Sociologica. V.16 N.3 (2022)
ISSN 1971-8853
https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.1971-8853/15897
https://sociologica.unibo.it/

The Spectacle of Performance. The Postmodern Hyperreal and Medieval European Play

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Submitted: December 2, 2022 – Accepted: February 1, 2023 – Published: March 15, 2023

Abstract

A postmodernist claim concerning contemporary displacement of reality by "simulacra" that subsume reality can inspire a broader genealogy of reality, representation, play, and imaginaries. This essay examines: (1) the supposed postmodern displacement of modern boundaries between reality and representation; (2) medieval European performance; and (3) implications for understanding reality construction as a genealogical project. Any overly binary distinction between the modern and the postmodern is problematic. The social construction of reality, representation, play, and imaginaries occurs in societies in general. Consideration of medieval European venues (the Church, courts, and others) reveals contestation about performances of jugglers and acrobats, minstrels and mimes, courtly poets, and religious performers of spectacular ritual. Myriad medieval practices created a "near imaginary" of enchantment that permeated even quotidian reality with magic, angels, devils, and monsters, nevertheless resisting dramatization as such. Modernization, marked culturally by the emergence of realist Renaissance theater, established stronger boundaries between reality and imaginaries. Postmodern developments undermine rationalized modern policings of objective reality and representation. However, in contrast to medieval enchantment through a near-imaginary, simulacra organize life through more free-floating representations. This analysis offers a prototype for further histories of cultural constructions of reality in relation to performance and imaginaries.

Keywords: Performance; Postmodernism; Representation; Theater; Dramaturgy; Social construction; Genealogy; Cultural History.

Acknowledgements

This paper was presented at the annual meetings of the Social Science History Association, Chicago, Illinois, November 1992.

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1 Introduction

It is by now a commonplace of postmodern thought that the object of thought — reality — has become displaced by its representation. Much to the dismay of modernists, postmodernists abandon any claim to know about the world in favor of a less ambitious — but no less fundamental — project of understanding how the world is represented. This shift in scholarly agendas itself is claimed to proceed in tandem with a shift in the character of reality itself: with the advent of an increasingly mediated world, the argument goes, the reality that used to be represented has drifted away. Reality is superfluous to a world where virtual reality will suffice as a realm in which social actors and their meanings are increasingly located. Here, I explore these claims via a speculative analysis of medieval European representation, extending from as early as the fourth century, and more richly, from the tenth to the fifteenth century. Certainly, within that enormous time span, the possible cultural genres wherein representation might be analyzed are diverse. I will therefore concentrate on the general terrain of performance (in an inclusive sense), for it seems to me that more than, say, music or painting and other figurative arts, performance depends on an affinity between phenomena and their representation. In a word, performance involves what Erving Goffman (1959) called dramaturgy — the staging of action that is both real performance by living, breathing individuals and representation of something. Yet what is represented, how, and with what significance for its audiences? Those are the questions.

It will be the burden of my speculations to show that the postmodern analysis is fundamentally in error: it forces a binary distinction of modern versus postmodern onto domains of representation that are far more complex. Despite its fundamental errors, however, the postmodern approach, when combined with the so-called 'New Historicism' in cultural criticism, offers a powerful basis for a cultural history of representation. This project is daunting both in its potential scope and in the difficulties of marshaling historical evidence. Thus, my enterprise today is necessarily only a preliminary discussion, based on previous studies of medieval culture. I mean to open up questions more than to provide answers.

What a 'cultural history of representation' might be is of course a controversial question, one that depends on what is meant by cultural history and by representation. Cultural history — the history of cultural objects — is for me a matter of tracing the meaningful usage, replication, and modification of cultural practices and products through their relationships to producers, users, and audiences (see Griswold, 1987; Hall, 1990, 1993). Representation is a much larger can of worms, because of the contentions among semiotic, phenomenological, speech-act, and other approaches to theorizing how the cultural object 'works' in relation to its audiences (e.g., in Eagleton, 1983; Holub, 1984; Maclean, 1988; Hall & Neitz, 1993). I do not hope even to review these controversies here, much less critically evaluate their positions. Trying to settle such controversies would not necessarily help us reach a better substantive understanding of historical cases of representation. Indeed, what is most important about these approaches is that they all share a fundamentally sociological insight, namely that drama cannot be understood purely on an internal basis; instead, critical analysis must contend with the question of how drama establishes a relationship between performance and what such performance might mean or signify to its audiences — when audiences are not treated as isolated receptors of culture, but as historically embedded and socially located individuals, with particular kinds of knowledge, interests, needs, and aspirations. Once representation is lifted out of the pure internality of the text and its self-referentiality, we can begin to ask about representations as historically situated cultural practices that embody distinctive notions about what is

to be represented, how, and on the basis of what socially distributed conventional knowledge about the conventions of representation. To historicize the question of representation, then, is to open up what might be called an historical ethnomethodology or social epistemology of representation. Or to play off of Berger & Luckmann (1966), I propose to move from studying the social construction of reality to analyzing the historical construction of representation. Within such a project, it becomes possible to explore the historical sources of modern and postmodern representation.

To display the possibility of such a project here, I briefly sketch three moments of analysis: (1) the supposed shift from modern to postmodern representation as a basis for identifying salient issues about long-term (or configurational) shifts in representation; (2) the milieu of performance in medieval Europe as an example of a much earlier culture of representation; and, briefly, (3) the implications of the medievalist analysis for the postmodernist claims about a world-historical representational shift.

2 The Postmodern Problem of Representation

In the diverse approaches of cultural studies that are hallmarks of scholarly postmodernism, one central thrust depends on taking a 'textual turn' by exploring the ways in which the social world is textually represented, categorized, and imbued with meaning. At its most fundamental level, the textualization of the world has been pursued by literary critics who have sought to show the alignments of texts with a larger social world (e.g., Mullaney, 1988; Greenblatt, 1990, 1991; Corrigan & Sayer, 1985). But that is just one possibility. Texts, once limited to printed materials, are now also to be found in the 'cultural scripts' by which people operate in the social world. Even social space — an urban area, or a suburb, a mall, a highway, or a farming region — has been treated as a 'text.'[1] To do so, it is only necessary to recognize that people orient actions on the basis of the 'signs' we see as intelligible patterns in those worlds. *How* those 'texts' are read, whether they have any stable meanings — these are questions of reception. Some theorists take a poststructuralist approach, arguing that texts and symbols order the worlds of actors; other theorists take hermeneutic or interpretive positions, pointing out how people make meaning in relation to the texts and symbols around them.

Given that poststructuralists now recognize both the instabilities of texts and the potential for audiences' divergent readings of them, the differences between poststructuralist and hermeneutic theories no longer loom so large as what unites them: they share an emphasis on the symbolic and textual construction of social reality that is marked by a lived and incessantly reworked tension between public symbols and meaningful individual conduct. In a way, then, the so-called 'textual turn' in sociohistorical inquiry is the flip side of the 'New Historicism' in literary criticism. Though this alignment of literary criticism and sociohistorical inquiry is relatively new, it builds on long established concerns in social theory with meaningful action, ritual, symbolic interaction, ethnomethodology, and dramaturgy (indeed, critics like Stanley Fish are explicit in their borrowing). And these strands of sociohistorical inquiry themselves have diverse, long established affinities with approaches of literary criticism based in hermeneutics, phenomenology, structuralism, and semiotics. These affinities and common sources notwithstanding, the convergence of sociohistorical and humanistic inquiry in cultural studies has

1. For example, Mike Davis (1990, Ch. 4) analyzes "fortress L.A.," showing how the districts of Los Angeles can be understood in terms of their orientations to "security." Though Davis's analysis can be broadly construed as textual, he sidesteps the sometimes-arcane debates about poststructuralism, deconstruction, and the like.

yielded new kinds of substantive analysis, some of them formidable. While the gamut of such new work is wide, analyses of the postmodern shift itself are particularly important in their implications, for they have to do with the character of reality and representation in our own lived era.

