LEABHARLANN CHOLÁISTE NA TRÍONÓIDE, BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH | TRINITY COLLEGE LIBRARY DUBLIN
Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin

**Terms and Conditions of Use of Digitised Theses from Trinity College Library Dublin**

**Copyright statement**

All material supplied by Trinity College Library is protected by copyright (under the Copyright and Related Rights Act, 2000 as amended) and other relevant Intellectual Property Rights. By accessing and using a Digitised Thesis from Trinity College Library you acknowledge that all Intellectual Property Rights in any Works supplied are the sole and exclusive property of the copyright and/or other IPR holder. Specific copyright holders may not be explicitly identified. Use of materials from other sources within a thesis should not be construed as a claim over them.

A non-exclusive, non-transferable licence is hereby granted to those using or reproducing, in whole or in part, the material for valid purposes, providing the copyright owners are acknowledged using the normal conventions. Where specific permission to use material is required, this is identified and such permission must be sought from the copyright holder or agency cited.

**Liability statement**

By using a Digitised Thesis, I accept that Trinity College Dublin bears no legal responsibility for the accuracy, legality or comprehensiveness of materials contained within the thesis, and that Trinity College Dublin accepts no liability for indirect, consequential, or incidental, damages or losses arising from use of the thesis for whatever reason. Information located in a thesis may be subject to specific use constraints, details of which may not be explicitly described. It is the responsibility of potential and actual users to be aware of such constraints and to abide by them. By making use of material from a digitised thesis, you accept these copyright and disclaimer provisions. Where it is brought to the attention of Trinity College Library that there may be a breach of copyright or other restraint, it is the policy to withdraw or take down access to a thesis while the issue is being resolved.

**Access Agreement**

By using a Digitised Thesis from Trinity College Library you are bound by the following Terms & Conditions. Please read them carefully.

I have read and I understand the following statement: All material supplied via a Digitised Thesis from Trinity College Library is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of a thesis is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or for educational purposes in electronic or print form providing the copyright owners are acknowledged using the normal conventions. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone. This copy has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

# Peter Sellars and the Persistence of Modernity

**Mark Patrick Bates**

**Ph.D. Thesis**

**Trinity College Dublin**

**2000**

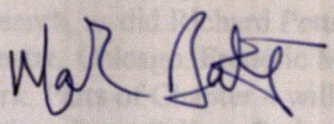
## Declaration

I, Mark Patrick Bates, declare that:

This thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university.

This thesis is entirely my own work.

The library of Trinity College Dublin may lend or copy this thesis upon request.



**Mark Patrick Bates**

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank many people for support during the writing of this thesis. My work was aided by an Ussher Fellowship from the Graduate Studies Committee of Trinity College. The Fulbright Commission, the Arts Council, and a John McCormick Fellowship from the Trinity Drama Department provided funding for my research in the United States.

At Trinity, Professor Dennis Kennedy guided my work with wisdom. For his support, and that of the whole academic and administrative staff of the School of Drama, I am very grateful.

At Yale, the faculty of the School of Drama and Professor Joseph Roach of the English Department expanded my conception of theatre studies. I greatly appreciate their encouragement.

Kevin Higa, Peter Sellars's assistant, helpfully facilitated much of my research, as did Richard Pettengill, the former literary manager of the Goodman Theatre, Chicago. Frédéric Maurin provided valuable insights in the later stages of my work. Parts of Chapter 4 will appear as 'Shakespeare à l'américaine' in the book he is editing: *Peter Sellars*, Paris: CNRS Editions, collection: Les Voies de la Création Théâtrale, vol. 21, 2001.

I have learnt as much from my friends and fellow students, Rebecca Rugg, Katharine Spencer, Christiane Salomon and Paula Gilligan, as from any classes. Their good humour and brilliant suggestions have been much appreciated.

Throughout this project I have been sustained by the inspiration of Peter Sellars. I thank him not only for the gift of his work, but also for his great personal encouragement over the last four years.

Finally, the support of my parents Jim and Anne Bates made this project possible. For their love, patience and generosity I am forever grateful.

## Summary

If language is subjective, if the sign is unstable, if meaning is endlessly deferred, how is it possible to assume a position of moral critique? Confronted by persistent social crisis, the American theatre and opera director Peter Sellars struggles to establish an ethical aesthetics after the neutralisation of the adversarial forms of modernism and the avant-garde. His work and career provide an example of the cultural confusion faced by socially-conscious artists in postmodernity. This thesis analyses Sellars's search, asking if his work represents an imaginative overcoming of postmodern impasses, or a nostalgic regression to the certainties of modernism.

While other critics have focused, almost exclusively, on Sellars's aesthetic significance, I examine the cultural and philosophical foundations of his work. I suggest that the contradictions of his career frame his own artistic concern with the contradictions of capitalism. Analysing four key productions, and his role as artistic director of the Los Angeles Festival, I argue that Sellars's work identifies the roots of contemporary social problems in the formation of subjectivity in modernity. To redefine a critical position, Sellars repeatedly questions the meaning of the condition we call postmodernity. I conclude that through his intense breakdown of American crises, Sellars demonstrates that the postmodern is not some radical new state of inevitable ethical relativism. Rather, postmodernity is figured throughout by a

persistent modernity, thus re-igniting our capacity for moral critique and political change.

The thesis begins by situating Sellars in theatre history, describing his creation of a unique performance aesthetic that breaks away from the work of his peers in the American experimental theatre. Sellars's 1987 production of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* introduces his discussion of subjectivity and provides a key example of the problems associated with his practice of updating classic texts. My reading of his 1988 version of *The Marriage of Figaro* explores his concern with capitalist contradictions, and his arrival at the frustrating equivocations of postmodernity. In his work with the Los Angeles Festival Sellars tried to move beyond postmodern paralysis but was hampered by his own nostalgia for the cultural security of the avant-garde. In *The Merchant of Venice* his treatment of the LA Uprising of 1992 suggested that the problems of the city were largely those of modernity. The thesis concludes with a reading of his 1996 staging of Handel's oratorio, *Theodora*, assessing the validity of Sellars's turn to the spiritual to imagine a way through the stifling complacency of our current cultural condition.

Much of my research was conducted in the United States where I had access to American newspaper and journal reviews of Sellars's work. I viewed many individual productions on video at libraries, theatres and on television. I interviewed Sellars in 1997 and have met him on a number of other occasions to discuss his work informally. I observed his rehearsals in New York in 1998 and Los Angeles in 2000, viewed productions in London and Los Angeles, and attended his classes at UCLA. My research is presented in a strong theoretical frame, dominated by the work of the Frankfurt School.

## Peter Sellars and the Persistence of Modernity

## Contents


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Introduction:** | Postmodern Problems | 1 |
| **1.** | Developing an Aesthetic | 15 |
| **2.** | The Authority of the Past | 73 |
| **3.** | Peter Sellars's Own Dialectic of Enlightenment | 113 |
| **4.** | Los Angeles Lessons | 149 |
| **5.** | Towards a Postmodern Ethics | 199 |
| **Conclusion:** | The Persistence of Modernity | 229 |
| **Appendix A:** | Production Chronology | 237 |
| **Appendix B:** | Interview | 247 |
| **Bibliography** | | 260 |

## Introduction: Postmodern Problems

The further we leave the twentieth century behind, the further the idea of revolution in the West seems like fantasy. While the pluralism, localism and respect for difference that sometimes attend postmodernity are potentially emancipatory, the darker side of the condition – its empty signs, its complicity with a ravenous global capital, its glittering surface – seems to foreclose, if not ridicule, the possibility of large-scale social change. After the disappointments of 1968, and the widespread acknowledgement of the material failure of the socialist project after 1989, how might radical new forms of social organisation be theorised? The difficulty is experienced acutely by the leftist cultural worker. While modernism generally functioned as modernity's own form of self-interrogation, the relationship between the condition and the aesthetic practice of the postmodern is not so clear. The mass commodification of aesthetics, the demise of the avant-garde, the so-called 'end of history', and an insidious moral relativism shook the philosophical foundation of artists who considered their task to be both the reflection and direction of contemporary culture. The American theatre and opera director Peter Sellars is such an artist.

Sellars is famous for setting every text he directs in contemporary America. His productions identify sites and moments of crisis in modern society: drug addiction and inner city decay (*Don Giovanni*), the Vietnam War (*Ajax*), American neo-

imperialism in the Middle East (*Giulio Cesare*, *The Persians*), excessive consumer capitalism (*The Marriage of Figaro*), suburban alienation and social fragmentation (*Così fan Tutte*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *The Magic Flute*), capital punishment and the vilification of religious minorities (*Theodora*), the American criminal justice system (*The Merchant of Venice*, *The Rake's Progress*). For Sellars these issues are an index of social failure – material instances of the collapse of any sense of moral centre without the compensatory benefits of pluralism. By implication he asks, 'how, in postmodernity, can we establish an ethical and moral foundation from which to act for change?' In this thesis I examine Sellars's analysis of the roots of these social problems, tracing his search for an aesthetic which might adequately reflect and challenge contemporary culture. I ask whether Sellars's mediation of the fragmentation and destabilisation posed by postmodernity is ultimately progressive or conservative. Does his work represent an imaginative overcoming of postmodern impasses, or a nostalgic regression to the certainties of modernism?

The contradictions in the structure of Sellars's career are a striking symptom of the cultural confusion that accompanies postmodernity. From his first professional engagements in the early 1980s, his scathing critiques of the effects of late capitalism have regularly been mounted with the financial assistance of transnational corporations like PepsiCo and Philip Morris.[1] His deconstructions of bourgeois complacency and class discrimination take place in the grand operas houses of Salzburg, Paris and Glyndebourne. His status as an international defender of a threatened high culture is paralleled by his political activism and community drama work in his hometown of Los Angeles. His calls for justice for those marginalised in Western society are made from within what is perhaps the world's most exclusive art

form. These are contradictions borne of necessity: Sellars's acknowledgement of the impossibility of revolution, his pragmatic acceptance that, in postmodernity, change must be effected as much from within as from outside the existing system.

This bifurcation frames a deeper conflict that Sellars diagnoses as the cause of many of the cultural crises his productions address: the contradictions at the core of individual subjectivity in modern capitalism. Capitalism positions subjects within a dialectic of ultimately irreconcilable binaries – self versus other, masculine versus feminine, individual versus collective, amongst others – the careful mediation of which is the measure of both psychic well-being and material success. Analysing four key productions from the last twenty years, I argue that this is the persistent theme structuring Sellars's work, reading his turn to the classics as an attempt to source the roots of postmodern power relations. A glance at Sellars's body of work reveals a particular attraction to Shakespeare, to the Enlightenment and to twentieth-century high modernism. For Sellars the texts of these periods function as milestones in the evolution of subjectivity in capitalism, revealing the development and structure of contemporary American culture. His work is both an analysis of the proto-capitalism of these periods, 400, 200 and 60 years on, and a search for ways out of the impasse it presents: a direct attempt to break through the nihilism, relativism and paralysis that often seem endemic to postmodern material reality. In each text considered, I examine Sellars's assertion that his modern-dress productions 'test the present against the past', interrogating the soundness of the contemporary analyses his updatings imply.

When both the principal issue Sellars treats in his work, and the principal issue I treat in my work on Sellars, is contradiction, dialectic returns as a useful analytical structure. It seems incongruous to address postmodernity, with its breakdown of

binary oppositions and affirmation of plurality, in such a way. I suggest, however, that this use of dialectic is both a necessary and a directional move. The pragmatism required of Sellars by postmodernity, the curtailment of his cultural response, compel him to constantly re-assess the meaning of the term 'postmodern'. Does Sellars accept the inevitability of late capitalism and resignedly search for cracks in its structure to occupy with acts of resistance? Or does he reject the 'inevitability' definition and counter the fragmentation and ambivalence of postmodernism with a return to the certainties of modernism, asserting that postmodernity does not represent the total break with modernity that's often claimed for it but rather may be understood, as Andreas Huyssen suggests, as modernity in its death throes, permitting Sellars the moral foundation and philosophical certainty from which to advocate material action? An analysis of Sellars's productions is ultimately a mapping of his endless exploration of paradox and opposition, a breakdown of an aesthetic practice in which every identification of the postmodern is countered by the re-emergence of the modern. Dialectic can thus be used to work through the enduring contradictions at the core of capitalism, provide an aesthetic frame through which to view Sellars's own divided career and artistic practice, and function as a model for my own reading of Sellars's work which moves between the identification of a revelatory radicalism and a reactionary conservatism.

Sellars's work is always an attempt to, as Craig Owens puts it, 'conceive difference without opposition'.[2] The productions themselves often fulfil this ideal, and contradiction and paradox are aesthetic characteristics for which he never apologises. I conclude that a unified reading of Sellars's work is itself an impossibility. There are many ways to interpret and contextualise him. Searching for a single, unified

(overdetermined) position may, in fact, be a throwback to the very modernity he attempts to critique.

If Sellars's work *is* postmodern it is most obviously in his assertion that the domestic social problems of the United States are the problems of the world – an acknowledgement of, and address to, the globalisation of culture. While the dissolution of so-called metanarratives is an aspect of postmodernity which promises welcome new freedoms, the idea of the nation endures in Sellars's work as a unifying force which permits the re-imagination of collective social change. American culture is the laboratory of postmodernity, and Sellars's productions display a continuing concern with the evolution of American national identity, and the implications of that identity for both the American individual and for the collective sense of self which grounds the USA's cultural interventions around the world. Sellars consolidates the importance of national thinking while constantly challenging received narratives of American identity. In a trait that will become increasingly apparent as this thesis develops, Sellars holds fast to existing cultural frameworks while rigorously dissecting their content. I constantly question the relationship between form and content in Sellars's work, determining if and where his productions are formally innovative, and asking if formal conservatism, no matter how self-conscious, can ever be a conduit for progressive politics.

Though Peter Sellars's work has received little substantial academic criticism to date, his *enfant terrible* persona, cultivated from his undergraduate days, means he has always benefited from sustained international media attention. The researcher is fortunate that most of his productions have been extensively reviewed in American domestic newspapers and journals, as well as in the British, French, German and

Austrian press when his work has been presented in those countries. He has also been the subject of many newspaper features, interviews and profiles. Nearly all this popular critical attention focuses on his status as an *auteur* figure and has, in fact, greatly contributed to this mythologising of his working process. The perennial theme of these articles is the perceived outrageousness of Sellars's decisions to set revered classic texts in contemporary America, somehow mitigated by the director's impish charm and evident social concern. Rarely, if ever, do the newspaper pieces attempt to determine *what* Sellars says about American culture through his updatings, preferring to concentrate on *how* he says it. Most of the popular criticism effortlessly labels his work as postmodernist, rarely explaining precisely what this means, or determining the criteria for such a categorisation beyond factors like 'aesthetic eclecticism' or 'pop culture influences'.

In recent years some newspapers have overcome their sensationalising '*Wünderkind*' labelling – possibly because Sellars is no longer a *Kind* – and have given more space to Sellars's social concerns, particularly evident in the coverage of his artistic directorship of the Los Angeles Festivals of 1990 and 1993. Critical opinion remains evenly divided, however, between those who admire his attempts to re-imagine classic art for contemporary audiences, and those who despise his arrogant aesthetic vandalism, accusing him of an unwillingness to 'enter the past worlds of the texts he produces'.[3] This polarisation is most vigorously expressed in opera criticism where Sellars found his staunchest defenders in writers like Andrew Porter of the *New Yorker* and Edward W. Said of the *Nation*, and his harshest attackers in critics like Donal Henahan of the *New York Times* and Samuel Lipman of the *New Criterion*. For many opera writers Sellars remains an interloper from the legitimate theatre, aggressively imposing acting demands and avant-garde dramatic conventions on

beloved operas to the detriment of the music, a phenomenon dubbed 'produceritis'. Yet some of the more extensive analyses of Sellars's work have appeared in books by opera writers such as Tom Sutcliffe's chronological account of key productions in *Believing in Opera*, and in David Littlejohn's *The Ultimate Art* where Sellars's work is treated in a chapter ominously titled 'What Peter Sellars Did to Mozart'. The British monthly *Opera*, with its extensive and rigorously formatted reviews of productions from around the world, forms a useful resource for assembling the facts of performance, including dates and locations.

Sellars's status as a director working mostly in opera seems to be a major factor in his neglect by theatre scholars, especially in comparison with the amount of attention his peers in the American avant-garde – people such as Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman and Elizabeth LeCompte – have received. Perhaps the revue-style humour found in his early work, as well as his own cheeky adolescent persona, suggested he was worthy of less than serious consideration. This discrepancy is a key point in my own contextualisation of Sellars, his departure from the obvious formal innovation of his immediate predecessors confusing leftist critics clinging to a narrow idea of the avant-garde as a catalyst for change, long after such categories ceased to be meaningful. For many theatre writers who lived through the 1960s, a return to narrative and character was the antithesis of progress, a co-optation of art by the politics of conservatism. Sellars was a child in the 1960s, and graduating from university in 1980 when Ronald Reagan was in the White House, knew that many of the aspirational reforms of the earlier decade had failed. Perhaps it was necessary to reverse in order to accelerate.

Of the serious academic analysis his work has received, little attention has been paid to the philosophical foundations of his art. Don Shewey, writing in Bruce

King's *Contemporary American Theatre*, is eager to hail Sellars's aesthetic and generic eclecticism as a liberating break from the stratifications of modernism and the solipsism of the New York avant-garde. In an article entitled, 'Not Either/Or, But And', Shewey celebrates what he perceives to be Sellars's forthright refusal to choose between existing aesthetic categories, ironically positioning Sellars as the ravenous, unprincipled consumer he so relentlessly attacks in his productions. In *The Revisionist Stage: American Directors Re-invent the Classics*, Amy Green provides a concise account of Sellars's Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy produced in the late 1980s, assessing the critical reaction to Sellars's updatings as much as the productions themselves. Balancing argument against counter-argument she ultimately concludes in Sellars's favour, though her analysis focuses almost exclusively on aesthetic and theatrical issues and rarely interrogates the ideology underlying Sellars's metaphorical choices. In *Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World*, Susan Letzler Cole provides a detailed spectator's account of Sellars at work on his 1986 production of *Two Figures in Dense Violet Light* at the Kennedy Center. Richard Trousdell has written a similar piece, 'Peter Sellars Rehearses *Figaro*', for *TDR* describing the rehearsal process for one of Sellars's most famous productions of the 1980s.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's excellent account of the planning and ideology of the 1990 Los Angeles Festival appears in her book *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Her suggestion that the multicultural ideals of the festival were figured throughout by a classic Western avant-garde agenda contextualises my discussion of Sellars's mediation of the legacy of avant-gardism and his preoccupation with LA. One of the most incisive analyses of Sellars's work may be found in *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* where W. B. Worthen examines Sellars's multi-racial 1994 production of *The Merchant of Venice*.

Worthen suggests that Sellars uses Shakespeare to dismantle the idea of high culture and the canon, arguing for a more pluralist social and cultural politics, yet ultimately employs Shakespeare strategically to authorise his own arguments, paradoxically benefiting from the cultural capital of the Shakespeare he pretends to deconstruct. Some of Sellars's writings and interviews are currently being collected into a single volume edited by Maria Delgado forthcoming from Methuen, while Frédéric Maurin is the editor of a book of essays on Sellars's work which will be published in French in 2001. Reviewing *Don Giovanni* in 1989, Edward Said asked the question most writers on Sellars have thus far been unwilling to explore:

> I am always stimulated by what Sellars does, but I'm not entirely convinced that he has really gone beyond the handful of arresting gestures that have made his Mozart/da Ponte work so striking and at the same time so curiously inconclusive. Is there a whole vision or theory there?[4]

It's the question this thesis hopes to answer.

Chapter 1, 'Developing an Aesthetic', positions Sellars's work in American and European theatre history, describing his creation of an artistic identity moulded by twentieth-century avant-gardism and a turn to classical and neglected native performance genres. Sellars's national concerns and his belief in opera's formal appropriateness for his cultural moment are contrasted with the more obvious innovations of his peers and predecessors in the American experimental theatre. As a full chronology of his career is provided in Appendix A, this chapter focuses on moments from key productions, as well as the work of his design collaborators, to illustrate Sellars's aesthetic evolution.

Chapter 2, 'The Authority of the Past', begins with an analysis of Sellars's practice of updating, explaining its attempt to institute dialogue between present and

past as a challenge to modernity's obsession with 'overcoming' history. The practice is complicated by issues of authority, however, as Sellars's *auteur* persona may erode the spectator's freedom of reception, and because the past, in our culture, is so frequently mobilised to legitimate the present. These issues are illustrated with a reading of Sellars's 1987/89 production of Mozart and Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni* – one of Sellars's earlier attempts at the deconstruction of the capitalist concept of the autonomous individual subject. This piece remains Sellars's darkest and most difficult work, representing the intersection of his deepest concerns – the destructive effects of the contradictions of capitalism and modernity on both the individual and the community, and the potential of spirituality to heal the fractured ego and enable progress. The production is an outstanding example of the dialectic at the core of Sellars's thinking: it might be read as an indictment of the excessive consumer capitalism of 1980s America and the damage it caused to already marginalised urban communities, or as a reactionary affirmation of addiction as the literal and metaphoric cause of that decade's social problems. My analysis charts Sellars's use of *Don Giovanni* to deconstruct enlightenment ideology, testing the philosophical and political soundness of his reading of this most eighteenth-century of texts to illuminate 1980s America.

Chapter 3, 'Peter Sellars's Own Dialectic of Enlightenment', develops this discussion of subjectivity with a consideration of Sellars's 1988/89 production of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Transferred to the penthouse apartment of Trump Tower, this production explored the confusion posed by postmodernity to the class relations that structure modern capitalism, working through the subject-object division that forms the core of enlightened, autonomous subjectivity. In the capitalism of the eighteenth century, the freedom to trade, the privileging of the market, and the cult of the

individual were, paradoxically and hypocritically, kept in check by the feudal system, absolutist monarchies and religion. In the postmodern present, feudalism and religion have essentially collapsed (what has replaced them?) and the frail structures of capitalism and individualised subjectivity are exposed in all their structural weakness. Sellars specifically relates the construction of the Enlightenment individual to late twentieth-century high capitalism, demonstrating the partial failure of the social change promised by an emerging late 18th century-bourgeoisie. The characters' individual crises reveal the impossibility of relationships modelled on absolute domination and absolute submission. Forgetting the past, sacrificing the present, and projecting to the future, the protagonists of Sellars's *Marriage of Figaro* blindly process through life using the mechanism of false harmonisation. By the end of the piece Sellars has reached an impasse: how do we reconceive subjectivity beyond these frustrating binaries?

In *The Marriage of Figaro* Sellars acknowledged the loss of the unified subjectivity of modernity, and in subsequent chapters moves on to cope with the consequences of this dispersal. Chapter 4, 'Los Angeles Lessons', analyses the expansion of Sellars's concerns into political activism, elaborating issues of citizenship and representation. The chapter begins with an examination of the ideology driving the 1990 and 1993 Los Angeles Festivals of which Sellars was artistic director. Identifying a tension between the Festival's stated localist, postmodernist mission and its persistent formal concerns, the chapter discusses the unique American intersection of avant-gardism with postmodernism, establishing the difficult philosophical terrain of the Sellars production which deals most explicitly with Los Angeles.

In *The Merchant of Venice* Sellars examined the material explosion of the contradictions of capitalism in the LA Riots, and also the decline of postmodernity as a theory capable of explicating the experience of mass urban alienation in the contemporary United States. Is it possible to assert the fragmentation of subjectivity when large numbers of citizens have been denied equality of subjectivity in the first place? In my analysis of Sellars's *Merchant of Venice* – a production which invoked both the 1992 Riots and the OJ Simpson trial of 1994/5 – I assess the validity of Sellars's assertion that capitalism is the root of modern racism. Sellars's was an historicist production, examining the construction of subjectivity in the proto-capitalism of Shakespeare's imaginary Venice, and making direct metaphorical links between Elizabethan colonial expansion and the colonial model on which contemporary America's domestic race relations often operate. This production marks a turning point in Sellars's consideration of postmodernism, when the material concerns addressed in the play somehow invade the theatre building, and Sellars is no longer just a mediator but is himself implicated in the construction of ideas of race.

Sellars's 1996 Glyndebourne production of Handel's oratorio *Theodora*, which I address in Chapter 5, 'Towards a Postmodern Ethics', articulated the failures of capitalist subjectivity in the most shocking terms. Echoing the Waco siege of 1993, the piece explored the persecution of minority Christians in Roman-ruled Antioch. Dissecting the use of national myths as the guarantors of individual and collective freedom, the production posed the torturous, recurring questions, 'how do we legislate for difference?' and 'what are the future and function of authority in postmodern culture?' The chapter analyses Sellars's attempt to break through the impasses of capitalist subjectivity with a turn to spirituality. I ask whether Sellars's projection towards the spiritual is a form of the very false harmonisation he attempts to critique –

a misplaced desire to return to a pre-secular, pre-enlightenment phase of psychic wholeness and plenitude – or an attempt to reconceive the concept of the individual subject, and his or her relationship to society as a whole.

The productions treated here were specifically selected to illuminate my exploration of Sellars's analysis of the roots of contemporary capitalism and his fraught engagement with postmodernism. While I believe the issues treated are representative of the core philosophical concerns of Sellars's work, and my approach addresses the most significant problems posed by that work, these productions do not represent the full range of Sellars's textual interests. I have omitted analyses of his work with ancient Greek drama, modern opera, and high modernism, focusing instead on the texts of the Enlightenment and Renaissance. Sellars claims to have directed over one hundred productions by the age of thirty, so limitations of space compelled judicious selection of key texts. My choices were also determined by the availability of videos of productions – many recordings either do not exist or are very difficult to access.

**A note on terminology**:

I use the term 'Enlightenment' to refer to the specific historical period, roughly the eighteenth century, associated with the concept of 'enlightenment' – a disenchantment and demythologising of culture, and a complex philosophical projection to the future. 'Modernity' and 'Postmodernity' refer to both chronological, historical phases as well as general cultural conditions. 'Modernism' and 'Postmodernism' are the cultural and aesthetic practices associated with those phases.

## Notes

[1] Spectators attending the 1988 PepsiCo Summerfare Festival at the State University of New York at Purchase, which presented Sellars's production of *The Marriage of Figaro*, were greeted on arrival by two pickets distributing leaflets which questioned the justice of the Pepsi Company spending money on the corporate sponsorship of eight days of arts events while denying its own employees salary raises since 1986.

[2] See Craig Owens, 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism', in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992, pp. 166-190.

[3] Richard Fairman, 'An Unexpected Handel', *Financial Times*, 20 May 1996, p. 15.

[4] Edward W. Said, 'Peter Sellars's Mozart', *Nation*, 18 September 1989, pp. 289-91.

# 1. Developing an Aesthetic

'I grew up with John Cage and Merce Cunningham as old masters', Peter Sellars once remarked in an interview.[1] These pioneers of the American avant-garde in music and dance, artists for whom form and content were indivisible, provided the 'tradition' against which Sellars developed his aesthetic. Directing his first professional production in 1980, his work emerged towards the end of one of the most intense and productive phases in twentieth-century performance – the American experimental theatre of the 1960s and 70s. While this period prepared the ground for Peter Sellars, the poles of his work – the classics, opera, formal stability, politics, national vision – set it apart from his predecessors'. This chapter charts his aesthetic development, reading his diversion as a search for an independent artistic vision, and as a reasoned response to a specific cultural moment. Part I contextualises his work, contrasting its traditional and institutional impulses with the often anarchic and resolutely marginal mission of the US avant-garde. Part II traces Sellars's aesthetic influences – European, American, non-Western – explaining his attraction to the modernist *auteurs* of the twentieth century, and their impact on his performance style and *mise-en-scène*. The chapter concludes with profiles of his key design collaborators whose work over twenty years has been integral to his artistic evolution.

## I. Contexts

When Sellars says that 'one of the most exciting moments in the history of world theatre was the experimental theatre movement in America in the 1960s', he's referring to a moment located firmly in the past. Though many of the practitioners who began experimental work in the 1960s continued working through the 1970s and up to the present, Sellars places himself after that historical period. For him, theatre history *was* the Living Theatre, Robert Wilson, the Bread and Puppet Theatre, Mabou Mines, the Wooster Group and Richard Foreman. Without their dedicated innovation Sellars's work would have been impossible; it's clear, however, that his pursuit of different artistic goals was not simply a desire to forge his own aesthetic but also an expression of dissatisfaction with the direction of the experimental project in general.

By the late 1970s much of the work of the New York avant-garde had descended into self-absorption.[2] Personal biography became the core content of theatre pieces; the work itself seemed to speak to an increasingly narrow and cliquish audience. The anarchic, utopian ideals that fuelled the work of artists like Julian Beck and Judith Malina – the desire to fuse art with life, to make theatre that could alter the perceptions of ordinary people – had, in places, dissipated into psychoanalytic narcissism. While Wilson had radically altered notions of what was formally possible in Western theatre, the so-called 'theatre of images' was accompanied by a content vacuum in which the function of text in performance was diminished as never before. For Sellars, the avant-garde's obsession with form, its need constantly to define and redefine its own parameters, meant that discussion of issues, the politics once so central to the largely left-wing origins of avant-garde art-making, was sidelined.

Don Shewey argues that the work of Sellars, and his peers like the choreographer Mark Morris and the Kronos Quartet, represents a natural process of consolidation. They take the work of their immediate predecessors, the radical experimentalists, and develop their innovations, incorporating them into broader artistic traditions located in a historical continuum:

> ...classical culture is re-evaluated in the light of recent developments, and the value of recent experiments [is] weighed against the truth and usefulness of art that has remained vital across centuries and continents. The collage that results is the basis of a new tradition, against which future innovators will inevitably rebel.[3]

Shewey argues that while the generation of theatre makers prior to Sellars felt they had to make clear choices between the avant-garde and the mainstream, Sellars experiences no such obligation – work in grand opera houses exists side-by-side with amateur community projects. In Shewey's reading, this indicates a welcome freedom in the roles cultural workers can occupy in the late twentieth century. I believe the persistence of such cultural binaries is as coercive as being forced to choose between them – maintaining a form of cultural schizophrenia is the only way Sellars can justify the relevance of high art forms like opera and conceive of any radical potential in theatre. The New York avant-garde had taken the dissection of form to its logical conclusion – Sellars felt the need to temporarily backtrack, to adopt sometimes discredited formal structures to frame a broader discussion of politics. Though Sellars's work is elaborate – he was actually taught by the philosopher and linguist Roman Jakobson – it exhibits a certain formal fatigue:

> The dead letter of form is what we have in the United States justice system – a spectacular form with no life inside it. And there's obviously the crisis of organised religion at this moment. I think we have to look at form as something to be desired on one level but, on another level, as something that can become a real nemesis. God knows, in this century form has overtaken content in a way that's really asphyxiating. One looks at parts of the world

> where people are fighting for the right to vote and don't have the forms with which to do it, yet there you feel the heat of commitment, courage and invention. Here we preside over our invented forms with a kind of smugness, but don't bother to vote.[4]

The political reality Sellars was confronted with in the early 1980s was Republican conservatism. The socialist dreams that fuelled (but rarely formed) the work of many of the leaders of the American experimental theatre had patently failed. For Anne Bogart the problem was historical:

> Our generation doesn't have anything to say because we've lost the ability to talk about things... It's specifically political – it goes back to the McCarthy era, when artists were destroyed for being politically involved. We've been brought up thinking art and politics don't mix, so what do we have to talk about? Ourselves.[5]

Making theatre for your friends in a basement in the East Village and touring it to university campuses was, Sellars realised, never going to change the perceptions of vast numbers of people. The US avant-garde had burnt itself out – alternative paths were required.

Sellars responded with the cultivation of an *auteur* persona – in direct conflict with the collective principles upon which so many of the ensembles of the 1960s and 1970s were founded. His pieces played on proscenium stages in contrast to the open, thrust, and in-the-round spaces that featured so prominently in the experimentalists' explorations of theatrical form. While many of the collectives worked with new or devised texts, Sellars has always worked with the classics – the 'content' he believed audiences were starving for. His interest in the classics began with his involvement, at age eleven, in Pittsburgh's Margo Lovelace Marionette Theatre where he trained in live *commedia dell'arte* improvisation and learned to perform *Punch and Judy* from eighteenth-century scripts. Besides the usual fairy-tales, once a year the theatre

produced what Sellars described as 'adult plays that puppets could do better than people'[6] – the Belgian surrealism of Michel de Ghelderode and the early modernist stream-of-consciousness wanderings of Gertrude Stein, works by Jean Cocteau, and Jean Giraudoux. Sellars was eventually allowed to produce his own show at the Lovelace – a version of *Alice in Wonderland* with music by Gounod and John Cage. When he moved to high school at Phillips Academy it was the avant-garde that came first:

> All I read...was anything published by the Grove Press: Beckett, Ionesco. When I got to Andover it took too long to teach puppeteers so I began doing plays with people... For reading I was handed *Finnegan's Wake* and Martin Buber. The second year I was introduced to Peter Handke... The Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams stuff I didn't read until years later.[7]

The works he directed at Andover read like a catalogue of twentieth-century avant-gardism: Tzara, Stravinsky, Pinter, Anouilh, Pinget, Daumal, Saint-Saëns, supplemented by Shakespeare, Marlowe, Mozart and Chekhov. At Harvard he plunged into the monuments of Western culture: Aeschylus, Monteverdi, Glück, Locke, Corneille, Göethe, Wagner, Ibsen, Pushkin, with some Mayakovsky, Wedekind, Stein, Brecht, Handke, and lots more Shakespeare and Chekhov.

In America, with its permanent cultural drive towards the new, the classics establish the roots of the contemporary, providing a genealogy of American mythology and identity. A glance towards the classic texts of Europe reveals precisely what it was that America left behind, and explains the cultural inheritance on or against which the modern USA was founded. As Robert Coe concludes in a profile of Sellars, 'tradition can supply the genesis of a necessary revolution'.[8] Sellars's attitude to the classics is not reverential or curatorial, rather the texts of the past function as a sounding-board for the present – our criteria for defining what is and is not a classic

reveal the cultural assumptions of today. For Sellars, classical culture also provides a counterpoint to the banality of the mass culture which dominates America:

> ...this hard-bitten cynicism – a kind of bitterness about the cruelty of the world and a sense of futility – is so deeply written into every Hollywood movie and into most television. I'm really interested in looking at Handel, Monteverdi, Messiaen – at these moments where genuinely idealistic people have tried to envision something that does propose a future.[9]

To solve current problems with solutions that are really new, Sellars believes it's vital to study the successes and failures of those who have gone before. Classical culture provides a short-hand which enables the artist to zoom straight to the emotional and political heart of the matter in question, avoiding the infinite maze of form associated with modernism. Sellars appropriates – and re-imagines – the classics to re-ignite the controversy and rebellion that move culture forward. He remarks that,

> A classic is a house we're still living in. As with any old house, you're going to fix it up and add a new wing. It's not an exhibit. It's meant to be lived in, and not admired.[10]

While Sellars's European-American peers like Andrei Serban and Liviu Ciulei embarked on similar projects, no contemporary American director has displayed as overwhelming a commitment to the classics as Peter Sellars.

Sellars's concentration on opera is another expression of frustration with American theatre. The form was uniquely placed to reflect and contain the cultural explosion of postmodernity. Sellars suggests that,

> In an age when the interrelatedness of things is increasingly the issue, opera becomes the medium of choice. Multilingual, multicultural, multimedia, diachronic, dialogic, dialectical, and somehow strangely delectable, opera is the one form that seems to have a chance of reproducing and invoking the simultaneities, confusions, juxtapositions, bitter tragedy, and just plain malarkey that constitute the texture of recent history.[11]

Sellars was immersed in classical music from childhood. At Andover he ran the school's classical music radio station and directed his first official music-drama – Stravinsky's *Story of a Soldier*. He continued directing opera intermittently while at Harvard, including versions of Mozart's *Bastien and Bastienne* and *Così fan Tutte*. In 1979 the singer Suzanne Larson saw his puppet production of Wagner's *Ring* and recommended him to the Opera League of New Hampshire which gave him his first professional opera assignment – *Don Giovanni* in 1980. After his departure from the artistic directorship of the Kennedy Center in 1986, Sellars worked exclusively in opera for seven years, the period when he seemed to consolidate his artistic voice. The failure of the American National Theatre project confirmed Sellars's loss of faith in legitimate theatre: 'The theatre is the most depressed art form in America. Either we continue with quick fixes or we recognise we've got to rethink the whole thing from the bottom up'.[12] Opera provided Sellars with a refuge, a breathing space to determine his own cultural direction, and a site where just about any directorial intervention would be regarded as radical.

Its appeal is formal, providing all the emotion of high drama in a frame that always reminds spectators they're in a theatre. Sellars remarks that,

> In opera, the musical grid structures and objectifies 'behaviour', thereby supplying a perfect 'alienation' that functions on a Platonic (or Brechtian) scale, which insists that we re-evaluate, re-think, re-cognize a series of actions.[13]

In a fractured, postmodern world, opera's status as a total work of art attracts Sellars. Its enormous scale and potential incorporation of virtually every art form create an artistic experience which aggressively challenges that provided by the electronic media, and responds to the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of contemporary artistic creation.

> I don't think theatre exists independently of music. It is no accident that all Greek drama was opera. And particularly in the light of the way new technologies are transforming everything we know as performance, the theatre of the future is necessarily this *Gesamtskuntswerk*.[14]

The Greek model to which Sellars aspires – a synthetic theatre at the centre of religious and political life – provides further evidence of his projection towards the institutional centre. It might be suggested that opera's formal expanse consolidates the idea of the director as authoritarian ring-master keeping the various divisions of the enormous enterprise in check, while risking artistic dilettantism. Sellars argues the opposite, suggesting that the scale of opera provides a social model of interdependence and co-operative decision-making:

> The [opera] form itself is a metaphor for government: a series of people of widely differing gifts and points of view come together to create a whole that is larger than the sum of its parts. Harmony, co-ordination, and logistical accomplishment are metaphors...[15]

In the Greek ideal, theatre addresses the fate of the nation and the spiritual destiny of individuals. The *Gesamtkuntswerk* model provides a formal openness to philosophical discussion, its grandeur permitting the contemplation of the most abstract and ephemeral subject matter:

> The abandoning of the visible world of appearances for the invisible world of substance is the yearning at the core of the form. The performance is not an object; on the contrary, tremendous effort, intelligence, stupidity, suffering, construction, and years of training and vast expense are gathered toward a huge event that disappears as you watch it.[16]

In this sense, lavish opera defies the logic of consumption. It's a difficult paradox, compounded by Sellars's selection of this most expensive and exclusive art form as the forum for radical social change. How can opera ever be transgressive? How can opera be anything but the ultimate bourgeois art form? In choosing opera, Sellars displays his dual strategy of working both within and against the existing system. The

form's appeal is its location at the apex of the Western cultural pyramid – it becomes a way of mainlining opposition. Opera attracts Sellars for

> its ironic centrality, its political clout. One is dealing in the arena of big money, the preferred (or at least obligatory) form of entertainment for heads of state and the diplomatic corps. One has an audience of 'the best people', the power elite, artists, hangers-on, and fanatics and students who are packing the cheap seats in the fifth balcony. You are performing in the big theater at the center of town, across from City Hall and itself easily mistaken for a government building. You are not pacing back and forth in a picket line on the sidewalk below, you are in the boardroom engaging in direct horizontal address...[17]

This is one of the most concise and revealing explanations of Sellars's artistic strategy and political outlook. Unlike the artists of the modernist avant-garde who preceded him, Sellars does not believe that a conservative form necessarily contaminates the content of the work. Abandoning the utopian dream of revolution, Sellars adopts a pragmatic politics of full engagement with the existing centre.

## II. Developing an Aesthetic

### National Visions

In the early 1980s American political discourse was filled with bombastic nationalist rhetoric heightening the polarising tensions of the Cold War. Sellars's response was not a retreat to the local but an investment in the capacity of national narratives and institutions to offer alternative visions of American identity. As Artistic Director of Washington D.C.'s re-launched American National Theatre (ANT) in the mid-80s, Sellars saw himself as court jester to Ronald Reagan, attempting to take on the forces of conservatism from within the institutional 'establishment'. While other practitioners would describe the regional movement as America's own national

theatre, Sellars, with his roots in the European high art tradition, sensed a deficiency in American culture without an institution to compare with Britain's National Theatre or France's Comédie Française. (This was the third time the Kennedy Center had tried to establish such a company).

In Sellars's vision, the ANT would function as a crossroads for American theatre as a whole, eliminating its traditional institutional and commercial divisions. He appointed Elizabeth LeCompte and Timothy Mayer as associate directors, and a board that included Laurie Anderson, Liviu Ciulei, Robert Falls, Richard Foreman, Elia Kazan, Meredith Monk, Gary Sinise, Robert Wilson, Ellen Stewart and Orson Welles. Ticket prices were slashed. Many productions were free. The project was launched amid a hail of publicity. The company's collapse two years later amid spiralling debts, retreating audiences and organisational chaos confirmed the fears of its numerous critics. For many, the ANT in the mid-1980s was a doomed anachronism, a centralist response to the increasing irrelevance of the US avant-garde. As Robert Coe remarked,

> Suspended between civic obligation and personal conscience, the needs of the polis and his vanguard aspirations, Sellars was at odds with any American criterion of success and failure. His Whitmanian impulse to embrace all failed to produce a new mainstream in an age of postmodern tributaries.[18]

Despite the project's failure, however, the ANT gave Sellars the opportunity to develop the American performance aesthetic he had aspired to since he began directing. He believed that for too long (and despite his own passion for the classics) the US looked to Europe for cultural authorisation, as if its own national culture were somehow deficient. Sellars's ANT would create and validate a uniquely American performance tradition. The marginalisation of American theatre was, for Sellars, the result of both its failure to centre a national vision, and its insecure and misplaced

borrowings from a European idea of culture unsuited to the dynamics of American life. Explaining his surprising choice of *Henry IV, Part 1* as the ANT's opening production, Sellars remarked, 'it is very important to raise the level of political discourse here, to have a poet, not an ad agency or propagandist, tell us where we stand as a nation. I want to reclaim Shakespeare for Americans'.[19]

Besides re-appropriating classic playwrights for the USA, Sellars's set about recuperating the neglected American dramatic repertory of the previous century. He directed Charles Fechter's dramatisation of Alexandre Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* because it was one of the most popular touring productions of the 19th century and, as the star-vehicle for James O'Neill, Eugene's father, established a genealogy in American theatre history. James's virtual imprisonment in the money-making role, described by his son as his 'good bad luck', is referred to in *Long Day's Journey into Night*.[20] Also mounted by Sellars was Robert E. Sherwood's isolationist, anti-war comedy, *Idiot's Delight*, a popular vehicle for the Lunts in 1936. A staging of Mae West's unproduced comedy *Come On Over*, discovered by ANT researchers in the Library of Congress and hailed by Sellars as the work of one of America's greatest playwrights, was unfortunately abandoned.

These were not simply revivals, but expressions of Sellars's appreciation of indigenous American forms like vaudeville and melodrama. Distinctions between so-called 'high' and 'mass' culture were irrelevant in Sellars's project. The influence of these American forms on his work is enduring and a major component of his early aesthetic: 'There comes a point when you have to face your own culture. Ultimately something has to be built towards a specifically American technique'.[21] The influence of vaudeville could be seen in the slapstick humour, sights gags and almost camp excess of his opera work in the 1980s. *Così fan Tutte* (1986/89) was a notable

example: when Ferrando and Guglielmo attempt suicide with poison Sellars had them messily swallow ketchup and mustard from the tables of their Long Island diner; the mysterious Dr. Mesmer was replaced in 1986 by the television sex therapist Dr. Ruth Westheimer, and in the 1989 revival by celebrity psychic Shirley Maclaine. In *Don Giovanni* (1987/89) the Don and Leporello's attempts to disguise themselves as each other were bizarrely complicated by the fact that they were identical twins. Giovanni's final meal of pheasant became a Big Mac and fries. In *Giulio Cesare*, Caesar and Cleopatra's romantic clinch was framed by the colliding bows of two enormous two-dimensional oil tankers sailing on the Suez Canal.

Sellars asserts that the American musical is his country's single most important indigenous artform: '...a form of such raw power that it cuts across class lines and a nation dreams of itself openly'.[22] Three notable productions attest to the broad influence of the musical on the development of his aesthetic. At Harvard he directed Richard Adler and Jerry Ross's romantic comedy *The Pajama Game* (1954), with book by George Abbott, the story of a management superintendant who falls in love with a union activist in an American pajama factory where workers are striking to get a raise. For Sellars, the appeal of the form was, once again, its ability to stage the nation: '[These works are] truly Brechtian in the deepest sense, nineteenth century performing based on gigantic recognizable archetypes of national history, and a tendency to feel like you're watching headlines'.[23] Sellars was disappointed with the narcissistic course of the American musical in the 1970s when, as he put it, it seemed theatre people could only make musicals about theatre people. One of his first major engagements after graduating was the Broadway-bound *My One and Only*, a revival of the Gershwins' *Funny Face* starring Tommy Tune and Twiggy. With a new book by Timothy Mayer that was more poetry than song lyrics, along with scholarly

reconstructions of original Gershwin orchestrations, this production was Sellars's attempt to revive a stagnant form and establish a new audience for the American musical. During tryouts in Boston, the producers fired Sellars from his first major commercial project for obscurantism and general disorganisation – Tune said, 'we were all totally sapped of our spirits, and were just sort of *Meister*-puppets that had been moved around'.[24]

Sellars revived his dream of a new American musical with his 1984 Guthrie Theatre production of *Hang On to Me*, a combination of Maxim Gorky's *Summerfolk* with sixteen songs by George and Ira Gershwin. Sellars has long read Russia as America's alter ego, arguing that 1980s America had more in common with Russia than any Western European country had – in formal terms, American consumerism was as repressive and conformist as Soviet communism. His starting point was his pleasure in the similarities between the anarchic, surrealist poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky and the almost avant-garde yet populist style of Ira Gershwin's lyrics. Another point of intersection was the similarity between the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s and the American commercial art of the same period, with Deco as Constructivism's lost twin – the Russian avant-garde was fascinated with American culture at that time.[25] *Summerfolk* could finally provide a worthy dramatic setting for the Gershwin songs as well a deeper connection between the USSR and the USA – wherever Gorky wrote 'Russia', Sellars inserted 'America'.[26] The resulting dramatic musical discussed the widening gap between the classes, the divisions between high and low culture, and the failure and stagnation of political activism – American as well as Russian concerns.

The source of Sellars's enduring attraction to Russian culture is its national frame, the legacy of an art and a literature that ponder the direction of a whole people:

> There's no tradition of theater by our greatest authors. But in Russia, Chekhov, Gorky, Tolstoy, Gogol, the greatest Russian writers – with the major exception of Dostoevsky – all wrote for the theater. Russian literature was about the future of the country. Russian literature has deep questions embedded in it – 'Where is the country going? How can we help shape it?' – and literature was an active force in shaping a national consciousness, a consciousness of civic identity and civil behaviour.[27]

The most significant Russian influence on Sellars's work has, however, been from practitioners. Attempting to build a theatre for America, Sellars looked to Europe and saw that, in the twentieth century, national theatre movements were led as much by directors as by writers. The performance innovations which drove the theatre forward, the reassessment of the function of performance – so vital if the theatre were to survive the challenges of filmed media – came from maverick individual innovators.

**Russian Masters**

Since he began directing, Sellars saw himself as an heir to the leaders of the European modernist theatre. Two figures, acknowledged as his 'masters', have exerted a major influence on Sellars's performance aesthetic, philosophy and career structure: Vsevolod Meyerhold and Yuri Lyubimov. Meyerhold has been Sellars's artistic mentor from the time he was an undergraduate – his final year thesis was on Meyerhold's concept of 'musical realism'. The most obvious trait the two directors share is their fascination with the classics, in both cases combined with a radical desire to re-imagine, and in Meyerhold's case to re-create, texts from the past to speak to their own respective cultural moments. In his years at St. Petersburg's Imperial opera and drama theatres (1908-18) Meyerhold was essentially a Court artist, patronised and hugely resourced by the State. It was this cultural centrality and awesome financial backing that enabled him to produce work that pushed formal

boundaries. Of course, the close involvement of the state ultimately proved his downfall when the messages his lavish productions delivered no longer flattered the regime. Sellars's position at the ANT seemed to offer the potential for similarly resourced work that might have an opportunity to extend the limits of America's theatrical imagination.

Beginning with aesthetics, Sellars was influenced by Meyerhold's organisation of stage space. Though Sellars has worked almost exclusively with the proscenium stage – Meyerhold experimented with versions of thrust and arena staging – their use of sets and their direction of the actor's body in relation to on-stage structures is strikingly similar. Sellars's regular designers, Adrianne Lobel and George Tsypin, have both been heavily influenced by the Constructivist work of Meyerhold's designers Liubov Popova and Varvara Stepanova. Lobel actually pastiched Constructivism for both *My One and Only* and *Hang on to Me*, her sets complete with three-dimensional climbing-frame-style structures – like Popova's 'acting apparatuses'. Tsypin's response has been more assimilative, his resolutely contemporary high-tech installations and exposed technology resembling a sort of architectural poststructuralism. His scaffolding-based design for Sellars's 1991 production of John Adams's *Death of Klinghoffer* could be directly descended from Popova's non-representational scaffold for *The Magnanimous Cuckold.* But while Popova's designs foregrounded function and were self-consciously utilitarian and anti-aesthetic, Tsypin and Lobel's work remains decorative and highly aestheticised – the reality, perhaps, of what Edward Braun notes is the ultimate theoretical incompatibility of the aesthetic world of the theatre and the rigorous utilitarianism of the Constructivist ideal.[28]

In the work of both designers the actor never performs *against* the scenery – rather, as was especially evident in Meyerhold's productions, performers are required to physically and dynamically interact with the set. The irony of Sellars's often realist stagings combined with the sheer abstraction of Tsypin's work mean that the stage effect is, like Meyerhold's, never illusionistic. Sellars's designers, like Meyerhold's, are treated as artists in their own rights, their sets as living art objects. In Meyerhold's and Sellars's productions the sets are rooted in function – they must perform labour within the diegesis of the production – and yet simultaneously operate using the languages of symbolism and the imagination. Meyerhold's functional stage constructions existed within spaces shorn of illusion, the back wall of the theatre – particularly in his work at the Theatre of the Revolution (1922-4) and at the Meyerhold Theatre (1923-38), in productions like Fernand Crommelynck's *Magnanimous Cuckold* (1922) and Sergei Tretyakov's *Earth Rampant* (1924) – was usually exposed, the technology of the stage open and on view to all spectators. The performance space was almost like a workshop, a practical place for completing the assigned task of theatre-making. Sellars, though more committed to the box set, has on many occasions similarly exposed the full extent of the stage space. In works like *The Death of Klinghoffer*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Peony Pavilion*, simple white cycloramas or curtains screened sections of the back wall whose upper reaches were clearly exposed; sets existed as three-dimensional art installations to be climbed over, into, and around by very physical performers; wings and flies were open, with technicians visible on stage, controlling technology and creating special effects.

Meyerhold's direction of the actor in space and, in particular, his system of actor training – Biomechanics – directly influenced Sellars's own development of a unique acting and performance style. Spenser Golub describes Biomechanics as

Meyerhold's solution to his search for an 'actor-cabotin, a combined singer-dancer-juggler-tumbler, whose precise physicalisation and mask-like presence would unite primordial and contemporary forms in a new, universal theatre'.[29] Sellars's reading of Biomechanics again involves a direct projection of Russian culture onto American culture:

> You figure out what Meyerhold was after when you see *Steamboat Bill Junior*. I always thought Biomechanics was this weird thing. What a remote concept that actors should be acrobats. And then in *Steamboat Bill Junior* you watch Buster Keaton leap four stories to save his father, and it's the most thrilling moment. It's emotionally transcendent, and it's not a circus trick. It has nothing to do with the circus. It has everything to do with pure emotion. Something very deep is happening, and it's only because he is an acrobat that we are able to feel it. And suddenly you realise that of course Meyerhold is watching Buster Keaton.[30]

The principal objective of Meyerhold's physical exercises was for the actor to realise and develop the idea of performance as a totality. In Biomechanics the body and the consciousness would not operate independently but in total harmony: a full union of the physical, mental and emotional capacities of the performer. As Joseph Roach explains in his essay 'The Future that Worked', this utopian dream of physical labour improved and enhanced by acute intellectual and spiritual consciousness – a total reconception of the potential of manual work – was a cornerstone of Soviet ideology in the 1920s, and a direct contrast to the nightmare vision of human machine cogs envisioned by Orwell and Huxley.[31]

One of Meyerhold's primary influences on the acting style evolved by Peter Sellars may be noted in this vision of the 'total' performer, with its roots in the political utopianism of the Left. The actor Erast Garin, (Khlestakov in Meyerhold's celebrated production of Gogol's *Inspector General*), remarked that through the physical training of Biomechanics, 'the merest gesture – say with the hand – resounds

through the entire body'.[32] In Sellars's productions, especially in his opera work, singing is indivisible from acting, movement is indivisible from singing, acting is indivisible from choreography. Critics have noticed, often with distaste, that Sellars requires his singers to be equally competent as actors. The reason for this unease, disregarding any decline in singing quality, is, I believe, largely to do with the type of acting required, and the eclectic nature of Sellars's stylised performance. In Sellars's work, like Meyerhold's, the merest physical gesture not only takes on vast symbolic import, but is directly aligned with the delivery of the music. Over twenty years, Sellars has developed a performance aesthetic which mixes and quotes naturalist American acting of the so-called Method schools, Brechtian presentationalism, non-Western gesture, and a self-devised hybrid form of physical movement which resembles a sort of deaf-signing of the musical score. Integral to the success of this form is the absolute commitment of the performer, and the solid rootedness of character at the centre of this complex web of external expression and visualisation. To carry it off, every minute gesture must be fully integrated not only to the other – often patently incongruous and contradictory – performance modes required of the performer, but also, vitally, to the emotional core of the character being portrayed. In the tense, physically demanding, almost balletic acting style developed by Sellars, each discrete movement resounds through the performer's body leaving, as in Meyerhold's prescription for Biomechanics, no possibility for extraneous gesture. Every single turn of the head and ripple of the fingers, most crucially in the delivery of arias, is perfectly choreographed. It is a performance of absolute totality, taut and fully energised. From observing Sellars in rehearsal I learned that, though each individual performance seems almost story-boarded or imposed by the director, this completely integrated acting results from a long process of collaboration between

performer and director. Through extensive exploration of the text, and precisely detailed rehearsals, every line of libretto and music is individually considered and physically illustrated using an exhaustive process of trial and error.

The key to the success of Meyerhold's vision of total performance was the absolute union of body and mind. The principle of habituation derived from reflexology was designed, notes Edward Braun, 'to foster a sense of complete self-awareness and self-control in performance'.[33] Habituation was advocated, not to fulfil some industrial vision of performers as automatons, but rather to free the performer to use his or her mind. Long predating Brecht, Meyerhold was advocating a European form of presentational acting. He asserted that,

> The whole Biomechanical system, the entire process of our movements is directed by one principle – our capacity for thought, the human brain…the brain must occupy the primary position, because it is the brain that initiates the given task, that gives orientation…[34]

The system was designed to enable the performer to self-consciously determine and monitor the best way to present character on stage. The actor was encouraged to think always in two minds, to exist on two planes simultaneously, as Alma Law and Mel Gordon note: '[In Biomechanics, the actor] is at the same time both the artist and the object of his art'.[35] This emphasis on self-consciousness in performance is integral to Sellars's work. Though classic American naturalistic acting suffuses his productions, its juxtaposition with almost anarchic choreography, non-Western performance genres and, crucially, with music, mean that neither performer nor spectator may assume a passive role or merely channel emotion: 'Because people are singing you can't possibly confuse it with naturalism', he remarks.[36]

One of the most significant instances of Sellars's structural inclusion of the principle of dual consciousness is in his performers' live interaction with technology. From the early 1990s, many of his productions have featured performers using video

cameras to film both themselves and other actors – recording footage played live on multiple TV monitors located about the stage and auditorium. Actors thus embody their characters, observe them externally, and present them to an audience – a complex intersection of subjectivity and objectivity. Filming themselves and filming each other, the performers invoke the critical distance, and aesthetic choice-making, of the director. Spectators observe spectators observing themselves. The texture of Sellars's work is so filled with visible seams and ruptures that no performer may create a unified world to fully psychologically inhabit – 'swords' become guns, 'caskets' become coffins, 'poison' becomes tomato ketchup.

Meyerhold's division of the acting exercise into three sections structures performance as a chain or cycle. Law and Gordon assert that, 'The *raccourci*, an art term borrowed from the French, and meaning "foreshortening," is a key concept for understanding Meyerhold's work with actors. Related to the *mie* of Kabuki theatre, it [understands] 'movement as an uninterrupted chain of changes in the actor's position'.[37] While a performance could be dissected into minute moments, the combination of the parts produced an indivisible aesthetic unit. Sellars borrowed this concept in his own work with actors, infusing it with an almost spiritual importance. The indivisible gesture, the performance cycle, becomes like a Buddhist mantra in Sellars's work, an expression of concentrated spiritual communion without beginning or end – the cornerstone of the sense of the sublime and the ecstatic that infuses the most intense moments of his opera productions. His recurring concern with resurrection, life after death, and his focus on the world of the spirit as the concrete *content* of his work, is vividly demonstrated in this particular use of theatrical gesture influenced by Meyerhold. The principle of permanent self-consciousness, permanent self-revision, is echoed in Sellars's fascination with the infinite. It's directly related to

his preoccupation with the breakdown of the subject-object division of modern subjectivity:

> ...This idea of unfinish is very important in many cultural traditions. And again it's the reason why I'm thinking of Hua Wenyi's gestures in *Peony Pavilion*. You never see any gesture begin or end. Every gesture is part of every gesture it was before and every gesture that comes after. So she is representing infinity. This world without beginning and end; this world of continuous transformation, where every moment has become something else; this world where you cannot separate this from that.[38]

The infinity principle is not confined to the Kunqu opera style used in *Peony Pavilion*, but also becomes, in Sellars's thinking, a link between Eastern and Western performance forms. In the same interview, he suggests that this ultimately religious principle also undergirds the notion of the repeat in baroque music: 'Every thought, every feeling, every moment in your life in baroque music is experienced as a circle. So in fact we're operating in cycles, where it's an understanding that everything returns to its beginning'. The cyclical, Meyerholdian gesture, directly derived from Biomechanics, is Sellars's attempt to physicalise the spiritual on stage, and to visualise the religious content of the music.

Meyerhold's concept of 'musical realism' permeates Sellars's opera and theatre work, and it is in the use of music that the work of the two directors is most closely aligned. Music was central to Meyerhold's aesthetic where it was never employed to merely provide an ambient background against which the 'real' action could take place, but rather took on an operatic force as melody was used to directly express dramatic mood and emotion.[39] Music was played in performance to forward narrative and connote character. Erast Garin provided a key account of Meyerhold's use of music in his production of Alexei Faiko's *Bubus the Teacher* (1925) to both

evoke and deconstruct the world of the play: 'The music of Liszt and Chopin, standard fare in bourgeois salons, fits organically into that group of devices which serve to reveal the world of the characters of the play: its contradictions, its over-refinement and decadence'.[40] Sellars's use of music is similarly strategic and dramatic. From his early days at Harvard his theatre work has regularly featured live musicians playing, for example, Beethoven's *Coriolan* overture in *Coriolanus*, Mozart's Quintet in G Minor in *Macbeth*, Alfred Schnittke's String Quartet No. 2 in *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the blues of Elmore James in *Pericles*, Nubian music by Hamze El Din in *The Persians*. During his time with the Lovelace Marionettes Sellars performed *Jack and the Beanstalk* in department store windows:

> ...when it comes to the chase down the beanstalk [you learn that] 'Night on Bald Mountain' will help... You learn that words only connect in a certain way, and that beyond words there has to be this musicality, or you have something that is exactly what it says it is, which isn't much.[41]

Though choosing the appropriate music is as important for Sellars as choosing the setting and casting the actors, music's importance for both Sellars and Meyerhold extends beyond illustration and evocation. Meyerhold employed music almost symphonically as a part of the dialogue, applying rhythm and musicality directly to the action on stage.[42] Reading Wagner's notebooks, Meyerhold was struck by the concepts of the 'leitmotif' and the 'endless melodic line',[43] using the ideas to structure his own textual analysis and stage direction, and as guiding principles for actors. He was fascinated by Wagner's idea that a single melody could embody and signify a character. 'Acting is melody, directing is harmony',[44] Meyerhold wrote, and in his later years actually began referring to his rehearsal books as scores. Music was the ideal imaginative concept to structure his vision of total, integrated theatre. In a Meyerhold production, acting, movement, text, design, sound and lighting functioned

rhythmically, with each discrete element carefully harmonised with everything else. Meyerhold could construct a production with almost scientific exactitude, rehearsing every soloist individually, and ultimately conducting the 'orchestra' of artists. Notes and memoirs from collaborators recall that Meyerhold timed every movement down to the precise mini-second; each gesture became a musical note or rest. Production notebooks from his 1936 *Camille* actually read like musical scores. For the performer, music and physical movement became indivisible, each determining the other.

