be almost impossible to orchestrate and with productions having to rely on the minuteness of the glass piece where the details of the operation would be hard to notice, on the actors' convincing reaction to the snapping, and/or on audio cues. The acting and sound can be seen as surrogates or placeholders of the "real breaking" that is essentially unstageable. The reaction this break produces differs widely in different productions. In the 2016 production directed by Julia Rand briefly mentioned above, Tom's knocking over of Laura's menagerie produces little remorse in him beyond a brief gasp and he does not help Laura collect the pieces as in the text, while Jim's accident, instead of shocking or hurting Laura, makes her almost desperate to hide any signs of grief.[57] This is similar to the response in a Newman University production from 2017 where she placidly resigns herself to the loss and desperately consoles Jim.[58] In the 1973 film adaptation on the other hand Laura is grief

[53] Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things,* p. 6.
[54] Ibid., p. 6.
[55] Babcock, '*The Glass Menagerie* and the Transformation of the Subject', p. 25.
[56] I am using ideas Jacques Derrida's poststructuralist ideas of the endless deferral of meaning of a sign and the modernist deconstruction of the 'transcendental signified' to highlight the men's aspirations that parallel this deconstruction.
[57] *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, 47th Street Theater, New York 2015, dir. by Christopher Scott.
[58] *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, Newman University, Kansas 2017, dir. by Mark Mannette.

stricken, emphatically following the stage directions in responding '*as if wounded*' (27).[59] These are only a few examples of the range of differences in both representation and reception that the moment of destruction produces. The breaking of an object reflects on the limits of the text, its very inclusion pointing outwards to the different iterations and performative possibilities. Furthermore, the dramatic effect of shattering, I argue, is to a degree contingent on the performance of fidgeting. In the 2022 West-end production directed by Jeremy Herrin, the moment of shattering emerges as less pivotal, intense, and pitiful than in the productions mentioned above.[60] In this production, Laura's glass menagerie is displayed in a glass case with comparatively fewer and less prolonged moments of physical fidgeting, often replaced by her visual absorption with the objects. Fidgeting thus emerges as an important affective determinant of the reception of shattering: it regulates both the shock or grief that the moment might produce as well as the pity that is evoked by Laura.

If breaking of the object reveals places that only performance can reach, it simultaneously reveals the limits of the stage and moments that only text can articulate. Drawing from Aoife Monks's idea of real objects producing belief in performance while simultaneously 'upstaging' the actor,[61] here the real destruction of the object might play with our belief in the actors' performance. The moment of destruction on stage might prompt the question: was that supposed to happen? This question might just be a momentary, inarticulate feeling, but it still does something to change our encounter with the performance, questioning the integrity and stability of both textual and scenic materials. Kyle Gillette delineates the dialectic between semiotic and affective break at a moment of staged destruction:

> broken and organic stage properties […] undermine the spectators' attempts to understand them through frameworks of symbolic associations, chains of narrative causality, and economies of use value and exchange value [..and] bare the operations underlying semiotic, economic, and spectacular value […] the destruction lies not within the fiction but rather tears a hole in the fiction's fabric precisely by occurring so vividly and forcefully in the world of the real, in the world the audience (and actors) occupy outside the characters' reality […] the moment of destruction ruptures their fictional reality (made of codes, causality, and so on) and reveals the materiality of the material world.[62]

---

[59] *The Glass Menagerie,* dir. by Anthony Harvey (US: ABC, 1973).
[60] *The Glass Menagerie* by Williams, Duke of York Theatre, London 2022, dir. by Jeremy Herrin.
[61] Aoife Monks, 'Human Remains: Acting, Objects, and Belief in Performance', *Theatre Journal*, 64.3 (2012), p. 360.
[62] Kyle Gillette, 'Poor Things: Naturalistic Props and the Death of American Material Culture in Sam Shepard's Action', *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, 25.2 (Spring 2013), 91–106 (pp. 92-97).

The shattering ironically causes a fictional as well as phenomenological alertness: we at once question the fictionality of the moment along with becoming phenomenally arrested with the materiality of the object and the awareness that it is a "part of our world". While the breaking of glass might ultimately be subsumed within the narrative, it does arguably leave a remainder that mediates and calls attention to the thingness of the object.

Going back to fidgeting, I frame the moment of shattering in light of this gesture, as Laura's fidgeting and the men's shattering of glass evoke fruitful contrasts in relation to dramatic action. The play positions escalating intensity and shattering of silence within moments of stillness and calm repetition of domestic and filial routines. Tom's shattering of glass is followed by a 'stunned and stupefied' silence (28), with the next scene being his drunk return in the dead of night met by Laura's shushing. Similarly, the stage directions at the beginning of Scene Five describe Amanda and Laura's movements as being '*silent as moths*' (39) This scene is lodged between two moments of gradually escalating intensity: preceded by Amanda's incessant imploring 'will you.. will you..will you dear?' with Tom's eventual frustrated 'YES' (38) conceding to bring home a gentleman caller, and followed by the excited discussion on Jim. Towards the end, after Tom smashes his glass on the floor and leaves slamming the door behind him, we see Amanda's 'slow and graceful, almost dancelike [gestures], as she comforts her daughter' (88). Some scenes then require barely any physical or audible action and just stop short of being completely static. This juxtaposition allows the subtlest movements to cause ripples and vibrations on the still, taut surface of the play and become more emotionally charged. The stillness and unaction of fidgeting with glass is now supplanted with its shattering. The two forms of interacting with glass create numerous juxtapositions — between stillness and shatter, fragility and destruction, unaction and dramatic action — stemming from the clash between fidgeting and breaking.

Stillness is not just a narrative or character choice but also has aesthetic and atmospheric bearing. The charged stillness, like that engendered by fidgeting, is pregnant with the anticipation of destruction. Both phenomena allow the audience to zoom in and latch their focus onto the subtlest changes. Fidgeting itself harbours stillness of action (even though it might be born out of restlessness). As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, it both inhibits and inhabits stillness as the audience in turn might fidget out of anticipation (or boredom) witnessing the pause onstage. Similarly, the conversation between Jim and Laura before the auditory overflow of dance music and eventual shattering of glass is preceded by silence and hushed conversation. As an account observes:

> The scene is still frequently described by reviewers as both the highlight of the play and the point at which audiences are held in a kind of rapt silence, as they strain to hear a conversation

> which must necessarily be pitched in as hushed a tone as the theatre's physical size will permit.[63]

Just as fidgeting transfers restlessness to the audience, here we see a theatre-like silent atmosphere transferred onto the stage, and along with it the tendency to whisper in a dark theatre. This prologue makes the breaking of the glass even louder in the silent theatre, conveying not the "real" value of the object but the personal investment and loss.

While glass has been shattered before, during Jim and Laura's dance scene its fragility is enhanced as it is planted within the corporeal and bodily field of touch, movement, and intimacy. The exchange prologuing this moment where the two characters discuss the glass collection at length ensures that we remember its presence. Furthermore, fidgeting harbours stillness and forestalls action, as observed above, but this stillness is charged with premonitions of destruction: Laura's prolonged discussions about the fragility of an object and its importance to her, along with moments of stillness with the touching, petting, and cherishing of an object might make us predict its destruction, given our familiarity with traditional narrative (novelistic, dramatic, cinematic) tropes and trajectories. There then seems to be a direct visual juxtaposition or even confrontation drawn between the objects and the bodies that threaten them. But the two are also similarly otherworldly: the dance has an air of an orchestrated dream that Laura gets to momentarily indulge in, a fantastical world she steps into, similar to the one inhabited by the unicorn. There is a slight hope fostered by this pseudo-fantastical atmosphere that maybe the glass will not break, maybe this illusion will sustain itself, maybe the association between fragility and destruction will be broken. There is a sense also that the affinity drawn between the two otherworldly presences and intimacies (between Jim and Laura, and Laura and the glass unicorn) might be mutually sustainable. But these prove to be mutually destructive as the figments of fantasy are made cruelly real.

Both the fairy tale moment and the glass are shattered in a single sweep of Jim's indiscriminate movement. Just as Laura's silence and apparent passivity are read as invitations to breach them (as explored above), so do the nurturing and caressing of objects invite an omen of destruction, as Williams himself suggests in his production notes mentioned in the opening of this section. The very presence of stillness, fragility, and passivity associated with things evokes an ontologically indiscriminate attempt to transgress and break them (be it Laura or the glass). Read through fidgeting, the moment of shattering then lies somewhere between phenomenally jarring and predictable.

The Afterlife of the Glass Unicorn

[63] Stephen J. Bottoms '*The Glass Menagerie* Commentary', n.p.

Much like the onstage gun, fidgeting carries prolepsis of destruction and by extension a destructive end. While the breaking of an object marks a dysfunction, disposal, or loss in the usual relations of possession, Laura does not adhere to this basis of object-owner relationship. She holds on to the broken object that is usually discarded. She not only refuses to dispose it but rewrites this object as a gift, and even a souvenir. By reinscribing rather than erasing the broken object, and restoring it from waste to a memento, Laura preserves what is usually lost in fiction — the discarded, disposable refuse, or ephemera. This gains new meanings in performance as it repetitively stages and replays 'the death of things', their resurrection and afterlife night after night.[64]

In its textual form, I suggest, the breaking of glass does not imply the triumph of the levelling forces of the real world but instead a reflection and scrutiny of these forces. The textual prescriptions that circumscribe Laura to the possibilities penned by the Jims of the world emerge as inadequate, as the breaking of the horn cues the reader/audience to look at Jim and the worldview that he represents with less understanding eyes, and even outright blame (as earlier with Tom). When read through fidgeting, this degree of distancing and reflection on the system that produces Jim and allows him to flourish is accompanied by the breaking of the readers' trust in the narrative of a good life offered to Laura and a reflection on our own yearning for the fairy-tale ending promised by this narrative. This potential of the snapping of the horn as the breaking of the spell of audience's complicity with Jim's worldview is available to us when fidgeting is rescued from an exclusively semiotic or psychoanalytical frame of a symbol or a nervous, anxious, un/counterproductive act and observed through the ideas of unaction, care, refusal, and destruction, as a prominent affective and ideologically mediated gesture.

The question of whether the materially packed ending marks Laura's growth or succumbing to what can be called the camp of productivity, confidence, and self-improvement (celebrated by Jim and Amanda) has been a point of debate among critics.[65] One way of reading the end is through the network of objects and gestures that the last scene orchestrates: while she hands Jim the broken unicorn (now just a horse), she also fiddles with the victrola and blows out the candle (on Tom's cue) leaving herself, Amanda, the stage and the audience enveloped in darkness. Parting with the broken unicorn can be seen as Laura parting with remnants of her difference from the industrial-patriarchal nexus (being a unicorn in a world of horses) and the creative and romantic impulses that she managed to preserve from the

[64] Sarah Wasserman in her study of ephemeral and disappearing objects in the America novel points to the paradox, 'While it may seem that fiction has the special ability to preserve lost things, it also has the ability to lose them.' *The Death of Things: Ephemera and the American Novel* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), p. 1.

[65] While critics like Bigsby, Deborah Kent, and Eric Levy hold that the play is a vivid story of a Laura's wasted life, Andrzejewski, Cardullo, and Gupta among identify resistant possibilities of the end.

outside forces. On the other hand, in light of the pointed inclusion of fidgeting after this parting, the handing of the unicorn must instead be read as Laura parting with a symbol of her victimhood and of the levelling system, marking its failure to infiltrate her world of unaction. As the glass crosses the border of the two worlds, taken away by someone willing to play by the rules of the exploitative system, the act of fidgeting and its associated mythology infiltrates Jim's world and his rhetoric of progress and material success. Laura continues fidgeting with the victrola, and we can safely assume, the rest of her menagerie.

While it may be tempting to read the blowing of the candle as cued by Tom, we must remember that this is his memory. Laura's act must precede Tom's narration as he merely captions it for our benefit. The 2013-14 Broadway production explored above stages this reminder by making Tom instead of Laura blow out the candles himself. As Laura evades his direction to 'blow out your candles' (89), this portrays the failure of his closing speech-act, revealing the fragility of his authority and Laura's resistance to it. It further highlights the challenge to realist representation posed by Laura's object-encounters — as she slithers back into the couch from where she entered (discussed above), the absurd exit *before* the end of the play allows her to lie outside and beyond realist closure and to a degree beyond the reach of the audience, narrator, critics, and even author. A review says that 'the play's finale, which was meant to demonstrate the newfound power of the author, ends up demonstrating the inventive power of the director.'[66] I would argue that this demonstration of the limits of authorial power by the production's finale equally highlights Laura's 'inventive power'. She is then released from the masculine forces of narrative — both through her fidgeting and by snatching the reigns of the narrative, inherited by her as Tom leaves. Fidgeting frustrates Tom's attempt to make the play a *Künstlerroman* and a male adventure narrative that find no place within the play, which is now Laura's "material" and must exist in a space outside the door of the realist living room. Reading through objects and bringing into focus Laura's fidgeting of the victrola following the exits of Tom and Jim then open the possibility of undoing conventional readings of the end of the play.

Despite this reading, we are nonetheless left with no suggestion of what the larger schema of the character's lives is and where from has the play been plucked. Is it a slice of their larger lives that will continue replaying a version of the action in perpetuum till Tom finally leaves? Does the end mark a radical change and break from a pre-existing cycle or was the action unique and uncharacteristic, briefly making the Wingfields worthy subjects of a play? What happened to Laura's walks, to her now chipped menagerie, and to Amanda's search for a gentleman caller? Not much happens after the

[66] John Lahr, 'A Misstep in "*The Glass Menagerie*"', *The New Yorker*, 8 Oct. 2013 <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/a-misstep-in-the-glass-menagerie> [accessed 17 October 2022].

"operation", the fragments are left as is, with no hints about what happens after the candles go out. The shatter at once anticipates a dramatic, realist closure (as a charged fictional moment) while also foreshadowing its disruption (as a semiotic interruption). The momentary presence of the object as unadulterated, and to a degree unmediated materiality over its utilitarian and semiotic value at once depends on and disrupts conventions of domestic realism. The momentary interruption of these conventions (channelled by the shatter) filters into the disruption of functional and fictional codes of objects and challenges the 'illusionistic basis of American material culture's presence onstage.'[67] The epilogue of fidgeting toys with loose ends and incompleteness, harnessing its earlier associations with interruptions, silences, and residues that push against the forces of realist, closure-orientated narrative and male storytelling. These loose ends challenge not just the comfort of a closure but also Tom's fashioning of himself (seconded by critics and reviews) as a Shelleyan poet-prophet, an 'unacknowledged legislator[] of the world'.[68]

Seen in this light, there is a suggestion that we can yearn for a different future for Laura that may be not possible in the world of the play but is certainly thinkable. Like Laura's glass unicorn, the illusion of a happy ending heralded by Jim must break. The glass then needs to break to shatter the taming forces of narrative and the illusion of Laura finding a home in the conventional marital plot. The shattering of this illusion allows her to yearn for a space beyond, perhaps in the offstage space beyond realist door, even if that space is not available historically in America of the 1940s.

Conclusion

I have attempted to explore how the material fidgeting of objects is a resistance to absorption into male narratives, and a reflection on their inadequacy to represent a way of being that does not perform legible femininity and productivity penned in conventional social and play scripts. This reconsideration of the play does not attempt to "rescue" Laura from her passivity but to suggest the rebellious potential of her unaction. This potential is only available when we move beyond the anthropocentric, subject-oriented approach to the play. Laura's fidgeting as unaction highlights the inadequacy of narratives of male storytelling, normalcy, productivity, and compulsory heterosexuality to accommodate her alternate worldview. While critical approaches to the play imagine its objects as anchors pulling the characters, especially Laura down, I posit these objects as sponges, absorbing and exuding personal brands of resistance and agency. These alternate interpretive possibilities emerge when fidgeting is rescued from critical dismissal as an escapist gesture or a psychoanalytical subject and read instead as a form of

[67] Gillette, 'Poor Things', p. 92.
[68] Percy B. Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry' in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), 478–508 (p. 508).

refusal, an opting out, or a 'prefer[ring] not to'.[69] This draws from the radical potential of passivity and refusal in feminist discourses as a rebellion against ableist heteronormativity and the fraught but marked presence of refusal in modernist texts. When read through her relationship with objects, Laura emerges as an anachronistic character, at once romantic and existential, trapped in a modern realist narrative and thus pitied for her paradoxical or "peculiar" way of being,[70] with the potential to be celebrated in the absurdist and avant-garde drama that American theatre was barrelling towards.

Drawing sensory practices of care, stillness, and fragility along with the ideological underpinnings of work, productivity, and gendered scripts, fidgeting becomes a fertile ground to interrogate the modernist material imagination planted within the specific valencies of social and economic productivity in mid-century America. Fidgeting further anchors Laura in her difference and engenders her alternate way of being, problematising her fictional and critical romanticisation or dismissal as a plaything. It refuses to be a redemptive act that rescues her and instead makes her stubbornly unintelligible and impenetrable. Laura's fidgeting then registers not her inability to find a place in the conventional scripts penned for her by Williams, her family, society, and even the reader/audience, but the inadequacy and failure of these scripts. Through the attention to fidgeting, gestures and object-encounters that harness inactivity, stasis, or unproductivity emerge as critically overlooked and generative as methods of approaching unintelligible characters like Laura. They further come to reflect the inadequacy of critically inscribed lenses associated with psychoanalysis, conventional frames of resistance, ableist understandings of action and productivity, and romantic optimism. These approaches fail to fruitfully place or interrogate marginalised forms of agency and object-directed gestures that are often overlooked or dismissed as an unimportant or critically barren habits. The case study functions as a methodological invitation for identifying moments of unaction introduced by such gestures and using these to create a new framework to approach impenetrable, unproductive, obsessive, and absurd gestures (from the fixation on the overcoat in Nikolai Gogol's 'The Overcoat', constant stroking of the bronze ornament in Sartre's *No Exit* to repetitive playing of tapes in Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*) as well as characters (from Melville's Bartleby in the eponymous story, Woolf's John in 'Solid Objects' to Barnes's Dove, which will be explored next).

[69] Herman Melville, 'Bartleby' in *Piazza Tales* ed. Egbert S. Oliver (New York: Hendricks House, 1962), 16–54 (p. 26).
[70] When Tom suggests that Laura seems 'a little peculiar' to outsiders, Amanda scolds, 'Don't say peculiar' (47).

BARNES'S *THE DOVE*

'I am the most famous unknown of the century!'[1] Djuna Barnes wrote to a friend, an observation that inadvertently encapsulates her critical obscurity and ironically the recent scholarly attention that this very obscurity has garnered. This comment expresses the 'central paradox of her dramatic writing'[2] and her position within American theatre and queer modernist literature. While her novels and only (published) full-length play, *The Antiphon,* have been recognised as prominent works of modernist literature within scholarship, her large corpus of shorter dramatic writing has not received similar attention. It is her later anthologising in the fields of women's writing, queer fiction, or 'improper' and 'blasphemous' modernisms that has both recovered her from relative obscurity (in contrast to the fame of the more celebratory portrayals of lesbian desire in the works of her contemporaries Woolf, H.D., and Stein) while simultaneously further pushing her short (often one-act) plays to the side-lines.[3] Her plays and closet dramas show a remarkable sense of experimentation, looking forward to the avant-garde and playing with theatre's relationship with comprehensibility and performability. Barnes is often read in tandem with her controversial biographical details and earlier critics seem to have been reading her diaries and fiction almost adjacently.[4] This has come under critical attack by later approaches that expose the increasing dredging and psychologising of facts of her real life as critically suspect and unproductive.[5] I build on this attack in my reading of the objects in *The Dove,* holding fidgeting of objects in the play in tension with the scholarly obsession with what seems like Barnes's overpowering, all-consuming biography of filial abuse, incest, and lesbian sexuality.[6] In so doing, I attempt to explore fidgeting as a fertile object-encounter for recovering writers from critical obfuscation and from the

---

[1] Letter to Natalie Barney dated May 31, 1963, Barnes Collection, qtd. in Susan R Clark, 'Djuna Barnes: The Most Famous Unknown' in *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History*, ed. by Kim Marra and Robert A. Schanke (USA: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 105–125 (p. 105).

[2] Sarah Bay-Cheng, 'Famous Unknown: The Dramas of Djuna Barnes and Gertrude Stein' in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama* ed. David Krasner (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 127–141 (p. 127).

[3] Daniela Caselli, *Improper Modernism: Djuna Barnes's Bewildering Corpus* (London: Routledge, 2016); Steve Pinkerton, *Blasphemous Modernism: The 20th-Century Word Made Flesh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[4] Dalton's commentary, a touchstone for later critics, approaches *The Dove* through the 'biographical evidence' of Barnes's abuse by her grandmother. Similarly, Clark argues that her writing 'helped to assuage her personal demons'. Anne B. Dalton, ''This Is Obscene': Female Voyeurism, Sexual Abuse, and Maternal Power in *The Dove' Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.3 (1993), 117–139 (p. 120); Clark, 'Djuna Barnes', p. 106.

[5] Sarah Bay-Cheng makes the argument that Barnes wrote with 'theatrical ambivalence', not particularly interested in aiming her plays at mass audience precisely because 'the personal events of Barnes's play would be protected from the scrutiny of the public.' She connects this with Puchner's idea of modernist anti-theatricality as a resistance to public performance. 'Famous Unknown', pp. 128-9.

[6] Salvato for instance points out that the preoccupation with the family dynamics in *The Dove* stemming from Barnes's own fraught personal life overlooks other important driving undercurrents in the play such as class. Nick Salvato, *Uncloseting Drama* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), p. 157.

'reach of [their] own biography'[7] as well as to establish *The Dove* as an important Barnesian and interwar play.

The Dove was published in 1923 as a part of *A Book*, a collection of poems, prose, plays, and sketches, and did not receive a professional run, with only two notable productions at Smith College, Massachusetts (1925) and Bayes Theatre in New York City in the Little Theatre contest (1926). It concerns the Burgson sisters, Vera and Amelia, along with a mysterious third inhabitant of their home, a 'strange happening' (304) called the Dove, described variously by critics as a 'maid',[8] a submissive pet, or a figment of their (sexual) fantasy.[9] The play ends with an ambiguous offstage gunshot, leaving unclear whether the Dove has shot herself along with a painting. Susan R. Clark has pointed out that the one-act play was 'one of the first lesbian plays by a lesbian-identified playwright produced on the American stage'.[10] I explore how Barnes's play presents objects as sites for performing the unspeakable, incomprehensible, and repressed. Given the backdrop of obscenity trials of the period,[11] I suggest that fidgeting emerges as a new dramatic lexicon to resist voyeuristic objectification and moralistic erasure of alterity and lesbian desire within and through the play. Looking at her larger oeuvre, this harnessing of the nonhuman as an expression of alterity can be seen in the representation of animals/animality (*Nightwood)*, the body as pastiche (*Madame Collects Herself,* where a woman collects the body parts of her former lovers) or unhuman bodies (*Kurzy of the Sea,* where a man refuses to marry anyone but an 'unhuman woman').[12] Coming back to *The Dove,* this portrayal where objects both represent the inarticulate or illegible and resist anthropocentric ideals finds expression in the hermeneutically challenging and affectively rich gesture of fidgeting. Fidgeting as an absurd and short-circuiting gesture encompasses other non-normative tendencies and undercurrents in the play. It condenses two specific, often overlapping Barnesian concerns — a challenge to both normative/transparent narrative and sexuality. The relationship between the play and social/theatrical conventions, I argue, is rehearsed in the three characters' distinct approaches to objects. Similarly, the play's representation of objects mediates and is mediated by erotic and non-erotic desire, reflected in characters' fetishization and

[7] Djuna Barnes, 'The Dove', *At the Roots of the Stars: The Short Plays* ed. by Douglas Messerli (LA: Sun & Moon Press, 1995), 147–161 (p. 157). All subsequent references to the play will be from this edition and appear as in-text page numbers.
[8] Nick Salvato, *Uncloseting Drama,* p. 156.
[9] See Bay-Cheng, 'Famous Unknowns', p. 131
[10] Clark, 'Djuna Barnes', p. 105
[11] Dianne Chisholme observes the 'legal spectacularization of "obscene" sexuality' in reference to the famous obscenity trials of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* or Hall's *Well of Loneliness* and argues, 'Modernist art is produced at the same historical moment and in the same social space as "obscene" art.' 'Obscene Modernism: Eros Noir and the Profane Illumination of Djuna Barnes', *American Literature*, 69.1 (Mar., 1997), 167–206 (p. 168).
[12] Djuna Barnes, 'Kurzy of the Sea' in *At the Root of the Stars*, p. 87.

collection of objects, and their use in personal fantasies and obsessions. Fidgeting in this play works to create a proxy, a site to perform and sustain illegible and "obscene" desires (not only sexual).

Waiting and Getting Bored

The play is set in a closed, crammed environment of the Burgson apartment, a 'long, low rambling affair at the top of a house in the heart of the city' (148). Despite the limited space of a living room and offstage bedroom, the house is nonetheless overfurnished and packs in a wide range of object and nonhuman life like firearms, flies, and animals. The concentrated environment seems to press upon the three characters of the play, ironically imposing an emptiness 'in the heart of the city' in a characteristic symptom of urban modernity. This density is markedly different from the post-depression claustrophobia of mid-century American realist stage of O'Neill and Williams. While in their works, the cramped space is a harbinger or metonym of the outside world and the industrial-patriarchal nexus, marked also by broken American dreams of progress and social mobility (discussed in the previous section), in *The Dove,* the claustrophobia establishes instead a sense of isolation (self-imposed, as we discover through the play), severance from society and perhaps reality, and womb-like stagnation evoking 'a kind of a closet'.[13] However, this does not necessarily mean a complete shunning of the world, as we do see at least once character traverse the domestic border and hear about the external activities of all three. What this confined space does is make visible by contrast the objects that densely populate the Burgsons' living room.

The overall ambience has a feeling of sensual density and pregnancy: 'The decoration is garish, dealing heavily in reds and pinks' (149). There is an evident attempt to make the place look luxuriously sensual with kitschy colours and reclining chairs, making the space 'more like a whorehouse than the home of two virgin sisters'[14] for one critic and 'the type of boudoir in which Sade would have set one of his kinky closet dramas'[15] for another. The space is overflowing with firearms and swords, evidently more in number than the human characters in the play. While this might not be unusual, here the number of a particular *species* of objects, namely those associated with violence, exceeds the number of people. Furthermore, the space is teeming with flies, French novels are scattered about, Amelia has a picture of Parisienne bathing girls in her bed, and the sisters 'keep a few animals' (150). The dense and congealed materiality infiltrates the play's descriptive vocabulary as well as the characters' perception, as seen in the misnomer 'the Dove' and her description as object-like, 'as delicate as china with almost

[13] Salvato, *Uncloseting Drama,* p. 155.
[14] Cheryl J. Plumb, 'Introduction: Djuna Barnes *The Dove'* in *Modern Drama by Women, 1880s-1930s: an International Anthology,* ed. by Katherine E. Kelly (London: Routledge, 1996), 299–302 (p. 301).
[15] Salvato, *Uncloseting Drama,* p. 155.

dangerously transparent skin' (149). Through the course of the play, we see that the objects' abundant presence seeps into the characters' language, dreams, imagination, and more broadly their worldview or conversely, objects' presence in the house and mental infiltration are products of a psyche whose approach to the world is overgrown with objects. In either case, from the beginning the play introduces itself to be as much about object matters as about its (controversially ambiguous and indiscernible) subject.

If the space is marked by the presence of object and inanimate life, the action is propelled alongside (if not by) an attraction to the inanimate and even, as I will show, the 'sex appeal of the inorganic'.[16] The opening object-encounter is the Dove 'polishing the blade of an immense sword' (150). We soon find out that the sisters refuse to keep the flies out as 'they have a right to be curious' (159) and 'collect knives and pistols' as well as animals. Their interest in objects seems to supplant their original purpose and function with something quite unrelated. The sword is being fidgeted not brandished, the pistols are to 'shoot our buttons' not people, the knives to 'cut our darning cotton' not someone's flesh, Amelia carries a gun to buy butter and the animals are kept in the hope 'to see something first-hand' (150). The weapons and animals are essentially domesticated and made toothless, the only persisting danger being, ironically, a fragile woman (girl?) named the Dove.

We see from the outset that the space is laden with specific kinds of objects that are coded with not just action and violence but also with an inherited theatrical tradition. These objects like swords, guns, and even symbolic paintings and surrogate objects (reminiscent of the absent father's portrait in *Hedda Gabler* or the boots in *Miss Julie*) are of a "theatrical species", belonging to a certain dramatic sensibility evoked by nineteenth century melodramas, well-made plays, naturalist and problem plays, or what Maria Irene Fornés has called 'masculine' dramaturgy.[17] As such, they become 'ideological guarantors'[18] of these genres, providing a visual shorthand that conjures a similar theatrical space and reception mode. The objects' ironic, domesticated, and counterintuitive use by the women divorces them from both their real and conventional theatrical functions as they are made ordinary, domestic, quotidian, and (hence) "feminine" and arguably boring. Their presence then becomes a mode of material teasing, arousing expectations of associated generic affiliations only to mock them.

---

[16] Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century' in Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings (eds.) *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings: 1935-1938* (Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2002), 32–49 (p. 37).
[17] Una Chaudhuri, 'Maria Irene Fornes' (interview), in *Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights*, eds. Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 98–114 (p. 107).
[18] Varun Begley, 'Objects of Realism: Bertolt Brecht, Roland Barthes, and Marsha Norman', *Theatre Journal*, 64.3 (2012), 337–53 (p. 339).

The Dove incessantly polishes something that is already clean, given Amanda's command to 'Take all the blood stains off first, *then* polish it' (152, emphasis added). This gesture of unnecessary touching and polishing with associations of unproductive repetition and domestic drudgery, evokes the idea of fidgeting that I have been exploring. Despite this mundane object-encounter, there is nonetheless an undeniable atmosphere of violence in the Burgson home. The Dove's fidgeting plays with the violent and dangerous affordance of objects. Vera comments, 'when you're out of this room all these weapons might be a lot of butter knives or pop guns, but let you come in […] It becomes arsenal' (157). Vera later relates a dream about herself as a doll, broken and as it is implied, violated by the wind, and we learn of Amelia's habit of stabbing pins in a picture of Parisienne girls. While these proclivities establish each character's object-encounters as underscored with the potential for destruction and violence, it is important to note that outright violent object interaction is not displayed — the Dove's fidgeting of the sword culminates in a violent end only in the offstage future, Amelia's pin-sticking is an anecdote that we do not witness and Vera's doll-being is a dream. Violent objects are then deferred through their offstage, past, and dream ontologies, and the only explicitly visible violent scene of the play is between bodies. Objects then despite being overpowering, consuming, and urgent presences, fidgeted and fetishized (as I will explore later), leave visible and spectacular violence as a human prerogative.

This teasing and almost parodic use of objects depends on an initial loyal adherence to the conventions mocked. Linda Hutcheon in her discussion of parody defines it as 'repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity'.[19] This replaying-to-mock mode of critique runs across the play that is increasingly conscious of the moment of theatrical history in which it finds itself and its dominant representational traditions. As such, it must faithfully reproduce the surface reality and material topography of these conventions to offer them at the altar of critique. Accordingly, fidgeting with objects offers a critique through ostensible adherence to the set-up of the conventions of masculine realist dramaturgies. While the play's parodic, absurdist, and impenetrable trajectory looks forward to the theatrical avant-garde, the surface of the play, both material backdrop and the narrative elements — a dysfunctional "family", symbolic objects, domestic living room space, haunting past, and a destructive offstage crescendo — all borrow from well-established theatrical conventions familiar to audience and readers alike.

---

[19] Linda Hutcheon, 'The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History', *Cultural Critique*, 5 (1986), 179–207 (p. 185). Penny Farfan draws on Hutcheon's parody to read the play in dialogue with *Hedda Gabler.* She observes,

> In *The Dove*, Barnes appropriated key motifs from *Hedda Gabler* - the repressed hysteric, the guns, the painting, the off-stage prostitute - but whereas Ibsen used these motifs to construct a tragedy, Barnes reworked them as parody to dramatize other, more emancipatory outcomes in terms of both sexual and representational practice.

Women, Modernism, and Performance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 77.

The play's material set-up is similar to the realist living room and one specific approach to objects that is reproduced and sustained is the sense of objects 'lying in wait'.[20] States's discussion of the material topography of *Hedda Gabler* is relevant here:

> All of these [objects] are visible from the beginning, nestling casually in their innocent verisimilitude, but their contribution becomes evident only as they are folded into action […] a characteristic instance of […] casual masquerading as casual […] there is a subliminal wonder in the self-sufficiency of the room to have contained, in advance, all of the properties necessary to produce this unique reckoning in time.[21]

A similar stasis, waiting, boredom and stretching of catapult that realism's opening acts orchestrate is materialised in the Dove's act of fidgeting. She is herself described as having a 'waiting air of a deer' (149) and is ordered to polish a sword, which we can imagine is only one of the house's many weapons she is obsessively made to shine. The imposed drudgery of her act of polishing the blade repeatedly and endlessly carries within it the very antithetical impulses of boredom and danger. Vera voices this paradox that characterises the Dove's very being, as 'the only dangerous thing [they] ever knew' (157):

> VERA: Yes, you seem so gentle—do we not call you the Dove? And you are so little—so little it's almost immoral […] your terrible quality were not one of action, but just the opposite, as if you wanted to prevent nothing. […] that's why you frighten me.
> THE DOVE: Because I let everything go on, as far as it can go?
> VERA: Yes, because you disturb nothing. (154)

Despite ostensibly seeming like a submissive pet, Vera recognises the Dove as frighteningly provocative in her very passivity, as seen in her obsessive resignation to the toil of fidgeting. Salvato observes, 'the danger that she poses comes not from any active or aggressive menace that she threatens […] but from her passive and tacit encouragement of illicit behavior.'[22] The ostensible drudgery of fidgeting similarly carries within it the tacit and provocative violence of disturbing nothing. Furthermore, the gesture's entwining of banality and danger, waiting and pouncing, pulling the catapult back and springing forth is reminiscent of the very mechanism of theatricalising, specifically, the theatricalising of objects. The Dove's paradoxical fidgeting channels the process of semiosis and the shift between a thing on stage and a stage object. Fidgeting here replays the theatricalization of objects whose passivity and stasis is

---

[20] Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (University of California Press, 1987), p. 68.
[21] Ibid., pp. 67-68.
[22] Salvato, *Uncloseting Drama,* p. 157.

coded with anticipation, framed as a *waiting*, capacity, potential, and affordance such that their very inactivity contains the seeds of action, as seconded in States's observation above. The Dove's provocatively dull object-encounter then is reminiscent of the theatrical mechanism of object-use, that disturbs nothing to eventually disturb everything.

