

Social Ontology and (Meta)theatricality: Reflexions on Performance and Communication in History

Tobin Nellhaus

Bad as it may sound, I have to admit that I cannot get along
as an artist without the use of one or two sciences.

—Bertolt Brecht¹

Analyses of plays-within-plays and other types of theatrical self-reflexivity—in a word, metatheatricality—have been problematic. Many tread no further than categorization. Those that seek an explanation usually refer to stylistic techniques or universal technologies, and so inadequately account for metatheatricality's historical emergence and functions. In short, previous approaches to metatheatricality fail to investigate its connections to social dynamics; indeed, they are usually founded upon an unacknowledged or an ideological theory of society's mode of being—its structure, the individual's place within it, the relationships between conceptual and material practices, and so forth. While these ideas constitute an ontology of society and culture, such ontological assumptions are not well developed by authors interested in metatheatricality. A better ontology would provide better historical and theoretical explanations. In this article I will outline a social ontology consisting of social structures, agents, and discourses. Analyzing theatrical performance in terms of that social ontology, and especially its relationship to communication structures, leads to a social definition of performance and demonstrates that metatheatricality emerges out of an interaction between the structure of theatrical performance and larger social forces. Thus the dynamics of metatheatricality (like those of theater itself) depend on social relations and vary historically.

Tobin Nellhaus (*nellhaus@mail.com*) is an independent scholar in theater studies and cultural theory. He has published on theater, social theory, and bibliographic history, and with Susan Chandler Haedicke co-edited *Performing Democracy: International Perspectives on Urban Community-Based Performance*, forthcoming from University of Michigan Press. The present article forms part of a project entitled *The Performance of Hegemony*.

1

For some writers, metatheatricality is just a device which takes various forms and can be used in various ways. Both Dieter Mehl and Richard Hornby, for instance, distinguish various modes, styles, or uses of metatheatricality: Mehl examines its types during the English Renaissance, whereas Hornby is mainly interested in identifying various kinds (such as the play within the play, the ceremony within the play, self-reference, and so forth) without much discussion of historical bounds or social conditions. Richard Nelson also finds different strategies of metatheatricality, but emphasizes historical transitions, without however providing a very strong explanation for those changes.² These discussions—Nelson's particularly—are quite valuable, but their focus on categorizing types of metatheatricality is not just their strength, but also their limitation. Their findings may be incorporated within a properly explanatory analysis, but as they stand, they suggest an understanding of metatheatricality's changes as fundamentally arbitrary. Discursive and performance strategies appear simply decided upon by individuals, and social trends are no more than the agglomeration of individual acts.

For others writers, such as Lionel Abel and Judd Hubert, "metatheatre" is a dramatic *genre* which does not necessarily involve plays-within-plays or other sorts of direct theatrical self-reflexions, but instead has characters engage in their own dramatization, acting as playwrights, directors and/or actors within the play. For Abel, "metatheatre" arises because metatheatrical playwrights are themselves self-conscious. In fact, it appears that for Abel, metatheatre is historically coterminous with modern, possessive, self-willed individualism—a crucial aspect of Western culture since the late sixteenth century.³ His position not only concerns individualism, but also (like the previous ones) adopts it ontologically and methodologically, although in this case it takes an expressivist cast.

According to a further line of thought, however, theatrical self-reflexivity has few or no historical boundaries. Instead it results from the very nature of art, or in some versions, from the nature of discourse. This, roughly, was the conclusion of the Russian formalists. For Victor Shklovsky, artistry was a matter of revealing aesthetic devices, and Boris Tomashevsky drew an explicit parallel between that activity and the play-within-a-play.⁴ This understanding of self-reflexivity perhaps has been taken farthest by Derrida, for whom self-reference is an inherent part of writing, perhaps writing's only meaning. He asks, for instance, why Plato and other writers so often condemn writing in writing, and he concludes:

This "contradiction," which is nothing other than the relation-to-self of diction as it opposes itself to scription, . . . is not contingent. In order to convince ourselves of this, it would already suffice to note that what seems to inaugurate itself in Western

literature with Plato will not fail to re-edit itself at least in Rousseau, and then in Saussure.⁵

For Derrida, the relation of writing to itself is always the same, always produces a phonocentric antagonism toward writing in writing itself, a disparaging self-referentiality that emerges regardless of any historical contingents whatsoever: it is a transhistorical universal. This thesis suggests that self-referentiality remains ever-present, takes identical forms, and serves identical functions in all periods; in fact it smacks of the “master-key to history” notion that poststructuralists usually deride. Despite recognizing that discourse and representation are social forms, these positions tend to place them ultimately outside human control, even to the point of asserting that they control *us*. In some versions, language or discourse constitute society *in toto*, and there may be little we can do to change it.

The theory of self-reference as necessary to art or discourse and the notion of metatheatricality as characters’ self-dramatization face similar historical difficulties. Perhaps the most obvious is that we do *not* find the same amount—or the same type—of metatheatricality in all periods. It appears frequently during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and again in the late nineteenth and especially the twentieth century, but less often at other times. If “metatheatre” really concerned individualistic consciousness (as Abel has it), one would expect more instances of that “genre” from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; if it truly were based on the phonocentrism of writing, metatheatricality should appear more-or-less evenly whenever and wherever theater appeared, from Aeschylus on.

In fact, as Nelson has argued, it is not just the sheer quantity of metatheatricality that changes historically, its uses or functions do as well. Three phases are discernable. Initially, the inner play served as a stratagem or a game. *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* offer examples of the inner play as stratagem; *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* provide instances of the play as game. However (writes Nelson), a new conception emerged in the late eighteenth century and became increasingly dominant. “The artist as a man, his personality for its own sake, becomes the focus of interest in those plays concerned with the theater. . . . In the nineteenth century . . . [t]he play is intended not to effect but to affect, not to implement an action but to express a being.”⁶ Nelson’s point has been confirmed in an article by Katherine Newey, who demonstrates that many nineteenth-century melodramas “have for their subject matter the theater and the theatrical profession.”⁷ While the representation of theater as a profession and an art appears sporadically in earlier eras, in the nineteenth century it became the emergent *norm* of metatheatricality, a norm which continues to be quite powerful. Then, in the twentieth century, plays-within-plays regained their strategic functions, but now with a strong self-referential aspect, as we will see.

This historicity raises questions of the relationship of theatricality and metatheatricality to society; and metatheatricality itself raises questions about the nature of theater's existence. Yet those questions are precisely what Nelson, Abel, Derrida and the rest ignore or even reject, and so produce either a flattened history, or one that implicitly belittles either agents' conditions and importunities or their resources and powers by presenting stylistic changes as essentially arbitrary, voluntaristic or nominal. The moment one accepts the possibility of a complex, multileveled universe—an ontology permitting depth—the picture changes. This is where the ontology of theater and society come in.

2

One of the key concepts behind my analysis is that of discursive and performance strategies. I put the terms "discursive" and "performance" together for several reasons. The understanding of discourse invoked here is a broad one, concerning the logical and analogical relations established among concepts and representations, and admitting all forms of representation (not just language). The idea of a discursive strategy is similar to the *episteme*, which, as Foucault suggests, is embodied not only in theories and speculations, but also in processes, techniques, and effects, such as a painter's use of space, color, proportions, contours, and even gestures.⁸ These manifestations are performative in nature. Performance strategies, then, encompass playwriting, directing, acting, scenic design, costuming, and all other aspects of performance. Thus performance necessarily involves discourse, and discourse (as I explain more fully later) is inherently performative. These strategies embody ways of managing similar (though not necessarily identical) conditions and imperatives which govern their production and emerge out of social relations and circumstances. Discursive and performance strategies consequently tend to share many concepts, methods, and historical trajectories. The notion of discursive and performance strategies sharpens the concept of *episteme* by introducing clear ties to social conditions. For that reason, it is possible for assorted (often complementary or mirror-image) strategies to emerge, though frequently one is culturally dominant. By the same token, discursive and performance strategies are not simply identical and the differences between them cannot be dissolved, because the production of (say) novels, philosophy, and plays each involves specific conditions and relations that inflect the possible strategies. In the analysis that follows, metatheatricality is a performance strategy that arises out of particular types of social situations; it results from the specific dynamics of certain structural relationships.

Let me start with a concrete example. One of the richest periods of metatheatricality was the Renaissance, and one of the most metatheatrical playwrights was Ben Jonson.⁹ Most of Jonson's comedies, including all the major ones, incorporate theatricality as a central motif. Volpone casts himself in several

roles, such as the marketplace charlatan and the dying magnifico. So too do the swindlers of *The Alchemist*. *Epicoene* reveals the title character as a boy masquerading as a woman. *Bartholomew Fair* starts with a contract between dramatist and audience, and ends with a puppet show. Many more examples could be offered. Even within English Renaissance drama, Jonson's insistent metatheatricality, the sheer weight that he gives it within his dramaturgy, is exceptional. Though often laced with antitheatrical sentiment, in Jonson's plays, metatheatricality rises to the point of method.

The example of Jonson offers important clues toward understanding metatheatricality in general. It turns out that explaining metatheatricality in Jonson's or any other time requires broadening our sights well beyond that period, in order to frame appropriate questions for any particular era.

Jonson's plays have other features closely related to his representations of theatricality. Not only does theatricality appear within his plays, Jonson does as well: in several plays (such as *Every Man Out of His Humour*, *Bartholomew Fair*, and *The New Inn*) he includes a character who is much like himself.¹⁰ Jonson's strong self-presence also appears in the way his plays were published. At a time when plays were considered a "low" form of entertainment, when a gentleman seldom admitted to writing and still less to writing for money, Jonson audaciously printed his plays and verse under his own name and entitled this collection his *Works*, pronouncing himself an author. In the plays' prefaces and prologues, he presents himself through his opinions. Jonson also corrected page proofs and in other ways designated his writing for publication. All in all, his use of and control over print was unprecedented, and played a notable role in the formation of modern authorship.

