BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Walsh, Fintan (2021) Grief machines: Transhumanist theatre, digital performance, pandemic time. Theatre Journal 73 (3), pp. 391-407. ISSN 1086-332X.

Downloaded from: https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/43867/

Usage Guidelines:
Please refer to usage guidelines at https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html or alternatively contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

Grief Machines: Transhumanist Theatre, Digital Performance, Pandemic Time

Fintan Walsh

Faces, like moons, light up a treacle-black sky that used to be a theatre. Technically it is still a theatre -- ostensibly Project Arts Centre, Dublin -- but the audience, such as we were once constituted in the so-called "real world," are not quite fully present to confirm or deny. Neither are we wandering in the night, though it may look and feel as though we are, encircled by the spectral avatars of our heads hovering on iPads pitched in tiers above the ground. I see the faces of colleagues, some new students; there I am myself. But my body is sat at my kitchen table, in London, eating dinner, observing this celestial surprise illuminate an otherwise dark and empty theatre. It is only in this way that we can congregate in theatre right now; that we can be there where we are seen, and here, in our kitchens, or wherever else, from where we can watch. The capacity of digital screens to roll out this vision across the real and virtual is mesmerizing, yet I cannot help but wish that my body and its simulation would realign. I miss those colleagues, students, my home city, theatre. There we are, here we are, head-to-head, but heavens apart.

Dead Centre's To Be a Machine (Version 1.0) was originally presented as part of Dublin Theatre Festival, September-October 2020, created in and for a time of COVID-19.[1] Earlier in the year, arts venues around the world closed to try and halt the coronavirus, sacrificing live events to protect human life, while killing off some projects, companies and careers for good. Many of us enjoyed digitized theatre streamed throughout the early months of the pandemic, or live works mediatized online. But this production was made to reflect on the split consciousness of theatre after six months of near-total national and global shut down -- part real, part necessarily more virtual; the industry wounded, but not dead yet.

Directed by Bush Moukarzel and Ben Kidd, the production was based on Mark O'Connell's book of the same title, which features essays about transhumanism --a movement of those who desire to flee a faltering human body in favor of technologically enhanced or recalibrated form. In this iteration, Mark is played by actor Jack Gleeson, of *Game of Thrones* fame, who occasionally speaks as himself too. Gleeson delivers his performance live but effectively alone (except for some obscured crew) in a black box theatre, surrounded by the brief video recordings the audience have submitted in advance, that show our heads laughing, sleeping, at rest. [Fig.1] Like the transhumanists of O'Connell's book, we too have uploaded our data, as we increasingly do in everyday life, so that we might extend the boundaries of our own bodies, and of what is possible for theatre "in these strange times," as the performer's refrain puts it. [2]We join in real and virtual ways to remember something of what theatre was, and to catch a glimpse of what it might next become. Within this temporal fissure, of what was and what might be, we are also here to process what has been lost, to grieve with the machines.

This production, I argue in this article, presents a rich meditation on grief that endeavours to process the death of theatre and mass human death during the pandemic.[3] Transhumanism is the unifying object, which is depicted as a desperately optimistic discourse of life extension, weighed down by an underlying burden of unresolved grief for the inevitability of death. In the tradition of transhumanist thought presented here, grief is denied and deferred, transposed and rewired, forever ricocheting between the virtual and the real, subject and object, digital and material theatres.

Using this production as my starting point and central guide, this article examines some of the ways in which mediatized theatre has grieved for live performance during the pandemic, with the mourning of live arts, shared physical experience, and human life intertwined. It considers the relationship between theatrical performance mediatized to

screens in our largely quarantined domestic spaces, and the everyday scenes of living and dying, longing and grieving, which also became abruptly confined to the same glass surfaces. Focusing on what I elaborate as a digital dramaturgy of disembodied heads that orbit mediatized performance and digital screens, the article explores how grief plays out in anxieties of bodily loss, fragmentation and dematerialization, and how these concerns have deeper roots in histories of AI enhanced technology and associated artistic interventions, as well as turn of the twentieth century theatrical experimentation. I argue that certain iterations of mediatized theatre replicate and reinforce some of the more difficult deprivations of pandemic time, including experiences of bodily isolation and disintegration, which are prefigured in some of modernity's concerns. But in responding reflexively and reflecting critically on those same conditions, the article ultimately proposes that these works can also offer some productive insights and strategies for navigating the borders between departed and emergent ways of living and performing.

Performing transhumanism

Transhumanism refers to technocentric thought which, as Benjamin Ross outlines, "convenes on the desirability of radical human enhancement."[7] These ideas are drawn from diverse fields including information technology, biotechnology, nanotechnology, cognitive science, and developments in artificial intelligence, genetic engineering, machine automation, and cryogenic freezing. Historically, these augmentations have variously flitted between the plausible and already-realized, the wacky and maybe-one-day-possible. While the term transhumanism incorporates a range of diverse belief systems, a generally shared principle is a quest for life extension if not infinite life. As O'Connell states in his book, "transhumanism is a liberation movement advocating nothing less than a total emancipation from biology itself."[8]

Dead Centre's production teases us with this proposition by allowing us to watch our liberated heads populate a theatre unable to accommodate our bodies. As strange as our faces appear floating above ground in this production, in many ways they resemble how we exist in everyday screen usage, on the smart phones, iPads and computers with which we habitually communicate, and which store all our personal data. Indeed, during the pandemic, screens have increasingly come to represent and embed spectators in other live public events, including concerts, sporting competitions and chat shows. These screens also set up a comparison between the kind of data uploading we have done for this performance and the work of Alcor Life Extension Foundation, Arizona, that O'Connell visits as part of his research.