Fidgeting is cast as a prologue to action (rather than unaction, as in *The Glass Menagerie)* and an action deferred. It reclaims the affective value of the potential and capacity for action as no less than that of action itself. The Dove herself confesses this position: 'A person who is capable of anything needs no practice' (155). Here the 'person' may as well be the Chekhovian gun, evoking response even before acting, thus echoing the power of material affordance over dramatic actants. Despite the departure of the Dove's fidgeting as dangerous and deferred action from Laura's fidgeting as rebellious unaction, the gesture appears equally illegible to the others and evokes similar frustrations: Vera's 'why don't you do something?' (155) and 'For heaven's sake, will you stop polishing that infernal weapon!' (151) echo Amanda's 'So what are we going to do the rest of our lives? […] Amuse ourselves with the glass menagerie, darling?'.[23] Beyond engendering ideas of waiting, anticipation, and possibility associated with the representation mechanism, we see here that fidgeting also reproduces the process of reception (specifically unfavourable reception). Barnes's own theatrical career was seen as a failure and *The Dove* in particular received its share of bad reviews and criticism, with a critic calling it 'flaccid by dramatic standards […] stretching out a stagnant situation'.[24] Just as failure itself, as Halberstam has argued, can be reframed as a critique or refusal of mastery and of 'acquiescence to dominant logics of power'[25] so is fidgeting as failed, unduly stretched or 'flaccid' action recast as a refusal of the dramatic imperative of functionality of object-encounters, the obligation of the Chekhovian gun to go off. While the play does end with the classic gunshot, this too is a performance of failure as critique, as I will explore later.

As argued in the introduction to this chapter, onstage fidgeting as latent action or inaction (by conventional theatrical standards) while often born out of restlessness and boredom, might also elicit boredom, impatience, and fidgeting from the audience. This is what we see here in Vera's frustrated outburst as she parallels the impatient audience waiting for something to happen. The failure of the play (to orchestrate active object-encounters and to engage the caustic reviewers) translates to the failure of the audience to "play along" (by staying engaged, by not being impatient and fidgety). The Dove's fidgeting and Vera's unfavourable reception mimic this mechanism of failure, and in doing so perhaps

[23] Williams, *The Glass Menagerie,* p. 20.
[24] Louis Kannenstine, *The Art of Djuna Barnes: Duality and Damnation* (New York: New York University Press, 1977), p. 135.
[25] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure,* p. 88

anticipate, domesticate, and mock the standards of success and mastery for dramatic action or theatrical pedigree (a similar parodic replaying-to-mock phenomenon as discussed above).

We see that dangerous objects are domesticated through alienation from real/theatrical function and the taming gesture of fidgeting. These, however, do not eliminate violence but await and defer violence which is continually pushed away from the here and now. Dangerous objects are then plucked from reality and past theatrical tradition, subdued, and tranquilised through fidgeting only for them (or at least some of them) to be (re)made disruptive and dangerous in the climactic gunshot, in Vera's dream, in Amelia's pin-sticking, and perhaps we can assume in an action that eventually leads the (new) Dove to polish the unexplained bloodstains. Objects packed with destructive semiotic significations are being presented, unpacked, and repackaged through the course of the play's harnessing of waiting, deferral, and anticipation, allowing fidgeting to move from being a mere theatrical gesture to a gesture of/embodying theatricality.

Touching and Repressing

Just as violence is replaced by the boring, all too tedious and repetitive world of object-interactions, so is sexual expression. Critics have pointed out the repressed sexuality that characterises the "family's" relationship. The Dove, Dalton and Farfan argue, is positioned as the opposite of these repressive forces.[26] The sisters' desire to 'know everything' comes at the cost of their ability to experience anything, giving their 'mind everything to do, the body nothing' (155). Susan Clark argues:

> the Burgson sisters are trapped by their fear of sexual expression in any form: they live vicariously through immoral pictures, dangerous weapons hanging on the walls, decadent red plush draperies, and copulating animals kept just for that purpose. Each of the sisters longs for the sexual freedom of the Dove, yet lacks the courage to commit to life by fully living.[27]

They, especially Vera, seem to have outsourced the experiential dimension of free, unrepressed subjectivity to the nonhuman world and the world of images and representation. Having left their lives 'entirely to […] imagination' (305), they are associated with the imaginative, visual, voyeuristic, and symbolic rather than the tactile, physical, and real — reading French novels, dreaming up scenarios, gawking at pictures of Parisienne women, or collecting animals 'to see something first-hand' (150). Even the task of handling and polishing their collection is outsourced to the Dove who we find is

[26] See Dalton, 'This is Obscene' pp. 120-121; Farfan, *Performing Queer Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 76.
[27] Clark, 'Djuna Barnes', p. 118.

fidgeting on Amelia's orders. Finally tired of 'disturb[ing] nothing' and wanting 'the beautiful thing to be' (157), the Dove asks, 'What do you want, Vera?' She answers by claiming her desires to be 'beyond the need of the usual home and beyond the reach of the usual lover' (155). While Dalton suggests Vera's metaphorically incestuous feelings for the Dove, Salvato argues that 'Vera longs, simply and literally, for her actual sister'.[28] Vera later expresses 'Perhaps what I really want is a reason for using one of these pistols!' (155). The seamless slippage between 'what' and 'who' Vera wants, between wanting to express her desires and a reason to use pistols, makes the sisters' material surroundings, entanglements, and withholding from objects a perfect metonym and realisation of their sexuality.

The dense environment of collected objects blends into the air of suspended and repressed sexuality. Similarly, the withholding from touching these objects reproduces the vicarious appropriation, detachment, repression, and restraint from the object of desire. The sisters' sexuality is mediated and refracted through their collected objects, or rather, their withholding from touching and fidgeting these objects. The Dove on the other hand, while not "active" till the end, is associated with a tactile approach to experience and perception — through her touching, polishing, and fidgeting of masculine firearms and phallic swords — over the visual. As Vera observes, 'You don't even observe as other people do, you don't watch' (154). The only two moments in the play when she is explicitly mentioned to have paused fidgeting objects (either polishing swords or loading firearms) is when she mock-strangles Vera's neck and when Amelia grabs her hand, mistaking it for a sword, provoking the Dove to bite her breast. Any pause in fidgeting then seems to reroute to violent or near-violent gestures that can also double up as sexual. Her project of tactility is interrupted all of two times, only to be replaced by a different mode of touch. Eventually a longer, more destructive pause occurs in the offstage end where she overtly destroys a visual object, discussed later. Being more willing to experience first-hand, the Dove admits openly that she loves Amelia. The Dove's tactile approach to objects and an unrepressed sexuality stand as counterpoints to the sister's vicarious and repressed approach.

In this light, fidgeting in the play goes beyond being a mere gesture and through the course of the play, it galvanises other meanings, impulses, and tendencies. A character's fidgeting and withholding from fidgeting becomes an allegory of not just a larger approach to the object-world but also of an alignment with a particular way of being and worldview.[29] In accumulating these resonances, fidgeting and anti-fidgeting positions come to stand for expressing or repressing sexuality, things or

[28] Dalton, 'This is Obscene', p. 120 ; Salvato, *Uncloseting Drama,* p. 158.

[29] As discussed in Chapter one, the idea of orientation towards objects associated with a way of being is similar to Ahmed's argument that objects can function as 'orientation devices' and that 'orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others. Orientations shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance, as well as "who" or "what" we direct our energy and attention toward.' *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 3.

vicarious representations, direct experience or indirect knowledge, and most overtly, tactile or visual encounters. The Dove's fidgeting and the sisters' resistance or anti-fidgeting approach emblematises or perhaps produces their larger worldviews, specifically, their approach to sexuality and experience.

The sisters choose the world of collecting weapons and animals and voyeuristic encounters with their possessions as a way of making up for the lack of the world of touch and experience, as practiced by the Dove's fidgeting. While Amelia does dabble in the experiential and tactile realms, going out into the world and sticking pins into photographs of women, both are underscored with violence (she carries a gun to buy butter), with the latter being a matter of shame and hiding. The sisters' anti-fidgeting distance from the object-world is an extension of their stunted and inhibited self-expression. The Dove's fidgeting comes into direct confrontation with the world of detached visuality that the Burgson sisters occupy in their 'business to know—everything' (150). Glen A. Mazis observes that 'the language of emotions is a tactile one'; being 'close' to someone or 'touched' by something all draw on this haptic sensory experience. On the other hand, the language of knowledge, and rational or distanced reflection is a visual one in which 'one *sees* things, something *dawns* on one as new *insight* is achieved'.[30] This split characterises the world of the women in the play, where the Dove's is a world of touch, fidgeting and (hence) experience, while the sisters subscribe to a detached visuality, compensating for the lack of first-hand experience with an obsessive "collection" or appropriation of knowledge. Mazis draws on Sartre who highlights the vicarious aspect of vision and knowing, 'what is seen is possessed, to see is to deflower. […] the relation between the knower and the known […] [is] represented as a kind of violation by sight'.[31] Knowledge, visuality, and possession all characterise the Burgson sisters' detached 'appropriative enjoyment',[32] one that can never be an adequate proxy for touch and direct experience.

Fidgeting enfolds the emotional, experiential, direct, and unrestrained value of touch, as opposed to the sisters' detached, appropriative, visual approach to the material world (as well as to sexuality), such that the Dove is able to unflinchingly feel and express love and to animalistically bite Amelia. Two worlds seem to be analogous and superimposed layers in the Burgson home: the worlds of touch and sight, of object-encounters and sexual (non)encounters. The opening gesture of fidgeting, read through ideas of tactile experience versus appropriative knowledge, "touching" emotional proximity and vicarious visuality, both reveals these two worlds and allows them to be analogies or "sisters" of each other.

Fetishizing and Biting

[30] Glen A. Mazis, 'Touch and Vision: Rethinking with Merleau-Ponty Sartre on the Caress', *Philosophy Today*, 23.4 (1979), 321–327 (p. 324), emphasis original.
[31] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* trans. Sarah Richmond, p. 578.
[32] Ibid., p. 400.

When extended further to include the overlapping impulses of passivity, violence, and sexuality, fidgeting evokes, I argue, ideas of object fetishism. This layer of the object-encounter draws on the Dove's specific orientation to the object-world and sheds more light on her later cannibalistic gesture, one that has often shocked and confounded critics and reviewers alike. What is interesting here is that the Dove's fidgeting of the sword might seem like a practice of object-fetishism, however, she performs this gesture on Amelia's command. While the Dove's sensory and affective engagement with fidgeting is direct, certain ideological and symbolic dimensions of fidgeting — pertaining to 'pathological collectionism',[33] appropriative possession (discussed above), and object-fetishism — are once removed, ordered by the sexually repressed sisters reluctant to get their hands dirty. We must then see this as fetishism by proxy, removed from the fetishizer. While fetish has a dense and varied tradition of theory behind it, pertaining to psychoanalysis, anthropology, and Marxism, here I am focusing on the larger thread that runs across its various uses that draws from ideas of substitution and alterity. Freud held fetishism to be 'the fruit of an ambivalent negation of reality ("I know how things are, but still . . ." […]) counterbalanced by acts of symbolic substitution, leading to the creation of alternative worlds'.[34] This is apparent in the sisters' substitution of bodily intimacy with distanced relation to objects, experience with knowledge, expressions of real alternate desire with violent and vicarious imagination. The different angulations of fetishism — anthropological, psychoanalytical, political — are in their own ways 'marked by the effort to comprehend alterity and the world'. The concept has expanded to encompass the other and 'the alienation created by modernity itself'.[35] The sisters' turn towards (delegated) object-fetishism is both an expression of their alternate desires buried in their hearts as well as a response to the isolation of urban modernity 'in the heart of the city' (148). Stemming from both within and without, fetishistic object-encounters create 'fantasies, dreams, visions, and obsessions [that] *cannibalize* reality, inventing parallel worlds'.[36] Resistant to direct experience, the sisters can be seen as using the Dove (like the copulating animals or the collected firearms) as a way to cannibalise reality, to experience by proxy, thus making her a fetishized object like the sword. In this backdrop of fetishism, the Dove also emerges as an object of the sisters' sexual fantasies, 'drawn from French libertine novels, pin-ups, and Italian songs […] a blank screen on which the sisters, and, by extension, the audience, project their own fantasies'.[37]

---

[33] Massimo Fusillo, *The Fetish: Literature, Cinema, Visual Art,* trans. Thomas Simpson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), p. 139.
[34] Fusillo, *The Fetish,* p. 10.
[35] Ibid., p. 4.
[36] Ibid., p. ix, emphasis added.
[37] Bay-Cheng, 'Famous Unknowns', p. 132

The cannibalising of reality reaches a literal culmination when the Dove 'bares Amelia's left shoulder and breast, and leaning down, sets her teeth in' (161). For Dalton, the biting is a 'dramatization of incest, which has been culturally unspeakable' creating a gesture that is 'culturally unreadable.'[38] The Dove seems to have absorbed the puncturing, penetrative, and punitive qualities of the sword. Here we see fetishism breaking down the 'borders between the animate and the inanimate',[39] where it is not the Dove's fidgeting that makes her sword-like, but the sisters' fetishism of the Dove, the sword, and fidgeting that works as an indiscriminate, levelling force homogenising the differences between the three. This piercing bite that fuses sexual and violent drives emerges as the climax and extension of the unreadable gesture of fidgeting of pointed swords. Reading through object-fetishism with its implications of parallel worlds and ontological flattening arguably reveals the biting scene as a fantasy as well, a (real or imagined)[40] puppet-theatre of fetishized objects created by the sisters as a mode of self-pleasure. It emerges as another second-hand, deferred experience that saves the sisters from participating and being immersed in the world, making them modern descendants of the repressed Lady of Shalott or the sisters in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market', honouring an unspoken curse perhaps on the lines of "watch but don't touch".

Beyond an increasing likeness between the sword and the Dove, object-fetish also points to something beyond itself, to the fetishiser's yearning and intense attraction to the inorganic, an 'extreme and erotic'[41] approach to things or the 'sex appeal of the inorganic'.[42] This fetishism, Walter Benjamin notes, 'does away with the boundaries separating the organic world from the inorganic. […] lead[ing] sexuality into the world of the inorganic'.[43] The phallic sword, the piercing, vampiric bite, as well as Amelia's offstage pin-sticking, all suggest a penetrative sexuality and violence. The phallic fetish-objects along with the masculine weapons point to both an absence of men and the presence of inaccessible desires, as a 'substitute for an original, originary totality, which we now recognize never actually existed, and which we no longer seek.'[44] Katie Connell's discussion of the queer ontology of

---

[38] Dalton argues that the biting of the breast, a symbol of maternal nourishment and nurture, suggests 'antimaternal hostility' which can be traced in many relationships between older women and younger children in Barnes's oeuvre. 'This is Obscene', p. 124.

[39] Fusillo, *The Fetish,* p. 16.

[40] Bay-Cheng holds that the Dove is the sisters' creation:

> The Dove has no real name because she is not, in truth, a real person. Rather, she is a character that Amelia and Vera have created in their sexual fantasies […] Barnes reinforces the Dove's role as object by positioning her among numerous visual representations of women in the play. Like the images on the postcards and in the painting, the Dove exists largely to be looked at, full of potential that only the viewer can determine.

'Famous Unknowns', pp. 131-132.

[41] Fusillo, *The Fetish,* p. 11

[42] Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', p. 37.

[43] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, qtd. in Fusillo, *The Fetish,* pp. 12-13.

[44] Fusillo, *The Fetish*, pp. 14-16.

the dildo is relevant to my exploration of object-fetishes in the play, given that they occupy similar gendered co-ordinates as the sex-object. Such objects destabilise the 'originary totality' or as Connell drawing from Butler puts it, the 'claim to originality' of heterosexuality.[45] In the play, the totality which the objects might seem to indicate is both the absent men and the heterosexual family unit which, as discussed above, the narrative and material set up both suggests and subverts. While ostensibly seeming to emulate phallic-centric idea of sexuality, the fetishized penetrative objects pose 'a challenge to the body in "possession" of gender by way of their genitals', making them an 'imitation for which there is no original'.[46] The fetish-objects and the biting scene then perform a '"perverse" reversal of the penetrative heterosexual ideal'[47] by having a woman (or rather a fetishized object) bear the piercing sword and probing bite. Fidgeting-as-fetish then displaces both normative sexuality as well as normative referentiality (genitals as signifier of gender) by destabilising the authority of the "original". The challenge to referentiality, or more broadly, the process of representation is more fully foregrounded by the Dove's destruction of the painting in the last scene. The scene emerges as a reflection on the theatrical/ritualistic substitution of their repressed desire with object-fetishes, as also on the theatrical and societal conventions that compel this repression and substitution.

'This is obscene [?]': The Painting, Voyeurism, Reception

The sisters' fetishism (exercised through the delegation of fidgeting, among other ways) is not tactile but visual. It works by avoiding touch as it stands for direct experience and thus 'feeds on visuality' and the scopic impulse.[48] We see this most evidently in the sisters' (especially Amanda's) voyeuristic consumption and interaction with representations of women. Amanda displaces active sexuality by staring at farm animals, fixating on the picture of Parisienne girls that she keeps in her bed and gazing at Carpaccio's painting, 'Deux Courtisanes Vénitiennes' (158), which hangs in the other room, substituting direct intimacy or erotic encounters with voyeurism. Like the other objects, the painting conflates 'domestic, violent, and erotic symbols'.[49] It has three human characters, two middle-aged women (seemingly related) in the centre and a small boy on the edge of the canvas. The scene is brimming with animals — dogs, doves, peacocks, and other birds — however, the women are oddly detached from their environment, looking not at each other or their immediate surroundings but beyond the frame. Dalton observes:

---

[45] Judith Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination' qtd. in Katherine Ngaio Connell, 'Objects in Human Drag: The Queerness of Object-Oriented Ontologies.' (Masters Thesis, OCAD University, 2016), p. 3.
[46] Connell, 'Objects in Human Drag', pp. 76-77.
[47] Ibid., p. 76.
[48] 'Fetishism feeds on visuality and on the primordial desire to watch which has been termed the scopic impulse'. Fusillo, *The Fetish,* p. 17.
[49] Dalton, 'This is Obscene', p. 122.

> Deep maroonish reds and pinks dominate Carpaccio's canvas, most likely inspiring Barnes's comment that such colors should "heavily" mark *The Dove's* setting. Carpaccio's use of the deep red tones contributes to the painting's sexually laden atmosphere and forms a jarring contrast to *the apparent boredom and apathy* of the two female figures.[50]

Similarly, the art historian Jan Lauts also notes 'their vacant, apathetic faces, devoid of any spiritual animation and individuality […] the mask of studied indifference seems to hide vice and perversion.'[51] The similarities and perhaps even Barnes's motivation for including this painting emerge quite evidently, with a shared concern for the subjects' relationship with the nonhuman environment. Just like the Dove's 'expectant waiting air' (149), the sisters in the painting seem to be awaiting the 'animating force of absent men'[52]; as with fidgeting, the interaction with the material world is coloured with the boredom that precedes anticipation of drama.

Vittorio Sgarbi's discussion on the painting explains waiting as the central theme (and a more appropriate title) with 'ladies […] awaiting the return of their men from a leisurely hunt', pointing to its 'essentially domestic and "feminine" nature with its tones of intimacy […] (the young one deadened from boredom stares into space; the older one attempts futilely to enliven the deadened environment)'.[53] The older sister does so by tugging on a leash that a feral dog clenches in its teeth. Obvious resonances emerge with the play: the waiting and deferring of dramatic action, the nonhuman conflation of boredom and danger, and violent things made domestic and mundane. The Dove's fidgeting of the sword and feral biting also seem to 'enliven the deadened environment'. But while the subject of painting illustrates a waiting for arresting, outside, masculine forces to reinvigorate mundane, feminine domesticity, the painting itself becomes an impediment and even a resistance to the arrival of these forces in the Burgson sisters' lives. Vera tells the Dove, 'It's because of that picture of the Venetian courtesans that I send Amelia out for the butter, I don't dare let the grocer call' (158). The act of waiting, passivity, and boredom that awaits men's arrival and heterosexual totality is here replayed and queered. The only arrival is of Amelia coming back from an errand and through Vera's comment we find that it is the painting that may have begotten her exit in the first place. Vera and the Dove are awaiting Amelia, not a man and the former even creates excuses to actively avoid men. Another arrival that precedes the play is that of the Dove, but there is a sense that the animating, erotic force of her arrival has also worn

---

[50] Ibid., p. 122, emphasis added.
[51] Jan Lauts, *Carpaccio: Paintings and Drawings* qtd. in ibid.
[52] Farfan, *Performing Queer Modernism* p. 78. The painting has two distinct interpretations through its two titles, *Two Venetian Women* and *The Courtesans.* Depending on the interpretation, the women can either be seen as waiting for their husbands or patrons. Bay-Cheng, 'Famous Unknowns', p. 132.
[53] Vittorio Sgarbi, *Carpaccio* qtd. in Farfan, *Women, Modernism, and Performance,* p. 70.

off, absorbed into the fabric of domestic, everyday life.[54] This evokes the idea of repeated touching and fidgeting of an object eventually leading to boredom, fetishizing of an object to the point of saturation, thus begetting a need for another object, another substitute for the 'originary totality' that never was.[55] The play queers the painting's subject of waiting by having women instead of men arrive. This challenges fidgeting as an idle, incidental, unspecific act of occupying oneself, a womanly twiddling of thumbs till men finally arrive to dispel the need for fidgeting, injecting it instead with a potential for offering queer critique.

Zooming out from the painting's subject to its central role in the last scene, we see the Dove for the last time exiting towards the hallway that houses the painting with a pistol:

> THE VOICE OF THE DOVE: For the house of Burgson! [*A moment later a shot is heard.*]
> AMELIA: [*Running after her.*] Oh, my God!
> VERA: What has she done?
> AMELIA [*Reappearing in the doorway with the picture of the Venetian courtesans, through which there is a bullet hole—slowly, but with emphasis.*] *This* is obscene! (161)

The painting occasions an anticlimactic end, one which is invisible and ambiguous. The earlier dissociation between an object and its (theatrical) function is smoothened as the weapon is finally (re)made dangerous. However, despite this containment of objects' earlier subversion of function, the disrupting effect introduced by fidgeting still remains. The Dove's fidgeting with dangerous objects throughout the play and her violent-erotic biting all mark her exit as a sign of impending dramatic closure that will retrospectively smoothen ambiguity and dispel the challenges to the heterosexual fabric of the realist living room. It creates an expectation of an overt elimination of the problem, the "sin" that is the Dove's presence,[56] restoring the sisters' self-imposed isolation to its earlier sexless innocence. The moralistic beacon of the end is (falsely) suggested in the fidgeting of dangerous, fatal objects and the Dove's morbid attraction to becoming inanimate. Going back to the earlier discussion of material teasing in the play, here too there is a sense of build-up and tension with no catharsis. The fetishizing and caressing of objects, the thick air of stifled sexuality redirected to objects, and the objects' titillating oscillation between boredom and danger all contribute to the anticipatory affect of fidgeting. This, however, is undone through the classic climactic gunshot that begets rather than solves ambiguity.

---

[54] Vera mentions twice that the Dove is dangerous or scary. However, her familiarity with the danger she poses (discussed above) suggests that this has become predictable. Perhaps Amelia's naming of her 'the Dove' is also an act of taming the unruly or "sinful" creature.

[55] Fusillo, *The Fetish,* p. 14.

[56] Amelia herself points out, 'it's a sin, truly it's a sin that I, a woman with temperament, permit a young girl to stay in the same room with me!' (159)

The Dove's fate is left unclear and we see neither her dead body not the other characters' reaction to (bodily) death as we aren't even afforded the denial and disbelief similar to Judge Brack's 'One doesn't do such a thing!'.[57] We only see a damaged painting with Amelia's emphatic declaration. While the fidgeted firearms serve their destructive function, (re)made into arsenal by the Dove's triggering touch after being tamed in the beginning of the play, they nonetheless frustrate and mock the anticipated and conventionally prescribed end by killing a painting rather than a person. The play subverts the teleology of the Chekhovian gun from within: the weapon is shown, milked for anticipatory effect, and used to undo rather than achieve closure.

By staging both an attempting of and failure at reproducing the offstage gunshot, the play leverages the earlier gesture of fidgeting (and its promise of a fatal closure) to stage a 'queer metatheatrical gest'[58] at the end that disturbs hegemonic representational modes. Furthermore, Jill Dolan has argued that 'the lesbian subject most readable in realism is either dead or aping heterosexual behavior' and as such 'difference is effectively elided by readability'.[59] The illegibility, unreadability, and ambiguity of the last scene further stages a radical departure from the dominant representational standards, 'masculine' dramaturgy,[60] or male-dominated representational traditions that 'precluded the possibility of autonomous female sexuality'.[61] The play's "failure" at recycling this tradition contains 'counterhegemonic possibilities'[62] offering a radical queer intervention into ideas of legible closure, mastery, and success that are revealed as necessarily incompatible with lesbian positions. As explored above, fidgeting itself coalesces this radical and queer potential of failure by inhibiting action and meaning, boring the audience, and thus inviting unfavourable critical reception.

Amelia's declaration '*This* is obscene' has also been subject to critical attention, with the indicative 'this' redirecting critique from the representation of autonomous female sexuality to the representational traditions that repress and kill these positionalities.[63] It can further be seen as reflecting an awareness and anticipation of the charges of obscenity that might be levied against the play, most evident in a reviewer's misquoting of the final line in a commentary on the 1926 production: 'It is

---

[57] Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler and Other Plays,* trans. Una Ellis-Fermor (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 364.
[58] Farfan, *Performing Queer Modernism,* p. 74.
[59] Jill Dolan, ''Lesbian' Subjectivity in Realism: Dragging at the Margins of Structure and ldeology' in Sue-Ellen Case, ed. *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 40–53 (p. 44).
[60] Una Chaudhuri, 'Maria Irene Fornes', p. 107.
[61] Farfan, *Performing Queer Modernism,* p. 78.
[62] Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure,* p. 88.
[63] See Farfan, *Women, Modernism, and Performance,* p. 69; Salvato, *Uncloseting Drama,* pp. 159-160.

obscene! It is obscene! […] And probably it is.'[64] Similar to the earlier discussion of Vera's frustrated reaction to the Dove's fidgeting anticipating unfavourable audience reception, here too the play frames itself as obscene by conventional theatrical standards. Conversely, the comparative comment makes the painting into a shield to divert the bullet from attacking representations of expressions of sexuality to attacking the representational mode that kills illegible women offstage.[65]

The Dove destroys the painting and with it the passive and apathetic engagement with the nonhuman represented by the women on the canvas. The destruction of the painting is also a destruction of its specific approach to the nonhuman, marked by the reduction of object-encounters to an unimportant pastime by the women in the painting, a forever inadequate substitute for men, and a trivial thing to occupy oneself while awaiting men and (hence) heterosexist closure. This destruction nonetheless does not necessarily mark a clear triumph of the Dove's engaged material approach. The ambiguity of the Dove's death has led to divisive critical claims. On the one hand, the destruction of the painting and Amelia's redirecting of attention away from the Dove to the painting might suggest a critique of the representational apparatus and standards that work to mark and eliminate the other as obscene.[66] On the other hand, read in the light of the sisters' aversion to the mode of being emblematised by the Dove's fidgeting and tactile experience, and their subscription to a detached, appropriative, and symbolic approach to bodies and objects, this can be potentially read as an extension of these impulses, given that Amelia finds the destroyed representation more obscene than the Dove's corpse (if indeed she is dead). Amelia's final comment in this reading emerges as a metonym of the sisters' fetishism and abstraction, wherein 'In spite of the ambiguity of the ending, *The Dove* as a whole nonetheless shows that for Amelia the symbols are more important than the things themselves.'[67]

The closing gunshot then seems to be orchestrating a delicate balance between conventional and subversive ideas across theatricality, sexuality, representation, and (or as condensed in) material relationships. The very inheritance and misdirection of the shot from traditional theatrical closure can be seen as the main culprit for the play's hermeneutic instability and semiotic "failure". Just like the biting scene, the closing crescendo works as a culmination of the Dove's and sisters' approach to the material world, marked by fidgeting and withholding from fidgeting, tactile experience and voyeuristic appropriative knowledge, things themselves and fetishised symbols respectively. If we read the end as being consistent with the play's larger metatheatrical replaying-to-mock tendency (discussed above),

---

[64] 'Pseudo- Freud, Neo- Shaw, Pre- Barrie in the Little Theatres' qtd. in Farfan, *Performing Queer Modernism,* p. 79.

[65] I engage with the theatrical tradition of women's offstage death or suicide in my consideration of *Hedda Gabler* in Chapter one.

[66] See Jill Dolan, ''Lesbian' Subjectivity in Realism', pp. 44-45.

[67] Dalton, 'This is Obscene', p. 123.

we may perhaps ask if it is even part of the play. The end can be read as an epilogue, a comment on rather than a part of the play, a scene offering an observation rather than participating in the theatre. I suggest that fidgeting as both a gesture and an allegory of approach to the (real/theatrical) world adds a question mark to the final line — the shift is not (only) between the Dove's body and the painting but between a comment and an accusation, and finally between theatrical representation and reception. With '*this* is obscene' Amelia seems to be directly confronting the audience/critics and rhetorically asking: after all that you have seen, after the intense repression, fetishization, and voyeurism (in other words the drives that are emblematised by the sisters' anti-fidgeting stance), it is the *representation* of alternative desires by the play, rather than the *reality* of their repression and elimination that you find obscene?

Barnes can be seen as drawing from a long theatrical history of obscenity, or rather more specifically, 'Ibscenity', but replaying it with a queer difference.[68] The last line after the offstage gunshot moves from the obscenity of '*do[ing]* such a thing'[69] to its *perception* as obscene — obscenity being a matter of reception more than representation. Reading the closing line as a question or accusation, the play seems to comment on its reception, challenging voyeuristic, anti-fidgeting approach not just within the play and conventional representational practices but also within the theatre's scopic regime and audience's voyeuristic gaze. The audience's fetishistic, distanced, and indifferent reception belonging to the realist mode and reflecting the apathy of Carpaccio's women is characterised as obscene and itself (circularly) held accountable for the sisters' sexual repression and fetishization of (and resistance to) the Dove and her fidgeting. The play anticipates, redirects, and finally implicates the audience in the charges of obscenity, casting them as both the cause and bearers of the sisters' detached and voyeuristic anti-fidgeting material approach and its associated allegorical affiliations.

Conclusion

The play's end orchestrates a direct confrontation between the Dove's and the sisters' modes of being amidst objects, the former's project of tactility challenging and even destroying the latter's voyeuristic, detached, abstract, and fetishistic use of objects, reflecting respectively a willingness and a reluctance towards active experience and sexual expression. Fidgeting emerges as emblematic of this split: an act that is actively performed by the Dove but fetishized, withheld, and outsourced by the sisters. In the play, it is a gesture that stands in for not just two opposing conceptions and orientations to the nonhuman world but also as the root (or culmination) of the characters' distinct relationship with sexuality,

[68] Farfan, *Women, Modernism, and Performance,* p. 70.
[69] Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler,* p. 364, emphasis added.

experience, and ways of being. The see-saw between these two modes is best revealed through a reading of fidgeting as not just a gesture but an allegorical and structuring force.

Fidgeting in *The Dove* embodies gendered and theatrical ideas of waiting, boredom, danger, and action, and condenses the play's tenuous relationship with violence and conventional dramatic plots. The object encounter reinvigorates saturated dialogues on Barnes's representation of sexuality, read in the light of her personal life. The play's emphatic concern with non-normative sexuality and representational apparatus is reflected in this non-normative gesture. Reading through this lens establishes and harnesses the sensory and symbolic power of objects to embody unreadable moments and inarticulate desires without resolving them, thus retaining the queer and disruptive potential of failure and illegibility. Finally, the critically overlooked gesture brings a relatively understudied play into discourse, allowing a recognition of its experimental and innovative representation of cross-ontological encounters and the queer potential of human-nonhuman entanglements.

