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Ilter, Seda (2015) Rethinking play texts in the age of mediatization: Simon Stephens's Pornography. *Modern Drama* 58 (2), pp. 238-262. ISSN 0026-7694.

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‘Now the machines have come back at the very heart of the lines’:

Pornography, Rethinking Play Texts in the age of Mediatisation

Prologue: An Imaginary Dialogue on The Encounter Between Theatre and Media

Tim Etchells: These days “you have to think about technology, you have to use it, because in the end it is in your blood. Technology will move in and speak through you, like it or not. Best not to ignore” (95).

Hans-Thies Lehmann: What worries me about the technology-theatre relationship is the live broadcasting of theatre events, “the emerging transition to an interaction of distant partners by means of technology” (167).

Peggy Phelan: Media technologies affect the here-and-nowness of theatre, its proximity and immediacy, and threaten the theatre’s ontology as live performance (146).

Philip Auslander: But what you suggest is a “reductive binary opposition of the live and the mediatised” (Auslander 3). There are no clear-cut ontological and phenomenological distinctions between live forms and mediatised ones. The live is supplanted by the mediatised double not only physically on stage, but also in the perception of individuals (Auslander 3 -7).

Introduction: The Missing Voice

This imaginary dialogue, based on renowned publications on contemporary theatre, indicates some of the issues about the influence of media technologies on performance: the inevitability of media’s influence on the ontology, phenomenology and the survival of theatre in an increasingly technologised culture. Also importantly, it illustrates the growing interest among theatre practitioners and scholars in media technologies and *mediatisation* – the phenomenon identifying the ‘meta process by which everyday practices and social relations are historically shaped by mediating technologies and media organizations’ (Livingstone, “Foreword” x) (a notion I will return to later). Since the 1990s, Western theatre has been increasingly interested in the media – forms of communication, social institutions and ideological tools – and processes of mediatisation, due to the growing prevalence of the media in Western societies. Companies such as The Wooster Group, Builders’ Association and Rimini Protokol use film, video and virtual technologies to consider various aspects of network culture and virtual reality. Interactive

productions by Blast Theory incorporate the Internet, navigation technologies into live performance to question changing modes of human perception and interaction. The media's influence on performance is present even in the *absence* of technology through a shared social-cultural consciousness, which "can only be understood by being related to life in a 'mediatized' society" (Jürs-Munby, "Introduction" 10). This is evident in the fragmented and overlapping utopian and dystopian visions in Forced Entertainment's *Tomorrow's Parties* (2011), which evoke hypertextual, multi-perspective modes of perception. The mediatization of the theatre, as hinted in the above dialogue, has also galvanised much scholarly attention. These significant accounts, among others, nonetheless reveal a certain blind-spot in current scholarship: the focus on performance often 'forgets' the effect media technologies and culture have on play texts and how plays evolve and react in return. As I shall demonstrate later, current scholarship is not entirely insensitive to textual form or playwriting. Nevertheless, there is a predominant tendency to explore changes in directing and design in response to a mediatised culture, and overlook concomitant changes in plays.

This paper responds to this tendency by investigating how a play text can accommodate media aesthetics and the social-cognitive conditions of today's culture, and reflects on the new realities of the contemporary. In so doing, I challenge recent shifts in critical discourse concerning the influence of the media on theatre: the growing emphasis on performance; and misconceptions about postdramatic theatre as a non-textual form and the text's supposed incapacity to accommodate the new reality of mediatised culture and consciousness. To do so, I do not consider plays that simply talk about media technologies and culture, or use motifs and images such as mobile phones and chat rooms in their representational narrative. Rather, this paper proposes to go beyond the limited idea that the relationship between plays and the media emerges only in plays' themes by instead exploring how text as a form can relate to aspects of contemporary culture without having to reproduce or explicitly thematise the media in its

narrative. I question whether or how the evolution of the mode of textual expression opens new vistas to engage with the world.

To this end, I introduce the concept of *mediatised dramaturgy*. Dramaturgy, a “slippery term” (Turner and Behrndt 17), here refers solely to the structure of a play text. Mediatised dramaturgy, an umbrella concept, therefore refers to the ways a play is affected by the media and the culture it generates rather than to theatrical dramaturgies and how they incorporate technology into performance. Modes of mediatised dramaturgy can be briefly categorised into two patterns, based on differing approaches to the mode of representation and thus the capacity to accommodate the realities of the contemporary: ‘dramatic’ and ‘no-longer-dramatic’ mediatised texts. The former engages with media culture without rethinking dramatic form in relation to the changing social and perceptual circumstances. These plays are based on the representations of the world as a unified, knowable and therefore representable cosmos. For instance, Martin Crimp’s *No One Sees the Video* (1990) and Enda Walsh’s *Chatroom* (2005) deal with the use of surveillance and information technologies as capitalist tools for “testing and polling, and finally control[ling]” (Baudrillard 119) individuals. However, although they thematise the dissolution of human agency and relations in a media-driven consumer culture, they do not attempt to adjust the mode of representation in response to these issues. Patrick Marber’s *Closer* (1997) and Douglas Maxwell’s *Helmet* (2002) consider similar questions yet, unlike Crimp and Walsh, incorporate media aesthetics into the plays’ form: Marber uses netspeak in a scene and Maxwell remediates videogame design through the plot structure. Nevertheless, they adhere to the conventions of dramatic representation, which have become ever more problematic in relation to the changes in consciousness and embodiment in a high-speed, information-intense world. Such attempts restrict the plays’ capacity to take account of the epistemological and ontological uncertainties they thematically consider. Representational comfort, based on the uncritical use of media aesthetics in line with dramatic illusion, puts the audience at ease and suggests an affinity with people’s unquestioning acceptance of the media influence on their lives. Thus, such plays

tend to propose an unnuanced representation of an unthinking attitude rather than pursuing a questioning critique.