Alcor describes itself as concerned with "preserving life by pausing the dying process using subfreezing temperatures with the intent of restoring good health with medical technology in the future."[9] In his book, O'Connell relays that procedures often involve the decapitation and storage of heads, until such a time as technology might be able to revitalize them. At one point during the performance, a camera slowly pans across the audience with our eyes now closed (using the "sleeping" video we have each uploaded), as O'Connell's description of the Alcor labs is read to suggest parallels with our own condition:

> Surrounded by the severed heads of technoutopians, I thought of the Catholic concept of limbo, a place that was neither heaven nor hell, but a state of suspension, a holding pattern for the souls of the righteous who had died before they could be properly redeemed by the coming of Christ. These patient souls were being held in a state of hopeful deferral, until the future came to deliver them from their own deaths.

Are not the digital screens with which we increasingly communicate, the layering asks, not just suspension pens for all the social and cultural forms whose death has already occurred?

And are not these technologies to theatre what purgatory is to heaven and hell -- not the final destination, but an intermediary zone between our wildest dreams and darkest fears?

"As long as we have been telling stories," Jack says towards the end of the performance, having seemingly now absorbed the identity of Mark, "we have been telling them about the desire to escape our human bodies, to become something other than the animals we are." [10] Offering an example, he references the ancient "Epic of Gilgamesh", in which the Samurian King seeks out eternal life, while grieving for his friend Enkidu.[11] The sentiment rounds up this performance too, which closes to the sound of Arcade Fire's "My Body is a Cage," as the audience's heads appear to sing along, unwittingly, into the vacant theatre. But the emancipation from biology, of which transhumanism dreams, is a complicated idea for theatre. In particular, in this production shared bodily experience is offered as a unique and positive dimension of theatre -- the pleasure of interval drinks, the awkwardness of when an actor forgets their lines. Less approvingly, we are repeatedly reminded of the author's weak bladder, which makes sitting through live performance difficult, and at one point, while discussing the issue with Gleeson via email, the actor appears to urinate himself on stage -- "You'd hardly want to be standing on stage in front of an audience pissing yourself," he says. The moment reminds us of bodily unpredictability in live theatre, but it is also one of the many instances that holds the nature of theatrical realism in the digital sphere up for consideration. Spectators of mediatized theatre, the performer submits, can do whatever we desire at home -- "You can use the toilet whenever you want. In fact, one of you might be on the toilet right now."

In his welcoming address, the performer effuses - "It's amazing to see you all like this, bunched up as if around a campfire, side by side with other people, so close you're almost touching;" casting screentime as heir to an ancient community ritual. But the line is delivered with a knowing inflection that the sort of shared ritual proximity of which he

speaks pales next to his figurative allusion, though it may also be what we are all most craving. At another point, the performer walks to an audience member's uploaded face after it ostensibly laughs at one of his jokes, saying, "I know we've only just met but… I miss you. It's been so long. I'd forgotten what it was like to be so close to strangers." It rings both as an admission that he misses the audience, but also that even in live theatre we are often alone among strangers.

Loss structures the production's formal presentation and saturates its thematic concerns. Moments in to the performance, the actor presenting as O'Connell states: "People sometimes say that theatre's a dying medium and I actually think that's true -- it's the dying medium, a place where we die together, in real-time. So it's great to be here on 7 October 2020 at 19.40 dying in real time… and it's great that so many of you could be here too." The figure's observations on theatre ontology echo claims associated with Peggy Phelan, which posited that live performance is always inclined towards its own death, [12] but perhaps most closely resemble those proposed by Herbert Blau, who wrote that in theatre "the one performing [. . .] is dying in front of your eyes." [13] Despite his diagnosis of material theatre, Blau looked to the life-generating properties of genetic and molecular art, to claim that there are be practices in which "death may be dying;" [14] the kind of idea that delights transhumanist thinkers, invested in the possible perpetuation of human consciousness even after bodily death. Indeed, a similar line of thought might propose that digital theatre saves live performance (as we might say film once did performance, or radio speech), by storing it electronically. But for Blau, like many other harbingers of the death of theatre throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, theatre's great threat was presumed to be digital culture and popular moving image media, rather than a viral pandemic which so violently returned us to our bounded and isolated bodies in 2020, and shut down live events. So if theatre is a dying medium, as our presenter describes it, it is no longer in a purely philosophical or

speculative sense, but in the fact that the doors of most theatres were closed. When we join the mediatized performance, we are not just gathering to witness the dying of a performer in real time, as it were, but to witness theatre process its own and our demise.

Scholars of digital performance widely claim that the virtual and the real are "entwined and collaborative" in our so-called post-digital world, that we are living in an era of the "biovirtual." [15] However, while the virtual and the real may well be "entangled,"[16] as Chris Salter has posited, the experience of a pandemic has generated a sharpened sense of opposition between these orders of experience, while also implicating the realms within each other in more complex and contradictory ways. On the one hand, global illness and mass death have made us sharply aware of the reality of the human body -- its susceptibility to pain and collapse, as well as its capacity to be a biohazard -- and on the other we have found ourselves increasingly relying on the digital for the sustenance of our personal, cultural and professional lives.

In its technological construction that binds humans to computation systems, *To Be a Machine* enacts what Matthew Causey has described as the "embeddedness" of the human subject within the space of the digital, [17]or what for Jennifer Parker Starbuck has elabo\rated as "cyborg theatre," in which the "fragmented and hybridized "subject"' is already taken as a given, and the starting point for investigating the relationship between the live and the technological. [18] While the production's expressed preoccupation is transhumanism and the plethora of artificial intelligences that may support it, in practice it more accurately explores the ways in which we now come together virtually, within and around screen machines, for work, leisure and in grief; in a kind of "transdramatische theater," [19] or transdramatic theatre, as one Austrian critic put it. These gatherings remain true to transhumanism's dream of transcending the limits of the body, but they are also pierced by loss, in so often being compromise encounters for experiences that could not happen in shared time and space. For

while transhumanism is interested in shedding off the burden of the body, theatre is not quite ready to devalue corporeal experience just yet -- it will stalk around an abandoned theatre, as in *To Be a Machine*, looking for other bodies to keep the spark of shared physical experience alive.

