3. Masques

Background

English masques, or costume balls as theater, date back to the fourteenth century, but evolved mostly after 1510 or so, since Henry VIII and Elizabeth I both enjoyed dancing (Henry even wrote music for masques). However, Tudor masques remained seductive diversions without fancy machines, more like days on the calendar, to commemorate a wedding or Christmas.

Not until the engines from Italy were added do we have anything that required elaborate playwriting or architecture. After 1570, Italian 'houses" or scenes were gradually adopted by the Office of Revels,[1] particularly after the Teatro Olimpico opened in Vicenza in 1585. Then Inigo Jones essentially brought the full machinery to the English stage after 1605. These included "turning" scenes on a revolving stage (*machina versatilis*), and painted plaster flats that moved on grooves (wings), mobile sound effects, thunder and lightning, more advanced chariots on wheels, many devices that flew, and, most of all, accelerated perspective.

Then in 1605,[2] Ben Jonson wrote the first of twenty-one masques for the court, *The Masque of Blacknesse*.[3] By 1618,[4] the form was set. The comic antimasque came first, as in antic, burlesque, grotesche, witcheries. Then the more sober, courtly masque took over—revels in song, with three dances and very lavish theatrical machines.

To keep the pacing brisk but dense, Jonson all but mashed his allegories. Cherubim, pygmies, Amazons, gypsies rubbed shoulders with Venus, Mercury Cupid, Hercules, Silenus, Juno; while Opinion, Merefool, Fame, or Golden Age would philosophize ("opine"). By all accounts, the effect was dazzling, an homage to perspective awry and to the throne. "Gaze upon them, as on the offspring of Ptolemy."[5]

> Clear Truth anon shall strip thee to the heart, and
> show how mere fantastical thou art.[6]

By all reports, the performances were full-throated, often at full throttle. Verses ranged from magisterial to bawdy (the king liked bawdy)[7]. But the sum had to promise a happy future for the court. At key scenes, the courtiers and their decorous women were invited to make a gaudy fuss.[8] Perhaps the gaudiest was the wedding masque Hymenaei (1606),[9] with its animated effects, its "region of fire … whirl(ing),"[10] but most of all its spinning globe on a revolving stage, a "microcosmos"[11] with continents in gold, and seas "heightened" by "silver waves." Inside the globe were eight members of the court, dressed as "the four humors and four affections." Along with musicians, they "danced out on the stage." Or should I say pranced and fawned? There is no record of how gracefully the courtiers moved that night; only how graceful they thought they were.[12] They fluttered under the "sunlike" gaze of King James,"[13] who was so clumsy he never danced at all.

From Innocence to Murder

Hymenaei celebrated what became the tragic dynastic marriage of Lady Frances Howard—then only thirteen—to the equally young and unprepared Duke of Essex.[14] Eight years later, she would have the marriage annulled, claiming Essex ignored her, but found time for sex with many others. Then she married the Earl of Somerset, the king's favorite. Her second wedding was memorialized by Francis Beaumont's *The Masque of Flowers* (1614).[15] Unfortunately, soon after, as Lady Somerset, she had her enemy poisoned—Sir Thomas Overbury, a poet known at court. Found out, she endured a famous trial,[16] was found guilty, avoided execution, but spent the rest of her life under a shadow.

However, in 1606, she is still the emblem of innocence, a virgin about to wed her callow groom. Hymen, god of marriage (apparently performed by Jonson himself), offers sage but bawdy advice for their wedding night: "Mutual joys … without fear … Glad Genius, enlarge, that they may both ere day, rise perfect every way."

Meanwhile, lords posing as Hellenistic fauns—Greek statues with Persian wreaths—begin a Roman mating ritual. They prance in something like peekaboo outfits, with tights made of carnation cloth, "cut to express them naked, like the Greek God Thorax."[17] Then their ladies arrive, weighed down

by silver "celestial" birds and fruit—with a "loose undergarment brocaded in silver and gold"—revealing gold lace even closer to the skin.[18] As nymphs, the ladies look "round and swelling." Nonetheless their "sweetness of proportion" is "preserved," or at least loaded down, by ridiculously gaudy accessories: jeweled hairpieces and gold shoes "set with rubies and diamonds."[19]

Increasingly, these very expensive costumes, surrounded by special effects to match, seemed to overwhelm Jonson's writing. He came to despise the man who designed them, court architect Inigo Jones. He complained that Jones simply plagiarized the Italians, even copied the landscapes popular at Florentine courts.[20] These "engines" made expensive waste look cheap. So why should Inigo Jones, a "maker of the properties … the scene[21] phallo-sadism … the engine … (now rule the play, as) musick-master (and) fabler?"

Effects specifically by Jones kept Jonson stewing for decades. He attacked Jones directly in poetry finally made him a devious character in *Tale of a Tub* (1633).[22] To Jonson, the "engine" stood in for the power of moneyed interests in England, even at court. He lampooned their hypocrisy of one, 1606), and their gullibility (Bartholomew Fair, 1616). In 1612, when the Crown is near bankruptcy, while London business thrives,[23] he has Robin Goodfellow warn of merchant power, and its Puritan allies:[24]

> 'Tis that imposter Plutus, the god of money, who has stol' love's ensigns, and in his belied figure reigns i' the world, making friendships, contracts, marriages and almost religion … Usurping all those offices in this age of Gold which Love himself performed in the Golden Age.
> —*Love Restored*[25]

In 1631, to elevate theater against the growing influence of the masque, Jonson declared that "the Pen is more noble than the Pencil. For that can speak to the Understanding; the other but to the Sense."[26] Masques with pomp distract from the actors. They destroy voice. The eye reigns, the ear fails. (Does that sound familiar in our age of ride movies?) Years before, a commentator on *The Masque of Blacknesse* marveled at how special effects "rise into the heavens or descend to the stage." They "arouse delight and admiration among the spectators," who fail to see how large engines can simply disappear."[27]

Engines

Surrounding the rotating globe in *Hymenaei*, there "hovered a middle region of clouds." Generally, moving clouds were controlled by counterweights—capstans. Along with the clouds, revolving prisms changed scenes (*machina versatilis*). Even more than Torelli, these changes could be synched to the falling curtain—for even quicker edits, to display "the scene with as startling a suddenness as possible."[28] These prisms could also make colors tremble. Artificial fires could leap across their gold-mirrored surfaces. Waves at sea might roll and crash: waves were painted on cloth rods.[29] Storms at sea could rise mechanically and dissolve, along with sounds of danger coming. From offstage, audiences might hear a tug of ropes aching. Suddenly from overhead, a flying monster would burst through the clouds and dive, with a hiss, into the sea.