Such attention to the dissemination of his writing is a symptom of Jonson's concern with language and representation, which appears throughout his writings and his attention to publication. On the one hand, Jonson saw himself as introducing an artistic discipline and verisimilitude—even a veracity—hitherto unknown in English drama. But on the other hand, his attentions to language and representation are riddled by deep suspicions. Jonson's discomfort with representation is vividly manifested by many of his theatrical and antitheatrical motifs. Characters in disguise (such as Volpone and Epicoene) are the occasion for Jonson's revealing in the finale a "true" character underneath. In his commonplace book, Jonson attacked mimesis itself as inherently dangerous.¹¹ Stanley Fish finds that Jonson's poems are self-referential in order to free themselves of representation;¹² arguably, his plays reflexively represent theatricality in order to attack the theatricality of representation.

The character of Jonsonian metatheatricality can be clarified further by comparing it to earlier strategies of self-reflexion, in medieval literature and in Shakespeare. Judson Allen contrasts the latter two in a highly suggestive way.

Medieval poetry and its interpretation, he argues, operate by “a continual process of looking in and looking back—looking at a text itself, and then looking for some external similar which will furnish the explanation.”¹³ Medieval texts invoke the external world as their referent, double, and completion. But *King Lear* (like other Renaissance texts) offers parallels for the main plot *within* the play itself, such as by drawing similarities between Lear and Gloucester, and between Lear and the storm: “everything past the literal sense is in the [play], explicit in the shape of events or implicit in the coherences and parallels which the [play] itself creates.”¹⁴ Thus Renaissance literature is far more self-contained than its medieval counterparts, which must be completed by referring to an external analogue.

In both cases the texts use a system of doubling to construct meaning, above and beyond immediate referentiality. Medieval writing doubled the literal meaning of the text with a figural meaning whose locus was outside the text, in the natural, cultural, or moral world: text and macrocosm completed each other to provide explanation and signification. Theater’s performance strategies were likewise built upon similitudes and related tropes, such as allegorical characters, biblical figures and fulfillments, and trade symbolism. As meanings and references multiplied, texts and performances were the subject of interrogation and dialogic interpretation. The doubling of the literal plane by figural analogues continued in Shakespeare’s time, but within the text itself, through subplots, correlates in nature, and other devices; the text was becoming a discursive microcosm, needing only internal relations for explanation and interpretation.

Jonson generally eschewed the mirroring of nature and action, plot and subplot: he preferred to have the play’s literal meaning doubled not by a figural meaning, nor by internal analogues, but instead by the play’s own manner of producing literal meaning—that is, by its being theatrical. Not only are all the play’s relations internal representationally, they are internal performatively: the representations on stage parallel the process of representing on stage. Thus, for example, the actor playing Volpone is doubled by Volpone enacting a dying man; the wits of *Epicoene* devise plots and scripts for other characters; the real audience is mirrored by an on-stage audience in *The Staple of News*; a sort of miniature playhouse appears in *Bartholomew Fair*. Virtually the only microcosmic doubling in Jonsonian theater is that of theater itself.

Systems of doubling can be combined—for example, the play *Hamlet* has the doubling of human catastrophes by disturbances in nature, and “The Murder of Gonzago,” a play-within-a-play. Likewise, Jonson readily utilizes direct address to the audience and emblematic characterizations when it suits him. Yet what distinguishes Jonsonian metatheatricality from previous forms is its degree of internality and self-consciousness. The fact that such different conceptual and performance strategies were not considered mutually exclusive was not simply a matter of their coexistence, nor really of their compatibility. The social relations

of the period gave writers and artists investments in both *epistemes*, so that despite whatever conflicts might exist between these modes of thought, they were often imbricated within each other, even used to support each other, in a kind of generative tension that (in England) only eased in the latter seventeenth century.

So far I have identified features of Jonsonian metatheatricality without attempting to explain it or even develop much of the context for that activity. Those features include the representation of theater within Jonson's plays, the more figurative plays-within-plays staged by individual characters, representations of Jonson's person, and conflicts over representation itself, including its relation to the external world. This sketch should serve to indicate the complex range of issues and strategies to which metatheatricality may be related. How do we explain the prominence and character of metatheatricality in the Renaissance? How do we explain the particularly insistent theatrical and personal self-reflexiveness in Jonson's work specifically? What do these things tell us about metatheatricality in general, and the relation between theatrical performance and society?

3

Analysis of theater and society must be in terms of their ontology—the nature and structure of their existence—because they involve not only concepts and representations, but also underlying social and cultural forces which change and generate change. Forces and their effects need not be perceived in order to operate; and if they are, the understanding that results need not be accurate (just as one may consider gravity to be “love” or even to be nonexistent, yet it operates the same either way). What we experience or represent is only a tiny fraction of what actually happens, and what actually happens is the contingent outcome of interactions between the innumerable entities, mechanisms and structures which comprise reality, from physics to biology to society to cognition itself. For that very reason, we must distinguish between *being* and *knowledge* of being. The latter is a necessarily fallible effort to identify and understand the former.

All theories assume some sort of ontology, whether recognized as such or not. To put it another way: it is now often argued that there is no such thing as a theory-free observation, and therefore we should acknowledge and choose our theory. By the same token, however, there is no ontology-free theory, so we should recognize which ontology we are using, and improve upon it. The conflation of being into knowledge of being—the “epistemic fallacy”—is startlingly commonplace: it appears, for example, in claims that because we can only think and represent in signs (discourse, etc.), therefore only signs can be said to exist, and that pulling back one layer of signs reveals only a further layer of signs. It is true that perception consists of signs, but that is not a limit on existence: all sorts of things are real (have causal powers) yet cannot be perceived except indirectly, through their effects. Social relations have this sort of reality. Positivists and many poststructuralists

have accepted the position that “to be is to be perceived,” that only signs or experiences can be taken as real. In contrast, the critical realist understanding which I am pursuing considers perceptions as the tip of an iceberg, the contingent products of real (and often unperceivable) forces and structures, many of them social. Identifying such mechanisms and structures is what interests me here, for these are the contents of ontology.¹⁵

In speaking of the ontology of society, I have in mind some fairly basic distinctions. Recent work in critical realist social theory has shown that social dynamics should be analyzed not in terms of a single level (such as individuals, collectives, discourses, or practices), nor on two levels (such as individuals and society), but on three. One level consists of *agents*, that is, individuals and organized groups, who each occupy various social positions (such as teacher, parent, employee) and engage in various practices. Underlying their activities is the level of social *structures*—relationships among people, and between people and material resources. These structures condition, constrain, but also enable agents’ activities; they establish the possibilities of action, or more precisely, the system of social positions and the practices that make actions possible. Beyond the structural possibilities of action and the actions which agents actually conduct, there is society’s third level: the systems of meanings and representations through which agents understand and shape their actions and the surrounding circumstances. These meanings are organized and articulated in various *discourses*, not just verbally but through signs of any sort. I will call this ontological stratification of society the structure/agent/discourse framework. The three tiers each possess *sui generis* powers and autonomies, and they are analytically distinct; yet they do not exist separately, and constantly interact with each other.¹⁶

The resolution of society into these three levels can be used in several ways. One is in historical analysis, in which one may (for instance) trace the ways in which agents act on the basis of society’s existing structural, agential, and discursive constituents; reproduce and transform each of these; and thereby set the stage for the next round of action. Another is in sociological analysis, including (among other things) investigating the system of relations that connect various structures, agents and discourses, and the manner of their emergence. A third is ontological analysis, through which one attempts to determine the manner and conditions in which some particular practice or social entity exists. *All* practices involve structures, agents, and discourses; but they involve different specific structures, agents, and discourses, and different relationships between them. These various approaches may and often must be combined. In the remainder of this article, I undertake an ontological analysis of theatrical performance; then I look historically at the connection between changes in certain social structures and changes in performance strategies leading to metatheatricality.

Some elaboration on each of the three levels is necessary. Structures in

society are social relations and depend primarily on material resources, whether physical or human.¹⁷ However, insofar as social structures are relationships, they are partially conceptual in nature. For example, one form of access to books involves the concept of ownership, another form is borrowing from a library, etc. Frequently concepts are “embedded” in material products themselves, such as in architecture, technological designs, bodily habits, and so forth. Consequently, social structures must be understood as being simultaneously material, sociological, and meaningful—but with the greatest weight on their material aspect. Two of the most important social structures are the economic system and the sex-gender system; but there are others, and I will speak of one of them shortly.

Agents can be individuals, but they can also be organized groups (such as a soccer team, a business, a labor union, or a university), for which I’ll use the phrase “corporate agents.” (Groups that are simply categories—like the homeless, the retired, or the upper-income bracket—are not corporate agents: their main agency is through the uncoordinated but aggregate effects of the individual agencies. But it is always possible for them to organize corporate agency, and they may actually do so.) All agents, whether corporate or individual, occupy locations within the social structure, which establishes a network of positioned practices. Agents are *central* to society because neither social structures nor meaning-systems would have come into existence without them. Like structures, agents have material, sociological, and meaningful aspects, but their sociological dimension is primary: their position and powers within various social relationships, and the interests such positions establish, must be considered agents’ foremost attributes.¹⁸

One basic capacity attributable to agents is the ability to monitor their actions and the results of those actions. This allows them to act selectively in order to achieve particular effects. However, this monitoring activity can itself be monitored: by “monitoring the monitoring” of their actions, agents generate understandings of what they do, producing the meaning-systems which influence their intentions and the actions which result. This capacity for reflexive self-monitoring is a crucial constituent of human agency, and is intimately connected to the possession of a sign system.¹⁹ Language is the most obvious sign system, but it is far from the only one.

These considerations bring us to society’s discursive level. This level encompasses not just discursive practices in a general sense, but also specific discursive products, such as theories, novels, plays, concertos, dances, and sculptures: anything which is primarily communicative or expressive. While discursive practices mainly involve meanings, ideas, images, and values, they do not simply work upon meanings: they require physical activities such as the production of sounds, marks on a page, or paint smears on canvas; and they involve interactions between individuals or groups, since they require an audience, though that may be oneself. In short, discursive practices too are simultaneously material,

sociological, and meaningful, but their meaningful component has the greatest weight: the crucial feature of a discourse is the system of logical and/or analogical relations it establishes among meanings and representations.²⁰

In the following analysis, then, the term “discourse” refers to a network of meanings and representations possessing (ana)logical relations. However, discourses are produced not only through logic and analogy, but also through *causal* procedures creating utterances, texts, etc.; for these causal structures I will use the term “communication.” Insofar as communication is a material practice, it occurs through various “modes”: social organizations and developments of speech, handwriting, printing, or electronics. Modes of communication are in fact social structures, and condition the activities of agents as fundamentally as economics and gender.

