

# And I Will Reach Out My Hand With A Kind of Infinite Slowness And Say The Perfect Thing: The Utopian Theatre of Suspect Culture

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Josef is a sculptor in glass and the central character of Suspect Culture's 1992 show *Stalinland*. He recalls how he was once commissioned to design a vase.

I made a vase that was pure. I thought. A pure vase. A vase that could contain a thought, a feeling . . . a container of feeling . . . so I banished decoration and pattern, I banished anything in line and curve that would lend itself to stand in some civil servant's house and shout about its cost . . . there would be no taste in it . . . it wouldn't stand in a corner and give away the secrets of the household incomes and moralities . . . it would be a minimum vase. A silent vase.<sup>1</sup>

But as Josef argues with his wife who wants to flee the oppressive communist system under which they live, they stumble into the vase which smashes to the floor. 'Never mind,' says Josef's daughter, 'They were mass produced. We have a box full.'<sup>2</sup>

The shards sent flying in the destruction of this perfect vase releases a series of motifs and concerns that have continued to animate Suspect Culture's artistic choices, the forms of their particular political intervention, and the cultural dilemmas that unfold through their work. Their first show, *A Savage Reminiscence* (1991), is a monologue imagining Caliban's reflections on his life after *The Tempest*, and begins with a quotation dug out from a pile of books left behind on the island: 'So in the end ... when one is doing philosophy ... one gets to the point where one would like to emit an inarticulate sound.'<sup>3</sup> The inarticulate sound is perhaps here a dream of aconceptual directness and recalls Josef's perfect vase, a vase so sublimely unadorned that it could offer no opportunities for accumulating cultural capital, and Suspect Culture's work is marked by an unusually intense concern with the theatre's simultaneous connection with and transcendence of contemporary life. Their most recent show, *Lament* (2002), albeit now with greater urgency and complexity, is still

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<sup>1</sup> *Stalinland: Family History*, Typescript, 1992, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> *A Savage Reminiscence: or, How to Snare the Nimble Marmoset*, Typescript, 1991, p. 3; the quotation is from Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Revised Edition, Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968), p. 93.

exploring these questions.

Over the last twelve years, Suspect Culture have developed a style of performance work characterised by a very close integration of music, design, text and gestural movement. This is no doubt due to the make up of the central architectural team: a composer (Nick Powell), a designer (Ian Scott), a playwright (David Greig), and an actor/director (Graham Eatough). The mature history of the company begins in the mid-nineties and turns on two productions: *One Way Street* (1995), apart from being the first show to receive funding, was the first to develop the company's now characteristic patterns of repeated gestures and stylised recursions of movement. *Airport* (1996), a more ambitious piece, was performed with a mixed British and Spanish cast, and toured Scotland, Spain, the Basque Country and Italy. Its pointillist structure, ensemble performances, cool intellectualism, and buoyant humour established the style in which (and sometimes specifically against which) Suspect Culture has continued to work.

Despite being one of most prominent Scottish theatre companies both at home and in Europe, their work continues to divide critics. The minimal, fractured performances and narrative seems to give rise to radically different views; political theatre in Scotland had become associated with the populist tradition of John McGrath's 7:84 and Wildcat. Suspect Culture's abstraction, their unashamedly intellectual processes, and the refined, minimalist beauty of their shows seemed to signify to some a deliberate turning away from politics. Their artistry and their political allegiances have always been controversial: one critic found *Mainstream* (1999) 'stylistically sumptuous', another thought it 'a sterile account of sterility'.<sup>4</sup> The reviewers were also divided over the politics of *Lament: Joyce McMillan in The Scotsman*, saw the piece as profoundly political, while Steve Cramer in the *List* found it conservatively reluctant to address politics at all.<sup>5</sup> Such discrepancies suggest more than a difference in taste but a substantial disagreement about how to 'read' these productions.

Suspect Culture's work thrives on ambiguity, contradiction and paradox. They are a leading Scottish theatre company whose work rarely addresses, in any direct form, specifically Scottish issues; the politics of the company's individual members is firmly to the left, yet their productions have been part of a move in Scotland away from the directly political work of 7:84 or Wildcat. Even the name was originally devised as a Derridean pun (was it a description of a culture that is suspect, or an injunction to suspect all culture?). Indeed, the ambiguities of Suspect Culture's work are central to their importance as a company. As I will argue, attending to this can point us to some broader lessons about the nature and scope of political theatre in

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<sup>4</sup> *Theatre Record*, 19: 19 (11 October 1999), 1191.

<sup>5</sup> *Theatre Record*, 22: 7 (29 April 2002), 429-430. These debates found particular force in 1996 when the Scottish Arts Council simultaneously granted revenue funding to Suspect Culture and cut funding to Wildcat. Without singling out Suspect Culture by name, John McGrath grumbled in the *Herald* that money had transferred from political work to 'theatre for west end yuppies'.

the twenty-first century.

A useful starting point for considering the possibilities for political theatre in the 1990s is Vera Gottlieb's article, written for *New Theatre Quarterly* in 1988 entitled 'Thatcher's Theatrecor, After *Equus*'. In it, Gottlieb claimed that the revolutionary clarity and rationality of writers like Trevor Griffiths has been replaced by 'mysticism; the irrational; violence, whether physical or verbal; impotence, and an abdication and surrender to 'dark forces', whether undefined, or anarchic'. Such work she considered to be 'in collusion with today's ideological climate [...]'.<sup>6</sup>

A particular focus of her attack was Howard Barker's work, which she accuses of 'mystical anarchism' and an embrace of 'violence' and the 'non-rational'.<sup>7</sup> Graham Eatough recalls the original impulse behind the formation of Suspect Culture being to bring together the literary intelligence of Howard Barker's work with the physical intelligence of DV8.<sup>8</sup> It may seem a diversion to reheat a fifteen-year-old debate, but British theatre since 1988 has gone more Barker's way than Gottlieb's, and some attention to what is stake here will help situate Suspect Culture's performative ambiguities and help clarify the different notions of political theatre that are at work.

