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## REVIEW ESSAY

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# Virtual Realisms: Dramatic Forays into the Future

Sarah Bay-Cheng

**THE NETHER.** By Jennifer Haley. Directed by Jeremy Herrin. Royal Court Theatre, London. 26 July 2014.

**MR BURNS: A POST-ELECTRIC PLAY.** By Anne Washburn. Directed by Robert Icke. Almeida Theatre, London. 25 July 2014.

“‘Virtual Reality’ is not a computer. We are speaking about a technology that uses computerized clothing to synthesize shared reality. It recreates our relationship with the physical world in a new plane, no more, no less. . . . It only has to do with what your sense organs perceive.”

—Jaron Lanier<sup>1</sup>

Technology futurist Jaron Lanier claimed to have coined the term *virtual reality* in the 1980s, but Antonin Artaud first used it when he argued that theatre belonged to the “virtual arts.” To the best of my knowledge Lanier never acknowledged Artaud, and yet both highlight the notion of the *virtual* in art and performance as not about the technology with which it has most often been associated, but about a social and experiential phenomenon. Less cited than other essays (Susan Sontag’s collection ignores it entirely), Artaud’s “*The Alchemical Theater*” (*Le théâtre alchimique*, 1932) draws on alchemy as a metaphor for theatre as the physical instantiation of an unseen and dangerous world lurking beneath the surface of everyday reality. Not so different from Lanier’s description of what the “sense organs perceive,” Artaud’s theatrical fantasies have much in common with virtual reality,

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Kelly, Adam Heilbrun, and Barbara Stacks, “Virtual Reality: An Interview with Jaron Lanier,” *Whole Earth Review* (1989), available at <http://www.jaronlanier.com/jaron%20whole%20earth%20review.pdf>.

immersive performances, and role-playing video games.<sup>2</sup> The concluding paragraphs to his related “No More Masterpieces,” for example, describe a theatre experience that will “crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectator” and send the audience into “trance, as the dances of Dervishes induce trance.”<sup>3</sup> This ideal spectator, experiencing a crushed and hypnotized sensibility, bears a striking resemblance to the young (often male) gamers described in hyperbolic news articles about the dangers of video games, such as the BBC’s 2005 coverage of a South Korean man who died of heart failure after playing an immersive role-playing video game for fifty hours with limited breaks.<sup>4</sup>

Not surprisingly, theatre’s engagement with what Charlie Gere refers to as “digital culture” has most often been realized in experimental, largely nonnarrative, and often individualized performances.<sup>5</sup> Mediated performances in art installations like Wafaa Bilal’s *Domestic Tension* (2007) and performance lectures like Rabih Mroué’s *Pixelated Revolution* (2012) highlight the eroding distinctions between reality and mediated representation, while Belgian artist Kris Verdonck has staged both humans displayed as objects in performances like *In* (2003), where an actor stands motionless in a transparent water tank, and the humanity of robots who elicit sympathy through their failures in his *Dancer* series (2010). German performance group Rimini Protokoll has explored the implications of techno-culture throughout a diverse array of projects through interactive, mobile performances, such as *Call Cutta* (2009) and *The Situation Rooms* (2013), almost always mediated through screens or other digital devices.<sup>6</sup> Although not always as formally radical as these performances, contemporary playwrights and theatre companies have similarly explored technology through productions that often align with what Hans-Thies Lehmann influentially called “postdramatic theatre.” Companies like The Builders Association and their intermedial productions of *Jet Lag* (1998–2000) and *Continuous City* (2007) stage the discontinuities of technology within fragmented, multi-plot narratives. Caryl Churchill’s *Love and Information* (2012) and Mark Ravenhill’s *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2007) further break down dramatic structure into increasingly smaller units, what John Muse calls “microdramas.”<sup>7</sup> Tracing their emergence in modernist performance, Muse links this development to modernist technologies, such as the railroad and the telegraph, and their effects on time. Similar arguments have been made about the historical avant-gardes by scholars who highlight both the rapidly devel-

<sup>2</sup>Perhaps it is not a surprise that scholars have built a virtual reality (VR) model based on Artaud’s theory; see Stephen Schrum and Elliot Sheedy, “Building a Virtual Reality Model of Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty,” *Metaverse Creativity* 2, no. 2 (2012): 205–21.

