



Article

Public Spheres, Counterpublics' Fears and Syncopolitics

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Abstract: This article explores the often normative and idealist notion of the public sphere at its possible breaking point by analysing the online reactions to two tabloid articles about a 2016 performance of *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* by Instant Dissidence. It first looks at how a comment platform could be perceived as a subaltern public sphere and as a substitute for a live audience in order to reconsider the notion of the counterpublic. For this, it examines the dialectical tension between politics and aesthetics within a subaltern online public sphere not immune to all kinds of extremism. This leads to an attempt to consider online hostile lay critics as a potentially legitimate public to address the dilemma faced by contemporary artists when engaging with society in an all-inclusive manner. Finally, this article offers a different reading of Instant Dissidence's performance and of the possible reasons for the commentators' rage and alienation and proposes syncopolitics as a way out of both online polarisation echo chambers and the public engagement conundrum.

Keywords: public sphere; civil society; audience; spectator; counterpublic; dance; performance; syncopolitics; phobocracy; emancipation

Introduction

Contemporary artists who are looking for public funding, especially when applying to Arts Council England (ACE), need to ensure that their projects engage the audience in aesthetic but also, and perhaps even more importantly, social terms. The public sphere is a key concept in trying to assess the impact that contemporary performance arts might have upon society. Here, I propose exploring the often normative and idealist notions of the public sphere and counterpublic at their possible breaking point. To this end, I examine online comments following newspaper articles on a 2016 performance of *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* by Instant Dissidence. I describe this choreography as a performance of syncopolitics that consists, in this case, of a politico-aesthetic approach that experiments with new forms of public engagement. I then look at how newspapers' comment platforms enabling some degree of engagement with the arts could be considered to be serving as a subaltern public sphere and, in the present case, as a potential substitute for a live audience. This approach enables me to reconsider the notion of the counterpublic and to reflect upon the dialectical tension between politics and aesthetics within a subaltern online public sphere not immune to all kinds of extremism. Finally, I analyse the hostile reaction to Instant Dissidence's work as a manifestation of what Marie-José Mondzain defines as phobocracy and propose syncopolitics as a way out of both online polarisation echo chambers and normative approaches to performing artists' engagement with society.

A Performance of Syncopolitics

In 2016, a series of dance workshops by Instant Dissidence in a migrant camp near Calais led to the creation of *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*, a performance based on four duets

created in collaboration with four migrants from Eritrea, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Ethiopia. Instant Dissidence returned to the UK to perform the piece in several locations by inviting passers-by to dance with a migrant by proxy: a performer stood in for the migrants' bodies, reproducing their moves for participants to dance to—while they listened to the migrants' voices through headphones. Upon accepting the invitation of the performer wearing a “Dance with Me” t-shirt standing in a public square with outstretched arms, participants could choose one of the migrant stories mapped out by the different choreographies. The recreated duets were supposed to embody the migrants' journeys including their imaginary conclusion in the UK. For Instant Dissidence, “[there] was a time when [her] work was concerned with advancing the art form of choreography. But ‘that time’ is no longer ‘this time’, and ‘this time’ no longer affords [her] that luxury. So today [she foregrounds] the role that dance can play as a social engine” (Instant Dissidence 2017, p. 18). As pointed out by Victoria Hunter referring to *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*, “the specificity of this work lies [. . .] not with its connection to a places in which it is performed but with the absence it invokes, through siting this work in a particular place and referencing somewhere else the public park or square becomes an arena for socially and ethically engaged discussion and reflection facilitated through the medium of sited dance practice” (Barbour et al. 2019, pp. 209–10). Instant Dissidence goes as far as referring to *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* as “a choreographic act of border transgression” (Instant Dissidence 2016).

