

The Pleasure of the Drama: A New Materialist Approach to Boundaries in Dorothy Heathcote's Conventions for Dramatic Action

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how drama organises bodies in space to generate human subjectivity that is open to 'other' experience, while safeguarding participants' imaginative and emotional wellbeing. The paper explores how the boundaries at the Theatre of Dionysus distributed power between stage and auditorium by giving the active gaze to the auditorium and the active voice to the stage, so that each side needed the perspective of the 'other' to function as a unity. The paper uses Bruno Latour's critique of Modernism to argue that when modernist theatre practitioners dismantled this hybrid structure, they took the vitality of 'other' experience—the pleasure of the drama—out of their performance practices. When Dorothy Heathcote liberated drama from the constraints of the theatre space by taking it into the classroom, many took her work to be part of poststructuralism's broader, boundary-breaking, revolution. But the paper argues that this understanding fails to grasp the dramatic integrity of Heathcote's

practice, resulting in applied theatre practices that ignore the validity of 'other' experience; or that blur boundaries between self and other to risk confusion, coercion, and psychological harm. The paper offers practitioners interested in ethical relationality a new materialist reading of Heathcote's '33 Conventions for Dramatic Action' (1980/2015). One which shows how contemporary practitioners like Tim Taylor maintain Heathcote's boundaries; to allow postcolonial schoolchildren, to quote Donna Haraway, to 'take difference seriously'.

Dorothy Heathcote was irritated by the cry 'let's have more drama in our schools!' (1980/2015, p. 77). It seems perverse for the originator of Drama in Education to say such a thing. Had Heathcote been able to foresee the demise not just of drama, but also of the arts and humanities in favour of STEM subjects in schools and universities, she may not have put it quite like that. Strangely though, it is by asking ourselves what she was getting at with that remark that we can get right to the heart of what drama is, how it works, its social impact—so that we can build on the ingenious ways in which she adapted it for the classroom with accuracy and precision.

WHO WAS DOROTHY HEATHCOTE?

The comment comes at end of her seminal paper [Signs and Portents](#) written for the Standing Conference of Young People's Theatre in the UK and originally published in the *SCYPT Journal* in 1980. Heathcote had come to teaching from actor training; she left her first job as a mill worker aged nineteen in 1945 having gained sponsorship from her employer to attend the Northern Theatre School. Realizing in her second year of actor training that the British theatre was not going to be for her, Heathcote moved into teaching. She brought with her an actor's understanding of drama that she used in schools to make imaginary situations from their curriculum feel personally authentic to children. Together they could imagine what it would be like to help the elusive Scarlet Pimpernell smuggle aristocrats out of France; or enact what Florence Nightingale might have said to Queen Victoria after Scutari. Heathcote's 'living through' or 'experiential' drama liberated

the imaginative power and energy of the art form for people who may not have been able to access it via literary texts and theatre tickets. At the same time, her work gave her classes the opportunity to shape culture for themselves; for instance, whenever she used words on the page, Heathcote put the children in charge of them; tasking the class to edit, adapt, annotate, voice, or interpret—as well as read them. This new way of using drama gave children extraordinary insight into their lives, allowing—in the words of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate in 1967—the boys and girls in the school to investigate ‘with great profundity such subjects as birth, marriage, death, in all their personal, social, anthropological, and artistic aspects’ (cited in Bolton, 1998, p. 173).

The work fed into the post-war British zeitgeist which aimed to rebuild a better society by making things that had only been available to the middle classes and elites—culture, education, and healthcare—accessible to everyone. Heathcote’s teaching gained significant international interest. Having begun her extraordinary career in schools and special education units, she moved to Newcastle University to train experienced teachers at Master’s level; all the time travelling extensively to give keynotes and workshops and share her extraordinary version of drama in education worldwide. She retired in 1986 but continued developing her practice and giving national and international workshops and lectures right up until she died aged 85 in 2011.

Of course, progressive educational practices came under attack during this time—particularly just as I was leaving school, when Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979, when work began on writing a National Curriculum. This coincided with a huge schism in the field that had been brewing for over a decade. Practitioner Brian Way tried to define the problem by suggesting ‘there are two activities which should not be confused—one is theatre, the other is drama’ (1967, p. 2). The advocates of what became called ‘process drama’ wanted, like Heathcote, to educate children *through* drama; while advocates of David Hornbrook’s education *in* drama felt drama should be approached via traditional literary and theatrical routes. The National Curriculum in effect watered down both approaches by including Drama as part of the English curriculum, which has made it easier for cash-poor schools to sideline over time. But the drama vs theatre debate rumbled on, to be fed by a developing poststructuralist distrust of text and language which we will explore a little later. Indeed, the

article under investigation here, *Signs and Portents* shows Heathcote engaging with semiotics in 1980. In it, she urges actor-teachers in the (then) emergent fields of Drama and Theatre in Education to sign in the manner of actors—rather than explain in the manner of teachers.

WHAT WAS THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HEATHCOTE'S MOVE?

