

What's Hamlet to Habermas? Spatial Literacy, Theatrical Publication, and the Publics of  
the Early Modern Public Stage

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## I

Did theater contribute to the formation of an early modern public sphere?

According to Jurgen Habermas, the answer is “no.” Of course, the classic or “bourgeois” public sphere that Habermas imagined in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*<sup>1</sup> was not an early modern phenomenon; according to Habermas, its earliest manifestation was in late-seventeenth century England, well after the early modern period in its customary sense was over. But if we put the same question to Habermas’ eighteenth-century public sphere—did theater contribute to it?—the answer would be only slightly different: “very little, and very late.” The public sphere as understood by Habermas was fostered and strengthened by a number of social and cultural and economic developments—the appearance (at long last) of an actually existing bourgeoisie, coffee houses, lending libraries, and a host of new forms of print media that included gazettes, journals, newspapers, and significantly, the early novel. Analogous developments would take place only slightly later in much of the rest of Europe. Theater did not participate in the resulting “bourgeois” public sphere, however, until well into the eighteenth century—not until the drama of Congreve and Beaumarchais. And it was not merely a late arrival. Earlier instantiations of theater, including the amphitheater playhouses of Elizabethan London, were in fact (according to Habermas) among the forces that retarded the emergence of a “bourgeois” public sphere. For Habermas, early modern theater was most retrograde to that emergence. It was entirely contained by the early modern *res publica*, and it served (in the strong sense of the word) to maintain and promulgate the “representative publicity” of rank and degree that characterized the early modern princely state. State and church together defined and largely controlled most forms and forums of publicness in the early modern period, and it was their hegemony that had to be displaced or weakened or opened out from within before a classic Habermasian public sphere would be possible. The theater of Kyd and Marlowe and Shakespeare was one of the forms of “representative publicity” that would have to be cleared away and replaced by new and radically reformed modes of theatrical performance.

It would easy to dismiss such a view, based as it seems to have been on a fundamental misunderstanding of Elizabethan popular drama and the place it occupied in the social imaginary of its times. In terms of theatrical and performance history, there can be little doubt that Habermas simply had his facts wrong on some important points. For example, he assumed that leading figures of the aristocracy and even the monarch visited performances at the Globe and sat in prominent and framed view of the rest of the audience. Noting that the general populace “had been admitted” to theaters “as far back as the seventeenth century” in certain instances such as the Globe and the *Comédie-Francaise*, he argued that the presence of the lower-rank “public” at theatrical performances did not mean that early modern theater had begun to be open to new forms of publicity or conducive to the emergence of any kind of public sphere. The populace was present only to serve the “ranks” or aristocracy, who were on view in the gallery for all to see and cheer:

They [the Globe and the *Comédie*] were all still part of a different type of publicity in which the “ranks” (preserved still as a dysfunctional architectural relic in our theater buildings) paraded themselves, and the people applauded.

(38)

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<sup>1</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

Insofar as the Globe is concerned, this is of course an historical fantasy. Neither the monarch nor aristocracy were on display or applauded at the Globe. The “ranks” had not admitted the public or allowed the people in to admire or applaud them; this playhouse, like all of London’s amphitheatres and most of its indoor playing spaces, was open to anyone with the price of admission. Furthermore, the reference to “the ranks” on view in the gallery seems to have in mind something like a box at the opera: an anachronistic projection of a much later architecture of privilege that would indeed, when it emerged, constitute ostentatious spaces of display. But the “ranks” viewed and admired in the opera house were members of the moneyed- and propertied-classes, such as the newly-risen bourgeoisie, as well as aristocracy and royalty.

Nonetheless, despite such doubtful theatrical history, there is something to be learned from Habermas about theater and publics. A number of contemporary historians, sociologists, and social theorists would say similar things about Habermas’ relation to their own disciplines,<sup>2</sup> even if they largely reject his historical account of the emergence of a “bourgeois public sphere” in late-seventeenth or eighteenth-century Europe. Over the past five years, the interdisciplinary team of scholars, graduate research associates, and other individuals and institutions that have been involved in “Making Publics: Media, Markets, and Associations in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1700” (MaPs), has regularly rediscovered this lesson: forgetting Habermas is hard to do, and not always advisable. In the MaPs project, our endeavor has been to develop alternative—and less teleological—understandings of the ways in which “private people come together to form a public” (25), so that we could examine a variety of different historical periods and diverse cultural and social and political contexts. We have explored the ways in which publics and counter-publics, understood to be always partial and often conflictual forms of association, come into being, and how such associations—heterogeneous, episodic, and as much conceptual or virtual as they are actual in nature—contribute to broader social formations.<sup>3</sup> When we refer to those broader formations as a “public sphere” or “spheres,” our usage is a register of difference—we mean something quite distinct from Habermas—and an acknowledgement of debt as well. “The public sphere,” as Craig Calhoun has defined it in this, its post-Habermasian sense, “comprises an indefinite number of more or less overlapping publics, some ephemeral, some enduring, and some shaped by struggle against the dominant organization of others.”<sup>4</sup>

Habermas remains especially compelling in his understanding of the dynamic and inherently paradoxical relationships that can develop between the public and the private dimensions of the social.<sup>5</sup> He understood theater, however, as a cultural form more or less fixed

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the essays by Nancy Fraser, Geoff Eley, and Michael Warner in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: 1992). Most widely adopted, of course, is “his” concept of a “public sphere,” understood as a space in civil society in which “private people [could] come together to form a public” (25). I highlight “his” because “public sphere” is a not-entirely-Habermasian concept in itself, since it is a quite inaccurate translation of Habermas’ *Öffentlichkeit*. I do not know whether Habermas approved the English phrase, but he subsequently allowed the translation to stand and adopted the phrase himself when writing in English.

<sup>3</sup> For a succinct overview of the team’s understanding of publics, see *Making Publics in Early Modern Europe: People, Things, Forms of Knowledge*, ed. Bronwen Wilson and Paul Edward Yachnin (New York: Routledge, 2010): 1-21.

<sup>4</sup> Craig Calhoun, “Imagining Solidarity: Cosmopolitanism, Constitutional Patriotism, and the Public Sphere,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002), 162.

<sup>5</sup> Most important and sometimes overlooked is his emphasis that the public sphere can only develop within the private or domestic sphere rather than in the open or in open public spaces where it might afterward manifest itself. “The public’s understanding of the public use or reason was guided specifically by such private experiences as grew out of the audience-oriented (*publikumsbezogen*) subjectivity of the conjugal family’s intimate domain

in its publicness and even trapped by what he refers to as “representation” (see especially his discussion on 8-14). For Habermas, theater was an inherently mimetic or reflective or representational phenomenon, in its spatial as well as its social production; it was opposed to the dialectical or dynamic or processual engagement of private people necessary for a public sphere to emerge. Some of these are my terms, but I have derived them from Habermas’ own delineation of the ways in which cultural or aesthetic or literary media played a role in the formation of the “bourgeois” public sphere (see 1-56). The first or mimetic mode of publicity, exemplified by theater in general and Elizabethan theater in particular, was a negative force: theater hindered the emergence of a public sphere by enhancing and contributing to the “representative publicity” of the princely *res publica*. The second or dialectical, exemplified by the emergent novel, was a positive force. And yet, as I hope to show, theatrical performance played a more significant role in Habermas’ own thinking than his explicit comments might suggest—just as it did in a great many historical civil societies.