<sup>3</sup>Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (1958; reprint, New York: Grove Press, 1994), 82–83.

<sup>4</sup>“S Korean Dies after Games Session,” *BBC*, 10 August 2005, “Technology,” available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/4137782.stm>. See also Tom Phillips, “Chinese Teen Chops Hand off to ‘cure’ Internet Addiction,” 3 February 2015, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/11386325/Chinese-teen-chops-hand-off-to-cure-internet-addiction.html>; Shosh Shlam and Hilla Medalia, “China’s Web Junkies,” *New York Times*, 19 January 2014, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/20/opinion/chinas-web-junkies.html>; and Benedict Carey, “Shooting in the Dark” *The New York Times*, 11 February 2013, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/12/science/studying-the-effects-of-playing-violent-video-games.html>.

<sup>5</sup>Charlie Gere, *Digital Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002). See also Andy Lavender, “Digital Culture,” in *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, ed. Sarah Bay-Cheng et al. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 125–34.

<sup>6</sup>See Nanna Verhoeff, *Mobile Screens: The Visual Regime of Navigation* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012); and Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink, “Nomadic Theatre: Staging Movement and Mobility in Contemporary Performance” (PhD diss., University of Utrecht, 2015).

<sup>7</sup>John Muse, “The Dimensions of the Moment: Modernist Shorts,” *Modern Drama* 53, no. 1 (2010): 77.



Amanda Hale (Morris) and Stanley Townsend (Sims) in *The Nether*. (Photo: Johan Persson.)

oping communication and war technologies as fundamental pressures on theatrical forms that eschewed realism in favor of alternative representational strategies. For much of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries scholars have often accepted that performances focused on technology and contemporary digital culture would follow the nonnarrative, nonrealistic experiments of the modernist avant-garde.

Recently however there have emerged productions that take up the questions of virtuality, technological dependence, and digitally transformed bodies—what Lehmann described as the “technically infiltrated body”—within structures of the *dramatic* theatre.<sup>8</sup> Particularly striking are Jennifer Haley’s *The Nether*, a rumination on the moral and ethical implications of living in alternate and artificial realities, and Anne Washburn’s *Mr Burns: A Post-Electric Play*, a speculation on the future of humanity, media, and culture after the world’s power goes out. Although both plays draw heavily on new media, digital technologies, and a collective familiarity with the early-twenty-first-century information age, they do so within dramatic structures and models of theatricality that are more akin to late-nineteenth-century realism than to either Artaud or the experiments with media and performance that have marked the turn of the last century. As such, they offer new possibilities for dramatic theatre in an era of new media, what we might think of more as virtual realism than virtual reality.

From the beginning Haley grounds her play in the terrain of the virtual by explicitly aligning the production with other experiments in digital performance. Entering the Royal Court Theatre, the first encounter with Haley’s “Nether Realm” came in the form of an online

<sup>8</sup>Hans-Thies Lehmann, *The Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 162.

interactive world available to the theatre's visitors. Accessible from terminals throughout the theatre, the digital Nether Realm offered audiences the opportunity to explore "a living virtual world," an online realm created by Michael Takeo Magruder (with Drew Baker and Erik Fleming) and supported by the Department of Digital Humanities at King's College London. Audiences were invited to interact with the Nether Realm by logging onto the domain and creating an avatar that then appeared in the artwork on digital displays throughout the theatre building. Viewers could also interact with the Nether by tweeting "sunlight" with the hashtag #TheNether. Tweeting about the Nether Realm gave it new life, but in the related brochure we were warned that "[w]hen the hashtag is not in use the world slowly starts to decay." From the beginning, whether we entered the play through the text or the digitized lobby, we were encouraged to view this world as somewhat ominous, even threatening. This sensation was sustained through the design of the play itself, its dark atmosphere ominously reinforced with a haunting underscore by Ian Dickinson.

