

Paul Rae
e-Smoker's Theatre, or, Modern Drama for Vapers



Fig 1. *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Installation View, Singapore Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2011. Photo Russell Morton.

We find a gesture which expresses one-half of [the actor's] attitude – that of showing – if we make him smoke a cigar and then imagine him laying it down now and again in order to show us some further characteristic attitude of the figure in the play. If we then subtract any element of hurry from the image and do not read slackness into its refusal to be taut we shall have an actor who is fully capable of leaving us to our thoughts, or to his own.

—Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre' (1964: 194)

[I]t doesn't take a genius to know that the real problem is capitalism. What leftists call the loss of the political is the fog they wander through because they've lost sight of the communist horizon.

—Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (2012: 66)

Why should I vape?

Vaping is an alternative to smoking. It provides a vaper with the sensations, rituals and nicotine that smoking provides, but without smoke and the vast number of dangerous chemicals found in smoke.

—vaping.com, 'New Users' Guides: Vaping FAQ

Too Easy

Shaun and Shane arrive with my stuff. Shane lights up outside while Shaun and I do a walk-through of the house:

ME This is the master bedroom
 SHAUN Too easy
 ME ... and this is the kids' room
 SHAUN No worries, too easy
 ME The dining table goes here ...
 SHAUN OK
 ME ... and the piano, here.
 SHAUN Too easy, mate

Except it isn't too easy. The guys have forgotten their hammer, so they can't uncrate the piano. I cycle off to buy them one, and a couple of pies. After lunch and a fag, they set about the box. Then Shaun limbers up and throws his substantial heft into hoicking the piano up while Shane slips a trolley underneath. Much huffing and puffing and damaging of doorframes ensues as they manoeuvre the instrument into place. Shaun is red in the face. Shane lights a cigarette and leans on the top of the neighbours' garden wall, staring into the middle distance.

After they've gone, I flop on the sofa, surrounded by boxes. For five weeks, I've been rattling around an empty house with nothing but an airbed and a camp chair for support. Now, with soft furnishings back in my life, I can read Jodi Dean's *The Communist Horizon* (2012) in comfort. Good job it's a small volume. When I hurl it across the room, it doesn't damage the piano; and though by the time I get to the end I feel I've been beaten about the head with it, the bruising is light.

I certainly won't need to supply Dean with a hammer. But the rest of her argument is, to coin a phrase, too easy. There is an atavistic appeal to the idea that modern life is so comprehensively implicated in widening income inequality that the only solution lies in overthrowing the system. But the amount of social complexity that must be disregarded for this to represent both a persuasive analysis of contemporary existence, and an appropriate solution to its problems, cannot so easily be held in check. Dean totalises capitalism as a system, and in so doing creates the communist alternative in its image. This is an eventuality that Dean herself keys us into when she elaborates on the mutual dependency of Soviet communism and US capitalism during the Cold War. And, just as she argues that the result is a flawed image of what communism could be, so her own vision, defined against what she calls 'communicative capitalism', is built on rhetorical sand. Her argument is variously coercive, opportunistic, wishful, evasive, contradictory, paranoid, weasely, uninformed and parochial.¹ As the piano and I discovered, in the event of revolutionary struggle, *The Communist Horizon* may be a more effective projectile than a call to arms.

And yet both in spite and because of this, Dean is right. *In spite* of the weaknesses in her argument, it is logical that there can be no thoroughgoing transformation in the way the world works without a division that would see the exploited turn as one upon the exploiters. *Because* of those holes, *The Communist Horizon* rehearses just such a breach, albeit it a minor one—taking place as it does at the modest scale of readerly engagement, and working most pointedly on Dean's intellectual fellow travellers.

As is often the way in doctrinal matters, Dean's critique of potential sympathisers is more acute than that of their shared adversaries. Deleuzian variants on post-Marxism, such as those advanced by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004), have focused on qualitative accounts of socio-political transformation. Dean will have none of it. She makes the quantitative case. You need the numbers—and to the extent that they comprise a collective, you need to subordinate yourself to it. Such an option cannot be entertained without countenancing violence or the prospect of, as Dean puts it, 'moralism, dogmatism, authoritarianism, and utopianism' (2012: 175). For her, the aversion of liberals and leftists to these outcomes has cost them political agency, and the resulting inability to imagine a collective response to the vicissitudes of capitalism has left them in a melancholic fug with only social media, identitarian indignation and conceptual art for solace.

Dean's caricature weakens the credibility of her position, but the challenge to her readers remains: have you been dining out on a rhetoric of radical politics that is ultimately self-serving? Is that self more in hock to a liberal vision of individual values than you would like to think? If you think yourself political, what concrete steps are you taking to solve the problems you have identified? How much of your material and psychic life are you willing to sacrifice in order to do so? Or does all this talk come, to coin a phrase, just a little too easy?