How, then, to understand what might be called the postmodern shift in representation? Despite a lot of talk about postmodern culture, no one seems to know what it is, and discussions are typically indexical. There are good reasons for this situation. The term 'postmodern' has been used in different contexts — in architecture, in film, in art, in politics, in philosophy, and so on. Moreover, in each context separately, and in all of them together, the prefix 'post-' causes problems. Post-anything implies a coming after; it is defined not so much in its own terms, but by what has come before. Thus, on purely logical grounds, we would have no reason to expect a 'post-' situation to have any definable characteristics; we would expect a jumble. And indeed, this jumble often is celebrated by postmodern thinkers as *itself* a defining characteristic of the postmodern.

There is also the tricky question of timing. Postmodernism clearly has antecedents in certain late-nineteenth and early-to-mid-twentieth century modernist and avant-garde philosophies and cultural movements that changed our sense of reality by focusing on relativism, perspectivism, subjectivity, and language. Modernism may have one side that emphasizes rationality, coherence, analytic science, and holistic theory, but the humanities and the arts reveal another modernism — of discordant and disjointed experience, contradictions, celebrations of the irrational, attempts to reintegrate the human animal within the total human experience. These movements of their day were 'modernist' in their breaks with a monolithic Victorian bourgeois public worldview (see Singal, 1987). But they typically remained elitist, rejecting mass culture and advocating pursuit of 'art for art's sake.' This form of cultural modernism typically remained separated from the masses and from history. Under these circumstances, avant-garde movements emerged in the efforts of Surrealists, Dadaists, and others, to offer a critique of elitist modernism by forcing art and culture into a confrontation with politics and history (see Huyssen, 1986; Cantor, 1988, pp. 35–41).

Because seemingly antimodern movements are deeply implicated in modernism itself, some theorists, for example Lyotard (1984), have suggested that the postmodern — however construed — is a 'moment' of modernism, and not simply the time at the end of modernism. In this sense, flare-ups of the postmodern have a checkered presence in the modern era; they are marked, in Lyotard's view, by rejections of the two prevailing 'master narratives' of modernity — the expansions of citizenship rights and scientific knowledge as progressive history. Yet in an ironic sense, it is the culture of modernity itself that facilitates cultural movements rejecting modernity, whether they be nostalgic and even reactionary, or alternatively, avant-garde (see Lechner, 1990).

Postmodernism may ultimately prevail as a break with modernism, but only if there is a fundamental shift. Earlier avant-garde movements did not effectively resist the institutional frameworks of the modern era by which legitimacy is ascribed to art and social critique. Writers of the postmodern have sometimes claimed postmodernism not as a movement to shift conventions of representation but more as the result of a set of social forces — changes in the structures (technological, social, economic) by which social life is enacted. In one version of postmodern thinking, these changes have brought about a circumstance in which the textual turn is something more than an intellectual move; it amounts to a fundamental shift in the character of representation within society-at-large. In its strongest version, the textual turn argument asserts that society is a text. Thus, for Richard Harvey Brown (1990), "selves and

societies are constructed and deconstructed through rhetorical practices" (p. 191). Of course, this view has a long heritage in social theory — in linguistic and cultural anthropology, in the studies by symbolic interactionists, in Erving Goffman's work, in the social constructionism of Peter Berger, and in the ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel. It suggests that the world is not accessible to us in its 'natural' state. Rather, we mediate our connection to the world symbolically. To take a classic example in anthropological linguistics, 'snow' is not apprehended by us as an intrinsically natural phenomenon devoid of its cultural packaging; instead, it becomes part of our experience in *different* ways according to the symbols we use to represent snow and the meanings we attach to them (white Christmas?, skiing weekend?, caring for cattle in a blizzard?). If this argument has at least some truth to it even for phenomena of the 'natural' world, it seems even more compelling for the social world, where we live our lives in terms of categories (such as marital status: single, married, divorced, and more detailed nuances) that themselves structure our own and other people's reciprocal social actions. Diverse strands of sociological thought — from Durkheim's symbolic structuralism to symbolic interactionism and Weberian interpretive sociology — acknowledge the centrality of symbols and meaning to representation in social life. What, we must ask, is so distinctive about the textual turn of postmodernism?

The answer is that the textual turn is not new. For example, among social researchers in the 1970s and 1980s, it became increasingly evident that cultural analyses and macro-structural perspectives have much to offer each other and that research excluding either dimension is incomplete. The currents within, and interchanges among, such perspectives are diverse. It is not so important to trace them as it is to recognize the rich interplay that results once analyses of culture and structure are undertaken in relation to one another. The study of the Balinese cockfight by Clifford Geertz (1973) is an icon of this possibility: Geertz does not simply assert that the lived activity of carrying out cockfights is a ritualized representation of Balinese social structure. Instead, he maintains that the cockfight

> provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment [...] it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves (p. 448).

For Geertz, the Balinese cockfight story is acted out by members of society in formulaic ways that comment on the world even while the tellers are enmeshed within it. Since Geertz, for social researchers, story and society have increasingly become a hall of mirrors where it is difficult to tell which is which.

A move like that of Geertz (paralleled by literary critics such as Jameson and Greenblatt) blurs (even erases) the difference between fiction and reality (between entertainment and news, for example). This blurring of reality and representation always was avoided by symbolic interactionists in sociology, for they struggled to establish their legitimacy in a field with aspirations to scientific objectivity, and, in these circumstances, 'idealism' was scorned. Literary critics, by contrast, suffered from no such censure; treating the world as a text actually *enhanced* the authority of literary criticism (Collins, 1989, p. 131). Ironically, the textual turn has its origins in part in social theory, yet the particular kinds of social theory that served as inspiration often have been treated as marginal to the discipline of sociology, creating the odd contemporary spectacle: literary theorists have adopted what amount to (sometimes marginal) sociological perspectives and techniques of analysis, and they have been met with great success by doing so,

but those same perspectives and techniques have sometimes been (and continue to be) resisted by 'mainstream' sociologists!

In short, when the textual turn is brought full circle, *back* into sociohistorical inquiry, the implications are substantial and controversial. In one aspect, the literary shift is concerned with rhetorical critique and the 'deconstruction' of texts, showing how texts create a sense of reality, even in the absence of the capacity of any text to represent or correspond to reality. In the modernist scheme of things, these critical tools were applied almost exclusively to fiction, but now they have been brought to bear to show the 'fictional' aspects of non-fiction narratives and stories — those about news, politics, gender, and race, and in academic disciplines such as history, anthropology, sociology, economics, and even the physical and biological sciences. Taken to their logical conclusion, they suggest that all knowledge is metaphorical, offering images by which we understand the world. Those images no longer are securely moored to reality; rather, they 'float' — that is, they lack any direct and unambiguous relation to the world they are intended to describe. Thus, the problem of representation is no longer simply an issue confined to critical and aesthetic analysis of humanistic pursuits — literature, drama, art, music, and so on. Representation must be understood as a central mediating process in other arenas as well. Most notably, these include the worlds of official, public, and popular culture, as well as scholarship. Thus, the emergent studies of governmental statistical categories, of discursive referents in social welfare debates, of the conventions that underpin the "objectivity" of journalism, and the deconstructions of rhetoric and statistical reasoning in both the sciences and the social sciences (Desrosières, 1991; Fraser, 1987; Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; McCloskey, 1985).