In Sellars's productions, all of Meyerhold's musical-structural elements are present: Sellars scores his texts, rhythm permeates his handling of dramatic form, he 'conducts' productions as total, fully-integrated works or art. His understanding of the notion of musical realism is particularly evident in his actors' interactions with music – music is not simply illustrated by physical gesture but seems to spring fully formed from the body of the performer. Paul Schmidt has observed this physical embodiment of melody:

> If you look at some of Peter Sellars' stagings of opera on videotape, you can see, for example, a soprano in a Handel opera doing this series of roulade scales that were going up and down like this. The hand gesture went like this [flicks his hand above his head], and as you watched it you realized that it was the hand that threw off the music. Her voice was singing, but what you watched was the hand throwing these notes into midair. It was astonishing.[45]

In 1991 Sellars made his first feature film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Ramirez*, a loose remake of Robert Weine's expressionist classic, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Sellars's version – featuring alienated Yuppies' troubled encounters with the mysterious homeless of New York – was silent and through-scored by John Adams. Naturalistic American film-acting was redefined by the lack of spoken words and the permanent accompaniment of Adams's minimalist, yet intensely emotional music. The symphonic, harmonic metaphor is what appeals primarily to Sellars. Asked to define

the meaning of 'musical realism', he replied, 'I think it's a metaphysical yearning. Meyerhold's asking how theater can represent the multiple levels of reality that are in people's lives'.[46] Asserting that Meyerhold's use of music was a response to the Communist outlaw of organised religion, Sellars performs a politicised reading of a concept that could easily dissolve into fanciful aestheticised vagueness. Music was Meyerhold's way of communicating emotions that were literally unspeakable in the Soviet Russia of the mid-thirties – a means of accessing alternative 'realities' that were aggressively denied and repressed.[47] With his consistent juxtaposing of Russian and American culture, Sellars is, by implication, using music to imagine alternative American identities.

This close alignment of seemingly irreconcilable opposites is the final source of Sellars's fascination with Meyerhold. The last chapter of his undergraduate thesis was an imaginary conversation between the two mavericks of early twentieth-century Russian theatre – Meyerhold and Constantin Stanislavsky. While the respective aesthetics and performance theories of the two men were famously different, Sellars was deeply interested in the things they shared, and particularly in the *entente* that occurred between them in the final years of Meyerhold's life. Sellars has been especially concerned to blur the edges of their differences – pointing to the fact that Meyerhold actually worked for Stanislavsky in the early years of his career – and also to revise the certainties of Stanislavsky's mythologised production methods – Sellars identifies the near-Expressionism of some of Stanislavsky's scenographic ideas expressed in the rehearsal promptbooks for *The Cherry Orchard*.[48] What Sellars finds so moving, however, was Stanislavsky's great act of grace and generosity to his rival when Meyerhold was stripped of his theatre by Anatoly Lunacharsky in 1938.

Stanislavsky took him in to the Moscow Art Theatre, and briefly there was the possibility that they could make theatre together. Meyerhold was assassinated in 1940, but the figure of a Meyerholdian-Stanislavskian performance aesthetic haunts Sellars's work, with its relentless and joyful juxtaposition of psychological realism with intense, precisely choreographed physicality. This refusal of binaries, or at least their constant mediation, is what unites the aesthetic and the philosophical in Sellars's work. With Meyerhold as his guide, that aesthetic is always political. His first professional production out of Harvard was Gogol's *Inspector General*, Meyerhold's most celebrated production. Sellars described his own version as being about 'a certain Khlestakov banality and empty-headedness which had a certain American quality... The eerie sense of desolation was very American'.[49]

In preparation for his 1984 production of *Hang On to Me* at the Guthrie, Sellars visited Moscow where he encountered the work of his second 'master' – Yuri Lyubimov. Yuri Andropov, Lyubimov's patron and protector, had recently died, and by extraordinary coincidence Sellars was visiting Moscow in the last week of Lyubimov's tenure at the Taganga Theatre before his replacement by Anatoly Efros. The Taganka was a repertory company, and in the short time Sellars had in Moscow he was able to see eight Lyubimov productions. He stated afterwards, 'this was the most important theatre I have ever seen in my life'.[50] Born in 1917, Lyubimov assumed the artistic directorship of the Taganka in 1964 and there developed a repertoire of new plays, classics and adaptations of novels that offered both an alternative to the propagandistic museum-style of Socialist Realism, and a committed interrogation of Soviet society. His life's work was an endless struggle with the censor and with the Communist authorities, giving the work that was permitted to go

before the public a super-charged edge. It was this tangible sense of national purpose, of a highly-politicised theatre at the centre of national consciousness, that so attracted Peter Sellars, soon to embark on his own national experiment. The final performances of productions that had been in the repertoire for years were intensely emotional. Huge queues formed for admission; Sellars recalled actors giving performances of extraordinary commitment:

> The audience's intensity and power of concentration was not something I had seen in a theater. They laughed a lot, and at moments you could hear weeping and snuffling, but as I found out, with the plays in the repertoire, if there is a line that has a double entendre and a meaning that reflects the political situation, the audience, even though they wish to respond, does not, because it would then be taken out by the censor.[51]

Two miles from the Kremlin, amid aggressive censorship, and in a climate of real political oppression, Sellars finally discovered a theatre with a purpose.

In Lyubimov's influence on Sellars it is impossible to neatly distinguish the aesthetic from the political from the philosophical – all three are fully synthesised in Lyubimov's work. Sellars was initially struck by Lyubimov's masterful use of *mise-en-scène*, his creation, in collaboration with his set designer David Borovsky, of what Spenser Golub calls, 'mobile, tactile and transformative scenic metaphors, Meyerholdian "machines for acting"'.[52] Meyerhold exercised a direct influence on Lyubimov, creating another generational link between Sellars's postmodern American theatre and that of the early twentieth-century Russian avant-garde. Besides attempting to replicate Lyubimov's sense of national purpose, Sellars explicitly borrowed aesthetic techniques and staging motifs from the Russian. The first production Sellars saw was Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* which impressed him with its high level of structured audience participation:

> At various points in the evening...when Lyubimov thought it was appropriate, special banks of lights permanently trained on the audience would be brought up to let us know that we were in this too and to acknowledge that there was one room, and we were all alive at one moment in what was reality.[53]

Audience members were directly implicated in the action of the play. Sellars has borrowed this device on a number of occasions, notably in his double-bill of Brecht and Weill's *Mahagonny Songspiel* with eleven excerpts from Bach cantatas collectively titled *Conversations with Fear and Hope after Death* (produced a year after Sellars's return from Moscow). Sellars followed the death that concludes Weill's catalogue of American greed and lust with a blackout and then a sudden flash of light which blasted out towards the audience like an accusation. During the 'resurrection' of Bach's pieces, the house lights gradually faded up, almost like a sunrise, until the whole house was bathed in light for the final cantata 'Es ist genug' – a collective act of spiritual re-birth.[54] Sellars has also used the device in *Hang On to Me*, *Ajax*, *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan Tutte*.

The static, spiritual staging of the ending of *The Master and Margarita* also affected Sellars:

> ...the last forty-five minutes or half hour were terribly quiet, and there wasn't much staging. It became a kind of cantata, which is something that has always fascinated me because I have been repeatedly drawn to what I have read about Meyerhold's production of *Hedda Gabler*, which he did in front of a giant curtain. He put all the actors on the edge of the stage and treated them as elements in a symbolistic scenic cantata.[55]

By the end of Lyubimov's piece it was if theatricality had become extraneous – the real issues of the spirit and of transformation had to be confronted directly. Sellars has used this device in a number of productions, notably *The Marriage of Figaro* (1988/9). In the final scene in the garden of Almaviva's palace, in this case the rooftop terrace of Trump Tower, the performers simply stood against a glass curtain

Sellars's productions from the 1980s were so dense visually and referentially that it was almost impossible for a spectator to decide what to look at. With their ambitious intersection of pure narrative, social politics, and metaphysics, these productions existed on a number of distinct but intersecting planes.

The transformation of everyday objects into charged spiritual symbols – the caskets in *The Merchant of Venice*, Du Liniang's self-portrait in *Peony Pavilion*, for example – is a feature of Sellars's work directly derived from the Russian. Lyubimov also pioneered the dramatisation of poetry with staged 'recital' versions of Andrei Voznesensky's and Evgeny Evtushenko's accounts of their trips to the USA in *Antiworlds* (1965) and *Under the Skin of the Statue of Liberty* (1972), which evolved into explorations of the lives of the poets themselves.[57] Sellars adapted the form himself with his 1987 staging of the Russian Futurist, Velimir Khlebnikov's epic poem *Zangezi: A Supersaga in Twenty Planes* for the opening of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. It too became a meditation on national themes and the troubled life of the artist. *Two Figures in Dense Violet Light* (ANT, 1986) included a staging of the poetry of Wallace Stevens, while *A Day in the Life of the Czar, or I Too Have Lived in Arcadia*, at La Mama ETC in New York in 1980 was Sellars's presentation of the poetry of Frank O'Hara and V. R. Lang.

Lyubimov and Sellars share more than aesthetic concerns, however. For Lyubimov before 1968, society as an institution was a potential vessel for change and reform. After Khruschev's forced retirement and the period of austerity that followed, Lyubimov began to turn more towards the individual in his search for alternative social configurations.[58] Birgit Beumers remarks that, in the 1970s, Lyubimov

> began to perceive society less as a cohesive social force than as a group of individuals who have neither respect nor responsibility for each other; the individual, therefore, is tragically

> alone in a hostile environment...The individual stood alone with the problems of his time, and this isolation turned his existence into a tragedy.[59]

In his 1971 production of Boris Vasiliev's sentimental melodrama, *But the Dawns Here are so Calm!*, Lyubimov explored the effects of World War II on individuals – a group of five women soldiers in the woods on an anti-Nazi search and destroy mission. The solitary individual faced with the monoliths of history, ideology and the collective became the 'scene' of debate in Lyubimov's later work – a figure that recurs in the work of Peter Sellars, notably in *Ajax*, *Mathis der Maler*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Theodora*. Sellars was especially affected by Lyubimov's technique of splitting individual characters among multiple performers. To dramatise the multiple facets of the fractured individual in his version of the life of Pushkin, *Tovarisch, Dear...* (1973), five Pushkins played the great artist simultaneously. The same device was employed as early as 1967 in *Listen!* in which the life and poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky was re-created with five performers playing the national poet, each representing a specific aspect of his personality. This concern with fractured individual subjectivity is echoed in Sellars's use of the same technique in his own version of *Macbeth* (1984) in which the title character was played by two actors, one murderous and frenzied, the other passive and dependent; in *Peony Pavilion* (1998), the central pair of lovers of Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei were played simultaneously by three different couples each performing in a different acting style. While Soviet society obliterated the individual, American society valorised it to the destruction of society and collective values. Sellars, after Lyubimov, dreams of an individual compatible with collective ideals, a social structure that could diminish the profound loneliness of the excesses of American individualisation, while preserving the spirit of liberty and individual rights at the core of American national mythology. Lyubimov's work in Soviet Russia functioned as a shadowy mirror image for his own in the USA.

The final element of Lyubimov's work that so astonished and influenced Sellars was its explicit presentation of religion and spirituality on stage, all the more amazing in its Soviet context. The dialogues between Christ and Pilate, taken verbatim from Bulgakov's novel, formed a large portion of Lyubimov's production of *The Master and Margarita*. Sellars noted that Lyubimov's *Crime and Punishment* foregrounded the novel's religious crisis, usually ignored in official Soviet criticism.[60] Characters in Lyubimov's work function on the deepest philosophical levels – national destiny, whether discussed in *Three Sisters* or *Boris Godunov*, is always spiritual destiny. It was a validation of the overtly spiritual that affirmed Sellars's own artistic development – since seeing the work of Lyubimov Sellars has never resisted his own desire to root his productions in the metaphysical world.

**European Masters**

Other European directors have had a formative influence on Sellars's work. From 1975-6 he spent a year in Paris with his mother and sister where he saw some of the most significant classical and avant-garde international theatre of the mid-1970s. Giorgio Strehler's *Cherry Orchard* and *Simone Boccanegra* represented exactly the kind of classical director's theatre to which Sellars aspired, while Strehler's *Marriage of Figaro* was, for Sellars, 'the most perfect opera experience, almost, that I have ever had'. The austere design of his own *Figaro* twelve years later, with its icy, minimalist interiors and soaring glass walls, may have been influenced by this version: 'The fact is, those rooms in those eighteenth-century chateaux were designed on some grand master scale of symmetry and grandiosity. Furniture didn't fit well into those rooms. It was the first *Figaro* to get how unpleasant it is to live in a palace'.[61]

Patrice Chéreau's version of Jacques Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann* was Sellars's first encounter with operatic work 'that critical of its source'.[62] Chéreau's bleak reading was closely attuned to Sellars's own fears about the direction of society under modern capitalism. The piece was also, crucially, an interrogation of the future and function of opera, corresponding precisely with Sellars's evolving concerns, and prefiguring his own revisions of the medium later in his career:

> Offenbach made this heroic attempt to say, 'Wait a minute. As we enter the Industrial Age, where are we going?' Are these, in fact, [opera] houses of pleasure?... What is this opera tradition?... Offenbach realised that opera was in danger of becoming an art form that no longer had anything to do with the present, that was dangerously close to necrophilia.[63]

Sellars's did not see Chéreau's milestone production of *The Ring* at Bayreuth between 1976 and 1980, but the impact of its modern industrial setting laid the ground for his own contemporary productions, which fifteen years later were often more positively received in Europe than in the USA. In France, he also saw the Bread and Puppet's Theatre's mammoth four-hour Bicentennial show (visiting Paris because it was unable to book dates in the USA), or rather its 'anti-Bicentennial', an angry and emotional elegy to the last survivor of the White genocide of Native Americans in the state of California.[64] Sellars saw this production in Paris six times, and also viewed Andrei Serban's *Fragments of a Greek Trilogy*. The final European *auteur* to have significantly influenced Sellars's aesthetic development was Jean-Luc Godard with whose postmodernist fragmentation of film form Sellars has long been fascinated. The French director's often patent disregard for narrative convention, foregrounding of philosophical exploration, and fascination with the instability of language, particularly as manifested in his later work, has had an enduring influence on Sellars. In 1987 Sellars actually apprenticed to Godard as assistant director on his bizarre film version of Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

**American Masters**

Shortly after Sellars left Harvard, Mike Nichols suggested that he was the most innovative figure in American theatre since Orson Welles.[65] The hyperbolic comparison is revealing not only because Sellars was very familiar with Welles's early work, but also because the 'innovation' of both men's theatre remains similarly problematic. In the cases of both Welles and Sellars, the hype of journalistic canonisation has infused their myths of originality. The controversy that attended Sellars's updated productions of the classics in the 1980s was surprising – the genre was far from unprecedented in the American theatre. In November 1937 Orson Welles's modern dress production of *Julius Caesar* for the Mercury Theatre opened in New York. Welles's staging deliberately evoked the emerging Fascist regimes in Italy and Germany: Caesar became a tyrannical dictator, Brutus (played by Welles) was an idealistic liberal, and Cassius a calculating revolutionary. Like Sellars in his own early versions of *Antony and Cleopatra* (1977), *As You Like It* (1978), *Macbeth* (1978/1984) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1984), Welles cut the text extensively to make it fit his vision and resources. In this version, Brutus was the central character. Simon Callow remarks that Welles suggested the play was about 'the anguish of the liberal in the age of dictators',[66] thus making himself the emotional fulcrum of the piece. Though Welles was lauded as a *Wünderkind* with a dazzlingly original concept, this was not the first time the play had been staged this way. The previous year, Arthur Schnitzler, head of the Federal Theatre Project at Wilmington, Delaware, had directed a Fascist-style *Julius Caesar*, news of which had not reached New York by the time Welles began his version with the Mercury.[67]

As Dennis Kennedy notes in *Looking at Shakespeare*, the design of the production was key to its success.[68] Sam Leve's set was a series of black Appiaesque platforms, hollow to intensify the menacing sound of marching jackboots. Actors were costumed in black and olive-green Fascist-style military uniforms with buttoned tunics and breeches. The most important design element was the lighting. Created by Jean Rosenthal, the design was based, at Welles's suggestion, on the awesome spectacle of the Nuremburg rallies devised by Albert Speer. Rosenthal inserted lamps flat into the stage floor creating columns of light and a frightening militaristic atmosphere. Years later, Peter Sellars, when researching the production, discovered the lighting plots in a university library in Virginia – and phoned Welles to tell him. The technique of uplighting, though never used to explicitly evoke Fascist Germany, features prominently in virtually every Sellars production. His lighting designer, James Ingalls, invariably places rows of floor lights at the front of the stage illuminating actors with intense and ghostly shadow. A reminder of Victorian music-hall footlights, Ingalls's designs never let the spectators forget they're in a theatre.

The mixed, though largely positive critical response to Welles's updating is paralleled by Sellars's experience fifty years later. Critics praised Welles's masterful sense of theatricality but were disturbed by both his cutting and the allegorical inconsistencies his updatings suggested. If Caesar was assassinated because he was ambitious, but it later appears that he was a benevolent dictator, then his killers have committed a grievous wrong. Antony thus turns out to be the demagogue, not Caesar. If this is the case, then he must be the Mussolini figure, not Caesar as implied in Welles's production.[69] Critics often attempt to determine the precise allegorical assertions of Sellars's updatings only to run into similar inconsistencies. The responses by both Welles and Sellars are remarkably similar. Both men have

invariably asserted that their modern day settings are used to merely 'evoke' contemporary events and generate debate. This is a somewhat disingenuous response – Welles and Sellars trade on the political currency their settings provide yet avoid the responsibility of either accuracy or real political leadership, a problem I'll discuss further in chapter 2.

Sellars's simultaneously fractious and reverential attitude to the avant-garde that directly preceded him is magnified in his relationship with the giant of American experimental theatre of the last thirty years – Robert Wilson. Wilson's landmark avant-garde interventions in opera directly forged a space for Sellars who shares with Wilson an absolute concern for the visual image. While in the latter's case this concern manifests itself in a relentless deconstruction or even elimination of verbal language, in Sellars's pieces text remains completely intact and central. Both men's preference for opera is evidence of a shared interest in the idea of the 'total' work art, Wagner's *Gesamtkuntswerk* re-imagined for the late twentieth century. In Wagnerian spirit, both artists work almost exclusively on the proscenium stage, a return to restriction that indirectly provides a kind of visual freedom. Wilson smashed apart received notions of opera, and then rebuilt the form with an interdisciplinary approach that broke down the barriers between theatre, film, sculpture, painting and music. Both men acknowledge a large debt to the movement and temporality of Japanese Noh theatre. Sellars remarks,

> Because everyone is so harried, so rushed, so pushed, in the theatre I try and allow some repose, some space. I'm very influenced by the work of Robert Wilson in this respect. His sense of slowing down time is one of the great gifts of his work.[70]

The two directors also share a passion for the choreography of George Balanchine, at whose dances, performed by the New York City Ballet, they were religious attendees

in the 1970s and early 1980s. From a formal standpoint Wilson's work seems the more radical – destabilising language, reinventing form, centring movement and the visual. Sellars's work, with its return to text, its reliance on narrative, and playful arrangements of signs, seems conservative in comparison. Wilson, descended from the Surrealists, understands the world within a psychological matrix and reinvents visual performance to realise his dreams; Sellars, the tentative cultural materialist, reads every gesture politically, and returns to the certainties of form to frame a 'content' which articulates explicit social and political concerns. However, just as without Wilson's innovations Sellars would have found it more difficult to establish a place for his work, so Sellars sometimes dips back into the psychologising his politics aims to avoid. The two artists saw nearly all of each other's work in the mid-1980s. Wilson's real significance for Sellars probably lies in the example of his career – the young, maverick, *auteur* director, creating rigorously contemporary high art in America – a model to which Sellars aspired and adhered.

Despite their obvious differences, Sellars repeatedly states that his 'favourite group working theatrically in America is the Wooster Group' [71] – the most important contemporary American influence on his aesthetic. He saw their work for the first time in 1981, and though he was already embarking on an alternative artistic path, his work has benefited from a continuing cross-fertilisation with the parallel experiments of his New York peers. Sellars's turn to opera was his response to what he perceived as a legitimate theatre in crisis, 'battered and painted into a corner where it *is* television. It'll starve in a corner and be airlifted out in a few years'. [72] The work of the Wooster Group is precisely the reinvention of theatre – part of a modernist trajectory, ensuring the survival of its medium through a disciplined engagement with

its own formal foundations. When Sellars suggests that, 'the Wooster Group is speaking the language that the theatre will speak fifteen to twenty years from now', he's speaking the language of the traditional avant-garde – ahead of its time, speaking to the future.

Like Wilson, Sellars's admiration of the Wooster Group is inspired by their creation of total works of art:

> ...the group's work is the first time that I've seen all of those elements combined in a really sophisticated way to create this *Gesamkuntswerk*, where the text is as important as the video image is as important as the sound, and nothing has dominance...[73]

Initially, it seems like a misreading – the group's primary aesthetic strategy is fragmentation and displacement. However Sellars and the Wooster Group share a similar sense of cultural (dis)orientation and a similar political response. Racism, gender discrimination, and the dehumanising effects of global capitalism are issues that recur in the work of both Sellars and the Wooster Group.[74] Sellars came of age professionally twelve years after the Woosters' first incarnation as Richard Schechner's Performance Group. This almost generational time gap may account for their different formal approaches to the same, enduring political issues. The most obvious difference is in company structure. The Wooster Group, though led by Elizabeth LeCompte, remains a decidedly collaborative enterprise: actors, director, designers and dramaturgs are all present from the beginning of project development and share the authorial function. LeCompte works as both filter and guide, but a pre-formed directorial vision is never imposed wholesale on cast or crew – the 'Group' takes full credit for the production as a whole. Though Sellars's designers, producer, production assistants, and frequently his performers, have worked with him for nearly twenty years he has never created an official company. His name remains firmly above the title and, unlike LeCompte, his productions are the product of a clearly

imposed directorial vision – the cast members may change, and sometimes the designers alternate, but the aesthetic and philosophical impression of the pieces which bear Sellars's name remains the same. Some of his regular singers – James Maddalena, Sanford Sylvan, Suzanne Larson, all collaborators of Sellars since his Boston days – set up their own venture, The Opera Company of Somerville, in the mid-80s, but Sellars was never officially a member. In fact, his involvement with every company of which he was an official director – the Explosives B Cabaret at Harvard, the Boston Shakespeare Company, the American National Theatre – has been abruptly terminated. The Wooster Group's collective structure was born of 1960s political idealism. It was a model Sellars consciously rejected in the early 1980s.

Issues of authority also magnify the differences between Sellars's and the Wooster Group's treatment of text. Though both work largely with the classics, and both ultimately effect projects of deconstruction, their means differ. The Wooster Group's works are textual collages, with fragments of established texts framed and destabilised by multiple 'supertexts' which often include films, soundscores, and devised inserts. Sellars also repositions classic texts, but his work usually retains an absolute fidelity to the integrity of the actual written text or score. Though some of his early theatre pieces, such as *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *A Seagull*, interpolated fragments from other texts, Wooster-style, Sellars's reframing of the classics is conducted via production and performance. Not for Sellars the almost cynical tactics of the Wooster Group with their selection of easy targets for dissection like Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* or T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*. Despite these obvious differences, the Wooster Group and Peter Sellars are united in their fundamental search to illuminate contradiction in existing texts,[75] their identification of the

unstable foundations of contemporary subjectivity colliding in their responses to the diffuse, virtual world of American culture.

Their respective aesthetics are most obviously similar in their use of technology. The Wooster Group pioneered the incorporation of filmed and video-taped inserts in their performances. Through complex tapestries of intertextuality and self-referentiality, these films *become* the production, provoking urgent questions about the status of the human body in live performance and the body's relationship to high technology in contemporary society. Sellars's incorporation of video into his performances is heavily indebted to the example of the Wooster Group. Unlike them, however, his films never become the actual text of performance, but exist as another textual layer constantly refocusing the spectator's reception of the corporeal. More specifically, video serves a scenographic function in Sellars's work: he gives the example of an Elizabethan stage where a player might parade a sign saying 'palace' (an idea grounded more in Sellars's imagination than in historical fact). He says his use of video is a similarly economic form of exposition. Sellars has included 'homages' to the Wooster Group in a number of pieces: in the 'Fascinatin' Rhythm' section of *Hang on to Me* a group of amateur performers played by children enacted a thirty second version of *Three Sisters*, quoting the Wooster Group's *Nayatt School* in which schoolchildren performed an abbreviated version of Eliot's *Cocktail Party*. Don Shewey suggests that Sellars's blend of classical music (Debussy, Beethoven) with blues (Elmore James) in *Pericles* (1983), was directly inspired by the use of music in the Wooster Group's *Route 1 & 9* which mixed Charles Ives with Thurston Harris's R&B.[76]

Peter Sellars and the Wooster Group have collaborated on two projects. In 1983 Sellars urged Elizabeth LeCompte to make a piece based on Gustave Flaubert's

*La Tentation de Saint Antoine.*[77] Production began on what became *Frank Dell's The Temptation of Saint Antony* in 1985 and the piece finally opened in 1989. Sellars was involved in the early stages. After appointing LeCompte as Associate Director at the ANT, Sellars invited the group to perform *North Atlantic* and *The Road to Immortality, Part II* in the Kennedy Center's studio space. Shortly afterwards work began on the St. Antony project. Both Sellars and LeCompte directed the company but agreed never to attend each other's rehearsals. Sellars translated and adapted sections of Flaubert's text and choreographed six dances, two of which were used in the piece's final version: the Queen of Sheba dance set to music by Art Tatum, and the Devil Dance accompanied by excerpts from Gounod's *Faust*. Though Sellars's development of the text was similar to the collaborative process used by the group with LeCompte, Susan Letzler Cole, present in rehearsals for both directors, observed that Sellars's leadership was more structured and explicitly directional. He actively participated in the piecemeal construction of a collage text, but his work was mostly confined to musical movement and choreography, inspired directly by the Flaubert with which he was most familiar. Recent Sellars work has returned to this collage structure, and his 2000 production of John Adams's nativity oratorio, *El Niño*, with its devised and assembled text and tightly-structured dance and film inserts, closely parallels the working process he evolved with the Wooster Group. Sellars involvement in the St. Antony project diminished over the course of the four years, and while he was credited as assistant director in an early programme, he was merely thanked in its final incarnation. Sellars worked with actors from the Wooster Group again in his 1991 film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Ramirez*, the title character played by Ron Vawter, supported by Kate Valk. The artists' mutual admiration is ongoing, and they all regularly attend each other's rehearsals in an advisory capacity.

**Non-Western Influences**

Sellars's interest in non-Western performance began in Pittsburgh where Margo Lovelace had a keen interest in the theatre of the East. When Sellars was thirteen she went to Osaka and worked with Bunraku. On her return, she brought a Bunraku puppet which Sellars was taught to manipulate, and for the following year the whole theatre went Japanese, culminating in a Bunraku version of *Beauty and the Beast*.[78] Sellars unsuccessfully attempted to make his own Bunraku puppet later at Andover. He studied with the Kabuki master and *onnagata* Onoe Kuroemon II at Harvard and, on graduation, travelled to Japan, China and India for six months studying theatre as the university's Sheldon Travelling Scholar. For a period Sellars's mother lived in Japan, and on his visits he regularly attended Noh, Kabuki and Bunraku. After his puppet training, Sellars explained that,

> Thinking in terms of those structures was completely logical...[I appreciated] the Oriental gift of separating sound from image, the sense that each of [the Japanese forms] have their own structure/systems which then intersect or don't intersect and create tensions and releases. And the idea that the image itself has power, which is something the traditional Western theatre has almost ignored.[79]

While Kabuki attracts Sellars as a total work of art with mass appeal, Noh is the ultimate form because of its 'very gentle insistence that theatre is present as a transcendent possibility and for no other reason. It's not especially entertaining...it's genuinely there to contemplate man's relation to nature'.[80] The influence of Noh can be identified in the minimalism and austerity of Sellars's later stagings. These expansive works – *St. François d'Assise*, *Theodora*, *Peony Pavilion*, for example – all featured huge, almost empty stage spaces, peopled by symbolic characters and performers with an almost other-worldly grace and nobility. Explaining the length of

these productions – all lasting more than four hours – Sellars explained that 'I just want a protective place, where people can just feel what there is inside themselves which is quite contracted, and where they feel they can breathe and expand'.[81] Such an explanation reaffirms the conclusion that Sellars's turn to East Asian performance is motivated by escape, a fundamental dissatisfaction with Western theatre forms felt by avant-garde practitioners since the early twentieth century.

This disillusion manifests itself in the eclectic performance style Sellars has developed for his actors. One of the directorial characteristics that most irritated opera critics in the early 1980s was his development of a system of hand and arm choreography not usually required of the opera singer. Inspired by the *mudra* of Kathakali and the hand movements of Noh and Chinese Opera, Sellars's choreographed gestures are explicitly non-naturalistic. Minute hand gestures take on enormous symbolic import – a performer singing and staring at the palm of her hand, as though it's a mirror, becomes a study in existential crisis, observing the collapse of received identity and the painful growth of something new – an image used extensively in *Don Giovanni*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *Theodora*. At other times, co-ordinated hand and arm movements seem to replicate the crises in the music and the oppositions between characters – one group will simultaneously cross their legs, while on the opposite side of the stage others will sweep their arms above their heads. Though the choreography has its roots in the East, it's almost completely transformed when finally performed in Sellars's work. The direct links between the pure forms of non-western performance and the tapestry of appropriation and quotation that is Sellars's performance style are admittedly tenuous. I merely wish to suggest that Sellars's immersion in the performance of the East filters through in his own work with visible consistency. (Sellars's appropriation of the signs of non-Western

performance leaves him open to standard charges of cultural imperialism. In Chapter 4 this issue is treated in more detail. Here I wish focus on aesthetics).

Sellars has produced a number of pieces with overt Eastern origins, many attempts at instituting formal dialogue between the theatres of China, Japan and South East Asia, and those of the West. At Harvard in 1978 he directed a version of the southern Indian epic *Sattityavan Savitri*, as well as the anonymous Chinese piece, *Chang Boils the Sea*. Details on both productions are scarce. In 1981, shortly after leaving Harvard, he directed a production for the National Theatre of the Deaf written by Shanny Mow entitled *The Ghost of Chastity Past or, The Incident at Sashimi Junction: A Kabuki Western*. The piece was a humorous exploration of the ways in which the American Western myth and Japanese and Kabuki culture have influenced each other. Particular attention was paid to points of continuity between the Hollywood Western and Japanese Samurai movies. In one clever example of cross-fertilisation, the doors of the on-set saloon featured pine trees rather than the usual cattle skulls. It was on this production that Sellars met the deaf-mute actor Howie Seago who later featured in a number of his pieces including *Ajax* and *The Persians*.

In 1983 he directed a production of three Noh plays which was never shown publicly. Working in his own apartment with three actresses he directed *Ikuta*, *Hagoromo*, and *Sotoba Komachi*. *Hagoromo* remains a vital piece for Sellars:

> It's about the gift of dance to human beings. It's about one's gifts and where one got them – under what circumstances they were presented. For every artist – which means for every human being – it's kind of required reading.[82]

In 1984 he returned to Harvard to direct another Chinese play, *Monkey Eating Peach, Rat Stealing Pumpkin, or The Phoenix Among the Peonies*, a huge spectacle performed in the university gym with 826 student participants, dedicated to the memory of Peter Ives. *Two Figures in Dense Violet Light* (1986) was what Sellars

described as his farewell to the American National Theatre, an evening comprising Beckett's *Ohio Impromptu*, Wallace Stevens's poem 'Angels Surrounded by Paysans' and Ezra Pound's translation of the Noh play *Tsunemasa*. The three texts were performed separately by the same actors, and in the cultural dialogue that resulted, each piece seemed to take on the formal dynamics of the other. The evening was staged in the Kennedy Center's studio space in natural light, and was timed at dusk so that the performance would begin in brightness and end in the dark. The idea was inspired by Sellars's visit to one of the oldest Noh stages in Japan located on an island opposite Hiroshima. Performances began at 9.30 am and lasted until dusk. The stage was actually sited on the seashore and productions were timed to coincide with the movement of the tides. Performances began with water lapping around the stage's stilts; by darkness, the tide would have retreated and the space between audience and actors was filled with scuttling crabs and wandering deer. For Sellars it was a moving demonstration of the intersection of art with real life so obviously absent in much twentieth-century Western performance. It was this dependence on nature that Sellars wanted to invoke in *Three Figures*: 'The real mystery of Noh...[is that] theatre happens with life and is part of it, that life doesn't stop when theatre happens'.[83] That his production was grounded in a dangerous essentialising of Japan, a tendency that permeates many of Sellars's engagements with non-Western culture, may account for the muted reception of this anti-climactic conclusion to his tenure at the Kennedy Center.

An amusing footnote features one of Sellars's more eccentric encounters with Eastern performance. In Act II of John Adams's *Nixon in China*, the American delegation attends a performance of the socialist realist ballet, *The Red Detachment of Women*. Re-choreographed by Mark Morris, this actual ballet became an ironic

pastiche culminating in the participation of a dazed Pat Nixon, and a libidinous Henry Kissinger tantalised by strident, Chinese female labourers.

In 1990 Sellars directed a radio version of Zeami's *Kagikiyo* re-titled *Where Does the Exile Live?*, produced in association with the Laboratory for Theatre Research and Performance at UCLA and the LA Museum of Contemporary Art. Sellars said that radio was a form that allowed the audience member to develop a life of the mind outside the 'coercive' strategies of Hollywood realism, and cultivate a space for memory and contemplation:

> ...we internalise sound, and sound has a world of associations which are basically memory-oriented. When we hear a sound we link it to an image or a period of time, or something in our experience that we remember. Since the basic structure of Noh drama is a memory play, to deal entirely in a world of sound was appropriate.[84]

Radio also allowed Sellars to play with the formal presentation of narrative and emotion. He explained that in Noh the chorus represents

> the interior thoughts of the *shite*, and the landscape. This idea of the landscape and the interior thoughts of the *shite* having a single manifestation is very beautiful...On radio, I could set that up so that landscape is created aurally and is utterly inseparable from the private thoughts of the protagonist.[85]

Sellars was primarily interested in the juxtaposition of the modern medium of radio with an ancient performance tradition which disrupts the comfort of segmented, tabled time and leads the de-habituated attendee on a journey without an obvious direction.

Sellars's latest major foray into intercultural performance was his 1998 production of Tang Xianzu's Kunqu opera *Peony Pavilion*. Sellars was hoping to bring this milestone of Chinese theatre – created in the same year Shakespeare probably produced *Romeo and Juliet*, and about a similar pair of lovers thwarted by family ties and generational authority – to a Western audience for the first time. The opera's fifty scenes are hardly ever performed in full. Sellars wanted to produce the

whole piece but ended up with just the first twenty-five scenes, commissioning a new score by the Chinese-American composer Tun Dan that combined traditional Kunqu musical forms along with Western rock and roll. Sellars cast six actors to play the central couple of Du Liniang and Liu Mengmei, each embodying a particular performance style. The first couple played in traditional Chinese opera style and included the famous Shanghai Kunqu opera star, Hua Wenyi – now exiled in the USA. The second couple performed in Western opera style, and the final couple acted with Hollywood-style naturalism. The first half of the production featured the Chinese performers and involved long sequences of authentic Kunqu acting. With Kunqu dying in modern China, Hua Wenyi was anxious to find ways to preserve it: 'For years I have been trying to add a new creative vocabulary to the Kunqu performance tradition which would help keep our traditions relevant to modern audiences. With regards to *Peony Pavilion*, I was very interested when Peter told me that he perceived this play as a work which addresses modern concerns and issues'.[86]

The play tells the story of a wealthy young girl forbidden by her parents to enter the garden behind her house. She disobeys them and falls asleep in the garden, dreaming about a young man with whom she falls in love. When she wakes, she is devastated to learn her love was a dream and she pines away and dies, burying her self-portrait in the garden. She is entombed in the garden's Peony Pavilion. The young impoverished student she dreamt about actually exists, and passing by the pavilion finds the self-portrait and falls in love with the girl. He takes her body from the tomb and brings her back to life, and the lovers are united as mortals.[87] This is where most productions finish. The second half concerns the young couple's attempt to challenge the unjust and corrupt laws of the prime minister. This subversion of authority has long been taboo in China, and Sellars read the piece as a metaphor for

the suppression of democracy in the communist state – the forbidden garden becomes democracy itself; the dream is one of freedom, and so on. By juxtaposing the three different acting forms, all performed by Asian or Asian-American actors, all treating the same text, Sellars sought to highlight their differences and their similarities, removing both the veil of transparency that shrouds Western naturalistic acting, and the aura of exoticism that gilds Chinese performance for Western spectators. The Western audience became as 'marked' as the Chinese culture it was attending. With its Chinese composer, cast of real Kunqu opera performers, and scholarly textual preparation, *Peony Pavilion* was Sellars's most accomplished attempt at creating an artwork spanning multiple cultural forms, while striving to avoid the taint of postmodern imperialism.

**Collaborators**

The aesthetic identity of Sellars's work is a product of his intensive collaboration with a core group of other theatre artists. In classic *auteur* mode, Sellars realised early that the creation of a unique artistic profile would depend on recruiting a loyal team of supporting artists who could develop together, learn the same theatrical vocabulary and achieve a level of excellence only possible in a 'company' setting. Meyerhold had Popova, Lyubimov had Borovsky, Sellars has relied on Adrianne Lobel and George Tsypin.

In contemporary American theatre design, Adrianne Lobel is probably best known for the on-stage arrival of a full-scale jumbo jet, Airforce One, at Beijing airport in Sellars's *Nixon in China*. The scene's hyper-realism, painterly texture, and playful, ironic humour characterise much of Lobel's work for Sellars. She worked in Hollywood production design before studying theatre design with Ming Cho Lee at

Yale, and her work is notable for a particularly American sensibility. Most of her work with Sellars was concentrated in the 1980s when together they created *The Mikado*, *Cosí fan Tutte*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, *The Magic Flute* and *Nixon in China*. In each production the action was set in real locations, a Tokyo office building, a Long Island Diner, Trump Tower, the freeways of Los Angeles, and Communist Beijing respectively. The designs were marked by rigorous attention to architectural form, and a deep, elaborate use of colour.

The lavish detail and expansive spaces of Lobel's sets seem particularly appropriate to Sellars's often satirical critiques of American high capitalism. Though exactly to scale, the jumbo jet in *Nixon in China* seemed like an enormous expression of bombastic American confidence, arriving in the order and austerity of Beijing airport like a Martian spacecraft. The scene in Mao's study was based on a famous photograph of Mao and Nixon conferring via translators against the background of Mao's overstuffed library. By replicating the room in exact detail but on a slightly larger scale, Lobel poked fun at the self-conscious wisdom and learning so lavishly displayed by Mao, as well as Nixon's discomfort in bookish surroundings. So many of her sets for Sellars display the pride of the characters who inhabit them, but the awkwardness of their spatial relations, the sight of characters stumbling over elaborate objects, or shivering in grand, oversize rooms, undercuts characters' outward displays of confidence, revealing the vulnerability beneath. In *The Marriage of Figaro*, the Count and Countess Almaviva's apartment was a 1980s icon of conspicuous consumption. Yet when they were alone in its vast, temple-like grandeur, they seemed lonely and overwhelmed, frozen by the coldness of the home which buttressed their very sense of themselves. Describing the Act II scene in the boudoir, Lobel said the image she had of the Countess in her huge bed was of 'a piece of sushi on a slab'.[88]

The realist perfection of these sets could never be described as pure pastiche – there was always some joke or detail to remind the audience they were in a theatre. In *Così fan Tutte*, the perfect unit set of a classic American diner was placed in a woodland setting of two-dimensional eighteenth century-style drops of painted trees and shrubbery. On separate romantic assignations, the couples emerged from the almost sitcom-like set of 'Despina's Diner' and were forced to negotiate a stage space like the one Mozart may have used. The men and women's toilets were indicated by eighteenth-century silhouettes of Mozart and Constanze affixed to the restroom doors. In *The Magic Flute* (1991), set in Los Angeles, actors performed on a three-dimensional platform set with clearly visible over- and under-worlds, backed by enlargements of technicolour postcards of LA scenes, such as freeways, a beach, a golf course, and a lurid orange sunset. Lobel's distortion of perspective made the performers seem almost giant-size against their disproportionate backgrounds. It's an aesthetic of eclectic collage and intertextuality, but one never employed with cynicism.

Lobel and Sellars met through Robert Brustein who employed them on Sellars's first professional engagement out of Harvard, *The Inspector General* at the American Repertory Theatre. They went on to work on the troubled Tommy Tune musical, *My One and Only*, which they like to refer to as their 'three million-dollar education'. Their working process takes many forms. Sometimes Sellars will have a clear sense of exactly what he wants from the design, at other times Lobel has absolute freedom to generate ideas that Sellars will only decide upon late in the process.[89] Though all their productions are set in the present, Lobel and Sellars pay enormous attention to historical detail: 'For *The Marriage of Figaro*, for example, we knew we wanted the characters to be rich New Yorkers. But we also went back to the

original play by Beaumarchais and realised that we had to have real rooms, that the set had to make sense architecturally. Only with a firm background of historical material could we draw parallels between life then and now', Lobel remarked.[90] This insistence on historical continuity takes Lobel's work far beyond her origins in Hollywood and forms the aesthetic and philosophical foundation for Sellars's updatings. In this sense, their artistic and philosophical sensibilities are acutely attuned.

Sellars alternated between Adrianne Lobel and George Tsypin throughout the 1980s, but in the 1990s it was Tsypin with whom he worked most. Tsypin's style was on full display in his first production with Sellars, *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1985). Sellars said that this production was 'a situation where the design and direction were inseparable. My directorial ideas came directly out of ideas generated by the scenic designer, George Tsypin. There was a sense of working so closely with the design team that there were no footnotes or nametags on anyone's ideas, so that it's impossible to say who thought of what'.[91] Tsypin gutted the performance space of the Kennedy Center's Eisenhower theatre, exposing the back wall of the stage, the wings and the roof. The performers worked with scenery that looked, according to some critics, like a movie set for *Star Wars*. In this sophisticated space technology was integrated with aesthetics. The playing area was dominated by a moving structure which resembled an oversize Napoleonic secretaire on casters out of which performers were deposited into various scenes, and into whose multiple doors and compartments they could disappear. The use of single structural elements within relatively empty spaces has characterised much of Tsypin's work with Sellars.

Tsypin handles space architecturally. Born in Moscow, he trained as an architect, and while initially he had no plans to work in the theatre, many of his most

exciting contemporaries were theatre artists. After entering a scenography competition he emigrated to New York and ended up studying theatre design at NYU with John Conklin and Oliver Smith, making money on the side as an architect.[92] Tsypin was deeply influenced by the history of Russian set design, particularly the work of those artists prominent in the avant-garde of the early twentieth century. Sellars had just returned from his important Taganka visit when the two men met, and while Tsypin's work is quite different from Borovsky's, Tsypin suggests that Sellars and he 'spoke a common language'. This language, most visible in the grand, often abstract ambition of their work together, was made possible by years of close collaboration. Sellars's pursuit of the total, synthetic work of art was a goal with which Tsypin could identify. He has said, 'I don't do realistic sets, and Peter doesn't do small, kitchen-sink dramas. He does large philosophical works where you need to have this large scale'.[93] Scale, here, does not always correlate with size. The 'vastness' of Tsypin's sets is often their astonishingly dense web of references, a visual realisation of Sellars's intellectual conception of the text. This almost over-determined complexity is most evident in their work in the 1980s, when realistic architectural fragments were juxtaposed with anachronistic quotations from art history, abstract metaphoric sculptural elements, and high technology. In his sets, Tsypin admits, 'you can't watch everything'.[94]

Sellars's production of Sophocles' *Ajax* was set in the aftermath of a contemporary American Vietnam-style conflict. Tsypin's set featured an exact to-scale replica of part of the exterior wall of the Pentagon (directly across the Potomac from the Kennedy Center), behind a courtroom setting complete with desks and microphones into which all characters spoke. Ajax arrived on-stage standing in an eight-foot perspex box, up to his shins in foaming, sloshing blood, imprisoned in both his own madness and in the objectifying gaze of his adjudicators. For the later scene

on the beach, the steel service grill of the Pentagon rose and water flowed down the full surface of the stage into a trough in the orchestra. Athena, played by Ben Halley Jr., wore modern military fatigues and large white angel wings.

A clear evolution is apparent in Sellars's and Tsypin's work together. While their productions in the 1980s often featured recognisable architectural features and representational elements – always underscored by a certain postmodern irony – their recent work from the 1990s had a more austere, almost minimalist character. This change has accompanied the increased foregrounding of the spiritual and metaphysical in Sellars musical pieces. Returning to the Noh-influenced principles described above, Tsypin's sets for Sellars permit the spectator the freedom of the non-representational, an open space for the contemplation of the dense, demanding ideas of the performance. The dizzying eclecticism of their postmodern pieces has given way to a return to principles, realigning the work of both men with what often resembles modernism. If Tsypin's Russian antecedents were Constructivists, Tsypin's own work, suggests Ronn Smith, might be labelled 'de-Constructivist'. 'I love this because nobody could ever build it', exclaimed Sellars when he first saw Tsypin's work, articulating a response that might equally greet the designs of contemporary architects like Frank Gehry and Daniel Libeskind. Tsypin pushes at the boundaries of what's technically possible in a theatre space, his work straining to physicalise the spiritual yearning, the projection to other dimensions that suffuses Sellars recent work. Tsypin explains that he is trying 'to explode the box. Usually the theatre model is in a box, but the box is irrelevant. In fact, you try to overcome the box whenever you design for the theatre. You design a world that is not in the box, that is much larger than the box'.[95]

Lately Tsypin has exhibited his design models as sculptures in galleries. His recent sets for Sellars have functioned as sculptural installations in white boxes that resemble modern art galleries the world over, sets which 'need directing'.[96] These museum quality pieces in productions such as *St. François d'Assise*, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, *Le Grand Macabre* and *Oedipus Rex* take their cue from the 'machines for acting' of Popova. In *Theodora* (1996), five enormous damaged glass flasks were arranged and reconfigured within a perfect white cube. In *Peony Pavilion* (1998), the empty space was occupied by moveable glass screens, almost like display cases, filled with brilliantly-coloured glass balls like paperweights, along with tiny TV monitors. Smaller glass panels were supported by rocks, while a mobile glass platform was filled with water and functioned as a bed, a temple and a tomb. The whole composition was a modern reinvention of traditional Chinese interior design, part-art gallery, part-TV studio. In these recent works multimedia technology has featured extensively. There is an undeniable commitment to the contemporary, not just in Sellars's settings, but in the design aesthetic itself – a determination not to fall into the nostalgia of much Western theatre design, an assertion of theatre's right to exist and develop in an electronic age. In Tsypin's sets, technology is actively displayed – we see the cables, the cameras, and the stage-hands making the visual effects on stage before our eyes. In *Peony Pavilion* Sellars seemed inspired by the Wooster Group, lining up his seated technicians at desks on both sides of the playing space. This display, used in conjunction with the live presence of the human body, focuses attention on the alteration made to our reception of any event through its framing and filtering by the media. The depth and endurance of the aesthetic relationship between Sellars and Tsypin has meant that both men have come close to their shared goal of creating a theatrical *Gesamtkuntswerk*.

The two other key collaborators who have worked with Sellars on almost every production are the lighting designer James Ingalls and the costume designer Dunya Ramicova. Ingalls first worked with Sellars on his 1980 production of *Don Giovanni* at the Monadnock Musical Festival and has been his lighting designer almost exclusively since the mid-1980s. His designs are restrained yet intensely beautiful, characterised by warm washes of pale colour, silhouettes, and slow, heart-stopping fades. At the Taganka, Sellars was stunned by Lyubimov's use of the so-called 'Rembrandt principle', in which performers are partially lit by sources of light indirectly focused on specific parts of the playing space. The result is the illumination of discrete parts of faces and bodies within an overall setting of darkness. This *chiaroscuro* effect was used most notably in the 1987/89 *Don Giovanni* at Purchase which had a texture resembling an old master painting, a visualisation of the characters' vain search for redemption in a sea of apocalyptic moral confusion. Ingalls's use of colour is equally painterly, a technique that responds to the yawning simplicity of Tsypin's recent white boxes. In *The Marriage of Figaro* (1988/9), the Countess sang her first Act III aria standing on a balcony against the stunning backdrop of a slow sunset over the Manhattan skyline. The ebbing of the Countess's hope and spirit, and indeed that of all the characters in this harrowing piece, was mirrored in the haunting fading of the light from orange, to purple, to grey. Like Sellars's use of movement, Ingalls's lighting is an attempt to find visual metaphors for the emotional arcs of each text.

Dunya Ramicova, Yale-trained like Lobel, has also worked with Sellars since *The Inspector General* in 1980. Sellars once remarked that the theatre performances which send him running from the auditorium are those 'in which people are just reciting lines they don't understand, raving on in dopey costumes, and making

gestures they don't believe in'.[97] His contemporary settings explicitly set out to avoid this, but may seem to present little challenge to the costume designer. While Ramicova's costumes are not far removed from what we wear on the street, they are frequently required to perform a serious symbolic role. By putting on stage the clothes we wear every day she makes us rethink our bodies and realise our own temporality. Our clothes are not culturally transparent or unmarked, they are ideologically-loaded styles – an aesthetic discourse unto themselves.

Despite the updatings Ramicova, like Lobel, does rigorous historical research before embarking on the design process. Sometimes she is required to make major cultural leaps and step back to remake contemporary designs. For the costume of Hua Wenyi, the Chinese opera star of *Peony Pavilion*, Sellars took account of her status as an exiled immigrant in the US. He sent Ramicova and Hua to Macy's to choose a contemporary American outfit that Ramicova then remade using traditional Chinese fabrics. In *The Death of Klinghoffer* all performers wore simple modern clothes which included tunic shirts and trousers. At the beginning their clothes were in light shades of grey, beige, lilac and blue. During the course of the opera, as the tone got darker and doom-laden, their clothes got darker too. It was an almost imperceptible change, like Ingalls's sunset – when a performer left the stage he'd simply change his sweater for one a tone darker. Suddenly the spectator realised that the whole company was dressed in charcoal, brown and black. By placing today's clothes on the stage Ramicova directs spectators to their concealed symbolic weight.

Sellars's aesthetic evolution is the product of intensive study, travel, experimentation and spectatorship. His performance style is fully integrated with both his career structure and his broader philosophical and political concerns. While the

enormous aesthetic sweep of his productions displays a classic postmodern eclecticism, his dream of a 'total', interdisciplinary work of art at the centre of institutional national life, fulfils a standard modernist agenda. Sellars increasingly attempts to shake off the *auteur* label:

> I, of course, was trained, and trained myself, to be one of these dinosaurs – the great visionary director. It's taken years of growing up to learn that none of us are that. And the people that still are, are anachronisms – Peter Stein... There's a whole generation in Europe of great *auteur* directors who are beside the point now, who truly are dinosaurs. I think that's the worst of Meyerhold's legacy, that all the students called him Master.[98]

But despite his protestations, *auteurism* endures as a valid category for his theatre practice. The contributions of his collaborators cannot be underestimated. However it is Sellars's relentless appetite for theatre history, cultural theory, and philosophical exploration that defines the 'content' so central in his work.

**Notes**

---

[1] Quoted in Robert Coe, 'What Makes Peter Sellars Run?', *American Theatre*, December 1987, p. 18.
[2] See Don Shewey, 'Not Either/Or But And', in Bruce King (ed.), *Contemporary American Theatre*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991, pp. 276-7.
[3] Ibid., p. 264.
[4] Peter Sellars, 'Theater, Opera and Society: The Director's Perspective', *Grand Street*, vol. 16, no. 1, Summer 1997, p. 202.
[5] Quoted in Don Shewey, p. 277.
[6] Peter Sellars interviewed by Arthur Bartow, *The Director's Voice: Twenty One Interviews*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988, p. 271.
[7] Ibid., p. 272
[8] Robert Coe, p. 49.
[9] Quoted in Della Couling, 'Opera Directors: Peter Sellars', *Opera Now*, March/April 1999, pp. 41-5.
[10] Quoted in John Lahr, 'Inventing the Enemy' [review of *The Persians*], *New Yorker*, 18 October 1993, pp. 103-6.
[11] Peter Sellars, 'Exits and Entrances', *Artforum*, December 1989, p. 23.
[12] Quoted in Martin Kettle, 'High on Mozart', *New Statesman and Society*, vol. 3, no. 1, 18 May 1990, p. 44.
[13] Peter Sellars, 'Exits and Entrances', p. 23.
[14] Quoted in Robert Coe, p. 15.
[15] Peter Sellars, 'Exits and Entrances', p. 24.
[16] Ibid., p. 23.
[17] Ibid., p. 24.
[18] Robert Coe, p. 49.

[19] Quoted in David Richards, 'Sellars: Now, Building the Dream', *Washington Post*, 24 January 1985, p. D1.
[20] See Louis Sheaffer, 'O'Neill, James', entry in Don B. Wilmeth and Tice L. Miller (eds.), *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 293.
[21] Peter Sellars interviewed by Ron Jenkins, 'American Directors on Directing', *Theater*, vol. 15, no. 2, p. 48.
[22] Ibid., p. 48.
[23] Ibid., p. 48.
[24] Quoted in Robert Coe, p. 17.
[25] See Mel Gordon and Alma Law, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia*, Jefferson, NC: McFairland, 1996, p. 96.
[26] See Bruce King, 'Alive in the Theatre, Awake in the World', *Village Voice*, 12 June 1984, p. 87.
[27] Peter Sellars interview by Mark Bates, 'Directing a National Consciousness', *Theater*, vol. 28, no. 2, Spring 1998, p. 87.
[28] See Edward Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, London: Methuen, 1979/1995, p. 179.
[29] See Spenser Golub, entry for 'Meyerhold, Vsevelod', in Martin Banham (ed.), *Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988/92/95, p. 728.
[30] Peter Sellars interviewed by Ron Jenkins, p. 49.
[31] See Joseph Roach, 'The Future that Worked', *Theater*, vol. 28, no. 2, Spring 1998, p. 21.
[32] Quoted in Edward Braun, p. 174.
[33] Edward Braun, p. 176.
[34] Quoted in Edward Braun, p. 176.
[35] Mel Gordon and Alma Law, p. 96.
[36] Quoted in Tom Sutcliffe, *Believing in Opera*, London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 200.
[37] Mel Gordon and Alma Law, p. 97.
[38] Peter Sellars interviewed by Veronica Kaup-Hasler and Katrin Klingan, 'The Right to Hope', *Theaterschrift*, 13/98, pp. 89-91.
[39] See Paul Schmidt, *Meyerhold at Work*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1981, p. 141.
[40] Quoted in Paul Schmidt, *Meyerhold at Work*, p. 151.
[41] Peter Sellars interviewed by Ron Jenkins, p. 47.
[42] See Paul Schmidt interviewed by Mark Bates, 'Acting Music, Scoring Text', *Theater*, vol. 28, no. 2, Spring 1998, p. 82.
[43] See Meyerhold quoted in Paul Schmidt, *Meyerhold at Work*, p. 154.
[44] Quoted in Paul Schmidt, *Meyerhold at Work*, p. 154.
[45] Paul Schmidt interviewed by Mark Bates, p. 84.
[46] Peter Sellars interviewed by Mark Bates, p. 89.
[47] See Peter Sellars interviewed by Mark Bates, p. 89.
[48] Ibid., p. 88.
[49] Peter Sellars interviewed by Mark Bates, p. 87.
[50] Peter Sellars interviewed by Mark Bly, 'Lyubimov and the end of an era: An interview with Peter Sellars', *Theater*, Spring 1985, p. 7.
[51] Ibid., p. 7.
[52] Spenser Golub, 'Lyubimov, Yuri', entry in Martin Banham (ed.), p. 656.
[53] Peter Sellars interviewed by Mark Bly, p. 7.
[54] See Bernard Holland, 'Music: Bach and Weill at Summerfare Festival', *New York Times*, 28 July 1985.
[55] Peter Sellars interviewed by Mark Bly, p. 8.
[56] Ibid., p. 10.
[57] See Spenser Golub, 'Lyubimov, Yuri', in Martin Banham (ed.), p. 656.
[58] See Birgit Beumers, *Yuri Lyubimov and the Taganka Theatre 1964-94*, London: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997, pp. 101-2.
[59] Birgit Beumers, p. 101.
[60] See Peter Sellars interviewed by Mark Bly, p. 10.
[61] Quoted in Thor Eckert, Jr, 'Taking Issue', *Opera News*, vol. 50, no. 12, July 1985, p.12.
[62] Quoted in Tom Sutcliffe, p. 198.
[63] Quoted in Thor Eckert, Jr., p. 13.
[64] See A.E. Green, 'Bread and Puppet Theatre', entry in Martin Banham (ed), p. 128.
[65] See Christopher Swan, 'Enter Peter Sellars and Shakespeare Company', *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 October 1983, p. B3.

[66] Simon Callow, *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu*, London: Vintage, 1996, p. 323.
[67] See Simon Callow, p. 322.
[68] See Dennis Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-Century Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 148-51.
[69] For detailed coverage of the critical response to Welles's *Caesar* see Simon Callow, pp. 336-42.
[70] Peter Sellars interviewed by Arthur Bartow, p. 276.
[71] Peter Sellars interviewed by Ron Jenkins, p. 49.
[72] Quoted in Tom Sutcliffe, p. 199
[73] Peter Sellars interviewed by Arthur Bartow, pp. 283-4
[74] See David Savran, *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988, p. 1.
[75] Ibid., p. 1.
[76] See Don Shewey, p. 271
[77] See Susan Letzler Cole, *Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World*, New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 94.
[78] See Peter Sellars interviewed by John J. Flynn, 'Transiting from the "Wethnocentric"', in Bonnie Marranca, and Gautam Dasgupta (eds.), *Interculturalism and Performance*, New York: PAJ Publications, 1991, p. 185.
[79] Peter Sellars interviewed by John J. Flynn, p. 185.
[80] Ibid., p. 186.
[81] Peter Sellars interviewed by Veronica Kaup-Hasler and Katrin Klingan, p. 87.
[82] Peter Sellars interviewed by John J. Flynn, p. 191.
[83] Quoted in Susan Letzler Cole, p. 192.
[84] Peter Sellars interviewed by John J. Flynn, p. 190.
[85] Ibid., p. 190.
[86] Hua Wenyi interviewed by Susan Pertel Jain, Barbican London programme for *Peony Pavilion*, 1998.
[87] See untitled programme note, Barbican London production of *Peony Pavilion*, 1998.
[88] Adrianne Lobel interviewed for Public Broadcasting Service documentary on Sellars's Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy.
[89] See Adrianne Lobel interviewed by Ronn Smith, *American Set Design 2*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1991, p.105.
[90] Adrianne Lobel interviewed by Ronn Smith, [Ibid., p. 106.]
[91] Peter Sellars interviewed by Arthur Bartow, p. 278.
[92] See Ronn Smith, p. 160.
[93] George Tsypin interviewed by Ronn Smith, p. 162.
[94] Ibid., p. 159.
[95] Ibid., p. 162.
[96] Ibid., p. 163.
[97] Peter Sellars, 'Theatre, Opera, Society: The Director's Perspective', p. 195.
[98] Peter Sellars interviewed by Mark Bates, p. 90.

