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The Meaning of Peeling Paint (notes on a Mitchell *mise-en-scène*)

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With an emphatic eye-roll, a friend once dismissed Katie Mitchell's work as 'so Farrow & Ball!' Pointing to its scenographic consistency (designs often, but not always, share family resemblances), and alluding to an aura of privilege and elitism, this attempt to politicise the decorative surfaces of Mitchell's theatre proved richly suggestive. Farrow & Ball are taste-makers for the moneyed class; following a take-over in the 1990s, they began mixing costly colours inspired by National Trust properties (like the Bloomsbury-influenced 'Charleston Gray'), developing aspirant paints and wallpapers that use historical research as a sales strategy but evoke a 'timeless' feel.¹ They therefore suit the feel of our age: the non-time and 'non-place' (as Marc Augé labels its generic, Starbucks-riddled spaces) of late capitalism.² Selling 'heritage' luxury ready to lick any wall, or the Morris-esque wrappings of an arts and crafts movement voided of its political implications, Farrow & Ball tip ever more *timeless* styles into the rapid flows that sustain late capitalism. More sinisterly, such commodities advance what Fredric Jameson calls 'the insensible colonization of the present by the nostalgia mode'.³ Describing a contemporary attachment to forms and styles unhinged from historicity, the nostalgia mode 'convey[s] "pastness" by the glossy qualities of the image'.⁴ We might say, then, that the painted surface neatly tropes the 'stasis and depthlessness' that, according to cultural geographer Doreen Massey, inheres in Jameson's perception of late capitalism's commodification of the past, and its simultaneous 'refus[al] to recognise the histories which are ongoing through the present'.⁵

For me, probing the spatio-temporal implications of surfaces helps us clarify the distinctive features of Mitchell's theatre and its political orientation. The Farrow & Ball *feel* may be adjacent to the high-modernist air of Mitchell's *Seagull* (2006), or the William

¹ See 'Revealing our 2017 colours' on the Farrow & Ball website: < <http://www.farrow-ball.com/new-trends-2017/content/fcp-content> > [accessed 18 June 2018]. For a critique of historical paint ranges as canny marketing exercises by companies including Farrow & Ball, see Amie Tsang, 'All in the mix', *Financial Times* (House & Home), 17 Feb 2012 < <https://www-ft-com.ezproxy.sussex.ac.uk/content/3b50786e-531b-11e1-8aa1-00144feabdc0> > [accessed 18 June 2018]

² Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 2009).

³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Duke University Press, 1991), 20.

⁴ Ibid, 19.

⁵ Doreen Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 120.

Morris wallpapers used as hand-held backdrops in *Waves* (2006), but in Mitchell's theatre the paint (and the wallpaper) tends to be peeling. Her several designer-collaborators join an ongoing artistic conversation that revels in the run-down, in constructed versions of anxiety-inducing ruin and collapse. Productions frequently unfold against time-stripped walls, within an architecture of cracks and fault-lines that open the space to organic matter (rain and trees in *Cleansed*, 2015), register residual stains and traces, and allow figures to merge into the walls (*...some trace of her*, 2008; *The Yellow Wallpaper*, 2013). In examining this predilection for ruinous spaces, I want to look beneath Mitchell's idiosyncratic taste for rotting buildings or cracked plaster to locate the implications of a scenography that understands place as permeable. Thinking across a trio of haunted scenographic worlds, I argue that Mitchell scratches away at the capitalist wallpaper to reveal muffled histories and their ongoing legacies, but also to see what forgotten futures might escape from its compacted layers. In addition, through excavating her canny critique of the 'stasis and depthlessness' of a neoliberal hegemony saturating late capitalist social and political interactions, my ultimate aim is to demonstrate its specifically feminist inflection.

Theoretical foundations

Understanding place as permeable poses a challenge to the habitual dichotomy of time (change) versus space (stasis, closure). Throughout this essay I rely on the insights of feminist scholars in cultural geography (Doreen Massey), postcolonial theory (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak), literary criticism (Sarah Dillon) and performance studies (Laura Levin), each of whom demonstrate the political necessity of Massey's injunction that 'time and space must be thought *together*' (my emphasis).⁶ In stressing their co-implication in Mitchell's theatre via architectural surfaces that peel or crack, my approach might appear to conceive of time materialised as layers – epitomised by the palimpsest which, following efforts to recycle costly vellum, now manifests the traces of earlier effaced writing. Massey, however, is suspicious of political cosmologies reliant on reductive views of space ordered by sequential time, resisting metaphors of space as surfaces that we might 'dig down through' like archaeologists.⁷ Similarly, Spivak employs the metaphor of the

⁶ Ibid. 18.

⁷ Ibid, 118.

‘palimpsestic narrative’ to describe Western imperialism, condemning as ‘epistemic violence’ its aim to delete all traces of so-called naïve native knowledges and overwrite them with new structures and beliefs.⁸ The logic of superimposed layers fails to recognise – and in colonial terms violently suppresses – the contemporaneous heterogeneity that runs through *any* given time *and* space.

Although Mitchell is interested in excavating the histories of place, that statement oversimplifies the eerie porosity of space and time in her work, signalled scenographically through the prevalence of peeling walls but also, as I will show, in staging techniques that disrupt normative time-signatures. With support from Dillon, I want to argue that Mitchell’s porous spaces investigate history, temporality and identity in ways that are ‘palimpsestuous’ rather than palimpsestic. Rather than merely recovering lost or marginalised histories, a palimpsestuous approach traces ‘the incestuous and encrypted texts that constitute the palimpsest’s fabric’ in the here-and-now, exposing their intricate and dynamic entanglements.⁹ What is at stake here are the political possibilities opened up by an investment in porous spaces, where place becomes (to borrow from Massey) ‘a constellation of trajectories’ that ‘bring distinct temporalities into new configurations’.¹⁰ Such an analysis invites us to view the scenographies produced by Mitchell and her collaborators not just as the bearer of oppressive histories or lost potentialities, but as the arena of ‘histories still being made, now’.¹¹

In developing this analysis, I also pursue a connection between scenography and spectral thinking in Mitchell’s work via the notion of ‘hauntology’. Writing in 1990, Jacques Derrida coined this term in response to the collapse of the Soviet Union and Francis Fukuyama’s celebratory announcement of ‘the end of history’: a media-savvy formulation cementing the triumphant alliance of liberal democracy and the free market (i.e. neoliberalism) as the culmination of ideological struggle.¹² ‘Time is off its hinges’, countered Derrida, riffing on *Hamlet*, conjuring instead the spectres of Marx as a way of

⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 66-111 (76).