A quite different perspective on this debate is offered by Marxist philosopher Theodor Adorno, whose work has been a decisive influence on both Howard Barker and Suspect Culture. Adorno's *Minima Moralia* supplied the epigraph for *And the Opera House Remained Unbuilt* (1992), and the play's grand themes of two theatre workers after the Second World War, traumatized by genocide, haunted by the complicity of the mass, consumed with the dilemmas of the peace. Adorno's influence on Greig is still visible in the title of his screenplay *Uncommitted Crimes* (a loose adaptation of *Crime and Punishment*), named after Adorno's epigram 'Every work of art is an uncommitted crime'.<sup>9</sup> Suspect Culture's shows have moved away from Adorno in their explicit content after *One Way Street* (inspired by Adorno's colleague, Walter Benjamin) they stop being peopled by anguished middle-

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<sup>6</sup> Vera Gottlieb, 'Thatcher's Theatrecor, After *Equus*', *New Theatre Quarterly*, 4: 14 (May 1988), 99-104 (p. 104).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>8</sup> Personal interview, Traverse Bar, Edinburgh, 14 April 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, Translated by E. F. N. Jephcott (Verso, London, 1974), p. 111. Page thirty-nine of this book also supplies the epigraph to *And the Opera House...* and a citation in David Greig's 'Internal Exile', *Theatre Scotland*. iii, 11 (Autumn 1994), 8-10 (p. 9). It was also a significant text for Howard Barker, who once wrote 'Adorno began as a passion for me and ended as a puzzle. I do not know his entire range of writing, and my bedside reading was always *Minima Moralia*,' Personal Letter, [December 1995].

European intellectuals but in their thematics and the experiences they provoke they suggest an intense and profound theatrical exploration of his characteristic themes of totality, negation and utopia.

The argument that Adorno developed with increasing urgency in the last twenty years of his life is a philosophically bleak reinterpretation of Marx's theory of history. Marx described history as a series of forms of society, each succeeding the other culminating in a final form, communism. At this point the dialectical contradictions between the general (social organisation) and the particular (human needs and abilities) that have driven this restless historical development disappear, thus bringing 'the prehistory of human society to a close'.<sup>10</sup> Adorno, in common with many western Marxists, did not share Marx's confidence that communism will follow capitalism so inevitably. In particular, he argues that the motor of history, contradiction, is at risk because the system as a whole is transforming every level of that society in its image, effacing any contradiction between general and particular.

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno calls this 'identity-thinking', taking as his model Marx's opening to *Capital* where he describes how money becomes a general measure through which all things must pass in order to join the system of exchange. In the process, the particularity of these things is stripped away so that those things which can be valued in monetary terms become their dominant attributes; money transforms the world of things into a world of exchange values.<sup>11</sup> This structure is also felt in the realm of ideas. For Adorno, it is characteristic of post-Enlightenment society that the general concept has come to dominate the particular. All things that do not fit the criteria of 'computation and utility' are remorselessly swept away by the new rationality: 'Enlightenment is totalitarian'.<sup>12</sup> Where once there was a multiplicity of differences, 'the spread of the principle imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total'.<sup>13</sup>

If the system of exchange were totally to conquer the social world, the dialectical movement that would drive society beyond capitalism (to what Adorno variously calls 'true society', 'utopia' or 'freedom') would grind to a halt. Given the optimism of the European Left in the ten years after 1968, Adorno's conviction that the process of totalisation was almost complete led to accusations of pessimism and despair: 'there can be few works of philosophy,' wrote one commentator, 'that give such an overpowering impression of sterility as *Negative Dialectics*'.<sup>14</sup> But more than three decades after his death, with the triumphant resurgence of turbocapitalism and the ideologues of global capital proclaiming 'the end of history as such' and

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<sup>10</sup> Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, Second edition. Edited by David McLellan. (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 426.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 481-488.

<sup>12</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Translated by John Cumming (London: Verso, 1979), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Translated by E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 146. Fredric Jameson argues convincingly that there is not merely homology between the system of exchange and enlightenment's tendency towards universal rationality but a relation of causality from the former to the latter, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 23-26.

<sup>14</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, quoted in Martin Jay, *Adorno* (London: Fontana, 1984), p. 53.

dismissing all opponents of the system as 'crackpot messiahs',<sup>15</sup> it is hard not to agree with Fredric Jameson's contention that 'Adorno's Marxism, which was no great help in the previous periods, may turn out to be just what we need today'.<sup>16</sup>

The imprint of globalization can be found right across Suspect Culture's work, informing their understanding of space, and the fracturing of individual experience that follows from it. Typical settings for Suspect Culture shows are what Marc Augé has called 'non-places', spaces brought into being by the rapid expansion of communication and transport characteristic of globalization.<sup>17</sup> Such places are anonymous, functional airports, shopping malls, hotels, bars, motorway service stations to be contrasted with anthropological place, which is characterised by the historical traces that it bears, the identities that it guarantees: 'a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place'.<sup>18</sup> The kind of anthropology proposed by Mauss saw the integrity and wholeness of a society reflecting in the individuals that inhabited it.<sup>19</sup> But these proliferating non-places offer no such integrity: an airport terminal is a machine that turns the people who pass through its mechanisms into commodities. Without the co-ordinates of anthropological space, we enter a world 'surrendered to solitary individuality, to the fleeting, the temporary and ephemeral'.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?' *The National Interest* (Summer 1989), 3-18 (pp. 4, 9).