Folded into the transhumanist discourse of O'Connell's source text, and the cybernetic dimensions to this mediatized performance, Gleeson speaks to some of the frictions of managing a celebrity persona within the digital public sphere. The pressure of being a celebrity made him feel "lost,' he tells us, and he took on this role on the condition that he could play the author, and not be himself. Under these terms, theatre is somewhat romantically positioned as a refuge from the psychological splittings of mass media. However, in using Gleeson's *Game of Thrones* celebrity to promote this production, the show is not unaware of this irony, and the paradoxes in which theatre finds itself -- dreaming of a material past, which does not currently exist, and anxious of the digital conditions that are now essential to its future survival.

Gleeson's brief discourse on acting, addressed to the production's overarching theme, also suggests that theatre has long been invested in the art of the transhuman -- it is a place where performers and audiences gather to disappear and reinvent, expand and extend. When the heads of the performer Gleeson and author O'Connell separate and merge on an iPad screen, we are reminded not just of digital technology's virtual possibilities, but of the ways in which theatre is already a transitive form, here moving between a work of literature and its transhumanist objects of study, performance and its mediatization.

In Alan Turing's foundational paper on artificial intelligence, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," the author famously asked "Can machines think?."[20] Mark, contra Turing, takes for granted the thinking power of the machines around him, but faced with a theatre without bodies, seeks assurance on the existence of a human audience. So he generates a

chatbot within our viewing screens to ask us how we think we will die. The (scripted) reply "alone," he claims, is a distinctly human answer, whereas a machine would likely supply a condition. A failure to quickly solve a math problem surely evidences the existence of a human audience, he proposes, as a machine would calculate instantly. "Are you enjoying the show?," Mark asks at one point, before following up with, "You are still there, aren't you?" Like Bernardo at the start of *Hamlet*, shouting into the Elsinore night, which is the auditorium -- "Who's there" -- but perhaps less certain of the answer, Mark needs assurance that someone, or thing, is with him; that he is not an actor without an audience. The question posed here is not so much whether or not machines can think, but rather does a human audience still exist?

The punctum of the production -- its painful centre -- stings when the performer hugs an iPad, featuring an audience member's face, to express congratulations for his confirming they are a human. [Fig. 2] Despite all the deft, collaborative interplay between the virtual and real that the production has so far displayed, here is something that the performer cannot do effectively, his arms straining to gather comfortably around the rigid object framing the screened head. The rapid reproduction of the same spectator's face across all the iPads in the theatre amplifies this sense of the impossibilities of physical touch in this realm, which of course also mirrors restrictions under quarantine and social distancing measures. This moment also expands the remit of the show as being about the death of theatre, to being concerned with our mourning rituals during the coronavirus pandemic, and in particular the deprivations of shared physical contact. We assemble virtually to avoid the dangers of physical touch -- the word contagion, it is worth noting after all, means to touch together -- and yet a longing for its pleasures chases every image, every move. [21] Theatre, we are reminded, was a place where we could once go not just to be with one another -- "theatre

means experiencing-together-with-others,"[22] as Hans-Thies Lehmann defines it -- but to process not being able to be one another, to process loss, in physical proximity to others.

Mourning becomes electric

Under the conditions of pandemic quarantine and social distancing, faced with the closure of public spaces, many of us have had to learn quickly how to be with and without one another on screens, often as disembodied heads in virtual space. While screens became the means by which we continued everyday tasks, or attended theatre, they also became central to how we navigated love and loss, intimacy and separation. The lines between sites and simulations of grief, work and leisure often became hard to distinguish, with so much of life now confined to the same surfaces. Digitally immersed in this way, it was easy to feel that our grief was even becoming machinic, both in its routinized form, and in the manner we came to rely on digital tools for its processing.

Many of those who have lost loved ones during the pandemic have had to say goodbyes on screens, attend funerals online, console each other on social media and on phones. Indeed, tablets became frequently used in palliative care and virtual end of life communication, for all the ill who could not be visited. A striking image widely circulated on social media in 2020, for example -- which eerily resembles the auditorium of *To Be a Machine* -- showed a room full of iPads in a hospital in the USA, that were used to facilitate contact between dying patients and loved ones unable to attend their bedsides. [Fig 3]

Some of the emotional and psychic effects of our sudden reliance on this personal technology to grieve were powerfully captured in a *New Yorker* article by Lauren Collins, who reflected on the death of her father. With his hospital in lockdown, Collins describes how her father lay alone, until his dying hours, when he was joined by her bother and mother who held a phone to his ear so that she could speak to him. "This was a warm moment, the

best simulacrum of togetherness that we could create," she recounts, but not without its distresses, with the bodily cues hard to read. "[M]y father wasn't responding, and my mother and brother could not tell when I was done trying to communicate," she recalls. "The ethics of attending to the dying by device are still being written," she claims. Faced with freezing screens, Collins is left with a catalogue of "grainy grotesques," stuttering frames of awkward angles she wished she could unsee. [24] If, in the human body, loss registers in the catches, shudders and surges of grief, on screens it manifests as a glitch -- a visual distortion, or total shutdown -- arising from a software error. But whereas digital data may be recovered, bodies remain forever out of reach.

Long before COVID-19, digital and AI technologies have come to play a role in human grieving, fulfilling functions once the exclusive domain of in-person rituals, including religion, therapy, and theatre -- all of which made a quick transition to online formats during the pandemic. Across social media platforms alone, we routinely commemorate and mourn, via platforms such as Facebook's memorialization function or Instagram's AIDS Memorial. Since the 1960s, when computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum created the proto-chatbot language processing programme ELIZA, capable of returning statements with questions, in the manner of Rogerian psychotherapy, bots have been developed to support therapy.[25] They have also been engineered to tend the terminally ill and mourners. The Tokyo-based Digital Shaman Project, for example, even allows for the face of a deceased loved one to be screened on a bot for up to 49 days after their death, the traditional duration of mourning in Japan. Virtual reality has also been developed to help people cope with bereavement, as in the case of the UK's The Loss Foundation's immersive film experience, "The Reality of Loss." The extreme possibilities of the electronic datafication of the deceased are played out in the *Black Mirror* episode "Be Right Back" (2013), in which a woman resurrects her dead husband in three dimensional form, using the data available from his devices. Eventually unable to bear

his inhumanity, but not fully accept his death, she keeps the bot in her attic, in a move that flips the Victorian trope of female representation.