When teachers focus on signing to children as opposed to lecturing them, it gives the class permission to scrutinize and critique the things they see and hear; this puts the class in a position to actively engage with, rather than just receive the information presented to them. It also—crucially—takes the focus off the children themselves. This is important: Heathcote's irritation with drama in schools came from her observation that actors, TIE teams, and teachers 'have all made a contract to allow people to stare at them, but the children have not made that contract'. Heathcote disliked 'the embarrassment which happens during drama lessons when children feel stared at', and said she spent 'a lot of time preventing classes to feel stared at' (1980/2015, p. 72). Central to *Signs and Portents* is Heathcote's list of 'thirty-three conventions for dramatic action'. These give teachers various different strategies to present the dramatic situation the class is exploring, so that the children can activate it in a variety of ways. As we shall see, each convention focusses and constrains the class differently; but all of the conventions give the class something 'other' to engage with, taking the pressure to 'perform' off the children themselves. Heathcote declared role to be 'one of the most efficient 'others''. But it is not just about role, and it's not just about distraction—it's about social involvement. Heathcote's conventions open the child's perspective to a world of human and non-human 'others' in ways she knew they would find irresistible:

I do not mean something which is merely interesting or entertaining... What I am discussing here is that the 'other' be the gateway to all the full depth of exploration which will follow as the class get involved with the issues. (1980/2015, p. 72)

For Heathcote these conventions offer a portal which will allow children to imaginatively inhabit their curriculum; an involvement that confers social responsibility and with it, agency. When we use Heathcote's

conventions, we do not just relieve the class of the panopticon pressure of the social gaze that is constantly embarrassing and categorizing children in schools: we actively democratize the classroom.

DRAMA AND DEMOCRACY

For the ancient Athenians in fifth century BCE going to the theatre was a paid civic duty; drama went hand in hand with democratic governance, so it was all about the social gaze. Like Heathcote though, the ancients managed it very carefully. They used the curvature of the local hillside to focus the auditorial gaze and amplify the staged voice; then convention repressed each side of the boundary from returning either gaze or voice in kind. We are so used to this practice now that we barely notice it, but the survival of this physically and conventionally split space in theatres well into the twentieth century suggests its importance. The practice kept stage and auditorium ‘together-apart’, to use Jacques Rancière’s concept from *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009, p. 51). Apart spatially and modally, because one side looks and the other speaks; but together, because everybody on both sides is focussed on the dramatic situation. As the auditorial gaze and staged voice crisscross, each into the space of the other, they generate an entangled, monadic, unity—not unlike the one Aristophanes jokes about at Plato’s Symposium (1999).

At his *Symposium* in the 4th century BCE, Plato records comic dramatist Aristophanes describing how Zeus punished humans by splitting them in two. In doing this Aristophanes tells us, Zeus accidentally generated ‘the innate desire of human beings for each other’. The archaic humans developed a compulsive attraction to each other, because each half-person needed unity with the ‘other’ to function as a ‘single living thing’ (1999 p. 28, 29). Aristophanes’ story is a metaphor for sexual desire of course; but also, I suggest, for drama. My proposal here is that both erotic attraction and drama instigate a lack that generates desire for unity with the ‘other’. Sexual unity is usually a personal matter; but the dramatic split between gaze and voice instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus pulls bodies together socially, so that fictional representations of social life onstage become personally important to people in the auditorium.

ECSTASY...

Aristophanes was not alone in hinting at a connection between theatre and sexuality; ancient Greek culture brought theatre and fertility together in the apparently eclectic portfolio of pursuits they associated with the god Dionysus—which included madness and wine. On closer inspection we can see that Dionysian concerns all share a potentially ecstatic dimension. For the Greeks *ek-stasis* meant standing outside yourself; losing, (or getting out of) your head, to take on the perspective of something or someone ‘other’. Classicist Edith Hall (2004, p. 2) characterises Dionysus himself as a breaker of boundaries; and in ancient drama, most notably Euripides’ *Bacchae*, he is certainly represented as such: joyously jail-breaking, shape-shifting, and cross-dressing the misogynist Theban King, Pentheus. But boundary violations can have tragic as well as comic consequences. Dionysus ultimately defends the freedom of his Maenad-followers by causing Pentheus’ mother Agave—herself a Maenad—to go mad and decapitate her son. We watch her ‘coming down’ from her manic state to realise she is holding his head. It is this double-edged aspect of Dionysian transgression that brings to mind Freud’s observation that ‘the performance of Tragedies’ can take us ‘beyond’ what he terms ‘the pleasure principle’ (2006, p. 143). I associate it here with the boundary-violating pleasure psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1992) terms *jouissance*; this embodied response to the ‘other’ is usually associated with sexual pleasure and orgasm. But I suggest it is also apparent when comic and tragic energy jumps across the stage, to be released in the bodies of audiences as laughter, pity, and fear.

... IN THE CLASSROOM?

Thinking about Dionysus tells us a lot about drama generally, and about Heathcote’s adaptations of it in particular. Of course, educationalists do not want children to lose their heads, or experience the decentring (*ek-static*) extremes of tragedy and comedy in the classroom. Heathcote was alert to the Dionysian dimension of the art form, and felt annoyed by her more conservative teacher colleagues in the 1970s who felt there was ‘something rather ungenteel about behaving like that in classrooms’ (1980/2015, p. 71). But she did want

to give children a ‘viewpoint which gets them into an effective involvement’ with their curriculum (p. 77), which drama achieves because ‘the medium of expression is the human person’ (p. 71). Her conventions, written in 1980, adapt drama so that it retains its power to attract—to bring the human and non-human ‘others’ in the curriculum into personal play for the class—crucially without the heightened emotion and psychological risk attached to other Dionysian exploits.

It has helped me and my drama students over the years to understand Heathcote’s move by using her 33 conventions for dramatic action with the boundaries at the Theatre of Dionysus firmly in mind. I offer this reading of the conventions here to practitioners who might find it useful to grasp how Heathcote adapted drama for the classroom structurally, without losing its capacity to draw us safely into a fictional situation. My proposal here is that Heathcote’s classroom offers a topological equivalence to the Theatre of Dionysus; that is to say she bends, but does not rupture, the porous boundaries put in place by the ancients. Without a physical boundary between stage and auditorium it is not about where the children are in their classroom, but whether the convention primarily activates their gaze or their voice.

