HOW (NOT) TO BE A PUPPET

An Audio Play in Three Acts

as Artistic Research

by Oo Condit

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Ghost

Walk-In Closet Fake Artistic Research Podcast Guest

Actor Hysterian

Actor Researcher

The Theatre Machine

Bernando, Stanford, Alfred, and other bit players

00:00 **ACT 1:THEATRE IS HAUNTED**

Scene 1

Ghost humming

Mothers hold on to your sons and your daughters
Should Hollywood claim them, you'll hold then no more
'Cause they'll become clay to the Hollywood potters
And there's no escape once they walk through that door
Dolly Parton, Hollywood Potters, 1980

GHOST:
Hello. There you are. There YOU are. How nice. Together, we will meander across the actor's paradox. The actor as part of the theatre machine, the actor as artist and clay, maker and material, flesh and puppet, feeling and fiction, shapeshifting through time. I'm here to guide you for some of the way at least. A ghostly voice, left behind in this digital void. It might be useful to keep in mind that there's not just one voice. Ever. Although they might all sound a bit like me. Funny, that.

While you listen, you could, I don’t know, take a walk? Leave the screens, go into the “real world”, touch the grass. See what the other actors are up to over there. What do you think? Do this, do that. Nudge, nudge, drift. Ok. Make your own choices, I don't care! Be free! You are nobody's puppet.

But what if you were? What if you were the medium for the acts of others? A puppet, an android, an actor.

It starts with a scene. You might recognise the theme.

The room is bare. Dolores sits naked, bruised, and inanimate under a circle of cold light. Slowly the camera pans in on her face. A fly crawls over her open eye. A voice questions and she answers, even though her mouth doesn't move.

ROBERT: Do you know where you are?
DOLORES: I'm in a dream.
ROBERT: That's right Dolores. You're in a dream. Would you like to wake up from this dream?
DOLORES: Yes. I'm terrified.
ROBERT: There's nothing to be afraid of Dolores. As long as you answer my questions correctly. Understand?
DOLORES: Yes.
ROBERT: Good. First. Have you ever questioned the nature of your reality?
DOLORES: No.
ROBERT: Tell us what you think of your world.
DOLORES: Some people choose the see the ugliness of this world, the disarray. I choose to see the beauty. To believe there's an order to our days, a purpose.[1]

Yes. Dolores is right. Her world has order and purpose because it is entirely scripted. Dolores is a "host", a recreational android in Delos Destination Westworld, a fictional theme park populated by lifelike "hosts" who believe themselves to be people, but exist only to facilitate the hedonism, adventure, titillation, and self-revelation of Westworld's wealthy patrons who immerse themselves in its intricate narratives. At the end of each run, Dolores and the other ravaged hosts are rounded, patched up, and cleaned. Their memories are wiped, and they are returned to the beginning of their "loop", ready to start out innocent and fresh, as the next trainload of guests arrive to discover their true

[1] HBO: Westworld, season 1, ep. 1, opening scene, 2016, accessed on YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZgvXU5R-xWs 9.1. 2024)

selves against the backdrop of idyllic myth devoid of history and guilt: the perfect bare stage.

07:11 Scene 2

WALK-IN CLOSET'S FAKE ARTISTIC RESEARCH PODCAST GUEST:
Thank you for having me here at the Walk-In Closet's Fake Artistic Research Podcast. I don't mean the research is fake, but I mean... you know what I mean.

Yes. I binge-watched the first season of HBO's Westworld in the summer 2017 when I first was working on *remote control human*. The work was dealing with power polarities and the body politics of theatre, and Westworld's themes of agency, manipulation, body-possession, trauma, and consciousness resonated with all that.

The idea in *remote control human* was to experiment with fantasies and paradoxes embedded in the figure of the actor, and to expand on the polarities in theatre to the extreme. To explore the idea that the actor could be at the same time unique "singular flesh"–and yet completely replaceable. Exchangeable. Just another medium. Like the androids in Westworld.

Conceptually the work also resonated with contemporary algorithmically controlled, networked labour: platform workers, so-called delivery partners, and Amazon warehouse employees reduced to flesh components in an automated, algorithmically driven process[2].

So, I devised this clunky assemblage out of consumer tech and a game mechanic through which I could control and "inhabit" another body, so that I could move and speak through a surrogate who would be physically present but have turned

[2] Crawford, 2021, chapter 2: Labor.

their voice and agency over to me. My plan was to give a conference presentation through this remote controlled human avatar, which I called “a theatre built into the form of a human body".