On the other hand, ‘no-longer-dramatic’ mediatised plays, based on Gerda Poschmann’s notion of the ‘no-longer-dramatic theatre text’ (more of which later), frustrate dramatic representation in response to changing culture and perception. Such plays are the focus of this article, as they engage with today’s culture through innovative modes of expression, and present a critical view on the contemporary moment. I will analyse this category further, but it is important to note here that it comprises not only direct references to media aesthetics and culture, but also implicit aesthetic subtleties that echo the phenomenon of mediatisation. This does not necessarily mean the author envisaged an analogy between the play’s aesthetics and changed modes of perception and culture. Yet, the text as a form can imply this link through its resistance to dramatic representation of the world as a unified place. Thus, this dramaturgical trend involves plays whose fabric overtly or implicitly addresses a mediatised society without naming the media explicitly. Accordingly, it is important to stress that the processes and effects of mediatisation, as I shall discuss, are fundamentally related to other social processes of the modern world such as globalisation and individualisation. Therefore, the dramaturgical responses to today’s culture may occur through reflections on these phenomena.

In light of this, I will analyse Simon Stephens’s *Pornography* (2007) as a case study for investigating how it negotiates aspects of the media’s impact on the human condition and consciousness. *Pornography* pictures a landscape of terror and social alienation with the 7/7 bombings in London as its backdrop. The world of *Pornography*, filled with CCTV cameras, iPods, eBay and emailing, is a media-saturated one in which society, perception and interpersonal relations are shaped considerably by media technologies and the culture they bring about. *Pornography*, I will argue, is not a play that merely talks about this world, but also one that engages with the socio-cognitive realities through its structure. The analysis will focus on how *Pornography*’s structure – chiefly characterisation – negotiates its thematic concern with the

changing experience of human subjectivity and relations due to individualisation, which, as shall be discussed, has been reinforced by mediatisation.

The analysis would be limited without the investigation of *Pornography*'s reception on stage. Thus, I examine its world premiere in Germany (2007) – a co-production between the Deutsches Schauspielhaus in Hamburg and the Festival Theaterformen at the Schauspielhannover, directed by Sebastian Nübling – and its first British production in Edinburgh (2008), directed by Sean Holmes. In focusing on *Pornography* and these productions, I am not suggesting that it is the first play that addresses mediatised culture through its form and themes. Early examples can be traced back to the first half of the twentieth century in Western drama, if not earlier: Jean Cocteau's *The Wedding on the Eiffel Tower* (1924) uses the telegraph as its protagonist (Lamont 148), whilst the language of German Expressionism registers media influence through the 'telegramme style' that 'consists of a concise and staccato language in response to the pace of contemporary life' (Patterson 22). In the 1960s and 1970s, plays increasingly incorporated film and television aesthetics and critiqued the ways these technologies affected society. Jean-Claude van Itallie's *America Hurrah* (1966) and *Eat Cake* (1971) deal with the influence of the media on society by incorporating televisual aesthetics into the plays' structure. Contemporary examples in British theatre range from Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (1997), Sarah Kane's *Crave* (1998) to Caryl Churchill's *Hearts Desire* (1997) and *Love and Information* (2012) whose dramaturgical structure, explicitly or indirectly, responds to changed modes of perception and being. Such modern plays invite detailed analysis in further studies. Here, I focus on *Pornography* thanks to its inventive ways of accommodating the experience of 'being' in a media-saturated environment through a refined congruity between the aesthetics of characterisation and the mode of consciousness and relations. Moreover, *Pornography* presents a noteworthy contradiction between the plot's concern with Britishness and the form's response to a globalised human condition, a feature that renders it a text of and for the mediatised age. Before exploring *Pornography*, it is important firstly to familiarise with the phenomenon of

mediatisation, and secondly to grasp the fundamental reasons underlying the overlooked position of plays.

Setting the Context for the Text: Mediatisation

The term mediatisation originates from the German *Mediatisierung* and simply refers to “the horizons of social change in relation to media change [and to] the interdependence between the media and other societal subsystems” (Livingstone, “Mediation” 6). Besides this, it “points to societal changes in contemporary high modern societies and the role of media and mediated communication in these transformations” (Lundby 1). Mediatisation is not a “long-lasting process” (Hjarvard 114) and does not characterise every process through which the media affects society. It is a concept that characterises the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in which “the media *at once* have attained autonomy as a social institution and are crucially interwoven with the functioning of other institutions” (Hjarvard 110), and society have become dependent on the media. Mediatisation is related to other social processes such as globalisation, commercialisation and individualisation - by-products of late capitalism,¹ namely, the neoliberal and universalised radicalisation of capitalist ideology and its means in contemporary society. Friedrich Krotz explains this link by defining mediatisation as a *meta-process*: a long-term, culture-crossing process in which media increasingly influence the social and cultural construction of everyday life, and “should be understood as a concept similar to globalization, individualization, and commercialization.” (25) Mediatisation as a metaprocess relates to mediatised dramaturgy because the formal changes in plays contain indices of these interlinked social processes.

Dwelling a moment on individualisation in relation to mediatisation is fundamental to the analysis of *Pornography*. “Individualization”, Zygmunt Bauman argues, “now means something very different from what it meant 100 years ago and what it conveyed in the early times of the modern era – the times of extolled human ‘emancipation’ from the tightly knit web of communal dependency, surveillance and enforcement” (“Foreword” xiv). The concept today refers to the inescapable condition of humans: it is “a fate, not a choice; in the land of individual freedom of

choice, the option to escape individualization and to refuse participation in the individualizing game is emphatically *not* on the agenda” (Bauman, “Foreword” xiv). Theodor W. Adorno identifies this as “pseudo-individualism”, the “endowing [of] cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization itself” (445). Individualisation is an “institutionalized” state shaped by ideological systems (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim xx). These critiques emphasise the increased control of ideological-symbolic systems over humans, leaving them with limited authority.