⁹ Sarah Dillon, ‘Reinscribing De Quincey’s palimpsest: the significance of the palimpsest in contemporary literary and cultural studies’, *Textual Practice*, 19:3 (2005): 243-263 (254).

¹⁰ Massey, *For Space*, 149 and 71.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 118.

¹² See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

haunting this hegemony with forces it purports to have laid to rest.¹³ Mark Fisher focuses on the implications of hauntology for confronting neoliberal culture in the 21st century, arguing that ‘the power of Derrida’s concept lay in its idea of being haunted by events that had not actually happened, futures that failed to materialise and remained spectral’.¹⁴ Hauntology provides a language for exploring the heterogeneous histories, trajectories, and *future* possibilities that traverse an unfinished ‘now’ – which Mitchell’s theatre precisely *does* materialise. In so doing, her work resists ‘the mobilisation of heterogeneity into temporal sequence’ which Massey’s work opposes (because this kind of ordering relegates anti-hegemonic alternatives to an earlier stage in the queue, as do the ‘palimpsestic’ narratives of imperialism Spivak identifies).¹⁵ Furthermore, I want to mark how Mitchell’s position as a feminist practitioner conditions the particular trajectories made visible in her work. Using Levin’s analysis of bodies comingling with space to offer a ‘political critique of structures of visibility’, I explore the recurrent image in Mitchell’s theatre of women trapped in walls.¹⁶ Asking what it means to foreground acts of (female) vanishing, I argue that Mitchell’s is a hauntology which, in its reproach of late capitalist ‘timelessness’, defiantly contests some of its losses and amnesias, particularly those produced by problematic forms of neoliberal feminism.

Methodology

My analysis of places, traces and spectres across Mitchell’s body of work is informed by my own experience of watching her theatre since 2003, alongside sporadic interviews with Mitchell and her collaborators and access to rehearsals throughout 2017 in preparation for a monograph. In ordering my case studies, I have used a technique borrowed from the director’s toolbox; this essay walks backwards, just as Mitchell uses ‘rewind’ in her stagings as a material strategy for bringing trajectories and temporalities into new configurations. Following the sacrifice of the Trojan baby Astyanax in Mitchell’s production of *Women of Troy* (2007), his mother Andromache (Anastasia Hille) went

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), 20.

¹⁴ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts Of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014), 107.

¹⁵ Massey, *For Space*, 70.

¹⁶ Laura Levin, *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage, and the Art of Blending In* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 15.

into reverse, retracing her steps through the collapsing warehouse used to process the refugee women of the title, but now heavily pregnant. Mitchell's backtracking direction, returning the child to his mother's womb, produced a weird kink in Euripides' linear dramaturgy, contesting the tragic finality of the play's narrative with a host of unborn futures that, dialectically, were also haunted by future violence. Embracing the rewind tool, I offer a reverse chronology of three productions, haunting each subsequent analysis with case studies that in reality were yet to materialise.

I begin with Mitchell's *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2017) which saw three temporally distinct trajectories overwrite the same space. Unpacking its 'palimpsestuous' choreography, I explore the production's scenographic solutions for dealing with a narrative that plots three sets of choices simultaneously, in a past, a present and a future that audiences experience as coeval. Next, I travel back four years to Mitchell's collaboration with Martin Crimp on *Alles Weitere kennen Sie aus dem Kino* (2013), which staged Greek Tragedy as sci-fi, bending time and space to raise consciousness of dark histories and their disturbing legacies. Finally, I visit 2008 to plot a connection between peeling walls and an early piece of Live Cinema designed by Vicki Mortimer. Using a sequence in *...some trace of her* depicting Nastasya's body wrapped in wallpaper, I explore Mitchell's interest in the 1970s photographer Francesca Woodman, whose images materialise traces of women's bodies pressed inside wrecked architecture. These case studies stress the political timeliness of Mitchell's disruptive strategies, which harshly illuminate our capitalist present and the limitations of its spatio-temporal imaginaries in ways driven by a feminist desire to conceive of space not as closed and exclusionary but as the sphere of inclusive multiplicity.

Anatomy of a Suicide (2017):

Alex Eales' set for *Anatomy of a Suicide* underwent a series of revisions. In this brief analysis, I explore the development of the artistic concept in order to argue two things. First, I propose that what I'm calling a 'Mitchell *mise-en-scène*' is in fact the product of the intuitive and collaborative labour of a tightly-knit creative team evolving a distinctive scenic vocabulary within parameters defined by the director. Second, I suggest that, as logistical challenges forced modifications to the set, Mitchell's team forged solutions that

blended hitherto distinct conceptual approaches connected with their naturalistic work. The resulting 'palimpsestuous' staging sharpens our understanding of tendencies running through Mitchell's oeuvre, ones that resonate with Massey's desire to 'uproot space from the constellation of concepts in which it has so unquestioningly been embedded (stasis; closure; representation) and settle it among another set of ideas (heterogeneity; relationality; coevalness)' through which 'it releases a more challenging political landscape'.¹⁷

Alice Birch's play is more accurately described as three separate plays that run simultaneously. Each is centred on a single woman drawn from three generations of one family and, over the course of 16 scenes, Birch depicts in parallel Carol's struggles with clinical depression in the 1970s-80s; her daughter Anna's battles with addiction in the 1990s-2000s; and her grand-daughter Bonnie's attempts, in the 2030s, to manage the accumulated trauma of Carol and Anna's suicides. Analysed independently, these three strands consist of 32 scenes each requiring a particular setting, which is especially challenging given Mitchell's preference for sealed, high-fidelity naturalistic environments. Eales explained that typically he and Mitchell would choose to box the three parallel timelines in compartments separated by walls in a modular construction reminiscent of his design for Mitchell's production of James MacMillan's opera, *Clemency* (2011), or Vicki Mortimer and Lizzie Clachan's split-stage design for *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (2011) – an impracticable solution at the Royal Court Downstairs given its smaller scale and curved seating that assigns some spectators an extreme side-view of the proscenium-arch stage.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Eales's initial concept pursued the notion of delivering separate worlds within a single encapsulating system.