BOUNDARY-CROSSING, HALLUCINATION, AND BEING ‘ON THE CUSP’

Seen in this light, the first fifteen conventions activate the auditorial gaze for the class by giving the class something ‘other’ to look at. So far, so Theatre of Dionysus. But in addition to focussing their gaze on the dramatic situation, each convention gives the class a subtly different way of influencing it; Heathcote terms focussing the gaze ‘the *seeing* position’, and influencing the dramatic situation physically, as ‘the *doing* position’ (1980/2015, p. 74). To achieve this state of affairs it is as if Heathcote allows the auditorium to overlap the stage by bending—not rupturing—the boundary between them. This gives the class the immense Dionysian pleasure of following their gaze over the boundary to enter the ‘*doing* position’ inside the drama themselves. Their physical involvement is key to understanding how Heathcote adapted drama to give agency to children. But as we know from Euripides’ *Bacchae*, Dionysian boundary-crossings can have adverse, as well as pleasurable consequences. The downside of Dionysian boundary crossing kicks in when we are unsure where the boundary is.

Agave in *The Bacchae* for instance has no idea she has crossed it; she revels in the super-heroic agency and strength that her imagination has conjured, under the illusion that she has killed a mountain lion. The dramatic irony her audience experience is unbearable because they can see what Agave cannot: that it is Pentheus' head she is brandishing. Being unable to distinguish between what we imagine, and what is literally real, defines hallucination.

The trick for Heathcote was to keep things, as she used to put it, 'always on the cusp'. I visited her at her home in Spondon in November 2006, after an NATD conference when she had used this phrase repeatedly. I wanted to get to the bottom of what she meant by it. We spent the day in incredibly rich discussion which I documented and must at some point write up. But just as I was about to leave, my notebook put away, Dorothy leapt up and fetched one of her late husband Raymond's engineering books to show me how cuspid valves work in car engines. There was an illustration which showed a diaphragmatic structure; it reminded me of the bicuspid heart valves I had studied doing A level biology years before. Bicuspid valves feature a single boundary which keeps two spaces separate but at the same time inseparable; oxygenated blood cannot be allowed to mix with deoxygenated blood in the heart for instance. The key feature of the bicuspid boundary is its mutability; like topological space or 'rubber sheet geometry', a mutable boundary can bend in shape and deform without losing its limits, its connectedness and continuity. This allows the contents of one space to overlap into the space of the other, without collapsing into, or merging with it. Raymond's cuspid valve, she told me as I was getting into my car, was what she meant by being 'on the cusp'.

Being 'on the cusp' then, allows Heathcote and her class the pleasure and agency of boundary crossing into the space of the 'other' without putting anyone in psychological danger. What the conventions seem to do is limit the nature of entanglement with the 'other' that is being made available to the class. Each nuanced constraint marks the boundary between the literal reality of the classroom and the imagined reality of the drama in a different way. We can soon see how they put the class 'on the cusp' between auditorium and stage, but in such a way that they never 'blend' into each other to confuse the class as to where reality lies. Heathcote does this by subtly altering the structure of the image to change the possibilities for dramatic action in the

'doing' position. For instance, activating the drama as if it were a film sequence gives the class temporal but not spatial control; that is to say they can start, stop, and rerun the action but not intrude on it. Portraits, paintings, and photographs, cannot be intruded upon either because, like film, they are two-dimensional. Effigies, cardboard cut-outs, and images in the making, such as depictions, are three-dimensional; this means they can be made, resculpted, dressed, and walked-around. These three-dimensional conventions open up the imagined realm of the stage to the class spatially, but not temporally; as though the children were designers and directors during rehearsal. It is not until the role enters the dynamic fourth dimension that time-and-space onstage and in the auditorium synchronize, or overlap, for the children in the classroom. Heathcote calls this 'action time, the seeming life rate of the theatre' (p. 198).

But 'action time' in the classroom is qualitatively different from the theatre. At the Theatre of Dionysus, the auditorium addresses the stage with their gaze, while the stage addresses the auditorium with their voice. Gaze and voice project across the boundary in different directions at life rate; each is introjected by those on the other side, so the two sides entangle or interpenetrate but never fully overlap. In Heathcote's classroom however it is as if stage and auditorium do sometimes overlap, but never so far, or for so long, that the class lose sight of the boundary. Heathcotian practitioner Betty Jane Wagner calls this 'shadowy role' (1985, p. 129); while Luke Abbott (quoted by Tim Taylor 2025) calls this 'going in-and-out of role'. Some conventions allow gaze and voice to both be reciprocated as they are in normal life outside the theatre; this happens when the role is represented psychologically as well as physically, as in conventions 1, 4, 5, 6, and 7. There are various ways in which the role can be 'brought into lifelike response' (Heathcote 1980/2015, p. 75); in person (1), as portrait (5), or as effigy (4). When this happens the boundary between stage and auditorium seems to dissolve and the children acquire the power to speak to the role; but acquiring a voice of their own comes at the expense of having to receive the gaze of the 'other'. Heathcote gives the class various ways to restore the safety and/or anonymity of the auditorium; they can activate and deactivate the role (4); allow it to hear and not speak (6); or speak and not move (7).

LIMINAL THRILLS

Their position on this boundary allows the class vivid imaginative glimpses into their curriculum, but the images are not supplied for the children—they are personal; that is to say each child brings their life with them when they use their imaginative insight. In the classroom the boundary between stage and auditorium, between the fictional situation that brings their curriculum to life and the reality of their desks and chairs, is in the head of each child—a mere shift of focus away. I used to ask my drama students what they ‘saw’ when they entered the dramatic space in this way and a huge variety of different but often vivid details emerged. Were we hallucinating? We did not think so because when you hallucinate you cannot tell the difference between what you imagine and what is real and Heathcote’s cusp never blurs that distinction. We felt the images our minds conjured were like the images we see in dreams; sometimes people said they imagined the staircase in the house where they grew up; sometimes the images just seemed to ‘land’ in ways that were unconscious. When they are in role children often have a far-away look that suggests the sort of *ek-static* double vision that psychologist Lev Vygotsky observed it in children at play, when they pivot between seeing a stick and imagining a horse (1966, p. 546). Aristotelian *mimesis*, or semblance, seems to have little to do with it. In fact, Heathcote commented that often the only concession she made to crossing the boundary and ‘acting’ was linguistic: ‘I talk as if I’m there’ (1980/2015, p. 72).