Incrementally, since the 1990s, the prevalence of the media has reinforced this concept of individualisation. The subject’s identity and states have constantly been constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed through its interaction with and exposure to the mediated environment (Hayles 3). Emphasising this process, Bernard Stiegler argues that human consciousness is synchronised with the dominant ideology as a result of being “bombarded mediatically by the cultural industries” (Stiegler 63). Likewise, Vilém Flusser notes that media images “transform their addressees into objects” (Flusser, *Writings* 73) by putting people into a state of exposure that they “cannot interrupt [...] and become a subject” (Flusser, *Writings* 73).

Additionally, Anthony Giddens argues that by promoting self-interest, individualisation renders humans arguably less able, “to take serious interest in anything other than shoring up the self” (*Consequences* 73). Likewise, Kenneth J. Gergen suggests that the self-interest of the “individualised” subject makes him/her less sensitive to minority voices and the “other”, and more likely to suppress the other and cause social division and alienation (33). Social isolation has arguably become more prevalent in contemporary culture due to the growing influence of the media. Arguably, although interpersonal communication has increased due to technological immediacy and “reduction of space by speed” (Mansfield 155), people tend to live more isolated lives than before. “Virtual proximity”, Bauman argues, defines the predominant mode of human connection today, “too shallow and brief to condense into bonds” (*Liquid Love* 62) since they are “easy to enter and to exit” (*Liquid Love* xii). For Bauman, people experience a shift in

interpersonal relations from strong bonding to superficial connection. The media's depictions of people contributes to the weakening of human relationships, for the media frequently treats humans as news material, a means to attract the consumer's attention. Such objectification of human lives trivialises their complexity and influences people's perceptions of other humans, leading them "to treat other humans as objects of consumption" (Bauman, *Liquid Love* 75). This is not to suggest that people become less 'human' as emotional beings, but they may become less attached and increasingly indifferent to other humans.

These criticisms of the influence of media technologies on society seem to present, albeit acceptable, a partial and technophobic viewpoint. Thus, one should emphasise, as Flusser does, that media technologies can also serve society as interactive, unifying instruments as an alternative to the totalitarian use of media technologies as ideological communication tools (Flusser, *Into the Universe* 4). Flusser therefore argues for a "dialogical, telematics society of image producers and image collectors" (Flusser, *Into the Universe* 4), which allows democratic communication between all members of society. Furthermore, criticising Stiegler for overestimating the power of the technical over the human, Mark B.N. Hansen underlines the agency of the human in creating meaning "by processing inchoate information" (Hansen, *New Philosophy* 52).

Such changes have influenced contemporary plays, yet the altering aesthetics of the text has not received sufficient scholarly attention, an oversight I will now venture to examine.

Tracing the Forgotten Text: Why is the impact of media technologies and culture on plays overlooked?

Despite being predominantly overlooked, the question of the text is not entirely unnoticed. In 'Technology and Dramaturgical Development: Five Observations' (1999) Arnold Aronson asks whether technological developments have 'given birth to new forms of dramatic art' (188). In response, he argues that although media technologies have influenced dramatic art (text and performance), they 'engender no new forms of drama' (189). For Aronson, incorporating new inventions into the plot proposes a 'theatre about the new technology [that] *discusses* rather than

embodies' (194). It is through the changes in the structure of text and performance that theatre can 'embody' the media-driven world (195). Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (1993), Aronson illustrates, "[t]hematically, imagistically, emotionally [...] has nothing to do with the world of computers and cyberspace" (196), yet its form "reflects the prevailing non-linear, juxtapositional, hypertextual world of cyberculture" (196). Despite its thought-provoking insights, Aronson's analysis remains limited in its discussion of the dramaturgy of texts. Similarly, Patrice Pavis argues that the aesthetics of media technologies and plays are deeply connected because "the writings 'speak' of a world constructed by all of the media, particularly by the new technologies" (187). According to Pavis, the changes in society and theatre have led to "a re-evaluation of the role of texts, and, as a result, a revival of dramatic writing" (192) that responds to today's culture. Thus, he posits that it is essential "to pick out, amongst the machines, videos, technology and other computers, [...] some scraps of text" (191). Like Aronson, Pavis argues that the relationship of texts to the media and their reactions are 'highly ambivalent' (192), yet they can be found in the intertextual and intermedial form of a play's incorporation of media aesthetics. Pavis provides a well-founded perspective on the changing form and status of text, yet fundamentally focuses on the French tradition.

Some of the research has focused on the impact of specific media forms on plays. For example, John H. Muse's "140 Characters in Search of a Theater: *Twitter Plays*" explores how Twitter has engendered new forms of plays and reshaped "both playwriting and the experience of theatrical spectatorship"(43). In "Theater and Media Before 'New' Media", Martin Harries focuses on Beckett's *Film* and *Play* to explore how Beckett's plays are "exemplary of a theater that makes itself out of the materials of this changed culture: a medium among media, where specificity belongs not to an existence apart from mass culture but to particular ways of working inside a culture reshaped by those media."(23)

Other critics indirectly or briefly hint at the influence of the media on plays. For instance, Andy Lavender talks about an aesthetic shift in theatre-making that engenders new forms of

writing along with new ways of rethinking the theatre space (180). Likewise, Maria Delgado and Caridad Svich emphasise that “technology plays a part in the way in which we can think about the creation of new languages for plays” (8). Yet critics do not take these significant observations further. More often than not, they tend to focus on a play’s themes about the media and overlook the changes in plays’ form. For example, Amy Petersen Jensen briefly investigates plays by studying the presence of media forms in texts as narrative content (113), whilst Kerstin Schmidt analyses the themes of Jean-Claude van Itallie’s plays by focussing on the “trivializing power of the omnipresent media on contemporary society’s ritualized behaviour patterns, and its unrestrained consumerism” (89). Hence, I further such theme-oriented readings by putting to one side the overt use of the media as a theme and instead examining the evolution of dramaturgical strategies in response to contemporary culture and consciousness.