## 2. The Authority of the Past

Andrei Serban expresses a common view that, in updating historical texts to the present, Peter Sellars is a 'destroyer of the classics'.[1] Since the start of his career critics have railed about the dishonesty, inaccuracy and lazy thinking they believe underlie Sellars's determination to set every production he directs in contemporary America. Traditionalist opera writers, appalled at the excessive-theatricalisation of what they believe is primarily a musical medium, have accused him of an insular imaginative deficit in his failure to engage with cultures and times beyond his own – 'But Why Call it *Don Giovanni*?', 'Wanted: Singing, Not Acting', 'Did Mozart Order a Side of Fries?', and 'Clothes Don't Make the Opera' are the titles of just some of Donal Henahan's *New York Times* reviews of Sellars's productions from the 1980s. However, the opposing sides in the modern-dress debate do not divide easily into those who sanctify the 'intentions' of the composer, and those who defend the director's right to serve his or her own vision. In this chapter I suggest that Sellars's practice of updating is more sophisticated – and problematic – than either his critics or his admirers give him credit for.

In Part I, I describe the motivation behind Sellars's updating and, invoking issues of authority and authenticity, compare his own explanations of this practice with the event of performance as received by the spectator. In Part II, I test Sellars's policy of updating with a reading of his 1987/89 production of Mozart's *Don*

*Giovanni*, analysing the logic of the contemporary cultural and philosophical metaphors he layers over the eighteenth-century text. In later chapters I attempt detailed scene-by-scene analyses of productions. Here I take a broader approach, interrogating Sellars's politics by working through the wider implications of the concepts he uses to make *Don Giovanni* speak to a twentieth-century audience. In particular, this chapter tries to make a link between Sellars's ambiguous relationship to both the contrasting modern and postmodern attitudes to history, and the ambiguous Enlightenment relationship with the past evident in *Don Giovanni*. Does Sellars's own aesthetic practice mirror the Enlightenment reliance on the past to authorise the contradictory philosophy of its present? This production introduces many of the recurring themes I identify throughout Sellars's work – the formation of individual subjectivity in capitalism, the problems of modernity, the function of spirituality in a secular society.

## I. Updating and Authority

Fredric Jameson describes postmodern culture as, 'an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way…[a] situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience'.[2] It's a situation to which Sellars's practice of updating directly responds. By framing contemporary life on-stage, by making direct links between the world of today and the worlds of the classic texts he chooses to direct, he attempts to make the present present to itself, reclaiming an historical trajectory that postmodernity seems to foreclose. 'I believe very strongly that the point of the theater is to make people notice the present. Most people go to the

theater to escape the present', he remarks.[3] Sellars dabbled with updating at Andover and Harvard but didn't adopt it as the defining element of his aesthetic until 1981 when his production of Handel's *Saul* became a four-and-a-half hour version of the Watergate hearings and the same composer's *Orlando* took place at Cape Canaveral and on the moon. Since then virtually every production has been set in contemporary America or in the USA's global sphere of influence: *Giulio Cesare* (1985) took place in a bombed out hotel in the Middle East; *The Magic Flute* (1990/1), *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1993), *The Merchant of Venice* (1994) and *Mathis der Maler* (1995) in Los Angeles; *The Persians* (1993) in post-war Iraq; *The Rake's Progress* (1996) in a California Prison. (*Nixon in China* (1987) set in China in 1972, and *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991) set aboard the hijacked Achille Lauro cruise ship in 1985, are thus rare period pieces for future directors to update.)

Both politics and aesthetics motivate Sellars's updating. He attempts to illuminate contemporary social issues by juxtaposing them with texts that constitute our inherited cultural capital, while jolting the museum culture of much Western opera production out of the pictorialist complacency to which, until very recently, it has been so prone. By directing the spectator's gaze to the material texture of contemporary life, Sellars is trying to contain a postmodern culture that appears both diffuse and unmappable.[4] In this sense, the eclecticism that dominated his work in the 1980s can be read as both an instance of directional postmodernist aestheticism, and as a mimetic reflection of what it was like to live in the United States in the late twentieth century. He suggests that updating implies a certain humility on his part, an unwillingness to presume he could ever fully know another time or culture. He sets productions in America because that's the world he knows – the dominance of

American culture around the globe means that these settings resonate for his European audiences also.

Updating, rather than ignoring the past as its critics charge, actively centres it in the present. It's an aesthetic policy that displays a classic postmodern lack of faith in the assumptions that underlie modernity's rejection of the past. Representing a rupture with modernity's conviction of inevitable progress,[5] updating stages the seepage of a past that previously seemed contained and overcome, a phenomenon experienced intensely in America. Directing *Pericles* in 1983, Sellars observed that,

> Shakespeare is mixing all these periods within one play, and you start to think that's very remote until you realise that the function room in the Holiday Inn in Athens, Ohio has little helmets of Medieval knights on the wall, and the red plush carpet is by Monsanto. At the same time over the door there are these little columns, and this Greek reference. And at the same time the Armstrong tile on the ceiling is making these Renaissance perspective lines. At the same time the ballroom furniture is a rip-off from the 1850s. At the same time the buffet table is Bauhaus. You start to realise that every day we are living with this incredible plurality of references...and you start trying to build as many of them as you can into the texture of your productions, to get them all happening, ideally at once.[6]

What Sellars acknowledges here is not just the persistence of the past in the present, but the impossibility of ever fully knowing history. When discussing what has gone before we are confined, as Nick Kaye notes, to an endless replaying of our ideas and inherited myths about that past.[7] In this sense, the antiquarianism that dominated theatre production in the West for much of the second half of the nineteenth century, and has survived in remote pockets of opera production up to the present, was misguided – it could never hope to offer accurate mimetic representations of past worlds, only contemporary arrangements of their visible signs. Sellars's updatings are not 'dumbed-down' fleeings from the complexities of history, but rather direct confrontations of the past – attempts to reconceive the function of time in the theatre

in the full knowledge that faithful re-creation is impossible. Sellars explains his process:

> [I do] all the period research – find out painstakingly what was done, and then make all the translations into a vocabulary, an imagery and a context that a twentieth-century audience can understand. Right up through Rembrandt, all religious painting was done in contemporary dress. There was this notion that these stories, if you will, or events, were not for a limited time or a limited following, but speak through all ages to all men…
>
> The secular world is unable to comprehend the fact that time is a red herring, that the moment is now. In fact, most secular entertainment – disco, soap opera, what have you – is based on passing time, so you won't notice it's happening now…
>
> Each time one goes to direct an opera, one has literally to set up a cosmology, set up an existential level – where are these people, where are their lives placed in the context of human and divine existence? What is space, what is time? None of those are givens.[8]

Sellars's desire to speak directly to a contemporary audience, his materialist critique of American social problems, is here undermined by his evident belief in the universality of selected classic texts, the idea that certain meanings from the past, like Christianity, are timeless and remain relevant through to the present. Throughout the practice of updating there is a persistent tension between the controversy of Sellars's perceived disrespect towards the performance histories of the classics, and his own insistence on the texts' almost mystical resistance to the depredations of time.

He spans this discrepancy by emphasising the *event* of performance. 'Whatever you do onstage must = the public at the time you stage it'[9] is the equation Sellars offers for theatre production, or 'Ultimately, you have to recognise that the theatre exists only in one tense – the present'.[10] The spectator should thus be aware that what he or she is presented with is never the definitive version of any text, but that text made manifest in live performance in the moment, one reading from an

infinite number of possibilities. Often the success of the concept relies on fortuitous timing – the Zeitgeist factor. For his 'televangelist-in-a-sex scandal' version of *Tannhaüser* (1987), Sellars initially had a very rough idea of where the piece should take place. When the Jimmy Swaggart scandal broke, Sellars's embryonic concept suddenly made sense and he made the changes necessary to make it directly correspond with real life events. Don Shewey described the result:

> [Sellars] set the final act in a deserted American Airlines Terminal, where Elizabeth – Wagner's representative of pure human love – waits for the return of Tannhaüser, and the mating of the banal setting familiar to every sophisticated opera-goer with Wagner's psycho-spiritual anguish elevated the former to Wagner's plane of inquiry and gave the latter the poignancy and urgency of real life.[11]

This texture of disjunction and incongruity forms the centre of Sellars's understanding of audience reception. In many ways, it's the *Verfremdungseffekt* inherited from Brecht, the renewal of perception idealised in exposure to the unfamiliar. The interaction between original text and updated concept is complex. Both operate individually – as separate interacting texts, writer's and director's – and together as a single new performance text. In each production, the new setting is directly interwoven with the libretto or playtext – the updating becomes a total concept layered on top of the original text, rooted in every line. It's this sense of totality that eliminates the incongruity of the many small, yet obvious, discrepancies. Yes, the 'peasants' in *Figaro* are not janitors and doormen, yes, Morocco's 'scimitar' in *The Merchant of Venice* is a real weapon, not a tattoo, yes Don Giovanni hosts a lavish ball, not a drug-fuelled street party. In the overall scheme of things, these small illogicalities are neutralised by the impact of the whole. Yet because of sheer historical fact, and national and cultural differences, the overall impression is of the

presence of two complete yet distinct texts in dialogue, neither one possible without the existence of the other.

For Sellars, the goal of the performance text is to span two time periods, two different ways of thinking at the same time. He provides his most comprehensive explanation of the thought process behind updating in an account of his work on *Così fan Tutte*, set in a chrome-and-formica diner on Long Island:

> A coffee shop was the first stage direction in the libretto…No time was spent on that. What you do spend time on is the way it works in detail and trying to be simultaneously eighteenth and twentieth century. See, updating in itself is not interesting, and also equally uninteresting is a so-called 'period' staging. Each is a falsification. The fact is that *Così* was written in 1790. So you can't say it was written in 1986 because it wasn't. At the same time you can't do it as they did in 1790 because you don't know how that was… We may be able to re-create half the equation, the production as it was done in 1790 (although I doubt it), but the other half, the public Mozart did it for, we can never re-create. For me it has to be both. Having set the production in a coffee shop, we then proceed to violate coffee shop behaviour in the staging. The important thing in theatre is the sense of anachronism – Shakespeare knew perfectly well there were no clocks in ancient Rome. The point is to deliberately leave in these little bits of roughage that don't digest, that suddenly make you stop, that don't go down easily.[12]

Don Shewey notes that Sellars is careful not to try to fully replace one set of references with another. In Sellars's explanation there is never meant to be any perfect one-on-one allegorical correspondence – the disjunction is what provokes attentive reception so that meaning is never totalised for the spectator. The idea is that in the gap between revered core text and disjunctive contemporary staging the work of meaning creation takes place. Forced to make connections, to work through contradiction, to literally 'join-the-dots', Sellars's ideal spectator occupies an empowered role in the theatre.

This ideal is admirable but somewhat disingenuous, however, as Sellars's insistence on the spectator's absolute freedom of interpretation is countered by his own role as controlling author of the theatre event. In his productions, librettos are always performed in their original languages – what Tom Sutcliffe generously describes as 'a New World view of culture as loaned rather than owned'[13] – with the surtitles, when they appear, written by Sellars in a jokey paraphrased American vernacular (an example: Donna Elvira to Don Giovanni: 'You put the make on me with all kinds of sweet talk'). Asked to explain this major artistic decision which impacts significantly on the spectator's reception of the event, Sellars's response is inconsistent:

> For one thing, since the death of Lorenz Hart, I don't know who to ask to come up with American versions that are as dark and as quick, as vibrant, and as deceptively simple, as Da Ponte's originals... I also enjoy the fact that for once most of the audience in this verbally-dominated culture is forced to take in information through other pores, be sensitive to other indicators, and ends up projecting its own text into the evening. It is the multiple levels that give pleasure in opera.[14]

While Sellars's professed desire to foreground non-verbal signifiers is perfectly valid, it's a position at odds with his intensive attention to text in performance. Every gesture is developed from line-by-line analysis of the text/libretto (even when the result is that one contradicts the other) which is nearly always produced uncut, or in many cases in 'complete' form, compiled from multiple extant versions of the text. The cynical spectator might suggest that Sellars knows most of his audience will not understand Italian, and so keeping the libretto in its original language conceals the more absurd discrepancies between text and staging, an arrogance evident in the

following hilarious programme note for *Don Giovanni* which was left untranslated for readers:

> To those who object to the absence or alteration of certain details of the setting, I would rather like to say, with the spirit of the Commendatore, 'Non si pasce di cibo mortale chi si pasce di cibo celeste; altri cure, piu grave di queste, altra brama quaggiu mi guido'. ['He who has fed on the bread of heaven has no need of earthly bread; I am guided by a greater purpose, a different mission than this'][15]!

Furthermore, all Sellars's productions feature extensive programme notes explaining the text to spectators, and in the case of the operas, detailed scene-by-scene plot synopses, all written by Sellars himself. These synopses summarise the plot in terms of Sellars's own staging, not in terms of the libretto as written – they explicitly interpret the opera for the spectator, describing not only narrative events but also characters' feelings and motivations. Sellars's synopsis of part of the opening scene of *Don Giovanni* is an example. The Commendatore has just been stabbed by Giovanni:

> Anna emerges from the building as cops arrive on the scene. One of the cops is Ottavio, who is stunned to find Anna, his fiancée, in this neighbourhood. This is superseded by the simultaneous shock for both of them of seeing Anna's father, the Commendatore, crumpled in a dead heap on the doorstep. Ottavio radios for help. Paramedics arrive, but how can he help the desperate woman he deeply loves? As he tells Anna that he lives only for her, strange pangs of conscience merge with her acute sense of loss and desolation. It was her clandestine life that brought her father to a dark street on this harrowing night.[16]

In this elaborate interpretation presented as a synopsis Sellars justifies his key decision to make Donna Anna a heroin addict. While Sellars is free to make any interpretative choices he wishes, it's clear that in the event of performance, spectators are required to take in large amounts of information 'verbally', not just 'through other pores'. In his production of *Giulio Cesare* Sellars provided spectators with facsimile copies of the original libretto in both Italian and English, as well as his own synopsis

and programme notes.[17] In this instance, it seemed that Sellars was acting like a curator with spectators encouraged to negotiate the performance like a museum exhibit. What should they look at first, the information panel or the picture?

Sellars's tight control of channels of interpretation reveals a haunted preoccupation with issues of authority and fidelity that destabilises his media status as iconoclastic cultural vandal. Despite his cultivation of an *auteur* persona, an individual artist wholly responsible for his cultural product, he continually invokes the authors of the texts he produces to legitimise his own directorial interpretations.[18] Not only are the classics somehow 'timeless', but their creators are due a respectful loyalty as a result. Sellars's decision to produce uncut texts, and to restore familiar excisions, is prompted by a classical humanist intentionalism:

> Even for a serious scholar, there are passages in Shakespeare that are totally incomprehensible. And they're crucial. You learn early on that Mr. Beckett must know what he's doing. It's up to us to find out. Of course we don't understand it. And we just have to sit there and work at it until we do. Because Shakespeare and Handel did know what they were doing.[19]

While Sellars sees fit to cast aside centuries of performance history and tradition in his own stagings, he reaffirms the central 'presence' of the author figure within the text, the complete realisation of whose vision he understands his task to be. In an example already provided – Meyerhold – and in examples to come – Mozart, Shakespeare, Stravinsky – Sellars authorises his own artistic choices by focusing on the censorship faced by great embattled artists of the past, a censorship his radical stagings purport to overturn. Directing *The Merchant of Venice*, he remarked, 'We have the opportunity and I think the obligation to present these plays [Shakespeare's] the way the playwright couldn't have and still have a career, and still live to write another play'.[20] He turns the complaints of his critics on their heads by

reappropriating the discourse of authenticity, and affirming his productions as fuller, truer and more fearless than their predecessors. In this dialogue between heroic artists the place of Sellars's empowered spectator is obscure. Two's company... His position ends up surprisingly similar to that of Samuel Lipman, one of his most virulent critics:

> These operas, and their stories, are not about what is changeable and particular in life, but rather what is permanent. We must accept that works of art have two lives: first the life of their origin, and second the life of their transcendence. Man is born, we are told, amidst faeces and urine, but our lives are impossible unless we realise that his origins need not determine his aspirations. Art partakes in its creations of every particularity, pleasant and unpleasant alike, of its creators and the world they inhabit, but it is the genius of the greatest art to go beyond even its creators and inhabit a metaphysical world that we may choose to call beauty, truth or the good. To pin Mozart or any other great art to its origin, as is urged by the authentic-performance movement, or to the moment of its performance, as Sellars so enthusiastically attempts, is to deprive it of the possibility of growing up, of the possibility of exchanging the contingent for the necessary, the timely for the timeless.[21]

In updating, exchanging the timely for the timeless is precisely Sellars's intention.

The problematics of updating extend beyond the event of reception by the individual spectator, however. Sellars sets all texts in the present, not just to refamiliarise jaded contemporary audiences with their daily environments, but also to make direct political interventions. When Sellars sets *The Merchant of Venice* in Los Angeles and casts African-Americans as the Jews and Latinos as the Venetians, when *Theodora* and Didymus are executed by lethal injection, when the protagonists of *The Rake's Progress* are American prison inmates, he is directing attention to what he argues are crisis points in American society. However, when questioned about his political stances, Sellars shies away from overt political statements and suggests that his productions merely 'evoke' contemporary issues and don't provide direct political

prescriptions for social problems, or indeed any integrated political point-of-view. Sellars trades on the critical controversy his political productions provoke, but then asserts that his contemporary settings cannot be read as direct metaphors for real-life political events. Is it enough when you compare Jimmy Swaggart to Tannhaüser, Donald Trump to Count Almaviva, or Bill Clinton to Valens, the Roman governor in *Theodora*, to say you're just 'raising issues'?

It's an evasion that Sellars justifies under the mantle of art. Critical attention to the details of his politics has so far been confined to the obvious observation that he approaches social problems from the Left. In the following analysis of *Don Giovanni*, I resist Sellars's assertion that he sets the opera in New York in the 1980s to merely provoke discussion. Instead I read the explicit contemporary metaphors he employs in order to determine the real political subtext of his work, an example of one spectator's reception of the production.

## II. *Don Giovanni* at Purchase

Mozart and Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni* opened on October 29th, 1787 in Prague. The work was created in a very short time and for his libretto Da Ponte drew heavily on existing literary and oral versions of the Don Juan legend. *Don Giovanni* tells the story of an aristocratic libertine's reckless rampage through the streets of Seville during the course of a single night. It opens with Don Giovanni being chased by the aristocratic Donna Anna who has managed to escape his rape attempt. Her father, the Commendatore, arrives, and after a tussle, is murdered by Don Giovanni. The scene is set for a night of crime and debauchery during which Giovanni, former lover of some 2003 women, rejects the overtures of a previous conquest, Donna

Elvira, and attempts to seduce a local peasant girl, Zerlina, on the day of her wedding. Ottavio and Masetto, Anna and Zerlina's respective fiancés, swear vengeance and spend the rest of the opera in pursuit of the villain. In the second act, Giovanni persuades his manservant, Leporello, to swap clothes to mislead the angry mob and facilitate further seductions. Much confusion ensues and at one point Giovanni escapes into a graveyard to evade his pursuers. He hears a voice – it is the stone statue of the murdered Commendatore warning him to repent and change his ways. The impudent Giovanni invites the statue to dinner at which repentance is again suggested and rejected. The ground opens up to reveal the flames of hell and Giovanni descends to eternal damnation. In a brief coda, the chastened survivors warn that, 'this is the end of those who do evil. Their death will be the equal of their life'.

Peter Sellars first directed *Don Giovanni* as a revival of an Opera League of New Hampshire production at the Monadnock Music Festival in 1980.[22] Seven years later, and almost exactly two hundred years after its Prague premiere, he directed an entirely new version for the PepsiCo Summerfare Festival at the State University of New York at Purchase, which opened on July 15th, 1987. It was part of the trilogy of Mozart-Da Ponte operas which Sellars directed for the Festival over the course of four years, beginning in 1986 with *Così fan Tutte*, continuing with *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1988, and concluding with a revival of the whole trilogy for the Festival's final season in 1989. The productions were subsequently remounted in Vienna in the summer of 1989 where they were recorded for television and commercial video, and broadcast in America in 1991 to coincide with the two-hundredth anniversary of Mozart's death.

It is largely on these video versions that I base my analyses. In Chapters 4 and 5, I work from recordings of live performances of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* at the Goodman Theatre Chicago, and Handel's *Theodora* at Glyndebourne. While performance analysis based on video presents a host of major theoretical problems for the theatre historian, the issues were doubly complicated by Sellars's own wholehearted embrace of the medium when recording his Mozart operas. These were some of the most talked about, indeed notorious, American theatre productions of the late 1980s, and in capturing them for the screen Sellars hoped to replicate the sense of eventfulness that accompanied them in original performance. Live recording usually frustrates the performance analyst because the obvious directedness of film – framing, editing, basic film grammar – denies the spectator the freedom of attention so integral to theatre. Also, the sheer liveness of the event, the crucial dynamic between audience and performer, is formally eliminated in the video experience.[23] Sellars, however, never attempted to position the camera as a transparent observer, but rather revelled in the distorting capacity of the electronic medium:

> What I like is that these videos look like TV. That's why a lot of people were stunned when PBS first broadcast the productions – they were flipping channels, and they flipped to this thing that looked just like the cop show on the other channel. Then suddenly they noticed that there was music, and people were singing. We've taken the situation and the comedy and allowed them to be as deep as Mozart happens to be. So it's really nice to subvert television in that way, at the same time using the vocabulary that television has perfected, these daydream diners, these non-existent street corners, the pathetic love life of the rich and forlorn. All standard television material. In some ways these operas find their ultimate home on TV.[24]

As Mark Swed observes, Sellars's video versions consciously subvert the original productions. Sellars directed the videos himself before live audiences in the Viennese television studios, and all were accompanied by his own English subtitles. At one point in *Così fan Tutte*, Ferrando actually leaves the stage and pretends to interview

audience members, providing the viewer with a full view of the auditorium filled with squirming spectators hoping they won't be approached. In *Don Giovanni*, George Tsypin's spectacular set never once appears in longshot; the camera frequently dwells on reaction shots while other characters deliver crucial arias; the darkness of James Ingalls's lighting is even more overwhelming on screen than it was on stage.[25] While much of the physical choreography that was such an integral part of *Cosi fan Tutte* was lost, the video close-ups of characters in *Don Giovanni* offered a level of intimacy and emotional detail that was unavailable on stage.

In fact, since these videos were made, Sellars has repeatedly incorporated video technology into his live performances so that spectators enjoy both the freedom of reception offered by human presence, and the emotional power of the close-up. (These issues are discussed further in Chapter 4). *The Marriage of Figaro* was the most successful of the videos, Adrianne Lobel's technicolour set perfectly suited to the harsh light of the TV screen, her juxtaposition of formal with intimate spaces approximating the rhythms of the television soap opera. If anything, television heightened the controversy of these pieces, ridiculing the disgruntlement of righteous opera critics. In 1991 PBS refused to show Sellars's 1985 version of Handel's *Giulio Cesare*, recorded for video at the same time as the Mozart productions, not because it was a betrayal of Handel's intentions, but because its Middle East setting was too sensitive for a viewing public that, at commercial breaks, might flick over to CNN's live coverage of the Gulf War.[26]

The exclusivity of live performance, and of opera in particular, weigh heavily on a director so concerned with the experience of those excluded from the centres of power in Western society. Video appears to salve his conscience:

> I do feel equally called to do a show for rich people as to do a show in East LA. Both things are important. One of the things I do with my expensive shows at Salzburg or Glyndebourne

> that nobody can get in to see is to make sure that they get on television. Then they go all over the place and have other lives. That's what that kind of privilege will do.[27]

Most people's experience of Peter Sellars's versions of the Mozart operas will be an electronic one. My understanding of the work comes initially from video, but is supplemented by a range of other materials including reviews, articles, interviews, programmes and set designs. If my discussion refers to moments of the production present on video but not in the live performance, or vice versa, I attempt to specify this. I remain convinced, however, that these video recordings are valid texts in their own rights, and have become an integral, and crucial, part of the continuing life of the productions.

Sellars's *Don Giovanni* provoked extraordinarily diverse audience responses, and as a production that crystallised many of his most daring directorial characteristics, it remains perhaps his most controversial. Unlike *Figaro* which was set in Trump Tower, and *Così* which featured middle-class Vietnam veterans and their frustrated suburban girlfriends, *Don Giovanni* was a portrait of those at the very bottom of the social ladder. In the video version, the overture is accompanied by images of urban New York at its most depressed: burnt-out buildings, rubbish-strewn wasteland, homeless people huddling around a makeshift fire, dead rats, scavenging dogs, and alienated commuters. Set in Spanish Harlem, George Tsypin's stage design consisted of a ghetto street scene inspired by Dante's *Inferno* and Giotto's 'Last Judgement' from the Arena Chapel, Padua. 'New York feels like a medieval city to me. It's dirty, it's vertical, and it's kind of barbaric', he remarked.[28] The atmosphere was gothic. The set was dominated by a looming, decayed tenement building with blocked-up windows and dirty stone steps leading to a cracked glass door illuminated from within by greenish fluorescent light. The flashing white neon cross of a

dilapidated church was an almost ironic symbol of all that had been rejected by the brutalised community that inhabited this urban hell. To the rear was a boarded-up store with menacing metal grilles, while the forestage right was dominated by a huge Con Edison gas excavation, perilously surrounded by yellow construction barriers and flashing warning lights. The oppressively dark and gloomy lighting by James Ingalls pinpointed individual figures and faces against a receding blackness.

The opera was performed in the original Italian and Sellars's extensive programme plot synopsis explained his concept in detail.[29] Don Giovanni was a brutal street thug, a drug dealer and addict whose control over the other characters was as much physical as psychological. He and his valet/sidekick Leporello were played in the 1989 and video productions by the African-American identical twins, Herbert and Eugene Perry. Donna Anna was a rich white woman from a nice neighbourhood who ventured into the ghetto to buy her heroin. In Da Ponte's libretto we are led to believe that Don Giovanni burst into her bedroom, and in the darkness was mistaken by Anna for her fiancé. Sellars's explanation complicated matters by suggesting that Anna and Giovanni's meeting was pre-arranged. The spectator was forced to wonder, uneasily, if she could be in any way culpable in her own rape. Anna was an addict who shocked her tense fiancé Ottavio by showing him the needle tracks on her arm, and shooting up halfway through her 'Non Mir Dir' aria in order to make the high notes. Ottavio was an undercover cop, making his love for a heroin addict a source of particular existential angst. After the death of the Commendatore Ottavio swears revenge, and Sellars staged the scene with Anna and Ottavio dipping their hands in her father's blood. Donna Elvira arrives – 'pale and haggard from the bus station' according to Sellars – and was dressed, as one critic remarked, like a down-at-heel Madonna fan with pink tights and a leopard-skin miniskirt. She accuses her lover of ruthlessly

seducing her – 'giving her three wonderful days in Portchester' suggested the programme – and then abandoning her. Leporello reminds her that she is just one of thousands. The theme of sexual brutality extends to the relationship of the newly-wed Zerlina and Masetto which is far from idyllic. Masetto is given to violence – in this version spectators actually heard him beating Zerlina inside the church, making her almost masochistic in her passivity as she sang 'Batti, batti,' – 'Beat me, beat me'. Refreshments for the wedding, played as a raucous street party, were provided by Don Giovanni's heavies who broke into the neighbourhood store to steal all they needed.

Sellars's staging of the second half was especially dark. At the beginning of Act II Leporello is getting disenchanted with his master's behaviour. Sellars had Giovanni persuade him to stay with the offer of a few lines of cocaine. The Commendatore's funeral procession passed by and dumped his coffin in the construction hole. As he sang his tortured aria of vengeance, 'Il mio tesoro intanto', Sellars's Ottavio contemplated suicide, actually placing the barrel of a gun in his mouth. He chose to live, of course, but not before pulling down a statue of Christ from above the church door. It fell into the hole below while the Commendatore silently walked out onto the plinth to take its place, compelling spectators to wonder if his retribution was earthly or divine. The dinner to which Don Giovanni invited the Commendatore consisted of McDonald's burgers and fries which Giovanni chewed, spat out, and then offered to a disgusted Leporello. When Elvira arrived to plead with him for the last time to repent, Giovanni fired his fries at her. This scene is accompanied by popular music of the period, including 'Non Piu' from *Figaro* – Mozart's little intertextual joke – played, in this production, not by Giovanni's musicians, but on a big box radio. In Sellars's staging of the Commendatore's final arrival and Giovanni's condemnation, the naked furies of hell rose up through holes in

the street while Don Giovanni was led to the underworld, not by the man he murdered, but by a little girl dressed in white. The remaining characters, dressed like ghosts, appeared through the stage traps to sing their moral warning.

The critical reaction was divided, to put it mildly. Some opera writers, such as Andrew Porter of the *New Yorker*, and Edward Said of the *Nation*, saw beneath the outrageous staging and recognised that this was an impassioned and earnest attempt to reach the heart of the opera. They appreciated Sellars's and conductor Craig Smith's decision to stage the opera with all but one small cut (60 bars from the Prague ending which Mozart removed for the Vienna premiere – a decision which made the coda more grimly abrupt), and the inclusion of two rarely performed arias. For every positive comment, however, there was a devastating criticism. Many commentators railed at the staging's wilful deviation from their understanding of the libretto. All reviews focused endlessly on the crudeness and ugliness of Sellars's version of Seville, somehow missing the point that Sellars's staging was not itself tacky, but was ironically commenting on a particularly grotesque corner of American society. The modern interventions I have outlined were recounted and assessed at great length, but rarely was there any attempt to read Sellars's reading of Mozart.

One of the most legitimate criticisms was that, because of its setting and Sellars's contemporary translations of character, the piece elided class issues. In a major caveat, Edward Said observed that,

> While Mozart fastidiously distinguishes between aristocracy, urban dwellers and peasants, most of the action in Sellars's version takes place on an ill-lit ugly stoop, and all the characters are drawn from the dregs of the earth – thereby rendering the politics of the work both primitive and, ultimately, unengaging.[30]

By making Don Giovanni a working-class street thug who destroys the lives of members of his own community, Sellars appeared to be abandoning Mozart and Da

Ponte's acerbic criticism of the behaviour of a wealthy aristocrat who abuses his social position to prey on the vulnerable lower orders. Wouldn't it have been more logical, some commentators suggested, to make Don Giovanni a greedy Wall Street financier venturing up-town to source his cocaine, further destroying communities already brutalised by 1980s economics, and thereby offering a more tangible explanation for the control he so powerfully exerts on the other characters?

The charges of Sellars's critics were partly correct. However, the European class system of the late eighteenth century did not survive intact into the American late twentieth. The bourgeois revolution of the Enlightenment dramatised by Mozart and Da Ponte had not fully delivered on its promises of egalitarianism and liberty. I suggest that Sellars's focus on the lives of those forced to inhabit this Harlem ghetto highlighted the failure of the eighteenth-century dream of meritocracy, displaying a world of people just as oppressed and excluded as the peasants that Don Giovanni so ruthlessly exploits. In zooming in to a precise location where class relations are not especially hierarchised, Sellars reflected a postmodern culture in which power operations are uncontained, transnational, faceless. In this production, the forces of capital were working *on* Don Giovanni – he was not their locus. In this shifting cultural and political landscape, traditional forms of materialist critique are inadequate – Marxism and class emancipation are sidelined by the implosion of class relations and the diffusion of capital. Peter Sellars's staging of *Don Giovanni* offered alternative explanations for the hell that was Spanish Harlem in the 1980s. By repeatedly turning to the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, Sellars sources the historical and philosophical roots of contemporary American culture, beyond the limitations of twentieth-century politics and economics.

Thomas Docherty writes that, 'In the modern world – that is, since the eighteenth century – the discourse of politics is founded upon one problematic relation: the relation between the subject of consciousness and its object'.[31] It's the relation that motivates all the protagonists of *Don Giovanni*, and is the philosophical theme to which Peter Sellars most frequently returns in his work. To understand how the subject-object relation determines the behaviour of the characters, and Sellars's reading of that behaviour, it is important to take account of the concept of libertinism that was such a central tenet of Enlightenment understandings of gender and sexual relations. (I am indebted to Charles Ford's book, *Cosi? Sexual Politics and Mozart's Operas*, and Nicholas Till's *Mozart and the Enlightenment* for much of the philosophical and historical background to the Mozart operas). Simon Jarvis outlines Adorno and Horkheimer's definition of enlightenment as, 'a series of related intellectual and practical operations which are presented as demythologizing, secularizing some mythical, religious or magical representation of the world'.[32] Reason was the key factor determining value in the Enlightenment. To leave behind the mystical superstitions of the past, human relations were centred around a rigorous empiricism rooted in a total separation of subject from object. The ability to isolate the other as object, dispassionately, became the foundation of the ideal of individual autonomous subjectivity. To make this leap, a number of factors determining human relations had to be re-imagined. Not everything could be accounted for scientifically. That which evaded conceptual apprehension, that which resisted language's empirical capacity to name and categorise was, according the Charles Ford, termed 'feeling'. Issues of guilt and individual responsibility were totally revised as Man's behaviour could be attributed to feelings that were 'naturally' determined.[33] But where was this ostensibly uncontrollable feeling, that which fully determined human behaviour and

relations, to fit with this individual subjectivity rooted in an almost scientific privileging of reason and separation from the object of study? The first of many contradictions was born.

In this disenchanted, enlightened world, divine influence had to be separated from a newly reconceived nature. In the spirit of empiricism, and in a series of awkward philosophical turns, nature had to be understood 'objectively' and mobilised for the benefit of Mankind. Although the seventeenth century was marked by major scientific expansion, the idea of a divine control or presence in the world was respectfully maintained.[34] That all changed in the century that followed when the Enlightenment replaced the practice of absolute faith with the concept of scientific understanding. Suddenly the mind became a blank screen for the reception of sense impressions, an idea of Man governed entirely by mediated sensation – legitimising libertine hedonism.[35] Contemporary thinkers were, however, already recognising the double-bind of this privileging of natural feeling, asking how it was possible to prescribe a life determined by natural feeling if the individual could have no choice in the matter. Personal happiness became the sole end of life in this new moral schema. Philosophers struggled to reconcile the obvious contradiction.

Sex became one of the most highly charged spaces for the playing out of relations between subject and object, embodied in the ever-widening separation and opposition of the concepts of love and the erotic.[36] Once faith and metaphysics were eliminated, libertinism became the most logical form of male behaviour – rooted in that rigorous separation of subject (male) from object (female). Authentic behaviour was defined by submission to natural feelings. If the passions of nature were really to be respected then the subject had a duty to take whatever was desired of the object, irrespective of any wishes the object may have had. The denial of all forms of

mediation between subject and object evolved into an adamant denial of moral concerns.[37]

The most famous advocate of libertinism was the Marquis de Sade whose absolute operation of the subject-object division was centred on the idea that only in overcoming the subjective autonomy of the other could the individual aspire to supremacy and freedom.[38] Thus the suppression of the freedom of the other becomes the foundation for autonomous individual (male) subjectivity.[39] Sade was still left, however, with the paradox of the Enlightenment's simultaneous appreciation of reason as the foundation of progressive society, and nature as the determining factor of human behaviour. Nature was a double bind for Sade. His system of behaviour was founded on a simultaneous suppression of and submission to natural feeling. His response, according to Charles Ford, was Classical Stoicism, the denial of one part of the self in order to ensure the freedom of another. The elements of nature to be conquered were those of compassion and sympathy, the expression or indulgence of which would destroy the strictly separate relationship between a subject dominating a passive object.[40] In Sade's system, individual autonomy is immediately sacrificed when compassion leads to identification with the other.[41]

The logic of Sade's relentless individualism became the philosophical foundation of modern capitalism – the 'natural' forces of the market rooting an aggressively competitive culture in which only the fittest survive. While Sade's logic of libertinism revealed the massive cracks in the concept of enlightenment as a way to structure modern existence, its fundamental tenets were borrowed by an emerging bourgeoisie which diluted them sufficiently to permit some sense of psychic wholeness and comfort to harmonise the fundamental contradictions at the core of its system for living.

'How seriously are we to take the damnation of Don Giovanni?', asks Nicholas Till.[42] The opera seems like a particularly anti-Enlightenment text. By the time Mozart and Da Ponte began their work, the Don Juan myth had become the stuff of farce and fairground shows. When *Don Giovanni* first appeared many critics asked why the composer and librettist would waste their talents on such debased material.[43] The subject matter was probably determined by their provincial, yet increasingly liberal Prague audience. Outside of the intensely censorious atmosphere of the Viennese Court, Mozart took the opportunity to challenge the moral foundations upon which the delicate balance of enlightenment subjectivity was constructed. He takes Giovanni's fate very seriously and the damnation scene is the most spectacular of the whole opera. The protagonist's fate is signalled not only in the opera's alternative title 'Il Dissoluto Punito – The Libertine Punished', but also in the opening bars of the Commendatore's fateful appearance in the final moments of Act II. Mozart's almost religious music for the visit of the Commendatore and Don Giovanni's descent into hell can leave us in no doubt that in the composer's view the libertine's punishment is fully deserved.

Why the need for such a dramatic and categoric punishment? Don Giovanni has no fear of God, no fear of death, no sense of responsibility to others. He is a symbol of mayhem.[44] The pre-modern provoked fears of social chaos that could only be arrested by institutions like property and marriage.[45] Economic development in modern society demanded an individualistic base, and the necessity of creating free and equal individuals under capitalism meant that those individuals had to *appear* independent before they ever entered society.[46] According to Till, identity that was not clearly formed, and sexuality that was undirected, were persistent Enlightenment

fears. The period found itself torn between its desire to follow its own philosophy to its logical conclusion and enjoy the freedom of sexuality, and its deep anxiety that sexual individualism might subvert independent identity and unleash social chaos.[47]

Giovanni has no respect for bourgeois contracts.[48] When Leporello attempts to remind him of a promised payrise, he replies, 'I know of no promise'. Though Elvira considers herself married to Giovanni, he recognises no such arrangement. Giovanni and Zerlina's duet 'La ci darem la mano', actually concludes with the proposition, 'There we shall be married'. When Zerlina calls him on his promise of marriage he replies, 'That promise means nothing'. Don Giovanni finally arouses the contempt of the Commendatore when he belittles marriage. When Giovanni recounts his latest seduction to Leporello in the cemetery, Leporello protests, 'But that could have been my wife'.[49] Giovanni replies, 'All the better', at which point we hear the stark warning of the Commendatore suggesting Don Giovanni's laughter will soon cease.

The social and sexual contradictions of the Enlightenment are the foundations of Don Giovanni's identity. Till remarks that he

> is an extreme embodiment of the bourgeois individualist's quest for liberty, but at the same time characterises the social disintegration that is the inevitable result of the fulfilment of that quest...[He] carries to its logical fulfilment both the bourgeois materialist's rationalisations of the morality of pleasure...and the materialist arguments that man attains his truest freedom in the unrestrained satisfaction of his desires.[50]

Divine retribution does not register with Giovanni who understands his behaviour as naturally determined, and therefore authentic. *Don Giovanni* stages the bourgeois enlightenment fantasy that self-service and the common good are identical – a self-perpetuating myth which authorises the relentless individualism and consumption of capitalism.[51]

With a total distrust of the state, the proto-bourgeois characters of *Don Giovanni* are forced to turn to other means to eliminate the figure who so brutally indexes their hypocrisy – vigilantism and religion.[52] The moral values of acceptance, charity, and turning the other cheek, preclude direct action to eliminate the charlatan or egotist. An all-powerful, judicial God was recalled to re-establish the moral laws Enlightenment values had seemed to destroy. Don Giovanni, however, does not care about God. Guilt about a debauched past, or fear for a tormented future, don't trouble the man who lives only for the rush of the moment.[53]

The very principle of enlightenment was a breaking free from the myth and superstition of the past, the end of an angry Old Testament God in perpetual surveillance, and the horror of a flaming hell.[54] The figure of the Commendatore represented a return of the supernatural – Don Giovanni's fate was a pre-enlightenment relapse. The Commendatore is a Deus ex Machina figure. The damnation seems a blast from the past, in direct contrast to Mozart's celebratory music for Giovanni's exploits. The logic of the Enlightenment cannot contain the punishment of Don Giovanni – in Molière's *Dom Juan*, the hero is punished for blasphemy, a sin that Mozart's enlightened, rational hero does not commit. Within the terms of progressive, radical individualism, sexual violence was justifiable, or at least not culpable. Giovanni had to be damned externally.

> Almost immediately, [Sellars's productions] put you in touch with what is most eccentric and opaque about Mozart: the obsessive patternings in the operas, patternings that have little to do with crime doesn't pay or the faithlessness inherent in all human beings that must be overcome before true union can occur. Mozart's characters in *Don Giovanni* and *Così* can be interpreted not as individuals with definable characteristics but as figures driven by forces outside themselves that they don't comprehend and make no effort to examine... I think

> Mozart has tried to embody an abstract force that drives people without the consent of their mind or will, through the use of stories whose moral pointlessness in highly in evidence.[55]

Edward Said's remarks about *Don Giovanni* brilliantly pinpoint Sellars's principal concerns in this piece. In updating the opera to New York's Spanish Harlem in the 1980s, the excessive consumerism of the West in the 1980s was the most visible object of Sellars's critique. This rapacious capitalism was deconstructed by Sellars using a particularly 1980s metaphor: 'The oppressive class structure that Mozart depicted is alive and well 200 hundred years later in the United States of America', he wrote in the programme notes, 'even if the money is from drugs. Addiction is, after all, the theme of this opera'. Though the concept was unknown at the time Mozart wrote his opera, Sellars used the addiction paradigm to assess and explain both the behaviour of the principal characters, and the state of the culture of which they are members. Elements of both the libretto and the music supported his choice. At the beginning of Act II, Leporello pleads with his master to abandon his licentious way. Giovanni responds in astonishment:

| | |
|---|---|
| Lasciar le donne! Pazzo | I give up women? Madman! |
| Lasciar le donne? Sai ch'elle per me | I give up women! You know very well |
| Son necessarie più pan che mangio | That I need women more than food and drink |
| Più dell'aria che spiro! | Or the air that I breathe![56] |

At the Act I wedding reception his 'Fan Ch'han dal Vino' aria is an impassioned, obsessive list of the sensuous delights of wine, food, song, and sex.[57] However, it was with drug use that Sellars most directly communicated his addiction theory. Giovanni and Anna were drug addicts who actually shot up on stage. Addiction was the motivation for their self-destructive behaviour. Don Giovanni's powerful hold over the rest of his community was attributed to his status as the neighbourhood drug dealer. In Sellars's staging, Ottavio, Elvira and Zerlina could all be read as co-

dependents, pathologically abjecting themselves in deference to their partners' abusive and erratic behaviour. Zerlina and Elvira returned to their brutal lovers again and again, begging for reconciliation, yet repeatedly suffering humiliation.

Drugs are the perfect symbolic consumer product – their consumption guaranteeing indefinite future demand. Addiction attribution was a notable social phenomenon in the 1980s. As drug use increased in the West, so urban communities suffered spiralling levels of crime and associated social malaise. However, in the 1980s addiction was no longer understood primarily as the excessive dependent ingestion of alcohol and narcotics. A huge range of activities was classified as addictive. A vast body of self-help literature emerged at this time, the ultimate conclusion of which was the diagnosis of the whole of American society as addicted.[58] Not only did addiction become an accessible concept through which to explain a large range of social problems, its corresponding recovery programmes were, crucially and problematically, premised as the only possible way for sick individuals to break the addictive cycle.

The medical attention received by opium users in the late nineteenth century formed the foundation of addiction theory as it is understood today. In their book, *Opium and the People: Opiate Use in Nineteenth-Century England*, Virginia Berridge and Griffith Edwards explain that the development of the theory of opium-eating as a disease was scientifically deficient and morally-based. Addiction to opium-eating demonstrated, in the view of nineteenth-century disease theorists, a fundamental failure of individual will, read in turn as a moral failure. Addiction recovery was founded on a paradox. The 'disease' was a valid space for medical intervention, yet responsibility for recovery lay largely with the patient. Treatment regimes emphasised the restoration of self-discipline and control to prevent the recurrence of the

fundamental moral failure that caused the disease in the first place. To bridge the gap between individual moral deficiency and medical illness, religion was advocated as a sort of healing force. By turning to religion, the addict could both strive for a renewed individual moral responsibility, while acknowledging that his life was always out of his hands.[59]

In 1913 drug addiction was included in the British Mental Deficiency Act as adequate grounds for committal, and was the beginning of an increasing trend towards social segregation of addicts. Berridge and Griffiths suggest that

> Disease theory was perceived by the expanding medical profession as a move to throw the light of scientific theory into an area characterised by outmoded moral judgements. Their medical ideology retained more than a trace of its moral ancestry. It excluded social in favour of individualist and biologically determinist explanations; yet in its operation and in the thinking of addiction specialists, it resolutely emphasised social values. It acted not simply as an agency of social control, but as one of social assimilation, in which symptoms were defined in terms of deviation from the norm and treatment involved inculcation in the values of conformity and self-help. Scientific theory and medical self-interest coincided in mediating social norms. The elaboration of theory and treatment structures was also part of the process of class and professional self-affirmation. The addict was separated out as a distinctive type which only the medical profession was competent to treat.[60]

The expertise of self-appointed addiction specialists de-legitimised whatever personal agency the addict may himself have had in the ingestion of narcotics.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her essay 'Epidemics of the Will', uses the contemporary application of the concept of addiction to patterns of substance refusal, such as anorexia, to reveal the theoretically arbitrary way addiction is frequently diagnosed. She suggests that, in these cases, the site of addictiveness lies neither with the body, nor with the abused substance, but in the discursive relations that link them:

> What still unites the over-eater, the anorexic, the bulimic as substance abusers is not anything poisonous about the substance, [but] the surplus of mystical properties with which the addict/abuser projectively endows it. Consolation, repose, beauty or energy that can 'really' only be internal to addicts themselves, are delusively attributed to the magical supplement that can then – whether consumed or refused – operate only corrosively on the self thus construed as lack.[61]

This pattern perfectly resembles the mechanism of late twentieth-century consumer capitalism, and using this model it becomes possible to explain the emergence in the 1980s of a number of notable addictions, each of which seem rooted in an extraordinary paradox. Workaholism, shopaholism, and exercise addiction, amongst others – 'process' as opposed to 'product' addictions in the terms of addiction specialists – are illnesses conceived around what would ostensibly seem to be the ultimate exercise of individual will, autonomy and active participation in contemporary culture.[62] In such a culture, any form of 'excessive' behaviour may be pathologised, with blame invariably assigned to the individual. Fortunately the addict may then embark on a process of recovery not far removed from those advocated by nineteenth-century disease theorists. The twelve-step programme assists the addict in the recovery of a damaged or deficient will, operating by way of a logical double-bind the successful mediation of which becomes the measure of both the addict's sanity and morality. Through the admission of one's inability to know all (a fundamentally anti-enlightenment, anti-modern stance), and a belief in the existence of an influential higher power, the 'addict' attempts to effect a reconciliation between the assertion that one can choose freely and the acknowledgement that one's behaviour is completely compelled.[63]

Drug addiction was used by Sellars to explain the extraordinary hold Don Giovanni has over the other characters. By making Don Giovanni a drug addict, and centring addiction in his updated concept, Sellars invited the extension of the addiction metaphor to the hero's equally excessive sexual behaviour. The concept of the libertine as understood by eighteenth-century Enlightenment audiences had ceased to exist in any pure form by the 1980s. Sellars's response was to make Don Giovanni a sex addict, most obviously demonstrated in his staging of the catalogue aria when the list of Giovanni's sexual conquests was accompanied by a pornographic slide-show of naked women with their eyes blacked out. In Mozart's music and Da Ponte's libretto, and even in the full history of the opera's performance, spectators were invited to look on Don Giovanni's behaviour with a measure of suppressed admiration. His extraordinary rebellion and unrelenting impudence, as well as the sheer ridiculousness of his excessive sexual past, must at some point provoke a smile. Sellars chose to remove any hint of irony from the story:

> Operating in an age, like our own, where big entertainment was primarily an avoidance tactic for a public that did not want to know about their own world or anyone else's, Mozart and Da Ponte also had to face the fact that the only way to get people in a basically trivial society to pay attention is to assure them that what you are doing is fun. Accordingly the 'dramma giocoso' ('jocund drama') label is brought out and plastered on every item of baggage. As a label, it is about as helpful as Chekhov's insistence that his great plays were 'comedies'. The implied disclaimer of larger ambitions is maddening...because they did mean it, they're not kidding. Again, one confronts the opening of *Don Giovanni*: ho, ho, ho, a woman is raped, wink, wink, boys will be boys, isn't this fun? Well, no. It's not much fun anymore, not as much fun as it was supposed to be. And by the late 20th century, it is certainly too late in the day to be winking.[64]

Justifying his interpretation by claiming the 'truth' of Mozart, Sellars pathologised Don Giovanni's behaviour. Giovanni's excessive wilfulness and assertion of personal

power were realigned to become a weakness of the will. In a 1980s setting, sex addiction was the only sympathetic explanation of Don Giovanni's actions, but it is a massive simplification of the concept of libertinism, and the motivations that determine that behaviour.

The eighteenth-century libertine's behaviour resulted from an austere and determined effort to establish and maintain the subject-object division as the only way to guarantee individual autonomy and free will. In contrast, the late twentieth-century sex addict becomes a hapless object for 'expert' subjects who would presume to diagnose him as ill. The sex addict's unwillingness to compromise, his very asceticism, becomes the mark of an abdication of subjective autonomy and the collapse of free will. Life within a bourgeois culture built on the inherently flawed and contradictory foundation of enlightenment ideology requires a persistent compromise on the part of the individual. That culture reads the sex addict's behaviour as a spiralling acquisition of sensual pleasure to fill a perceived lack within the individual. Rather than filling the lack, however, addictive behaviour comes to define individual subjectivity to such an extent that self is ultimately annihilated. Within the addiction paradigm, 'excessively' sexualised behaviour maps a pattern of almost suicidal self-destruction; the addict is fundamentally disempowered, aware of his compulsion but unable to halt its destructive progress. In her 1989 book, *Escape from Intimacy: Untangling the 'Love' Addictions: Sex, Romance, Relationships*, Anne Wilson Schaeff outlines the effects of sex addiction on the sufferer:

> Addicts become progressively more preoccupied with the sexual 'fix' until it becomes central to their lives. As the disease progresses, the sexual obsession takes more control of the person's life, and more and more time and energy need to be spent in the sexual activity in order for the addict to get the same high... I believe that sexual addiction...is progressive and fatal... Like all other addicts, sexual addicts become progressively dishonest, self-centred,

> isolated, fearful, confused, devoid of feelings, dualistic, controlling, perfectionistic, blinded to their disease (denial), insane, blaming (projection), and dysfunctional.[65]

Fortunately, Schaeff devises twelve steps, modelled directly on those of Alcoholics Anonymous, to lead the sex addict away from the abyss. Here are four of them:

> 1. We admitted we were powerless over sex and love addiction – that our lives had become unmanageable.
>
> 2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
>
> 11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us and the power to carry that out.
>
> 12. Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to sex and love addicts, and to practice these principles in all areas of our lives.[66]

This recovery programme with its system of checks and balances, and the ultimate declaration of total powerlessness it demands of the addict, finally leads to the definition of a narrower and more abstract zone of pure will-power.[67] Spirituality in this framework is revealed not as the primary source of meaning in the world – the purpose claimed for it by religious leaders – but rather as the only logical way through which humans, read addicts, can mediate existence. Living out enlightenment ideology with a disturbing truthfulness, the libertine was the eighteenth century's nightmare, an internal demon that could be eliminated only by recalling an unscientific, moralistic God. Updated to the 1980s in Sellars's production, the libertine became the disruptive, though necessarily benign, sex addict, embodying all the contradictions of capitalism, but safely individualised, and treated simultaneously as mentally ill and morally flawed.

Bourgeois society formulated the concept of addiction to contain a disruptive, divided subjectivity struggling with the contradiction between reason and feeling

created by the Enlightenment. By pathologising Don Giovanni as an addict, Sellars, two hundred years after the Enlightenment, succumbed to the false harmonisation his production appeared to attack. His use of the addiction metaphor was complicated further by his shocking staging of the opera's ending. Sellars's malevolent, reckless, self-annihilating Don Giovanni was banished to hell not only by the vengeful ghost of the Commendatore, but also by the wrath of his living victims, and a little girl whose innocent presence was a direct riposte to the corruption of the libertine. Though the text is Mozart and Da Ponte's, spectators at Sellars's highly moralistic and macabre staging were forced to wonder why, if Don Giovanni was an addict, if his behaviour was compelled, if he was suffering from a disease, he suffered such a harsh, unforgiving punishment.

The problem lay with the updating. Sellars's transposition of eighteenth-century morality to the twentieth-century concept of addiction didn't quite fit. Though the staging consisted of dense, direct, contemporary references – real locations, real social problems, real economics – something was absent. The missing link I was searching for seemed to be located off-stage. The dynamic of updating – its address to the material lives of its audience – means that the stage space cannot fully contain the 'world' of the production. Sellars's programme notes provided a clue. In his insistence on taking the libretto literally, Sellars attempted to rationalise Don Giovanni's seduction of 640 Italians, 231 Germans, 100 French and 1003 'Hispanics'. 'These numbers don't seem so incredible', he moralised in the synopsis, 'One recent AIDS patient has spoken recently of having had 300 hundred separate sexual contacts a year'.[68] The promiscuity for which Don Giovanni is damned eternally, by Mozart and by Sellars, was directly compared by Sellars to the promiscuity of some AIDS patients in the 1980s. When I stepped back from the small incongruities of the staging

and assembled its principal themes – intravenous drug use and heroin addiction, promiscuity, public morality, New York in the mid-1980s – AIDS loomed, for me, as the unavoidable governing narrative. Though at no time explicitly referred to in Sellars's production, AIDS seemed to authorise and complete his inconsistent use of the addiction concept. In fact, it seemed like a more accurate contemporary metaphor for the eighteenth-century bourgeois panic surrounding libertinism.

Just as the bourgeois subjects of the Enlightenment betrayed themselves and relapsed to pre-Enlightenment values to eliminate the socially and sexually disruptive figure of the libertine who emerged from within the ideological core of their own culture, so the so-called 'mainstream culture' of the 1980s benefited from a spontaneous destructive force to eliminate both the addict and the gay man, a force which could be simplistically read as a precisely targeted form of natural punishment.[69] Just as the Enlightenment bourgeoisie had to reinstate the poles of heaven and hell to destroy the threatening demon of Don Giovanni, so AIDS was frequently cited during the 1980s as a form of divine retribution against those who defied the higher power. The American evangelist, Jerry Falwell, used precise words: 'AIDS is God's judgement on a society that does not live by His rules'.[70] Historically plagues have always been viewed as divine condemnation of deviance, nature's revenge on unnatural or sinful behaviour. AIDS in the 1980s was rapidly seized on as the wages of sin. The Enlightenment, which understood itself as an overcoming of mythical superstition and the dark ages, relied on the ideological and religious tenets of that period to justify the condemnation of the libertine. The 1980s featured a similar relapse, with much popular media speculation about the origins of AIDS in Africa with its subliminal connotations of a primitive past, a dark continent, and the

HIV virus's transmission through monkeys.[71] AIDS became a spectre of pre-civilisation vengefully returning to undo the progress of modernity.

Destabilised individual identity returned in the 1980s as a major source of suspicion for a bourgeois society that relies on autonomous and identifiable individuals to participate in the contracts of capitalism. Commentators on the Mozart opera, and on Sellars's production, have focused extensively on what they perceive to be a vacuum in Don Giovanni's character. Thor Eckert, Jr., writing for the *Christian Science Monitor*, remarked that,

> What is missing from the 'interpretation' is any sense as to who the Don is, and why the people around him have anything to do with him. Perhaps we are to assume that this callow archetype is the collective *Doppelganger* of all these troubled people – in other words that he has no identity outside of what each one wills him to be.[72]

He is a cipher with little or no personal reflection, just an insatiable appetite for sex that determines all of his behaviour. Sellars's casting of the identical twins Eugene and Herbert Perry as Giovanni and Leporello increased the sense of absence and confusion at the core of the opera. Mozart had created a *seria* hero with a *buffo* manservant providing an extraordinary double consciousness that refracted Giovanni's behaviour from within the performance text before it reached the audience. The bourgeois spectator could lasciviously witness Giovanni's bad behaviour, while hearing a reassuring ironic commentary on it from his wily servant. When the virtually identical Perrys swapped their virtually identical clothes to impersonate each other, they became a force of chaos not only within the narrative, but also within the diegesis of the production itself.

This staging compounded the fear provoked by promiscuity and undirected sexuality in the 1980s. Sellars's staging both revealed the problematic construction of modern subjectivity in the Enlightenment, while shoring up its inevitable

disintegration by affirming the fears of 'the general public' in the 1980s. The wonderful conceit of the Perry twins was not a playful experiment with the fragmentation of character in postmodern theatre, but rather a fearful warning about the consequences of the dissipation of individualised identity and individual responsibility in contemporary culture. The reasons for Sellars's bizarre omission of AIDS from his opera trilogy on life in New York in the 1980s are clear. Were Sellars to have realised on stage the painfully real threat to subjectivity that is AIDS, his work would have logically vilified drug addicts and gay men for their roles in the spread of the epidemic – a position at odds with his ostensibly liberal politics. A radical American staging of *Don Giovanni* in the 1980s would have played promiscuity for laughs.

In a rare rave review for the *Nation*, Thomas M. Disch revealed the subtext of this piece:

> Sellars's *Don Giovanni* is that rare thing, a puritanical vision that fully appreciates the allure of vice... Sellars seems to be saying that the problem with drugs is not that addicts must resort to crime in order to maintain their addiction... Rather, Don G. and his friends use drugs in order to have the spacey courage to pursue their primary goals, which are mugging, rape and murder. Sellars does not extenuate or exonerate; his Don G. is guilty as charged. No wonder the production has ruffled so many feathers. It is not the indignities done to the text; it is the heretical statements Sellars is making about his society, and ours.[73]

In this reading, Don Giovanni was fully culpable – the object of critique for the self-help doctrines of the Reagan years. Sellars redirected blame and responsibility for the wretchedness of the urban ghetto in the 1980s back onto individual behaviour. This highly literal production targeted personal conduct; only at the most abstract level did it attack broader social structures. If Sellars's production was controversial, in Disch's

view, it was in its delivery of a harsh conservative message to a damp, liberal audience of New York opera-goers.

Despite its problems however, Sellars's *Don Giovanni* succeeded as an exploration of the flawed foundations of modernity and enlightenment that undergird capitalism. Though the Don's behaviour was despicable in this staging, the opera functioned equally as an indictment of the bourgeois hypocrisy that produced him. The key problem of Sellars's updating remained his reverential approach to the text, his humanist, universalist conviction that Mozart's opera speaks timeless truths to contemporary audiences. What began as a radical materialist critique of late capitalism warped into a moralising, fearful reduction of that issue. Sellars's refusal to adopt any kind of critical attitude to the ending of the opera meant that he replicated the bourgeois reliance on myths like religion and marriage to conceal the logical flaws in modern capitalism. In addressing audiences with reference to the most literal aspects of their lives, Sellars cannot avoid responsibility for the real implications of his bold contemporary metaphors. The bourgeois fear of a dispersal of identity embodied by both the libertine and the addict echoes Sellars's own fear of the dispersal of character and form in postmodern performance.