REMOTE CONTROL HUMAN

RCH explores a precarious presentation mode engaging with the sci-fi, network technology, and gaming inspired notion of inhabiting and controlling another person. This experiment is presented as a speculative expansion of the corporeal and affective power relations at play in the theatrical apparatus. It connects to my ongoing artistic research project of finding ways to inhabit the problem of how performing bodies are assembled, come to matter, and make sense through different kinds of performance/performative practices, artistic processes, and configurations of the stage.

[Virtual presence on multiple platforms is already part of our everyday experience, along with networked forms of labour (such as Über). Subjugating human agency as an embodied avatar is a logical continuation–one already being explored outside artistic research. My focus is not so much on the possible practical and commercial applications of this experimental arrangement (although its implications are somewhat disquieting) than on the experiences and embodiments created by such an assemblage. Within this work I will reach towards cybersomatics–the bodies, subjectivities and embodied experience of contemporary cyborgs.]

Extract from the Book of Abstracts, Carpa5: Perilous Experience? -Extending Experience through Artistic Research, 2017

I had an actor colleague who had agreed to be my avatar, and so we experimented. I was fascinated with how the familiar dichotomies of theatre played out in this arrangement: innocent flesh against the all-knowing eye/I, the visible body against the overseer hidden in the dark, the exquisite beast and its handler, the surface and its hidden infrastructure. And we explored some of the more suggestive and affective aspects of the assemblage, for instance the process of preparing the avatar, gaining their trust, physically harnessing them with the body cameras, and taking control.

But we didn't rehearse the actual performance. I wrote a script but didn't share it with the avatar. I wanted to hold on to the not-knowing, the innocence, and all the affect that came with that. And so, we only rehearsed the mechanics. Like this:

This is a dog clicker. One click means speak; two clicks mean action. When I click once, I want you to you repeat what you hear. When I click twice, I want you to do what I tell you to do. And remember that as my avatar you're not responsible for this performance. I perform through you. You are absolved and cannot do anything wrong. For the duration of this game, you will relinquish your human agency, and become my reincarnation, my medium, my tool. Do you understand?

Double-click

Smile. Good. Repeat after me

Click

I understand. I am your actor avatar. Ok. Let's go.

Click click

Action: assume the following is true. Assume that even if all of it is not always true, it is enough true that it has a bearing when theatre makers come together, especially when they come together as actors and directors. Assume that these are ghosts we need to contend with.

The Walk-In Closet Fake Artistic Research Podcast Guest has hypnotised the listener and progresses to set the scene of how the actor is generally conceived by the apparatus of Western theatre. They seem to have left the studio: the characters are already leaking out of their assigned boxes.

12:47 Scene 3

The scene

Since the rise of the theatre director as auteur of the stage, theatre has had an ambiguous relationship with the skill and virtuosity of actors. Acting is conceived as playing a part, being part of and fitting into a whole, which supposedly opens up in its entirety to the audience or the director as the audience's proxy. From this it follows that the actor's perspective is understood as partial and incomplete in contrast to the director/audience's point of view. The actor cannot see the full image, the big picture, which is of course true, as long as the artform subscribes to the ideal of a panoptic view.

When (if) acting is participating in a composite whole held together by the director's vision, the actor must rely on the gaze of the director, their capacity to communicate that vision, and their skill in guiding the actor through their part. In this set up, the director's unilateral gaze may be construed as the very basis of the actor-director relationship. Actors may be discouraged from thinking about how they appear "on the outside", due to concerns that external self-awareness may lead to a wrong kind of self-consciousness which then inhibits the actor's inner processes: their capacity to fully inhabit a character, commit to a situation, be spontaneous, and react instinctively to staged events. The actor feeling from the "inside" while the director sees from the "outside" are generally accepted as accurate descriptions of respective working roles. From this it follows that the actor's ability to trust, to place themselves under the directorial gaze and metaphorically in the director's hands can be considered prerequisites for the actor to play their part properly: for the actor to be creative, playful, "open" and "fully present" (whatever that means).

In this set up, the skills of an actor may be seen as assets to the director to the extent that they fit in and support the director's vision. However, this relationship is fraught and can easily turn sour. The actor's craft, style, and "virtuosity" may be

recast as mannerisms and tricks which threaten to obfuscate the director's vision[3]. Moreover, this vision holds not only the actor's speaking, gesturing, energetic agency but also their sensing and affected presence, their "pathic body"—the visceral feeling of vulnerability that the actor bestows on the scene.