Indeed, all this gaudy fuss, what we call eye candy today, signaled a dark force for Jonson. He lived off the provenance of the court, but merely as the writer. Masques paid well, but writers were secondary. Eventually Jonson fell out of favor, particularly during the reign of Charles I,[30] and would die in poverty. Meanwhile his partner in masques, the court architect, stayed on, like a spawn of commerce. The more Jonson felt his career slipping, the more he vented against this one man. Inigo Jones, he wrote, made the Boards to speak …" because "Painting and Carpentry (were) the soul of the maske." So "pack with your peddling Poetry to the Stage! This is the money-get, Mechanick Age!"[31]

Jonson and Jones were like spiteful contract players who made great films during the Golden Age of Hollywood, both men of immense talent. Jonson in particular, a guiding theatrical spirit for his era, invented a form for the masque that had never existed before. His allegorical figures, like forces of spite more than nature, allowed the effects to criticize as well as amaze. The obvious symbolism[32] of the characters took on a brittle duplicity. Beneath the courtly fuss, he made the characters (often courtiers) swindle their way to the truth, with hollow tricks, exaggerations of the natural. How strange then that Jonson was so annoyed at special effects: he devised a form of narrative that made special effects a splendid alternative to drama, that suited them magically. He literally gave Inigo Jones more rope.

Interlude

In theater history following the lead of Steven Orgel,[33] much has been uncovered about masque as an alternative to drama. This research serves my purposes very well. I will rely on it to jump from 1605 to the "masquing impulse" in the present.

In 1605, in *The Masque of Blacknesse*, courtiers dressed as sea creatures—posing, flouncing. Blue-haired Tritons met sea maids, who rode sea horses "writhing" on the "artificial sea."[34] Then the sea itself disappeared into clouds—through the back of the stage, a miracle of 'Perspective."[35] Jonson's directions here are quite specific: the court should operate as a collective character. All effects should revolve around them, while the scenography revolves around the king. The masque should clarify the rules at court, and the power of the state.

But as I mentioned earlier, the rules could get rather woeful. The dancing by courtiers was probably slow, only occasionally graceful, certainly not very limber. It was, to coin a phrase, "stately" "fixed in the firmament." Courtiers posed gracefully, at the height of narcissism I suspect. Without much sudden movement, the rhythm mostly followed one artifice after the other. The sum of all these—costumes, machines, lights—was often called the "engine." For Jenson, this engine announced that Artifice defines Nature. The engine was Artifice on behalf of the crown. It guided the court through chaos—antimasque—where Nature bowed before Artifice.

The "story" was more about counterpoint than conflict. Or should I say *counterpoise*? The dancing of the court could be frozen inside a space that resembled an enchanted ship guided by machines, while the sea melted in front of your eyes. Then to balance all this stateliness, Jonson added some bawdy humility. Against the stately engine, he added a humbler chaos, some pests sneaking in, imaginary social warfare. For that, he borrowed from streetwise London culture, from forms that already existed by themselves—impromptu, without much budget. His sources often spoke more directly about political action, about repression, alienation. (As comparison, I am reminded of songs from campgrounds and picket lines—made polite in the 1890s—or black jazz whitened up for Broadway in the 1920s.)

Anti-Masques: Street Revels and the Bold Slasher

For his anti-masques, Jonson borrowed from street theater about chaos, outgrowths of medieval carnival, much older than masque.[36] By the Renaissance, there was already a primitivist fascination with carnivals. They influenced slapstick, vaudeville, the Italian commedia dell'arte. Thus, when Jonson decided to add a spicy prelude, he turned to "homely" street chaos, even to the illusion of class conflict (certainly not real conflict). He inserted the anti-masque as dialectical critique of the order that followed, to give more rope to himself as much as to Jones. Within ten brawling minutes, anti-masque moved from buffo chaos to order, what he also called "a foil or false Masque."[37] But in those ten minutes, this street jesting[38] made for asides that could be edgy (But edgy with due care; he was at court, after all.)

Jonson also borrowed from London mummings,[39] where amateurs in pantomime went door to door, doing *mumchance* (gaming with dice); or invaded Christmas and spring festivals. Often, mummers took over the street, engaged in the sword dance,[40] the wooing ceremony, or St. George and the fire-breathing dragon, sometimes with exploding gunpowder through its fangs.

My favorite is the parody about a Turkish knight called the Bold Slasher, a paranoic remnant from the Crusades: After slapstick swordplay, the Bold Slasher dies. Then, a quack doctor appears, master of the black arts. He applies a magic elixir, *elucompane*, to the Slasher's wounds. This brings the knight back to life, but in an ungodly way. The quack doctor and the crusader turn out to be agents of the devil. They have to be chased away. Someone throws a bowl of "girdy grout" at them. Revels like these invited the audience to get noisy and antic, to throw the rascal out. Mock revenge was ritualized into an outdoor disguising: Mummers could have their naughty say before they lost to Order. Or better still, they could infect Order with frolic. They were anti-masquers before the fact, on the streets of London.

But not only the roar of street life was essential here, also the fact of theatricality outdoors. Well into the seventeenth century, plays were staged out of doors, particularly in England and Spain. They looked vaguely like mummings already. We sense that affinity in Shakespeare, in his comic relief borrowed from street festivals. However, Jonson still preferred chaos that was more genteel. He relied more on street pageants dominated by the merchant class, more enclaved, like St. Bartholomew's Fair,[41] closer to a Watteau painting than a Brueghel.

And Inigo Jones generally avoided plebeian street references altogether—with one exception. He was fascinated by the grotesque maiming among the poor in pageants. He studied the etchings by the French artist Jacques Callot[42] very carefully: the floats, the *caprices*,[43] the costumes of each class, the poses, the layered hierarchy. In Callot, sad mobs, ghoulish dwarfs, and dandified nobles would squeeze by the hundreds into the plaza, during fêtes celebrating royal births, military victories, visiting royalty.[44] However, Callot was painting a darker picture as well. He was clearly an opponent of Artifice. In his famous *The Miseries of War* (1633), he inverted the civic pageant altogether, made it grotesque. He replaced the outdoor spectacle with wartime executions, bodies flailed, armies sacking a town.

But Jones simply added jewelry and pomp to what he saw in Callot's theatricalized engravings. After all, Callot recorded pageants familiar in England as well. These often started in front of the gates of the city, then along toll roads into the town square. Floats of chimera were followed by equestria: horses suffocating in plumage—equestrian fantasia—ridden by nobility sporting costumes beyond what a peasant could earn in ten years. Then the court architect added mock architecture. Plaster facades without buildings were raised for the pageant alone, like movie sets with all the trimmings. To the poor, this must have looked like ruthless condescension, but there was usually one saving grace. Crowds were permitted to hover very close to the action, bask near the glory.