Communication is a productive practice. Since communication produces various effects, including meanings and interpersonal or social relations, one can accomplish things by communicating, or as J. L. Austin put it, “do things with words”: every speech act, and communication in general, is performative.²¹ Verbal performatives and stage performance have a number of things in common. The most important here is that both pertain to the production of meaningful effects. They concern *production* because they generate something new, an array of meanings, feelings and sensations in an audience; they concern *effects* because no speech act and no performance can be considered performed unless it achieves some effect upon that audience—even if not the one intended.²² Performance, then, is a productive practice that aims to produce meaningful effects. This definition is intentionally broad, because there are many types of performance, and because the concept of performance crosses both discursive and nondiscursive practices. These in fact intersect in certain ways—discursive practices affect nondiscursive practices and vice versa, because each possesses material, sociological, and meaningful aspects. Thus the production of meaningful effects is only one of the ways in which theater and communication possess a common performative structure. That commonality will play an essential role in explaining metatheatricality; but first we must consider the ontology of theater.

4

A good start on theater’s ontological structure comes from the Prague-school semiologist, Jiří Veltrusky, who distinguished between the “acting event,” consisting of the conventions and relationships governing the interactions between performers and audience members; and the “enacted event,” the story represented or narrated by the performers, the interactions between the characters that they perform. As Veltrusky observes, the difference between these two planes can be blurred, and some genres of performance make a point of blurring the distinction. Nevertheless the two are analytically distinct: the blurring effect derives from close

interplay between the two levels, not from an actual disappearance of their difference.²³

However, theatrical performance possesses a third plane which Veltrusky does not consider, consisting of the complex network of ideas and imagery which direct, are transformatively concretized in, and/or emerge out of the enacted event. The “performance score” used to produce actions and characterizations *may* be a traditional playtext, but it might be simply a scenario, or even a mere attitude or image; it is a “text,” but in the broadest sense of the term. The idea here has been well expressed by Bert States: “Even in most forms of improvisational theater the actor is performing only what he has, in Hamlet’s phrase, ‘set down’ for himself to improvise. . . . From the phenomenological standpoint, the text is not a prior document: it is the animating current to which that actor submits his body and refines himself into an illusionary being.” Thus a script in performance is not something previous, but rather happens concurrently. Both the performers and the audience produce it and use it as material to be worked upon. The third level of theatrical performance thus consists of “scripting” in a sense that applies even to the images and role-types involved in stage improvisation. It applies also to the audience’s interpretive activity: for example, spectators may understand the movements of (say) geometric figures in an anthropomorphic way, *narrativizing* their behaviors. We may, for convenience, refer to these levels as the theatrical, the dramatic, and the scriptive planes of performance.²⁴

The three planes of performance parallel the three strata of society. The theatrical level, which is a system of social relationships between performers, audience, and physical resources such as the theater building and the stage, is like society’s structural level; the characters enacting events on stage are agents of sorts; and the script is comparable to society’s discursive level. In one sense this homology is unexceptional, because *all* practices involve structures, agents, and discourses. This is especially clear for collectively organized practices, that is, those of corporate agents, of which a theater company is a type; from this perspective, performers are individual agents within a corporate agent, and the direct producers of its primary product, the drama (enacted event). A corporate agent entails two important features: (1) It organizes individuals toward some end, and (2) articulates their interests, goals, or ideas.²⁵ Thus a corporate agent possesses an *interior* structure/agent/discourse framework, which consists of its organizational relations, the individuals it comprises (members, employees, etc.), and the discourses it produces for the outside public and for its internal culture. Organizations are in effect miniature societies, with a structure/agent/discourse framework in the midst of the larger societal structure/agent/discourse framework; but unlike societies, organizations are agential in the sense that they can make decisions and act upon them. Theater companies similarly reduplicate the structure/agent/discourse framework, and can intervene in social life.

However, there is a major difference between theatrical performance and society: the agents *in the drama* (the characters) are fictional, or if you will, virtual. They may (perhaps) behave much like real agents, and spectators may respond to them in similar ways, but they remain discursive, representational constructs which cannot, for example, make decisions within the theatrical organization. The introduction of virtual agents is one aspect of an ontological dislocation resulting from two peculiarities of theatrical performance. First, not only is every layer of society's structure/agent/discourse ontology implicated (as it is in any practice), every layer is doubled. (See Figure 1.) Society's structural level is echoed in the theatrical dynamic; real agents find a counterpart in the drama's virtual agents (characters); the discursive level is reduplicated in the script. The last doubling is especially complex, for ordinary speech acts—performatives—already involve reflexive self-monitoring. The script, then, performs a monitoring of monitoring-of-monitoring: the performatives of the scriptive level govern and interpret the performatives of the dramatic level, forming a new, metadiscursive level of reflexivity. Theatrical performance thus consists of discursivized actions of producing discursivized actions, the enactment of enactment, the performance of performance.

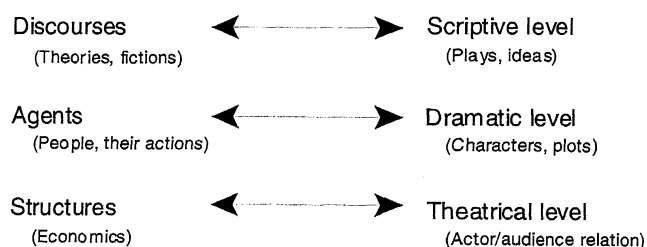


Figure 1: Theatrical Doublings
(Examples shown in parentheses)

The second peculiarity is that theatrical performance not only doubles social ontology, it also shifts or rotates it. We might call this aspect of theatrical doubling an “ontological shift.” (See Figure 2.) The theatrical structure is formed by real agents (actors and spectators); that is, agents take the role of structures. Within that structure, the virtual agents (characters) act; but they are fictive, the products of discourse—discourses take the role of agents. Structures are (re)presented by agents, and agents by representations. The “ontological shift” within theatrical performance explains how the virtual agents can sometimes displace the real agents: the real agents are in a social relation which positions them as part of performance's *structure*. (The displacement can even involve different bodies, as in puppet shows.) But strictly speaking there is no ontological level beyond meaning

and discourse; instead, the discursive level is doubled by becoming a system not just of signs, but signs of signs—a frequently noted feature of theatrical performance.²⁶ (Again, discourse consists not just of verbal signs, but signs of any sort.) Due to the systemic nature of its signs-of-signs relation, theatrical performance bears a capacity to double the discursive level through a metadiscourse that theorizes the underlying conditions of human existence, in whatever manner these may be conceived: humans' relations with nature, with god(s), with each other, with their own selves, and so forth. In a sense, then, in theatrical performance (meta)discourses take the role of underlying structures, and structures form (meta)discourses. The circuit connecting metadiscursive activity to fundamental structures of human and social existence is completed by the audience, who (like the actors) occupy a structural position within theatrical performance, yet possess the power to respond intellectually, emotionally, and ethically to the drama enacted on stage. The audience is part of a “conscious social structure,” or better, a virtual structure.

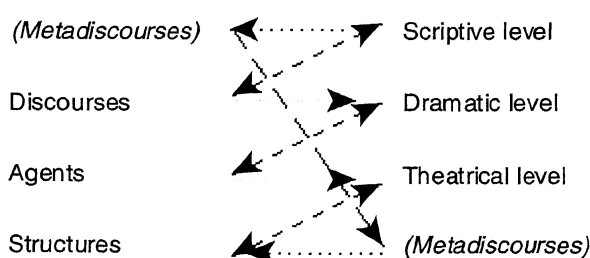


Figure 2: The Ontological Shift

Note that theatrical performance doubles the social structure/agent/discourse framework *ontologically*, not substantively or mimetically. The theatrical level (that of performers, stage, and audience) reduplicates the structural level of society insofar as both are systems of social relationships establishing positioned practices. But the theatrical dynamic need not mirror the dominant social relationships, and in fact can differ from them sharply. For example, theater need not take a commodity form despite prevailing capitalist relations. Likewise, the dramatic characters who pass before the spectators need not behave at all like contemporary people, or even like human beings. Nor, finally, must the play's discursive content (and potentially its metadiscourse) be familiar, acceptable, mimetic, realistic, or even comprehensible. Theater's key likeness to society is not a question of imitation or representation, but homology. Whether or not a theater performance represents a model of society, ontologically it *is* a model of society. The social situation alone—a performance event with a performed event governed by a performance score—makes it so. Naturalism and verisimilitude

thus have *no* privileged capacity to address social reality, and can even obscure it by effacing the stratified nature of social ontology. By the same token, stylization, strangeness, or even subversiveness in a performance need not limit its potential audience. Theatrical performance's doubling of society's ontology, which is necessary to all forms of theater, is in principle enough to make it "speak" to the participants.

Theater's character as a doubling of social ontology emerges in other ways. In discussing the nature of society's structure/agent/discourse framework, I emphasized that agents are the central element: structures and discourses exist only by virtue of agents' activities (especially what they have done in the past), and can continue or change only through agents' actions and inactions today. Yet agents can act in the present only on the basis of the structures and discourses given by the past, which provide the conditions and real possibilities for agents' activities. In short, if society is understood simply as the structure/agent/discourse framework, it will appear static; but once the special position of agency is clear, that ontological framework becomes dynamic and sociological analysis is immersed in history.

A similar dynamic exists in theatrical performance. Nothing happens without the characters' activities. When they act, the changes they instigate become almost unavoidably narrativized, and they are accomplished on the basis of structural conditions and discursive directives established within the drama, howsoever they may be construed. The characters also act within the parameters of the theater's underlying stage/audience relationship, and in relation to discourses existing outside the drama as well. With the virtual agents thus nestled dynamically within two types of structures and discourses, theatrical performance must be understood as being not just a model of society, but *also* and more specifically, as a model of social agency.

This argument may be viewed as enforcing a character-oriented concept of drama. Such a view would be mistaken. Characters do not exist frozen in time: they only emerge by virtue of their emplotted activities. Depending on the play and the sociohistorical context, they may be (seen as) the masters of their actions, or subjects caught within an action driving them ineluctably forward and creating them as it presses onward, or some other kind of being. The centrality of virtual agents within theatrical performance arises on the theatrical level, but need not figure within the drama. Thus even the production of *rasas* depends on virtual agency as transformative praxis.