My larger goal is to recover a sense of the early modern playhouse as a significant forum for social thought in its own day and age. The plays it produced were rich in information and ideas, but even more importantly, the production or performance of those plays was in itself a kind of social thinking, experiential and affective as well as cognitive, collective as well as individual.<sup>6</sup> Properly understood, theatrical performance acted as a significant mode of discursive and non-discursive production in the early modern period: performance was (and is) a form of “publication,” and as such, a potential catalyst for the making of various publics and counter-publics.

## II

Early in the pages of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas interrupts a dense, abstract, and preliminary discussion of the “representative publicity” of the sixteenth- and early-seventeenth centuries with a subsection entitled, “Excursus: The Demise of the Representative Publicness Illustrated by the Case of Wilhelm Meister” (12-14). It is an odd moment for an unnecessary anecdote or digression, the customary meaning of “excursus” (in the German (22), *Excurs*), especially one like this: it interrupts an historical overview of the politics of the late-medieval and early modern *res publica* and transports us to a late eighteenth-century novel (1795) by Johan Wolfgang von Goethe. Immediately after this brief *explication de texte romantique*, we return to the seventeenth century where Habermas continues his interrupted explanation of earlier forms of publicity, chronicling the economic, cultural, political, and other developments that would eventually give rise to the “bourgeois” public sphere.

But Goethe is not a digression, even if the literary turn seems odd or out of place at first. Like Freud finding a literary habitation and a name for the Oedipal complex in Sophocles, or Foucault using Cervantes and Velasquez to think his way into *The Order of Things*, Habermas looks to an aesthetic object for insight into his own sociological and historical hypotheses.<sup>7</sup> In

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(*Intimsphäre*). . . [I]ncluded in the private realm was the authentic ‘public sphere,’ for it was a public sphere constituted by private people” (28, 30).

<sup>6</sup> For a fuller articulation of this, see Steven Mullaney, “Affective Technologies: Toward an Emotional Logic of the Elizabethan Stage,” in *Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England*, ed. Mary Floyd-Wilson and Garrett Sullivan (Palgrave Macmillan): 71-89.

<sup>7</sup> If the Frankfurt school is sometimes remembered for its suspicion of the aesthetic object, fostering a form of critique devoted to the demystification and correction of art and its ideological complicities, this is a reminder that

Habermas' hands, Goethe's novel becomes a *bildungsroman* for an entire historical *episteme*, a parable of the public sphere and its relation to different forms of public and popular art. In the novel, Wilhelm Meister rejects the bourgeois world of business and politics for a career as an actor. He joins a company of traveling players, where he hopes to establish himself as a kind of "public person" (in Goethe's phrase) by representing on stage the one class of individuals for whom "seeming" and "being" had always been one and the same: the aristocracy. He eventually rises to top of his acting troupe, and as a reward is given the role of the prince of all princes, Hamlet the Dane.

For the aristocracy and the society they governed, as Habermas explains via Goethe, authenticity and authority were real "inasmuch as [they were] made present."

The nobleman was what he represented; the bourgeois, what he produced: "If the nobleman [as Wilhelm writes in a letter to his brother-in-law], merely by his personal carriage, offers all that can be asked of him, the burgher by his personal carriage offers nothing; and can offer nothing. The former has a right to *seem*; the latter is compelled to *be*, and what he aims at seeming becomes ludicrous and tasteless." (13)

What the aristocracy made real by representing it as such, in its own figure and presence and rites of display, was nothing less than the "representative publicness" of the princely state. It displayed a form of power produced (in part) by its own manifestation, an understanding of early modern power we have encountered in a host of later theorists, including those new historicists who laid special emphasis on the kinship between such state or princely power and the theater.<sup>8</sup> Goethe and Habermas would seem to agree. What Wilhelm sought on stage was a surrogate for such already-archaic publicity. And since he relied on the "secret equivocation"—Goethe's phrase—that theatrical performance shares with actual public representation, his enterprise seemed to be successful, at least for a short period of time.

What's Hamlet to Habermas? He's a sixteenth-century dramatic character played by a misguided late-eighteenth-century novelistic character. He is also the emblematic representative of an anachronistic conjunction of theater and civil society: insofar as the public sphere is concerned, he is a mistake, a digression, a false lure. He is what keeps Wilhelm from assuming his proper place in the by-then-fully-formed bourgeois public sphere:

Wilhelm came before his public as Hamlet, successfully at first. The public, however, was already the carrier of a different public sphere, one that no longer had anything in common with that of representation. In this sense Wilhelm Meister's theatrical mission had to fail. It was out of step, as it were, with the bourgeois public sphere whose platform the theatre had meanwhile become. Beaumarchais's Figaro had already entered the stage and along with him, according to Napoleon's famous words, the revolution. (14)

What is it that makes Figaro an agent in the formation of something we might call a theatrical public—or even, in this instance, a theatrical counter-public (*Vive la Révolution!*)—while Hamlet, even when performed 200 years after his conception at the Globe, cannot escape the representative publicity of the early modern *res publica*? Habermas' answer is a complex one,

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there was always another side to that distrust. Art also mattered a great deal to the Frankfurt school, and the cultural sphere (in the aesthetic sense of the term) was for Habermas a kind of laboratory for new collective and individual subjectivities to develop—and a place where the social theorist can sometimes discover new algorithms for the historical relation of public to private, social to individual.

<sup>8</sup> I would include Michel Foucault, Roy Strong, Stephen Orgel, Ed Muir, Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, Leonard Tennenhouse, Steven Mullaney, and a long list of others.

involving as it does an extensive account of significant historical transformations of both the theatrical apparatus of European popular drama and the subjectivity of those private individuals who formed its audiences. A key component in such historical changes can be identified quite economically, however. What separates these two modes of theatrical production—Hamlet from Figaro, Shakespeare from Beaumarchais—is the emergence of the novel.

Habermas' attention to the role played by literary and dramatic modes in the formation, transformation, and maintenance of different historical regimes of publicity is noteworthy, and should be of interest to any post-Habermasian study of the relation of the individual to the social, the private to the public, and especially that paradoxical emergence of the public within the private or domestic sphere that grounds all of Habermas' thinking about the development of civil society from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. The turn to literary or dramatic and other performative forms, as in the seemingly out-of-place "Excursus" on *Wilhelm Meister*, is neither a whim nor a moment of mere illustration. Literature is not representing social changes that are happening elsewhere. Rather, it is the phenomenology of *reading* a novel that is Habermas' central concern: the actual, ongoing, cognitive and affective experience of the reader:

Especially Sterne, of course, refined the role of the narrator through the use of reflections by directly addressing the reader, almost by stage directions; he mounted the novel once more for a public that this time was included in it, not for the purpose of creating distance (*Verfremdung*) but to place a final veil over the difference between reality and illusion. The reality as illusion that the new genre created received its proper name in English, "fiction;" it shed the character of the *merely* fictitious. The psychological novel fashioned for the first time the kind of realism that allowed anyone to enter into the literary action as a substitute for his own, to use the relationship between the figures, between the author, the characters, and the reader as substitute relationships for reality. The contemporary drama too became fiction [*"fiction"*] no differently than the novel through the introduction of the "fourth wall." (50)

Importing the English word and spelling, Habermas makes "fiction" do extra work as a critical concept: it is the name for a new "kind of realism," one which does not, surprisingly, have anything in common with representation. "Fiction" at first sounds as if entails a naturalistic verisimilitude, but its psychology is transactional and it includes Sterne as well as Defoe or Fielding. Habermas regularly stresses the *metacritical* aspects of a novel like *Tristram Shandy*, and it is a metacritical inclusion of the reader that ultimately defines his phenomenology of reading "fiction."

