

In the ‘Display Case’: (Capitalist) Realism and Simon Stone’s ‘Zoological’ Ibsen¹

MARGARET HAMILTON

*How are theatre practitioners (re)defining the realist project, a form of theatre intrinsic to the ideological domestication of capitalism? This paper takes up this question through an examination of Simon Stone’s production of *The Wild Duck* ‘after Ibsen’, staged at Belvoir Theatre in Sydney in 2011, and the late Mark Fisher’s (2009) theorization of a market-dominated present as capitalist realism. In doing so, it refers to three different cultural contexts by making parallels to the German theatre director Thomas Ostermeier’s work and pointing to developments in Britain. It argues that performances dependent upon the subject’s capacity to know and represent the world are predicated on a subjective response and therefore risk locating systemic issues in the closed fictional cosmos of situational dramatic art as part of its exploration of the paralysis intrinsic to the capitalist realist politics of (theatre) spectatorship.*

Contemporary realities are no longer the realities intrinsic to Henrik Ibsen’s late nineteenth-century era. Ibsen’s drama, however, has continued to exert global reach and arguably enjoyed a recent resurgence in theatre productions that can be broadly described as ‘variants of realism’, spearheaded by German theatre director Thomas Ostermeier.² It is an artistic resurgence that has coincided with a theoretical reconsideration of realism’s political potential.³ Against this backdrop, this paper takes up the question of the relation of form to context, specifically through an analysis of the Australian theatre director Simon Stone’s production of Ibsen’s *The Wild Duck*. How are artists (re)defining the realist project and can these developments counter a contemporary experience dominated by a mode of consumption that the late Mark Fisher contends has become ideologically ‘naturalized’ as capitalist realism?⁴ Stone’s production cast a myopic lens on personal, domestic conflict by disconnecting it from broader socio-contextual relations through its framing of scenic action. In doing so, the Australian director set up a theatrical portal dedicated to the ‘methodological individualism’ that Fisher identifies as intrinsic to capitalist realism, and ultimately reinforced human experience as an object for consumption.⁵ His scenographic attention to the paralysis of (theatrical) spectatorship heightened the acculturation of a capitalist realist imagination or the broader cultural *mise en scène* that this paper contends is at the heart of the question of the depoliticization of such modes of representation.

By referring to artists from three different cultural contexts – Australia, Germany and Britain – this essay's analysis of Stone's production takes up the question of the political accusations levelled against and in favour of 'realism', a term that resists simplistic categorization and an appellation increasingly significant in neo-Marxist thought. In doing so, it grapples with the relation between ideological formations and aesthetic modes of perception and is framed by the issue of performance's capacity to impact the public sphere or the pressing political and social issues specific to 'living in the end times' of global capitalism, to refer to the title of Slavoj Žižek's book.⁶ Can we afford to be realists? This question, adapted from the title of a published conversation between Fisher and Jodi Dean, encapsulates the significance of aesthetic critique in a culture increasingly characterized by the neo-liberal subject and the erosion of the ability to think collectively.⁷ It is deployed here to foreground the artistic challenges intrinsic to negotiating what Fisher describes as a 'transpersonal psychic infrastructure', or a realism that finds its strength on the basis of the 'feeling of resignation' central to the inability to combat capitalism, a condition at its strongest when it is presented and experienced as inescapably non-political, or as 'just the way things are'.⁸

It is against this sociopolitical, cultural context that this paper considers the recent traction of realism, a form of dramatic expression that scholars such as Benjamin Fowler and Elaine Aston identify as a 'maligned' genre.⁹ Theatrical realism, as Fowler notes, cannot be dismissed as simple mimesis; that is, as a straightforward and fixed method.¹⁰ Over time it has developed significantly in the hands of a number of artists producing work internationally. Fowler, for example, advocates the political significance of the disparate work of the contemporary theatre directors Katie Mitchell and Thomas Ostermeier.¹¹ At issue, however, is the question of realism's referential relation to the social imagination, especially in light of Dean's challenging conception of artistic experiences as products that 'spectators see', and, as such, modes of expression that contribute to the increasing disconnection from political action.¹² Does the 'in-yer-face realism' of Ostermeier's early theatre, the 'neo(n)-realism' of his Ibsen productions, and specifically his *Nora* and *Hedda Gabler*, the 'reflexive realism' of his later work, to use Peter Boenisch's terms, or the 'realist scenarios' of the live cinema underpinning much of Mitchell's work, enable agency in so far as they inscribe how sociocultural forces make the spectator feel, as Fowler argues in an essay that identifies both artists as cultural materialists?¹³ Or do these forms of theatrical production ultimately, as I argue in relation to what I term Stone's zoological realism, succumb to the fundamental impasse intrinsic to Dean's conception of the inaction tied to artistic, commercial objects and what Fisher ultimately diagnoses as the political resignation and malaise at the heart of the social and aesthetic logic of capitalist realism?

Ostermeier, after all, argues that *Nora* demonstrates that 'in the man-woman role model, nothing has changed', and Mitchell's work has been subject to critique on the basis of her lack of interrogation of the relationship between technology – or the dominant framing tool mediating the consumption of images – and physical behaviour.¹⁴ While this essay's focus is limited to Stone and is therefore not in a

position to specifically take up Fowler's argument concerning Ostermeier and Mitchell, it seeks to foreground the reach and political implications of the appellation 'realism'. As the range of descriptors above suggest, it has been applied to a broad spectrum of theatrical work. Realism, as Raymond Williams defines it, consists of three characteristic features: first, the notion of 'social extension' in terms of the stratum represented onstage, a shift critical to 'realist intention'; second, it renders action contemporary; and third, it is secular in so far as human action is played out in 'exclusively human terms' and the spectator is in a position to explicitly apply the action of drama to their life.¹⁵ Williams recognizes the 'high naturalism' of the late nineteenth century – key to this paper through the discussion of Ibsen – as a development emerging from the bourgeois drama of the eighteenth century, 'for a time interchangeable' with realism.¹⁶ However, realism, he argues, is distinct in its method and intention in that its reproduction of the external realm concerns dynamic reality as a historical phenomenon, as is exemplified by the Marxist tradition.¹⁷