CHAPTER 2: CONCLUSION

Through the examples of these two case studies, we see the prominence, specificity, as well as range of fidgeting as a multivalent object-encounter in early to mid-twentieth century American theatre. Theatrical objects on the American stage of the period materialise the historical and cultural backdrop of an increase in mass production, consumerism, and thus possession of things at the turn of the century, and the eventual post-Depression disillusionment with the rhetoric of progress. The drastic changes in the idea of production, both artistic and economic/industrial parallel the reimagining of textual and stage materials within American theatre. Fidgeting emerges as a befitting vessel for registering and exuding the cultural shifts and arguably people's relationship to objects. Its stage rendition then reflects how a new approach to objects came to command, intervene, and negotiate with American theatre's relationship with reality and modernisms' relationship with (artistic) production.

Through these two case studies, I have identified fidgeting as a prominent dramatic idiom and a site for crystallising and performing non-normative ways of being and desires. Applied to a canonical and a largely unknown play, fidgeting establishes a critically generative connection between the two plays and emerges as a flexible methodology and pervasive encounter, with the potential to recover texts from critical obscurity. In both case studies, it has a tenuous relationship with action and meaning, emerging as a static, unproductive, and inscrutable gesture. It makes visible the power of objects to forestall theatrical, economic, gendered, and interpretive forces. I have attempted to approach the encounter as a refusal, an opting out, or a 'prefer[ring] not to' do as well as mean.[1] The chapter further demonstrates how to identify object-encounters in service of recognising non-normative agencies, ways of being, and resistance. This mode of attention can recover certain encounters and presences dismissed as or shoehorned into the category of habit, tics, or instinctive and irrational gestures, seen largely in psychoanalytical terms. This has interesting overlaps with and important implications for emerging fields like drinking or substance studies and antiwork aesthetics, beyond the more established fields that recognise alternate agencies and move beyond psychoanalysis in engaging with passivity and overlooked forms of action. Accordingly, this chapter draws indirect influences from and has further implications on the radical potential of passivity, failure, and refusal recognised in feminist, queer, and disability discourses, resisting ableist heteronormativity and action-based determination of subjecthood, success, and value. Drawing sensory practices of care, stillness, desire, fragility, objectness along with the underpinnings of work, productivity, sexuality, and theatrical action, fidgeting emerges as a generative methodology and subject to interrogate affective and ideological object-encounters in theatre.

[1] Herman Melville, 'Bartleby', p. 26.

Chapter 3: Revolting Objects

INTRODUCTION

> FEFU: You too are fascinated with revulsion. […] You see, that which is exposed to the exterior ... is smooth and dry clean. That which is not... underneath, is slimy and filled with fungus and crawling with worms. It is another life that is parallel to the one we manifest. […] If you don't recognize it […] it eats you.[1]
>
> —Maria Irene Fornés, *Fefu and her Friends*

The subject of revolting and disgusting objects is located at the intersection of affective and aesthetic coordinates of art. There has been some recent critical interest in negative affect and the unaesthetic both within and beyond the humanities from interdisciplinary directions such as queer theory, affect studies, psychoanalysis, waste studies, and new materialism. While these works theorise and historicise disgust as an emotional, aesthetic, literary, and psychological phenomenon, theatrical objects of disgust have been largely overlooked. Sarah J. Ablett's *Dramatic Disgust*, Zachary Samalin's study of revulsion in Victorian culture in *The Masses are Revolting*, Elinor Fuchs's and Pao-hsiang Wang's discussions on the obscene body on stage, to name a few along with the renewed interest in surrealist, dadaist, grotesque, and Grand Guignol theatre in the last few decades, while engaging with the specific phenomenon of staged disgust, leave largely untouched the objects of disgust.[2] I borrow from these works and their approach to theatrical disgust as an encounter folding within it the aesthetic, affective, and political, extending it to include the specific matter of revolting objects.

Another gap that emerges in discourses on representation of disgust is the tendency to privilege its experiential aspect to the extent that the object is rendered effectively invisible, dematerialised, and

---

[1] Maria Irene Fornés, 'Play: Fefu and Her Friends' *Performing Arts Journal*, 2.3 (Winter, 1978), 112–140 (p. 114).

[2] See Sarah J. Ablett, *Dramatic Disgust: Aesthetic Theory and Practice from Sophocles to Sarah Kane* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020); Zachary Samalin, *The Masses are Revolting: Victorian Culture and the Political Aesthetics of Disgust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021); Elinor Fuchs, 'Staging the Obscene Body', *TDR*, 33.1 (Spring, 1989); Pao-hsiang Wang, 'Enacting Repulsive Bodies in Djuna Barnes's *The Dove'*, *Journal of Theater Studies*, 1.17 (2016) DOI: 10.6257/JOTS.2016.17149; Richard J. Hand and Michael Wilson, *Grand-Guignol : the French Theatre of Horror* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002).

forgotten. While it cannot be denied that revulsion is a matter of response, apprehension, and judgement, I go beyond (or before) the focus on theatrical disgust as mainly an abstract and intangible *response*. I do not completely forego this prominent focus in critical approaches to disgust but attempt to trace the material source of this response. In pulling at this thread, I take as the starting point not *disgust* but *the disgusting*. In privileging the stimuli over the response, I credit the shifts and disturbances in the theatrical event to the presence of the disgusting as much as, if not more than, the expression of disgust. Going beyond the scholarly attention to human response as a critical intervention, I attempt to redress the gap in the largely anthropocentric, psychological, symbolic, and abstract approaches to revulsion. While I use the words revolting, disgusting, repulsive, unaesthetic and so on freely and interchangeably, my specific choice of the word 'revolting' to categorise these objects attempts to draw on the two senses of the word: the aesthetic and visceral feeling of disgust and aversion as well as the idea of resistance.[3] The latter is central to my discussion of theatrical objects.

This introduction and larger chapter speak in terms of the revolting object's power or impotence, fecundity or barrenness as a lens of analysis, offering specificity and a new direction to the exploration of disgust as a critical lens in twentieth century theatre. The early twentieth century witnessed a profound change in society's 'structure of feelings' that found its way into theatre's approach to the material world and radically shifted the aesthetic basis of representation.[4] War, technological advancement, mass destruction, and rise in fascism led to unprecedented changes in theatre's aesthetic and affective responsibility as an antidote to the turbulent facts of reality.[5] The post-realist suspicion of representation challenged not just the faithful reproduction of material reality or its reliance on language's transparent referentiality but also the (subject/object) matters that were considered "worthy" of representation. This chapter will attempt to show that in the twentieth century, revolting object matter began to be staged more intentionally and critically than before, through my exploration of these matters in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* and Boris Vian's *The Empire Builders*. In this introduction, I will use my exploration of disgusting objects to bring sensory approaches, aesthetic theory, affect studies, and twentieth century philosophical approaches to disgust into dialogue with

[3] As mentioned in the thesis introduction, the idea of misbehaviour and recalcitrance is retained to a degree in the objects discussed across chapters, with a focus on objects' resistance and challenge to control, agency, conventions, and aesthetics among other imposed ideas. As I show through this chapter introduction, revolting objects often resist conventionally entrenched ideas of art and aesthetics as well as theatrical conventions. My use of the word revolting then draws on its sense of disgust as well as its other definition: 'To rebel against (a person or thing)'. The latter is reflected in revolting objects' disturbance of artistic conventions and aesthetics of representation, as explored in detail in the last section. "revolt (v.)" in *Oxford English Dictionary*, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/revolt_v [accessed 21 November 2024].

[4] Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996), p. 128.

[5] See Ablett, *Dramatic Disgust* pp. 59-60. Subsequent references will appear in-text as a bracketed DD followed by page number.

revolting theatre objects. In so doing, I show how a focus on theatre objects reinvigorates these fields and redresses the subject, experience, and reception centric approaches to the (theatrical) revolting.

In Bad Taste: Revolting Objects and the Senses

The feelings of revulsion and disgust have strong associations with the sense of taste, with some words like distaste, nausea, and foulness having more direct links with food and eating.[6] The related German idea of *Ekel* and classical Greek concept of *Dyschéreia* are also connected to the semantic field of food, consumption, distaste, and unpleasantness (difficulty to stomach) while also incorporating the sense of touch, and the ideas of pollution, contagion, and defilement (DD 22). Along with taste, the senses of touch and smell commonly crop up across cultural and theoretical discussions of revulsion. These three senses were associated with the corporeal and sensual and hence deemed base and bestial within the ocularcentrism of western thought and the Cartesian perceptual culture that favoured sight and hearing as 'higher senses', enabling rationality and epistemological insight.[7]

Not only are revolting objects considered contaminating and polluting, but also the very medium of reception, the sensory inlets permitting the experience of revulsion, evoke low, debased, and animalistic connections and connotations. Any permeation of the body through the "base" senses that threatens the integrity of the skin as a container, a barrier against the contaminating without, is then seen as disgusting. Such materials evoke a sense 'as if the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's "own and clean self "' (I explore this in detail later in my discussion of Kristeva's abject).[8] Along with the sensory, the classical Greek idea of *miasma* incorporates this 'physio-moral' dimension of revulsion wherein 'just like a physical wound "violates" the integrity of the body, a moral digression […] violates the given rules of a society and thereby the integrity of its system.' (DD 17) The idea of contamination, pollution, and contagion that repulsion conveys works on both sensory and bodily level while also pertaining to the less tangible, such as moral disruptions, the obscene or the taboo.

These effects of the presence of revolting objects weave a sense of contamination both corporeal, where physical contact with an object of disgust makes one polluted, as well as abstract, as a breach of social, cultural, and moral codes by something "in bad taste". It is unsurprising then that the sense is associated with hierarchy and power, with its evocation of a certain verticality, positioned as it is on the lowest rung of the aesthetic-sensory ladder. Miller has pointed out that certain emotions like

[6] See Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 83.
[7] James Krasner, *Home Bodies: Tactile Experience in Domestic Space* (United States: Ohio State University Press, 2010), p. 2.13/01/2025 13:16:00
[8] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 53.

disgust and contempt have a specifically political significance.[9] Whether revolting objects maintain or subvert hierarchy is a question I return to later, but here I would like to look at their association with the low and inferior. Revulsion organises both objects and bodies on a scale such that certain bodies come to be marked as objects of revulsion, as *lower* (than) subjects. As observed above, the experience of revolting objects is associated with the base senses. Similarly, Ahmed observes, that the body itself comes to be hierarchised with the lower half associated with waste and sexuality.[10] The idea of revulsion becomes physically and spatially located in the lower regions, and similarly differentiates between bodies above and below, higher and lower, superior and inferior, advanced and primitive. Revulsion as something that is lower then becomes a property of certain objects, bodies, and spaces. This 'spatiality of disgust'[11] can be lateral as well as vertical so that the objects of disgust are rejected and excluded to the margins, becoming both *othered* subjects and *other than* subjects. These are repressed (pushed *downwards* to the underbelly) and excluded (cast *aside*). The term revulsion itself carries a sense of almost magnetic repelling or centrifugal pushing to the margins. These ideas of spatiality and inferiority of disgust specifically underpin my exploration of *Endgame.*

In this light, Ablett argues, revulsion is often written off as too base a subject for serious critical or creative approaches because of its dismissal as an instinctual, reactive, and thus unrefined emotion. The sensation's 'inherent function to keep contents or objects associated with it at bay' might extend to scholarly avoidance of repulsive materials as well (DD 11). Susan Miller argues that this can be attributed to the contagious nature of disgust, with its 'unsociable stink [threatening] to transfer to those who study it'.[12] While other negative emotions associated with drama such as pity, pathos, and fear can be redeemed as cultured, refined, and even creative, revulsion is construed as exclusively negative, concerned with the utterly animalistic and instinct-driven part of the soul. Revolting objects find themselves at the margins of culture as they assault the senses, ranking lowest in the hierarchy of affects.

As the disgusted subject is placed above the disgusting object, revulsion works simultaneously as a reaction to an object as well as a moral judgement, an evaluation, and a designation of something as inferior and rejected. At the same time, these lower and othered locations of revolting objects are not necessarily expressions of powerlessness. Miller observes that while expression of revulsion might be an assertion of superiority, this claim

[9] See William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 206-7.
[10] See Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* p. 89.
[11] Ibid., p. 88.
[12] Susan B. Miller, *Disgust: The Gatekeeper Emotion* (Hillsdale: Analytic P, 2004), p. 2.

> at the same time recognizes the vulnerability of that superiority to the defiling powers of the low. The world is a dangerous place in which the polluting powers of the low are usually stronger than the purifying powers of the high. Rozin quotes a mechanic who captures the point vividly: "A teaspoon of sewage will spoil a barrel of wine, but a teaspoon of wine will do nothing for a barrel of sewage."[13]

The sense of contamination evoked by revolting objects is a common thread running through scientific, anthropological, or psychological studies of disgust. The prominent idea that emerges across these fields is the preventative and protective role of disgust reactions to these objects, both evolutionarily and culturally. Darwin claimed that the sensation of revulsion is rooted in biological instinct of distaste and much scientific research following him has seen it as a reflex related to survival instinct, protecting humans from unhealthy substances, such as rotten food, diseases, or infection.[14] At the same time, the view that disgust is purely physiological has been questioned and there has been evidence to support Freud's counter-claim that it is primarily a cultural and learned emotional response that keeps animal drives at bay (DD 58). In either case, while revolting objects are a source of contamination, revulsion is seen as a warding off or protecting from either physical or social contamination.

Locating the above discourses on revolting objects and revulsion within theatre, the contaminating value and the antidotes of purification and purging have significant connections with the history of drama. The very origin of dramatic genre evokes a similar web of associations between revulsion, contamination, and protection. According to Aristotle, the genre has its origins in Dionysian rituals. To appease an insulted Dionysius who struck the 'male sexual organs with an incurable disease', the Athenians performed rituals and processions with 'manufactured phalluses, penises made of wood and leather' in a display of honour for the god (DD 16). While there were also material reasons for this—introducing younger women/older girls to sex to boost the flagging birth rate (due to women dying in childbirth)— the aim was to make the private public and thus less obscene or revolting. This marrying of the animalistic, obscene, and ritualistic continued to be present in classical tragedies both in content, with the use of gruesome and repulsive ideas (from self-blinding and incest in *Oedipus the King,* to the ripping apart of Pentheus's body in *The Bacchae*) as well as structure, with tragedy's drive towards catharsis. Aristotle in *Poetics* discusses the pleasure derived from tragedy's staging of things that are painful or unpleasant to see, or the willingness to engage with emotions one would avoid in reality. This 'paradox of aversion' is dissipated when seen in relation to catharsis as tragedies orchestrate an exposure and purging of undesirable feelings from the recipient's soul (DD 31). This for

---

[13] Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust,* p. 9.

[14] See Hanah A. Chapman and Adam K. Anderson, 'Understanding Disgust', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences,* 1251.1 (2012), 62–76 (p. 63).

Aristotle makes the recipients better equipped to encounter these pity and fear evoking elements in reality, freeing the audience members from the intense affective experience of real tragedy. Plato, on the other hand, deemed tragedy polluting, arguing that drama awakens the lowest part of the soul. The idea of catharsis can then be seen as a remedy for this pollution, an antidote against drama's contaminating embrace and display of revolting matters.

While these classical theories are useful in demonstrating the long history of drama's engagement (or at least acknowledgement) of revolting materials (even if as an issue to be eliminated), many discourses on aesthetics from eighteenth century onwards (that I explore below) as well as more contemporary explorations see disgust as a phenomenon or negative affect beyond merely a (instinctive) reaction or emotion, with a unique relationship with representation. These disturb, or see the site of performance as disturbing, the alignment of disgust with more unambiguous and classically theatrical feelings of pity, fear, terror, or shock. However, the focus on the experience of revulsion is what gives rise to, I argue, the exclusion of objects from theories of disgust.

'Not me, not that, not nothing': Revulsion and Objects[15]

The presence of revulsion brings to the fore the separation of a thing and its experience more viscerally than the classically aesthetic phenomena like beauty or pathos. Locating the revolting object within aesthetic theory makes evident this cleaving. The nineteenth century marked a significant shift in theories of the aesthetic, in what Martin Jay calls 'the cult of experience' wherein beauty assumed to be residing in the object was now seen as a response of experiencing subjects.[16] The onus on the 'intensity of experience' led to a questioning of intrinsic or objective aesthetic value of an object and its circulation within new networks of value. This meant a progressive loss of what Walter Benjamin understands as aura, which maintains a unique, original presence of the object distinct from the perceiver.[17] Similarly, aesthetic apprehension according to Kant is a synthesis between feeling and thinking, wherein the thing itself (noumenon) is progressively subordinated by the cognitive, aesthetic, and sensory in his discourse.[18] In other words, he argues that the beautiful is an aesthetic *judgement*, not a quality of an object. This indifference to the object is the basis of Kantian disinterestedness wherein 'Our pleasure in beauty […] is disinterested because we are indifferent to the actual object'.[19] Aesthetic experience is

[15] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4

[16] Martin Jay, 'Drifting Into Dangerous Waters: The Separation of Aesthetic Experience From the Work of Art', *Filozofski Vestnik*, 20.2 (1999), 63–85 (p. 65).

[17] See Walter Benjamin 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217–251 (pp. 221–223).

[18] See Jay, 'Drifting Into Dangerous Waters', pp. 67-68.

[19] For instance, while a meal might look good but needs to taste good as well for it to be pleasant, it does not need to be eaten to produce *aesthetic* pleasure. Ibid., p. 69.

disinterested because it is neither interested in the object nor in its utilitarian functions. The theoretical emphasis for Enlightenment theorists is then more on the reception or the ones who did the experiencing rather than the objects *per se*. This increasing erasure of the thing meant that, '[o]bjects were admired not for what they were in themselves, but for what they could do to us' leading to '*an increasing indifference to the object as such*, perhaps even extending to its very existence.'[20] The result of this shift in attention to the experience and perception of beauty, aesthetics, and the related idea of taste was that the object itself receded into oblivion.

The aesthetic indifference, disinterestedness, and erasure of object, while largely theorised in reference to ideas of beauty, have significant implications on the aesthetics of revolting objects. The feeling of revulsion contains within it a desire for excluding the revolting object. The perceiver's revulsion can be seen as a way of revolting against the object's presence. As at once an attribution and a reaction, 'revolting' collapses an abstract feeling or bodily response and a physical, tangible object, such that the revolting object and the feeling of revulsion are neither clearly separated nor chronologically arranged, seeming to occur almost concurrently. Beyond the web of semantic associations, revulsion becomes indistinguishable from the object itself, such that the sensation is read as inherent to the object. The lack of distinction is not independent of the above discussion of prioritisation of the experience of disgust over the object of disgust as a worthy subject of discourse. Sara Ahmed observes that disgust 'is not just about bad objects that we are afraid to incorporate, but the very designation of badness as a quality we assume is inherent in those objects.' She further argues that it is the proximity and contact, not the object itself, that is felt as 'being offensive' such that the revolting object's invasion of space is what is read as disgusting.[21] Herein lies the problem of ontology and experience that, according to Ahmed, the presence of a revolting object engenders: one pulls away from the object because it is revolting, at the same time, it is the very pulling away that creates the revolting object. In other words, the revolting object emerges out of revulsion, at once preceding and succeeding the experience. Ahmed calls this the performativity or 'temporality of disgust' wherein 'it both lags behind the object from which it recoils and generates the object in the very event of recoiling.'[22] So while the aesthetic judgement of beauty erases the object through disinterest, that of disgust absorbs the revolting object into the feeling of revulsion. The two are not very different, with the end result being a clash and eventual victory of subject's aesthetic experience over the object's material presence.

A similar tendency of swallowing up the object appears in twentieth century theories of disgust, specifically in the field of psychoanalysis and existential philosophy. Instead of an anthropocentric

[20] Ibid., p. 68, emphasis added.
[21] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* pp. 82-85.
[22] Ibid., p. 93.

prioritisation of experience and the experiencing subject, these studies tend towards a poststructuralist breakdown of the subject-object binary, such that revulsion is not a matter of either objects or experience, but the very formless collapse between the two that the encounter generates. This idea is famously expressed in Kristeva's conception of the abject. Her essay begins with a section, 'Neither Subject nor Object' where she defines abjection as 'a vortex of summons and repulsion'.[23] She theorises (revulsion adjacent) abjection as a rejection or negation at the edge of the assimilated, tolerable, thinkable, or possible. Describing the encounter with the abject as facing 'a "something" that I do not recognize as a thing',[24] she illustrates this threat of ambiguity using the example of the skin on top of milk that is neither a part of nor clearly separate from the milk. She also uses the examples of phenomena of in-betweenness related to bodily orifices. Bodily fluids, wounds, excrement, vomit, blood, smell of sweat and decay disturb the clear distinction between the inside and outside of the body. But these also manifest a specific kind of abjection as material reminders not just of death but of 'death infecting life'. Similarly, the disturbances or 'revolts of being' are not just limited to the physiological threats to bodily integrity as anything that 'disturbs identity, system order' can be repulsive: 'the traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior'.[25] The abject emerges in Kristeva's schema not as merely an object or response of disgust but as a threat: the perceiver is haunted by the state of ambiguity, in-betweenness, and a 'weight of meaninglessness' that results from the abject being somewhere between *I* and *not I* or *not I* and a *thing.* More concisely, it is 'Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either'.[26] Kristeva's ideas of revulsion emanating from death contaminating life and the disturbance to established systems emerge prominently in my discussion of Nagg and Nell's decaying bodies in *Endgame* and the schmürz's transgressive and in-between presence in *The Empire Builders,* respectively.

A concept that is often discussed in the same vein as Kristeva's abject is Sartre's idea of slime. He uses this as an extended metaphor for humans' essential conflict with existence. Just like slime, the existential condition is clingy and ungraspable. A range of objects and actions that evoke these ideas can be called slimy: 'A handshake, a smile, a thought, a feeling can be slimy', as well as oysters and raw eggs.[27] Slime disturbs clear distinction not only between solid and liquid but also between the self and the object such that the 'sucking of the slimy which I feel on my hands outlines a kind of continuity of the slimy substance in myself.' Slimy encounters cause revulsion in making us confront our contingency to material existence and challenge our efforts to gain control over it. Just as Kristeva's

[23] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.
[24] Ibid., p. 4.
[25] Ibid., p. 4.
[26] Ibid., pp. 1-2.
[27] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), p. 604.

abject annihilates the distinction between subject and object, so does Sartre's slime outline 'a fusion between the world with myself.'[28]

While the ideas of the abject and slime, as psychoanalytical and existential versions of revolting objects, stress on the human desire (and inability) to master or expel these elements, the philosopher Georges Bataille charts a very different relation to objects of disgust. Bataille presents what Menninghaus calls an 'affirmative aesthetic of the repellent' in his discussion of *l'informe.*[29] He argues that the opposite of beauty is not its monstrous antithesis but formlessness. Unlike Kristeva's abject or Sartre's slime, Bataille here attempts to speak *for* the revolting object instead of emphasising the distinction-annihilating experience of revulsion. Bataille reveals the object-erasure at play in encounters with and critical studies of revulsion. Challenging the focus on disgust avoidance and repression, Bataille highlights the annihilation of the beautiful as making space for the revolting.[30] The *informe* offers an intervention into the negative value attached to revulsion through the aesthetic representation of 'that which horrifies us most, that which provokes our most intense disgust' lodged somewhere between 'the rationally comprehensible and the unrepresentable' (DD 64). By resisting representation and intelligibility, Bataille's *informe* comes close to the rationality defying abject and slime. At the same time, he asserts the presence of revolting materials in society and aesthetic culture as unavoidable and necessary but more importantly as subversive and liberating. *Informe* art would then unflinchingly present the formless object without the imperative of aestheticized 'participation, identification, or assimilation' (DD 63-64). His centring of objects can be seen as a challenge to the critical erasure of revolting objects: the swallowing up by subject-centric experience in aesthetic theories and the subject-object fusing into abject or slime in psychoanalytical and ontological discourses.

What emerges as a common thread in these twentieth century approaches to revolting objects is how seamlessly discussions of affective and visceral responses blend into the questions of the limits of meaning, identity, or knowledge. The characteristics of unassimilation and in-betweenness, along with being about physical and bodily borders, are equally about more abstract borders of identity and knowing. This percolation between the bodily and the abstract is what allows commentators to speak about existential disgust, a seemingly oxymoronic marrying of an intangible philosophical state with an embodied feeling. The slippages between material and existential disgust are particularly relevant to and inform representations of revolting objects, bringing up the question: does representation, specifically staging of revolting objects interfere with their absorption into experience, redressing the

---

[28] Ibid., p. 606.
[29] Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2003), p. 343
[30] See Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality. A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (New York: Walker and Co., 1962) qtd. in ibid., p. 347.

subject-centric scholarly approaches? In the following section, I engage with revolting objects' tenuous and at times hostile relationship with representation, and then more specifically, twentieth century theatre.

'The silk and the shit go together': Revolting Objects and Representation[31]

- *Edge of Mimesis*

Revolting things have historically been seen as incompatible with art.[32] There is a longstanding aversion to treating disgust as an aesthetic emotion and most explorations until the nineteenth century focused on banishing disgust from the arts, as explored above.[33] Ngai sums up these positions wherein disgust is the 'ugly feeling par excellence' as the 'single exception to representational art's otherwise unlimited power to beautify things which are ugly or displeasing in real life'.[34] The two central objections in aesthetic theories against revolting objects that occupy the 'endpoint of mimetic art'[35] are that they establish limits to art's ability to beautify and aestheticize things and that their realness poses a challenge to the process of mimesis and representation.

Beyond the classical and Enlightenment ideas of the aesthetic, revolting objects only occupy this antipodal, incompatible, and diametrically opposite position to art if the traditional equation between art and beauty is left unquestioned. But this equation can no longer be taken as given once we come down to the gradual increase in the engagement with unaesthetic aspects of reality with the post-Victorian questioning of art's/represented objects' functional and utilitarian basis (discussed in the introduction). As art outgrew the idea of beauty or the aesthetic ideas of beauty themselves became more flexible and forgiving, the concern of artistic representation was less to beautify or serve a specific aesthetic-moral function and more to engage with the uncomfortable reality and later with representation itself. The very presence of revolting objects can be seen as anticipating not only 'the

[31] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 22.
[32] Mendelssohn, for example, argued that disgust is too real to be incorporated within aesthetics and that an encounter with even the idea or representation of disgusting object can cause real revulsion such that 'feelings of disgust are therefore always real and never imitations.' Qtd. in Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011), p. 47.
[33] Kant seconds disgust's "realness" as incompatible with mimesis. He positions it as the ultimate 'other' to beauty and art, contending that it is the only kind of ugliness that is 'incapable of being represented conformably to nature without destroying all aesthetic delight'. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 141.
[34] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 334.
[35] Ibid., p. 348.

modernist avant-garde's critical assault on art's identification with beauty'[36] but also the subversive potential of negative values.[37]

The presence of revolting objects points to art's desire and ability to 'examine problems whose greatest import arguably lies beyond the sphere of the aesthetic per se.'[38] This is in part related to disgust's entanglement with fascination and desire which I have pointed to briefly and has specific implications for representing the revolting. Its presence marks a certain urgency and immediacy, demanding to be attended even as one tries to pull away. Ahmed calls this 'double movement' (towards, away) as disgust requires a certain proximity, attention, and moving towards after which the body recoils with 'an intense movement that registers in the pit of the stomach'.[39] Accordingly, it is impossible to remain indifferent to revolting things in terms of both the affective or physiological responses — the urgency, demand for attention, claim for desirability, and strong opinions they provoke — owing largely to their asymmetric embodiment of aversion and attraction.

Going back to the representation of revolting objects, this doubleness has a long history of being acknowledged and even honed by art, even if aesthetic theories have insisted on banishing these objects from the realm of art. Kristeva discusses art's ability to offer a form of sublimation where an artistically mediated immersion into the abject can be purifying and cathartic, allowing us to release the negative feelings of being between life and death. This is similar to Aristotelian catharsis and Artaud's view of theatre as a plague, 'not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is a revelation.'[40] People's confrontation with the tragic human condition through 'abject art' can even give rise to a recognition of 'their own regression' and *jouissance*.[41] While the incompatibility between art and revulsion is historically and critically entrenched, this is not a product of a creative reluctance to accommodate revolting objects. Ablett proposes that the reason for the focus on the incompatibility is that the critical reception of personal disgust reactions is often seen as a sign of the work's deficiency or lack of artistic skills, as evidence of the artist's 'adolescent desire to shock' (DD 9). However, from the above discussion we see that some of the recurring ideas on art's engagement with revolting objects, specifically from the twentieth century onwards, are more willing to admit the critical productivity of

---

[36] Ibid., p. 335.

[37] As I have argued across the chapters, critical exploration of objects as alternate (to) subjects overlaps with and productively blends into interrogations of a range of negative values such as passivity or objectification.

[38] Ngai, 'Introduction', *Ugly Feelings,* p. 2.

[39] Ibid., p. 85

[40] Antonin Artaud, 'Theatre and the Plague' in Maggie Barbara Gale and John F. Deeney, eds. *The Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 252–260 (p. 259).

[41] Charles Penwarden, 'Of Word and Flesh: An interview with Julia Kristeva' in Stuart Morgan and Frances Morris, eds. *Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1995), 21–27 (p. 23).

locating them within art and aesthetics. Revolting objects' challenge to representational apparatus and the urgency and demand for attention have resonances specifically with the shifting affective and artistic modalities of twentieth century theatre. I will now locate my above theoretical picture of representing revolting objects within the specific aesthetic, sensory, and ontological coordinates of the modernist stage.

- *Twentieth Century Stage*

The questioning of beauty as an artistic obligation and imperative finds a prominent critical and polemic interrogation in the writings and manifestos of late nineteenth century naturalists. Their staunch commitment to the exact contours of reality meant a necessary engagement with the revolting and disgusting underbelly of contemporary society and a digression from the kind of emotional and aesthetic responses that art was required to elicit. From the last decades of the nineteenth century, naturalist and realist modes tapped into the potential presented by revolting objects on the edge of the aesthetic sphere. Zachary Samalin draws from early twentieth century commentators like Lukács and Auerbach who argue that recognition and incorporation of revolting matters has been essential to the development of socially critical naturalism.[42] While their focus is on the development of the naturalist novel, turn of the century realist theatre specifically used revolting things as a reflection of the increasingly diseased world as well as an affective weapon of critique and disavowal of the disturbing facts of reality.

Beyond this, revolting objects went against the artistic codes and conventions that policed the representation of disgust, offering a material critique of these limits. The overt challenge to these conventions can be seen in various shocking and graphic examples of revolting objects around late nineteenth–early twentieth century that pre-empt similar presences in post-war theatre (which I discuss later). These range from revulsion associated with the violent, grotesque, erotic, horror, and even with technology. Some prominent examples include the *sang, sperme et sueur* (blood, sperm, and sweat) and torture machines of Grand Guignol theatre, Artaud's use of scorpions pouring out from under a woman's skirt or the rain of body parts in *The Spurt of Blood, Ubu Roi's* scatological objects and imagery (from a toilet brush sceptre to a dish of cauliflower *a la* shit), among others.[43] As such, revolting objects occupied the borders of representation and reality in more ways than one. They offered an embodied critique of both the moral and social decay as well as of the decaying theatrical tradition that sanitises the disgusting.

---

[42] See Samalin, 'Realism and Repulsion', *The Masses are Revolting,* p. 100.

[43] See Elizabeth K. Menon 'Potty-Talk in Parisian Plays: Henry Somm's *La Berline de l'émigré* and Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*.' *Art Journal* 52.3 (1993), p. 61. https://doi.org/10.2307/777370.

Samalin argues that in representing the disgusting,

> it could hardly matter whether an author was striving to reflect on or even to reject a set of social conditions, or rather seeking to produce a monstrous disruption of the social order. Their intentions were null; all that mattered was the obtrusive intentionality of the disgusting text.[44]

Along with specific objects and stage matter, the desire to stage unwanted reality was also prominently visible in the theatrical *subject* matter, especially in late nineteenth century naturalist drama. The naturalist writer was imagined by Zola as a surgeon, an 'anatomist of the soul and the flesh' who cuts open and dissects the usually hidden aspects of reality with 'neither shame or revulsion when he explores human wounds' and 'lays before us the corpse of our heart'.[45] Revolting object matter such as wounds, decay, cutting flesh, disease offered a vocabulary and extended metaphor for the writers to describe their subject that drew in turn from the social and moral ills festering outside the "little theatres". Much like the objects of disgust, the staging of the "dirty laundry" of the bourgeois family also evokes a similar idea of exposure of what is unwanted and repressed. The presence of revolting subjects and ideas then confronted the bourgeois refusal to recognise the unpleasant and disturbing aspects of reality.

This realist subject matter often mirrored the effects of rapid urban changes and included alcoholism, prostitution, consumerism, class conflict, and most controversially, venereal diseases. Material idioms of urban decay, pollution, and squalor seeped into reflections on decay of morals, character, and relationships. However, the engagement with revolting materials was seen not as a critique but a sign of depravity itself, evoking harsh criticism and in many cases censorship and ban of plays that were deemed obscene and even pornographic. The scathing reviews against realist plays of the time express this revulsion clearly, equating the plays with filth and polluting matter. One reviewer called *Miss Julie* 'water from…[a] dirty sewer',[46] Ibsen's *Ghosts* was denounced by critics as 'putrid' and 'an open sewer, a loathsome sore unbandaged' for its representation of syphilis,[47] and Ibsen himself criticised Zola in similar terms saying, 'Zola descends into the sewer to bathe in it; I to cleanse it'.[48] These responses use a common image of sewage overflowing into clean streets, the idea of exposing filth and dirt to its very producers.