Finally, theater doubles society's three ontological levels in a different manner at each level. The theatrical level is related to society's structural level, the dramatic to the agential level, and the scriptive to the discursive level—but the relationship itself differs for each pair. The stage/audience relationship within theatrical performance, in all its institutional complexity, is a kind of image or

model of the existence of social structures which enable and constrain agency—not necessarily a model of any particular social structure (though such may be the case), but of what it is to be a social structure. Dramatic acting doubles agency by producing virtual agents, which are simultaneously products or causal *effects* of actual agency, *causes* of action in the dramas, and *indexes* of what it is to be an agent; that is, they point to forms of agency as defined within some society (as do methods of dramatic acting, and historical agency itself). This holds true even when the characters act like no human ever has on earth: their nonhumanness is itself defined by some society, as one of its “negative images” of human agency. The script, for its part, constitutes an organization of and comment upon existing discourses—that is, the systems of *conventionalized* signs, each of which is a generality (e.g., the word “dog” applies to all dogs) that becomes incorporated through the script into a system of higher generalities: again, a system of signs of signs; again, generalities that concern the fundamental conditions of human existence.

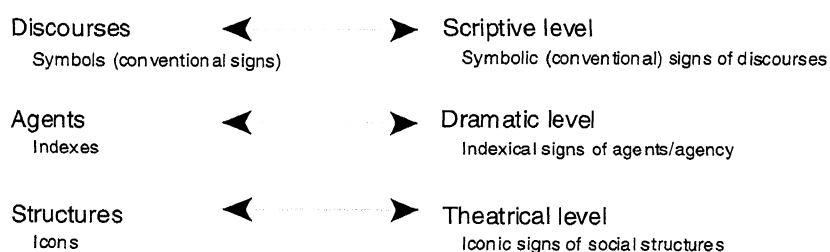


Figure 3: Theatrical Doubling as Semiosis

Thus, the process of ontological doubling in theatrical performance involves the construction of an organized representation—in a broad sense, a sign—of each level of social ontology, by means of the next level up (structures by agents, agents by discourses, discourse by metadiscourse). But the sort of sign involved differs at each level: the theater is an icon of structures, dramatic characters and actions are indexes of agency, and scripts are (in the Peircean sense) symbols of discourse. In fact, the three levels of *society's* ontology (structure, agent, discourse) have a special relationship to each of the three types of Peircean sign (icon, index, symbol) respectively.²⁷ (See Figure 3.) Theatrical performance, as a double of social ontology, models not only each of the latter's levels, but also the modes of semiosis embedded at each level. By the same token, one may say not only that the scriptive level consists of signs of (conventional) signs, but also that the dramatic level consists of signs of agents (virtual agents) and the theatrical level consists of signs of structures (virtual structures). Theatrical performance, then, is a complex, partially embodied sign of society.

Interpreting theatrical performance as ontological doubling of society resolves problems that arise in alternative approaches. Some recent discussions focus on repetition in time. For example, Richard Schechner argues that “Performance is ‘twice-behaved behavior.’” Coming from a different theoretical orientation, Judith Butler arrives at a similar conclusion, arguing that “performativity must be understood . . . as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names. . . . [I]t is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms.”²⁸ The notion of performance as “temporal doubling” encounters difficulties in handling improvisation, transformative innovation, and the immediacy of the performative act. By grasping the repetition as not a temporal but an ontological aspect of performance, those problems do not arise. Moreover, these writers (especially Butler) misrecognize the function of the “citing” or “reiteration” that necessarily occurs in performance: discourse is performative, and it involves citation and citationality, but discourse is not performative because it is citational—it is citational because it is semiotic (in particular, because discourse works with *conventionalized* signs). “Performativity,” however, is discourse’s power of *social transformation*.²⁹

More traditional arguments maintain that theater is fundamentally mimetic or representational. For Bruce Wilshire, for instance, “Theatre is . . . a perceptually induced mimetic phenomenon of participation”; likewise, Eli Rozik argues that “theatre is essentially representational.”³⁰ This notion of “experiential doubling” has the advantage of involving a specific social or discursive relationship between theatrical performance and social life, and is in fact closer to the correct analysis. But it flounders on the role that representation, referentiality and iconicity play in *all* social practices, and it tends to privilege verisimilitude or aesthetic naturalism and mystify the non-empirical. The ontological analysis recognizes the semiotic aspect of all social practices and finds that it undergoes an additional degree of reflexion in theatrical performance, which “imitates” society not necessarily through what it represents, but through how it is structured.

The analysis I have developed here is most akin to Augusto Boal’s view that “Theatre is born when the human being discovers that it can observe itself. . . . On stage, we continue to see the world as we have always seen it, but now we also see it as others see it: we see ourselves as we see ourselves, *and* we see ourselves as we are seen.” Also similar is his assertion that in theater, two spaces—one real, the other fictive—occupy the same place at the same time. This dichotomy dichotomizes the spectators: “we are here, seated in this very room, and at the same time we are in the castle of Elsinore.”³¹ The key difference is that (at least in its current state) his analysis of reflexivity is essentialist; my argument, however, firmly plants theatrical reflexivity within a theory of social dynamics.

To hazard another definition, then, theatrical performance is the produc-

tion of societal reflexivity. Both terms should be glossed. On the one hand, *societal* reflexivity involves reflexivity at each level of social ontology—their doubling into the performance event, the performed event, and the performance score. Thus the structure of theatrical performance is a model of social ontology; the structure, but not necessarily the representations. However, the practice of societal reflexivity can only be performed by specific societies—specific in their history and geography as well as their social structures and culture. Consequently theaters must be understood institutionally, in terms of not just what they perform, but also their location, occasion, architectural arrangement, performance styles, and performer and audience social categories; all areas which can involve social struggles. (The relevance of social specificity to metatheatricality will emerge toward the end of this article.) By the same token, the ontology of theatrical performance as a model of social ontology enables it to function as a “virtual public sphere” capable of presenting alternatives to the dominant social, political, and cultural order,³² but it almost inevitably offers representations of *some* society, whether or not it is one that has ever or could ever exist.

On the other hand, societal *reflexivity* involves semiosis, or more precisely, communication, and so must be performative and dialogic. For that reason, the performers and the audience must *both* be aware of the reflexive character of the event, and both must recognize that the being enacting the drama is a virtual agent (a character), not a real agent (a person), and so govern their social relationship to that being accordingly. Situations in which someone “puts on an act” for unsuspecting witnesses, observes people in life as unwitting actors, and similar permutations might be described as theatrical in a *metaphoric* sense, but not in an *analytic* sense. However, since the reflexivity of theatrical performance is societal, it constitutes a structural (not simply discursive) reflexivity involving all three ontological levels; and there is no reason why discourse must be the most important among them, or when it is, that the discourse need be abstract and intellectual rather than, say, affective or even sensual. Since the reflexivity of theatrical performance is “global,” it can engage the audience on numerous levels—the reflexive experience of “enjoying themselves,” perhaps. We can see, then, that while from a formal semiotic perspective, theatrical performance simply produces various signs and representations (or better, signs of signs), from the standpoint of social ontology something far more complex takes place, which involves the doubling of society’s overall ontological structure and the creation of a special sort of social agent that exists only virtually and only within the confines of the drama, and which produces intended and unintended cognitive, emotional and sensual effects within the audience.

The distinction between theatrical performance and other performance genres cannot be adequately understood as the presence or absence of some element, because the basic elements—structures, agents, and discourses—are the same for

all practices. What makes theater unique is the set of *social relationships* it establishes among these basic elements (in particular, its doubling and “twisting” of social ontology). The definition of theater belongs on ontological and sociological grounds, not on technical, formal, or experiential grounds. Only a social definition of theatrical performance can ever achieve an understanding equal to its richness, and only if “social” embraces more than discourse. At the same time, the fact that theater doubles social ontology illuminates theater’s value for understanding society: not only do theatrical performances often present images of a society (however ideological in character), its very ontology echoes society’s.

5

Theatrical performance possesses a special relationship to the ontological structure of society, but also to a particular social structure: it has multiple connections to communication practices. Theatrical performance is a type of communication, and communication is performative. Communication in the sense of discourse is crucial for the constitution and activity of agents; and the virtual agents (characters) in drama are discursive constructs. The reflexive dimension of discourse, as the monitoring of monitoring, is reduplicated within theatrical performance as the performance of performances, and still more so as the production of societal reflexivity. And on the practical level, theatrical performance requires communication and often involves a complex relationship between speech and writing, a relationship that is defined by and builds upon the complex relationship they have within most societies.

But neither the use and function of a mode of communication nor the relationship among modes is stable. Like any other practice, communication changes: an existing mode of communication may be used by new people, utilized in a new way, lose its previous importance, and so forth; and a new mode of communication can be introduced. The effects of such changes in communication practices are far more profound than might at first be realized, because the social organization of communication creates ground rules for discourse—generative principles which govern the production of concepts, shape the basis of their validity, and design their relation to the realities they represent. When communication practices significantly alter, the old order of representation is put into question. A crisis in representation ensues.