I would like to argue here that Instant Dissidence's *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* is a performance of syncopolitics. This term points not so much to the syncope as spasm, convulsion, or even collapse of political representation, but to the very conception of politics as syncope. This refers to the failure of representative politics, as well as to the notion of collapsology as defined by Peter Bjerregaard as “a process where our conceptual knowledge is shattered and we are asked to construct a new set of relations, a new meaningful order by activating an aesthetic approach” (Bjerregaard 2020, p. 96). However, the term syncopolitics also refers to the emancipatory nature of passing out or disappearing from the political struggle scene before coming to as part of a collective political subject, perhaps in the present context, within a renewed social sphere. Syncopolitics calls for a rupture and accounts for moments or works where the unrepresentable of the syncope can inform the fugitive nature of thought, for example, in *Ville de Calais*, a series of photographs of a dismantled migrant camp by Henk Wildschut, when the image, literally here of people having vanished, “must be unimagined, that is, thought, if thought is considered a commotion, a syncope, and a bedazzlement” (Nancy [2003] 2005, p. 79). This recess of the image, “this necessity to confine the image to the recess, to unimage the image, to unrepresent”, I consider as a condition for rethinking arts engagement with politics (Dalmasso 2017, p. 228). The performance provides interstitial space and time where the encounter between migrant and participant can take place by proxy. However, if this choreography is considered in terms of syncopolitics, this allows for its political significance to come to the fore more radically. With the syncope in mind, its passing out and coming to, the focus shifts from the relation to the in-between as such, to the gap upon which the body exchange takes place. Instead of seeing the dance with a migrant by proxy as a metaphor, as an image of what could be, it becomes possible to see the dance as what is not there, as what does not take place, as a *no-place*, that is a utopia in the etymological sense of the term (οὐ τόπος)—the precise ground for change, the powers-that-be's no-go zone, which can paradoxically but precisely become the very site in which politics can take place. This is effected by the disappearance of the dancer through the dance, neither here nor there, neither herself or the migrant, and by the embrace of this *inexistent*, by the participant joining in the dance. My concept of syncopolitics is connected to what Alain Badiou calls “the raising up of the inexistent” (Badiou [2009] 2011, p. 83), as syncopolitics would indeed come to manifest itself in the unforeseen and startling nature of upraising, when the disappeared, the unaccounted for, the syncopated no-ones come to rally. *Inexist[a]nce* as defined by Alain Badiou, corresponds to a minimal degree of appearing in a world, and politics only truly occurs when those who inexistent in a world—the unaccounted for (here, the migrants stuck in Calais' no man's land)—raise from the recess of that

world or situation (Badiou [2009] 2011, p. 83). The interstitial motion of the dance by proxy points to a syncopated action—that is happening in recess—as opposed to a metaphorical action—that would remain imagined. If we consider the syncopolitics at play in *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*, the dance could mark this non-place that resists thinking, this non-place where the degrees of excess and recess of existence in a world are fixated. I see this creation of syncopated spaces through performance as a condition for syncopolitics. Not in the sense that these performances open up the imagination as a political power by merely proposing to swap places with the other, but on the contrary, precisely because performances of syncopolitics allow for the unimaginable, the unthinkable, as they prevent us from thinking representatively and imagining our relationship to the world. To an extent, performances of syncopolitics open up the possibility of a public debate that is not grounded in fixated opinions and the need to convince the opposing party, but fuelled by a collective drive to reset, to start anew.

A Coerced Public Sphere?

Performances of syncopolitics point to the openness intrinsic to Habermas's concept of *Öffentlichkeit* (public sphere). The process of exploring, as a case of syncopolitics, Instant Dissidence's *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* opens up the argument to the syncopated and suspensive play of the syncope which is defined by Catherine Clément as an "intrusion . . . that breaks the laws of the world" (Clément [1990] 1994, p. 7), even though the breaking of the law in the piece is done by proxy. As the performer lends her dancing body to enable the participants to break the law in gest, it is not the law in general that is broken, but worse, what is perceived as 'the law of the land'—established through fear mongering and propaganda by the media. This might explain why this production attracted the ire of the right-wing tabloid press in the form of two nearly identical articles. However, it is unlikely that the journalists who wrote these pamphlets, rather than reviews, had witnessed, never mind experienced, the performance first hand. In his book *The Structural Transformation of The Public Sphere*, German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas argues that the free debates enabled by the press contributed to the opening up of the public sphere and consequently to the democratization of Europe. According to Carlos Ruiz et al., "if bourgeois cafés were the scenario of democratic discussions in the nineteenth century, and newspapers played a crucial role in mediating public opinion in the twentieth century, [. . .] online newspapers provide a new incarnation of the public sphere, becoming the digital cafés of a Public Sphere 2.0" (Ruiz et al. 2011, p. 464). However, in the present case study, the press might well perform a different function. In the context of the infuriated comments about *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*, it is difficult to see how this particular press contributes to democracy, unless democracy is reduced to the unabashed unleashing of dissenting voices (it is telling that following the posting of these comments, the choreographer prefers to withhold her own name and to use the generic name Instant Dissidence to sign her work). However, considering (for the sake of the argument) these comments not as a mere form of social media trolling but as genuine attempts to formulate criticism and contribute to a public debate about arts funding in the UK might help us understand better how online forums and social media in general might not only have redefined what can be conceived as the public sphere. More specifically in the case of performing arts, it might help figure out how online amateur critics might redefine audience participation and spectatorship. To an extent, looking at comments made by a performance's non-attending public might also shed some light on what would constitute a counterpublic. It is important to note that a single tabloid article about *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* generated 125 hostile comments in one day, which is a surprising amount when compared to the 160 comments following Ken Dodd's obituary published on the same day (Clarke 2016), especially as there are very few traces of comments online from Instant Dissidence's live audience members. Online reactions to Instant Dissidence's work have to be understood within a hostile environment fuelled by the tabloid press. As Mike Berry remarks, "immigration reporting particularly in the tabloid press has tended to be extremely negative, with a steady stream of stories about immigrants

‘sponging’ off the welfare state, ‘bleeding’ the NHS dry and being involved in criminality” (Berry in Jackson et al. 2016, p. 14). The importance given to comment sections by both press outlets and their audiences is ever increasing since the emergence of online versions of main newspapers in the last fifteen years (Ruiz et al. 2011; Kalogeropoulos et al. 2017; Khabaz 2018), and commenting on news articles is currently the most widely practiced form of audience participation on news websites across Western democracies (Toepfl and Piwoni 2015). The most widely practised form of audience participation across Western democracy news websites is the commenting on news articles.