As to why the play text has been a blind-spot for discussions of media and theatre, one response could be because media aesthetics and discourses are seemingly less pronounced and perceptible in writing than they are on stage. The media in text, Pavis argues, “is not, as it is onstage, a foreign body; it actually places itself in an intertextuality in the widest sense of the word” (192). In a similar way, media influence can be an entrenched, taken-for-granted or unconscious experience due to the ubiquitous presence of media technologies and images in society. The impact of the media may be embedded in the flesh and blood of texts, as it were, rather than an overt presence. It would be a mistake to think that, compared to media influence on the stage, plays are not affected by or are unresponsive to changing conditions.

This neglect is also potentially bound up with the changing status of text in theatre. In *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006 [1999]), Hans-Thies Lehmann theorises the changing position of written text in theatre. He focuses on the move towards performance and on the questioning of the primacy and centrality of the text in European and North American theatre since the 1960s, with the arrival of neo-avant-garde art forms (Jüers-Munby, “Introduction” 4). In questioning the position of plays in the *dramatic* theatre tradition, an issue raised earlier by Antonin Artaud

among other historical avant-gardists, Lehmann does not propose a textless theatre. However, his theory and the tendencies in contemporary theatre towards a performance-oriented approach have been misunderstood as such. One of the reasons for this misconception is Lehmann's own deliberate avoidance of the textual dimension in postdramatic theatre. This is not, however, because Lehmann excludes text from theatre. Rather, it is because he reserves the category of postdramatic theatre for the performance dimension of theatre, without overlooking "the continuing association and exchange between theatre and text" (Lehmann 17). He considers Heiner Müller, for example, an important playwright and claims that "[i]mportant texts are still being written" (17).

Gerda Poschmann coins the term the "no longer dramatic theatre text" (qtd. in Jürs-Munby, "Resistant Text" 46) to indicate new kinds and roles of texts in the theatre. Lehmann reads such plays as a new mode of theatrical sign usage (17) and a critique of what he considers the potentially untenable role of dramatic representation in a media-saturated, globalised world (a subject I will discuss below). The distinction between 'no-longer-dramatic' text and *postdramatic theatre* is that the latter refers to theatrical performance rather than the written text *per se*. In 'no-longer-dramatic' texts the "principle of narration and figuration' and the order of a 'fable' (story) are disappearing" (qtd. in Lehmann 18); rounded and psychologically motivated characters, dialogue form and linear dramatic plot dissolve. Such texts may act as an initial and significant element of the performance, yet they do not claim dominance over other elements of performance. These texts propose a productive tension between text and performance; indeed, they are "not complete until they are given performance" (Turner and Behrndt 35). Thus, a 'no-longer-dramatic' text asks for new directorial, performative and spectatorial approaches as it "suggests itself as a relativized element for performance from the outset and points to its own indeterminacy and status as uninterpreted material" (Barnett 16). Although 'no-longer-dramatic' texts generally result in postdramatic performances, the latter does not exclude dramatic texts. There are attempts such as the Wooster Group's *To You, the Birdie! (Phèdre)* (2001) and *Brace Up*

(1991, 2003) to re-interpret dramatic texts by stripping them off their teleological and logocentric narrative, and treating them as another element of performance text. As shall be seen, in plays such as *Pornography*, texts have an important, though relativised, position; the plays deconstruct the text's constitutive role and the dramatic mode of representation as a response to the contemporary world.

Misconceptions about the changing position of plays have also arisen from Lehmann's conflation of a logocentric dramatic tradition and the play text itself, contributing to the general lack of interest in plays. In his critique of dramatic theatre Lehmann merges the primacy of text in dramatic tradition with "the logocentric implications of the dramatic playtext" (Tomlin 58) – the philosophical category of the 'dramatic' as a representational design for a unified world. So far I have discussed the tendency of playwrights to undermine the texts' authority over theatrical performance. It is now important to investigate the second implication of the conflation. This is fundamental to the analysis here, because postdramatic theatre does not only imply undermining the text's primacy. It also implies a theatre that is beyond drama as "the logos of a totality" (Lehmann 40) and beyond "the authority of the dramatic paradigm" (Lehmann 27) in the theatre. It is about rethinking the theatre in relation to a "globalized and multiply mediatized [thus,] less 'surveyable' and manageable than ever world" (Jürs-Munby, "Introduction" 11).

Lehmann's conflation of the primacy of text with the dramatic idea of text-cosmos runs in parallel to his definition of the dramatic as "a design of a world, the author as its creator" (53-4). However, as Liz Tomlin argues, Lehmann's assumptions imply that the central role of the text places the work within the logocentric bind of the dramatic (59). This view of Lehmann's arguments leads to a binary definition: 'dramatic' as text-based and 'postdramatic' as non-text-based theatre (58). This binary categorisation suggests that if the written text has a central role in the artistic process, it cannot be considered in terms of postdramatic theatre. However, as discussed earlier, for Lehmann the postdramatic does not suggest an exclusively non-text-based

theatre, but a theatre in which the text is the basis for a performance without dominating the realization process.