This brings us back to the English Renaissance and the problem of Jonsonian metatheatricality. As many studies have attested, there was a crisis in representation in Renaissance England. One major cause was the rise of print culture, which produced disruptions within and departures from manuscript culture. In medieval manuscript culture, books were relatively rare and reading (still more, writing) skills were restricted to a small minority forming a sort of literate island in an oral sea. Cultural dependence on orality strongly affected uses and

understandings of texts, even while texts (especially the Bible) shaped oral culture.³³ With the introduction of printing, slow transformations arose, becoming most acute around 1600. Writing could now be produced in two forms—handwritten and printed—and as more and more people became readers, writing's relation to oral communication changed. Books and pamphlets became increasingly commonplace, they played an ever-greater role in culture and society, and the deepening cultural dependence upon them fostered a new standard of textual exactitude and systematicity. Educators relied on classical Roman authors to fill their textbooks, and as classical writings became more readily available, the humanists used textual evidence to discover the historicity and conventionality of language. The legal profession began to depend on the publication of case books that allowed citation of precedents. Protestants located their spiritual foundations in reading the Bible, grasping its words as literal truth, and using the text as the launching point for castigating the older, more orally- and ritually-based religiosity and for their own self-questioning and introspection. Culture, then, became increasingly text-based. This was not solely a matter of a developing print culture, since merchants and capitalists found the contract to be the essential model of social relations, and so with regard to the growing textual orientation in society, printing and capitalism went hand in hand: "print capitalism," in Benedict Anderson's phrase.³⁴

The Renaissance crisis in representation can be understood as resulting from a conflict between the expansion of manuscript culture's old discursive products, and the introduction of print culture's new discursive process. For example, the massive growth in mystical and alchemical publications meditating on the similitudes between things was opposed by those advocating Baconian notions of scientific method and mathematically lucid writing based on a new role for linearity. But the dimensions of the Renaissance crisis in representation cannot be gauged simply in terms of the old *vs.* the new, nor product *vs.* process. The transformation in communication practices created a conflict between two discursive orders, two different ways to produce and validate knowledge. The complex relations between old product and new process probably contributed to the fusions and confusions between contrasting or even contradictory *epistemes*. But such conflicts place a question mark over truth: an unavoidable uncertainty arises, an inadequacy or absence in knowledge which must somehow be enclosed.³⁵ Knowledge itself becomes a problem. Thus we find that Renaissance theorists of drama and poetry were preoccupied with issues of knowledge and truth, consequently reviving the Horatian call for instructive entertainments, and even arguing (as Castelvetro did) that writers must choose subjects and methods that pleased the uneducated. Whether as wisdom or ignorance, knowledge was the crux. This is the context for Jonson's constant concerns regarding language and representation, and for his pursuit of a kind of truth-to-life in his drama.

The transition from a manuscript culture to a print culture generated specific pressures toward metatheatricality. The medieval strategy of doubling text and world, multiplying the referential aspect of discourses, was part of the custom of seeing all things as signs authored by God. This strategy gave theater enormous power, as its representations had direct applicability for interpreting the world at large; but by the same token, the Church constrained the permissible interpretations. Print culture displaced the medieval discursive rules asserting bonds between culture and nature with rules asserting bonds within culture alone—that is, it replaced referentiality and external relations with conventionality and internal relations. The Renaissance strategy of internal doubling emphasized discourses' formal construction and conventions, and their human authorship; interpretations of plays increasingly strove to reconstitute authorial intentions. Those developments turned plays into self-conscious artifacts of human creation and paved the way for authorship to become a prominent cultural function. Though the shift from external to internal relations occurred slowly and allowed for epistemic combinations, it ultimately provoked a crisis in the social relationship to representation, a crisis that highlighted discourses' internality, conventionality, and possession by a linguistic community; consequently, representation had to represent representation. The development of internal discursive relations forced a *theatrical* recognition of theatricality as a conventionalized, contingent mode of representation which offered truth through inner coherence. For this reason the focus on the problem of knowledge even oriented specific metatheatrical techniques: two major usages of the play-within-the-play were to represent the conflict between appearance and reality, and to offer a moral or allegorical exemplum.³⁶

It is easy to see why Jonson was particularly ensnared by the crisis of representation, and therefore frequently metatheatrical in his dramaturgy. His activity in editing and publishing his plays are just one aspect of his deep involvement in early print culture. His extraordinary scholarship, his reliance upon printed texts, made him question his knowledge and his theater more than most—a questioning that consisted at core of demanding from each its textual validation. This authority was ultimately secured through the (implied) presence of the author in the performance, declaring his possession of the text's meaning. Such possession was encouraged by capitalism but made possible by printing. As printing was one of the earliest capitalist enterprises, so too was the printed book one of the earliest mass-produced commodities. To have knowledge meant to have books on the shelf and in the head. Jonson thus printed his *Works* and inserted himself into his plays as evidence of his authority and mastery over his own meaning, the meanings he owned. Renaissance metatheatricality reduplicated the figure of the author, and no matter how jocularly or sneeringly Jonson depicted that author, the authorial presence was what mattered. The advent of the author function thus went hand in hand with the strategy of theatrical self-reflexion.³⁷

And by doubling human products with a human process, Jonsonian metatheatricality effectively eliminated the lingering power of nature which oral culture posited. Creation was an act of authorship, and authorship an act of knowledge and power.

6

In contrast to Derrida and Abel, I find that metatheatricality of the type appearing in the Renaissance results out of and is contingent upon social forces. Discursive reflexivity arose not because of the nature of writing's internal relation to speech or some other technological determination, or because of the arbitrary development of a style or genre, but primarily because the revolution in communication structures generated a need to reconceive discourse within discourse. The advent of print capitalism led to writers' political invocation of themselves as authorities—even incompetent authorities—over meanings, in circumstances where the new mode of communication made older strategies of discursive coherence and control uncertain or contested. The search for meaning through a text's internal relations and authorial intentions thereby imposed a new order of control over discourse and interpretation.

But that is only part of the explanation. So far I have restricted my discussion to the English Renaissance and pointed out some of the unique circumstances that fostered metatheatricality then. However, to gain a fuller grasp of the dynamics producing metatheatricality, we must recognize that there have been other revolutions in communication, such as from an oral to a literate culture, and now, evidently, from a print to an electronic culture. Many of the problems that arose during the manuscript-to-print revolution of the Renaissance are features of all transformations in communication. In particular, they involve a conflict between two discursive orders resulting in a crisis in representation marked by a gap or lack in knowledge that must somehow be repaired.

However, a crisis in representation is also a crisis of agency: if discourse is crucial to the constitution of agency, a transformation of communication practices necessarily disrupts social understandings of agency and action as well as the structural conditions for action, thus posing the problem of what to do and how to speak—the problems which face Hamlet, who acts mad while trying to decide how to act and how to justify that act and who finally ends in silence, and which also face Morose (in Jonson's *Epicoene*), who demands silence and comes to rue a decision made most carefully and rationally. In the twentieth century, Beckett, Handke and Artaud (among others) worked similar furrows. In short, transformation at the structural level of communication induces crises at both the discursive and the agential levels.

That suggests some ways we may refine our concept of performance, theater, and metatheatricality. Discourses and social structures both depend on the exercise of agency—performance in everyday life, in the sense of conducting

meaningful, real actions and interactions. At the same time, agents' activities involve discourse, that is, their understanding of, reasons for, and comments upon their own activities in the world: reflexive (second-order) monitoring. Such discourse necessarily is itself performative: it produces meanings which transform social circumstances. Consequently, individual and group agency is constituted in part through discursive practices, as is the very concept and nature of agency within a given society; thus, for example, the differences between "selfhood" during the Middle Ages and the modern era.

But since discursive strategies are shaped by communication practices, changes in the communication framework disrupt the conduct of reflexive self-monitoring. That historical situation puts the concept and nature of agency into question: agents must then monitor the monitoring of monitoring, that is, be reflexive about reflexivity. This introduces not just performance in everyday life, but a theatricality of everyday life; but not theater in everyday life, since the dislocation derived from the ontological shift—the creation of virtual agents recognized as such by the audience—does not occur. This theatricality within everyday life appears in forms such as Renaissance self-fashioning, or today's gender performativity and cultural "styling." Within theater itself (as a model of social agency), the shifting of the communication framework generates the need for a third level of performativity, in which agents enact the enactment of agency. To fill that need, the structure/agent/discourse framework, duplicated in the form of theater, must be reduplicated yet again by way of theatrical self-reflexiveness—such as the play-within-a-play. Metatheatricality, then, is a way to comprehend and perhaps resolve crises in agency, particularly when two (or more) models of agency are in contention.

One would therefore expect metatheatricality to crop up most during major alterations in the framework of communication. Metatheatricality is possible at other times (various sorts of social change can provoke similar, if less drastic, disruptions in the constitution of agency, and the strategy is always available in principle), but the need for theatrical self-reflexivity should be greatest during radical changes in communication practices. And that seems indeed to be the pattern. After the transition to print culture, there is rather little metatheatricality during the eighteenth century when communication structures were fairly stable; it increases over the course of the nineteenth century under the pressure of economic and political upheavals. With the introduction of electric and electronic culture in the late nineteenth century, metatheatricality arose in many modernist plays, such as Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and appeared in various sorts of postmodernist performance. But what of the first communications revolution, the transition into literacy? Classical Greek drama does not offer examples of metatheatricality in the form that we find in later epochs. Of course, that was the period in which theater (in the narrow sense) was invented, so to that degree it

would scarcely be surprising if theater was not yet grasped as a model for the structure of social agency. Yet if one considers what *was* the core model for social agency, the form of metatheatricity possible for Greek performance quickly becomes apparent. The genre most concerned with agency was religious ritual, which we find represented in many Greek tragedies—represented, but not in fact performed.

But this difference in forms of theatrical self-reflexivity points to issues which deepen the historicity of metatheatricity. For ancient Greek religious ritual was itself a historical form that emerged from a certain set of material and social conditions, most notably the society's dependence upon oral culture and hence upon embodied memory.³⁸ The rise of literacy within the ascendent mercantile and artisanal classes in Athens ruptured oral culture. The situation fused two different tendencies in conceptualizing agency into a tense, unstable, temporary, but also highly energizing compromise. On the one hand, oral culture posited ultimate agency among the gods, before whose interventions mortals were fundamentally helpless, aided only through religious rituals and support from a god. On the other hand, democratized literate culture tended to generate a notion of individual human will and responsibility, regulated by written laws and judgment in a court. Together, these two perspectives fused into a notion of human *participation* in the divinities' deeds—a notion exemplified in *Oedipus Tyrannos*, or in the dictum of Heraclitus, *aēthos anthrōpō daimōn* (equally translated as "one's character is one's lot," or "one's lot is one's character"). Theatrically, the ritual-based concept of agency also fostered a representation of agents through masks, since their primary feature was not their inner depth but their external relations in terms of social status and divine (dis)favor; but the literate-based concept of agency motivated the creation of individualized protagonists and interlocutors—indeed, it stimulated the very notion of the actor on stage. The chorus in turn slowly lost its dramatic functions.³⁹ But the embedding of literate and oral concepts of agency also appears in Greek theater's institutional structure, in which the theater—a fundamentally *voluntarist* practice—occurred within the ritual context of the annual Festival for Dionysus; but interestingly, that festival was itself an invention, roughly coeval with tragedy. Thus were orality and literacy embedded within each other in classical Athens.