The textual turn, as I have described it so far, is a philosophical argument with generalized implications. In essence, it amounts to a critique of the modernist assumptions about how (or indeed whether) we *know* about reality. If the philosophical argument is given credence, then what the symbolic interactionists and others have been saying for decades has merit: the symbolic construction of reality occurs within modern societies and indeed societies in general, even if the claims of objectivist modernism were quite different.

But there is another dimension to the textual turn, one which argues that the rise of the postmodern is nothing less than a shift in the nature of reality and representation themselves. Contradictions pose difficulties for this argument; it seems odd to describe texts as non-representational and then use texts to talk about real changes (especially real changes in the arrangements of texts). In spite of this difficulty, some postmodernists want to say that the realities/representations now are organized in new ways.

In part their arguments mirror sociological theories that were emerging independently of the textual turn. Thus, Herb Gans (1974) noted that much of so-called high culture depends upon the same general mechanisms of mass production and distribution — the recording industry, television, film — that are associated with popular culture. Daniel Bell (1976) argued in *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* that the spheres of work and leisure were becoming disconnected from one another, such that people were something like Jekyll-and-Hyde figures playing contradictory roles on the job and off. Other sociologists, Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983), for example, have shown that with the rise of a postindustrial service economy, culture has been recreated as work. In the opposite venue, of life outside the workplace, Ann Swidler (1980) observed that emotional relationships now require "work" (p. 135), and Barry Glassner (1990) has explored the leisure-time pursuit of "fitness" through exercise and diet. In an ironic and quintessentially postmodern way, the pursuit of selfhood becomes work — the therapeutic meeting by people sharing a common personal problem, the visit to the health club for regimented exercise and socializing, carefully distanced from any hint of productive labor such

as mowing the lawn. In short, studies of work and leisure by sociologists suggest a shift in cultural practices that amount to changes in the ways that social reality not only is constructed, but also represented.[2] So, what makes these cultural changes specifically postmodern?

Architecture provides a clue when it is considered as an intersecting problem of reality — the physical spaces and boundaries, and representation — the symbols and meanings and the ways in which they are embodied in spaces and boundaries. In 1968 a group from the Yale Architecture School conducted a studio exercise, 'Learning from Las Vegas' (Venturi et al., 1977). They wondered whether the American commercial strip could teach architects something about the new type of urban form then emerging next to the strip highways, expressways, and interstate highway system. What they found in their field trip to Las Vegas was that commercial architecture of the strip was redefining the relationship of building forms to space and signs. In the nineteenth century, the sign had simply *identified* the building — a hotel, a store, or an office. To be sure, building style communicated something about its use and status. But in the early twentieth century, small-scale entrepreneurs began to experiment in radical ways with vernacular commercial buildings. Sometimes they made the shape itself represent a building's function. Thus, in the 1930s some coffee shops were built to look like coffee pots, and there were hotdog stands in the shape of hotdogs, gasoline stations that loomed up as giant gasoline pumps, and so on. In Las Vegas, the Yale architects made note of a related development: the signs in front of buildings were overwhelming the buildings, to the point where the buildings themselves were becoming caricatures of their signs. Ultimately, buildings were enclosed signs, decorated on the interior as continuations of the signs. The visitor to a casino enters a fantasy experience theme park like 'Caesar's Palace' or goes on a 'safari' into sub-Saharan Africa. Residential space began to follow the same tendency toward adornment. These developments have deep connections to the emergence of modern commercial space beginning in the nineteenth century, such as department stores. Overall, a fundamental inversion had occurred — "the victory of symbols-in space over forms-in-space" (Venturi et al., 1977, p. 119). The architectural critics thus trace a fundamental shift: as the new structures of the suburbs and malls and vacation meccas rise up around us, we live no longer in space: we wend our way through symbols.

Jean Baudrillard has championed this view of the subsumption of reality by representations on a more general basis, by consolidating an argument made by Daniel Boorstin. Images might once more or less accurately have reflected reality. However, Boorstin (1962) claimed in his book *The Image, or Whatever Happened to the American Dream?*, "a new kind of synthetic novelty [...] has flooded our experience" (p. 9). For example, authentic heroes are getting more and more difficult to find in the midst of celebrities (like Madonna) who, Boorstin suggested, are "known for their wellknown-ness." By now these developments have proceeded to the point where, as Boorstin put it,

> everybody's reliance on dealers in pseudo-events and images cannot — contrary to highbrow cliches — accurately be described as a growing superficiality. Rather these things express a world where the image, more interesting than its original, has itself become the original (p. 204).

In Boorstin's account, this development was foreshadowed by the rise of public relations

2. These changes almost undoubtably were connected in part with structural economic changes in the U.S. and other relatively developed societies — namely, the emergence of a postindustrial economy oriented to provision of services rather than manufacturing.

early in the twentieth century, which amounted to a self-conscious exercise in the manipulation of images.

For Jean Baudrillard (1988b), there are two alternatives here: it is possible that an image "masks and perverts a basic reality" or, more radically, that it "masks the *absence* of a basic reality." Even in the latter case, the reality assumption can be maintained, by a fictive attempt to simulate a reality that does not exist, as in the case of advertising that depicts a utopian world; we would be hard put to find such a world in reality but nevertheless can imagine it as real. But for Baudrillard, there is a final step, in which the image "bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum" (p. 170). Baudrillard describes "simulacra" as artificial realms like national political dramas and television "virtual reality" commercials that lack any necessary and direct connection to the everyday world, stating that, "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (p. 166). For both Boorstin and Baudrillard, the everyday world of our lives has become overshadowed by images that give the appearance of reality, but without having to have any necessary correspondence to the world beyond their realms.

These ideas can be given concrete form through the example of tourism (Boorstin, 1962). It is still possible to travel without being a tourist. But tourism has grown to the point where it often overshadows travel. It has become an enormous industry; certain places — the Caribbean, Hawaii, and so on — are now essentially 'tourist destinations.' Organizers of tourism thus have worked to create images (in travel brochures and posters) of the tourist destinations in order to pique tourists' interest in an experience of novelty that does not require great personal risk. Yet the effective marketing of such images requires a reorganization of the tourist destination experience itself as a pseudo-event. The tourist has to be able to return from a trip and proclaim satisfaction that everything was as the travel brochure portrayed it. In the ongoing real world, this is not always easy to achieve, of course. Kenya is a great tourist destination, but if tourists look behind the facade of the tour, they may see social and political conditions that will be, at the least, unsettling to the idea of 'vacation.' Vacationing can be something like visiting a Potemkin village, a socially constructed corridor to be experienced as the real world that nevertheless masks the real world. Thus, to place tourism within the vocabulary of representation and drama: tourists take the stage that has been created by tourist impresarios to act out a previously scripted performance, self-documenting the drama — in the early days, with Kodaks and Super 8 movies, today, with vcr camcorders.