<sup>16</sup> Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Translated by John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), p. 34. But note that Augé does not use the word 'globalization' in his book.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

These are the spaces in which Suspect Culture's stories unfold. *Candide 2000* takes place in a shopping mall, *Mainstream* in an anonymous hotel, *Timeless* (1997) in a designer bar, all glass walls and tall, narrow tables. The inhabitants of *Airport* reflect the emptiness of their setting. One character, Gordon Syme, appears to live at the airport, repeatedly failing to board his flight home, and instead creating fleeting acquaintances with the travellers passing through. Another continually invents personalities and histories for herself, admitting at one point that she's never before told anyone her name.<sup>21</sup> They recall Augé's comment that a person entering a non-place is relieved of the usual determinants of his or her identity and 'tastes for while [...] the passive joys of identity-loss, and the more active pleasure of role-playing'.<sup>22</sup> The sense of the setting as a non-place is emphasised by Ian Scott's design which encloses the main playing space between two baggage conveyor belts, emphasising the transitional nature of the space—it is somewhere to pass through while the sterility of these machines point up the functional neutrality of the place-as-machine. The transformation of people into things is enacted by wittily moving characters around the stage on trolleys and conveyor belts, turning people into baggage (see fig. 1).<sup>23</sup>

Despite their addiction to non-place, the characters retain an obsessive interest in the older organisation of space by nation. Gordon and the Spanish check-in clerk can only recognise his Scottishness by a few emblems of his nationality: malt whisky, kilts, and the Loch Ness Monster, Gordon completing the picture with a brief Highland fling (see fig. 2).<sup>24</sup> In a later sequence as all the characters hail one another's nationalities, an English tourist can be seen in making conversation with a poor Spaniard: 'You're Spanish aren't you? Do you do that flamenco dancing? And that bullfighting? You're such *passionate* people aren't you?'.<sup>25</sup> In the commodified emptiness of non-place, the former territoriality is glimpsed only in logos, stereotypes, cultures reduced to the images in the travel agent's brochure. In this sense it may be the apparent unScottishness of Suspect Culture that make the company most pertinent to Scotland's encounter with globalization.

Adorno's vision of a world totally transformed by exchange is more clearly identified in the first Suspect Culture show of the new millennium, *Candide 2000*, which relocated Voltaire's novel in 'Clearwater': a twenty-first-century shopping mall, watched over by a restless chorus of kids who hang around the levels occasionally eulogising what is on offer:

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<sup>21</sup> David Greig, *Airport*, Performance Script (Spanish Tour), Typescript, October 1996, pp. 23-26, 36.

<sup>22</sup> Augé, *Non-Place*, p. 103.

<sup>23</sup> Suspect Culture, *Airport*, Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, Performance video, 1996.

<sup>24</sup> Greig, *Airport*, pp. 4-5.

<sup>25</sup> Transcribed from Suspect Culture, *Airport*, Performance Video.

You can eat Chinese food  
Indian food  
Mexican food  
Italian food  
French food  
American food  
All different countries  
That's what it's like.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> David Greig, *Candide 2000*, Rehearsal Draft 2, Typescript, January 2000, p. 2.

The monotony of the syntax conveys the bland interchangeability of the foods on offer, the effect of total exchange on the particular culinary traditions of the world, bringing them under one system (or, 'under one roof. / Everything. / That's what it's like').<sup>27</sup> That repeated phrase, which runs right through *Candide 2000*, is important too: 'that's what it's like'. The triumph of totality, according to Adorno, is the triumph of the general over the particular, in which the system of exchange transforms all particulars in its image, leaving no room between what *is* and what *might be*. Such a society would offer no epistemic space in which someone could explore their desire for a better society, and certainly offer no room for critique, for unmasking the relations of power and capital: 'In the open-air prison which the world is becoming, it is no longer so important to know what depends on what, such is the extent to which everything is one'.<sup>28</sup> The phrase 'that's what it's like' suggests the numbed identity of things with themselves, in its tautologous affirmation of what is. *2002's Lament* begins with videos of members of the company answering an off-camera questioner, asking them things about things they feel have been lost, things the might wish to lament. Paul Blair admits, 'Everything seems to be just 'this is it'. ' As Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia*, 'that's-how-it-is is the exact means by which the world dispatches each of its victims'.<sup>29</sup>

The dominance of the totality is even registered on the level of narrative. The winding and improbable tale that twists through Voltaire's original novel is part of its charm and part of its argument. Dr Pangloss's optimistic philosophical 'proof' that the world obeys rational principles and will come right in the end is harshly negated by Voltaire's narrative, driven on by accident, coincidence, disease, natural disaster, and inexhaustible brutality. *Candide 2000*, on the other hand, seems impatient with the novel's ungainly picaresque, and throughout the performance when a character begins to recount the unlikely chain of events that brought them to this place, a bell sounds and the production fast-forwards through their speech, to the actors' (or characters') increasing disgust. It is as if the performance were deliberately crushing the actors' performances, a metaphorical re-enactment of the subjugation of the particular by Enlightenment generality, reason's revenge on the unreasonable. *Candide 2000's* subtle relocation of Voltaire's story attributes the power of global capitalism to its evacuation of any reference beyond this, this best of all possible worlds.