All this indicates three things. First, the relationship between the stage actor as real agent and the character as virtual agent is governed by a concept of agency. From there, such discourses can become embedded in agents' practices and institutional arrangements, and may ultimately affect the very social structures from which the concepts originally emerged. The "movement" from structures through agents to discourses is succeeded by one from discourses through agents to structures, in multiple overlapping cycles that constitute the reflexive transforma-

tional process of human history. Hence the suggestion that metatheatricality may help to resolve crises in agency is more than notional: it is a palpable potentiality.

Second, concepts of agency arise on the basis of communication structures not alone, but in relationship to other structures, among them economics, which also conditions the formation of theatrical institutions (as corporate agents).⁴⁰ The specific circumstances under which societal reflexivity occurs (its time, place, methods, persons, and social relations) are consequently critical for the historical formation of metatheatricality.

Third, when the model of agency changes, so too must the nature and structure of metatheatricality. Thus the oxymoronic “rituals of individual will” recurring throughout classical Greek drama became self-reflexive through a ritual of individual will at another level. When the archaic ritual basis of the Furies’ claim on a parricide is displaced by a human court in *The Oresteia*, the new ritual is invented at the behest and with the participation of a god. And the “little play” within *The Bacchae*, in which Dionysus dresses up Pentheus to see and be the greatest performance of his life, similarly makes a human participate with a god in making a ritual out of his individual agency. In classical Greece, then, metatheatricality—if that is the best word here—consists of the individual ritualizations of ritualized individualities.

From this perspective it is clear that the need to contain absences in knowledge and govern ambiguities in interpretation need not be met in the way that it was during the Renaissance, by imposing the author as the source and final arbiter of meaning, and making the discourse’s internal relations primary. That strategy was motivated in part by capitalism. Theatrical practice was becoming not merely voluntarist, but professional. Where classical Greek and, somewhat differently, medieval theater were basically voluntarist institutions within ritual frameworks, most Renaissance theater contained theocentric ritual within an anthropocentric institutional framework. Not only was ritual (and the ritual of individual will) interiorized, the will was as well. Henceforward, characters would increasingly possess inner psychological depth, which was largely a product of print culture. (And casting moved toward a one-to-one relationship between actors and characters, a standard finally established around the mid-seventeenth century.) The interiority of agents opened the possibility of “metatheatre” as a genre of self-dramatization. More importantly, however, theater increasingly replaced its ritual aspects with representational functions, a shift that corresponded to the move from similitudes to verisimilitude. That too resulted from print culture—among other reasons, because beings and events once interpreted according to a natural and social order forged by God now increasingly had to be seen strictly through the eyes of an individual human. The theatrical representation of theatrical representation thus formed the play within the play, allowing the source, center,

and control of meaning to be situated within individual authorship.

Metatheatricality has essentially remained in this mode throughout print capitalism: in effect, an entrepreneurial representation of representational entrepreneurship. Thus we find the plays concerned with theater as a profession and as a cultural agent (described by Nelson and Newey) as the norm of metatheatricality during that era. The nineteenth-century emphasis on the actor as opposed to the theater institution does constitute a shift (encouraged, no doubt, by the advent of the star system, among other things), but it is a shift within the overall framework which makes metatheatricality concern the character of theatrical agents, whether they are corporate or individual—a concern that can even shift the play-within to an offstage event. That concern is consistent with the era's empiricism and positivism, which conceived of reality in terms of discrete units acting under the compulsion of external (mechanistic) or internal (organic) laws of behavior, in effect limiting the ontological gaze to the level of agents alone.⁴¹ To that extent the nineteenth century's plays about theater are little different from its plays about stock speculation, prostitution, or poor-but-honest Irishwomen: theater is just one in a field of individual and corporate agents.

During the transition era of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, the play-within was often a stratagem chosen by a character in order to act, in contrast to an expression or instance of character. It was not something an agent does so much as a way of doing agency. As a result, the inner play generally had strong thematic and/or functional connections to the outer play, aiming to affect the onstage audience in some way. Such connections were encouraged by the decaying but still active medieval orientation toward external relations. (Interestingly, the plays chosen as stratagems or entertainments, such as "The Murder of Gonzago" in *Hamlet* or *Bartholomew Fair*'s puppet-show, often involve a type of theater that is outdated or disreputable, suggesting an effort to contain or supplant an old or problematic form of agency with a new form that the outer play already institutes; or less often, as a gesture toward a classicist restoration.)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, with communication practices again transforming, plays-within-plays returned as a model and mode of agency. But another form of metatheatricality also became prominent: theatrical self-reference. I am using this term in a narrow sense: not the broad notion of reference to or representation of some theater or convention generally, but rather, specific reference to the *present* performance. As Hornby notes, such self-referentiality has appeared (and disappeared) most often during the same eras as the play-within-the-play, though it is even more uncommon;⁴² but while it arises in various eras, I think it is no accident that his most extensive examples of self-reference come from the twentieth century: on the one hand, the technique extends the principle of internal relations yet one step further, in a manner consistent with the further sociological specialization and compartmentalization of artists and intellectuals and their

concomitant formation of competing avant-gardes; on the other, the increasingly obvious role of large sociopolitical forces in everyday life has attuned a segment of that group to questions of social and artistic process.

There are three basic ways in which theater can refer to itself, corresponding to its ontological levels and consequently involving distinctive concepts of agency. Modern forms of self-reference once again make theatrical performance a method of doing agency, but each in a different way and to a different degree. The first refers to the theater as an institution, a corporate agent possessing particular goals, strategies, resources and roles. Characters may refer to the conventions of theatrical performance, whether as drama or as professional activity, perhaps showing the events on stage to be mere dramatic illusions. This approach is a kind of offshoot of nineteenth-century plays-within-plays focusing on actors and dramatic art, and as such appears in Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, when a character reassures the ne'er-do-well that he needn't worry since nobody ever dies in the middle of the last act (a moment which revives the theatrical gesture toward the author). Another example is Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, with its stage manager conducting the theatrical representation of small-town scenes. Self-reference of this sort serves as a sort of knowing wink to the audience, ensuring its complicity in a system of fixed identities.⁴³ It is essentially a further development of "professionalistic" metatheatricality.

An extreme instance of this first approach, bridging toward the second, occurs in Pirandello's "trilogy of theater in theater," especially *Six Characters*. In these plays, if the events in the inner play are mere dramatic illusions, so are those in the outer play and potentially in everyday life as well, and members of the audience are scarcely more substantial than characters who "literally" come to life in order to play out their drama. Identities are unstuck, but they are reduced to theatrical types and (melo)dramatic stereotypes, not dispersed altogether.

In its anthropocentrism, its focus upon perceptions and on regularities of behavior, and in other ways, "professionalistic" theatrical self-reference is fundamentally positivistic; not surprisingly, the two other approaches have ties to forms of antipositivism. The second form of self-reference focuses on performance as discursive, a system of signs and representations referring in the end only to other signs and representations which (according to this view) constitute social life in an unending process of semiosis, without an underlying reality. Self-referentiality here is less a technique than a principle, an inevitability. Agency is dispersed into discourse: it is a cipher produced by and caught within discourse's self-weaving webs. This is the approach adopted in postmodernism, recently and vividly exemplified by the music video of Björk's "Bachelorette," a *tour de force* of discursive self-reference in which Björk's character, digging in a forest, finds a blank book which begins to write itself, creating a narrative which she enacts as she reads. The book functions as a script, which Björk's character performs not

just in the theater of life, but in theatrical re-stagings of those same events—unlike the traditional play-within-a-play, discursive self-reference incorporates itself not just generically, but *literally* (that is, as a reiteration or quotation), so that the inner play is largely identical to the outer play. In the “Bachelorette” video, when the recursive process reaches the point of theater-within-theater-within-theater (within video), the performative cycle begins to unravel: the book erases itself while the inner theaters are consumed by the sinuous, mute greenery from which the entire sequence began, and just at the moment when, forced onward by its incessant discursive self-production, the performance would enter a still further level of self-reflexiveness, it crumbles into vegetation and in a sense (re)turns itself into a natural state.⁴⁴

The sheer literalness of discursive self-reference can take the opposite path, not toward infinite recursions, but toward total reduction into the actors’ and audience’s consciousness of performance. Handke uses this tactic in *Offending the Audience*. The multiple layers of theatrical performance seem (but only seem) to collapse into present speech acts, as the speakers alternately characterize, curse, and compliment their audience. This theatrical implosion into what is actually present at the moment of performance might, aesthetically speaking, be called a style of ultra-naturalism.

Fascinating and suggestive as such performances are, discursive self-reference (like agential self-reference) treats agency as involving only one ontological level. Much more radically, however, theatrical self-reference can occur not discursively, but *performatively*, so that the production of meaningful effects refers to and hence reveals the production of meaningful effects.⁴⁵ In this performance strategy, theater refers to itself not so much as an agent or a discourse, but as a productive structure. More exactly, theater’s structure/agent/discourse framework refers to and reveals itself as a structure/agent/discourse framework, and it does so primarily through the activity of the actors and director (and need not conduct theatrical self-reference via the characters at all). The difference here is subtle but crucial: the performance refers to the theater/drama/script structure of theatrical performance not institutionally—treating theater as one agent among many—but *ontologically*, as a model of social agency itself. Thus agents are understood as being both distinct from and conditioned by preexisting structures and discourses, which then are reproduced and/or transformed as the (generally unintended) outcomes of agents’ intentional and embodied activities. This form of self-reference radically expands the critical potential inherent in theatrical reflexiveness. Theater becomes a mode of self-reflexivity not just about theater, but about the very structure of society, suggesting its performative, transformative, and hence transformable nature.

The best-known proponent of self-referential metatheatricality of this type is Brecht. Reflexivity regarding social structures is the aim of his most crucial

performance strategies, particularly estrangement and distanced acting. The latter, for example, concerns the need to keep the actor from “disappearing” into the character, so that (to use the terms developed here) real agents in theatrical performance are not entirely displaced and hidden by virtual agents. Such distanciation contrasts with acting styles which aim for the disappearance of the actor within the character, the real agent within the virtual agent; a disappearance that is tantamount philosophically to the collapse of ontological strata into a single plane of perception. By keeping both sorts of agents evident, Brecht would reveal theater’s doubled structure/agent/discourse ontology. Since actors are not the only agents involved in theatrical performance, exposing theater’s structure/agent/discourse framework exposes the role of the audience in that performance, inviting self-reflexivity on its part. Probably the most thorough-going effort along these lines remains Weiss’s *Marat/Sade*, which conjoins Brechtian self-referentiality with a play-within-a-play.