In the tourist industry, the danger of offensive reality intruding can be controlled by an altogether different solution: rather than establishing a tourist destination within a real place like Kenya or New York City, it is possible to create tourist destinations that are, to use Baudrillard's term, simulacra. Thus, Disneyland and Las Vegas are not real worlds that tourists come to visit; they are places where the controlling reality is the reality of tourism. But for Baudrillard, Disneyland — tremendous achievement of controlled imagery that it is — only begins to unveil the possibilities. For Disneyland has boundaries: we know when we are going to visit it. But what if the world at large has become a Disneyland, a simulacrum? For Baudrillard (1988a), this is the current condition: "It is not the least of America's charms that even outside the movie theatres the whole country is cinematic. The desert you pass through is like the set of a Western, the city a screen of signs and formulas." To unravel the mysteries of the city, he adds, "you should not, then, begin with the city and move inwards to the screen; you should begin with the screen and move outwards to the city" (p. 56).

The possibilities of postmodernized simulacra are difficult for us as individuals to absorb, for they take away the foundations and the lines of connection by which we might establish our

bearings. Images become the world, yet they bear no necessary logical relation to one another: rather, they can be juxtaposed with one another in ways that do not depend on the principles — such as gravity — that operate in the real world. It no longer matters if these images cannot be claimed to represent the real world — the simulacrum is the world. Ralph Lauren manufactures images of the past — "from Scottish manor houses to African safaris, from Caribbean beach houses to clapboard cottages" (Goldberger, 1992). These images are simulacra in which we can immerse ourselves, detached from the present moment of history by their nostalgia, even as they detach themselves from the unevenness of the real world of the past by their utopian perfection. At a personal level, the implication of Baudrillard's vision thus is as disconcerting as the cultural claim; individual people too must be simulacra — simulations of the images that construct identities that yield a sense of reality. The same would hold for the events of public life. Undoubtedly 'real' events like the Gulf War against Saddam Hussein invert the old sense of reality and image; such events of historical significance increasingly are swallowed up by the simulacra that present them to us. If Baudrillard's postmodern account of postmodernization has any plausibility, the surface image has behind it not reality, but only the backstage. We all know that surfaces are produced by backstage work but this knowledge no longer discounts the surface, and so the surface is what counts. Yet the surface no longer is the surface that represents or obscures reality; the surface is self-consciously constructed reality.

The upshot of Baudrillard's form of postmodern analysis is to suggest that a dramatic cultural shift has taken place. It holds that reality has become subsumed by its representations, themselves freed by technology from the constraints of the material world. Paradoxically, Baudrillard evokes the idea of a totalistic change, and the plausibility of this idea depends upon an essentialist view of the world — the very viewpoint that postmodernists criticize when they find it in certain modernist theories. Only if the social world has a prime cause, one or another basic animating force, can a change in one aspect reshape the world in general. Some versions of postmodernism simply shift the prime mover from economics to symbols. Yet a more relativistic postmodern view — one that acknowledges the historicity and contingency of culture — would raise doubt about any such essentialist and holistic theory.[3]

In an odd way that was considered a possibility by critics during the modern era (Max Weber, 1958, p. 182, comes to mind), the world has become reenchanted. Yet this reenchantment must remind us of what we all know, that Weber's famous thesis about rationalization posits a world before modernity that was unrationalized, indeed, enchanted in certain ways by beliefs in magic, angels, devils, apparitions, monsters, and the like. By virtue of the virtual reality that is this text, it is possible to flash back to the medieval era of enchantment. If, as I am arguing, the simulacratic emergence adumbrated by Boorstin and extended by Baudrillard can neither be considered as a binary shift nor a totalistic occurrence, questions about the bases of reality and representation in the contemporary world demand a more elaborate cultural history. If the simulacra are particular kinds of blurred genres in today's world, it may be useful to identify previous blurred genres, both because they may help us identify parallel historical situations and, perhaps, because they may reveal something of the cultural sources of our own contemporary practices of representation. Obviously, I cannot do more than sketch an example here for a project that ought to cut a wide swath. As Michel Foucault has demonstrated, the early modern and modern eras themselves are fruitful subjects, precisely because of the attempts to

3. One line of critique, already developed elsewhere (Hall & Neitz, 1993, Ch. 11), is to question the postmodern claims on an extra-symbolic basis, by inquiring about the material and social conditions of postmodernity. Here, I take a different tack. I propose that we critically assess claims about representation in their own terms, that is, in terms of a cultural history of representation itself.

contain representation through the process of rationalization. Yet postmodern simulacra pose the opposite challenge — that we come to terms with the historical sources of enchantment and their connections to our cultures of representations. Performance in the European medieval era offers one venue in which to explore the problem of representation, for what performance was to 'represent' — and how — were in considerable flux.

3 Medieval Performance as an Exemplary Problem of Representation

The word 'representation' itself is problematic for the medieval era, precisely because the intentions or *raisons d'être* for various kinds of cultural practices cannot be forced anachronistically into our current conceptions. We must imagine circumstances in which the strong modernist distinctions — between fact and fiction, objective reality, symbolic reality, and experience — were not yet established. To consider medieval performance is thus to take on Foucault's (1972) archeology. Though it would be possible to attempt a 'history' of modern drama and its medieval sources, to do so would miss a key point, namely that medieval performances were meaningful in their own right; to understand them is to begin to unearth the relationship of cultural practices to social reality. Yet to do this, we must avoid assuming any specificity of either cultural practices or social reality. Instead, we must simply ask, "what kinds of relationships did culture in the medieval world have with those who apprehended it?" To answer this very broad question in any definitive way is impossible within the confines of the present essay. All I can do is offer some interesting leads and conjectures, based on a preliminary and very exploratory survey of previous research.

Because my interest is in a broad question about the cultural and social presuppositions of cultural practices, I draw on a wide range of evidence, both temporally, and by way of venues, in the churches, the courts, villages, and town squares. The differences between the times and venues are not to be denied, but neither should diverse moments of cultural practice be assumed to be institutionally autonomous (the available evidence suggests considerable overlap, interplay, and cross-fertilization). I should also insist that I do not mean to generalize on the basis of my discussion. Instead, I cite a series of examples that point to a variety of existent — and apparently widespread — practices that suggest conclusions about certain aspects of medieval performance. Nevertheless, even today, culture is not of a piece, and certainly in the medieval era, it is quite likely that diverse practices existed that do not fit the general configuration I am describing.

Indeed, the existence of cultural diversity of performance practices in the medieval era is a thesis upon which my argument builds. Quite simply, before blurred genres of postmodernism, there had to be genres to be blurred. Before genres was the *mélange* — a sort of primordial blur. This suggests a curious affinity of the medieval with the postmodern, albeit in a very different situation: the two cultural formations share more with each another than either does with the modernism that established a firmer set of separations — between performance and audience, between real and imaginary representation, between one genre and another (topics that I will take up briefly, each in turn). These affinities in turn raise the question of whether the simulacrum is a distinctive quality of the postmodern, or a feature deeply embedded in earlier historical experience.

As with Foucault's (1965) consideration of reason and unreason, there is no tidy way to talk about a social world that lacks the distinction about performance, where people make a variety of performance moves that portend their wrestling with questions of persona, representation, imitation, and disguise, but in the absence of any fixed compass. Foucault (1965) could not

speak of the time before reason by using the word unreason, for unreason presumed reason. The dilemma with performance is much the same, and for similar reasons. One promising approach would be to play with the words and etymologies. As Tydeman (1978) has observed, the word play, now taken to have a rather solid set of alternative meanings — a dramatic presentation, a football move, a children's leisure activity, and so on — this word might be taken in a more generic sense. In an undifferentiated sense, play includes a broad swath of human activity, both scripted and spontaneous, undifferentiated and differentiated. To define play would be to presume the boundaries, whereas in the medieval era the boundaries themselves were in play.