Each narrative strand would occupy a third of the stage from front to back, without partitions, allowing audiences an unimpeded view across the space. In addition, a series of independent panels (solid to denote interiors; semi-transparent and back-lit for exterior scenes) would fly in and out of position behind each strand to suggest locations. Further back, behind these panels, Eales designed a detailed naturalistic living-room interior the entire width of the stage, based on his and Mitchell's realisation that the

¹⁷ Massey, *For Space*, 13.

¹⁸ Eales in conversation with the author, 20th April 2017.

highest number of scenes take place in a family home passed between generations. For these scenes, the panels in each strand would rise to show a slice of the house behind, which wouldn't be fully revealed until the end. However, two weeks into the four-week rehearsal period, Mitchell and Eales realised that technical and budgetary pressures, and the problem of actors needing to cross other strands to enter the middle scene, compromised their ability to realise this plan satisfactorily. Moreover, rewrites by Birch necessitated all panels flying out together in scene 10, making redundant the initial idea that the house is only fully exposed in the final, sixteenth scene.

In addressing these predicaments, Mitchell's team returned to the tried and tested method of staging the three worlds 'all in one room'.¹⁹ Mitchell has tended to seek ways of staging plays in a single setting in order to 'maximise the sustained building of dramatic tension'.²⁰ Even in her productions of Chekhov's plays she has moved exterior scenes indoors to avoid disruptive scene changes which, in the case of *The Cherry Orchard* (2015), also accentuated the haunting presence of the drowned child Grisha, whose preserved nursery became the literal backdrop to all four acts (instead of two as Chekhov stipulates). But by this stage in the *Anatomy* process, the builders had constructed the living room interior forming the back of the set. Eales's solution was to replace the flying panels with a single wall hiding this interior, providing the huge advantage of three additional upstage doors offering new entry points into each narrative. He stripped the aesthetic back to a single environment whose surfaces, uncharacteristically, were not peeling; instead, the new wall extended the neutral aesthetic of the foreground – a bruised concrete effect typifying what the lighting designer James Farncombe described as Mitchell's and Eales's preference for paint finishes that look 'haunted'.²¹ Although Farncombe used distinctive practical lighting sources to compliment the period costumes and furniture in signalling temporally distinct narratives, these now unfolded coterminously in an enclosed concrete surrounding with seven access doors.²² *Anatomy*

¹⁹ See 'Immersive Worlds: Designing Katie Mitchell's Theatre' in *The Theatre of Katie Mitchell*, ed. Benjamin Fowler (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019) where Eales discusses this principle as it relates to designs like *Cleansed* (2015), which located Kane's eclectic scenes in a single environment governed by the logic of a dreamscape.

²⁰ Mitchell in conversation with the author, 7th November 2017.

²¹ Farncombe in conversation with author, 5th July 2017.

²² The three new doors joined four existing doors in the stage-left and -right walls. Carol's 1970s pine furniture dominated stage-right, a 1990s 'shabby chic' aesthetic characterised Anna's central strand, and the projected future of Bonnie's world featured clean lines and minimalism in the stage-left section.

thus produced a creative melding of the ‘one place’ principle and Mitchell’s strategy of inviting audiences to read between compartmentalised spaces – most prominently, the homes of Anne Frankford and Susan Mountford, set side-by-side in *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (2011) or the scenic juxtapositions of public and private domains in Mortimer’s designs for *Lucia di Lammermoor* (2016).²³ But unlike those detailed naturalistic compartments, this concrete holding environment with its seven portals led to a more fluid, palimpsestuous choreography evocative of the porous nature across time, one that foregrounded hauntings and spectral effects.

Sarah Dillon’s differentiation between two types of reading – ‘palimpsestic’ and ‘palimpsestuous’ – is relevant here. The first scrutinises the palimpsest’s traces of distinct layers of writing with what Dillon calls the ‘sole aim and objective of the resurrection of the underlying script’.²⁴ In bringing obscured traces to the surface, palimpsestic acts of rescue reinforce Massey’s concern that the palimpsest is an ‘archaeological’ metaphor with a tendency to transform multiplicity and radical contemporaneity into history.²⁵ Helpfully, Dillon is more interested in the cohabitation of various unconnected texts that the palimpsest-as-object makes apparent. She advocates processes of ‘palimpsestuous’ reading that create relations between these ‘incestuous and encrypted texts [...] where there may, or should, be none; hence the appropriateness of its epithet’s phonetic similarity to the incestuous’.²⁶ In *Anatomy*, the incestuous connotation is especially evocative, as the temporally estranged narratives of near relations become the raw material for ongoing processes of identity-construction in the *here-and-now* of each timeline.²⁷ Crucially, Birch’s generational narrative resists adhering to a linear temporal sequence, and Mitchell responded to a dramaturgy that presents its unfolding trajectories as coeval by developing directorial interventions that created additional palimpsestuous readings, using bodies to overwrite the same space.²⁸

²³ For more on this strategy see Margaret Jane Kidnie, “‘We really can’t be doing 1603 now. We really can’t”: Katie Mitchell, Theatrical Adaptation, and Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness*,” *Shakespeare Bulletin* 31:4 (2013): 647-668.

²⁴ Dillon, ‘Reinscribing De Quincey’s palimpsest’, 253.

²⁵ Massey, *For Space*, 110.

²⁶ Dillon, ‘Reinscribing De Quincey’s palimpsest’, 254.

²⁷ As always in Mitchell’s process (where detailed character biographies and textual analysis are used to infer inherited thoughts and behaviours), but rarely this explicitly, family functions as the ultimate haunted structure.