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>28</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, Translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 212.



This brings us back to Gottlieb's objections to Howard Barker's use of the 'irrational' and her insistence that theatre is properly political when it 'illustrates and demonstrates contemporary social reality'.<sup>30</sup> In Adorno's terms, when social reality has been entirely transformed by global exchange, illustrating that social reality just reinforces that totality, offering 'only advertisements for the world through its duplication'.<sup>31</sup> And if all conceptuality has come to be dominated by a single concept, exchange value, then all thought that operates under the categories and laws coming to us from the Enlightenment will lead us back to the totality: 'when men [*sic*] are forbidden to think, their thinking sanctions what simply exists'.<sup>32</sup> A commitment to social reality and rationality might in these terms be a lethal kind of conservatism that offered no fundamental opportunity to think beyond the system.

It could plausibly be countered that if Adorno truly believes that society has fallen beneath the spell of a remorseless totality that has closed off the possibility of all historical change, then there is little to choose between him and the proponents of the end of history. If so, the objections made against Barker for negativity and pessimism still stand and may also be applied to Adorno. (Indeed if *Suspect Culture* are to be dragged into this, well so be it, let them all be damned together.) However, this popular image of Adorno the radical in despair at the seamless totality of the world system is a caricature, and Adorno's work is careful to insist on the persistent presence of contradiction, the aporetic, the gaps through which freedom may be glimpsed.

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<sup>30</sup> Gottlieb, 'Thatcher's Theatre', p. 104.

<sup>31</sup> Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 34.

<sup>32</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 85.

The most important of these gaps is art. The value of art, for Adorno, is that it provides a source of profound opposition to the empirical reality that has been colonised by identity-thinking and exchange. Despite sharp criticisms made of him elsewhere, here Adorno is drawing on Kant's discussion of beauty in *Critique of Judgment*. For Kant, our appreciation of beauty involves us suspending several of our usual responses to the world: we are disinterested, meaning that we have no ulterior purpose in finding something beautiful; and the beauty of the object is not judged against any external concept, and is independent of any function or purpose it may have. While any beautiful object (natural or human-made) might characteristically appear somehow designed and fashioned, its suitedness to purpose is irrelevant to the beauty of the designedness itself. For this reason, Kant characterises the experience of beauty as experiencing 'purposiveness without a purpose'.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, Translated with an Introduction by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), pp. 64, 53, 65. A useful recent discussion of the disinterestedness of judgments of taste can be found in Henry E. Allison's *Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), Ch. 4.

It is precisely this suspension of interests, concepts and purposes that explains art's importance for Adorno. If art's value lies in its fundamental lack of any purpose beyond itself, then it will be peculiarly impervious to the system of exchange ('the prevailing realm of purposes'<sup>34</sup>), which involves extracting and commodifying the utility of an object.<sup>35</sup> As Adorno states Kant's position, 'artworks were purposeless because they had stepped out of the means-end relation of empirical reality'.<sup>36</sup> Or as David Greig puts it, 'its uselessness is its value'.<sup>37</sup> Further, if aesthetic experience involves suspending our concepts, then it may be a way of briefly experiencing life beyond the domination of identity-thinking, and a way of momentarily grasping the particularity of things. As globalization spreads exchange extensively and intensively across the world at all levels, art is an increasingly oppositional voice speaking against totality. 'Art must be and wants to be utopia,' says Adorno, 'and the more utopia is blocked by the real functional order, the more this is true'.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 23.

<sup>35</sup> 'Only what is useless can stand in for the stunted use value,' Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 227; see also *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 11, 146.

<sup>36</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Edited by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone, 1997), p. 139.

<sup>37</sup> David Greig, 'Paying the Piper', a talk given at the Edinburgh Festival, 13 August 1999, quoted in Mark Fisher, 'Folding stuff gets into the act,' *The Herald* (17 August 1999).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Utopia has always been a controversial term in left-wing debates (Gottlieb uses the term dismissively herself.) In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx condemns the experiments of Fourier, Owen and others as of 'a purely Utopian character', because they were trying to act independently of the historical process.<sup>39</sup> Adorno has argued that Marx and Engels' hostility to such beliefs were based on an expectation of revolution as imminent, and a tactical belief that independent anarchist groups shouldn't act precipitately.<sup>40</sup> But with the revolution not having transpired as Marx thought it would, and totality instead threatening the very motors of historical change, a sense of utopia is vital to keep the possibility of change alive: 'what is must be changeable if it is not to be all'.<sup>41</sup>

Suspect Culture's work exemplifies what Adorno claims for art. For one thing their work is very beautiful; graceful, elegant, striking and subtle. But also their work is marked throughout by an insistent desire to escape the clutches of identity and exchange. Everywhere there is an ambition to exploit the residual gap between what is and what might be, to rediscover the non-identity of things with themselves. *Mainstream* concerns an encounter between a record company employee and a personnel consultant, who meet in an appraisal interview but end up having a one-night stand and parting, embarrassed, the next morning. The whole play takes place in the hotel, and we move between a conference room, the lounge bar, a bedroom, and the breakfast room, and the play is suffused with the strange melancholy that inhabits non-places through which people only pass, something akin to that phrase for which there is no precise English equivalent, *l'angoisse des gares*.

