Beyond Performance Studies:
Mediated Performance and the Posthuman

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ABSTRACT: My project is not to create a model for intermedial performance analysis, but rather to set the discourse about it in a larger context. Given the rich variety of mediated performances, the notion that there is a definable and delineated act of «performance» demands methodological scrutiny because the discipline of Performance Studies has yet to find a coherent approach to a type of performance that is not grounded in the presence of the body. I suggest that the view that ties performance to individual human agency, to the performer and the body of the performer is a liability in the study of mediated performance; but also, perhaps paradoxically, that the analysis of mediated performance, once the anthropic bias is discounted, allows us to revalorize certain seemingly obsolete «humanist» categories by embracing the notion of *posthumanism*. Discussing a number of instances of mediated performance, including video, digital avatars, and CGI, the article posits that performance analysis should embrace posthumanism and models of consciousness as a way of coming to terms with the «theory machine» of digital/virtual performance modes.

Keywords: mediatized [theatre], posthumanism, performance, consciousness, methodology

RESUMEN: Mi propósito no consiste en crear un modelo de análisis de puesta en escena intermedial, sino situar el discurso sobre la misma en un contexto más amplio. Debido a la variedad de representaciones transducidas, la asunción de que existe un acto «representacional» claramente definible y demarcado debe ser abordada sistemáticamente, ya que aún está por desarrollar dentro de la disciplina de los Estudios Teatrales una línea de investigación coherente para estos tipos de representación que no se basan en la presencia del cuerpo. Sugiero que el modelo de representación actoral basado en la agencia humana individual, el actor y su cuerpo reduce el campo de estudio de la representación transducida; aunque, paradójicamente, el análisis de la transducción dramática, una vez desligada de su

condicionamiento antrópico, permite recuperar algunas categorías «humanistas» aparentemente obsoletas, mediante la adopción de la noción de *posthumanismo*. Tras el análisis de algunos ejemplos de representación transducida entre los que se incluye el vídeo, los personajes digitales, CGI, el artículo concluye que el análisis espectacular debería adoptar el posthumanismo y el circuito modelo de conciencia para reconciliarse con la «maquinaria teórica» de los modelos espectaculares digital / virtual.

Palabras clave: transducción [teatral], posthumanismo, representación teatral, modelo de conciencia, metodología.

1. Restarting the Theory Machine

One of the most difficult challenges the new regimes of performance pose to the academy is not an aesthetic or ideological, but a *methodological* one. Developments in distributed performance, immersive virtual reality environments, televisual presence, neuroaesthetics, and so forth are proceeding now with such rapidity in the practices of a significant number of performers and content creators that they outrun most efforts to map, chart, describe, systematize, and interpret them. Analogous in some ways to the unfettered vigour of the post-classical avant-garde of the 1950s to 1970s, the medial and intermedial avant-garde has not been known to wait patiently for academic analysis, which is still largely circumscribed by the cumbersome and inefficient rituals of textuality and publication.

By pointing to the many and pervasive analogies between modernist theatre and recent digital[1] performance practice, in his book *Digital Performance* (2004) Steve Dixon demonstrates that much of what is only now technically possible was already theorized presciently in the early twentieth century, although the practice itself was often lagging. However, in the realm of medial and digital performance today, theory is not clearly *a priori* or *a posteriori* to the practice, but rather emerges from a constant, and constantly accelerating, feed-back loop of theory and practice witnessed in the incessant morphing, splitting, and recombining of representational strategies. It is hardly surprising that the artists who have been able most easily to move into this theory/practice territory are dancers, who have little attachment to the theatre's metaphysics of text (and

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1.   I take «digital,» which is used rather promiscuously in recent scholarship, to be shorthand for new media rather than a specific technical descriptor opposed to, say, «analog». See also the remarks by Andrew Murphie (2000) cited later in the essay.

textual criticism), or its poetics and noetics of space; for they are accustomed to think of their bodies materially, energetically, kinetically, and notationally rather than as the corporeal domain of a separate psychic existence. In fact, digital, mediated, and mediatized performance, as a field and in its manifestations, has become a kind of «theory machine». Thus, writing about mediated performance (I will adopt this as the synoptic term), if it is not entirely descriptive, necessarily engages in a meta-theoretical discourse, which acknowledges that ruptures in representational practices call for the reconstellation of analytical strategies. My argument is that performance theory, because of its strong paradigmatic power remains the prevalent meta-theory, even as it undergoes a significant paradigm shift of its own.