Scholars have devoted considerable energy toward clarifying the boundaries of performers and their styles of performance, along with those between performers and audiences, at the same time admitting to a wide range of evidence suggesting that boundaries were not well established. There is at least one general truth that seems to be shared among scholars who have done the most exhaustive research: the decline of Rome in the third and fourth centuries created conditions in which theater as the Greeks knew it simply did not exist. During the medieval era, cultural practices sporadically moved in the direction of a new consolidation of drama, but for the most part, cultural practices lacked both the directionality of plot and the imitative, role-playing representation of characters. Yet cultural practices of performance seem to have flourished. There were jugglers and acrobats, bear-baiters and magicians, minstrels and mimes, these in addition to the practitioners of 'folk' cultural rites of the season, the courtly poets, and the religious performers of spectacular ritual. Yet to name performers by their activities seems misplaced, for a good deal of evidence suggests that many performers practiced more than one talent and, in order to gain a livelihood, they did so in whatever venues presented themselves. Thus, we have, for example, an eleventh-century minstrel named Taillefer serving at the vanguard of the army of William the Conqueror, "who went to his death exercising the double arts of his hybrid profession, juggling with his sword, and chanting an heroic lay of Roncesvalles" (Chambers, 1948, p. I: 43). Nor were the social origins of performers less diverse than their repertoires. Chambers suggests the existence of higher and lower forms of minstrel activities that drew on performers more and less talented, and Wickham (1974) notes the role of gentlemen scholar poets in promoting love poetry and points to persons of letters on Oxford's Arts Faculty who also practiced arts of entertainment to finance their studies! (pp. 107, 159) And if they were to prosper, performers often had to be prepared to appeal to more than one audience; even the sinecured court minstrels, for example, could fulfil the direct duties of their positions and still have many opportunities to perform outside the court (Chambers 1948, p. I: 52). Wandering minstrels, of course, had to take what opportunities presented themselves. In either case, to play to a variety of audiences often meant offering more than one type of entertainment. Indeed, even with one audience, the minstrels had to entertain if they were to prosper, and this meant that they could ill afford to allow their audience's attention to lag. In the bragging contests between minstrels that survive (themselves as performances), "they cover not only every conceivable form of minstrel literature proper, but also tricks with knives and strings, sleight of hand, dancing and tumbling" (Chambers, 1948, p. I: 67). In quite an opposite sense, to think of minstrels purely as entertainers would again risk the danger of anachronism. The common etymology of 'minstrel' and 'minister' suggests what is common knowledge, namely that the court 'fool' was sometimes wise. In the more established courts, the persons on retainer were a diverse lot, of diverse talents, and it would be wrong to rationalize strong role boundaries between serious affairs and those of pure entertainment. Whatever their formal obligations, at least some minstrels were expected to be 'in waiting' for their pa-

trons, ready be participate in the pomp and circumstance of courtly interaction as something like a participatory chorus (see Chambers, 1948, p. I: 48, 52).

Indeed, the intriguing task of separating minstrels and ministers suggests that we turn our attention more directly to the question of whether, where, and how 'play' was distinguished from everyday life. Admonitions of the Church and kings offer some of the most important clues we have about where the 'accent on reality' might legitimately be placed. They also represent important efforts toward the conventionalization of reality. Of the two, the kingly interest is more straightforwardly concerned with disguises per se, because they give opportunities for theft and leave the king vulnerable to the possibility of assassination. Yet kings also shared an interest of the Church — the avoidance of ridicule. By the latter Middle Ages, minstrels were seemingly ubiquitous entertainers likely to be seen in taverns, guild halls, at a baron's house, in the marketplace, at the courts, and at occasions such as weddings, baptisms, knightings, and tournaments. With their special costumes and their wanderings, they became, in effect, a sort of gypsy status group, yet one with a degree of *entrée* into the courts and great houses. There, minstrels were expected to recount the heroic deeds of, and otherwise entertain, their courtly audiences, but some of them seem to have delivered homages that fell short in their praise, and perhaps mocked their audiences. Henry I had the eyes put out of one who sang against him, and Edward II must not have been pleased by the insult posed to him by an emissary under dress of a minstrel. Especially in the late Middle Ages, wandering minstrels came to be considered vagrants, often interested only in food and drink — or worse. To control the riffraff and avoid the mockery, the courts came to favor household minstrels whose obligations to their patrons would be more clear-cut. To the degree that this tendency took hold, of course, it pushed other minstrels toward the very vagabondage for which wandering minstrels were becoming known (Chambers, 1948, pp. I: 43–54).

Compared to the courts, the Church had an earlier and much deeper hostility toward a multitude of forms of play. Like the courts, the Church could find itself the object of mockery, ridicule, and jest. On a different score, the Church inherited a concern with maintaining the Hebraic binary division between truth and falsehood, and any performance that involved play, disguise, or impersonation had to be suspect in these terms. Tertullian (b. circa 155 - died circa 222) condemned this idolatry:

> Again, I ask whether this business of masks in fact pleases God, who forbids the making of any likeness, his own image in particular? The Author of Truth hates whatever is untrue; in his sight everything fabricated is corrupt. In the same way he will not approve of an assumed voice, sex, or age, or anyone who displays love, anger, sighs, and tears: for he condemns every kind of falsehood. Moreover, when in his law he ordains that the man who wears female dress is accursed, how will he judge the pantomime actor who sways around in imitation of a woman? (quoted in Tydeman, 1978, p. 25).

Yet Tertullian also revealed, perhaps inadvertently, what might be the crux of the matter. For those who wanted spectacle, he entreated, let them turn to the Church: "Here are nobler poetry, sweeter voices, maxims more sage, melodies more dulcet, than any comedy can boast, and withal, here is truth instead of fiction" (Tertullian summarized by Chambers, 1948, p. I: 11). Jest amounts to the denial of a given social construction of reality. The Church had its own spectacle, its own way of moving from ordinary reality into an enchanted one. The mimes and minstrels were their competitors, and the Church's admonitions thus amounted to efforts to monopolize the orchestration of special accents on reality. In direct contradiction to the

Church's posture toward secular play, its masses exhibited a long-term development toward increased theatricality, a development which rightly has been credited with the consolidation of theatric practices that later became influential in secular theater (Tydeman, 1978, p. 35ff.). And quite apart from its own development of spectacle, some within the Church chose to fight fire with fire, practicing the craft of minstrels to deliver the word of God, permitting the play of minstrels in pilgrimages, and encouraging participation by minstrels in holy day festivals of religious guilds. Though the Church condemned much popular spectacle and play, it left room — at least in the formulation of Pope Alexander at the end of the thirteenth century — for minstrels who sang of the great deeds of princes and praised the lives of saints. Serious spectacle — that is, spectacle that respected the Church and the secular order — was to be regarded as uplifting rather than sinful (Chambers, 1948, p. I: 46, 56–62).

For all the Church's efforts at condemnation and usurpation of spectacle, the popular entertainments of both lords and common folk are legion. In some cases, popular entertainment seems to have borrowed the Church's themes, both displaying religious condemnations and at the same time satirizing them. Thus, there is the odd spectacle recounted by Roger de Wendover (died 1236) of an Essex peasant named Thurkill who had a vision that he was carried off to hell. For those of us today who wonder exactly what hell is like, the report describes a theater of sorts in which demons are the spectators for shows in which the damned act out the misdeeds that brought them to the land of fire from this vale of tears in the first place (Tydeman, 1978, pp. 47, 189). As Wendy Griswold (1986) once remarked, by the later Middle Ages, the devil had become a bit of a wag!