Haley introduces her text with a similarly dark epigraph of definitions of *nether realm* from *urbandictionary.com* that include: "Another world for mythical creatures"; "Demon world"; and "A dimension of Evil or Imagination." This last definition may be a bit misleading, however, since it suggests that evil and imagination are mutually exclusive. Despite its interactive digital lobby introduction and opening references to emerging technologies, the play itself centers on a moral conundrum with roots in Plato's attack on theatrical representation: Does an immoral or illegal act committed in a representational world constitute a crime? Does participation in artificial environments foster and encourage immoral acts, or does virtual engagement relieve the need to actualize such actions in real life? Can pure imagination be evil?

Yet, for all its digital menace *The Nether* itself plays like something Ibsen might have devised had he written for the early twenty-first century. Like his *Ghosts*, for instance, Haley's tight, mostly one-set structure raises specters of familiarity and alienation simultaneously, trading on common knowledge within an uncertain context. Although she engages the subject matter of the postdramatic theatre, Haley grounds fundamentally moral questions in what is ultimately a realist framework with perfectly opposed binaries. Director Jeremy Herrin's staging reinforced the text's fundamental oppositions. The primary action of the play unfolds in the interior of a police station, where two characters oppose each other across a center-stage table. These static confrontations are interspersed with episodes experienced in the Nether Realm, a futurist version of the Internet expanded into a virtual and immersive environment that is sensually indistinguishable from reality. The text includes almost no details of the space, and the interrogation room was appropriately nondescript. The only visual dynamism in this space came from a series of digital projections on the scrim that divided the interrogation room from the imaginary space of the Nether Realm, which was distinguished by its natural elements and nostalgic detail. The black-and-white projections (designed by Luke Halls) consisted primarily of distorted video of the actors onstage, visualizations of their voices, and geometric designs reminiscent of 1980s-era perspective computer modeling.

By contrast, Haley describes the Nether Realm as bathed in a "ray of sunlight" (19) where characters sit in "a vault of trees" with the sound of "leaves fluttering" (40). On a second stage space elevated upstage of the dark interrogation room, moving projections of densely leafed trees surrounded a metal-frame cube with a few pieces of carefully crafted Victorian furniture. Juxtaposed with scenes from the dull "in-world," characters reveal that such natural elements are now available only in the Nether Realm; that "real grass"

has become an expensive commodity and real trees can no longer be found. The realm of the Nether thus functions as a space of fantasy and nostalgia: a virtual archive of beauty, including not only the elements of a lost nature, but also those of a now-defunct high culture expressed in classical music played on gramophones, a “perfectly rendered vintage Steinway pianoforte” (22), period clothing, and references to fine cigars and cognac.

Like the physical symmetry of false beauty and real emptiness, the play’s characters are similarly constructed as opposites whose respective desires neatly counter one another. The play focuses on Morris, a moralistic young detective who is determined to prosecute Mr. Sims for sex crimes against children committed in the Nether Realm. A prominent in-world businessman, the aptly named Sims has created an alternative life in what he calls the Hideaway, a virtual house where clients can do what they like with young children, or at least the virtual representations of young children. In this alternative reality Sims is known as Papa, a grandfatherly figure with a sexual preference for prepubescent girls, Victorian aesthetics, and a talent for encryption. In the Hideaway anonymous clients interact with child avatars (including rape and murder), who are controlled by anonymous employees. In one of their early confrontations Sims lays out the rationale for his realm to Morris: “Look, Detective, I am sick. I am sick and I have always been sick and there is no cure. . . . I have taken responsibility for my sickness. I am protecting my neighbor’s children and my brother’s children and the children I won’t allow myself to have, and the only way I can do this is because I’ve created a place where I can be my fucking self!” (19). Morris, having lost her own father to excessive time in the Nether—a condition in which a person becomes known as a “shade”—is not persuaded by Sims’s argument. She follows not only Sims, but also his employee Cedric Doyle, a middle-aged former science teacher who performs as the 12-year-old girl, Iris, in the Hideaway. Morris pursues both Sims and Doyle as an undercover agent named Mr. Woodnut, ultimately revealing her own and everyone else’s dark desires.