Certainly, these are the questions that endure for the art scholar despite the peevishness of Dean's description of contemporary art events:

A pointless action involving the momentary expenditure of enormous effort—the artistic equivalent of the 5k and 10k runs to fight cancer, that is to say, to increase awareness of cancer without actually doing much else—the singular happening disconnects task from goal. Any 'sense' it makes, and meaning or relevance it has, is up to the spectator (perhaps with a bit of guidance from curators and theorists). (2012: 14)

In view of the complexities of artistic production and reception, the point is almost entirely meretricious. And yet, in context, it stands. It must be maddening for someone with Dean's political agenda to see so much critical and creative energy expended with so little measurable benefit to the dispossessed; to place her ideas in service of the collective while art theory feeds self-regarding hermeticism; to know the galvanising power of a slogan or song, and yet be confronted with an aesthetics of indeterminacy. It is only right that contemporary art and performance scholars sense at least a hint of rueful recognition in Dean's complaint. But how should those of us who do so respond? Meeting Dean on her own terms is hard for many to do in good faith. We can't all be John Berger, who has so distinctively combined radical leftist politics with an exquisite aesthetic sensibility. But to cavil at the terms on which Dean makes her argument risks proving her point. It seems to me the honest response is the proportionate one. The challenge of *The Communist Horizon* is to take seriously its provocations, while taking on its presumptions. By Dean's lights, this is already a temporising move, anathema to the militant commitment to abolishing capitalism she advocates. But although Dean's vision aspires to universality, it can only be formulated at a certain distance from lived experience. Asserting that '[t]he dominance of capitalism, the capitalist system, is material' (2012: 5), Dean avoids history, ignores human fallibility, oversimplifies economics and generalises from a limited geopolitical sample. As an addressee, therefore, one measures the validity of Dean's argument against one's own knowledge, experience and aspirations. As critic, one tests its possibilities against those phenomena in which one believes the world to be most richly disclosed.

In my case, that phenomenon is theatre, and in this article, my goal is to explore what one is to make of theatre in light of Dean's provocation, and of the question posed by the *Performance Paradigm* editors in their Call for Papers, namely 'whether or not there are performances of resistance and what these might look like.'

Resistive Theatre

In order to do so, it is important to establish what will be understood by "resistance." As Dean suggests, art and performance are ill-suited to realising a goal-oriented resistance that has been conceived in a different domain of human activity. At the same time, theatrical performance is such a varied endeavour, it would be naïve to suggest it possesses any characteristics that are inherently resistant to any given political or ideological project. Instead, I suggest that the most appropriate interpretation is concerned not with how art and performance school us in social activism (though they can), but with the resistances we encounter *from* the form: to the attentions we lavish upon it, say, and the interpretations we seek to derive from it. That such resistances are exercised is evident in Jodi Dean's frustration that the 'singular happening' of art entails 'the momentary expenditure of enormous effort.' We are reminded here of the more technical meaning of "resistance", defined in the *New Oxford American Dictionary* as 'the degree to which a substance or device opposes the passage of an electric current, causing energy dissipation.' If we are sufficiently attentive to the material implications of this definition, we might say that theatre is not resistant to capitalist exploitation as such, but resistive *of* any attempt at wholesale co-option. This cuts both ways. Theatre cannot easily be placed in the service of a pre-determined political scheme; but in the differentiated encounter with what yields to our attentions and desires and what does not, what imposes itself upon us and what we reject, it instructs us in the art of not being taken for a mug.

No wonder Dean, with her preference for propaganda and the subordination of the self to the Party, sees art as wasted effort. But this view on creative practice is not necessarily at odds with her own. Brecht's 'Short Organum for the Theatre' of 1949, for instance, establishes a political analysis that is remarkably similar to Dean's, in order to envision a theatre of resistances. '[O]nly a minority gain from the exploitation of nature, and they only do so because they exploit men', writes Brecht, of then-contemporary advances in the technologies of production (184). As such, the actor 'must master our period's knowledge of human social life by himself joining in the war of the classes' (196). Failure to do so would not mean rising above the fray, but coming down on the side of the ruling group.

Yet Brecht has greater faith than Dean that the theatre can serve these political goals in its particularity, rather than through wholesale instrumentalisation. In critically examining how new modes of production are shaping social relations, spectators will be left 'productively disposed even after the spectacle is over' (205). This entails bringing the resistive qualities of the theatrical event to the fore. Since "man" is mutable, writes Brecht, '[w]e must not start with him; we must start on him. This means, however, that I must not simply set myself in his place, but must set myself by facing him, to represent us all. That is why the theatre must alienate what it shows' (193). Nor is this limited to human identifications. All aspects of the theatre are capable of registering resistance: different media may be brought together on stage, for instance, not through integration, but in a relationship of 'mutual alienation' (204).