But Weiss’s play also suggests the fragility of this strategy, which remains within the cultural and political structures of aesthetic autonomy and professionalism. The strategy unavoidably depends on voluntarist and individualist commitments by the performers (and the characters-as-performers, for the play-within) and by the audience, which ultimately are coordinated hierarchically in accordance with the script and an authorial or directorial intention. Should any of these commitments not be secured, the strategy generally fails. Another form of theater founded on roughly the same concept of agency removes this concern by abandoning the institution of professionalistic performance. In particular, it shatters the social and architectural division between actor and audience, turning all participants into “spect-actors” who may watch a scene and then assume a role within it, altering that character’s actions. That is the basic goal of Boal’s forum theater, and of a whole strand of community-based performance in which a group of people utilize theater directly as a way to reflect and potentially act upon situations in their own lives. The process fosters a dialogic reintegration of intellectual producers and recipients (and implicitly or explicitly, of mental and manual labor) and a reintegration of art with society, and so community-based performance constitutes a kind of anti-avant-garde.⁴⁶ In this type of performance, the inner play is a brief, “fictive” structure/agent/discourse framework referring to the real structure in which the participants find themselves. Such performance involves self-referentiality in the sense that the participants reflect on their performances, but with an eye for its reflexion into performance in everyday life rather than professionalistic issues of doing theater. It is self-referential insofar as it implicitly raises the question of the conditions and possibilities of enactment; it may even be said to position the real world as its outer stage.

As did the play-within-a-play during the Renaissance, these various forms of theatrical self-reference focus upon a problem or fracture within knowledge

(that is, within the dominant discursive order), and a need for a new order that can overcome that absence. Though I must discuss this in only the briefest terms, the basic contours of each conflict are clear.⁴⁷ The crisis during the Renaissance had as its background the late medieval discourse of patterning and similitudes interpretable only by infusing any given discursive product with references to words and things outside it. This discursive order elaborated an ontology in the form of mystical metaphysics and theocentrism. In the Renaissance, against the revelation of truth through divine correspondences, there arose the possibility of human discovery of hidden truths via instrumental controls upon the empirical realm. The conflict between the two orders hinged on the nature and role of perception. During the struggle to make knowledge literally come to its senses, performance strategies sought the exposure of plots and the disclosure of mistaken identities, the shimmering peek-a-boo between putting on and pulling off masks and disguises, the play-within-a-play as a stratagem to release knowledge in its coy absence. In the end, the similitudes gave way to verisimilitude, external to internal relations, ontology to epistemology. The ultimate outcome of this struggle was a discourse of experimentalism and psychological verity in which, as Descartes asserted, only what was absolutely certain could be accepted as true. The different candidates for such certainty—innate ideas, empirical sense data, even sign systems—all circulated around one or another meaning of “perception.” Perception became the litmus test of existence; at the most extreme, it was existence itself: *cogito ergo sum*.

In the twentieth century, the tables have turned: the empirical realm is assumed, and the problem has become the very relation between the *cogito* and the *sum*—that is, the relation not between perceptible appearance and reality, but between thought and material being. Such fractures in the epistemic legacy are everywhere: it finds itself schizophrenically viewing agency as accountable for everything and/or capable of nothing; it makes experimentation the groundwork of science, yet it cannot adequately theorize the significance or implications of that practice; despite according pride of place to causation, its notion of causality in fact treats “laws of nature” as though nature behaves quite literally by laws of logic; even when it seems most adamantly to insist on the existence of a reality outside the mind, it persistently conflates being with knowledge of being; and it surreptitiously generates a self-division between itself and various subjectivisms, relativisms, idealisms and romanticisms which believe themselves to be its mortal enemy when in truth they are but its mirror images, its *doppelgängers*, its self-reflexions. All of these cracks stem from a single faultline: the spectre haunting knowledge is the question of ontology.

Confronted by the patent inadequacy of empiricism, the efforts to supplant it again revolve around problems of knowledge—this time, the relation between knowledge and existence. We have seen the three major options within theater.

One approach, encompassing both the infinite regress of performance containing itself and self-deconstruction, coils knowledge into its own circle so that it cannot escape, like a Möbius strip ever discovering itself on the other side of itself as it runs away toward itself: being collapses into knowledge of being. Other strategies, as in the Handke example, embark on the degree zero of performance that delimits knowledge into present actualities: the converse of the former approach, knowledge is compulsively determined by being. In the final analysis, these approaches share empiricism's anthropocentric assumption that "[discourse] is the measure of reality." Discourse captures the spectators within itself, because—or so that—it and they have no place else to go, and all we can know is the discourse we already have.⁴⁸

But these are not the only alternatives to empiricism: the order of perception may be sundered by the *transformative process* through which we come to understand something. For the Brechtian actor and spectator (when achieved), and still further, for the spect-actors of forum theater, knowledge is never a given: it *emerges* through human efforts upon a world that resists being the mind. This can only occur, however, if a stratified ontology is acknowledged as the condition on which knowledge has any possibility of emergence. Thought and being, epistemology and ontology, must be distinct, non-identical, irreducible.⁴⁹ Knowledge is unable to provide its own truth through purely internal relations; it is fallible, contingent, tentative. It is a question mark in dialogue with existence.

For all these differences, however, the new performance strategies do have a commonality. Where the post-Renaissance era replaced medieval similitudes with verisimilitude, these recent modes of performance produce not a verisimilitude, but rather perform a *model* of existence. Endless self-reference, for example, enacts a discursivized universe. Moreover, these models point to *social* elements (discourse, structures) as the cornerstones of society's existence and the touchstones for interpretation. We might describe these performance strategies as social modeling of societal models. But whereas Brecht and Boal are cognizant of their performative modeling and its assumptions and implications, postmodernist performance strategies can coherently sustain neither the significance nor the relevance of the modeling relations they embody, for a model is necessarily a model of something else, a something else that motivates the model and enables us to understand things outside discourse. In other words, those strategies secrete an implicit ontology even if they explicitly repudiate any such thing. As Bhaskar maintains, "Ontology—and realism—are *inexorable*. The crucial questions in philosophy are not *whether, but which*." These latter modes of performance are ensnared in a performative contradiction.⁵⁰

A final point about (meta)theatricality is spotlighted by the dynamics of community-based performance. As I observed earlier, agents are the central element of social ontology: nothing happens without agents' activity. For this reason the

three levels of social ontology constantly interact as people reproduce and transform each of them. The same holds true in theatrical performance—within an institution that forms a model of social agency, the theatrical, dramatic, and scriptive levels necessarily interact with each other. The play-within-the-play as an agent’s stratagem makes this especially clear, for it is crucial that the inner play elicits a response from the inner audience. Consequently, plays using this device emphasize the inner audience’s behavior (as in *Hamlet*) or even their misbehavior (as in Jonson’s *The Staple of News*). Likewise community-based performance rejects the notion of the audience as passive consumers, and instead seeks to recognize—indeed, maximize—their agency. In other words, it addresses the inner audience not solely as part of a virtual (theatrical) structure, the “conscious social structure” that I described earlier, but as agents.

It hardly seems coincidental that Brecht obtained some of his ideas from Piscator’s work with motion pictures, that he wrote radio plays, and occasionally performed his own poetry; nor that Boal made some of his crucial innovations in the course of his involvement in a literacy campaign, that is, by working with modern oral cultures, and that his projects tend to de-emphasize playtexts. It appears then that both the rise of new modes of communication and aspects of class-based political activism are involved in these theatrical innovations. All of this, however, preceded computer-based communication. How that may affect theater is impossible to predict, since so much depends upon how we use and organize it. But in whatever way it develops, theatrical performance will continue to embody concepts of agency, and so to enact for society theories of society itself.

7

[J]ust as a social science without a society is impossible, so a society without some kind of scientific, proto-scientific, or ideological theory of itself is inconceivable.

—Roy Bhaskar⁵¹

Like Brecht, theater’s historians and theorists cannot get along without using one or two sciences. Knowledge of society’s ontological stratification into structures, agents and discourses, knowledge about the interaction between these levels, and knowledge of particular structures such as the framework of communication practices, the economic system, and sex-gender relations, provide theater scholars with crucial tools for understanding the nature and development of performance. In this circumstance there lies at least one irony. Theater appears to be all about producing appearances, spectacular displays, fascinating surfaces; but its real mode of existence, its performative process, is all about depth and the operation of underlying structures. Understanding theatrical performance, then, requires abandoning the generally prevailing concept of the world, which holds

that experiences, surfaces, or representations occupy the whole of what exists; that, as the “empiricist” Bishop Berkeley put it, “to be is to be perceived”; that all is just a show.

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Notes

1. Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theater*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964) 73.
2. Dieter Mehl, "Forms and Functions of the Play Within a Play," *Renaissance Drama* o.s., 8 (1965): 41-61; Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1986); Robert J. Nelson, *Play Within a Play—The Dramatist's Conception of His Art: Shakespeare to Anouilh* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1958).
3. Lionel Abel, *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963) 64, 77-78, 101, 113; and see Judd D. Hubert, *Metatheater: The Example of Shakespeare* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1991).
4. Victor Shklovsky, "Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary," *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1965) 25-57; Boris Tomashevsky, "Thematics," *Russian Formalist Criticism* 61-95.
5. Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981) 158. See also Derrida's analyses of Rousseau and Saussure in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976).
6. Nelson 89-90.
7. Katherine Newey, "Melodrama and Metatheatre: Theatricality in the Nineteenth Century Theatre," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 12.1 (Spring 1997): 87.
8. Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972) 193-94.
9. I use the term "Renaissance" somewhat reluctantly, but it seems the best choice, since Jonson wrote during both the Elizabethan and Jacobean reigns, and because I am discussing the historical transition period cresting at about 1600.
10. See David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989), 59-60; Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) 132-39; and Alexander Leggatt, *Ben Jonson: His Vision and His Art* (London: Methuen, 1981) Chap. 6.
11. Jonson, *Timber, or Discoveries*, in *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925-52), vol.8, lines 1093-98.
12. Stanley Fish, "Authors-Readers: Jonson's Community of the Same," *Representations* 7 (1984): 34-35.
13. Judson Boyce Allen, *The Ethical Poetic of the Later Middle Ages: A Decorum of Convenient Distinction* (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1982) 150.
14. Allen 151. The original sentence refers to *The Faerie Queene*; Allen then extends his comparison to *Lear* and *Hamlet*.
15. The best defense of ontology to date is Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Knowledge* (Sussex: Harvester Press; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1978). The term "epistemic fallacy" is his. For a discussion of critical realism's application to theater history, see my "Science, History, Theater: Theorizing in Two Alternatives to Positivism," *Theatre Journal* 45 (1993): 505-27.

