The performer is absent: spaces of absence in the contemporary performing arts

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I would like to start this talk with a personal experience I had a few months ago while I was traveling in Chilean Patagonia. For two weeks I stayed with friends on a sailing boot, in what for me was the most remote, nonhuman area I had ever been. For days we did not see other people, or their traces. And even though I know about Timothy Morton's hyperobjects (2013) and about the Anthropocene, I felt as if I was in an untouched part of the world. And that's when I experienced something that might seem obvious to you today, but which then, struck me: nature does not and will not miss humanity. There is no human absence there.

It is my conviction that we create our own environments in which we then later can be absent. The theatre is such a space, but also the fully automated factory hall or Amazon distribution centre. The last two cases, the factory and the distribution centre, 'create' absence through replacement of the human worker by a machine or robot. In the performances I will discuss today, the same has occurred: the performer is absent, perhaps even obsolete, and replaced by nonhuman actors or actants. At the same the human performer is somehow 'present' in his absence. I would like refer here to the quote by Giorgio Agamben who says that *The question 'where is the thing', is inseparable from the question 'where is the human?'* (1993, p. 59).

I propose absence here as a strategy of the contemporary performing arts to reflect upon the decentring and possible disappearance of the human. Adopting a posthumanist perspective, the disappearance or withdrawal of the human from the stage holds a critique

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on anthropocentrism and of the relation between man and technology. Artists like Kris Verdonck, Romeo Castellucci and Andros Zins-Browne have created performances with nonhuman performers, reflecting on the absence of their human antagonists. The human absence in these performances leads to a haunted space in which the human remains present in a spectral state of being. So absence and spectral presence here collide.

Theatre and performance are somehow inherently ephemeral and temporal, and so they seem the right kind of space to reflect upon humanity's own possible finitude. I would like to suggest different typologies of absence, or strategies *for* absence and the first is the holographic double.
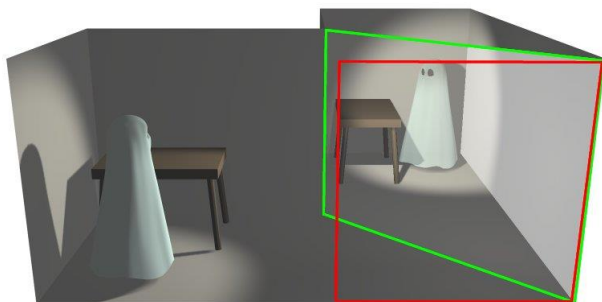
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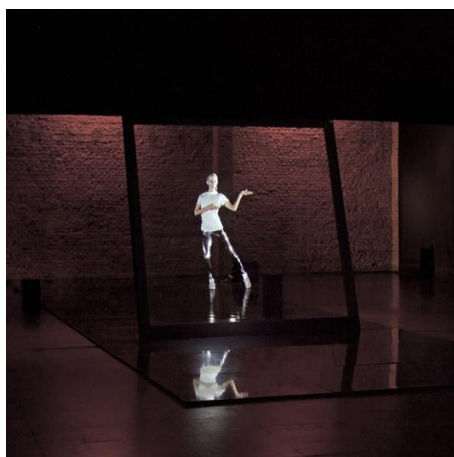
Lac of Signs - Andros Zins-Browne

Pepper's Ghost Technique 1

The absence or spectral presence of the performer and the haunted nature of the posthuman stage, find a very clear example in the use of the hologram. The Brussels-based choreographer and dancer, Andros Zins-Browne, created *The Lac of Signs* in 2013. This performance, of which the title alludes to the Lac de cygnes, the Swan Lake, shows a holographic projection of dancer Chryssa Parkinson performing a fragmented choreography. The technique used here, is an updated version of the Pepper's ghost, a nineteenth century technique to put

'ghosts' on stage, with Hamlet's father as probably most famous example. I say holographic *double* because up until today we still need an original. The holographic projections are always copies of something which exists or existed already. Giorgio Agamben wrote that *In order to be truly alive, images … need a subject to unite with them. This creates spectres chasing the human*, they are the spectres that haunt not only the original, in this Chryssa Parkinson, but also us, spectators (2013, p. 78).