As in carnivals, the poor classes in London—even the rabble, the disempowered—were granted a few hours to roar openly in the presence of their betters. To compete with this noise, fireworks and theatrical machines were set off by the state. But even over the racket, often the voices hung on anyway, or were too hungover to care. In anti-masques, Janson parodied that openness—that boozy inchoate nuisance. It gave him more room to be prickly. From the mouths of Chaos, he slipped in guarded jokes about the scandals of aristocrats at court.[45]

Thus, anti-masques were "guardedly" a *contested* form, not simply pomp to honor a nobleman or a royal visitor. Even more clearly, anti-masque allowed for jokes about contested space. Characters symbolizing class warfare (shown as chaos) roared like street folk, did their slapstick, talked like rabble. They were then shooed away by the courtly, humanistic master of ceremonies and his allies. A good prince knew how to handle intruders.

This momentary break from repression, ten minutes of Chaos, must have looked familiar, even gratifying to courtiers. They noticed how the London

streets were policed during pageants. They very likely agreed that it was good to police the poor that carefully, but presumably with a velvet glove, like Good King James. They very likely assumed that pageants gave the poor a breather between nightmares. Good King James, for a few hours, let the miserable world go upside down. But there is very little evidence that the rabble enjoyed pretending that they were knights at a joust, then peacefully went home.

Hierarchy

Jonsonian masque defended the hierarchy of the court, and the anti-masque theatricalized a few minutes of revolt. The balance of the two amounted to performance theater about crowd control. For the opening scene (anti-masque), the crowd might pretend to issue a call to arms. But immediately afterward, the masque itself smoothed that away, out of sight out of mind. *Politesse*—a seventeenth-century term for courtly manners—sublimated the mob. Thus, in the final scene, in an irradiated sunset (special effects), the prince could appear "fully extended," as Apollo spreading like a peacock.

Consider Jonson's irony in calling masque "the study of magnificence."[46] In a world where everyone at court knew their place, class difference was magnificent; and the world outside could shake as much as it pleased. But it was hardly a secret, from the Dutch Revolt onward—from 1580 into the eighteenth century—that divine right was constantly under fire. Civil and religious wars afflicted every major power. Masque could blacken out this anxiety, and replace it with a fragile, very extreme code of decorum.

Anti-masque suggested a different twist: the myth of subversion, of a riot by the poor. The anti-masque theatricalizes revolt, while masque subdues this revolt gracefully, through media and special effects. These contrasts between anti-masque and masque are useful tools, even for the history of special effects.

Courtly masque died out during the reign of William and Mary, gone by 1700. Some traces continued in opera and the music hall well into the nineteenth century, but mostly as interludes in upscale vaudevilles, the so-called vanities and follies in 1920s Manhattan, and finally as long dance numbers in thirties Hollywood musicals. The earnest tenor is surrounded by a dither of beauties with spit curls in a Busby Berkeley number.

Where indeed does masque theatricalize and anti-masque subdue? In the movies, *masque* in the title usually means a horror tale, about Svengali, the Phantom of the Opera, red shoes that kill, Poe's *Masque of the Red Death*, Orpheus in madness. *The Golddiggers* musicals of the thirties vaguely fit as

masques. They pretend to take the audience to the actor's life behind the curtain. The audience is then shown joining the show. The Marx Brothers are anti-masque in the Brothers' *A Night at the Opera*, 1936.

Perhaps raves, even karaoke, and various subcultural underground music scenes are reactions against subdued masque. There is something of the same in performance theater, performance art, even lip-synching in the aisles during midnight screenings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

All these fit what Jonson meant by "emblematic." The plots, such as they were, amount to "mashed"[47] allegories where music, dance, and spectacle served as theatrical interlude. The payoff—the dance—came after a journey from chaos to order. But the journey itself began as anti-masque, as awry, until the courtiers showed up. Their bodies were turned into gaudy sculpture. They were dressed like glazed pheasants inside elaborate machines.

Other kinds of masque, not Jonson's kind, were often held outdoors, to glorify the civic space, to help mourn a dead worthy, celebrate a famous marriage, a royal birth, a holiday, a war, a peace. More often than not, they were overripe military parades, the Baroque equivalent of ticker tape on the day that Germany surrendered, or a Nazi rally in Technicolor. They were massively scripted shows of military pride, gaudy with special effects, usually with costumed horses prancing. Governments today find that television news does much more than parades.

Scripted Chaos

What about Vegas acts as subdued and theatricalized masque? From Liberace to Elvis(es) to costumed animal acts: fire-breathing magicians embracing tigers; expensively-lit naked showgirls as costumed sculpture. Expensive rock concerts, with all the special effects, have evolved into a rather sedate form of masque, a soothing cathexis, with some contact high, and sexual entendres.

In a class on special effects, a student asked if an orgy was a form of masque. Then she asked, if sexual domination with music counted. She worked part-time as a dominatrix. Slaves paid to clean her apartment in the nude while she spanked them, sometimes to music. I admitted that I hadn't done this research at all. I didn't enjoy cleaning floors even for myself.

1920: Agitrop as Anti-Masque

For the twentieth century, another example resists easy classification:

On November 7, 1920, to celebrate the Third International, artists staged a street pageant in Petersburg—a Bolshevik Feast of Fools.[48] Massive puppets were raised like corpses on pikes. Armed soldiers joined the thousands of civilians. The roar was so convincing to those not part of the play, rumors spread of another coup. This came to be called *agitprop*,[49] on streets, in storefronts, even on the sides of moving trains.

During the early 1920s, variations of agitprop were practiced by avant-gardes in Europe, particularly in Germany. Simply put, a troupe of political farceurs would "perform" the revolution. They might pretend to liberate a street, use agitation and propaganda, with music-hall forms of direct address, usually pressuring the audience to act. Thus, we should understand "mass action" in two senses—as interactive theater, and as theater merging into politics.

Brecht's theories on epic theater came partly out of his fascination with agit-prop, and its applications by his friend, Impresario and producer, Erwin Piscator. Walter Benjamin noticed agitprop at the time when he was writing about Baroque *Trauerspiel* as subversive allegory (1925).[50] There were also puppet and robotic agitprops: Oskar Schlemmer staged machine-aesthetic puppet plays for the Bauhaus, as part of the style called *Neue Sachlichkeit* (the "new object-ness"), updated from constructive operas, like *Victory Over the Sun* (1913). These, in turn, point toward Eisenstein's theories on the montage of attractions (1923).