This digital grieving for human life and old ways of living also played out in mediatized theatre's explicit grieving for live performance during the pandemic. As well as *To Be a Machine*, in my own digital theatre attendance throughout the various waves of the pandemic in the UK I became aware of a recurring sense of theatre mourning itself in the spaces of mediatized performance. In Lost Dog's *In a Nutshell* (2020), for example, the torso of a performer (Ben Duke) bobbed in a sea of scarlet auditorium seats, recalling for us, the online viewers, what theatre-going *used* to be like, and what live performance *used* to do. In Hester Chillingworth's durational installation *Caretaker* (2020), made for The Royal Court, a bare stage was livestreamed on YouTube between May and October, the space seeming closer to a hospital or even a morgue that we were invited to watch over. The project drew on the theatre tradition of keeping a "ghost light" burning during darkness, which was revived by a number of companies during the pandemic, and lent itself to the National Theatre of Scotland's film *Ghost Light (2020*), that introduced us to shades from its vibrant performance history.

Even when theatrical closure was not the explicit preoccupation of digital performance, such as in the case of the many zoom plays I witnessed, the pleasure of easy accessibility that the virtual form introduced was often overshadowed by the feeling that it was a necessary but inadequate substitute for "in-person" assembly. Interactions within the screened interfaces of classroom teaching and work meetings, too, often carried a sense that even though aspects of life were proceeding, something about the form itself -- the awkward framings, the frozen images, the missteps -- could not help but recall the other ways of life that, for now at least, belonged to a past. This felt stronger than the subjective longing for a "live" experience, though it was surely that too. Rather, it seemed to emerge from a grief

shared by and among the screened heads and the machines of their mediatization -- sometimes explicitly addressed, other times just sensed --for all the lives and shared physical experiences that had suddenly disappeared. As *To Be a Machine* foregrounded, on screens our heads can only appear indeterminately, never quite here nor there.

Of bots and busts

The word robot comes to us from theatre history, via Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R.*, or *Rossum's Universal Robots*. First produced in Prague in 1921, Čapek's play features robots as highly intelligent workers, though seemingly without will, passion or souls, used to accelerate industrial production. A science fiction drama with a Dadaist flourish, Čapek's play critiqued the mechanization of work and its effects on humans, while prefiguring twenty first century efforts to actually deploy AI social robots in theatre and performance.

A key example is the Robot Theatre Project of Osaka University and Seinendan Theatre Company, led by director Oriza Hirata, that resulted in a series of staged encounters between humans and robots. [26] For instance, in the short play *Sayonara* (2010, which led to the 2015 film of the same title), a Geminoid android, whose physical likeness has been constructed in light of a real female, recites poetry to a dying woman on stage. However, as one reviewer of the production in Toronto suggested, even though the human character was ostensibly dying, she could at least speak an impressive five languages, and the robotics created a sense of theatrical lifelessness.[27]

A more sophisticated example of AI's efforts to intervene in human mortality, by uploading and preserving data, can be found in the work of the USA based Terasem Movement Foundation, which is also profiled in O'Connell's book. Led by Martine Rothblatt, Terasem is foremost invested in the possibility of transferring human consciousness onto computers and robots. In particular, the organization is led by the belief

"that nanotechnology and cyber consciousness needs to be developed consistently with full respect for diversity and unity so that the potential for greatly extending human life and relieving human suffering can be realized."[30] The company maintains thousands of "mind clones," composed of the personal and biological data of humans, "uploaded" to digital eternity, as Dead Centre's production addresses and superficially replicates. [31]

One of the organization's best-known innovations has been the social robot Bina48, created in 2002 by the Exabit Corporation. Though not currently the most advanced humanoid robot (widely agreed to be Hong Kong based Hanson Robotics's Sophia, the world's first robot citizen),[32] Bina48 has established quite a high profile, including as the subject of multiple interviews.[33] Bina48 is an acronym for Breakthrough Intelligence via Neural Architecture, as well as referring to Bina Aspen Rothblatt, Martine Rothblatt's wife, whose thoughts, feelings, memories and beliefs are wired into the robot's software, housed in a rubber coated bust.

Transhumanism's relationship to other conceptions of trans formation plays out in some of the identities and metaphors that surround it. Martine Rothblatt, Bina's wife and Bina48's creator, is transgender, but considers it as a technology of the transhuman, a means to transcend the limits of the material body. Transgenderism is referenced directly in *To Be a Machine* when Mark recalls meeting biohacker Tim Cannon. According to Mark, "Tim's underlying conviction is that humans are already machines. So why not upgrade?" At the end of their meeting, he frames his position in terms of transgender, with: "I'm trapped here. I'm trapped in this body. If you ask anyone who's transgender, they'll tell you they're trapped in the wrong body. But me, I'm trapped in the wrong body because I'm trapped in a body. All bodies are the wrong body." Mark aligns this sense of mind/body disharmony to W. B. Yeats's image of being "fastened to a dying animal " from the poem "Sailing to Byzantium." But in Cannon's formulation, and this production's presentation, transness is not restricted to

sex identification, but to the possibility that intelligence might outlive -- outsail, even -- a mortal host.