When Habermas discusses the rise of the middle class, the increasing hegemony of print, the establishment of new discursive spaces in the civic topography such as coffee houses, salons, public libraries, or most of the other historical developments associated with the emergence of the "bourgeois" public sphere, it is often impossible to determine whether he is identifying a cause or an effect, an agent in or a symptom of the social transformation he has in mind. Common to all of these developments, however, was a change that took place in the subjectivity of private individuals. A new kind of subjectivity began to develop: first in the intimate sphere of the conjugal family, where the private yet social interactions of lived and everyday life took place, and afterwards in a host of other experiences which contributed to the production of this new or emergent subjectivity:

The sphere of the public arose in the broader strata of the bourgeoisie as an expansion and at the same time a completion of the intimate sphere of the conjugal family. Living

room and *salon* were under the same roof; and just as the privacy of the one was oriented toward the public nature of the other, and as the subjectivity of the privatized individual was related from the very start to publicity, so both were conjoined in literature that had become “fiction.” On the one hand, the empathetic reader repeated within himself the private relationships displayed before him in literature; from his experience of real familiarity (*Intimität*), he gave life to the fictional one, and in the latter he prepared himself for the former. On the other hand, from the outset the familiarity (*Intimität*) whose vehicle was the written word, the subjectivity that had become fit to print, had in fact become the literature appealing to a wide public of readers. The privatized individuals coming together to form a public also reflected critically and in public on what they had read, thus contributing to the process of enlightenment which they together promoted. (50-51)

We have moved beyond “reading” in the everyday sense of the word. In the passage above, reading a novel is not a strictly private activity but rather a dynamic, social, yet imaginary transaction or dialectic of empathy. Reading “fiction” involves a great many literacies—social, emotional, ideological, and so on—beyond the linguistic or the aesthetic, and it does not take place only in the aesthetic space between the reader and the text. It begins outside that literary relation, in the intimate sphere of family interactions, and it continues to circulate recursively between private and public realms, actual and virtual relations, feelings, and ideas. Fiction emerges within the lived self; lived relations “give life” to fictional ones. “Reading” is a name for a paradoxical reflexivity which can also be observed elsewhere,<sup>9</sup> such as in the proximate spaces of the living room and the *salon*: “just as the privacy of the one was oriented toward the public nature of the other, and as the subjectivity of the privatized individual was related from the very start to publicity,” so were private and public, imagined and lived, virtual and actual relations conjoined in the novel as a dialectical experience.

I’ll reserve judgment on the question of whether an historical transformation of human subjectivity, unabashedly Hegelian in Habermas’ account, might in fact have taken place in the course of the long eighteenth century. First, it is important to note that his detailed and compelling account of the phenomenology of reading imaginative “fiction” is presented as something less than a cause but more than a mere example of the emergence of the public within the domestic or private sphere. Individual and collective subjectivities were also being produced elsewhere, in the social and spatial architecture of the *salon* as well as in the study or other places of reading and writing:

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<sup>9</sup> One example would be Dutch *huiskerken* or “house churches” in early modern Amsterdam: Catholic churches that thrived in a Calvinist city-state because they were both hidden (they looked exactly like the Dutch homes on either side of them) and yet they were also known to all, public secrets to Protestant and Catholic alike. Steven Mullaney, Angela Vanhaelen, and Joseph Ward describe the paradoxical expansion of the public within the private in this fashion:

If ‘house church’ is a conundrum or portmanteau word, the sociological entity it refers to is a conundrum or portmanteau creature as well. It is as if a single room in a home were discovered to house, in a Mobius strip sort of way, another room within it, and that this second, interior space also violated the normal laws of physics by being larger than the space in which it was contained. In the *huiskerk*, private space opens up into, opens up as, public space in this fashion . . .

See “Religion Inside Out: Dutch House Churches and the Making of Publics in the Dutch Republic,” in Wilson and Yachnin, pp. 25-36; quote is from 33-34.

The same Madame de Staël who in her house cultivated to excess that social game in which after dinner everyone withdrew to write letters to one another became aware that the persons themselves became *sujets de fiction* for themselves and the others. (50)

This public-making proliferation of *sujets* was not caused by the novel, or at least, not by the novel alone. It is in his more extended consideration of reading fiction, however, that Habermas most extensively clarifies the process by which *sujets de fiction* are brought into self-consciousness, to a stage where they become aware of themselves as both subject and objects of apprehension. As we have seen, this process is a dynamic, inter-subjective transaction between virtual and actual subjects. Wherever it takes place, in the salon or the study or even, eventually, in the theater, this *sujets*-producing dialectic is a lived, experiential phenomenon. It happens in everyday life: it is an actual experience of a community in the process of its imagining. Reading novels took place in, and also helped to create, a new kind of social and psychological and experiential space, which then served as a kind of practice field for the development of what Habermas calls an “audience-oriented subjectivity.” Reading provided “a training ground,” in Habermas’ own terms,

for a critical public reflection still preoccupied with itself—a process of self-clarification of private people focusing on the genuine experience of their novel privateness. . . . [and] sparked by the products of culture that had become publicly accessible: in the reading room and the theater, in museums and at concerts. Inasmuch as culture became a commodity, and thus finally evolved into “culture” in the specific sense (as something that pretended to exist merely for its own sake), it was claimed as the ready topic of a discussion through which an audience-oriented (*publikumsbezogen*) subjectivity communicated with itself. (29)

An audience-oriented subjectivity, communicating with itself—but able to do so only late in the historical process if an actual audience were involved, when we are in a theater rather than a reading room.

Before its audience could become audience-oriented, complexly self-conscious of its private and public dimensions, theater had to be taken to school by the novel. It freed itself from representative publicity only when it acquired a new social and experiential architecture:

The psychological novel fashioned for the first time the kind of realism that allowed anyone to enter into the literary action as a substitute for his own, to use the relationship between the figures, between the author, the characters, and the reader as substitute relationships for reality. The contemporary drama too became fiction [*“fiction”*] no differently than the novel through the introduction of the “fourth wall.” (50)

Drama had to become a kind of enacted and embodied novel, establishing a new and quasi-readerly relationship with its now comfortably-distanced audience. The theatrical audience is thus recast as a collection of private *readers*. The fourth wall, according to Habermas, altered both the theatrical apparatus of live performance and the social consequences of seeing and hearing a play in this “novel” mode. It rescued theater from itself.