**Notes**

---

[1] Quoted in Julius Novick, 'Interlopers at the Opera House', *American Theatre*, May 1986, p. 16.
[2] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London and New York: Verso, 1990, p. 21.
[3] Quoted in David Littlejohn, *The Ultimate Art*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1992, p. 142.
[4] For an broad explanation of the 'unmappable' nature of postmodern culture see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, pp. 1-54
[5] See Nick Kaye, *Postmodernism and Performance*, London: Macmillan, 1994, pp. 5, 20.
[6] Peter Sellars interviewed by Ron Jenkins, 'American Directors on Directing: Peter Sellars', *Theater* vol. 15, no. 2, p. 49
[7] See Nick Kaye, p. 20.

[8] Quoted in Thor Eckert Jr., 'Taking Issue', *Opera News*, vol. 50, no. 13, July 1985, p. 14.
[9] Peter Sellars interviewed by Arthur Bartow, *The Director's Voice: Twenty-One Interviews*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988, p. 279.
[10] Quoted in Martin Kettle, 'High on Mozart', *New Statesman and Society*, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 44.
[11] Don Shewey, 'Not Either Or/But And', in Bruce King (ed.), *Contemporary American Theatre*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991, p. 272.
[12] Peter Sellars interviewed by Arthur Bartow, p. 279.
[13] Tom Sutcliffe, *Believing in Opera*, London: Faber and Faber, 1996, p. 198.
[14] Peter Sellars, 'Welcome', in programme for the Mozart-Da Ponte Operas, PepsiCo Summerfare Festival, 1989.
[15] Quoted in David Littlejohn, p. 144. In his essay, 'What Peter Sellars Did to Mozart', Littlejohn explains in detail the reception problems posed by Sellars's unwillingness to perform librettos in translation.
[16] Peter Sellars, plot synopsis in programme for *Don Giovanni*, PepsiCo Summerfare Festival 1989.
[17] See Don Shewey, p. 272.
[18] In *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, pp. 76-94, W.B. Worthen provides an excellent account of Sellars's complex reliance of the figure of the author in his production of *The Merchant of Venice*.
[19] Peter Sellars interviewed by Arthur Bartow, p. 276.
[20] Peter Sellars, programme notes for Goodman Theatre production of *The Merchant of Venice*, 1994.
[21] Samuel Lipman, 'Peter Sellars Trumps Mozart', *New Criterion*, vol. 9, no. 8, April 1991, p. 40.
[22] The production was set in the nineteenth century with sets by Edwin Gorey. Craig Smith, who went on to be Sellars's regular conductor, worked on this production as 'musical advisor'. The staging of the champagne aria was the only significant element that survived in the 1987 production.
[23] For an excellent discussion of the problematics of using video recordings in performance analysis, see Marco de Marinis, '"A Faithful Betrayal of Performance": Notes on the Use of Video in Theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 4, November 1985.
[24] Quoted in Mark Swed, 'Getting Intimate with Mozart', *American Theatre*, vol. 9, no. 6, October 1992, p. 86.
[25] See Mark Swed, 1992, p. 86.
[26] Ibid., p. 88.
[27] Peter Sellars, 'Theatre, Opera and Society: The Director's Perspective', *Grand Street*, vol. 16, no. 1, Summer 1997, p. 202.
[28] George Tsypin interviewed by Ronn Smith, *American Set Design 2*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1991, p. 165.
[29] In the 1989 version there were English surtitles. None were provided in 1987.
[30] Edward W. Said, 'Theater: Don Giovanni', *Nation*, 18 September 1989, p. 290.
[31] Thomas Docherty, introduction to 'Politics' section, *Postmodernism: A Reader* (ed.), London and New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 319.
[32] Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998, p. 22.
[33] See Charles Ford, Cosi? *Sexual Politics in Mozart's Operas*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1991, p. 8.
[34] Ibid., p. 11.
[35] Ibid., p. 13.
[36] Ibid., p. 29.
[37] Ibid., p. 62.
[38] Ibid., p. 29.
[39] Ibid., p. 67.
[40] Ibid., p. 30.
[41] Ibid., pp. 67-9.
[42] Nicholas Till, *Mozart and the Enlightenment: Truth, Virtue and Beauty in Mozart's Operas*, New York: Norton, 1996, p. 197.
[43] See Nicholas Till, p. 199.
[44] Ibid., p. 203.
[45] Ibid., p. 205.
[46] Ibid., p. 3.
[47] Ibid., p. 205.
[48] Ibid., p. 203.
[49] Ibid., p. 211.

[50] Nicholas Till, p. 212.
[51] See Nicholas Till, p. 213.
[52] Ibid., p. 218.
[53] Ibid., p. 220.
[54] Ibid., p. 197.
[55] Edward W. Said, 'Theater: Don Giovanni', *Nation*, 26 September 1987, pp. 318-9.
[56] Lorenzo Da Ponte, libretto, translated by Norman Platt and Laura Sarti, English National Opera and Royal Opera Guides series, London: John Calder, 1983, p. 81.
[57] See Nicholas Till, p. 202.
[58] For excellent examples, see Anne Wilson Schaeff, *When Society Becomes an Addict: Understanding the Social System, Reclaiming Our Power*, London: Thorson/Harper Collins, 1987/92 and *Escape from Intimacy: Untangling the 'Love' Addictions: Sex, Romance, Relationships*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989.
[59] See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Epidemics of the Will', in her book *Tendencies*, London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 130-42.
[60] Virginia Berridge and Griffith Edwards, *Opium and the People: Opiate Use in Nineteenth-Century England*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987, p. 170.
[61] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, p. 132.
[62] See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, pp. 132-3.
[63] Ibid., pp. 134-5.
[64] Peter Sellars, programme notes for the Mozart–Da Ponte Operas, PepsiCo Summerfare Festival 1989.
[65] Anne Wilson Schaeff, 1989, p. 11.
[66] Ibid., p. 151.
[67] See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, p. 134.
[68] Peter Sellars, plot synopsis in PepsiCo Summerfare Festival programme for *Don Giovanni*, 1989.
[69] See Leo Bersani, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?', in Douglas Crimp (ed.), *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, London and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988, pp. 197-222.
[70] Quoted in Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor/AIDS and its Metaphors*, London: Penguin, 1978/89/91, p. 147.
[71] Susan Sontag, p. 138.
[72] Thor Eckert, Jr., 'A Don Giovanni at Odds with its Locale', *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 July 1987, p. 19.
[73] Thomas M. Disch, 'Theater: Don Giovanni', *Nation*, vol. 4, no. 11, September 1989.

## 3. Peter Sellars's Own Dialectic of Enlightenment

> Figaro: No, My Lord Count, you shan't have her, you shall not have her! Because you are a great nobleman you think you are a great genius. Nobility, fortune, rank, position! How proud they make a man feel! What have you done to deserve such advantages? Put yourself to the trouble of being born nothing more! For the rest a very ordinary man! Whereas I, lost among the obscure crowd, have had to deploy more knowledge, more calculation and skill merely to survive than has sufficed to rule all the provinces of Spain for a century! Yet you would measure yourself against me… Could anything be stranger than a fate like mine? Son of goodness knows whom, stolen by bandits, brought up to their way of life, I become disgusted with it and yearn for an honest profession only to find myself repulsed everywhere. I study Chemistry, Pharmacy, Surgery, and all the prestige of a great noble-man can barely secure me the handling of a horse-doctor's probe.[1]

While debates rage about the accuracy of Sellars's updatings, the slippery disjunction between core text and staging provided the dynamic of his production of Mozart and Da Ponte's *Marriage of Figaro*. Transposed to the penthouse of New York's Trump Tower in the late 1980s, Sellars invited a comparison between the opera's Count Almaviva and billionaire businessman Donald Trump. But 200 years after the work's premiere, was Donald Trump the Count, or was he Figaro? Trump is a self-made man, whose deployment of knowledge, calculation and skill have seen him rise to the highest levels of a society which understands itself as the ultimate meritocracy, founded on the rejection of the nepotism and privilege of a feudal

Europe.[2] He would seem to symbolise all that Figaro aspires to in Beaumarchais's play. The predictable question Sellars asks is, 'But is he happy?' On the basis of this production, evidently not. Mozart and Da Ponte's excision of the famous speech quoted above – which seemed to jump out of the narrative as more Beaumarchais's thinking than Figaro's – seems motivated by more than the pressures of censorship. The opera, which operates on a grander, more metaphysical plane than the play, seems cannily aware of the stifling limitations of Figaro's bourgeois aspirations. His career ambitions for science and medicine are incomprehensible to a Donald Trump for whom the whole concept of the bourgeoisie must seem like a quaint anachronism. Figaro's ideals actually represent a noble restraining of the ravenous capitalism that is their inevitable logic. Peter Sellars's despairing production revealed those ideals as credulous and deluded.

The source of Sellars's despair was the experience of living in America through the 1980s. In the programme notes he attempted to understand his own cultural moment through a comparison with late-Enlightenment Austria, but the analogy seemed strained and inadequate:

> Let's face it, in the America of the 1980s, as in the Vienna of the 1780s, the *ancien regime* is crumbling, whether it cares to admit it or not...America is turning right as the rest of the world is turning left, and the historical moment is passing from our hands into the hands of others who have been waiting for a long time. Mozart's point is that amid the crumbling of the orders, between the offstage choruses of 'Bella vita militar', the inane wars in the distance that are designed as persiflage to take our minds off our own motives and quality of life at the end of the day, after all the press releases have subsided, the question remains: who were we really, and how did we really live?[3]

With hindsight, Sellars's references to a crumbling American establishment seem naïve at best, grounded more in hope than in reality. It's as if the phenomenon of 1980s American capitalism exceeded his political or social explanation. In that

decade, in that country, despite two centuries of individual liberty, the gap between master and servant seemed greater than ever. In fact, the 1980s actively rolled back many of the Left's achievements of the 1960s and 70s, crystallising the myth of those decades in the minds of the Right as the moment when America lost its course. Dunya Ramicova provided a symbol of this development with her costume design for Susanna:

> You know, the Reagan era made this possible, for the rich people to really become rich and the servants to wear those uniforms, for there was a period when the more progressive rich people did not, you know, ask their maids to be dressed in little black outfits with white [caps].[4]

To comprehend this extraordinary regression, Sellars turned back to the personal and emotional, focusing again on the individualism at the core of American culture. His production of *The Marriage of Figaro* continued themes explored in *Don Giovanni*, analysing the formation of subjectivity in capitalism, and demonstrating the failures of modernity with its myth of progress. That production's confused contemporary metaphors were the subject of my previous chapter. In *Figaro*, Sellars's analogies were more successful; accordingly, I provide a scene-by-scene analysis of the production rather than a testing of the overall concept.

Sellars faced his greatest challenge at the conclusion of the piece. In unravelling modernity and demonstrating the brutality of the subject-object formation in capitalism, he was left at an impasse. The postmodernity that results, unlike the – albeit flawed – bourgeois dreams of Beaumarchais, offers no prospect of collective social change. The tone throughout this production was of pained nostalgia, longing for the security of the unified subject the staging so relentlessly tried to demolish. The final section of this chapter explores what I believe was Sellars's fraught attempt to re-imagine the postmodern in order to break through the paralysis that seems its very

definition. I examine Sellars's search to recover a sense of objective critical autonomy – the autonomy that enables leadership and change – when his own reading of *Figaro* implied the impossibility of any such position. The absence of Beaumarchais's Figaro speech haunted this production like a ghost.

## *The Marriage of Figaro*: The Performance of Loss

Early in Act III of Sellars's 1988 production of *The Marriage of Figaro*, spectators encountered what seemed like a live accident in the performance.[5] Shortly after he began his aria voicing suspicions of Susanna's treachery, James Maddalena, who played the Count, suddenly dropped to the floor, almost as if he had fallen. Astonishingly, he kept singing as he writhed on the stage surface, and it soon became apparent that this was, in fact, an element of the staging. His hair-tearing and violent physical contortions were Sellars's physical realisation of the Count's self-destructive inner crisis, prompted by the collision of destabilising social and sexual developments during the course of this *folle journée*. After arranging a romantic assignation with Susanna, Mozart's Count catches sight of her with Figaro, his nemesis. His tormented sexual frustration is exacerbated by the horror that his own valet is romantically fulfilled: 'Vedro, mentr'io sospiro/ Felice un servo mio?/ E un ben che invan desio/ Ei posseder dovra': 'Must I forego my pleasure/ While serf of mine rejoices?/ Must I renounce my passion/ He have his heart's desire?'[6] It is just one example of the Count's relentless drive to disrupt the romantic unity the other characters seek. His inability to acknowledge the possibility of a relationship in which sex and love can merge, in which male and female are interdependent, in which the culture of marriage and the nature of feeling can coexist in harmony, is the behavioural embodiment of a

philosophical divorce of subject from object. His moment of crisis illustrates the inward collapse of a fiction of autonomous subjectivity[7] which sustains a myth of enlightenment founded on a structure of seemingly irreconcilable ideological poles. Invocation of myth becomes the Count's coping strategy as he grasps at the straws of feudalism to maintain his own psycho-social integrity in an increasingly bourgeois world. It is a world of which he is still technically master, but one he is just learning to painfully negotiate.

The Count's collapse was just one of many instances in which Sellars literally staged the fissures in the idea of an enlightened individual subjectivity: a visualisation of the dialectic and its consequences. Sellars's staging resisted the frothy romantic comedy that has been the opera's standard production history throughout the twentieth century. He adopted a darker, harsher and more unforgiving approach, his staging functioning as an intense reading of the opera's polished surface to identify the gaps in its seemingly unified, linear discourse. In this production, the moral and emotional crises of each character were magnified to become microcosms of the philosophical contradictions of enlightenment. The horizontal progress of Mozart's narrative was constantly disrupted by Sellars's insertion of sudden vertical shifts – physical and emotional – of which the Count's collapse was just one example. The result was an opera in relief, with an aesthetic resembling a photographic negative – at one its greatest strength, and its most profound sadness.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's analysis of the concept of enlightenment provides a brilliant theoretical counterpoint to Sellars's reading of modernity: Sellars's postmodern concerns often intersect surprisingly with those of his early twentieth-century European predecessors. Sellars's repeated turn to the past

mirrors what is both the central thesis and critical battleplan of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, that 'myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology'.[8] Adorno and Horkheimer's dogged recovery of the past for the present is a defiance of enlightenment's evasion of history, which becomes both the subject's greatest fear – a dangerous repository of all that has been overcome – and greatest comfort – a realm of collective security for the fragmented individual ego.[9] They argue that, 'the true nature of schematism, of the general and the particular, of concept and individual case, reconciled from without, is ultimately revealed in contemporary science as the interest of industrial society'.[10] The impossible logic of that reconciliation, the very purpose of that schematism, was the subject of this production. The searing pain of the protagonists of Sellars's *Figaro* was the experience of individual division – caught in an uncertain present, longing for a future of promise, while lamenting a discredited past of certainty and security.

While Sellars's staging of *Don Giovanni* compounded Mozart's nightmare vision of the chaos that accompanies excessive individualism, Sellars's *Marriage of Figaro*, already plotted by Da Ponte with astonishing density, became a finely-calibrated exploration of subjectivity. The drive for unity essential for the maintenance of subjective autonomy does not involve any harmonious negotiation between the binaries of self versus other or male versus female, but rather the brutal incorporation of one by the other. 'False harmonisation' is both the subject's myth that these irreconcilable ideological differences can be transcended, and the willingness of the object to assume this position in pursuit of the temporary myth of reunification with the subject. The subject is torn in two directions, towards nihilism and idealism,[11] willing to conform to the grim realities of the present while

rationalising such pain through a constant projection to some transcendent future – a cycle in which fulfilment is always sought, but always deferred.

This despair was beginning to manifest itself in Austrian society when Mozart and Da Ponte produced *The Marriage of Figaro* in 1786.[12] As Sellars observed in his programme notes,

> A century that considered that it had invented the notions of progress and enlightenment, that master-minded the triumph of the encyclopedia and the development of the water-closet, the century that created and epitomized the idea of civilization, was ending in exhausted confusion; the old world, awash in its failed idealism, feeling its age, and sensing, however faintly, that the future now belonged to the more urgent idealism of a New World.[13]

By the end of the decade, the idealisation of that future by the aristocrats, intellectuals and statesmen who formed Mozart's immediate circle was disintegrating into reaction, disillusion and defensiveness.[14] Art, and music in particular, became safe, contained spaces for the projection of ideals of unity. Mozart's ability both to critique and move beyond the rigid polarities of enlightenment reason in search of some alternative model was partly the result of an innovative negotiation of musical rules.

The divorce of subject from object was as evident in music as in other fields. The fusion of Rococo and German *Sturm und Drang* formed what is generally called the 'Classical' Style, whose most significant form was the sonata. With its ABA structure, the sonata was virtually designed to consolidate the existing order. Its resolution of dissonance, dramatised in the juxtaposition of dominant modulation representing the assertive striving of reason, with subdominant modulation as the inevitable yielding of feeling,[15] provided an ideal outlet for the fractured enlightenment ego to play out its fantasies of unity. This pattern permeates Mozart's music.

While the plot of *The Marriage of Figaro* may tell us most about Mozart and Da Ponte's analysis of enlightenment subjectivity, the genre displays evidence of Mozart's moves beyond the confining ideological stratifications of his place and time. The *opera seria* and the *opera buffa* maintained strictly separate forms and audiences until the late 18th century. Mozart's experimentation with the insertion of *seria* moments into the *buffa* of *Figaro*[16] destabilised the definitions of both forms, subverting the rigid border separating that subject matter deemed worthy of the elite, and that fit for the masses. Of course, Mozart's choice of a banned play for his libretto already suggests revolutionary leanings, but his creation of serious comedy in *Figaro* may be a more substantial legacy. Sellars never avoids an opportunity to realise vividly the shift from light to dark, the combination of *seria* and *buffa* an innovation indirectly mirrored in his own unapologetic incorporation of pop cultural signifiers into a form that in the early 21st century remains resolutely high cultural. A rave review of Sellars's recent London revival of *Nixon in China* suggested that that piece occupied the absolute centre-point between grand opera and the Broadway musical, a position inspired by Mozart's place in his own time, and surely the summit of Sellars's own cultural aspirations.

Besides their attempts to blur formal boundaries, the extraordinary timeliness of Mozart's operas is manifested in their assertion that what is meant to be private, in an enlightenment schema, is actually public and contingent.[17] The most profound and common emotion experienced by enlightenment subjects, according to Nicholas Till, was one of loss. In this period of massive social change, in which individuals were literally cut loose and confronted with the wholesale effacement of old certainties, their insecurities were expressed in a longing for wholeness and reconciliation.[18] Though marriage has been a standard topic for comedy since Plautus, its institutional

transformation in the eighteenth century formed a microcosm of enlightenment. In heterosexual union, all binary oppositions could be reconciled.[19] In the *Don Giovanni* that followed *Figaro*, similar themes prevail – social chaos would result when the institution of marriage was undermined. Although this new marriage privileged love and sexual attraction over the organisation of property it had been up to this point, it was an embodiment of the capitalist spirit – a contract entered freely by both partners. Marriage would form the cement for the construction of the new bourgeois society, a defiance of the old aristocratic conception of marriage in which love appeared well down the list of priorities.

With this panoptic maintenance of subjectivity, the wounds inscribed on individuals by enlightenment reason were no longer so clearly visible by the 1980s. To highlight their continued existence, Peter Sellars set *The Marriage of Figaro* – first performed at the PepsiCo Summerfare Festival at SUNY Purchase in 1988 and revived the following year – in the 52nd floor penthouse of Trump Tower. The Count was a brash Donald, the Countess a vapid Ivana, Figaro the Count's chauffeur, while Susanna remained the Countess's maid. Sellars once again relied on extensive programme notes to explain the logic of his directorial interventions. Even amid the grotesque ostentation of Trump Tower in the 1980s, pages were unknown. Cherubino, described as 'the neighbour's kid',[20] was dressed in jeans, sneakers, a hockey jersey and shoulder pads. Barbarina, just one of his many amours, was the punky daughter of Antonio, the building superintendent. Marcellina and Bartolo were upwardly-mobile New Yorkers. Sellars told us that Bartolo might be an Italian professor at Columbia (the profession and institution in which Lorenzo Da Ponte actually ended his days), while Marcellina was the Count's 'executive assistant' who in typical 1980s fashion

had just started her own small business.[21] Most hilariously, the peasant women of the third act chorus were 'a group of country girls in the big city'. Adrianne Lobel's sets, though perfectly accurate replicas of 1980s interior design, were charged with a slightly sardonic air. By juxtaposing the grand reception spaces with cramped, undecorated servants' quarters, Lobel deflated the pomposity of the elaborate, over-designed home of the Almavivas. The ostentatious minimalism of the Count and Countess's bedroom and drawing room, with their rigid vertical and horizontal lines and ruthless order, was constantly undermined by the complicated, messy farce of their inhabitants' personal lives. Though the interiors represented were completely of their moment, the effect for spectators hinted at pastiche – everything seemed accurate and plausible, but simultaneously fake and meaningless, much like the architecture of the time. The whole spectacle would probably have been more palatable if it had taken place in the distanced world of an eighteenth-century palace. The simple act of framing the contemporary placed the whole audience of well-off New Yorkers under rigorous scrutiny.

Mozart's overture is pure Rococo frivolity and in the video version Sellars accompanied it with images of exuberant Christmas shoppers on Fifth Avenue. Dripping with furs and laden with bags from Gucci and Tiffany, the manic energy of these model consumers seemed to fill the vacuum of their real political impotence. This ultimate scene of 1980s consumer excess was rapidly contrasted with Adrianne Lobel's set for Act I, a cramped laundry room in the Count's apartment that will serve as Figaro and Susanna's bedroom after their marriage. The steel sink, detergents and ironing board of the servants' domestic world invaded what would be their domestic space, which was dominated by a large collapsible sofa-bed. The appliances were modern, but the servants remained always on call. As Figaro measured the bed,

Susanna tried on her bridal veil. Initially they occupied different worlds, not looking at each other as they mindlessly exchanged compliments. This scene as staged by Sellars was a dramatisation of the pervasive enlightenment dialectic between reason and feeling, duty and passion. (I am indebted to Richard Trousdell's extensive account of Sellars's *Figaro* rehearsal process for my analysis here). Susanna's disappointment at the proximity of their room to the Count's bedroom was countered by Figaro's suggestion that it is a convenience which will allow them to serve their master and mistress more easily. During their duet, they both walked along the back of the sofa until, as if by chance, they met in the middle and fell to the bed for a moment of sexy playfulness. When Susanna contemplated the Count's invidious advances, she left Figaro's embrace and removed her wedding gown to put on her maid's outfit – duty calls. For one cold moment Figaro and Susanna were alienated, each questioning the other's motivations. The chill swiftly passed, however, and they rushed to embrace once again.[22] Both were subjectified: Susanna attempting to reconcile the love she felt for her fiancé with the intractable position into which her employer had placed her; Figaro not yet willing to combat the sexual depredations of the boss to whom he's duty bound.

The pattern of the scene was replicated throughout the opera – the modulation of intrigue and distress followed by its temporary resolution. Susanna's opening line is 'Ora si chio son contenti' – 'Now I am happy', an Edenic beginning which precipitates an inevitable fall.[23] Sellars described the inspiration for this theme of falling which recurred throughout the piece:

> Everything in these Mozart-Da Ponte operas starts with the Dantesque notion of original sin and the Fall. The words 'precipitare' [precipitate] and 'cadere' [fall] just are coming constantly... In *Figaro* they are on virtually every page... And of course falling is a profound

idea, not only connected with some vertical notion of religious hierarchy and a kind of cosmic design…but falling in love.[24]

Despite their luxurious habitat, all the members of the Almaviva household had been banished from a realm of plenitude and wholeness. The Count and Countess's compulsive acquisition of wealth, the sham of their marriage, their Act IV frolics in the garden, resembled a vain, manic attempt to recover Paradise. Sellars's staging magnified the theme. Falling became a vivid cultural motif in the late 1980s: we remember the 1987 stockmarket crash, the urban myths of stockbrokers jumping from windows, the crests and troughs of Trump's own career, and the disgrace of Leona Helmsley (whom Sellars mentioned in his programme notes). The loss of a pre-Enlightenment world of security by the characters mirrored the loss of totalising modernist certainty and critical independence experienced by the director through his reading of the piece. Caught between the safety of an obsolete past and the uncertainty of a problematic future, this might be a formula for Sellars's own career.

Sellars's reading of Marcellina was more sympathetic than most productions'. Generally played as a shrewish middle-aged woman (the *buffa* to the Countess's *seria*), desperate to marry a man much younger than herself, she could be seen as a text-book case of false harmonisation as she scrambles for the union that embodies bourgeois security and propriety. In the programme notes, Sellars wrote that her plot to coerce Figaro into marriage was actually a trick to make Bartolo, her true but estranged love, jealous.[25] Sellars's explanation of their relationship was particularly complex: they had been companions for over twenty years – Marcellina had acted as a mother to Bartolo's adopted daughter Rosina, on whom Bartolo had designs, but lost to the Count who was aided by Figaro. Bartolo had long resisted Marcellina's matrimonial prodding and the Figaro debt-scheme was her counter strategy. Sellars

staged Bartolo's reaction to this news as a fit of confused, pained anger, a distress-cry at the imminent loss of his longtime companion, his wasted opportunities and the love-destroyer role into which he was being coerced. In the stifling, feminine space of the laundry room, Bartolo faced the loss of his manhood, and the prospect that he might die alone. He raged at Marcellina and at himself while they engaged in a violent struggle over a trophy – money? love? outward success? They belonged together, yet circled in separate orbits, clinging to the crutches of autonomous subjectivity, never to collide.

The subtlety with which Marcellina was played here suggested that, initially at least, even she might have been unaware of her more tender motivations. It's clear from both the music and the libretto that, in this, the first scene with Susanna and Marcellina together, the women's exchange of barbed insults under the guise of social compliments signals their construction as subjects. Marcellina plots to frighten Susanna, getting her to reject the Count who will be piqued, and so force Figaro to marry Marcellina. When she sings: 'ed egli ha meco/ Oltre a questo contratto, certo impegni.../ So io': 'I've got my contract/ Signed and sealed by Figaro/ and I'll see that he fulfils it',[26] it is a travesty of both the enlightenment financial contract, and the modern marriage contract into which both partners are supposed to enter freely on the basis of equality. In Sellars's staging, Marcellina's bourgeois ambition was apparent as she perched disdainfully on the edge of the sofa-bed, positively defiled by her surroundings, while Susanna went about her chores. In the libretto Marcellina spitefully tells Susanna 'Ma da Figaro, alfine/ Non puo meglio sperarsi: *l'argent fait tout*': 'That is Figaro all over/ Money's all he cares for: *l'argent fait tout*', while Susanna replies with the cruel reminder of 'L'età': 'Your age!'[27] In this staging, however, the end of their bitter exchanges suggested that the façade had become too

much – the sadness of the women's sense that they had essentially been positioned against each emerged in the concealed weeping of Sue Ellen Kuzma's Marcellina and the general weariness of Jeanne Ommerlé's Susanna. In the terms of Sellars's complicated synopsis, Bartolo's ultimate acquiescence called Marcellina's bluff – a pathetic irony if, in fact, he was the one she truly cared for.

The harshness of the encounter was tempered by the entrance of the exuberant Cherubino. This hormonally-charged all-American teenager was very much at ease in his neighbours' laundry-room, drinking milk from the refrigerator and lounging on the bed. Professing his love for almost every woman in the building, his scene with Susanna displayed more than a *frisson* of sexual chemistry. Cherubino is a hugely significant character. As an adolescent, he has not yet encountered the rigid process of subjectification of the adult world. He still maintains a semblance of psychic, spiritual and social harmony. His expressions of love are inherently linked to his sex drive; his conception of nature, although bearing traces of romanticism, does not imply an ideal of conquest. This fluid sexual identity is magnified by the fact that, in most productions, Cherubino is played by a woman. For him, subject and object are mutually determining – his subjectivity is formed by nature and vice versa: 'Parlo d'amor vegliandi/ Parlo d'amor sognando:/ All'acque, all'ombre, ai monti/ Ai fioro, all'aria, ai venti/ Che il suon de'vani accenti/ Portano via conse': 'Only for love I languish/ Dream of delicious anguish/ To every vale and mountain/ to stream, to lake, and fountain/ For love, for love I'm sighing/ And echo's voice replying/ Bears back my tender moan'.[28] Sellars had Cherubino sing this aria spread-eagled on the sofa, his pelvis thrusting rhythmically to the music. He is the character in the text who is most disruptive to the mechanism of false harmonisation, his sexual honesty and wholeness repelling those who occupy the subject position and attracting those cast as objects.

The Count falls firmly into the former category and his entrance terminated another moment of Edenic innocence. What followed was the famous chair scene which this time took place on the sofa-bed, behind which Cherubino hid during the Count's propositions. Susanna concealed her master with a sheet upon the entrance of Don Basilio, perhaps the most hollow and degraded character in the Sellars version, who was dressed in a multi-zippered leather jacket and worked, according to the programme, 'in the music business'. In Da Ponte's libretto, Basilio adeptly mobilises the enlightenment ideology that constructs women as objects. His blunt suggestion to Susanna that she has been 'yielding to a pageboy' is just one of the barrage of accusations of sexual impropriety against which Susanna has to defend herself. By constructing Cherubino as a source of uncontrolled sexuality, Basilio succeeds in playing Susanna off against the Countess and reaffirming the subjectification of both. As the quintessential sidekick to the Count, he lacks real social autonomy, and possesses only a façade of subjectivity.

In the text, the Count's emergence from under the sheet is prompted by the irony of his personal outrage at suggestions of sexual impropriety. Sellars heightened his comic embarrassment by having the sofa-bed almost swallow him up as he protested his indignation.[29] His subsequent discovery of Cherubino, hidden by Susanna beneath her wedding dress, was just the first instance of this character's subversion of the Count's semblance of subjectivity. Confronted with this deviant male example of untamed feeling and apparent psychic harmony, the Count ruthlessly plots Cherubino's elimination. In this staging Susanna fainted under the psychological assault of the Count's and Basilio's bullying accusations, and when she recovered they were preying over her in a menacing, lascivious manner. The previous day the Count caught Cherubino in a romantic tryst with Barbarina. However, the libretto

makes clear that he has more to reckon with than the libidinous pageboy – Figaro himself is beginning to shirk his yoke of passive subservience. When called by the Count to witness his fiancée's supposed infidelity, he enters with what the libretto describes as a chorus of local peasants. In Sellars's version they were random building personnel who happened to be in the vicinity: a doorman, a security guard, janitors and maintenance people all bearing Christmas gifts for the Count. Their presence in the laundry room was initially odd, but proved to be a clever strategy on Figaro's part, a way of publicly corroborating his betrothal to Susanna. Sellars had Figaro gently coerce the Count into placing the bridal veil on Susanna's head in full view of his neighbours and staff.

The presence of the chorus, however, was more than a means of cornering the Count – it was a bourgeois affirmation of marriage as the basic unit of society. In this staging, betrothal before a gathered community was a declaration of investment by both participants: an agreement was being witnessed and the aristocratic order of the Almaviva household, with its manipulative control over the romantic lives of its servants, was being passed by.[30] As if to emphasise the Count's paralysis, Sellars deviated from the libretto and had him stay on-stage until the end of the act. He was forced to witness mutely Figaro's aria to Cherubino extolling the rigours of military life. On Figaro's persuasion, the Count has commuted his sentence of banishment for Cherubino to enlistment in his private – read US – army, although it is by no means certain that this is the more lenient punishment. Figaro sings of how Cherubino must grow up and enter the adult male order:

| | |
|---|---|
| Delle belle turbando il riposo | Here's an end to the life that was gay, lad, |
| Narcisetto, Adoncino d'amor | Here's an end to your games with the girls. |
| Non più avrai questi bei pennacchini | Not for you now are ribbons and laces, |
| Quel cappello leggero e galante | Not for you frills and feathers and favours; |

| | |
|---|---|
| Quella chioma, quell'aria brillante | Pink and white like a girl's though your face is, |
| Qeul vermiglio, donnesco color | You must lose all your ringlets and curls[31] |

Sellars's staging of the aria was more complex than a straightforward charge to Cherubino. Figaro sang with an increasingly sardonic air: his display of military posturing became parodic, an attack on the disciplining of Cherubino, and consequently a half-joking-whole-in-earnest confrontation with the Count. Miming combat behaviour, he fired garbage at the Count, and finally eggs, which smashed against the white walls against which his master was pinned. The Count was clearly shaken, and in another moment of temporary resolution, Sellars finished the act with Figaro rushing to Susanna for affirmation which she gleefully provided.[32]

Adorno and Horkheimer assert that 'the history of civilisation is the history of the introversion of sacrifice',[33] and in Sellars's *Figaro*, the Countess Almaviva fully embodied the principle. We met her at the opening of Act II in her boudoir, an icy chamber with minimalist décor: hardly any furniture, a bed like an altar-slab, a wall of mirrored closets, and a view of the spiky Manhattan skyline behind razor-thin vertical blinds. Sellars staged her 'Porgi Amor' aria as the painful outpourings of an isolated, individual character outside the hyperrealistic discourse of the production – a stylised expression of profound existential crisis. Mozart's music is a tortured plea for the restoration of an harmonious past, the loss of which has made the Countess's life unbearable and meaningless. As Jayne West sang the lines, 'Porgi, amor, qualche ristoro/ Al mio duolo, a'miei sospir./ O mi rendi il mio tesoro/ O mi lascia almen morir': 'God of love, I now implore thee/ Broken-hearted to thee I sigh/ Love that once was mine restore me/ Or in mercy let me die',[34] she writhed on her bed, her torso twisted and contorted as she tore at her silk sheets. Sellars's stage picture displayed an object longing for reconciliation with the subject: the Countess's own subjectivity

relied on the affirmation of another, and when it was denied she faced death. For me as a spectator, her recognition of the fragmented state of her own identity, the impossibility of the reconciliation to which she aspires, became both the source of her subjective autonomy, and her most excruciating torment. Feeling pain we know we are alive, we know where our bodies end and where others' begin.

The grim mood of despair in the bedroom is broken, in the text, by the entry of Cherubino who functions here as the representative of the emotional unity to which the Countess aspires, as well as a possible surrogate for the lover who rejected her. But even Cherubino displays an awareness of the creeping construction of subjectivity. His song to the Countess is a performance of loss:

| | |
|---|---|
| Seno un affetto, Pien di desir | I feel a longing I can't explain, |
| Ch'ora è diletto, Ch'ora è martir | Sometimes a pleasure, Sometimes a pain. |
| Gelo, e poi sento l'alma avvampar | One moment frozen, Then all aflame, |
| E in un momento torno a gelar | Then sudden shivering, All through my frame. |
| Ricerco un bene fuori di me | Something I'm seeking, Outside of me. |
| Non so chi'l tiene, Non so cos'è | Where shall I find it? What can it be? |
| Sospiro e gemo senza voler | Without a reason I heave a sigh; |
| Palpito e tremo senza saper | Sometimes I tremble, I know not why[35] |

His movements during the aria, his back pressed to the closets, culminating in a collapse of exhaustion, prefigured the Count's tortured sexual frustration in the following act. While Cherubino was being dressed as a girl as part of the women's plot to trap the Count, the Countess's deeply sensual removal of his hockey gear suggested that sexual initiative emanated as much from her as from the teenager. Before the Countess gets too assertive, however, her husband invades her personal space.

The resulting scene was a brutal staging of the separation of subject from object as the Count violently abused his wife to maintain his own subjectivity. In the

libretto, he has just returned home after a hunting trip (his hunting does not cease). Rather than change it to 'a day at the office', Sellars maintained the hunting conceit, and the Count entered in a ridiculous green tweed suit complete with breeches and cap. It was a parody of conspicuous consumption, dissecting the Ralph Lauren fantasies of all those 1980s yuppies who fetishised the country on their weekends away from the rat-race. On a deeper level, the anachronism of the hunting outfit in Midtown Manhattan was a reminder of Adorno and Horkheimer's central thesis, a chronotopic moment illustrating the idea of enlightenment stretching back to myth. In a passage from 'Odysseus, or Myth and Enlightenment', Adorno and Horkheimer describe Odysseus' and Penelope's argument over the location of their marriage bed which he wants to fix in the centre of the room:

> Furious, [he] answers her with a detailed account of his long-lasting woodwork. He is the prototypical bourgeois – the with-it hobbyist. His do-it-yourself effort is an imitation of the actual labour of a craftsman, from which, in the framework of differentiated conditions of property ownership, he has long been necessarily excluded. He enjoys this, for the freedom to do what is really superfluous as far as he is concerned confirms his power of disposal over those who have to work in order to live.[36]

While the kitted-out huntsman might be an upper-class signifier, the process operates in the same way when the Count has become Trump – distanced from material labour, free to play, aping the blood-aristocracy his success has eliminated. It became possible to read the successful migration of Figaro's bourgeois subjectivity to the Count in the 1980s version through Adorno and Horkheimer's intractable suggestion that there never was a time before domination, that in ancient 'domination' are visible the traces of modern rationality and vice versa. This key idea proved to be one of the few way to think beyond the total paralysis we encounter at the end of this production – a search for other ways to explain and counter social injustice when the traditional

left has been annihilated by late capitalism. It forms a tentative foundation for Sellars's distrust of postmodernism.

The comedy of the Count's absurd pretensions was swiftly undercut by his vicious anger as he threw his wife onto the bed and pointed a gun at her head, accusing her of infidelity. The dark mood was tempered by the high romance of Cherubino's willingness to die for his love by jumping from the window (in this version he lands on the terrace below), but the temporary reconciliation that follows Susanna's emergence from the closet rings very hollow. Jayne West's Countess was pained and exhausted as she pleaded with her husband, 'Crudele!/ Più quella non sono/ Ma il misero oggetto/ Del vostro abbandono/ Che avete diletto/ Di disperar': How cruel! Rosina no longer/ But now sad and lonely/ A woman deserted/ And you take pleasure in causing her pain'.[37] After this staging of the Count's violent threat to renounce his wife, Susanna's encouragement of the Countess to forgive him seemed naïve and submissive: 'Confuso, pentito/ Son troppo punito:/ Abbiate pietà': 'Forgive him, dear Madam/Enough has been suffered/ I'm sure that he will never doubt you again'.[38] As staged by Sellars, the women had an air of weary knowingness, somehow aware of the fiction that the acceptance of present pain promises a better future. The Count's suggestion, 'Comune è la pace': 'let all be forgotten',[39] is both the pattern of his marriage and one of the foundations of enlightenment.

Temporary resolution is again interrupted, however, this time by the arrival of Bartolo and Marcellina, contract in hand, to remind Figaro that if he cannot repay the debt he will have to marry the lender. The Count's subjectivity is miraculously restored. Sellars staged the destruction of the previous brief moment of harmony by assigning the performers in groups to different spaces in the room while they illustrated the music with vivid, but completely contrasting limb movements – a non-

verbal visualisation of emotional conflict. It worked as a form of physical counterpoint, with the Countess, Figaro and Susanna on or near the bed, while Marcellina, Barolo and Basilio sat together on a couch stage right with the Count hovering beside them. As the pace of the music increased we saw a visualisation of dialectic, as groups of individuals were temporarily united, but only in opposition to each other.

The agency which the Countess appears to have recovered at the opening of Act III is a cipher. The trick that she and Susanna plan to trap the Count is not designed to expose his infidelity publicly and provide evidence to justify either her revenge or her departure, but is another attempt to win him back, to harmonise the fractured pieces of her identity. The irony is that this woman who has everything cannot acquire what she wants most. In Sellars's production, the lavish setting drove home Da Ponte's message. In contrast to the stifling spaces of the previous two acts we were now in the grand duplex reception room of the Almavivas' apartment. With an enormous glass wall displaying a spectacular view of the city skyline, a balcony with spiral staircase, and the requisite piece of modern art to punctuate the austere minimalism of it all, the atmosphere was more mausoleum than lived-in drawing-room. Donald Trump's autobiography was entitled *The Art of the Deal*, and as his operatic representative, the Count applies the principle to sexual matters (Trump was, after all, one of those 1980s celebrities who introduced the term 'pre-nuptial agreement' into our vocabulary). The arrangement he attempts to negotiate with Susanna is financially-based – in return for sexual favours he will provide her with a 'dowry' which will enable her to pay off Marcellina and marry Figaro. Susanna is placed in an impossible position and Sellars staged the moment with her literally pinned against a wall while the Count leant over her, drooling. As she agreed to meet

him in the garden that night, he dropped to his knees putting his head under her maid's apron to nuzzle her crotch – for a horrible moment she appeared pregnant.[40] This shocking tableau made her attempts, in the libretto, to rationalise the degradation even more excruciating: 'If I do not deceive him, he'll only try again'. Despite her own awareness of her conflict between duty and honour, the Count has succeeded in constructing her as an object within the formulation of his own subjectivity.

The Count's subsequent torment, described above, can be traced to the self-destruction and alienation that is the logical conclusion of his practice of objectifying others. The 18th-century privileging of the natural determination of feelings effaced both claims to control and the will to resist. The Count occupies the same territory of libertinism so graphically embodied by Don Giovanni. His behaviour, bordering on the Sadistic, is compromised by the fact of his marriage. His selfish pursuit of personal pleasure always has material consequences that he cannot fully banish from his consciousness. Though he tries to adhere to that model of individual subjectivity rooted in the separation of subject from object, the division can never be totally maintained. The pain of the victim, Charles Ford remarks, can never only be seen as 'the cry of a wounded animal, but must always be the representation, albeit poorly structured, of an existent, self-reflexive being'.[41] In this sense, despite the overwhelming oppression of Sadean discourse and practice, there must be an acknowledgement of the relationship of two consciousnesses. The Sadist must imagine himself as he appears to the victim as his objective self.[42] His actions, intended to confirm his own superior subjectivity, instead reflect his own objective paralysis. Confronted with the uncertainty and disgust of Susanna in the face of his advances, and conscious that her willingness is motivated by her love for another, the semblance of the Count's subjectivity crashes.

After the Count's extraordinary aria, Sellars snapped us back into comic realism. Don Curzio has confirmed the validity of Marcellina's claim over Figaro, whose self-defence involves a relapse to romantic feudalism and a plea for reconciliation: 'Son gentiluomo, e senza/ L'assenso de'miei nobili parenti.../ Lasciate ancor cercarli/ Dopo dieci anni io spero di trovarli': 'I am a nobleman, and I cannot/ Marry without the consent of my parents.../ I wish someone would find them; for the last ten years I've been looking for them everywhere'.[43] Nature gets its revenge on Marcellina, however, when it emerges that Figaro is, in fact, her long-lost son, stolen by robbers 'near a castle'. The plot of the opera verges dangerously close to incest. The harmony that results cannot be taken at face value – Sellars certainly played it for laughs, and even in the opera it has a distinct air of parody. The wariness of Bartolo is not just the result of his sudden paternity, but the confused realisation that now he'll have to marry Marcellina. Figaro's freedom to marry Susanna is a source of bitter disappointment for the Count who sings, 'Meglio è assai di qua partir': 'All my hopes are now destroyed'.[44] The past has been recovered for Marcellina: 'Eccovi, o caro amico, il colce frutto/ Dell'antico amor nostro': 'To think that we have found him, the little darling that we used to be so fond of...', she sings, to which Bartolo replies, 'Or no parliamo/ Di fatti si remoti': 'I thought that little episode was buried in oblivion'.[45]

Arias are significant moments in any opera, but in this *Figaro*, Sellars magnified their impact through highly stylised stagings. The overwhelming sadness with which each aria was delivered meant that they gradually accumulated to form a sort of subplot or counterpoint to the main action, articulating what Sellars likes to call 'the actual'.[46] The staging of the Countess's third act aria was devastating. As the opera progresses, her subjectification is increasingly solidified, as if she's stuck in

slowly drying cement. In Sellars's staging, she stood clutching the balcony overlooking her drawing room, wearing diamonds and a beautiful gown. She sings, once again, of an idealised time of joy and fulfilment: 'Dove sono I bei momenti/ Di dolcezza e di piacer/ Dove andaro I giuramenti/ Di quel labbro menzogner': 'I remember days long departed/ Days when love had no end/ I remember vows fond and fervent/ All were broken long ago'.[47] She may have lost the things she values most but her reaction is to steadfastly guard what she still possesses: she reaffirms her superior social status. She muses aloud on what is, for her, the greatest insult of all: 'must I beg for a servant's favour?' As Jayne West turned to the window and gazed at her reflection in the glass, it was as if the Countess was wondering if she was still beautiful enough to attract the Count's attention. Mirrors and self-portraits are recurring signifiers of the ache of individual isolation in Sellars's staging – the mudra of the hand-held mirror in *Don Giovanni* and *Theodora*, the pre-death self-portrait of Du Liniang in *Peony Pavilion*. Trapped by her externally-determined subjectivity, this Countess seemed unable to connect with anything beyond her own reflection.[48] The cruel irony was that were she to smash the glass reflecting and imprisoning her glacial image, her literal and metaphoric prison wall, she would fall to her death. To indicate her profound despair, Sellars had her move from the balcony, almost offstage – just her hand on the rail remained visible – while she sang of her attempts to grasp at the memory of a past whose recovery was her only hope of survival:

| | |
|---|---|
| Perchè mai, se in pianti e in pene | Oh, then, why if I was fated |
| Per me tutto si cangiò | From that height of joy to fall |
| La memoria di quel bene | Must I still those happy moments |
| Dal mio sen non trapasso? | In my hour of pain recall? |
| Ah! se almen la mia costanza | Dare I hope to be rewarded? |
| Nel languire amando ognor | Must I languish all in vain? |

| | |
|---|---|
| Mi portasse una speranza | Someday surely my devotion |
| Di cangiar l'ingrato cor | Might his faithless heart regain[49] |

After this aria it was impossible to ignore the futility of her hopes and ambitions. The extraordinarily intense staging of this aria suggested to me, however, that the overwhelming tone of pain in this scene had other sources. The Countess's excruciating longing for a complete past, and an integrated subjectivity of balance and unity, seemed to reflect Sellars's own longing for security and his nostalgia for a unified subject – a concept which his reading of the opera appeared, at the same time, to shatter.

In the Countess's duet with Susanna in which she dictates the fake love note to the Count, Sellars staged both women literally 'going through the motions' – knowingly performing the behaviour that consolidates their paralysis. The message consists of three lines of elusive pastoral poetry – the Countess insists that 'the rest he'll understand' – and as the women clutched the note and passed it from one to another, they turned and swayed with the music, buckling over in pain. These adults were reduced to playing a game, the triviality of which had suddenly struck them. As they rotated to the music like musical box ballerinas, they were fully conscious of their humiliation and desperation.

Their pain is briefly eased by the solidarity of the chorus of peasant girls who have come to watch the wedding ceremony. Among their ranks is an imposter – Cherubino is still dressed in girl's clothes, and once again he must endure the wrath of the Count, who in this production caught him receiving a very passionate 'greeting' kiss from the Countess. Sellars's staging of the wedding march particularly irritated traditionalists – Figaro cued the music with a CD and Basilio recorded the proceedings, including the Count's receipt of the love note, with a video camera. As the Count and Countess received the wedding parties, seated on enormous, brutalist,

steel chairs, the coldness and distance between them was palpable. They preside over the union of two couples from their household while their own marriage, the foundation of that household, is crumbling. In the video version, Sellars made brilliant use of cross-cutting to capture the narrative subtlety of his own unscripted staging of the act's final moments: the Countess saw her husband leering over a dancer from the chorus and ran up the spiral staircase in distress; Barbarina then received the note of reply from the Count, rushed off-stage, and was followed in succession by Cherubino and the Count.

This staging of complex subtext culminated in an extraordinary set conceit in Act IV. A glass curtain (the exterior wall of the apartment) descended and the arbour of Beaumarchais became the rooftop terrace of Trump Tower complete with Christmas trees and fairylights – a vulgar rich man's fantasy of nature. The action was played on the forestage, allowing Sellars to stage the 'reception' with its subtle presentation of subplot in the upstage drawing room space in full view of the audience.[50] The roof terrace really was a precipice, a place, wrote Sellars, 'not intended for human beings'. Barbarina opened the act searching for the pin used to seal the fake love note. Until this moment she had been an embodiment of youthful exuberance, her wild hair and short skirt resembling the young Madonna, an active participant in Mark Morris's punk-style Act III fandango. Singing her Act IV cavatina, uplit with shadow and crouched on the ground, she was a broken woman: 'L'ho perduta…me meschina!…/ Ah, chi sa dove sarà?/ Non la trovo…E mia cugina…': 'Oh how dreadful! I have lost it! Oh wherever can it be?/ I have dropped it in the darkness, I have lost it! Oh how dreadful!/ Oh what will they say to me?/ No, 'tis useless. I cannot find it'.[51] It seemed she had lost more than a pin.[52] Her pain seemed to indicate both a loss of youthful innocence and fulfilment, and a despairing

awareness of the adult, female subjectivity she was being forced to assume. As the messenger for the scheming lovers and spouses, she was already disillusioned with romance.

Sellars treated Act IV as one expression of profound loss after another. With its multiple disguises, spying sequences and hiding places, the farce of this act is very difficult to manage. Sellars did not even attempt it – it seemed that by the end of Act III all the characters were so aware of the fraudulence and destructiveness of their construction as enlightenment subjects that it only remained to stage their despair with an almost meta-theatrical self-knowledge. It was as if Sellars was using the very device of performance to smash through the rigid cage of enlightenment subjectivity, revealing the tyrannical rigidity of identities constructed through the aggressive elimination of the 'other', and advocating in response a more porous, interdependent, and compassionate model. As Susanna and the Countess swapped identities to play each other, their stiff, figured movements hinted at an uncanny awareness of their own construction as characters. Sellars did not treat the clothes-swapping here as the menacing loss of character and individuation indicated by Don Giovanni and Leporello's similar strategy. In *Figaro*, the clothes-swapping between the Countess and Susanna is ostensibly a playful celebration of fluid identity – an act of liberation. In this production, however, it became an act of desperation not malice, resulting in a weary sense of loss and pain.

Nature again provides the model for Marcellina when she sings her famous aria urging women to support one another: 'Il capro e la capretta/ Son sempre in amistà/ L'agnello all'agnelletta/ La guerra mai non fa/ Le più feroci belve/ Per selve e per campagne/ Lascian lelor campagne/ In pace e libertà': 'Throughout the realm of nature/ When Springtime bids them pair/ We see how every happy creature/ Its joy

and peace can share/ The wildest and most cruel/ Through pathless forest ranging/ Shows to his mate unchanging/ His love and tender care'.[53] As she finished, Sellars had Basilio and Bartolo enter to overhear her last lines, and literally bundle her off stage. To suggest that 'love and tender care' are inherent elements of romantic relationships strikes at the heart of the failed Sadistic subjectivity so relentlessly practised by the Count.

Men are also the victims of the myth of autonomous enlightenment subjectivity. Basilio's aria was excruciating to watch. Before he began his outpouring of grief at the shallowness of his misspent youth, the actor Frank Kelley took a long, wistful pause – a moment of despair for which there were no words. As he mused that 'In quelgi anni in cui val poco/ La mal pratica ragion/ Ebbi anch'io lo stesso fuoco:/ Fui quel pazzo ch'or non son': 'Youth is headstrong, overbearing/ Too impulsive as a rule/ I myself was young and daring/ I was just as big a fool',[54] he crumpled up in pain. During the course of the opera Basilio has lied and bullied, a morally corrupt agent for his master's brutality. That his first words describe his construction of an impregnable subjectivity is shocking: 'Ch'onte, pericoli/ Vergogna e morte/ col cuoio d'asino/ Fuggir si pou', 'Scandal or calumny/ Injustice or dishonour/ Will never penetrate/ A donkey's hide'.[55]

As Figaro sang of his pain over the apparent betrayal by his fiancée, Sellars had the Countess and Susanna appear on the balcony upstage and then descend to stand directly behind him looking at him through the glass. Figaro, like the Count in the previous act, squirmed on the ground in agony, crying 'Ah, che il fidarsi a donna è ognor follia!': Oh, he who trusts a woman, fool, fool and fool again!'[56] The women watched with deep sadness, not only at Figaro's distrust and condemnation of a whole sex, but at the subjectified position he occupies that has driven him to this conclusion.

Figaro has become as much of a manipulated object as they have. When it was Susanna's turn to sing, her aria of deception for Figaro's benefit was delivered with deep regret – she has been coerced into debasing the most valued relationship in her life. As she stood over the 'sleeping' Figaro, almost on the verge of collapse, she was embraced by Marcellina and watched with sadness by the Countess – a moment of profound female solidarity. In Sellars's staging, the characters were rebelling, resisting the plot and the music.

The mood was lightened by Cherubino, whose entrance once again threatened to destroy everyone's plans. He caused no harm, however, and Sellars allowed the plot to work itself out with all its necessary deceptions. The reconciliation between Figaro and Susanna, as staged by Sellars, was hard and serious. They had both learnt painful lessons and their relationship will now proceed from a basis of deep mutual understanding: love has been affirmed – temporarily. In this staging, the Count's imagined betrayal by the Countess provoked an especially vicious reaction that echoed his behaviour in Act II, suggesting that little had been learnt on his part, and that his objectification of women in order to shore up his own crumbling sense of self was a recurring cycle. He was oblivious to the appeals of the household to 'forgive her' – it took the Countess's almost miraculous emergence, dressed as Susanna, to bring him to his senses. Wearing the white bridal gown, she was more ghost than apparition, her appearance a travesty of her own wedding day. The resulting reconciliation was sudden to the point of implausibility and it seemed that the cracks in enlightenment logic, so masterfully exposed, had been hastily plastered over once again: 'Let all learn the lesson, forget and forgive'. Mozart's extraordinary music solemnises the moment, however, and Sellars matched it by facing the performers directly towards the audience, uplit and still as they sang of forgiveness. The

Countess's absolution of her husband was pained and weary and it seemed that after such a harsh dissection of Mozart's final act, Sellars's conga dance at the end had been earned.[57] Fulfilment is again deferred, however, as all sing together, 'Tutti contenti saremo' – 'We *shall* be happy'.[58]

The swiftness of the ending certainly suggests that the Almavivas and their household have once again fallen prey to false harmonisation. It could be suggested that Mozart and Da Ponte do too, but Sellars's production rigorously resisted this. His stylistic juxtaposition of realistic recitative with highly choreographed aria constituted a formal dialectic that both reflected and illuminated the dialectic of enlightenment which the opera addresses. However, the status of the principal characters remained problematic. In the USA of the 1980s, the triumph of individualism and the success of late capitalism skewed the class relations that were the target of Beaumarchais's 18th century attack. In Mozart's time, Figaro was undoubtedly the hero, seizing social initiative, filled with the potential for success. In Sellars's version, Figaro was ultimately a loser, at the bottom of the social and economic ladder after two centuries of capitalist meritocracy. His 18th-century subjectivity had been assumed by the Count/Trump who was a shocking example of the misery and spiritual vacancy of capitalist individualism. The success Figaro achieved in the 1980s was personal and emotional, not professional or social. His fulfilment was the security of his relationship with Susanna, and so the solution to his many problems was an individual one, and was not part of some collective transformation. There was nowhere for Figaro and Susanna to go in terms of social mobility. Wholesale social change was not a possibility. Adorno and Horkheimer return as an obvious critical lens to suggest

the limits of classical Marxism as a universal strategy of emancipation. Simon Jarvis outlines their historical understanding of subjectivity:

> Class division appears with the division of labour, most archaically with a division between intellectual or spiritual labour and manual labour. There is class domination before there is capitalist class domination. The category of subject appears with conscious mastery over impulse and over other subjects. Accordingly, an end to capitalism and its property relations, difficult enough as this already is to imagine, might not secure an end to class domination.[59]

This appeared to be Sellars's conclusion at the end of his 1980s *Marriage of Figaro*. All the other characters seemed doomed. The Countess's expectations for her marriage remained delusionally high. The union of Bartolo and Marcellina retained an air of distrust and coercion. Cherubino was ignored by his elders and would probably end up an alienated Gen-Xer. Susanna made little progress as a character: she was as subjectified at the end as she was at the beginning – Sellars's staging just made her more aware of the condition. For Sellars as for Susanna, paralysis and self-consciousness seemed to be the experience of postmodernity.

**Modernity or Postmodernity?**

Sellars's treatment of one of the iconic artworks of the European Enlightenment amounted to an unravelling of the fundamental principles of that moment, affirming Jean-François Lyotard's understanding of postmodernity as 'a decline in confidence, that for two centuries, the west invested in the principle of a general progress in humanity'.[60] This decline forecloses all dreams of Utopia, dreams that fuel the work of Peter Sellars. His *Figaro*, in its deconstruction of modernity, performed the work of postmodernism, a work of demolition that implicitly abandons the constructive sensibility of modernism. In dismantling the mythology of modernity,

Sellars celebrates the implication of every critical stance in the object of critique – blurring subject and object indivisibly. In doing so, however, he is forced to abandon the critical autonomy that permits the imagining of alternative forms of social organisation.

To break out of this impasse, Sellars further scrutinises the belief systems he has deconstructed. In *Don Giovanni*, he mistakenly laboured to resolve the dilemmas he had revealed. His *Figaro* was an acknowledgement of stalemate, a performance of failure without any obvious recipe for success. His production emerged from his recognition of the double-bind of enlightenment subjectivity – in offering itself for critique, it demands its assumption on the part of the critic. Sellars does not attempt to dismantle the whole concept of reason, but rather searches for moments of transgression within the concept itself.[61] Trapped in postmodernity, Sellars's work is a determined quest to identify the slips and inconsistencies in that concept which famously defies definition.

'What is the postmodern?, is the question he asks, and more pertinently, 'Who defines it?' The problem of defining Sellars's postmodernism goes deep into the concept itself, into the precise yet virtually unchartable difference between practice and condition. The notion of modernity was determined by the ideal of progressive evolution through the recovery of 'foundations'.[62] According to Nick Kaye, postmodernity is a rejection of this forward-thrusting trajectory, the dream of absolute unity, and the concept of a transcendent, recoverable 'truth'. The idea of a postmodern critical practice assumes a fundamental break with, or disintegration of, the modernist project. The postmodern becomes, itself, an almost transcendent sphere from which to critique modernist ideals, outside of modernism's evolutionary path.

Yet, as Kaye notes, this statelessness is countered by the very prefix 'post' of the title, implying such an evolutionary development. Thus postmodernism is engaging with a theory which it acknowledges as its own original source. In this sense, postmodernism is simply the evolutionary conclusion of modernism,[63] a processual unravelling of modernist ideals. In an age in which the label 'postmodern' is easily and often mistakenly applied, Peter Sellars, adamant in his own rejection of categorisation, finds himself caught between the multiple and confused definitions of the term. His work is definitely a recycling of past forms, a rejection of the logical conclusion of modernism's drive towards foundation. But it is also clear that this cultural and temporal mining can be categorised, by a critical practice still indebted to modernism, as a new form. A unified reading of Sellars's aesthetic eclecticism as a primary signifier of his postmodernism must be disrupted by his clear projection to Utopia, his humanist belief in the merit of analysing difficult social and political issues. Sellars's struggle with the possibility of a postmodern ethics, despite the term's implicit assertion of the impossibility of any such concept, dogs any attempt at straightforward definitions.

This blurring of practice and condition presents a definitive impasse to critics who must attempt to explain postmodernism as either the cultural symptom of a diseased late modernism; or, as a new formal expressive idiom – a premeditated rejection of modernism; or, as a simple and absolute break with any concept of evolutionary foundationalism – a new way of seeing, a new dimension. Sellars's work may be placed in the second category as it is clearly a reaction to a failed modernist project. This recurrent dialectic with modernism means that Sellars's work cannot be read as some new expressive dimension, a breaking away from modernism's forward-

thrusting trajectory. In this sense, Sellars's own brand of postmodernism might be more accurately described as 'late modernism'.

By setting *Figaro* in Trump Tower, and by comparing Trump to the Count, and indeed to Figaro, Sellars affirms Marshall Berman's suggestion that, 'recent movements that call themselves postmodern only re-enact, rather than overcome, modernism's deepest troubles and impasses'.[64] The despair of Sellars's production is thus its embrace of a sort of negative universalist humanism – the timelessness of tyranny. In this context, Sellars's longing for the unified subject of modernity, his pained nostalgia, seem like a perfectly justified, even heroic, way of coping with late capitalism.