Although numerous productions have explored questions of realness in virtual environments, including questions of sexual agency and the line between imagination and action, rarely have these questions been staged so overtly within the structures of the *realist* theatre. In addition to the play’s detailed environments, characters’ motives are clear, uncomplicated, and well-articulated to themselves and one another. In addition to Sims’s striking self-awareness (“You don’t know what you do, Detective, putting me into the world”), Morris, as both herself and Woodnut, frequently cites the loss of her father as the key motive of her desire to expose and dismantle the Hideaway (63). Structured as a series of short sequential scenes, the play is both linear and explicitly causal, following a structure familiar to many crime narratives. (Indeed, the sound transitions between scenes and the snap light cues reminded me of an episode of the long-running television serial *Law and Order*.)

The only exception to the play’s linearity is a final scene, labeled “Epilogue” in the text, which replays an earlier affectionate interaction between Papa and Iris, this time performed by the “real” Sims and Doyle. In the Royal Court staging both men faced the audience in their in-world garb, but set within the lush virtual world of the Hideaway. They spoke directly to the audience, nearly unmoving though vocally embodying the scene with emotion and warmth, including an incongruous bout of giggling. The only change in the repeated dialogue is the addition of a final line (significantly, *the* final line of the play) in which Sims finally admits his love for Iris. We are thus encouraged to view this expression of “love” as the explanation for his sudden surrender to Morris and the ultimate reality of the play. This expression of love by an older man to a 12-year-old girl is a potentially unsettling no-



David Beames (Doyle) and Stanley Townsend (Sims) in *The Nether*. (Photo: Johan Persson.)

tion that is simultaneously ameliorated by having the “girl” performed by another adult man—an explicitly theatrical move that evades the main ethical questions raised throughout the play. The play concludes by having its central characters articulate their real feelings in their actual bodies, as if their virtual selves were simply masks that transparently covered the true selves beneath. Although this may be reassuring to the morals of its audience, the epilogue works against the ontology for much of the rest of the play.

Indeed, the play’s realist style lends a metatheatricality to the descriptions of the virtual. For example, against arguments that the Hideaway encourages proclivities for only the “image of a little girl,” Morris contends that “[i]t’s more than that, Mr Doyle. It’s sound, smell, touch. The Hideaway is the most advanced realm there is when it comes to the art of sensation” (24). Later, she repeats this same sequence of sensations to Sims arguing that “[y]ou don’t just offer images of children. You provide the sound and the smell and the touch of them” (32). Considering a contemporary representational medium that provides sound, smell, and sometimes touch, the theatre is the epitome of a virtual environment to be feared and yet also ironically the very thing that precludes the kind of danger that Plato feared and Artaud desired. As we watch the events of the play unfold—particularly its attention to the representational beauty of the fantasy realm in comparison to the real—the Nether appears less and less as a digital construct and increasingly a theatrical one, a space in which the props and costumes of a past era are lushly realized and vicariously, pleurably experienced.

In her author’s notes Haley writes that the character of Iris, who appears in the virtual Hideaway scenes, should be played by “an actress who will appear on stage as a prepubescent girl,” citing Bert States’s description of the child actor as a mechanism to take “the audience *out* of the play” (n.p. emphasis in original). The presence of an actual child per-

forming onstage thus both enacts the sensual danger that Morris (and perhaps the audience) fears in virtual representations (the presence of an actual, physical child as opposed to an image) *and* provides a guard against that danger by reassuring the audience that, as Haley posits, “nothing awful will be enacted upon the child, whereas they have no such confidence with an adult posing as child” (n.p.). Theatrical virtuality thus provides a defense against its mimesis.