This holographic ghost-technique is also becoming increasingly popular in music and politics, remember Michael Jackson and Tupac Shakur, but also Erdogan's and India's Narendra Modi's holographic projections over the past years. Whereas these last popular examples all strive for presence, Andros Zins-Browne seems to emphasize exactly the opposite. His Lac of signs, is literally a *lack* of semiotic signs, presenting his 'ghost' as what Mary Luckhurst has called a *paradigmatic deconstructive gesture: a trace of an absence* (2014, p. 1). Precisely because *The lac of signs* refers to such a famous ballet which represents the highest virtuosity, the holographic reproduction points at a lack. It has at once something museal, showing the past's virtuosity in a moving diorama and is also a technological take on the doppelganger-motive which is also present in the Swan Lake (and was according to Marvin Carlson the prototype of the ghost in German romanticism (Carlson, 2014, p. 34)). The Swan Lake's black and white swans are then the real and the virtual dancers, of which clearly only the virtual one remains. The use of an updated Pepper's ghost technique in this context holds a critique on technology and the production of ghosts today, stating that contemporary technologies create in-between creatures, blurring the boundaries between life and death and thus creating uncanny 'living dead'.

The uncanny, then becomes an essential feature of this type of 'absence-performances'. Once the distinction between the human and the non-human is blurred, we enter in what Masahiro Mori has called the Uncanny Valley (Mori, 2012 (1970)). A holographic projection such as the one in The Lac of Signs produces this uncanny eeriness and affinity, but because the technological construction is not hidden, the emphasis of this performance-installation lies not on rendering the projection present, but precisely on the absence of the real dancer's fleshly body. What is uncanny then, is the lack of consciousness or exhaustion of the images (Wolfe, 2010, p. 288), and as Timothy Morton pointed out in yesterday's keynote lecture, our knowledge of technology does not decrease its uncanny-ness. On the contrary: the more we know, the more confusing it all gets. She can dance for ever... According to Byung-Chul Han, absence in Eastern culture is closely related to not having a fixed home, which then brings us back to the uncanny, *das unheimliche, that which does not have a home*, in Western culture. (Han, 2007)

Luckhurst analyses the uncanny as modern predicament (2014, p. 1), and links it to the industrialisation that has occurred over the past three centuries. She also refers to David Safran and to how he argues that the *industrialized world has come more and more to resemble a spook-house*, in which new media technologies have brought with them ever more subtle ways of creating virtual realities, inspiring fear and wonder. (Luckhurst, 2014, p. 3) Indeed, the factory halls without human labour feel empty and uncanny and a theatre space without actual human performance but still referring to a very human tradition such as 19th century ballet, also has a very spook-house 'touch'.

The holographic projection, due to its high-tech nature and sci-fi look, presents then not only ghosts from the past, but also what Brecht has once called 'ghosts from the future', hinting at the possible absence of humanity, not only on stage, but also in the world.

Machinic replacement

Romeo Castellucci - Le Sacre du Printems

Another performance referring to the dance-tradition is Romeo Castellucci's *Sacre du printemps (rite of spring)*. I would like to present this performance as paradigm for a second typology of absence, namely machinic replacement. Castellucci's Sacre still uses the original music, although it is not played live, but has left out the physical bodies of dancers that have in numerous choreographies already incorporated Stravinsky's music. Performing instead is an ingenious set of machines, attached to the sealing of a stage that is sealed-off by means of a plastic transparent screen. These machines are not humanoids and don't perform a choreography in the classical sense. They release at very precise intervals and positions a white powder or dust, closely connected to the musical score. The whole surface of the stage is used, the machines move back and forth, left and right, accompanied by a meticulous light design. The dust showers that are thus created seem to recall movement and create a wholly autonomous performance.

The tradition of the iconic *Sacre du printemps* also here works as an important frame to create absence. The dust shower-choreography seems an inversion of Pina Bausch' *Sacre du*

printemps from 1975, in which brown earth lay on stage and created upward clouds in reaction with the dancers' movements. Instead of the dust moving upwards, here it comes down, in this way

Pina Bausch - Sacre du Printemps

creating temporary movements and an instant dissolving into dust of every kind of presence created.