Chris Falzon explains that for Habermas, “the only acceptable form of social existence is that of collective rational self-determination through open, unconstrained dialogue” (Falzon 1998, p. 82). While a form of “consensus arrived at in communication free from domination” became the focus of Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, in practice, it raised issues in relation to minorities and oppressed groups (Habermas [1968] 1972, p. 284). However, since Habermas introduced his concept of the public sphere, the development of new communication technology and the emergence of new media, including social media, has deeply redefined the notions of public sphere and public discourse. As already stressed by Habermas, these should operate within the realm of an educated and civilised society, and discussions of events within this realm should be enabled with public interest in mind. While Habermas warned that certain media could turn into a deceiving tool to generate a passive consuming audience (Habermas [1962] 1991, p. 31), it seems that with the development of online social commentary, certain media deceitfully encourage on the contrary public participation. However, the proliferation of biased public reactions thus generated is still of a consumerist nature. This is the case for the two articles commenting on Instant Dissidence’s work and the series of comments they triggered online. These comments reflect Habermas’ view that participation within the public sphere should occur via communication channels that do not exclude certain themes or opinions in a structural manner based on social categories (Habermas [1962] 1991, p. 31). However, although the comments on the two aforementioned newspaper articles do not seem to refrain from formulating any kind of opinion, even the most extreme opinions, the triggering articles are written in such a way as to galvanise the newspapers’ readership and consequently exclude potential commentators who might have phrased different opinions, as they are not interested in the newspapers’ content in the first place. Therefore, while participation is encouraged, it is also regimented. However, it remains interesting to reflect upon the nature of the readership’s participation in the discussion orchestrated by the writers of the twin articles. By “public sphere”, Habermas meant “first of all a realm of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed. Access to the public sphere is open in principle to all citizens. Citizens act as a public when they deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion” (Habermas [1962] 1997, p. 105). Both articles under scrutiny are allegedly written with public interest in mind, but the defence of public interest is precisely what these newspapers keep claiming as their own prerogative and preserve, thus excluding any diverging opinion on the matter. Therefore, while the comment platform might constitute a public sphere, it might not entirely match Habermas’ criteria, especially in terms of openness of debate. It is important to remark that, for example, *Daily Mail* (59%) readers were more likely to say they had voted to leave the EU than *The Guardian* readers (15%) (Lynott et al. 2019, p. 5). This political positioning is very likely to have shaped their attitude towards *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*. Moreover, the themes addressed in the comments are known territories for the users of both tabloids’ online forums as shown in the following examples:

“Once these guys cross the channel all our dancers will be unemployed . . . ”; “I can see it now every British value being transmitted to the locusts. 1; civil partnerships, 2; a remoaner, 3; non heterosexual, 4; scrounging from the taxpayer, 5; anti British, 6; political activist, 7; me me me . . . ”; “After this idiot was prating about in a tent in Calais with illegal immigrants. What exactly did that make us, the British public, aware of? The only awareness that I have gleaned from this stupidity, is that there should be greater controls on where the tax payers money is spent, and that some people should not be let out on their own . . . ”; “I wish she’d

go and ‘see the world from another person’s point of view’ by getting lost . . . elsewhere . . . ”; “Little wonder we’re heading to Brexit, what benefit is she to us . . . ”; “Enough. Let’s stop wasting money right, left and centre on absolute nonsense, and start to spend it on things that really matter?” (anonymised comments cited in [Burt 2017](#)).¹

Sounding like punch lines, these comments make a comparison possible between the comment platform and a counterpublic sphere as defined by Michael Warner as “a scene for developing oppositional interpretations of its members’ identities, interests, and needs [. . .] structured by different dispositions or protocols from those that obtain elsewhere in the culture, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying” ([Warner 2002](#), p. 86). The leitmotifs in the hostile comments are not new. A 2005 study already flagged that, compared to other newspapers’ readership, for *The Sun* and *Daily Mail* readers, the most important issues facing Britain were by far the funding of the National Health Service (NHS) and race relations/immigration/immigrants ([Duffy and Rowden 2005](#)). Spurring their readership, the twin articles also keep referring to “public money” that would have been wasted by ACE when funding Instant Dissidence’s project. Yet, neither article provides a thorough analysis of how society would benefit from such funding or its reallocation. Habermas’ key point in the definition of what is a public is the notion of “coercion”, as citizens can only discuss and address public interest when they are free from any manipulation. One might argue, albeit naively, that tabloid readership is free and entitled to discuss any matter of public interest and that these media online platforms merely provide a place for open debates. While assessing the level of ideological coercion exercised within the online platform is beyond the scope of this article, it is equally difficult to rule out the comment platform as a non-public sphere, as to some degree, it still fits in with Habermas’ definition of the public sphere. In any case, as pointed out by Ramsay Burt, the level of abuse directed at Instant Dissidence’s performer in comments about *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* can be considered hate speech: “in a situation that Judith Butler identifies in her book *Excitable Speech* where we are subjected to the violence of ‘the Law’s failure to protect its citizens’ (Butler 1997, p. 61)” ([Burt 2017](#), unpaginated). Nevertheless in the case of the present study, despite the fact that commentators did not experience the performance directly, it remains interesting to consider these public comments as, to a degree, they mirror, albeit deformingly, what it is to be a spectator of a performance eliciting different, often conflicting, reactions and ideas among an audience.