The first fifteen conventions put the class on a cusp between looking and acting; shifting between the safety of the auditorium and the thrill of the stage, and sacrificing invisibility for imaginative agency and vice versa. Never though, like Agave, confusing where they stand. The second fifteen conventions activate the voice that the ancients gave to the stage, putting the class in the position of actors, voicing, and considering the words spoken by, or of, the ‘other’. This shift takes us to another boundary the ancients instituted at the theatre of Dionysus: the *skene*, a wooden wall which divided the stage into visible and invisible sections. The first dramatists wrote for both sides of the *skene*, as classicist John Gould tells us:

The dramatic weight of comings and goings is proportional to the openness of the space that the Greek theatre presented to the playwright, who was also the producer, for exploitation. In its

function as part of the scene of imagined action, the *skene* is the place where those dramatic events that occur, as we should say, 'off stage' are imagined as happening. [...] violent death characteristically occurs within, that is inside the *skene*, and has its dramatic impact through the death-cries of the victim and the controlled passion of the messenger-speech. (Gould, 1999, p. 13).

Indeed, many of Heathcote's conventions in this second batch (16-33) fall into the *ekphratic* category of 'messenger-speeches'; I say *ekphratic*, because these accounts, reports, and stories of people and events translate first-hand experience into words, so we hear of things second-hand that we have not seen or experienced personally. Those conventions that are not 'messenger speeches' are 'death-cries' in the sense that we hear the voice of someone we cannot see. When sounds and words are not visually grounded it makes us pay more attention to their tone and timbre. Convention 22 conveys 'a letter read in the voice of the writer' which Heathcote describes as 'an emanation of a specific presence'; the 'other' is present vocally not visibly. And conventions 25, 26, and 27 are voices 'overheard (person not seen)', including 'eavesdropping' (1980/2015, p. 76). Only in convention 18 is the role 'present' audibly and visibly reading their own written account; and then only 'in contact through their writing as an author might be' (p. 76). Unlike 'messenger speeches' and 'death cries' the last four conventions are not voiced. Convention 30 for instance is read, but privately, and therefore silently. However, like conventions 14 and 15, conventions 30, 31, 32, and 33 resemble 'death cries' because they are metonymic. That is to say they represent the body of the 'other' by virtue of having been in personal contact with them; their clothing, possessions, written reports of their conversations, their cryptic codes, signatures, or 'special mark'.

HOW DRAMA CHALLENGES IDEOLOGY

In a sense the class brings the auditorium with them when they enter the liminal spaces that the conventions open up: they never stop looking at and/or listening to the drama as audiences do, even when the conventions allow them additional faculties. While they occasionally have to bear the gaze and voice of a single 'other', crucially the social gaze belongs to the class, as it belonged to the

auditorium at the Theatre of Dionysus. French psychoanalyst Louis Althusser can help us understand why this matters. Althusser theorised the structure of authoritarian communication that is used in the civic institutions he termed 'Ideological State Apparatuses' or ISAs; these include schools, churches, families, the military, prisons, the media, and so on (p. 138). Althusser termed this type of communication 'interpellation'—a portmanteau word containing the dual activities of interpretation and appellation. Interpellation then comprises an interpretative gaze twinned with a commanding voice. Althusser outlines how it works in his 'little theoretical theatre' below:

There are individuals walking along. Somewhere (usually behind them) the hail rings out: 'Hey, you there!' One individual (nine times out of ten it is the right one) turns round, believing/suspecting/ knowing that it is for him, i.e. recognizing that it 'really is he' who is meant by the hailing. But in reality these things happen without any succession. The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing. (Althusser, 1971, p. 163).

Interpellation is a travesty of the democratic allocation of gaze and voice we see at the Theatre of Dionysus, so it is strange Althusser should describe it as a 'theatre'. Althusser tells us the interpellating call usually comes from behind the recipient; this indicates that the caller commands both gaze and voice and puts the interpellated person in a passive position, lacking agency on both counts. Interpellation identifies and categorises you without your having any say in the matter. Foucault termed this the 'panopticon' gaze (1975) of the prison guard; it is also arguably the gaze of the stalker and gossip, who take care to see without being seen in return. Althusser teams this gaze with the 'acousmatic' or hidden voice, which Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalyst Malden Dolar tells us gives the speaker the authority of 'his master's voice' to complete the cast iron gaze-voice configuration of autocracy (Dolar 2006, p. 61). According to Dolar, Pythagoras the ancient Greek mathematician used this set-up by teaching his disciples from behind a curtain which, like interpellation, eliminates their gaze altogether. Although traditional teaching does not usually go so far as to hide the speaker from the class, Heathcote termed the arrangement where the teacher's gaze and voice are trained on an entirely receptive

class, 'transmission teaching':

Teachers are noted for their propensity to share their understanding by a process of telling in one form or another. This often tends to look like one-way transmission. (1980/2015, p. 73)