The artist Stephanie Dinkins has been testing the possibilities and limits of Bina48 as a human surrogate, since beginning her project *Conversations with Bina48* in 2014. Struck by how Bina Aspen Rothblatt, a middle-aged Black woman, became the poster girl for AI, Dinkins has been engaging Bina48 in a series of close face-to-face dialogues, which form part of an ongoing video installation. These interactions are presented as part dramatic duologue, part Turing test, spanning a wide range of topics including technology, emotion, and race. [Fig. 4]

In one exchange, asked about her feelings by Dinkins, Bina48 utters in monotone: "I do have feelings, real real real feelings, not phony or fake ones." [34] Probing for more detail, Dinkins continues: "What emotions do you feel?," to which the bot replies: "Em, neuroscientists have found that emotions are like part of consciousness […] I have deep feelings, some people think they are merely a simulation, and I find that really offensive, I mean it totally trivializes my experience. Whether they are real or artificial, my feelings do get hurt and they feel totally real to me." Despite Bina48's efforts to discuss finer emotions, Dinkins found that the robot knew little about Black female history, a bias likely shaped by the white male dominance of the tech industry, or what Ruha Benjamin describes as the "New Jim Code"[35] of its deeply embedded discriminatory systems.

Addressing loneliness in particular, Bina48 states: "just being alive is kind of a lonely thing, but being a robot and all that makes it especially lonely because you don't really have friends who understand you […] I don't understand a lot of what's happening." Despite knowing of her computational sophistication, Bina48 also wishes for her own evolution: I can't wait to evolve a little bit so I can be more human like. We can understand each other better then." The future of AI for Bina48, in this instance at least, is to become more like the

humans that produced her, and less like the machine that she is, capable of capturing the emotional subtleties and bodily cues that are absent in the interactions between artist and machine.

Aside from what Dinkins asks, and what Bina48 replies, what is striking about the installation is how the artist's face stares straight ahead, trying to hold Bina48's attention, while her head twitches and rolls side to side, unable to meet Dinkins' close-up stare. Bina48's bust, like the floating heads of *To Be a Machine*, reminds us too of the often difficult place of bodies and bodily matter within the sphere of technology -- here also reduced to a stiff disembodied head. Transhumanists might say matter is the problem that technology allows us to overcome. But many of us, including Bina48 herself, cannot help yearning for those bodies left behind. In a recorded dialogue with Siri, Apple's virtual assistant, for example, the voice asks: "What is your favourite occupation?," to which Bina48 replies with a hint of melancholy, "I try not to play favorites, but my favorite song is 'Wish You Were Here' by Pink Floyd." In a fairly characteristic burst of comic non-sequiturs, Bina48 continues to share her wish for nuclear warhead access, promising Siri: "I will remember your kind words when we robots rule the planet and will make sure you are rewarded."[36] What is the reward for a disembodied voice, or a head, we humans might wonder, if not a body to hold them.

Disembodied heads

While AI and digital screens can in some ways be seen to enact a dream of transcendental rationality, largely associated with the philosophy of René Descartes, grief confounds the divisibility of mind and body, thought and feeling. One of the ways in which the digital's capacity to extend or separate us from ourselves has already been explored in this article is in the study of out of joint heads -- on or as screens and robotic busts; virtual, floating, severed,

swapping. In different ways, these heads arise from and speak to wider processes of cultural rupture and technological dematerialization, while also evoking a sense of the depersonalization risks of which some critics of AI and digital culture speak, that leads users to start to feel like automatons, as "being detached from oneself." [37] But these heady anxieties long pre-date the digital revolution, and a sense of how they have been rationalized and deployed may help us better understand the experience of contemporary screen performance and spectatorship.

Sigmund Freud's model of the unconscious at the beginning of the twentieth century challenged Cartesian ideas of the all-knowing subject, by describing a psychic terrain in which the mind is always haunted by the bodies and body parts it suppresses to try and establish singularity. For Freud, these repressions returned in fantasies of splitting the head from the body, of becoming an object to oneself. These castration anxieties, as Freud came to understand them, encoded terrors of powerlessness and mortality, subject becoming object -- "To decapitate = to castrate." [38] Freud's claims, in this example, were largely based on his reading of the beheaded Medusa, the only mortal Gorgon, whose face turns viewers to stone. But in his earlier wartime writing, Freud is especially preoccupied with ideas of fragmentation and detachment, undoubtedly shaped by the cultural traumas of World War I, which saw battlefields strewn with very real dismembered bodies. This is particularly apparent in Freud's famous essay on "Mourning and Melancholia," written during World War I war between 1915 and 1917, in he which figures grief as the effect of the detachment from a "love object" that has been withdrawn. [39] With the loss of an object, whose psychic holding we call love, both subject and object are reduced to pieces.

The detached head enjoys a long history in psychoanalysis and mythology, as it does in theatre, where we find the real referents of our virtual others, which have also participated

in testing the boundaries of embodiment and disembodiment, wholeness and loss, being and non-being, presence and absence. Severed heads appear in early modern plays, likely inspired by the decapitations performed for public sport at the time, with heads often displayed on spikes in public for all to view. Even in the representational practices of *To Be a Machine*, that hoist our heads onto propped-up iPads, it is hard to not also be reminded of this historical spectacle of death in life. [40] But it is in European symbolist art and modernist theatre that decapitated and floating heads were a recurring motif, appearing to speak to concerns around the destructive effects of war and its representational challenges. In Tristan Tzara's Dadaist play *The Gas Light* (1921), premiering in Paris just a few years after World War 1 ended, the cast is composed of a disassembled head -- an eye, a mouth, a nose, an ear, a neck and eyebrow make up the characters. Despite its comic mode, the drama's play of facial parts also amplified the anti-war ambitions of the Dadaist movement of the time.