Realism and naturalism are frequently used synonymously, and this is perhaps not surprising, given, as Williams notes, the historical intersection of stage techniques designed to render the real legible for the spectator. As part of a conversation with Kim Solga, Dan Rebellato offers a useful fivefold elaboration of naturalism as part of teasing out the intersections he identifies between this late nineteenth-century development and Katie Mitchell's work.¹⁸ According to Rebellato, naturalism is, first, defined by a scenographic approach that set out not simply to represent the world but to comprehend it. Second, it is linked to the intersection of character and actor specific to Stanislavski's system. Third, he points to naturalist practice as denying the presence of the spectator 'just as a scientist should not interfere with the experiments they are observing'.¹⁹ In doing so, Rebellato acknowledges the potentially contradictory significance of the gaze in so far as naturalist practitioners focus a lens on the not always comfortable issues intrinsic to contemporary reality. Finally, he sums up the scientific and philosophical imperatives of naturalism through the idea that human beings are indistinct from animals; that is, part of the natural world. Rebellato's last point resonates specifically in relation to Stone's approach in so far as he heightened the audience's consciousness of their zoological role as a spectator in the theatre medium through, first, his central scenographic image – a barren stage encased in glass panels that resembled a display case – and, second, the presence of a real duck onstage (see Figs. 1 and 2). In contrast to naturalist scientific thought and method, however, his realization of Ibsen's text ultimately depended upon contemporary modes of perception, as exemplified by Jan Chapman's observation. Chapman, the producer of Jane Campion's film *The Piano*, found the production captivating on the basis of its 'cinematic styling'.²⁰

This is not to overlook Stone's attention to the modernist representational model of theatrical spectatorship. His *Duck* foregrounded the presence of a literal, albeit transparent, fourth wall which rendered tangible the interface between private revelation and 'public' consumption. His 'series of realistic moments in a very unrealistic setting', to cite his description of the performance, intensified the spectator's consciousness of their status as that of an onlooker and quasi-public eye.²¹



FIG. 1 Ewen Leslie (Hjalmar Ekdal), John Gaden (Werle) and Anita Hegh (Gina Ekdal) in the display case in *The Wild Duck*. Surtitles can be seen on both sides of the display case and while this photograph is from the production at Malthouse Theatre it indicates the proximity of the stage to the audience at Belvoir. Photograph (of the production at Malthouse Theatre) by Pia Johnson.

– quasi in so far as *the* audience is constituted by a grouping of largely unconnected individuals in the theatre auditorium, a space that no longer operates as a site of public exchange. Christopher Balme elaborates on this point in his account of the modernist transformation of the sociopolitical function of theatre from ‘a rowdy, potentially explosive gathering place’ into a private space dedicated to ‘aesthetic absorption’.²² Stone’s glassed stage framed the experience of mediated spectatorship, and, in doing so, reinforced dominant habits of perception by enabling members of the audience to apply the action of drama to their life experience predominantly as a distanced, consuming subject of human spectacle, to return to Williams’s definition of realist form. It could be argued that Stone’s ‘representative figures’ function as ‘social specimens that exhibit or embody some larger problem’, as is potentially suggested by the zoological treatment of the decline of heteronormative interpersonal relationships, to use Richard Halpern’s conception of modern drama.²³ However, they remained politically constrained as a gallery of the living – that is, compelling as a middle-class theatre of illusion – yet ultimately disconnected from a broader critique of the public domain.

Fisher’s critique of ‘methodological individualism’ suggests further, exacting questions for the (historical) dramatic realist project and its organizing principle in the form of the domestic, nuclear unit. His plea is ultimately for ‘a public space that is



FIG. 2 *The Wild Duck* (Lucky), Ewen Leslie (Hjalmar Ekdal) and Eloise Mignon (Hedvig) in *The Wild Duck*. Hedvig is dressed in a distinctly private school uniform in an Australian context. Hjalmar points out to Gregers that 'Hedvig's school gets more expensive every year and we're flat out trying to make enough' (Simon Stone and Chris Ryan after Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*, unpublished script provided by Malthouse Theatre, p. 34). Photograph (of the production at Malthouse Theatre) by Pia Johnson.

not reducible to an aggregation of individuals and their interests' and, as such, counters a social domain in which '[a]ll that is real is the individual (and their families)'.²⁴ It is an appeal against a world view that hermetically severs 'acts' from their systemic formation. Fisher sets out a major ideological impasse for (realist) theatre's political efficacy by defining capitalist realism as 'the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it'.²⁵ In doing so, he refers to the oft-cited idea that the end of the world is easier to perceive than the destruction of capitalism, attributed to Žižek and Fredric Jameson. Capitalist realism is 'not a particular type of realism; it is more like realism itself'.²⁶ It cannot be limited to art or the 'quasi-propagandistic' function of advertising.²⁷ Instead, it constitutes a 'pervasive *atmosphere*' shaping culture, its production and reception, and above all presents itself as natural.²⁸ Against this backdrop, the challenge intrinsic to Stone's project can be expressed through reference to Ibsen's character Hjalmar Ekdal in *The Wild Duck*. Ekdal's professed profession is that of a photographer, yet as such he is unable to grasp the 'reality' behind the illusion literally framed for him and thereby decipher the way in which his social context has been structured.