A Polarised Audience

It is impossible to dissociate the comments made about *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* at the end of 2016 from its post-Brexit referendum context. According to Aleks Sierz, this is also true of any post-referendum artistic production: “the problem with Brexit is that it affects not only how we respond to current plays, or revivals of recent dramas, but to all theatre shows. It has profoundly changed how we look at any play, no matter when it was first staged. It has changed audience perceptions of everything” ([Sierz 2018](#), p. 69). To an extent, the online comments about *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* are not too dissimilar to the lines of *My Country A work in Progress*, a play about Brexit created at the National Theatre in March 2017, described by Aleks Sierz as “verbatim opinions of ordinary people: some reasonable, some racist, some frankly stupid” ([Sierz 2018](#), p. 62). In this context, what is manifest in the two articles is the development of a “we” versus “them” trope that fuels nationalistic stances. According to Burt, Stephen Moyes’ article about *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* in *The Sun* newspaper “twists and emphasises details to maximise their potential to generate outrage, using triggers to insinuate, avoiding libel” ([Burt 2017](#)). For him, both articles allude to the nationality, sexual orientation, and mental health of the Instant Dissidence performer in a way that escalates the acrimonious nature of the readership’s

¹ For a full transcript of the comments, see <https://ramsayburt.wordpress.com/2017/01/02/dance-brexit-and-post-truth-hate-merchants/>.

reactions. This escalation of negative comments takes place in what appears to be an online echo chamber, not dissimilar to what occurs across social media in general. Social media users often limit their communication sphere to like-minded users, thus reinforcing their opinions without being challenged by discordant points of view. To an extent, social media's echo chambers contravene the principles of a public sphere, which are supposed to generate democratic debates within society. However, according to Paul Lee, "despite the echo chamber effect, social media have a limited part to play in the formation of polarized stances compared with other factors, such as demographics, political orientation, and mass media use" (Lee et al. 2018, p. 1949). Moreover, Elizabeth Dubois and Grant Blank argue that the echo chamber effect might be overstated and even question the validity of applying this term to social media (Dubois and Blank 2018, p. 740). Nevertheless, in the case of the public comments analysed here, it might still be relevant to consider the comment platform as an echo chamber, as it not only relies upon social media stances, but also mass media use and related partisan political orientations. In this respect, the comment platform's format duplicates that of other social media posting arenas. While the online material examined here is anonymised and not backed up by a profile as such, where the forging of opinion could be traced, the communication norms are similar to those used on platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter, and users rely upon affects belonging to their albeit undeclared profiles. The comments about an unseen performance of *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* could be very different from live audience reactions, and yet, these seemingly unfounded yet emotionally charged comments provide an alternative perspective on the performance in question. Because analysing spectatorship tends to involve some degree of speculating upon audiences' reactions, including the reactions of a non-attending public who have a knowledge of the performance piece through a critic's description only, it might still provide some information on how a performance is perceived, especially when it comes to assessing its public impact.

Online forums constitute a subaltern public sphere for those who might feel excluded from the dominant public sphere, and as such, Instant Dissidence's counterpublic might be considered as part of a subaltern public sphere compared to the general public sphere of contemporary performances' audiences. However, subaltern public spheres only correspond to specific gathering of people and, as such, differ from Habermas' notion of an encompassing public sphere unified by rational discourse. As stated by Nancy Fraser, subaltern public spheres enable minorities and the marginalized to defy the mainstream discourses in the public sphere (Fraser 1990, p. 57). This is the case for the users of the tabloid platform commenting about *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* in ways that not only defy contemporary aesthetic canons, but also social propriety. This article is not a comprehensive study of Habermas' notion of the public sphere in relation to performing arts. This notion is primarily referred to as a *repoussoir* for the type of public reactions to the specific performance project analysed here. It is therefore useful to also refer to Jeffrey Alexander's notion of the civil sphere here, as it provides a different perspective to analyse the micro social media phenomenon triggered by Instant Dissidence's work.