Given these definitions, a postdramatic theatre proposes a different understanding of time and space that is a “speed-space” (*dromosphere*), where the experience of the world is accelerated (Virilio 71) and shaped by the media. This new theatrical paradigm responds to the conditions of “the spread and then omnipresence of the *media* in everyday life” (Lehmann 22). It offers “a theatre that cannot be taken in ‘at once’, that is not easily ‘surveyable’, and thus a theatre that does not make the world ‘manageable’ for us” (Jüers-Munby, “Introduction” 11). Relatedly, as will be seen in *Pornography*, ‘no-longer-dramatic’ texts put forward a new dramaturgical form that subvert dramatic representation of the world as a fictive whole and accommodate the “unsurveyable present” (Lehmann 175) of the mediatised-globalised world.

Pornography: A Play Mapping the Mediatised Age and Subject

Largely set in London, *Pornography* unfolds in the week of July 2005 that saw Live 8, the G8 summit, the 2012 Olympics announcement and the 7/7 bombings take place. The temporal setting gathers, yet does not unite, the lives of eight people: a female solicitor, disclosing trade secrets to her boss’s rival; a pupil in love with his teacher; two incestuous siblings; one of the 7/7 bombers coming down to London on the day of the bombing; a university lecturer and his student; and a lonely widow, watching online pornography and craving human connection. Although every character in this mosaic of human lives offers fragments of different stories, the themes of individualisation, alienation and the objectification of humans link their narratives. Stephens sets these motifs as the central theme, which he introduces metaphorically through the play’s title. For Stephens, “[w]e live in pornographic times” where people objectify others in ways that echo “the process of objectification that goes on in the production and consumption of pornography” (qtd. in Gardner *guardian.co.uk*). Human beings today perceive and connect to the world and other humans beyond their physical experience through media technologies. This state of ‘virtual proximity’ and the consumerist culture ingrained in the mentality of the

individualised subject leads him/her to judge other humans “after the patterns of consumer objects by the value of pleasure they are likely to offer, and in ‘value for money’ terms” (Bauman, *Liquid Love* 75). In a similar way, the human body in pornography becomes an object of desire and satisfaction; people beyond the screens become images and experiences to consume. It is this change in perception intensified by individualisation and media-saturated culture that *Pornography* critiques.

The play is filled with recognisable images and motifs such as eBay, CCTV cameras, iPods and videogames, emphasising the omnipresence of the media in everyday life. These familiar images establish the link between the content of the play and media-dominated culture. Stephens complements the critical content with an inventive approach to dramaturgy, in terms of plot composition and, particularly, character presentation. The play is comprised of seven scenes that are, like the lives it portrays, disconnected: there is neither a linear storyline nor a logically constructed plot to arrange the fragments in an easily understandable order. Only the temporal and spatial structure form common ground for the disjointed stories: yet the shared setting does not necessarily generate a coherent narrative. Additionally, Stephens does not attribute character names to the text or to mark the change of speakers. Unattributed text is not a new dramaturgical device. Plays like Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life* or those written by Heiner Müller and Peter Handke in the German tradition use similar strategies. Yet, *Pornography* uses this technique in a way that specifically emphasises the changing nature of ‘being’ in a mediatised culture.

Unlike the liberal humanist concept of character, which represents humans as fully-developed individuals, the characters in *Pornography* appear to be figures or silhouettes without names and detailed information about their personalities or motives. For example, the female character in the first scene is a solicitor sharing her boss’s business secrets with his rival. However, Stephens provides no further information about this character regarding her past or personality, gives us instead a snapshot of a character within the limits of this fragment of a

scene. Such withholding of information engenders a sense of uncertainty and unknowingness.

The fifth scene furthers this epistemological uncertainty, switching from a monologue form to a dialogue between undefined characters. At the beginning of the conversation, it is not clear how many characters there are or who they are. The dialogue continues for a while without attaching an identifiable individual voice to the speakers; then it implies that the speakers are siblings:

“You decide. Have you seen Mum and Dad?” (Stephens 231). This relationship becomes more evident later in the conversation when one of the speakers says: “You’re my sister” (Stephens 239). Nevertheless, the scattered information about their kinship or identities does not lead to any definitive picture of the characters, nor does it provide the reader with anything approaching an in-depth understanding of their identities. On the contrary, as the scene moves forward the sense of uncertainty becomes more intense due to the discontinuous nature of the conversation:

You were absolutely mad last night. But it is.

-

What do you want to do today?

Go out.

Where do you want to go?

*

She was a cleaner in St Pancras, at the train station. She found out she was pregnant. This was a hundred years ago. She came here. She spent all her money on getting a room.

Threw herself over the side of the stairs. All the way down into the lobby. I’ve never seen her. People talk about her all the time. That’s why they built the handrail.

How did you find out you could get in? (234)

Besides the discontinuity of the conversation, a hyphen in place of the character’s response indicates perhaps silence or a pause, increasing the degree of unpredictability and also implying a sense of absence, perhaps, of an individual voice. Similarly, the use of an asterisk before an abrupt change of the topic and mode of the narrative seems to function as an indicator of a shift

or pause, though it is not identified earlier through a stage direction. This increases uncertainty, inviting one to a guessing game about the speakers and their fragmented stories. When considered in relation to the play's socio-cultural setting, the anonymity and incompleteness of characterisation offers a critical link to the condition of subjectivity in the contemporary world in terms of the dissolution of the idea of the self-sustaining subject, promised by individualisation.

Stephens exposes the limitations of individualisation by challenging the characters' once firm relation to and control over language through the unattributed text. Here, the text stands on its own and the characters are detached from it, becoming its means, rather than its originators. The characters do not seem to be the sole source of meaning, nor does language appear to be the indicator of their singularity. Nevertheless, the dialogue and language are realistic; thus, a director would have to address and portray this particular status of the speakers in performance. Despite the characters' limited agency, Stephens's unattributed text does not entirely divorce the characters from the language with no sense of individuality and consistency. Rather, the characters present some personal traits and anecdotes through their narrative descriptions, monologues and dialogues. Nevertheless, the incomplete mode of characterisation prevails over consistent characterisation with agency and entirety. The characters and their narratives remain limited to specific fragmented scenes and are not structured as unified, three-dimensional personae. Stephens highlights this aspect of language and characterisation through the use of media discourses as opposed to self-determined utterances in the final scene, analysed below.