The breakdown of the subject-object division is both the ultimate liberation – forcing subjects to acknowledge their own implication in the object of critique and thus recognise that object's fragile humanity – and the ultimate disempowerment – trapping the critic in a web of equivocal relativism. Sellars cannot solve the dilemma, yet his work remains free from the cynicism that often characterises the art of his cultural moment. His hope may reside in the artwork itself. The irreconcilability of the dialectic within the artefact of Sellars's opera, it denial of pat resolution, its paradox, may be the marks of its resistance and autonomy.

**Notes**

[1] Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, *The Marriage of Figaro*, translated by John Wood, London: Penguin, 1964, p. 191.
[2] Donald Trump is not completely self-made. Much of his wealth was inherited, but he functions here as a symbolic representative of American capitalism rather than as an individual.
[3] Peter Sellars, programme notes to 1989 productions of the Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy, PepsiCo Summerfare Festival, SUNY, Purchase.

[4] Quoted in Samuel Lipman, 'Sellars Trumps Mozart', *New Criterion*, April 1991, p. 39.
[5] See Richard Trousdell, 'Peter Sellars Rehearses Figaro', *TDR*, vol. 35, no. 1, Spring 1991, p. 85.
[6] Lorenzo Da Ponte, libretto, translated by Edward J. Dent, 1937, English National Opera and Royal Opera Guides series, London: John Calder, 1983, p. 96. The libretto was sung in the original Italian in Sellars's production. Throughout this chapter I refer to this complete English translation rather than to Sellars's paraphrased and incomplete surtitles. Sellars rooted his staging in a line by line analysis of the libretto. By quoting the English translation I hope to make a clearer distinction between the original text and Sellars's realisation of it. As discussed in Chapter 2, Sellars's synopses often tend to obscure, for spectators, the complex dynamic between text and staging.
[7] See Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (eds.), *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1997, p. 6.
[8] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London and New York: Verso, 1944/1999, p. xvi.
[9] See Nicholas Till, *Mozart and the Enlightenment: Truth, Virtue and Beauty in Mozart's Operas*, New York: Norton, 1996, p. 2.
[10] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, p. 84.
[11] See Nicholas Till, p. 16.
[12] Peter Sellars describes the spiritual climate in late 18th century Austria in his programme notes to the 1989 production of the whole trilogy at the final Summerfare: 'A sad, wise angel hovers over this world'.
[13] Peter Sellars, 'Welcome', in programme for PepsiCo Summerfare Festival production of the Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy, 1989.
[14] See Nicholas Till, p. 5.
[15] See Charles Ford, *Così?: Sexual Politics in Mozart's Operas*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1991, p. 52.
[16] Ibid., p. 99.
[17] See Nicholas Till, p. 153.
[18] Ibid., p. 141.
[19] See Charles Ford, p. 9.
[20] See David Littlejohn, *The Ultimate Art*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992, p. 137.
[21] Peter Sellars, programme notes for *The Marriage of Figaro*, PepsiCo Summerfare Festival, 1989.
[22] See Richard Trousdell, p. 77.
[23] See Nicholas Till, p. 140.
[24] Quoted in Richard Trousdell, p. 79.
[25] See David Littlejohn, p. 137.
[26] Libretto, p. 53.
[27] Ibid., pp. 54-5.
[28] Ibid., pp. 56-7.
[29] See Amy Green, *The Revisionist Stage: American Directors Re-Invent the Classics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 168.
[30] See Nicholas Till, p. 150.
[31] Libretto p. 65.
[32] See Richard Trousdell, p. 82.
[33] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, p. 55.
[34] Libretto, p. 67.
[35] Ibid., p. 71.
[36] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp. 74-5, quoted in Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998, p. 23.
[37] Libretto, p. 83.
[38] Ibid., p. 83.
[39] Ibid., p. 84.
[40] See Richard Trousdell, p. 85.
[41] Charles Ford, p. 68
[42] See Charles Ford, p. 68.
[43] Libretto, p. 97.
[44] Ibid., p. 99.
[45] Ibid., p. 101.
[46] See Richard Trousdell, p. 83.

[47] Libretto, p. 102
[48] See Peter Dews, 'Adorno, Post-structuralism, and the Critique of Identity', in Andrew Benjamin (ed.), *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989, p. 18
[49] Libretto, p. 102.
[50] The transparent glass curtain was an addition for the 1989 Summerfare production. It was not present in the original 1988 production.
[51] Libretto, p. 110.
[52] See Nicholas Till, p. 141.
[53] Libretto, p. 112.
[54] Ibid., p. 114.
[55] Ibid., p. 114.
[56] Ibid., p. 115.
[57] The exuberant ending is a recurring Sellars motif, the fun of sheer celebration incorporating the audience, as well as implicating them.
[58] See Nicholas Till, p. 142.
[59] Simon Jarvis, p. 28.
[60] Jean-François Lyotard, 'Notes on the Meaning of 'Post-', in Thomas Docherty (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, London and New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 47.
[61] See Max Pensky, *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays in Adorno and the Postmodern*, New York: SUNY Press, 1997, p. 14.
[62] See Nick Kaye, *Postmodernism and Performance*, London: Macmillan, 1994, p. 1.
[63] Ibid., p. 2.
[64] Marshall Berman, 'Why Modernity Still Matters' in Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman (eds.), *Modernity and Identity*, Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991, p. 34.

## 4. Los Angeles Lessons

> Artists have been encouraged to think marginally – they've been taught that they're separate from society... Communication is the thing that artists do, so they're at society's center, not on the periphery.[1]

Writing in the aftermath of the Los Angeles Uprising of 1992, Peter Sellars was here imagining a new function for culture in a city where politics and social policy had patently failed. The culture he dreams of no longer hovers esoterically above material reality as reflective mirror and critical lens, but rather is incorporated directly into the fabric of daily life – art as praxis. It's hardly a new vision. The elimination of the modern separation of art from life was the foundation of the European avant-garde of the early twentieth century. In the avant-garde view art would perform a kind of redemption, restoring human values to the cold abstractions of modernity. A return to tradition – rejecting the immediate past – would, paradoxically, be revolutionary.[2] However, it's clear from Sellars's language, quoted above, that such a move presents particular complications in the 1990s, not the least of which is the disintegration of the concept of the avant-garde itself. In this brief quotation Sellars acknowledges the failure of the European avant-garde project to substantially penetrate American attitudes to culture. With the postmodern 'end of history', the mass commodification of aesthetics, and the move from alienation to institutionalisation, the contemporary fate of the avant-garde provides unstable

foundations for the development of any socially-conscious aesthetic practice in the late twentieth century. Addressing Sellars's work in and about Los Angeles, this chapter analyses his handling of the inheritance of avant-gardism, and his response to the social crises faced by LA in the 1990s.

The loss articulated in Sellars's *Marriage of Figaro* was both aesthetic and philosophical. Not only was the Enlightenment ideal of a unified subjectivity an impossibility, but the exclusive critique of bourgeois values through a high-art form like opera – a model of social change resembling Reagan's own 'trickle-down' economic theory – appeared increasingly immobile and redundant. In 1987 Sellars was appointed artistic director of the Los Angeles Festival of the Arts where he steadfastly developed that alternative vision of culture as the practice of everyday life. Privileging local, ethnic and non-professional art-making, the LA Festival defined culture as community-building and political activism. Though postmodernity permitted Sellars the space to develop these two very different – and theoretically opposing – strands of his career (which actually serve to validate each other), I suggest that the LA Festival's preoccupation with identity goes beyond classic postmodernist attention to 'difference' and, in fact, reveals persistent modernist fears regarding form and spectatorship.

Los Angeles has become a contained space for Sellars's exploration of the painful and incomplete shift between the modern and the postmodern. The texture of everyday life in LA in the 90s, the explosion of iconic dramas like the Uprising of 1992 and the trial of OJ Simpson are real-life illustrations of what are often construed as risible philosophical and aesthetic concerns. Sellars's LA projects – plays, operas, festivals, teaching – attempt to explain chronic social exclusion, racism, and spiritual disorientation in a philosophical climate which insists that identity is plural,

subjectivity fragmented, and meaning endlessly deferred. Theories of emancipation simultaneously stymie its material accomplishment.

In Part I of this chapter I outline the origins of the LA Festival and the history of Peter Sellars's involvement. Examining the festival's themes and agendas, the programming of art events, and Sellars's stated attitudes to the work presented, I suggest that the mission of the LA Festival derived from the troubled juxtaposition of postmodernist cultural aspirations with the universalising tendencies of the avant-garde.[3] In Part II I explore this tension with a discussion of the contemporary fate of the avant-garde, paying particular attention to the tardy development of the concept in the USA and the unique American intersection of avant-gardism with postmodernism. The chapter concludes with an analysis of Sellars's 1994 production of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* at Chicago's Goodman Theatre. Set in contemporary Los Angeles, with audacious racial casting and an austere high-tech performance style, this production was a direct response to the turmoil of the Rodney King verdicts and the subsequent riots. In this section I assess the turn to overtly political art-making as one of the few viable outlets for a contemporary avant-garde. My concerns here turn away from the eighteenth-century foundation of the preceding chapters, focusing instead on this parallel, but extremely significant, strand of Sellars's career. Though the issues explored in other productions – the roots of modernity, bourgeois hypocrisy, capitalist excess, spiritual collapse – recur in this *Merchant*, I suggest that the opaque political metaphors conceal a more urgent nostalgia for a stable individual subject, and a righteous concern – and possibly conservative – concern for whom and what postmodernism actually serves.

## I. 'Excuse me, this is now central, not fringe'

The Los Angeles Festival of the Arts began as the Olympic Arts Festival in 1984. In true Olympic spirit its mission was to bring glory to LA by lavishly demonstrating the city's cultural sophistication to the rest of the world. Chaired in 1984 and again in 1987 by Robert Fitzpatrick, the Festival's programming betrayed a lack of confidence in the city being so assiduously promoted. Events like Peter Brook's *Mahabharata*, Cirque du Soleil, and Ingmar Bergman's *Miss Julie* suggested that LA relied on imported international superstars to authorise a civic identity which, on its own, was culturally deficient. Local artists who wished to participate in the Festival were curtly informed that this was impossible.[4]

When Robert Fitzpatrick departed to head EuroDisney, it was clear to the Festival board that a new vision was required. Straight from his unhappy tenure at the Kennedy Centre, Peter Sellars was appointed artistic director with no prior experience of running a festival. His first decision was to postpone the 1989 event until 1990 to allow more time for planning and fundraising (he waived his fee for both Festivals). Sellars originally envisioned a programme not dissimilar to its predecessors, with his own Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy as the core of a series of high-profile high art events. On moving to Los Angeles, however, he realised that the Festival's relationship to the city had to be radically re-imagined. The demanding high culture of the early LA Festivals was a response to the dominance of a largely vacuous mass culture – driven by the film and TV industries – over civic life. In both cases, however, huge numbers of the ordinary people of Los Angeles were being overlooked and under-represented. In collaboration with scholars from the World Arts and Cultures Department at UCLA, Sellars and his team concluded that the 1990 Festival would focus on issues

of identity – what it means to be American; what it means to be Angelino. Before the 1990 event Sellars remarked: 'The first step on the road to knowing what we may be is beginning to notice what in fact we are'.[5] Though some major events would continue to be imported from Europe and the East Coast, big international names were to be avoided. As early as 1987 Sellars stated: 'I'm not interested very much by something that's "official culture". Basically, the Royal Shakespeare Company is not exactly what I need when I get up in the morning. Thank God, that's done. People have seen it... I tend to like things where you can really feel the heat of creation or you can feel it was created under political circumstances'.[6] In fact, the festival actually turned down numerous offers from foreign governments to present their official or national touring companies because it believed all work produced needed to have a specific connection with Los Angeles.[7]

Sellars seized on LA as the site of some of the most significant current social and political developments:

> ...demographically speaking, you get the two most important movements that are happening to America, the two things that America is confronting: Asia in the east and the other America to the south. The point where these two movements converge is southern California... This is where the border issues are so absolutely hot, and it is the first region in the country that will have a white minority... The basic idea of the LA Festival is to try to share as much information with as many people, so that with a number of these cultures that have been marginalised or treated as something exotic or 'interesting' we can make a statement that, 'Excuse me, this is now central, not fringe.'[8]

Key to this revision was the recognition of LA's links with non-Western culture. The city's pivotal location was one factor, but more immediate was LA's extraordinarily diverse ethnic population. Festival planners were adamant that the 1990 event would foreground the wealth of artistic talent among Los Angeles's ethnic communities, as

well as their links to the artistic traditions of the countries of the Pacific Rim. The festival would be an attempt to quantify Angelino identity. Sellars stated:

> In Los Angeles we have the single largest concentration of Urban Native Americans in the United States. The Japanese community, the Chinese community are well-established. We have a Persian population. We have Thai and Hindu temples. And we have refugees: Vietnamese and Cambodian, Guatemalan, Salvadoran and Nicaraguan. And we have a large black community. I used to go around claiming that there are 82 languages spoken in the elementary schools of this city. I have recently been corrected: There are 85.[9]

The resulting theme of the 1990 Festival was 'The World is Coming to Town', taking its cue from the art forms of the Pacific from East Asia to Latin America. The budget was six million dollars. In 1984 the *Los Angeles Times* had been the sole sponsor of the event. In 1990 supporters besides the Times Mirror Corporation included AT&T, Occidental Petroleum, as well as the Japanese Business Association which donated two million dollars.[10] Like his Eisenhower Theatre experiment at the Kennedy Center, 70% of events in the 1990 Festival were free – 'Really! If you're going to have a populist event, please, it has to be populist!' Sellars declared. Altogether the Festival featured 2900 performers in 550 events in 70 venues around the city. The curated programme contained 1400 artists in 150 events – 500 participants were from Pacific Rim countries, 900 were from Southern California. These numbers were supplemented by 1500 Californian artists who presented their work in 400 events in the 'Open Festival'.[11] In the official Festival programme book, the Mayor Tom Bradley recalled the historical segregation of the city and suggested that the task of the Festival was 'to open up Los Angeles's neighbourhoods to one another as never before, to introduce us to ourselves'.[12]

Sellars spent much of the three years before the Festival travelling around the countries of the Pacific Rim searching for work to present in LA. The participants in

the event that resulted included: from Japan, the traditional Shinto troupe Ueneda Kagura, the Butoh company Karas, and the folk dance company Gujo Hachiman which conducted concerts and dance sessions on Santa Monica pier; Indonesia's Court performers of the Yogyakarta Palace including the complete retinue of sixty-five dancers and musicians who make up the sacred royal Gamelan orchestra who performed the last section of the *Mahabharata*; a children's dance troupe from Bali; from the Chendo Islands of Korea a demonstration of shamanistic ritual featuring a religious trance ceremony accompanied by traditional music; the Kulintang Gong dance ensemble from the Philippines; the 32-member national Dance Company of Cambodia; the Likay Folk Opera Theatre of Thailand; the Hula Kahiko from Hawaii; fourteen performers of Aboriginal dance and music from the Mornington Islands; the Inupiak Eskimo dancers from King Island, Alaska; the Mexican dance company Tarhumara Marachines – interpreters of the 'prayer in motion' style of dancing found in the border region between the US and Mexico; the Chilean theatre company El Grand Circo Teatro; a Wayang Kulit show from Java; and Chinese Kun opera amongst many other events. From America projects included Sellars's own *Nixon in China*; Native American dancers representing the Pacific tribes; Reza Abdoh's production of *Pasos en la Obscuridad*; Dennis Cooper's AIDS play *The Undead*; as well as a major exhibition at UCLA, 'Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation'; films on Native American culture at the Huntington Library; and a poetry symposium entitled 'Women's Voices in the New World'.[13]

In the three years before the next festival, Los Angeles experienced some of the most difficult events in its history. The world was coming to town for all the wrong reasons. The acquittal of the police officers charged with the beating of the black motorist Rodney King in 1992 and the city-wide civil unrest which followed

radically destabilised Los Angeles's sense of itself. Its people were forced to confront their identity in order to address pressing issues of authority, justice and racial equality, not just to appreciate their fascinating multicultural nuances. The interpretation of the events of 1992 was highly contentious, with debates even raging about what to call the disturbance: Riots? Insurrection? Rebellion? Uprising? While people on the streets were asking 'Who owns our city?', the festival organisers asked 'Who owns our culture?'[14] In a bitterly divided city where citizens were burning their own neighbourhoods, attacking fellow citizens, and being attacked by the forces of law and order, what it meant to be an Angelino, and an American, returned as the city's most highly charged cultural issues. Sellars asked, 'What do you think of as your home? Is it this place where you go home to everyday or – as many people in Los Angeles come from somewhere else – is it a memory that you are carrying of home? Is home really somewhere else?'[15] The focus of the 1993 festival became 'African, African-American and Middle-Eastern people in Los Angeles, the Americas and throughout the world'. Susan Berman, director of the Skirball Museum, which is dedicated to Jewish cultural issues, explained the official festival theme, 'Home, Place and Memory':

> Home means we're here now, and how can we be served here on a more essential level? Place focuses the question by asking: 'Do Jews consider their home Israel? Do Africans consider their home Africa?' Memory is a curatorial focus, allowing what we are bringing from abroad to flow through the prism of memory, rather than just bringing in the best foreign events.[16]

After the 1990 festival, local artists still complained that they felt excluded from the official programme which they believed was, to a large extent, imposed on the city externally. In 1993, over half the featured artists were from LA, and the festival committee with its single artistic director had been dissolved into a wider committee of twenty people, each of whom had artistic input into festival

programming. In effect, the 1993 project became an exercise in new types of festival-making, with great emphasis placed on imaginative interfacing between organisers and participants. The committee was comprised of academics, artists and presenters, chaired by Sellars, whose mandate was to create a festival with a broad philosophical underpinning – an experiment in artistic authority.[17] After the riots, finances were lean in Los Angeles with fewer major sponsors willing to invest large sums of money in return for uncertain corporate kudos. In 1984 there was one sponsor, in 1993 there were 200; however the budget was reduced by $2m to $4m, and the curated festival ran for just two weeks. Nevertheless, attendances which had been 150,000 in 1987 had grown to 500,000 by 1993. Besides the main fourteen day festival, there were seven themed 'Cluster Weeks' of associated cultural events, featuring educational programmes, symposia and exhibitions, with the titles 'Spirituality in Art', 'Voices of Liberation – Women', 'Streetlife/Art/Marketplace', 'Recovering One's History', 'Healing and Purification', 'Reconciliation/Atonement', and 'Cultural Survival'.[18]

In the main festival, events included the Mivlevi Dervishes from Turkey; the African Cultural Group – a troupe of Nigerian-born, LA-resident masquerade dancers; the Travelling Jewish Theatre from San Francisco; Ahmakhosi – a youth theatre/music/dance collective from Zimbabwe; the Diwan Ensemble of Yemenite Women who performed sacred Jewish music; Soulemani, a renowned 80 year-old Kurdish dotar player from Iran; Sabrin, a Palestinian singing group; and Shashmaqam, a Jewish musical ensemble from the Bikharan region of central Asia whose work is influenced by Arab and Persian forms. Other artists included Reza Abdoh who returned with his production of *Shahnmeh* adapted from the Persian Book of Kings; Bill T. Jones with his dance piece *Still Here* about people facing terminal illness; Sweet Honey in the Rock, the African-American gospel/activist group; the

jazz musician Ornette Coleman who collaborated on a piece with the Joajouka musicians of Morocco; Sellars with his own production of Aeschylus' *Persians*; Bernice Johnson Reagon curated a large-scale programme exploring the Californian gospel tradition; and Dagoberto Reyes, the Salvadoran sculptor, made a major piece exhibited in MacArthur Park illustrating the experience of his compatriots as immigrants in LA.[19]

The programming of both festivals was understood by the organising committee not only as the recognition of hitherto under-appreciated cultural work by the ethnic populations of Los Angeles – and the connections between those communities and their non-Western origins – but more significantly as a reorientation of cultural functions and priorities in contemporary America. The LA Festival's valorisation of the local, of the non-professional, of expression that undermined totalising national narratives, was a classic postmodernist challenge to the contemporary 'International Style' of cultural organisation. The development of a micro politics was a strategic move to 'speak the truth to power', impeding the homogenising juggernaut of late capitalism. Politics is the significant word here, for Sellars and the Festival committee understood their role – and that of the work presented – as a form of political intervention. This culture would be directional, not reflective: 'The task is to foster interaction, not spectatorship', Sellars remarked.[20] Culture would actively transform the material circumstances of the people in whose city it would be presented. Sellars repeated one example in many speeches and interviews:

> We decided to headquarter the events of the 1993 Festival...at the intersection where the first fires were started during the Uprising...During our first visit to this intersection, which has a park in it, we noticed that there were no street lights, there was garbage all over the place, the park had not been landscaped and the fountain had never been turned on. It turned out, in fact,

that there were street lights, just that nobody had cleaned the bulbs in ten years. They had not gotten regular garbage pick-up in this neighbourhood, and the park had been completely ignored by the Parks and Recreation Department. So as usual, while the media paints this as a group in America asking for special consideration, what people in this neighbourhood were asking for were basic rights that everyone else in the city enjoyed everyday. What we were able to do as an arts festival, was to go to the Los Angeles City Council and say, 'we have *Time* magazine and the *New York Times* showing up here. We need garbage pick-up, we need the streetlights on, we need the park landscaped and the fountain turned on'. All of these things happened and that is how the arts festival got basic city services in a major neighbourhood of Los Angeles.[21]

To justify the event, art was allocated a constructive social function. However, though the programming of the Festivals emphasised a pluralist approach to culture, the preoccupation of Sellars and the organisers with the binaries of centre versus margins, and high versus folk culture, suggests that their apparent ease with their own effortless postmodernism was troubled by the persistence of classic modernist dialectics.

When asked in an interview about the ground-rules for his own intercultural borrowings, Sellars answered with questions:

...must the discussion be left as the exclusive property of the experts?...at what point do cultural phenomena become common property, points in a discussion rather than ends in themselves, and move beyond copyrights, priesthoods, and the narrowly stated aims of the creators?... But it's a different rule of engagement for artists than it is for bureaucrats. People who are now writing the legislation for intercultural interactions, and who are deciding what is legal and what is not, what is permissible and what is not, what is officially offensive and what is not, have to realise that the artists have a different set of rules from the bureaucrats, the arts administrators, and the critics...It's exactly the people who are having these artificial reactions about multiculturalism, where they want to like it or they want to have a certain point of view or they want to be politically correct – a great deal of wishful thinking replaces

> actual engagement. I find that wishful thinking, that wish to be proper, frequently appropriate, but just as frequently condescending and counter-productive.[22]

It's clear from this interview that Sellars's principal irritation in intercultural engagements is with those individuals and institutions that would presume to mediate such events for spectators. In the LA Festival this concern manifested itself in an unwillingness to define or theorise the multiculturalism being so actively encouraged. Beyond the naïve exasperation of Rodney King's own 'Why can't we all get along?' plea, the thinking behind the juxtaposition of these very different national cultural events – events that could only occur together in the setting of a festival[23] – actively resisted serious consideration of the implications of such multicultural practices for the artists and cultures represented. This resistance was most clearly manifested in the discrepancy between the treatment of non-Western art – which was presented and interpreted as contained, non-referential, with spiritual value, in other words, 'art' – and art produced in America – which was expected to have some political, agit-prop, materialist function, in other words, 'culture'. Journalists reviewing the non-Western events frequently resorted to a type of ethnographic reportage, uncertain of the criteria for critical evaluation of such work.[24] American-produced pieces, especially those with recognisable cultural forms like Sellars's and Abdoh's, benefited from standard journalistic reviews. If we imagine the non-Western artists as spectators at each other's work, and speculate on their own mutual incomprehension, it becomes clear that the multiculturalism advocated by the LA Festival remained at the service of an exclusively Western gaze.

In contemporary Los Angeles the world has already come to town and it's for sale. Faced with Middle Eastern cuisine on supermarket shelves, whole Parisien streets in Disneyland, and Mann's Chinese Theatre, the presentation of 'real' Kun Opera, or Wayang Kulit, or Mariachi dancing becomes a determined search for a

purer, narrower cultural authenticity. The unmediated presentation of these events becomes their very point. Festival organisers presented non-Western art not only to affirm the cultural identities of immigrant communities in LA, but to educate the arts establishment in the USA about new ways to use and understand culture. Judith Mitoma, professor of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA, and curator of the 1990 festival, celebrated non-Western art because,

> Performance in these cultures occurs in the streets, in the temple, in the public square – contexts that democratise the arts to a great extent since access is assured for all levels of the community.[25]

Non-Western culture's value, therefore, is its example of art woven into the fabric of everyday life, the connection that's been missing in Western culture since the Enlightenment's segregation and secularisation of art. Sellars goes further. For him, non-Western art is so especially vital and dynamic because it resists commodification:

> So many of these cultures have been virtually invisible because they are not susceptible to commercial exploitation. They are about sharing. They are about a graceful attempt to acknowledge and respect the unknown. They are about boundaries and mutual obligations. They are about value before profit.[26]

In an almost New Age vein, Sellars asserts that such art fills a specifically spiritual vacuum because, 'We all need a collective experience and a part of our life that's not available to be bought and sold, and is private in the deepest and most beautiful sense'.[27] Mitoma stated that the intention behind the presentation of this non-Western art was 'to return to our spiritual essence through image, song and dance'.

The cumulative effect of such statements is the conclusion that non-Western performance became for Sellars in the LA Festivals both the template for radical social change in urban America and a kind of surrogate for his profound disenchantment with modernity. What made these pronouncements so compelling, yet

incongruous, was the history of his own involvement in the highest of Western artforms. Adam Leipzig, commenting on the Festival in *American Theatre*, noted that 'by finding the culture-bearers in communities throughout Los Angeles, and supervaluing their efforts to the point that they can share a platform with some of the best-known performers in the world, the festival makes an important statement that counters the professionalisation of human expression in America'.[28] In the view of the Los Angeles Festival, therefore, the time was ripe for art that is spiritual, free, amateur and found on the street. It's a vision that almost seems to fetishise non-Western art, imprisoning it in the Orientalist gaze its presence in LA was designed to counteract. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett observes that the rhetoric of the 1990 Festival organisers closely paralleled that of the American Arts and Crafts movement of the 1920s which, in search of '...a pre-industrial past that might save European and American society from itself...found the 'folk' at two social margins, the countryside and inner-city neighbourhoods with immigrants'.[29] The Festival organisers were attempting to map the values of non-Western 'Heritage' art – transplanted wholesale from its native environments – onto the hybrid immigrant cultures of contemporary Los Angeles.

Thus far, the Festival organisers' appreciation of non-Western performance seems motivated by an anti-modernist, almost reactionary desire to arrest the progress of modern culture. But there's another way to read this discourse. When Peter Sellars writes that immigration parallels 'an unnamed internal exile from our own selves... Our effort and our need to recover the lives of others is a need and a possibility to recover the missing pieces of our own lives',[30] he's expressing the classic impulse of the Western avant-garde since the early years of the twentieth century – turning to non-Western culture to fill a perceived domestic vacuum caused by the evils of

modernity. While the Arts and Crafts movement sought to preserve a mythical past, avant-gardism expressed a radical faith in the future. Proposing a vision of art as integrated with everyday life, resistant to commodification, spiritually driven, process (rather than product)-oriented, and frequently non-professional, the avant-garde's values closely resemble those of the Los Angeles Festival.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that avant-garde values were applied not only to the appreciation of the work, but also to its mode of reception. Confronted with performances that were completely unfamiliar, presented absolutely out of context, without reference to academic explanation, in foreign languages, with dense layers of culturally-specific signification and unique spiritual resonances, how was the average Angelino to receive the art of the Festival? Sellars's wariness of mediation provides a key: 'People [at the Los Angeles Festival of the Arts] had to look at stuff they did not know how to react to. That began to be an authentic experience. They simply had to react as human beings. They did not know [how to react]. They simply had to look'.[31] Here Sellars describes the process of defamiliarisation that is the foundation of avant-garde spectatorship. The work's very incomprehensibility was the key to its reception.

Avant-garde art throughout the twentieth century has emphasised the limits of language as a mode of communication – language can represent, but that language is always subjective.[32] It comes as no surprise, therefore, that Sellars should remark that 'communication reaches the most satisfying level when we don't have to talk'. The non-Western art presented in the Festival was being offered to spectators as an opportunity to 'unlearn' the reception strategies they usually applied to performance.[33] Audiences were expected to access meaning from the performance of native dancers from Korea in the same way they would attend a Robert Wilson

production, the music of John Cage, or even a Peter Sellars show. It was as though the Festival organisers assumed that the American avant-garde would have prepared spectators for the experience of non-Western performance. According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, such audiences

> value abstraction, pure form, pure theatricality, pure performance. They are open to chance operations, indeterminacy, improvisation. They enjoy the blurred boundaries between art and life and between performer and audience...these audiences have been trained to receive [performance forms from other social and cultural worlds] as if they had emanated from the avant-garde itself.[34]

The implications of this mapping of avant-values onto non-Western performance is, most significantly – and ironically, given the Festival's stated mandate – the erasure of difference. Every art work becomes readily (in)comprehensible through the vocabulary of the avant-garde, every art work serves the same purpose of defamiliarising an habituated Western audience. That imagined audience becomes increasingly narrow, as the cultural capital of the American avant-garde has only ever been available to a select section of the educated middle-class. This prompts speculation that the real mission of the Los Angeles Festival – conscious or unconscious – was to consolidate the precarious position of, or develop new audiences for, an endangered American avant-garde. If ordinary audiences could be trained to appreciate that which deviates from traditional narrative conventions, formal expectations, and 'appropriate' artistic content, then perhaps, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests, they might be willing to support the projects of Richard Foreman, Meredith Monk and the Wooster Group.[35]

This Festival's suspicion of expertise, of any intervention that might come between spectator and the 'raw experience' of performances, meant that the very literal, direct, referential meanings of these productions in their native contexts was

largely overlooked. It seemed that underlying the Festival's radical assertion of the significance of the local, the ethnic, of minority cultures previously neglected, was a gnawing anxiety about the real, material efficacy of its approach. Could the celebration of difference, the fanciful assertion that the centre-margins opposition was redundant, really change the social politics that led to the turmoil of 1992? The postmodernism which seems to frame the official doctrines of the LA Festivals appears to be figured throughout by an avant-garde ideology originally created to address the problems of modernity. In theory, postmodernism and avant-gardism are logically incompatible. The sheer confusion of the LA Festival suggests that in America their relationship may be more complex.

**II. Avant-garde Crises**

Stuart Hobbs suggests that 'three themes explain the relationship of avant-gardists to their culture: alienation, innovation, and the future'.[36] The work of Peter Sellars is aligned with, and diverges from, each of these themes. The confusion lies with chronology and nationality: After modernity, Hobbs's themes are de-contextualised and increasingly meaningless; in America, 'avant-gardism' survives as genre, with no real possibility of overturning the culture it was born to attack. The attraction of the avant-garde for artists like Sellars remains its tenuous potential for resistance to late capitalism, a potential grounded in history and memory as much as any concrete contemporary capability.

In the view of Peter Bürger, the goal of the early European avant-garde was to undermine the established institution of high art which legitimised bourgeois political and social domination.[37] From Dada through Surrealism and Constructivism, amongst

many movements, the avant-garde attempted to smash the idea of an autonomous high art by incorporating art with life. The avant-garde was an expression of dissatisfaction with the status quo, and a direct call for the mobilisation of art in any movement for change. By definition, its practitioners were alienated from the existing order – the credibility of their work rooted in its ideological independence and rigorous adversarial stance. Innovation was the *raison d'être* of that work, the relentless pursuit of the new countering the bourgeoisie's reliance on myths of the past to consolidate its own power base. In the vision of the avant-garde, the future assumed an equally mythical quality, the dream towards which individual artists aspired, a site of limitless possibilities for social change, and a talisman to shake a turgid present from its destructive complacency. Avant-garde art was art out of time, the future made manifest, its creators like self-appointed prophets. However, it is in this privileging of the future that the avant-garde project begins to unravel, for in rejecting the past, rejecting its parent modernism, it was rejecting a movement which was itself founded on a rejection of the past.[38] Avant-gardism was expressing an undeviating faith in the trajectory of 'Progress', itself the founding principle of the modernity whose depredations the avant-garde was created to counteract. The alienation so vital to the integrity of the avant-garde, the critical distance celebrated for its transformative capacity, proved much less clear-cut than generally imagined. The source of Sellars's confusion may lie in the often complex social work performed by the avant-garde. As Andreas Huyssen remarks,

> The futurist and constructivist confidence in technology and modernisation, the relentless assaults on the past and on tradition which went hand in hand with a quasi-metaphysical glorification of a present on the edge of the future, the universalizing, totalizing, and centralizing impetus inherent in the very concept of the avant-garde (not to mention its metaphoric militarism), the elevation to dogma of an initially legitimate critique of traditional

> artistic forms rooted in mimesis and representation, the unmitigated media and computer enthusiasm of the 1960s – all these phenomena reveal the secret bond between avant-garde and official culture in advanced industrial societies.[39]

As an American, Peter Sellars experienced this confusion most acutely.

Modernism *was* high art in Europe. In the early years of the twentieth century, America had no institutionalised high art that an avant-garde might have found worth resisting. Instead, American artists were generally attracted to the positive agenda of modernism with its maintenance of artistic autonomy and separation from material life.[40] (Much of Sellars's own career has been a plea for the centrality and institutionalisation of classical culture in America.) While the rise of fascism liquidated the avant-garde in Europe, by the 1950s America finally had an institutionalised high culture that required opposition. Modernism and New Criticism had become entrenched in American culture. While the European avant-garde had aspired to the merging of high and folk culture, in America pop culture was already at the heart of national discourse, and American avant-gardism advocated the incorporation of that pop culture into artistic life. The celebration of camp and kitsch, the playful, self-referential incorporation of ordinary objects into the work of art – such as the experiments of Andy Warhol – and the fascination with the media world envisioned by Marshall McLuhan, became some of the most striking themes associated with the new American avant-garde.

There was, however, another name for these experiments – 'postmodernism'. The revolt against abstract expressionism in the visual arts, and the radical experiments of groups like the Living Theatre, saw the alignment of avant-garde principles with a very real 'counter-cultural' movement in the USA in the 1960s.[41] The ethereal abstraction of modernism seemed distanced from the real political concerns of 1968 and the anti-War protests. Institutionalised art became a legitimate

object of critique. The uncritical approach to pop culture by many of the participants in this so-called avant-garde, the porous line between the celebration of pop as a radical political strategy and the reciprocal appropriation of the label 'avant-garde' by the culture industry, suggest that the concept of 'avant-garde' becomes impossible to clearly define after the mid-century. The avant-garde that survived in America after the 1960s is virtually impossible to distinguish from what has since been termed postmodernism. Cultural resistance in America happened to coincide with the collapse of received cultural stratifications, the demise of metanarratives, and the de-centring of the individual subject. Thus Andreas Huyssen suggests, 'Despite its radical and legitimate critique of the gospel of modernism, postmodernism, which in its artistic practices and its theory was a product of the 1960s, must be seen as the endgame of the avant-garde and not the radical breakthrough it often claimed to be'.[42]

The key problem postmodernism poses for avant-gardism is its tenuous capacity for resistance. So-called avant-garde artists in America survived by adapting the concept to their very specific needs. They had to cope with a theory whose defining elements were changing beyond recognition. The future was perhaps the biggest casualty of the postmodern assault on the avant-garde. With the demise of the ideology of modernity with its relentless emphasis on progress and innovation, the future so fetishised by the avant-garde lost its material significance. If history was over, the structuring of cultural creation within some framework of segregated time – discriminating between the finite art of the past, and the unlimited potential of the future – was now meaningless. The idea of the individual artist as someone miraculously 'ahead of his time' became a jaded cliché. The response of American avant-gardists was to turn to the here and now. Stuart Hobbs remarks that after the 1960s,

> Cultural radicals abandoned the idea of a unified culture with themselves in the vanguard. Avant-gardists looked less to the future and emphasised the infinite possibilities of meaning their work could have in the subjective present... Intellectuals increasingly focused on present injustices against particular communities and looked for elements of the past that could be used in political struggles.[43]

Peter Sellars's practice of updating, and his dramatisation of American social crises, perfectly illustrate Hobbs's theory. But Sellars's work never abandons this sense of the future. It's not that the future retains any sense of mythical power, rather Sellars refuses to subscribe to a nihilism that would render his work for social change meaningless. While the Second World War may have ended Europe's fantasies of the future, America retained such hopes almost to the 1970s. And even when society abandoned those hopes, the possibility of a different future was what still drove so-called avant-garde artists right up to the present.

Postmodernity has accomplished the avant-garde dream of incorporating art with life – art has been commodified. In fact, the whole discourse of the avant-garde has been appropriated by capital in the USA. If James Dean is twentieth-century America's personification of alienation, then the avant-garde doesn't stand much of a chance. Almost as soon as there was an American avant-garde, alienation became 'cool', innovation became 'hip' and avant-garde became 'style'. In the last twenty years, the visual history of the avant-garde has become the oxygen of advertising. With the post-structuralist assertion that meaning is formed in language, that language is completely subjective, and objective existence outside hegemonic discourse is impossible, the distanced metalanguage of avant-gardism vanishes. In postmodernity it becomes impossible to occupy some separate critical position to deconstruct artistic and cultural discourse. The response of artists like Sellars is the abandonment of the antagonistic alienation of the early European avant-garde in favour of a pragmatic

engagement with sources of power. Both Sellars's opera work and his involvement with the LA Festival might be read in this way – amicably inviting in audiences whose way of life Sellars believes may be the source of the problems his work addresses. More cynically, perhaps, the term 'avant-garde' has become a label of exclusivity and cultural currency, authorising and supporting the work of artists like Sellars. The American avant-garde is almost exclusively patronised by the bourgeois audiences its European predecessors set out to attack. As American mass culture explodes around the world, so increasingly the term 'avant-garde' has come to signify 'art' itself.[44]

The obvious result of this process is the loss of the avant-garde's real adversarial capacity. Examining the work of contemporary American avant-gardists – which is completely informed by postmodernism – it's true that in certain cases the content of such pieces is innovative, but invariably the form is not. Certainly in theatre, it's arguable that there has been no major formal innovation in the medium since the late 1960s. It's hard to be shocked by the incorporation of electronic equipment and multi-media technology into live performance today when Guy Debord wrote *Society of the Spectacle* in 1967, and Walter Benjamin 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in 1936. In fact, it's hard to be shocked by anything. If we examine the impact of the work of Gertrude Stein, James Joyce or Pablo Picasso in their respective times, it exceeds anything any contemporary avant-garde artist could imagine for their own work. The reason the work of Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, or Cindy Sherman seems innovative today may be because America didn't go through the birth pangs of Dada and Surrealism, and because in Europe those movements remain in the distant past. Sellars's diversion from the American performance avant-garde of the late 1960s and 70s makes sense therefore –

Meyerhold had dealt with most of their issues already. And the original European avant-garde had failed in its mission.

The neutralisation of the avant-garde in America was compounded by institutionalisation.[45] The massive growth in fine arts programmes at universities meant that artists finally had the opportunity to do their edgy work and get paid for it. Almost every major avant-garde theatre director in the USA now has a teaching position – Peter Sellars is at the World Arts and Cultures Department at UCLA – while what remains of 'serious' theatre is impossible to imagine without the interest of university drama departments for whose digestion almost all avant-garde performance is positioned. The postmodernism with which that avant-garde work is so inextricably intertwined finds its most fertile home in the university in the form of high theory. In fact, the fate of the avant-garde is now solely in the hands of the university, the gallery, and the festival, keeping this precious flame alive for the delight of the intellectually curious and the impossibly chic. Can any work claim to be avant-garde if it demands or relies on state funding?[46]

Despite its theoretical inconsistency, the contemporary attractions of avant-gardism are clear. Its valorisation of the heroic individual artist is another one of them. The discourse of the avant-garde fuels the myth of the artist as pioneer, leading his 'advance guard' to the frontline of innovation and experimentation. This 'great man' theory, the most conservative of ideologies, is ideally suited to the contemporary cultural obsession with celebrity and provides an outlet which both justifies theatrical *auteurism* and acceptably packages avant-garde art for bourgeois consumption. This trend, as well as America's unique cultural concerns, has shaped the actual content of contemporary avant-gardism. Stuart Hobbs, paraphrasing Warren I. Susman, remarks of the later American Avant-Garde that 'liberal and radical critics have been

concerned with cultural restrictions on individual expression and self-fulfilment. Self-fulfilment through the synthesis of art and life was the goal of members of the avant-garde'.[47] This move was compounded by the dominance of poststructuralism in the university, with its suggestion that meaning through language was a completely individual and subjective matter. In America, as it became increasingly apparent that wholesale social change would be impossible via the avant-garde, artists became increasingly preoccupied with individual identity and personal freedom, as if, somehow, the individual might be a catalyst for such change. This is precisely the concern of Peter Sellars's later work, which remains distrustful of any collective movements, and focuses on the personal transformation of the individual as the only hope for social salvation.

To compensate for the demise of the universalising themes guaranteed by the future, and the obvious narrowing of interests evident in the concern with individuation, material politics are foregrounded in the work of the contemporary avant-garde as never before. After the late 1960s there really were only two options for avant-gardists: a continuation of the intense formal experimentation embodied by artists like Warhol, and a type of socialist realism in which art returns to a sort of explicit agit-prop, with formal innovation set aside in favour of social discussion.[48] This move is most visible in America, where one branch of avant-garde performance functions as political activism driven by feminist, gay and racial concerns. Sellars's work hesitates somewhere between these two paths, with an obvious pull towards that contemporary socialist realism. He suggests that,

> Theater really is the only place left for politics. In politics now, candidates really can't speak with much complexity. Everybody's simplifying the issues and pretending they're a little simpler than we all really know they are. Everything gets boiled down to a slogan. And what I can do in theatre is present a political idea in its complexity again.[49]

In this way, Sellars and others try to reclaim the resistance promised by avant-gardism, but dilute both alienation and innovation in the process. The term 'avant-garde' becomes a bastion of security in a cultural landscape that has become increasingly disorienting. The fervour for social change expressed by Sellars is very different to the instincts of early avant-gardists like Jarry and Artaud whose desire for revolution was essentially formal – but politically conservative. As Peter Bürger remarks,

> When the [early] avant-gardists demand that art should become practical again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant. The demand is not raised at the level of the contents of individual works. Rather, it directs itself to the way art functions in a society, a process that does as much to determine the effect that works have as does the particular content.[50]

Contemporary 'avant-gardists' are constantly thwarted by a shape-changing postmodernity which is at one moment their friend, at the next their enemy. Their projects are frustrated by their knowledge that avant-gardism may easily function as an inoculation for bourgeois society, providing a harmless space in which to contain that culture's guilty conscience

In the exigencies of postmodernity the differences between modernism and the avant-garde become increasingly meaningless for the socially-committed artist. The foundation of the resistance offered by both movements is an individual subject that is socially-centred.[51] The principal threat posed by postmodernity is to that subject. Much of the performance work which falls under the rubric of the uniquely American postmodernist avant-garde described above is concerned with the shifting location of the contemporary subject and the implications of that shift for our capacity for social change. Peter Sellars's 1994 version of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* displays

many of these concerns – theatre as politics, the fate of the subject amid postmodern fragmentation – and it is to this production that I now turn.

### III. *The Merchant of Venice*

In Jean-Luc Godard's 1987 film of *King Lear*, Peter Sellars plays William Shakespeare V, Jr., an American descendent of the Bard on a European mission to recover the pieces of the fragmented text after a 'post-Chernobyl' catastrophe.[52] In this version, without the actual text of *Lear*, it is only the sign of Shakespeare that endures – 'Shakespeare' must be reconstructed from the splinters of the past, filtered through the consciousness of the present. It is appropriate that the individual charged with this task should be American. In this version Shakespeare is a site of cultural contestation, an icon whose secure place in the national pantheon is increasingly unstable. For Sellars, as for Godard in Europe, Shakespeare's interest lies not in his reign as a transcendent seer with universally applicable insights into the human condition, but rather as a sort of shattered mirror to contemporary Americans in all their fractured specificity.

Godard's 'Chernobyl' was not a literal apocalypse, but rather a metaphor for a major cultural shift, a time of philosophical uncertainty. For artists and social activists living in Los Angeles after the Uprising, the metaphor could easily apply to their city. The fires of LA were illustrations of failure, filling a vacuum left by 'twenty years of demented social policy'. According to Peter Sellars, the question the riots posed was, 'Is government more than a police force and a jail system?'[53] Compounding the sense of chronic disorientation was the inconsistent television reportage of events that was marked by a sensationalising incomprehension: 'I can't believe these people are

looting right in front of us. We're obviously watching people with no values!', Sellars paraphrased the TV reporters. The understanding of events within the city, and especially within the ethnic communities most visibly represented among the participants, seemed to completely contradict that of media commentators. Race appeared the most obvious explanation for what happened – poverty was a much more intractable proposition. After the utopianism of the LA Festivals with their openly activist agendas, it was clear that somehow culture had failed too. The question Sellars continued to ask was, 'How is it that the art which emerges from this city is so unrepresentative of the people who live here?' He read the events of 1992 as a cultural conflagration focused on the operation of video and the status of the filmed image – paradoxically, the film of the beating of Rodney King was read by the original jurors in such as way as to impute the victim with guilt. It was this visual discrepancy, this breakdown of teleliteracy, and the enormous questions it posed about the representation of the individual subject, the meaning of the filmed image, the mediatisation of culture, and the constitution of identity, that Peter Sellars attempted to address in his *Merchant of Venice*.

In the weeks after the riots, Sellars attended many political, community, and artists' meetings at which everybody was asking the same question – 'how do we as community members and as citizens respond to this crisis in our city? How do we articulate, represent and discuss the issues when the violence of this event was an expression of total frustration with the inadequacy of language itself?' It was clear to Sellars that any artistic response would have to emphasise the difficulties posed by the use and power of language in LA. Considering all of Sellars's protestations during the formation of the LA Festival's cultural policy – that the city should not look to the east coast or Europe for cultural authorisation – his choice of Shakespeare to treat the

issues surrounding the riots seems incongruous. His initial reason was language. Shakespeare could become a sort of neutral zone amid the cacophony of competing discourses:

> The level of rhetoric was so high on all sides, and I remember the real need to search for somebody who uses words with a certain level of precision. I think that's why I felt 'Okay, let's do Shakespeare', because he is somebody who uses words with the kind of exactitude that one rarely encounters. But also Shakespeare has this amazing gift of going head-on for the most violent and dysfunctional elements of society, and presenting them not groomed or scaled back.[54]

But Sellars's reasons for choosing Shakespeare went far beyond linguistic clarity or 'common ground'. A devised or traditional performance piece by Latino or African-American artists as a response to the LA uprising could have been easily assimilated by middle-class white America. Sellars, however, was taking on Shakespeare not as some buffer zone, but as a battlefield, a radical reappropriation of the sacred cultural icon, an assertion that Shakespeare – for better or worse – is as central for the ethnic minorities of LA as for the people of Cambridge, Massachusetts or Washington D.C. If, as Sellars argued, the actors cast in this production occupied marginalised positions within American culture, their act of speaking the established language of Shakespeare posed major questions.[55]

While Sellars's choice of Shakespeare could be read as conservative pragmatism – articulating an alternative political agenda from within existing power structures – it might also be interpreted as an attempt to unravel exclusivist national mythologies. When he was appointed director of the American National Theatre, Sellars grandly announced that his goal there was the wholesale invention of an American theatrical tradition. Critics were astounded, therefore, at his choice for the company's first production. Rather than turn to a new American play or old American

classic, Sellars, as observed in Chapter 1, opened the season with Timothy Mayer's production of *Henry IV Part I*. Sellars inverted the criticism by responding that, as everyone had expected him to produce some radical avant-garde piece, his presentation of a classic was, in fact, the more radical move. Shakespeare was the obvious choice. Sellars is fascinated by Shakespeare's status as a sort of Court poet, a witness to the workings of the state who was deeply aware of the machinations in the corridors of power, and whose work was presented in a climate of censorship. It was precisely this juxtaposition of art with material power that Sellars hoped to spotlight. 'How can you do Shakespeare if you haven't been inside the Pentagon?' he asked in a lecture at Indiana State University in 1997.[56] The choice of Shakespeare for the first production of the newly-formed ANT was Sellars's assertion that Shakespeare was an integral part of modern American culture, a Shakespeare inseparable from his history as power-broker in the nation's mythology.

Sellars presents Shakespeare as an accumulation of cultural meanings and transactions whose evolving place in American consciousness tracks the nation's journey from marginal colony to world superpower. This understanding is informed as much by performance history as by Shakespeare's place in the classroom, a history that weighs heavily on Sellars:

> Shakespeare is still the most produced playwright in America, so I consider him an American author, because clearly something's there that America responds to very deeply and always did – in the nineteenth century these touring companies were doing Shakespeare in the mining camps.[57]

The 'something' that America responds to is ambiguous and historically contingent. The country's appropriation of Shakespeare seems almost schizophrenic. That the Puritans fled from the perceived degeneracy of the Elizabethan theatres to the modern nation that would eventually adopt Shakespeare as its surrogate national poet is just

one of many paradoxes.[58] By the nineteenth century Shakespeare was being appropriated as both an act of resistance to a degenerate European culture, and as a bulwark against America's own perceived cultural inferiority. With the rise of the great American Shakespeare actors like Edwin Booth, Shakespeare was being politically neutralised to consolidate the myth of the heroic American individual.[59] America was imitating the British bourgeois canonisation of Shakespeare as the cornerstone of an exclusivist high culture. This particular form of appropriation might be read as evidence, Michael D. Bristol explains, of America's cultural immaturity, its unwillingness to make a real break with its English roots. Shakespeare could thus be used to conceal America's deep ambiguity about its definitions of democracy, and its affinity to ancient models of governance and authoritarian control. Bristol summarises the reasons for Shakespeare's endurance as a buttress of American culture by suggesting that '[Shakespeare]'s works are included on the general curriculum of socialisation because they are a codification of norms and of practical consciousness within a political economy based on individualistic social ideals'.[60] In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, according to Thomas Cartelli, Shakespeare was being used as a sort of 'reconciling mediator within the US between capital and labour on the one hand, and the new metropolitan centre and its immigrant 'colonies' on the other'.[61] It was against this cultural history that Sellars's situated his 1994 *Merchant of Venice*.

The production opened on October 10th, 1994 at Chicago's Goodman Theatre, then toured to Paris, Hamburg and London, was filmed in rehearsal by Sellars for the BBC, and may yet be made into a feature film.[62] Surprisingly, the production did not visit Los Angeles: the people of that city would surely have been the most appropriate

audience for this dense and difficult exploration of civic and national identity, and the dynamics of the 1992 riots. The negative reaction it received from many audiences, especially those in Chicago and London, suggested that no spectator outside Los Angeles could be fully sensitised to the urgency and complexity of the issues on stage. However, Sellars perhaps benefited indirectly from audiences who could not authoritatively challenge his personal presentation of real-life events in LA.

To develop his discussion of the racial issues Sellars cast African-Americans as the Jews, Latinos as the Venetians, Asian-Americans as the inhabitants of Belmont, and white European-Americans as Old Gobbo, Launcelot Gobbo, and the Duke. The premise was that this merchant was from Sellars's hometown of Venice Beach, while Portia's Belmont logically became Bel Air. With this concept Sellars hoped to, 'touch the texture of life in contemporary America; the metaphor and the reality of anti-Semitism is extended to include parallel struggles and their related issues'.[63] George Tsypin was credited as 'visual design consultant' in the programme. More substantial input was not required as Sellars staged *The Merchant* with a minimal set which exposed the wings, backstage area and flies. The floor of the Goodman stage was black and backed by a huge white cyclorama. Props consisted of sterile office furniture reconfigured by silhouetted stagehands for different scenes. The 'caskets' of Belmont were literally translated as coffins, painted gold, silver and lead-grey. Throughout the action, television monitors played video images of Los Angeles (filmed by Sellars himself) which included street scenes in Venice Beach, a beautiful Bel Air swimming pool, the Rodney King video, fires during the riots, and a Japanese animated film, *Kiki's Delivery Service* by Hayao Miyakazi, during the scene just before Jessica's elopement. Lighting effects were stark, with James Ingalls featuring his usual deep shadows on the cyc along with stark up-lighting. Salerio and Solanio

carried hand-held video cameras which they used initially to tease Antonio and which were later employed by other characters to project their images and faces live on the video screens. The sound score was complex – Bruce Odland, the sound designer, was present in rehearsals from the outset. Traffic and water sounds accompanied many Venice scenes while those in Shylock's dark and menacing office featured blipping computer noises. The mood of the production was dark, and the pace was slow. Sellars said originally that he wanted to produce *The Merchant of Venice* because it was a comedy. This production was almost completely drained of humour; where humour survived it was black and bitter.

Sellars applies a principle of inversion when reading Shakespeare:

> When I direct Shakespeare the first thing I do is go for cuts. I go through to find the passages that are really heavy, that really are not needed, places where the language has become obscure, the places where there has been a bizarre detour, where the scene could play with maximum impact if this one little speech were removed... I find all these passages, identify them, I go through the whole script marking those places that could really just impede the understanding for an audience. I take those moments, those elements, and I make them the centrepiece, the core of the production, because those are the things I resisted.[64]

For Sellars, Shakespeare's history of canonisation and the legacy of accumulated meanings often serve to obscure the texts themselves. Sellars never hopes to strip away these layers of applied meaning – rather, they *are* the truth of Shakespeare. The resulting thesis of his historicist *Merchant of Venice* was that capitalism is the root of modern racism. In an interview, he asserted that,

> This play is about what happens when market values overtake a society completely... Shakespeare was writing when the entire capitalist, colonialist system was being put in place. In 1602, the Dutch East India Company is chartered. In the previous century, contacts with the Third World were random acts of exploitation by gentlemen explorers. Whereas within Shakespeare's generation it's set up as an organised, systematic development where the navy

> goes out based on what four or five powerful businessmen would like. England is the economic and military superpower... 'How will you use this?' is Shakespeare's question. If you set up exploitative relationships with people – or peoples – what is the karmic result?[65]

Setting aside for the moment the validity of Sellars's claims, it's clear that the LA setting and racial casting of this production were classic examples of the postmodernist avant-garde's attention to politics and sites of localised injustice. On further examination, however, Sellars's underlying concerns were with a broader modernity – in this case the ideology of unfettered progress that justifies colonialist expansion. Sellars mapped Elizabethan colonialism onto economic and race relations in contemporary Los Angeles, positioning Shakespeare as a sort of prophet of modernity. The human toll exacted by modernity in *The Merchant* was similar to that articulated in his other productions. Once again, Sellars was attempting to break down the fundamental contradictions at the core of capitalism, demonstrating the psychic impossibility of maintaining the individual/collective binary at the heart of American subjectivity. This recurring issue of the 'schizophrenic' American psyche was a major theme of this production, and the reason why the overwhelming tone of the piece was bleak. The production opened in darkness. Antonio stood on the forestage right, uplit and drawn. The merchant of the title, he was the American individual, the consumer who filled his life with material goods and services to numb the pain at his core. Now the anaesthetic has worn off. Despairing and alone, he faced his demons:

> In sooth, I know not why I am so sad:
> It wearies me; you say it wearies you;
> But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
> What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
> I am to learn;
> and such a want-wit sadness makes of me,
> That I have much ado to know myself. (I.i.1-6)

In a motif repeated throughout the production, the key opening lines of a scene were spoken in near darkness, almost outside the narrative of the piece, and were then

repeated immediately as part of the scene played in full – dramaturgical signposts for the whole play. Portia's opening line in Scene II was a similar expression of personal sadness:

> By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world. (I.ii.1)

The woman who has almost everything is bitter and dissatisfied. The money she has inherited from her father is a burden – her love life is inherently linked to finance, and is directed from beyond the grave. Yet while her noble birth stifles Portia's search for love, she cannot fully abandon the privileges of wealth. We see it in her cynicism when suitors of other 'complexions' fail to decipher her father's riddle, and when the mercy she eulogizes in the penultimate scene quickly changes to vengeance. But though others suffer her cruelties, her own crimes return to hurt her again and again. It was this self-betrayal that Sellars repeatedly foregrounded.

Sellars's staging implicated the corrupting taint of capital in just about every human relationship in the play. Antonio and Bassanio were lovers in this production, making Bassanio's betrothal to Portia even more mercenary. If Bassanio is already in love, then he only wants Portia because she's 'richly left'. His trip to Belmont became as much an act of self-betrayal as a romantic and financial adventure. Portia's riches would give Bassanio the opportunity of acquiring the luxury of wealth without the unseemly taint of trade – the perfect way to dance around the glaring contradictions of burgeoning capitalism.

Bassanio's discussion of his plans with Antonio was perhaps the most tender scene of the production. As Bassanio entered, Sellars dimmed the lights in front while the lovers sat on a coffin to the rear of the stage. Their backs to the audience, silhouetted against the cyclorama, their faces were visible only on the television monitors. It made for a scene of painful intimacy as Bassanio explained to Antonio

why he needs to marry Portia and, in effect, end their relationship. This was a deep and harsh love, a moment when the necessities of capital brutally infringed on the workings of the human heart. Already, in Sellars's reading, the love relationship between Bassanio and Portia, and indeed that between Antonio and Bassanio, was underpinned by cynicism, deceit, and betrayal.

Once again, the figure of the ascetic – like Don Giovanni, like Theodora – revealed the impossible contradictions at heart of this proto-Enlightenment world. Paul Butler's Shylock was the philosophical and dramatic core of Sellars's *Merchant of Venice*. This production centred on Shylock's construction as subject – as racial subject, as economic subject. Shylock is ironically the perfect embodiment of high capitalism, living the ideology that structures his society to its logical limits. His ultimate goal is to make money, and he takes this as far as it will go – he makes money from money. He is the spectre of truth that haunts capitalism, the rapacious alter ego of Venice's merchants. Racially different, he becomes the ideal scapegoat for an emerging bourgeoisie altogether uncomfortable with the logic of the system that seems to benefit it so handsomely. Shylock doesn't affect the easy bourgeois balance of national loyalty and relentless self-interest. He poses a threat because his loyalties as a Jew extend beyond the nation/city state. The institutions of the collective fail to keep his rampant individualism in check, the rampant individualism which the merchants Bassanio and Antonio know is the foundation of their whole life philosophy.

In Act III, Scene i, when Salerio and Solanio report that Bassanio's ships have been caught in storms, Shylock delivers his most powerful speech, angrily ordering Bassanio to 'look to his bond'. In Sellars's staging it was a scene of deepest wrath. Though the atmosphere was menacing and cruel, we were not invited to hate Shylock,

however. His demands were indeed unjustified, but the audience was positioned to sympathise with this dignified man, wracked with pain over his own abject position in society, the loss of his daughter, and the loss of himself. At no time in this production was Shylock driven by purely sadistic malice. Rather, his reactions were those of a cornered animal – a form of slightly crazed self-defence. His face multiplied on the monitors, his speech delivered with an eloquent nobility, Shylock became a ghost-figure, like some Old Testament God beyond the parameters of material reality, pointing a moral, accusing finger at the greedy merchants attempting to destroy him.

In this *Merchant of Venice*, human agency was completely determined by choice – a sacred American right Sellars attempted to demythologise. He seemed to argue that while free choice in contemporary America is more circumscribed than it might appear, abdication of the ability to choose mounts to irresponsible negligence. All the characters face profound choices – which casket? Whether to stay loyal to one's father, or whether to abandon him? Whether to stay with the man one loves or leave him for wealthy woman? Whether to keep one's wife's ring or give it away? The most obvious metaphor for these themes is the riddle set up by Portia's father to select her husband. Each suitor must choose a casket that will determine the course of their lives. In this production, when Morocco and Arragon chose incorrectly, they opened the upright coffins to discover their fate and were confronted not just with a nasty riddle, but with full-length mirrors. Their subjectivity (and the audience's) was constituted in their reflections staring back at them, imprisoning them in eternal chastity. Portia's racist sneers about the two hapless suitors – one African-American, the other Middle Eastern – rang distinctly hollow in this production. We were encouraged to have nothing but sympathy for these two subjects hailed into a

capitalist system where consumer choice is the mythical guarantor of individual freedom and agency, concealing the racist apparatus of power.