Alexander's contribution to the debate about the public sphere is his definition of civil society as a "solidary sphere, in which a certain kind of community comes to be culturally defined and to some degree institutionally enforced" (Alexander [2006] 2008, p. 31). While it might seem forceful to consider the community of uncivil commentators as part of civil society, their online collusion fits Alexander's description of a community sustained by public opinion or cultural codes and regulative institutions or political stances erected as institutions, namely, in this case, the xenophobia and homophobia covertly encouraged as norms by the specific press outlets referred to here. Such systemic stoking of public opinion is a way to trigger reactions—and incidentally advertising revenues through click-baiting; yet, stirring the debate in a particular direction is also a means to somehow regulate the exchange of opiated statements within that particular social sphere. While Alexander presents the civil sphere as a model of the production of commonality that "pays more attention to shared feelings and symbolic commitments, to what and how people speak, think, and feel about politics", he also remarks that "civil society is regulated by an internally complex discourse that allows us to understand the paradox

by which its universalistic ideals have been institutionalized in particularistic and anticivil ways" (Alexander [2006] 2008, pp. 43, 48). While in the case of ACE-funded *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*, it might be argued that the tabloids' online comment platform allows for symbolic commitments to a vague idea of how to protect public finances and shared feelings to be expressed. The fact that no commentators, including the journalists, seem to have experienced the performance directly, probably highlights the degree to which the alleged freedom to publicly, albeit uncivilly, comment on anything has been instrumentalised by institutional bodies such as the press to paradoxical heights, especially as these comments are supposedly moderated.

A Counterpublic within a Dematerialised Theatre

According to Christian Fuchs, "the published content in the social media is reachable from anyone throughout the world eliminating in this way the physical and infrastructure obstacles which means that the freedom of the speech is now the freedom of the press and as a consequence the freedom to gather together" (Fuchs 2014, p. 185). These platforms are means of communication and places of gathering; they give form to what could be described as a dematerialised theatre, a contemporary version of Alfred de Musset's armchair theatre where there is no need to physically attend nor even the need to spectate, but that nevertheless provides an illusion of a collective. The aforementioned media outlets provide an arena that precisely allows commentators who feel excluded by contemporary arts and public funding policies to phrase their discontent and alienation.

While Alexander stresses that civil society's norms are not external or ideal but intrinsic to society, he also insists that the media nevertheless produce some kind of social solidarity (Alexander [2006] 2008, p. 72). Uncivil stances and abuse of the performer aside, the online commentaries on Instant Dissidence's work are a good illustration of the emergence of an immanent, albeit tabloid-driven, civil society through a type of social solidarity based on consensus among an alienated public. According to Janelle Reinelt, "Those excluded from the official public sphere nevertheless have historically found their own spaces of discourse and intersubjective exchange in public and have through a variety of means provided counterweight to the dominant public sphere" (Reinelt 2011, p. 18). In the case of what I would be tempted to call Instant Dissidence's counterpublic, it is clear from the comments quoted above that the commentators feel excluded from decisions about public finances made in their names. The degree to which they are excluded from the official public sphere is debatable. However, not only does this feeling of exclusion appear to be partly fabricated by the media, but the commentators' discourse also seems to be fabricated, as it reverberates mediatic stock phrases and mirrors trolling stances. Nevertheless, one might argue that the online platform in question merely counteracts a certain elitist approach to the arts and arts funding. According to Reinelt, "Habermas also idealizes the hoped-for outcome of public participation. Not always is consensus desirable; sometimes, rather, actual dissensus is productive because it registers a lack of consensus or insists on polyvocal fragmentation, even disintegration of a univocal public voice" (Reinelt 2011, p. 19). The comments about *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* display a dissenting consensus against Art Council England and, by extension, what is perceived as an elitist art world. However, the comments do not amount to dissensus, as neither Reinelt describes it, as fragmenting univocal public discourse as the commentators in fact speak as one, nor as Rancière defines it, as a disruption of cultural and identity belonging (Corcoran in Rancière 2010, p. 2). The online commentators rather form what Ruiz describes as a homogeneous community "in which expressing feelings about current events dominates the contributions and there is less of an argumentative debate" as opposed to a community of debate "based on mostly respectful discussions between diverse points of view" (Ruiz, 463). Far from questioning cultural and identity belonging, the illusion of debate created by the online platforms inviting comments about *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* reinforces the illusion of a homogeneous culture and identity for their readership. This seems to rule out this type of public participation as politics as defined by Rancière, because for him, as remarked by Stephen Corcoran, "genuine political or artistic activities always involve forms of innovation that tear bodies from their

assigned places and free speech and expression from all reduction to functionality" (Corcoran in Rancière 2010, p. 1). In the case at hand, the online commentators do not seem to be questioning the place they have been assigned or assign to themselves within society. Instead, they challenge the place given to the EU artist and to migrants. As such, the online comments do not suggest any level of the critical introspection called for by Rancière. Moreover, the alleged freedom of speech of the online commentators is regimented by the comment platform format and its hosting media outlet. Therefore, the online comments about *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* might provide little insight in terms of political debate or arts engagement as such. However, they might still provide some perspective into what might constitute a counterpublic.