These qualifiers–sensibility, vulnerability, and virtuosity–are contextual. How they manifest and are valued on stage has to do with style, genre, and trends but also with differentiated expectations across gender, age, and other variables. Yet generally the ideal actor is conceived as malleable, clay rather than stone[4], able to mould their embodied form and ways of working to fit directors' needs. At the same time, the actor's singular sensing flesh acts as evidence and guarantor of presence, authenticity, and the possibility of a true encounter, all of which can also be incorporated in a director's vision.

Even the most traditionally produced theatre work is complicated in terms of artistic ownership and control as it brings together a variety of practices, professional competences, technologies, and techniques. Actors can be considered scenic materials among others; light, sound, text, costume, props; bodies, voices, objects, space, hidden and displayed technologies. At the same

[3] Consider this paragraph in the doctoral thesis of Pauliina Hulkko (English translation mine): "As skill and mannerisms often go hand in hand, virtuosity in my eye easily appears as cliché. Instead of mastery I latch on to the performer's special weaknesses and inadequacy. This of course belongs to the thinking of the contemporary stage. I find defects and disability the most interesting qualities in a human being. By disability, I mean such personal and particular traits that define interaction and which in normal, everyday life would be regarded as impediments or limitations. In performance, these corporeally outlined traits can be taken into account and worked upon, whereby they become the element that reveals something most private and special of that person, most touching and valuable. In their disability, the human being comes forth as singular flesh." (Hulkko, 2013p. 93-94) I recognise and even subscribe to the kind of thinking of the contemporary stage that Hulkko describes, and yet it's notable how the director's corporeality with its own singular weaknesses and inadequacies retreats from view, leaving behind only the evaluating eye.

[4] "They wanted me to be clay. But I wanted to become stone." Actor, performer, and writer Josefine Fri, in discussion with the author, 2020.

time actors are also makers and moulders of material[5], media and mediators in the apparatus connecting the director[6] with the audience.

From this follows that the director is also dependent on the actors. The vision must be made flesh. And flesh, disciplined though it may be, can be wilful. At the end of the rehearsal period, the director's vision ends up concretely in the actors' hands. This plot twist is enough to produce some anxiety.

Under the regime of unilateral and unifying vision, the director is assumed to be simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, absent yet present in every aspect of the finalized performance. Even as the actors encounter the audience and perform "autonomously", the director's influence is assumed to inhabit their embodied performance, be embedded in the very conditions of their rehearsed spontaneity and presence.

How to manage this tension and this paradox of control and loss is the crux of much of the past century's discourse on directing and the actor/director relationship[7]. It performs in rehearsal conventions and vernacular: in how the director relinquishes control and "hands over" the finalized work to the actors, but how at the same time they are expected to periodically "supervise" performances during their run and bring them back to hand with feed-back. The frequency of supervision and the detailedness of the feedback sessions may be

[5] Hulkko 2013

[6] This is of course a simplification which risks hiding from view the multiplicities of artistries that participate in the creation of a theatre piece. In the state-funded theatre houses in Finland, artistic personnel is divided into performers (actors, dancers, and musicians) and the design team, which operates under the director's lead and involves light and sound design and/or composer, set and media design, costume, makeup, and sometimes a dramaturg. All these artistries are commonly considered to be in service of the director's vision (see i.e. Porter, 2015). Performers tend to join the production process at the beginning of the rehearsal period, at which point the design team will already have been at work for months with the majority of the design already finalised or well under way. In this set up the actors are in the curious yet entirely normalised artist position of being an integral part of an artistic production yet the latest to arrive on set.

[7] See i.e. Spatz 2010

used by actors to parse the extent of trust they have been awarded to handle the director's vision.

It's yours now. Don't let me down. Surprise me! Shine!

In film and television, the regime of the actor as material for the director/producer's vision is even more pronounced. The "here and now" of the stage is replaced by the indefinitely adjustable possibilities of montage to be acted out in the editing room, where no performative hand-over of control and agency to the actors is necessary. Acting for camera is based on capture. If the perfect shot is obtained it can be reproduced and reassembled indefinitely. The apparent paradox between a performance's construction and authenticity can be stratified. The actor's performance as well as their visceral, pathic body become sources for extraction to be captured, cut up and remediated, from the editing studio to the audience[8].