'No store-bought duck. That duck's special': unchained Ibsen

The Wild Duck by Simon Stone with Chris Ryan after Henrik Ibsen,²⁹ to refer to its full promotional title, opened at Belvoir theatre in Sydney on 12 February 2011 and has been since presented by a number of European festivals, including Wiener Festwochen, the Holland Festival and the International Ibsen Festival.³⁰ Ibsen's text explores the social ramifications emerging from the quest for private profit by capitalist Håkon Werle in the patrilineal domestic context. His drama juxtaposes the outcome of two families, the Werles and Ekdals and the former's wealth at the expense of the latter. Old Ekdal, Werle's former business partner in his lumber mill, has borne the consequences of illegal logging on government land and his son, Hjalmar Ekdal, unwittingly, paternal 'responsibility' for Hedvig, Werle's child with his former housemaid, Gina. Werle's economic manoeuvring has seen Hjalmar train as a commercial photographer, although he clings to a delusion of himself as an inventor. Gina, Hjalmar's wife, ultimately, is the 'breadwinner', managing the household and business and retouching photographs with her daughter Hedvig, thereby ensuring the family's survival in the apartment that doubles as their studio or workroom. Old Ekdal's pursuits add another dimension to the expression of a 'wounded' spatial realm in the form of a makeshift, artificial forest. In the apartment's cramped loft, which contains animals and birds, including Hedvig's pet, a wild duck shot down and injured by Werle, he re-enacts his past as a hunter. Ibsen's character Gregers, Werle's son, embarks on a moral crusade that not only exposes, but also enacts, the human cost of his father's autocratic orchestration of interpersonal relationships in Hedvig's suicide at the conclusion of the text.

Ibsen's minor characters further demonstrate the brutal dysfunction of heterosexual interaction and the social relations defining the context. Relling and

Werle's housekeeper/soon-to-be-wife, Mrs Sørby, had a relationship in the past, presumably after the death of her 'wife-beating' husband.³¹ Neither Mrs Sørby nor Gina, both realists in the sense that they are thoroughly pragmatic, expresses sympathy for the late Mrs Werle. Instead, they align themselves with the patriarch Werle. In front of Gregers, Gina agrees with Mrs Sørby's description of his father as 'a healthy, vigorous man' in his youth unfairly chastised by his wife, an opinion that Mrs Sørby openly acknowledges has been formed on the basis of gossip.³² Ironically, Ibsen's drama opens with Werle's servant Pettersen and the hired waiter, Jensen, gossiping about Mrs Sørby's relationship with her employer, before it sets the scene for the social politics that have shaped the Ekdals' circumstances as a result of Old Ekdal's imprisonment. Gregers, as the bearer of 'ideals' or truth, finds his counterpoint in Relling, a physician offering the 'standard prescription', as he puts it, a 'life-lie' to cure the 'sick'.³³ For Relling, illusion is an ideological fiction central to psychological health in so far as it 'sustains life in all of us'.³⁴ Relling calls out Hjalmar as a 'shining light' in his 'own little circle' and the Ekdals' menagerie as a 'dingy loft' housing Hedvig's wild duck and Old Ekdal's impoverished re-enactments of his days as a 'mighty bear-hunter'.³⁵

'After Ibsen' emerged in Stone's performance as a plot relocated to the present and a cast condensed to six central characters: Werle, Gregers, Old Ekdal, Hjalmar, Gina and Hedvig. Ibsen's Mrs Sørby, Relling, Molvik, the drunken theology student, Werle's bookkeeper Gråberg, the servants and dinner guests featuring as part of the opening act's party were all cut. In addition, Stone brought onstage (and out of the Norwegian playwright's loft) a real duck, ironically named Lucky in the concluding stages of the production. Gregers suggested the name to Hedvig on the basis that it had survived being shot down by his father. By deleting Relling, Stone's production eradicated, first, a character to temper Gregers, and second, Ibsen's cynical lens on the social microcosm. Hjalmar no longer exhibited the traits of Ibsen's egoist and makeshift patriarch or depended on the claim of the central income producer and inventor so central to the Norwegian playwright's text. Instead, Gina's deception concerning Hedvig's paternity constituted the principal mirage that destabilized the Australian director's twenty-first-century nuclear family. Kai Krösche aptly refers to Stone's approach as 'Turbo-Ibsen'.³⁶ It is perhaps not surprising that the compressed cast attracted critique. Keith Gallasch, for example, concludes that Stone's script reduces the play's 'sociological density'.³⁷ At the time of writing this article, Gallasch's observation resonates strikingly, and perhaps unexpectedly, in relation to Mrs Sørby's experience with her former husband, given that domestic violence is at the forefront of the public agenda in Australia.³⁸ It is worth noting that Ostermeier, who has described his theatre as a 'sociological laboratory', not only foregrounded the stalemate intrinsic to heterosexual gender roles by heightening the objectification of the titular character in his *Nora*, but arguably normalized the implications of this treatment of female subjectivity in the form of Krogstad's expression of physically aggressive, sexual desire towards Nora in his production.³⁹

Critic Jason Blake described Stone's depiction of character action and reaction as 'blowing the accumulated dust from one of the high points of 19th-century theatrical

naturalism'.⁴⁰ Werle, Hedvig's biological father, emerged as the archetypal cool, philandering businessman in sunglasses preparing to marry his 'very attractive' twenty-eight-year-old secretary, and asserting his sexual function to his son as part of the opening banter of the production.⁴¹ Gregers rendered palpable his own and Werle's sexual objectification of his fiancée in his assurance to his father that he is not going to 'fuck' her.⁴² Old Ekdal appeared distant and befuddled at times, yet highly lucid in his assessment of the circumstances that had determined his life and, similarly, stereotypically attuned to the physical qualities of the female body. His opening remark concerned the shape of a waitress's ankle, which he referred to as a 'cankle' and pointed out should be covered up.⁴³ Hedvig, as an outspoken, gifted and sexually curious teenager in her final year of school, presented as the most thoroughly adapted character, conscious of the fact that she is suffering from macular degeneration, the condition that Werle discloses he has to his son at the outset. Against the backdrop of misogynistic male characters, it is perhaps not surprising that Hedvig's mother, Gina, constituted a not so 'modern' embodiment of Ibsen's housekeeper. While her language did not contain the linguistic limitations of the Norwegian playwright's text, her dialogue suggested that she had had a limited education or life beyond the domestic concerns of the household. Toby Schmitz portrayed Gregers's missionary-like pursuit of the claim of the ideal as 'low-keyed menace', to cite Blake's review of the performance at Belvoir.⁴⁴