The pressures of totality bear down heavily on these characters who continually find themselves measuring up to external definitions of themselves. At one point the record company employee describes a recent purchase, a device that attaches to your car stereo:

it observes what you listen to and it builds up a profile of you... then, when you're driving it automatically tunes to the station that's playing the type of stuff you like [...]  
I used to think I was the sort of person who liked radio four  
That's what I would tune to  
Until I had this gadget

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<sup>39</sup> Marx, *Selected Works*, p. 269.

<sup>40</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 322,

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 398.

It taught me who I really am.<sup>42</sup>

They find out each other through a kind of commodity fetishism, asking for their favourite tv shows, sweets, songs, sports. They repeatedly assert and adjust their views of each other, of the 'type of person' they take each other to be. The CV, that universal passport of personal exchangeability, is constantly evoked, in debates about which personal attributes can be put down and which must remain excluded by it. These externally-derived definitions layer around the characters until it becomes difficult to say exactly who they might really be, echoed in the framing image of the play; someone trapped in a broken-down car on a motorway in a snowstorm, almost freezing to death:

I was only just alive. All the heat in my body had retreated inside me, away from my skin, away from my arms and legs. There was only the faintest detectable pulse being sent out from some deep core. So quiet it was hardly anything at all. Like one of those radio signals sent through space that just says, 'I'm here.' 'I'm here.' 'I'm here.'<sup>43</sup>

The mainstream of the title seems akin to totality itself, a fast-flowing stream that it seems dangerous, almost unthinkable to leave. Yet that breakdown, that interruption, becomes emblematic of the show's artistic intervention, its determination to pick up the faintest signals from somewhere beyond exchange. The transmitter of that signal is the way *Mainstream's* story is told.

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<sup>42</sup> David Greig, *Mainstream*, Typescript, 1999, p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

Four actors play these two characters, and every combination of performers is seen several times across the length of the performance (see fig. 3).<sup>44</sup> The story is splintered into fifty-five short scenes, not structured in chronological order, with many of the scenes offering overlapping and alternative versions of particular conversations. While two performers are playing a scene, the other two are often echoing it off-stage, sometimes glimpsed through the upstage screens, sometimes mirroring the action, sometimes multiplying the narrative still further (see fig. 4). The linear story described above can thus not be described with any precision, since it is possible that we are watching one story or fifty separate stories. The stage is organised in four quarters, one item of furniture indicating each of the rooms the relationship passes through, but particular actions and lines of dialogue bleed across these zones, overflowing the spatial boundaries of the narrative, and the whole encounter seems to exceed the bodies of the particular actors, transcending its material representation, intensifying and sharpening the difference between what we see and what we feel to be happening.

At one moment, the personnel consultant, or one of the personnel consultants, speaking to the record company employee, or one of the record company employees, says,

You look beautiful  
Your eyes.  
Your skin.  
Your lips.  
You look perfect.  
[...]  
I feel as though ...  
If I put out my hand to touch you,  
You would disappear.

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<sup>44</sup> Suspect Culture, *Mainstream*, Performance video, Falling Water Films, 1999.

The room would disappear'.<sup>45</sup>

The experience of love is here registered as something that weightlessly frees the self from all materiality, perhaps because, as Adorno writes, 'Tenderness between people is nothing other than awareness of the possibility of relations without purpose'.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> David Greig, *Mainstream*, p. 12.

<sup>46</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 41.

Crucially, this conjunction of beauty and disappearance is situated in a gesture, someone reaching out a hand to someone else. Fredric Jameson describes the obverse experience of the same gesture in his account of the tedium of totality, the 'boring imprisonment of the self in itself, crippled by its terror of the new and unexpected, carrying its sameness with it wherever it goes, so that it has the protection of feeling, whatever it might stretch out its hand to touch, that it never meets anything but what it knows already'.<sup>47</sup> The body is imprisoned in the familiar, and marginalised by rationality, a founding move of Enlightened modernity for Adorno, who argues for a return to the body as a source of value: 'It is at its most materialist outer limit that materialism unexpectedly coincides with theology. It longs for the resurrection of the flesh'.<sup>48</sup> While I have described *Mainstream* as transcending the physicality of the actors, it is in fact the patterning of physical gestures that detaches the somatic from the character; just as a word repeated too often too quickly will begin to seem clumsy in the mouth and its meaning will fall away from it, so these gestures lose their attachment to character. But rather than becoming meaningless, their very physicality is revived by coming out from under the umbrella of character, somewhat akin to the sensuous recovery of use values from exchange. This physical reaching out becomes itself an act of resistance to totality as well as an emblem of someone groping for utopia.

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<sup>47</sup> Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p. 16.

<sup>48</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 207. [Translation adjusted as suggested by Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p. 119.]



This is particularly felt in *Timeless*. In the first section we see a group of university friends meeting for an informal reunion up some years after graduating; their awkwardness is captured in a series of gestural character motifs. Ian's motif shows him raise his hand as if to wave to someone he's seen, not being seen and embarrassedly converting the gesture by rubbing the back of his neck (see fig. 5).<sup>49</sup> The play is punctuated by awkward actions like these which punctuate the scenes and give it an aestheticised quality, as we follow the development of the relationships through these gestures. In the middle section, we understand the cause of some of the present unease in a flashback to the last time they were together. The third and final section displays all the characters' most utopian fantasies of the perfect meeting they might have, where all that was unsaid is said without recrimination or misunderstanding. Hauntingly, although they are theatrically separated out by individual lighting, and each now have associated with them one instrument in the string quartet that hauntingly underscored the performance, their unspoken desires are for perfect communion. The 'open air prison' engenders a prisoner's dilemma in their mutual desire for, but terror at, making contact (fig. 6). Martin, an unthinkingly cruel womaniser, admits that he would like to reach out:

If I could reach out my hand and say  
If I just had that touch.  
A touch that could transmit that thing you want.  
That thing women want which is...  
Whatever it is.  
I would.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Suspect Culture, *Timeless*, Gateway Theatre, Edinburgh, Performance video, Left and Right Video Productions, 28 August 1997.