I want to return at this point to how Dorothy Heathcote solved the original problem she had with drama in schools: namely, 'the embarrassment which happens during drama lessons when children feel stared at' (1980/2015, p. 72). Understanding 'embarrassment' in terms of 'interpellation' helps us get to the heart of how—and why—Heathcote gave gaze and voice to her class; as well as the *extraordinary* social radicalism of using drama to turn the school—which epitomises Althusser's Ideological State Apparatus—into a democratic space that gives voice and agency to children. Heathcote's first fifteen conventions give the active gaze to the class; and when she removes the gaze in the second set of conventions, she gives them the active voice instead. When we associate these moves topologically with the boundaries instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus, we can see that the first set of conventions have the class on the cusp between auditorium and stage, venturing onto—and back off of—the stage, to glimpse and interact with its fictional world. While the second set of conventions puts the class onstage, in front of and behind the *skene* as it were, to engage as actors do, with its invisible voice. Just as the interpellating gaze was never turned on the audience at the Theatre of Dionysus to objectify and ideologically appropriate the citizens of ancient Athens, so it is never turned on the children in Heathcote's classroom.

Unfortunately, the same thing cannot be said of many of the 'applied theatre' practitioners who seem to have misread Heathcote's memo—if they read it at all. And it is here perhaps that Brian Way's remark in 1967 about not confusing drama with theatre came home to roost: theatre studies had come to dominate the field. Few people understood, or could explain, how drama challenges ideology in the ways we have just been exploring. Indeed 'drama' acquired a pejorative inflection worthy of misogynist King Pentheus—to be dramatic was to be over-emotional like a woman: a 'drama queen' was someone we could all do without. Without Heathcote, my generation of drama teachers and students were likely to have been shaped by

Margaret Eddershaw's influential A Level Theatre Studies syllabus. I remember graduating from David Davis's life-changing Drama in Education PGCE course in 1988, and trying to reconcile the vividly experiential classroom practices of Davis, Heathcote, and Bolton—who all taught us in person on the course—with the boorish mid-twentieth century theatrical Modernists who populated the syllabus I was now obliged to teach: each practitioner at odds with the others and convinced of his own greatness. It is true that Brecht and Artaud did dominate *avant garde* and increasingly mainstream theatre practices in the UK in the 1990s; but their work seemed to lack the pleasure of getting out of your head without losing it—that Heathcote's practice understood, and that had drawn me and many of my students to a career in drama in the first place.

MODERNISM AND POSTDRAMATIC THEATRE

What made Modernism and Drama such uneasy bedfellows? Two writers have been incredibly helpful to me in thinking this through. The first is Bruno Latour. His new materialist anthropology of science *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993) explores how the scientific method drove the Modernist tendency to 'purify' its practices by splitting nature from culture, humans from 'things'. Latour challenges the subsequent rift between science and the humanities that keeps knowledge in specialist binary camps; instead, motivated by the problems thrown up by climate change and pandemics, he champions 'the exploration and proliferation of hybrids' (1993, p. 144). These hybrids contest anthropocentrism; questioning the binary notion that humans are active and nature is inert, new materialism foregrounds instances of human and non-human agency. Latour always gave the ozone debate as an example of nature-culture hybridity, but we can also see his family's Burgundy vineyards as iterations of the same thing.¹ For Latour, the interrelationship of human and non-human agencies demands public scrutiny because our survival as a species depends on it. Latour's work brings to mind the remarks of the schools' inspectorate I quoted earlier, who noted how Heathcote's classroom promotes an extraordinary level of curricular interconnectedness; allowing children to investigate 'with great profundity such subjects as birth, marriage,

¹ My thanks to Steve Shapin for pointing this out.

death, in all their personal, social, anthropological, and artistic aspects' (cited in Bolton, 1998, p. 173). Indeed, I have come to view the entangled boundaries we have been exploring at the Theatre of Dionysus and in Heathcote's classroom as prime examples of the hybrid subject-object complexity that new materialism foregrounds.

The other writer who helped me clarify what was going on in the field in the 1990s was Hans-Thies Lehmann, who published his groundbreaking *Postdramatic Theatre* in 2006. As I have argued here, Heathcote seems to have carefully honoured the boundaries at the Theatre of Dionysus; whereas according to Lehmann, Brecht and Artaud foregrounded post-dramatic theatre by dismantling theatre structure, and with it—I suggest—the hybrid vitality of dramatized experience itself.

How did they do this? We can chart Brecht's experiments with the *skene* from his collected writings in *Brecht on Theatre* (1992). As he developed his Epic Theatre model to challenge Aristotelian or Dramatic Theatre, we can see how he progressively made the backstage space visible to the audience. In a Copenhagen production in 1936, scenes were changed behind a 'small subsidiary curtain which did not completely interrupt vision' (p. 102). In Casper Neher's production of *Galileo* Brecht notes that instead of creating a room or locality, Neher used the *skene* for a more abstract purpose—to project flags and 'make statements of historical or social interest' (p. 293). In Neher's production of *Antigone* the *skene* seems to be dissolving: the 'acting area is bounded by four posts', while the 'actors sit and wait for their cue' in a darker space behind it (p. 212). By 1951 Brecht has dispensed with the *skene* altogether, writing that Epic Theatre 'must acquire *qua* theatre the same fascinating reality as a sporting arena during a boxing match. The best thing is to show the machinery, the ropes and the flies.' (p. 233). Indeed, a *skene* does seem to be the key architectural feature that differentiates a theatre from an amphitheatre or sporting arena.