The theatrical avant-garde that in the latter part of the twentieth century gave rise to the Living Theatre, the Performance Group, or the Wooster Group, to name only some obvious markers, concurrently pushed for the overthrow of older methods of theatrical analysis and opened the door to what then became institutionalized in the academy as Performance Studies. It is unnecessary to rehearse this history here; I only need to point to Marvin Carlson's recent seminal study of the field. The great virtue of Performance Studies became its theoretical flexibility, or what Richard Schechner called its «in-betweenness» (Schechner, 1998: 360). Poised in the liminal space in-between categories, it could absorb even radical shifts in the nature of performance practice and rearticulate them. It became the theory machine of performance. But performance theory was plagued by at least two problems: for one, the further it extended its referential reach, the more limited, paradoxically, became its capacity to respond subtly to new manifestations of performance, especially if they were in some sense intermedial. There is a problem in the potentially totalizing gesture of any explanatory paradigm; in this case the question arises, if anything is performance, or at least by inclination performative, where is the specific instance of performance in any given event?

Performance theory's second limitation, in spite of having been richly inflected by post-structural critiques of presence and embodiment, is that it has maintained an epistemic and institutional attachment to anthropology and the analysis of cultural performance, and to a point of view that might be called conservatively anthropic. Carlson, summarizing, describes performance as:

> a specific event with its liminoid nature foregrounded, […] presented by performers and attended by audiences both of whom regard the experience as made up of material to be interpreted, to be reflected upon, to be engaged in – emotionally, mentally, and perhaps even physically. (Carlson, 1996: 198-99)

I don't so much want to dispute Carlson's definition, which clearly still characterizes a certain type of performative interaction, as to extend it, because it seems to me that it has little purchase on the specific nature of performance in most mediated events, from the integration of video technology to the instrumental extension of the performing body through the internet, digital avatars, or machines, to the composited performances of virtual humans, and computer-generated imagery (CGI). Even though attempts have been made to theorize the progressive nature of performative identity, I am not completely persuaded that intermedial, or mediated, performance is easily enfolded in a stable terminology, and this slippage in the face of the plurality of intermedial practice, or its perpetual self-retheorizing is in some sense the primary virtue of contemporary performance. In the intermedial discourse, while we increasingly understand how media redefine *each other*, we poorly understand how they redefine the performer and performance itself.

Here, my project is not to create a model for intermedial performance analysis, but to set the discourse about it in a somewhat larger context. I want to suggest that the view that ties performance to individual human agency, to the performer and the body of the performer is a liability in the study of mediated performance; but also, perhaps only apparently paradoxically, that the analysis of mediated performance, once the anthropic bias is discounted, allows us to revalorize certain seemingly obsolete «humanist» categories by embracing the notion of *posthumanism*. I want to range here through a fairly wide set of mediated performances before I return to this idea.

The layering of complementary medial forms in much of contemporary performance has presented theory with a problem, literally, in coming to terms with its manifestations. Theoretical discourses are threatened with a self-recursive hypertrophy of terminology related to mediality. To cite Gabriella Giannachi as an example:

> [It] must be remembered that the medium itself always remediates. In relation to an analysis of virtual theatre and performance, this means that virtual theatre is therefore subject to a process not only of mediation but of remediation. This implies the use of a certain degree of intertextuality and metatextuality, but also of intermediality and metamediality. In other words, the medium of virtual theatre is always also its content and this content is always also inclusive of other media. It is the very metadiscoursivity about these other media that allows the work to be metamedial – about media. (Giannachi, 2004: 5)

While Giannachi's observations may all be valid they have surrendered any specific explanatory power. From some interrogatory vantage point, any performance, even the most conventional, is metamedial. I don't need to belabour the point. Of course, theatre, as «a space of illusory immediacy»