Dozens of other names could be added here as well, like Auguste Boal's Theater of the Oppressed in Brazil, the Federal Theater Project in New York (e.g., *The Cradle Will Rock*, 1936), campesino theater emerging out of the grape strike in California (1970). Agitprop was anti-masque without courtly masque afterward. It returned the allegory of the crowd back to its sources, to street pageants, to mass action as theater, not the other way around.

Agitprop after 1968

Let me leap ahead in my argument for a moment, to the afterword that follows agitprop. The arc of this book will take us from scripted spaces dominated by public architecture to special effects dominated by media and tourism. Much

of this section may be more useful later on; but it belongs in this category. The rest of it will be available as an epilogue to this chapter.

Clearly in 1968, the public "interactive" process that I call masqueing took a strange, and indeed a dangerous turn. And now in 2003, it has clearly taken yet another step, in the midst of a worldwide crisis during the invasion of Iraq, followed by a stillness. The stillness is in fact a camouflage, punctuated by media news as agitprop, to cover up the looming crisis. Media experts help the political handlers. Together, they stage photographs of Bush as Moses, or perhaps as Indiana Jones.

Like loyal Baroque masquers, they have saved the monarchy. It is an Electronic Baroque kingdom. Since the early seventies, the momentum toward this has been steady and well financed. The direction of American political culture has been altered, away from any version of mass action. The anti-masque, as it developed in industrial culture, as agitprop, subcultures, perhaps even the tradition of the avant-garde, has been short-circuited. And these were forces far more politically vigilant than anti-masque ever was. But they no longer function very powerfully as a mode of resistance and political critique. It has been absorbed into a system of special effects generated through electronic media, and massive global branding. Agitprop has been institutionalized, converted into media talk shows and war shows as masque. The turning point was undoubtedly 1968, and the decade afterward.

Chains of Being: In Defense of Hierarchy

Like my memories since 1968, Jonsonian masque was media in control of a theatrical crowd. Meanwhile, through media—special effects—an irradiated sunset revealed the king's power "fully extended," an Apollo spread like a peacock. This masqueing through media had its own "pop" philosophy as well, a kind of McLuhanism for the Electronic Baroque. In 1976, literary historian Northrop Frye discussed the process very clearly.[51] First, he linked Jonsonian masque to the Great Chain of Being: feudal theory updated during the Renaissance, about feudal order as an unbreathable chain, from God on down.

Within this hierarchic scheme of things, there were the four elements, governed by the echo of a fifth: the spiritual ether (*spiritus mundi*). *Spiritus mundi* operated almost like a thinking organism, the cortex of the chain. Through matter, it taught the truth behind appearances, that in time, all things must learn their place, most of all how to act graciously (with *politesse*). The three estates

presumably knew their place—a myth to cover up the sense of a brooding crisis ahead. In the same sympathetic way, the soul knew its place within the body. Or the planets moved knowingly, to keep the heavens from falling apart.

This mindful order made knowing your place self-evident. It could be sensed as plainly as Jacob's ladder—*axis mundi*. From high to low, the Chain assigned rank. Those who failed to understand their rank, like poor Faust, fell under God's savage wrath, or, like Lucifer, were exiled outside the Chain altogether. The debates on all this were fierce, on how the Chain related to natural law, and so on. After 1630, many philosophers argued for a more pluralist Great Chain—Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza, Locke—while at the English courts, a reductive version was frequently applied, as a fashionable aesthetics echoed in masques.

According to tradition, the Great Chain was theologically linked to Neoplatonism; and in courtly circles this amounted (no surprise) to a defense of the monarchy. Of course, this convenient Neoplatonism[52] came by way of Marsilio Ficino and others, who used a Christianized Plotinus as their source; but it had traveled the low road for over a century, leading to terms like Platonic Love, and numerous cults (Christian cabala, Gnosticism, etc.). It had been steadily turned into fashion at various courts since the Renaissance, since the popes who patronized Michelangelo, and in the courts of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I as well.

The fashionable version was simple enough to argue, considering how deep the source. Neoplatonism (and, by extension, the Great Chain) "proved" why architectural special effects were necessary, why synesthesic immersion did its tricks beneath a Renaissance dome, in Raphael or Botticelli, how it guided the viewer toward *spiritus mundi*. As art historian John Shearman explains, when viewers walked beneath a Renaissance dome, the historian imagines (for often scholarship can only be a deeply informed fiction) that they traveled "from real space to fictive space." In grander terms, they went "from this world to the world beyond the tomb in space and time … liberating the space of earthly dimension."[53]

Presumably, this scripted journey proved that the neo-feudal state was spiritually imminent because it felt politically eminent. Princes could not fail to be good, even bad princes, because *spiritus mundi* showed them sponsoring the scheme of things. This convenient Neoplatonism also defended the taste of patrons with ready cash. It made theatrical illusion Neoplatonically self-evident. Thus, alongside the glories of Ficino's academy in Florence, with its call for Rapture and Becoming, emerged Neoplatonic special effects—the

scripted, rapturous space. It was courtly mind over matter inside a scripted space. Neoplatonic immersion became Raphael's defense, as it was Inigo Jones's argument a century later—and Jonson's, identifying Pythagoras as Neoplatonic. Let us say that there was high Neoplatonism and practical Neoplatonism.

In the eighteenth century, the term degraded even further into a wonderful, ornate claptrap. We finally wind up with Goethe's mournful Werther (1775). Poor Werther is platonically in love. His lady (already married) decides not to soil this pure love by having sex with him. At last, as his only Platonic choice, the gracious way out, Werther flings himself into the river. Romantic death was commodified further by 1850. Near train stations, shady vendors hawked occult, gnostic, cabalistic, moonstruck powders— Romantic ways to tease death. In immersive space, late pop Romanticism went even more gruesome and carny. Twisted bodies were featured in dime museums. Hypnotists and magicians unleased the spirits of the dead. Baum finally deflates and satirizes these morbid swindlers in *The Wizard of Oz*.

To be fair, of course, the high road for Neoplatonic forms also survived,[54] variously in Palladio and his followers, later in Leibniz, even Hegel, and was clearly a principal target for Descartes. But these giants also knew its vernacular form quite well, equated Neoplatonism with theatrical illusion. It amounted to a simplified pilgrimage inside a scripted space, along a stream of special effects, from the ancients to the Church, from Artifice to God. In masque, this Great Chain involved a series of correspondences, of linking analogies and dances. Ancient pagans bow in as Christians under the skin. By the third dance, the pagans sense the superiority of Christ the way a dog hears its master. As masque, paganism was a Neoplatonic path to the Christian order, just as special-effects machines were a "beguiling syncretism"[55] similar to the Great Chain.