²⁸ Across her work, Mitchell has created structures that invite ‘palimpsestuous’ reading. See, for instance, her Live Cinema productions that overlay the unconnected writings of poets and dramatists (Franz Xaver

The most significant of these were elaborately choreographed transitions between scenes. Mitchell decided early on that Carol, Anna and Bonnie would remain onstage throughout, keeping audiences immersed in their dramatic situations. Consequently, during dance-like scene changes, they became supple but inanimate mannequins. The other six actors traversed the entire space in tangling lines tasked with dressing and undressing the protagonists (who wore 84 costumes over the production's 116 minutes). During these sequences, the already invisible spatial and temporal boundaries dissolved completely as doors flung open of their own volition, and in slick, graceful moves actors furnished the stage with magical speed; testifying to their complexity, during rehearsals one actor compared navigating these sequences to crossing a motorway. Mitchell orchestrated contrasts between stillness, slow motion, and frenetic activity in transitions lit by Farncombe with an eerie blue wash, lending them a spectral quality captured in Stephen Cummiskey's long-exposure production stills. But they also drew attention to ongoing histories that transcended individual narratives, as in a number of sequences exclusively the men would strip or dress the women, or lift and reposition them simultaneously, using kinaesthesia to play out on the female body the deep-rooted gender politics connecting all three social structures. Picking up on Birch's interest in the ways that medical discourse and patriarchal attitudes at times infantilise women across all three timelines, Mitchell's transitions resonated with the writer's attempts to probe the wider structural forces – beyond genetic inheritance – that shape experiences easily depoliticised as individual psychosis or disorder. Going beyond an anatomy of a single suicide (promised in the title), Mitchell staged distinctive and highly memorable tangles of the ensemble in ways that made visible the influence of cultural and social systems over decades.

Mitchell's well-documented use of 'events' to structure her work with actors provided additional means for stressing temporal entanglements between scenes that the director insisted were never rehearsed separately.²⁹ In scene 7, while Anna is re-painting the

Kroetz and Anne Sexton in *Wunschkonzert*, 2008; Strindberg and Inger Christensen in *Fräulein Julie*, 2010).

²⁹ See Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 55-62. All events and intentions, which Mitchell identifies in collaboration with the cast, are assiduously documented and enjoy the same status as the written text. Actors can call out for their 'intention' at any point in a rehearsal, just as they

family house to live in it with her partner, Jamie, she senses her mother, still alive in the narrative flow of strand A: 'I can Smell her. I can Feel her. She's sitting at the table'.³⁰ Having identified this as an 'event', a moment of change in which every character shifts their intention, Mitchell moved across to the future timeline to work with Adelle Leonce (Bonnie) on her physical action, repotting house plants she has nurtured from seed: 'When Anna says "I can Feel her", there's a haunting for you too; the pleasure of doing the plants is disturbed by some other thought'.³¹ In using 'events' as tangles between the three timelines, Mitchell transcended mono-directional lines of influence connecting past to present, allowing future timelines to create reverberations in antecedent worlds. Her techniques materialised as bodily effects Massey's argument that 'identities are relational in ways that are *spatio-temporal*', 'bound up with the "narratives of the past" and made up of resources we "inherit" in 'process[es] of identity-construction' which are "'ongoing" *now*'.³² But using events and their tangible impacts, Mitchell also heightened audience sensitivity to the interpenetration of projected, imagined, and actual *futures*, drawing them into the constellations of spatio-temporal relationality that inform identity construction in three simultaneous here-and-nows.

In a final development during technical rehearsals, the team collectively decided to leave the upstage doors open and light the rear of the set during scenes set in the family home, offering glimpses of a solid structure that began haunting the pared-back, concrete environment in the foreground. Eales had designed his emergency back wall with flying capabilities, allowing the last-minute decision to restore the idea of the final scene yielding a clear view of a unified space: a bare front room in a Victorian house with bright sunlight flooding its bay windows. The result was a striking *coup de théâtre* (unusual in Mitchell's work to date, which has sought to avoid moving scenery in view of the audience) that carried huge symbolic significance. This sense of spatial expansion followed the longest transition, a ninety-second slow-motion sequence in which Carol

would a line of dialogue. This documentation is centralised and accessible to anyone, and often drawn on as a blueprint for adjustments in lighting and sound.

³⁰ Alice Birch, *Anatomy of a Suicide* (London: Oberon Books, 2017), 135.

³¹ Rehearsal observation (London), Weds 17th May 2017.

³² Massey, *For Space*, 192. Mitchell's artistic collaborators supported this event structure, and the bodily effects it produced in actors, with technology; James Farncombe (lighting designer) and Melanie Wilson (sound designer) plotted changes in their abstract, atmospheric or diegetic designs (the boundaries of which were creatively blurred) that registered events in barely perceptible (almost spectral) ways.

and Anna (who had dropped out of the narrative, and left the stage, in scenes 14 and 15 respectively at the point of their suicides) crossed the space horizontally, breaking its organisation into distinct temporal lanes and making physical contact with Bonnie as they passed.

Here scenography and staging conspired to generate a sense of coeval heterogeneity that gestures towards a politics of palimpsestuous porosity. The 2030s strand occupies a time that has not yet arrived. It haunts the play with a projected future in which Bonnie decides not to sell the house but moves in and confronts its repressed histories. Importantly, this contrasts with Anna (occupying the central narrative, closest to our own social and political reality) who uses drugs and alcohol as ruses to erase past traumas, producing a state of numbness and stasis reminiscent of the 'anterograde amnesia' that, for Mark Fisher, is the cultural pathology of late capitalist culture.³³ Nevertheless, the play doesn't offer a crass or sentimental happy (future) ending – indeed, the penultimate scene shows Bonnie pursuing sterilisation to ensure that 'it finishes here', a choice that appears to yield, in its drastic refusal, to the logic of biological determinism and the inevitability of inherited trauma.³⁴ Birch then adds a short final scene to finish in more liminal, ambiguous territory. Following (in this production) Mitchell's lengthy transition and the raising of the wall, another mother and her daughter descend the newly revealed stairs – it transpires that they are prospective buyers – and Bonnie, who is now ready to sell, invites them to pick plums for their picnic, envisaging new uses for the trees that prompted Carol to buy the house six decades ago.

Building on Birch's final direction that 'The light changes. Just a little',³⁵ this staging opened up an expansive space (figuratively and literally) of inclusive multiplicity, charged with the traces of the women who had just traversed its dimensions in slow motion to make contact with Bonnie, signalling a psychological and scenographic accommodation of old and new inhabitants in shared space that counterbalanced purely determinist logics and singular trajectories whilst acknowledging the ongoing histories that traverse an unfinished now. Although very different in form and feel, it thus bore

³³ Fisher, *Ghosts Of My Life*, 111.

³⁴ Birch, *Anatomy*, 235.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 237.

traces of a work four years earlier that forced the escape of traumas trapped in the walls of a house to release a more challenging political landscape.