One easily interprets Castellucci's *Sacre* as humanity's sacrifice to technology, with human ashes being gushed around in a posthuman context. However, Castellucci informs us through projection on the transparent screen that it are actually cow bones that are being used. In agriculture industry, these are being turned into a powder which fertilizes the soil, thus creating a circle of life and death. This does not imply any less a posthumanist perspective, it even adds an ecological layer onto this technological story and brings the two together.

Everything in the performance is performed by non-human entities: machines and light and dust. After the performance a strange moment occurs, in which the audience does not know whether it should applaud or not. This also occurred in Zins-Browne's *Lac of Signs*: although the absence of liveness was even stronger there, people still have the reflex or urge to close the performance with an applause. Castellucci's ritual has no clear-cut ending though. After the music and final dust showers, people in disinfection suits enter the stage and start

cleaning everything. This is the role that remains for the human: a functional operator of non-human entities, just like the operator in the Amazon warehouse.

Machinic replacement is not only an aesthetic choice, but has a strong relation to our current socio-political and economic situation. Recent studies have calculated that more than fifty percent of the existing jobs will be replaced by non-humans, such as robots, machines or software. The automated environment Castellucci created in a live arts context, referring to very 'human' art traditions such as the Sacre and dance tradition, evokes an absence of the human that goes beyond the walls of the theatre or the old German iron factory where I saw Castellucci's performance. Machinic replacement is a reality and fear that lives in the Western world, a fear that is closely connected to several posthumanist and transhumanist discourses.

Castellucci's *Sacre* provokes other questions as well. Why do we tend to make ourselves superfluous? Why do we create our own doubles that will eventually be able to substitute us in ways we cannot foresee now? What space remains for the human here? And what will this being human be? Walter Benjamin's angel of history seems all the more contemporary today: we are flying forward and can only register the debris we are leaving behind.

Posthuman landscape

To present a third typology of absence, I choose to work with a performance *with* a human on stage. *Untitled*, a performance by Belgian artist Kris Verdonck, focusses on the mascot as symptom of the disappearance of the human from both entertainment and work. The replacement by nonhuman entities can apart from the holographic double and the machine, also take the shape of a literal disappearance *in* the object, in this case: the mascot-suit. Mascots are the emblem of the dominance of the Spectacle, of the economy and

entertainment over the subject. The performer is absent even though he is physically somehow there, this is the wry message of *Untitled*. Allowing for no empathy or direct communication, the mascot-suit is indifferent to its human bearer: it could have been anyone taking his place. He hits his head and jumps to the ground; only a silent microphone in the suit, which amplifies the breathing and bumps, generates a connection between the audience and the person inside. The performance ends by emphasizing the replaceability of the human on stage also in different way. Large inflatable tubes and two robots take over the stage in a posthuman landscape and affirm the redundancy of the human performer. Entertainment and the arts have become industrialized as well and can be done by nonhuman performers, *Untitled*

Kris Verdonck / A Two Dogs Company- Untitled

seems to tell us. The mascot in *Untitled* is the synthesis of the hologram's dematerialized image of the human and the material performing nonhuman machines: it is the material image, reminding of Guy Debord's assertion that *The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image* (1995, p. 24). In this way, *Untitled* brings technology, economy and politics together in a critical posthumanist performance.

A key element in *Untitled* was the notion of the posthuman landscape and its specific nature of time and space. There is a bundle of essays by Alain Badiou, *On Beckett*, in which he reflects on the nature of space in Beckett's work (Badiou, 2003). He sees two typologies, one being a '*closed space, so that the set of features of the place of being may be enumerated*

and named with precision'. The second type is an '*open, geographical space, a space of transit*'. And Badiou adds to that: '**both in spaces of wandering and in the closed spaces, Beckett tends to suppress all descriptive ornamentation*.' (Badiou, 2003, pp. 5-6) The result is a grey black as space of being. This grey, which does not contrast darkness with light, is the posthuman space that is also created in *Untitled*. The mascot finds itself in a space that is at once closed and open, between the actual closed theatre space and the openness of the street which is evoked. Badiou wrote that Beckett made a *progressive fusion of closure and of open space, making it impossible to know whether this grey black is destined for movement or immobility* (Badiou, 2003, p. 6)*. In *Untitled* they have completely merged, and have become the nothing, the dim, the void: a space of absence. It's the deadlock of the posthuman humanity we have created ourselves.