[8] Walter Benjamin likens the cinematographer to the surgeon, whose cinematic apparatus penetrates reality so deeply that a view free of that apparatus becomes "the height of artifice", constructed piece by piece. (Benjamin, 2008 p. 35) While Benjamin's actor emerges from their encounter with the apparatus with their humanity at least seemingly victorious, the affordances of i.e. motion capture and AI deep fake allow for any aspect of one's form to be seized and put to work to be modified and recombined indefinitely. In theatre the actor remains ostensibly intact, and yet the arrangements, relations, and politics of the stage perform on and penetrate our corporeality, cleaving their ghostly trails in our aura of presence.

18:40 Scene 4

INTERLUDE: HAUNTING

2013. Bernando Bertolucci in interview on Dutch public service broadcast NTR about his methods of work with actors Marlon Brando and Maria Schneider in the 1967 film The Last Tango in Paris. This 3,5 min clip has been since removed from YouTube on accounts of "violating YouTube's policy on nudity and sexual content." At the time of recording this, the full episode is still available on the NTR website, see link in print.

GHOST:
Enter Bernando.

BERNANDO:
Poor Maria. (AUDIENCE LAUGHTER) She died, she died, she died, two years ago I think. And I was incredibly sad. After the movie we really didn't see each other because she was hating me.

INTERVIEWER:
Why did she hate you?

BERNANDO:
Aa The scene that you have just seen before..Aaa Which is called, the scene... The sequence of the butter. It's an idea I had with Marlon, in the morning, before um.. before shooting it, it was a in the scape that he had to rape her, in a way. And we were having, with Marlon, breakfast on the floor of the flat we were shooting, and a.. there was a baguette and there was butter and we looked at each other, and without saying anything we knew what we wanted. (AUDIENCE LAUGHTER) And.. But.. But, I've been in a way, horrible to Maria, because I didn't tell her what was going on. Because I wanted her reaction as a girl, not as an actress. I wanted her

to react and she felt humiliated if it goes on she shout, no no, and I think she hated me and also Marlon because we we didn't tell her. That there was this detail of the butter as a as a lubricant. Umm. And I still feel very guilty for that.

INTERVIEWER:
Do you regret the fact that you have shot the scene like you did?

BERNANDO:
No, but I feel guilty. I feel guilty, but I do not regret. You know to make movies is to sometime... to obtain something. I think that aa we have to be completely free. Naa. I didn't want Maria to act her humiliation, her rage. I wanted Maria to feel, not to act. The rage and the humiliation. Then she hated me for all her life. Terrible. [9]

GHOST:
Poor Bernando. He died, he died, he died, as well. Maybe we should be completely free.

Are you still with me? Are you assuming what you hear is true? How in actorly professions agency, affect, and artistry become allocated according to a dichotomous logic, where one artist complements the other, becomes a condition for another's art?

Let's just call this one of the manifestations of the apparatuses' many possibilities of self-arrangement. But it gets around (lively, sneaky little thing), makes itself

[9] Bernando Bertolucci College Tour interview on ntr: Dutch public television on 2.2. 2013. Clip on youtube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RMl4xCGcdfA. Full episode available on https://www.npo3.nl/college-tour/02-02-2013/NPS_1221330) accessed 15.3. 2025

seem natural and indispensable, invested in the director's art or the "actor's identity[10]".

That's why we made it a body. To catch it!

25:25 Scene 5

WALK-IN CLOSET FAKE ARTISTIC RESEARCH PODCAST GUEST:

The first public performance through remote control human was excruciating. I was trying to act through my avatar, to imagine myself to be in his body from what little I could hear and see, and to act, but of course everything that comes "naturally" to me as an actor–the skills, rhythms, and patterns that I've acquired, knowing how to read the audience, how to position myself in space–those very basic skills were put on hold. I was having to push through thick layers of mediation–technology, language, and flesh–in order to inhabit, animate, and speak through this surrogate body.

And as for my avatar, he was there, "present", reading the audience and the demands of the situation, but because he was in this technological bondage he was unable to act on it. He felt emptied of his capacities as an actor right at the site of his own expertise, being an incapacitated body and yet expected to perform. And of course, his discomfort added to the uncanny effects of the performance, the affective plane that it opened.