Alles Weitere kennen Sie aus dem Kino [The Rest Will Be Familiar to You from Cinema]
(2013)

In 2013, Mitchell staged a new play by Martin Crimp that borrowed a plot from the past (Euripides' *The Phoenician Women*) but situated it in a crumbling present pulsating with a futuristic, other-worldly force. At the start, a black wall slid sideways to reveal an interior designed by Alex Eales that was the apogee of the ruinous sets he and others have created for Mitchell's naturalistic work – a two-storey stately home in disrepair, chunks of plaster falling from the ceiling, with shattered sockets and gaps through which nature has begun its slow enjungling creep. It was reminiscent of a building from Ukraine's abandoned city of Pripyat in the aftermath of Chernobyl, broken chairs left upended in the corners, and walls exfoliated as if by acid rain or radiation. In this brief analysis, I want to focus on the mystery of the squad of women, named the 'Mädchen' (Girls) in Crimp's script, who take up residency in the ruins during the production's opening minutes. Dressed in black sleeveless smocks, their long hair wound into tight top-knots, they bundle Euripides's ancient protagonists into the house, blindfolded, and lock them into offstage rooms. As the production unfolds, the Mädchen disclose numinous abilities that blur the boundaries of the human and the architectural – in their presence, chairs and doors move without human agency, and they repeatedly lift and drop the imaginary fourth-wall (realised as a lighting effect) to expose Euripides' cast of characters to twenty-first-century spectators. Unlike the *displaced* Phoenician women – the chorus in Euripides' play who find themselves trapped in Thebes on the brink of a violent civil war – these women seem at home; working with the porous building, they release coevalness into the space in ways that challenge dominant conceptions of spatio-temporality underpinning what Massey calls the oppressive political cosmology of 'only one narrative'.³⁶

Mitchell stated in production publicity that her staging 'attempt[s] to walk a fine line

³⁶ Massey, *For Space*, 5.

between naturalism and science fiction'.³⁷ As if ciphers for the director herself, the Mädchen's experiments with ancient narrative exploit the boundless spatial and temporal possibilities of speculative worlds. More than passive respondents to the conflict between Eteocles and Polynices that threatens to ravage Thebes, the Mädchen cause scenes to repeat and restart, but the most startling of their powers is 'rewind', reversing the flow of realist sequences with spellbinding choreographic accuracy. These are Mitchell's directorial interventions, but they are responsive to Crimp's textual concerns. In order to deliver his revamped choral odes, the Mädchen carry illuminated glass display cabinets containing 'evidence' – books, maps and diagrams, a globe, a film projector – that anachronistically confuse ancient with modern. Opening a dusty manuscript that she has lifted from a display case wearing pristine white gloves, one of the Mädchen invites us to 'look carefully at the map' of Thebes and locate the 'supermarket car-park', the 'bus station', the 'concrete apartment-block' with its wall blown out.³⁸ Anachronism becomes a tool, then, not to elide temporalities, but to expose the traces of a violent past in surroundings familiar to an urban Western elite, dissolving the spatio-temporal boundaries that separate ancient fictional Thebes from modern-day Hamburg (the city in which the production premiered). Crimp's text for the Mädchen, realised by Mitchell as futuristic curators, enacts what we might call a 'palimpsestuous' remapping of the city, one alert to Kimberly A. Powell's sense of the 'ways in which voices 'live on' in the traces of our built, material and visual cultures'.³⁹

Crimp's interest in tracing ongoing legacies of (patriarchal) violence that continue to reverberate in a neoliberal hegemony is evident from the bits of Euripides' play that he preserves. The Mädchen retrieve characters from offstage spaces and remove their blindfolds, prompting them to talk, but also to append sentences with formulations ('says Jocasta') that turn dialogue into reported speech. Early on, they get Jocasta to disclose backstory: her husband-son, Oedipus, has blinded himself after learning that he killed his father and married his mother, and now their sons, Eteocles and Polynices, are waging war on the outskirts of Thebes to determine who owns the city. But Jocasta reaches

³⁷ Katie Mitchell, quoted in 'Regisseurin Katie Mitchell im Gespräch', *Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg Spielzeit 2013-14* (Lüneburg: v Stern'sche Druckerei, 2013), 27.

³⁸ Martin Crimp, *The Hamburg Plays* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), 39-40.

³⁹ Kimberly A. Powell, 'Remapping the City: Palimpsest, Place, and Identity in Art Education Research', *Studies in Art Education* 50:1 (2008): 6-21 (19).

further across time to offer a striking account, prompted by the Mädchen, of what happened when Thebes' founder and first king (Kadmos) left Phoenicia and landed on European shores:

Jocasta His fingers – from the perpetual cracking open
 of shellfish to obtain dye – says Jocasta –
 smell of sex.
 He brings with him from the east
 bright light, the blood-red dye that's made him rich
 his own human material and the alphabet.⁴⁰

Crimp's tenses cause past and present to co-mingle. Jocasta's account of Thebes's founding myth similarly fuses the capitalist extraction and exploitation of resources with (sexual) violence, but also with what Spivak (developing Foucault) terms the 'epistemic violence' of colonialism: the 'effacing' work of dominant discourses that silence heterogeneity, 'disqualifying' prior sets of knowledge as 'inadequate'.⁴¹ It isn't accidental that colonising Kadmos brings the alphabet. Language will create and reproduce relations of power and subordination as his patriarchal political economy reproduces itself across subsequent generations. Crimp has Polynices read from a sheet of paper the uncomplicated truths, the 'facts that speak for themselves', that give him 'no choice but to wage a just war'.⁴² As he reads, Mitchell's direction has Jocasta, Antigone and Ismene – under the oversight of the Mädchen – stop listening and start walking backwards; women, in this production, pursue trajectories that resist the linear flows of self-justifying narratives of conquest and domination.

Moreover, Crimp's is a highly reflexive text alert to culture's implication in the 'palimpsestic' imperialist narrative Spivak critiques. The Mädchen's odes pull high-art into their palimpsestuous webs; in their first speech they use a projector to screen the final frames of Pasolini's *Oedipus* (1967), asking us if the close-up of Silvana Mangano's Jocasta nursing her baby makes us want to cry: 'Is it the music?' they probe.⁴³ Later, in

⁴⁰ Crimp, *The Hamburg Plays*, 9.