Given the vehement negative reactions to Markus Öhrn’s *Conte d’amour*, a theatrical reflection on real child abuse and exploitation, Haley is probably right about the figure of the young girl onstage. It is not only the presence of the child actor that inculcates the audience against the moral concerns of representing child sexual abuse onstage, but also the form in which the abuse of children is contextualized. In Öhrn’s distinctly postdramatic show, the characters—whether adult or child, male or female—were performed by adult men whose bodies were barely disguised as such (for instance, one of the “children” sporting a mustache). Öhrn’s performance setting was mediated almost entirely through video cameras and largely without dialogue, using instead familiar mass-marketing icons, such as McDonald’s hamburgers, popular brands of potato chips, and 1980s pop songs, as its primary texts. Created in response to a real perpetrator, Austrian Josef Fritzl who locked his daughter and some of their offspring in a cellar for twenty years, Öhrn’s work reenacted both racist and sexualized assaults, drawing strong reactions in venues from Avignon, where it played in 2012, to Toronto, where I attended in 2014. In a typical response from the Canadian premiere, critic J. Kelly Nestruck in the *Globe and Mail* summed up the prevailing response as “zero stars for this artistically and morally bankrupt monstrosity.”<sup>9</sup>

As befitting a postdramatic performance, Öhrn’s production was distinctly nonrealistic and rendered everything in layers of ironic artificiality (extreme camera closeups of porcelain figurines of doe-eyed children were particularly effective). Most simply he took real events and played them false. By contrast, Haley’s *The Nether* considers imagined events (that is, the virtual activities of online exploitation) and renders them realistically. Whereas audiences stormed out of Öhrn’s artificial world, the critical response for Haley’s play at the Royal Court was quite favorable. Since its run there the show has been well-received both at the MCC Theater in New York City and in a continuation with the show’s London cast at the Duke of York Theatre in March 2015. As dominant mass media, Ibsen’s realist theatre posed a real threat to society; now theatrical realism suggests an aesthetic distance that allows us to consider violent actions with a critical distance. Haley also points to a theatrical future driven by technology. As the natural world decays, our virtual environments will become desirable only insofar as they become theatrically real.

This idea of the rise of theatre from the ashes of technological destruction similarly informs Anne Washburn’s *Mr Burns*, a dystopian play about life, culture, and memory after the loss of electricity. Wondering “what would happen to a pop culture narrative pushed past the fall of civilization,” Washburn has written a “post-electric play” that stages a future where the threat is not from too much technology, but too little. She envisions a time without electricity as the return of theatre as the dominant form of mass media, ironically by remediating media of the past. It is a neat inversion on the usual technological teleology of media narratives, and is shockingly hopeful and fun for an end-of-the-world narrative.

<sup>9</sup>J. Kelly Nestruck, “Conte d’amour: Zero Stars for This Artistically and Morally Bankrupt Monstrosity,” *Globe and Mail*, 3 April 2014, available at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/theatre-reviews/contes-damour-theatre-doesnt-get-more-artistically-and-morally-bankrupt-than-this/article17777550/>. See also Sarah Bay-Cheng, “Global Screen Shots,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 37, no. 1 (2014): 60–63.

Sometime in the not-so-distant future North America has suffered an unidentified apocalyptic accident that has wiped out all of the electrical systems, possibly worldwide. In the aftermath the play renders contemporary life without power in three acts set respectively in “the very near future,” “7 years after that,” and finally “75 years after *that*” (emphasis in original).<sup>10</sup> In the first act a small group of survivors—Matt, Maria, Quincy, Jenny, Quincy, Colleen, and Sam—gather together in groups mostly to deal with their grief at the loss of loved ones and to unite against impending threats. They speculate on the status of nuclear power plants threatening to explode and draw their guns when an unknown visitor, Gibson, arrives. Although tension pervades the small camp, encounters with unfamiliar people are not unwelcome. In a sad shared ritual, each member of the group takes turns reading the names and ages of lost loved ones in case the visitor has encountered any of them. Through Washburn’s skillful exposition we learn the consequences of the massive loss: in addition to the nuclear threats, no one can communicate over distances, the lack of light has created dangerous conditions after dark, and the familiar trappings of daily life in the twentieth century, such as duct tape, batteries, and Diet Coke, are in limited supply or gone entirely. What remains of civilization are the fading memories of its popular media.