This is as unfair to the proscenium stage as it is to earlier modes of performance. However, it is a fairly accurate overview of the way Habermas thought about theater—or rather, of the way that he *thought* he thought about theater and its capacity to contribute to the bourgeois public sphere. There is more to his phenomenology of *fiction*, however, than fits within this explicitly anti-theatrical philosophy. What interests me here is the degree to which Habermas seems to have been incapable of thinking about novels and empathetic readers without recourse to the language of the stage, even when his express purpose was to differentiate the



phenomenology of reading from the phenomenology of performance. Richardson weeps along with his readers, for example, over the “actors” in his novels (50), and his plots “came to occupy center stage” (49) despite the author’s intentions. Sterne “refined the role of the narrator . . . by directly addressing the reader, *almost* by stage directions” (50—italics mine). It’s the language—and a lot more. Habermas explicitly argues that theater could contribute to the public sphere only after it had denatured itself and become *less* theatrical, placing itself under the tutelage of prose fiction. What Sterne and Richardson and other novelists produced, however, was “an audience-oriented subjectivity:” a prosaic version of something derived, it would seem, from the spatialized dynamics of theatrical performance itself. The empathetic reader repeats within himself or herself<sup>10</sup> the private relationships “displayed before him” in a novel: the “subjectivity that was fit to print” emerges not from the page but from an intersubjective transaction between actual and virtual relations, feelings, and selves. Between reader and fictive character, scene and story, a fully recursive dialectic restructures the relations of subject to object, private to public, active to passive, embodied to imagined. Each is constituted by the other: “from his experience of real familiarity (*Intimität*), he [the reader] gave life to the fictional one, and in the latter he prepared himself for the former.” It is a compelling and in many ways persuasive account of what happens when we read, a clarifying exposition of how reading imaginative fiction could be a process with public-making potential. It is also an inherently theatrical one. The same dynamic, the same complex dialectic between actual relations and their virtual or imagined counterparts, takes place between an audience member and a character or represented scene in a play, but in theatrical performance, unlike reading, it takes place in a literal as well as a figurative sense. At the phenomenological core of theatrical performance, according to Stanton Garner, is an “irreducible oscillation between represented and lived space,”<sup>11</sup> and that oscillation is realized not only on stage but also in the lived and imagined relations of the audience—in the dynamic interactions of audience, actor, and character, spectator and scene, and one member of the audience with his or her others. A play performed before an audience involves an inter-subjective dynamic that is played out in all the virtual, empathetic dimensions that Habermas described so well in terms of reading fiction, but in a theater or other playing space, the audience-oriented subjectivity is a twice-behaved orientation, to adapt Richard Schechner’s definition of performance.<sup>12</sup> It occupies and takes place in the actual, lived space inhabited by the audience, who are the performative subjects of a play as much as (if not more than) the actors on stage, and it also takes place in the imagined and virtual space that it shares with novelistic “fiction.” Reading imaginative fiction is a complex, empathetic, and inter-subjective process. It is also a performative and theatrical one, albeit in a more abstracted and figurative sense than we experience when seeing and hearing a play. Habermas’ understanding of the social and spatial phenomenology of popular forms of art like the novel is quite persuasive, but not when it is mistakenly and exclusively—mistakenly, because exclusively—applied to the wrong popular and public art. Theater operates as the ghost in

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<sup>10</sup> The gendered dimension of such empathy is even more complex. Since the affective point of view in most fiction was (and still is) structured as male rather than female, there is another stage to the dialectic for the female reader and more complex subjectivity would be one of the results.

<sup>11</sup> Stanton Garner, *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 42. See also Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin, 2008) and Herbert Blau, *The Audience* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> See Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

Habermas' literary machine, despite his efforts to exorcise it. It's the Derridean supplement to his otherwise brilliant analysis of the reading process, a necessary imp of the Habermasian perverse.

### III

My point is not that Habermas contradicted himself. Indeed, his capacity to contradict himself, to think beyond and sometimes against his explicit historical and theoretical assumptions, is one of his strengths as a social theorist, and may be one of the reasons why we still read his early work. Did an unprecedented or “novel” kind of human subjectivity evolve in the course of the eighteenth century, at least in certain European societies? Probably not. Were the dimensions and parameters of the social subject *recalibrated* during the same period? I'm sure they were. Our sense of self and other, the syntax and declension of our social emotions and thoughts, the cognitive and affective scaffolding we rely on in the everyday world—all of these aspects of the social habitus are subject to history and to culture, to regular and even constant reconfigurations and negotiations. Nor do I mean to suggest that Habermas' “audience-oriented subjectivity” was a product of the reformation *rather* than the Enlightenment, or that the vehicle for such a shift or emergence was the Elizabethan play *rather* than the eighteenth-century novel. I do mean to suggest that Habermas' insistence on print as a primary agent of social change, capable of producing a new “familiarity [*Intimität*] whose vehicle was the written word, the subjectivity that had become fit to print” (51), should be met with skepticism rather than affirmation. Print was a highly important if not-quite-new signifying medium in the sixteenth century, and its societal role increased and expanded throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. In the period of the reformation, however, it was by no means the dominant signifying medium that it would later become. Viewing the early modern period too narrowly from the perspective of print can obscure other modes of discursive production,<sup>13</sup> especially those that combine the discursive and the non-discursive, such as theatrical performance.

What about the staged word, the subjectivity that had become fit to perform? It is a question that troubles modern theories of social media, when it is raised at all. In *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700*, for example, Adam Fox generally avoids the misleading binary opposition of his title and counsels us to think instead of different media, complex in their fluid boundaries and hybrid forms. Early modern England was a society “in which the *three* media of speech, script, and print infused and interacted with each other in . . . myriad ways” (emphasis Fox).<sup>14</sup> Shifting our terms of historical analysis from the linguistic equivalent of apples and oranges—“oral” is a medium of discourse, but “literate” describes a skill that has been taught and learned<sup>15</sup>—to actually comparable yet distinctly different media is a great step

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<sup>13</sup> We can observe this in a wide range of studies of the printing press or printed book as an agent of social transformation; see, among many examples, Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press As an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe*. (Cambridge [Eng.]: Cambridge University Press, 1979), and David Zaret, *Origins of Democratic Culture: Printing, Petitions, and the Public Sphere in Early-Modern England* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700* (Oxford, 2000), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> The lasting hold of such an ill-sorted and misleading dichotomy suggests that it has strong ideological roots, which in this case seem to be the residue of an embarrassed ethnography. The dichotomy makes sense only if we sufficiently deconstruct it to realize that “oral” is a cover term for its repressed original in literacy studies of the past:

forward. Theater is notably absent from this complex inmixing, however, and is scarcely mentioned elsewhere in Fox's study. Are we to assume that drama in performance, on the stage rather than the page, was not a significant factor as a signifying medium in the period? Or that performance is so much like speech that it need not be mentioned as such? That it goes without saying?