After that stop on the chain came the next practical step—into pure ether (*spiritus mundi*)—as represented by a spectacular mishmash of pagan and proto-Christian images, and from there to pure magic itself. Of course, Shakespeare clearly thought some of this was nonsense in *The Tempest*.[56] His characters are more than willing to give up perfection along the chain, and settle for humanity instead. Prospero's masque is mostly about theatrical evasion. His humans daydream too much anyway. Their Neoplatonic spirit may never find a home (daily life is a glorious but low-grade nervous breakdown). Certainly Ariel and her antipode Caliban, the walking embodiment of Neoplatonic order, keep missing their cues; while the great magus Prospero

is forced, to recite these cues. Finally, in Act IV, he mournfully rejects Neoplatonism—and special effects in the masque (a masque modeled partly on *Hymenaei*, on the dissolving "great globe"):[57]

> …These our actors
> As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
> Are melted into air, into thin air,
> And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
> The cloud-clapped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
> Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
> And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
> Leave not a rack behind.

The payoff then was not Rapture, but "such stuff as dreams are made on." However, for other Elizabethans, like Spenser and his *Faerie Queen*, even pagan enchantments from the Druids could be labeled Neoplatonic. "Popular" Neoplatonism allowed for many forms of non-Christian animism. It offered a kind of woven tapestry where satyrs and tree sprites could nap beside Christ the Lamb. It was, in its way, very ecumenical—and very despotic. Any gruesome deft-footed monster loses a will of its own. It must drag itself, as if in a trance, toward Christianity, to its place on the Great Chain. And that place was holy, because Augustine, Plotinus, or Boethius dreamed it up. Thus, even during the Inquisition, hundreds of pagan names are forgiven by way of Neoplatonic "Rapture," along the Great Chain of Being.

Dancing and Civil War

The elegance and hokum of "pop" Neoplatonism is like a pyramid scheme (very hierarchical indeed), from Leibniz writing on theatrical illusion to flying chariots taking chimera down to hell. And while masque choreography has been studied very seriously—the influence of Italian and French dance, the ethnography of dance, and so on[58]—I keep laughing over one image. I see bloated courtiers dancing while the world outside explodes, en route to civil war by 1640.

The career of playwright James Shirley (1596–1666) is particularly apt here. He converted to Catholicism as a young man, bounced from court to the street

as the civil war shifted the government away from Catholics. Consider Shirley's ominous stage directions for the comedy *Love's Cruelty* (1631): "a tempest so artificial and sudden in the clouds, with a general darkness and thunder … that you would cry out with the [actors] that you cannot scape drowning."[59] Indeed, the Artifice of Shirley's masque, its thunderous effects, suggests a formal act of forgetting. Drowning onstage precedes the drowning on the street when the Civil War arrived.

Dancing in the masque, with glittery media all around, was an exercise in collective forgetting. As Jonson advised, Dances and Antics might reign together, but running away from Nature was "the only point of art that tickles the Spectators." Or as Frye explained: To Jonson, the special effects by Inigo Jones were "a perishable body."[60] Thus, to restore what was "obliterated," Jonson added anti-masques: "the epiphany of temporary disorder or confusion." Conflict between the two provided the immortal soul of theater, its Neoplatonic truth.

Jonson saw Neoplatonism as imbalance finding harmony, a story conflict about contested space. The Great Chain of Being was weak. Hierarchy along the chain was shaky, like the neo-feudal state itself. Masquers may attempt absolutist avoidance, but the tensions on the street were still impossible to ignore. Thus Jonson invited courtiers to act out the demise of their creed. He wrote masques as an imbalancing act. Draw some blood, but pretend that this is not the end of courtly life altogether.

Let the special effects (but not his dialogue) be a dance without death, so artificial, so immersive, so filled with fake cataclysms, to put the courtier's mind at ease. Of course, many writers saw the irony of special effects as an imbalancing act. In 1613, Thomas Campion wrote in *Lord's Masque* (1613) about "the kind delights" that God, through Inigo Jones, could "breed." The stars moved in an exceeding strange and delightful manner, and I suppose few have ever seen more neat artifice than Master Inigo Jones shewed."[61]

> But [Campion adds] to return to our purpose; about the end of this song, the stars suddenly vanished, as if they had been drowned amongst the clouds, and the eight masquers appeared in their habits, befitting their states … the richest show of solemnity that could be invented.

Campion has the masquers pretend to be set on fire, with "flames of embroidery" at their feet, and flames of gold enamel on their head. Silk "representing" a plume of smoke emitted from their skull. Campion's story, of course, explains

all this away, as "artificial fire" (very Neoplatonic indeed): But the grim special effects speak for themselves, about literally dancing in style at the end of the world.

As we shall see in chapters further on, special effects are one's fondest desires and worst nightmares joined at precisely the same instant. The staging, meanwhile, has to look artificial, and yet immersive, to charm and reassure the audience. In that spirit, Jones's special effects were immersion as a loyalty oath. But they too had their underbelly, their imbalancing act.

To find that underbelly, we return to our dancing courtiers one last time: They still look overdressed. Some are in shape; many are flumpfing around, very likely overfed. There are even rumors of heavy boozing and falling into food at some masques.[62] The courtiers recite speeches about how frail they are, how contingent to the king, along the Great Chain: They bow with grace, immodest for modesty's sake. Their place in the political hierarchy has grown weaker. They promise to look to their own house instead, to their servants, mistresses, and hunts—to never make war against their king. They will settle for peace above uncertainty.

The special effects whirl around them. But even the effects look like enemies dressed as machines. They stand in for an uneasy alliance between the weakened king and the merchant class, not with the nobles. Pythagorean proportions, after all, were the tools on merchant ships. Indeed, Jonson's complaints aside, even the special effects trembled under all this exertion. Courtiers look exhausted just keeping their legs high enough for the last dance of the masque. A courtier's metaphysics could be rugged.

The Digital Chain of Being

Needless to say, this Neoplatonic unease grew horrific after 1649, when Charles I was beheaded. In brief, Neoplatonism did not survive well into the nineteenth century except in spooky sects and magic lore. Then its Baroque origins were essentially rediscovered—and scholarly interest renewed—in 1936, when intellectual historian A.O. Lovejoy published *The Great Chain of Being*. But even Lovejoy concentrated more on Enlightenment natural religion than on masques in 1610.