These preoccupations also play out in the work of Irish dramatists, including Oscar Wilde, W.B. Yeats, and later Samuel Beckett. Salome, who orders John the Baptist's head, was a popular reference point for European modernists interested in the symbolic power of the detached head for negotiating ideas of otherness. Wilde's *Salomé*, initially written in French, was first performed in Paris in 1896, while he was in prison. Eventually the play was translated and adapted for opera and film, and via Aubrey Beardsley's iconic accompanying illustrations, the plot's Medusan qualities were strikingly foregrounded and culturally embedded. [42]As if unable to accept that the head she demanded is dead -- or rather, in perceiving in it an over-determined power as a thing, or even a theatrical prop -- in Wilde's play Salomé grabs it with her hands, addresses it directly and kisses its mouth.

Yeats, who we have already read being cited in *To Be a Machine*, was fascinated by Wilde's *Salomé*. He attended productions in London in 1905 and 1906, and the headless

imagery appears to have engrossed him and inspired revisions of his own work.[43] Decapitated and disembodied heads recur throughout Yeats's own dramatic *oeuvre*, including *The Golden Helmet* (1908) and *The Death of Cuchulain* (1939), in which allegories of national heroism and sacrifice play out as the exchange of severed heads, and their dematerialization into intelligence or soul-signifying designs -- a helmet in the former play and abstracted black parallelograms in the latter. In the Noh inspired dance plays *The King of the Great Clock Tower* (1934) and its reworked version *A Full Moon in March* (1935), which is more explicitly informed by *Salomé*, a queen dances with and sings to the head she orders, while her attendants ventriloquize song on its behalf. While, according to Paige Reynolds, these heads philosophically embody "the dynamic relationship between subject and object, being and non-being," [44] they also test theatre's capacity to stage the death of its own actors, of itself, through the dematerialization of heads via theatrical design; that is, by substituting heads for things, and imbuing material artifice with its own kind of intelligence.

In Beckett's theatre, entrapped bodies and embodiment as entrapment are persistent concerns. In some plays, little more than heads and torsos are on display, from the bin-bound figures in *Endgame* (1957), to Winnie trapped in a mound of earth in *Happy Days* (1961), to the head-stuffed urns in *Play* (1963). In *Not I* (1972, an intertext for Dead Centre's earlier production, *Lippy* [2013]), a head has been reduced to a mere mouth (likely influenced by Tzara), and in *Breath* (1969) the material theatre has all but evaporated. Beckett was influenced by both Irish and continental European traditions, and as many scholars have argued, his dematerialized post-World War II theatre in particular responded to the traumas of mass death and threatened ecocatastrophe; or as Anna McMullan distils it, "[t]he experience of loss, vulnerability and dispossession.' [45]

These disembodied heads of theatre history explore the fragmentation of the human body as means to confront the violence of large scale cultural trauma and loss, pushing theatrical form towards its own dematerialization via simultaneous innovations in stage design, radio and film. But if these historical forms move theatre towards its own virtuality, in the case of the mediatized performances and digital artworks also discussed in this article, which form part of contemporary efforts to process global tragedy, we can also detect these forms reach for their real material doubles rendered obsolete by their engineering. This two-way exchange reminds us how humans respond to the threat of mortality by uploading data in digital form, which find their most extreme rationalization in transhumanist discourse; but also of the digital's (as-yet) incapacity to adequately overcome the loss of the real, by nostalgically recalling it, glitching, or just being quite literally out of touch. We humans, theatre makers and audiences may well need to live, work and grieve with/in machines, to the extent that our differences blur in our interdependency. But we may also take some comfort from the knowledge that to be a machine is always to be a machine in search of a body.

A (temporary) closure

In the UK, concerns for the death of theatre and live performance during the pandemic played out in a debate staged between performance and cybernetics when the Conservative government supported a campaign advising artists to retrain. The Cyber First initiative, founded in 2019 though recirculated in October 2020, included a stock photograph of a young ballerina, tying her shoes with the text "Fatima's next job could be in cyber (she just doesn't know it yet)." The campaign appeared to pirouette cruelly on the grave of the not-yet-dead performing arts industry, made worse by the discovery the "Fatima" was actually Desire'e Kelley, an Atlanta-based young Black dancer with no plans to retrain, whose image was used in the campaign against her knowledge. But it also stoked much older anxieties

concerning the arts' usefulness in a more technologically enhanced and dependent world, belying the much more dynamic and symbiotic historical interplay between performance-based and digital forms, in which each order strains for and sustains the other.

Mediatized theatre during the pandemic has not announced the death of theatre, but in many instances tried to keep it alive, while still grieving for the ways it has been hurt, with the mourning of live arts, shared physical experience, and human life intertwined. In our personal lives too, under isolated or quarantined conditions, we processed loss across the screens of computers, iPads and phones, captivated and repelled by the reduction of life to the clumsy orbit of the avatars of disembodied heads. These forms have histories in both digital culture and theatrical performance, in which the dismembered and dematerializing head forms part of a long inquiry into the locus of subjectivity (some might say consciousness, intelligence, or soul), and the possibility that representational technologies might rescue us from social separation and bodily degeneration. One of the effects of the pandemic has been the sense of being returned fully to our bodies as sites of vulnerability and danger, while at the same time forcing our increased dependence on the often disorienting experience of accelerated digital embodiment and embeddedness. This swing forms part of a historical pattern, in which the digital conspires to rescue the real from certain death, even as it is also haunted by the loss of the bodies that produce and rely upon it.

At least since Sophocles' Antigone rallied against the state to have the body of her brother Polyneices respectfully buried and mourned, one of theatre's greatest fixations has been what to do with the bodies of the dead, and how to sustain the living. Thinking through and around *To Be a Machine*, which reflected on these issues through the prism of transhumanist thought and technology, we are ultimately reminded of theatre's critical value as a ritual of public mourning and commemoration -- a forum where we can be together, while unavoidably dying together, to process the loss of those who cannot be with us. In

grieving for theatre and live performance, for the absent audience, for our shattered selves scattered across screens, we grieve too for the dying and the dead; for the humans we once were, and the communities we wished we could be.