⁴¹ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', 76.

⁴² Crimp, *The Hamburg Plays*, 31.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 8.

Scene 10, they wheel on a reel-to-reel tape player and get us to listen to Bach's aria 'Die Seele ruht in Jesu Händen' – asking what kind of world produced it: 'How many cars streamed along the motorways? In the green tree-tops of Thebes when this music was written / how many birds precisely nested?'⁴⁴ Harking back to the army of skeleton warriors Kadmos raised from the earth, using the teeth of a snake he bashed to death with a stone, Creon's son remembers that 'they founded this city with blood and constructed the walls [...] with music'.⁴⁵ Whereas notions of so-called 'advanced' culture often accompany the epistemic violence of colonial discourse (defining other cultures as 'primitive') the Mädchen's non-sequiturs trace connections between cinema, sublime music and violent hegemonic structures of power, showing them as interlocked and ongoing in our present.⁴⁶ The English title of Crimp's adaptation – *The Rest Will Be Familiar to You from Cinema* – now comes into focus. Using film to trope 'familiar' cultural narratives often blind to their implication in hegemonic structures of power (think, for instance of Laura Mulvey's seminal exposé of the oppressive patriarchal tendencies governing 'visual pleasure' in mainstream narrative cinema),⁴⁶ this adaptation pierces culture's civilising veneer, reaching to embrace *unfamiliar* perspectives that lie outside and beyond the cinematic frame.

This reading helps clarify Mitchell's major directorial intervention. The published German and English scripts reveal that Crimp wrote a long penultimate scene between Oedipus and Antigone dramatising her radicalisation by the violence of war. However, an asterisk explains that the bulk of the scene did not feature in the premiere.⁴⁷ Mitchell drastically cut Crimp's text, halting the scene at a moment of peak-intensity when the blind Oedipus asks his traumatised daughter to kiss him (Crimp hints at sexual abuse throughout). Antigone is paralysed, so one of the Mädchen steps forwards instead, giving Oedipus a slow sensual kiss. Unable to see, he at first relishes the kiss, but then a horrifying moment of tactile recognition sends him reeling; stumbling back, Oedipus shouts a line pulled from the end of Crimp's scene – 'I thought I had answered your question' – that identifies the Mädchen as the Sphinx.⁴⁸ Reality buckles. Mitchell halts the

⁴⁴ Ibid, 54.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 53.

⁴⁶ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 833-44.

⁴⁷ See Crimp, *The Hamburg Plays* for the English edition, which reveals that Mitchell cut pages 76-83.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 83.

action and the actors shift into reverse-gear, making the entire scene spool backwards.

The effect is terrifying, accompanied by the screeching high-pitched jibberish of a cassette-tape being rewound. I want to argue that Mitchell's temporal reversal picks up on clues dropped by Crimp, but also displaces his narrative (and Euripides' plot) to give more space, power and agency to the counter-hegemonic spectres haunting his play. Crimp has Jocasta remind audiences early on of Oedipus's encounter with the Sphinx in which he solved a riddle that led to him taking control of Thebes: 'Oedipus swaggers in. "It's not difficult" he says, "The answer's a human being. Now make me king."' ⁴⁹ His words silence the Sphinx (literally killing her) allowing him to claim both the crown and his mother-bride, but as Rachel Clements argues, 'in the process of silencing and suppression via which any hegemony operates and maintains its position, it becomes haunted'. ⁵⁰ I want to suggest that Mitchell's intervention positions the Mädchen as the heterogeneous, multi-bodied agency of a repressed, female Other; speaking in riddles from the outset ('If Carolin has three apples and Luise has three apples / how many oranges has Sabine got?') ⁵¹, Crimp's Mädchen are mouthpieces for a series of multiplying questions. Mitchell makes them spectres of a dead Sphinx who derail linear narrative, reversing its temporal flow to point us back to an originary act of epistemic violence whose ongoing consequences ricochet through Oedipus's patriarchal regime. Resisting his attempts to convene history into temporal sequence – Oedipus thought he *had answered* her question – the silenced not only persists, but it *interrupts*.

Feminist critical analysis shows time and again how hegemonic definitions of what constitutes a 'human being' emanate from a universalising discourse that masks the positionality of the (typically) white male heterosexual. Here, the Mädchen haunt the patriarchal hegemony of Thebes with the discontinuities and heterogeneities silenced by Oedipus's (and patriarchy's) limiting notions of the 'human being'. Their disruptions insist in a material sense that the interlocking trajectories of Sphinx and king share space in ways that accommodate hybridity and constitutive interrelatedness. Such a haunting is hopeful; in giving agency to these spectres, Mitchell's staging uses slippery spatial and

⁴⁹ Ibid, 12.

⁵⁰ Rachel Clements, 'Deconstructive Techniques and Spectral Technologies in Katie Mitchell's *Attempts on Her Life*', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 24:3 (2014): 331-341 (333-4).

⁵¹ Crimp, *The Hamburg Plays*, 7.

temporal logics to reopen a basic question, asking the dominant trajectories to recognise themselves 'as part of a complexity and not the universals which they have for so long proposed themselves to be'.⁵² 'Rewind' here tropes the director's use of representational tools to disclose counter-hegemonic perspectives. With this in mind, I now (re)turn to my final case study, in which Mitchell explored ways of repurposing the camera itself as a technology that might locate subaltern traces and linger on the vanished.

...some trace of her (2008)

The name of this multimedia adaptation is a quotation from its source text, Fyodor Dostoevsky's nineteenth-century novel, *The Idiot*. But whereas Dostoevsky's title refers to his narrator, Prince Myshkin, Mitchell's choice of an elliptical reference to an unnamed woman (Myshkin's love interest, Nastasya Filipovna) declares a shift in emphasis. Using poetry and visual images to explore how Nastasya's identity takes shape, Mitchell materialises interlocking trajectories embedded in the time and space of the novel, transforming Dostoevsky's first-person narrative into something hybrid. Here I explore the sequences in the production showing Nastasya alone, unfiltered by the gaze of the male protagonists through whom Dostoevsky envisions her, taking self-portraits using wallpaper as camouflage.⁵³ Her artistry resonates with the case studies in Laura Levin's book *Performing Ground*, which explores the feminist possibilities of 'a performance strategy in which the human body commingles with or is presented as a direct extension of its setting'.⁵⁴ Rather than grapple with the intricacies of *The Idiot's* adaption, I want to explore Mitchell's depiction of Nastasya as an artist whose practice blends women into the walls. Levin's analysis of corporeal mingling builds on foundations laid by feminist theorists including Luce Irigaray, who excavate the toxic gender politics undergirding spatial metaphors like figure v. ground to reveal that women are the 'disavowed ground that makes male self-figuration possible'.⁵⁵ One strategy of resistance involves appropriating representational codes in ways that don't merely side-step their hidden sexist traps but make them known and felt. Reading Nastasya's art as the correlative of

⁵² Massey, *For Space*, 11.