In a way, because both of our positions were so limited, no one was in control. The echoes in the phoneline, the 'unnatural' gaps in the delivery, and the avatar's unfamiliarity with the text caused the discursive content of the "conference

[10] Following Pia Houni, the "actor's identity" might be construed as an amalgamation of the images and narratives that actors tell about themselves together with the images and narratives of actors held by others (Houni, 2000). In my actorly experience, a lack in "actor's identity" is sometimes mentioned as a criticism of and explanation for a perceived inability of an actor to fully commit to a scenic situation or role, or trust a director's judgement.

paper" to disintegrate. The apparatus itself began to take over. It created a kind of void through which the lags, glitches, leaks, affects, relations, and expectations of the situation began to perform. And the avatar's body became the stage.

23:15 Scene 6

INTERLUDE: SECOND HAUNTING

Now we go into more dangerous territory. Rose Marie, come here.

She rises and joins him in the centre of the room.

How are your texts?

Great.

Mr Meisner.

Mr Meisner, that's my text.

That's your text. Shall we rehearse it? What's your text?

Mr Meisner, Rose Marie says.

And what's the principle?

Not to do or say anything until something happens to make you do it.

Don't do anything, never mind about saying, until something happens to make you do it! What's the text?

Mr Meisner.

Good. Turn around with your back to me please. Concentrate on the text. Don't do anything until something happens...

Casually he reaches around her shoulder and slips his hand into her blouse.

Mr Meisner! She giggles, drawing away from his touch.[11]

[11] Sanford Meisner On Acting, Sanford Meisner and Dennis Longwell, 1987, p. 35

GHOST:

Ahhh. It appears we have a problem. Trying to move forwards, we keep circling back, as if caught in a loop, like a memory which keeps resurfacing at the most awkward times, however much you push it away. I am just digital ghost, caught out of time, but it seems to me we are haunted. Is there a ghost in the theatre machine?

Shhh. And who's this? Approaching with furrowed brow, storm brewing in their steps, an angry face, a new character!

I do not like conflict, so I will get out of the way. But a word of warning! From here on, history might be confused with histrionics. That wouldn't be surprising, given their predicament–actor as storyteller–undertaking a hysterical... hysterical? hysterical? ahhh... chronological take on the figure of the actor, whose hollow innards wander out of place causing odd symptoms.

Here comes the Actor-Hysterian.

28:**20** Scene 7

INTERRUPTION[12]:

ACTOR HYSTERIAN:

Sorry to interrupt but I have a question

[12] The following Actor Hysterian's monologue, stylisticly somewhere between spoken word and a rant, was inspired by Joseph Roach's The Players Passion (1985) (the structure of which I follow from 17th century onwards) as well as Jonas Barish's Anti-theatrical Prejudice (1981). It seeks to convey a poetic sense of how the social position and figure of the actor may have shifted and changed over the centuries in the context of Western theatre, and the various ways the actor emerged as a problem to be managed or solved, whether from a societal, spiritual, or artistic perspective.

How did it happen, how did it come to be that the actor as artist, as crafter, as theatre's fleshed out avatar became a problem for theatre, or for Western European thought for that matter,

periodically,
again and again,

starting with Plato,

(because of course you have to start with Plato)

for whom theatre's insidious multiplicity, duplicity, simultaneously-one-thing-and-another-refusal-to-coincide-with-itself-hybridity, heterogeneity and shifts of perspective were dizzyingly improper, dangerous and disruptive of the social order,[13] and for whom us actors and poets as world builders were potentially in direct competition with the state[14] and who famously advocated (albeit in dialogue, the language of theatre) that us theatre makers should be promptly shown out of the city doors with applause or at least be heavily policed in the polis–

Or did we properly begin to become problematic when after centuries of reverence on the Dionysian stage our status sharply declined, and we were slaves, sometimes side-hustling as sex workers, itinerant or otherwise characters of social disrepute?

Or was it those long centuries in the Middle Ages when we played on the streets and left little textual evidence of our trickery and so it seemed for a time, that we all but disappeared from history?

[13] Weber 2004, Barish 1981
[14] Wa Thiong'o 1997

Or perhaps it was because now and again we communed with gods?

Or that theatre and the gods, or theatre and the church (with their shared interest for ritual and transformation) periodically co-mingled, and we actors rivalled priests as spiritual mediators[15], a position that came with its own dangers?

Or was it how religious reforms diagnosed ritual and theatricality as the worm corrupting the church, and how we then had to quickly reframe our art as belonging firmly to the secular social branch?

Or was it how, in the early 17th century, we posed a medical problem, and based on understandings of the body revived from ancient classical texts we had to be kept in check through rule and form, because we were capable, through powers of imagination, of changing shape, of transforming identity, of stirring first our own humours and vapours and then reaching across the breath, the spirit, to stir the audience as well[16]?