But if the play of spectacle is hell on earth, it is a mansion that had many rooms during the medieval era. It is not my point here to retrace the nuances of poetic development, the differentiation of composers from performers or other important developments debated by historians of theater. Rather, I want to pursue that relationship between reality and non-reality that the Church considered so important. What was real and what was imaginary, and if there was a distinction between them, where was it? Analytically, practices of play — in the broadest sense — seem to have moved in two directions: from the imaginary into the real, and from the real into play.

The play of the 'imaginary' into the 'real' can only be described from a viewpoint that acknowledges the difference, and this viewpoint certainly has to come from outside the medieval world. From what we know, it is reasonable to suspect that it was a world routinely enchanted. Magic, symbols, rituals, and rites were manifestly central to how life was conducted. If, as Durkheim argued, the social construction of reality is established by ritual action, such action so permeated medieval life, and on a variety of fronts, that reality itself was established through the manifestation of unreality. The Church's spectacles are obvious examples. They include not just the mass, but also increasingly theatrical elements within the mass (the representation of the three Magi who bore gifts to the Christ child in Bethlehem, for example), to say nothing of the processions that developed around Corpus Christi, and the more theatrical productions of the lives of Jesus Christ and the Saints, to say nothing of the enactment of miracles, such as the one in which Saint Nicholas brought three clerks back to life after they had been murdered by an innkeeper. Indeed, it seems likely that the Church was the site of performance in the medieval era that came closest to dramatic representation, with the Devil and his accomplices foremost among personified characters. Thus, in *Le Mystère d'Adam*,

> Then shall come the Devil and three or four devils with him, bearing in their hands fetters and iron chains which they place on the necks of Adam and Eve. And some

> will push and others will pull them to Hell; further devils still will be close by waiting for them as they come, and they will make a great dance of triumph over their ruin; and each of these other devils will point them out as they arrive, and will receive them and send them off to Hell. And they will make a great cloud of smoke to arise from within, and shout one to another in Hell, rejoicing, and crash their pots and cauldrons together, so that they can be heard outside (quoted in Tydeman, 1978, p. 193).

For all its strictures against mime, then, the Church performances went farther than most into the dramatic realm of impersonation (with occasional dialogue). But the personification had a mythic, or better, metaphoric cast to it; the characters portrayed included figures — Adam, Eve, Herod, Jesus — presumed to have once had an actual existence. But given that they appeared on stage with the Devil, the ritualized dramatization involved not an imitation of social reality through impersonation, but something more like a breaking through of extraordinary spiritual reality into the everyday world.

The activities of the Church were hardly the only such incursions of the metaphoric into the real. To the contrary, as various observers point out, folk traditions included a wide range of seasonal rituals and fertility rites, and parades and spectacles and executions were increasingly important to secular authorities as ritual invocations of their domains, as Wickham put it in reference to executions, "at once emblematic and realistic" (Wickham, 1974, pp. 168–170; Tydeman 1978, pp. 14, 22, 35ff., 59, 93ff.). Beyond major events, life itself was ritualized, so much so that Johan Huizinga was given to argue, in *The Waning of the Middle Ages*,

> Every event, every action, was still embodied in expressive and solemn forms, which raised them to the dignity of a ritual. For it was not merely the great facts of birth, marriage, and death which, by the sacredness of the sacrament, were raised to the rank of mysteries: incidents of less importance, like a journey, a task, a visit, were equally attended by a thousand formalities: benedictions, ceremonies, formulas (quoted in Tydeman, 1978, p. 86).

The play of ritual in the Church, then, was part of a wider field of ritualized life. If acting is the playing of roles according to instruction, then people of the medieval world were disguised in reality by the play of ritual that established an enchanted theater of reality.

Land of enchantment notwithstanding, however, the burden of the enchanted reality was so strong that movement from that enchanted reality into the imaginary beyond its bounds had its limits. That is, people did not easily break past the boundary of enchanted reality into the imaginary. To understand this, we need only survey the character of play in the medieval world. Two aspects bear note. On the one hand, the boundary between life and play was certainly not well established, at least in comparison to contemporary society. On the other hand, the movement from play into imitation, disguise, and mimicry — that is, to dramatization conventionally understood — seems to have been much more problematic.

In any number of settings, play is either an extension of life by other means or an imitation of it. Tournaments offer one example: with their origins in training for war, they included a number of realistic war set competitions — jousting with lances, for example; these were embedded within extensive parade activities; in the whole affairs, participants might even choose to "assume allegorical identities reinforced by their dress and behaviour, playing quasi-dramatic roles which they might maintain into evening festivities which followed a day's combat in the

lists." (Tydeman, 1978, pp. 87, 91) Thus, the play of real war became the focus of play competition. Such competition was embedded in situations of social gamesmanship that had potentially real consequences. The real-life drama of such play in turn became the topical material for theatrical performances.

A similar example of the heightened or worked-up version of reality is the debate-play form. Among many types of 'interludes' meant for performance during extended dinner festivities were staged debates that aired two sides of some question of religion, philosophy, or politics. Here the abstract was made real by placing the theoretical issues into the framework of an impassioned or sometimes farcical argument between performers (Tydeman, 1978, pp. 81, 87). Yet the boundaries of reality were not necessarily transgressed by dramatic action in such events. Instead, the performers could play out the argument in a seemingly naturalistic way.

Indeed, a number of examples of medieval performance suggest a boundary, either for lack of wherewithal or imposed in deference to the religious strictures against disguise. For whatever reason, there were many movements of entertainment that emerged almost seamlessly out of ongoing activity but then ran up against a barrier, beyond which lay dramatization proper. Some of the diverse entertainments sound like those of the circus: a master of ceremonies might keep the show moving with patter, 'carping' with rough wit, stringing together the acts of acrobats, contortionists, tumblers, tightrope walkers, dancers, jugglers, buffoons, magicians, puppeteers, imitators of animals, purveyors of trained animals, musicians, singers, storytellers — the list of acts goes on (Chambers, 1948, p. I: 70ff.). There are surviving medieval types of stories that depict the 'parade,' or preliminary and ongoing show patter of the impresario, and several of them reveal a certain resistance to the playing of roles: in one, the impresario's entertaining patter amounts to no more than bragging about himself; in another, the author or performers appear as themselves before beginning the show (Chambers, 1948, p. I: 85).

One conduit that did get established from the real to the imaginary came through the practice of mumming, described by Tydeman (1978) as "a processional visit on a winter night to a private house by masked and silent figures who may dance and play dice with, or bring gifts to, their host." (p. 74) At Kennington in 1377, such an event was held before the ten-year-old King Richard II, who proceeded to win jewels by rolling rigged dice with the mummers, themselves disguised as emperor, esquires, knights, a pope, and cardinals, with a few devil-like figures thrown in for good measure. Mummings by strangers, like the wandering minstrels, posed security problems, and in the fifteenth century, various edicts forbade them. In response, the nobility took to 'disguisings,' in which they took costumes themselves, and apparently played out bits of mime acting on occasion. By the early sixteenth century, mumming and disguising were being supplanted in England by masques, in which disguised personages would actually mingle with their audience, dancing and socializing, until they revealed their true identities. No less a personage than King Henry VIII of England is said to have disguised himself in this fashion (Wickham, 1974, pp. 161–63; Tydeman, 1978, pp. 74–9). The differences among mummings, disguisings, and masques are not so important in the present context as what they share: they all involve elements of disguise and costume, yet the disguised enter into the real world and interact with its 'natural' inhabitants. Sometimes the interaction is more magical (as with the loaded dice), other times, more conventional (as with the dancing). Yet in all cases, the action is focused on playing with a boundary between the real and the imaginary. The imaginary is never quite cut loose from the real because the notion that the action is 'only a show' is undercut by the social interaction with spectators.