In *The Marketplace of Print*, Alexandra Halasz recognizes early modern theatrical performance as a separate and distinct medium of signification. She concludes, however, that early modern theater in performance was unable to contribute to the making of a public, counter-public, or public sphere. Enacted on an actual stage, popular amphitheater drama in early modern England functioned, as she writes, "as a kind of lightning rod in the emergence of the public sphere" (182): in other words, it diverted social and discursive energy from that emergence, just as a lightning rod diverts electrical energy from a house in a storm. Only when a play becomes less present and differently public—when it reappears on what Halasz calls the "paper stage," in the form of a printed book—can drama give us access to public events or issues from within the private sphere:

Disseminated from the stage, discourse remains in public. Embodied in the commodity-book, discourse enters into private spaces, indeed helps define them as private, as places where one might have privileged access to public events without having to enter into public space. (185)

There is more than a whiff of magical thinking here. A book on a shelf, its pages uncut, defines a certain kind of private space but not yet, I would argue, a discursive one. "Discourse" enters the study only when the physical object is read, something that might take place soon after the purchase of the commodity-book but might also first take place decades or even centuries later—if ever. Discourse is the active agent here, not the book as a physical object that can be bought and sold. An argument on the street, a sermon in the square, a royal proclamation read out loud—these are not made available for purchase, are not "commodities" in any sense of the word, but they are discursive entities nonetheless, and capable of functioning as both partial cause and telling effect of the classic Habermasian public sphere.

According to Habermas, earlier forms of theater had to be weaned away from "representation" before theater could participate in the public sphere—but it did eventually do just that. According to Halasz, a play in performance, regardless of period or the presence or absence of a "fourth wall," can never so participate. Halasz assumes that it is only through the "commodification of discourse" that any discursive media can contribute to any kind of public. In her understanding, a performance cannot be a commodity even when it is bought and sold. Commodities, according to this school of thought, are "things" in a physical, material, tangible sense:

The marketplace commodification of discourse requires the conversion of social practices—storytelling, preaching, the dissemination of 'news' or knowledge—into things available for purchase. (29)

Sixteenth-century popular drama, it seems to me, was quite inventive in the ways it converted other social practices into something available for purchase—biographical narratives, fictional and historical modes of storytelling, various forms of knowledge disseminated in new and sometimes original forms, and most importantly, in the way in which it converted such sources

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for the illiterate conceived as the "primitive." It is mystified distinction, and continues to impede even the best studies of public and private form of meaning and understanding in the early modern era.

from one regime of literacy to another, from the highly-restricted social practice of reading into a phenomenally accessible experience. But a play in performance lacks “thingness” in Halasz’ sense—“things available for purchase”—even though it has been made available to any and all who can pay the price of admission. A play cannot become a commodity *qua* performance, even when theater adopts the proscenium stage and the “fourth wall” that were so important to Habermas. Halasz’ exclusion, in other words, is absolute. A play must shed its performative nature and reappear in print, on what she calls the “paper stage,” before it can give us access to the virtual dimensions of a public sphere that can only emerge, according to Habermas and most of his critics and commentators, within the private or intimate sphere.

According to Marx, however, commodities are *social* things as well as physical or material things. Indeed, in terms of their value-form, they are networks of association. They are “social relations between things,” as Marx writes in the first volume of *Capital*, and “material relations between persons.”<sup>16</sup> They are not contained in or by their physical or material properties.<sup>17</sup> They are never identical to themselves in their material guise, even when they are accessible to analysis in that form. Discourse does not need to be commodified in order to contribute to the making of a public or counter-public, but even if it did, early modern theatrical performance represented an intense and extensive commodification of the discourses of the period.

Halasz clearly thinks otherwise; hers is a more radical anti-theatricality than Habermas’. “Disseminated from the stage, discourse remains in public.” The assumptions underlying Halasz thinking are not unusual ones. Performance is effervescent; theatrical productions do not last; they cease to exist as such once the performance is over. For Halasz, a play in performance is rooted in the immediate present and has no subsequent history or itinerary; it cannot travel in time or space after the epilogue is delivered and thus it cannot enter into the private or intimate spheres of the social. Books last, on the other hand, and are not left behind in the book stall after we have purchased them.<sup>18</sup> They accompany us home, where they can redefine our private spaces and private and public spheres. Words on the page are lasting forms of distributed memory as well as signification; they can be reread, transported elsewhere, conveyed to future generations, and so forth. Performance has limited duration and no lasting memorial existence: it is inaccessible once it has been experienced, so even if we accept it as a commodity-form, it is one that is fully consumed at the moment of its own production. It is a signifying medium, but its poor memory and lack of retention mean that it cannot help us to imagine alternative communities or counter-publics or bring them into historical actuality. Publics always historicize; performance, like orality, suffers from a kind of structural amnesia.<sup>19</sup> It remains in public and in the present, which it can only hypostasize as the past.

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<sup>16</sup> *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, tr. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977): 165, 166.

<sup>17</sup> Marx uses a wide range of metaphors to convey what he calls the transubstantial or mysterious aspects of commodities. Commodities are described as *pupae* metamorphosing into other commodities or into money, sometimes as sirens who cast “wooing glances” at money, and sometimes they are even cast as *dramatis personae*. They are animated social entities, intersubjective as well as inter-objective.

<sup>18</sup> In so far as this is true, it should be true of books written, marketed, circulated, and read long before the invention of the printing press. Halasz is not alone in her fetishization of print, by which I mean the attribution of new powers that have always been characteristic of written language, whatever the mode of its inscription.

<sup>19</sup> For the concept of structural amnesia, see J.A. Barnes, J. A. Barnes, “The Collection of Genealogies,” *Rhodes-Livingstone Journal* 5 (1947): 52-53.

## IV

Clearly, we are dealing with different blindnesses to performance, different strains of anti-theatricality, and different misapprehensions of the place of the stage as a potential catalyst for the formation of publics, counter-publics, or public spheres. We can only assume, given his general silence on theater, that Adam Fox would regard a play in performance as a hybrid form of oral media, which would mean that its participation in the public sphere would be limited but not impossible. Habermas and Halasz would privilege the book and its role in fashioning “the subjectivity that was fit to print,” but Habermas has a more capacious understanding of the commodity-form, and his emphasis on the phenomenology of reading and performance, although hampered by some fundamental misapprehensions about the nature of early modern English drama, does recognize that theatrical performance eventually contributed to the ongoing maintenance, if not to the initial formation, of the bourgeois public sphere. It is a denatured form of theater, stemming from Habermas’ deep misunderstanding of the semiotics and phenomenology of performance, and of some of the specifics of theater history. He mistakenly regarded popular Elizabethan theater as a kind of court masque writ large—but his unwittingly performative account of novel-reading reveals a rather insightful understanding of the cognitive, affective, and ideological dynamics of performance itself.