---

[44] Samalin, 'Realism and Repulsion', p. 101.
[45] Émile Zola qtd. in Dan Rebellato, 'Introduction: Naturalism and Symbolism' in *The Routledge Drama Anthology,* 6–24 (p. 10).
[46] ibid., p. 7.
[47] Peter Watts 'Introduction' in Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts and Other Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 11.
[48] Rebellato, 'Introduction', p. 7.

The responses further charge revolting subject matters with a specific property of revolting objects discussed above — contamination. This property of the revolting object comes to characterise the nature of theatre in general, imagined as a contaminant, with the inherent suggestion that engaging with "depraved" or "polluted" theatre would also make one the same. The crossing-over of revulsion is most evident in the outrage and at times riots that met many late nineteenth century plays dealing with sensitive and taboo subject matters — from the charges of 'Ibscenity' (discussed in the previous chapter) to the Playboy riots in response to the scandalous themes in Synge's play. Revolting theatrical objects can thus be seen as evoking both revulsion and revolt. Furthermore, audience reactions across theatre history have often themselves been expressed *through* and not just *at* revolting matters. We see this in the quintessential objects of theatrical aversion, rotten vegetables pelted on stage — from the bouquet of rotten vegetables left at the stage door at the opening of *The Importance of Being Earnest* to the vegetables and stink bombs hurled on stage during the opening of *The Playboy of the Western World.* Revolting matters then come to highlight or tap into (more than other materials, affects, and subjects) the contagious, contaminating, or crossing-over potential of plays. This idea would later find an overt reflection in surrealists' desire for art to 'infect' people.[49] I draw on the idea of (fear of) pollution, encroachment, and disgust's spilling-over from the stage in my exploration of Vian's *The Empire Builders.*

Revolting matter (including subject matter) and engagement with the obscene, scandalous, repressed, and controversial topics became a site and outlet for theatre's dissection of both artistic conventions and reality, and their refusal to recognise the unpleasant. Elin Diamond explores how the critique of established theatrical conventions often materialised through physical shocking and aberrant objects:

> avant-gardists on the margins of legitimate theatre before and after World War I […] attacked realism's psychological interiority by exploding the body (Artaud's *Un Jet de Sang*, 1925), by turning brains into straw (Kokoschka's *Sphinx and Strawman*, 1907) or anuses (Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, 1896).[50]

This points to a changing aesthetic attitude marked by an increasing readiness to stage the recognition of and encounter with the uncomfortable underbelly of reality, both as a mode of modernism's artistic experimentations and a social critique of modernity.

---

[49] Maggie B. Gale, 'Introduction: The Historical Avant-Garde' in *The Routledge Drama Anthology,* 170–188 (p. 181).

[50] Elin Diamond, 'Deploying/Destroying the Primitivist Body in Hurston and Brecht' in *Against Theatre* eds. Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006), 112–132 (p. 115).

Ablett argues that the '[i]nterwar period of the early twentieth century saw an unprecedented explosion of radical forms of European art, many of which dealt with repulsive contents such as excrements, decay, and aberrant forms of sexuality' (DD 59). These profound changes in society's 'structure of feeling'[51] were a consequence of, according to Lotringer, the devastation of war as also the leap of technology.[52] Ablett echoes that these transformations led to a numbing and desensitisation of the 'shell-shocked society' (DD 120). Consequently, according to critics like Wilson, Critchley, and Webster, aesthetic disgust in its incarnation as shock startles the audience out of 'habitual complacency' and functions to 'wake people up'.[53] Many early twentieth century theatre-makers from Artaud to Alfred Jarry recognised the radical potential of revolting materials to affect a strong reaction and jolt the audience out of numbness. As discussed above, disgust as a visceral and vital emotion pierces out of the mimetic layers and discourages indifference and numbness. The incorporation of revolting materials was used to 're-unite body and mind, and to liberate suppressed feelings' by excavating the repulsive and repressed core of mortality (DD 59). Revolting objects by breaking theatrical conventions and taboos demonstrate more than a dissatisfaction with the political and social reality. The disgusting also has the ability to tap into the difficult, the ambiguous, the disturbing, and the incomprehensibility of mortality highlighted by the brutalities of war that preoccupied existentialism in the first half of the century. These slippages between material and existential revulsion inform my analysis of *Endgame's* materials.

The jolting out of numbness is reminiscent of the 'double movement' of revulsion discussed above. Revolting objects play with theatrical visibility and invisibility, given their marrying of aversion and fascination, as also the theatrical history of deferring excessive violence or disgust to the offstage. They seem to go against theatre's visual basis of drawing attention by pushing the audience away. The very words "staging" and "revulsion" carry inherently antithetical implications of centring/pulling into visibility versus repelling or pushing away. These stage matters imbibe the paradox of *inviting* the audience to *look away,* attracting with an indifference-breaking urgency only to repel. As discussed earlier, the disgusted subject is often placed above the disgusting object and with staged disgust, the audience's revulsion might ostensibly suggest this hierarchy. However, in pulling the audience out of comfort and performing a certain breach or violation by affecting an often unsuspecting spectator, the revolting object overturns this hierarchy, disturbing the audience and unseating habitual, "disinterested" engagement. This further allows space for a theatrical piercing of numbness that, as observed above, gained political resonances post war.

---

[51] Williams, *Modern Tragedy,* p. 128.

[52] See Sylvére Lotringer, 'Mack Lecture: On Antonin Artaud', online video, Youtube, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHlsfEw-FqI [accessed 12 January 2024].

[53] Rawdon Wilson, *The Hydra's Tale: Imagining Disgust* (Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2002), p. 16*;* Simon Critchley and Jamieson Webster*, Stay, Illusion! The Hamlet Doctrine*. (New York: Pantheon, 2013), p. 218.

A similar recognition of the potential of staging revolting, aversive elements found reflections in the various isms of modernist and avant-garde theatre: dadaism, surrealism, expressionism, theatre of the grotesque. The piercing effect of revolting object was specifically important to Artaud's theatre of cruelty. Artaud sees theatre as an instrument of 'cruelty' aimed at jolting the masses out of their complacency. He calls for an unleashing of sensory violence on the audience, 'a bloodshed of images, a bloody spurt of images' through amplified light, sound, images, bodies, and other theatrical materials.[54] These overpowering "piercing" elements would have visceral, repulsive effects that appeal 'directly to the audience's nervous system' and 'bypass reason and consciousness' as well as theatrical representationalism. The aversion caused by sensory violence is in service of evoking in the audience a 'violence in thought' once outside the theatre. This acknowledges the critical potential of "drawing back" or aversion and sensory assault caused by revolting objects, used as a means to get out of the 'slump' of both codified theatrical conventions as well as the 'boredom, dullness, and stupidity of everything'.[55] I use Artaud's ideas of overpowering sensory materials in theatre in my exploration of *The Empire Builders*, specifically the figure of the schmürz as well as auditory materials, locating these within specific mid-century political contexts.

Artaud's suggestion that theatre must create social upheaval also has resonances with modernist antitheatricality, with the shock, aversion, and critical disengagement effected by revolting objects having overlaps with Brechtian V-effect. Through this, we see that revolting matters across different modernist and avant-garde genres become a fertile mode of conducting the postdramatic current of the period, inheriting the late nineteenth century questioning of "sanitised" or "beautiful" staging and in turn informing post-modern experiments with performed revulsion. Prominent examples of late twentieth century experiments that carry forth this material current include the absurd violent, shocking, and obscene materials of the Panic Movement, like live turtles thrown at the audience, giant phalluses, or crucified chickens; staged corpses and defecating in Sarah Kane's *in-yer-face* theatre, dead rodents in Ralph Oritz's *The Sky is Falling* causing audience to vomit, or even performance piece/protest art like *Kunst und Revolution* with mutilation, masturbation, and excrement. These examples perform the afterlives of revolting theatrical objects of realism and modernism, inheriting with a difference their critical, *revolt*-ing, (anti)theatrical, and purging potential.

*

The first case study explores revolting objects in Beckett's *Endgame.* I focus on two specific objects-encounters — Clov with a flea, and Nagg and Nell in ashbins — using the frame of revolting objects to

[54] Artaud, 'No More Masterpieces' in *The Routledge Drama Anthology,* 260–265 (pp. 264).
[55] Ibid., p. 265.

critique their pacification and objectification. Using Beckett's own stances on post-war humanism and existentialism, I explore the ability of revolting objects to channel his challenges to anthropocentricism. I attempt to explore the play's weaving of material revulsion with existential disgust associated with mortal decay, dehumanisation, and death. I further use the revolting objects and bodies across different versions of the play and Beckett's notebooks to trace the overlaps and digressions with modernism's modes of representing mortality. Through this exploration, I hope to recognise material contamination, decay, and waste as pervasive undercurrents in the relationships with and among *Endgame*'s objects.

The second case study uses this object lens to bring a relatively understudied play into discourse —Vian's *The Empire Builders.* I explore the undefined but visceral presence of the schmürz as a revolting object, and its enfolding of political and existential resonances of revulsion. Leveraging its indefinability, I attempt to locate it within contemporary French cultural memories of war, Holocaust, and colonialism. Through this, I interrogate the fertility of revolting objects to reveal/reframe various networks of power and violence.

BECKETT'S *ENDGAME*

Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* begins with a 'brief tableau' with Hamm in an armchair covered with a sheet, Clov, Hamm's companion/servant, staggering across the stage, two ashbins with (as we find out) Hamm's parents, and scant stage elements — two windows and a ladder.[1] It presents a sense that the events (or lack thereof) of the play occur *after* a climactic event which is deliberately shrouded in ambiguity.[2] We are presented with a relatively emptied out world, one that is characterised by the stillness and desolation after the storm. This has made the play a malleable and versatile canvas and invitation for critical and creative interventions that impose a range of apocalyptic events or catastrophes onto the ostensibly shapeless and mouldable fabric of the play.[3] In my consideration of the play, I suggest that the emptiness and vacating of (physical and narrative) materials, under the faint shadow of a dramatic event that precedes the action, demand a new approach to the play's objects — one that does not see material dwindling as an obstacle to the study of the nonhuman.[4] Material diminishment in *Endgame* does not occur after annihilating the object but instead draws attention and even comparisons between what *is* present, the bodies and objects as also the materiality of these materials: the noticeable decay, wasting, and embodied erosion and wear of stage matter.

Beckett's association with the nonhuman has been well-embedded in critical approaches. With his post-war plays, the specific scholarly focus spans across a range of diverse subjects, from animate/inanimate matters to natural/unnatural phenomena. These include the representations of

---

[1] Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (United Kingdom: Faber & Faber, 2009), p. 5. Subsequent references will occur as in-text page numbers.

[2] In the working versions of the play, Beckett makes the climactic event more apparent in the stage directions. In a typescript called 'Avant *Fin de partie'* the protagonists are clearly survivors of a World War I battle: 'Progressively destroyed in the autumn of 1914, the spring of 1918, and the following autumn, under mysterious circumstances'. These realistic details were 'progressively eliminated in revisions' to birth the nondescript grey refuge of the present version. S. E. Gontarski, ed. *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett: Volume II Endgame* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 43.

[3] Richard Halpern comments on the two most common interpretations of *Endgame*: a post-nuclear Holocaust world or the devastation after a second Noah's flood. Similarly, Jonathan McAllister in a review of a 2020 production draws out its resonances with the Covid-19 pandemic. Richard Halpern, 'Beckett's Tragic Pantry: *Endgame* and the Deflation of the Act', *PMLA* 129.4 (2014), 742–750 (p. 744); Jonathan McAllister, 'Beckett, *Rough for Theatre II* and *Endgame*', *Journal of Beckett Studies* 29.2 (2020), pp. 273–80.

[4] Enoch Brater's book questions the over-reliance on minimalism as Beckett's poetic idiom. *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theater.* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

animals,[5] space,[6] materials,[7] and perhaps most prominently, the war.[8] In relation to *Endgame*, most of the latter follow and build on Adorno's contention in the famous 1961 essay that the play reflects the negative value of humankind in Beckett's linguistic landscape. I use this long-codified critical stance to propose another expression of how Beckett 'explode[s] the individual'.[9] Revolting objects, I argue, reinvigorate this established scholarship and become both a reflection and vehicle of Beckett's own revulsion and critique of human exceptionalism, mastery, and anthropocentricism in general. While 'interest in the nonhuman in relation to the human spans Beckett's long career',[10] this critical focus on the nonhuman (and posthuman) in Beckett, I argue, comes at the cost of specific objects.[11] *Endgame* among his other plays from the 1950s has been read in the light of the war, climate change, nuclear and Jewish Holocaust, Irish famine, apocalypse, natural disaster, animate/ ecological/ organic matter, present day planetary crises, and even the Covid pandemic. We see that the consideration of the nonhuman in Beckett (and arguably, theatre scholarship in general) tends to question anthropocentricism by concerning itself with larger events and phenomena that challenge and overpower the human. This is especially true of Beckett criticism in the last decade that has seen a spurt of approaches from Anthropocene studies, ecocriticism, technology studies, posthumanism, and animal/species studies.[12] These approaches, while shedding light on human contingency on the nonhuman (something that a study of objects attempts to do as well) tend to overlook the aesthetic, affective, and ideological encounters with specific objects. The reason for this is not just a preoccupation

---

[5] See K Kendall-Morwick, 'Dogging the Subject: Samuel Beckett, Emmanuel Levinas, and Posthumanist Ethics'. *Journal of Modern Literature* 36.3 (2013), pp. 100–119, Mary Bryden, *Beckett and Animals.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Think, Pig!: Beckett at the Limit of the Human* (New York : Fordham University Press, 2016).

[6] See Nicholas Grene, '*Endgame*: In the Refuge', *Home on the Stage: Domestic Spaces in Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014),, pp. 127-144.

[7] See Julie Bates, *Beckett's Art of Salvage: Writing and Material Imagination, 1932-1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Steven Connor, *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

[8] See William Davies, *Samuel Beckett and the Second World War: Politics, Propaganda and a 'Universe Become Provisional'* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); Hannah Simpson, *Samuel Beckett and the Theatre of the Witness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

[9] Theodor W. Adorno and Michael T. Jones, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*,' *New German Critique* 26 (1982), 119–150 (p. 126).

[10] Amanda Dennis, 'Introduction: Samuel Beckett and the Nonhuman', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 32.2 (2020), 151–160 (p. 152).

[11] In *The Nonhuman Turn* (2015), Richard Grusin defines the nonhuman broadly as 'animals, affectivity, bodies, organic and geophysical systems, materiality, or technologies'. This approach either forgets the object, or subsumes it within a general consideration of these other materialities. Richard Grusin, ed., *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2015), p. vii

[12] In 2018, a 'Beckett and Technology' conference was held in Prague. The Samuel Beckett Society organised a 'Beckett's Environments' conference in December 2023, building on the works of conferences like 'Samuel Beckett and the Anthropocene' (Trinity College Dublin, 2020) and 'Samuel Beckett and Nature' (Lyon College, 2020). The 'Beckett and the Nonhuman' conference held in Brussels (2019) had panels on the environment, technology, ecology, and animals.

with unspecific nonhuman phenomena over specific nonhuman objects but also the critical imposition of material bareness which overshadows what *is* present — objects, bodies, and ontological encounters.

I argue that revulsion in the form of material infestation, decay, and waste is the underlying impulse dictating the relationships with and among *Endgame's* stage matter. I begin by briefly locating Beckett within his contemporary literary, philosophical, and historical contexts, reading them as the sites of his resistance to ideas of post-war humanism. I then explore Clov with a flea and Nagg and Nell in ashbins as the two central revolting object-encounters. This reading of the beings as revolting objects does not reflect my own claim or understanding. Instead, it leverages the potential of the frame of revolting objects to oxymoronically humanise/subjectify them by offering critique and baring the operations of power that turn them into revolting objects. Finally, I trace how lofty and tragic matters of existential anguish, metaphysical despair, and mortality are all reduced to discarded, rubbish, or trivial objects: meditations on the nature of the world are intruded by pests, revolting wastebins replace the denial of mortality and of one's own inevitable transformation into disgusting matter.

Using the playtext, its different versions, Beckett's own notes and revisions of the play, and selected productions, I locate these objects within narrative, material, and theatrical spheres in an attempt to consider Beckett's object representation as an exercise in harnessing revulsion. Furthermore, by weaving the tangible, *thinged* form of revulsion with figurative, philosophical, affective, or existential disgust, I make an argument for the revolting object as at once a physical material with a visceral presence and responses, as well as a phenomenon and encounter that points outwards to its containers (or indeed its containability). Revolting materialities shape the narrative, affective, and aesthetic functioning of the play. These objects, I hope to show, emerge as critically and methodologically generative in the study of object-encounters and object-being in (Beckettian) theatre.

Beckett and Post-war Humanism

'Let us talk about the "human"', Beckett writes in a piece shortly after the first world war.[13] Against the backdrop of unprecedented human brutality, Beckett shows an enduring preoccupation with the idea of the human. His work, both dramatic and shorter prose, can be seen as reflecting a particular concern with the category of human as it becomes a matter of judgement and measure, defined as superior and in opposition to what is deemed to be not human.[14] Many critics point to Beckett's challenge to humanist

[13] Samuel Beckett, 'La peinture des Van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon', *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Fragment* qtd. in Rabaté, *Think, Pig!,* p. 19.
[14] Beckett in his essay notes, 'With "this is not human", one has said it all. Throw it to the garbage can'. Ibid., p. 19.

thought. His work 'radically questioned the foundations of humanism', notes Thomas Trezise, one of the first critics to explore this friction.[15] Similarly, David Jones has also explored the links between 'Beckettian testimony and recent rethinkings of human epistemology'.[16] More recently, critics have identified Beckett's use of the nonhuman and his attending to the nonhuman roots of humanity as vehicles of his questioning of anthropocentricism in general and more specifically, his antipathy to post-war humanism.[17] Alhasan and Salman observe that Beckett critiques

> the philosophical underpinnings of the humanist tradition which, for many, has strong links with the human condition since the Enlightenment. What he particularly wishes to rethink, that is, is the Cartesian notion of the human perceived as a discrete, self-contained being separated from and elevated above other creatures and species[18]

His use of the nonhuman spans his entire career and reflects his attitude towards the human, specifically human exceptionalism and mastery over "inferior" beings and nonbeings. This is echoed in his own brand of existentialism and its departure from Sartre's views in *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946).[19] Sartre argues that 'there is no reality except in action' and that 'there is no other universe except the human universe'.[20] Despite the contemporary French intellectual climate,[21] Beckett's post-war writings mock the 'prevailing anthropocentric humanism' expressed in Sartre's book 'with its strong appeals to will and action*'*,[22] placing human-centrism at the core of his strained relationship with existential philosophy.

---

[15] Thomas Trezise, *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature* qtd. in Kevin Brazil, 'Beckett, Painting and the Question of "the Human"', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 36.3 (2013), 81–99 (p. 82).
[16] David Houston Jones, *Samuel Beckett and Testimony*, qtd. in ibid., p. 82.
[17] As mentioned in the beginning of this case study, the discussions come from various fields including animal studies, waste studies, and Anthropocene approaches, all of which are alert to Beckett's resistance to anthropocentricism and human exceptionalism. For an exploration of Beckett's relationship with post-war humanism see Shane Weller, 'Negative Anthropology: Beckett and Humanism', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 32.2 (2020), 161–175.
[18] Ghadeer Alhasan and Dina Salman, 'Cross-Species Contagion in Beckett's *Endgame*: A Posthumanist (Re)Reading', *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture*, 68.3 (2021), p. 157.
[19] Beckett has a contentious relationship with existentialism. Adorno argues that while Beckett's oeuvre 'has several elements in common with Parisian existentialism' with Beckett, philosophy and poetry 'proclaim […] bankruptcy'. The individual's 'substantiality and absoluteness' which was the 'common element between Kierkegaard, Jaspers, and the Sartrian version of existentialism' have effectively been 'exploded'. 'Trying to Understand *Endgame'*, 119–150 (p. 119, 126).
[20] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism* trans. Philip Mairet, qtd. in Weller, 'Negative Anthropology', pp. 163-166.
[21] The period was marked by many prominent European philosophers contributing to the discourse on humanism including Heidegger with his *Letter on Humanism* and Merleau-Ponty on *Humanism and Terror.*
[22] Dennis 'Introduction', p. 156.

Beckett also critiques the humanism inherent in high modernist literature, specifically its verbosity and erudition as symptoms of a kind of humanism. Acknowledging his debt to James Joyce, he positions himself at the opposite end:

> I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] *in control of one's material*. He was always adding to it; […] I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding.[23]

Beckettian economy and stripping away of words and objects is a challenge to the Joycean high modernism and Sartrean existential humanism wherein fiction and philosophy become a demonstration of control, will, and mastery over one's materials.[24] His works instead become a 'recognition of his own stupidity' focusing on 'folly and failure, impotence and ignorance […] —as he put it, on man as a "non-knower" and as a "non-can-er."'[25]

By engineering entanglements and co-existence (even if forced) between characters and "base" revolting materials, through characters physically immersed in filth (as with Nagg and Nell) or infested with fleas (as with Clov) as I explore below, Beckett disturbs the complacent post-war humanism widely prevalent in contemporary French thought. Deflating human faculties of will, action, agency, and freedom, Beckett attempts to undermine the humanist and Cartesian dichotomies of self/other, subject/object, active/passive, mind/body, nature/culture and so on. The failures and nondoings as strategies of attacking anthropocentric conceptions of the human are, I argue, most evidently visible in the encounters with revolting matter.

While reading sentient beings like the flea and Nagg and Nell as revolting objects in the following analysis might ostensibly seem to buy into the humanist framework of exclusionary, ageist, and ableist understandings of the subject, I do so to critique rather than affirm these understandings and

---

[23] James Knowlson, *Images of Beckett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 37, emphasis added.
[24] This is also at the heart of Beckett's 'poetics of diminishment' which are arguably the driving aesthetic, material, and narrative impulse of his work. Véronique Bragard, 'Sparing Words in the Wasted Land: Garbage, Texture, and écriture Blanche in Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* and McCarthy's *The Road*,' qtd. in Susan Signe Morrison, *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 259. As argued in the beginning of this case study, his brand of 'minimalism' is not necessarily the enemy of objects or material, nonhuman presences. On the contrary, both help Beckett take the path of 'unlessenable least', chipping away at the human, to 'test the limits of the human, rather than the path of metamorphosis that might transform human lack into animal [or nonhuman] plenitude'. Maud Ellmann, 'Jean-Michel Rabaté, Think, Pig! Beckett at the Limit of the Human', *Modern Philology*, 117.2 (2019), 127–132 (p. 129).
[25]James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp 319-20

contemporaneous narratives of objectification. I counterintuitively read these beings as objects (as earlier with Hedda's body in Chapter 1), or rather objectified beings, to reveal objectness and revulsion as constructions informed by contemporary humanist rhetoric as well as the post-Holocaust landscape. I leverage this object-lens to offer a critique of the ableist, ageist, and racial dimensions of the categories of object, subhuman, less-than-human or disgusting, highlighting their forceful imposition that hides in plain sight and comes to be taken as natural. As the rejected and the abhorred, the revolting object's presence and confrontation with the human elicit affective and sensory responses that reveal the operations of power and the borders of the powerful, that is, the human along with imbibed notions of order, purity, rationality, and independence. Clov, Nagg, and Nell, I will show, are deemed merely decaying, disgusting objects, and less-than-human by the figure who epitomises anthropocentric mastery, control, and blind authority. Reading them as revolting objects paradoxically works as a critique of their pacification and objectification into disgusting things, opening a dialogue with humanist and Holocaust frames and challenging the central figure of authority that imposes these frames—Hamm. In Hamm's bunker, being human becomes a matter of his ordaining and discretion. Beckett in an article gives expression to this phenomenon by caustically observing that the concept of the human is one that tends to be reserved 'for times of great massacres', that the human is being debated with unprecedented 'fury' in mid-twentieth century, and if something is deemed not to be human, it is being tossed 'into the dustbin'.[26]

'Something is taking [the opposite] course': The Flea and Regression

Despite the seeming insularity and solitude of their refuge, the fragility of the borders of Hamm and Clov's "bunker" is evident in their reactions to the (invisible) presence of a flea:

> CLOV: [*Anguished, scratching himself.*] I have a flea!
> HAMM: A flea! Are there still fleas?
> CLOV: On me there's one. [*Scratching.*] Unless it's a crab louse.
> HAMM: [*Very perturbed.*] But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him, for the love of God!
> CLOV: I'll go and get the powder. [*Exit* CLOV.]
> HAMM: A flea! This is awful! What a day! (22)

They react similarly to a rat:

[26] Samuel Beckett, 'La peinture des Van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon' qtd. in Weller, 'Negative Anthropology', p. 166

CLOV: There's a rat in the kitchen!
HAMM: A rat! Are there still rats?
CLOV: In the kitchen there's one.
HAMM: And you haven't exterminated him? (33-34)

Fleas and rats as carriers of disease and memories of the war and Black Death evoke at once an untameability and potential for large-scale calamity and suffering, exposing human vulnerability to that which is deemed low, base, and rejected. The hierarchical space of the bunker, with Hamm's insistence to be 'right in the centre' (18) is then being threatened by the invasion of a pest (invisible to the audience) that violates the ostensible sanctity, purity, and order of the last remnants of humanity. This threat becomes progressively more immediate and at-hand: as the flea finds its way into Clov's pants, the infestation and disgust move from being a mere trespassing of space to bodily and even sexual encroachment:

HAMM: Did you get him?
CLOV: Looks like it…Unless he's laying doggo.
HAMM: Laying! Lying, you mean. Unless he's *lying* doggo. (22, emphasis original)

The combination of confusion between 'laying' and 'lying' (leading to confused suggestions of avoiding detection and laying eggs), genital scratching, and 'extermination' evokes images of infestation and reproduction. The flea then does not merely point to a penetrable border but also suggests a corporeal penetrability and interspecies mingling. The possibility of mutation and bestiality suggested by the visual and dialogue might seem to be the most materially and sensually disgusting aspects of the encounter. However, disgust is not only material or rather the material encounter ignites a more abstract form of revulsion. This becomes more evident when read with Hamm's disturbed reaction to this parasitical infestation. He worries that 'humanity might start from there all over again' (22) if the flea isn't killed. He expresses an aversion to the flea and also to the very notion of reproduction, the horror of the prospect of creation and beginnings at the end of the world as a difficult birth astride the grave.[27] Near (or after) the end of the world, the idea of reproduction itself is painted as disgusting and even obscene, not least because it is interspecies. 'The end is', after all, as Hamm tells us, 'in the beginning' (41).[28] The farcical reduction to an annoying, persistent, parasitical infestation connects reproduction or repetition not to pro*creation* but to staleness, rot, or decay that are the other byproducts of repetition.

[27] Here I am paraphrasing Pozzo ('They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more') and Vladimir ('Astride of a grave and a difficult birth'). Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1956), pp. 89-90.
[28] Gontarski observes that 'part of Beckett's formal innovation with this play is surely that it begins by announcing its ending, begins with its conclusion […] Numerous critics have noted the anti-creation or anti-re-

It is worth noting that Clov's scratching and Hamm's revulsion materialise the revolting object, since the flea itself is invisible. It is not just the revolting object but revulsion itself that is being staged in Hamm's disgusted response. While Clov's discovery of the flea varies across productions — from exaggerated panic and shock in some (the 2010 Complicité production and the 2000 film, for instance)[29] to impassive, matter of fact delivery (as in the 2016 The Theatre on King production)[30]— Hamm responds with heightened emotion, from panic to fear. His panic, fear, and disgust nonetheless all remain contained to the stage, as the effect tends to be comic and the scene is played for laughs in theatre. Beyond revulsion, the flea poses another, more dire threat. Hamm's response points to the seeming absurdity of the fact that humanity evolved from miniscule, nonhuman life, insects, and animals, deemed inferior and unwanted. These are actively exterminated from civilised and urban spaces, the sanitised havens epitomising human triumph over and taming of nature, for which the bunker arguably stands. This reminder of "base" origins works to, Alhasan and Salman argue, 'significantly undermine grandiose delusions about the purity and unity of the human subject.'[31] The flea incites Hamm's fear and repulsion, subverting the hubristic delusions of human superiority over the nonhuman, specifically and more offensively, the revolting and unwanted nonhuman. The parasitic infestation of rats and fleas then is not just a corporeal breach but also a contamination of grandiose notions of purity, mastery, and self-containment of the human subject.

However, the flea does something more than merely affect revulsion and conjure gross images of infection, festering, rot, and staleness or in other words, phenomena associated with repetition, stagnation, and staying-still (ironically in someone who cannot sit).[32] It goes further and engenders a going-backwards, atavistic regression, and 'becoming-animal'.[33] Clov begins to aggressively 'scratch his belly with both hands'. His association with the animalistic is anticipated in his opening monologue,

---

creation themes in *Endgame*; Ham, the cursed son of Noah, fears that the whole cycle of humanity might restart from the flea. Although Hamm fears the actual end, he fears more that the end may signal a new beginning.' *The Theatrical Notebooks,* p. 57.

[29] *Endgame* by Samuel Beckett, Duchess Theatre, London 2010, dir. by Simon McBurney; *Endgame* dir. by Conor McPherson, (UK: Blue Angels Films, 2000).

[30] *Endgame* by Beckett*,* The Theatre on King, Ontario, 2016, dir. by Ryan Kerr.

[31] Alhasan and Salman, 'Cross-Species Contagion', p. 155.

[32] Clov has a strange condition where he is unable to sit and has a 'stiff, staggering walk' (5).

[33] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari contend 'Becoming-animal […] constitutes a single process, a unique method that replaces subjectivity'. Fixed and stable identity here is replaced by process, assemblage, and becomings. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 36. Alhasan and Salman observe that the concept does not imply a transition from one distinct identity to another but 'an undoing of identity itself'. 'Cross-Species Contagion', p. 163. I read this idea alongside Eunjung Kim's idea of 'unbecoming human' and 'object-becoming' which she suggests 'reveal the workings of the boundary of the human'. Eunjung Kim, 'Unbecoming Human: An Ethics of Objects', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 21.2–3 (2015), 295–320 (pp. 295-297).

'I'll go now to my kitchen […] and wait for him to whistle me' (6). Beckett in the diary kept for his Schiller-Theater production of 1967 (called *Berlin Diary)* insisted on Clov's 'hunched ape-like posture' in the opening.[34] His association with the regressed and apish, once induced by the revolting object-encounter, is sustained, echoed, and progressively escalated throughout the play. This animal-becoming crops up more overtly later in the play through Hamm and Clov's interaction with the toy dog. Gontarski notes that 'when Clov stoops to get the dog to stand, he ought to be poised *like the dog* so that the image is of two dogs in profile'.[35] In his director's notebook for the Riverside Studio production (1980), Beckett insists on 'Analogy of Clov-dog when trying to make it stand'.[36] The analogy is made explicit in Hamm's clubbing together of the dog and Clov: 'Ah the creatures, the creatures, everything has to be explained to them' (27).

Going back to the brutish scratching, the boorishness and apishness of this caricatured gesture is further highlighted by the fact that it is couched amid discussions of rationality and meaning:

> HAMM: […] Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough. [*Voice of rational being.*] Ah, good, now I see what it is, yes, now I understand what they're at! [*Clov starts, drops the telescope and begins to scratch his belly with both hands. Normal voice.*] […] To think perhaps it won't all have been for nothing! (22)

Furthermore, the flea, or rather the scratching that indexically signifies the flea, occurs right after Clov 'drops the telescope'. Renouncing the symbol of rationality becomes a prerequisite for being pulled into the camp of the base and the bodily. The displacement of the telescope with Clov's flea infested body weaves together two different modes of disgusting object-encounters: the flea's *contact* with the body as a site of infection, obscene reproduction, festering and stagnation, and its *pulling* of Clov into the sphere of primitive, untamed, and repulsive organic matter that always threatens to spoil the smooth veneer of order and purity. We see here that the revolting nonhuman threatens to both encroach on the human as well as to pull the humans into its own sphere.[37] This brings up two important effects of revolting matter — contamination and conversion. As argued in the introduction to the chapter,

---

[34] Gontarski, *The Theatrical Notebooks,* p. 48.
[35] Ibid. p. 59, emphasis added.
[36] Ibid. p. 59.
[37] Taking imaginative liberties with the play, I picture the two sides, human and nonhuman, playing an allegorical game of *kabaddi* insofar as it is based on making physical contact with the players of the other side, as well as pulling a player over to one's own side. The significant difference being, at the end of the world any victory would be, quite literally, immaterial.

revolting objects both pollute the subject as well as turn the subject itself into a thing of disgust.[38] As inherently 'slimy' (per Sartre), revolting objects stick, cling, and cross-over, or rather here make the subject cross-over.[39] Instead of a *return of* the repressed disgust, here the revolting matter threatens to engender a *turn (in)to* the repressed disgusting.

The flea-Clov encounter with its animalistic, savage, and atavistic resonances is pitted against the telescope as an embodiment of Galilean science, rationality, and human triumph over far away cosmic objects brought close at hand, rendered accessible, and inspected. The battle between the sanitised product of messy human dominion and invasion of nature, and the unhygienic, savage, repellent, and natural scratching is fought on Clov's body rather than between the spatial spheres of civilisation and nature. This rewrites the battle as a material and corporeal one and reimagines the trajectory of civilisation and scientific progress as a systematic attempt to subdue nature through repressing, disciplining, and exterminating the primitive and the disgusting within the body itself. Recreating or sustaining a semblance of civilisation away from nature post-extinction becomes a material rather than a philosophical or anthropological matter, condensed within Clov's body and its encounters with the telescope, science, and order on the one hand, and the flea, organic matter, and animal-becoming on the other.