Along with the contemporary context of the play, the unattributed language accommodates individualised subjects whose subjectivity is shaped by symbolic structures. Stephens's characterisation evokes what Anthony Giddens defines as a common experience of all authors dealing with subjectivity in capitalist systems: "feelings of powerlessness in relation to a diverse and large-scale social universe" (*Modernity* 191). In contrast to the liberal humanist subject, who believes himself/herself to be substantially in control of the influences shaping him/her life, in capitalist systems, "the individual cedes control of his [sic] life circumstances to

the dominating influences of machines and markets” (Giddens, *Modernity* 191). What is considered self-propelled has become or always been a product of external agencies, promoting individualisation.

The analogy between the aesthetics of characterisation and the phenomenology of ‘being’ is reinforced through the plot structure. Each character and story is confined to one scene alone and has no relationship to the others. The characters may be related to one another through shared instances of time and space; nevertheless, neither they nor their stories link or develop together to form a coherent narrative. The structure works as a critical tool to generate a sense of disconnectedness and alienation, evoking the idea of ‘being’ in a globally connected yet increasingly less communal social environment. This critique becomes more pronounced in the scene where a lonely old woman talks about watching television, sending emails and using the Internet, and defines the latter as being pulled “towards the world that is there, on the other side of [her] screen” (Stephens 270). Through her own choosing, she lives an isolated life: “I don’t see anybody. I don’t speak to anybody. And God, the fucking horror if I were forced to” (Stephens 269). However, despite her disinterest in other people, there is an underlying sense that she longs for human bonds. This becomes particularly clear when she smells barbecued chicken from a house while walking home and knocks on the door to ask for some. They think that she is “fucking retarded” (Stephens 274), and after whisperings among themselves, which the reader cannot see as the lines are left blank, they give her a piece of chicken and ask her to leave with no sign of sympathy for her. This scene gives an uncanny glimpse of social alienation and the pursuit of intimacy – themes running throughout the play, although the characters’ attempts to go beyond isolation do not succeed, as none of the scenes end with a sense of togetherness. The construction of characters as disengaged beings, situated in a landscape of iPods, surveillance cameras and television, accommodates the increasing frailty of social relations.

The characterisation in the last scene differs from the style of the rest of *Pornography* but manifests similar social criticisms. The scene presents fifty-two separate, fragmentary descriptions with no speech prefixes. Each utterance is numbered and gives information about each of the fifty-two victims of the bombings. Numbering the victims as opposed to naming them speaks critically to a culture of institutionalised individualisation that objectifies people. Considered alongside the references to the media-saturated environment, the numbered utterances also stress the objectification of humanity by the media. Some of the numbered lines evoke various media-related discourses, styles and indirectly refer to the media culture:

13: The twenty-six-year-old, an engineering executive from Hendon, was killed on the number 30 bus after he was evacuated from King's Cross (276).

[...]

24: She attended the mosque every Friday, but loved Western culture and fashions and regularly shopped for designer clothes, shoes and handbags. She worked as a cashier at the Co-operative Bank in Islington (277).

[...]

43: - (279)

Like the scenes preceding them, the numbered lines are fragmented glimpses, taken from a wide variety of perspectives. They present a mosaic of diverse discourses mainly in an impersonal tone and with no clearly identified source. They implicitly involve media patterns and evoke the way the media presents people. For example, the impersonal and formal tone of number 13 evokes the tone and style of broadcast journalism or news broadcasting. Number 24 relates to consumer capitalism and cultural assimilation with a focus on the cliché binary between Islam and Western culture and on the contradiction between what the victim's career and consumption habits. Highlighting such superficial characteristics of a victim killed in a tragic event connotes the discourse of human interest television programmes, the way the media treats people as means to attract audience-consumer attention, and so foreground the sensational or polemical aspects of

their stories to attract interest. Number 43, on the other hand, is the only number with no commentary. The gap may suggest various meanings (e.g. a reference to an unidentified victim), but its presence as absence merely poses a question and resists an answer. The impersonal tone articulating personal qualities and the brevity of the information speak of the ways the media represent human lives, often reduce individual existence to short snippets of ‘news material’ that quickly appear on screens and are easily consumed. Likewise, the presentation of the victims through anonymous and brief fragments mirrors flickering images on television which reduce their lives to superficial pieces of information or even to silence or nothingness: “43: -”(Stephens 279).

The influence of the media brings with it another inevitable consequence. It shapes the ways in which humans perceive and relate to other humans, which have already considerably changed due to the relatively isolated life styles in the age of media-saturation and individualisation. The form of this scene, then, implying objectification, along with the disconnectedness of the characters, responds to the increasing frailty of human relations – ironically – in a globally connected landscape.

Pornography on Stage: Performing Mediatized Dramaturgy

Whilst generating a landscape that refers to certain aspects of living in the media age, *Pornography*’s unattributed and discontinuous form along with the media-related motifs opens the text to multiple readings in performance. At its world premiere in Germany, *Pornography* presented the audience with a stage set picturing a city in ruins, a contemporary setting with implied references to today’s world. Nübling set the stage against an immense, fragmented image of Brueghel’s ‘Tower of Babel’ as an unstable edifice, “like a huge unfinished jigsaw puzzle with half the pieces lying around the floor” (Hamburger 541). The presentation of Brueghel’s painting as a fragmented mosaic on the stage emphasised the fragmented structure of the play, and visualised the disintegration of contemporary society and the destructive effect of the 7/7 bombings and other terrorist attacks.