(Causey, 1999: 383) has always been subject to mediation and part of what Anja Klöck (2005: 117) has recently referred to as «a conceptual a priori mediality of all representational practices». In the paradigm of the medial a priori, she writes, «the body may no longer be defined as a place of nature. Nor can the existence of immediacy – of an unmediated reality, outside of the theatre – be assumed» (Klöck, 2005: 119-20). The anthropic strain of performance theory, often indebted methodologically to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, has sought to salvage out of the white noise of mediated transmission a kind of pure body whose salient feature was ostensibly its freedom from signifying practices; it simply was, phenomenologically, «in-the-world». It acquired a kind of categorical status marked by a determinate article, as «The Body». This categorically exalted Body, in its complete presence, was counterpoised to the constant, polymorphic semiosis of performance, especially if it involved some manner of feeding-back the living body through digital representation. It seems a logical operation to me to suggest that the binary opposition of presence and semiosis, as far as performance is concerned, collapses into a perceptual loop where signification is always marked by an overt sense of presence, just as presence is never just by itself or for itself, but rather always a sign of presence as well. Today, even without the element of the digital, the phenomenal body in the act of performance signals its own phenomenality, and so becomes mediated; not so much in itself but because it meets the consciousness of an audience whose perceptual frame is now irreducibly one of mediation. The contemporary performance context, I believe, is in fact defined by this collapse into mediation. This is, by the way, not that same as arguing, as Philip Auslander does in his *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, that there is no meaningful ontological difference between live and mediatized performance (Auslander, 1999: 38-54). Mediation changes only the perceptual, not the ontological status of the body. Even so, it seems almost wilfully atavistic to want to rescue presence from its critics by suggesting a return to a less encumbered version of the concept, as Jon Erickson has recently done. Presence in performance, for Erickson, consists of «directing and focusing the audience's attention in as strong a fashion as possible, and […] remaining as present as possible in one's concentration and being» (Erickson, 2006: 147). One could point out, among other theoretical objections, the tautological nature of this definition. But the largest problem of such rear-guard actions is that neither the performer's nor the spectator's bodies, which are the necessary constituents of such presence, quite seem to exist anymore as before. As Drew Leder has pointed out in *The Absent Body*, in daily life the body, as «thematic object of experience» tends to disappear (Leder, 1990: 1), the lived body «always constitutes a null point in the world I inhabit» (Leder, 1990: 13), subordinated or sublimated to the objects it perceives, and consequently vanishing from its own purview. Maaike Bleeker

has used the term «dys-embodiment» to reflect what she sees as «a condition of unreality brought about by experiences that point to the involvement of our bodies in the constitution of the world as we perceive it». This sense of unreality, she writes, is generated not by «the sudden awareness of our bodies, but rather the awareness of the invisibility or imperceptibility of their involvement» (Bleeker, 2006: 50). If we indeed have entered what Roy Ascott calls the «post-biological era» then bodies not only no longer represent some «natural» fixed point of the real, but on the contrary the very place (or scene) at which the real comes undone: «the site of bionic transformation at which we can recreate ourselves and redefine what it is to be human» (Ascott, 2003: 376).

2. Digital Doubling and Digital Doubt

If presence and body are already in a kind of theoretical quandary, what happens to the site of performance when video is introduced and the performer is doubled by another layer of mediation? I suggest that this is a shift not easily absorbed by performance theory. Whereas in cultural performance (in Carlson's sense) the performative can be located in a relatively simple linear transaction between performer and observer, video repositions performance in the interstitial margin, where the frame of one mediated mode adjoins and creates tension with the other. Consequently in mediated performance, as Gavin Carver and Colin Beardon write in *New Visions in Performance*:

> [even] seemingly straightforward relationships between performer and audience are subverted, and theatrical hierarchies are unbalanced in that space, sound and (projected) image are as dominant as the performer, who in some cases is not present at all. (Carver & Beardon, 2004: 181)