In terms of the cultural sphere of the late-eighteenth century, Habermas seems to recognize two distinct kinds of theatrical public. The first, which he explicitly identifies and calls a “theater-going public,” does not involve theatrical performance per se; the second, which bears no name but is exemplified by the theater of Beaumarchais, involves an etiolated form of performance, a withdrawal from the audience to establish a new and more distant relationship with them—a more novelistic one—from behind the proscenium. Provisionally, I’ll call these the institutional and the ideological. The first, the theater-going public, would be made up of those private individuals whose self-interpellated identities, as members of a class that includes a great many other like-minded theater-goers, was the force that created a “cultural” kind of imagined community:

the products of culture . . . had become publicly accessible: in the reading room and the theater, in museums and at concerts. Inasmuch as culture became a commodity, and thus finally evolved into “culture” in the specific sense (as something that pretended to exist merely for its own sake), it was claimed as the ready topic of a discussion through which an audience-oriented (*publikumsbezogen*) subjectivity communicated with itself. (29)

Such a public would exceed any given audience by definition, since it would necessarily include an undefinable number of posited or virtual individuals who might not be attending any given theatrical performance but were nonetheless included in this culturally- or aesthetically-determined form of imagined community.<sup>20</sup> The second kind of theatrical public, which we might call the ideological or perspectival, has more amorphous outlines. It would be composed of those private individuals who, in response to some aspect, large or small, of a particular performance, align themselves with a particular cognitive and affective position, a perspective or point of view that extrapolates a collective or public identity from the ground of such an individual, phenomenological alignment. In this kind of theatrical public, the play—in

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<sup>20</sup> Most of us would agree, contra Habermas, that this kind of theatrical public was a significant social phenomenon at least as early as the rise of Elizabethan professional theaters, which precipitated new forms of critical and aesthetic thinking about drama as well as new debates about the relation between theater and commonwealth, theater and morality, theater and religion.

performance—is the thing. The public in question would be made up of those private individuals whose self-interpellated identity, as members of a class that included all those who might share a similar response to this specific moment in or this specific aspect of the performance, fostered an ideologically-determined kind of imagined community. An ideological or perspectival public might include most or all of those present, but in an extreme case it might also include only one member of the actual audience, whose alignment with other members of a like-thinking public would, in such a case, be entirely virtual. An example might be someone who doesn't laugh when Malvolio is taunted even though all those around her do so, or someone who responds with ambivalence or distress rather than relief or joy when the duke makes his queasy proposal to Isabella at the end of *Measure for Measure*. From this kind of theatrical public, new kinds of cognitive and affective alliance, powerful and real despite—or rather, because of—their imagined nature, can develop. New modes of social or ideological or political thinking can even emerge. The theater of Beaumarchais, as Habermas put it, brought the revolution on stage.

My own examples are drawn from early modern popular drama, of course. For Habermas, theatrical performance always has consequences, but theater is natively attuned to the promulgation of representative publicity and only becomes a factor in a public sphere when it undergoes a radical reformation; for most modern theorists of performance, what Habermas locates in Beaumarchais is inherent in the theatrical or performative sign in and of itself. Theatrical performance is always a powerful form of symbolic *action*, as Kenneth Burke would say, with both discursive and non-discursive attributes. Contemporaries of Kyd and Marlowe and Shakespeare hardly needed to be reminded that theatrical performance was a potent social force, or that its relationship to the established order could be quite different than what Habermas imagined.

“Preachers, Printers, and Players . . .,” as John Foxe declared in 1570, “be set up of God, as a triple bulwarke against the triple crown of the Pope.”<sup>21</sup> Not all devoted or “hot” protestants, it seems, were anti-theatricalists like Philip Stubbes or Stephen Gosson. Unlike Adam Fox, who asked us to think of oral, scribal, and printed media as the primary forms of signification in early modern England, the author of the *Book of Martyrs* rightly includes theater as an essential component of his militantly protestant trinity. Note that Foxe highlights “players” rather than playwrights or authors: the emphasis is unmistakably on performance rather than script, the stage rather than the page, as one of three distinct and critical media of social transformation. Preaching, of course, is a specific type of oral medium; printing, a specific type of what we might call “inscriptive” media; and playing, a specific type of what we might call “performative” media. Our social and historical terms of analysis determine what we can see of the past and where we can go in our efforts to understand it. If we expand Foxe's specific types of signification into general categories and begin to think in terms of the oral, the inscriptive, and the performative, we can begin to escape the ideological and other confusions that are imbricated in the long-standing distinction between “oral and literate” cultures. We can also begin to restore

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<sup>21</sup> John Foxe, *The First Volume of the Ecclesiasticall History Contaynyng the Actes and Monumentes* (London, 1570): 1524. The image is the “bulwarke” is of a siege, and offensive rather than defensive. A siege engine in Deuteronomy 20:20 is translated in the King James and other English Bibles of the period as a “bulwark” (“thou shalt build bulwarks against the city that maketh war with thee, until it be subdued); the Geneva Bible, which Foxe contributed to, clarifies “bulwark” as a siege engine by translating the Latin into “fort”: “Only the trees which thou knowest that they be not trees for meat, thou shalt destroy and cut them down; and thou shalt make forts against the city that maketh war with thee, until thou subdue it”).

the performative to its rightful place in the early modern period, as a consequential and primary mode of signification, and to understand theatrical performance in its capacity to reconfigure and transform subjectivities as well as forms of publicity: to see it as Foxe once saw it, as a way to bring alternative forms of civil society into being, to reimagine community and, by doing so, bring new forms into historical actuality.

A classic Venn diagram, which pictures a single configuration but implies all the innumerable other inmixings that are possible, seems the best way to illustrate our revised categories of primary signifying media:

## Discursive and Non-Discursive Media

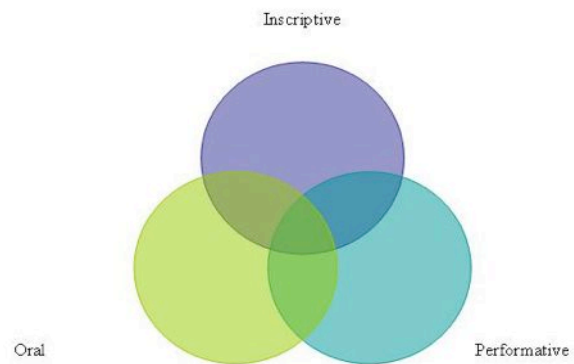


Figure 1 Discursive and Non-Discursive Media



In everyday life, it would be rare to encounter any specific medium in an unadulterated form. A sermon would usually be written before delivered; an actor's part, scripted before being memorized or performed; a dramatic role enacted with and through complex forms of speech but also without any words at all, at silent but often highly significant moments. "Inscriptive" would include linguistic signs that are cut in stone as well as inked marks made by the hand or mechanically impressed on a page (the term comes from *sker-*, to cut or incise). Some forms of ritual might qualify as purely performative, silent and communal forms of efficacious enactment, and would thus represent an entirely non-discursive mode of signification.<sup>22</sup> Theater would be lodged in the performative yet it would also communicate with both the inscriptive and the oral, in varying ways and degrees.

Media are technologies, however. An undue or exclusive emphasis on them can (and often has) easily distort the role they play as agents of social change. In his seminal study of manuscript culture in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, Harold Love suggested that the hegemony of print has obscured our understanding of the other ways in which meaning was regularly and consequentially made public throughout this period.<sup>23</sup> We haven't fully digested Love's work on what he called "scribal publication," however, if we fail to realize its implications for other media, including the oral and the performative. Scribal publication, the circulation of a manuscript as the final, public, and perfected form of the work rather than a draft in search of a printing press, differs from print publication in significant ways. Works that were scribally published established different audiences, especially in terms of class, and encouraged or made possible different forms of association; they contributed, in other words, to the imagining (and hence the production) of different kinds of community and different kinds of publics or counter-publics. Love was not merely juggling terms when he described the circulation of a work in manuscript as an act of *publication*; he was shifting our focus on that manuscript from its mode or technology of production to the public and social roles that it played. Publication, in this broader sense of a concept that has been unduly monopolized by print, can be understood as the instantiation of a general kind of signifying medium—but not merely an example of it. Publications are symbolic actions that produce public forms of signification: they are social things, we might say, whose modes of production and dissemination convey, interpellate, induce, or make possible, differing social and ideological perspectives. If media make meaning in the sense of *techne*, then publications make meaning in the sense of *poesis*.