<sup>50</sup> David Greig, *Timeless*, Touring Script, Typescript, 1998, p. 68.

But his desire is not simply strategic; he is not trying to find the perfect chat-up line. Elsewhere, his language is more clearly abstracted from his own interests, more utopian, when, picturing the scene, he states, 'I reach out my hand, with a kind of infinite slowness, / And say the perfect thing', which is: 'blah blah blah blah blah' (see fig. 7).<sup>51</sup> The perfect thing cannot be spoken, of course, but these 'inarticulate sounds' stand in for it, holding it tantalisingly out of our view, but marking the outlines of utopian space.

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

This desire to reach out across the barriers of atomisation and isolation is a motif that runs right across Suspect Culture's work. In *Airport*, there is a childhood memory that, irrationally, seems to be shared by all of the characters. In *One Way Street*, the central character's misanthropic isolation is both emphasised and counterpointed by the show's monologue form: the hated others that Flannery tries to evade are necessarily embodied by the same actor, creating a visual unity that defies his desire for escape. The doubling of characters in *Mainstream* suggests this too, and this is echoed perhaps in the faint reflections visible in the glass walls Ian Scott designed for *Timeless*. Even the chorus of mallrat kids in *Candide 2000* suggests a kind of tribal unity in which a single story can pass indistinguishably from voice to voice (see fig. 8).<sup>52</sup> Despite the frequent association of the aesthetic with romantic individualism, the aesthetic experience, as much for Kant as for Adorno, is an experience that crosses the boundaries and limits of the bourgeois individualist body. Kant claimed that it is characteristic of aesthetic experience that it feels universal, not 'that everyone *will* agree with my judgment, but that he [*sic*] *ought* to'.<sup>53</sup> Freed from the concepts that separate us we all make our judgments of taste on the same basis, experiencing that 'common sense' (*sensu stricto*) that unites us. This is why Adorno suggests so mysteriously that when a writer writes a work that negates the empirical world, 'watching over the artist's shoulder is a collective subject that has yet to be realized'.<sup>54</sup> Art engages 'a deeply collective objectivity'<sup>55</sup> of a kind that foreshadows utopia.

Suspect Culture's work does not absurdly pretend to show utopia. In *Candide 2000* the very idea is satirized, when the protagonist, Colin, still roaming the shopping mall, Clearwater, enjoys a drug-induced hallucination that he is in Golden Springs, a utopian version of the mall. The perfection is instantly ironized; the chorus describe it in bathetically rapturous terms:

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<sup>52</sup> Suspect Culture, *Candide 2000*, Royal Lyceum, Edinburgh, Performance Video, 2000. This kind of impossible transpersonal contact is a theme that crosses over into David Greig's, as it were, solo work; see my 'Gestes d'utopie: le théâtre de David Greig', in Jean-Marc Lanteri (ed.), *Nouvelles Dramaturgies Britanniques: Le Naturalisme à l'épreuve* (Paris: Lettres Modernes Minard, forthcoming). This particular instance, a story passing from voice to voice, became literally true on tour where a new chorus was drawn from each city the production visited.

<sup>53</sup> Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 89.

<sup>54</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 231.

<sup>55</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature, Volume Two*, Edited by Rolf Tiedmann, Translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1992), p. 80.

The houses run on solar energy  
And wind power  
And bottles are recycled  
And newspapers as well

Except there ' s no newspapers  
Because there ' s no news  
Except good news.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Greig, *Candide 2000*, p. 37.

The invocation of the daily routine: 'In the afternoons everybody makes music / And does art / And in the evening / They put on plays',<sup>57</sup> recalls one of Marx's rare and incautious attempts to describe communist society, in which anyone can 'hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner'.<sup>58</sup> His description says more about the visions of nineteenth-century German romanticism than it does about utopia, just as Golden Springs is plainly a rather limp reheating of a few contemporary aspirations which soon bores Colin who asks to go home.

Because utopia cannot be shown. That one can imagine the purely Other, the Beyond, the Noumenal, is a fantasy only held by a few Deleuzian postmodernists. 'Art,' wrote Adorno, 'is no more able than theory to concretize utopia, not even negatively'.<sup>59</sup> It is the *possibility* of utopia that is affirmed, more than any specific plan of how such a society would function. When David Greig claims that 'political theatre has at its very heart the possibility of change',<sup>60</sup> the emphasis is precisely on *possibility* more than change as such.

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>58</sup> Marx, *Selected Works*, p. 185.

<sup>59</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 32.

<sup>60</sup> David Greig et al., 'Plays on Politics' in David Edgar (ed.) *State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 66.