What then of the many stories, interludes, and plays of the medieval era? Here we would expect to find drama proper — with impersonation, disguise, and plot. Yet here too there is a

distinct resistance. Or better put, central problems of staging dramatic performances have to do with both establishing with the audience a basis for performers to make the transition to impersonation and bringing the dramatic convention of acting into play with it. Any number of examples point to ways these problems might be handled.

To understand the problem, it is easiest to begin with the recognition that the speech of an individual — as poem, song, or chronicle — offered the principal channel for early medieval performance. To this basic form of presentation, mimed action, impersonation, and dialogue would later be grafted in various ways. But the poet's performance, at least in a number of early surviving English examples, derived from the personal experience of the poet and thus was more aligned with reality than imagination. The earliest surviving example is probably the autobiographical account of Widsith, a fourth-century folk poet. The poem recounts his travels amongst the powerful, his ability to "sing and say a story" in the "mead hall," and his return home to sing the praises of his lord and win from him an inheritance; the poem, presumably sung by other gleemen, ends by praising gleemen themselves. As Chambers (1948) summarizes, "In every land they find a lord to whom songs are dear, and whose bounty is open to the exalters of his name." (p. I: 29) Here, then, the poem itself is both an account of the poet's life and a self-bootstrapping legitimation of its worth to those of greater means and power. In a similarly autobiographical vein, the 'Complaint of Doer' tells the (sad) story of a minstrel who has been displaced by a younger and more talented man. However exaggerated and glorious the claims, they are claims about the practices of the performers themselves. The performer of the poem, even if not the original author, recites a story about the situation of the person reciting stories. Hardly a radical departure from reality, it is instead a story that has its place within the occasion where such stories are told. Even when the narrative shifts to days gone by, it does so on the basis of a narrator (or the reciting of a narrator's voice) who claims personal knowledge.

Other cultural performances move further from reality but often only in very tentative ways. I already have mentioned the author or performers who played themselves in a prologue before a show. In the surviving document of the earliest known example, the part played is a Roman playwright, who engages in a discourse that defends his plays, possibly as a prologue to a narration of the play with actions mimed by actors. Here and in other cases narration combined with mimed action may simply be an efficient means of production that did not require actors to memorize dialogues (Chambers, 1948, p. II: 326; Tydeman, 1978, pp. 27–28; for another example, of mumming, see Wickham, 1974, p. 163). The circumstance has its parallel in early modem silent film, with its mimed action interspersed with stills of captions for the audience to read.

Whatever the explanation for this specific prologue that survives from the late tenth or early eleventh century, it is evident that many later performances used similarly indirect devices to convey dramatic action, while often avoiding any aesthetic of dramatic realism that would involve disguise, impersonation, and dialogue, to say nothing of stage sets. Thus, there are a series of twelfth-century poems structured by narrative accounts ("He said," "she retorted") that could have been performed, and comedies that amounted to "dramatic monologues with narrative links" (Tydeman, 1978, p. 29). One of them suggests an early plot basis for the city comedies of the Elizabethan era (analyzed by Griswold, 1986). In it, an old farmer who tries to seduce a young beauty loses out altogether: a young squire wins the girl's heart and the farmer's wife takes the occasion of his absence to strike up an affair with her servant (Tydeman, 1978, p. 29).

Similarly, a number of later lyrical minstrel texts suggest dialogue, sometimes songs of soloists answered by a chorus; other times, exchanges between two minstrels. The subject

matter varied from complaints by an unhappy wife about her husband the poet, to love dialogues between shepherd and knight, to the staged debates, typically on topics of love. In more narrative contexts, the protagonists to such debates might take on the character of 'personified abstractions' — summer and winter, wine and water, or body and soul. Yet Chambers (1948) acknowledges that even these dialogues might easily have been presented by single performers who changed demeanor and speech to mimic different roles. Often, even this device of representation was forsworn. For example, minstrel narratives — the *chansons de gestes* and *romans* — largely stuck to reporting of dialogue by a raconteur. Several exceptions to this rule of thumb are instructive, for — like the earlier examples of poets — the subject matter derives from the situated action of minstrels themselves. Thus, in *Deus Bordéors Ribauz*, two minstrels vie to outdo each other in their claims of skill in the minstrel arts. In another, *Le Roi d'Angleterre et le Jongleur d'Ely*. the king and the minstrel engage in a dialogue of witty repartee (Chambers, 1948, pp. 77–85).

The devices of representation here are diverse, ranging from reportage of experience by poets through enactment of disputes supposedly of the natural persons of the minstrels, to what may be actual representation of other personages — impersonation of a character in the strict sense of the term. Yet the impersonations of lovers are largely set pieces that could be sung without dramatic action, while the personifications of abstractions like winter and wine speak more to the medieval proclivity toward enchantment than to impersonation! Chambers (1948) may be correct to suggest that the fixation of many minstrel texts on their own situations may derive from their use as part of the parade — the preliminary patter used by wandering minstrels to drum up an audience (p. I: 85). Yet despite the Church's hostility to mimed farce — the one form of true dramatic action that Chambers (1948) can identify as even a possible candidate for medieval dramatic representation — he is not able to provide any solid evidence for their existence (pp. I: 830–884). This is despite the surviving texts suggestive of a wide variety of other performance genres. To my mind, it therefore does not seem that the minstrel's aversion to passage beyond his own situated purview needs be explained on the basis of its derivation from the patter of the parade. For it can be explained on a more general basis. In the medieval era, there were countless ways in which reality veered off in performance into the imaginary. But it was almost universally a 'near-imaginary' that was established within the world of the real itself, by movement of performers into play or game settings where they typically retained their own identities, or alternatively, by movement of imaginary figures — the mummers being the most notable — into the real world, where they enticed their audiences to flirt with the boundaries of the imaginary. That the play world was a seamless part of the real world — a hyperreal, and not just a detached imaginary world — is suggested by the way events in the play world could feed back into the taken-for-granted real world. The complex possibilities are suggested by Shakespeare's account of a masque at which King Henry VII chooses Anne Boleyn, leading to his decision to divorce Catherine of Aragon, and changing the political and religious alignments of the English throne in the bargain (Wickham, 1974, p. 167). As in the postmodern situation, the medieval hyperreal cannot be dismissed as illusory, because events within it can be consequential for the more prosaic play of events.

One way of crystallizing an understanding of the medieval hyperreal is to recognize that, by modern standards, its performance practices tended to destabilize rather than conventionalize reality and play. Rather than fixed genres, medieval performance was based on the *mélange* of genres, mixed together by tropes and allusions that continually reworked the tension between life and play, imaginary performance and performed imaginary. Chambers, Wickham, and Tydeman — the three authors I have depended upon for this brief survey — all struggle in their

own ways to reach a sort of modernist clarity about all the different terms for performance and performers and what their referents might be. Faced with a semiotic nightmare, they curse the medieval writers who seem incapable of following fixed terminological conventions, and they despair of ever getting beneath the textual representation of medieval performance to the reality of medieval performance (e.g., Tydeman, 1978, p. 186ff.).