Now in 2003, we see a revival of the Great Chain as digital entertainment, as the title of a computer game,[63] mostly tongue in cheek, about humans spoiling the balance of the universe. Role players can fix this imbalance by

dressing up as wood sprites, ores, trolls, dryads. The pagans along this Great Chain have been infected by Tolkien's trilogy, along with movies like *The Fifth Element*. For the term *axis mundi*, I found 820 sites, including a role-player game (from White Wolf), hundreds on spiritualism, witchery, paranormals, folk music, jazz, esoterica, ancient artifacts for sale, global shopping online, links to Gala (the world spirit inside the earth), and a comic about "a famous virtual reality (sex-changed) terrorist hacker."[64]

Also in the mid-nineties, during a utopian bubble on the Internet, the concept *virtual* was occasionally labeled Neoplatonic, as in magic, Rapture, and alchemy. In 1998, science critic Margaret Wertheim wrote: "Contemporary dreams of cyberspace parallel the age-old Platonic desire to escape from the 'cloddishness' of the body into a 'transcendental" realm of disembodied perfection—the realm of the soul."[65] But then Wertheim warned that this new Jerusalem "will be lonely," as in the Christian eschatology. Cyberspace will respond to alienation, but with communities that remain disembodied. Then, soon after Werthheim's essay appeared, the e-commerce bubble collapsed.

We wonder if, along these new Chains of Being and *axes mundi*, there will be revivals of feudalism and hierarchy, or simply better search engines when shopping for accessories to the masque. The image of the special-effects city, of the microcosmos, of dark cities and *Blade Runner* cities, recover the axis mundi. We go back for a last look: Milton dedicated his masterpiece *Paradise Lost* to its sculptural imaginary: he dangled the earth on a chain, below a quadratura ceiling of the heavens. Satan was stuck at the bottom, to prowl but never repent, "hurled headlong" from "the ethereal sky with hideous ruin and combustion down to bottomless perdition, there to dwell in adamantine chains and penal fire."[66]

Satan's refusal would become a tallying cry for centuries, a Romantic foreboding, as the poet Henry Vaughan wrote in 1650:[67]

To live in grots and caves, and hate the day
  Because it shows the way;
The way which from this dead and dark abode
  Leads up to God;
A way where you might tread the sun, and be
  More bright than he

In our future, I see us shrinking the Chain to a pocket watch.

Masque at War

The art direction for the principal scene in *The Masque of Blacknesse* begins with an "artificial sea" flooding a landscape. Waves crash "the billow to break"; they "imitate that orderly disorder … common in nature."[68]

Tritons arrive, human from the waist up. Taffeta on their back is "carried by the wind." They are followed by two sea maids on mechanical sea horses, an Ethiope, twelve nymphs inside a glowing concave shell, and twelve torch bearers on sea monsters. Meanwhile behind everybody, in deep focus, the sea empties into the horizon. Then the sea merges with clouds toward "the level of the *State*, at the upper end of the hall, drawn by the *lines of Perspective*." The scene is sloped downward, as if from a ship, catching "the eye far off with a wandering beauty."[69]

As so often in masques, nods to shipping were everywhere: power at sea, power from ships, power for war. On the horizon, the sea was very still, but of a "wandering beauty in orderly disorder." I am reminded of newsreels from the great powers before World War II, and the war of nerves about to begin. In 1608, masques were sent to war by letters of state between diplomats from France, Spain, and England. In 1610, the royal counsellor for Henry IV in France wrote a tract condemning masques as heretical, arguing that madmen, satyrs, animal fetishes, and monsters were taking the place of Christ Himself.[70]

Later in response, John Taylor, a counselor for James I, defended masques,[71] because they "demonstrate the skills and knowledge that our warlike nation (has) in engines, fireworks, and other military discipline." Let the machines of war be gloried even in spectacle. "War seems to sleep," but our sovereign may "arouse her, to the terror of all malignant opposers of his Royal state and dignity." That bombast turned out to be more than simply a flare. Ten years later, a colossal war engulfed the continent (1618) and continued for thirty years, while the popularity of special effects grew in the courts at war.

Proscenium: The Triumphal Outdoors

Indeed, the masque was often propaganda, but with hidden paradox. For example, we study the proscenium itself: it alluded to *triumphal* celebrations where crowds mingle on the streets. These presumably echoed ancient Rome. The returning army would be welcomed through a proscenium. Imagine gargantuan statues guarding 'the entrance to Cleopatra's needle, or the gates of

Rome, or the center of Piazza Navona—the Romans taking on the mantle of Hellenistic monumentality, a Greco/Egyptian/ Roman procession. The two pillars of the proscenium signified a great victory.[72] They stood *pro*—before—the scene; and framed the spot where honors might be given. Suddenly, the curtain (also *pro/scenium*) dropped to reveal the spectacle, like velvet off a statue.

In the Baroque memory of ancient Rome, this proscenium signified an interactive process, a public triumph with diffuse events all over the site. If we look at Callot's etchings of proscenium events outdoors, the proscenium stage was dwarfed by the subnarratives around it. Each of the various classes and guilds had its place, and events. It was crowded frolic. The two dressy pillars at the center served as polestar more than a centerpiece. So too with masque in many ways: the proscenium invited the interactive; the audience crossed its threshold to join the play.

Proscenia also allowed the outside and inside to interact. The curtain edited from one to the other, from Nature to Artifice, back and forth (outdoor/indoor). After all, the proscenia that Architects built for fireworks often resembled the proscenium they designed for the royal theater—as did the chapels and altars for churches. The proscenium was a military symbol. It signified the triumph of a new set of alliances, between faith, entertainment, mercantilism, and the prince.

Masque simply exaggerated this symbolism. It let courtiers "revel" as if they were sea captains and Olympians—to sail through the proscenium gateway into an imaginary city or countryside. By 1600, arches had been added to proscenia on the stage, to enhance the crossing. It highlighted the curtain, the magician's velvet, a tease to hide sleight of hand. This upgraded proscenium helped the turning of Nature into Artifice stay "more thoroughly hidden and indiscernible."[73]

The Limit Between the Visible and Invisible

But what good is sleight of hand if you cannot see the hand? Theater historian John Peacock calls the proscenium "the limit between the visible and the invisible."[74] It was a seam where nature turned into theater; and back again. Masque turned this seam into the suture that made a kind of architectonic story: It was a story about contested space—for war, for power—where order and disorder became a pilgrimage and an adventure for the courtiers.

No wonder then that Inigo Jones emphasized very speedy disappearances, set changes that matched rapid-fire curtains, for a "scenic transformation of startling ingenuity." Like computer compositing in film today, the suddenness of his *machina* "took on a preternatural character."

This montage of effects gave the masques their presence—a multiple of media and narratives sharing the same moment. The proscenium was monumentalized, like war monuments. The proscenium was also a journey behind the machine, to how the "engine" used perspective awry; accelerated perspective, and winches, counterweights, to feel the genius of the seafaring ship of state pay homage to its king. Artifice turned politesse into marching orders. It turned overlapping scripted spaces into a living ecosystem, life as an automatic machine. Thus, the courtiers became automata of a kind, so costumed, on their mechanized floats in a wood and cloth *microcosmos*.