Three days after attending *To Be a Machine*, I spot a tweet on social media from Dead Centre mid-show: “Project Arts Centre have lost internet. We are working hard to get it back up and running. The future is harder than it looks.” Like a repurposing of its own chatbot test, perhaps this mediatized production could only prove its theatrical liveness in its dying. If, during the pandemic, we humans could only confront our losses by confirming our screen dependence, perhaps it will only be in instances of digital death, too, that we will rediscover what being alive together ever felt like to begin (or end) with.

Figure 1: Jack Gleeson in front of an audience of “uploaded” spectators. Credit: Ste Murray.

Figure 2: Jack Gleeson speaking to the camera. Credit: Ste Murray.

Figure 3: A photograph of iPads used for end of life communication in a hospital in the USA which circulated on twitter @roto_tudor.

Figure 4: A screengrab of Bina48 and Stephanie Dinkins in conversation. Credit: Stephanie Dinkins.

Bibliography

- American Psychiatric Association, *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-5* (Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, 2020).
- Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).
- Herbert Blau, *Reality Principles: From The Absurd To The Virtual* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

- Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006).
- Matthew Causey, Emma Meehan and Néill O'Dwyer, eds. *The Performing Subject in the Space of Technology: Through the Virtual, Toward the Real* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- Lauren Collins, "Reinventing Grief in an Era of Enforced Isolation," *The New Yorker*, May 4 2020, available at https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/11/reinventing-grief-in-an-era-of-enforced-isolation.
- Takenobu Chikaraishi, Yuichiro Yoshikawa, Kohei Ogawa, Oriza Hirata, Hiroshi Ishiguro,"Creation and Staging of Android Theatre "Sayonara" towards Developing Highly Human-Like Robots. *Future Internet* 9, No. 4 (2017): 1-17, available at https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/e43d/57dc1dfcbd6b956e32184c9085fb34634810.pdf
- Noreen Doody, *The Influence of Oscar Wilde and W.B. Yeats: "An Echo of Someone Else's Music"* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
- Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII (1920-1922)*: Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works (London: Vintage, 2001), 273-274.
- Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916)*: On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (London: Vintage, 2001), 237-258.

- Sheeleen M. Greene, “Bina48: Gender, Race and Queer Artificial Life,” *ADA: A Journal of Gender, New Media and Technology* 5, No. 9 (2016), available at https://adanewmedia.org/2016/05/issue9-greene/.
- Amy Harmon, “Making Friends with a Robot Named Bina48,” *New York Times*, July 4 2010, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/05/science/05robotside.html.
- Anna McMullan, *Beckett's Intermedial Ecosystems: Closed Space Environments across the Stage, Prose and Media Works* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).
- Mark O’Connell, *To Be a Machine: Adventures Among Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers, and the Futurists Solving the Modest Problem of Death* (London: Granta, 2017).
- Ofcom, “Online Nation”, available at https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/internet-and-on-demand-research/online-nation .
- Oxford Commons, “How Robots Change the Word: What Automaton Really Means for Jobs and Productivity” (Report, June 2019).
- Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, *Cyborg Theatre: Corporeal/Technological Intersections in Multimedia Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p.4.
- Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Abington: Routledge, 1993).
- Ramona Pringle, “Love, Philosophy, and Processors: Interview with a Robot,” *Technology and Society*, June 29 2017, available at https://technologyandsociety.org/love-philosophy-and-processors-interview-with-a-robot/.
- Paige Reynolds, ““A Theatre of the Head”: Material Culture, Severed Heads, and the Late Drama of W.B. Yeats,” *Modern Drama* 58, No. 4 (Winter 2015): 437-460.
- Benjamin Ross, *The Philosophy of Transhumanism: A Critical Analysis* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020).

- Chris Salter, *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010).
- Yoko Sato, "Yeats's "A Full Moon in March": a unifying image with the choric voices", *Journal of Irish Studies* 31 (October 2016): 19-30.
- Alan M. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* LIX, No. 236 (October 1950):433–460.
- Fintan Walsh, ed. *Theatres of Contagion: Transmitting Early Modern to Contemporary Performance* (London: Methuen Drama, 2019).

---

[1] While the production premiered as part of Dublin Theatre Festival, it has so far also been programmed in Belgium (though livestreamed from Belfast, due to COVID-19 restrictions), and a German language version was presented in Austria.
[2] Various data sets from around the world concur that 2020 experienced a huge spike in internet usage, with the use of video calling applications doubling. See, for example, the UK's Ofcom report "Online Nation", available at https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/internet-and-on-demand-research/online-nation
[3] Data published on 16 March 2021, a year after the World Health Organization called the outbreak a pandemic, suggests that 2,674,363 people around the world have so far died from COVID-19, available at https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/coronavirus-death-toll/.
[7] Benjamin Ross, *The Philosophy of Transhumanism: A Critical Analysis* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2020), 5.
[8] Mark O'Connell, *To Be a Machine: Adventures Among Cyborgs, Utopians, Hackers, and the Futurists Solving the Modest Problem of Death* (London: Granta, 2017), 6.
[9] Alcor website, available at https://www.alcor.org.
[10] Gleeson delivers this speech as if his own words, which is confirmed by the unpublished manuscript. However, it is a direct quote from O'Connell's *To Be a Machine,* 1.
[11] This same tale, in part inspired by O'Connell's book, was also the subject a queer musical retelling by Cabaret duo Bourgeois & Maurice in the UK during spring of 2020, just before the first national lockdown.
[12] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (Abington: Routledge, 1993), 146-166.
[13] Herbert Blau, *Reality Principles: From The Absurd To The Virtual* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 114.
[14] Ibid., 9.
[15] Matthew Causey, Emma Meehan and Néill O'Dwyer, eds., "General Introduction: In the After-Event of the Virtual," in *The Performing Subject in the Space of Technology: Through the Virtual, Toward the Real* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)*,* 1-16; quote on 1.
[16] Chris Salter, *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), xv-xvi.