As we have seen, the backstage space—conjured by Heathcote in the classroom by voices, words, and contiguities that are not grounded visually—opens gaps that can trigger personal, imaginative, involvement in dramatic situations. This may be because, as Mladen Dolar has observed, sound penetrates our body through the ear canal: 'it pours directly into the interior'; whereas vision distances us from events (2006: 78). When our auditory and visual senses ground each-

other—from the moment a baby first follows the sound of a rattle with their eye—we can orient ourselves in time-and-space and separate ourselves from our surroundings. But when they are dis-integrated, as when we hear something we cannot see like a rattlesnake or an ancient tragic death-cry, distance collapses and we return to our decentred monadic state. The situation may be real and life-threatening as in the case of the rattlesnake, or it may be fictional and dramatized in the case of the death-cry; but either way we become personally involved in that situation because we are metonymically—physically—entangled in it. According to semiologist Charles Pierce, indexical signs, in contrast to icons and symbols, can activate us with an urgency he terms ‘blind compulsion’ (qtd. In Chandler 2002, p. 41); even though in the dramatized scenario we know perfectly well—because we can see it—we are in fact sitting in a theatre or a classroom. The *skene*, and conventions that understand it, allow us to ‘get out of our head’ into an intuitive place where imagination and reality coexist to produce insight, without psychological risk. Conditions in a sporting arena, with everything on show, are surely less likely to engage us in this way.

In another contrast to Heathcote, whose conventions tend to give authority to the auditorium, Brecht’s Street Scene increases the authority of the stage in the form of ‘the direct addressing of the audience by its actors’ (1992, p. 126). Brecht’s intention was to dis-integrate the components of a performance—an instance of the Modernist splitting Latour identifies—so that their relationships with one another ‘lead to mutual alienation’ (p. 204). But in effect the street scene gives the power of gaze *and* voice to actors, which may put us in mind of transmission teaching and interpellation. Even Brecht does not go so far with the boundary between actor and audience as Artaud, who eliminates it completely: ‘abolish the stage and auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind’ (Artaud in Bentley, ed. 1986, p. 61). Without a boundary between stage and auditorium literal and fictional realities become indistinguishable—certainly to audiences who, unlike actors, were not present at rehearsals. This puts audiences at psychological risk because, like Agave in Euripides’ *Bacchae*, when we cannot tell the difference between what is real and what is imagined it is as if we experienced psychosis—something Artaud suffered with himself.

These ‘avant garde’ modernist practices were being

enthusiastically taken up by the theatrical mainstream in the UK in the 1990s. So, it was easy to see Drama in Education as part of a post-dramatic liberation from the constraints of text and theatre—an aspect of poststructuralism’s wider, rhizomatic, boundary-breaking revolution, which aimed to dismantle traditionally authoritarian structures. It was tempting to go along with this idea because it looked like a win for the radicalism of process drama over the theatre studies traditionalists. And of course, this was at least partly what Heathcote was doing when she unlocked drama from its literary and theatrical constraints to make it accessible to children in classrooms. But her conventions show us that Heathcote’s classroom operated in many ways *like* a theatre. Not in the architectural sense of having three distinct spaces to work with; but in the sense that her conventions managed the bodies of her participants in the same way as the boundaries instituted at the Theatre of Dionysus. Her conventions activate either the audience gaze (conventions 1-15) or the actor’s voice (16-33). Unlike people in a theatre, Heathcote’s class can enter the drama from either position, that of the actor or the audience: but crucially not both at the same time. We can say that the theatre manages the split between gaze and voice spatially, while Heathcote’s conventions manage it temporally.

DRAMATIC INTEGRITY

It seems to me that this split between gaze and voice is what defines drama and gives it its vitality and integrity. To go back to Aristophanes, the split triggers our desire for the ‘other’ by cutting each of us in half ‘like flatfish making two out of one’ (p. 29); in Heathcote’s terms, it puts us ‘on the cusp’. Together, the positions of stage and auditorium conjoin to form a looking-speaking unity of self-and-other, literal-and-fictional realities. The single boundary attracts each side to the other to form an integral whole; but it also guarantees the irreducibility of each to the other so there is no confusion between them. This gives drama what I will call its monadic integrity; because it holds together self and other, imaginative and literal realities, in a way that is fair and honest to both sides without any deception.

Epic Theatre famously estranges us from familiarity, but fails to attract us to what is ‘other’, to invalidate the imaginative aspect of the drama. Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty on the other hand—a bit like Euripides’ Dionysus—attracts us to the ‘other’ but blurs the boundary

so like Pentheus and his mother, we lose our heads. By maintaining the gaze-voice split Heathcote upholds the integrity of the drama even as she takes it out of the theatre space. Such integrity would seem to be what distinguishes drama from post-drama. So, tempting as it may be to view Heathcote's move as post-dramatic, technically—in terms of its gaze-voice split—it remains dramatic.

APPLIED THEATRE

We have only to look at many 'applied theatre' practices to see why this 'drama' vs 'post-drama' nomenclature matters so much. In 2022 John O'Toole (et.al) very usefully republished nineteen articles from 1991 onwards which he felt were instrumental in the developing field of participatory performance practice, or 'applied theatre' as it became known. It is telling that the new field soon dropped the term 'drama' to describe their practices. O'Toole's book charts drama educationalist Judith Ackroyd's dismay to find that 'drama in education is no longer the regular focus of the *Research in Drama Education*' journal, and that 'the places for focused academic debate on drama education are being usurped' (p. 124). Taking their eye off drama's careful choreography of gaze and voice had some pretty dire consequences in some of the practices O'Toole documents. Andrea Baldwin's 2010 paper about an Australian-funded project to promote sexual health around HIV and Aids in Papua New Guinea, has more than a whiff of colonial patronage about it (pp. 16-31). Kathleen Gallagher documents classroom practice that tries to deal with three shy yet challenging year 8 students by focussing a video camera on them (p. 179). And Roozmond and Wenzel also turned the social gaze on the young people at the World festival of Children's Theatre in 2002 by getting them to spy on each other and document every aspect of the children's public and private behaviour, as 'practice research' (pp. 210, 211). As Penny Bundy notes in her introduction to section three of O'Toole's book, blurring boundaries between fact and fiction—something Heathcote never does—can also be part of applied theatre's problem. In Shifra Schonmann's classroom in Israel for example, the unbearable violence outside the classroom plays out inside it, when a rehearsal for a fight scene turns real (pp. 130-140).