Noise

To pay homage to conspicuous display,[75] in Baroque theaters, many of the nobility and upper bourgeoisie were dressed as theater pieces themselves, actually sitting on the stage. To get a sense of what this meant, we imagine ourselves in the cheap seats. Around us, everyone seems to be craning to see a nobleman's full regalia. Some can't take their eyes off the worthies seated above the play. Even the stage lighting often matches the colors they wear. This display has been planned. We are, in a sense, permitted to watch them above us. That is why they sit in boxes built literally within the curve of the stage itself. They are a subnarrative for us—and for them—to enjoy, a second play about intrigue and power. Some boxes have a guile added in front, to protect against prying eyes, as yet another tease, more magician's velvet.

The worthies know that they are here to be gawked at. They even dressed for the performance. They are a *tableau vivant*. Their clothing blends with the show, since they sit so close to the action. But like all special effects, they remain out of reach, just past our fingertips. Those in common seats, including supplicants and aspirants, nudge each other. We mumble loudly, practically in a stage whisper. We watch the worthies at their ease. We share their gracious space for almost two hours. A man be-side me keeps asking if the play goes well for them, then spits on the floor.

Clearly, he and many others did not come to see the actors. For example, at the new theater built for Cardinal Richelieu, the stage was angled so obliquely,

most of the audience couldn't see much anyway. Instead, they followed the action by studying the face of the cardinal or the king. Look, Richelieu is laughing. Deference to his power was more important than the story on stage. So many good reasons to visit a theater without having to see the play. Near the cheaper seats, we hear a constant buzz, enough to fill the theater with noise. This would be true often in the eighteenth century as well. Keeping an audience quiet was notoriously difficult. Often, the buzz was encouraged. The audience was invited to let loose.

In fact, ruckuses became standard at many theaters. Jonson's anti-masque merely aestheticized that buzz, the controlled anarchy. But if buzz from spectators amounted to a secondary form of story, what was its conflict? Obviously the conflict was about class—about perverse fealty, about homage gone a little sour. It was a theatrical war between deference and chaos. The crowd in the cheap seats acts as if this were market and slaughter day. They might even scream stories of their own while the play is on, all but drown out the performers speaking their lines.

Arguably, Jonson's anti-masque refers to that crowd. Its noise amounted to a people's critique, to street pageants taken indoors. They were carnival, when peasants were given a few days by the lord to pretend they had power, to turn the world upside down. After venting and gorging like cattle getting fattened for the summer, they were presumably ready to slave in the fields for another season.

In France, the pit of the theater, known as the *parterre*, operated very much like carnival. The poor were allowed to play critic, to carp about the play. By copying the style of the pit occasionally—as anti-masque—a crafty writer like Jonson could risk a little carping as well. He could deflect his critique of the court, release his bile through the mouths of imaginary troublemakers—voices from the pit. Masque was indeed early stately triumphalism inside a contested space. It was allegorical contested space, where complaints about the economy, even the court, were snuck in—with the prince's preapproval.

Then after 1780, the noise from the pits practically stopped throughout Western Europe—replaced by new house rules for piety and enlightenment. Even talking too loudly from your seat became the mark of a slovenly oaf. Rather suddenly, historians point out, a bourgeois definition of propriety took over.[76] But the anti-masque did not quite disappear. It found places in industrial cities as street theatricality or in pubs; as burlesque, stand-up, performance art; as avant-garde performance theater; perhaps even in computer war games; and of course, in outdoor processions where the audience is

formally invited to be angry, but goes home after dark, from soccer matches to raves. It is the sport of "spiriting".

Anti-masque also crops up more sedately during the Fourth of July picnic, with fireworks as a symbolic gesture to the past, even some howling at the moon, but no one charging up Bunker Hill. I remember on the Fourth hearing teenagers fire pistols ritually into the air, pretending that bullets leave the earth, and never come back, like the Jules Verne ship in *From the Earth to the Moon*. However, occasionally the crowd may act. Urban uprisings sometimes start as innocently as anti-masque, like crowds waiting quietly online to loot a strip mall in 1992 in Los Angeles, or throwing small stones at the start of intifadas in Jerusalem.

But my subject is more modest, perhaps sadder. I arrive when the anti-masque has been converted into special effects. I study a splashdown at shooting waters, or a group weekend in Vegas. Or try to stay awake at a youth nightspot or, better still, as hormonal agitprop and anti-masque, a fully loaded rock concert.[77] There, the *parterre* is scripted of course. The group is liberated because it agrees to be inert. While letting off some steam, they sense collective power, and that is enough. They feel better afterward, ready to pay fealty to the lord. I'm not all that different. I'm a ridiculously peaceable middle-aged man these days, but this project is teaching me to remember the difference. Sometimes I simply let off steam in order to be inert. Sometimes, I am required to lose track of my authentic self-interest. I wonder if anti-masque has been confused thoroughly with carnival. If it has, we'll be masquing our way to nowhere.

Epilogue: Breaking News

During the sixties, the term *agitprop* was rediscovered as an adjective. It appears in numerous articles, flyers, posters for political mime troupes, Fluxus and Situationist events, American free-speech and antiwar rallies, hippie and yippie theater. The adjective *agitprop* even occasionally was applied to television news teams covering the antiwar movement. This is a crucial distinction to notice, how media converts mass action into masque. Breaking news stories about the New Left were featured at the news hour, alongside scenes of the Vietnam War. News at six sometimes turned into an anti-masque of sorts, a subversive ninety seconds at the top of the hour.

This was quite evident in August 1968, for the four days when I cautiously joined demonstrations at the Democratic Convention in Chicago—during a police riot. Cameras showed up everywhere, even while the riot turned darkly whimsical. One afternoon, I saw police fire tear gas at young demonstrators. Then winds off Lake Michigan blew the smoke backward. The cops went momentarily blind, dropped to their knees while the tumult scattered around them. I watched gleefully, was reminded for a second about Dada and twenties agitprop. I remember the faces of demonstrators. They were so much gentler, more innocent than I had wanted to admit back then, tender anarchists, yippies, neighborhood kids, a few organized radicals—just molten carnival, despite the high stakes, the fury, and police brutality. On Sunday night, while police circled hundreds of children, a strange young man came up to me. He had no toes, no fingers, seemed to exist on stilts. He threw a small rock at the police, and yelled "fuck you" a few times. Later on, I was told he was a police agitator, a performing geek for a street pageant.

Nonetheless, these demonstrations helped topple the Democratic Party in 1968. Yet to this day, I cannot say for certain if they were acts of citizenship, or modes of distraction. And yet by Election 2000, even that small bit of political good seemed to have disappeared. While Bush was selected president, the whole world was *not* watching anymore.