Byung-Chul Han, wrote in a book on absence that it is exactly this fusion or indifference between the closed and the open that characterizes the Far-East's culture of absence (Han, 2007, p. 46). This is also the space of Noh-plays, where ghosts appear and masks are characters. Beckett's grey comes to mind when he describes the light in these spaces of absence. Han calls it *standing or still light* (2007, p. 47, my translation), which does not have an explicit direction and is just 'there'. Verdonck's stage in *Untitled* is also lit by invisible lights in such a way that the grey black is created: there is light, but it does not 'enlighten' or 'lit' anything.

Time in this space is at similar to the grey: at once 'now' and 'never', it is a suspended time in which time is exhausted. We could situate this time as a time *after*: after the human, after destruction, after replacement… This temporal situation of the hour of never, or of post-history, is essential to create the spectral presence in the performances discussed here. The

spaces of absence do not mean a return to the time *before* the human; they are a time in which the nature of human presence has changed profoundly. It might have disappeared, or become indeed: spectral. The result, when a disappeared human performer such as the mascot is placed in this environment, is profound feeling of being lost. The mascot does not know why he is there, what he is doing there and for how long it will last. Panic, despair and finally surrender, characterize the mascot's actions in this posthuman space, which all seem utterly useless. What remains to be done when all is over?

Formally, this posthuman environment causes the boundaries between black box and white cube, between representation and exhibition, to blur. Dramaturge Marianne Van Kerkhoven, who used to work with Kris Verdonck, coined the notion of 'theatrical installation' to name his work which constantly presents human in a museum-setting and objects in a theatrical space. This is also a way of thinking about the grey we know from Beckett. The in-between space where subject and object confound and where the uncanny has its home.

Conclusion

In my introduction I stated that theatre is an evanescent, temporal art form. The three performance that were discussed here, might challenge these characteristics. The *Lac of Signs* is literally a video on repeat, Castellucci's machines in the *Sacre* are programmed and don't get tired, and Verdonck's *Untitled* comments on the automation of entertainment. The theatre in these performances, *can be* detached from its temporality connected to human presence. This is I believe an important and almost paradoxical consequence of bringing posthumanism to the performing arts. It threatens to reproduce or create that which it is actually criticizing.

What would it mean if Benjamin's mechanical reproducibility of the work of art might also start to count in theatre and dance, the 'live arts'? Would it be the final step in commodification of the arts, connecting the reproducibility to the neoliberalisation of the performing arts? I believe that the performances of Castellucci, Verdonck and Zins-Browne have exactly the opposite scope. Gerald Siegmund suggests that absence is a refusal of the society of spectacle, in which the body and its movements, so to say, the performer's presence, is reduced to a product (Siegmund, 2003, p. 22). As Benjamin said, in the era of technical reproducibility, the authentic and auratic to no longer stand as principle base for the arts: it is politics (2007 (1968), p. 224). Absence as a performative strategy for political critique not only directs itself towards the self-destruction of humanity, the omnipresence of technology and spectacle, but also towards anthropocentrism. Absence or spectral presence, combines a reflection on a current condition and a claim for post-anthropocentrism, for acknowledging these nonhuman entities' place in the world and taking them up in 'politics'. The threat of extinction is an opportunity to reposition ourselves, if not a choice, than maybe an ethical and ecological duty. More than fear and awe, these performances call for some humility, for we are not *incontournable*. As Heiner Müller once said in an interview with Alexander Kluge that "*What occupies the space, can change all the time. It does not have to be a human being, it can also be a computer or a herbal substance, whatever....*"

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