According to critic Cameron Woodhead, Stone's cast of players bypassed the charge of melodrama and the realism most common to television soap operas – no doubt debatably – on the basis of the concrete, abstract 'reality' of the stage.⁴⁵ The conditions in which Stone's fictional characters performed Ibsen's central plot – albeit a precis of the text – depended on the quasi-disappearance of the (historical)-realist set. In Stone's treatment of bourgeois realism, the 'public arguments' limited to the nuclear domestic sphere were no longer 'locked inside a living room'.⁴⁶ Rather, they emerged from what Stone describes as a 'void space – everywhere and nowhere'.⁴⁷ In doing so, the production circumvented the body's inculcation in a specific social, cultural and economic landscape. That is, it established the instant recognizability of the characters and their dilemmas to a twenty-first-century audience, but, in doing so, displaced them from their natural habitat and quarantined the domestic unit as an exhibit. In contrast to the propensity in Australia to stage Ibsen as costume drama and the 'aesthetic of affluence' that has defined the multidimensional stage designs created by Jan Pappelbaum for Ostermeier's early Ibsen projects, set designer Ralph Myers's glass-panelled box encased the actors in an artificial display case on an empty, black-carpeted stage.⁴⁸ According to Myers, the distinct separation between the spectator and the stage enabled 'the observation of the behavior of a group of animals'.⁴⁹ His central scenographic image ultimately evoked a 'zoological investigation in which we watch humans caged by obligations and taboos'.⁵⁰

As the statements above indicate, Stone's *The Wild Duck* foregrounded 'spectating' as a static act. His stage was first and foremost a space for *showing*, opened by the most authentic of *performers*, a real duck. Alone onstage, the duck – seen flapping its wings – rendered explicit Myers's conception of the stage as a platform for the observation of 'a

group of animals'. A bird, as Nicholas Ridout reasons, 'is not capable of performing theatrically', it does not know what to do as a subject and object of representation (see Fig. 2)⁵¹ – that is, how to pretend. In a fascinating article considering the relationship between Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* and the emergence of new scientific animal practice in the late nineteenth century, H. A. E. Zwart offers a number of insights concerning the impact of the transformation of the scientific gaze as it manifests on both the behavioural repertoire of the object of study and its perception by the observer applicable to Stone's theatrical construction of (middle-class) research animals for consideration.⁵² According to Zwart, Ibsen's play 'stages an important cultural struggle, the one between the scientific and the romantic understanding of animals'.⁵³ On Stone's stage, like the artificial environment of Ibsen's loft where the menagerie of animals exists in an unnatural construct, this 'battle' concerned the question of banal, everyday (private) interaction and (public) spectacle, where everything is mediated – and most notably Stone's 'special' duck emerged entirely tamed.

Myers's display case operated twofold in so far as, first, it ensured that the scientific gaze or '-ology' of the zoo positioned the human subject as an object for contemplation and, in doing so, suggested a theatre of domesticated animals, performer and spectator, and second, it submitted the eye of the spectator to a scopic regime defined by consumption. His design effaced what Franco Moretti identifies as the seeming 'anchor against the fickleness of Fortune'⁵⁴ – that is, Ibsen's armchairs, bookcases, pianos, desks and so forth or the stability of (bourgeois) materialism. According to Moretti, these objects are essentially an illusion of a constant, steadfast existence given that the action exposes Ibsen's 'victims of the bourgeois century' as part of his broader body of work coinciding with capitalism's inaugural crisis of 1873–96.⁵⁵ Stone's performers only occasionally utilized realistic props, including a double-barrelled shotgun in the comparatively lengthy scene that depicted Old Ekdal teaching Hedvig how to shoot (Fig. 3). In contrast to the mimetic 'weight' of Ibsen's milieu, the appearance of a laptop signified more than an instance of updating the *mise en scène*, as the minimalist set cast a spotlight on the 'light', portable modes of network communication intrinsic to present-day capitalism. More significantly, the performance's central scenographic image, the display case, returned the spectator to the etymological roots of the term 'spectacle', in *specere* (to look at, see) and the Latin *spectaculum* (or public show). The public of Stone's showcase, however, has been fundamentally challenged by the emergence of the private space of the darkened auditorium, to return to Balme's point concerning the impact of modernist theatre referred to earlier in this paper.

Zygmunt Bauman's influential account of the politics of the social in *Liquid Modernity* as 'fluid', constituted by 'light capital' and the self-made, self-managed individual, further opens up the question of the privatization of experience and reinforces the discussion of Fisher's conception of the public sphere as a depoliticized site of singular interests and entities rather than a 'civic' domain.⁵⁶ According to Bauman, the public has been populated or effectively 'colonize[d]' by the private, and as such it has been 'squeezing out and chasing away everything which cannot be fully, without residue, expressed in the vernacular of private concerns, worries and



FIG. 3 Anthony Phelan (Old Ekdal) and Eloise Mignon (Hedvig). Old Ekdal teaching Hedvig how to shoot in *The Wild Duck*. Photograph (of the production at Malthouse Theatre) by Pia Johnson.

pursuits'.⁵⁷ In Stone's treatment of Ibsen's text, nothing existed beyond domestic relationships expressed through intra-scenic dialogue. His characters exerted no visible agency on the external, public sphere, which remained unknowable beyond the zoological stage, a space for the spectator to gaze at bodies and behaviour, including their own concrete reality in the auditorium. Myers's set implicated the audience in the illusory apparatus of theatre through the reflective glass of the literal fourth wall of the stage design. At Belvoir members of the audience found themselves catching glimpses of their image and reflections of other spectators at the very interface that demarcates the stage from the auditorium. This mirror effect affirmed the life politics of not simply looking at the (animal) body but comprehending 'reality' as 'knowable' entirely in terms of cognitive processes defined by the idea of display. Ultimately, there is no recognizable habitat for the human subject beyond visual consumption, and Stone's conceptualization of the experience of *looking* is fundamentally informed by what he terms a 'post-cinematic' cultural context.