Brecht reminds us that political activism and aesthetic innovation need not be exclusive. But there are of course limitations to his analysis. To the modern eye, Brecht's confidence in the scientific basis of social development, and the rational humanism of his spectators, seems misplaced.

Meanwhile, some of his anticipated solutions have become problems in their own right. ‘Society cannot share a common communication system so long as it is split into warring classes,’ he opines (196). But for Dean, by contrast, our contemporary communication systems are a key source of exploitation precisely *because* they are shared: ‘[O]ur setting is one of the convergence of communication and capitalism in a formation that incites engagement and participation in order to capture them in the affective networks of mass personalized media’ (2012: 215).

At the same time, Brecht’s analysis includes a dimension that is notably absent from Dean’s. Alienation may crystallise in the image of figures that set themselves against each other, but they do so in a distinctively hazy milieu. As the epigraph to this article highlights, smoking on stage provides an opportunity for the Brechtian actor to develop an appropriately gestic method, disclosing the contingent social circumstances of a character’s behaviour. Indeed, Brecht listed study of ‘the varying attitudes of smokers’ (1964: 129) amongst his suggested acting exercises, as well as granting the activity a totemic significance in the auditorium. A smoker’s theatre, argued Brecht on numerous occasions, would ensure the necessary detachment on the part of actors and audiences alike for critical social analysis to take place, and the appropriate political conclusions to be drawn.²

There is little scope for such murkiness in Dean’s account of art. Where Brecht would have an actor ‘leave us to our thoughts,’ Dean decries artworks whose sense ‘is up to the spectator’; where Brecht would encourage the casual commentaries of cigar-smoking audiences like those found at a boxing match, Dean believes spectatorship comes at the expense of direct action; and where Brecht would view in a smoky theatre audience members relaxed enough to exercise their customary shrewdness, Dean would wish away the fog the left is currently lost in, since only by making a clear-eyed distinction between the rich and the rest of us can we discern the communist horizon.

By this token, the cancer run analogy in Dean’s critique of art events would testify to the unfortunate consequence of too much smoker’s theatre: political complacency, aesthetic obfuscation, a public health problem, and a charity effort to compensate for falling state spending on the healthcare system. But, while we can recognise these problems in the world around us, that may be a rather too generous interpretation of an apparently offhand dig from Dean that mainly serves to underscore the brittleness of her social analysis. The communist horizon may be a shimmering intuition, but we will only realise it, argues Dean, through struggle: ‘If communism means anything at all, it means collective action, determination, and will’ (2012: 195). There is no room here for the particulate diffusion of smoke, let alone the contemplative aesthetics of puff, plume, or eddy. This is the politics of unstoppable force v. immovable object: ‘We haven’t been demanding enough. We haven’t followed up, refused, smashed, and taken more’ (45).

What fate smoker’s theatre in the face of such sentiments? Does it evaporate? Was it ever really there? Although a connoisseur of cigars, it was the image of smoking that animated many of Brecht’s—patently masculinist—references to it, rather than a detailed appreciation of the act. In his theoretical writings, smoke is a figure of reflection, a metaphor for the undulating and expansive diffusion of thought. Smoking is specified in his play *The Good Person of Szechuan*, where various spongers help themselves to the stock of Shen-Teh’s tobacco shop. But even there the action dissipates into metaphor as the refrain of ‘Song of the Smoke’ is repeated: ‘Like smoke twisting grey/ Into ever colder coldness you’ll/ Blow away’ (1962: 19–20).

Perhaps the most suggestive instance of smoker’s theatre in the Brechtian mythos is to be found not in Brecht’s plays or theoretical writings, but in his biography. Appearing before the House Un-

American Activities Committee (HUAC) on 30 October 1947, it is reported that Brecht smoked ‘an acrid cigar that made some of the committee members feel slightly ill’ (Wikipedia).³ Anticipating Brecht’s observations on gestic smoking in the ‘Short Organum’, a newspaper article the following day noted that Brecht ‘spoke with a heavy accent and puffed at a long cigar with easy poise,’ (Los Angeles Examiner 1947) and Brecht later told Eric Bentley that the Committee members were not as bad as the Nazis, who ‘would never have let me smoke. In Washington they let me have a cigar, and I used it to manufacture pauses with, between their questions and my answers’ (Brecht, 2006).