Periodically, the play hints at what contemporary media saturation has done to cultural memory. For example, in trying to understand the range of the destruction the characters mentally trace the geographical areas on the East Coast affected by the disaster. Struggling to understand Gibson’s description of the proximity of a nuclear power plant, Maria confesses that she does not really know where Mystic, Connecticut, is: “Wait I don’t know where—I just know the movie title . . .” (loc. 491). At the same time, media are also cast as humanity’s salvation. Following the rather dark ritual of reciting the names of lost loved ones (a kind of post-Internet, solemn social networking), the mood brightens when Gibson agrees to perform “Three Little Maids” from Gilbert and Sullivan’s *The Mikado*. The group around the campfire enthuses over his performance even though, as Washburn notes in a stage direction, “these are none of them people who, in their previous life, would have enjoyed the idea of an impromptu Gilbert and Sullivan recital” (loc. 706). In the midst of despair it is the shared ritual of collective storytelling that lifts the mood of the group.

But the familiarity of Gilbert and Sullivan pales in comparison with the play’s primary source material, the television show *The Simpsons*, which as of mid-2015 has run continuously since 1989 over twenty-six seasons and more than 560 individual episodes—the perfect source material for cultural memory. Not only is *The Simpsons* the longest-running television show in history, surpassing *Gunsmoke* in 2009, but it is one of the most extensive parodies of all time, drawing on not only original narratives, but also every aspect of popular culture during the last three decades, including politicians, celebrities, literature, and art and other media, nearly without limit. Over its more than quarter century it has become perhaps the key archive of late capitalist culture—remediation par excellence. It is hard to imagine a more comprehensive cultural archive of collective popular American memory than *The Simpsons*.

In her notes in the program for the Almeida Theatre production Washburn describes the process of developing the *Mr Burns* script with The Civilians theatre group in New York. Asking the actors to replay *Simpsons* episodes from memory, Washburn recalls that “[t]he episode they did the best with was *Cape Feare*, a parody of the Scorsese remake” (5). “Cape Feare” is no ordinary *Simpsons* parody, if such a thing exists; the television episode

<sup>10</sup> Anne Washburn, *Mr Burns* (London: Oberon Books, 2014).



Demetri Goritsas (Gibson) and Jenna Russell (Colleen) in *Mr Burns*. (Photo: Manuel Harlan.)

is mostly about performance itself, even more so than other *Simpsons* episodes. The opening credits, for instance, are altered to include the Simpsons family in an elaborate dance number. Instead of collapsing on the couch in front of the television as they usually do, the family runs into the living room and is swept up in a theatrical kick-line to which jugglers and circus performers are added, until eventually the entire living room set is pulled apart to reveal an extensive stage display. The central conflict is a showdown between Bart and the villain Sideshow Bob (voiced by television and musical theatre actor Kelsey Grammar) in which Bart foils Bob by convincing him to sing the entirety of Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*. The episode further spoofs not just the Scorsese remake, but also the 1962 film directed by J. Lee Thompson ("Thompson" is the alias given to the Simpsons when put into a witness-relocation program), Shakespeare, a host of classic horror films (*Psycho*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *Friday the 13th*), Looney Toons, *The Night of the Hunter*, and *I Love Lucy*, among others. While all *Simpsons* shows draw on diverse cultural material, few incorporate so many specific *performances* in a single episode. While it is possible that this episode was simply (though perhaps predictably) the one best remembered by a group of actors, "Cape Feare" is particularly apt for a production about the future of performance after the end of media. Drawing on *The Simpsons'* rich repository of parodic material, *Mr Burns* imagines a world in which the largest source of collective knowledge is an irreverent television show and the only form of media left is theatre.