Only three characters were white in this production, the Duke, Old Gobbo, and his son Launcelot Gobbo. Old Gobbo was an eccentric vagabond. He walked the streets in rags, mumbling to himself, wearing a sandwich board with a quotation from the Old Testament – 'The Fall of Babylon'.[66] Young Gobbo was the archetypal alienated Yuppie, the empty corporate drone who beavers away as Shylock's abused office worker. He was deeply unhappy, hating his job and himself. Again, his subjectivity was defined in choice: should he, or should he not leave 'the fiend'? Old Gobbo was the shameful, messy parent the upwardly mobile son desperately wanted to conceal. In this production, Young Gobbo's immersion in the corporate rat-race had erased his identity: 'Do you not know me, father?' he asks bitterly. In Act II, Scene 2 Young Gobbo dropped to the ground, grabbing his father's knees in supplication, telling him in agony 'I'll give you news of your son' – the news of self-betrayal and abandoned integrity.

To analyse the LA riots Sellars extended the capitalist conflict between individual and group to racial matters. Jessica was caught in a double bind – her affair with Lorenzo was sad and troubled. These weren't happy lovers gleefully abandoning the tyranny of parental control – Jessica's was an individual crisis of identity and personal direction. In Sellars's version she was also having an empty, mercenary affair with the troubled Launcelot Gobbo which was conducted in torrid tableaux. Her own scenes were staged in almost total darkness. In confrontation with her father or Gobbo, she sat on the floor, downstage, like some abject girl-woman. Her individuality was stifled by the burden of having to defend her race against racist onslaught. Defence of her ethnicity – in this casting, simultaneously Jewish and

African-American – meant that individuality was subsumed beneath the monolith of racial identity. In rehearsal, Sellars had the actress Portia Johnson read from Adrienne Rich's collection of poems *My Native Land, My Life* – another narrative of a headstrong Jewish woman's difficult struggle for personal identity and independence from a domineering father. It was this suffocation, as well as the damage racism had inflicted on her father, that Jessica was trying to escape.

Morocco's opening line took on an ominous significance in this production: 'Mislike me not for my complexion', the black actor Tyrone Beasley pleaded into a microphone while his face was magnified on the TV screens. In the BBC film of the rehearsals, *This Is Now Our Time*, Sellars made every actor repeat this line. Each player – black, white, Asian and Latino – was compelled to feel what it is to be marked, to have skin colour as the touchstone of identity. Actual footage of the actors performing Shakespeare was interspersed with their filmed reading of some of the key texts of post-colonial and American race theory. Significant passages from *The Merchant* were vividly brought to life by counter-readings from Noam Chomsky's *Necessary Illusions* and *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*, Manning Marable's *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America, The Open Veins of Latin America* by Eduardo Galancea, and Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. In a production in which race issues were directly linked to the history and politics of post-colonialism, Sellars drew an allegorical parallel between the colonialist projects of Elizabethan England and contemporary American neo-imperialism both within and outside the USA.

But while the connections Sellars was making certainly compelled spectators to rethink the history of race in America and the ethics of contemporary America's

global role, both race issues and postcolonialism were under-theorised in this production. Shakespeare's Venice was indeed a trading city, but Sellars over-estimated its historical racial diversity to authorise his own version of Los Angeles.[67] With an African-American Shylock, Sellars invoked multiple, often conflicting connotations. Though the presence of a black man on video did provoke vague echoes of the events that led to the riots, Sellars's racial casting provided no clear allegories. As both Albert Williams for the *Chicago Reader* and Robert Brustein for the *New Republic* remarked, this Shylock was more Clarence Thomas than Rodney King.[68] More serious, however, was W. B. Worthen's accurate assessment that by making Shylock black, Sellars ignored the specificity of anti-Semitism, and also that the rest of his updating was patently incorrect – Latinos are not Los Angeles's most upwardly-mobile citizens, nor are they engaged in institutionalised racial animosity towards African-Americans; Asian-Americans are not the supremely wealthy class and don't generally live in Bel Air. There was a danger that in this scenario, actors were actually required to perform their race, that Sellars mimicked the ideology he was directly critiquing, reverting to essentialist prejudices in order to somehow smash them apart. Sellars's standard response to such observations is that, as in all his work, he was not attempting to create some seamless allegorical correspondence between the play text and present-day Los Angeles, but rather was invoking race in seemingly inexplicable ways in order to both echo the confusion of recent events in LA, and more importantly, to disrupt contemporary American racial mythologies. It's a disingenuous response. The production traded on its controversial political nuances, promising the spectator a radical new reading of real events in Los Angeles, but actually delivered the now familiar avant-garde experience of defamiliarisation by way of allegorical inconsistency and sheer incomprehensibility. The confusion of the

updated concept was designed to provoke the spectator into daring new ways of thinking about race, while steadfastly holding its own political cards close to its chest.

The problems associated with the race metaphors reveal a deep uncertainty at the core of this piece; for me, its real dynamic lay elsewhere. The racial casting was not the most striking element – for most critics and spectators, the use of video technology was more impressive (or distracting). I believe that beneath the heavy-handed political allegories of this production lay more highly-charged formal concerns. There were five television monitors on stage – two on the floor, one on a stand, and two hanging from the flies; another five monitors were suspended above the audience in the auditorium.[69] Sometimes all screens would feature the same image, at other times they showed a mixture of the live and the recorded. At times the live recording of actors was actively incorporated into the dramaturgy of the production – in the opening scene Salerio and Solanio were skittish homeboys dressed in streetclothes of baggy shorts and baseball caps, who used their camcorders to tease the sensitive, middle-class Antonio, feeding closeups of his distressed face to the TV monitors; later they announced the loss of his ships as a jokey, sneering TV news report. In other scenes, live video recording took on a cinematic function, relaying images of characters ostensibly unaware of the camera's presence. The most intimate scenes between friends and lovers, played statically and obscurely on stage, took on a highly-charged emotional force when presented as a series of close-ups, multiplied throughout the theatre. In these scenes, though the characters would sometimes film each other, the camera assumed an almost transparent function – in their logic, it was perfectly normal for one character to video another: the camera became another pair of eyes; 'character' became presentational in the most Brechtian sense. In the last use of live video, cameras were sometimes positioned to convey visual information to

spectators that they could not possibly glean from the corporeal *mise-en-scène*. Shylock's 'Hath not a Jew eyes?' speech was delivered upstage in shadow, its emotional force delivered solely through the multiple close-up images of Paul Butler's face on the monitors while the rest of the stage was in near darkness; in the courtroom of Act V, Scene 1, the judge sat with his back to the auditorium – a camera positioned on his desk provided the only live pictures of his face for the audience. In the final scene, in the cold dark hours just before dawn, the monitors remained on but without images, their screens filled only by the familiar deep blue of the television video channel. Sound was also distorted and fragmented, with microphones used to amplify major speeches spoken in whispers or to finesse the texture of discrete pieces of dialogue. At times voices seemed disembodied, the emotional field shifting again from the whole visible body to its constituent parts. Mark Swed writing for the *Los Angeles Times* described the effect:

> All of Shakespeare's text is included, but not all is heard. Actors swallow lines, emphasise words in their own ways, amplification plays its own internal havoc on the lines as they come and go. Some lines are spoken simultaneously, whispered inaudibly. The result is a familiar play changed and surprising. It is, in fact, changed almost as if it had become an opera, with nearly every line is heard in a different context and inflection that it had ever been before.[70]

Sellars's sustained technological treatment of live performance approximated the human effects of television's mediation of real events in Los Angeles in the 1990s. The distorted reporting of the 1992 Uprising was just the starting point for a trenchant critique of the news media's presentation of fact as narrative. Ironically, Sellars's theatre was attacking what it perceived as a cynical dramatising of human crises. The most striking moments of this scrutiny occurred in Act IV. The climax of *The Merchant of Venice* comes, of course, during the court scene when each of the

disputing characters' versions of events is articulated, interpreted and adjudicated. In the 1990s the courtroom literally became the 'scene' of American national life, assuming an almost iconic status as the site where the most difficult national 'problems' are debated and analysed. The operation of justice and the use of law test the soundness of a society. In the courtroom the established myths of the nation are played out, contested and re-evaluated.

In the 1990s we witnessed the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas congressional hearings, the trials of the police officers charged with beating Rodney King, the OJ Simpson trial, and the impeachment of Bill Clinton, along with a host of other tabloid murder trials. In these symbolic dramas, individuals were ostensibly tried for criminal offences. In fact, it is the nation itself which has become the defendant, as the analysis of individuals – particularly their relationships and sex lives – becomes a test of what the country thinks about itself. Mediated disputes played out in front of an audience have become a phenomenally popular television genre with Rikki Lake, Jerry Springer and Judge Judy vying for audiences with the latest outrageous sensation.[71] The televising of these events makes the courtroom a loaded, sacred space in which the fate of individuals is decided – an arena of public entertainment and national debate. Never before have mass media, popular culture, politics, national symbolism and the fate of the individual – human drama – been so profoundly intertwined: a state of sheer confusion that Sellars's *Merchant of Venice* attempted to parse.

As the scene began, the light increased to cold white and stage-hands silently brought on the office furniture that would form the courtroom. The scene was accompanied by Morton Feldman's chilling piano score – just the alternation of a few close range notes. The judge's face appeared live on some of the TV monitors while others displayed the King video and scenes of the fires in the riots. For the first half of

the scene, Paul Butler as Shylock was articulate and immovable – 'I'll have my bond' became his stony mantra. Despite Portia's profound 'The quality of mercy is not strain'd' speech, the case seems to be going Shylock's way. Sellars handled Portia's reversal of Shylock's position with shocking harshness. The embodiment of wisdom who spoke so eloquently about the virtues of compassion suddenly, almost inexplicably, became nasty and mean-spirited. In this staging, when the tables turned viciously on Shylock, the elimination of his race and religion appeared unbearably humiliating. Antonio, who just a few minutes before was pleading for mercy, became a hungry dog baying for blood and vengeance. In Sellars's production the American criminal justice system seemed to be on trial. The proceedings directly echoed the Rodney King case: the black man who begins the case as chief witness for the prosecution ends up indirectly as the defendant.

While Sellars's use of video appeared overtly political – reawakening audience members to the distorting effects of TV images on their understanding of real events – its effects on actual spectatorship were formal and philosophical. Mary Poole, Professor of Acting at Northwestern, described the experience:

> It took me up to twenty minutes to figure out how to watch it… It was the television that was the nexus of what was happening. The stage became my reference point, my 'reality check', the whole reality, and the television became the moments of emotional reality. I was going back and forth in the wrong patterns. I traditionally go to the actors for my emotional information. Once I figured out how to read it all it became extremely powerful… I had to give up my Shakespeare, to release my traditional ideas of what theatre should be, to hear it. I ended up bonding with the camera person, and the camera became a character.[72]

In fact, character was in jeopardy in this production. In the context of Jean Baudrillard's assertion, paraphrased by Thomas Docherty, that 'technology has so

expanded and perfected the techniques of representing the 'real' that the ontological status of real life itself has been called into question',[73] Sellars's use of technology displayed a profound anxiety about the state of subjectivity in postmodernity. Spectators had to mediate between the live body and its on-screen representation. Such a scenario might be read as either an appropriation of the technological construction of contemporary subjectivity, or as nostalgia for the unified subject of modernity, an exorcism of the demons of fragmentation and displacement. In this production, the fragmentation of subjectivity by a ravenous image-addicted media culture was articulated through the technological displacement of the individual performer. The austere, melancholy tone of the piece suggested that the intimacy provided by technology came at the cost of real human connection. This seemed to be the experience of the audience – most nights in Chicago over half of them left at intermission.

Once again, Sellars was articulating a sense of loss, a nostalgia that initially marked his use of technology in *The Merchant of Venice* as not especially innovative. As early as the late 1960s, video artists like Bruce Nauman and Nam June Paik were using technology to explore an individual subject in crisis; Hansgunter Heyme's 1979 Cologne production of *Hamlet* featured the same live video feed of the actors, along with no less than a hundred television monitors showing the evening news – a mediatised Elsinore;[74] American artists like the Wooster Group were using film and video throughout the 70s, gleefully playing with their capacity to decentre identity and multiply theatrical character. Even Meyerhold, Sellars's guiding light, developed his Constructivist aesthetic to embrace the liberating possibilities of technology and human labour. The doom-filled intensity of video in *The Merchant* seemed almost Luddite in comparison.

However, I believe that if we juxtapose the material politics of contemporary Los Angeles with these familiar formal and philosophical concerns the production's conclusions are compelling. The tension Sellars's *Merchant* articulates is between the *alienation* of the individual subject in modernity – represented by the marginalised human body of the performer – and the *fragmentation* of that subject in postmodernity – visible most acutely in the disembodied images of that performer on screen.[75] So far, so familiar. Analysing the role of technology in the King case, however, Sellars asks if that theory of fragmentation is applied *selectively*, and if so, whose interests it might serve. During the first Simi Valley trial of the LAPD officers, the footage of the beating was broken down into second-by-second frames, each static gesture of Rodney King's physical resistance read by the defence as evidence of his history of, and potential for, violent aggression. Though King was plainly outnumbered and defenceless, his existence as an African-American man – outside the temporal and visual frame of the video evidence – guaranteed for jurors his implication in and responsibility for his own assault. King was reduced from an integrated, individuated human subject to what Judith Butler has described as a 'phantasm of white racist aggression'.[76] The video became a surrogate for Rodney King himself, who was reconstituted as a series of fractured images circulating electronically which could be edited and reinterpreted over and over. In classic poststructuralist lingo, the transcendental signifier, the sense of real presence, could be endlessly displaced and deferred. Postmodern technology was at the service of an explicitly racist agenda. And the camera never lies.

The reverse side of Sellars's nostalgia for the struggles of modernism is his realisation that the decentering, presence-obliterating fragmentation of subjectivity associated with postmodernity has been the life experience of minorities in Western

culture for long before anybody thought of a camera, let alone video. It seems especially convenient that after thirty years in which women, gays and lesbians, and people of colour were finally recognised as integrated human beings rather than collections of signs, suddenly their identities are diffuse, plural and fragmented. Before the emancipatory potential of modernity is fully, or at least equally, realised, the goalposts have shifted. Those long denied the benefits of an integrated individual subjectivity, however flawed the concept, are suddenly informed that such an aspiration is both undesirable and impossible. The persistent colonial model of social relations which Sellars identifies in contemporary LA disrupts the notion that postmodernity is somehow our *collective* cultural state. As Simon During remarks, 'the concentrated annihilation of the postcolonial is actually necessary to any argument which attempts to show that 'we' now live in postmodernity'.[77] Initially postmodernism and postcolonialism seem to converge in the same project. However, on closer examination, it's clear that a denied or oppressed subjectivity must be first expressed before any breakdown of the idea of a unified, autonomous subject can take place.

The key problems of LA – economic inequality, deprivation, alienation – are the problems of modernity. Those with access to, and control of, the fragmenting technology of postmodernity tend to be those who already possess the luxury of integrated, autonomous subjectivity – the white middle-classes. Displaced, de-centred subjectivity is an attractive prospect for those who feel trapped by the intractable binaries at the core of modernity's fantasy of unified subjectivity, those alienated by their own participation and implication in late capitalism. That fragmentation denies access to those who have never had the dubious benefits of such participation. In the headlong rush towards postmodernity, Sellars does a double-take and concludes that

this new theory of social organisation is just as potentially totalising, universalising and centrist as its cultural predecessor.

My reading of this production is perhaps over-sympathetic. Sellars never had to face the audience most invested in the production's subject matter. The audiences who saw it were often alienated. Critics, especially the British ones, savaged it. W. B. Worthen's analysis was the most comprehensive: he noted Sellars's paradoxical reliance on Shakespeare to authorise – and advertise – a production that pretended to dismantle and disperse the cultural capital of Shakespeare the icon. Sellars's much-trumpeted use of non-verse-trained actors, mostly seen on TV where 'they get to play gang members, drug-dealers and cops', was neutralised by Shakespeare's positioning as universalist, cultural prophet. The racial implications of his casting and his reading of the text were often simplistic. Nevertheless, beneath the chaotic surface of this confused and often confusing production, individual dramatic moments possessed great emotional power. These moments displayed an unfashionable humanism that represented both a welcome antidote to the violent fragmentation of Los Angeles in the early 1990s, and a committed effort to explain that crisis. Kwame Anthony Appiah imagines an anti-essentialist humanism, wary of both the modern and the postmodern, which I believe is similar to that articulated in much of Sellars's work:

> What I am calling humanism can be provisional, historically contingent, anti-essentialist (in other words postmodern) and still be demanding. We can surely maintain a powerful engagement with the concern to avoid cruelty and pain while nevertheless recognising the contingency of that concern. Maybe, then, we can recover within postmodernism the postcolonial writer's humanism...while still rejecting the master narratives of modernism.[78]

In this production, theatre was on trial along with Shylock, OJ Simpson, and the LAPD. Sellars was clearly on the side of the defence.

## Notes

[1] Peter Sellars, 'The Vision Thing', *Artforum*, September 1992, p. 74.
[2] Thomas Docherty describes this paradox in his introduction to 'Crisis in the Avant-Garde', *Postmodernism: A Reader*, London and New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 217.
[3] For my discussion of the avant-garde agenda of the LA Festival I am indebted to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's superb analysis of the 1990 Festival in her essay 'Undoing the Ethnographic', in her book *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums and Heritage*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.
[4] See Adam Leipzig, 'Acts of Imagination', *American Theatre*, May/June 1993, p. 23: 'I recall leading a delegation of local theatre artists to the OAF's cavernous offices one morning in late 1983. Fitzpatrick appeared, flanked by a staff of 10. It took me five minutes to present the ways in which local theatres would like to be included in the festival, after which Fitzpatrick announced this was not possible, stood and left the meeting'.
[5] Peter Sellars, 'Beginning to Notice What We Are', *Los Angeles Times*, 5 February 1989, Calendar Section, p. 75.
[6] Quoted in Judith Michaelson, 'Director Sellars: You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet, *Los Angeles Times*, 13 December 1987, Calendar Section, p. 5.
[7] See Adam Leipzig, p. 26.
[8] Peter Sellars interviewed by John J. Flynn, 'Transiting from the "Wethnocentric"', in Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta (eds.), *Interculturalism and Performance*, New York: PAJ Publications, 1991, p. 188.
[9] Peter Sellars, 'Beginning to Notice What We Are', p. 3
[10] Jim Farber, 'L.A. arts fest hikes budget to $5.5-mil; Japan corporations targeted for $2-mil', *Variety*, 18-24 October 1989, p. 91.
[11] See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, p. 205.
[12] Tom Bradley, 'Official Invitation', in Los Angeles Festival Programme Book, edited by Barbara Allen, Los Angeles: McTaggart-Wolk, 1990, quoted in Barbara Kirshenlatt-Gimblett, p. 208.
[13] This incomplete, but hopefully representative, programme of events for the 1990 Festival was compiled from Peter Plagens and Lynda Wright, 'Multiculturalism or Bust, Gang', *Newsweek*, 24 September 1990, pp. 68-9; Jim Farber's *Variety* article of 1989; Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's essay; as well as the other articles cited in these notes.
[14] See Adam Leipzig, p. 23.
[15] Peter Sellars, from a speech at the 'First Night' conference at Monterey, California, Spring 1997, Online posting: http://firstnightintl.org/spr1999.html
[16] Quoted in Adam Leipzig, p. 23.
[17] See Adam Leipzip, p. 23.
[18] Ibid., p. 26.
[19] This incomplete programme was compiled from Adam Leipzig's article, 'Acts of Imagination', Sellars's First Night conference speech, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's essay.
[20] Peter Sellars, 'The Vision Thing', *Artforum*, September 1992, p. 74.
[21] Peter Sellars, speech at First Night International Conference.
[22] Peter Sellars interviewed by John J. Flynn, pp. 188-9.
[23] See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, p. 242.
[24] Ibid., p. 246.
[25] Judith Mitoma, 'Art and Spirit in Los Angeles', in *Los Angeles Festival Program Book*, p. 16, quoted in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, p. 233.
[26] Peter Sellars, 'Beginning to Notice What We Are', p. 75.
[27] Quoted in Adam Leipzig, p. 27.
[28] Adam Leipzig, p. 27.
[29] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, p. 225.
[30] Peter Sellars, 'Artistic and Aesthetic Agendas', in the *Los Angeles Festival Program Book*, p. 15, quoted in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, p. 234.
[31] Peter Sellars, quoted in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, p. 203.

[32] See Stuart Hobbs, *The End of the American Avant-Garde*, New York: New York University Press, 1997, p. 8.
[33] See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, p. 232.
[34] Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, p. 232.
[35] See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, pp. 232-6.
[36] Stuart Hobbs, p. 8.
[37] See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974/1984. p. 49
[38] See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, London and Bloomington: Macmillan and Indiana University Press, 1986, pp. 160-77, published as extract, 'The Search for Tradition: Avant-garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s', in Thomas Docherty, *Postmodernism: A Reader*, p. 227.
[39] Andreas Huyssen, p. 231.
[40] See Stuart Hobbs, p. 223.
[41] See Andreas Huyssen, p. 223.
[42] Andreas Huyssen, p. 226.
[43] See Stuart Hobbs, p. 8.
[44] Stuart Hobbs, p. 181.
[45] See Stuart Hobbs, pp. 125-38.
[46] Ibid., p. 181.
[47] Warren I. Susman paraphrased in Stuart Hobbs, p. 8.
[48] See Thomas Docherty, 'Introduction' to *Postmodernism: A Reader*, pp. 1-31
[49] Peter Sellars quoted in Judith Michaelson, 'Director Sellars: You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 December 1987, Calendar Section, p. 5.
[50] Peter Bürger, p. 49.
[51] See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London and New York: Verso, 1990, p. 15.
[52] For detailed analyses of this film, see Kenneth S. Rothwell, 'In Search of Nothing: Mapping *King Lear*', in Lynda E. Boose, Richard Burt (eds.), *Shakespeare, The Movie: Popularising the Plays on Film, TV and Video*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 135-45. Also Peter S. Donaldson, *Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors*, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990, pp. 189-225.
[53] Peter Sellars, 'The Vision Thing', p. 74.
[54] Peter Sellars, quoted in an interview with Norman Frisch, Goodman Theatre Newsletter, Richard Pettengill (ed.), *On Stage*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1994-95, p. 11.
[55] See Simon During, 'Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today', *Textual Practice*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1987. Published as extract in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tifflin (eds.), *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 125.
[56] Peter Sellars, Collins Memorial Lecture, Indiana State University, 25 April 1997. Videocassette
[57] Peter Sellars interviewed by Mark Bates, 'Directing a National Consciousness', *Theater*, vol. 28, no. 2, p. 87.
[58] Michael Dobson mentions this irony in, 'Fairly Brave New World: Shakespeare, The American Colonies, and the American Revolution', *Renaissance Drama*, N.S.23, p. 189, quoted in Thomas Cartelli, *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 9.
[59] Thomas Cartelli outlines the 19th century American treatment of Shakespeare in his book, *Repositioning Shakespeare*, pp. 27-45.
[60] Michael D. Bristol, *Shakespeare's America, America's Shakespeare*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 123.
[61] Thomas Cartelli, p. 3.
[62] For my discussion of *The Merchant of Venice* I work from the video of the original Goodman Theatre production filmed in October 1994. I also rely on some of the following reviews: Michael Billington, 'Venice Champion' and 'Love and Loot in LA', *Guardian*, 16 November 1994; Robert Brustein, 'The Merchant of Venice Beach', *New Republic*, 5 December 1994; Richard Christiansen, 'Provocative Merchant', *Chicago Tribune*, 11 October 1994; Jack Kroll, 'Chicago – My Kind of Theater', *Newsweek*, 17 October 1994; Lewis Lazare, 'The Merchant of Venice', *Variety*, 24-30 October 1994 ; David Richards, 'Sellars Moves the Merchant to Venice Beach', *New York Times*, 18 October 1994; David Patrick Stearns, 'Timely Reworkings of 'Merchant', 'Clockwork Orange'', *USA Today*, 18 October 1994; Sid Smith, 'The Art of Upset', *Chicago Tribune*, 16 October, 1994; Mark Swed, 'Merchant of Venice Beach? Peter Sellars Strikes Again', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 October 1994; Hedy Weiss, 'Peter Sellars' Merchant of Venice Beach', *Chicago Sun Times*, 9 October 1994, also

'Merchant A Mixed Bag', *Chicago Sun-Times*, 12 October 1994; Richard Zoglin, 'Shylock on the Beach', *Time*, 31 October 1994.

[63] Peter Sellars, untitled text in Goodman Theatre Newsletter, Richard Pettengill (ed.), *On Stage*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1994-5, p. 4.

[64] Peter Sellars quoted in Richard Zoglin, 'Shylock on the Beach', *Time*, 31 October 1994, p. 78.

[65] Peter Sellars, quoted in Michael Billington, 'Venice Champion', *Guardian*, 4 November 1994, Arts section, p. 6.

[66] The same image of a man with a sandwich board appears at the end of Sellars's 1993 video version of Brecht and Weill's *Seven Deadly Sins* for the Opera de Lyon

[67] See W.B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 80.

[68] Robert Brustein, 'The Merchant of Venice', *New Republic*, 5 December 1994, p. 33; Albert Williams, 'The Quality of Merchant is not Strained', *Chicago Reader*, 21 October 1994, pp. 33-4.

[69] For an extensive, in-depth discussion of Sellars's use of video in *The Merchant of Venice* see, Frédéric Maurin, 'Usages et Usures de l'Image: Speculations sûr *Le Marchand de Venise* Vu par Peter Sellars', in Beatrice Picon-Vallin (ed.), *Les Ecrans sur la Scène: Tentations et Resistances de la Scène Face aux Images*, Lausanne: L'Age D'Homme, 1998, pp. 71-105

[70] Mark Swed, 'Merchant of Venice Beach? Peter Sellars Strikes Again', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 October 1994, p. F1.

[71] Rikki Lake hosts one of the more downmarket US daytime television talkshows on which guests openly discuss their personal problems before a live studio audience which is then invited to pass judgement. Jerry Springer took the genre further, inviting disputing guests onto his show to engage in live, and sometimes violent, confrontation. 'Judge Judy' Sheindlin is a real judge who adjudicates over petty civil disputes in a television courtroom. In the 1990s all three shows received massive viewing figures worldwide.

[72] Mary Poole, quoted in Richard Pettengill (ed.), Goodman Theatre Study Guide to Peter Sellars's production of *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 31.

[73] Thomas Docherty, 'Politics', in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, p. 322.

[74] See Dennis Kennedy, *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-Century Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 275-9.

[75] See Fredric Jameson's discussion of the difference between modernist alienation, exemplified by Edvard Munch's 'The Scream', and postmodernist fragmentation, exemplified by Andy Warhol's silk screens, in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, pp. 1-16.

[76] Judith Butler's superb extended discussion of the constitution of agency and subjectivity in the discourses surrounding the Rodney King video, 'Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia', appears in Robert Gooding Williams (ed.), *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

[77] Simon During, 'Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today', *Textual Practice*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1987. Published as extract in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, p. 125.

[78] Kwame Anthony Appiah, 'The Postcolonial and the Postmodern', in *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, London, Methuen, 1992. Published as extract in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (eds.), *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, p. 123.

## 5. Towards a Postmodern Ethics

Shortly after 6.00am on April 19th, 1993, FBI agents attempted to end the 51-day stand-off at the Branch Davidian compound outside Waco, Texas. Persuaded by suspicions of child abuse and intelligence reports suggesting further negotiation was useless, Attorney General Janet Reno finally gave permission for a CS gas assault on the Mount Carmel buildings. The tear-gas failed to force out the heavily armed Davidians, and around noon a fire began in the second storey which rapidly engulfed the entire structure. 74 people died, among them 21 children.[1] Broadcast live by satellite, the Waco siege became one of the most notorious American law enforcement debacles of the 1990s. One result was a wave of right-wing anti-government feeling, culminating in the horrific Oklahoma bombing on the first anniversary of the FBI assault. Waco was a difficult reminder of some familiar yet unresolved questions: What are the rights of (religious) minorities in pluralist Western democracies? How do we legislate for difference? What are the status and future of authority in postmodern culture?

These questions constantly recur in the work of Peter Sellars, never more vividly than in his 1996 Glyndebourne production of Handel's oratorio *Theodora*. With a staging that implicitly referenced significant American events of the early 1990s, Sellars's *Theodora* was a deep philosophical meditation on the (in)compatibility of religious belief with pure reason. The problem of Waco – what happens when worship of an authority higher than the state compels a total rejection

of compromise – is a penetrating test of post-Enlightenment subjectivity. The individual is forced to mediate a torturous set of binaries between self and group, between religious faith and national identity. In this production, which marked a return to the eighteenth century, Sellars traced the forcible application of abstract rationality to the material lives of human beings, revealing the betrayals and performances required of those who act for the state, and the barbaric consequences for those who refuse. The first part of the chapter charts the production's exploration of this difficult dialectic, examining the (by now familiar) strategies of false harmonisation mobilised by both majority and minority to cope with their inevitable cultural schizophrenia.

Though the Branch Davidians were never explicitly mentioned in this production, I believe that their story provided the complex background to Sellars's piece, compelling spectators to make difficult connections between symbolic events on stage and traumatic recent history.[2] As before, having unravelled the monoliths of modernity, Sellars arrived at the impasses of the postmodern. In the crucible of Waco, the respect for difference that is the foundation of postmodernist social practice was put to the most difficult of tests. Forgetting temporarily the horrific outcome, the moral, ethical and political problems posed by the situation were intractable. In the contained space of the LA Festival, multiculturalism was a viable frame for issues of cultural difference. The same principles seemed somehow naïve in a crisis like Waco. What happens when 'differences' are more than artistic or cultural? How could the state accept the Branch Davidians' blatant defiance of federal laws? How could that state violently put down a group which understood its actions as compelled by religious faith and identity? This last factor was crucial. In a secular culture – and in a post-metaphysical theatre – where do we find our moral compass? I

suggest that in the world of this production, the events of Waco were about not only the treatment of minorities. More specifically they were about the difficult place of spirituality in the formulation of contemporary justice and ethics. If postmodern morality is measured by our treatment of the 'other', the 'non-identical', then justice and ethics inevitably involve our acceptance of our own ignorance, our inability to fully comprehend, explain and quantify those people outside our immediate experience. If 'not-knowing', if simple faith, become an integral part of the way we aspire to deal with others in postmodernity, then the religious faith of the Branch Davidians, and the unmistakable spirituality in the work of Peter Sellars acquire a new validity in the post-Nietzchean dance of equivalence of our lives. It becomes increasingly difficult to always dismiss the life of the spirit as the opium of the masses.

*Theodora* had an ecstatic reception, reviewers citing the director's simplicity, unified vision and deference to the composer as the defining elements of one of Glyndebourne's 'great evenings'.[3] It seemed that Sellars was finally assimilated into the British artistic establishment which just six years previously had booed his Los Angeles freeway version of *The Magic Flute* off the same stage. This new pleasure in Sellars's work requires careful scrutiny, however. In working through the brittle contradictions at the core of modernity, was Sellars once again trying to exceed them, tentatively pursuing the dream of a unified subject? Was he searching for some form of harmonisation that might permit him to assume a position, to explain or assess what happened at Waco, providing his notoriously traditional audience with the security of a moral viewpoint? The persistent spirituality of Sellars's work provokes suspicions that he turns to religion as a recourse in the moral wasteland of postmodernity, projecting to the transcendent in a classic example of the neo-

conservative false harmonisation he so rigorously reveals in bourgeois culture. In the second part of this chapter I try to interpret Sellars's invocation of spirituality beyond the arid attacks of cultural materialism, asking if it might constitute a conscious and sophisticated attempt to navigate the web of contradiction that is the philosophical landscape we inhabit.

## I. *Theodora* at Glyndebourne

In the 1990s, the Enlightenment returned as the site for some of Sellars's most difficult explorations of the contradictions of modernity – contradictions he experiences acutely himself. He appears drawn to the ideal, to social perfection, yet increasingly aware of the destructive mechanism of reason that propels him towards this goal. For Adorno and Horkheimer, reason is that which formulates individual human understanding into a system:

> The system the enlightenment has in mind is the form of knowledge which copes most proficiently with the facts, and supports the individual most effectively in the mastery of nature. Its principles are the principles of self-preservation. Immaturity, then, is the inability to survive.[4]

The measure of power becomes the ability to know. This enlightened survival through systematisation must be underpinned by a drive towards unity, the reconciliation of the general with the specific. Only in total abstraction can such reconciliation be achieved.

The paradox at the heart of modernity, the source of its ultimate collapse, was the very engine of enlightenment – a process of subjectification that was both totalising and individualising.[5] It functioned by encouraging self-reliance, self-determination, and individual responsibility, combined with belief in a society, loyalty

to the state and the ideal of a collective or greater good. In *Theodora*, Sellars addressed this dual process of subjectification, a process that frequently results in conflict within the individual and breakdown of social order. The divisive consequences of this totalising/individualising process crystallised vividly in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The ideal of social unity clashed with the so-called rights of individuals; in Britain, an all-pervasive emphasis on religion, bolstered by an established church, contrasted with a secularism rooted in a Protestant doctrine of self-reliance and self-service; a sophisticated general political awareness and a faithful belief in a civil society of law, order, and relative democracy were countered by a widespread fear of large government and unwarranted state interference in the lives of individuals.

These polarities are clearly manifest in Handel's penultimate oratorio, *Theodora*, which opened on May 16th, 1750 at Covent Garden. Thomas Morrell's libretto was based on a didactic novel by the Irish physicist, Sir Robert Boyle, entitled *The Martyrdom of Theodora and Didymus.*[6] In fourth-century Antioch, the Roman prefect Valens decrees that everyone must worship Jove to honour the emperor's birthday. Theodora, a young woman of noble birth and leader of the minority Christians, refuses to offer sacrifice and, since she is not afraid of death, is condemned to serve as a prostitute in the Temple of Venus. Didymus, the Roman officer and secret Christian who loves her, helps her escape. Visiting her in prison, he encourages her to swap clothes to dupe the guards, and while Theodora returns to her Christian followers, Didymus remains in the cell. When he is found he is condemned to death, and Theodora joins him voluntarily in martyrdom. At their execution they sing a rapturous duet while Valens and the Romans look on. Septimius, Didymus' close friend and fellow Roman officer, is troubled by what he sees as wilful self-

destruction. Theodora's cousin and confidante Irene finishes the piece by leading the Christians in prayer for the souls of the dead.[7]

The British Enlightenment unfolded on a different time-scale and against different political and religious backgrounds than those on the Continent. The dominant forces in eighteenth-century English life, religion and politics, reflect the Enlightenment matrix of the individual versus the collective (I am indebted to Ruth Smith's *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* for much of the historical and intellectual background to *Theodora*).[8] This was a society that was politically aware, and religious belief informs much eighteenth-century English art. Handel was no exception. Upon his arrival in Britain from Germany, he immediately began composing for state and religious occasions. He readily absorbed his new society's tastes, building on existing English musical forms. He is, however, credited with introducing a new form to England – the oratorio. Unstaged music drama with a religious theme, its chorus was a direct throwback to Greek tragedy, which was lauded by eighteenth-century social reformers for its civic example.[9] The Greek chorus was cited as the voice of moral and religious instruction.[10] Eighteenth-century writers commend the form's display of a divine providence firmly controlling the lives of its human subjects, a benevolent God concerned with the fate of the individual, who usually fails through 'moral fault'.

This flaw was invariably attributed to a deficiency of reason. The eighteenth century saw the universal recognition of the power of music and widespread concern at its emotive potential. While martial music could inspire patriotism, courage and loyalty, softer sounds (embodied by Italian [read Catholic] opera) could lead to licentiousness, emotional weakness, and the elimination of rational, objective thought.

The essentially verbal oratorio was an ideal response to the demand by contemporary critics, Carey and Hall, for an 'opera' in which

> The Dignity of Reason is not sacrific'd, as it is now, to the Dissoluteness of sound; but the force of words and meaning, was increas'd by Musick, and impressed upon the soul.[11]

Oratorio was a formal attempt at synthesis, an artificial site for the resolution of conflict between the spiritual and material.

A reading of Peter Sellars's production of *Theodora* is inevitably multi-layered. We must cope with an eighteenth-century plot and libretto that are heavily allegorical, and would have been received as such by a politically-sensitive original audience. We must overcome the problematics of a text which presents not only an intractable moral dilemma, but one that is doubly complicated by the impact of an emotionally-charged score which is frequently ambivalent in its own moral direction. Despite the libretto's obvious condemnation of the Romans' behaviour, Handel's music for them is by no means dark or villainous: some of the most cheerful scoring is provided for the scenes of Roman revels.[12] It was upon this complex substrate that Sellars layered his own meaning. His interpretation was significant for its dramatic realisation of a text that was written to be performed without the visual or theatrical aids of the stage.

In contrast to the baroque excesses of his previous designs for *Don Giovanni* and *Tannhaüser*, George Tsypin's set for *Theodora* was a simple white box dominated by five enormous cracked bottles (the five damaged souls at the heart of the oratorio?) which were carefully reconfigured for different scenes. In an environment that evoked the placelessness of modernity, lighting became the principal signifier of location. The design by James Ingalls seemed almost expressionist. Theodora's prison cell was denoted by a white square projected on the

floor. Irene visited her there, emerging like a ghost from the shadows and silhouettes created by the macabre illumination of the angular glass flasks. Silhouette was a recurring motif – these characters, verging on two-dimensional types, were frail individuals overwhelmed by the ideologies they had to represent and practice.

The oratorio opens with Valens's decree which Sellars staged as a presidential press conference. The Roman prefect was a Bill Clinton-style figure wearing a smart suit, with a wink and a handshake for everyone. A roving TV camera crew recorded every sign of approval from his audience, the Roman chorus. Valens' speech was a spectacle of authority, only validated by its capture on film – an aestheticisation of politics. The artifice of power was temporarily shattered, however, as Sellars, in a obvious nod to George Bush's physical collapse in Japan, and in an uncanny foreshadowing of Bob Dole's fall from a stage during the 1996 presidential campaign, had Valens crumple with a heart attack at the end of the speech. The frail and unpredictable human body erupted into the stage-managed fantasy of TV. Before his poll ratings could plummet too far, however, Valens miraculously recovered with the aid of some strategically-placed paramedics. His later actions – the persecution of a religious minority – might be read as an attempt to recover the semblance of authority so embarrassingly lost in the early moments of Act I.

This opening scene featured a symmetrical stage setting that was echoed throughout the production – a signifier of order, balance and rationale. In the world-view of Handel's Romans, Valens' decree is a reasonable strategy for the maintenance of civic order. All citizens must be loyal to the state and to the emperor: collective obedience is the guarantor of individual freedom. The cohesion that fuels national success is undermined by minority groups who recognise a higher authority. Ironically, the relationship of the Roman state to religion was very similar to that in

eighteenth-century England – in both cases the institutions were inextricably linked – yet Handel's audiences were expected to sympathise with the oppressed Christians. Didymus expresses the paradox at the heart of enlightened society when, as a soldier of the law, he sings, 'Ought we not leave the free-born mind of man still ever free?' 'Liberty' was the defining concept in eighteenth-century Europe, a catchphrase signalling the end of feudal order and the birth of meritocracy. Co-opted by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, by the 1980s 'liberty' had mutated into the moral authority of the market. Reading Sellars's Valens as a centre-right American president, it was possible to grasp the logic of a system that can both celebrate the individual's absolute freedom of choice, while justifying capital punishment.

The pacifist, minority Christians are the biggest threat to Roman rule and, by extension, to eighteenth-century British hypocrisy. They refuse to submit to an economy that manages individuals;[13] their group is of itself disruptive. In their first scene, Theodora leads a tirade against excessive luxury and prosperity based on injustice and corruption. As she sings the aria 'Fond flatt'ring world Adieu', Sellars had her collecting jewellery and other worldly goods from her Christian listeners, and casting them to the ground. Though early Rome had been admired by Enlightenment Anglicans as a model of civil government, its power is seen to decay through the increase of empire, materialism, and self-interest. Imperial rule in Antioch is tyrannical and debased – social disintegration begins when prosperity produces excessive luxury.[14]

But while Handel's audiences were expected to condemn this behaviour, it is worth considering eighteenth-century Whig advice for those tempted by political bribery and corruption. The solution, according to Ruth Smith, was not participation in public life to set an example of integrity, but rather the establishment of individual

financial independence through industry, sobriety, and prudent accounting. This was the formula for national salvation, not large-scale government reform.[15] Sellars's work in *Tannhäuser*, *Giulio Cesare* and the Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy has consistently examined the consequences of spiralling prosperity, for those at both ends of the social scale. The eighteenth-century obsession with 'corruption', particularly as manifested in the uneasy relationship between government and nation, is carried forward to the present in these productions.

The scene was abruptly terminated by the arrival of Roman soldiers wielding guns and wearing gas masks. For the chaste Theodora, removal to the Temple of Venus will be the ultimate test of faith. Surely it would be possible to make a simple outward gesture to honour the emperor, and still maintain private spiritual integrity? Theodora's strident ethical and moral stance, her solid belief in the indissolubility of the public and private spheres, her relentless pursuit of a unified subjectivity, ironically make her a model enlightenment subject.

The Christians' Spartan lifestyle was thrown into relief by the Romans' Bacchanalian celebrations that opened Act II. In the libretto it is a scene of feasting, but Sellars increased its impact to contrast with the pure models held up for eighteenth-century English Protestants. Frode Olsen played Valens as a comic drunk, tripping over the prostrate bodies of inebriated citizens. This religious feast, in whose name others were being persecuted, was an exercise in sham and hypocrisy. In this staging, the human body, with its often uncontrollable instincts and predilections, became an emblem of failure, of the inability to marry the organic with the purely conceptual. Alienated consumption was an outlet for all that reason could not account for.

For the Romans, religion is just another function of the state – a scenario echoed in eighteenth-century Britain. With the monarch as its head, its bishops appointed directly by government, its liturgy enshrined in all state business, the established church institutionalised false harmonisation. Oratorio played a vital role here, affirming Protestant identity in terms of both form – oratorio choruses were a direct reflection of Anglican worship – and content. Oratorio attendance was another means of cleansing the soul, an act of automated personal edification like weekly church attendance. While promoting virtue and condemning vice, the moral history of the eighteenth century located rewards in this life. Although material success was attributed to divine favour, neglect of political self-interest was interpreted as conscious ignorance of the terms on which God provides for his people.[16] These contradictory impulses, the secular versus the religious, formed the uneasy foundation of enlightenment reason. As Fredric Jameson remarks, 'Obviously you can't have it both ways: There is no such thing as a booming, functioning market whose customer personnel is staffed by Calvinists and hard-working traditionalists knowing the value of the dollar'.[17]

The 'introversion of sacrifice' that Adorno and Horkheimer identify as the foundation of Enlightenment civilisation, drives the plot of this oratorio.[18] Theodora's chastity and self-denial are the brutalising cornerstones of her subjectivity. Surrounded by compromise and injustice, like the Countess Almaviva she sacrifices the present moment to the future, hoping her ego can maintain a measure of integrity. Her inability to adhere fully to the rigorous ideals she has set for herself is, however, the most sympathetic sign of her humanity. Sellars staged the clothes-swapping scene in Theodora's cell with great tenderness. It became clear that Theodora and Didymus were willing to die as much for worldly love of each other as for love of God.

Theodora's body is used to define, control, and threaten her. For a brief moment, in this scene, she seemed to reclaim her body and appreciate the present; physical attraction to Didymus provided a material challenge to reason – and religion's – pure abstraction.

The Christians finish Act II with a chorus said to be one of Handel's favourites.[19] Lamenting Theodora's fate, they look to the next world and sing of resurrection: 'He Saw the Lovely Youth' tells the biblical story of the Widow of Nain whose dead son was brought back to life by Christ – a parable of absolute faith in the face of death. Despite the apparent loss of their leader, the Christians remain steadfast, their fortitude a model for insecure Anglicans. The decadent Roman rule in Theodora could be directly associated by eighteenth-century British audiences with the absolutist Catholic nation states of continental Europe[20] (it would, however, be equally possible to read the Christians as Britain's own disenfranchised Catholic population). Handel's oratorios encouraged those audiences to identify themselves as the true chosen people. The besieged British nation could empathise with the embattled Israelites, punished for their beliefs yet confident of their predestination.

Our readings of the Christians must be complicated, however, by the parallels between this frugal, patriotic band and the citizens' militias of the eighteenth century. The period saw considerable debate in both Britain and the American colonies on the desirability of militias over a standing army, focusing on the suggestion that weapons and property should be held for those who guarantee liberty at home as well as abroad.[21] Oppressed by government interference, convinced of their election, willing to die for their faith, a reading of Sellars's contemporary American Christians must extend beyond sympathy for a threatened minority. At the outset, Sellars's treatment

of the Christians seemed like a dangerous essentialising of a tribal identity, naively cherished for its lack of individualism and narcissism. By the end of the second act, however, his interpretation appeared harsher and more rigorous. Though it was still possible to feel profound pity for Theodora, Irene and Didymus, they came to appear austere and almost obsessive. For 'He Saw the Lovely Youth', the Christians stood or knelt in the same direction. Sellars's trademark Kathakali-style hand and arm movements suggested the arm-waving intensity of evangelical church services. All were dressed in drab colours, the men in white shirts and black ties were strikingly similar to the Mormon missionaries who call door-to-door to explain their faith – America's own chosen people. Individuality was not an option in this homogeneous, embattled group.[22] While the fidelity and bravery of the Christians was clearly laudable, and the Roman treatment of them profoundly unjust, they suggested a possibly dangerous fundamentalist sect. They embraced martyrdom with an ease that comes with belief in predestination. In this production both sides were, on their own terms, uncompromising and rational, making the moral dilemma especially difficult. As Rodney Milnes remarked of Sellars's staging, 'The Romans, surely, are "us"'.[23]

It is all too easy, however, to share the reactionary fear of the Romans when faced with collective austerity. These Christians display a violent potential, but the unease they induce has deeper sources. Their very existence is a committed statement of dissatisfaction with the status quo. Their response, mirroring the Whig advice mentioned earlier, is not participation to effect social change, but a total break with society as it currently exists and the establishment of a new, separate and ideal community. Family becomes a function of affiliation and philosophy; the biological family is no longer the primary social unit.[24] Aspirational belief in the supremacy of a world to come limits commitment to the present and, in particular, to the state. In a

purely Foucauldian sense, the Christians of *Theodora* are more than helpful in their own construction as a mad 'other', the exclusion of which is the foundation of the Romans' own 'reasonable' subjectivity. The parallels with the treatment of cults by contemporary media (media which often find it convenient to overlook Christianity's own origins as a radical sect on the margins of Judaism, and modern America's own foundation by Puritans) are obvious.

Cults are vilified for their weirdness and eccentricity, the humanity of their members erased like that of the enemy in wartime propaganda. Sellars's staging of *Theodora* plotted the horrific consequences of the Roman deployment of a reason which displays no concern for individual circumstances, what Adorno and Horkheimer describe as a 'purposeless purposiveness...planning considered solely as planning'.[25] If we juxtapose Handel's Romans and Christians with the Enlightenment moment of their creation, the moral logic of this oratorio becomes especially complex. The abstraction of pure reason views the material content of the world as merely a formal set of categories. In the cycle of deferral that is the foundation of post-enlightenment 'civilisation', present evil is vindicated by projection to some mythical judgement of history, and the service of 'the greater good'.[26] The unquestioned execution of Valens's decree becomes completely separated from the human beings it will destroy. But while the Romans display unwavering loyalty to the concept of reason, their own material lives are always a (necessary) compromise, a messy attempt to negotiate the binaries of enlightenment ideology. It is in this context that the asceticism of the Christians becomes a threat, a destabilising image of the operation of pure theory. The austerity of Christian life becomes a spectral paragon of absolute human submission to a concept, albeit a spiritual one. Their refusal to accept

the false harmonisation of the state reveals the fundamental hypocrisy of Roman behaviour. The Christians are, I suggest, ironically the Romans' finest role-models.

These difficult issues of authority were, for me, the emotional and philosophical core of Sellars's production. The aspirations of both Romans and Christians, and contemporary cults, were strikingly similar. In Peter Sellars's staging, the literalism and fundamentalism of both groups represented a fraught scramble for stable meaning amid the uncertainty of postmodern deferral and fragmentation. By juxtaposing two equally uncompromising and reactionary positions, Sellars demolished the myth of 'reason' as some transparent, scientific lens through which to interpret culture and govern others. Sellars's Christians, like the Branch Davidians, were not some harmless, colourful minority – their difficult presence was a challenge to the most liberal of Americans, representing a harsh testing of the limits of postmodernism as a critical and organisational practice.

The damage of the Roman compromise was felt most painfully by Septimius, the Roman officer who was Didymus' closest friend. Charged with the imposition of reason, Septimius could not ignore the humanity it would crush. At the trial, he pleaded with his friend to save himself, but his efforts were in vain. The resistance to compromise of both parties meant that the sentence and its acceptance were swift. The Romans were astonished at Theodora's willingness to die for Didymus: their culture of individual self-service found such behaviour strange. Their anxiety stemmed from their own ability to extinguish life with the ease and efficiency that come with the mastery of nature.[27]

Sellars's staging of the ending linked the vilification of cults with a practice of the American criminal justice system that did not feature at Waco, but is

nevertheless becoming increasingly familiar. In the libretto, stage directions indicate that Theodora and Didymus are led away for execution. Sellars's decision to stage the procedure provided an extraordinary metaphor for the implosion of the dialectical structure of enlightenment reason when faced with the reality of the body. In this production the human body was the seam between the rational and the unknowable, between the modern and the postmodern, a canvas on which reason was brutally imposed, and a complicating presence to reveal the failures of that totalising concept. Lethal injection was the logical choice for this doctrine of efficiency and rationality, silently eliminating the disruption of the material. Like the use of video in *The Merchant of Venice*, this was another expression of anxiety at the loss of corporeal experience that accompanies modernity. After 210 minutes of high philosophy in a three-sided white box, Sellars's hyper-realistic staging of the execution was viscerally shocking. The procedure was carried out in medically-accurate detail complete with intravenous drips and high-tech cardiographs; the flasks of poison fed into the blood of the two martyrs by the resolute but regretful Septimius reflected the giant flasks of Tsypin's set. Calmly watched by the Romans, and indeed the Glyndebourne audience, the human body was simultaneously displayed and effaced. Though performed as a sanitised termination, the very purpose of the procedure – death – became a reminder of the greatest threat to reason: the inextinguishable presence of nature in culture. The brilliance of Sellars's conceit was its symbolic denial of the rational project. Their tables tilted forward at 60-degree angles, their strapped arms outstretched to receive the hypodermic needles, Theodora and Didymus were visibly crucified.[28] The ultimate act of secular barbarism was unintentionally spiritualised.

Time was drawn out, almost to abstraction. As Theodora and Didymus sang their extraordinary final duet, their lives ebbed away as though the music were their

pulse. When the orchestra played its final chords, the jumping lights of the heart monitors died. In this juxtaposition of the mechanical with the sublime – that which inspires awe, cannot be spoken of, resists representation – the measured time of modernity no longer mattered. Valens and the Romans were forced to witness the martyrs' resigned departure to another dimension, their absolute faith in a different God and a world to come. The Glyndebourne audience was similarly implicated: with the soaring ecstasy of Handel's music, and the shocking connections made by Sellars's staging, the final moments of *Theodora* resembled some profound, spiritual communion.

By the end of *Theodora*, the edifice of modernity with whose foundations Peter Sellars had so mischievously tinkered had again fallen down around him. His graphic staging of the execution explicitly linked the Enlightenment's construction of subjectivity to contemporary American cultural schizophrenia. The philosophical theme of Sellars's reading of Handel was the failure of Enlightenment reason to cope with capitalist endeavour, a failure that resulted in the marginalisation of culture and a religion that veered increasingly towards fundamentalism. The recurring recourse to mythology, exemplified by the eighteenth-century pastoral idyll, the trials of the Israelites, and the nobility of martyrdom, can be read throughout history since the late seventeenth century as the only outlet for a policy of rationality that is finally irrational – a lame attempt to replace an obsolete religion with sane reasons for 'persisting in society when interest is absent'.[29] Sellars's baffled Romans did not learn any applicable moral lesson. Their means of coping with the present order was simply annihilated. In executing the Christian leaders (and not just locking them in an institution), the Romans – purveyors of absolute reason – successfully incorporated

and assimilated everything: nothing now remains outside them and their philosophy. In the process, they eliminated the other against which they defined themselves. The *dialectic* of enlightenment – the very framework which permits a vaguely sane existence in capitalism – was shattered. Their fiction of autonomous subjectivity collapsed. At the end of this production, my thoughts were dark: Enlightenment without dialectic is fascism.

**II. Acts of Faith**

'The ethics of postmodernism today…proceeds theoretically from the idea of morally considering the particular, the heterogeneous. Not unlike Adorno's unwritten theory of morality, this ethics revolves around the idea that it is only in dealing appropriately with the non-identical that the claim to human justice can be redeemed'.[30] Implicit in Axel Honneth's assertion is human limitation. The foundation of any 'appropriate' way to deal with the heterogeneous must be the acknowledgement of its infinity – we can neither know all, nor can we know anything fully. The disruption the Christians represent is not just their refusal to support the institutions of the state but rather, through the intensity and asceticism of their own spiritual commitment, their declaration of ignorance, their assertion of their own inability to know all, their faith in a world beyond this one. The Romans also practice religion, but the Christians' example demonstrates their oppressors' payment of hypocritical lip-service to that faith in the pursuit of a completely worldly power. The Christians abdicate a controlling, individuated, autonomous subjectivity based on the classic subject-object division in favour of a diffuse, collective, determinist model

which demotes the present in favour of an unseen future, and casts aside free will to acknowledge the influence of a higher power.

Between Roman and Christian, between libertine and addict, Peter Sellars searches for an alternative model of subjectivity, the starting point for a postmodern ethics. While Christian fundamentalism appears dangerously obsessive, individual moments of humility and grace burst through its monolithic austerity, expressed most eloquently in simple gestures of sacrifice, generosity and, most crucially, faith. Unlike the impenetrable reason that dominates our modern consciousness, the 'not-knowing' Sellars seeks to centre in any new conception(s) of subjectivity is impossible to legislate for. In fact, the very idea of legislation in this context is redundant. Some other philosophical motivation is required to ground a sophisticated respect for difference. For Sellars, spirituality provides this catalyst, actively resisting a reason which understands only that which it can name and identify.

The whole body of Sellars's work from the start of his career, spanning both his life in the theatre and his projects as teacher, activist, curator, and artistic director, has been a committed engagement with spirituality. He insists that, 'a metaphysical grasp of the world is what's real, and...the asphyxiating, materialist, surround being stuffed down people's throats is the illusion'.[31] His parents were Christian Scientists and, although he rarely discusses it in interviews, Sellars himself remains a devout practitioner. Scriptural study is an integral part of Christian Scientists' daily religious duties. The conductor Craig Smith stayed in the room next to Sellars during rehearsals for *Don Giovanni* at SUNY, Purchase in 1987, and recalls that Sellars would work late every night studying the score and the next morning 'would get up very early and read the Bible for an hour – I'm talking about five in the morning [and would then go and] do this wild theatrical thing and give interviews and shock all these people'.[32]

Sellars's extensive familiarity with Scripture provides the cosmos of his productions – biblical quotations have even appeared on stage in the form of sandwich boards worn by characters in both *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Seven Deadly Sins*. *Theodora* is among the overtly religious pieces Sellars has produced, which also include Olivier Messaien's opera *St. François d'Assise*, and Paul Hindemith's *Mathis der Maler* which depicts the life of the creator of the Isenheim altarpiece Matthias Grunewald, a parable of an artist's struggle in difficult times. Sellars has also experimented with the combination of secular with religious works in single productions. *Conversations with Fear and Hope after Death*, mentioned in Chapter 1, is the elaborate title for an evening which began with Brecht and Weill's *Mahagonny Songspiel* and concluded with Bach cantatas. Recently he followed Igor Stravinsky's opera-oratorio *Oedipus Rex* with a staging of the same composer's *Symphony of Psalms*. Explaining his choice, he remarked that,

> For the last few years I have decided never to do a show that ends tragically. It's too late in history to do that right now. I think it is very silly to take as giant news an announcement that the world is a terrible place. That's perfectly obvious. What is the next step from that? All of the shows I've been doing for these last years are all concerned with forward momentum, with a vision into the future and with a kind of hope.[33]

This concern with life after death, embodied in the idea of resurrection, figures throughout much of Sellars's work. The second halves of *Conversations*, *Oedipus Rex/Symphony of Psalms*, *Peony Pavilion*, *Ajax* and *The Death of Klinghoffer* all take place after the deaths of principal characters, as those left behind work to interpret the lives of the dead and apply those lessons to the making of a new future. In December 2000 he will direct John Adams's new oratorio about the Nativity, *El Niño*, to commemorate the Millennium year. In 1999 he directed stagings of Stravinsky's late liturgical pieces from the 1950s and 60s – *The Flood*, *Babel*,

*Abraham and Isaac*, *Threni*, *A Sermon*, and *A Narrative and a Prayer* – interpreting their critical and popular neglect as evidence of audiences' inability to assimilate modernist high art that is demonstrably religious:

> I'm obsessed with the fact that in Hollywood, where he wrote them, of course there was no way to understand why this man would set the *Lamentations of Jeremiah* in that culture! For many years, Stravinsky in every interview had to say, 'Well, of course the words don't matter – I was just interested in the pattern of syllables'. And he's setting *Jeremiah*! And *Genesis*, and *Acts*. It's not a pattern of syllables at all, but at that moment in history, you couldn't admit to taking on that subject matter.[34]

Ironically, Sellars encountered active resistance to these pieces in Amsterdam where as 'the left is in control of the arts, religious matter [on stage] is simply not permitted'.

Occasionally, Sellars's grounding in the spiritual has taken the form of collaborations with other artists. In Chapter 1, I described his involvement with the Wooster Group in the 1980s when his proposal for a piece based on Flaubert's *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* developed into *Frank Dell's The Temptation of Saint Antony*. In 1998 he curated a major retrospective of the work of the California-based video artist Bill Viola at the Whitney Museum in New York. Much of Viola's work is overtly spiritual. Sellars was responsible for the temple-like exhibition spaces in which works were presented without information cards and where security staff were specially trained to maintain the atmosphere of Zen-like calm. Like his presentation of work at the LA Festival, spectators were encouraged to respond to pieces without mediation: works like 'Room for St. John of the Cross', 'The Greeting' – based on Pontormo's painting of the Visitation, and the 'Nantes Triptych', exhibited on its own in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, were designed as experiences, not exhibits. Even when the pieces Sellars directs do not possess overt religious content, the tone of his direction is often spiritual – otherworldly moments often seep through to

disturb the dry surface of the material: arias are performed as prayers, finales become cantatas, gears shift and what seemed like melodrama suddenly becomes an epic of salvation and resurrection. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Nerissa sang her concern for Portia as a melancholy negro spiritual; in *Tannhauser* a television evangelist recovered the faith his hubris had clouded; in *Nixon in China* the comic protagonists' preparation for bed became Passions of self-interrogation and spiritual crisis. Examples are endless.

Despite his own background, Sellars's spiritual interests extend far beyond the Christian. He is attracted to non-Western religion for the same reasons he's attracted to non-Western theatre – its incorporation into the fabric of everyday life. His search for alternative models of subjectivity is guided by his own study of Taoism, Buddhism, Islam, Sufism and Hinduism. The sacred texts of these religions feature prominently in his formation and understanding of character, as well as the broader issues of justice and morality treated in his pieces. During rehearsals for *The Merchant of Venice*, actors read from the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Dhammapada*, The King James version of the Gospel according to St. Matthew, and the *Koran* – all interpreted comparatively as a background for the production's exploration of Western colonialism. Though the same familiar criticisms may be applied to Sellars's non-Western religious borrowings as may be applied to his theatrical ones, it is my opinion that the level of his personal commitment to these models of spirituality, his scholarly study of their texts, his extensive travel in their countries of origin, his work with believers in these faiths, and his own earnest humility before these other belief systems mitigates against standard charges of cultural or spiritual imperialism.