Of course, there is no reason to expect fixed usage over a period of a thousand years or more at a time when rationalization was not even a compelling idea. But I think the problem has more profound (than simply methodological) implications for our understanding of medieval performance. Quite apart from the instability of terminology, the practices described are blurred genres, as yet not well rationalized, not strongly conventionalized, but nevertheless bearing the germs of purpose and intention that have led to subsequent conventionalization of genres, from play, to speech, to parade, to news, to commercial appeal, and so on. To make this case in any but a suggestive way lies beyond the project of the present essay. But it is important at least to recognize in general terms that the history of performance in theatrical terms overlaps considerably with histories of religion, of war, of politics, of everyday life. Indeed, historiographers seeking the origins of historical consciousness — people like Hayden White (1987) — confront similar issues of dramatic plot, and even the same historical figures — the performers of epic poems — that concern us in part here. The lines between counsel and jest, chronicle and praise, between poem and history, song and war cry, myth and deed, are not yet drawn by the modernist hand that will attempt to establish reason and reality as apart from unreason and the imaginary (for example, see Chambers' (1948) discussion of Charlemagne (pp. I: 36–37)).

Certainly, war had its heroic songs and epic narratives, just as powerful men had their poet/sages, freely participating with other members among the retinue. Indeed, the instability of the categories relative to performance situations probably is a testament to the variety of status positions and performance activities of individuals who might variously be called bards, poets, chroniclers, minstrels, storytellers, singers, jesters, fools, buffoons, and so on, and engage in every activity from heroic praise of lords to farcical imitation of animals (see Chambers, 1948, pp. I: 28, 73–74). Even by the fifteenth century, when more conventionalized genres might be expected, the interlude was defined not by its content or performance aesthetics, but by its occasion as a short piece performed at a banquet that might amount to anything from a farce to singing or wrestling (Wickham, 1974, p. 171ff.).

Similarly, we may speak of sport and theatrical performance and parade and spectacle in separate breaths, but the lines distinguishing them are difficult to chart. For tournaments had their dramatic performances, above and beyond the jousting games. *The Pas de la Dame Sauvage*, performed in Ghent in 1469, had a knight who fought for the honor of a wild woman to whom he was indebted for saving his life. Wearing no clothing but her body covered completely with her beautiful blonde hair, the woman resurfaced after the jousting drama at the feast to award prizes to tournament winners. A 'Robin Hood' drama from around the same period had the hero contesting with a knight over which of them possessed the superior skills in archery and wrestling, and finally, a sword fight in which Robin Hood managed to slice off the head of his opponent (Tydeman 1978, p. 20). Equally blurred, the parade of royalty through a city could include tournaments, set theater pieces by the wayside, martial demonstrations, and elaborate floats — worlds of performance themselves (Tydeman, 1978, pp. 89, 91).

It is perhaps fitting to conclude our tour of medieval performance by reflecting on a concern evidenced by the civic-minded in our putatively postmodern period — namely the blurring of advertising and program content. Such blurring has its clear medieval precedent. In an era when advertisements and commercials as distinctive genres of culture did not yet exist,

the 'pitch' was often enough embedded in the performance itself, just as it is today in various films and children's tv programs. In the medieval era, mumming activity often was directed to raising funds for charitable causes, including the support of the mummers themselves, and the collection was sometimes seamlessly integrated into the narrative of the play (Wickham, 1974, p. 139, 146ff.). But there may be other commercial aspects as well. In a typical medieval staging of a mummers' play, in the clearing of a space amidst a gathered audience, possibly at a market, two performers brag about their exploits and then fall into mock combat. One of them dies, a doctor enters, claims miraculous healing abilities, and brings the slain combatant back to life; "The performance ends with a collection of money from the audience and with a song" (Kirby, 1975, p. 142). Did the performers perhaps sell magical potions, like other market vendors? It is at least possible that performance, advertising, and direct sales were once fused in market spectacle. In a similar vein, it seems to me within the bounds of reasonable comparison to note that the Church's morality plays were more than simply the ritualized recreation of great moments in religious history. As Wickham suggests, they were meant to warn their viewers of the pitfalls and traps of evil and encourage the call to a higher standard of personal conduct They were, then, a form of drama with a moral message, perhaps more sophisticated than our postmodern-day infomercials, but nevertheless similarly scripted as shows meant not just to entertain, but also to convince by way of demonstrations and testimonials and cautionary tales (Wickham, 1974, pp. 105–111).

4 Postmodern and Medieval: Reality and Simulacra

The decline of the medieval cultural configuration of performance that I have been describing came, fittingly enough, with the rise of Renaissance realism in the sixteenth century (Tydeman, 1978, p. 236ff.). Paradoxically, increasing realism in plays with plot, impersonation, and stage sets established the theater as an imaginary, at a distance from social reality, clearly distinguished from it, yet serving as an analogue. The reasons for this transformation in performance would be worth investigating more closely, as a case study of the rise of modernist culture (for speculative leads, see Chambers, 1948, pp. 68–69). Here, the task is only to come full circle, back to the questions that animated this essay in the first place. If my survey of medieval performance has been somewhat repetitive, it is because I have compassed the practices from multiple analytic directions, in order to get at the implications of the empirical phenomena for our understanding of representation. This preliminary survey suggests that many medieval situations of play — performance in the broadest sense — shared features that also have been described as distinctively postmodern.

The blurred genres of medieval performance have such obvious postmodern parallels that I will only mention several examples — the infomercial, the advertorial, and the fictional news programs that cover real stories (this, even before Murphy Brown[4] took up the gauntlet). The relatively relaxed medieval distinction between performers and audience is also one that can be found recycled into postmodern discourse in any number of ways — archetypically in that defining moment when Ronald and Nancy Reagan became the audience for the performance in their own spectacle, such that the entire set of inversions themselves became the spectacle for an audience of millions. I can only be suggestive here, but parallel complexities can be found

4. Murphy Brown was the eponymous television investigative journalist and news-program anchor in an American television situation comedy that ran originally from 1988 to 1998. The fictional program blurred genres by including actual media figures such as Connie Chung and real news events in the fictional news programs 'FYI' and 'Murphy in the Morning.'(See IMDb, n.d.) [Footnote added, November 2022.]

in the emotion work that Hochschild (1983) has documented in airline flight attendants and the performed work of leisure that Barry Glassner (1990) has found in aerobics groups. Then, too, audiences have become increasingly part of the performance in some television programs and rock festivals.

The question of a medieval equivalent to the postmodern simulacra is more complex. For it does not seem appropriate to suggest that medieval culture created a hyperreal that served as an alternative to the real and increasingly displaced it (as the argument goes for the postmodern). For the mumming, the minstrels' performances, the masques, the tournaments, and the enacted church dramas did not really create an alternative to the real. Instead, they infused the real with qualities of ritualization and enchantment. We must suppose from a good deal of evidence that life in the medieval era was brutish, short, and hard. But medieval play did not simply offer an alternatively constructed simulacra that would displace that world. Rather, to the degree that medieval culture worked, it recreated the world itself as simulacra. Life, rather than being reality, is a performed simulation. This conclusion is perhaps no more but certainly no less warranted than the formulations about the postmodern hyperreality. But postmodernists, of course, will not have to worry about its truth status. What they will need to confront is a simple thesis: that the postmodernist claims about hyperreality are too parochial and based on an overly drawn binary distinction between the postmodern and the past. This said, the basic task of exploring the cultural construction of social reality historically is a potentially rewarding one, and the questions about the history of play and performance offer an important empirical venue for this pursuit.

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