According to the Australian director, 'Ibsen's naturalistic framework does more to undermine the realism of his plays than support it' in the present day.⁵⁸ He elaborates on this notion by describing his adaptation as 'travelling like an unchained camera' on Ibsen's action and, in doing so, liberating the drama from a 'single drawing-room' and its five-act structure set in two locations.⁵⁹ His *Wild Duck* alluded to multiple locations and was organized according to a series of scenic units that were introduced

by a digital title that projected the day of the week and time above the stage, framing the events leading to Hedvig's suicide as commencing on Monday at 8.59 a.m. and concluding on Sunday at 8.57 a.m.⁶⁰ Each of these digital representations of the time appeared during a structural gap created by a snap blackout that enabled the performers to enter and exit unseen by the spectator. Classical music punctuated the cuts between scenic units until the revelation of Hedvig's paternity and '[e]vents proceed[ed] with gunshot rapidity', to cite Michael Billington.⁶¹ While the blackouts clearly suggested the operations of a camera shutter and alluded to Hjalmar's profession as a photographer by plunging the production into a darkroom, the abrupt transitions from dark to fluorescent light in the glass cube produced a sensory social relation in so far as they heightened the impact of the image on the gaze of the spectator.

Stone's 'unchained camera' was not the camera or commodity image of Hjalmar's era. Instead, his production produced a sensorium dependent upon technological filters for corporeal communication. Headset microphones amplified the actors' speech. Alison Croggon describes the effect of this apparatus as 'hear[ing] their [the performers'] bodies as much as see[ing] them' and, in doing so, reinforces the distinct, mediated presence of the actor-objects onstage.⁶² In Stone's *Duck* the display case constructed an image of 'ourselves' in which 'we' are enframed and technologically modulated. Further, the Australian director constrained the spectators' imaginative possibilities to domestic, familial identities operating not simply according to the mode of individualism so divisive for Fisher, but according to a depiction at odds with Victoria Carrington's conception of the reconfiguration of the normative idea(l)s of the Western nuclear family. According to Carrington, these 'new times' call for different perceptions of the domestic unit.⁶³ In doing so, she points to capitalism – and globalization as a 'generic process' of this economic phenomenon – as central to a new and non-normative family formation.⁶⁴ While Stone countered the narrative of a homogeneous nuclear family, and in this respect adhered to the thematic preoccupations of Ibsen's text, his 'contemporary' engagement with these 'new times' neither acknowledged the 'economic pressure' that Ostermeier identifies as the heart of the Norwegian's work nor undermined the heterosexual, normative social formations specific to nineteenth-century capitalism.⁶⁵ Instead, he dilated the idea that '[a]ll that is real is the individual (and their families)', to refer back to Fisher.

The Australian director's specific zoology or study of familial behaviour reinforced an ideological *reality effect* dependent upon the representation of normative political social beings and the experience of immobilization intrinsic to contemporary modes of spectatorship. His intermedial 'looking' emerged from a specific approach to the architecture of theatrical 'exchange' in the form of Myers's design and an adaptation indebted to writing techniques influenced by the montage sequences typical of screen narration. Blake refers directly to the presence of the intermedial in his description of the production as a 'screenplay-like' realization of '90 minutes of tightly focused drama'.⁶⁶ In contrast to what Halpern describes as the novelization of tragic drama in the work of Ibsen and Chekhov, Stone and Ryan's script immediately suggested the concise, if not banal, language of the screenplay, its succinct descriptions of action

and casual exchanges, as is evident in the excerpt below.⁶⁷ (Its central object for discussion is presumably an ironically gendered reference to the Gina of Ibsen's milieu, who devotes her time not only to cleaning but also to preparing food for her husband in the play.)

(*Electronic surtitle*) The Wild Duck. Monday 8.59am

WERLE: I could make you a sandwich.

GREGERS: Since when?

WERLE: I've always made you sandwiches.

GREGERS: I've never seen you make a sandwich.

Apart from Hjalmar's account of meeting Gina after his father went to prison, which constituted the longest instance of a speech block, and occasional examples of more lengthy text predominately delivered by Old Ekdal, Stone and Ryan's script largely consisted of clipped, vernacular speech. Myers's display case, however, ensured that the audience did not feel part of the action by heightening the focus on detached interpersonal communication, as opposed to *interaction*.

Ultimately, the performance laid bare the conditions of (bourgeois) subjectivity by subjecting psychological illusionism to the frame of the gaze, and in doing so, to the ways in which the medium of theatre is determined by dominant visual scripts, scripting not just the 'lives' of the characters onstage but also the ideological terrain of the spectator more broadly. By sealing off the unfolding drama and ostensibly disavowing the reciprocal presence of the actor and audience until the final moment of the performance, Stone completed the *mise en scène* by emphasizing the spatial relations intrinsic to the conditions of (theatrical) spectatorship. Onstage, the surtitles temporally punctuated the at times almost ballistic, episodic nature of the scenic-linguistic construction (see Fig. 1). Prior to the blackouts, the final exchange of dialogue functioned as a curtain line constituting an ominous premonition of the scene to follow. Werle, for example, asked Gregers, 'You're not going to tell him, are you?' and the next scene opened to Gregers onstage with a suitcase and plastic suit bag with Hjalmar and Gina, delivering the lines, 'Sorry to barge in on you like this'.⁶⁸ At the end of the tenth scene onstage, Gregers announced that he had something he has to tell Hjalmar and the following three scenes took place in quick succession. Gina, Hjalmar, Hedvig and the duck appeared in scene xi at 9.41 p.m. on Wednesday, followed by Hedvig, Ekdal and Gregers in scene xii at 9.53 p.m., before scene xiii backtracked temporally to 9.50 p.m. on the same day for the audience to witness Hjalmar confront Gina about Hedvig's paternity.