Warner defines a counterpublic arena as "a scene in which a dominated group aspires to re-create itself as a public and, in doing so, finds itself in conflict not only with the dominant social group, but also with the norms that constitute the dominant culture as a public" (Warner 2002, p. 80). To an extent, the funding of arts institutions might generate counterpublics as it pushes artists, as well as audiences, to position themselves in relation with the social and political agenda promoted by arts institutions. Reinelt argues that "there are possible collateral effects in some of these cases when counterpublics may recognize themselves in relation to these vehicles and circulate additional texts among themselves, eventually strengthening their power and ability to be politically effective as a counterpublic" (Reinelt 2011, p. 21). Although their authors might not necessarily feel they are part of a "dominated group" or even of a group at all, the reactions on the tabloid comment platform in the case of Arts-Council-funded Instant Dissidence's socially engaged work *de facto* create a counterpublic scene. For Reinelt, "these counterpublic formations need not be progressive. In fact, they can just as easily be reactionary because the process can be set underway by any group that recognizes itself as a public" (Reinelt 2011, p. 21). This is the case with the online comments about *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*, as commentators recognise themselves as a public by criticising the performance and its social value, even though, as mentioned earlier, they are unlikely to have directly experienced it. This non-attending public is dispersed and fragmented online, and yet somehow unified and relayed through a collective imagery that infers not only the performance's intentions but questions the validity of its content and why it happened in the first place. Given the eagerness to comment on a performance they had not witnessed nor participated in, it could be argued that the commentators understood the performance more as a rhetorical, symbolic strategy to deliver a message or at best as an aesthetic event than a proper embodied experience. However, their remote reactions to a performance that they refuse to contemplate and can only imagine within a common space create a public or a counter public as they occur in the communal space on an online forum.

Emancipated Critics?

Despite the fact that this counterpublic seems to be of a reactionary nature, it is necessary to assess whether the online discussion generated by *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* does not contribute to the social inclusion of its participants into a wider democratic debate, beyond perhaps a sense of belonging to a restricted civil society, despite its displaying of uncivil stances. In principle, to some degree, questioning arts funding and, to an extent, proposing alternative uses for the perceived common good might be considered an act of collective emancipation. It is difficult to completely disagree with commentators proposing to redirect Arts Council funds towards the reopening of a local library or the funding of the NHS. Following Rancière, who considers that audiencing is always a position of emancipation (Rancière [2008] 2009, p. 13), it would even be tempting to see *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England's* non-attending public's reactions as an act of emancipation. However, while some commentators vaguely propose to redistribute public resources, this is far from the redistribution of the sensible Rancière advocates. The comments do not constitute an innovative way to challenge social or cultural norms in any way, shape, or form, but, on the contrary, they reinforce them. Moreover, not only do the commentators radically depart from Instant Dissidence's original intentions, they propose to do away with the performance altogether. Therefore, from a

Rancierian perspective, the comments cannot be considered genuine political or artistic activities, and commentators are not emancipated but rather trapped in the reproduction of common diatribes. It might well be that the non-attending public of *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* cannot rely on the same cultural capital as ACE's executives or most of Instant Dissidence's usual live audiences to be able to decode the aesthetic and social value of such work, but this view is precisely what Rancière questions. If there is equality, as Rancière argues, equality is immanent to society and does not happen as a result of the setting up of a specific social framework (Rancière [1987] 1991). If we follow Rancière's precept, the judgement of expert and non-expert publics must be valued equally, or at least, one might assume that there is some value attached to non-expert criticism. Therefore, in the case of *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*'s non-attending public, this would imply that hostile comments cannot simply be dismissed because commentators might be deprived of the cultural capital to understand the validity and value of Instant Dissidence's performance. There is perhaps something to be learnt from its non-attending public's online outrage. However, as highlighted by Kirsty Sedgman, there is a risk to see in Rancière's proposition not "the utopian elevation of democratic grass-roots creativity but the delegitimizing of 'education, specialisation, depth, command of material detail, dexterity, high levels of understanding and attainment and more challenging cultural substance'" (Sedgman 2017, p. 314). Sedgman remarks that there is a risk that this might lead to instrumentalization as "the idea that broadening models of cultural value might be used to guide funding decisions, either privileging community-led projects over professional artists or transforming the arts into an arena for 'consumer-based capitalism' and force institutions to target work at an imagined lowest-common-denominator audience" (Sedgman 2017, p. 314). Referring to Chris Goode's "The Audience Is Listening" (Goode 2011) and Paul Kosidowski's "Thinking through the Audience" (Kosidowski 2003), Sedgman adds that "both valuably critique the lowest-common-denominator position, arguing that listening to audiences does not necessarily present the risk to theatre that is often assumed" (Sedgman 2017, p. 322). In the case of *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*, it is rather Arts Council England that might perhaps benefit from listening to the non-attending public, while the performer should ignore their comments.