Oral publication has a long history, of course—proclamations were said to be "published" when read out loud in market or square—but since the oral has been misrecognized as an absence by modern disciplines, the opposite of literacy rather than a discursive mode that requires a different form of literacy, we have often under-appraised its role, in terms of kind as well as degree. Theater and other performative media have also been with us, East and West, long before Gutenberg. Harold Love recovered the social dimensions of certain kinds of

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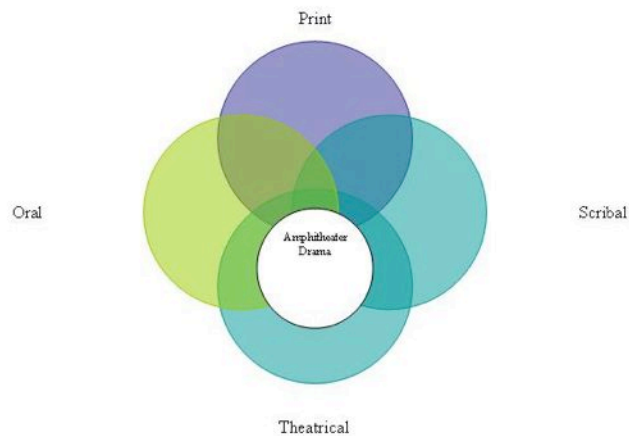
<sup>22</sup> Foxe eschews such ritual or spectacle, unleavened by the word in any form, as any decent early modern protestant might be expected to do. However, the visual and the material aspects of *Actes and Monuments*—the woodcuts that convey many things that are not glossed by the text, the heft and ever-expanding number of its folio volumes—are also key elements in what the text publishes, or makes public, for its readers and viewers and auditors.

<sup>23</sup> Harold Love, *The Culture and Commerce of Texts: Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998).

manuscript when he coined the phrase, “scribal publication.” Francis Beaumont asks us to think of theatrical performance in a similar vein. In the first printed edition of *The Faithful Shepherdess* (c. 1609), Beaumont identified the commodity-book as “this *second* publication [my emphasis].” The *first* publication of the play, in other words, was the one that took place on stage: an act of theatrical publication, with entirely different capacities to engage individual and collective identities.<sup>24</sup>

Considered as distinct and alternative ways of making words and things public, we might illustrate the most significant kinds of early modern *publication* (as opposed to early modern media) as follows:

### Spheres Of Early Modern Publication The Place of the Amphitheater Stage




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<sup>24</sup> Italics are mine. See Julie Stone Peters, *Theatre of the Book 1480-1880: Print, Text, and Performance in Europe*, p. 238, for other examples.

Any given genre of drama or any individual play will participate in a different ratio of the four spheres of publication (my smaller figure quite approximately locates amphitheater drama). Likewise, other modes of public meaning—a sermon, a prose fiction, a lyric poem—will involve a hybrid conjuncture of some or all of these spheres of publication. Each conjuncture locates us in a different signifying social space, and asks from us or offers to teach us a different combination of literacies.

## VI

Making *something* public—out in open, widely known or disseminated or accessible—is not the same thing as making *a* public. Acts of publication are, however, significant acts of production and dissemination, and can serve as one of the conditions of possibility for making a public, a counter-public, or a public sphere. Publication is not the province of any one signifying medium such as print; different media lend themselves to different forms of publication and affect or make possible different kinds of publics because they involve different material and spatial phenomena. The social arts—I would include Habermas’ novel in such a category—have critical or theoretical dimensions as well as aesthetic ones. However, experiencing theatrical performance and reading a novel are markedly different ways of participating in, and thus thinking about and contributing to, our always-ongoing socializations. At the most general level, for example, performance requires a different and more complex kind of spatial literacy. The reading of a novel takes place in actual as well as virtual time and space, but the physical setting—the study, the library, the morning bus—needs to be as insignificant (or non-signifying) as possible. The actual space of reading remains nearly transparent to the virtual, imaginatively performative dialectic of relations that Habermas describes so well. The actual space of reading contributes to the phenomenological experience as little as possible.<sup>25</sup> A dramatic performance has a different spatiality and sociality, distinct from what we experience in a “private” reading space but also distinct from what we experience in a public square where a proclamation might be read or a church where a sermon is delivered. The imagined communities explored by theatrical performance are actual as well as virtual in a deeper and even additional spatial sense, since they include rather than eclipse the physically inhabited social space of the theater or auditorium for any given performance.

Theater is a spatial art, but it is also a social art with deeper or additional dimensions. The play’s the thing, but “the play” only comes into existence when it is performed and experienced by an audience. It is not the thing which is published on the page, by scribal or printed means; phenomenologically, the play-as-read is closer in terms of its actual spatiality and sociality to the novel-as-read, although a more literate reading can supply something like the performative dimensions that are missing. Theatrical performance is something that happens only in the presence of and by means of an actually-existing audience; it takes place, which means that the play in this sense comes into existence, only through the collective and individual

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<sup>25</sup> By actual, I do not mean “real,” nor do I merely mean physical or sensible. The Real is rather understood here as a complex algorithm of the actual and the virtual, neither one of which functions as literal or figurative, extant or imagined, present or absent. For a related conception of the Real, developed in dialogue and disagreement with Giles Deleuze, see Slavoj Žižek, *Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*, (New York and London: 2004).

participation and agency of that audience. An audience is both a plural singularity and a singular kind of plurality. It is one of the crucial components that make up the complex physical, social, psychological, and semiotic architectonics of the theater or auditorium.

All of these aspects of theater combine in its sociality and all of them work together to produce its spatiality. Experiencing or thinking about theatrical space is inseparable, therefore, from thinking about or experiencing theatrical sociality. The space of performance, in other words, has actual and virtual dimensions, and these are not only complexly intertwined but they are also complexly and differently embodied in the audience as an *individuum*. “Theater” is not merely a term we have for the production or performance of a play. It is also what we call the physical space or architecture in which that play is produced or made or brought into existence. What we see or hear in theater is precisely not what we get: such an emphasis on what is presented or represented or enacted would leave out the most important and heterogeneous components of the art in question, namely ourselves.

All modes of publication have their own histories as well as literacies, of course; each historical mode has served, in its specific historical context, to define or recalibrate or challenge or even simply to make capable of imagination, quite different relationships between private and public spheres and their corresponding collective and individual identities. Publication of the theatrical kind requires and develops in us a kind of literacy that is at once a social and a spatial literacy. Different forms or moments of theater require us to develop different kinds of social and spatial literacy, but in general, and in comparison to print or scribal or oral modes of publication, we can say that theatrical publication typically shows a special knack for the semiotics of affective and cognitive space.