By presenting a moment in time chronologically independent in so far as it interrupts linear narration, Stone further foregrounded the experience of *display* consistently reiterated through the presence of the digital clock. Once Gina's secret was out about her affair with Werle, an electric guitar resonated throughout the auditorium and the stage was flooded in fluorescent light, signalling a shift in the

episodic structure of the production. After a short exchange with Gregers, seen entering and exiting the stage through a door upstage right, Gina slid down the glass pane into a foetal position at the foot of the glass box where she remained, almost lifeless, during a number of scenes until Hjalmar entered carrying a bag and she stood up to discuss his imminent departure as a result of the breakdown of their relationship (see Fig. 1). A series of titles continued to track the passing of time until the final digital display of the performance announced that it was Sunday, 8.57 a.m. In the penultimate scene of the production, Hedvig pleaded with her father to stay after telling him that Werle was going to fund the cost of her treatment for macular degeneration and her tertiary study. Hjalmar rejected his daughter and then Gina, dismissing any notion of reconciliation. A loud guitar reverb framed the disintegration of Hjalmar and Gina's relationship as a result of the exposure of Hedvig's biological father. Finally, after a lengthy blackout, the lights revealed Gina and Hjalmar standing outside the display case, dislocated from the spatial *reality* that up until that point had mediated the phenomenological experience of the production.

It was during this exchange that the audience learned of Hedvig's death. As part of Gina and Hjalmar's conversation it became clear they were visiting the site of Hedvig's ashes in a forest. The performance concluded in darkness to the sounds of a taxi as Gina departed and Hjalmar remained, his anguished breathing closing the production. In the intimate environment of the Upstairs Theatre at Belvoir, which seats an audience of approximately three hundred, the unexpected presence of the actors in front of the glass enclosure and less than a metre from audience members briefly dismantled the gulf distinguishing stage and spectator as Gina and Hjalmar momentarily became 'one of us' – no longer objects in a stage exhibit (see Fig. 1). Here, Stone arrested the observational patterns of the spectator. By removing the enclosure, his *Duck* culminated at a juncture that suggested a totalizing, homogeneous register for the consumption of the 'real', a register that left the spectator connected to the devastating psychosocial dynamic of a performance dependent upon the internalized, domestic politics of capitalist realism and its modes of spectatorship. In this context, Gina emerged as arguably less radical in terms of the depiction of gender relations than the fictional character that the Norwegian playwright had crafted over a hundred years earlier. Despite her 'better business head', to cite the Gina of Ibsen's text, she participated and appeared invested in gender inequity throughout the performance at Belvoir.

Just as in Ibsen's script, Stone's Hjalmar capitalized on Gina's labour, her countless hours in the domestic sphere organizing, as he coasts along under the guise of amateur inventor and professional photographer. Both Ibsen's and Stone's Gina are determined by patriarchal formations, familial and capitalist. Onstage, the Hjalmar and Gina of Stone's final scene emerged as a pained, yet ostensibly amicable, couple, and in this respect adhered to the contemporary ideal of a post-separation relationship, briefly touching on their financial predicament. Hjalmar told Gina he had settled into shared accommodation, found employment in a bar and paid to be included in a group exhibition. In the performance at Belvoir, Gina indicated that her brother had loaned her funds to set up a studio and emphasized that he could not look after her forever, an assertion of dependence arguably at odds with the practical resilience that has

defined her as a character.⁶⁹ By closing the production with an interchange consisting of the revelation of Hedwig's suicide and Hjalmar and Gina's financial circumstances, the Australian director concluded the performance with dialogue indicative of the type of 'psychic infrastructure' that Fisher argues has ensured the acceptance of a precarious economic situation and grim psychosocial context as a normal feature of everyday 'reality'. In doing so, Stone's *The Wild Duck* constituted a pragmatic expression of the need to adapt to the experience of 'total instability' that Fisher contends is at the heart of a 'ruling ontology' that abrogates the social causation of economic or mental-health concerns by assigning culpability to the individual and the cultural cocoon of the household.⁷⁰

Fisher's paramount concern is the improbability of conceiving of a life not determined by neo-liberal capitalism and therefore the possibility of imagining a 'new (collective) political subject'.⁷¹ Dan Rebellato, drawing on Fisher, argues that realism had emerged as a 'compromised mode' for specific British artists and, more significantly, as redundant in the context of neo-liberal capitalism.⁷² Rebellato charts the emergence of a non-realist representation of apocalyptic brutality from the 1990s in Britain, and specifically Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995), as a response to the 'totalizing absorption of realism' intrinsic to neo-liberal capitalism.⁷³ At a time when British dramatists and directors were abandoning realism in order to resist neo-liberal capitalism, according to Rebellato, other artists such as Ostermeier had been gaining international traction by deploying forms of realism to counter capitalist realism.⁷⁴ In addition to the question of the broader *mise en scène* or cultural context that this paper has raised as a challenge, if not positioned as a contra-indication impacting specific examples of realist form, a final consideration concerns the (de)politicizing effect of 'brand Ibsen' as a consumer good. The 'after Ibsen' of Stone's performance arguably ensured that the Norwegian dramatist functioned as an 'immaterial' asset or capitalism without capital, to refer to the conceptualization of the intangibility of the resources intrinsic to the political economy in the twenty-first century.⁷⁵ Stone's acknowledgement of his production as 'after' called attention to the nineteenth-century playwright as a (cultural) asset or 'constellation of signs through which processes of social interaction and communication are mediated and captured', to refer to the function of branding for commercial gain.⁷⁶

It is a point that further foregrounds the imbrication of theatre in mechanisms of market-based capitalism and the legitimization of 'brand Ibsen' as a strategy in the sense that repertoire is key to the financial survival of the medium as a site of aesthetic absorption rarely impacting significantly on the discourses of the public domain.⁷⁷ Stone's zoological *Duck*, predicated on these fundamental precepts concerning theatre's economic, artistic and civic dimension, *showcased* (human) experience as an object for consumption, domesticated and incapacitated in so far as it left the spectator to contemplate individual resilience in the form of Hjalmar and Gina, rather than the broader politics of the social field. As a director Stone has expressed political intent, pointing out that '[w]e have to be socially responsible. We can't sit in the dark'.⁷⁸ It is a statement that returns to the question of the reach of theatre form and its relation to context, raised at the outset of this paper, and