This is controversial, but I want to throw out a challenge to the community of arts educators by suggesting that any applied post-

dramatic practice is going to be authoritarian—even abusive—in nature because post-drama ignores the integrity of drama’s carefully nuanced, democratically balanced, boundaries. If we are in any doubt about the serious consequences of using post-dramatic strategies in applied settings, we have only to look at Persephone Sextou’s ‘bedside theatre’ project for children in hospitals, which is a cautionary tale *par-excellence*. Sextou says she gives the children the ‘gift of compassion’; she is concerned that ‘the identity of the ill person is a label that many children often adopt during their stay in hospital’; she wants to break ‘the circle of inability and disability that children experience in hospital’. Looking into what ‘the details of what a rather experimental, unconventional, actor-audience relationship can tell us about theatre in hospital’, she tells us:

Two elements are vital to this discussion. One is the accidental as an opportunity for playfulness. The other is the transformation of the hospital into a ‘stage’ [...] how the hospital space works as a ‘stage’; and how it affects the dramatic work.

Sextou’s actors engage each bed-bound child ‘in an intimate one-to-one performance’ which she films ‘for the needs of the study’ (2016, pp 1-22). In practice however, the children often surprised their benefactors by hiding behind their bedsheets. When we understand the dynamics of *The Theatre of Dionysus*, this need to take defensive action is not the least surprising. If the entire hospital space (including their own bed) is made to work as a stage, the child finds themselves the object of the social gaze because the privacy and anonymity of the auditorium is taken from them. So it is no wonder that this vulnerable bed-bound audience did whatever they could to protect themselves from being stared-at. Sextou gives the authority of gaze *and* voice to the adult performers, so it is unclear how the children have any agency that would prevent them from being interpellated by the adults—however well-intentioned they may be. In addition to this, Sextou’s inexperienced actors found the children were confused as to who they were: actor, or character. Although the boundary between stage and auditorium was clear to the actors, it was not clear to the isolated individuals in their young audience. As we have already observed, being unable to distinguish between what is imaginary and what is real defines hallucination and Artaud’s *Theatre of Cruelty*; to bring the

much-vaunted compassion of the project into question, perhaps.

HOW TO HOLD ONTO THE BOUNDARY

If we look at a very recent account of drama in education practice published by the *NATD Journal for Drama Education* in the Autumn of 2025 (just a few months before I am writing this), we can see Heathcote's boundaries working beautifully. I am referring to Tim Taylor's charming account and analysis of using teacher in role with a class of four-to-five-year-old children. In it he pays particular attention to the importance of signalling boundaries so as not to frighten the children. It is striking how faithfully Taylor adheres to Heathcote's conventions—a feature I want to highlight in my own analysis of his work to demonstrate how successfully they function in practice.

The lesson goes through stages to show us how Taylor helps the children 'hold two ideas in mind at once' without confusing them as to which is literally real (he is their teacher) and which imaginatively real (he is a bear). The class have been reading *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen (1989), and getting up to 'act out' the challenges the family in the story encounter. This is an activity the class is used to doing with their teacher but they do not normally take it further. Taylor notes how the activity has already generated a certain amount of the enjoyment for the class; and he wants to harness the agency that dramatic playing has given the children: to 'keep the energy in the room and direct it to a purpose'. (Compare this sense of fun for a moment to the debilitating experience of the hospitalized children hiding behind their bedsheets). By taking the class further into the dramatic situation Taylor's purpose is to help them use their 'imagination to step into another perspective'; to picture 'the inner life of another being'; to make a fictional representation of someone 'other' become personally important to the class.

To do this Taylor uses the final double page image in the book which shows the bear, having chased after the 'hunters', trudging home disconsolately to his cave. But rather than reflecting on it from outside the drama by looking at the book, which would mean losing the impetus that crossing the boundary onto the 'stage' has given the class, he decides to activate their gaze by giving the class a three-dimensional (staged) image of the bear to look at instead. He brings it briefly to life by going into role to walk sadly like the bear, and then he

steps out of the 'doing position', to ask the class what they make of the bear's demeanour. This is Heathcote's convention 4, which puts the teacher briefly 'onstage' as it were, and asks the class from the 'seeing position' of the auditorium as it were, to comment on it afterwards. Heathcote was aware of the debilitating effects of gaslighting children when boundaries are unclear; so, she is explicit about asking the class to take decisions early on in their drama lesson from the auditorium or 'spectator position', 'so that everyone can see there is no confidence trick happening' (1980/2015, p. 74). Only then, having 'scaffolded' or modelled the 'doing position' for the class, does Taylor invite the class to join him 'onstage' inside the fictional situation. Would they like to talk to the bear? Of course they would! When the boundary is clear it is safe—and exciting—for them to cross it. In that case, Taylor tells the class, they will need to 'come into the story' themselves by standing up. Once the children are standing Taylor sets the scene by narrating what the bear is doing: trudging along staring at the sand on the beach. He helps the class step over the boundary into the drama by asking if they would like to 'be the bear'? They would. As they all trudge, Taylor helps them imagine the dramatic scenario they have just entered using an ancient *ekphratic* technique, where images and sensations are conjured using words just as they were in the messenger speeches of the ancient tragedies. He uses Convention 16: 'an account of a person by another person':

The bear trudged along the beach; he stared at the sand. His shoulders slumped, his mouth turned down in a sad frown. He could hear the sea lapping against the shore, but he wasn't interested. All he wanted to do now was get home to his cave. There it was, just up ahead, a dark hole in the cliff face. He went inside and sat down, dejected.