The Cartesian resonances emerge quite self-evidently: the two material presences of the telescope and flea-Clov encounter follow the mind-body duality and hierarchy. I would like to layer onto the discussion the scientific resonances of this revolting object-encounter. Clov's absorption and regression into the animalistic or revolting material sphere follows a non-evolutionary path, most overtly in the move towards rather than away from the animal roots of humanity. Perhaps after the unspecified mass annihilation, these few remnants of the species find themselves on an inverted path.[40] This has specific implications on the behaviour of revolting matter. As discussed in the introduction to the chapter, in scientific research following Darwin, disgust is often attributed to survival instinct, protecting us from rotten food, diseases, infection and so on. In an ironic reversal of this function of disgust, this scene demonstrates not Darwinian evolution but (some selective aspects of) Deleuze and

---

[38] Silvan Tomkins argues, 'Anything which has had contact with disgusting things itself becomes disgusting.' *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness: The Negative Affects*, vol. 2, (New York: Springer, 1963), p. 131. For critical views on contaminating and contagious aspects of disgust, see this chapter's introduction.

[39] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* trans. Hazel E. Barnes, p. 604.

[40] Critics like Gontarski, Halpern, and Lavery among others have pointed out the recurrent anti-(re)creation theme in *Endgame,* specifically registered in Hamm's aversion to ends as they might mark beginnings, to reproduction, and to the possibility of a cyclical existence (see footnote 28). The threat of cyclical existence is also suggested by the play's chess imagery since 'even in the endgame of a chess match the possibility exists not only for a checkmate but for a stalemate as well'. Gontarski, *The Theatrical Notebooks,* p. 57; Halpern, 'Beckett's Tragic Pantry'; Carl Lavery, 'A Cave, a Skull, and a Little Piece of Grit: Theatre in the Anthropocene' in *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 55–69.

Guattari's 'involution'[41] which disrupts the line of progress and 'involves, through parasitical and "contagious" alliances, multiple bodies of different kinds.'[42] This reframes evolution such that survival includes rather than purges parasitical contagion, infection, and border-crossing. Hamm's remark about humanity beginning again from an insect understands the evolution of human species less as a 'progressive or linear process of species development than a parasitical entanglement of heterogeneous elements across the species.'[43] Instead of being unwanted pests disturbing human purity and order, revolting and parasitical materials are acknowledged players and agents that have brought humanity to the current moment in (or after) history. Hamm's remark then invokes Darwinian evolution (in its reference to extermination of the disgusting) only to overturn it (in its acknowledgement of revolting matter's role in human development, accompanied by Clov's own regression). In either case, the ideas of human-matter hierarchy are distilled into a moment of revolting bodily encounter.

As critics including Ahmed, Ngai, and Ablett have observed, disgust *makes* disgusting, that is, contaminants do not just contaminate but also turn bodies into contaminants.[44] The revolting object becomes a floating signifier rather than a fixed ontological category that is appropriated by or forced upon bodies and materials freely. Clov becomes a revolting object through his contact with the flea, and to do so he has to give up his humanness (dropping the telescope, acting animalistically). Or conversely, as discussed above, his regression makes him disgusting. Human and revolting objects emerge as mutually exclusive categories (even if human and nonhuman are not): to become one necessitates a relinquishing of the other, relinquishing one entails an embrace of the other. The moments of contact between self-contained subjects versus untamed matter might seem to evoke a blurring of borders between human, animals, and others as present in contemporary ecological thought, specifically 'the inter-species "making kin" called for by Donna Haraway and Timothy Morton's critique of the severance of the human from nature.'[45] Similarly, critics like Shane Weller also read these entangled moments as Beckett's assault on the subject-object borders.[46] But when read in the light of disgusting objects, I suggest that the borders are not weakened but heavily policed in characters' (especially Hamm's) response to revolting materials and affective experience of revulsion. The encounter does not result in a romanticised dissolution of hierarchies where fleas and humans are in a harmonious new materialist continuum. These moments of contagion, contingency, and intertwining might ostensibly

[41] My use of 'involution' is selective and restricted to its meaning as a 'contagious alliance'; I consciously do not use the creative aspects of involution that are at odds with the earlier discussion on the aversion to reproduction. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophreni*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 238.
[42] Alhasan and Salman, 'Cross-Species Contagion', p. 162.
[43] Ibid., p. 162.
[44] See Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*; Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*; Sarah J. Ablett, *Dramatic Disgust.*
[45] Dennis, 'Introduction', p. 157.
[46] See Weller, 'Negative Anthropology', pp. 161–75.

seem like romantic coexistence has been forged by the world-burning fire. However, the inclusion of and interaction with base nonhuman objects (and not just "normal" non-revolting objects) like the flea and rat that are tainted and mediated by repulsion stifle any such reading of dissolving hierarchies. The relationship is one of hostility that is dependent on difference. While the encounter sheds light on human-nonhuman contingency and dependence, and poses a limit to human subjectivity and agency, these phenomena necessitate, produce, and even police a difference. Unlike the telescope that is an emblem and symptom of human faculties, the flea and rat are defined against the human.

In this light, 'making kin' is reframed from a kindred interspecies relationship to one between materials and becoming-nonhuman. Here, Clov can be seen as a proto-object whose contact with repulsive objects begins (even if momentarily) the process of his object-becoming. Beckett in his diaries and theatre notebooks hints at Clov's intimate relationship with objects, something that informed his directions to the actor in his own productions.[47] This can be seen in his suggestion that the objects in the shelter are 'brought into the action through Clov's looking at them'.[48] The actor's performance and its rousing of the object is also reflected in the fact that we only see Clov and not the flea. It is his repulsive gestures — the animalistic scratching, scraping, and suggested biting — that point to the revolting object (as he turns into one himself). The flea itself is invisible and his reaction to it is what materialises it.

The denial of representational space to both the flea and the rat relegated to the offstage suggests their elusiveness and untameability. They are invisible threats that 'cut across the human-animal divide' and embody the exercise and limits of forces that repress these fleeting natural objects.[49] We are constantly reminded, through these absented revolting matter, that the isolated human refuge has been built or indeed is constantly being built and rebuilt through an ongoing process of repressing disgusting objects. But more important is the effect of these invisible presences on Clov's body and its expanding ontology. In one reading discussed above, Clov becomes nonhuman/ animalistic/ object-like, regressing through contact with the revolting flea. In another more semiotic reading, Clov's body absorbs and enlarges its ontological limits and signifying borders — his body carries within it his humanness, his proto-objectness or the process of becoming-animal, and the flea all at once. With the latter, he does not just intimately interact with objects and serve as a host to a parasite but semiotically inscribes it within the body. It is his body that represents the flea, as also himself. His body then houses signs of the human, the object, and the object-becoming, making it an assemblage, process, or (eco?)system. He is at once a primitive less-than-human body and an overgrown more-than-human entity. (This is

[47] See Gontarski, *The Theatrical Notebooks,* p. 44.
[48] Ibid., p. 45.
[49] Alhasan and Salman, 'Cross-Species Contagion', p. 159.

markedly different from the numerous instances in theatre history where an actor interacts with/mimes an invisible object, given Clov's unstable and shifting ontological status discussed above). Both states are shown to be equally revolting as both overgrowth and decay (explored later) are materially and figuratively repulsive.[50] Beckett then uses the revolting nonhuman to interrogate the limits and extent, flexibility and rigidity of the borders of traditional conceptions of the human.

Gontarski argues, 'Clov takes great pleasure in announcing the escape of the rat. Hamm is helpless, seated, unable to move, and the half-dead rat will eventually get him.'[51] In employing an insignificant, tiny, repulsive organism like the rat or flea to challenge grand humanist notions, Beckett's dark humorous tone exemplifies, Rabate argues, his 'determined animus against postwar humanism'. He further observes that Beckett often used '"low" animals like rats or pigs to set a humorous limit to higher aspirations'.[52] With reference to the rat, Hamm's choice of the genocidal word 'exterminate' draws overlaps between the patterns of anthropocentric domination and violence against both the human other and the nonhuman other. This overlap is further highlighted in the intertwining of varied ontologies of revulsion — the regressed human body and the nonhuman pest. This alignment offers a reflection and critique on the anthropocentric and humanist aversion to human and nonhuman other that are both deemed subhuman and inferior, and thus subjects of extermination.

The alignment of human and nonhuman other becomes visible when we read the encounter through the performance of revolting matter. Whether it is through revulsion that Clov and the flea become inferior or through their status as nonhuman/less than human that they become revolting matter is ambiguous.[53] What is important is the encounters among these varied forms of othering — human other, object other, revolting other — and with the human subject. These reflect Hamm's (as a mouthpiece of post-war humanist discourse) insistence on preserving imagined borders, revolting object's disrespect of these borders, and Beckett's own opposition to traditional conceptions of the human as above other species and (non)beings. Revolting matter becomes a strategy of baring these

---

[50] In Beckett's reading of the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno, he summarises Bruno's ideas, 'There is no difference […] between the smallest possible chord and the smallest possible arc, no difference between the infinite circle and the straight line. The maxima and minima of particular contraries are one and indifferent.' In *Endgame* the material maxima and minima are both layered with revulsion. Beckett, 'Dante … Bruno. Vico..Jo'ce' in Lawrence Rainey, ed., *Modernism: An Anthology* (United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons, 2005), p 1063.

[51] Beckett during the rehearsals for the Riverside production said that the declaration of the 'at's escape and C'ov's tormenting Hamm about the possibility of pain-killer only to announce 'Th're's no more pain-kil'er' (42) wer', 'One of the cruellest sections of the play'. Gontarski, *The Theatrical Notebooks,* p. 65.

[52] Rabate, *Think Pig!*, p.18.

[53] This draws from my argument in the introduction to this chapter: one pulls away from the object because it is revolting, while it is the very pulling away that creates the revolting object. The revolting object emerges out of revulsion, at once preceding and succeeding the experience.

operations in Hamm's bunker, where the spatial and bodily contamination reveals the fragility of human-centric ideas, and where the categories of human, object, or nonhuman become not a characteristic but an attribution or a judgement, much like disgust. Reading sentient beings as revolting objects reveals the process of their objectification, constructed inferiority, and disempowerment through imposed revulsion that comes to be taken as natural. This approach allows the revolting objects to channel and critique the surrounding post-war narratives wherein revulsion and objectness are reified as inherent attributes of bodies considered inferior and (hence) less than human (discussed in the next section). In other words, the category of nonhuman is revealed to be not ontologically essential but a withdrawal of power through the weaponization of disgust. I move to this weaponization in the next section, which considers the encounters between Nagg, Nell and the ashbins as the locus of Beckett's engagement with mortality mediated through revolting materials.

Nothing is more tragic than the grotesque: Mortality, Disgust, and the Ashbins [54]

Beckett has been seen as the last modernist.[55] His writing shows an enduring concern with matters of mortality and material and existential decay, something he shares with post-war modernist fiction and theatre. But with Beckett, this preoccupation with entropy, ennui, and decay comes to reflect the decay of high modernism itself, including its very modes of representing mortality. Stanca observes this divergence from modernist approach to existential despair:

> What Beckett shares with modernist writers are the themes of the random meaninglessness of existence, the hollowness of human relations and the blank hostility of fate, but what is different is that his themes are worked out to the point of absurdity and played for dark humour. Rather than high modernist anguish and despair, we have the flat affect, the blankness and apathy of the characters.[56]

Adding to this emptying out of the modernist apparatus for representing existential anguish, I argue in this section that in *Endgame*, disgusting materials distil and mediate the play's engagement with mortality. Revolting objects chart both a continuity with modernism's thematic preoccupation with mortality, as well as a break from its mode of representing mortality. This break can be seen, as Stanca

---

[54] I am paraphrasing Beckett's comment in his letter to the director Robert Blin with reference to *Waiting for Godot,* 'Nothing is more grotesque than the tragic'. Samuel Beckett et al. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: Volume 2, 1941-1956*, qtd. in Dirk Van Hulle and Pim Verhulst*, The Making of Samuel Beckett's "En Attendant Godot"/"Waiting For Godot"* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2017), p. 38.

[55] See Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Flamingo, 1997).

[56] Nicoleta Stanca 'The World Corpsed in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*.' In *Wounded Bodies, Wounded Minds* eds. Oana Cogeanu and Radu Andriescu (Romania: Editura Universitatii Alexandru Ioan Cuza Iasi, 2014), 77–92 (p. 80).

observes, in the blankness and flatness that replaces anguish and despair, and their inflation to 'the point of absurdity'. Furthermore, the mid-twentieth century turn to postdramatic antitheatricality (much discussed in the context of Beckett's works) carries within it a memory of modernist concern with mortality, or more figuratively, modernism's mortal remains.

Revolting matter in *Endgame*, I argue, triangulates Beckett's unique approach to mortality and theatricality and by extension, his continuity/discontinuity with modernism. This marked departure from classical and modernist approaches to one of the most universal dramatic themes is materially embodied in the changes between *Endgame*'s different versions. Beckett made copious notes, edits, revisions, and interventions to the playtext, giving rise to numerous sources and co-texts. These include earlier versions of the play (including a two-act version and *Avant Fin de Partie)*[57], the revised text published in 1992, Beckett's diaries, theatre notebooks for productions directed by himself as well as others, and actor copies with Beckett's suggestions and directions. The most significant interventions here are the switching of Hamm's bloody handkerchief with a dirty rag and coffin with trashcans. The revised text replaces the 'large blood-stained handkerchief' with a 'dirty handkerchief', following the 1967 Berlin production directed by the playwright.[58] While most productions have followed suit by using a dirty rag, there are some notable exceptions like the 2000 TV movie that used a reddish-brown stained handkerchief (keeping ambiguous whether it is blood-stained or dirty), and productions directed by Krystian Lupa (2010), György Kurtág (2022), and Danya Taymor (2022) to name a few that clearly used a red-stained handkerchief to show bleeding. Similarly, in the earlier two-act versions of the play, a coffin sat on the stage with its presence denied by the characters. The coffin was eventually eliminated but may have been the precursor to the ashbins.[59] In both cases, an overt (iconic) sign of mortality and death is replaced by a visceral image of pollution and filth, one that implicitly connects the ideas of mortality to decay and rot. Suggestions of wounding and mortal decay are then counterintuitively associated with the materially dirty instead of the semiotically tragic. Death becomes attached and coded with ideas of becoming and devolving into revolting detritus and trash, severed from transcendental and disembodied notions of existential dread and tragic mortality.

'Can there be misery loftier than mine?' (6) Hamm wonders, amid yawns and the stretching emptiness of their lives. In many senses, drama and action have happened *before* the play and *Endgame,* like the eponymous chess stage, is located amid the ruins. I suggest that when (the lack of) action is located in the still, stagnant, and stinking waters of a world *after* drama and the depletion of objects,

---

[57] Samuel Beckett, *Fin de partie / Endgame*: a digital genetic edition (Series 'The Beckett Digital Manuscript Project', module 7) edited by Dirk Van Hulle, Shane Weller and Vincent Neyt. (Brussels: University Press Antwerp, 2018) <http://www.beckettarchive.org> [accessed 13 January 2024]

[58] Gontarski, *The Theatrical Notebooks,* p. 45.

[59] Ibid., p. 67.

mortality and death are emptied of tragedy, becoming more a matter of fleshly decay and revolting material reality and less of spiritual, philosophical, and existential *condition humaine.*[60] In other words, mortality and death are reframed from tragic and existential matters to matters of disgust, decay, depletion, and rot in *Endgame.* Nonetheless, there are more deaths at this wake (explicit and suggested): from Nell's actual death (from either age or starvation) to almost certainly suggested deaths of Hamm and Nagg after Clov's (implied) departure, with nobody and no resources to sustain them. We also witness the decay and death of modernism and existentialism, or rather more specifically, their approach to mortality, as observed above. Halpern argues that the tragedy of Beckett's *Endgame* is 'the loss of tragedy itself': 'Aristotelian *megethos* or loftiness […] cannot find room within the lower limits where the play situates itself'.[61] In a world consumed by the base concerns and overpowering rank of infestation, rot, decay, and garbage, tragedy requiring lofty heights for dramatic falls cannot occur. Here, I am not suggesting that revolting materials swallow tragedy whole, but that the conditions of the play world allow room for revulsion which ends up repelling tragedy, along with other larger human-centric/aggrandising forms and ideas. Or in another view, tragedy is grotesquely lowered from the higher, existential, spiritual ideal to the material realm. This debasement enlarges the idea of tragedy to include disgust or perhaps, to a degree, replaces tragedy with disgust.

Endgame converts the ineffable, existential, and disembodied idea of mortality into object matters transforming them into tangible, material decay through rotting objects, bodies, and waste. The most overt embodiments of this existential disgust are Nagg and Nell, Hamm's parents, who are physically consigned to ashbins. They are old, largely immobile, discarded, and the target of Hamm's periodic angry outbursts. As Adorno observes, Beckett literalises a conversational phrase, '"Today old people are thrown in the trashcan" and it happens'.[62] The waste bins housing the figures evoke both embodied revulsion with bodies immersed in refuse as well as deferred/anticipated revulsion, as the waste-body encounter becomes an existential affordance, a constant corporeal reminder of decay, death, and disgust *to come,* suggested through the parental relationship and the aged and fragmented bodies.

Hamm commands Clov to 'Clear away this muck! Chuck it in the sea!' (17). In the opening sequence in the Irish Repertory Theatre production of 2023, as Clov opens a bin lid, he comically draws

---

[60] Peter Boxall draws on Adorno suggestion that Beckett's plays show philosophy and poetry to have become obsolete and useless. 'Pre Beckettian existentialism', Adorno argues, 'exploited philosophy as a literary subject […] Now Beckett, more cultured than any of them, hands it the bill: philosophy, […] and the poetic process declares itself to be a process of wastage'. Boxall further argues that Beckett raises the dilemma of doing poetry and philosophy after Auschwitz, as they 'reveal themselves to have wasted away, to have become so much detritus in the landfills of the culture industry; they are the garbage that is scattered across the stage at the opening of Beckett's comically brief play *Breath'.* Boxall, "There's No Lack of Void': Waste and Abundance in Beckett and DeLillo.' *SubStance* 37.2 (2008), 56–70 (pp. 61-62).

[61] Halpern, 'Beckett's Tragic Pantry', pp. 746-747.

[62] Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame'*, p. 142

back from what is implied to be an overwhelming stench, instead of laughing as in the playtext. While most productions house Nagg and Nell in old metal trash cans, one experimented with newer recycling bins (Old Vic Theatre, 2020) while another lined the bin with a garbage bag (Complicité, 2010). The metal ones look more like public bins while the newer, lined bins seem mostly domestic, giving a sense of segregated, organised, and hence less repulsive waste (given also that public waste feels more repulsive than domestic waste, which is produced by known, familiar people). The Irish Repertory Theatre production further used the bins to invoke the outdoors within the domestic space by separating them with bricks, indicating outside debris and rubble. While domestic bins are clean and spotless from the outside (one could almost forget that these are garbage receptacles) in this production (among others) the bins' surface is covered with miscellaneous stains, gunk, and dirt, making them revolting even before we see their inhabitants.

As older, disintegrating, dying bodies, they are relegated to and treated like garbage. Like babies, they are dependents, or rather pacified into dependence, being confined to trashcans and having stumps for bodies due to an accident,[63] constantly needing attention, 'pap' and sugar-plums, and cleaning up.[64] Adorno observes that given their inability to perform 'socially useful labor' they are seen as 'superfluous' and to be discarded.[65] Is it their association with old age, uselessness, and bodily decay that makes them refuse, rubbish, trash and thus objects of disgust or is it their social exclusion and Hamm's chucking them into trashcans that makes them revolting? In other words, are they revolting trash because they are in the ashbins or are they in the ashbins because their aging, decaying bodies makes them less human and more akin to revolting matter? In either case, revolting object-encounters effect an ontological flattening (similar to the encounter between Clov and the flea) that muddles causality and strict humanist binaries. The flattening, as observed above, occurs because revulsion prompts and is prompted by the dehumanisation of bodies. A revolting body is often treated as an object and similarly a body closer to an object can often be revolting.

The body-trash encounter flattens human-nonhuman differences into a broader category of 'organic matter'— things that necessarily will decompose and experience multiple deaths, not least because they are theatrical bodies. They will die as people, as discernible waste, devolving into 'muck' and finally dust; similarly, they might die onstage (as Nell does) but will definitely experience the death of the character — everything, after all, is materially and theatrically 'corpsed' (20). By staging the

[63] Beckett in his Berlin production notes instructs that there must be 'almost no movement on the part of Nagg and Nell and they must not look at each other'. Gontarski, *The Theatrical Notebooks,* p. 53. They periodically try to strain their heads towards each other but, 'fail to meet, fall apart again' (12).
[64] Gontarski notes that the 'three urned figures of *Play* have their roots in this legless, moribund couple reminiscing about their golden moment.' Ibid., p. 53.
[65] Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame'*, p. 142

gradual erosion of this organic matter, waste is shown to be 'simultaneously what we inherit and what we become'.[66] The human-nonhuman flattening is taken to the extreme in a 2005 Spanish production that situates the play in a hospital room,[67] completely replacing the parents with garbage bags, and a 2016 U.S. production that uses puppets to play them,[68] where instead of trashcans, they appear out of a cardboard junk-pile.[69] They are then located amid rubbish that we refuse to throw (junk, hoard) instead of amid waste that we discard (garbage, trash).[70] These productions' ontological intervention make overt the objectifying effect of revulsion. The text says that Nagg and Nell have 'very white' faces (9, 12), and there has been a trend to paint these almost clown-like in performance, clearly contrasting the sphere of the living with those of the unreal, dead, or nearly dead, stuck in their urns, perhaps doused in their own ashes or made up by a mortician. The Sydney Theatre Company production reimagines Nagg and Nell as being 'stuffed in bins of toxic poison that had affected the colour of their skin and flaked [it] off.'[71] The 2000 Conor McPherson film pointedly makes Nagg and Nell's hands a different colour, purplish-blue, leaving ambiguous whether it is the lack of circulation leading to a slow rot in their cold, immobile bodies or if it is a trace of the gunk or garbage in which they are immersed. The difference between disgusting, toxic matter and decrepitude or physical decay is rendered blurry and trivial, with the only certainty being their separation from the vital, clean, and pure.

As immobile bodies pacified into dependence, these 'urned figures' are actively decaying into objects,[72] more specifically, into the trash they live in. Revulsion, material and bodily, is coupled with immobility, stillness, and finality, arguably imposed by Hamm who is the authority in the space and has thrown his parents away. This allows Morrison to make a connection with Levinas's observation on the horror of 'degrading types of servitude imposed on us by *the blind mechanism* of our bodies'.[73] The blind Hamm can then be seen as the externalisation of the repression, control, and servitude enforced

---

[66] I am paraphrasing Carl Lavery who is speaking in the context of the Anthropocene and reads the 'grit' and geolithic imagery in the play, suggesting that in Beckett's universe, 'Stone is simultaneously what we inherit and what we become'. 'A Cave, a Skull, and a Little Piece of Grit', p. 65.

[67] *Fin de Partida de Samuel Beckett,* Andalusian Performing Arts Research and Resource Centre, Sevilla, 2005, dir. Pepa Gamboa and David Montero.

[68] Steve Pfarrer, "*Endgame'* Uses Live Actors and Puppets' *The Recorder,* 3 November 2016. <https://www.recorder.com/Life/-Endgame--uses-live-actors-and-puppets> [accessed 13 January 2024].

[69] Nagg and Nell's dwellings have been subject to radical scenographic interventions— from barrels of toxic poison to almost industrial chimneys. Sydney Theatre Company, *Director Documentaries: Andrew Upton, Endgame,* online video recording, Youtube, 27 January 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2f3dDJVY1MA, [accessed 13 January 2024]; *Endspiel* by Beckett, Theater und Orchester Heidelberg, 2022, dir. Holger Schultze.

[70] Kermit Dunkelberg, the actor playing Clov, claims that he designed his movements with the idea that Clov is a bit 'puppet-like' himself, further linking the inferior (Clov as regressed) with the object-like. Steve Pfarrer, "*Endgame'* Uses Live Actors and Puppets'.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Gontarski, *The Theatrical Notebooks,* p. 53.

[73] Morrison, *The Literature of Waste,* p. 37, emphasis added.

on Nagg and Nell's corporeal decay. He is the outward projection of the disgust we feel about our 'smelly, decaying, and all-too-mortal bodies'[74] as also the embodiment of the attempt at mastery over the unrelenting and inevitable decay.

Their aged, fragmented, disintegrating bodies are corporeal reminders of the revolting trash we one day will become, and while they cannot be exterminated like flies, they can be trapped like spiders under a glass, who can see everything but not participate — much like the audience. This audience-like combination of immobility and omniscience is explicitly evoked in the Krystian Lupa production mentioned above. Here, Nagg and Nell live not in trashcans but in transparent coffin-like boxes, 'like in the mortuary'.[75] The boxes are stained, dirty, with their half-naked bodies visible to everyone and equally, everything visible to them. With their old bodies pointedly and transparently portrayed as unappealing, disgust becomes less a product of their association with garbage and more overtly attached to ageing and bodily decay. Nagg and Nell in their 'sarcophagi sliding out from the wall'[76] are revolting not because, as in other productions, their own decrepit bodies are amid and akin to decaying garbage while hidden in the ashbins but because they are visibly disintegrating in their transparent coffins. Their revolting presence is removed from the realm of imagination and blind belief in Hamm's aesthetic-existential displeasure. As we see what Hamm sees, we are perhaps less perplexed at the discarding of his parents. In experiencing a similar revulsion as Hamm (blocked in other productions by the opacity of the trashcans) we arguably understand (even if guiltily) Hamm's shunning of his parents as mere rotting bodies. As the revolting objects become more visible, revulsion spills from the stage and now affects the audience, reducing the pity evoked for the revolting objects and increasing affinity with the revolted Hamm.

Going back to the text, Nagg and Nell are chucked into the sea, confined, and sequestered, as if to contain the spread of the human condition. Mortality and decay are imagined here not just as waste and garbage, but as contagion, something that can spread and needs to be contained and quarantined away from "society". Physical exclusion is not enough, the revolting non/human other as the embodiment of mortal decay must be treated with enough hostility, rejection, hatred, and denial to make absolutely clear the distinction from self, to safeguard and immunise oneself from the contagion. Hamm, the resentful 'worst of sons',[77] goes so far as to stuff his parents into ashbins to contain the spread or perhaps as a punishment for giving him this life:

---

[74] Martha C. Nussbaum, *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law,* qtd. in ibid., p. 37.
[75] Alicja Rosé, 'Krystian Lupa Closely Examined: "*Endgame*"', *The Theatre Times*, 18 June 2010 <https://thetheatretimes.com/lupa-closely-examined/> [accessed 13 January 2024].
[76] Ibid.
[77] Julie Bates, *Beckett's Art of Salvage,* p.110

HAMM: Scoundrel! Why did you engender me?
NAGG: I didn't know.
HAMM: What? What didn't you know?
NAGG: That it'd be you. (31)

Julie Bates observes that a consistent feature of Beckett's parent-child relationships is a sense of guilt, disappointment, and futility of repentance for the harm inflicted. She further explains that this might be because, '[a]s the source of life, mothers are the origins from which Beckett's characters seek to distance themselves, yet whose approval is sought and whose will cannot be denied.' [78] Simpson argues that there is an underlying tension between decline and continued endurance in *Endgame.*[79] This evokes an image of something going bad or rotting but nonetheless preserved, like bad milk in the fridge or an infected body part needing amputation. The fact that Nagg and Nell are simultaneously discarded and clung to (made overt in their location amid a junk-pile in the 2016 production, discussed above) further embodies this tension. Similarly, Morrison sees this distancing from the maternal as an attempt at 'ultimate freedom—to destroy the ones who engendered you, and, in effect, yourself and your stinking flesh. Such liberty comes at the cost of total annihilation.'[80]

As psychological, spiritual, and existential disgust and decay are physically manifested onto the material wasteland of the post-annihilation world, they also threaten to encroach the interior landscape as 'waste creeps inexorably into our mental landfills'.[81] Hamm's disgust at being engendered and at his parents alike betrays a human belief that the physical exclusion of revolting matter, be it garbage or bodies, would purge us of our own fleshly filth and stink; if it is invisible, hidden away, hated, and denied enough, we might will it into nonexistence both within us and without. Nagg and Nell constitute and are constituted by rotting, revolting objects, but so are Hamm and Clov (and whatever objects and bodies have survived the unnamed disaster). The only difference is that Nagg and Nell constitute revolting matter by (being forced into) embracing it and being immersed in it, whereas Hamm constitutes himself as its opposite, as pure and untampered, by rejecting it.

The parallel between material and internalised revolting objects can be seen in the likeness, both of their bodies and psyche, between the parents and son. Hamm is also trapped in his inaction, unable to move or move on from nostalgically retelling anecdotes from his past, like his parents.

[78] Ibid., p. 110.
[79] See Hannah Simpson, *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 72.
[80] Morrison, *The Literature of Waste,* p. 37
[81] Ibid., p. 94.

Physically, their bodies are all wounded, in pain, and falling apart: Hamm bleeds through the handkerchief covering his face and cannot stand, see or urinate, Nell is cold and Nagg has lost his teeth; they are constantly starving and will die in their dustbins, unable to scratch or even touch one another. Hamm has wounds and sores on his body but there are no more painkillers. When Clov checks to see if Nagg and Nell are dead, Hamm raises his cap and, after Clov closes the two ashbins, he puts it on as a third "lid", 'a third note of the chord'.[82] Given the progressively increasing likeness between his own body and the trash and trashed bodies, the only option is to keep going on through denial, and perhaps with the self-awareness of being in denial. Indeed, the reason Hamm is angry about being engendered is because of his awareness of becoming that by which he is so repulsed: the 'muck' which he actively rejects and discards. The only option that remains is to keep on actively rejecting the muck while being aware of the inevitability of becoming it.

The onstage waste and bodily decay arguably find reluctant recognition not only in Hamm but also the audience. Simpson argues that *Endgame* presents a particularly bleak reading of the human body wherein diminishing bodily health, corporeal struggle, deterioration, and even disability are shown to be not exceptions but inevitable. Hamm admits as much in his warning to Clov, 'One day you'll be blind like me' (23). This intensely evokes 'the ineluctable finitude of physical wellbeing and human life rather than some unrecognisable "other" ontological state: the stage-audience dynamic is not one of radically visible *difference*, but of discomforting recognition.'[83] Revulsion becomes then a strategy to fortify oneself against the decay, by insisting on the myth of ontological separation between the *disgusting* and the *disgusted*. Hamm's anger and disgust are byproducts of his clearsighted recognition of the insoluble crisis and impasse, the acknowledgement of 'I can't go on' within the realisation of 'I'll go on'.[84]

Hamm asks how he would know if Clov died in the kitchen:

HAMM: Yes, but how would I know, if you were merely dead in your kitchen?
CLOV: Well... sooner or later I'd start to stink.
HAMM: You stink already. The whole place stinks of corpses.
CLOV: The whole universe.
HAMM [*angrily*]: To hell with the universe. [*Pause*.] Think of something. (29)

[82] Gontarski, *The Theatrical Notebooks,* p. 63.
[83] Simpson, *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance,* p. 77, emphasis original.
[84] Beckett 'The Unnameable', *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1955), p. 414.

Clov's account of the world outside is similar: 'What all is? In a word? […] Corpsed' (20).[85] The frequent evocation of corpses suggest that even the ostensibly brand-new world purified by the flood is always already decaying, rotting, and stinking of death.[86] Clov as an inferior, both in rank and ontology, already stinks of decay or perhaps the physical toil to which Hamm is literally blind.[87] Hamm's annoyance that the whole universe, along with Clov and quite possibly himself, stinks of corpses echoes the earlier impasse of his self-aware repression of mortality. Morrison quotes Calvino's description of taking out the garbage as a 'rite of purification', a way of deferring death, and a confirmation that 'for one more day I have been a producer of detritus and not detritus myself'.[88] She compares this description to defecation or urination as modes of reinforcing 'hermetic security in myself'.[89] Separation from revolting objects, as I have observed earlier, is a way of reasserting that we are not disgusting. Here the separation takes the form of a denial or at least a deferral of mortality and decay. The self is being defined and secured through the rejection and expelling of the revolting other. But with bodily waste and body-as-waste, 'it is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled.'[90] In the exchange above, Hamm and Clov lament the impossibility of separating from their revolting materiality. (In reference to Calvino's observations, it is worth noting that Hamm has trouble urinating, as mentioned earlier). Like Mephistopheles always in hell, they are always in time, immersed in existential filth as Nagg and Nell are in material filth. The only escape is to 'think of something', to immediately resort to the Cartesian fiction of mind over matter, to take comfort in the myth of human will and rationality as superior and conquering the bodily, material, and debased.[91]

Adorno points out that 'Endgame is the true gerontology' where old people are literally thrown into the trashcan.[92] I return to my earlier question on both Clov with the flea and Nagg and Nell with the dustbins: are the characters revolting and dehumanised *because of* their association with revolting matter or are they dehumanised and objectified *and so* relegated to the sphere of revolting objects? I

---

[85] Anna McMullan lists references to World War I, the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Irish famine and Biblical flood as among the 'accumulated corpses of history [that] haunt the stage […] sedimented in the deteriorating bodies' of the characters. *Performing Embodiment in Samuel Beckett's Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 44.