explored through Fisher's conceptualization of the 'reality' available to 'us' and the difficulty inherent in imagining an alternative to capitalist politics on the basis of its presentation as 'natural' and fundamentally an experience defined by a pragmatic recognition of and resignation to the terms of the social formation. There is no doubt one needs to *see through* the sequestered household as a walled-up retreat of the micropolitics of the everyday, as Stone's *The Wild Duck* compellingly reminded the spectator. However, Ibsen's late nineteenth-century struggle for the self-assertion of the human subject against the obligations of a bourgeois social order has a new set of circumstances for any director to confront in the aesthetic logic and organizing principles of what Fisher termed capitalist realism.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to express my sincerest thanks to the anonymous readers for their engagement and the insightful revisions they suggested with regard to this paper.
- 2 Frode Helland described Jan Pappelbaum's set for Thomas Ostermeier's production of *Hedda Gabler* as a 'display case' in 'Against Capitalist Realism: Thomas Ostermeier', in Helland, *Ibsen in Practice: Relational Readings on Performance, Cultural Encounters and Power* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 11–46. Keith Gallasch used the term 'zoological' in 'The Wild Duck Re-make', *RealTime*, 102 (April–May 2011), p. 34, at www.realttimearts.net/article/101/10195 (accessed 15 November 2019). Peter M. Boenisch, *Directing Scenes and Senses: The Thinking of Regie* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), p. 183. See Margaret Hamilton, 'Who's Watching? Neo-realism and Global "Brand Ibsen" in Germany and Australia', in Ulrike Garde and John R. Severn, eds., *Theatre and Internationalization: Perspectives from Australia, Germany and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 179–96, for a discussion of Ostermeier's influence in an Australian context.
- 3 See Elaine Aston, 'Room for Realism?', in Siân Adisehiah and Louise LePage, eds., *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 17–35; Benjamin Fowler, 'Re-scripting Realism: Katie Mitchell and Thomas Ostermeier at the Schaubühne', in Peter M. Boenisch, ed., *The Schaubühne under Thomas Ostermeier: Reinventing Realism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 141–58; Vera Gottlieb, 'Theatre Today: The "New Realism"', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 13, 1 (2003), pp. 5–14.
- 4 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), p. 16.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- 6 Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2011).
- 7 'We Can't Afford to Be Realists: A Conversation – Mark Fisher and Jodi Dean', in Alison Shonkwiler and Leigh Claire La Berge, eds., *Reading Capitalist Realism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), pp. 26–38.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 9 Fowler, 'Re-scripting Realism', p. 141; Aston, 'Room for Realism?', p. 17.
- 10 Fowler, 'Re-scripting Realism', p. 141.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 13.
- 13 Peter M. Boenisch, 'Confronting the Present: Thomas Ostermeier's Post-conceptual *Regietheater*', in Boenisch, *The Schaubühne under Thomas Ostermeier*, pp. 105–19, here p. 105; Fowler, 'Re-scripting Realism', pp. 141–2, 157, positions Mitchell's 'realist scenarios', along with Ostermeier's work, in terms of the tradition of 'character-based realism'.
- 14 Ostermeier in Peter M. Boenisch and Thomas Ostermeier, *The Theatre of Thomas Ostermeier* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 67. For a critique of Mitchell's work see Johannes Birringer, 'The Theatre and Its Screen Double', *Theatre Journal*, 66, 2 (May 2014), pp. 207–25; and Peter M. Boenisch, 'Towards a

- Theatre of Encounter and Experience: Reflexive Dramaturgies and Classic Texts', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 20, 2 (2010), pp. 162–72.
- 15 Raymond Williams, 'A Lecture on Realism', *Screen*, 18, 1 (Spring 1977), pp. 61–74, here pp. 63–4.
- 16 *Ibid.*, pp. 64–5.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 65.
- 18 Dan Rebellato and Kim Solga, 'Katie Mitchell and the Politics of Naturalist Theatre', in Benjamin Fowler, ed., *The Theatre of Kate Mitchell* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 39–71.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- 20 Jane Albert, 'Simon Stone, Australian Theatre's Wunderkind, Releases Superb Film *The Daughter*', *Australian Financial Review*, 17 February, 2016, at www.afr.com/life-and-luxury/simon-stone-australian-theatres-wunderkind-releases-his-first-feature-film-the-daughter-20151211-gllm2d (accessed 10 April 2022). Simon Stone's screenplay for his film *The Daughter* is based on Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*. My thanks to my honours student Lillian Woods for her astute discussion of the cinematic in Stone's work as part of her thesis project (2021).
- 21 Simon Stone, 'Director's Notes', *The Wild Duck Program*, 17 February–17 March 2012, Malthouse Theatre, at <https://issuu.com/malthouse/docs/wdprog> (accessed 18 May 2022), p. 4.
- 22 Christopher B. Balme, *The Theatrical Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 3.
- 23 Richard Halpern, *Eclipse of Action: Tragedy and Political Economy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 15.
- 24 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, p. 77.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 2. Emphasis in the original.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 16.
- 28 *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original.
- 29 Simon Stone and Chris Ryan after Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*, unpublished script. The lines cited in the section title are spoken by Old Ekdal (p. 20). My thanks to Mark Pritchard, new work manager, Malthouse Theatre, to whom I am indebted for providing this script for a remounted version of the production. All quotes are from this script unless otherwise indicated.
- 30 This paper is based on a performance of the production seen at Belvoir Theatre and an archival recording of the production at Belvoir filmed on 24 March 2011, featuring John Gaden (Werle), Toby Schmitz (Gregers Werle), Ewen Leslie (Hjalmar Ekdal), Anthony Phelan (Old Ekdal), Anita Hegh (Gina Ekdal) and Eloise Mignon (Hedvig). Belvoir's production of *The Wild Duck* has been presented by Malthouse Theatre (17 February–17 March 2012), the International Ibsen Festival (27–9 August 2012), Wiener Festwochen (18–21 May 2013), the Holland Festival (2–4 June 2013), the Barbican (23 October–1 November 2014) in London and the Perth International Arts Festival (11 February–6 March 2016). See AusStage (www.ausstage.edu.au) and/or IbsenStage (www.ibsenstage.hf.uio.no) for further information.
- 31 Henrik Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*, trans. Stephen Mulrine (London: Nick Hern Books, 2006), p. 96.
- 32 *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- 33 *Ibid.*, p. 116.
- 34 *Ibid.*
- 35 *Ibid.*, pp. 115, 117.
- 36 Kai Krösche, 'Leben mit dem Kuckuckskind', *Nachtkritik.de*, at www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8157:the-wild-duck-die-ibsen-bearbeitung-des-australischen-regisseur-simon-stone-bei-den-wiener-festwochen&catid=127:wiener-festwochen (accessed 15 November 2019).
- 37 Gallasch, 'The Wild Duck Re-make', p. 34.
- 38 In 2009 the now defunct performance collective version 1.0 first staged its production *This Kind of Ruckus* at CarriageWorks in Sydney, which explored violence against women in a range of contexts, including the domestic, and responded to a series of sexual-assault scandals in sport in the media.