(Image by Eine Szene, *taz.de*)

Nübling emphasised the anonymous form of Stephens's text. He situated all the actors simultaneously on stage, sometimes attributing multiple roles to them and refusing for the most part to identify them with individual names. Nübling rarely used props to physically transform the actors into characters, although there were a few instances where he used props and accessories to indicate an actor's change of role from the one in a previous scene. For example, he used high-heeled shoes to imply one of the male actors was enacting the role of a female teacher, or a relatively old actress represented the old woman in the second scene not only through age similarity, but also by carrying a walking stick. Nevertheless, despite such congruence between some actors and characters, the discontinuity of the narrative and the disconnectedness between characters resisted dramatic representation as such.

Nübling benefitted from the freedom anonymity offers, and proposed alternative interpretations of some characters on stage by deploying actors who did not fit the role in terms of their physical appearance or gender. For instance, in the sixth scene, a pupil, Jason, falls for his teacher, Lisa, (two of the rare characters with names). On stage, however, Nübling presented Lisa using a male actor. Likewise, he interpreted the fifth scene differently from Stephens's text, which suggests that the characters are siblings having an incestuous relationship and that one of the characters is the sister. Nübling, however, employed two male actors, making the incestuous

relationship more transgressive. Besides the uncertainty about the characters due to the unattributed, fragmented form, Nübling's technique offered a form of disparity – yet not a complete separation – between the characters and actors. The performance furthered the destabilisation of the liberal humanist characterisation and presented characters – by extension, humans – as fluid subjects with limited agency. Nübling did not use technology on stage, but the mode of theatrical expression and the references to media-saturation (e.g. emailing, eBay) suggested a link between the setting, characterisation and the contemporary society.

Nübling's interpretation also reinforced the play's reference to social relations by situating the actors separately on the stage. Whilst the actors in the staged scenes performed, the other actors remained on stage, yet showed no interest in the on-going action. They wandered around or tried to gather pieces of Brueghel's mosaic. Their detachment and indifference generated a sense of disconnectedness, and their failure to gather Brueghel's painting reinforced the critique of social disintegration. Nübling's production offers a compelling interpretation of *Pornography*, exploiting its aesthetic dynamism and highlighting its deliberate opacity as a critique of contemporary culture that was able to reach beyond the theme of British society and the bombings.

In the first British production of *Pornography*, Holmes's setting illustrated the media-saturated landscape of modern society. The stage was a “big mess of TV screens, stereo speakers and exposed lights [...] all connected up somehow by a riot of wires and extension cables that stretched out from the auditorium” (Cooper 1519). The director presented a microcosm of London in the week of July before the attacks on stage where “the faint sounds of Coldplay mix with the electric drone of a hot summer” (Gardner *guardian.co.uk*).

(Image by Robert Day, *birmingham-rep.co.uk*)

Holmes staged the play in episodes; however, rather than single episodes, the production cut between different stories. Holmes's interpretation furthered *Pornography's* fragmented form and engendered a sense of disengagement, suggesting a critique of the disintegration of social relations. The intensified discontinuity enhanced the theatricality by exposing the workings of the performance and overexposing the seams between the fragments of scenes. This undermined the audience's expectations of a well-made narrative based on a seamless connection between the scenes. The fairly unfamiliar form raised the audience's awareness of the theatre as a construct and their position in it. Moreover, the epistemological instability that the production generated through the unattributed and fragmented speech invited the audience to fill in the uncertainties, and form their own interpretations. Holmes's production therefore encouraged the audience to engage with the meaning-making process and its critical implications.

The production involved an ensemble of eight actors, all present on stage at once. Following Stephens's characterisation, Holmes gave a glimpse of the characters rather than a detailed, psychologically motivated, figurative representation: a randy schoolboy, the incestuous brother and sister or a jaded lecturer (Cooper 1519). Unlike Nübling, Holmes did not generate incongruity between the characters and the actors; however, he did not form completely unified

characters either. Rather, he staged what the text proposed: superficially connected, but essentially unspecified characters by refusing to attribute individual names and characteristics to the actors, and by merely gathering them in the same temporal space (day of the bombing) yet still resisting a unifying narrative that would relate their stories to one another. Moreover, following Stephens's text, Holmes refused to show characters-actors in communication with each other outside the scenes they took part in. Rather, as in Nübling's version, they remained detached from each other and somewhat uninterested in the others' narratives, evoking a critique of social disintegration.

Considering Holmes's interpretation, one might argue that it failed to represent the bombings or their social implications. Joyce McMillan's review of Holmes's production reflects on the production and the play: "the piece fails to convince [...] the portrayal of the bomber, in particular [...] Stephens has suggested the play is a serious exploration of four British men driven to attack the very heart of the society that raised them, but it hardly even makes a start on that vital task" (*living.scotsman.com*). McMillan would be correct if the 'critical' and the 'social' in contemporary theatre involved only direct thematisation of real-life events; *Pornography* does refuse to give a fully developed representation of the bomber, or of any other character. However, this reading overlooks the critical implications of Stephens's conscious refusal to generate dramatic certainty and to represent the contemporary world and subject as a unified totality. As my analysis suggests, the form renders *Pornography* critically able to map the darker elements of contemporary society.

The interpretation of the final scene with the numbered lines in both productions puts forward interesting perspectives on mediatisation. Holmes set the scene as a text scrolling up the wall/screen after the curtain call, evoking the credits at the end of a film. With this analogy in mind, this could be read both as a memorial to the victims and as a critical reference to a media culture that reduces real lives to pieces of information and objectifies people as a mere list of names or collection of images through filmic conventions. In his conversation with Aleks Sierz,

whilst talking about Holmes's closing scene, Stephens mentioned that some audience members had not even noticed the text and left the auditorium (*theatrevoice.com*). This suggests Holmes's staging produced an unintended reflection of how the fast-paced life-style of contemporary society reduces our attention spans and how becoming accustomed to rapid consumption leaves us increasingly indifferent to one another. In Nübling's production, the actors began eating apples quite expressionlessly as they listened to the pre-recorded text about the victims, thus presenting a critique of social apathy more overtly than Holmes, through the actors' depiction of a callous attitude whilst listening to the recording. The scene in both productions enhanced the critical scope of *Pornography* through aesthetically engaging with the objectification of humans and social apathy. Stephens's strategies confer performative openness upon the text, allowing the text and its productions to expand the audience's critical horizons and allow them to create their own associations, bounded only by the productions' own thematic concerns.