It would be trite to claim Brecht’s smoking as a simple act of resistance, or even an exemplary instance of smoker’s detachment. In his comments to Bentley, Brecht may have been doing some after-the-fact burnishing of an appearance that was criticised at the time by colleagues, and—perhaps more damningly—praised by the Chairman of the Committee, Parnell Thomas, as a good example for other witnesses. Nevertheless, the apparently minor detail of Brecht’s cigar in the high-stakes environment of the HUAC does appear to be an integral component of the event. In the face of halting and somewhat confused questioning, Brecht evaded accusations about his communism, asserted his anti-Nazi credentials, and quibbled over the translations of poems and songs being selectively cited as evidence of his political sympathies by Committee members. The transcript alone barely makes sense. But piecing together the accounts, images and audio and video footage available in the public domain, one can appreciate how the cigar—as well, it should be noted, as the cigarettes being liberally smoked by others in the packed room—contributed to the smokescreen of interpretive obfuscation that clouded the hour-long event, and that is as much an expression of the intellectual and moral murkiness of the enterprise as a whole, as any tactical actions on Brecht’s part.

Needless to say, it is not only the Nazis who would have prevented Brecht from smoking during testimony. To those of us who live in post-industrial economies where tobacco smoke is increasingly confined, even in outdoor spaces, to designated and delimited zones, the clouds of smoke that hang in the air of the chamber where Brecht testified date the event as much as—if not more than—the witch-hunt itself. This is not to say, however, that either our environments or our social imaginaries are smoke-free. On the contrary, we arguably stand between whatever the vaporous equivalents of rocks and hard places are. On the one hand, we have herded smokers and their noxious emanations into cubicles and backstreets (creating for we non-smokers a smoker’s theatre of a rather different order), while on the other we are acutely aware that the very air may be against us. Knowledge of the toxicity of tobacco smoke has rendered us highly sensitive to the fact that several horsemen of the apocalypse now come in aerosol form. And while the good people of Szechuan and other industry-intensive zones in the emerging global economy may bear the brunt of the pollution, this does little to alleviate pervasive concerns—some more justified than others—over air quality, carbon emissions, disease, and all the other harbingers of the unidentified “airborne toxic event” that Don DeLillo so presciently identified as the postmodern pathology *par excellence* in his 1985 novel *White Noise*.⁴

In its particulate diffusion, its drifting ubiquity and its scented threat, therefore, smoke is at once a compelling image of global integration and interdependence, and a microscopic material presence we can ill-afford to ignore. That said, it is not immediately apparent how the theatre might help us understand the phenomenon. Even those of us who might appreciate the romance and indeed sensuality of smoke are likely to find the prospect of a smoke-filled theatre profoundly unappealing, and hardly conducive to the kind of relaxed scepticism Brecht envisaged. Today more than ever, theatre is a typically smoke-free zone. But could this in itself be a reason to examine where and how smoke nevertheless figures in the artform, and in the social

understandings it prompts? If so, perhaps the best way of responding to this possibility is to make like smoke: to insinuate ourselves into the field of theatre and performance, and take a drift through the contemporary vapescape.

Smoking the 20th Century

Let's start with a brief drag on the dramatic canon. There are several possible interpretations of Anton Chekov's unlovely short play, *The Dangers of Smoking* (1896, revised 1902). The most straightforward is the most misogynistic, and least interesting: henpecked husband has meltdown. In the course of a short public lecture, ostensibly on the harmful effects of tobacco, a shabby man departs repeatedly from the topic to detail the many ways he is bullied and exploited by his wife. He makes a brief bid for freedom, casting off the tailcoat that symbolically and physically constrains him, only to climb sheepishly back into it and revert to his earlier manner when he sees his wife in the wings. A second, aesthetic, interpretation would see in the play a concentrated and accelerated version of the disappointment, frustration and festering anger we find played out with devastating languor in Chekov's great full-length plays. And a related third would view the play as social commentary. The lecturer, Iván Ivánovich Nyúkhin, represents an educated middle class chafing at the bit under Tsarist autocracy—here his wife, who hoards the profits he earns as the sole teacher and caretaker of her boarding school. Impecunious, unfulfilled and put-upon liberals would feature prominently in the 1905 revolution, which brought about limited and ultimately doomed political reforms. The trope certainly has legs. Lenin's disdain for liberals, coupled with the militant vision laid out in *What is to be Done?* (also 1902), finds a clear echo in Jodi Dean's *Communist Horizon*. There, liberals are once more the useful idiots, unwittingly conspiring in their own—and, structurally, the proletariat's—oppression by taking on all the tasks demanded of them by a self-enriching few. By this token, Nyúkhin deserves what he gets, and represents a cautionary tale for the rest of us.

From a contemporary perspective, several features of the play complicate these possibilities. The first is that the extreme imagery of the play far outstrips its narrative premise. Cartoonish though the wife's portrayal may be, Nyúkhin's predicament is severe. Calling into question the possibility of free will, he qualifies the statement that he has 'chosen' his topic, and advises those who are uninterested that they should 'feel perfectly free not to listen' (1997: 325). He suffers from anxiety, which manifests itself in a nervous twitch, and while he seems to speak almost compulsively, his sporadic, self-dismissing asides—'Of course, I don't have a penny to my name, not one. ... But what's the point of talking about it?' (326)—hint at a dark hinterland of unarticulated and perhaps inarticulate lived experience.