Washburn's plot thus remediates a television show that remediates other television show, films, and media, all of which are displayed within the constructs of theatricality—specifically, modes of realism. Like Haley's play, *Mr Burns'* realism inscribes the future within a world of theatricality. Set seven years after the catastrophes of act 1, the second



Ensemble in the second-act musical number of *Mr Burns*. (Photo: Manuel Harlan.)

act reveals a new society in which the primary social and economic activity is the recreation and performance of *Simpsons* episodes. Absent a banking system or organized trade, people now barter and sell remembered lines from the television show, while rival theatre groups with names like “Thursday Night” (the typical day that *The Simpsons* aired) and “The Richards” (named for an obscure though beloved *Simpsons* character) compete with one another for accurate material. The small group of survivors from act 1 has endured as a post-apocalyptic guild, and we find them rehearsing the episode “Cape Feare” that they first recalled around the earlier campfire. Interspersed with their recreation of the episode are commercials that remind their audiences (including us) of an all-powered life, including lovingly detailed descriptions of refrigerators, takeout food, and wine. As one character reflects, “I think people are forgetting the taste. And the ethos. They’ve reverted to pure sound pleasure: Chablis” (loc. 935).

Like the vintage nostalgia of *The Nether’s* design, Washburn stages a virtual recreation of lost history to reflect on a shared loss of the future. Echoing the Platonic moral debates raised in *The Nether*, her characters question the larger purpose of performance. In response to a call for more meaningful scenes, the character Quincy responds: “Things aren’t funny when they’re true, they’re awful. Meaning is everywhere. We get *Meaning* for free, whether we like it or not. Meaningless Entertainment, on the other hand, is actually really hard” (loc. 1277; emphasis in original). In worlds under threat and depravation, escape into artificial, virtual comforts is all that remains. *Mr Burns* is in many ways about performance *with* consequences, perversely using the silliness of *The Simpsons* to suggest that the layers of seemingly meaningless popular culture might cumulatively be the primary source of meaning and relief in a hostile world. The highlight of act 2 comes in musical mash-up of

popular songs, performed with an emotional intensity that reveals their collective desperation. (I will never hear Brittany Spears's "Toxic" in the same way again.) The faux menace of the villain Sideshow Bob from the original episode is replaced by the "real" threat of armed gunmen who suddenly appear in the theatre at the end of the act. Reminiscent of the Chechen terrorists who occupied a Moscow theatre in 2002, the silent gunmen situate themselves among the audience at the Almeida, shoot and apparently kill one of the actors mid-scene. In this moment we are reminded that the function of performance, especially in realist dramatic forms, is nearly always to bring order to a disordered and random world. Realism is often reassuring because its very conventions (decried by avant-gardists as artificial) keep the messiness of real life outside the theatre through the neat structures of dramatic form. In these final moments that swung wildly between desperate singing and death Washburn suggests that such efforts, although necessary, may inevitably fail.

By the third act (seventy-five years after act 2), post-electric US culture has refined "Cape Feare" and *The Simpsons* performance genre into an elevated art form. Staged in the style of tragic high opera (complete with a chorus, masks, gold lamé costumes, and live music), act 3 follows the Simpsons family as they embark on the houseboat as part of the witness-protection program on Terror Lake, echoing roughly the third act of the original episode. Interspersed with details and characters from other episodes, the familiar antics are no longer played for laughs or cartoon escapism; it is all meaningful now. Sung largely in verse, the Simpsons characters take their roles seriously, including deaths represented by characters ritualistically painting their faces with a red line when they leave the boat. The final combat between Bart and Mr. Burns (an amalgam of several Simpsons villains) is not the merry replay of Bart and Bob's Gilbert and Sullivan rendition in the original episode, but a vicious battle interspersed with existential musings. Before the final battle Bart sings: "There's no one looking after me / Just shadows and their history / There's nothing for me up ahead / The river curves and then I'm dead" (loc. 1770–71). Bart has gone from scamp to hero in less than a hundred years.