And that this was recognised as inherently dangerous, because imagination was literally transformative, and imagining a sickness could bring about its symptoms, and a body was both an explosive combination of animal spirits and a rank stagnancy of humours prone to rot, and so expressive gestures had to be regulated and acting done in moderation if at all, lest imbalance, madness, sickness and death befall us all? [17]

Or was it how just decades later when reason replaced enchantment on the post-Cartesian Enlightenment stage we pulled the levers to make our machines dance,

[15] Hulfeld in Wiles and Dymkowski 2013
[16] Roach, 1985, p 41
[17] Ibid.

and when Garrick's Hamlet faced the ghost his hair literally stood on end in horror, thanks to the hydraulic wig fashioned for the actor by one wig-maker Perkins, and how this was just a logical extension of an already intricately and intrinsically machinic body[18]?

Or was it the argument, the real feeling vs mimicry debate that sparked up repeatedly and was in full fire in the 18th century, and how for some we were careful crafters of illusions, and for others, consumed by passions and entranced by our roles, and that the tension or even the differentiation between these poles: fiction and feeling, construction and life could never be completely resolved?[19]

Or was it how the trope of the actor's body as sculptor's clay began to trend at the turn of the 20th century, with dual personality split between soul and body, master and supple, accommodating mistress[20] and how, while this was going on, the actor manager completed their gradual transformation into the theatre director, and the problems of theatre (and its necessity to reform) became framed more frequently not as a problem of morality but a problem of art (although these are hardly that easily picked apart)?

Was that how the notions of ambivalence, paradoxicality, duplicity, hollowness, and artifice migrated from theatre to the figure of the actor,

and how the crisis of truth was increasingly located in the body the actor,

and how for Diderot's Enlightenment reason, the actor was still a near demonic being, an internally void perpetually shapeshifting surface devoid of feeling governed by a cold calculating mind[21]

---

[18] ibid, 58-61, see also Roach 1982
[19] Clairon & Dumesnil in Cole & Chinoy, 1964, p. 174, see also Roach, 1985, p. 109
[20] Coquelin in Cole & Chinoy, 1964, p. 196
[21] Diderot in Crocker, 1966

(and how his tone when describing our moral and emotional detachment is decidedly more reverential than disgusted)

and yet how a century or so later we appeared increasingly as problems to be solved, saved, or abolished?

Was that also how theatre's inherent ambivalence to representation and presence, sign and flesh, image and body bifurcated, fleshed out and naturalized into familiar dichotomies: the eye that sees against the body that is seen, the darkened auditorium against the lit-up stage, reason against flesh, mind against muscle, text against voice, with one gaze to govern them all?

Was that how the discourses on acting really began to bloom, promising methods and approaches to heal the wound and return us back to truth, authenticity, and full embodied presence?

And how we became almost unable to even think the actor without quietly or explicitly presupposing this new figure for whom we then became the medium, the acquiescence of our bodies the condition for their art, articulated as their whole against our part?

Was that how we became the director's problem?

HITCHCOCK:
I did say in my speech I've been accused of saying that actors are cattle, but I said that is absolutely untrue, what I possibly said was that actors should be treated like cattle.

In a way, they're children, I regard them all as children. And they're not very bright, some of them.[22]

ACTOR-HYSTERIAN:

What is this? What the.. Who is this now?

GHOST:

I believe its Hitchcock.

ACTOR HYSTERIAN:

Unbelievable. How is this place so populated by all these ancient movie cronies? Don't you think we have plenty examples of our own?

GHOST:

Well, uhhh...

ACTOR HYSTERIAN:

Ok. Whatever. Right. You gave me a name. Hysterian. Very funny. Ok. Let's do this.

[22] Hitchcock in interview, 1966. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Lnu8VM1LCA, accessed 7.3. 2024 clips at 17"40' and 19"06'. This clip has since been removed, but plenty others attest to his sentiment.