- 39 Thomas Ostermeier, 'Reading and Staging Ibsen', *Ibsen Studies*, 10, 2 (2010), pp. 68–74, here p. 71.
- 40 Jason Blake, 'The Wild Duck', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 February 2011, at www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/the-wild-duck-20110217-1ay30.html (accessed 15 November 2019).
- 41 Stone and Ryan, *The Wild Duck*, p. 6.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid., p. 10.
- 44 Blake, 'The Wild Duck'.
- 45 Cameron Woodhead, 'The Wild Duck', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 February 2012, at www.smh.com.au/entertainment/theatre/the-wild-duck-20120222-1took.html (accessed 6 January 2020).
- 46 Franco Moretti, *The Bourgeois: Between History and Literature* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 186.
- 47 Stone, 'Director's Notes', p. 4.
- 48 Anja Dürrschmidt quoted in Helland, *Ibsen in Practice*, p. 18. According to the current holdings in the AusStage database (www.austage.edu.au), *The Wild Duck* has been performed professionally five times in Australia since 1977, apart from Simon Stone's production.
- 49 Myers quoted in Meg Upton, 2012; 'Prompt Pack: The Wild Duck', Malthouse Theatre, p. 13, at <https://issuu.com/malthouse/docs/promptpackthewildduck> (accessed 19 May 2022).
- 50 Gallasch, 'The Wild Duck Re-make', p. 34.
- 51 Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 98.
- 52 H. A. E. Zwart, 'The Birth of a Research Animal: Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* and the Origin of a New Animal Science', *Environmental Values*, 9, 1 (February 2000), pp. 91–108.
- 53 Ibid., p. 98.
- 54 Moretti, *The Bourgeois*, p. 174.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012).
- 57 Ibid., p. 37.
- 58 Stone, 'Director's Notes', p. 3.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 The time titles referred to in this paper are from the DVD of the performance held in the Belvoir archive. In the remounted script, the production title commences on Monday at 12.13 p.m. and concludes a year later on Monday at 8.59 a.m.
- 61 Michael Billington, 'The Wild Duck Review – Revision Serves up 80 Minutes of Potted Ibsen', *The Guardian*, 27 October 2014, at www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/oct/27/the-wild-duck-review-ibsen-simon-stone (accessed 6 January 2020).
- 62 Alison Croggon, 'Review: The Wild Duck', *Theatre Notes*, 30 March 2011, at <http://theatrenotes.blogspot.com.au/2011/03/review-wild-duck.html> (accessed 14 January 2020).
- 63 Victoria Carrington, 'Globalisation, Family and Nation State: Reframing "Family" in New Times', *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 22, 2 (2001), pp. 185–96, here p. 185.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Ostermeier in Boenisch and Ostermeier, *The Theatre of Thomas Ostermeier*, p. 72.
- 66 Blake, 'The Wild Duck'.
- 67 Halpern, *Eclipse of Action*, p. 223.
- 68 This dialogue has been transcribed from the recording of the production held in Belvoir's archive and filmed on 24 March 2011, and differs slightly from the remounted script, which has the scene opening with Hjalmar asking Gina, 'You remember Gregers, don't you?' (p. 13).
- 69 Gina's dialogue concerning the funds for her studio is based on a transcription from the recording of the production held in Belvoir's archive and filmed on 24 March 2011.
- 70 Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, pp. 34, 37.
- 71 Ibid., p. 53.

- 72 Dan Rebellato, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Theatre: British Drama, Violence and Writing', *Sillages Critiques*, 22 (2017), at <https://journals.openedition.org/sillagescritiques/4798> (accessed 5 January 2020).
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 See Helland, *Ibsen in Practice*; and Boenisch, *Directing Scenes and Senses*, pp. 176–8.
- 75 See Jonathan Haskel and Stian Westlake, *Capitalism without Capital: the Rise of the Intangible Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).
- 76 Dennis K. Mumby, 'Organizing beyond Organization: Branding, Discourse, and Communicative Capitalism', *Organization*, 23, 6 (2016), pp. 884–907, here p. 889.
- 77 In an interview Stone rationalized his decision not to retitle his adaptations by stating, 'I suppose it's a marketing technique', in Rosemary Neill, 'Hooked on Classics', *The Australian*, 25 May 2013, p. 5. See Balme for a detailed discussion of theatre's capacity to impact on the public sphere.
- 78 Simon Stone, 'Designing and Staging Yerma', 21 April 2018, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=X2wzR-PTIGw (accessed 14 January 2020).

MARGARET HAMILTON (margham@uow.edu.au) is Senior Lecturer in Theatre Studies at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Her research has encompassed the emergence of post-dramatic theatre in Australia and currently focuses on main-stage theatre as part of a project that analyses the prospect of artistic critique in the context of neo-liberal capitalism. She is the author of *Transfigured Stages: Major Practitioners and Theatre Aesthetics in Australia* (2011). Her writing has appeared in such journals as *Theatre Journal*, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, *Sexualities and Australasian Drama Studies*, as well as in several edited collections, including *Rimini Protokoll Close-Up: Lektüren* (2015). She is a chief investigator on the Australian Research Council-funded digital humanities AusStage project.