⁵³ They echo the way Mitchell, across her Live Cinema work, has wielded technology to materialise traces of women who disappear inside mirrors (*Waves*, 2006) or become trapped in wallpaper (*The Yellow Wallpaper*, 2013).

⁵⁴ Levin, *Performing Ground*, 13.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 17.

Mitchell's own Live Cinema strategies, I'm interested in the possibilities of photography as a time-based medium that puts an environment through an artistic process of response, filtering reality in ways that 'expose' its disavowed absences and exclusions.

...some trace of her introduced Nastasya (Hattie Morahan) as a photographer angling a nineteenth-century bellows camera towards a wall in her apartment. Stepping into her own composition, she held still for the glass plate's lengthy exposition, creating the first in a series of photographic self-portraits. But beyond the bellows camera, a huge network of digital apparatus surrounded and framed Nastasya's analogue artistry; as happens across Mitchell's Live Cinema work, the actors doubled as twenty-first century technicians, manoeuvring backdrops, lights and film cameras to create cinematic output edited in real-time and projected above the stage, stepping in and out of the frame to play Dostoevsky's characters as required. When Mitchell later returned us to Nastasya's apartment for another experiment in image-making, a different actor filmed Morahan in costume as Nastasya, focusing on her hands scratching at the wallpapered backdrop representing her apartment until a panel peeled away. Then the projection screen went dark as Morahan's Nastasya approached another Live Cinema camera on a tripod (twenty-first technology now ghosting nineteenth-century equipment) to remove its lens cap, returning visual output to the screen. Walking in front of the camera, she stripped to her waist, holding pieces of torn-off wallpaper against her naked torso. The screen now showed Nastasya, seen through the camera, disappearing into a wall: a direct citation of a black-and-white image in the *Space2* series by the American photographer Francesca Woodman. Another actor (Pandora Collins) read an Emily Dickinson poem in voiceover as we digested the image – 'There is a pain – so utter – / It swallows substance up' – and as Morahan/Nastasya broke from her pose to return the lens cap, a frozen screenshot of Nastasya/Woodman's artistic composition lingered above the stage, a visual after-effect of Dickinson's poem about pain's capacity to dissolve matter.

The sequence productively entangled Nastasya's self-portraits and Mitchell's Live Cinema form, literalising the major influence of Woodman's black-and-white images (made in the 1970s) on Mitchell and her team across both naturalistic and Live Cinema

modes.⁵⁶ The designer Vicki Mortimer remembers the role Woodman's photographs played in artistic conversations adjacent to the 'release' of the early multimedia experiments, affirming her and Mitchell's discovery that a representation of reality could also be 'a blend of the subjective and the objective'.⁵⁷ Woodman's lengthy exposures often register the photographer's body as a smear, literally blending with the derelict surroundings in which she chose to shoot. They therefore materialise Levin's desire to 'reorient the ways that performance theorists approach spatialized identity' – pushing beyond understandings of self as an 'individual moving *within* an environment' towards conceptualisations of self 'as the environment itself, as something that is coextensive with its surroundings'.⁵⁸ Increasingly in Mitchell's work, stage architecture (the bedroom that floods in *Ophelias Zimmer*; the torn yellow wallpaper in the Live Cinema production of the same name) becomes a physical extension of the protagonist, a membrane that registers psychological damage and also outlasts bodily forms (these protagonists often commit suicide). Cameras and sets, like the light-sensitive chemicals that fix the fleeting human energies in Woodman's photographs, have become representational tools to *rematerialize* women undergoing processes of dematerialisation, working in concert with Mitchell's frequent choice to focus our gazes on women experiencing a pain that literally *swallows substance up*.

Mitchell's material interest in porosity thus make sensible the invisible violence of representational economies and patriarchal cultures that, in Levin's summary, rely on 'woman as [the] *disavowed* ground' (my emphasis) on which male selfhood is constructed.⁵⁹ As if propelled by the imperative voiced by Sarah Kane's speaker in *4.48 Psychosis* (which Mitchell directed in 2017) – 'Watch me vanish!' – Mitchell has over the last decade confronted audiences with reiterative narrative patterns that affectively impress upon audiences the erasure of women.⁶⁰ In this, I discern a relationship with what Elaine Aston identified in 2010 as a genealogy of experiential British female

⁵⁶ Most visibly, *On Being an Angel #1* (Providence, Rhode Island, 1977) provided the poster for Mitchell's *A Dream Play* (NT, 2005).

⁵⁷ Mortimer in conversation with the author, 26th September 2017.

⁵⁸ Levin, *Performing Ground*, 6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 17.

⁶⁰ She retrieves them from existing narratives (e.g. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*; Thomas Heywood's *A Woman Killed With Kindness*), conjures unhappy ghosts from canonical texts (e.g. *Hamlet*), or commissions new works (e.g. *The Forbidden Zone*) that insist we hold our attention on vanishing women, real and fictional.

playwriting from the 1990s onwards that trades in affect and is imbued with a drive to make audiences *feel* what she terms the loss of feminism: 'Widely circulating ideas of Postfeminism that unhelpfully foster an erroneous belief that feminism is redundant and over'.⁶¹ Aston also problematizes the notion that a collective and communal feminism ever 'happened' in the first place, using debbie tucker green's play *stoning mary* (2006) and the titular character's rant against 'feminist bitches' to evince the movement's internal divisions and disavowals, painfully acknowledging 'the loss of a feminism "we" never had'.⁶² Thinking of the spectres of Marx populating Derrida's hauntology, we might refer to the loss that Aston registers in these plays as a haunting by lost futures, understanding feminism itself as a frustrated promise (and therefore an ongoing potential) that runs through Mitchell's practice.