16. Using somewhat different terms and a not-altogether explicit analysis, the three-leveled conception of social ontology is developed in Margaret S. Archer, *Realist Social Theory: The Morphological Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995). Archer also develops a highly valuable analysis of how the levels interact. I attempt to define the three levels more explicitly and to clarify the role of signs and representations within social ontology in "Signs, Social Ontology, and Critical Realism," *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 28.1 (1998): 13-21.

17. Archer 175-79.

18. "Agents" should not be simply identified with "people": as Archer points out, the latter have all sorts of characteristics, such as hair color and birth dates, but only some of these pertain to people's social position and their intentionality. The phrase "corporate agent" is also Archer's. See Archer 248-93.

19. Roy Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989): 35, 81-82. I have adopted Bhaskar's choice of the term "monitoring"; a few respondents to a draft of this paper have understood it to mean something like "scrutiny" or "surveillance," but all that is necessary is the weaker, even desultory sense of "checking and being aware of."

20. The material, sociological, and meaningful aspects of each level of society's ontological structure is where my analysis draws close to the one developed by Alice Rayner, *To Act, To Do, To Perform: Drama and the Phenomenology of Action* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994). This book develops a fundamentally phenomenological analysis, in contrast to my ontological one.

21. J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1962). Note, every speech act: in some quarters Austin is thought to retain a distinction between performatives and constatives, but that interpretation ignores the burden of the last two lectures, in which the distinction dissolves into an issue of illocutionary force (Austin 133-64). "Constatives," one might say, are a species of performative.

22. As is well-known, Austin dismissed theatrical speech as "parasitic" upon ordinary speech acts (22); I think Derrida's critique is adequate. Darko Suvin (in correspondence) has objected to the adoption of Austin's concept for theater and performance studies, arguing that Austin could very well have called his notion "executivity." But in my view, what unites the Austinian and the theatrical concepts of the performative are their productive character and their emphasis upon the generated outcome or effect, whereas the verb "to execute" stresses the intentions which precede the action and the degree to which the action is consistent with those intentions.

23. Jifi Veltrusky, "Contribution to the Semiotics of Acting," in *Sound, Sign and Meaning: Quinquagenary of the Prague Linguistic Circle*, ed. Ladislav Matejka (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Contributions, 1976) 577-78.

24. Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1985) 128. See also my "Performance, Hegemony, and Communication Practices: Toward a Cultural Materialist Analysis," *Theatre Annual* 49 (1996): 6-7. The traditional playtext may thus be paradigmatic of the scriptive level, but it is clear that even in the most conservative text-based performance, the playtext is never the *only* source of scriptive imagery and ideas.

25. Archer 185-86, 258-65.

26. Here another link between theater and communication appears, since the signs-of-signs structure of theatrical performance is akin to that of phonetic writing. There may also be a historical relation between the two: see my "Literacy, Tyranny, and the Invention of Greek Tragedy," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 3.2: 53-71 (1989).

27. Nellhaus, "Signs" 20.

28. Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1985) 36; Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 2, 12; Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," *Theater Journal* 40 (1988): 519-31.

29. Social actions do of course often repeat or invoke previous actions, and so accomplish similar acts which reproduce underlying social relations, but events are not (textual) citations. Though Butler constructs her notion of "performativity" upon Derrida's analysis of speech act theory in "Signature Event Context," *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1988) 1-23, Derrida himself does not commit the error of collapsing performativity into citationality. In fact, he never refers to "performativity" at all, only to "performatives" and "performative utterances"—that is, speech acts themselves. (Interestingly, the phrase "speech acts" connects these two facets of language: speech as a system of signs, and acts as exertions of social agency.) Butler's confusion of discourse's social dynamic with its semiotic mechanism constitutes a "linguistic fallacy" (the assimilation of being into language), which is a variant of the "epistemic fallacy" (the definition of being in terms of knowledge) and a form of de-stratification. Once the social is equated with (or viewed as wholly determined by) discourse alone, the confusion between performativity and citationality is not only inescapable, but invisible.

30. Bruce Wilshire, *Role Playing and Identity: The Limits of Theatre as Metaphor* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982) 26; Eli Rozik, "Theatre at One of Its Borderlines: Reflections on *Suz/o/Suz* by La Fura dels Baus," *Theatre Annual* 49 (1996): 93.

31. Augusto Boal, *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy*, trans. Adrian Jackson (London: Routledge, 1995) 13, 22-23, 26.

32. Cf. Loren Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992) 11-17.

33. I have explored an example of this in "Mementos of Things to Come: Orality, Literacy, and Typology in the *Biblia pauperum*," in *Printing the Written Word: The Social History of Books, c. 1450-1520*, ed. Sandra Hindman (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1991) 292-321.

34. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), passim. The link between printing and capitalism in Europe is discussed in Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800*, ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith and David Wootton, trans. David Gerard (London: Verso, 1976) 37-44, 109-27, 224-44.

35. Cf. Timothy J. Reiss, *Tragedy and Truth* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1980) 11 and passim.

36. Mehl, passim.

37. On willful, possessive, knowledgeable selfhood, see Timothy J. Reiss, *The Discourse of Modernism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 1982). On Jonson's use of print, see Joseph Loewenstein,

"The Script in the Marketplace," *Representations* 12 (1985): 101–14; Timothy Murray, *Theatrical Legitimation: Allegories of Genius in Seventeenth-Century England and France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), chaps. 2–5; Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton, and the Literary System* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983) chap. 3; and Richard C. Newton, "Jonson and the (Re-)Invention of the Book," in *Classic and Cavalier: Essays on Jonson and the Sons of Ben*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), 31–55

38. On ritual as embodied memory, see Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989) 54, 57–59. I should note that I am referring in this discussion strictly to *religious* ritual, not to ritual in general.

39. Jean-Pierre Vernant, "Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy" and "Intimations of the Will in Greek Tragedy," *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, tr. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1988) 29–48, 49–84; Joel D. Schwartz, "Human Action and Political Action in *Oedipus Tyrannos*," *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, ed. J. Peter Euban (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986) 183–209; Nellhaus, "Literacy"; and Graham Ley, "Performance and Performatives," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 8.1 (1998): 5–18. Ley's article appeared after this passage was written, but supports my claim that the actor emerged in classical Athens because of a communication-based crisis in representation that required agential self-reflexivity.

40. Sex-gender structures (including family arrangements, gendered divisions of labor, and sexual dynamics) also shape concepts of agency, but given the manifold complexities of this area and the limitations of a single article, the issue cannot be addressed here with any adequacy.

41. It can be shown that empiricism and positivism are themselves products of capitalist print culture, but such a demonstration lies beyond the scope of the present article. So too is the problem that these philosophies ultimately entail an incoherent, even self-contradictory concept of agency, often resulting in not just an overburdened agency responsible for all things, but also (and even simultaneously!) a denial of agency, an agency that simply leaves things as they are or is wholly the product of forces beyond its control (heredity, environment, society, language, libido. . .). From that perspective, metatheatricality in the nineteenth century resulted not only from secular social changes, but also from a conceptual fissure *within* the dominant ideologies.

42. Hornby 114–17.

43. See also Newey, esp. 87–90, on the use of plays-within-plays (instead of self-reference) to the same end in melodrama.

44. Björk, "Bachelorette," written by Björk and Sigurjón Birgir Sigurdsson (a.k.a. Sjón), dir. Michel Gondry, *Volumen*, videocassette (Elektra Entertainment, 1998). The video was released in December 1997. The director, Michel Gondry, probably devised the idea for the video, which won an award for Best Art Direction from MTV in 1998, and was a 1999 Grammy Award nominee for Best Music Video (Short Form). Some may object that a music video shouldn't count as theater; I think this is mistakenly narrow, and a video seems perfect for strict self-reference, since its repetitions and replays are virtually identical.

45. Cf. Hornby 116.

46. I am considering only the goals and methods that tend to characterize community-

based performance. Particular instances and projects may operate differently, or be undercut by contradictions in the social circumstances, process, etc. It seems likely that the advent of state-subsidized theater has also chipped away at the entrepreneurial character of live performance, although in film and television production capitalist formations have taken gargantuan proportions.

47. This paragraph draws heavily on Reiss, *Discourse of Modernism*, esp. 29–33, 42–51, 55–107.

48. Quoting Reiss, *Discourse on Modernism* 362. The collapse of being into knowledge of being, and the compulsive determination of knowledge by being, constitute the epistemic fallacy and the ontic fallacy, respectively. Both are underwritten by the anthropic fallacy, which comprehends being in terms of human being. All three have received critique in various works by Roy Bhaskar; see, for example, *A Realist Theory of Science* 36–45; *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (London: Verso, 1993) 205.

49. This holds for thought and social reality, since social structures exist independently of whatever people may think of them *at any given moment*, even if *over time* thought (through agents' actions) alter those structures.

50. Bhaskar, *Dialectic* 44, 119, and quoting 205. This sort of performative contradiction is akin to what Reiss terms the "occultation" of a practice which, however, may emerge as a new basis for meaning (Reiss 96–97, 100–2 and passim). In this instance, experimentation itself is a practice that seemingly undergirds empiricism, yet can be adequately theorized neither by it nor by its subjectifying and linguisticizing opponents, whereas the effort to make experimentation intelligible leads in critical realist directions. On this issue see also Robert P. Crease, *The Play of Nature: Experimentation as Performance* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993).

51. Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1989) 84.