His commitment is especially apparent in his work at UCLA. His course, 'The Invisible World', is an intense spiritual exploration of art that resists categorisation.

Visitors are not permitted into what is evidently an intensely personal journey for participants. The course is about issues of visibility: who are the people hegemonic American culture wants to conceal and why? How are these material issues of visibility related to the dynamic between reason and faith? How might the unseen world of the spirit facilitate a re-seeing of that which remains hidden in the every-day world? The core text of his other course, 'Art as Moral Action', is the *Bhagavad Gita*[35] which he uses to read a variety of political crises throughout the Americas. Though only a tiny minority of his students could possibly be Hindu, the text is used as an accessible moral template for individual and political analysis. Classes have included 'Affirmative Action: Classical Hindu and Buddhist Traditions of Portraiture', 'Art as Medicinal Practice in Koran Shaman Ceremony', 'Prophets and Visionaries: Native American Revival Movements', 'Report from the Rampart Division: First Cracks in the Armor of the Drug War', 'Truth and Reconciliation: Ethnic Cleansing and its Aftermath', 'Chicana Power: Reclaiming Feminine Spirituality', and 'Economic Justice: Cesar Chavez, The United Farm Workers, and El Teatro Campesino'. The atmosphere in the lecture theatre is more 'event' than seminar. The classes feature guest speakers from 'the field', whose personal testimony of political and cultural struggle is directed by Sellars for maximum dramatic impact. The course description is a summary of Sellars's personal search for pockets of resistance in postmodernity, addressing

> cultural strategies of moral engagement, persuasion and inquiry, in personal and public life, including acts of conscience and civil disobedience. Particular attention will be paid to personal complicity and resistance in the face of historical and contemporary manifestations of racism, economic injustice, and genocide.[36]

It is not a traditional academic course, but rather attempts to train students in political and cultural activism. The focus is clearly on the individual who must arrive at a point

of personal political consciousness before embarking on acts of advocacy, alliance, and social engagement.

This is where Sellars locates a need for spirituality, which is employed throughout his work as a catalyst for primarily *individual* rather than collective transformation. But the juxtaposition of the spiritual with the individual makes the religious tone of Sellars's work problematic. The Christians of *Theodora* practice their religious faith collectively, but their relationship to their God is a singular one. Might the projection to the metaphysical be a temporary escape from the monolith of late capitalist commodification rather than its active confrontation? Isn't Sellars's plea for the re-centring of the spiritual dangerously (if unintentionally) close to the neo-conservative call for a religious revival to secure a destabilised individual identity amidst what Daniel Bell has called the 'contradictions of capitalism'?[37] Theodora and Didymus may have achieved their own measure of psychic harmony in the release that was death, but the oppressed comrades they leave behind can only pray. Martyrdom is not a recovery of agency.

Spirituality in the work of Peter Sellars treads a very fine line between the conservative and the radical. Sellars's own aspiration is clearly towards the latter and, in a philosophy centred around the practice of faith, perhaps faith is the leap the critic needs to make in order to give him the benefit of the doubt and join him in a search for a world beyond the dull, exhausting impasses of the postmodern. In *Theodora*, Sellars demonstrated the hypocrisy and tyranny of the Romans' practice of religion, creating a space for his own alternative models of the spiritual – beyond false harmonisation. By presenting this difficult dialectic between different, fundamentalist versions of religion, Sellars is able to re-appropriate spirituality as a sort of 'Third Way'. Embracing the unknowable, Sellars posits versions of subjectivity based on

multiple interconnections, rather than a strict subject-object model. The need and desire to protect, at all costs, a mythical autonomous, independent, individuated, contained subjectivity is the foundation of tyranny. Inspired by non-Western definitions of a more porous, fluid self-hood, and especially by 'anatta',[38] the Buddhist ideal of 'no-self' which teaches that all pain and suffering arises from grasping for an impossible permanence, Sellars imagines the subject located in a web of multiple power configurations which cross and intersect each other.[39] His vision resembles Jürgen Habermas's, sometimes problematic, proposals for a 'dialogic subjectivity', summarised by Thomas Docherty:

> Habermas argues that the problems associated with the Enlightenment and modernity lie in the individuation of the individual subject of consciousness and argues for a theory of 'communicative action' which will relocate the subject as the agent of an intersubjectively agreed reason whose basis lies in communication or discourse and in the social consensus produced by such discourse.[40]

To find a base from which to treat the 'non-identical' ethically, morally, and with justice, Sellars argues, we first need to grasp the enormous network of intersecting communities of which we are members. The most prosaic things we have in common with others are the foundations for the creation of a just, humane society. To explain his concept he often cites the example of Cornerstone Theatre Company. After years of touring the United States making theatre in local communities the company recently decided to return to their native Los Angeles to create productions with people with unusual connections. One piece featured performers from a certain neighbourhood, another included people with specific immigrant experiences, another was created by people with birthdays on the date the company was founded.[41] In such a scenario, there is no centre, there is no margin, just a web of infinite links between the most diverse individuals and communities. Sellars is fascinated by the amount that

religions have in common – beyond the doctrinal differences that often masquerade as licenses for barbarism. Key to all is the principle of generosity, of giving what you own to those who need it more. This generosity relates directly to the alternative models of subjectivity developed, in relief, throughout his work. 'One of the great tragedies of the world', Bill Viola remarks, 'is that we can never truly enter the subjective of another. We're all isolated form one another'.[42] Personal sacrifice for others – a foundational principle of just about every established world religion – is for Sellars the single most powerful way to transgress this isolation:

> There is a rule in the Koran, the first rule, and it is almsgiving, the rule to share. Take care of the widows, the poor, the orphans... This is repeated over and over again in the Koran. There is one passage describing it in detail, which says it doesn't mean that you're offering things you had extra of, something that you didn't need but from things you really need. It means that you have to offer something which is really important to you. You must offer from the best of what you have and of the things you needed the most.[43]

In giving away what we need most, we abandon the brittleness and meanness of a subjectivity that finally serves only itself. Rather, in literally giving away our selves, and in seeing those selves, our images, in others, we are compelled to treat others with the respect and humanity with which we would wish to be treated. It's a conclusion that seems naively primitive and inadequate in the light of the elaborate tools of critical theory employed here to read Sellars's work, but it's a principle that permeates that work and is one Sellars discusses over and over in interviews. Interpreting the behaviour of Bassanio and Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice*, he asked,

> What's the difference between doing that [lending money] for friends and doing that for people who aren't your friends? Or doing someone a favour when you're really only going to do yourself a favour, where the point of origin was selfish and the endpoint was selfish and there was no midpoint. So the stage you set for yourself, for your beneficent actions is the stage of people who already love you. But you don't venture beyond that stage to the realm of

people that don't already love you. Meanwhile you hold on to your same old prejudices every day while drastically overcompensating with your friends.[44]

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia's caskets bear riddles that could be Buddhist in their cautionary meaning. Gold: 'Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire'. Silver: 'Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves'. The lead casket is the right one. Its inscription is Shakespeare's simple and profound prescription for living: 'Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath'. It's the single line that provides the key to Sellars's philosophy.

A degree of embarrassment is often the common response to expressions of spirituality in contemporary art. The openness and centrality of spirituality in Sellars's work may provoke a cringe from those trained in cultural materialism, for whom a denial of all metaphysical explanations for events and phenomena is the foundation of any critical consciousness in postmodernity. The reactionary evasions of New Ageism seem to lurk in the wings. When I put this to Peter Sellars and asked if his projection to the transcendent was just another way of evading the inevitable contradictions revealed in his work – a search for an ending – his response was frank: 'But, of course. It's when you get to the core of contradiction that you reach the point of transcendence'.[45] He implied that somehow the process, the actual labour, the dedication, the pain of working through a seemingly intractable problem, eventually supersedes the problem itself. Making art, for him, is no longer about the final destination, the finished product. Rather the simple fact of commitment, of taking action, of faith, re-asserts the humanity the 'problem' seems to threaten. Maybe it's a modernist position – a belief in the formal capacity of the artwork itself to redeem culture. Maybe it's postmodernist – affirming the potential of the individual to effect

change by simply taking an activist stance. Whatever it is, the urge to categorise is not part of its agenda.

Echoing avant-gardists throughout the twentieth century, Sellars defines theatre by its spiritual function. Film is the post-metaphysical dramatic medium; by virtue of its form theatre can never fully abandon its spiritual baggage. The presence of the body means that, in the theatre, the rationality of modernity is destined to remain an eternally incomplete project. The whole concept of drama is rooted in the idea of resurrection. Theatre, Sellars remarks,

> is a place where real persons having real problems can actually be together without violence...like in 'Hamlet', everybody is dead by the end, and then they get up and take a bow. I mean nobody has to die to express these things.[46]

The 'generosity' Sellars centres in his aspirational subjectivity is magnified in the theatre. In *Theodora*, in that scene of execution, the shock of the sublime was not the promise of paradise or the thrill of oblivion, but the presence of the human body live in time, the sacrifice and generosity of the actor before an audience, defying enlightenment's deferral of the immediate. Of course, the success of this production, before the most bourgeois of audiences, might still have occurred because it fit patterns of pre-modernist humanism. I'm more hopeful, however. For me, Peter Sellars's inability to overcome the ghost of dialectic, his dubious attraction to metaphysics, his nostalgia for reconciliation, were the ironic marks of *Theodora*'s success. His search for meaning is utterly lacking in cynicism. His failure recovers the power of transgression.

## Notes

[1] See James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America*, Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1995, p. 3.
[2] Reviewers made the Waco connection. See Richard Fairman, 'An Unexpected Handel', *Financial Times*, 20 May 1996, p. 15.
[3] See Rodney Milnes, 'Happy to be Provoked', *Times*, 20 May 1996, p. 13; Richard Fairman, 'An Unexpected Handel', *Financial Times*, 20 May 1996, p. 15; Andrew Clements, 'Here Comes the Summer', *Guardian*, 20 May 1996, p. 10.
[4] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London and New York: Verso, 1944/1999, p. 249.
[5] See Michel Foucault, quoted by Paul Rabinow in introduction to *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Critical Thought*, London: Penguin, 1996, p. 14
[6] See Winton Dean, *Handel's Dramatic Masques and Oratorios*, London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1959, p. 558.
[7] See Peter Sellars, programmes notes for Glyndebourne Festival Opera Production of *Theodora*, 1996.
[8] The British Enlightenment included movements in both Scotland and England. As Handel was a Court composer based in London and composing for national events, my discussion of *Theodora* takes place in the context of the English Enlightenment.
[9] Greek tragedy has been a staple of Sellars's career since Harvard. Notable productions have included Sophocles' *Ajax* at the ANT in 1986, and Aeschylus' *Persians* in 1992 in the aftermath of the Gulf War. Sellars continually expresses his attraction to the form and period citing its political and spiritual centrality in the life of the nation, as well as its status as the model for the *Gesamtkuntswerk* – the forerunner of modern opera. For more details see Chapter 1 and Appendix A.
[10] See Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth Century Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 62.
[11] Quoted in Ruth Smith, p. 75.
[12] See Winton Dean, p. 566.
[13] See Paul Rabinow, introduction to *The Foucault Reader*, p. 23.
[14] See Ruth Smith, p. 266.
[15] Ibid., p. 269.
[16] Ibid., p. 222.
[17] Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic*, London and New York: Verso, 1990, p. 271.
[18] For a discussion of Adorno on sacrifice, see Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998, p. 29.
[19] See Winton Dean, p. 569.
[20] See Ruth Smith, p. 263.
[21] Ibid., p. 242.
[22] A tension explored with great sympathy in the Jessica-Shylock subplot of *The Merchant of Venice*
[23] Rodney Milnes, 'Theodora', *Opera*, Festivals Issue 1996, pp. 30-3.
[24] See James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, p. 180.
[25] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, p. 89.
[26] See Thomas Docherty (ed.), introduction to *Postmodernism: A Reader*, London and New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, p. 11.
[27] See Marshall Berman citing Sigmund Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents* in 'Why Modernism Still Matters', in Scott Lash and Jonathan Friedman (eds.), *Modernity and Identity*, Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1991, p. 42.
[28] The staging was Sellars's idea – the execution was not. Thomas Morrell's libretto indicates that Theodora and Didymus were executed by crucifixion.
[29] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, p. 83.
[30] Axel Honneth, 'The Other of Justice: Habermas and the Ethical Challenge of Postmodernism', in Stephen K. White (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 290.
[31] Peter Sellars interviewed by Mark Bates, 'Directing a National Consciousness', *Theater*, vol. 28, no. 9, p. 90.

[32] Quoted in John O'Mahony, 'The Mighty Munchkin', *Guardian*, 20 May 2000, Review section, p. 6.
[33] Peter Sellars interviewed by Veronica Kaup-Hasler and Katrin Klingan, 'The Right to Hope', *Theaterschrift* 13/98, p. 79.
[34] Quoted in Della Couling, 'Opera Directors: Peter Sellars', *Opera News*, March/April 1999, p. 45.
[35] *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*, translated by Barbara Stoller Miller, is the prescribed course text.
[36] From Sellars's course description and syllabus, UCLA, World Arts and Cultures 140B, 'Art as Moral Action', Winter 2000, Course ID# 359 541 200, and from 1997 description of the same course subtitled 'Civil War and Reconstruction'.
[37] See Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project', in Thomas Docherty (ed.), p. 101.
[38] See Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Theatre after Modernism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 9.
[39] Thomas Docherty discusses this concept when summarising the position of Ernesto Laclau in 'Politics and the Limits of Modernity', in introduction to 'Politics' section of *Postmodernism: A Reader*, p. 321.
[40] Thomas Docherty, summarising the position of Jürgen Habermas in 'Modernity – an incomplete Project', in introduction to 'Modernity: Complete and Incomplete' section of *Postmodernism: A Reader*, p. 95.
[41] Sellars illustrated this concept of a subjectivity of multiple connections with the example of Cornerstone Theatre Company, in his Collins Memorial Lecture, at Indiana State University, 25 April 1997.
[42] Quoted in Andrew Solomon, 'Bill Viola's Video Arcade', *New York Times Magazine*, 8 February 1998, p. 37.
[43] Peter Sellars interviewed by Veronica Kaup-Hasler and Katrin Klingan, p. 97.
[44] Peter Sellars, 'On Choice and Usury: Peter Sellars talks about *The Merchant of Venice*', edited by Maria Delgado, online posting: http//:www.ardenshakespeare.com , 19 November 1998.
[45] Peter Sellars in informal discussion with the author, Los Angeles, 10 February 2000.
[46] Peter Sellars interviewed by Veronica Kaup-Hasler and Katrin Klingan, p. 87.

## Conclusion: The Persistence of Modernity

Peter Sellars's critique of postmodernity, his recovery of an adversarial aesthetic, is rooted in his conviction that modernity still shapes our collective cultural condition. His ambition is neither to eradicate the creeping traces of that modernity – mindful of the horrors of a twentieth century driven by the rational – nor to fulfil its potential – Habermas's 'Incomplete Project'.[1] His strategy is rather the pragmatic acceptance of the chronological fact of postmodernity, combined with a relentless interrogation of that condition's broader assertions and assumptions. Working through the contradictions that shape our lives in capitalism, Sellars complicates the formulation of categories – social, personal, political, aesthetic – mapping the blurred exchanges between public and private, local and national, individual and collective, spiritual and secular, modern and postmodern. His work is a denial of simplicity, an assertion of the complexity that is the guarantor of our individual humanity, and a refusal of the conclusion that totalises meaning. The result is a re-focusing of the problems we face, and a re-imagining of our capacity to deal with them. This thesis has attempted to describe and explain that project.

I began by explaining the broad problems Sellars faces as a socially-committed artist in postmodernity – moral relativism, the culture industry's appropriation of oppositional aesthetic forms, the dangers of corporate patronage.

Sellars developed his aesthetic to cope with these cultural and temporal exigencies, moving away from the sometimes redundant formal concerns of the American experimental theatre towards a more explicit foregrounding of social and political issues. Sourcing precedents in the work of Russian and American *auteurs* of the twentieth century, Sellars's performance style was founded on making connections – between Europe and America, between East and West, between naturalism and stylisation, between formal experimentation and discussion of 'content'.

These concerns are magnified by Sellars's interest in capitalism's binary model of subjectivity. This dialectic frames his practice of updating, which I discussed by invoking complex issues of authority and progress that centre the concept of enlightenment. Sellars's turn to the texts of the eighteenth century to understand contemporary power relations is part of a widespread recent trend of deconstructing the ideology of modernity. My reading of Sellars's production of *Don Giovanni* examined the formation of modern individual subjectivity, and argued that Sellars's confused attempt to justify his explanation of 1980s social crises replicated the hypocritical bourgeois ideology he set out to critique.

His *Marriage of Figaro* examined the divisive effects of modernity on human relationships, exploring the contradictions of capitalism by turning the opera into a critique of excessive consumerism in America and the resulting impasses of the postmodern. At this virtual dead-end, I tried to understand Sellars's committed search for a way forward, suggesting that he counters the inevitable paralysis of postmodernity with a re-centring of the modern. His examination of contemporary social crisis concludes that postmodernity is not some radical new phase which has destroyed the dialectic that enables progress, but is just modernity in its later stages.

'At this point in history, probably at any point in history...if you've only got one strategy, you're already dead. You've got to move in many directions at once', Peter Sellars has remarked.[2] The Los Angeles Festival was another such strategy, an attempt to frame the inevitable coexistence of difference in postmodernity with a righteous ethical and moral philosophy. The confused result demonstrated the difficulties of cultural relativism, the theoretical weaknesses of postmodernism, and the persistence of Sellars's modernist concerns with form and cultural organisation. I contextualised these problems by discussing the unique American intersection of avant-gardism with postmodernism, describing Sellars's search for resistance amid postmodernity's neutralisation of resistant forms. *The Merchant of Venice* was Sellars's analysis of the problems of contemporary Los Angeles, a diagnosis which argued that the crises of what is ostensibly the world's most extravagantly postmodern metropolis are largely those of modernity.

This conclusion does not permit a simple turn back to the certainties of dialectical critique, however – the modern and the postmodern have become inextricably linked. Sellars's production of Handel's *Theodora* dissected the dehumanising effects of the imposition of modernity's pure reason on individual lives, while demonstrating the practical and legislative inadequacy of postmodern 'celebrations' of difference. Sellars turns to the spiritual to cope with the stalemate of his cultural condition. It is a move which warily treads a path between the conservative evasion of material contradiction, and the admirable call for a new subjectivity based on unconditional respect for that which remains 'unknowable' and 'invisible' in others, that which lies beyond our individual experience.

It seems strange to strive for conclusion when I have criticised Peter Sellars for attempting to do just that. As I try to complete this thesis I am acutely aware of my own methodological inadequacies. To explain Sellars's work I have tried to position him among significant theorists of the modern and the postmodern, particularly those of the Frankfurt School. I have invoked Max Horkheimer, and especially Theodor Adorno, because their early concerns intersect with those of Peter Sellars with amazing prescience, his work functioning almost as the haphazard conclusion of theirs. More contemporary contexts are provided by Jürgen Habermas, for whom contemporary social problems may be solved by the completion of modernity, and his polar opposite, Jean-François Lyotard, the foremost theorist of 'The Postmodern Condition'.[3] At moments Sellars's work is aligned with the ideas of these theorists, at other times it diverges. I specifically turn to Adorno because, despite the pessimism of his critique of modernity, he never fully abandons the concept, a move that would amount to pure nihilism. Rather, according to Stephen K. White, the critical theory that he and Horkheimer employ, 'would have the role of giving new life to ideals of reason and freedom by revealing their false embodiment in scientism, capitalism, the "culture industry" and bourgeois Western political institutions'.[4] From this follows Sellars's tentative faith in the usefulness of existing forms, and his refusal of the total despair that is the logical conclusion of postmodernity.

The danger of employing these theorists, however, is that they address an earlier time. Sellars's cultural confusion reflects my own critical disorientation. The tone of my analysis has been overtly Marxist, my harshest words occurring when Sellars diverges from some theoretically unified Marxist ideal. Marxism may be useful when analysing the traces of a persistent modernity. However, it is at this point that the enormous gap between critical and artistic practice in a project like mine is

most apparent. While Sellars's work addresses the failures of the material Marxist project, the critical project remains largely impervious. In fact Marxism really only survives in the West as a beautiful, brilliantly-formed set of critical and analytical tools, employed in academic discourse to shore up an increasingly fragmenting objective autonomy. On the ground, in the theatre, its perfection is strangely inadequate, and Sellars seems aware of this. Purity of form is a redundant ideal, the single strategy that means death. In the world's most successful economy, in the world's most powerful nation, poverty has multiple definitions. Reviewing Amyarta Sen's book, *Inequality Reexamined*, Nicholas Lemann observes that

> Marxism posits a more brutal form of want than exists [in the United States]: go to a majority-poor neighbourhood in this country, and what you'll find is not people starving to death, but a searing isolation that makes life physically and psychologically terrible. It is, in other words, a tragedy that isn't best understood as a simple lack of cash. Also, the idea that 'opportunity' rather than money is the one thing that poor Americans need isn't satisfactory, because...there are wide differentials in people's ability to take advantage of opportunities. In a country where disadvantage is much more often perceived in terms of location, ethnicity, and gender than in terms of relationship to the means of production, a new set of conceptual tools seems to be called for.[5]

I first understood the need for these new tools in Chapter 2, when what seemed like a classic Marxist critique of excessive consumer capitalism in America – *Don Giovanni* – became, for me, a submission to the flawed mythology of addiction. The more closely I read the production, the more interdisciplinary my critical skills needed to be. The *Merchant of Venice* began, for me, with similar priorities but unravelled into more difficult and complex territories of race and postcolonialism. The most intractable critical challenge came in Chapter 5 where I needed to find some way to theorise Sellars's immersion in spirituality without resorting to crass, reductive dismissal. I realised that my difficulties as critic were precisely those of Sellars as

artist, who understands American poverty as manifested in multiple locations, multiple layers of human experience. He cannot respond with a focus on pure class injustice, pure economics, pure gender struggle. His diagnosis of American problems involves the recognition that spiritual, emotional, social, national, political, as well as economic poverty are profoundly interlinked in the condition we call postmodernity.

If anything resembling a pure Marxism appears in Sellars's work it's in his borrowings from Brecht. In his address to the bourgeois audiences of opera, his love of the American musical, his turn to national institutions, Sellars pragmatically embodies one of the key elements of the *Short Organum*:

> The bare wish, if nothing else, to evolve an art fit for the times must drive our theatre of the scientific age straight out into the suburbs, where it can stand as it were wide open, at the disposal of those who live hard and produce much, so that they can be fruitfully entertained there with their great problems... A theatre which makes productivity its main source of entertainment has also to take it for its theme, and with greater keenness than ever now that man is everywhere hampered by men from self-production: i.e. from maintaining himself, entertaining, and being entertained.[6]

In postmodern America, Sellars realised that the middle-class is the new Proletariat. They're the only people who go to the theatre anyway. The theatre remains decades behind most other media, visual art especially. It cannot hope to lead formal innovation in the fine arts, nor can it survive simply as a spiritual surrogate or artificial community for the individuated population of a secular culture. For Sellars, the theatre has to embrace every possible function, a scenario in which the creation of major professional artworks becomes inseparable from the idea of art as a 'doing-of-life' that figures in his community projects. He embraces the permanent crisis in which theatre has found itself since the spread of electronic media because that's real life, that's the cultural situation all art has to respond to:

> Your great idea and finding money for it are the same thing. Does one thing actually drive the other in an interesting way? Is the discussion that you have in order to fund the work the discussion that should be on stage anyway?[7]

Sellars argues that theatre must be functional and productive to survive, and must communicate its usefulness to those who would like to see its neglect or elimination. Hence his extraordinary prolixity. Dialogue and communication *are* the functions of theatre in Sellars's view.

Sellars has stated that since 1992, the underlying concern of all his work has been the events of the LA Riots. The multiple layers of communication in theatre provide an ideal form to discuss these issues because

> People do not know how to articulate what they are feeling in this society. The absence of articulation is what creates violence. If you can't express something, or if your voice is unheard, you of course resort to violence. The ability to move against violence is the ability to create forms of expression, where nobody has to be killed in order to say something.[8]

The threats theatre faces from mass culture are the reasons it must survive. But its survival must be based on engagement, not precious segregation. It must aggressively argue its own importance. Sellars observes that

> We've been in a terrible period where [critics] announced that art begins where function ends. So that anything that had no function was elevated as art and anything that you could use, like a pot, was called a craft; particularly if it was made by women and wasn't signed by anyone. What I think is so exciting right now is that as art is under attack all over the world, we are going to have to demonstrate that we are functional; we're going to have to demonstrate that we add something to people's lives... Art is not the desert part of your menu, it's the protein. It's not what comes after, it's what comes first.[9]

When assessing Sellars's place in theatre history, the criterion of formal innovation, and the ideal of the great individual artist creating an heroic body of work,

are irrelevant. I have attempted to demonstrate that Sellars's work is significant as much for its failures, problems and contradictions, as for its creation of any new theatrical paradigm. His art is important because it provides a dense and self-aware example of the complexities of our current cultural condition. That Peter Sellars's work does 'touch the texture of life in contemporary America', that that work is suffused by a passionate, steadfast, earnest concern for the spiritual and material welfare of human beings, renews the ideal of an art that's truly functional.

## Notes

[1] See Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project', *New German Critique*, 22, Winter 1981, pp. 3-15. Reprinted in Thomas Docherty, *Postmodernism: A Reader*, London and New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993, pp. 98-109.
[2] Peter Sellars, 'Theatre, Opera and Society: The Director's Perspective', *Grand Street*, vol. 16, no. 1, Summer 1997, p. 199.
[3] See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979/84.
[4] Stephen K. White, 'Reason, modernity, and democracy', in Stephen K. White (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 4.
[5] Nicholas Lemann, 'The Poverty of Poverty', *Transition*, Issue 71, vol. 6, no. 3, Fall 1996, pp. 138-9.
[6] Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre', Section 23, in John Willett (ed.), *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, New York: Hill and Wang, 1957, p. 186.
[7] Peter Sellars, 'Theatre, Opera and Society: The Director's Perspective', p. 199.
[8] Peter Sellars, 'The Question of Culture', lecture given at the Fourth Elia Conference, 'Reflections on the Human Face', Lisbon, 13-16 November 1996, p. 2
[9] Peter Sellars, 'The Question of Culture', pp. 3-4.

## Appendix A: Production Chronology[1]

**1957:** Born September 27th, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

**1971-5**: Phillips Academy, Andover

*The Gas Heart*, Tristan Tzara

*The Tempest*, William Shakespeare

*Danse Macabre*, *The Bald Soprano*, Eugene Ionesco

*Concerto for Wind Instruments*, Mozart – a multi-media performance

*The Nightingale*, Stravinsky/Andersen

*Peter Pan*, J. M. Barrie – a multi-media performance

*The Wizard of Oz*, Frank L. Baum

*Revue Sketches*, Harold Pinter

*The Lesson*, Eugene Ionesco

*Everyman*, Anonymous

*Winnie the Pooh*, A.A. Milne

*The Forest* – an environmental performance

*Rich Damp Moist Chocolate Cake* – a multi-media performance

*Lucky Zucker Campaign* – a multi-media performance

*Peter Sellars Birthday Special*

*Faust*, Christopher Marlowe – a co-production

*The Carnival of the Animals*, Saint-Saëns/Nash – concert version

*The Bear*, *The Wedding*, Anton Chekhov

*Picnic on the Battlefield*, Fernando Arrabal

*The Firebugs*, Max Frisch

*Humulus the Mute*, Jean Anouilh

*The Party*, Harold Robbins

*Calm Reigns in the Country*, John Stephen – co-production

*Lord Byron's Love Letter*, *Portrait of a Madonna*, Tennessee Williams

*The Story of a Soldier*, Igor Stravinsky

*En G-g-garrrde*, René Daumal

*Architruc*, Robert Pinget

7 Episodes from WPA Radio Theatre

**1976-80**: Harvard University

*Coriolanus*, William Shakespeare
Loeb Experimental Theatre: 12-16 January 1977

*Play* and *Come and Go*, Samuel Beckett
Loeb Experimental Theatre: 24-26 February 1977

*Façade: an Entertainment!*, poems by Edith Sitwell, music by William Walton
Loeb Experimental Theatre: 14-17 and 20-23 April 1977

*Striptease*, Slawomir Mrozek
Performed by Explosives B Cabaret – founded by Sellars – in the basement of Adams House, 21-22 October 1977

*Boris Godunov*, Aleksandr Pushkin
Adams House and Lowell House, 3-4 November 1977

*What Happened*, Gertrude Stein
17-18 November 1977

*Quodlibet*, Peter Handke
28-29 November 1977

*Bastien and Bastienne*, W.A. Mozart
Freshman Union, 11 December 1977

*Salzburg Dance of Death*, Bertolt Brecht and *Death Knocks*, Woody Allen
12-13 December 1977

*Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus
22 and 24 February 1978

*Sattiryavan Savitri*, traditional Indian drama
16-17 March 1978

*Macbeth*, William Shakespeare
18-19 March 1978

*Introspection*, Peter Handke
21-22 March 1978

*Cosi fan Tutte*, W.A. Mozart
Date?

*The Dumb Waiter*, Harold Pinter
4-5 May 1978

*Chang Boils the Sea*, anonymous Chinese play
Radcliffe Quad, 7 May 1978

*When We Dead Awaken*, Henrik Ibsen
15-16 May 1978

*Egmont*, Johann Wolfgang von Göethe
Freshman Union, 23 September 1978

*Tarelkin's Death*, Alexander Soukhovo-Kobyline
Department of Slavic Studies, 19-21 October 1978

*Orfeo e Euridice*, C. W. Glück
Agassiz Theatre, 6-10 December 1978

*Antony and Cleopatra*, William Shakespeare
Adams House swimming pool, 7-10 December 1978

*Three Sisters*, Anton Chekhov
Loeb Drama Center, 15-18 and 21-24 march 1979

*The Masque of Cupid and Death*, John Locke
Date?

Shaman Dance Project, in collaboration with Philip Tussing
Loeb Experimental Theatre, 3-5 May 1979

*The Garden of Earthly Delights*
Loeb Experimental Theatre, 4-5 May 1979

*Le Piège de Meduse* and *Geneviève de Brabant*, Erik Satie
Adams House, 7-8 May 1979

*Il Ballo delle Ingrate* and *Combattimendo di Tancredi e Clorinda*, C. Monteverdi
Loeb Experimental Theatre, 11-12 May 1979

*Private Lives*, Noel Coward
Date?

*Bill Doggett Revue*
Date?

*Much Ado about Nothing*, William Shakespeare
Harvard Student Theater Festival, Loeb Drama Center, 4-7 and 11-14 July 1979

*Lulu*, Frank Wedekind
Harvard Student Theater Festival, Loeb Drama Center, 18-21 and 25-28 July 1979

*The Bedbug*, Vladimir Mayakovsky
Harvard Student Theater Festival, Loeb Drama Center, 1-4 and 8-11 August 1979

*The Ring*, Richard Wagner, for actors and puppets
15-18 and 26-29 September 1979

*Walter*, a musical, author?
4-5 October 1979

*Calling for Help*, Peter Handke
Date?

*Trumpets and Drums*, Brecht/Farquhar
Date?

*The Pajama Game*, George Abbott, Richard Adler and Jerry Ross
Date?

*King Lear*, William Shakespeare
Loeb Drama Center, 26 February-1 March 1980

**1980**: *The Inspector General*, Nicolai Gogol
American Repertory Theatre, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 22 May-12 July

*Don Giovanni*, W.A. Mozart

Palace Theater, Manchester, New Hampshire, 20 and 23 September. Produced by Monadnock Music Festival/Opera League of New Hampshire

*A Day in the Life of the Czar, or I Too Have Lived in Arcadia*, Frank O'Hara and V.R. Lang
La Mama ETC, New York, 23 October-9 November

*Santur Opera*, Ivan Tcherpnin
Festival d'Automne, American Center, Paris, 17 November-2 December

**1981**: *Saul*, G.F. Handel
Sanders Theatre, Cambridge Massachusetts, 11 and 15 February

*Armida*, J. Hayden
Monadnock Music Festival, Keene State College, New Hampshire, 13 September

*The Ghost of Chastity Past, or The Incident at Sashimi Junction: A Kabuki Western*, Shanny Mow
Paul Mellon Arts Center, Waterford, Connecticut, 2-3 October, created and performed with the National Theatre of the Deaf. Toured around USA and Japan

*Orlando*, G.F. Handel
American Repertory Theater, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 16 December-14 March 1982

**1983** *The Yellow Cake Review*, Peter Maxwell Davies
Emanuel Church, Boston, 25-26 February

*Conversations with Fear and Hope After Death: Mahagonny Songspiel*, Bertolt Brecht/Kurt Weill, translated by Timothy Mayer, with canatas by J.S. Bach
Agassiz Theatre, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 21, 23, 24, 27, 28 March
Revived: PepsiCo Summerfare Festival, SUNY, Purchase, NY, 25-28 July 1985
Majestic Theatre, Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, 30 March-2 April 1989
MC93 Bobigny, Paris, and Theater am Türm, Frankfurt, 1997.

*The Mikado*, Gilbert and Sullivan
Lyric Opera, Chicago, opened 11 May

*The Visions of Simone Machard*, Bertolt Brecht
La Jolla Playhouse, California, 24 June-17 July

*Pericles*, William Shakespeare
Boston Shakespeare Company, 12-30 October

*The Lighthouse*, Peter Maxwell Davies

Boston Shakespeare Company, opened 2 November

*A Midsummer Night's Dream*
Boston Shakespeare Company, opened December 11

**1984** *Play/Macbeth*, Samuel Beckett and William Shakespeare
Boston Shakespeare Company, 11 February-24 March, in repertory

*Ping*
Included *Ghost Trio* and *Rough for Radio I* and *II* by Samuel Beckett, and *A Proposal* and *A Tragedic Hero* by Anton Chekhov
Boston Shakespeare Company, 25 February-1 April, in repertory

*Monkey Eating Peach, Rat Stealing Pumpkin, or The Phoenix Among the Peonies*
Indoor Athletic Building, Harvard College, 18 March

*Hang on To Me*
Created from Maxim Gorky's *Summerfolk*, translated by Peter Sellars and Maria M. Markof-Belaeff, and sixteen songs by George and Ira Gershwin
Guthrie Theater, Minneapolis, opened 16 May

*Cosi fan Tutte*, W.A. Mozart
Castle Hill Festival, Ipswich, Massachusetts, 1, 3, 5, 9, 11 August

**1985** *The Count of Monte Cristo*, Alexandre Dumas, adaptation by Charles Fechter, revised by James O'Neill
Eisenhower Theater, Kennedy Center, Washington D.C., 13 May-22 June

*Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, G. F. Handel
PepsiCo Summerfare Festival, SUNY, Purchase, NY, opened 5 July

*A Seagull*, Anton Chekhov
Eisenhower Theater, Kennedy Center, Washington D.C., 9 December 1985-11 January 1986.

**1986** *Idiot's Delight*, Robert Sherwood
Eisenhower Theater, Kennedy Center, Washington D.C., opened 22 February

*Ajax*, Sophocles
Eisenhower Theater, Kennedy Center, Washington D.C., opened 12 June
Translated by Robert Auletta
Toured to: California, Brussels, Vienna, Stuttgart and Amsterdam

*Cosi fan Tutte*, W.A. Mozart, new version
PepsiCo Summerfare Festival, SUNY, Purchase, NY, opened 16 July
Revived: Staatstheater, Stuttgart, 16-28 June 1987
PepsiCo Summerfare Festival, SUNY, Purchase, NY, 22, 24, 25 July 1987
PepsiCo Summerfare Festival, SUNY, Purchase, NY, 13, 16, 23, 30 July and 4 August 1989

Filmed for video: Vienna, 1990

*Two Figures in Dense Violet Light*
Included *Ohio Impromptu* by Samuel Beckett; *Tsunemasa* by Zeami translated by Ezra Pound; 'Angels Surrounded by Paysans' by Wallace Stevens
Free Theater, Kennedy Center, Washington D.C., 9-23 August 1986

*Zangezi: A Supersaga in Twenty Planes*, Velimir Khlebnikov, translated by Paul Schmidt
Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 6 December 1986-11 January 1987
Revived: Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, 17 November-6 December 1987
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2-4 March 1988

**1987** *Don Giovanni*, W.A, Mozart, new version
PepsiCo Summerfare Festival, SUNY, Purchase, NY, 15, 17, 19, 23, 25, 29, 31 and 2 August
Revived: PepsiCo Summerfare Festival, SUNY, Purchase, NY, 8, 15, 22, 29 July and 3 August, 1989
Toured: MC93 Bobigny, Paris, 13-27 November 1989
Filmed for Video: Vienna, 1990

*The Electrification of the Soviet Union*, Nigel Osborne/Craig Raine
Glyndebourne, England, opened 5 October
Toured: Glyndebourne Touring Opera, Autumn 1987: Glyndebourne, Oxford, Southampton, Birmingham, Manchester
Revived: Glyndebourne, 5-12 June 1988
Toured: Hebbel Theater, Berlin, 1-2 September 1988

*Nixon in China*, John Adams/Alice Goodman
Houston Grand Opera, Houston, Texas, opened 22 October
Toured: Brooklyn Academy of Music, New York, 4-17 December 1987
Washington, 1988
Edinburgh, September 1988
Amsterdam, 1988
Revived: Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles Festival, 11-16 September 1990
MC93 Bobigny, Paris, 14-28 December 1991
Oper Frankfurt, July 1992
English National Opera, London, opened 7 June 2000

**1988** *Le Nozze di Figaro*, W.A. Mozart
PepsiCo Summerfare Festival, SUNY, Purchase, NY, 13, 15, 17, 20, 24, 27, 29, 31
Revived: PepsiCo Summerfare Festival, SUNY, Purchase, NY, 21, 26, 28 July and 2 August 1989
Toured: MC93 Bobigny, Paris, 10-23 December 1989
Filmed: Vienna, 1990
Revived: Opera House, Boston, January 1991

Gran Teatro del Liceu, Barcelona, 23 November-1 December 1991

*Tannhäuser*, Richard Wagner
Lyric Opera, Chicago, opened 10 October

**1990** *Die Zauberflöte*, W.A. Mozart
Glyndebourne, opened 21 May
New Version: titled *The Magic Flute*, with a new English translation by Alice Goodman, 13 July-22 August 1991

**1991** *The Death of Klinghoffer*, John Adams/Alice Goodman
Théâtre de la Monnaie, Brussels, opened 19 March
Toured: Opera Nationale de Lyon, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21 April 1991
Wiener Festwocher, Vienna, 9, 11, 13, 15 May 1991
Brooklyn Academy of Music, 5-13 September 1991
San Francisco Opera, 7, 13, 15, 19, 22, 24 November 1991

*The Cabinet of Doctor Ramirez* (film), conceived by Peter Sellars, music by John Adams
Produced by Mediascope in association with Canal+ productions, Mod Films, Paladin Films, BBC, WNET Thirteen and WDR. Broadcast in the USA on PBS Television, 14 April 1993.

**1992** *The Story of a Soldier*, Stravinsky/Ramuz, concert version
Libbey Bowl, Ojai, California, opened 29 May
Revived: Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles, 21-24 January 1999

*Saint-François d'Assise*, Olivier Messaien
Salzburg Festspiele/Felsenreitschule, Salzburg, opened 17 August
Revived: Opera de Paris-Bastille, Paris, 12-29 December
Salzburg, 16, 19, 22, 24, 28, 30 August 1998

**1993** *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Claude Debussy
Het Muziektheater, Amsterdam, opened 1 June
Revived: Los Angeles Music Center, Los Angeles, 4-12 February 1995
Het Muziektheater, Amsterdam, opened 6 May 1996

*The Persians*, Aeschylus, translated by Robert Auletta
Szene Salzburg/Lehrbauhof, Salzburg, opened 20 July
Toured: Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, 16-21 August
Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles, 30 December-24 October
MC93 Bobigny, Festival d'Automne, Paris, 9-28 November
Hebel Theater, Berlin, 10-12 and 14-18 December 1993

*The Seven Deadly Sins*, Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill (video)
Produced by Caméras Continentales, Opéra de Lyon, La Sept, Arte, RM Associates. Distributed by Decca and Polygram, 1995.

**1994** *Oedipus Rex* and *Symphony of Psalms*, Igor Stravinsky
Grosses Festspielhaus, Salzburg, opened 22 August

New version: Het Muziektheater/De Nederlandse Oper, 4-30 March 1998

*The Merchant of Venice*, William Shakespeare
Goodman Theater, Chicago, 10 October-5 November
Toured: Barbican Centre, London, 16-19 November
Thalia Theater, Hamburg, 24-30 November
MC93 Bobigny, Festival d'Automne, Paris, 6-17 December

**1995** *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*, John Adams/June Jordan
Zellerbach Playhouse, Berkeley, California, opened 12 May
Toured: Festival des Ameriques, Montréal, 30 May-4 June
Serious Fun Festival, New York, 11-16 July
Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, 14-19 August
MC93 Bobigny, Festival d'Automne, Paris, 26 September-15 October
Thalia Theater, Hamburg, 21 October-18 November

*Mathis der Maler*, Paul Hindemith
Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London, opened 16 November

**1996** *Theodora*, G. F. Handel
Glyndebourne, opened 17 May
Toured: Glyndebourne Touring Opera, October-December 1996, Southampton, Oxford, Norwich, Plymouth, Woking, Manchester, Norwich
Revived: Glyndebourne, opened 3 August 1997

*The Rake's Progress*, Igor Stravinsky
Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris, opened 28 September
Revived: Het Muziektheater, Amsterdam, 4-29 November 1998

**1997** *Mahagonny Songspiel*, Brecht/Weill, *Conversations with Fear and Hope After Death*, J. S. Bach,
MC93 Bobigny/Festival de Saint-Denis, Paris, 31 May-7 June
Theater am Türm, Frankfurt

*Le Grand Macabre*, Gyorgy Ligeti, new revised version, in English
Grosses Festspielhaus, Salzburg, opened 28 July
Revived: Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris, 5-13 February 1998

**1998** *Los Biombos/The Screens*, Jean Genet, new Anglo-Hispanic version
East L.A. Skills Center, Lincoln Heights, Los Angeles, 10 January-1 February. Translated/Adapted by Gloria Alvarez in collaboration with P. Galindo, L. Jeffries and Peter Sellars. With the actors of the Cornerstone Theatre Company, the Los Angeles Poverty Department and members of the Hispanic community of Boyle Heights, L.A.

*Peony Pavilion*, Tang Xianzu, music by Tan Dun, translated by Cyril Birch
Wiener Festwochen, Vienna, opened 12 May
Toured: Barbican Centre, London, 10-20 September 1998
Teatro Olimpico, Rome, 27, 28, 29 September and 1, 2, 3 October 1998

MC93 Bobigny, Paris, 4-22 December 1998
Zellerbach Hall, Berkeley, 5-7 March 1999

**1999** *The Story of a Soldier*, after Igor Stravinsky
Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, Los Angeles, 21-24 January 1999
Revived: Hansen Dam Amphitheatre, Pacoima, 16 September 1999
Hollenbeck Park, Los Angeles, 17 September 1999
MacArthur Park, 19 September 1999
Festival sul Novcento/Teatro Massimo, Palermo, 15-17 October 1999
Festival Romaeuropa/Teatro India – Teatro di Roma, Rome 22-24 October 1999
Festival de Otono de la Communidad de Madrid/Teatro de Madrid, Madrid, 29-31 October 1999.
Revived: Wiener Festwochen/Sofiesale, Grosser Saal, Vienna, 16-18 June 2000
MC93 Bobigny, Paris, November 2000

*Biblical Pieces*, Igor Stravinsky
*The Flood*, *Babel*, *Abraham and Isaac*, *Threni* (*The Lamentations of Jermiah*), *Three Russian Prayers* (*Ave Maria*, *Credo*, *Pater Noster*), *A Sermon*, *A Narrative and A Prayer*
Choreography: Donald Byrd (*Threni*), Mark Morris (*Three Russian Prayers*)
Holland Festival/De Nederlandse Opera, Theater Carre, Amsterdam, 14-20 June
Revived: De Nederlanse Opera/Het Musiektheater, 24-30 December

**2000** *L'Amour de Loin*, Kaija Saariaho, libretto by Amin Maalouf
based on *La Vida Brève* by Jaufre Rudel
Salzburg, 15, 19, 22, 27, 30 August

*El Niño*, John Adams, libretto by John Adams and Peter Sellars
Théâtre du Châtelet , Paris, 15, 17, 19, 20, 22, 23 December

## Notes

[1] Frédéric Maurin helped fill in a number of significant holes in this production chronology. He is the editor of a book of essays on the work of Peter Sellars, forthcoming in 2001: Frédéric Maurin (ed.), *Peter Sellars*, Paris: CNRS Editions, collection: Les Voies de la Création Théâtrale, vol.21, 2001, which will contain an expanded version of my treatment of *The Merchant of Venice*.

## Appendix B: Interview

Peter Sellars interviewed by the author at Yale University, October 4th, 1997. An edited extract of this interview appeared as 'Directing A National Consciousness: Peter Sellars, Interviewed by Mark Bates', *Theater*, vol. 28, no. 2, Spring 1998, pp. 86-90.

**Mark Bates**: You frequently return to the texts of Russian authors, consistently placing them in contemporary American contexts: *Hang On To Me*, your combination of Gershwin songs and Gorky's *Summerfolk*, Velimir Khlebnikov's *Zangezi*, *A Seagull* at the Kennedy Center. What's the source of this attraction?

**Peter Sellars**: In the 19th century the great American authors didn't write for the theatre. They wrote novels and short stories. Melville never wrote for the theatre, Hawthorne never wrote for the theatre, Mark Twain kind of, but not really. There's no tradition of theatre by our greatest authors. But in Russia, Chekhov, Gorky, Tolstoy, Gogol, the greatest Russian writers – with the major exception of Dostoevsky – all wrote for the theatre. You have this fantastic tradition. Russian literature was about the future of the country. Russian literature has deep questions embedded in it – 'Where is the country going? How can we help shape it?' – and literature was an active force in shaping a national consciousness of civic identity and civil behaviour.

Shakespeare is still the most produced playwright in America, so I consider him an American author, because clearly something's there that America responds to very deeply and always did – in the 19th century these touring companies were doing Shakespeare in the mining camps! Otherwise, American theatre was basically a tradition created by professional playwrights, like Charles Hoyt – who in the 1880s and 90s wrote dozens of plays like *A Texas Steer* and *A Trip to Chinatown* – all these people who write plays, but not literature, and the greatest of those is Tennessee Williams. It's a tradition that's just playwriting, and not a national literature.

**Bates**: One of your first professional productions out of university was *Inspector General* at American Repertory Theatre in 1980-1981. Did Meyerhold's version influence your own?

**Sellars**: I was writing my thesis on Meyerhold's production of *Inspector General* while I was rehearsing, but my production was very American. It was about a certain Khlestakov banality and empty-headedness which had a certain American quality. Meyerhold's 'musical realism' was already a very big part of my work. Since I was young, I've staged most plays to music.

My production was absolutely dark, and then really, really dark. And pretty virtuosic, you know. I didn't have Meyerhold's rehearsal time, or his huge company of actors. But the set was very mobile, everything was active. I think that people who knew Meyerhold could tell that I was working on Meyerhold, though there was a limit on the big, vast movements, because I just didn't have the masses. At the same time, the sense of humour was not Meyerhold's at all, and it was really funny in an American way. The eerie sense of desolation was very American.

What mostly interested me in my thesis was the rapprochement between Meyerhold and Stanislavsky at the end of their lives, that moment when those two men could actually have a conversation together, a conversation that still hasn't really happened in the world, but that the two of them really managed to have.

**Bates**: Was the aesthetic polarisation of Meyerhold and Stanislavsky as deeply defined as is usually suggested?

**Sellars**: Stanislavsky's airbrushed portraits are beginning to flake. There's a lot more than we've been shown, certainly in America. Stanislavsky himself, particularly late in life, was really experimenting. In fact, during most of his life, he was constantly trying to explore biomechanics and its equivalents. He knew that pure 'psychological realism' was insufficient. If you actually look at promptbooks for things like *Cherry Orchard*, it's not psychological realism by a country mile. That play is totally out of control, with the crickets, the red lighting, the whole thing. He's really not a very naturalistic director, and I think, if we examine his method of actor training against our own tradition of film acting, we wouldn't recognise it. We would think it way over the top.

Meyerhold was shot just after Stanislavsky's death. Stanislavsky had been the only thing between Meyerhold and assassination. I think that the rift is overplayed.

**Bates**: Is the acting style in your later productions a product of that *entente* between Meyerhold and Stanislavsky – a mixture of intense physicality and 'realism'?

**Sellars**: I'm fortunate to live in a time unlike Meyerhold's. All he could do was see Mei Lanfang, say 'That was really interesting', and go back to his rehearsal room. When I work in theatre, every one of my shows has in it a great Javanese dancer, a great Chinese performer, or a great deaf actor. I'm constantly working with multiple languages on stage, and with people who are masters of physical traditions. I don't just have to imagine it, or re-imagine it – I'm there with the real thing, and we can have a real discussion. It doesn't feel like appropriation. It fells like we're really talking, back and forth. It's not the colonial model of seeing what you can get from the Third World, and then bringing it home and working with it.

There's no uniform theatrical style in my shows, because, of course, we don't live in a period when people have uniform lives. The whole point is that somebody is right next to you, doesn't think the way you do, doesn't have your body rhythms, doesn't listen to the same music you listen to etc., etc. And so what's interesting in theatre is not to have everybody speak Shakespeare the same way but, in fact, to have a whole cast, in which no two people speak Shakespeare the same way at all across the evening. There's no agreement as to how this verse should go.

**Bates**: There is a great deal of speculation on the origins of biomechanics. Was it a response to a specific cultural moment in Russian history?

**Sellars**: Meyerhold was one of the most privileged directors in theatre history. He worked in imperial theatres, with the most famous artists. In a period when his country was going through a revolution and then famine, he realised that culture had to be more than decorative. The gesture of biomechanics has almost nothing to do with the Italian *commedia dell'arte* and stereotyping, and everything to do with the

need for grace, strength, poise and courage in daily life. If Meyerhold uses circus it's not because he's interested in cheap entertainment, it's because the image of circus performers is of people who should be dead by now, because what they're doing would kill any normal human being. The only reason they're still alive is sheer stamina, skill, courage, and intelligence. The public is, itself, under tremendous pressure, and as artists, you have to meet the public directly on their level and say, 'That's right, I work as hard as you do'. You must demonstrate skill, and grace under pressure. These are qualities an audience that has been through a civil war can identify with. Who would rather be Stanislavsky, who unwittingly created the ideal theatre for Stalin?

**Bates**: Meyerhold's techniques are antithetical to mainstream American performance traditions. What are the issues in contemporary American culture that you feel Meyerhold's work could directly address?

**Sellars**: The nightmare of America today is the substitution of public relations for civil rights. It's the trend of not discussing serious issues, and artificially imposing happy endings. If you have a problem, it must be your problem – everything is reduced to personal psychology. If you have a 'dysfunctional psychology', you're not allowed to suggest that it may, in fact, be a systemic problem. When Meyerhold attempted to move beyond psychology, it was to address such systemic problems, and to equip the audience to begin discussing the structures that were determining the basic aspects of their lives.

In America, with our highly sophisticated audience, we intentionally keep people structurally illiterate – we're not interested in educating them about the

structural forces that are shaping their lives. And that, of course, is the glory of capitalism – a long as you keep celebrating individuals, you can say that some people are lucky, and some people aren't – why the fact that 12% of America owns 78% of the country may be a structural question, not just a personality profile. America can learn directly from Meyerhold's work. He created performances in which the audience was invited to participate in structuring and restructuring their life experiences, their economic and political lives, their relations with fellow workers, their relationships within the family, and the relationship of a citizen to a government.

**Bates**: What's the function of Meyerhold's 'musical realism' – a search for some other spatial and temporal dimension in performance?

**Sellars**: Music functioned within a highly sophisticated structure, was able to pinpoint a vast range of human experience and speak it with incredible exactitude, and at the same time, defied categorisation. That was, for the last ten years of his life, Meyerhold's hope for survival, literally and physically. Much of the discussion about Meyerhold annoys me because it just assumes that he could do anything, and this is what he chose to do. And nobody's asking, 'What were all the things he couldn't say?' They're not looking at what he didn't say and couldn't say, they're just looking at what he said. In fact, what he said was completely a strategic reaction to what he couldn't say. I think Meyerhold's choice of music was very deliberate. When he said 'realism', he meant it. At that time, Soviet society was busy trying to figure out how to get more productivity out of the worker in a given number of hours, which is just such a hideous idea, it's so ugly. Meyerhold's trying to say that reality is not just this ridiculous, determinist dead-end.

In the 30s, Hollywood and Soviet Russia had the same set of censorship guidelines. Both were creating a complete illusion of well-being within the regime, officially imposed happy endings – weird, bitter little tragedies that trivialised the notion of what tragedy is, dumb little bourgeois melodramas. And Hollywood is still making them to this day. I mean, the same systems are all in place, and the question is, how can you sustain some other possibility? Well, you can refer to music.

I think it's a metaphysical yearning. Meyerhold's asking how theatre can represent the multiple levels of reality that are in people's lives. You have to understand that in Russia after the revolution, once religious practice was banned, you could not discuss religion. Much of Russian art is profoundly religious, or is a discussion of religion, or a struggle with faith, or an embodiment of spiritual yearning. From the second decade of the century you couldn't even mention these things in your work. How could you suggest that a metaphysical grasp of the world is what's real and that the asphyxiating materialist surround being stuffed down people's throats is the illusion? The code name that Meyerhold had to use, the subterfuge that so many artists were compelled to employ, was 'musical realism'.

**Bates**: Meyerhold is often cited as one of the first *auteur* directors, exercising a very large degree of aesthetic control over the theatre event. You might be cast as one of his heirs. Do you think that's an accurate description, or a useful one?

**Sellars**: To me it's one of the problematic elements of our inheritance. I, of course, was trained and trained myself, to be one of these dinosaurs – the great visionary director. It's taken years of growing up to realise that none of us are that. And the people that still are, are anachronisms – Peter Stein… There's a whole generation in

Europe of great *auteur* directors who are beside the point now, who are truly dinosaurs. I think that's the worst of Meyerhold's legacy, that all the students called him Master. Paul Schmidt's book *Meyerhold at Work* is helpful, because you can see that the work itself didn't take this domineering tack. Meyerhold was a great man of the theatre who worked with great actors, and the give-and-take was beautiful.

The other books give you a very distorted image, because they're all biographies of Meyerhold, or collections of his writings, so everything in the world seems to revolve around him. The press likes to write about a single individual, creating a personality profile rather than getting into the dynamics of a working system. That ends up being repeated by historians who are interested in the Great Man. Gradually a cult of the exceptional figure is created, when in fact, directors' work is only good because there are exceptional performers, and exceptional writers, and exceptional musicians.

Of course, Meyerhold worked with Mayakovsky and learned a great deal from him. And it's not that Meyerhold returned to Chekhov minus the consciousness of Mayakovsky. When Meyerhold went back to Chekhov at the end of his life, to do *33 Fainting Spells*, it was as a different director. It was somebody who had worked with Mayakovsky for years and years, and then went back to Chekhov vaudevilles with a completely different understanding. That what's interesting, this cross-fertilisation.

In contrast, Eisenstein was trapped as the *Wünderkind*, and across his lifetime didn't learn much. It's why his films look brilliant, impressive, but depressing now. They were just to get you to buy the regime, like the world's most spectacular 90-minute commercials. Whereas even Meyerhold's pro-Soviet productions were more subtle and had a different dynamic from Eisenstein's. Eisenstein's films are so demagogic and are so willing to traffic in hideous reductions. Meyerhold's theatre is

alive by contradiction, it's alive through complex layering. The sets, particularly from the revolutionary period on, always insist that the audience imagine a reality rather than accept a ready-made reality. I think Meyerhold constantly insisted on a critical engagement from the audience, and in general, the type of satire that he worked in, was Mayakovsky's satire. He cuts right through all the hypocrisy.

**Bates**: Critics often label your work 'Postmodern'. Are you comfortable with that categorisation? Is it constructive?

**Sellars**: No, I can't stand postmodernism. To me it's a trivialisation of the history of art. My name for it is 'playing with your food'. It's something that's meant to be nutritious, and three-quarters of the people in the world went to bed hungry tonight, and you have so much food you can just sit there and play with it. These were gestures that were not meant to be rearranged into your own amusing little selection of bric-a-brac. These were gestures that people lived and died in order to make, and just to rearrange them and doodle in the margins is not acceptable. So no, I don't think of my theatre as postmodern in any way.

I'm working in within a much deeper tradition which is the history of Hindu, or Medieval Christian, or Buddhist art, where everything is shown in the present tense. Any time you refer to a Tibetan manuscript it's as it's embodied in the reincarnation of a given Lama. In this notion of perpetual reincarnation, it's not that the manuscript is old, it's that it's newly manifested in out lifetime. Rembrandt paints a crucifixion not with people wearing Biblical clothes, but with a bunch of Dutch people standing around. Because the point is, if this was ever true, then it's true now and we've got to find the way in which it's true on our terms, in our lifetime. That's

not postmodernism, that is a basic, standard, religious practice of people for whom art was a sacred activity, and not a novelty item. Nobody looking at Flemish painting would say, 'Oh my God, how strange! Van Eyke has put in modern clothes!' Totally the opposite – it would be normal. So I think what I'm doing is normal, and I never think of it as some wacky thing to do, or some novelty, or some attempt to grab attention. I'm just trying to say – okay, what kind of world would I like to live in, what kind of world are we living in, and can we arrange that those two things confront each other? And that's what a classic is – the voice of your ancestors speaking in your lifetime.

**Bates**: What is it that draws you to the texts of the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment? Is it an ideal of unity in the face of the fragmentary nature of contemporary culture, or are you grappling with the inconsistencies and paradoxes of the drive towards that ideal?

**Sellars**: For me, it's the birth of America. It really is the Declaration of Independence, it's 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal' – what it took the eighteenth century to get to that point, the number of intelligent people who worked, and worked, and worked, so that those worlds could be uttered.

It's the tradition of the eighteenth-century oratorio, lifting the level of public dialogue, creating a climate in which democracy would be possible, that kind of extraordinary effect. I've just come from doing another Handel – *Theodora* at Glyndebourne. Handel was the first person in several hundred years who could get a chorus on the British stage, the first time you could actually attempt a collective statement, the first time the British stage was capable of the grandeur of the Greek

stage, of saying, 'okay, here's a cross-section of citizens'. That's Handel's great accomplishment – to bring a chorus on the British stage, and to make these oratorios, in which the highest level of sentiment is expressed towards cultivating a politically aware body. That Handel chose again and again the image of the Israelite nation, struggling to find its identity, is not an accident.

And the key element for me is Handel's notion of what an artist was. The *Messiah* was written for Dublin because London wouldn't deal with it, and Handel went to Ireland for very real reasons – the enlightenment of the Irish intelligentsia. The *Messiah* was put on as a benefit for a prison in Dublin – one of the first movements in prison reform. A lot of the Handel oratorios were simultaneously fund-raisers and consciousness-raisers for the first mental hospitals, for orphanages. Handel's notion of what an artist was, was that you were working in support of those institutions, and he was at the beginning of prison-reform. He was at the beginning of the discussion on what to do with these kids on the street; he was at the beginning of the discussion of what mental illness was. His pieces are about mental illness. His pieces are about people who don't know who their parents are, his pieces are about people who are incarcerated. And at the same time they're fundraisers. That's the point and that's in the eighteenth century. For me that's one of the most moving images – artists who were committed, and who were truly asking questions, attempting to explore possible avenues of solutions, and meanwhile devoting their work, both in terms of its subject matter and in terms of its economic leverage, to socially useful action.