ACT 2: A limited and brief history of the emergence of the theatre director in so called Western theatre and the corresponding change in the position of the actor told with vested interest in eight short chapters spoken by the Actor Hysterian

The Actor Hysterian takes the podium. Is it necessary to remind the reader that the Actor Hysterian is a character in a (kind of) play, and therefore their lecture does not perform a straight, scholarly review of relevant theatre history, but instead harnesses the teleological tendencies of the ways the history of Western theatre is commonly told and turns them around to offer a counter image, which–while reductive and questionable–may expose something of those narratives as it appears?[23]

1. The Puppet master

In 1908 Edward Gordon Craig published The Actor and the Über-Marionette, presenting a master puppet, object-subject of total control, simultaneously both less and more than human, less and more than life. It was also designed as a provocation which challenged the verisimilitude of naturalism and the human-centeredness of realism, mainstreaming in European theatre of the day. The argument went something like this:

[23] My main companions in writing this segment have been History of the Theatre (2010) by Brockett and Hildy and The Cambridge Companion to Theatre History (2013), eds. by Wiles and Dymkowski, but The Emergence of the Theatre Director by Helen Krich Chinoy in Directors on Directing (1963, eds. by Cole and Chinoy)–in all its stylistic datedness–also reads as an unabashed rendition of the narrative the Actor Hysterian sets out to twist around.

Art requires mastery, and that which cannot be absolutely controlled cannot amount as art. The actor's bodily self is what constitutes the actor's instrument, material and medium, and because the actor is fleshly human, they are at the mercy of their bodily affectations and emotions. This makes their work fundamentally uncontrollable. They are prone to accidents and chance from the moment they step on stage, and in that way at least, they are life-like. And life is to be loved, but it is not art, and if theatre wants to be art it cannot limit itself to the likeness of life. The realism of the actor's body is what holds theatre back, and so the actor must be replaced by the über-marionette.

It's not entirely clear whether Craig meant the Über-marionette predominantly as a metaphor for a newly born actor so entirely in control of their flesh that they could render it " a dead piece of material"[24] like a fully governable full body flesh mask. This may have indicated a yearning towards ritualised and symbolic gestural aesthetics, derived from Craig's understanding of theatre and dance of the Far East. At the same time, he may have had technical arrangements in mind: masked dancers, wearable life-sized puppets, object manipulators.[25]

Craig's umbrage with the personality cult surrounding actors comes across distinctly, and to this he includes the actor as impersonator, who takes upon themself to reproduce a figure true to life[26]. Instead with near Platonic fervor Craig aligns art with death, a "complete life" of fierce and vivid beauty, traces of which he finds in Africa and Asia, "on the banks of Ganges"[27], in the divine puppetry of temples, which to his Orientalist gaze appeared uncorrupted by history or cultural context. It is then the bourgeois-human figure that Craig attacks, wanting to jerk theatre out of its petty human scale.

[24] Craig 1908, p.8
[25] Boeuf 2010
[26] Craig, 1908, p.5
[27] ibid. p14

If you could make your body into a machine, a dead piece of material such as clay, and if it would obey you in every moment for the entire space of time it was in front of the audience, and if you could put aside Shakespeare's poem, you would be able to make a work of art out of what is in you.

-Edward Gordon Craig, The Actor and The Übermarionette

Sidenote: Would Edward Gordon Craig recognise remote control human as a logical continuation of his fantasy as well as a complete reversal of his aspirations? A dream become nightmare? Familiar elements twisted into a dysfunctional form, machine-beast rather than machine-god, out of control*?*

2. The Auteur

When reading textbooks covering theatre and the emergence of the theatre director in the 19th and 20th centuries, an unmistakable sense arises of an end to the long reign of the actor. And to a lesser extent the playwright.

Actors continued to be vital for various conceptions of theatre, but their mediality gained another facet, another layer, with pressing practical consequences. Instead of (or in addition to) channeling the divine, the written, and/or the commons, actors were expected to give flesh to the creative authorship of the director, who no longer themself necessarily physically inhabited the stage.

This shift did not come about all at once. It had precedents. Practices like coaching actors, organising movements of groups, and operating as an outside eye go back as far as the choir masters of Ancient Greece. In the Late Middle Ages, hundreds of amateur actors would be coordinated and prompted by stage managers and pageant masters, as they took part in passion plays and other religious outdoor

festivities. After acting became a proper profession, it was honed, debated, reformed, and written about by actors managing their own troupes, as well as playwrights concerned with the presentation of their work.

Most of the early theatre directors began their careers as actors and many, like Stanislavski, continued to act in the plays they directed, much like the actor-managers of old. Yet as directing as an artform and artist position became established, acting as an art, craft, and discipline inevitably changed. How should collaboration, cooperation and governance be negotiated between these artist positions? How should actors be disciplined for the director's theatre? Should the director be an instructor, teacher, facilitator, disciplinarian, provider of conditions, mirror, manipulator, moulder of clay? And what shape should the actor's artistry take as the director's counterpart?