For the pre-electronic sphere, Meike Wagner has argued that the puppet body fulfils essentially the same function of rupture by becoming «a potential troublemaker for the apparently coherent concepts of live performing bodies versus the mediatized body» and by «mov[ing] the margins of the perceivable» (Wagner, 2006: 128, 131). This is true, and accounts for what some perceive to be the puppet's uncanniness. But in contrast to the puppet body, I think that the body on video, with its specular smoothness solicits a different quality of «attention» For example, Jonathan Crary has identified an important cultural trope of modernism in his work on the image culture of the nineteenth century and the remaking of the spectator into a detached observer. Many artists who used the medium of video, such as Nam June Paik and Vito Acconci, were aware early on of its attention-getting, performance-altering quality. Nick Kaye (2005)

credits these artists with first establishing and articulating the grammar of multi-medial performances «emphasizing processes of doubling and multiplication» that are still often the basis for the work of contemporary groups such as The Builders Association, who in their recent performances, for example *Alladeen* (2003), have explored the simultaneous location of performers in various live and mediated spaces. Commenting on an Acconci work of thirty years earlier *Theme Song* (1973), Kaye relates the artist's attempt to «play and perform against» mediation and, «to become "present to" the "private" time and space of the viewer's encounter» (Kaye, 2005: 205). While such a construction of an extensive sense of videated presence seems rather benign and playful, some critics have felt it necessary to implicate the doubling of the performer by analog or digital video as a kind of threatening «Other» in the psychic economy.

Steve Dixon summarizes this approach when he writes that «the digital double is a mysterious figure» which as the «dark doppelgänger represent[s] the Id, split consciousness, and the schizophrenic self» and invokes archaic beliefs of image magic that «cast a sinister shadow over the digital double and our fascination with mediatised reflections» (Dixon, 2004: 28-29). He echoes (doubles?) Matthew Causey's strongly articulated view that the screening of the performer is a token of «technological uncanniness» (Causey, 1999: 386), which enacts «the subject's annihilation, its nothingness» (Causey, 1999: 385). Arguing that such televisual rupture is a kind of Dionysian *sparagmos* or tearing-apart, Causey (1999: 393) writes: «the ontological shift from organic to technological, televisual, and digital beingness is tragic».[2]

This peculiar concatenation of Aristotelian, Nietzschean, and Freudian references seems to me to mark an attachment to an older discourse of performance theory. While it can be conceded that the introduction of video and other media «destabilise» (Carver and Beardon, 2004: 181) a performance situation, there is a regressive and alarmist component in some recent criticism, even as it ostensibly seeks to open up new discourses. So for instance Hans-Thies Lehmann, in *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006), a book that has become a touchstone of current theoretical discussions, offers a critique of the fascination the electronic image that, as he puts it, «lures through emptiness» (Lehmann, 2006: 171). A little further in the text, he retreats to familiar discursive ground: «Theatre is first of all anthropological, the name for a *behaviour*, […] secondly it is a *situation*, and only then, last of all, it is *representation*. Media images are – in the first and in the last place – nothing but representation» (Lehmann, 2006: 171). This spurious opposition of the «anthropological» theatre on the one hand,

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2.   It should be fairly pointed out that in his recent book, Dixon (2007: 155) rejects Causey's more alarmist conclusions.

and electronic media tainted by their association with the vacuous commodification of commercial imagery and advertising on the other, is finally nothing but simply binary, privileging the supposed «real» of the stage over the «unreal» or «inauthentic» electronic medium, based on a set of extraneous value judgments. Later, in a metaphysical turn that seems particularly unwarranted, Lehmann argues that electronic images are «representation» rather than «representability» (Lehmann, 2006: 172), and asserts that «*fate is another word for representability*» – thus images are a «perpetual affirmation of "fatelessness"» (Lehmann, 2006: 173). We encounter here a cultural critique of the deployment of electronic images that assumes, to some degree, that mediation always reduces or compromises human agency in performance. Although it is true that the video doubling of the performer can be thematically linked to alienation and to the uncanny, it is hardly sufficient to subject the technology itself to a categorical indictment.

If mere doubling by video is already uncanny, tragic (and in this tragic state, paradoxically «fateless»), what happens if personal agency is further reduced and control of performance is given to a computational or cybernetic system? Australian performance artist Stelarc, in recent works such as *Fractal Flesh* and *Exoskeleton*, has surrendered control over his body to remote manipulation via the internet, in some cases himself becoming the avatar of a dispersed, often chaotic, sometimes self-regulating system. The paradigm generated by these performances, as Johannes Birringer writes, are different from the role play studied by social anthropologists, because «performance is here always understood to take place in relationship to system-design which often encloses performer and interface within a physically traversable projected display or immersive environment». Such a shift creates «a fascinating re-orientation of our anthropomorphic assumptions about performance and agency» (Birringer, 2007: 28). Clearly, any such re-orientation is considerably extended with the introduction of digital avatars, humanoid simulacra designed to respond to real-world stimuli, which call in particular the idea of agency and volition, and so the nature of performance itself, into question.