At this point the class are no longer in the 'seeing-and-doing' position between auditorium and stage, but in the 'doing-and-imagining' position of the actor, who operates onstage between visible and invisible aspects of the *skene*, imagining the fictional world beyond the stage. Taylor warns teachers not to overuse the narrative voice because you do not want the class to be simply acting out your story, you want them to connect to the feelings of the 'other'. The narrative voice sets the scene; but other conventions which allow the class to

voice the words of the 'other' as actors do, might connect the class physically to the 'other' more personally in a different scenario perhaps.

Taylor advises leaving space for the children to 'bring their own sense of things' to the fictional encounter. It may be worth unpacking the nature of this *ek-static* space a little because it is built-into each convention. The first fifteen conventions put the class between Jerome Bruner's (1957) iconic and enactive modes of learning; while the second set of conventions work between Bruner's symbolic and enactive modes. Heathcote's conventions take us to the heart of ancient drama's hybrid of *logos*, the always-already logic of linguistic representation, and *pathos*, the emotional or metonymic connection with the 'other' that Taylor is after here. Drama allows images, words, and bodies to inform and confound each other on equal terms (Rancière, 2009); as they do when Agave brandishes her son's head and demands praise for killing a mountain lion. Taylor tells us *logos* should not dominate: 'If you tell them everything the character thinks, feels, and does you leave no space for their imagination'. Leaving a gap gives the class space to put meaning together for themselves during the event and not receive it ready-made or *apriori*, as in transmission teaching.

Following this short narration, Taylor and his class sit on the classroom carpet, whilst imagining they are in the bear's cave. Then teacher-as-bear speaks to the class using convention 1 when the role is 'actually present': 'Humph, I'm so lonely. Why does everyone run away from me? I just want to be their friend.' The bear gives the children a look and asks 'What can I do?', before Taylor comes out of role to ask the class as teacher 'did you hear what the bear said?'. 'He's sad, he's lonely' they respond. We might note at this point how brief each foray 'in and out of role' onto the 'stage' is in Taylor's lesson; this is what keeps things safely on the 'cusp' for the class. This gives the class glimpses of *ek-stasis* while at the same time giving them the security that, as Taylor puts it, the 'teacher is still there, guiding'.

TAKING DIFFERENCE SERIOUSLY

Having explored such a great example of Heathcote's dramatic boundaries at work in a contemporary classroom, I want to conclude by thinking about the wider significance of what Taylor is doing here.

He refers to what 'psychologists call theory of mind' and suggests that empathy—picturing the inner life of someone 'other'—is 'one of the most remarkable things human beings can do'. But in addition to the psychological benefits of drama, when we read it through the new materialist lens I am developing here, we can understand its extraordinary social impact too. According to biologist and philosopher Donna Haraway it is imperative for postcolonial societies to take difference seriously:

How can people rooted in different knowledge practices "get on together", especially when an all-too-easy cultural relativism is not an option, either politically, epistemologically, or morally? How can general knowledge be nurtured in postcolonial worlds committed to *taking difference seriously*? Answers to these questions can only be put together in emergent practices; i.e., in vulnerable, on-the-ground work that cobbles together non-harmonious agencies and ways of living that are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures. For me, that is what *significant otherness* signifies. (2003, p. 7, my emphasis).

It seems to me that 'taking difference seriously' is precisely what drama does; and it does it precisely because it is not post-drama. The Theatre of Dionysus established an architectural boundary between fictional and literal realities by building a stage and an auditorium. These spaces were governed by conventions for dramatic action that allowed the audience gaze to project onto the stage in one direction, and the staged voice to project into the auditorium in the other. In order to function as a looking-and-speaking unity each side had to introject the projections of the other. This state of limited entanglement seems to generate comic and tragic *jouissance*—the laughter, the pity and fear—that materially jumps the boundary from the fictional side of the arrangement to express itself energetically in the bodies of the audience. In this way *pathos*—'other' experience that resists signification—is brought into the social frame to generate what Haraway terms 'significant otherness'. Perhaps this is what allowed Athenians in the fifth century BCE to reconstitute their entire social system and institute democratic politics.

As we have seen, the post-dramatic move disrupts this complex

dramatic boundary. By taking drama out of the theatre building and using it in the classroom, Heathcote seems to join the post-dramatic practice of eradicating the boundaries between backstage, stage, and auditorium. But as I hope to have shown, her classroom goes to great lengths to neither assimilate, nor estrange imaginative, fictional, and literal realities, so that they can use or inform each other. Heathcote's conventions seem to be interested in building *pathos* to attract the class to the 'other' by taking children 'through the layers from mere attraction, to interest, to attention and finally to concern' (1980/2015, p. 77). If we read her conventions for dramatic action as we do here, with the Theatre of Dionysus firmly in mind, we can see how they preserve the ancient gaze-voice dynamic that allowed audiences *ex-static* or 'other' experiences—without losing themselves in the process. The conventions do this by bending theatrical boundaries; 1-15 combine the active audience gaze with the director's, designer's, and actor's metonymic power to influence what they see; while 16-33 combine the audience's capacity to receive language with the writer's and actor's ability to shape it—all without the penalty of being looked-at or interpellated in return. Her move resolves Heathcote's annoyance at 'the embarrassment which happens during drama lessons when children feel stared at' (p. 72). But it also preserves the integrity of the democratically balanced—dramatic—boundaries that need to be in place for us to, in Haraway's terms, take 'difference seriously'. They are boundaries that anyone who wants to work ethically in educational or applied theatre practice might wish to take very seriously indeed.

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