While the complete Florida vote was cut short for Christmas, those demonstrators who condemned the process were often downgraded or downcast) on cable news as a few sour faces ruining the parade. Almost nothing like mass action or agitprop made it to American TV. Cable news simply ignored the rallies in Florida and the anti-globalization events. In fact, nearly all public resistance was simply kept off the screen altogether. Instead, the cable networks (and NBC, ABC certainly) agreed with the Republican leadership that it was best for the country to cancel the presidential election before it ruined Christmas shopping altogether. Global media achieved a Baroque coherence in 2000 that would have made the court of King James proud. Moguls like Rupert Murdoch became the Counter-Reformation that year, cutting deals as if TV were the Vatican, on a mission to make a fundamentalist king.

Now it is almost three years later. What sort of agitprop as demonstrations can influence politics today? Global media has grown into a Vatican for entertainment. It is an instrument of power.[78] It sits at the table like a nation in its own right. Recently, a breaking story showed Americans watching the Northern Alliance slaughter thousands in Afghanistan (December 2001).[79] This apparent war crime never made it to cable news in the U.S. but was big news in

Europe. This pattern repeats continuously—factoids, raw quotes that are featured almost everywhere but here. In the U.S., like courtly masque, breaking stories that might embarrass Bush's war are mostly blacked out. Right-wing think tanks account for close to half of the news stories that appear on Fox news alone, and probably something like that on other cable stations as well.

We must ask what this simple and obvious transition suggests, from 1968 to 2003, at least as masque. The democratizing presence of agitprop antics, whatever its strengths and weaknesses, has all but disappeared. It simply no longer operates as mass action influencing national policies. Instead, on a national scale, Baroque masque has taken over. By that I mean media news as masque, in monumental defense of hierarchy, of class difference, of conservative politesse. We even seem to have social conditions around the world more like 1620 than they were in 1970. Americans certainly find a nation split horizontally, vaguely like France in the youth of Louis XIV. There is an elective monarchy at the top, our Peron, and fiscal chaos in the states and cities below.

Cable news tends to reinforce this emerging split. They dedicate hours of programming to national and global markets, almost nothing to cities and states. They interview corporate CEOs as the Baroque Jesuits of globalism. Almost nothing is heard from national and local unions, or from wage earners; they are classified as "special interests," nuisance makers getting in the way of global markets and suburban shopping. Since 1970, many Americans have mentally adjusted to this relatively new political culture. (I would say that it was set up during the Nixon and Ford administrations.) By 2003, they have adjusted to vanishing pensions, to a world without public support for declining hospitals and schools.

Certainly, my students talk almost obsessively about the shrinking middle class, about real estate apartheid taking over the Manhattan art world (and practically every major city), about fiscal bankruptcy of almost every state budget—and their lives. They assume that oversight by the president against this corruption has all but disappeared—under the shadow of Homeland Security, in a ghostly war against fundamentalism that is run by American fundamentalists.

I often describe this process as reverse imperialism. The United States is being colonized by its own economy (a faint but scary resemblance to the chaos of the Thirty Years' War, 1618–1648). In effect, the president of the United States treats the state of California as a foreign country. The American union between the states has become more balkanized. Regional planning across state and county lines grows near impossible, for roads, water, health. Meanwhile, at the

White House, courtiers left over from the Nixon-Ford seventies have a masque all their own. Every night on TV their talk shows feature a xenophobic, fundamentalist adventurism that no longer believe in many of the old checks to presidential power.

It is masque in the age of the Electronic Baroque. Cable news relies on its own drama, a future based on near permanent, posttraumatic, postapocalyptic unease. It takes for granted that this sort of entropy is permanent, for our politics and finances.

Meanwhile, within my immediate world, responses to all this are perversely supportive. Many of my sixties generation affect an elitist contempt toward Bush, a dismissive anti-Americanism. I sense that this apathy comes out of the withering of the humanities since 1969. But however doleful, it amounts to a noncommitment that sponsors right-wing political values more than progressive politics.

So let me be a cheerleader for a page or two. Our job today is much clearer than this apathy suggests. But to take on this job, we should avoid nostalgia; no groaning that the best is over. Living through this unfolding crisis is too much of a privilege to sit back. Extraordinary options lie ahead, despite all the consumer flatulence, the chirpy banality, the warmongering.

Many critics argue that practically nothing remains of the old New Left, not even much from the New Deal. I can see that surely. Even Teddy Roosevelt must be turning over in his grave. In response, the sixties are middle-aged, in a state of moral dyspepsia. And yet, much is at stake now. My generation could easily serve as a vanguard to students and young artists, writers, filmmakers. At least to warn them very respectfully: let them know that agitprop has a naive problem. It can—by accident—form an alliance with the right against the center, as it did after Nixon's election, and into the late nineties. Also, respectfully advise them to shift their attention toward media politics, to assemble a new grammar and a new discourse.

We also, at the very least, should find out precisely how ultra-conservative media became the new Vatican. As one "shadow" nation cutting deals with another, it has joined an alliance to help a small fundamentalist wing of the Republican Party stay in power (I am heartstruck to report this. Occasionally, I remind students that I accidentally voted for Nixon seven times in 1968. By joining the anti-masque against Democrats, and feeling superior to the "dumbass reactionary" Republicans, I helped strengthen an alliance with the right against the center. I had been so certain that there was a limit to how far the right might go. Now, every time I see George Bush's smirk, his sheer hubris, my

dyspepsia returns. The joke is on me. But I honestly feel much more prepared in 2003 than ever before. The options are spectacular, even while the gloom takes over.)

To operate as cultural critics, we must speak unflinchingly about this emerging Baroque hierarchy. At the same time, we should be genial about the American madness, enjoy our imperfections. Admittedly, anti-masque was always escapist, a mass cathexis about actions never taken, a wish unfulfilled, and reduced to spectacle. On the other hand, agitprops and anti-masques can be prophetic. Riots inside theaters in eighteenth-century France sometimes took on the seriousness of a *jacquerie*, of a mob making demands, and threatening property. In 1968, the theatricality of student revolts in France, with the active support of labor, nearly toppled de Gaulle's government, and shifted the political direction for leftist movements across the world.

Admittedly, anti-masque is mostly theatrical, a performance and little more. Too often, it is a mode of distraction, a whiff of rebellion as special effects. Still, it is fair to say that even those who ran through downtown Chicago in August 1968—without quite knowing why—were politicized afterward. There is collective adrenaline in agitprop and anti-masque, as long as the players understand the difference between action and theater. Within five or ten years, the possibilities for renewed action, even based on special effects, may grow enormously. I am convinced of that.