In an article on her by now well-known 2001 project *Blue Bloodshot Flowers*, Susan Broadhurst describes the deployment of an avatar – a projected human head named Jeremiah – programmed with a simple «emotion engine» that registered and reacted to changes in its visual field. Not by chance endowed with the name of the bible's most apocalyptic prophet, Jeremiah liked visual stimuli; vigorous motion made him «happy», he became «angry» when ignored, etc. (Broadhurst, 2004: 50). She is careful to note that «current theory needs to be adjusted» to account for the effects of new technologies «especially in relation to the problem of (re)presenting the «unrepresentable», that is the sublime of the physical/virtual interface» (Broadhurst, 2004: 48), but she makes a

strong claim that Jeremiah has in fact crossed the boundary from representation to autonomous, spontaneous performance. «Jeremiah», she writes, «is original, just as an improvising artist is original. Jeremiah is literally "reproduced again" and not "represented"» (Broadhurst, 2004: 51). This is a rather strong ontological assertion that may not withstand scrutiny, although it is an open question at what level of autogenic behaviour in a digitally produced avatar an imaginary «Turing Test» of performance would become unassailable, that is, it would be practically impossible to distinguish the digital performer from a human performer rendered in digital form.

This problem is receiving much attention in fields not necessarily connected to live performance. Sampling some newer publications in computer graphics and animation, for instance, one can encounter attempts to create complex and subtle facial expressions and resolve emotional contradictions in digital embodied agents. Catherine Pelachaud and Isabella Poggi expend considerable ingenuity and computational energy on constructing expressive algorithms in avatars that take into account «power relationships», «degrees of certainty», «types of social encounter», among other dimensions. In their work, they tellingly give this experiment to synthesize a human «integrated perception and knowledge process» the label «belief networks» (Pelachaud and Poggi, 2002: 301).

In another case, the authors are concerned with giving virtual humans not only the capability of perceiving and remembering information, but also of forgetting it (Strassner and Langer, 2005). In other words, programmers are trying to de-digitalize the stringent and limiting capacity for perception, action, and expression still typical of most digital avatars in the pursuit of a kind of imperfect digital consciousness. Between the growing complexity of believing and/or forgetful avatars simulating the fuzzy logic of neural systems and the use of human brainwaves to create neuroaesthetic representations, a site of convergence in the human-computer interface (HCI) is slowly coming into view where the manifestation of mental images and the emergence of a digital *imaginary* (also in the Lacanian sense) may in fact coalesce and finally nullify the distinction between real and virtual – a scenario already envisioned in the 1980s by cyberpunk literature.

3. Performance from Almost Nothing

How far can the idea of performance without human agency be extended? In an article entitled «Humanoid Boogie» (2006), Philip Auslander made an argument for robotic performance, and it is worth dwelling on briefly. His principal example is Sergei Shutov's installation work *Abacus* at the Venice

Biennale in 2001, consisting of «over forty crouching figures draped in black, which face an open door and pray in numerous languages representing a multitude of faiths while making the reverential movements appropriate to prayer» (Auslander, 2006: 87). Auslander (2006: 88) answers the question whether such an installation of automata constitutes performance in the «affirmative». His argument revolves around the assertion that performance is constituted primarily by two sets of skills, technical and interpretive. Conceding that robots lack the latter (in fact, that deficiency is to Auslander the «crucial distinction between robotic performers and human performers» (Auslander, 2006: 91)), he determines that the fact that such automata technically appear as «metaphoric humans» and can be given the simulacrum of human activity is sufficient for performance to occur: «Because it is not necessary that they actually pray (whatever that may mean), only that they appear to do so, their actions […] may be treated as non-matrixed and task-based» (Auslander, 2006: 95).[3] Apart from the fact that he doesn't distinguish meaningfully between robots and automata, Auslander's retreat to such categories as «skill» again seems strangely reductive. More curiously, he does not emphasize that underlying the installation's «performance» as a simulacrum of human activity is an entirely unilateral model of communication akin to what Jon McKenzie (2001: 95-99) has termed «technological performance», and it is incidentally through this tightly rationalized mode of performance that *Abacus* is more closely aligned with the unrelenting efficiency of the animatronic figures at Disney World than with the theatre.