This is not simply a matter of language. With hindsight, one could say that when Chekov's oneiric realism is sped up and foreshortened as here, the result is a subject bursting at the seams in ways that anticipate the modernist innovations of the inter-war years. Confessing at the outset that he is an amateur scientist who has written (and then destroyed) an article entitled 'The Problem with Insects', Nyúkhin's preoccupation with insect infestation and mortality returns in hallucinatory form as his emotional excitation rises. His daughters' aunt Natalie, he tells us, 'always wears a yellow dress with little black dots that makes her look as if she had cockroaches crawling all over her' (328). His own dream, meanwhile, is to be transubstantiated even more thoroughly. He'll run away, and then: 'I'll stop in a field somewhere and stand there like a tree or a fence post, like a scarecrow, and stare up at the enormous sky, stand there all night just looking at the moon, the quiet, shining moon, and forget it all ...' (328).

This moment of imagined self-dissolution marks the highpoint of Nyúkhin's rebellion. He proceeds to tear off the tailcoat and stomp on it, but that is too bound up in his material circumstances to represent further flight, marking instead the beginning of his inevitable retreat. It is, rather, those three dots following 'forget it all' that stand at the centre of the play, for they represent the moment when Nyúkhin most closely approximates the one thing he won't—in the sense both of quit and relinquish—give up: smoke.

At the last, Nyúkhin implores his audience to tell his wife 'that the old bag of bones—me, I mean—behaved...with dignity' (329). The line seems larded with pathos, but Nyúkhin has a point. In the course of the lecture, he abases himself thoroughly, but he does not perjure himself. Indeed, *only* by placing his dignity on the line can he retain it. And he achieves this by doing the very thing that seems to embody his weakness and desperation most: failing to deliver the lecture as advertised. Near the beginning of the play, he tells us: 'I myself smoke, but my wife told me I should speak today about the dangers of tobacco, so of course there's nothing more to say, is there?' (325). Although he will go on to talk at length, it is indeed true that there is nothing more to say. If he is to behave with dignity, he must avoid hypocrisy—or own it. Tobacco may be dangerous, but compared to the depredations of his circumstances, it is at least a harm freely chosen.

One way of thinking about *The Dangers of Tobacco*, then, is of a contest between the positive liberty to practice one's habits, and the negative freedom from being harmed by others. However, as Nyúkhin is denied the latter liberty, so the former, too, is thrown into question by the addictive nature of smoking, its capacity to harm others 'passively', and, in the contemporary context, the coercive practices of big tobacco and wider costs to society in terms of healthcare, lost productivity and so on. Indeed, it is tempting to say that Nyúkhin's histrionics stem precisely from being denied his preferred narcotic for the duration of the lecture. That trope, too, has legs. In her memoirs of life with Harold Pinter, Antonia Fraser writes that Pinter 'felt a kind of existential despair in the mid eighties,' which stemmed in part from the state of the world, and in part from giving up smoking sixty Sobranie Black Russian cigarettes a day (2010: 207).

Vaping the Contemporary

Recently, debates over the interplay of liberty and toxicity in smoking has taken on a new complexion. Proponents of electronic cigarettes—amongst them many former cigarette smokers—argue that tobacco-free delivery of nicotine through the vapour from a coil-heated liquid solution reduces harm to the vaper, and eradicates it for others. Opponents point out that not enough is yet known to support claims that vaping is either safe or an aid to quitting smoking, and that young people are particularly vulnerable to the product range and marketing strategies of a predatory and self-interested tobacco industry.⁵

Having drawn in some of the theatrical tendencies and moral dilemmas of the 20th century, then, on exhaling into the 21st we discover matters and materials of a somewhat different consistency. From a 'smoker's theatre' perspective, the rise in the popularity of e-cigarettes is intriguing because they seem so theatrical. First generation e-cigarettes—so-called "cigalikes"—were modelled after conventional cigarettes, with a glowing LED tip. The result was, as the third epigraph to this article signals, smoke without fire, with all the ritual pleasures of smoking, but none of the pain. Critics are less convinced by such airy similitudes. They argue that the vapour remains toxic, and that the unregulated visibility of the e-cigarette creates a gateway, undoing the hard work of rendering smoking socially unacceptable by making the activity once again a cool thing that young people will want to copy.⁶