As Adorno says repeatedly in *Aesthetic Theory*, art has a double character; its form expresses its autonomy from empirical reality, while its content is drawn from it. The elegant minimalism of Suspect Culture's productions does not elevate them out of any connection with the world; as we have seen, the settings, the characters, the actions, are drawn from a more or less recognisable reality. This is, in fact, crucial to art's political function, and to Adorno's controversial rehabilitation of mimesis as a politically positive artistic component. Utopia is glimpsed in the aporias produced by representation; in *Candide 2000*, the jubilant eulogies to Clearwater and Golden Springs are what produce a sense of dissatisfaction, because they evoke concepts necessary for freedom and clumsily try to apply them to a state of unfreedom: 'because culture affirms the validity of the principle of harmony within an antagonistic society, albeit in order to glorify that society, it cannot avoid confronting society with its own notion of harmony and thereby stumbling on discord'.<sup>61</sup> Indeed, even within the very notion of identity-thinking, there is a dialectical contradiction because 'hidden within it is also the truth moment of ideology, the pledge that there should be no contradiction, no antagonism. In the simple identifying judgment, the pragmatist, nature-controlling element already joins with a utopian element'.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Adorno, *Prisms*, p. 27.

<sup>62</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 149-150.

In this sense art is dialectical, and utopia is what is glimpsed through its opposition between artistic form and social content: 'an art shall be different is hidden in even the most sublimated work of art'.<sup>63</sup> Even in *Candide 2000s* mantra, 'that's what it's like', the very assertion of identity may open up a gap between the empirical and the possible. However, the risk of the dialectical method, which preserves two oppositions in the synthesis it creates of them, is that it builds to an even more totalising system than the one it replaces.<sup>64</sup> Adorno instead recommends a *negative* dialectics that intensifies the misfit between concept and object, between universal and particular. We have seen this already operating in the cruel clashes between the production and the performers in *Candide* (see above, p. 11 [**epic**]). The same motif appears in *Timeless* in which the shaggy dog stories that each character has to tell gets drowned out by the music. In *Mainstream* the ends of scenes are often given a peremptory suddenness, more as though a guillotine had fallen than a blackout.

This process reaches a kind of climax in *Lament*, which saw the company deliberately turn its back on some of its most recognisable stylistic traits. There is a motif of mapping that runs through many of Suspect Culture's performances, of adopting the perspective of the cartographer. In *A Savage Reminiscence*, Caliban describes Miranda teaching him how to draw a map of the island, 'to see its shape the way Ariel sees it'.<sup>65</sup> Similar ariel perspectives are afforded characters in *Airport*, *One Way Street*, and several of Greig's own plays, including *California Dreaming*, *The Architect*, and *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman He Once Loved in the Former Soviet Union*. One might interpret this as an attempt to withdraw from the immediacy of the empirical to understand the broader pattern, but, perhaps experiencing something akin to Adorno's concern about yet greater totality, *Lament* deliberately eschews such grand visions for something more, well, negative.

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<sup>63</sup> Adorno, *Notes on Literature*, p. 93.

<sup>64</sup> Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p. 50.

<sup>65</sup> Greig, *A Savage Reminiscence*, p. 4.

Visually, *Lament* was deliberately stark. The stage area was largely open and clear, but there was a wall of fencing upstage that suggested a security fence, on which fibre optics cables created a pattern which could have been international telecommunication networks, but could equally have suggested the flight paths of intercontinental missiles. Behind this ambivalent image, a further screen depicted three spheres, each in slightly greater shadow; the image strongly suggested the gradual eclipse of the earth. The connection with globalization and totality was not incidental. In the opening video sequence, Nick Powell was goaded into admitting his attitude to the changing world: 'Yes, I would club global capitalism to death with an iron bar. But my feeling is that it's won and I can't be in the same room as it'.<sup>66</sup> In a later sequence in the play, Graham is enacting a fantasy in which he is a guitar maker in Spain and taking a commission:

Graham      If I'm going to make a guitar for you I have to talk to you. I  
                  have to understand what you want your music to say.  
Paul            I want to write a lament for socialism.  
Graham        That's a good theme for a lamenting song.<sup>67</sup>

*Lament* laments not merely socialism but utopian space generally, and the work of the show is to keep the gap between 'life lived as it ought to be' and the way we live now.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Suspect Culture, *Lament*, performance: Traverse, Edinburgh, 13 April 2002 [transcription].

<sup>67</sup> David Greig, *Lament*, Typescript, 2002, p. 23.

<sup>68</sup> Adorno, *Notes on Literature*, p. 93.



*Lament* carefully avoids irony, as though the company were feeling the impact of Adorno's claim in *Minima Moralia* that totality had made irony impossible: 'Irony's medium, the difference between ideology and reality, has disappeared [...] There is not a crevice in the cliff of the established order into which the ironist might hook a fingernail'.<sup>69</sup> This in turn curiously recalls the postmodernists' claim that the distinction between reality and illusion has broken down; that, in Deleuze's words, 'difference does not lie between things and simulacra, models and copies. Things are simulacra themselves'.<sup>70</sup> But if we are to accept the absorption of everything into the simulacrum, as Deleuze and Baudrillard seem to imply, then the possibility of change, the 'hope for a Beyond' or the 'glimmer of life free of oppression', has been extinguished.<sup>71</sup>

Suspect Culture's project here was committed to affirmation, to directness, to the distinction between representation and the real. Yet tendency of the totality to turn all things into images of itself has its parallel in the stage's tendency to turn everything on it into representation. An affinity between totality and the theatrical means of production already lurked within *Candide 2000*'s fast-forwards and *Mainstream*'s cruel closures. *Lament*'s negative dialectic is to attack the means of representation themselves. In the opening sequence the company members' comments about fantasy and loss were played on video while they themselves stood on stage, virtually motionless throughout, occasionally joining in with one of the recordings, sometimes anticipating, sometimes with a slight delay. It located the fragmented episodes of loss very much within their own experiences and beliefs,<sup>72</sup> but also accentuating the lack of liveness of the recording.

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<sup>69</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 211.