With an increase in participatory culture (Bishop 2012), in the case of the online reactions to *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*, the main question is whether online criticism of the type displayed in the comments contributes to generating some level of public engagement or total disengagement. As pointed out by Jonathan Roberge, while "participation does not mean rationality *per se* and, for that matter, does not correspond with the Habermasian project of consensus reaching through the 'force of the better argument' [...] criticism remains key to understanding how culture and politics converge in the process of creating society's interpretation of itself [it] is always normative and interrogative, always tries to define culture through a political lens and, conversely, politics through a cultural lens" (Roberge 2011, pp. 445, 448). The difficulty in the case of *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* is to assess what in the comments "belongs to a properly democratic tension and what belongs to a democratic potential" (Roberge 2011, p. 448). In the case of *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*'s non-attending public, the separation between the performance and its critics is stretched to the limit. However, it would be difficult to ignore these comments when examining the performance and its potential impact on society. While performance critics tend to speculate on audience's reactions, the social media comments might provide a potentially more tangible source to assess a performance's impact on the public (even, albeit paradoxically, in the case of a non-attending public). However, non-attending lay critics' inferred world is definitely user-specific and bound to the socio-economic conditions of their own existence. The comments not only expand, often in vile terms, on what might have been the practitioner's intentions, but also present an alternative to what could be achieved with ACE's funding were it to be redirected according to their own vision of the place and function of the arts within society. Anyone applying for funding in the UK will be aware of the numerous questions on application forms regarding public engagement and how projects could partly be presented as community projects. According to Sedgman, "it is feared that paying attention

to audiences' responses might lead to an affirmation of anti-expert thinking, and potentially even pose a danger to artistic integrity itself" (Sedgman 2017, p. 314). With *Dancing With Strangers: From Calais To England's* commentators, not only is there a blatant anti-expert thinking at work, but also a denouncing of ACE's broadened cultural values as flawed despite ACE's increasing efforts to reach out to communities (Arts Council England 2013). Paradoxically, in the case of *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*, despite the averse comments stating that the piece was elitist in the sense that it did not address the concerns of an alleged majority of UK taxpayers, the artist's intentions were in concordance with Rancière's idea of democratising grass-roots creativity and of disenclaving contemporary dance (Burt 2016, p. 72). In an interview with Rosanna Irvine, Instant Dissidence's performer explains that she doubts the morality/ethics of contributing to the advancement of choreography as an art form and of herself as an artist. She questions the validity of "creating work which operates in a way that only those with an art education can understand [thus] re-enacting [her] (educational) privilege [and] accumulating more cultural capital, in the same way that a banker might be said to [be] constantly re-enacting his/her economic privilege and accumulating more financial capital." As an artist, she sees her duty as enabling others to acquire cultural capital instead of "continuing to service [her] own cultural capital" (Irvine 2017, unpaginated). However, how could a totally alienated audience acquire cultural capital? Ultimately what would be the point of creating work that will antagonise people and fuel extremist views? It is important to stress here that *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England's* hostile critics are coerced into these critic roles and that this discussion is not about people experiencing a performance but playing a part in a fabricated subaltern public sphere. At this stage, it is important to try to understand what it is in *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England's* performance set-up, as described by the tabloid critics, albeit not in the experiencing of the performance itself, that might alienate its non-attending public so much.

A Case of Phobocracy

Perhaps it is the swapping of places between migrant/performer/participant that is the most disturbing for this piece's non-attending public, as it might generate the vertiginous standpoint of having to imagine themselves crossing into another's world. One of the implicit concerns in the comments about *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* is the difficulty of conceiving the cultural boundaries to protect against the idea of an art world without borders. It is interesting to remark that in the comments, cultural and financial concerns are often interchangeable either because culture is seen as part of a globalised market and/or because ACE's funds are not conceived as ring-fenced but part of taxpayers' contributions that could easily be re-allocated to the NHS or the funding of local libraries. However, the dance in *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* is intangible; it is not meant to be conceived as a cultural product or object but as an act of transgression, and as such, any consideration about its value seems irrelevant. The dance is not a representation; it does not evoke an image of a migrant that could crystallise tabloid readers' angst and fury.² In *Homo Spectator*, Marie-José Mondzain argues that "an image is not an object" but a place where "the choreography of appearances and disappearances" is played out (Mondzain 2008, pp. 55–56, my translation). As opposed to other types of performances about migrants, *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* does not summon up an image that persuades or provokes, but rather an image that through the substitution of the migrant body, subtracts itself from what it might be supposed to represent. Instead, the performance could have been providing an intense examination of the migrant crisis and aiming to give audiences an insight into the horror and despair of displacement. The performance could have involved performers