Mitchell started describing her work as 'feminist' in 2010, two decades into the actual interpenetration of postfeminist cultural sensibilities and neoliberal ideology, and three years after 'postfeminism' was formalised as a term in cultural studies.⁶³ Her relatively recent articulation of structural misogyny as her explicit focus, dredging dramatic canons for the voices they submerge, may appear to indicate an outdated fascination with historical examples of women's subjugation in a culture where more market-friendly notions of empowerment hold sway.⁶⁴ On the contrary, I argue that Mitchell's work represents not a disabling, punishing attachment to transhistorical female victimhood; rather, it enacts its own haunting of a 'postfeminist' hegemony – one that resists the violence of such an epistemic shift by insisting that we recognise how feminism's promises of more equitable futures have failed to transpire in truly transformative ways.

Apposite here is Massey's warning that the convening of difference into temporal sequence risks occluding 'present-day relations and practices and their relentless *production*, within *current* rounds of capitalist globalisation, of increasing inequality'.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Elaine Aston, 'Feeling the Loss of Feminism: Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and an Experiential Genealogy of Contemporary Women's Playwrighting', *Theatre Journal* 62:4 (2010): 575-591 (577).

⁶² Aston, 'Feeling the Loss of Feminism', 590.

⁶³ For a discussion of the term 'postfeminism' and its circulation in academic discourse see Rosalind Gill, 'The affective, cultural and psychic life of postfeminism: A postfeminist sensibility 10 years on', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 20:6 (2017): 606-626.

⁶⁴ Similarly out of joint, it pre-dates the widespread shock to such complacency prompted by #metoo.

⁶⁵ Massey, *For Space*, 82.

We might easily reformulate her claim, in 2005, that ‘the discourse of globalisation as free movement about the world is fuelling the ‘archaic’ (but not) sentiments of parochialism [and] nationalism’ to argue that discourses of postfeminism fuel the archaic (but not) sentiments of sexism and misogyny.⁶⁶ In a recent interview with Maddy Costa, Mitchell described her work as an attempt to create an alternative body of theatre texts recognising the ‘validity of oppression’ and acknowledging the ‘toxic gender politics’ so often presented as acceptable in contemporary productions of canonical works.⁶⁷ Adapting *Hamlet* from the perspective of Ophelia’s bedroom (*Ophelias Zimmer*, 2015) is therefore part of a co-ordinated strategy of reinscription, marking the latent misogyny that courses through ostensibly non-gendered *present-day* relations and practices in the production of classical texts, which however unknowingly posit the male as the neutral.

There is a risk that such a project is viewed as an outdated expression of a 1970s second-wave essentialist position, stuck in a melancholic attachment to misogyny as the fundamental oppression. Wendy Brown diagnoses something similar in her analysis of the ghostly spirit of a (politically) Left Melancholy, ‘most at home dwelling not in hopefulness but in its own marginality and failure’.⁶⁸ Mark Fisher has no traffic with melancholia when it is ‘perniciously disavowed’ by those who believe they are being ‘realistic’. He does, however, discern progressive potential in a politicised, self-aware melancholia that ‘refus[es] to adjust to what current conditions call “reality” – even if the cost of that refusal is that you feel like an outcast in your own time’.⁶⁹ For me, this resonates loudly with Mitchell’s work, its temporal porosity, and the impulse to literalise the entanglement of female subjectivity and sexist spatial metaphors in *...some trace of her* and beyond. Rather than indulging in naturalising repetitions of woman as vanquished object, Mitchell *denormalises* the figurative and unmarked assimilation of women into the walls by forcing audiences to confront acts of vanishing *in process*. Once again, Mitchell’s peeling walls and palimpsestuous techniques harness what Levin calls ‘morphological transformations and sensible material form’ to instrumentalise acts of erasure themselves as an interruptive force, haunting the hegemonic structure with what

⁶⁶ Ibid, 87.

⁶⁷ Maddy Costa, ‘Alternative point of view: The Malady of Death’, *Barbican Blog* 4 May 2018 < <http://blog.barbican.org.uk/2018/05/alternative-point-of-view-the-malady-of-death/>> [accessed 15 July 2018].

⁶⁸ Wendy Brown, ‘Resisting Left Melancholy’, *boundary 2* 26:3 (1999): 19-27 (26).

⁶⁹ Fisher, *Ghosts Of My Life*, 24.

it disavows in ways that (literally) weaken its physical, spatial integrity.⁷⁰ In this sense, Mitchell inscribes twenty-first-century constructions of reality with ongoing strains of hegemonic violence targeted at making audiences recognise – or rather, *feel* – the rot behind the wallpaper of neoliberal postfeminist hegemony as a necessary step towards imagining structures that truly accommodate alterity and heterogeneity, rather than being quietly constituted on their erasure.

Conclusion

The case studies I've tackled stack up to reveal how scenography and Mitchell's direction work together to disrupt the purported density and solidity of an ever-refreshing capitalist present, which – like the 'end of history' – actually reinforces a questionable view of temporality as sequential coherence. Mitchell's strategies subvert such illusory coherence by transforming the everyday experience of material reality into something more eerie and provocative. Her porous spaces and palimpsestuous strategies puncture the glossy surfaces of late capitalist culture, forcing audiences to confront the ongoing histories that seep through, but also acknowledging multiplicity in ways that challenge dominant formations of culture, history and patriarchy under the social and political consensus of neoliberalism. I hope it is clear that it thus matters a great deal that the paint is peeling; far from peddling historical kitsch or dwelling in romanticised ruin, Mitchell drags forgotten histories and frustrated futures into her theatre in ways that challenge common understandings of the present-tense rather than paper over its faultlines. Contesting neoliberalism's colonisation of the present and its commodification of various pasts that sheer off their spiky and subversive political implications, Mitchell has developed palimpsestuous approaches to history, temporality and identity that simultaneously offer a feminist critique of structures of visibility. They also raise important questions about how we historicise theory, practice and politics, suggesting that attempts to convene 'feminism' itself into temporal waves might unhelpfully constrain as much as they clarify; worse still, they risk unwittingly authenticating the 'end' of anti-hegemonic trajectories already smothered by a capitalist culture that saturates everything with its reflective gloss.

⁷⁰ Levin, *Performing Ground*, 23.