[86] Stanley Cavell reads the enclosure as Noah's ark in which they have survived a second flood. 'Ending the waiting game: A reading of Beckett's *Endgame*' *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[87] Morrison argues, 'We associate the lowest ranks of any society with filth.' *The Literature of Waste,* p. 104.

[88] Italo Calvino, 'La Poubelle Agréée', *The Road to San Giovanni*, trans. Tim Parks, qtd. in ibid., p. 31.

[89] Ibid., p. 31.

[90] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror,* pp. 3–4

[91] This is similar to the flea infestation occurring after Clov drops the telescope, discussed earlier. Similarly, the spotting of the rat is immediately followed with a prayer to god. Revolting objects are often offset and juxtaposed by cerebral, spiritual, disembodied things or exercises, maintaining the opposing relationships between humanist binaries of mind/body, subject/object, spiritual/sensory.

[92] Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame'*, p. 142

raise this question not to answer it but to use it as a connecting link with other instances in the specific historical context where revulsion, disempowerment, and dehumanisation/objectification are interwoven or confused, where the constructedness of equating the "low" with filth is continually elided which begins to be taken as natural. A similar self-erasing rhetoric occurs in the context of concentration camps where the lack of washing facilities 'prevented prisoners from washing themselves properly, thus turning them literally into what they had been figured as rhetorically: filthy.'[93] This points to the materialisation of revulsion from an ideological weapon to a material, affective, and sensory stink, filth, pollution, and rot because of being read as at once naturally emanating from bodies deemed sub/nonhuman as well as/and hence the befitting fate of these bodies, as is the case with Nagg and Nell's dwellings. Reading living beings like the flea, Nagg, and Nell as revolting objects ironically allows the categories of revulsion and objectness to emerge as weaponised attributions by the humanist subject, channelling post-war resonances and critiquing the operations of power that normalise these as intrinsic and natural. Any tracing of which came first, the filth or filthiness, cause or fate, is thus rendered impossible or insignificant by its use as a weapon in guarding the anthropocentric borders of the pure, uncontaminated human subject.

Conclusion

The consideration of revolting objects and material revulsion, I argue, moves beyond and reinvigorates the critical preoccupations with *Endgame*'s "emptiness" or with nonhuman phenomena and events within scholarship on Beckett's material imagination that overlook specific objects. The material diminishment of the play draws attention to what is present, the material decay, infestation, and waste. Revolting objects channel Beckett's own revulsion and critique of post-war humanism and associated ideas of human exceptionalism, mastery, and anthropocentricism in general. Through both these encounters, revulsion emerges as a strategy of dehumanising the revolting other, withdrawing power and humanity, and fortifying oneself against disgust and (mortal) decay. While Nagg, Nell, Clov, and the flea are not traditional objects, they evoke an orientation of revolting objectification from the central authority, Hamm. The lens thus bares both revulsion and objectness as weaponised constructions to fortify the clean, central subject and its claims to power over those deemed as nonhuman/subhuman other. The analysis established the various contours and characteristics of theatrical disgust — contagion, transformation, weaponization, and its circular relation to objectification, where being deemed less human both stems from an attribution of revulsion and makes one revolting. As humanity

[93] Morrison further points out, 'The use of "showers" with which to gas the Jews in death camp was the ideal trope to suggest how Germany could be made clean by their elimination.' *The Literature of Waste,* p. 242. In the *Endgame* world, there is no rain to wash away revolting objects and no exit from the existential disgust of mortality.

emerges as an attribution like revulsion in Hamm's bunker, I showed that this has pertinent resonances with the political, post-war context.

The attention to revolting objects makes interventions into the breadth of dialogues on the play, thus establishing the potential of this lens to disturb and reinvigorate entrenched approaches to reading canonical writers. *Endgame* harnesses the contaminating, weaponised, and existential presence of revolting objects as the ultimate other to and interrogation of the borders of the traditional conceptions of the human. The analysis establishes revolting objects as prominent presences in and fertile lenses for mid-century drama, situating the play within the context of post-war humanism, existential thought, and their conceptions of the human.

VIAN'S *THE EMPIRE BUILDERS*

Boris Vian's *The Empire Builders* was first performed in Paris in 1959, the year of the writer's death, and in London in 1962. While his name does not 'immediately leap to mind' when considering post-war theatre,[1] it has nonetheless become one of the most famous in his oeuvre as well as an abundantly recognised (albeit relatively understudied) fixture of the Theatre of the Absurd, following Martin Esslin's designation. Vian's own pacifist and anti-war sentiments inform the play's attack on both the shrinking overseas French empire and the 'bourgeois confidence in its seemingly all-powerful literary canon',[2] anchoring the still undefined absurdist theatre of the late 1950s within the politically oriented landscape of post-war *literature engagée*.

The play follows a bourgeois family unit with a father, a mother, their daughter, a maid who periodically and inexplicably flee their home upon hearing an unidentified noise, moving to increasingly smaller apartments and losing both their belongings and memory. They are accompanied by the silent and menacing presence of the schmürz who is a passive recipient of the characters' incessant and almost unconscious blows, kicks, stabs, and slaps.[3] Only the daughter, Zenobia, resists others' amnesia and violence against the schmürz. As they frantically gather their belongings and retreat each time they hear the noise through the only escape route which goes upstairs to dwellings with fewer rooms and amenities, they leave behind both possessions and family members till the father and the schmürz are the only ones left at the top.

I explore the play's portrayal of the undefined presence of the schmürz as a revolting object. Appearing variously as thing, a phenomenon, a hybrid creature, a dehumanised person, or a dematerialised object, the undefinable and silent 'object-character'[4] was received as a 'compassionate pulp'[5] at best and a 'hulking mass of bandages and rags'[6] at worst in the play's initial reception. Its indefinability has led to many varied interpretations from political to existential: it is read variously as

---

[1] Charles Stivale, 'Of Schmürz and Men: Boris Vian's Les Bâtisseur d'empire'. *Cincinnati Romance Review* 7 (1988), n.p.
[2] Ibid.
[3] I consciously digress from the first two acts of the play in not capitalizing the schmürz to acknowledge it as a designation and/or a collective noun rather than a name. In the third act, the play does not capitalize the schmürz, perhaps pre-empting the army of 'schmürzes' that enters (58). I also digress from critics who use 'he', 'his' etc and use 'it' instead for the same reason.
[4] Gary L. Johnson, 'Characters Kick Schmürz', St. Cloud State University, *The Chronicle*, November 21, 1969, 1644. p. 3 https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/chron/1644 [accessed 14 April 2024].
[5] Clive Barnes, 'The Theater: An Image of a Man's Life' *New York Times,* Oct. 2 1968, p. 34. https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/theater-image-mans-life/docview/118208782/se-2. [accessed 14 April 2024].
[6] Johnson, 'Characters Kick Schmürz', p. 3.

embodying death, God, atomic bomb, or people from French colonies.[7] Such incomprehensible presence/absence was not unfamiliar to the late modernist stage, with counterparts in Beckett's Godot or Ionesco's once-human rhinoceroses. What sets the schmürz apart, I argue, is that its ontologically nebulous status harbours a concrete affective orientation of revulsion and disgust. I explore how the revolting object performs an embodied reminder of the violent and ritualistic processes of othering that constitute and define the human subject. In so doing, the uncategorised but revolting, silent object exposes several networks of domination — anthropocentric, bourgeois, colonial, patriarchal and theatrical — revealing one as entwined with the other. Moving across the playtext, selected productions, and reviews, I begin by discussing the schmürz's undefinable status and then focus on the networks of power and violence that the schmürz as a revolting object exposes. Using revulsion as a necessarily hierarchical object-encounter, I move on to interrogating the material, scenographic, and sensory aspects of the revolting object as it performs sensory jostling on the modernist stage. In approaching the schmürz as a revolting object, I hope to show its fecundity as a simultaneously absurd and deeply political presence, one that reimagines material revulsion as both a critique as well as a theatrical harnessing of inscrutability, othering, and 'cruelty'.[8]

Defining the Schmürz

The opening stage directions describe the schmürz, as the family climbs up into their new home:

> *Already, in the corner, the Schmürz is waiting. Its limbs are swathed in bandages, it is dressed in rags. One of its arms is in a sling. It is holding a walking stick in its free hand. It limps, bleeds, and is ugly to look at. It cowers in its corner.*[9]

The opening scene is heavily auditory: the audience hears the *bruit*, that is the undefined noise, and Zenobia's scream. The schmürz is the only presence and with no visual source of the noise, a connection is established with the bloodcurdling sound that elicits aversion, fear, and flinching from the beginning. The noise attaches itself to the only signifier in an empty stage which is itself disturbing, 'ugly' and repugnant to look at. Even before the action begins, the two unpleasant yet undefined sensory

[7] See Martin Esslin, *The Theater of the Absurd* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 228; Johnson, 'Characters Kick Schmürz', p. 3; Barnes, 'The Theater', p. 34; Laurence M. Porter 'Family Values: Decoding Boris Vian's Les Bâtisseurs d'empire', *Studies in 20th Century Literature*, 21.2, 399–415 (p. 399) https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1425.

[8] Here I am using the word 'cruelty' both literally and in the Artaudian sense, which I explore in detail in the last section.

[9] Boris Vian, *The Empire Builders,* trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London: Methuen, 1971), p. 8. Subsequent references will occur as in-text page numbers.

phenomena are linked in an unknown way. The play opens with uncomfortable, disorienting, and disturbing sensory materials, setting the stage for the schmürz's increasingly revolting presence.

As the play progresses, the limping, bleeding figure is periodically abused in a habitual, customary manner, as the parents and maid beat it, spit on it, strangle it. The violence is framed as an almost unconscious instinct rather than a deliberate act stemming from rational forethought and culminating into a coherent response, like a thoughtless, Sisyphean ritual. While this description of a fragmented, mutilated, bleeding, and dismembered body evokes a distinctly human, or at least *living* being's experience of pain and suffering, its immobility, silence, and absence of expressions of pain when it is being attacked suggest an object-like passivity and deadness that can scarcely be attributed to even a living nonhuman creature, much less human. Going back to the opening stage directions, the curtains open to a stage that is 'empty of people' (7) and as the family starts spilling in one by one, the schmürz is present 'already, in one corner' (8). The directions then make clear that the schmürz is not a person, or at least not in the same category as the (other) people of the play. If the schmürz was once human or an undamaged thing, we never see it. It variously appears as a cadaverous figure, dead or undead rather than alive, an *informe* thing (per Bataille),[10] or a feral 'caged and bullied tiger'[11] fixed only in its tortured and odious corporeality. From the outset the schmürz is associated with the physical, embodied *consequences* of violence and pain and divorced from its *experience* of it. While we do witness its brutalisation, the lack of response diverts attention to the revolting aftereffects of having endured pain and away from the tragic ordeal of undergoing violence. Its relentless abuse is frozen into a disturbing picture amidst the unfolding theatrical action, becoming a noun rather than a verb. As the violence and pain are reduced to their materiality and given a lack of reaction from both the victim and the perpetrators, the schmürz appears just as revolting as pitiful, if not more.

The schmürz is represented as a pained body rather than a body in pain, a revolting object over a violated (and thus pitied) subject. This is further clear from the origins of its name. Michel Rybalaka explains:

> Created around 1957 by Ursula Kubler [Vian's second wife], it quickly became common in the Vian household to designate someone you didn't like or something that opposed you. Among the expressions used, there was: "Holy Schmürz!", "schmürzerie", "he's pretty schmürz, that

[10] See Menninghaus, *Disgust,* p. 343.
[11] Clive Barnes, 'The Theater', p. 34

> guy", etc. It was the sound of the word rather than its meaning (derived in all likelihood from the German *Schmerz* and *Schmutz*) that struck Boris Vian.[12]

For a silent figure, the name was ironically chosen by Vian largely for its phonetic properties.[13] Combining two German words, *Schmerz* meaning pain and *Schmutz* meaning filth, its coinage further stresses the unpleasant, soiled, and 'ugly' (8) aspects of pain embodied by the bleeding schmürz. While the witnessing of this pain might evoke pity, the absurdity of an uncannily human-seeming body (and a human actor) behaving as if not human, neither registering pain nor evoking remorse or indeed any reaction in the abusers, upstages the pity to become confusing, disturbing and (thus) repugnant, as I explore later.

In the first act, Zenobia asks her parents why they have to share a space with the schmürz, pointing directly at it:

> ZENOBIA. [. . .] *that* wasn't there!
> FATHER. What wasn't there?
> ZENOBIA. *That!*
> *(she points at the motionless schmürz)*
> *There is a very long silence.*
> MOTHER (*carefully*). Zenobia, my dear child, what are you talking about?
> FATHER. Zenobia, you'd better lie down and rest.
> […]
> MOTHER. You can see quite well there's nothing here.
> *(she goes up to the schmürz and attacks it viciously)*
> You can see quite well. *(She is panting.)* (11)

Variations of the above quoted domestic tussle and contradictory acknowledgement and denial repeat throughout the play and have at the centre the question, what is the schmürz? if indeed it is something. The schmürz is not only ontologically ambiguous — living or object, person or beast, human or nonhuman — but also does not sit squarely within larger social networks in relation to the family. Is it their possession, a parasite, a displaced inhabitant, a piece of furniture, or absolutely nothing? One thing

---

[12] Michel Rybalka, *Boris Vian: Essai d'interprétation et de documentation*, qtd. in Alexandra Lukes, 'Critical Listening: Boris Vian's Play *Les Bâtisseurs d'empire Ou Le Schmürz'*, *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature*, 65 (2019), 138–163 (p. 157).

[13] While the readers would be aware of the word, the spectators never hear it as it only appears in stage directions. The second part of the title, *The Schmürz,* was only added later to *The Empire Builders,* presumably to rectify this. Lukes, 'Critical Listening', p. 157.

we are sure of is its unwantedness which is entwined with its repugnance. As discussed elsewhere in this chapter, revulsion both begets and is begotten by ontological ambiguity, the flouting of subject-object hierarchies and boundaries. In this sense, the violence and disempowerment suffered by the schmürz both stem from and cause revulsion: it is beaten, spat on, and stabbed because of its disgusting otherness to well-defined subjects and objects; simultaneously, it is made disgusting by the incessant brutality. This is evident in its particular form of revulsion being associated with wounds, pain, and violence. This overlap that the revolting object produces is a feature of the schmürz's straddling of the category of human and object, its both-ness or neither-ness, which is inseparable from its dehumanisation. As Mel Y. Chen argues, '[o]ne form of what is understood as dehumanization involves the *removal* of qualities especially cherished as human; at other times, dehumanization involves the more active *making* of an object'.[14] The parents exercise both these forms by actively attacking the schmürz, removing any expression of life, and by tacitly denying even its presence, let alone its ability to feel pain. Its revolting presence is then deeply entwined with both dehumanising violence and ontological instability (itself inherent in dehumanisation). During a large part of the play, however, we see the schmürz in a hybrid state between these two poles, that is, the point *after* the removal of human qualities and *before* its absolute reduction to an object.

That the schmürz is not always an object is seen in its affinity with an equally undefined and unpleasant presence, the *bruit* that periodically terrorises the family and drives them away. The noise revitalises and animates the schmürz, '*the only one not frozen still*' (23) while the others are '*frozen into immobility*' (45) before they bolt for safety. In all the productions I have encountered, the schmürz is performed by a *human* actor and not an object, who frequently enacts small movements such that we aren't given the comfort of deeming it an object. As the schmürz is activated by another less material presence that evokes a different kind of intolerance and aversion, its animatedness and objectness emerge as either fluctuating and situation-dependent or mediated and biased. In other words, the schmürz either oscillates between subject and object, or its ambiguous being is a matter of our mediated access to it, refracted through the parents' approach to it.

While the schmürz's ontology is fluctuating, material revulsion is the only certainty of this "character". On the surface, the play seems to stage the revolting object without staging revulsion, which is deferred to the audience. While the characters' responses to the schmürz vary, they all overlap in constructing it as an inferior and debased object through expressions of abhorrence, hatred, aversion, avoidance, or pity. The family seems aware of its presence — the father, mother, and maid, Mug, go to great lengths to assault it or resist contact with it, while simultaneously ignoring its presence. However,

[14] Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 43, emphasis original.

turning a blind eye can be read as a strategy of dealing with the unbearable, unwanted, and revolting. Violence and avoidance being classic disgust reactions show that the characters register and even construct the schmürz's revolting embodiment, despite or *through* their denial. The contradictory coexistence of awareness and denial points to their role in constructing the schmürz's revulsion and the denial of the consequences of their actions.

The second act begins with the family in a smaller apartment than before with the schmürz still present:

> *[…] in an even more ghastly state than before […] bandaging itself with some filthy old rags, paying special attention to a bleeding wound on one of its legs from which it occasionally flicks away the flies with a rag*. (26)

It seems less immobile than before and at one point, it drags itself to block the passage downstairs that Zenobia wants to take. When she offers it a glass of water, its response is described in terms significantly different from act one: 'With a quick movement, *as if striking with a claw,* it knocks the glass away' (29, emphasis added). The flicking of flies, dragging, and clawing all seem to construct the schmürz as animalistic, bestial, or creature-esque, in other words a step above an object in the ontological hierarchy. The very increase in mobility and even a degree of volition and gaining of faculties of a living thing (it is described as 'highly amused' at Zenobia's inability to return at the end of the act, 45) seem to go hand in hand with an increase in its filthiness and repugnance: it has festering wounds, wrapped in filthy rags, and attracting flies. This establishes its ontological liminality and instability as central and even entwined to its revolting materiality. The final act (which I explore in detail in the last section) shrouds the schmürz in darkness and the play ends with the father's ostensible recognition of the schmürz's humanity. Through the three acts, the schmürz shuttles across objectness, animality, and humanness, as also across being recognised, avoided, denied, and feared; it is fixed only in its ontological unfixity and decaying, wounded, and repugnant corporeality.

Despite seeming arbitrary, the schmürz's status does not oscillate in complete randomness, given that it is rooted in the stable presence of revulsion. Certain factors make the schmürz more or less animated. As explored, it "unfreezes" upon hearing the noise and Zenobia's exit further causes it to emote. Similarly, in the 2018 production at Theatre L'impertinent, Mug's challenging of the father's authority and storming off animates the schmürz, making it move and sit up from its prostration. The next time we see the schmürz sit up and crawl more animatedly and uncannily like a wounded creature

is when Zenobia exits, never to return.[15] Furthermore, in the last act in this production, the schmürz is almost squatting and makes much more life-like movements. It slowly gets up and stands erect, hunchback and then taller than the father, provoking him to shoot. While in the playtext the schmürz remains relatively passive, this production makes overt the fear of contamination and contagion associated with disgust. The schmürz shadows the father and follows him in close proximity with a menacing expression, conveying a progressively threatening sense of anger, inescapability, and perhaps revenge. The father presents it with objects 'as if placing offerings on an altar' of an angry god or an idol come to life (56). There is a pervasive sense that it is the father's very recognition (and avoidance which entails recognition) that ultimately breathes life into the schmürz.

We see that a diminishment and challenge to the parents', specifically the father's, authority or security (be it through other characters or the menacing noise) reinvigorates the schmürz. Conversely, an exercise of their power further objectifies it. Their attacks and violence freeze it into complete immobility, nonresponse, and passivity while a threat to the authority of the central subject or any chink in the bourgeois humanist armour activates it. Humanity or 'lifeliness'[16] and its associated attributes (animacy, volition, sentience) emerge as a limited resource, at once antithetical to and contingent on objects and objectness in the Dupont house. Not only does being more of one entail being less of the other but, if the characters occupy one position the schmürz invariably occupies the other. As Chen has shown, within the 'animacy hierarchies' only privileged few are granted the status of a subject.[17] The schmürz's usual silence and immobility makes it a vessel for attribution of the aesthetic-moral judgement of disgust, revealing both objectness and disgust as not intrinsic but weaponised attributions, arguably to justify violence, as I explore in the next section. Humanness, subjecthood or animacy then emerge as matters of attribution or recognition. While the schmürz as a revolting, unstable being is forever denied privileged subjecthood, it is nonetheless an ever-present amorphous other to the central subjects and a circumscribing limit to their subjecthood.

It might seem tempting to conclude that it is the schmürz's attempts at 'lifeliness' that makes it disgusting or at least contribute to the abhorrence elicited from the Duponts. However, its very unresponsiveness, an attribute ostensibly associated with object-being, that becomes an object of aversion and disgust, as I will discuss later. We can draw a straight line from its ambiguous status to its embodied disgust, however, a simplistic correlation vanishes when we attempt to attribute revulsion squarely to either humanness or objectness. It is this very murkiness rather than transgression (as is the case in revolting objects in *Endgame*) that produces and to a degree stems from its revolting presence.

---

[15] *Les bâtisseurs d'empire ou le schmürz* by Boris Vian, Théâtre L'impertinent, Nice, December 2018, dir. Guillaume Morana.
[16] Chen, *Animacies,* p. 28.
[17] Ibid., p. 13.

The subject of authority — the father and by proxy, the mother — finds the various claims to centrality (the patriarchal, bourgeois, and as I explore in the next section, colonial/racial) entirely dependent on their position in the humanist hierarchy. As argued in my discussion on *Endgame,* revulsion becomes a weapon to maintain and police distance and separation from "inferior" and *other* states of being: the primitive, the dehumanised, the animalistic, the 'perversity of inanimate objects' and ultimately the revolting thing.[18] The undefined yet necessary otherness of the revolting object within these matrices of power invites readings of marginalisation, decentring, and specifically, violent disgust.

Revolting Object as the Other

- *'I didn't know': Disgust, Violence, Objectness*

Both the schmürz and the unbearable noise materialise intolerable truths to which the characters close their eyes and ears, the lengths they go to avoid or outrightly deny the unwanted, repugnant, and encroaching other. This repression of the revolting material reality embodied by the body-object both threatens the clean, pure veneer of the anthropocentric authority (bourgeois, colonial, or patriarchal) and forms the very basis of constructing this authority. Critics have framed the thematic preoccupation and more specifically, the family's relationship with both the *bruit* and the schmürz as a microcosmic colonial encounter and more broadly, an encounter with the racial, cultural, or even class other.[19] Furthermore, critics like Porter and Stivale have observed that the family's ever-shrinking size of apartments allegorise the disintegrating French empire as, 'the absurdity of the play suggests the absurdity of the colonial enterprise; and reality—the ever-shrinking size of the apartment (of France's colonial empire)—undercuts le Pére's claims to absolute authority.'[20] The brutalised schmürz as the oppressed "subject" or the subjugated other is always there, a passive recipient of their abuse but never acknowledged as a human subject.

Arijeet Mandal's discussion of *ghinn* or disgust as it correlates with colonialism and functions as a praxis of constructing and silencing the subaltern is worth discussing here. Mandal traces how the 'rise of the study of disgust and the spread of colonisation shared a correlative timeline' highlighting

[18] Porter 'Family Values', p. 400.
[19] Given the post-war French context, this can be extended to the mass atrocities fresh in cultural memory, like the Holocaust and German occupation, given also Vian's own antiwar position. These have largely been overlooked in commentaries on the play that tend to focus only on a colonial reading. For discussion on Vian's politics see Stivale, 'Of Schmürz and Men'.
[20] Porter 'Family Values', p. 401.

disgust as a 'pathway to marking, vilifying, criminalising, and discriminating against the Other'.[21] From beyond the aesthetic (as with its historical association with taste) and ethical (for instance, its association with moral or social taboos) resonances of disgust, Mandal concludes that disgust enfolds 'the bourgeoisie vision, the orientalist gaze, and the ideological manifestation of racial supremacism and colonial imperialism'.[22] Suggesting that disgust is at once an existential and a political emotion, he argues that it occurs when the 'order of things' is violated, be it physical or social. These two forms of out-of-placeness coincide in the schmürz as the colonial/racial other encroaching on both territory, being an unwanted presence perhaps in its own home (Zenobia repeatedly highlights its unwelcome presence within the home and family), and purity (being filthy).

Another layer of othering comes through the parents' performance of various bourgeois rituals. While the parents' faculties of memory, logic, vision, and rationality seem to dwindle when it comes to presences beyond their control or comprehension (the noise and the schmürz), the father nonetheless often takes great pride in his mastery over language as seen in his intellectual sparring with a neighbour as a self-fashioned philosopher. This is challenged by the two other characters with limited authority, Zenobia and Mug. Here, the performance of eloquence is a part of the various bourgeois myths and rituals that the parents insist on, from arranging Zenobia's marriage to the 'educational diversion' (35) of reminiscing and acting out memories of their betrothal, all the while bludgeoning the schmürz. Both Zenobia and Mug, overtly and implicitly, register a protest against attacking the schmürz. While Zenobia's takes the form of a full-blown outburst, Mug on the other hand as a subservient employee is ordered to hit the schmürz, which she does 'dispiritedly' (12) and eventually refuses before her exit. While she too denies its presence, it is evident that she does so on orders, with the father commanding, 'haven't you forgotten something?' (25) when she tries leaving without having hit the schmürz. Indeed, the brutality itself becomes absorbed in the ritual, with the father ordering Mug and inviting the neighbour to partake, to legitimise the act.

So, while the parents take pride in certain social performances that might fortify and separate them from the savage or primitive other, they are conveniently ignorant, innocent, and uncomprehending when it comes to the actual physical presence in their home and its embodied threat of contamination and debasement. The slow threat of the material and sensory epitomised in the revolting object against the refined, cerebral, and sophisticated spreads as the play progresses, reaching

[21] Mandal points out how the first mention of disgust as part of a serious study happened in Charles Darwin's work which relied on an example of a Tierra del Fuego native. Thus, 'even if the study of emotions as a field had already been established since Descartes and Spinoza, a special look at disgust only comes within the context of a colonial Other'. Arijeet Mandal, 'Ghiñn', *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry,* 9.2 (2023), 55–66 (p. 55).
[22] Ibid., p. 57.

its apogee in the deafening sound or flooding schmürzes of the closing scene. However, that this veneer of sophistication is not only fragile but performative is evident in both the progressive loss of their "empire", their house or the 'bastion of bourgeois status',[23] their denial of this loss, and the clear pretended selectiveness of their memory and perception.

The schmürz is tortured as the revolting other and simultaneously its presence is not acknowledged. This self-contradictory interaction is reminiscent of a child satisfying himself by hitting a table to "punish" it after stubbing his toe. However, here even that level of causality isn't available (we do not witness any harm or threat posed by it) and the only somewhat discernible provocation to violence is the material repugnance stemming from being an 'out-of-order' object.[24] This revulsion and offence to an invisible and unspecified 'order', I will now argue, is itself a construction and product of violence. In other words, the schmürz is made into a revolting object in order to justify the violence which in turn makes it progressively more revolting and objectified. Building on the earlier discussion on subaltern disgust, I offer Ditte Munch-Jurisic's conception of 'perpetrator disgust' as a potential thoroughfare through the contradictory construction of the schmürz as a revolting nonsubject and, for the parents, a nonobject, and its incessant punishment and brutalisation. Reading the interlocking of othering, revulsion, and objects reveals the paradox of violence as at once dehumanising and humanising the schmürz. This paradox in turn allows us to navigate without resolving the parents' oxymoronic approach to the revolting object.

Munch-Jurisic observes that 'perpetrator disgust' or the disgust and distress felt by perpetrators of violence (especially in the context of mass atrocities) at their actions has been read within philosophy and psychology as a form of embodied moral judgement indicating a sense of remorse or guilt. She argues against this 'moral approach to perpetrator guilt' asserting:

> When perpetrators feel disgust and distress in situations of mass atrocity, they are not inspired to moral action; on the contrary, they are primarily motivated to find ways to overcome their personal discomfort. The most common result is increased violence.[25]

In other words, disgust is not a sign of guilt but a fodder for further violence. Munch-Jurisic approach provides a fertile lens to weave the genocidal resonances of the schmürz's repulsion and repulsive

---

[23] Stivale, 'Of Schmürz and Men' n.p. Philippe Gautier suggests that 'the empire that falls is not a historical one but a linguistic one, an empire of words, upon which critical thought depends and which holds together the social and cultural values of the bourgeois target of Vian's critique.' qtd. in Lukes, 'Critical Listening', p. 161.
[24] Mandal, 'Ghiñn', p. 55
[25] Ditte Marie Munch-Jurisic, *Perpetrator Disgust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), p. 2. Subsequent references will appear as a bracketed 'PD' followed by a page number.

brutalisation. Discussing the case of the discomfort and disgust experienced by many high-ranking Nazi officers and its interpretation as a sign of a 'deep seated moral sense', she challenges this notion, arguing that rarely do these aversive feelings have a deterrent effect. On the contrary, 'such reactions are often *part of a process of brutalization* that leads to increased violence by the individual perpetrator. The ability to overcome disgust and discomfort becomes a key element in the actions of the perpetrator' (PD 90-91, emphasis added). The parents practice this overcoming by not showing any disgust at either the schmürz's fragmented "body" or their own actions. Perpetrator disgust emerges as 'not only a morally *impotent* emotion (in the sense that it does not impede atrocity) but also a morally *destructive* emotion (in the sense that it often helps facilitate a genocidal mentality)' (PD 92, emphasis original). In this light, I argue that the violence inflicted on the schmürz is a consequence and expression of perpetrator disgust which itself incites further brutalisation. As such, their violence is both a sign of being overcome by revulsion and a way of overcoming revulsion. The destructive and violent rather than moral and empathic approach to revulsion allows us to reframe the parents' simultaneous denial and brutalisation of the schmürz from a reading of guilt or remorse, and to navigate (even if not explain away) their absurd violence against an already destroyed, objectified, and revolting (non)object. In other words, their inexplicable violence is reframed here as a destructive rather than remorseful expression of disgust.

If disgust is a remnant of the perpetrator's humanity, it is also the 'final inhibition' or moral constraint against killing (PD 97). The play begins after this inhibition has been surpassed and after the object of violence has ostensibly been emptied of any redemption from revulsion and possibility of subjecthood. This reading allows us to place what is often read as unusual, abnormal, or absurd violence within discourses on other perpetrators and mass-atrocities, like the Holocaust that was fresh in cultural memory when the play premiered. Approaching their actions as ordinary and redirecting attention to the schmürz as a revolting object instead keeps the fascination with the perpetrator in check. In recognising this 'banality of evil' per Hannah Arendt's famous coinage, we are faced with a violence that is 'neither perverted nor sadistic [but] terribly and terrifyingly normal'.[26] She offered this as an antidote to the conception of Nazi perpetrators as mad, perverted, and *inhuman*. In this light, I suggest that objectness in the play's dynamic of brutalisation and disgust between the family and the schmürz is used not merely as a category to be inflicted on the revolting other but a quality appropriated to escape guilt. Despite the earlier pride in bourgeois rituals and human(ist) faculties of articulation, critical thinking, and even memory (the mother boasts, 'I pride myself on my good memory', 32), the Duponts conveniently abandon these and the privilege of subjectivity that they guarantee when it comes to the schmürz — they don't see or remember it, they have no awareness of hitting it (an action akin to habit or reflex, heavily associated with animal or subhuman instincts) and have no discernible rationale for

[26] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 276.

doing so. Neither reasonable nor able to reason, the parents' abandoning of all that they pride as reliable separators between the self and the disgusting other can be read as a strategy of performing objectness.

Their denial and pretended memory loss is then less a guilt response of not being able to face unbearable facts (which would imply a recognition of wrongdoing) and more a strategy to absolve guilt by making themselves less human and closer to objects in the ontological hierarchy, by wilfully surrendering some faculties of humanness. Eunjung Kim echoes Arendt in arguing that viewing perpetrators of violence as nonhuman animals renders them 'outside the human, thereby preventing a closer look at the human contexts in which violence and nonviolence occur'.[27] The 'inhuman' conception of violence then to a degree absolves the perpetrators of responsibility, intentionality, and guilt; such acts need to be positioned inside the human, or *'in human'*.[28]

The inhuman approach to violence and playing up of objectness is appropriated as a strategy in the parents' performance of ignorance and denial. Munch-Jurisic has observed that post-war perpetrator on trial would often 'diminish […] his own role and responsibility, playing up […] his own ambivalence sometimes with an apologetic attitude' (PD 12). While this diminishment and ambivalence is evident throughout the play in the parents' strategic objectness, it finds the most overt reflection in the final scene. The father's apology and refrain of 'I didn't know' (58) has been read as a recognition of the colonial other's humanity and by extension his own guilt.[29] However, if we read the last scene as staging a perpetrator on trial, having to face the consequence of his actions in the form of an army of schmürz or a deafening noise demanding answers (Vian offers two ends, which I discuss in the last section), the apology and claim to ignorance is exposed as an extension of weaponised and appropriated objectness. It emerges as a fragile performance that cannot sustain itself once there is no audience to validate it (as everyone who legitimises the father's anthropocentric authority by attacking the schmürz or participating in bourgeois rituals, be it the neighbour, wife, or servant, has died or left). The repercussions of his actions now invade the small attic in the form of sensory flooding, harnessing the unrestrained force of wild matter and more specifically, the contaminating potential of revolting materiality (discussed in this chapter's introduction): the threat that disgusting objects possess of both physical pollution and of 'disturb[ing] identity, system order'.[30] There is no escape above, either physically through the staircase or hierarchically on the ontological ladder that maintains his subjectivity and purity at the cost of the schmürz's.