Mentioning Disney, a corporation whose subsumption of avant-garde modes of performance has been rather systematic, creates a useful segue for pursuing a final venue of virtual performance where the anthropic bias of performance theory is challenged: computer animation, or CGI. CGI is troubling to performance theory because it both disperses the performing subject and it situates itself outside of the spatio-temporal axes of most other digital performance. All of the forms I have discussed in this essay exhibit some kind of spatio-temporal continuity, even if their ultimate fragmentation is thematic to the performance. They exist, if not in a «here» and «now», then at least in a «then» and «there», indexically linked to a present time and place. The categorical difference of CGI is that it is the performance of no-body emanating from no-space in no-time. The space of CGI is purely ideational; the result of infinitely complex algorithms that

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3. I need only briefly invoke theatre history's most notorious simulated prayer, Claudius' abortive entreaty in *Hamlet*, to show that «whatever that may mean» is precisely the crux of the matter; Claudius' prayer is a doubled performance which, to the observing Hamlet, who sees interpretive skill and intentionality, is deceptively successful, while Claudius, knowing of its merely technical provenance («Bow, stubborn knees […]», he says), considers it no performance at all.

frame, render, shade, texturize, etc. That is, it is purely digital, paradoxically perhaps more so, the more it mimics real space. (Traditional animation retains a referent in the spatial real, since it is basically the photography of two-dimensional objects). In the no-time of computer animation, a pure temporal illusion devoid of temporality is created. While any mediated, or videated performance, and indeed any performance on traditional audiovisial media such as film, is «ghosted» by the actions of the performer between the frames or scans – actions no less real for their absence, CGI renders only the frames necessary to sustain the temporal illusion; there is nothing between the frames. Or, as Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006: 171) might put it, the electronic image «*lacks lack*, and is consequently leading only to – the next image […]». Such is the stringency of this illusion that any instant when a CGI character ceases to move between two adjacent frames spells instant «death». As John Lasseter (1994) of Pixar puts it, «in 3-D computer animation, as soon as you go into a held pose, the action dies immediately. […]. Even the slightest movement will keep your character alive». Not only have the spatio-temporal categories been radically altered in CGI, the identity and subjectivity of the performer is dislocated, dispersed, and finally re-composed in a painstaking and lengthy process out of innumerable discrete elements both digital and human. Procedurally and structurally, CGI is in fact a vast hypermedium. As Katherine Sarafian remarks, CGI performance is a performance out of almost nothing:

> The artists' interactions with tools of the new technology are such that they experience the actual manifestation of their creative energy and output incrementally, as lines of code compute or as frames render finally in completed form. The reward for this delayed gratification is the performance created from almost nothing – not motion-captured from live movement, and not the result of an automated, programmed task list in the computer. (Sarafian, 2003: 215)

CGI opens up a site of performance between live and digital not yet fully understood or theorized. The paradoxical project of computer animation, at least in its commercial and mass-medial manifestations such as Pixar, has not been to push the boundaries of animated performance into the realm of the nonhuman, to animate the inanimate, to create sophisticated object performance, or even to escape entirely from a dimensional representation of the empirical world into pure digital visualizations. On the contrary, as rendering and simulation programs have become infinitely more efficient and versatile, computer animators have largely abandoned their earlier experiments with animated desk lamps and tin toys, entities easily constructed from simple geometry, and have gravitated towards the photo-realistic representation of the humanoid and human actor in specific social environments. Consequently, the work of composited

performance has become increasingly naturalized, increasingly transparent. As a result, animators have developed an understanding of performance that eludes human actors:

> Human actors study the motivating details of a character, then they might improvise the acting once they are «in character». Computer animation characters, by contrast, are always in character. They were born in character. Animators need to finesse certain details and make the acting seem improvised, matter-of-fact, *natural*. (Sarafian, 2003: 215)