<sup>70</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, Translated by Paul Patton (London: Athlone, 1994), p. 67.

<sup>71</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 397; *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 296.

<sup>72</sup> This effect was emphasised by the performers having all been in Suspect Culture shows before: Paul Blair was in *Candide 2000* and *Casanova*, Kate Dickie in *Timeless* and *Mainstream*, Louise Ludgate in *Mainstream* and Callum Cuthbertson in *Mainstream* and *Casanova*. The show also saw Graham Eatough's first performance in a Suspect Culture show since *Airport* (1996).

Lament's scenes take place across the world: Alaska, Nepal, Buenos Aires, Texas, Kenya, Madrid, Mexico, and elsewhere. But as if there were something rather too easy about the multiple global locations of *Cosmonaut* or Suspect Culture's *Casanova* (2001), *Lament's* representations of the world admit their fictionality. The characters and locations of the fragmented scenes are all named with a kind of deliberate cursoriness, as if impatient with pretence: we meet, amongst others, Chief Muckaluck, Brother Tuckersluck, Brother Catamaran, and a tour guide called Catherina Costacoffeebutic. These names are not purely flippant; there was no smile as these names were used. It was as the Other has become more and more difficult to grasp. As Nick Powell wrote during the development of the show 'I'm interested in how the digital, high tech world both expands the scope of our world-view geographically but somehow reduces our sense of difference'.<sup>73</sup> Similarly, there are many evocations of an organic community life in the performance, but these too display an awareness that these are now a fading memory (perhaps even a fantasy) for the west. In a small third world village a storyteller arrives; this moment of magic and mystery calls for special preparations, but imagining them has become impossible: 'Call the children together, clear a circle of bare earth, bring water in a goatskin, light fires, do things do things'.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, during the performance, gaps began to appear in speeches, as if suggesting the loss of all those things that totality has closed over and excluded. In one scene set in Alaska, two people lament the disappearance of the Inuit. 'They live up here in this godforsaken place and they know it the way my brother Clem knows Wall Street. They can read it like a book. Those skills are dying out'; 'sure as a stone drops in a lake,' the other agrees, 'How to skin a [ ] and how to pray to [ ] and how to heal a broken [ ] with herbs'.<sup>75</sup>

Such moments can be compared to what Adorno says of negative dialectics, that in the inescapability of identity-thinking, of the exchange form of conceptuality, one has to think *through* these concepts to negate them. In another of *Lament's* fantasy enactments, Callum Cuthbertson is a Great European Novelist discussing his latest opus: 'You know when I started writing it I thought it was a metaphysical story about faith but now that it's finished I look at it and I realise it's all about hope. The last word is hope'.<sup>76</sup> In a sense, precisely by identifying the limits of representation the show allowed itself to think beyond them. To lament something that is gone is to affirm its value, something perhaps discovered by Suspect Culture in this production, which also appears to have begun with despair and whose last spoken word is 'hope'.

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<sup>73</sup> Nick Powell, e-mail, 11 December 2001, printed in the programme for *Lament*.

<sup>74</sup> Greig, *Lament*, p. 13.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

<sup>76</sup> Greig, *Lament*, p. 35.

Theatrically there was an affirmation of resistance to totality through resistance to Suspect Culture's own facility for theatrical effect. Nick Powell's music for *Lament*, like his music for *Casanova*,<sup>77</sup> was characterised by heavy electronic processing, full of sampling and the sound of binary being spoken, a pulsing digital underscore that tore through the piece giving the fragmentation a globalizing rush. Yet just as the physical presence of the actors was heightened by their appearance on video, in the final sequence, the processed quality of the music was abandoned; Nick Powell entered from behind the upstage fencing where he had been operating the sound to play the final musical theme 'live'. As he did so members of the cast takes turns to attach various items associated with moments in the performance and with loss to the fence, which began to look like a railing near a bad traffic accident, the gates of a dead star's home, or perhaps the Wailing Wall. The effect was very sombre, very mournful, very moving. The movements slowed, the music built, and the moment became increasingly ritualistic. It seemed as if, the performance's negative dialectic that had undermined itself so ruefully had yielded a desire to do something 'real'. A ritual with some undisclosed function, a ceremony of mourning that raises the dead.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Powell describes that music as 'really urban, really twisted, really druggy,' Personal Interview, Traverse Bar, Edinburgh, 14 April 2002.

<sup>78</sup> These thematics are indebted to those raised by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international*, Translated by Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

Even in *Lament*, then, the bleakest and most restless of Suspect Culture's performance, there remains an affirmation of the utopian impulse. And this is the political theatre for our time; there are references in *Lament* to an unnamed and unnameable catastrophe (the word itself appears in corrupted forms in the text: 'ctststroff', 'ctststrof' as if the memory even of the catastrophe has failed) in the aftermath of which we are living. It was tempting to refer this to September 11<sup>th</sup>, but in some ways the real catastrophe is the closing off of utopia. The critics who have found in Suspect Culture a refusal to offer clear statements of their political beliefs are mistaken. The desire to reduce everything to reasoned concepts is itself, as Adorno has said, the catastrophe.<sup>79</sup> Suspect Culture's work has been a sustained investigation of the unknown lands of utopia, offering a reminder that 'in the world we live in there are always things for which art is the only remedy; there is always a contradiction between *what is* and *what is true*, between arrangements for living and humanity'.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Notes on Literature*, p. 76.

<sup>80</sup> Adorno, 'Modern Music is Growing Old' (1956), quoted in Jay, *Adorno*, p. 159.