² In terms of manipulation of images by tabloid newspapers at the time of the Brexit referendum, according to Steven Barnett "perhaps the most egregious example was the Daily Mail headline of 16 June (inevitably followed up by the Sun), claiming that a lorry load of migrants had arrived from Europe. Despite video footage which clearly demonstrated they were refugees from Iraq and Kuwait, the banner headline 'We're from Europe—let us in!' was plastered across the front page. The following day's 'correction' consisted of 54 words at the bottom of page 2" (Barnett in Jackson et al. 2016, p. 47).

who have had experiences of being migrants in the past to both aid the alleged authenticity of the piece and perhaps even to add insight/depth to any post-show discussion. On the contrary, what Instant Dissidence attempts in *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England* is far more complex. It is dealing with absence and the capacity of the dance performance participant to embody the dance of a migrant, thus giving the migrant a freedom of movement by proxy without needing to obtain some kind of authorization to visit, remain, and perform, unlike the performers in the other type of performances mentioned above. Not subjected to law, this body-transfer in Instant Dissidence's choreography might well be the main reason behind the non-attending public's condemnation of the piece. Paradoxically, even without fully realising it, the commentators' remote engagement with the piece already constitutes an act of border-crossing.

One of the reasons why this piece might provoke or create fear is that unlike representations of migrants in other art works, the performance itself does not provide a tangible image to keep at a distance. On the contrary, it shows the embrace of a non-image, of an absence of image, of an absent body, that of the migrant. The dance withdraws the image of the migrant and thus any potential support for what Mondzain calls "phobocracy" or the reign of fear induced by images and especially images of crowds of migrants in tabloid newspapers. According to Mondzain, fear has become the most common social norm, a social bond that tends to replace any other forms of public discussion or solidarity. Fear binds and the most accomplished forms of power have become phobocracies, thus installing "the reign of fear that feeds off images and uses them to establish its domination." (Mondzain 2007, p. 73, my translation). It is important to remark that in the case of the non-attending public's reactions to *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*, it is the portrait of the performer depicted by the tabloid newspapers that is the focal point of the commentators' anger. Because of the absence of an image of the migrant, it is the image of the performer with open arms inviting random people in the UK to dance that is used to illustrate the tabloid articles and, arguably, to instil fear among the readers. Consequently, in the comments it is also this photo of the performer that crystallises the abuse. It is through animalization, and notably through a comparison to a hyena, that the performer is described in repulsive terms as an attempt by the commentators to keep all that the performance might represent at a tangible distance. The reign of phobocracy prevails through description of the performer as an unpleasant animal leech or hyena. However, the performance itself is an attempt to de-image. To de-image, to de-imagine is perhaps a way to escape the dead-end of what I have tried to address here as a coerced counterpublic sphere. The question remains whether similar artistic escapes will be able to match the public engagement criteria of funding bodies. In any case, in *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*, what the subtracted image leaves room for is the idea of fleeing and the hope for border transgression. Despite the way representation is circumvented in the piece, there is always a theatricality inherent to the act of fleeing across borders. As Walter Benjamin remarks when considering performing as the ultimate act of border crossing, Shakespeare's plays are full of *dramatis personae* who "enter fleeing" but whose flight is arrested by the stage when they enter into the visual field of nonparticipating persons. Benjamin remarks that this "fleeing" "is imbued with expectation of a place, a light, a footlight glare, in which our flight through life may be likewise sheltered in the presence of onlooking strangers" (Benjamin [1928] 2004, p. 484). In *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*, it is the presence of an embracing stranger by proxy that confronts a non-attending counterpublic and comes into the light; the stage is replaced by the body of the dancer, which provides the fragile space "in which our flight through life may be likewise sheltered", perhaps a public sphere where fear is momentarily suspended.

Conclusions

The de-imaging at work in syncopolitics offers, perhaps, a way of escaping the suturing of debates to antagonism in the post-Brexit referendum context and in the case of *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England*, a way of circumventing its counterpublic's fears and rejections. Building on Clément's definition of the syncope as a flight from "an unbearable collection of belongings", syncopolitics, as an

escape from representation, perhaps offers a path to step away from the seeming degeneration of the public sphere described above (Clément [1990] 1994, p. 251). The question remains whether similar or even more radical artistic escape from identity politics will be able to match the public engagement criteria of funding bodies. If the current model for arts funding and arts making is to be preserved, there is an urgent need to reconsider the precarious balance between the democratisation of culture and the aesthetic education of the public. In order to assess the level of intervention required in order to prevent the complete erosion of expertise within the artistic public sphere, this article proposes the need to include the experience of a non-attending public in the assessment. Paying attention to lay critics' online comments could represent a valid access to tap into counterpublics' feelings about the art world as orchestrated by well-intentioned funding bodies' values and abiding artists. However, trying to consider *Dancing with Strangers: From Calais to England's* ferocious online critics as a subaltern public sphere or even as a counterpublic might be an illusory task. In the aftermath of the Brexit referendum, the idea of free debates enabled by the press and notions such as public spheres, civil spheres, and social frameworks as conceived or analysed by Habermas, Frazer, Warner, and others, as well as templates for public engagement, might be eroded.

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