Pornography may at first seem to be only about the bombings and British society. However, as this analysis suggests, beyond the historical details lie compelling techniques as critical tools, mapping aspects of culture and subjectivity through a link between the mode of theatrical expression and contemporary human condition. Thus, *Pornography* goes beyond its direct thematic concerns towards a critique of the mediatised culture and its focus on individualisation, isolation and the objectification of human life. The dramaturgical structure here does not argue for the death of 'character,' nor "bemoan the lack of an already defined image of the human being" (Lehmann 18). Instead, it ruptures and reconsiders the representation of the contemporary in theatre, and proposes inventive ways of mapping the phenomenology of living in today's world. In so doing, *Pornography* takes theatrical boundaries beyond the existing rules and expectations, and enhances audience's critical horizons while inviting them to reflect on their own position.

Epilogue: Listening to the Voice of the Text

The analysis of *Pornography* offers a corrective to the overlooked position of plays in comparison to the extensive academic and artistic interest in performance in terms of theatre-media interactions. The investigation into the ‘no-longer-dramatic’ mediatised plays through Stephens’s text challenges the idea that plays, as Axel Schalk argues, have become “obsolete” in their attempt to relate to the electronic image and culture, and to deal with the new realities of the mass media (269). Schalk stresses that theatre “is structured time [whereas] the current state of society is characterized by a racing stasis” (271). Thus, he argues, plays cannot cope with the new coordinates of society and consciousness, and asks: “how could they?” (271). Schalk’s idea of theatre and drama is clearly based on the paradigm of dramatic theatre which renders his arguments questionable in the context of the plays I refer to via *Pornography*. Schalk is right to argue that mimetic representation “is suspended” (254) and “threatened” (255) in media-determined context. However, claiming that there are no new forms of play texts that are able to accommodate current conditions is problematic in light of my findings.

My analysis demonstrates that a ‘no-longer-dramatic’ mediatised play that frustrates elements of dramatic theatre does not attempt to ‘replicate’ the technological image or culture. On the contrary, it frustrates the idea of ‘replication’, and proposes new possibilities for theatre to take into consideration and call into question how media technology “is rewriting bodies, changing our understanding of narratives and places, changing our relationship to culture, changing our understanding of presence” (Etchells 97). Thus, as opposed to being ‘obsolete’, plays such as *Pornography* shows a capacity to engage with the material and perceptual conditions of the mediatised age. They show that play texts can be responsive to the new realities of the contemporary as much as performance is, that through their form they can offer “the accessibility of the play[s] from our knowledge of the world that is shaped by the media.” (Pavis 193) Thus, expanding Etchells’s proposition that it is better not to ignore technology in theatre, I would emphasise that it is also better not to overlook the impact of media technologies and the

culture they generate on play texts since, directly or indirectly, the media are “at the very heart of the lines and the words” (Pavis 192).

Additionally, what comes to the fore in the analysis is the bleak tone that dominates *Pornography* through its focus on the disorientation of living in late capitalist, mediatised culture and its atomising effects on inter- and intra-subject formation. This rather pessimistic take on contemporary culture is not peculiar to *Pornography*. There has recently been a tendency towards a cynical and dystopian quality in play texts that deal with aspects of mediatisation such as Caryl Churchill’s *Love and Information* (2012), Hannah Walker and Chris Thorpe’s *I Wish I Was Lonely* (2013) and Jennifer Haley’s *The Nether* (2014). Although these plays among similar others address important social concerns of the present, one wonders about the possibility of more hopeful yet equally critical ways of responding to these issues.

The recent Royal Court production of Tim Price’s *The Internet is Serious Business* (2014) offers a response to this question. Within its fragmented structure, which constantly blurs the boundaries between the real and the virtual, the play explores how hacktivism can be used to violate government agencies and corporate culture - “the reality of a global network of bright young people dedicated to challenging existing values.”(Billington *guardian.co.uk*) The play has a relatively optimistic tone, reminding the audience of the importance of media technologies in recent events such as the Snowden case and the riots in Middle East. While presenting a hopeful angle, the play does not compromise its critical and objective manner as it also addresses concerns such as the possibility of oppressive uses of the media. These visions of today’s culture seem to display different critical tones. Nevertheless, at the heart of their critique lie not only shared concerns, but also a capacity to offer an experience that is accessible for audience’s media-saturated lives – a dramaturgical capacity that will call for further research as new technologies and related socio-cultural conditions emerge.

Notes:

¹ The notion of 'late capitalism' (Ernest Mandel, Fredric Jameson) brings into mind such neologisms as 'very late capitalism', 'zombie capitalism' or 'post-industrial society', which aim to identify the changing aspects and scope of capitalism in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, following Slavoj Žižek's suggestion that one should "analyze the world through the lenses of what was 'eternal' in the Old" (Žižek 6) to grasp "the true novelty of the New" (Žižek 6), I use 'late capitalism' to emphasise the continuity of the ideology of capitalism in a new socio-cultural, economic environment. This is particularly to underline that rather than entering a new period or facing a new society, as Anthony Giddens suggests, "we are moving into one in which the consequence of modernity are become more radicalised and universalised than before." (Giddens, *The Consequences* 2-3)

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