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Hammers and Blind Man's Sticks: Re-examining the Digital Double

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Introduction

Research areas: technological embodiment, digital double, experiences of self, somatic sensation

Methodology: lived experience and autoethnographic writing

Performance work: *Me and My Shadow* (2012)

Aims: illustrate theoretical and embodied basis of research, highlight flaws in current theorisations of the digital double and technological embodiment

Auto-ethnography

'...an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*) (Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005).'
(Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011: 1)

Acknowledging the presence of the researcher in the research, and how my 'assumptions' as a dance scholar and practitioner might provide new insights in to the research area

Experiential narratives that allow my 'theoretical and embodied understandings' of technological embodiment 'to be revealed through rich narratives of lived movement experience.' (Barbour, 2009: 87)

Digital double

Me and My Shadow is an installation in four cities; London, Paris, Istanbul and Brussels. Each installation acts as an online portal, connected in real time to a 3D virtual environment where participants meet both their own representations, and participants in other cities. The piece combines motion-capture and telepresence technologies. Multiple Microsoft Kinects are used in each site to capture the movement of participants, which is then projected on to an avatar or 'shadow' in the virtual world. The avatar is featureless; merely an outline of body shape. The only way to distinguish avatars is by colour; each of the portals is represented by a different colour avatar, so that you know where your dance partner is coming to you from. London based participants have purple avatars, Paris red, Istanbul blue and Brussels green. The London base for the installation is the National Theatre, and is open to the public from 10th-26th June 2012. By the time I arrive at the London portal, due to delayed trains and tubes I am flustered and running late.

Philosophical Basis for the Digital Double

Learning to move isn't quite as straight forward as I expect it to be; mainly because movement of the upper body changes the direction. The comment book I am directed to as I leave the installation calls it 'getting lost standing still'. Every time I move my shoulders my avatar races off in to the virtual space, and I feel like I am running after them, asking them to come back. Once, when I get lost, I cannot find my way back. The space is featureless - nothing but a gray expanse of land, a blank expanse of sky and the moon. The moon quickly becomes my point of orientation, and when it eludes me I begin to panic. I can feel my heart racing and my breath constricting; it feels like getting lost in the woods as a child and thinking I'm never going to get back home. But, gradually, as I learn to keep my shoulders still I find my way back, and when I see the moon again I reach up to it, relieved.

Somatic philosophy and the self

My avatar doesn't move in disjointed steps as I do, but glides through the virtual world, aided by the fact that the bottom half of my legs aren't picked up by the kinect. It's a bit like skiing; I have the feeling like I'm gliding, due to the smoothness of the movement. I soon become engrossed in the correspondence between how my movement feels, and how it looks. As a dancer, I frequently use a mirror as a means to correlate kinaesthetic and visual information about my movement. The use of the mirror in this context is as a corrective tool, to confirm that my kinaesthetic and proprioceptive perceptions of my bodily position and movement are accurate. Working as a dancer for film and projection, I am also used to seeing myself dancing on film, a process that facilitates the judging of technical flaws in my movement. The relationship I have to seeing the movement of my avatar is somewhat different, because it doesn't have my face, or distinct bodily features. Without being able to focus on my bodily features and the technical accuracy of movement, I begin to see the quality of my movement more clearly than I ever do in a mirror: and I am struck by its fluidity. For the first time, the visual image of my movement seems to correlate to the feeling of moving when I am improvising. I being to play with maintaining a visual and kinaesthetic sense of fluidity in my movement whilst increasing its swiftness. I am no longer lamenting the absence of a remote partner to dance with, because I am engrossed in a dialogue with my own movement.

To Conclude

Prioritisation of Merleau-Pontian philosophy has led to the dismissal of somatic experience, knowledge and philosophy

My experiences discussed in relation to *Me and My Shadow* are more akin to Merleau-Ponty's blind man's stick than Heidegger's hammer

These insights come from an embodied research methodology, and the prioritisation of experience as a form of knowledge making

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