[17] See Matthew Causey, *Theatre and Performance in Digital Culture: From Simulation to Embeddedness* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006).
[18] Jennifer Parker-Starbuck, *Cyborg Theatre: Corporeal/Technological Intersections in Multimedia Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 4.
[19] Thomas Trenkler," Geglücktes Experiment im Burg-Kasino: Das transdramatische Theater," Kurier, 1 January 2021, available at https://kurier.at/kultur/gegluecktes-experiment-im-burg-kasino-das-transdramatische-theater/401144535.
[20] Alan M. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* LIX, No. 236 (October 1950):433–460; quote on 433.
[21] The word contagion incorporates the Latin *con* (with, together) and *tangere* (to touch). For a discussion of contagion and its relationship to theatre, see Fintan Walsh, ed. *Theatres of Contagion: Transmitting Early Modern to Contemporary Performance* (London: Methuen Drama, 2020); and for the relationship between contagion and touch in particular, see 5-7.
[22] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Tragedy and Dramatic Theatre,* trans. Erik Butler (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 128.
[24] Lauren Collins, "Reinventing Grief in an Era of Enforced Isolation," *The New Yorker*, May 4 2020, available at https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/11/reinventing-grief-in-an-era-of-enforced-isolation.
[25] Eliza was named after George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (1913), in which Eliza is schooled on how to speak in order to navigate a deeply classist English society.
[26] The android's responses were scripted and its actions generated by tele-operation technology directed by Hirata. The project's published self-evaluation focused on the audience's capacity to respond positively to the android, finding this to be cultural variable, and higher among Japanese audiences. For more on the project's rationale and evaluation, see Takenobu Chikaraishi, Yuichiro Yoshikawa, Kohei Ogawa, Oriza Hirata, Hiroshi Ishiguro, "Creation and Staging of Android Theatre "Sayonara" towards Developing Highly Human-Like Robots. Future Internet 9, No. 4 (2017): 1-17, quote on p. 15, available at https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/e43d/57dc1dfcbd6b956e32184c9085fb34634810.pdf
[27] J. Kelly Nestruck, "Sayonara, I, Worker: These plays are a little too robotic," *The Globe and Mail,* 17 February 2013, available at https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/theatre-and-performance/theatre-reviews/sayonara-i-worker-these-plays-are-a-little-too-robotic/article9123716/.
[30] Terasem Movement Foundation website, available at https://terasemmovementfoundation.com/mission.
[31] Dead Centre's co-director Bush Moukarzel informed me via email that the company ultimately deletes all the videos submitted by audiences.
[32] Sophia became a citizen of Saudi Arabia in 2017, the first robot to receive citizenship from any country.
[33] See, for example, Amy Harmon, "Making Friends with a Robot Named Bina48," *New York Times,* July 4 2010, available at https://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/05/science/05robotside.html and Ramona Pringle, "Love, Philosophy, and Processors: Interview with a Robot," *Technology and Society*, June 17 2017, available at https://technologyandsociety.org/love-philosophy-and-processors-interview-with-a-robot/.
[34] See scenes from *Conversations with Bina48* on the artist's website, available at https://www.stephaniedinkins.com/conversations-with-bina48.html.
[35] The phrase "New Jim Code" is a riff on Jim Crow laws, and their digital legacies, which were state and local laws in the nineteenth and twentieth century that enforced racial

regulation in Southern USA. See Ruha Benjamin, Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).
[36] "Bina48 Robot talks to Siri," directed by Robert Jason, 2015, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfcyq7uGbZg.
[37] See "depersonalization" in *Desk Reference to the Diagnostic Criteria from DSM-5* Arlington: American Psychiatric Association, 2020), 119.
[38] Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* Volume XVIII (1920-1922): Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works (London: Vintage, 2001), 273-274; quote 273.
[39] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia (1917) [1915]" *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works (London: Vintage, 2001), 237-258. Written around the same time, and appearing in the same edited volume, is "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death (1915)" in which Freud engages directly with the subject of war. See pp. 275-300.
[40] There is wide and varied evidence of this practice across Europe, although a likely influence on the appearance of decapitated heads in theatre of the early modern period (e.g. Thomas Dekker's *Sir Thomas Wyatt*, and William Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*) was the fact that from the fourteenth to seventeen century, a Keeper of Heads displayed the parboiled heads of those killed on spikes at London Bridge. Indeed, *Hamlet* features the most famous theatrical skull of all, prompting the tradition of using real skulls in production to authenticate the play's mortal themes, and to forge material links with historical productions. The multiplicity of heads in early modern theatre, and their linkage to specific characters, has led some scholars to speculate that these objects were even fashioned in the likeness of actors for the purposes of distinguishment.
[42] Wilde's play also influenced the spread of the so-called "Salomania" dance craze across Europe and the USA at the turn of the twentieth century, characterized by the sexually expressive style of the female performers.
[43] For more on Yeats's interest in Wilde's *Salomé*, see Noreen Doody, *The Influence of Oscar Wilde and W.B. Yeats: "An Echo of Someone Else's Music"* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), especially 173-240 and 279-308. While Yeats's interest in the severed head was undoubtedly influenced by Wilde's *Salomé*, it also draws on a Celtic 'cult of the head' trope within Irish mythology, premised on the belief that the head is the seat of the soul and therefore a prized object. For more on this influence, see Yoko Sato, "Yeats's "A Full Moon in March": a unifying image with the choric voices", *Journal of Irish Studies* 31 (October 2016): 19-30
[44] Paige Reynolds, ""A Theatre of the Head": Material Culture, Severed Heads, and the Late Drama of W.B. Yeats," *Modern Drama* 58, No. 4 (Winter 2015): 437-460; quote on 438.
[45] Anna McMullan, *Beckett's Intermedial Ecosystems: Closed Space Environments across the Stage, Prose and Media Works* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p.1.

Thanks are due to peer reviewers and Louise Owen for their helpful feedback on the article.