4. Strange Loops and the Posthuman Turn

Samuel Weber reminds us that such naturalness and the transparency of the medium has always been both an illusion and an ideological problem in theatrical performance, beginning with Aristotle's attempt to claim theatre as a purely *synoptic* medium that is principally «a means of perception, of vision, and of understanding» (Weber, 2004: 101). Weber points to Walter Benjamin's essay on radio which argues that the quality that most distinguishes this 'new medium from an antiquated, bourgeois, *Gesamtkunstwerk* notion of theatre is its *Exponiertheit*, that is, its very different social and technical mode of exposure, but also its contingency and riskiness. Brecht's epic theatre, which Benjamin reads through the lens of another medium, film, is similarly exposed by its structured interruptions and discontinuities, its *a priori* citational quality, its refusal to be merely transparent. For Weber, it is here that the discourse of mediated theatre begins:

> [What] emerges is a reiterative singularity that is no longer taken for granted as the transparent medium of identification, of recognition, but that becomes identifiable and recognizable only through the «trembling» of an irreducible alterity. [...] The interruptive gesture [of epic theatre] calls this precedence into question, even as it questions the notion of performance and performativity, at least as teleological processes of fulfilment. (Weber, 2004: 117)

Such a reiterative singularity of mediatized theatre substitutes for the false concept of a closed-off, self-reliant, autonomous individual – the vision of an individual himself open and exposed, or, in Benjamin's phrasing, «man in our crisis» (Weber, 2004: 115).

Just as our new media have surpassed radio and our modes of performance have rendered epic theatre historically contingent, this exposure has occasioned a new terminology that would have eluded Benjamin or Brecht: *posthuman*. Therefore, I want now to return to my original idea that performance studies may

have to look to a posthuman ethics to liberate itself from a threatening critical impasse. As Steve Dixon writes in *Digital Performance* «There is a real danger of theoretical imperialism, of certain modes and analytical world views colonizing, civilizing, and trivializing digital performance […]». Posthuman and cybernetic perspectives, he argues, offer «a more specific and rationally considered analysis of the field» (Dixon, 2007: 156). Like Dixon, I understand the term posthuman here in the non-dystopian sense proposed by Katherine Hayles, who asserts that:

> the posthuman does not really mean the end of humanity. It signals instead the end of a certain conception of the human, a conception that may have applied, at best, to that fraction of humanity who had the wealth, power, and leisure to conceptualize themselves as autonomous beings exercising their will through individual agency and choice. (Hayles, 1999: 286)

Hayles' posthuman human is essentially the millennial version of Benjamin's «man in our crisis». But how does a posthuman ethos function in the creation and reception of performance? For one thing, posthumanism dispenses with the categorical separation of «body and world» or «self and other» that constituted an older model of performance premised on presence. As Robert Pepperell writes:

> *The human body is not separate from its environment*. Since the boundary between the world and ourselves consists of permeable membranes that allow energy and matter to flow in and out, there can be no definite point at which our bodies begin or end. Humans are identifiable, but not definable. […] The notion that each of us is a discrete entity can be called the «boxed body» fallacy. (Pepperell, 2000: 13)

It is easy to see that a boxed body fallacy would in turn give rise to a performative fallacy that privileges notions of agency, semiotic transactions, and of being *present to*. In fact, if «the body» was the locus *sine qua non* of performance studies, the locus for posthuman performance theory is consciousness. Consciousness has been described as *emergent*:

> Given the right combination of genes, tissues, nutrients, chemicals and environmental conditions the property we know as «consciousness» emerges. We cannot precisely define what this quality is, where it occurs or how it might look in isolation from those conditions – *it is a consequence of all those conditions*. (Pepperell, 2000: 14)

Similarly, performance, especially in mediated events, is not so much the result of a clearly defined transaction as an *emergent structure* that becomes extant under certain conditions. The analogy is here to the kind of trans-

subjective mode of consciousness in cyberspace that William Gibson (1984: 69) famously defined as a «consensual hallucination». How might those performance conditions be described? We could perhaps say that they entail an element of reflexivity that opens up a virtual space – usually technologically mediated – that in turn inflects the «real» space in complex ways, and vice versa. The performance manifests itself (if that is the word) in this iterated and reiterated inflection of the real by the virtual, creating what Ascott terms a «double consciousness»:

> The state of being that gives access, at one and the same time, to two distinctly different fields of experience: psychic space and cyberspace, the material world and the virtual, in an artwork and outside of it. (Ascott, 2003: 377)