If vaping has sparked yet another round in the age-old debate over the mechanics of mimesis and the dangers of imitation, a different aspect of e-cigarettes is more novel. Recent e-cig models have broken the skeuomorphic mould in favour of more features—such as variable wattage and digital display panels—and greater scope for the customisation of flavour, e-liquid composition, and delivery intensity. The result is a massive hobbyist culture, with users taking to online forums to debate the merits of diverse recipes and settings. While the "e-" in "e-cig" ostensibly refers to the fact that the device is battery powered, this is in fact the real gateway, for it is what enables it to be plugged into the "Internet of Things." While recharging the battery from a USB port, one can, at the same time, upload activity data to software such as Joyetech's 'My Vapor Record'. From there, users can plot usage, exchanging vaping profiles with other users, and purchase new and replacement products. No doubt it also provides Joyetech—a major e-cig manufacturer—with invaluable commercial information. However, perhaps the most suggestive feature for jacking into the system is the 'pass-through charger' (PTC), which enables the user to vape and charge off their computer at the same time. The eGO PTC, for instance, plugs directly into the tip of the device, so that the user literally looks as if they are smoking the internet.

Has smoker's theatre come to this? Inhaling your nicotine hit directly from the WWW? If so, it is tempting to suggest that Jodi Dean's critique of the total capture of meaning, effort and affect under communicative capitalism does not go far enough. With vapour reconfigured as a kind of digital smoke, not even the tiniest particles seem capable of evading the global singularity of capital we serve with every breath we take. Brecht must be choking in his grave.⁷

But this is hyperbole of the sort that is all too common when determinism departs from materialism. So let us go back to the materials and pursue another line of enquiry. One of the three variables that 'My Vapor Record' can plot (along with puffs and wattage) is resistance. In an e-cigarette, resistance is one of the elements that determines vapour quality and quantity. More electricity flows through a low-resistance cartomizer (a combination of atomizer and cartridge holding the e-liquid) than a standard one, which makes the coil hotter and creates warmer vapour in larger quantities. These kinds of considerations have provided vapers not only with the opportunity to modify their device to suit their tastes, but to experiment with the aesthetic qualities of the vapour. "Vapertainment" enthusiasts have taken to competitions and the Internet to demonstrate their tricks, and while it's easily enough dismissed as a passing fad as insubstantial as the vapour itself, for the theatre-minded, there's something strangely compelling about it. These people are hacking their devices in order to turn themselves into human fog machines. Kitchen surfaces and coffee tables are being converted into mini stages swirling and smogbound enough to give *Phantom of the Opera* a run for its money. While the cigar in Brecht's smoker's theatre is ultimately a prop—a bit of stage business for the actor and a minor distraction for the audience member—vapers have made thick white billows objects of attention in their own right, if indeed 'object' is the right word. Even as Jodi Dean calls for a clear division between the 1 percent and the rest of us, all that is solid is being melted into propylene glycol, vaporised at variable levels of resistance and puffed through a toilet roll middle into a soap bubble.

Reflecting on recent smoking bans in the UK, the author Will Self writes that since tobacco smoke gives a room volume, substance and scent, '[t]he decline in smoking has important consequences for our perception of space and place ... If you like, smoking in a space is a physical version of the Cartesian cogito: I fill this with smoke, therefore I am in it' (2014). It is fair to assume that, in the short term at least, vaping will not prove a satisfactory alternative. A vaper does not exhale gently eddying haze so much as discharge a thick ectoplasmic blanket. To watch them in action is to envision a super-cut of all the movies where the soul leaves the body through the mouth of the



Fig 2. MASS. Photo © A Two Dogs Company.

dying, or is drawn out by some Mephistopholean ghoul. Nevertheless, for such a new and striking material form to enter the everyday visual field presents us with a novel account of what the world is made of, and how we shape our understanding of it. Even in the theatre, which in gross remains a clunkingly Euclidean enterprise, experiments with texture and form are reflecting the shifting shapes—and perhaps growing complexity—of contemporary experience and social organisation. Once the preserve of clichéd special effects along with the mirrorball and the strobe light, the past few years have seen the promotion of vapour to plasmatic agent of performance in its own right. Audiences of "posthuman" theatre in particular are increasingly invited to contemplate carefully modulated symphonies of the stuff, with actors obscured or occluded altogether. Nyúkhin's fantasy in Chekov's play seems finally to have been realised. We have travelled from a man raging through his situation to touch the threshold of dissolution, to stage spaces filled with smoke, with nothing discrete or concrete enough to alight our thoughts upon, or wrap our attention around.

Is this the fog we wander through because, as Dean puts it, we have lost sight of the communist horizon? Very possibly. Certainly, it bears a troubling resemblance to the performances Brecht would define his smoker's theatre against, where spectators 'stare rather than see, just as they listen rather than hear. They look at the stage as if in a trance...like men to whom something is being done' and 'seem to be given over to vague but profound sensations' (1964: 187).