Does this emphasis on the spatial and social dynamics of the performative involve us in an illegitimate mystification or metaphysics of presence? Or a rarefied sense of the aesthetic, as something set apart from the pressures and fault lines of everyday life, occupying the kind of safe or neutral zone that Stephen Greenblatt has defined as the place of the stage?<sup>26</sup> I think not. The fleeting experience of a play performed vanishes in the instant of its flaring up before and within us, but the phenomenological experience of reading that Habermas describes is also fleeting, unrepeatable, yet lasting and consequential, too. Disseminated on the stage, theatrical discourse like all the other components of theatrical performance does not “remain in public” as Halasz would have us believe, any more that a novel or treatise remains on the page after it is read. Like other forms of publication, theatrical performance shapes and disseminates knowledge—and knowledge is not fully disseminated if it is not remembered, circulated, and capable of informing our private and public selves.

## VII

Let us imagine, as a kind of corrective thought experiment—corrective to my abstract theoretical assertions as well as customary ways of thinking about theater as something merely momentary or effervescent—let us imagine that the year is 1599 and we are in Elizabethan London. At one much-frequented book-stall, we buy a relatively new translation of Plutarch’s *Lives*, realizing as

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<sup>26</sup> See Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). For a different understanding of the cultural ecology and topography of the Elizabethan amphitheater, see Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988; rptd. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1995).

we come across it that we know almost nothing about Roman history and wanting to close that gap in our education. On that same afternoon, we travel to Southwark to see the new play that has opened at the recently-erected Globe. It is called *Julius Caesar* and is largely based on Plutarch, though we may or may not know this as yet. The playing space or theater is of course accessible to anyone who can pay the price of admission, just as the book, where the story of Caesar's assassination is also related, is accessible to anyone who has the price of purchase. We need different skills, however, different social, linguistic, spatial and other literacies, to get beyond the threshold of either form of Roman history.

Where is discourse located in each instance, where does it go, and are there other, non-discursive forms of signification that are important to consider? For Habermas, an Elizabethan play could only operate to reiterate and reinforce the princely *res publica*; early modern theater was entirely caught up in the creation and promulgation of the representative publicity of the official and dominant order. For Halasz, the performance of Shakespeare's verse-drama, however rich and strange, would remain in public, a theatrical ghost in the machine; we would leave it behind when we exited the amphitheater. But Plutarch's *Lives*, made portable and accessible by the printed form of the work and its translation into English, would enter into our private spaces and help to redefine them "as places where one might have privileged access to public events without having to enter into public space."

But it is hard to imagine, as Halasz asks us to do, that every bit of Roman history and every bit of Shakespearean verse was left behind in the Globe, like so many peanut shells, when the play was done. For a moment, let's consider what we know about the dissemination of book and performance and what we can only speculate about. With any printed book, of course, we have no way of knowing how many copies were actually read. Even if its pages have been cut, we can't be sure that a particular volume was ever read, in whole or in part, unless the reader or readers left behind some form of scribal notation in the margins. Knowing how many copies were sold tells us little about the discursive circulation of *knowledge* in the form of a printed book, but we often know something about the limits of its immediate, synchronic dissemination. Even when the protestant reformation expanded the "marketplace of print" significantly, press runs of books printed without patent were relatively small. 800 to 1000 copies of a title would not be unusual. If we assumed, as part of my thought-experiment, that every copy of the new Plutarch was sold and read immediately, the scale of its synchronic dissemination would pale in relation to what was regularly, even daily, achieved by early modern amphitheater drama. London amphitheaters seated from 2500 to 3000; although we have very little information about the number of performances that a relatively successful new play might enjoy, the number of auditors and spectators at a single performance on a single afternoon could easily involve as many as three times the number of readers possible for the printed book. And there can little doubt that, on any given afternoon, a substantial percentage of the audience at the Globe heard and saw a significant portion of Shakespeare's play.

There is no reason to imagine that the performance, whether in its kinetic and enacted dimensions or in its linguistic ones, "remain[ed] in public" when the play was over, any more than the knowledge or what we read was left behind on the page, or what Halasz calls the "paper stage," when we finished reading the printed book. In either case, we enter into real and imagined dialogue with other individuals, other ideas, and other experiences in an affective and cognitive space that extends far beyond the material or physical dimensions of the medium in question. Early modern theater was not *merely* an enacted form of learning, but it was this too, a highly accessible and complex distribution of knowledge. The performance of *Julius Caesar*

injected a significant part of Roman history, with its attendant and quite relevant republican debates, into the hearts and minds of its audience, including all those whom Plutarch's *Lives* could never reach. The play in performance was available to all those individuals whose literacies—social, spatial, oral, and so forth—did not extend to the written or printed word.<sup>27</sup> By the end of the performance, the individual and collective memories of our imagined audience had deeper roots than before. That audience would have acquired a more complex and branching purchase on the historical past; the affective and cognitive experiences of that audience would have accompanied them home or to the tavern where they would continue to grow and develop, as memories sometimes do.

The printed or written word has a greater reach, of course, geographically as well as diachronically; its memory is distributed across the page as well as in the consciousness of the reader, which allows it to survive from one generation to the next and enjoy a multiplicity of readings and readers over time and space. However, we moderns and post-moderns, entranced by the powers of print and digital media, tend to regard theater as if it were local in its effects as well as in its conditions of possibility. We tend to underestimate how quickly and how far social things can pass from person to person, whether by word of mouth or breath or touch. When the audience of a video on Utube expands at an exponential rate, we say that it has “gone viral.” No one can deny that modern media disseminate images and ideas, discursive and non-discursive forms of signification, at a scale that is unprecedented. But “going viral” is a metaphor here, evoking something else that spreads at surprising rates and conquers great distances. The potency of the metaphor lies in human catastrophes of biology. A virus travels by proximate means, whether by the passing of breath from one to another or the touch of bodies or the intermixing of plasmas, but viruses also travel quite efficiently in space and time, as we know from the history of medieval plagues and early modern syphilis and the Spanish flu of the early twentieth century or the human immunodeficiency virus that continues to spread in the twenty-first.

Theater is well woven into the fabric of a great many different societies; people in groups find it useful and even, I would propose, necessary to think in terms of theatrical performance. It has served as one of the social tools that Western cultures have regularly employed when they want to think about how they feel or feel what they think, and to do so in actual, experiential, and felt spaces as well as virtual or imagined worlds.<sup>28</sup> We turn to social arts like theater and invent new forms of it for a variety of reasons, but sometimes, to quote Simpcox' wife in *2 Henry 6*, we do so out of pure need: in order to think through and about ourselves in ways that can't necessarily be accomplished elsewhere or by other means. This seems to have been especially the case in a period like the early modern, when theater could still be part rival, part complement or ally, partly alternative to other forms of publication like script and print and proclamation: all of them ways of making something public, and all of them playing significant roles in the

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<sup>27</sup> See especially David Cressy, “Literacy in context: meaning and measurement in early modern England,” in *Consumption and the World of Goods*, ed. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London and New York: Routledge, 1993): 305-319.

<sup>28</sup> The literature on the social construction of space is too extensive to chronicle here. In terms of “virtual” space, my own thinking began long ago when reading Suzanne Langer's insightful inquiry into the role of space in various arts; see *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art Developed from Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: Macmillan, 1977). Langer fundamentally misunderstands theatrical space, however; like Habermas, she objects to performance that does not hew to the architecture of the fourth wall

structures of thought and feeling that made up the Elizabethan social imaginary, the publics and counter-publics that informed it, and were informed by it.