If that description sounds flatly dialectical (and so indebted to older analytical modes), it should be noted that the process of perceptual reiteration «trembles», in the sense of Weber's singularity, and the double consciousness of perceiver and perceived, of spectator and spectated, in the emergent structure of performance, becomes a double helix of consciousness, or perhaps a «strange loop». This last phrase I owe to Douglas Hofstadter, who uses it to characterize the formation of consciousness and «I-ness» by observing that consciousness is not some pre-existing Cartesian object located in the brain, but the result of the gradual «locking in» of passive mental epiphenomena «in the feedback loop of human self-perception [so that] causality gets turned around and "I" seems to be in the driver's seat». Hofstadter refers to the «strange loop of selfhood» (Hofstadter, 2007: 205), and it is perhaps fitting in this context that he uses video feedback loops as a rough analogue of this process. Applying this notion to performance, one might agree with Birringer who writes about the «emergent» or «liquid» situation of virtual reality (VR) digital performance that human performers are not separate from the software system or programming environment; «the entire interface environment can be understood as digital performance process, as emergent system» (Birringer, 2006: 44).

I hope it is clear from the above that the particular quality of performance I am describing is not merely to be thought of as an instrumental extension – digital or mechanical – of conventional human performance, much less its substitution, as in Auslander's automata. The transition into posthuman performance is to be found where digital media are transformed from simply providing channels streaming a version of physical reality to being harbingers and constituents of a new «condition of virtuality», to invoke another of Katherine Hayles' coinages. Andrew Murphie has best characterized the crucial distinction of digital and virtual:

It is the digital that makes things certain but the virtual that raises a very productive doubt. […] As we tire of looking at our fingers on keyboards and on all the other indexes of the digital that surround us (the hyperlinks, hypertexts and so on), we shall gradually awaken to the dawn of the virtual in all its sublime horror and all its beauty. For while the current digital conversion is exhaustive and reductive and, despite the abstraction, almost always ends in a re-extension of the known, the virtual is intensive and, though particular, always alive to something else. (Murphie, 2000: n.p.)

In virtual reality, CGI, and other mediated performance environments it is this «something else» that performance theory has yet to come to terms with. It seems that we are at a transitional moment where even «posthuman» and «virtual» are merely convenient placeholders for whatever the post-posthuman has in store; at the same time, as Susan Melrose observes sceptically, performance criticism still works in «conventional registers»: «Performance *writing* persists in reproducing the materially grounded constraints applying to writing, even on-line, at precisely that moment when a writer thematises the virtual» (Melrose, 2006: 11).

As I said at the outset, coherence in mapping the varieties of mediated performance may be elusive, but that is a problem only insofar we value the conceptual and categorical qualities of academic discourse over the theory machine of the performance itself. It seems possible to me that mediated performance can get past the ostensibly «tragic» rupture in the subject caused by digital doubles and other challenges of virtuality and recuperate some of the anthropic categories of performance theory, such as the value of bodies in space or the status of narrative, without being wedded to outmoded schemata. Dixon indeed emphasizes that most «digital/posthuman performers» aim not for chaos but «cohesion, for meaning, for unity, for intimate cybernetic connections between the organic and the technological» (Dixon, 2007: 155). Thus, Susan Broadhurst (2004: 55) concludes her discussion of the Jeremiah project by stating: «[…] it is my belief that technology's most important contribution to art is the enhancement and reconfiguration of an aesthetic creative potential which consists of interacting with and reacting to a physical body, not an abandonment of that body». And Johannes Birringer, in a recent article, cites Cynthia Hopkins' multimedia operetta *Accidental Nostalgia* «a heightened concentration of many perspectives, rhythms, voices, and polyphonic energies» with «continuous transfers between film, dance, music, and computer-assisted montage» as «live digital art at its best, reviving narrative traditions» (Birringer, 2007: 35). I sense that in such utterances, and in the performances they aim to evoke, «body», «presence» and «narrative» are not simply offered as retrograde categories tinged with nostalgia for a pre-digital world, but instead consciously (even

provocatively) deployed as the very anthropically charged terms of Performance Studies, but with a posthuman turn. You can go back, they might argue, only as long as you understand that there is no going back.

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