At this point, however, we once more find ourselves drifting off into generality, so let us again introduce some material detail back into the discussion. Not all stage fog is made the same way. In *Tales of the Bodiless* (2011) by Eszter Salamon, for instance, the entire stage space was filled with huge clouds of the stuff, through which the audience occasionally glimpsed unmoving performers in tableau. In Kris Verdonck's *Mass* (2010), by contrast, it remained heavy and low-lying. From these differences in behaviour, we can presume that the first was made primarily through the



Fig 3. Video still from *The Cloud of Unknowing* by Ho Tzu Nyen, Video Installation, Single Channel HD projection, 13 speakers, smoke machines, floodlights, show control system, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist.

vaporisation of fog juice (similar to the functioning of an e-cigarette), and the latter involved the sublimation of dry ice—a process that also formed one of the most beguiling sections of Heiner Goebbels’ mechanical performance *Stifter’s Dinge* (2008). In physics, sublimation describes the phase transition of a material from a solid to a gas without passing through the liquid phase. The behaviour of frozen carbon dioxide when it comes into contact with metal or hot water is one of the best-known examples. The term was adopted by Freud to describe how powerful psychic drives can materialise defensively in refined and socially acceptable activities, and then adapted by Herbert Marcuse, who in *One Dimensional Man* (1964) described the commoditised enjoyment of those same stimuli as “repressive desublimation.” The dynamics are fun to conjure with. We might see Jodi Dean critiquing contemporary art for being a kind of repressive sublimation, and Nyúkhin’s self-exposure in *The Dangers of Smoking* as an unrepressed desublimation. But must such processes always be so unidirectional? In the circulation of theatrical energies between solids and gases, spectatorship and participation, resistance *to* and resistance *from*, we arguably find a model of transition or transformation that is more nuanced and less schematic than that of the Brechtian face-off or the Deanan division, and for that reason brings with it both possibilities and limitations. It would certainly be neater and perhaps more politically desirable if things were more clear-cut, but if theatre can lay any claim to the accurate representation of human (and perhaps non-human) nature, then the picture that emerges is a hazy one in which those diverse phases seem to coexist.

This is well demonstrated in another ‘fog machine’ work, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2011), by the Singaporean artist Ho Tzu Nyen. First presented as the Singapore entry to the Venice Biennale, *The Cloud of Unknowing* explores the relationships between the material qualities of human bodies and other objects, and the evanescence of clouds. A thirty-minute film features eight individuals who share a public housing block and are weighed down by their preoccupations and possessions: a man with a skin condition surrounded by light bulbs; a compulsive drummer; a woman in love with her radio; an obsessive scribbler in a book-lined room; a corpulent,



Fig 4. Video still from *The Cloud of Unknowing* by Ho Tzu Nyen, Video Installation, Single Channel HD projection, 13 speakers, smoke machines, floodlights, show control system, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist

bedridden man; a green-fingered woman overwhelmed by nature, and so on. As the film unfolds in the gallery, a process of sublimation takes place both on-screen and off. A near-naked Chinese man with black hair and tanned complexion (Johnston Anderson Cheong, credited as 'The Actor') enters a room full of water. He re-emerges with white hair and pale skin—Cheong has albinism. This moment in the film triggers a thick smoke to start billowing through the apartment building, enveloping each inhabitant as they come face to face with the white figure. Meanwhile, the audience, who have been reclining on (and progressively sinking into) puffy white cloud-like bean-bags are themselves enveloped in fog, which pours out from behind the projection screen and billows through the beams of theatrical lighting that surround them. In the version I saw in Singapore, the film was accompanied by a live drone-jazz-metal score, and culminated in the appearance of 'The Actor' amongst the audience.

The Cloud of Unknowing is titled after a fourteenth century mystical treatise written to advise novice monks contemplating their relation to the divine. As June Yap, the curator of the project put it, '[T]he cloud it refers to represents the uncertainty and doubt that an aspirant may find—faced with "but a darkness...as it were a cloud of unknowing, (where) thou knowest not what, saving that thou feelest in thy will a naked intent unto God"' (2011: 7). Ho seeks to explore those dichotomies between darkness and enlightenment, nakedness and knowledge, corporeality and transcendence, and he does so by instantiating the cloud both in 'The Actor' (and ultimately the other characters and the bodies of the audience) *and* in the smoke (on-screen and in spilling into the gallery).

Conclusion: Smoke Machine

To begin with Brecht and end on the discussion of a gallery work for the Venice Biennale is not a promising trajectory by the standards of the hard left. But if I catch theatre's drift correctly here, the unequivocal assertion of hardness is difficult to support. This is not say that social participation, direct action or indeed agitation cannot be part of one's political life. But while, in theatre,

sublimation—an act of radical transformation—is possible, it is never absolute or complete. Insofar as theatres are resolutely smoke-free zones that nevertheless stage contemporary realities, they provide a usefully delimited site in which we can apprehend, in concentrated form, what is conventionally diffusive and dispersed—and therefore overlooked by a deterministic worldview. Moreover, even as our attention may have drifted from the act of smoking to smoke ‘itself’, as Brecht’s appearance before the HUAC illustrates, as a material entity, smoke sits alongside and indeed infuses other objects of diverse properties and consistencies, including bodies. In human-scaled environments, it provides a suspension in which differentiated material components and consistencies can be disclosed.