[27] Eunjung Kim, 'Unbecoming Human', p. 297.
[28] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies,* qtd. in ibid., p. 297.
[29] See Porter 'Family Values', pp. 401-402.
[30] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

The performance of objectness as a perpetrator strategy finds its parallel in the critical insistence on the unusual, absurd, and irrational violence, which further entrenches the parents within the 'inhuman'. By highlighting the ordinariness and banality of their evil and locating it within the human, we redirect attention to the debased other, the revolting object, instead of the disgusted subject. Additionally, this also resists critical temptation to absolve the Duponts of guilt by reading their disgust as a sign of morality and strategic objectness as a sign of ambivalence. This allows their objectification and brutalisation of the schmürz to retain its colonial, genocidal, and post-war resonances, thus establishing theatrical presences of revolting matter as a generative approach for reading violence and different modes of othering. It also reinvigorates critical dialogues on the absurdity and inscrutability of disgust: both in the parents' inexplicable disgust-inducing violence and the schmürz's own ontological and affective illegibility, towards which I now turn.

- *'I find they all look alike': Revolting Opacity*

It is not only the parents who are passive to their violence and ostensibly oblivious to the schmürz's presence, the schmürz itself has no reaction to the range of torture it bears. While my conception of the schmürz as a revolting *object* might offer some answers, I would like to further complicate this idea by extending my earlier discussion on its ontological ambiguity. As discussed, the schmürz is not so much a fixed and stable object as it is an ever-fluctuating other to the central subjects. It is objectified and dehumanised, allowing it to be reminiscent of oppressive modes of objectification and weaponization of disgust. While we may not be able to answer what it truly is, we can use this unanswerability itself as an object of study. As such, I would like to layer the earlier argument of its disgust being entwined with *ontological* ambiguity and add the idea of *affective* ambiguity and inscrutability as producing material revulsion. Xine Yao proposes the idea of 'unfeeling' or being 'disaffected' to describe affective modes and performances that 'fall outside of or are not legible using dominant regimes of expression'.[31] This extends to 'the case of people who do not react to insult or injury, […] seen as "contemptible" and just as bad as their aggressor' (D 13). The schmürz's lack of response to the violence inflicted by the family can be seen as a mode of being disaffected and a break from 'politics of recognition' (D 11). Yao connects the radical potential of being disaffected and inanimate to the idea of oriental inscrutability, a 'racialised mode of unfeeling'.[32] Without any pain responses, the schmürz emerges as

[31] Xine Yao, *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), p. 11. Subsequent references will appear as a bracketed 'D' followed by a page number.
[32] 'Darwin footnotes the challenge of extracting ethnographic knowledge about emotions from Indians through the network of the British colonial apparatus due to their "habitual concealment of all emotions in the presence of Europeans."' (D 15). This difficulty or refusal to recognise is also reflected in the father's comment, 'personally, I find they all look alike' (18). The scholarship on the play also reflects a preoccupation with the difficulty of reading the schmürz.

an 'inexpressive racialised alien' (D 26) and is ironically audacious and revolting in its inanimacy, something that contradicts the usual idea of animacy and liveness as transgressive for both objects and the objectified and dehumanised other. The Duponts perhaps continue to attack the schmürz because of its aversive disaffectedness, attempting to bludgeon a reaction out of it. This points to the frustrating opacity of the other which reflects the perpetrator's anger back at them: the anger is deflected from the lack of reaction to pain (as even animals react to pain) towards the perpetrator's own inexplicable action that produces nothing.

In expressing this 'right to opacity',[33] the schmürz is at once the marginalised other and a nonhuman other. Yao contends that this opacity is either demonised (and in this case, deemed disgusting) into 'adversarial alien unassimilability' or neutralised into 'compliant passivity' (D 173). We see both these constructions in the schmürz's audacious 'unfeeling' (D 3) which is either neglected or read as abhorrent (by the parents, and to a degree by us, as is evident in the critical interest in and even disgust at the schmürz's inscrutability) even if the violence is generously posited as unconscious. The nonreactive other is hard to read in multiple senses, making affective inscrutability work in tandem with disgust as they both resist sympathy. Oriental inscrutability and opacity are reflected in the little to no sympathy elicited in the representation of the schmürz. Its revolting presence and lack of expression of any pain or suffering interferes with both sympathy and affective intelligibility. Certain moments between Zenobia and the schmürz that bait us into reading a comradery between them further end up entrenching its obdurateness and disgust. Zenobia offers the schmürz water behind her parents back, inviting us to read a degree of affinity between these two disempowered characters. At one point the stage directions read, 'Each time that ZENOBIA speaks, no one listens to her' (20) which parallels the schmürz's silence. The 2018 production at Theatre L'impertinent further enhances this affinity by staging a moment of physical levelling that might establish a momentary bond or allyship. During Zenobia's distraught recap of their constant flight, the schmürz slowly crawls up to her. She later sinks to the ground crying, now at the same level and in close proximity to the prostrated schmürz. While momentarily heart-warming, the fragility of the moment soon becomes apparent. Just as the offered glass of water is knocked away, this scene is quickly followed by the mother's beating of the schmürz. This further emphasises that Zenobia's feelings, pity or residual humanity as opposed to other characters' cruelty cannot sustain; it will not be the rescuing force that the audience hopes for and that her actions bait. Instead, she will remain helpless in the face of similar forces that denigrate the schmürz. Similarly, the schmürz is described as 'highly amused' (45) when Zenobia is unable to return home from her visit to the neighbour (a fatal visit, as we might safely assume). It neither responds to

[33] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 194.

expressions of pity nor expresses it, alongside (and thus) being a revolting and inexpressive object that does not itself elicit sympathy.

Munch-Jurisic warns against confusing moral conflicts and even pity towards victims with 'prosocial motivation'. The complex amalgam of disgust, numbness, and (self)pity in perpetrators is not necessarily moral as the 'focus of attention is fundamentally self-centred' (PD 96). Zenobia's 'monstrous pity' (PD 92) is similar to the vilification of the disaffected (D 3) wherein her act places an imperative on the schmürz to react sympathetically and thus retrospectively become a worthy "subject" of sympathy. However, its response is not merely disaffected but actively resistant, making it even less worthy and more brutish (with its 'claws') and loathsome. Its position does not change when it is pitied by Zenobia, recognised as a subject, or even apologised to by the father. This reflects both the earlier break from 'politics of recognition' (D 175) as also the impotence and hollowness of sympathy. Just as not reacting to violence is seen as abhorrent and 'contemptible' (D 13) so is the resistance to acts of pity. Zenobia's pity then only works to further render the schmürz as an ungrateful other, an illegible and revolting thing unworthy and incapable of sympathy and humanity.

Yao argues that the marginalised lack the 'privilege to be unsympathetic' which always requires forfeiting their status as subjects.[34] Given the lack of the luxury of being unsympathetic while remaining a subject, the schmürz's portrayal is assertively nonhuman. Alongside my earlier argument against the inhuman or object-like approach to the parents, here I argue against the human conception of the schmürz. I echo Yao's resistance to the usual 'they feel too' argument which attempts to affirm the 'humanity of minoritized subjects'. This approach challenges 'the need for the demystification of that inscrutability in a bid for […] legibility' (D 175). The schmürz perhaps to its own detriment unwaveringly holds on to its object-like opacity, oriental inscrutability, and subaltern disgust. The audacious resistance to the politics of recognition, assimilation, and sympathy confuses and disgusts the characters and audience alike. This mode of representing the disgusting, brutalised object offers a critique of our willingness to accommodate violence as compared to our resistance to comprehend the other that embodies revulsion.[35] In essence the schmürz is to a degree being punished for not being the aesthetic victim or the dignified oppressed whose tragically beautiful pain might lift it out of its dehumanised and revolting state. The schmürz's revolting thingness, with its polysemous associations that I have been exploring, echoes the subaltern resistance to the politics of recognition, to inclusion

[34] 'one must be recognized *as* sympathetic to be deserving of sympathy from those with the agency to sympathize. Thus, the marginalized do not have the luxury of being unsympathetic without forfeiting the provisional acceptance of their capacity for affective expressions and, therefore, the conditional acceptance of their humanity' (D 4, emphasis original)

[35] As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, Kant argues that disgust is the only emotion that cannot be aestheticized. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, p. 141.

through performing a more legible, transparent, sympathetic, and aesthetic form of subjecthood/victimhood.

A 2014 Turkish production makes a significant intervention in the schmürz's staging — the schmürz is portrayed as not only human but as a *feeling* woman.[36] She responds to the inflicted brutality by shrieking, crying, struggling, writhing in pain, and thus evoking pity. The pitiful schmürz is correspondingly less revolting. Conversely, its nonrevolting, responsive presence makes it sympathetic (given also the gendered nature of violence) and more human. This further reveals the nexus between revulsion, ontology, and pity at work in the play. As the revolting object is made aesthetic and human on stage, the audience's alliance with the perpetrators (as the only human characters in the text) is replaced with alliance and sympathy with the schmürz. Once free of suggestions of complicity, the audience are absolved of the critical labour of accepting, recognising, and reading the other, as the schmürz is already assimilated into the schema of recognition. The subversive potential of disaffectedness is dissipated through a recognisable, aestheticized, and "clean" victimhood that neither obstructs sympathy nor legibility. This absence of revulsion reveals the critical potential of revolting objectness as well as the revulsion-enabling modes of unfeeling.

Reading the schmürz's revolting thingness through the ideas of colonial/racial disgust, perpetrator violence, and disaffectedness reveals that revulsion, violence, and otherness all have a mutually sustaining and contingent relationship, blurring causality and chronology. As with Clov's regressing body in *Endgame,* here too the schmürz is simultaneously othered because it is revolting and its otherness (marginalised, ontological or affective) makes it revolting. Its revolting presence makes it unsympathetic and less (than) human while its resistance to pity (through affective opacity) in turn make it a revolting non/human other. This framing highlights the limits of claiming the schmürz's humanity as done by some critical and creative interventions (seen above), since these attempt to "resolve" its revolting inscrutability and fluctuating being, only to make it adhere to dominant matrices of recognition. Antithetically, the discussion shows the fecundity and importance of counterintuitively retaining both the schmürz's unfixed state as well as its revolting presence. This avoids more comfortable arguments of 'it isn't that disgusting' or 'it feels too' that leave dominant frames of feeling, being, and othering unexamined.

The End(s) and Scenographic Revulsion

The last act brings the father to the topmost room with no escape except for a window. We only hear the mother's voice who, like Zenobia, is unable to make it into the room and presumably dies. He is

[36]*The Empire Builders* by Vian, Edinburgh Fringe, 2015 dir. Aleksandar Popovski

alone with the schmürz in a very small room, with barely any space to look away from the repugnant body-object. There is a sense of shrinking of environment making proximity materially immanent and inevitable. This sense of walls closing in is literalised in a 2016 German production where, instead of fleeing from their home, the Duponts wrestle with moving walls shrinking in.[37] The father launches into a verbose, delusional tirade, perhaps to make up for the lack of physical distance by establishing a linguistic one, asserting that he is still a different and superior "species" than the silent schmürz. He becomes progressively more detached from reality, his identity crumbles, his memories seem like someone else's, he questions, 'Who am I?' (48) recapping basic biographical facts to anchor himself, and when nothing works, he puts on his reserve military uniform.[38] His uniform betokens 'his artificial but coherent identity',[39] highlighting a precarious and drowning subjectivity desperately looking for the shore. As this feeble hanging on to identity also proves inadequate, he resorts to attacking the schmürz: his tried and tested mode of establishing an identity and subjecthood by repressing and subduing the revolting, unwanted, and ontologically inferior being. However, there is no one else to witness and legitimise his violence, as he admits, 'When there were several of us, I retained the absolute majority. Now that there are no longer several of us, I feel my majority slipping away' (54). The disintegration of his sanity and self gives way to self-doubt as he begins reflecting on the meaning of the noise whose presence he has denied till now. Eventually this recognition extends to the schmürz, giving an impression that 'he understands for the first time that he is confronted by something more than an object' (53). From denying its presence, he starts avoiding it. He shoots the schmürz which does not move and then places objects in front of it as tribute. Porter observes that 'to recognize the colonised victim as a person calls one's own role as occupier into question'.[40] In a rare moment of lucidity, the father states:

> It is a mistake to devote to pure speculation time that could more profitably be occupied in examining realities which are tangible, audible, in one word, accessible to our organs of perception. For there are moments when I wonder if I am not simply playing with words. (52)

Like a culprit on trial, he 'speaks as if in defence of himself' (53) reaching his crisis point as he struggles between two opposite stances: proclaiming innocence, 'these hands are spotless'; 'I have no accounts to settle' and begging forgiveness, 'I didn't know… Forgive me' (58). The recognition comes only too late as self-awareness is soon followed by self-destruction and he jumps from the window.

---

[37] *Die Reichsgründer Oder Das Schmürz* by Vian, Ballhof Eins, Hanover, 2016, dir. Tom Kühnel.
[38] Vian anticipated the end elsewhere, 'a uniform, that's an initial project for a coffin.' *Cahier 19,* qtd. in Porter, 'Family Values', p. 412.
[39] Ibid., p. 412.
[40] Ibid., p. 412.

Whether a production chooses the unbearable noise that drives the father to jump to his death or the army of schmürzes that spread, take over, and finally "contaminate" the father with overpowering disgust (most I have encountered choose the former), he is at the mercy of sensory flooding which further augments the sense of walls closing in. Like the abhorrent sound that is both 'an invitation and a deterrent to listening',[41] so is the disgusting object at once enticing and repulsive. Furthermore, the audience, seeing the same abhorrent sight and hearing the same unbearable noise as the family, is also subjected to the repulsive sensory attack. Given my focus on revolting materials, I will only be discussing the former, however, the unpleasant noise like the schmürz contributes to the sensory revulsion of the play. Lukes discusses the similar position occupied by the family and audience in their exposure to the sensory assault and contends that 'our exposure to the unbearable Bruit and the unexplainable Schmürz aims to destroy our critical faculties, bringing us close to the Artaudian crisis point, where we risk falling out the window along with the father.'[42] As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, Artaud views theatre as a 'plague' inducing a 'crisis' in the audience.[43] Using contagion-adjacent vocabulary of infection, cure, and purification, he sees it as an instrument of 'cruelty' aimed at jolting the masses out of their complacency. Theatre should 'appeal directly to the audience's nervous system and bypass reason and consciousness'[44] such that 'instead of making the stage and auditorium two closed worlds, without possible communication, [it] spreads its *visual and sonorous outbursts* over the entire mass of the spectators'.[45] Applying Lukes's discussion on the noise to objects, the play shows what happens to individuals when they are subjected to a revolting object by exposing the audience to that very object.

Compelled to face unwanted and unbearable material and reality, the characters and audience find themselves in a thick environment of uneasiness and discomfort, one that is pregnant with anticipation and threat. The discomfort created by disgust is both conceptual and sensory, as discussed above, spanning across ideas of mass violence and intrusive sensory materialities. I repurpose Lara Kipp's exploration of scenographic violence for my reading of scenographic revulsion in the play. She also uses ideas of Artaudian theatricality and explores how thematic violence of war, genocide, and dehumanisation might be expanded or subverted through scenography.[46] Similarly, in Vian's play, the interest in and harnessing of revulsion thematically through violence, (collective) trauma, dehumanisation, and humiliation, is expanded and amplified scenographically through spatial

[41] Lukes 'Critical Listening', p. 138
[42] Ibid., p. 155
[43] Antonin Artaud, 'Theatre and the Plague', p. 259.
[44] Ibid., p. 143
[45] Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards, (United States: Grove Press, 1958), p. 86, emphasis added.
[46] See Lara Maleen Kipp, 'Between Excess and Subtraction: Scenographic Violence in Howard Barker's Found in the Ground', *Sillages Critiques*, 22, (2017), 1–9 (p. 2).

cramming, discomfort, and auditory and visual disgust. The staging of revolting object and scenography can then be seen as an Artaudian endeavour where disquieting images are intensified by spatial and auditory elements. This imposes a sensory assault to the audience who are already confronted with a complex and absurd narrative and various uncomfortable and inscrutable stage phenomena and encounters — from the schmürz's mysterious being, the spatial precarity and threat, linguistic confusion, to the family's inexplicable violence, denial, and memory loss. The Artaudian cruelty of scenographic disgust both allures and repels, at once disturbing us and jolting us with the urgency and insistence that revolting things embody; it leaves us 'riven with potentially contradictory and violent emotions in response to clusters of meaning that overwhelm, strain and distort our self-perception.'[47] The overwhelming and urgent scenographic, material, and sensory revulsion that the play choreographs for both the family and the audience cruelly deny 'a place to hide from the collective European memory of the Holocaust',[48] colonial violence, and mass atrocities as well as comforting hermeneutic certainties.

A specific moment in the 2018 French production of the play directed by Guillaume Morana at the Theatre L'impertinent (briefly mentioned earlier) demonstrates this theatrical harnessing of scenographic disgust. At one point, the stage is split in half through lighting, cladding the schmürz in darkness, with only the human characters clearly visible. The human-nonhuman split is made overt optically, which has two significant implications. Firstly, the lighting materialises for the audience the characters' wilful blindness to the schmürz. This extends the boundary-dissolving sensory assault discussed earlier, that levels the human characters and audience, perhaps implicating the audience in the characters' violent denial. Secondly, this partial obscuring adds to the schmürz's revulsion. Mystery, uncertainty, and looming threat add to the affect of disgust, contributing to its fascinating and attractive aspect. The schmürz is frequently partially obfuscated in the production, most overtly through bandages but also often through lighting. The production adheres with the stage directions in making it lurk in shadows in the last scene, which adds to its insect-like creepiness, eeriness, and uneasiness that its specific brand of revulsion evokes, blocking our interpretive, empathetic, and intrusive visual access.

The physical scenographic revulsion in stagings of Vian's play, I argue, complements, heightens and gains vitality from the thematic and figurative revulsion in the playtext. This production, by layering light onto the visual and sonic materials (present in the text) of revulsion, reveals the play to be pregnant with and receptive of a range of scenographically revolting affordances. Light is added to the repertoire of revolting and 'cruel' materialities harnessed by the play that seep into and draw on thematic and narrative revulsion. I hold that this figurative, scenographic, and sensory permeation of disgust is owed in large part to the schmürz. Its disgusting objectness provides a model for, or more

[47] Lara Kipp, 'Between Excess and Subtraction', p. 3.
[48] Ibid., p. 8.

figuratively infects like the Artaudian 'plague', the sensory and scenographic material worlds of the play across stage renditions.[49] A 1969 American production directed by Fred Breckenridge similarly tapped into the levelling force of sensory threat, as a review observes, 'the audience finds itself surrounded by a persistent knock coming from all sides of the auditorium, as if our own personal Schmürz were hulking nearby.'[50] The use of scenographic interventions to jolt the audience who, like the characters, have no place to hide reflects the capacity of staged revulsion to respond to the numbness and 'habitual complacency' of a 'shell-shocked society'.[51] Perhaps we might take a bold and optimistic leap and suggest that the schmürz mobilises the material world of the play as a revenge of the non/human other, weaponizing revulsion as 'cruelty' against the humans (characters and audience) for once. Lastly, the interplay between interruption and invitation embodied by revolting objects through their sensory assault is augmented by and permeates into other scenographic elements (sound, light, space) and also comes to characterise our comprehension and interpretive efforts.

Conclusion

The schmürz emerges as a simultaneously absurd, political, and existential presence. Its ontological ambiguity reveals violence and othering as at once stemming from revulsion and making it revolting. I explored its oscillation between objectness and lifeliness, recognising its role as an amorphous other and circumscribing limit to the human characters the in Dupont household. Its necessary otherness, repugnance and lesser (than) human status invite readings of marginality and violence in the play, specifically colonial brutality, Holocaust atrocities, bourgeois hypocrisy, and larger oppressive systems that dehumanise, diminish, and objectify the marginalised body. The ontological and affective ambiguity of the schmürz-as-other and the interlocking of othering, revulsion, and objects reveal the paradox of violence as at once dehumanising and humanising the marginalised other. This intervenes in subject-centric readings of violence by redirecting focus from the disgusted subject to the revolting object and the processes of objectification.

We see that the schmürz's revulsion and thingness mark certain limits for the *human* characters and audience/critics alike: we are unable to get *through* to the schmürz in terms of both sympathy and interpretive access. The discussion establishes theatrical presences of revolting matter as generative approaches for reading violence and different modes of othering. It further establishes the potential of a disturbing, uncomfortable, and (hence) critically overlooked lens to recover plays from critical obscurity by recognising their innovative use of objects and objectness.

---

[49] Antonin Artaud, 'Theatre and the Plague', p. 259.
[50] Johnson, 'Characters Kick Schmürz', p. 3.
[51] Ablett, *Dramatic Disgust*, p. 120.

CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION

This chapter explored both a category of and encounter with objects located specifically within the radically shifting aesthetic basis of theatre and changing notions of matters considered worthy of representation. It attempted to insert the often overlooked category of revolting objects within discussions of theatrical disgust as an affective, aesthetic, and political phenomenon. The introduction ultimately worked to identify specific aspects of revolting objects that are of interest to post-war modernist theatre — including their ironic fascination, demand for attention, "too real" presences, and politicised shock effect.

The lens of revolting objects brought Vian's relatively understudied play into dialogue with Beckett's critically established one. It established a critically generative connection between a canonical and a forgotten play, speaking to revolting objects' varied presence and their ability to recover works from scholarly obfuscation. The chapter used these two post-war plays to recognise the complex and imposing presence of the revolting object in (later) modernist theatre. As the rejected and the abhorred, its presence reveals the operations of power and the borders of the subject, along with imbibed notions of order, purity, rationality, and hierarchies. Using the overlooked critical approach of revolting objects establishes the value of discomforting, avoided, or abhorred presences and phenomena more broadly, and situates the lens within the turn towards negative values and affects in humanities.[52]

The lens specifically allows engagement with mechanisms of othering and violence, revealing revulsion and objectness as constructions and ways of withdrawing power. Importantly, it reveals the potential of the frame of revolting objects to critique narratives of objectification. This approach redirects attention to the object of violence, redressing the critical preoccupation with the perpetrator (Hamm or the Duponts). The chapter further establishes the value of using this lens as a method of engaging with representations of violence, disgust, and other disturbing thematic or physical matters, as well as its potential, as a largely overlooked presence, to recover critically obscured plays.

[52] This spans from engaging with negative feelings to failure and boredom studies. See Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Kaye Mitchell, *Writing Shame: Gender, Contemporary Literature and Negative Affect* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019); Adriana Mica, Anna Horolets, Mikołaj Pawlak, Paweł Kubicki (eds.) *Routledge International Handbook of Failure* (New York: Routledge, 2023); Josefa Ros Velasco (ed.) *The Culture of Boredom* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

Revolting objects' contaminating and converting power also does not leave this thesis immune, making objects and subjects draw closer in this chapter as compared to the previous two. Accordingly, the use of revolting objects as a lens of analysis reveals the overlaps between the patterns of anthropocentric domination over both the human and nonhuman other. Revulsion as at once a sensory, existential, and political object-encounter emerges as a generative and overlooked methodology for (post-war) theatre and comes to characterise our own encounters with revolting theatrical objects in its coalescing of fascination and avoidance.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to engage with the representations of objects, in their various renditions, in western modernist theatre. Covering a range of genres within modernism — from naturalism to avant-garde, tragic/comedy to problem plays — and an equally wide array of objects — pistols, flowers, trash, and bodies — I highlighted both the breadth of object presence in early–mid twentieth century text and stage and its deep mark on the fabric of the play, the cultural moment, meaning-making, creative possibilities, and reception. I identified a gap in present approaches to modernist plays that critically elide the imposing and fertile subject of objects, object-encounters, and objectness. This leads to a corresponding impoverishment of not just play analysis but also methodological frameworks that emerge as subject-centric and thus limited. The chapters attempted to redress this gap by identifying categories of objects and using them to design new methods of engaging with playtexts and their productions. The thesis revealed both the critical and theoretical fecundity of objects to contradict established readings and approaches to specific plays and to invite and synthesise interventions from different fields, weaving object and nonhuman studies with identity and cultural theories. I identified three categories — misbehaviour, fidgeting, and revolting objects — establishing them as at once the most theatrically pervasive and critically generative forms of objects, encounters, and objectness in modernist plays. Engaging with these categories through their presence in specific plays, relevant literature and theory, and their channelling of adjacent fields evokes connected ideas, themes, and dynamics that are prevalent concerns for theatre and modernist studies.

The chapters are rooted, to a degree, in a self-critical understanding of objects, at once relying on and poking holes in their traditional definition as the other to a subject. While the study hints at hybridity and disloyalty to these categories, it still largely approaches objects as objects and subjects as subjects. This acknowledges the critically productive avenues offered by a somewhat traditional and stable definition of objects, when used in service of engaging with underrepresented and overlooked forms of agencies, practices, philosophies, and ways of being. It similarly allows for a re-evaluation and even reclaiming of negative values — unruliness, alterity, passivity, nonresponse, unreadability, failure, and disgust — widely seen as associated with objectness and nonhumanity. However, in the very honing in on the (negative) qualities attached to the object, it becomes an ontologically unmoored category, marking instead a loose set of qualities and orientations both fictional and readerly, theatrical and receptive, even if these maintain a separation from desirable human qualities. From the carnation's unruly spillage, Laura's rebellious unaction, to Nagg and Nell's discarded bodies and the schmürz's stubborn nonresponse, the thesis reveals the constructedness of negative values attached to objects. It

thus acknowledges the sensory and symbolic temptations of objects to question dominant and central ideas that circulate within and outside theatres. This has significant overlaps with and applications for present and future directions within disability, feminist, and queer studies and newly emerging fields of anti-work aesthetics, animal studies, death studies and other fields that attempt to interrogate and reclaim negative values.

Equally, my consideration of body-objects, quasi-subjects, and object-becoming — as materialised in Hedda's body, the manuscript-child, the fetishized Dove, regressing Clov, and the schmürz — points to the possibilities beyond comfortable categories. As seen above, the category of objectness looks forward to without fully embarking on a method of extremely radical disrespect to ontological fixity and where that might lead us in theatre studies. As my discussions on Laura and the Duponts show, object-being and *in*humanity can often be a strategy to escape narrow ableist and patriarchal definitions of subjecthood or to evade accountability for violent and oppressive acts, respectively. Objects and objectness can signal both oppressive constraints and utopic freedom, depending on the appropriating *subject's* own position within the ontological spectrum. As briefly mentioned elsewhere, this also hints at the limits of the material turn in humanities where the category of liveness is being expanded, and cast as unquestionably desirable and sought, highlighting the need for a similar expansion of the category of objects and objectness, that is, recognizing deadness as well as liveness, passivity as well as agency, *in*animacies along with animacies. This is only possible if the negative co-ordinates of object category are rendered visible and interrogated. The thesis undertook this visibilisation and interrogation, opening a door for a dedicated redressal, levelling, and overturning that lie beyond its scope and have significant implications for other disciplines, mentioned above.

The thesis drew on and established the potential of an object-oriented approach to make visible and often critique the processes of making a subject central — gendered, racial, narrative, or critical. In interrogating the preoccupation with *who* we read/watch in theatre and who makes meaning instead of the *what,* the project redirected attention to crevices, slippages, and interruptions opened by objects. These subvert objects' own assigned role as 'reliable positive outward manifestation of successful subjects dominating the world'.[53] Objects in all three forms discussed emerge as subversive not only in themselves but also in the possibilities they hold for the characters, allowing a (re)discovery of paths overlooked by codified methods of analysis. One prominent path they open is for women characters like Hedda, The Dove, and Laura, allowing them to shrug the critical forces of repetitive psychologising, merging with the writer's biography, and moralistic taming as victim, villain, or subversive hero. Objects also challenge the theatrical container — narrative, fictional role, closure — providing moments

[53] Kyle Gillette, 'Poor Things: Naturalistic Props and the Death of American Material Culture in Sam Shepard's Action'. *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre,* 25.2 (Spring 2013), p. 4.

of critical distance and recognition of entrenched subject-centric lenses. Across these three chapters, the particular mode of object-encounter or objectness does not remain restricted within the living rooms of Tesmans or Windermeres, Wingfields or Duponts. Like Wilde's carnation, each lens can be drawn beyond the fictional space and come to characterise (or colour) our own engagement with the play — misbehaving materials encourage us to disobey conventional modes of reading/seeing, fidgeting on stage might make us restless and fidget-y, and affective paradox of revolting objects evokes our own simultaneous fascination and aversion. The thesis revealed objects' ability to shape not only relations within the plays, but also relationships with and to the plays, affecting orientations, encounters, and understandings beyond the fictional.

My research in the second and third chapters followed the specific object/encounter to engage with two critically neglected plays — Barnes's *The Dove* and Vian's *The Empire Builders*. This speaks to the potential of an object-oriented approach to recover obscure, under-researched, and under-staged plays, bring them (back) into discourse, and discover their critically generative and exciting use of cross-ontological interactions. Modernist plays, beyond getting lost in interdisciplinary crossovers between theatre, literature, and modernist studies (as shown in the introduction) further find themselves at the mercy of rapid and profound changes in artistic standards, traditions, and tastes. From the constant eruption and taming of modernist "badness" or disobedience against established conventions that was central to the movement's self-definition (chapter one) to the naturalist rupture of art's equation with beauty (chapter three), the perpetually shifting sands of artistic conventions and merit as well as modes of reception and critique often meant a burial of some innovative, experimental, and discursively rich and unmined representations of subject/object matters. My engagement with *The Dove* (with no professional run) and *The Empire Builders* (very scarcely considered in its own right, subsumed within Ionesco's and Beckett's brands of absurdism) shows that the crafting of specific, untapped object lenses renders possible a recovery of texts that are seen as having limited theatrical merit, addressing their unique attention to objects. This, by extension, challenges our present understandings of artistic merit and what is considered a "worthy" subject of criticism, asserting the value of a constant reassessment and renewal of these standards through new critical interventions.

Beyond these examples, the other plays explored are canonical and well-established within theatre scholarship. This focus on canonical plays provided a suitable starting point to craft a new approach to modernist theatre, while simultaneously gesturing towards a move beyond the canon (through the two understudied plays discussed above). This thesis can be seen as a *demonstration* of developing and executing object-led methodologies, to extend these to different periods, genres, spaces, and notably, to identify and engage with new categories of objects, encounters, and objectness. While an endeavour at changing the subject of study within and around modernist theatre, this thesis looks beyond its own scope and subject. The various discoveries and frameworks of this thesis are not specific

to delineated contexts. These invite productive interventions from different periods and genres of theatre and a rediscovery of understudied plays and productions. Similarly, as shown above and throughout the thesis, interrogating the very focus of this study, that is, the traditionally defined object, provokes productive links across various ontologically diverse alterities and corresponding fields, acknowledging that certain strategies of subversion can draw affinities across ontologies and disciplines. Undertaken against the backdrop of the current planetary crises, begun during the Covid pandemic, and ended during an ongoing genocide, this research is indirectly cognizant of and hopes to contribute to future interdisciplinary interventions on: the repercussions of remaining entrenched in harmful, exclusionary definitions of the subject, the dearth of attention to the nonhuman environment and its unequal consequences, the weaponization of object(ification) and withdrawal of subjecthood, and the erasure and brutalisation of those deemed less (than) human. The critical tools developed and used here have significant applications for nonhuman fields like animal studies, Anthropocene studies, ecocriticism, and environmental humanities as well as for continued interrogations of identity and marginality, discussed above.

Going back to Bill Brown's example from A.S. Byatt's *A Biographer's Tale* to which I have frequently returned across the thesis:

> Fed up with Lacan […], a doctoral student looks up at a filthy window epiphanically thinks, "I must have *things*." He relinquishes theory to the world at hand: "A real, very dirty window, shutting out the sun. A *thing*"[54]

This study can perhaps be seen as demonstrating the value of looking through a dirty window instead of a clean one, to retain its obtrusive disobedience to transparency, engendering an incomprehensible absorption, longing, and distraction from the "real world", and materialising a fecund filthiness. Like Byatt's protagonist, in focusing and unfocusing our vision, peering intermittently and 'binocular'-ly at the sun and at the window,[55] *through* the object and *at* it, we perhaps manage to synthesise attention to both the view and method of our looking. The object served as both the subject and lens of my analyses, debunking the need for dissipating contradictions that lie at the heart of this nebulous yet solid entity as the only way to forward for object studies. Holding its contradictory methodological and represented, material and signifying, textual and theatrical, tamed and subversive presences makes the object a perpetually renewing category and establishes its complex presence as critically and creatively indispensable yet inadequately addressed within theatre, modernist, and literary studies. The modernist

---

[54] Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory' *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001), 1–22 (p. 2).

[55] Bert O. States *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (United States: University of California Press, 2023), p. 8.

theatrical attentiveness to objects then at once stages and provokes a change in the subject of attention, critique, visibility, and knowledge.