This final operatic act sets the realism of the previous acts in relief, with high-culture references that evoke a diverse theatre history, including everything from ancient Greek theatre, to Kabuki performance (including characters' painted faces and rapid, technical costume changes), to late-twentieth-century music videos. Washburn's play thus brings us full circle. The post-electric theatrical restagings of late-twentieth-century media—first as ritual storytelling, then theatre guilds, then opera—have become the seeds for a new cultural and aesthetic vocabulary. Through its unparalleled absorption and recirculation of culture *The Simpsons* television show has become the new myth.

Both *The Nether* and *Mr Burns* are undoubtedly enhanced by their fully realized performances. The lush, virtual scenography of the Nether Realm is essential to understanding the tension between a barren real world and the relief to be found in sensuous experiences of imaginary environments. *Mr Burns* not only exposes the gap between painful reality and theatrical fantasy, but also offers directors and their casts wide dramatic license to realize the not-so-distant future. Washburn's play is a designer's dream, with the chance to imagine the world of today and tomorrow without power. For example, in Robert Icke's Almeida Theatre production, Tom Scutt's clever designs included a recreation of the Simpsons' car, with empty two-liter plastic containers serving as headlights, and the script calls for a candle in a box with aluminum foil to create a stage television, chalk erasers to generate smoke, and water poured from bucket to bucket to simulate running water. In many ways *Mr Burns* is a homage to ingenious theatre designers everywhere, and I have no

doubt that college campuses will pick this show up and run with it, probably for as long as familiarity and memory of *The Simpsons* lasts (forever?).

But in spite of their inventive stagings, both digital and analog, it is ultimately the texts that drive these productions, and they are as satisfying to read as to watch. Amid the many contemporary performances that explore the effects of digital culture through experimental stagings, new technologies, and shifting relations among audiences and performers, both *The Nether* and *Mr Burns* imagine the future within the form of a realist, dramatic theatre. As such, they remind us that nostalgia for the past is almost always an undercurrent of futurism, and further point to the enduring appeal of theatrical mimesis as an artificial respite from the painful realities outside theatre buildings. It is no coincidence that both ultimately turn metatheatrical as they consider the various potential futures before us. Although *The Nether* imagines a world with overwhelming technology and *Mr Burns* creates a world with almost none, both find relief in the most artificial presentations. It is perhaps little wonder that, as contemporary US playwrights, Haley and Washburn would project the resurgence of theatre in the future, or that they position the return of the theatre as the salvation of humanity. For those of us who bemoan the decline of theatre-going in the United States, futurist fantasies of theatre's return are often articulated as desires for a pre-medial time of theatre's past glory. It is almost enough to make one wish for the apocalypse.

Reflecting on both plays and their virtual realism, I was reminded of the current discussions regarding media archaeology and the nostalgia for vintage and past forms. As Jussi Parikka notes in his *What Is Media Archaeology?*: "retrocultures seem to be as natural a part of the digital-cultural landscape as high-definition screen technology and super-fast broadband."<sup>11</sup> So perhaps just as vinyl records, 1970s photographic filters, and steampunk fashion have reemerged among their digital replacements, so too might theatre and theatrical realism come back into fashion. Certainly, Haley and Washburn think so, and their plays offer guides to what the future of theatre might look like. It is not a perfect vision, but it is compelling. And, in spite of my own digital preferences and predilections, I am inclined to agree with them. After all, on the evening I saw *The Nether* everything worked flawlessly onstage, but the virtual, twitter-dependent, digital interactive stations were out of order.

<sup>11</sup> Jussi Parikka, *What Is Media Archaeology?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 3.