**Bates**: Both the Romans and the Christians in *Theodora* were ultimately inflexible, as if trapped by the totalising and individualising mechanism of enlightenment. Was this a reflection of recent events in America?

**Sellars**: Yes, it's a fight to the death in this country. The fact is, if you're of Mexican origin and you're coming over the border, it's not a question – they're going to shoot. America's not particularly flexible on most of these topics. Just look at the way Muslims are treated in America: people who have convictions, who believe something deeply, who are criminalised on the basis of external things – guilt by association.

That piece speaks very well to a country that is beyond the limits of tolerance, that's in the PC backlash, that is saying, 'well, we've let all those people of colour walk over us long enough. It's time for us threatened white males to reassert ourselves now that only ninety-five percent of all managerial positions are held by white men in America'. Thirty years have made that tiny five percent erosion that we will not tolerate. And now an incredible atmosphere of hostility is projected by the politicians. 'Zero Tolerance' is the word that's used by every politician for the crime bills, the unspeakable crime bills, that are not just being put forward, but are now law. So for me, Handel's piece could not have been more exact, saying, 'let's look at what Zero Tolerance means – you want to see it, let's look'.

**Bates**: You have always attempted to establish the spiritual dimensions of the works you direct. In the 90s, this instinct seems to have actually determined your choice of texts – *The Death of Klinghoffer*, *St. François D'Assise*, *Mathis der Maler*, and *Theodora*. What is it you're searching for?

**Sellars**: Well, the history of art is religious. The twentieth century is the aberration – what most people were not allowed to talk about. When I was saying earlier that people in Russia were not allowed to talk about it, in America we're not allowed to talk about it either. That's why the Museum of Modern Art was invented – so that art could be abstract, have no subject matter, you just talk about pure line, pure form, pure colour, as if there's nothing else at stake. We're all recovering from this imposed moratorium on discussion of larger subject matter.

When I say the history of art is religious I don't mean sectarian. I mean artists who were really in the service of saying, okay, this table is not the only thing that exists in the world, and the things that are affecting your life are many, many more things than you can touch or talk about. And that's the logical place where art would locate itself, it's the things you don't know how to talk about, and the things that you can't touch. That's why it exists. It's another way, perhaps the only way, of beginning to touch those things and talk about them.

I'm just working in a tradition. It's so basic, I don't even think about it. It's what happened in Java, it's what's always happened in Japan, or Aboriginal culture. It's just so normal. I think of that as the basic given, and the last couple of generations as completely aberrant. So no, it's not some special point I'm making, it's just what I assume most people are looking for on their lives – some compass points, and some sense that there is, in a world that's increasingly hostile, some source of generosity, and some surprising thing that keeps you going when everything looks like you can't go on.

## Bibliography


Acocella, Joan, 'A Hero for Our Time?' [review of *Nixon in China*], *Art in America*, April 1988, p. 51.

___, 'Intimate Enemies' [review of *The Death of Klinghoffer*], *Art in America*, September 1991, pp. 66-9.

___, *Mark Morris*, New York: The Noonday Press/Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1993.

Adorno, Theodor, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, New York: Seabury Press, 1962/76.

___, *Aesthetic Theory*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London and New York: Verso, 1944/1999.

Aeschylus, *The Persians: A Modern Version by Robert Auletta*, Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1993.

Allison, John, 'Mathis der Maler', *Opera*, vol. 47, no. 1, January 1996, pp. 104-9.

Althusser, Louis, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, London: New Left Books, 1971.

Appiah, Kwame Anthony, 'The Postmodern and the Postcolonial' [extract], in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (eds.), 1995, pp. 119-124.

Artaud, Antonin, *The Theatre and its Double*, London: Calder, 1970.

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (eds.), *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 1995.

Auslander, Philip, *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

Auletta, Robert, *Ajax*, Adapted from Sophocles, *Theater*, vol. 18, no. 1, Fall/Winter 1986, pp. 19-35.

___, 'Notes on Writing Ajax', *Theater*, vol. 18, no. 1, Fall/Winter 1986, pp. 16-18.

___, *The Persians*, adapted from Aeschylus, Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1993.

Baer, Nancy Van Norman, *Theatre in Revolution: Russian Avant-Garde Stage Design 1913-1935*, New York and San Francisco: Thames and Hudson and The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1991.

Banham, Martin (ed.), *Cambridge Guide to Theatre*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988/92/95.

Barber, Stephen, *Antonin Artaud: Blows and Bombs*, London: Faber and Faber, 1993.

Bartow, Arthur, *The Director's Voice: Twenty-One Interviews*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988.

Bates, Mark, 'Acting Music, Scoring Text: Paul Schmidt Interviewed', *Theater*, vol. 28, no. 2, Spring 1998, pp. 81-5.

___, 'Directing a National Consciousness: Peter Sellars Interviewed', *Theater*, vol. 28, no. 2, Spring 1998, pp. 86-90.

___, 'Shakespeare à l'américaine', in Frédéric Maurin (ed.), forthcoming 2001.

Baudrillard, Jean, 'The Evil Demon of Images and The Precision of Simulacra' from *The Evil Demon of Images*, Sydney: The Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1987, pp. 28-31, 33, and *Simulations*, New York: Semiotext(e) Inc., 1983, pp. 10-13, 38-44, published as extract in Docherty, 1993, pp. 194-199.

Bayley, Claire, '*The Persians*: Things We Never Saw or Heard', *American Theatre*, vol. 10, no. 12, December 1993, pp. 10-11.

Beaumarchais, Pierre-Augustin Caron de, *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*, translated by John Wood, London: Penguin, 1964.

Belsey, Catherine, *Critical Practice*, London and New York: Routledge, 1980.

Benjamin, Andrew (ed.), *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989.

Benjamin, Walter, *Illuminations*, London: Fontana Press, 1973/92.

Bentley, Eric (ed.), *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, London and New York: Applause, 1968.

Berlant, Lauren, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997.

Berman, Marshall, 'Why Modernity Still Matters', in Lash and Friedman (eds.), 1991.

Bernheimer, Martin, 'Nixon in Progress', *Opera*, vol. 38, no. 9, September 1987, pp. 1022-3.

___, 'Sellars' Mozart: Anger Behind the Smiles', *Los Angeles Times*, 30 July 1989, Calendar p. 4.

___, 'Los Angeles', [review of *Pelléas et Mélisande*], *Opera*, vol. 46, no. 5, May 1995, pp. 538-9.

___, 'Avoiding the o-word' [review of *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*], *Opera*, vol. 46, no. 8, August 1995, pp. 921-4.

Berridge, Virginia and Griffith Edwards, *Opium and the People: Opiate Use in Nineteenth Century England*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987.

Bersani, Leo, 'Is the Rectum a Grave?' in Douglas Crimp (ed.), 1992.

Beumers, Birgit, *Yuri Lyubimov and the Taganka Theatre 1964-84*, London: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997.

Bigsby, C.W.E., *Modern American Drama 1945-1990*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Billington, Michael, 'Venice Champion' [profile of Sellars], *Guardian*, 16 November 1994, Arts pp. 6/7.

Birringer, Johannes, *Theatre, Theory, Postmodernism*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991.

Bly, Mark, 'Lyubimov and the End of an Era: An Interview with Peter Sellars', *Theater*, Spring 1985, pp. 6-17.

Bokina, John, *Opera and Politics*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.

Boose, Lynda E. and Richard Burt (eds.), *Shakespeare, The Movie: Popularising the Plays on Film, TV and Video*, London: Routledge: 1997.

Booth-Davies, John, *The Myth of Addiction*, London: Harwood, 1992.

'Boston's Norton Award Goes to Peter Sellars for Shakespeare Co.', *Variety*, 22 May 1985, p. 88.

Bradby, David and David Williams, *Directors' Theatre*, London: Macmillan, 1988.

Brandon, James R. (ed.), *Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Braun, Edward, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in the Theatre*, London: Methuen, 1979/1995.

Brecht, Bertolt, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, edited and translated by John Willett, New York: Hill and Wang, 1957.

Brecht, Stefan, *Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theatre*, London: Methuen, 1988.

___, *The Bread and Puppet Theatre, Vol. 2*, London: Methuen, 1988.

___, *The Theatre of Visions: Robert Wilson*, London: Methuen Drama, 1994.

Bristol, Michael D., *Shakespeare's America, America's Shakespeare*, London and New York: Routledge, 1990.

Brunskid, Ian, 'Die Zauberflöte', *Opera Now*, August 1990.

Brustein, Robert, 'The Merchant of Venice Beach', *New Republic* 211.23, 5 December 1994, pp. 31-4.

Bürger, Peter, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.

Butler, Judith, 'Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia', in Robert Gooding Williams (ed.), 1993.

Cahoone, Lawrence (ed.), *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*, Oxford, Cambridge Mass.: Blackwell, 1996.

Calder, Angus, 'Just a Nasty Kid' [review of *The Persians*], *New Statesman and Society*, 20 August 1993, pp. 30-1.

___, 'Cities of Sin' [review of *I was Looking at the Ceiling and then I Saw the Sky*], *New Statesman and Society*, 25 August 1995, p. 27.

Callow, Simon, *Orson Welles: The Road to Xanadu*, London: Vintage, 1996.

Campbell, Patrick (ed.), *Analysing Performance: A Critical Reader*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996.

Camus, Albert, *The Rebel*, London: Penguin, 1951/53.

Canby, Vincent, 'Film: Godard in His Mafia "King Lear"', *New York Times*, 22 January 1988, p. C6.

Carlson, Marvin, *Theories of the Theatre: A Historical and Critical Survey, from the Greeks to the Present*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984.

___, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989.

Cartelli, Thomas, *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations*, London and New York: Routledge, 1999.

Carter, John Ross and Mahinda Palihawadana (translators), *The Dhammapada: A New English Version*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Cattani, Richard J., 'The Baritone Who Sings Klinghoffer' [profile of James Maddalena], *Christian Science Monitor*, 5 September 1991, p. 11.

Chaffie, Mark, 'Fizzled Explosives: Boris Godunov Directed by Peter Sellars', *Harvard Crimson*, 7 November 1977.

Champagne, Lenore, 'Always Starting New: Elizabeth LeCompte, *The Drama Review*, vol. 25, no. 3, Fall 1981, pp. 19-28.

Chomsky, Noam, *Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies*, London: Pluto, 1989.

___, *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*, London: Verso, 1993.

Christiansen, Richard, 'Provocative "Merchant"' [review of *The Merchant of Venice*], *Chicago Tribune*, 11 October 1994.

Clark, Katerina, 'Meyerhold's Appropriation of Gogol for 1926 in the Soviet Union', *Theater*, vol. 28, no. 2, Spring 1998, pp. 27-33.

Clay, Carolyn, 'From Here to Eternity: *Play/Macbeth*', *Boston Phoenix*, 21 February 1984, Section 3 p. 4.

___, 'Peter Sellars Gets the BSC in Tune', *Boston Phoenix*, 25 October 1985.

Clements, Andrew, 'Peter Sellars as seen on TV', *Opera*, vol. 42, no. 6, June 1991, pp. 641-4.

___, 'The Magic Flute', *Financial Times*, 15 July 1991.

___, 'Peter Sellars', *Opera*, vol. 46, no. 11, November 1995, pp. 1260-8.

___, 'Here Comes the Summer' [review of *Theodora*], *Guardian*, 20 May 1996, p. 10.

Clothier, Peter, 'New-Age Visions: *Zangezi* Goes West', *Art in America*, May 1987, pp. 25-7.

Coe, Robert, 'What Makes Peter Sellars Run?', *American Theatre*, December 1987, pp. 12-19, 46-49.

Cole, Susan Letzler, *Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World*, New York: Routledge, 1992.

Couling, Della, 'Opera Directors: Peter Sellars', *Opera Now*, March/April 1999, pp. 41-5.

Cox, Meg, 'Sellars' Mikado: Hummable Excess', *Wall Street Journal*, 20 May 1983, p. 31.

Crishton, Ronald, 'Die Zauberflöte', *Opera*, vol. 41, no. 12, December 1990, pp. 1487-9.

Crimp, Douglas (ed.), *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1988.

Crutchfield, Will, 'Modern Twists Spice a Mozart Opera' [review of *Così fan Tutte*], *New York Times*, 13 July 1986, p. H1.

___, 'Recording "Nixon in China"', *New York Times*, 15 December 1987, p. C23.

___,'The Triumphs and Defeats in Sellars's Mozart', *New York Times*, 25 July 1988, p. B1.

___, 'Mozart in the Style of Sellars or Vice Versa' [review of the Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy], *New York Times*, 25 July 1989, p. C13.

Daniel, David, 'Theater: *The Death of Klinghoffer*', *Vogue* (USA), vol. 181, no. 9, September 1991, pp. 368-70.

Da Ponte, Lorenzo, *The Marriage of Figaro*, translated by Edward J. Dent, English National Opera and Royal Opera Guides series, London: John Calder, 1983.

___, *Don Giovanni*, libretto, translated by Norman Platt and Laura Sarti, English National Opera and Royal Opera Guides series, London: John Calder, 1983.

Davidson, Michael, 'Holland: a contemporary Pelléas' [review of *Pelléas et Mélisande*], *Opera*, Annual Festivals Issue 1993, pp. 90-1.

Davis, Peter G., 'Well-Handeled' [review of *Giulio Cesare*], *New York*, 29 July 1985, p. 56.

___,'Don Juan in Hell' [review of *Don Giovanni*], *New York*, 3 August 1987, pp. 4-9.

___, 'Nixon – The Opera', *New York*, 9 November 1987, pp. 103-4.

___, 'Wing and a Prayer' [review of *Tannhaüser*], *New York*, 31 October 1988, p. 103.

___, 'Parallel Bars' [review of *Conversations with Fear and Hope after Death*], *New York*, 17 April 1989, p. 78.

___, 'Don Juan, Anybody?' [review of 1989 revival of *Don Giovanni*], *New York*, 24 July 1989, p. 58.

___, 'Static "Klinghoffer"', *New York*, 30 September 1991, p. 66-7.

___, 'The Sound Bites of Music' [article on *The Death of Klinghoffer*], *New York*, 14 December 1992, p. 96.

___, 'P.C. in Our Time' [review of *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and then I Saw the Sky*], *New York*, 31 July 1995, pp. 46-7.

Dawood, N.J. (translator), *The Koran*, Harmondsworth, New York: Penguin Books, 1990.

Dean, Winton, *Handel's Dramatic Masques and Oratorios*, London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1959.

Debord, Guy, *Society of the Spectacle*, New York: Zone Books, 1967/1994.

De Haan, Christopher, 'Remembering Between the Lines: Mel Gordon Interviewed', *Theater*, vol. 28, no. 2, Spring 1998, pp. 11-18.

Delgado, Maria M. and Paul Heritage (eds.), *In Contact with the Gods? Directors Talk Theatre*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996.

De Marinis, Marco, '"A Faithful Betrayal of Performance": Notes on the Use of Video in Theatre', *New Theatre Quarterly*, vol. 1, no. 4, November 1995.

'Director Sellars on "Sabbatical"; Staff Gets Axed', *Variety*, 13 August 1986, p. 115.

Disch, Thomas M., 'Theater: The Marriage of Figaro', *Nation*, 27 August 1988, pp. 176-9.

___, 'Theater: Don Giovanni', *Nation*, 4/11 September 1989, pp. 254-5.

Docherty, Thomas (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader*, London and New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993.

Dobson, Michael, 'Fairly Brave New World: Shakespeare, The American Colonies, and the American Revolution', *Renaissance Drama*, N.S.23.

Donaldson, Peter S., *Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors*, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990.

Drummond, John D., *Opera in Perspective*, London and Melbourne: J. Dent and Sons, 1980.

During, Simon, 'Postmodernism or Post-Colonialism Today', in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (eds.), 1995, pp. 125-129.

Dyer, Richard, 'Castle Hill: Sellars's Così' [review of 1984 *Così fan Tutte*], *Opera*, Festivals Issue Autumn 1984, pp.105-8.

___, 'Handel Threesome' [review of *Giulio Cesare*], *Opera*, vol. 36, no. 11, November 1985, pp. 1256-61.

___, 'Disturbing and Rewarding' [review of *Così fan Tutte*], *Opera*, Festival Issue Autumn 1986, pp. 116-8.

___, 'Sellars Finding Celebrity in Europe', *Boston Globe*, 20 June 1987.

___, 'Mozart American Style', *Connoisseur* 219, April 1989, p.144.

Easthope, Antony and Kate McGowan (eds.), *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1992.

Eckert, Jr., Thor, 'Taking Issue' [profile of Sellars], *Opera News*, vol. 50, no. 13, July 1985, pp. 11-14.

___, 'A Don Giovanni at Odds with its Locale', *Christian Science Monitor*, 29 July 1987, p. 19.

Edelstein, David B., 'Floating Shakespeare' [review of *Antony and Cleopatra*], *Harvard Crimson*, 12 December 1978.

Engstrom, John, 'Sellars Interprets Shakespeare's "Dream"' [review of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*], *Boston Globe*, 6 December 1983, p. 44.

___, 'A Pastiche Called "Ping"' [review of *Ping*], *Boston Globe*, 27 February 1984.

Erstein, Hap, 'Ajax Worthy of Scrubbing' [review of *Ajax*], *Washington Times*, 12 June 1986, pp. 1B/4B.

Fairman, Richard, 'An Unexpected Handel' [review of *Theodora*], *Financial Times*, 20 May 1996.

Fanon, Franz, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963/67.

Farber, Jim, 'L.A. Arts Fest Hikes Budget to $5.5-mil; Japan Corporations Targeted for $2-mil', *Variety*, 18-24 October 1989, pp. 91-2.

Flynn, John J., 'Transiting from the "Wethnocentric"', in Bonnie Marranca and Gautam Dasgupta (eds.), *Interculturalism and Performance*, New York: PAJ Publications, 1991.

Ford, Charles, *Così? Sexual Politics in Mozart's Operas*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1991.

Foreman, Richard, *Unbalancing Acts: Foundations for a Theater*, foreword by Peter Sellars, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992.

Fortier, Mark, *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

Foster, Susan Leigh, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1986.

Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, London: Penguin, 1976/8.

___, *Discipline and Punish*, London: Allen Lane, 1977.

___, *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Critical Thought*, Paul Rabinow (ed.), London: Penguin: 1986.

France, Richard, *The Theatre of Orson Welles*, New York: Bucknell University Press, 1977.

___, (ed.), *Orson Welles on Shakespeare: The W.P.A. and Mercury Theatre Playscripts*, London and New York: Greenwood Press, 1990.

Frankel, David, 'A Tragedy of Excess' [review of *King Lear*], *Harvard Crimson*, 29 February 1980, p. 2.

Freedman, Samuel G., 'Kennedy Center Has a Plan for a National Theater', *New York Times*, 25 January 1985, p. C3.

Friedman, Arthur, 'Wild Child' [profile of Sellars], *Real Paper*, 7 August 1979.

Friedrich, Otto, 'The Camping Up of Mozart' [review of *Don Giovanni*] , *Time*, 7 August 1989, p. 63.

Frisch, Norman, 'The Peter Sellars Interview', *On Stage* – Goodman Theatre Newsletter, vol. 3, no.1, 1994-5, pp. 10-14.

Fuchs, Elinor, 'Is There Life after Irony?', *Village Voice*, 3 January 1984, p. 78.

___, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.

Furie, Kenneth, 'After the Uproar, What Has Sellars Done for Mozart?', *New York Times*, 12 July 1992, p. H24.

Galgan, Gerald J., *The Logic of Modernity*, New York: New York University Press, 1982.

Gibbs, Jewelle Taylor, *Race and Justice: Rodney King and O.J. Simpson in a House Divided*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1996.

Gold, Sylviane, 'Forward March/About Face' [review of *Ajax*], *Wall Street Journal*, 2 July 1986, p. 24.

___, 'Theater: Peter Sellars Opens MOCA Theater with "Zangezi"', *Wall Street Journal*, 9 December 1986, p. 32.

Goodwin, Noel, 'Nixon in China', *Opera*, vol. 39, no. 1, January 1988, pp. 22-4.

___, 'Glyndebourne' [review of *The Magic Flute*], *Opera News*, vol. 55, no. 3, September 1990, p. 60.

Gordon, Mel and Alma Law: *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia*, Jefferson, NC: McFairland, 1996.

Green, Amy, *The Revisionist Stage: American Directors Re-invent the Classics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Griffiths, Paul, 'The Magic Flute', *Times*, 15 July 1991.

___, 'Rattle and Sellars: Hearing Debussy' [review of *Pelléas et Mélisande*], *New Yorker*, 28 June 1993, pp. 86-9

___, 'Stravinsky at Salzburg' [review of *Oedipus Rex*], *New Yorker*, 12 September 1994, pp. 99-101.

___, 'Earthquake Weather' [review of *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and then I Saw the Sky*], *New Yorker*, 29 May 1995, pp. 94-5.

Gussow, Mel, 'In Boston, A Symposium on Contemporary Arts', *New York Times*, 18 March 1985, p. C13.

___, 'Henry IV in Washington', *New York Times*, 29 March 1985, p. C3.

___, 'Theater: "A Seagull" in Washington', *New York Times*, 17 December 1985, p. C22.

___, *Theatre on the Edge: New Visions, New Voices*, London and New York: Applause, 1998.

Habermas, Jürgen, *Legitimation Crisis*, London: Heinemann Educational, 1976.

___, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990.

___, 'Modernity – An Incomplete Project', in Docherty (ed.), 1993.

Hamilton, David, 'Music: Handel Operas' [review of *Giulio Cesare*], *Nation*, 28 September 1985, pp. 290-2.

Handel, George Frideric, *Theodora, an Oratorio*, words by Thomas Morrell, Sevenoaks, Kent: Novello, 1984.

Hannham, James, 'Wrestling with Shylock', *American Theatre*, July/August 1995, pp. 24-9.

Henahan, Donal, 'Opera: The Mikado, Chicago Lyric Opera', *New York Times*, 13 May 1983, p. C3.

___, 'Labelling This Era May Be Easy after All', *New York Times*, 7 September 1986, p. H29.

___, 'Wanted: Singing, Not Acting', *New York Times*, 27 June 1987, p. H21.

___, 'Opera: Sellars's "Giovanni"', *New York Times*, 17 July 1987, p. C3.

___, 'But Why Call it Don Giovanni', *New York Times*, 2 August 1987, p. H25.

___, 'A Tale of Two Operas, or When Not to Interfere' [review of *The Electrification of the Soviet Union*], *New York Times*, 25 October 1987, p. C31.

___, 'Did Mozart Order a Side of Fries?', *New York Times*, 17 July 1988, p. H25.

___, 'Clothes Don't Make the Opera' [review of *Tannhaüser*], *New York Times*, 23 October 1988, Section 2, p. 23.

Henderson, Robert, 'Motorway Madness at Glyndebourne' [review of *The Magic Flute*], *Telegraph*, 23 May 1990.

___, 'The lives and times of "Mathis" [der Maler]', *Opera*, vol. 46, no. 11, pp. 1279-84.

Henry, William A., 'Arcane Framing', *Time*, 30 December 1985, p. 72.

Higgins, John, 'Mozart's Californian Trip' [review of *The Magic Flute*], *Times*, 23 May 1990.

___, 'Martyr to the Sellars Cause' [profile of Dawn Upshaw], *Times*, 17 May 1996, Section 2 p. 39.

Hightower, Martin, 'Peter Sellars: Harvard's Wunderkind Takes on Lear', *Harvard Gazette*, 22 February 1980, p. 12.

Hobbs, Stuart, *The End of the American Avant-Garde*, New York: New York University Press, 1997.

Hodgson, Moira, 'Theater: PepsiCo Summerfare Festival', *Nation*, 30 August 1986, pp. 123-5

___, 'Theater: PepsiCo Summerfare', *Nation*, 5 September 1987, pp. 208-9.

Holden, Stephen, 'A Rainbow Coalition in "Ceiling" [review of *I was Looking at the Ceiling and then I Saw the Sky*], *New York Times*, 14 July 1995, pp. C1/5.

Holland, Bernard, 'Music: Bach and Weill at Summerfare Festival' [review of *Conversations with Fear and Hope after Death*], *New York Times*, 28 July 1985.

___, 'Sellars Withdraws at Met', *New York Times*, 31 October 1987, p. 57.

___, 'Updated, Yes, and That's Not All' [review of *The Rake's Progress*], *New York Times*, 7 October 1996, pp. C11-12.

Holmberg, Arthur, 'Another Opening. Another Show?' [features discussion of Sellars's BSC *Macbeth*], *Antioch Review*, vol. 44, no. 2, Spring 1986, pp. 220-231.

___, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Holstrom, David, 'Art According to Sellars', *Christian Science Monitor*, 2 October 1991, p. 13.

Honan, William H., 'Theater of Images Discovers the Word', *New York Times*, 10 August 1986, p. H14/31.

Honderich, Ted (ed.), *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Howell, John, 'Nixon in China', *Artforum*, March 1988.

Howarth, William D., *Beaumarchais and the Theater*, New York: Routledge, 1995.

Huhn, Tom and Lambert Zuidervaart (eds.), *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, Cambridge Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1997.

Hunt, Darnelle M., *O.J. Simpson: Facts and Fictions: News Rituals in the Construction of Reality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Hutcheon, Linda, 'Circling the Downspout of Empire: Post-colonialism and Postmodernism', *Ariel*, vol. 20, no. 4, 1989, published as extract in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (eds.), 1995, pp. 130-135.

___, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1989.

Hutcheon, Linda and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death*, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1996.

Huyssen, Andreas, 'The Search for Tradition: Avant-garde and post-modernism in the 1970s', in Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*, London: Macmillan, 1986, pp. 160-77, published as extract in Docherty (ed.), 1993, pp. 220-236.

Jacobs, Arthur, 'The Electrification of the Soviet Union', *Opera*, vol. 38, no. 12, December 1987, pp. 1449-51.

Jacobs, Karrie, 'Peter Sellars Digs Up "The Cabinet"' [review of *The Cabinet of Dr. Ramirez*], *New York Times*, 17 February 1991, Section 2 pp. 11, 14-5.

James, Jamie, 'The Persians: Twisted History and Radical Chic' [review of *The Persians*], *American Theatre*, vol. 10, no. 12, December 1993, pp.11-12.

Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London and New York: Verso, 1990.

___, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of Dialectic*, London, New York: Verso, 1990.

Jarvis, Simon, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.

Jenkins, Ron, 'American Directors on Directing: Peter Sellars', *Theater*, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 46-52.

John, Nicholas (ed.), *ENO Opera Guide 17: The Marriage of Figaro*, London: Calder 1983.

___, *ENO Opera Guide 18: Don Giovanni*, London: Calder, 1983.

Jordan, June, *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky: Earthquake/Romance*, London, New York: Scribener, 1995.

Kasow, Joel, 'France: High Theatre' [review of *St. François d'Assise*], *Opera*, vol. 44, no. 4, April 1993, pp. 456-8.

___, 'Amsterdam' [review of *Pélleas et Mélisande*], *Opera News*, vol. 58, no. 6, 11 December 1993, p. 56.

Kaup-Hasler, Veronica and Katrin Klingan 'The Right to Hope: An Interview with Peter Sellars', *Theaterschrift* 13/98, pp. 79-97.

Kaye, Nick, *Postmodernism and Performance*, London: Macmillan, 1994

___, (ed.), *Performance Research*, vol. 1, no. 1, Spring 1998, 'On America', London: Routledge, 1998.

Kelly, Kevin, 'Boston Shakespeare's New Leader', *Boston Globe*, 2 October 1983.

___, 'Pericles with Great Feeling', *Boston Globe*, 13 October 1983, p. 73.

Kellerman, Kate, 'Merchant of Menace' [review of *The Merchant of Venice*], *Observer*, 20 November 1994, Review p. 15.

Kenyon, Nicholas, 'Cambridge, Mass.' [review of *Orlando*], *Opera*, vol. 33, no. 7, July 1982, pp. 709-11.

'Kennedy Center Bow Thumped by Critics', *Variety*, 3 April 1985, p. 77.

'Kennedy Center gets Record $1-Mil Grant from Gerald Freed', *Variety*, 26 February 1986, p. 107.

Kennedy, Dennis, *Looking at Shakespeare: A Visual History of Twentieth-Century Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Kennedy, Michael, 'More Freeway, Less Madness' [review of *The Magic Flute*], *Sunday Telegraph*, 21 July 1991.

Kerner, Leighton, 'Mozart Told True' [review of Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy], *Village Voice*, 8 August 1989, p. 80.

Kettle, Martin, 'High on Mozart' [profile of Sellars], *New Statesman and Society*, vol. 3, no. 1, 18 May 1990, p. 44.

King, Bruce, 'Alive in the Theatre, Awake in the World, *Village Voice*, 12 June 1984, p. 87.

___, (ed.), *Contemporary American Theatre*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

'King Lear', [review of Jean-Luc Godard's *King Lear*, no author], *Variety*, 2 September 1987.

King, W.D., '"Nailed to a Circus of Blood": Ajax at the American National Theater', *Theater*, vol. 18, no. 1, Fall/Winter 1986, pp. 9-15.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*, Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.

Kiung, Hans, *Mozart: Traces of Transcendence*, London: SCM Press, 1992.

Kondo, Dorinne, *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

Kramer, Hilton, 'Art and Politics "Klinghoffer Style"', *New Criterion*, vol. 10, no. 3, November 1991, pp. 2-3.

Kramnick, Isaac (ed.), *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, London: Penguin, 1995.

Kroll, Jack, 'Daring to be Different' [review of *Pericles*], *Newsweek*, 4 November 1983, p. 8.

___, 'A Capital Magician', *Newsweek*, 1 April 1985, pp. 80-1.

___, 'The Making of a Monarch' [review of Timothy Mayer's production of *Henry IV, Part I*], *Newsweek*, 15 April 1985, p. 95.

___, 'Monte Cristo Con Brio', *Newsweek*, 3 June 1985, p. 65.

___, 'Ajax Updated', *Newsweek*, 23 June 1986.

___, 'Midsummer Night's Treat' [review of *Così fan Tutte*], *Newsweek*, 28 July 1986, p. 67.

___, 'Chicago – My Kind of Theater' [review of *The Merchant of Venice*], *Newsweek*, 17 October 1994.

Lahr, John, 'Inventing the Enemy' [review of *The Persians*], *New Yorker*, 18 October 1993, pp. 103-6.

Lang, Paul Henry, *George Frideric Handel*, London: Faber and Faber, 1966.

Larson, Susan, 'Homeless in Beantown', *Opera News*, September 1996, pp. 13-14.

Lash, Scott and Jonathan Friedman (eds.), *Modernity and Identity*, Oxford: Cambridge Mass.: Blackwell, 1991.

Lautman, Joan, 'Sellers' [sic] "Ado" is Shakespeare via Brooks [sic]' [review of *Much Ado about Nothing*], *Boston Ledger*, 13-19 July 1979, p. 21.

Lazare, Lewis, 'The Merchant of Venice', *Variety*, 24-30 October 1994.

Leipzig, Adam, 'Acts of Imagination' [feature on 1993 Los Angeles Festival], *American Theatre*, May/June 1990, pp. 22-7.

Lemann, Nicholas, 'The Poverty of Poverty: Assaying Inequality', *Transition*, vol. 6, no. 3, Issue 71, Fall 1996, pp. 132-141.

Leppard, David, *Fire and Blood*, London: Fourth Estate, 1993.

Lieberson, Jonathan, 'Nixon in Brooklyn' [review of *Nixon in China*], *New York Review of Books*, 27 January 1988, p. 35-6.

Lindenberger, Herbert, *Opera: The Extravagant Art*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.

Lipman, Samuel, 'Sellars Trumps Mozart', *The New Criterion*, vol. 9, no.8, 1991, pp. 37-1.

Littlejohn, David, *The Ultimate Art*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992.

___, 'Sellars, Peter', entry in C. Steven LaRue (ed.), *International Dictionary of Opera*, Detroit and London: St. James, 1993.

___, 'Onstage: The United Colors of Los Angeles' [review of *I Was Looking at the Ceiling at the Ceiling and then I Saw the Sky*], *Wall Street Journal*, 25 May 1995, p. A12.

Livingston, Guy, 'Redgrave's Suit Against BSO Raises Questions of Artist's Right to Work Despite Political Credo', *Variety*, 31 October 1984, p. 3/31.

Loppert, Max, 'The Magic Flute', *Opera*, Annual Festivals Issue 1991, pp. 42-4.

Luten, C.J., 'Purchase, N.Y.' [review of *Don Giovanni*], *Opera News*, vol. 56, no. 5, November 1987, pp. 52-3.

___, 'Purchase N.Y.', *Opera News*, vol. 53, no. 6, 10 December 1988, pp. 48-50.

Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979/84.

___, *Political Writings*, London: UCL Press, 1993.

Malcolm, Noel, 'Baffled by Buckets: The Electrification of the Soviet Union', *Sunday Telegraph*, 12 June 1988.

Manery, Becca, 'Shakespeare, Sellars Style', Goodman Theatre programme for *The Merchant of Venice* 1994, pp. 10-14.

Mann, William, 'The Electrification of the Soviet Union', *Opera*, Festivals Issue 1988, pp. 20-1.

Marranca, Bonnie, *The Theatre of Images*, New York: PAJ Publications, 1977.

Marranca, Bonnie and Gautam Dasgupta (eds.), *Interculturalism and Performance*, New York: PAJ Publications, 1991.

Marx, Hans Joachim, 'Sellars, Peter', entry in Stanley Sadie (ed.), *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, London, New York: Macmillan, 1992.

Marx, Robert, 'Grand Finale' [feature on the Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy], *Opera News*, July 1989.

___, 'Directions', *Opera News*, October 1989, pp. 28-30, 68-72.

Mascaro, Juan (translator), *The Bhagavad Gita*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962.

Maurin, Frédéric, 'Usages et Usures de l'Image: Speculations sur *Le Marchand de Venise* Vu par Peter Sellars', in Beatrice Picon-Vallin (ed.), *Les Ecrans sur La Scène: Tentations et Resistances de la Scène Face aux Images*, Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1998.

___, (ed.), *Peter Sellars*, Paris: CNRS Editions, collection: Les Voies de la Création Théâtrale, vol. 21, forthcoming 2001.

May, Henry F., *The Enlightenment in America*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Mayakovsky, Vladimir, *Plays*, translated by Guy Daniel, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995.

Mayer, Martin, 'Purchase, New York: Sellars Market' [review of *Così fan Tutte* and *Don Giovanni*], *Opera*, Festival Issue 1987, pp. 51-3.

McCann, John, 'Belgium: Berghaus and Sellars' [review of *Giulio Cesare*], *Opera*, vol. 39, no. 8, August 1988, pp. 942-5.

McFadden, Robert F., 'Peter Sellars, Director of Theater in Kennedy Center, Takes a Leave', *New York Times*, 10 August 1986, p. 31.

Merschmeier, Michael, 'Ajax, Unser Zeitgenosse', *Theater Heute*, 8 August 1987, pp. 18-20.

Meyerhold, Vsevolod, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, translated and edited by Edward Braun, London: Methuen, 1969.

Michaelson, Judith, 'Director Sellars: You Ain't Seen Nothing Yet', *Los Angeles Times*, 13 December 1987, Calendar, pp. 1, 4, 5, 48.

Millington, Barry, 'From Letters to Libretto' [review of *The Magic Flute*], *Times Literary Supplement*, 1 June 1990, p. B11.

Milnes, Rodney, 'Nixon in China', *Opera*, Annual Festivals Issue 1988, pp. 34-6.

___, 'Bored and Angry' [review of *The Magic Flute*], *Spectator*, 2 June 1990.

___, 'Glyndebourne's 'Flute' Highlights' [review of *The Magic Flute*], *Opera*, vol. 41, no. 7, July 1990, pp. 795-8.

___, 'The Melody Lingers On...', *Opera*, Annual Festivals Issue 1990, pp. 26-7

___, 'Angels, Fools and 'Klinghoffer'', *Opera*, vol. 42, no. 5, May 1991, pp. 494-7.

___, 'Silent Night' [review of revival of *The Magic Flute*], *London Evening Standard*, 15 July 1991.

___, 'Salzburg: Mortier Contra Mundum' [review of *St. François d'Assise*], *Opera*, Annual Festivals Issue 1992, pp. 38-40.

___, 'Happy to be Provoked' [review of *Theodora*], *Times*, 20 May 1996.

___, 'Theodora', *Opera*: Festival Edition 1996, pp. 30-3.

Mitchell, Stephen (translator), *Tao Te Ching/Lao Zi*, London: Frances Lincoln, 1999.

Molotsky, Irvin, 'Kennedy Center's Chief Seeks Wider Audience', *New York Times*, 5 December 1984, p. A26.

___, 'Henry IV Closes Early in Capital', *New York Times*, 5 April 1985, p. C10.

___, 'National to Stage "Seagull"', *New York Times*, 17 October 1985, p. C24.

___, 'Briefing: Sellars: I Shall Return', *New York Times*, 19 October 1986, p. 62.

Morrison, Richard, 'Fragments of Terse Turmoil: *The Electrification of the Soviet Union*', *Times*, 6 October 1987.

Morrison, Toni (ed.), *Birth of a Nation'Hood: Gaze, Script and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case*, London: Vintage, 1997.

'My One and Only', *Variety*, 23 February 1983, p. 108.

Nagel, Ivan, *Autonomy and Mercy: Reflections on Mozart's Operas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Norris, Geoffrey, 'That Freeway Flute' [review of *The Magic Flute*], *Daily Telegraph*, 15 July 1991, p. 15.

Novick, Julius, 'Interlopers in the Opera House', *American Theatre*, May 1986, pp. 10-17.

___, 'Eine Diner Nachtmusik' [review of *Così fan Tutte*], *Village Voice*, 29 July 1986, pp. 76-81.

O'Connor, John J., 'Don Giovanni and 2 Virginia Woolf Lectures', *New York Times*, 4 January 1991, p. B12.

___, 'An Apocalyptic Vision of Wall Street's Future' [review of *The Cabinet of Dr. Ramirez*], *New York Times*, 14 April 1993, p. C15.

Oestreich, James R., 'Peter Sellars Evokes an Operatic Bach' [review of Sellars's staging of Dawn Upshaw's concert of Bach cantatas, entitled 'Crises of Faith', in the 'Voices of the Spirit' concert series], *New York Times*, 23 March 1996, p. 18.

Oppenheimer, Joshua and Helena Reckitt (eds.), *Acting on AIDS: Sex, Drugs and Politics*, London, New York: Serpent's Tail, 1997.

O'Mahony, John, 'The Mighty Munchkin' [profile of Sellars], *Guardian*, 20 May 2000, Review section pp. 6-7.

Osborne, Charles, 'The Magic Flute', *Opera*, Annual Festivals Issue 1991, p. 47.

Owens, Craig, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

Parker, Roger (ed.), *Oxford Illustrated History of Opera*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Pavis, Patrice (ed.), *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

Pensky, Max, *The Actuality of Adorno: Critical Essays in Adorno and the Postmodern*, New York: SUNY Press, 1997.

Perlmutter, Donna, 'Los Angeles' [review of *Pelléas et Mélisande*], *Opera News*, vol. 59, no. 17, June 1995, p.54.

'Peter Sellars to Head Los Angeles Festival', *New York Times*, 2 October 1987, p. C31.

Pettengill, Richard, unpublished Student Study Guide for Goodman Theatre production of *The Merchant of Venice*, 1994.

Plagens, Peter and Lynda Wright, 'Multiculturalism or Bust, Gang' [review of 1990 Los Angeles Festival], *Newsweek*, 24 September 1990, pp. 68-9.

Porter, Andrew, 'Infinite Variety' [review of *Giulio Cesare*], *New Yorker*, 29 July 1985, pp. 70-2.

___, 'Fundamentals' [review of *Così Fan Tutte*], *New Yorker*, 11 August 1986, pp. 80-2.

___, 'Unlimited Potentialities' [review of *Don Giovanni*], *New Yorker*, 10 August 1987, pp. 66-9.

___, 'Nixon in Houston' [review of *Nixon in China*], *New Yorker*, 30 November 1987, pp. 124-9.

___, 'And in My Lady's Chamber' [review of *The Marriage of Figaro*], *New Yorker*, 15 August 1988, pp. 63-4.

___, 'Distortion and Recognition' [review of *Tannhaüser*], *New Yorker*, 7 November 1988, pp. 147-53.

___, 'Tragical-Comical-Historical-Pastoral' [review of *Conversations with Fear and Hope after Death*], *New Yorker*, 17 April 1989, pp. 117-20.

___, 'All-American Mozart' [review of Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy], *New Yorker*, 21 August 1989, pp. 70-5.

___, 'Mirrors' [review of *The Magic Flute*], *New Yorker*, 18 June 1990, p. 69-72.

___, 'Ritual Song' [Review of *The Death of Klinghoffer*], *New Yorker*, 30 September 1991, pp. 82-4.

___, 'The Imperial Theme' [review of revival of *The Magic Flute*], *New Yorker*, 7 October 1991, pp. 97-9.

___, 'Master and Pupil' [review of *St. François D'Assise*], *New Yorker*, 14 September 1992, pp. 85-9.

Quinn, Daniel, 'Re-Visioning Opera', *Performing Arts Journal*, vol. 13, 1980, pp. 87-95.

Reinelt, Janelle G. and Joseph R. Roach, (eds.), *Critical Theory and Performance*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1992.

Rice, Philip and Patricia Waugh, *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, London: Edward Arnold, 1989.

Rich, Adrienne, *Your Native Land, Your Life*, New York, London: W.W. Norton, 1993.

Rich, Frank, 'Stage: "Idiot's Delight", at the Kennedy Center', *New York Times*, 24 February 1986.

___, 'Here a Star, There a Star, Some Lose their Way!', *New York Times*, 28 August, 1986, p. C22.

Richards, David, 'American Theater Plan Set', *Washington Post*, 24 January 1985, p. A1/7

___, 'Sellars: Now, Building the Dream', *Washington Post*, 24 January 1985, p. D1/13.

___, 'Henry: A Royal Letdown [review of Timothy Mayer's production of *Henry IV, Part I*], *Washington Post*, 29 March 1985, p. C1.

___, 'The "Count" Unbound' [review of *The Count of Monte Cristo*], *Washington Post*, 20 May 1985, p. C1/6.

___, 'ANT's Audacious Ajax for the 80s', *Washington Post*, 9 June 1986, pp. C1/10.

___, 'Sellars Moves the Merchant to Venice Beach', *New York Times*, 18 October 1994, p. B1-2.

___, 'Sellars's Merchant of Venice Beach', *New York Times*, 18 October 1994, p. C15/18.

Riley, Brooks, 'Peter Sellars Looks at Mozart Through a TV Lens', *New York Times*, 10 July 1989, p. H42-4.

Roach, Joseph R., *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993.

___, 'The Future that Worked', *Theater*, vol. 28, no. 2, Spring 1998, pp. 19-26.

Robertson, Nan, 'After the MacArthur's Golden Touch', *New York Times*, 17 July 1988, section 2, p. 20.

Rockwell, John, 'A Sellarsized "Figaro" in First Performance', *New York Times*, 15 July 1988, p. C3.

___, 'Opera: Mozart's "Cosí Fan Tutte"', *New York Times*, 18 July 1988, p. C26.

___, 'Peter Sellars Tries Out His Magic on the English' [review of *The Magic Flute*], *New York Times*, 21 June 1990, p. C17.

___, 'Debussy's "Pélléas at Mélisande" is Unexpectedly à la Mode Again', *New York Times*, 16 June 1993, pp. C15-16.

Rogoff, Gordon, 'Auteur Hauteur' [review of *Giulio Cesare* and *Conversations with Fear and Hope after Death*], *Village Voice*, 6 August 1985, p. 81-3.

___, 'Don Juan in Hell's Kitchen' [review of *Don Giovanni*], *Village Voice*, 28 July 1987, p. 82-3.

Rorty, Richard, 'Postmodernist Bourgeois Liberalism', *Journal of Philosophy*, LXXX, 10, 1983, pp.583-9, published in Docherty (ed.), 1993, pp. 323-328.

Rosenberg, Scott A., 'Dons, Dummies and Directors' [review of *Much Ado about Nothing*], *Harvard Crimson*, 10 July 1979, pp. 2-3.

Rosenfeld, Megan, 'Sellars' Plan for Theater Praised', *Washington Post*, 25 January 1985.

Rothstein, Edward, 'A New Breed of Director Changes the Face of Opera', *New York Times*, 11 March 1984, Section 2 pp. 1/32.

___, 'Dimsum Nixon' [review of *Nixon in China*], *New Republic*, 4 and 11 January 1988, pp. 25-6.

___, 'Pelléas, Updated and Slightly Political' [review of *Pelléas et Mélisande*], *New York Times*, 9 February 1995, p. C13.

Rothwell, Kenneth S., 'In Search of Nothing: Mapping King Lear', in Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt (eds.), *Shakespeare, The Movie: Popularising the Plays on Film, TV and Video*, London and New York: Routledge, 1997.

Rubin, Sy, *Trump Tower*, Secausus, New Jersey: C.C. Stuart, 1984.

Said, Edward W., *Orientalism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

___, 'Music: Don Giovanni', *Nation*, 26 September 1987, pp. 318-20.

___, 'Music: Peter Sellars's Mozart' [review of the Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy], *Nation*, 18 September 1989, pp. 289-91.

___, 'Music: The Death of Klinghoffer', *Nation*, 11 November 1991, pp. 596-600.

___, 'Hindemith and Mozart' [review of *Mathis der Maler*], *Nation*, 3 June 1996, pp. 41-4.

Salzman, Eric, 'Opera is Dead, Long Live Opera', *BBC Music Magazine*, November 1996, p. 90-3.

Samachson, Dorothy, 'Chicago' [review of *The Mikado*], *Opera*, vol. 34, no. 9, September 1983, pp. 979-80.

___, 'Chicago' [review of *Tannhaüser*], *Opera*, vol. 40, no. 4, April 1989, pp. 429-31.

Savran, David, 'The Wooster Group, Arthur Miller and The Crucible', *The Drama Review*, vol. 29, no. 2, Summer 1985.

___, 'Adaptation as Clairvoyance: The Wooster Group's Saint Antony', *Theater*, vol. 18, no. 1, Fall/Winter 1986, pp. 36-41.

___, *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988.

Schaeff, Anne Wilson, *When Society Becomes an Addict: Understanding the Social System, Reclaiming Our Power*, London: Thorson/Harper Collins, 1987/92.

___, *Escape from Intimacy: Untangling the 'Love' Addictions: Sex, Romance, Relationships*, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989.

Schmidt, Paul, *Meyerhold at Work*, Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1981.

Schwarz, K. Robert, 'In a Tough Neighbourhood on the Border of Opera', *New York Times*, 9 July 1995, p. H24.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, *Tendencies*, London: Routledge, 1994.

Segal, Lewis, 'When Fire Doesn't Melt Ice' [preview of *Pelléas et Mélisande*], *Los Angeles Times*, 29 January 1995, Calendar pp. 3/83-4.

Seibert, Gary, 'Nixon in China', *America*, vol. 158, no. 3, 23 January 1988, p. 67.

'Sellars' Kennedy Center Plans: Wider Public, Start, Low Prices as Base for National Theater', *Variety*, 30 January 1985, p. 85.

Sellars, Peter, programme notes for *Coriolanus*, 12-16 January 1977, Harvard University.

___, 'Do It Yourself Does it One More Time', *Harvard Independent*, 19-25 May 1977, p. 22.

___, programme notes for *Macbeth*, 18-19 March 1978, Harvard University.

___, 'G & S: Sharp, Bright, and Profuse', *Harvard Independent*, 20 April 1978.

___, programme notes for *Antony and Cleopatra*, 8-10 December 1978, Harvard University.

___, 'A Play Not Seen in a "Beggar's Opera"', *Harvard Independent*, 8-14 November 1979, p. 12.

___, programme notes for Boston Shakespeare Company production of *Pericles*, 1983.

___, unpublished letter to subscribers, Boston Shakespeare Company, 25 January 1984.

___, 'Beginning to Notice What We Are', *Los Angeles Times*, 5 February 1989, Calendar pp. 3/75.

___, programme notes for PepsiCo Summerfare Festival productions of *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan Tutte*, SUNY Purchase, 1989.

___, 'Exits and Entrances: Peter Sellars on Opera', *Artforum*, December 1989,

___, 'The Vision Thing', *Artforum* 31, September 1992, p.74.

___, programme notes for Glyndebourne Festival Opera production, *Theodora*, 1996.

___, 'The Question of Culture', lecture given at the Fourth Elia Conference, 'Reflections on the Human Face', Lisbon, 13-16 November 1996.

___, address to First Night International Conference, Monterey 1997, Online posting: http://www.firstnightintl.org/spr1999.htm

___, Collins Memorial Lecture, Indiana State University, 25 April 1997.

___, 'Theater, Opera, Society: The Director's Perspective', introduction by Edward W. Said, *Grand Street*, vol. 16, no. 1, Summer 1997, pp. 193-203.

___, 'On Choice and Usury: Peter Sellars Talks About *The Merchant of Venice*', Edited by Maria M. Delgado, Online posting: http://www.ardenshakespeare.com, 19 November 1998.

'Sellars Postpones L.A. Festival to 1990', *Variety*, 30 March 1988, p. 69.

Selznick, Daniel M., 'Ancient Greek Drama With a Topical Twist' [review of *The Persians*], *Christian Science Monitor*, 3 November 1993, p. 12.

Sewall, Gilbert T. (ed.), *The Eighties: A Reader*, Reading MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997.

Shakespeare, William, *The Yale Shakespeare*, edited by Wilbur L. Cross and Tucker Brooke, New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1993.

Shank, Theodore, *American Alternative Theatre*, London: Macmillan, 1982.

Shapiro, Laura, Katrine Ames and Brad Risinger, 'A Breather for the Whiz Kid', *Newsweek*, 25 August 1986, p. 61.

Sherlock, 'Rich Theater, Poor Theater', *Harvard Crimson Arts Weekly*, 20 October 1977.

Shewey, Don, 'The Visions of Der Wünderkinder' [review of *The Visions of Simone Machard*], *Village Voice*, 9 August 1983, p. 73.

___, 'A Weekend Near Boston' [review of *Pericles*], *Village Voice*, 22 November 1983, p. 107.

___, 'Mr. Sellars Goes to Washington', *Village Voice*, 12 June 1984, p. 41.

___, 'Alive in the Theater, Awake in the World' [review of *Hang on to Me*], *Village Voice*, 12 June 1984, p. 87.

___, 'Baby Step', *Village Voice*, 16 April 1985, p. 102.

___,'Not Either/Or But And: Fragmentation and Consolidation in the Post-modern Theatre of Peter Sellars', in Bruce King (ed.), 1991.

Shyer, Laurence, *Robert Wilson and his Collaborators*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1989.

Simon, John, 'Inchworm's Delusion' [review of *Idiot's Delight*], *New York*, 10 March 1986, p. 57.

___, 'Dumbing Down Debussy' [review of *Pelléas et Mélisande*], *New Criterion*, vol. 13, no. 9, May 1995, pp. 19-26.

Smith, Patrick J., 'The Birth of Klinghoffer', *Opera News*, vol. 55, no. 13, 16 March 1991, pp. 20-2.

Smith, Ronn, *American Set Design 2*, New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1991.

Smith, Ruth, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Smith, Sid, 'Father of Invention' [profile of Sellars], *Chicago Tribune*, 9 October 1994, Arts pp. 18-21.

___, 'The Art of Upset' [review of *The Merchant of Venice*], *Chicago Herald Tribune*, 16 October 1994, Arts p. 18.

Smith, Terry Donovan, 'Shifting Through Space-Time: A Chronotopic Analysis of Peter Sellars' Don Giovanni', *Modern Drama*, vol. 39, no. 4, Winter 1996, pp. 668-79.

Solomon, Andrew, 'Bill Viola's Video Arcade', *New York Times*, 8 February 1998, Magazine pp. 34-7.

Sontag, Susan, *Illness as Metaphor, AIDS and its Metaphors*, London: Penguin, 1978/89/91.

Sophocles, *Ajax*, adapted by Robert Auletta, *Theater*, vol. 18, no. 1, Fall/Winter 1986, pp. 19-36.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, London: Macmillan, 1988, published as extract in Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (eds.), 1995, pp. 24-28.

Stanislavsky, Constantin, *An Actor's Handbook*, London: Methuen, 1963/90.

Stearns, David Patrick, 'Timely Reworkings of "Merchant", "Clockwork Orange"', *USA Today*, 18 October 1994.

Steptoe, Robert, *The Mozart-Da Ponte Operas: The Cultural and Musical Background*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988.

Sterrit, David, 'Making Mozart Postmodern', *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 August 1989

Stoller, Nancy E., *Lessons from the Damned: Queers, Whores, and Junkies Respond to AIDS*, London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

Stone, Webster A., 'Beyond Interpretation' [review of *Pericles*], *Harvard Crimson*, 21 October 1983, p. 2.

Sutcliffe, Tom, 'The Re-electrification of Pasternak' [review of *The Electrification of the Soviet Union*], *Guardian*, 2 June 1988.

___, *Believing in Opera*, London: Faber and Faber, 1996.

Swan, Christopher, 'Enter Peter Sellars and Shakespeare Company', *Christian Science Monitor*, 20 October 1983, p. B3.

Swed, Mark, 'Peter Sellars at Glyndebourne', *Wall Street Journal*, 18 July 1990, p. A7.

___, 'The Magic Flute', *Wall Street Journal*, 20 July 1990.

___,'Going Their Own Way', *Opera News*, vol. 56, no. 2, August 1991, p.20.

___, 'Getting Intimate with Mozart' [review of video recordings of Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy], *American Theatre*, vol. 9, no. 6, October 1992, pp. 86-8.

___, 'Merchant of Venice Beach? Peter Sellars Strikes Again', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 October 1994, pp. F1/5.

___, 'Philharmonic Making No Mistakes as Tourist', *Los Angeles Times*, 8 October 1996, Online posting: http://newsfeed.hollywood.com/latimes/calendar

___, 'For L.A., History's Knocking', *Los Angeles Times*, 26 December 1996, Online posting: http://newsfeed.hollywood.com/latimes/calendar

Sweeney, Louise, 'Theater's One-Man Meteor', *Christian Science Monitor*, 27 March 1985, p. 28.

___, 'For Embattled Peter Sellars, an Intermission', *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 September 1986, p. 25.

Tabor, James D. and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America*, Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1995.

Taylor, Paul and Nick Kimberley, 'A Long Meditiation About Love' [review of *Peony Pavilion*], *Independent*, 12 September 1998, Arts p. 13.

Till, Nicholas, *Mozart and the Enlightenment: Truth: Virtue and Beauty in Mozart's Operas*, New York: Norton, 1996.

Triebwasser, Joseph, 'Harvard Theater: Buyer's Market for Sellars', *Harvard Independent*, 26 April-2 May 1979, p. 10.

Trousdell, Richard, 'Peter Sellars Rehearses Figaro', *The Drama Review*, vol. 35, no. 1, Spring 1991, pp. 66-89.

___, 'Sellars, Peter', entry in David Pickering (ed.), *International Dictionary of Theatre – 3: Actors, Directors, Designers*, Detroit and London: St. James, 1996.

Trump, Donald, *Trump: The Art of the Deal*, New York: Random House, 1988.

Vanden Heuvel, Michael, *Performing Drama/Dramatizing Performance*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991.

Vattimo, Gianni, *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press, 1988.

'Video: Handel: Giulio Cesare', *Opera News*, vol. 56, no. 11, 13 February 1993, p. 44.

Von Buchau, Stephanie, 'Not Just an Entertainment' [feature on *Nixon in China*], *Opera News*, vol. 56, October 1987, p. 24.

Von Rhein, John, 'Unorthodox Opera' [profile of Sellars], *Chicago Tribune*, 8 March 1987, Arts p. 10.

Wadsworth, Stephen, 'Wild at Heart' [profile of Lorraine Hunt], *Opera News*, November 1996, pp. 13-17/65.

Walsh, Michael, 'Stagecraft as Soulcraft' [review of *Nixon in China*], *Time*, 9 November 1987, p. 110.

___, 'Art and Terror in the Same Boat' [review of *The Death of Klinghoffer*], *Time*, 1 April 1991, p. 79.

___, 'To Love and Die in L.A.' [review of *Pelléas et Mélisande*], *Time*, 20 February 1995, p. 73.

___, 'Political to a Fault' [review of *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*], *Time*, 29 May 1995.

Watney, Simon, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

Weiss, Hedy, 'Peter Sellars' Merchant of Venice Beach', *Chicago Sun-Times*, 9 October 1994, Arts pp. 1/6.

___, '"Merchant" a Mixed Bag', *Chicago Sun-Times*, 12 October 1994, Section 2 p. 45-6.

White, Michael John, 'Power to the Soviets' [review of *The Electrification of the Soviet Union*], *Times*, 8 June 1988.

White, Stephen K. (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Habermas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Whitmore, John, *Directing Postmodern Theatre: Shaping Signification in Performance*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Wieseltier, Leon, 'Clagic Trash', *New Republic*, 30 September 1991, p. 40.

Willett, John, *The Theatre of Bertolt Brecht*, London: Methuen, 1959/77.

Williams, Albert, 'The Quality of Merchant is Not Strained', *Chicago Reader*, 21 October 1994, p. 33.

Williams, Raymond, *Culture and Society 1780-1950*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

___, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, London: Fontana, 1976

Williams, Robert Gooding (ed.), *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

Wilmeth, Don B. with Tice L. Miller (eds.), *Cambridge Guide to American Theatre*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

Wilson, Edwin, 'My One and Only Opens on Broadway', *Wall Street Journal*, 6 May 1983, p. 29.

Worthen, W. B., *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

'Zangezi', *Variety*, 17 December 1986, p. 92.

Zoglin, Richard, 'Running Wild with a War-Horse' [review of *The Count of Monte Cristo*], *Time*, 3 June 1985.

___, 'Shylock on the Beach' [review of *The Merchant of Venice*], *Time*, 31 October 1994.

## Videography

*Zangezi: A Supersaga in Twenty Planes*, Velimir Khlebnikov
Live recording: Brooklyn Academy of Music, 1987
Brooklyn Academy of Music/New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

*Nixon in China*, John Adams, Alice Goodman
Live recording: Brooklyn Academy of Music, 1987
Brooklyn Academy of Music/New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

*Conversations with Fear and Hope after Death*: *Mahagonny Songspiel*, Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill; cantatas by J. S Bach.
Live recording: Majestic Theatre, Brooklyn Academy of Music, 1989
Brooklyn Academy of Music/New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

*Cosi fan Tutte*, W. A. Mozart
Commercial video: Decca, 1991

*Don Giovanni*, W. A. Mozart
Commercial video: Decca, 1991

*The Marriage of Figaro*, W. A. Mozart
Commercial video: Decca, 1991

*Giulio Cesare*, G. F. Handel
Commercial video: Decca, 1991

*The Death of Klinghoffer*, John Adams, Alice Goodman
Live recording: Brooklyn Academy of Music, 1991
Brooklyn Academy of Music/New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

*The Cabinet of Dr. Ramirez*, film, directed by Peter Sellars, 1991
Produced by Canal+ Productions, Mod Films, Paladin Films, BBC TV, Thirteen WNET, and WDR

*The Persians*, Aeschylus
Live recording: Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles, 1993
New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

*This is Now Our Time*, film of New York rehearsals for *The Merchant of Venice*, directed by Peter Sellars
BBC Television, 'Bard on the Box' series, 1994

*The Merchant of Venice*, William Shakespeare
Live recording: Goodman Theatre, Chicago, 1994
Goodman Theatre Chicago

*The Seven Deadly Sins*, Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Weill
Created specially for video. Produced by Caméras continentales, Opéra de Lyon, La Sept, Arts, RM Associates.
Commercial video: Decca, 1995

*Theodora*, G. F. Handel
Live recording: Glyndebourne, 1996
Channel 4 Television/Channel 4 Video

Peter Sellars, Collins Memorial Lecture, Indiana State University
Live recording: 1997