Bibliography

Ablett, Sarah J. *Dramatic Disgust: Aesthetic Theory and Practice from Sophocles to Sarah Kane* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020)

Adorno, Theodor W. and Michael T. Jones, 'Trying to Understand Endgame', *New German Critique* 26 (1982), 119–150

Ahmed, Sara. *What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019)

Ahmed, Sara. 'Happy Objects' in *The Affect Theory Reader* eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 29–52

——*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 82–100

—— *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006)

Alhasan, Ghadeer and Dina Salman, 'Cross-Species Contagion in Beckett's *Endgame* : A Posthumanist (Re)Reading', *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture*, 68.3 (2021), 154–177

Alter, Jean. *A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theater* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990)

Andrzejewski, Alicia. 'Blue Roses and Other Queer Energies in Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie', *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, 16 (2017), 37–57

Anon., 'The Contributor's Club: The Tyranny of Things' *Atlantic Monthly*, 97 (May 1906) https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1906/05/the-tyranny-of-things/638334/ [accessed 20 Aug, 2022]

Archer, William. 'Introduction' in Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler: A Play in Four Acts*, trans. Edmund Gosse and William Archer (The Floating Press, 2009)

Ardis, Ann L. *Modernism and Cultural Conflict: 1880-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

Arendt, Hannah. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Penguin, 2006)

Artaud, Antonin. 'No More Masterpieces' in Maggie Barbara Gale and John F. Deeney, eds. *The Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 260–265

—— 'Theatre and the Plague' in Maggie Barbara Gale and John F. Deeney, eds. *The Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 252–260

Babbage, Frances. *Adaptation in Contemporary Theatre: Performing Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019)

Babcock, Granger. '*The Glass Menagerie* and the Transformation of the Subject', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 14.1 (1999), 17–36

Baldwin, Thomas. 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm', *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings* (London: Routledge, 2004), 247–270

Barad, Karen. 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* 28.3 (2003), 801–831

Barish, Jonas A. *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981)

Barnes, Clive. 'The Theater: An Image of a Man's Life' *New York Times,* Oct. 2 1968, p. 34. https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/theater-image-mans-life/docview/118208782/se-2 [accessed 14 April 2024]

Barnes, Djuna. 'The Dove', *At the Roots of the Stars: The Short Plays* ed. Douglas Messerli (LA: Sun & Moon Press, 1995), 147–161

Barstow, Susan Torrey. '"Hedda Is All of Us": Late-Victorian Women at the Matinee', *Victorian Studies*, 43.3 (2001), 387–411

Bartlett, Neil. *Who Was That Man: A Present for Mr. Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent's Tale, 1988)

Bates, Julie. *Beckett's Art of Salvage: Writing and Material Imagination, 1932-1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017)

Baudelaire, Charles. *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays* trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1995)

Bay-Cheng, Sarah. 'Famous Unknown: The Dramas of Djuna Barnes and Gertrude Stein' in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama* ed. David Krasner (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 127–141

Beard, Toten. 'American Experimentalism, American Expressionism, and Early O'Neill' in *A Companion to Twentieth Century American Drama* ed. David Krasner (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 53–68

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1974)

Beckett, Samuel. *Endgame* (United Kingdom: Faber & Faber, 2009)

Beckson, Karl. 'Oscar Wilde and the Green Carnation', *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, 43.4 (2000), 387–397

—— *Oscar Wilde: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1970)

Begley, Varun. 'Objects of Realism: Bertolt Brecht, Roland Barthes, and Marsha Norman', *Theatre Journal*, 64.3 (2012), 337–53

Belsey, Catherine. 'Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text', in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change* ed. Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Newton (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 45–64

Benjamin, Walter. 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century' in Howard Eiland, Michael W. Jennings, eds. *Walter Benjamin Selected Writings: 1935-1938* (Massachusetts: Belknap Press, 2002), 32–49

—— 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), 217–251

Bennett, Jane. 'Powers of the Hoard: Further Notes on Material Agency', in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics of Objects,* ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Brooklyn NY: Punctum Books, 2012) 237–270

——*Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010)

Bentley, Eric. *The Life of the Drama* (London: Methuen & Co, 1965)

Berghaus, Gunter. *Theatre, Performance, and the Historical Avant-Garde* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005)

Bernstein, Robin. 'Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race' *Social Text* 27.4 (2009), 67–94

—— 'Toward the Integration of Theatre History and Affect Studies', *Theatre Journal*, 64.2 (May 2012), 213–230

Bigsby, C.W.E. 'Entering the Glass Menagerie' in *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams* ed. Matthew Roudane (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 29–44

Björklund, Jenny. 'Playing with Pistols: Female Masculinity in Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler', *Scandinavian Studies*, 88.1 (2016), 1–16

Bleeker, Maaike, Jon Foley Sherman, and Eirini Nedelkopoulou, eds. *Performance and Phenomenology: Traditions and Transformations* (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2015)

Bloom, Harold. ed. *Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie* (New York: Facts On File, 2007)

Bommer, Lawrence. 'Chicago Theater Review: THE GLASS MENAGERIE (Mary-Arrchie at Theater Wit)', *Stage and Cinema*, 2013 <https://stageandcinema.com/2013/05/31/glass-menagerie-mary-arrchie/> [accessed 17 October 2022]

Bottoms Stephen J. '*The Glass Menagerie* Commentary' in *A Student Handbook to the Plays of Tennessee Williams* ed. Katherine Weiss (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014)

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000)

Boxall, Peter. "There's No Lack of Void': Waste and Abundance in Beckett and DeLillo.' *SubStance* 37.2 (2008), 56–70

Bradbrook, Muriel Clara. *Ibsen, the Norwegian: A Revaluation* (London Chatto & Windus, 1966)

Brandt, George W. *Modern Theories of Drama: A Selection of Writings on Drama and Theatre 1850–1990* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998)

Brazil, Kevin. 'Beckett, Painting and the Question of "the Human"', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 36.3 (2013), 81–99

Bristow, Joseph. 'Introduction', *Oscar Wilde: 'The Importance of Being Earnest' and Related Writings* (London: Routledge, 1992)

Brown, Bill. 'Thing Theory' *Critical Inquiry* 28.1 (2001), 1–22

——*A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003)

Cahill, Ann J. *Overcoming Objectification: A Carnal Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2011)

Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage, 1991)

Cardullo, Bert. 'The Blue Rose of St. Louis: Laura, Romanticism, and "The Glass Menagerie"' *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, No. 1 (1998), 81–92

Carlson, Marvin. 'French Stage Composition from Hugo to Zola' *Educational Theatre Journal*, 23.4 (1971) <https://doi.org/10.2307/3205746> 363–378

—— 'Semiotics and Nonsemiotics in Performance', *Theatre Semiotics: Signs of Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990)

——*The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003)

Cather, Willa. 'The Novel Demeuble', *Not Under Forty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1936)

Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015)

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002)

Chapman, Hanah A. and Adam K. Anderson, 'Understanding Disgust', *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences,* 1251.1 (2012), 62–76

Chaudhuri, Una. 'Maria Irene Fornes' (interview) in *Speaking on Stage: Interviews with Contemporary American Playwrights*, eds. Philip C. Kolin and Colby H. Kullman (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 98–114

——*Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (United States, University of Michigan Press, 1997)

Chen, Mel Y. *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012)

Chisholme, Dianne. 'Obscene Modernism: Eros Noir and the Profane Illumination of Djuna Barnes', *American Literature*, 69.1 (Mar., 1997), 167–206

Clark, Susan R. 'Djuna Barnes: The Most Famous Unknown' in *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History*, eds. Kim Marra and Robert A. Schanke (USA: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 105–125

Connell, Katherine Ngaio. 'Objects in Human Drag: The Queerness of Object-Oriented Ontologies.' (Masters Thesis, OCAD University, 2016)

Critchley, Simon and Jamieson Webster*, Stay, Illusion! The Hamlet Doctrine* (New York: Pantheon, 2013)

Cronin, Anthony. *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Flamingo, 1997)

Cuny, Noelle and Xavier Kalck. 'Introduction', *Modernist Objects* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2020)

Dalton, Anne B. ''This Is Obscene': Female Voyeurism, Sexual Abuse, and Maternal Power in *The Dove' Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.3 (1993), 117–139

Davidson, Guy. and Monique Rooney. *Queer Objects* (New York: Routledge, 2019)

Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1986)

Dennis, Amanda. 'Introduction: Samuel Beckett and the Nonhuman', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 32.2 (2020), 151–160

Diamond, Elin. 'Deploying/Destroying the Primitivist Body in Hurston and Brecht' in *Against Theatre* eds. Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian, 2006), 112–132

—— 'Realism and Hysteria: Toward a Feminist Mimesis', *Discourse*, 13.1 (1990-1), 59–92

Die Reichsgründer Oder Das Schmürz by Vian, Ballhof Eins, Hanover, 2016, dir. Tom Kühnel

Dolan, Jill. ''Lesbian' Subjectivity in Realism: Dragging at the Margins of Structure and ldeology' in Sue-Ellen Case, ed. *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), 40–53

Drugeon, Marianne. 'Aestheticism on the Wildean Stage', *Études anglaises*, 69.1 (2016), 88–99

Durbach, Errol. 'The Apotheosis of Hedda Gabler', *Scandinavian Studies ,* 43.2 (1971), 143–159

Eco, Umberto. 'Semiotics of Theatrical Performance' *The Drama Review*, 21.1 (1977), 107–117

Elam, Keir. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Routledge, 1980)

Ellman, Richard. *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Vintage, 1988)

Ellmann, Maud. 'Jean-Michel Rabaté, Think, Pig! Beckett at the Limit of the Human', *Modern Philology*, 117.2 (2019), 127–132

Endgame by Samuel Beckett, Duchess Theatre, London 2010, dir. by Simon McBurney

——The Theatre on King, Ontario, 2016, dir. by Ryan Kerr

——dir. by Conor McPherson (UK: Blue Angels Films, 2000)

Endspiel by Beckett, Theater und Orchester Heidelberg, 2022, dir. Holger Schultze

Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014)

Evans, T.F. 'Shaw and Wilde', *The Wildean*, 8 (January 1996), 31–36

Farfan, Penny. *Performing Queer Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017)

——*Women, Modernism, and Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)

Feagin, Susan L. 'Where Hedda Dies: The Significance of Place' in *Ibsen's Hedda Gabler: Philosophical Perspectives,* ed. Kristin Gjesdal (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 48–70

Fin de Partida de Samuel Beckett, Andalusian Performing Arts Research and Resource Centre, Sevilla, 2005, dir. Pepa Gamboa and David Montero

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

Flint, Kate. 'Peter Walsh's Pocket-Knife' *Times Literary Supplement*, 5262 (2004), 12–13

Foldy, Michael S. *The Trials of Oscar Wilde: Deviance, Morality, and Late-Victorian Society* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997)

Fordham, Finn. *I Do I Undo I Redo: The Textual Genesis of Modernist Selves* (Italy: OUP Oxford, 2010)

Fornes, Marie Irene. 'Play: Fefu and Her Friends' *Performing Arts Journal*, 2.3 (Winter, 1978), 112–140

Forte, Jeanie. 'Realism, Narrative, and the Feminist Playwright – A Problem of Reception', *Modern Drama*, 32.1 (1989), 115–27

Fortunato, Paul L. *Modernist Aesthetics and Consumer Culture in the Writings of Oscar Wilde* (New York: Routledge, 2007)

—— 'Wildean Philosophy with a Needle and Thread: Consumer Fashion at the Origins of Modernist Aesthetics', *College Literature*, 34.3 (2007), 37–53

Fox, Ann M. 'Reclaiming the Ordinary Extraordinary Body: Or, The Importance of *The Glass Menagerie* for Literary Disability Studies' in *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama* ed. Kirsty Johnston (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 129–151

Frederick and Lise Lone Marker, 'The Airless World of Hedda Gabler' in *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler,* ed. Christopher Innes (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2003), 88–92

Fusillo, Massimo. *The Fetish: Literature, Cinema, Visual Art,* trans. Thomas Simpson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017)

Gagnier, Regenia. *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986)

Gale, Maggie B. 'Introduction: The Historical Avant-Garde' in *The Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 170–188

Galliene, Eva le. 'Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler'* in *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler,* ed. Christopher Innes (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2003), 72–74

Gardner, Lyn. 'Prop Flops: Why I Love It When Things Go Wrong on Stage', *The Guardian*, 3 July 2013, section Stage <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2013/jul/03/lyn-gardner-blog-theatre-mishaps> [accessed 15 May 2023],

—— 'We Need to Talk about Hedda: Why The National's Ibsen Shocker Isn't Sexist,' *Guardian*, January 17, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2017/jan/17/hedda-gabler-national-ibsen-sexist [accessed 24 February 2023].

Garner Jr., Stanton B. *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994)

—— 'Staging Things: Realism and the Theatrical Object in Shepard's Theatre', *Contemporary Theatre Review,* 8:3 (1998), 55–66

Garrington, Abbie. *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013)

Gay, Peter. *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy from Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (New York: Norton, 2008)

Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (United Kingdom: Yale University Press, 2020)

Gillette, Kyle. 'Poor Things: Naturalistic Props and the Death of American Material Culture in Sam Shepard's Action'. *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, 25.2 (Spring 2013), 91–106

Glavey, Brian. *The Wallflower Avant-Garde: Modernism, Sexuality, and Queer Ekphrasis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016)

Gontarski, S. E. ed. *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett: Volume II Endgame* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992)

Graff, Torsten. 'Gay Drama / Queer Performance?', *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, 46.1 (2001), 11–25

Grusin, Richard. ed., *The Nonhuman Turn* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2015)

Gunn, Olivia. 'Leaving the Theatre of Suffering: Two Endings—and a Color-Conscious Future?—for Hedda Gabler', *Theatre Journal,* 73.2 (2021), 189–207

Gupta, Pragya. 'The Glass Menagerie and Mirrored Identities' in Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie,* ed. Payal Nagpal (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2016), 161–167

Gupta, Tapati. 'Contemporising Ibsen in Bengal', *Academia.edu* <https://www.academia.edu/33338246/Contemporising_Ibsen_in_Bengal_Identity_Modernity_Culture_as_Represented_in_Bengali_Adaptations_of_An_Enemy_of_the_People_A_Dolls_House_The_Master_Builder_and_When_We_Dead_Awaken> [accessed 23 May 2024]

Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure* (London: Duke University Press, 2011)

——*Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020)

Halpern, Richard. 'Beckett's Tragic Pantry: Endgame and the Deflation of the Act', *PMLA* 129.4 (2014), 742–750

Hand, Richard J. and Michael Wilson, *Grand-Guignol: the French Theatre of Horror* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002)

Harman, Graham. 'Technology, Objects and Things in Heidegger', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 34:1 (2010), 17–25

Harris, Jonathan Gil and Natasha Korda, eds. *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

Harris, Jonathan Gil. 'Shakespeare's Hair: Staging the Object of Material Culture', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52 (2001), 479–491

Hedda Gabler by Henrik Ibsen, National Theatre, London, December 2016, dir. by Ivo van Hove

Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought* trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Perennical Classics, 2001)

——*Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008)

Higonnet, Margaret. ‘Suicide: Representations of the Feminine in the Nineteenth Century,’ *Poetics Today* 6 (1985), 103–108.

Howe, Irving. ‘Introduction: The Idea of the Modern’, *Literary Modernism* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1967), 11–40

Hulle, Dirk Van and Pim Verhulst*, The Making of Samuel Beckett's "En Attendant Godot"/"Waiting For Godot"* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2017)

Hunt, Elle. ‘Pair of Glasses Left on US Gallery Floor Mistaken for Art’, *The Guardian*, 27 May 2016, section US news <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/may/27/pair-of-glasses-left-on-us-gallery-floor-mistaken-for-art> [accessed 15 May 2023]

Hutcheon, Linda. ‘The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History’, *Cultural Critique*, 5 (1986), 179–207

Ibsen, Henrik. *Hedda Gabler and Other Plays*, trans. Una Ellis-Fermor (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1961)

Ingold, Tim. ‘The Textility of Making’, *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34.1 (2010), 91–102

Innes, Christopher. *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2003)

——*A Sourcebook on Naturalist Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2002)

James, Henry. ‘On the Occasion of Hedda Gabler’ in *Henrik Ibsen: The Critical Heritage* ed. Michael Egan (London: Routledge, 1972), 234–244

James, William. *The Principles of Psychology, Vol. 1* (New York: Henry Hold & Co, 1890)

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991)

Jay, Martin. ‘Drifting into Dangerous Waters: The Separation of Aesthetic Experience From the Work of Art’*, Filozofski Vestnik*, 20.2 (1999), 63–85

Jentsch, Ernst. 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny' in J Collins and J Jervis, eds. *Uncanny Modernity: Cultural Theories, Modern Anxieties* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 216–228

Jindrich Honzl, ‘Dynamics of the Sign in the Theater’ trans. Irwin Titunik, in Ladisalv Matejka and Irwin Titunik eds. *Semiotics of Art: Prague School Contributions* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1976), 74–93

Johnson, Gary L. ‘Characters Kick Schmurz’, St. Cloud State University, *The Chronicle*, November 21, 1969, 1644. p. 3 https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/chron/1644 [accessed 14 April 2024]

Kannenstine, Louis. *The Art of Djuna Barnes: Duality and Damnation* (New York: New York University Press, 1977)

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*, ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Kaplan, Joel. ‘Wilde on the Stage’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, ed. Peter Raby (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 249–275

Kent, Deborah. ‘In Search of a Heroine: Images of Women with Disabilities in Fiction and Drama,’ in Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch, eds., *Women with Disabilities: Essays in Psychology, Culture, and Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 90-110

Kim, Eunjung. ‘Unbecoming Human: An Ethics of Objects’, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 21.2–3 (2015), 295–320

Kipp, Lara Maleen. ‘Between Excess and Subtraction: Scenographic Violence in Howard Barker’s Found in the Ground’, *Sillages Critiques*, 22 (2017), 1–9

Kirby, Michael. ‘Nonsemiotic Performance’, *Modern Drama* 25 (1982), 105–111

Kistenberg, Cindy J. *AIDS, Social Change, and Theater* (New York: Garland, 1995)

Knapp, Bettina L. ‘The Reign of the Theatrical Director: Antoine and Lugné-Poë’ *The French Review,* 61. 6 (1988), 866–877

Knowlson, James. *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996)

——*Images of Beckett* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

Knutson, Sara Ann. ‘When Objects Misbehave: Materials & Assemblages in the Ancient Scandinavian Myths’, *Fabula*, 61.3–4 (2020) 257–277

Koprivšek, Nevenka. ‘Audience To Be’, *The Theatre Times*, 2019 <https://thetheatretimes.com/audience-to-be/> [accessed 22 May 2024]

Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Savoring Disgust: The Foul and the Fair in Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011)

Krasner, David. *A History of Modern Drama Volume I* (Germany: Wiley, 2011)

Krasner, James. *Home Bodies: Tactile Experience in Domestic Space* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010)

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, tr. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982)

Laan, Thomas F. Van. ‘Not Just Visual; Not Just Illustrative; Performance in Ibsen.’ *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen*, ed. Björn Hemmer and Vigdis Ystad (Oslo: Norwegian UP 1990), 51–63

Lahr, John. ‘A Misstep in “The Glass Menagerie”’, *The New Yorker*, 8 Oct. 2013 <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/a-misstep-in-the-glass-menagerie> [accessed 17 October 2022]

Lavery, Carl. ‘A Cave, a Skull, and a Little Piece of Grit: Theatre in the Anthropocene’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Theatre and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) 55–69

Lawrence, D. H. *Sons and Lovers* (London: CRW Publishing, 2005)

Les bâtisseurs d'empire ou le schmürz by Boris Vian, Théâtre L'impertinent, Nice, December 2018, dir. Guillaume Morana

Lesjak, Carolyn. ‘Utopia, Use, and the Everyday: Oscar Wilde and a New Economy of Pleasure’, *ELH*, 67.1 (2000), 179–204

Lester, Elenore. ‘Hedda — Frigid Woman or Life Bearer?’, *The New York Times*, 7 March 1971, section Archives [accessed 26 May 2021]

Levy, Lior. ‘Reading Ibsen with Irigaray: Gendering Tragedy in Hedda Gabler, *Ibsen Studies*, 17.1 (2017), 54–84

Lewis, Cara L. *Dynamic Form: How Intermediality Made Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020)

Lewis, Pericles. *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernism* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2007)

Lobdell, Nicole Catherine. ‘The Hoarding Sense: Hoarding in Austen, Tennyson, Dickens and Nineteenth Century Culture’ (doctoral thesis, University of Georgia, 2013)

Luckhurst, Roger. ‘The Weird: a Dis/orientation’, *Textual Practice*, 31:6 (2017), 1041–1061

Lukes, Alexandra. ‘Critical Listening: Boris Vian’s Play *Les Bâtisseurs d’empire Ou Le Schmürz’*, *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature*, 65 (2019), 138–163

Mandal, Arijeet. ‘Ghiñn’, *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry,* 9.2 (2023), 55–66

Mao, Douglas and Rebecca L. Walkowitz. *Bad Modernisms* (New York: Duke University Press, 2006)

Mao, Douglas. *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998)

Maratto, Scott L. *The Intercorporeal Self: Merleau-Ponty on Subjectivity* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012)

Martin, Randall. *Shakespeare and Ecology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

Marx, Karl. *Capital Volume 1,* translated by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1992)

Mayerson, Caroline W. ‘Thematic Symbols in “Hedda Gabler”’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 42.4 (November, 1950), 151–160

Mazis, Glen A. ‘Touch and Vision: Rethinking with Merleau-Ponty Sartre on the Caress’, *Philosophy Today*, 23.4 (1979), 321–327

McAuley, Gay. *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999)

McKinney, Joslin. ‘Empathy and Exchange: Audience Experience of Scenography’ in *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices* eds. Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 219–233

—— ‘Vibrant Materials: The Agency of Things in the Context of Scenography’ in *Performance and Phenomenology: Traditions and Transformations*, eds. Maaike Bleeker, Jon Foley Sherman, and Eirini Nedelkopoulou (New York: Routledge, 2015)

McMullan, Anna. *Performing Embodiment in Samuel Beckett’s Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2012)

McNamara, Brooks. ‘Scene Design: 1876-1965 Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg’, *The Drama Review*, 13.2 (1968), 77–91 <https://doi.org/10.2307/1144412>

Melville, Herman. ‘Bartleby’ in *Piazza Tales* ed. Egbert S. Oliver (New York: Hendricks House, 1962), 16–54

Mengesha, Lilian G and Lakshmi Padmanabhan, 'Introduction to *Performing Refusal/Refusing to Perform*', *Women and Performance* 29.1 (2019) 1–8 https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2019.1574527

Menninghaus, Winfried. *Disgust: Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (Albany: State U of New York P, 2003)

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012)

——*The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. A. Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1968)

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman* (New York: Dramatists Play Service Inc, 1980)

Miller, Susan B. *Disgust: The Gatekeeper Emotion* (Hillsdale: Analytic P, 2004)

Miller, William Ian. *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997)

Moi, Toril. 'Hedda's Silences: Beauty and Despair in *Hedda Gabler*', *Modern Drama*, 56.4 (2013), 434–456

——*Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Monks, Aoife. 'Human Remains: Acting, Objects, and Belief in Performance', *Theatre Journal*, 64.3 (2012), 355–371 <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2012.0082>

Morden, Robert. '"Disconnecting Something from Anything": Fetishized Objects, Alienated Subjects, and Literary Modernism' (doctoral thesis, York University, 2021)

Morrison, Susan Signe. *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethical Matter* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

Moshenska, Joe. *Feeling Pleasures: The Sense of Touch in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014)

Munch-Jurisic, Ditte Marie. *Perpetrator Disgust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023)

Nagpal, Payal. 'Introduction' in Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie,* ed. Payal Nagpal (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2016), xi–xlv

Nahm, Kee-Yoon. 'Props Breaking Character' in *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things* ed. by Marlis Schweitzer and Joanne Zerdy (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 187–199

Nazimova, Alla. 'Ibsen's Women' in *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler,* ed. Christopher Innes (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2003), 66–69

Nelson, Charles. ''Beautiful Untrue Things': Green Carnations and the Art of Dyeing', *The Wildean*, 48 (2016), 96–103

Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007)

Norseng, Mary Kay. 'Suicide and Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler"' (The Seen and the Unseen, Sight and Site, In the Theater of the Mind)', *Scandinavian Studies*, 71.1 (1999), 1–40

Noys, Benjamin and Timothy S. Murphy. 'Introduction: Old and New Weird', *Genre,* 49.2 (2016), 117–134

Olson, Liesl. *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Orlin, Lena Cowen ‘The Performance of Things in *The Taming of the Shrew*’ *Yearbook of English Studies,* 23 (1993), 167–188

Penwarden, Charles. ‘Of Word and Flesh: An interview with Julia Kristeva’ in Stuart Morgan and Frances Morris, eds. *Rites of Passage: Art for the End of the Century* (London: Tate Gallery Publications, 1995), 21–27

Perloff, Marjorie. *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986)

Pfarrer, Steve. ‘’Endgame’ Uses Live Actors and Puppets’ *The Recorder,* 3 November 2016. <https://www.recorder.com/Life/-Endgame--uses-live-actors-and-puppets> [accessed 13 January 2024]

Phelan, Peggy. *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (New York: Routledge, 1997)

——*Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993)

Plumb, Cheryl J. ‘Introduction: Djuna Barnes *The Dove’* in *Modern Drama by Women, 1880s-1930s: an International Anthology,* ed. by Katherine E. Kelly (London: Routledge, 1996), 299–302

Porter, Laurence M. ‘Family Values: Decoding Boris Vian's Les Bâtisseurs d'empire’, *Studies in 20th Century Literature*, 21.2, 399–415 https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1425

Prager, Sarah. ‘Four Flowering Plants That Have Been Decidedly Queered’, *JSTOR Daily*, 2020 <https://daily.jstor.org/four-flowering-plants-decidedly-queered/> [accessed 4 June 2023]

Puchner, Martin. *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002)

Quigley, Karen. *Performing the Unstageable: Success, Imagination, Failure* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020)

Quillard, Pierre. ‘On the Complete Pointlessness of Accurate Staging’ trans. Dan Rebellato in *The Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance*, ed. by Maggie B. Gale and John F. Deeney (London: Routledge, 2010), 163–165

Rabaté, Jean-Michel. *Think, Pig!: Beckett at the Limit of the Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016)

Rainey, Lawrence. ed., *Modernism: An Anthology* (United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons, 2005)

Ratcliffe, Matthew. ‘The Phenomenology of Touch’, *Feelings of Being: Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)

Rebellato, Dan. ‘Introduction: Naturalism and Symbolism: Early Modernist Practice’ in *The Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance*, ed. by Maggie B. Gale and John F. Deeney (London: Routledge, 2010), 6–24

Reckson, Lindsay. ‘Gesture’, *Keywords*, 2015 <https://keywords.nyupress.org/american-cultural-studies/essay/gesture/> [accessed 24 February 2023]

Reynolds, Nicholas ‘Introduction: What is a Thing?’ *Konturen*, 8 (2015), 1–7

Rich, Adrienne. ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision’, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979)

Richardson, Brian. '"Time Is Out of Joint": Narrative Models and the Temporality of the Drama', *Poetics Today* 8 (1987), 299–309

Rokem, Freddie. 'A Chair Is a Chair Is a CHAIR: The Object as Sign in the Theatrical Performance' in *The Prague School and Its Legacy* ed. Yishai Tobin (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1988), 275–288

Rosé, Alicja. 'Krystian Lupa Closely Examined: "Endgame"', *The Theatre Times*, 18 June 2010 <https://thetheatretimes.com/lupa-closely-examined/> [accessed 13 January 2024]

Rush, Fred. 'Two Pistols and Some Paper' in *Ibsen's Hedda Gabler: Philosophical Perspectives,* ed. Kristin Gjesdal (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 194–214

Salvato, Nick. *Uncloseting Drama* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017)

Samalin, Zachary. *The Masses are Revolting: Victorian Culture and the Political Aesthetics of Disgust* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021)

Sampson, Ellen. *Worn: Footwear, Attachment and the Affects of Wear* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020)

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Sarah Richmond (New York: Routledge, 2022)

—— *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992)

Schechner, Richard. *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985.)

Schlueter, June. *Dramatic Closure: Reading the End* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1995)

Schmidt, Henry J. *How Dramas End* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992)

Schneider, Rebecca. 'It Seems As If…I Am Dead: Zombie Capitalism and Theatrical Labor', *TDR/The Drama Review*, 56.4 (2012), 150–162

—— 'New Materialisms and Performance Studies', *TDR/The Drama Review*, 59.4 (2015) 7–17 <https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00493>

Schumacher, Claude. *Naturalism and Symbolism in European Theatre, 1850–1918*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)

Schweitzer, Marlis and Joanne Zerdy, eds. *Performing Objects and Theatrical Things* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

Schwenger, Peter. *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006)

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003)

Shaw, George Bernard. 'Preface to Mrs Warren's Profession,' *Complete Plays with Prefaces,* volume 3 (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co, 1963)

Shaw, George Bernard. 'The Lesson of Ibsen's Plays' in *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler,* ed. Christopher Innes (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2003), 56–57

——*The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (London: Constable and company, ltd., 1922)

Shelley, Percy B. ‘A Defence of Poetry’ in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, eds. Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), 478–508

Showalter, Elaine. *The Female Malady* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985)

Simpson, Hannah. *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022)

——*Samuel Beckett and the Theatre of the Witness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022)

Simpson, Kathryn. *Gifts, Markets and Economies of Desire in Virginia Woolf* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

Single, Lori Leathers. ‘Flying the Jolly Roger: Images of Selfhood and Escape in Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie’* in Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie,* ed. Payal Nagpal (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2016), 185–205

Sofer, Andrew. *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003)

Song, Jungmin. ‘Death and the Anthropomorphic Life of Objects in Performance: Marina Abramović’s *Nude with Skeleton* and Other Animations’, *Performance Research*, 20.2 (2015), 4–11

Stanca, Nicoleta. ‘The World Corpsed in Samuel Beckett’s *Endgame*’ in *Wounded Bodies, Wounded Minds* eds. Oana Cogeanu and Radu Andriescu (Romania: Editura Universitatii Alexandru Ioan Cuza Iasi, 2014), 77–92

States, Bert O. ‘The Dog on the Stage: Theater as Phenomenon’, *New Literary History*, 14.2 (1983) 373–388 <https://doi.org/10.2307/468691>

——*Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (United States: University of California Press, 2023)

Stivale, Charles. ‘Of Schmürz and Men: Boris Vian’s Les Bâtisseur d’empire’. *Cincinnati Romance Review* 7 (1988)

Strindberg, August. ‘Preface to Miss Julie’ trans. Michael Robinson in *The Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook: From Modernism to Contemporary Performance*, ed. by Maggie B. Gale and John F. Deeney (London: Routledge, 2010), 138–146

Sydney Theatre Company, *Director Documentaries: Andrew Upton, Endgame,* online video recording, Youtube, 27 January 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2f3dDJVY1MA, [accessed 13 January 2024]

Teague, Frances. *Shakespeare’s Speaking Properties* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1991)

Templeton, Joan. ‘The Deviant Woman as Hero’, *Ibsen’s Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 204–229

Tewes, Christian. ‘The Phenomenology of Habits: Integrating First-Person and Neuropsychological Studies of Memory’, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9 (2018), 1–6

The Empire Builders by Boris Vian, Edinburgh Fringe, 2015 dir. Aleksandar Popovski

Tomkins, Silvan. *Affect, Imagery, Consciousness: The Negative Affects*, vol. 2, (New York: Springer, 1963)

The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams, 47th Street Theater, New York 2015, dir. Christopher Scott
—— dir. by Anthony Harvey (US: ABC, 1973)
—— Duke of York Theatre, London 2022, dir. by Jeremy Herrin
—— Newman University, Kansas 2017, dir. Mark Mannette
Veltruský, Jiri. 'Man and Object in the Theater' in *A Prague School Reader on Esthetics, Literary Structure, and Style*, ed. and trans. Paul L. Garvin (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1964), 83–92
Vian, Boris. *The Empire Builders,* trans. Simon Watson Taylor (London: Methuen, 1971)
Wardle, Irving. 'Glenda Jackson Meets Hedda Gabler' in *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler,* ed. Christopher Innes (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2003), 95–98
Wasserman, Sarah. *The Death of Things: Ephemera and the American Novel* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020)
Way, Twigs. *Carnation* (London: Reaktion Books, Limited, 2016)
Weller, Shane. 'Negative Anthropology: Beckett and Humanism', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 32.2 (2020), 161–175
White, John J. *Bertolt Brecht's Dramatic Theory* (United States: Camden House, 2004)
Whitlock, Keith. *The Renaissance in Europe: A Reader* (United Kingdom: Yale University Press, 2000)
Wilde, Oscar. 'A Preface to "Doran Gray"' *Fortnightly Review*, 49.291 (March 1891), 480–481
—— 'The Decay of Lying', *In Praise of Disobedience: The Soul of Man Under Socialism and Other Writings* (London: Verso Books, 2020)
Wilde, Oscar. *An Ideal Husband,* ed. Russell Jackson (London: A&C Black, 2003)
——*Epigrams; Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* (London: A.R. Keller, 1907)
——*Lady Windermere's Fan* ed. Ian Small (London: A & C Black, 1999)
Williams, Raymond. 'Dominant, Residual, and Emergent', *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121–127
——*Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (NY: Penguin, 1973)
——*Modern Tragedy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996)
——*The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, (London: Verso, 1996)
Williams, Tennessee. 'Playboy Interview' by C Robert Jennings in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams,* ed. Albert J Devlin (London: University P of Mississippi, 1986), 224–250
——*A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays* ed. Martin Browne (London: Penguin, 2000)
——*The Glass Menagerie,* ed. Payal Nagpal (Delhi: Worldview Publications, 2016)
Wilson, Rawdon. *The Hydra's Tale: Imagining Disgust* (Edmonton: U of Alberta P, 2002)
Woolf, Virginia. 'Solid Objects' in *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick (London: Hogarth Press, 1989)
Yao, Xine. *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth-Century America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021)

Yurka, Blanche. ‘Acting Hedda Gabler’ in *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on Henrik Ibsen's Hedda Gabler,* ed. Christopher Innes (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2003), 70–71