By this token, for good, ill and otherwise, the theatre *is* a smoke machine, pumping out an ethico-affective sensibility that settles amongst the hard surfaces and sharp edges of the world. Consider the removals men, Shaun and Shane who, like the mordant stagehands of Brecht’s poems and treatises, have been sitting on the sidelines of this enquiry, munching their pies and puffing away. Were one so inclined, one might find in their forgotten hammer an apt symbol of the disempowerment of the proletariat, or indeed of the absent-minded neglect of its own interests. But my recollection of the day they delivered my stuff is patterned around a mixture of resistances, affordances and ruminations that the theatre has taught me to recognise. At one end of the spectrum, the recalcitrant bulk of that damn piano; at the other, those reflective and jocular fag breaks. In between, boxes of every size and weight, and all the furniture you need to stage a domestic scene—a resolutely middle class one, mind you, that I’d be hard-pressed to disavow.

If the performance event is, as Augusto Boal claimed, a rehearsal for revolution, then, when actual revolution is in the offing, its role changes. It now provides reflections *on* revolution, perhaps even internal resistance *to* it. It does so not in the singular event that Jodi Dean maligns, but through the accumulation of experience over time. It does so not through our absorption into it, but in our sensing of its resistances to us (and itself), and our resistances to it (and ourselves). These resistances vary widely in consistency and composition. The theatrical encounter is in flux: materials, affects, meanings, judgements are now sturdy, distinct or hulking, now pillowy, eddying, opaque. The resistances it offers are not the kinds you push with or against, but through.

Notes

1. Specifically: Dean is coercive, opportunistic and wishful when she implies that a wide variety of expressions of unhappiness and dissent with diverse governments and economic systems show a groundswell of support for the communist worldview; she is evasive when she dismisses historical study of the Soviet Union as “primarily a propaganda apparatus for the foreign policy establishment” (2012, 33) and contradictory in asserting both the totalising power of communicative capitalism and neoliberal economics, and the imminent collapse of the system; she is paranoid in blaming the failure of the Occupy movement partly on ‘charismatic individual speakers’ able ‘to move the crowd and acquire quasi-leadership positions...’ (55) and weasely in her wording around the necessity of revolutionary violence (116); her eagerness to make sweeping statements while failing to offer empirical support (a brief flurry of statistics on p. 50 is the exception that proves the rule) and her failure to engage substantively with China or indeed the particularities of any other developing economies means her argument is uninformed and parochial.

2. The best-known statement on this appears in a short fragment cited by John Willett, where Brecht expresses his belief ‘that in a Shakespearean production one man in the stalls with a cigar could bring about the downfall of Western art. He might as well light a bomb as light his cigar. I would be delighted to see our public allowed to smoke during performance. And I’d be delighted mainly for the actors’ sake. In my view it

is quite impossible for the actor to play unnatural, cramped and old-fashioned theatre to a man smoking in the stalls' (1964: 8–9).

3. I have been unable to locate the original source of this unreferenced detail in *Wikipedia*. We should therefore take it with the appropriate circumspection, while at the same time noting its currency in what is no doubt one of the most frequently consulted summaries of Brecht's life and work.

4. For a century-spanning history of related concerns, see Peter Sloterdijk (2009).

5. For details of these contrasting views, see the two letters sent by scientists to the Director General of the World Health Organisation. The May 26 2014 letter in support of e-cigarettes is archived at <http://nicotinepolicy.net/documents/letters/MargaretChan.pdf>; the 16 June 2014 counter-argument is at <http://tobacco.ucsf.edu/sites/tobacco.ucsf.edu/files/u9/Chan-letter-June16%20PST%20FINAL%20with%20129%20sigs.pdf>

6. A June 2014 letter to the WHO signed by 129 scientists cited recent research to state that e-cigarette emissions 'include ultrafine particles, propylene glycol, tobacco-specific nitrosamines; nicotine; volatile organic compounds (VOCs), and carcinogens and reproductive toxins, including benzene, lead, nickel, and others.' [http://tobacco.ucsf.edu/sites/tobacco.ucsf.edu/files/u9/Chan-letter-June16 PST FINAL with 129 sigs.pdf](http://tobacco.ucsf.edu/sites/tobacco.ucsf.edu/files/u9/Chan-letter-June16_PST_FINAL_with_129_sigs.pdf)

7. Though the same might not be Brecht's most prominent theatrical heir, Heiner Müller, who was buried with a supply of his favourite cigars.

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