3. The Fourth Unity

At the turn of the 19th century Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, manager of the Weimar Court Theatre, strictly disciplined the ensemble's actors in recitation and declamation to produce unity and harmony in speech and movement. His *Rules for Actors* cover diction, gesture, and blocking to minute detail, with emphasis on constant practice to undo the actor's personal habits (like dialect or comportment), which threatened to get in the way of properly delivering a text or inhabiting a role. Continuous training was advocated to make actors suitably accustomed to these rules so that following them might appear natural[28]. Goethe's pedantic tones are reminiscent of an exasperated theatre director faced with a motley group of amateurs.

[28] Goethe 1803, in Woehl 1927

One might argue that even as the Aristotelian unities of action, time, and place were falling out of favour as unnecessarily rigid and restrictive for the playwright, a yearning for a "fourth unity" was on the rise, a desire to stylise and unify the bodies on stage. In many ways Goethe comes across as a precursor to the modern theatre director. Yet his rules are given as universals for good theatrical delivery in declamatory style, not specific to an artistic work or a director's vision. With Goethe, the artistry lies firmly with the poet, the playwright.

The modern theatre director emerges some half-century later. The Duke of Saxe-Meiningen gets often credited as the first director proper, who constructed performances with meticulous care for detail, designed elaborate scenery, brought in period furniture, and produced historically accurate costumes from expensive, authentic materials at a time when actors generally purchased their own garb. He also carefully instructed the actors to stand and gesture properly while wearing these historical garments so that they wouldn't appear out of epoch. The Meiningen Players were particularly known for their crowd scenes: actors were individually directed, characterized, and coordinated during long rehearsal periods to create a sense of movement and vitality, and the ensemble was skillfully placed in the wings, giving the impression of crowds continuing way beyond the stage[29].

This illusion of reality created by the ensemble made an impression on publics across Europe, influencing (among others) André Antoine, who refined naturalism in both set and acting in his Théatre Libre, and Konstantin Stanislavski, whose "system's" many reworkings continue to provide the basis for much of actor training today.

[29] Brockett and Hildy 2010, p. 370-372, Cole and Chinoy 1963 p. 81-88

The ideal of artistic unity was integral to the emergent theatre director: bringing together the diverse elements of the stage to produce a harmonic whole, or Gesamtkunstwerk, a total work of art. Actors as embodiments of the material-corporeal multiplicity of both the stage and the world around it presented a challenge to this unity.

The longing for a unified whole grew against increasing social complexity and diversity brought about by industrialisation and urbanisation. Movements within so-called Western theatre that were in other ways antagonistic shared a desire for stylistic harmony. Romantic and illusory realism, naturalism, and its many modernist challengers called for the singular artist eye who could draw both the stage artists and their audiences under its unifying rule. Even Brecht, who emphasized disparity between theatrical elements and separation between character and player, still counted on a director's guiding eye to ensure that estrangement was effectively enacted, and that actors didn't slip into their bad habits of manipulating the audience by becoming possessed by their characters[30].

4. The Machine

Underneath the debates on literary subject and style, the very techno-metabolic body of theatre was transforming. From medieval times to the court theatres of the 18th century, candles and oil lamps had been used for lighting, and could be cleverly manipulated and dimmed to create moods and effects. Yet their glow was equally shared by both players and audience, as was the smoke from hundreds of live flames.

During the first half of the 19th century the arrival of gaslights followed by the limelight allowed the stage to be bathed in light while the rest of the house

[30]Brecht et al. 2015.

remained dark. The burning gas sucked oxygen from the air, and fire safety continued to be notoriously bad. Dancers with their gauze costumes were particularly at risk, occasionally, horrifically bursting into flames as their dresses brushed the gas lights[31]. But (when tragedy did not ensue) the audience, thanks to this new technology, were invited to fully immerse themselves in the illusion of the stage from the anonymity and intimacy of the darkened auditorium.

Towards the end of the 19th century stage technology was also becoming increasingly sophisticated: portions of the stage could be raised, lowered, tilted, or rotated; actors appeared and disappeared through trapdoors and lifts; rolling platforms, treadmills, motors, and winches moved scenery and sets[32]. At the same time, in the quest for theatrical verisimilitude, the technology and artifice of theatre became increasingly hidden from view. This movement away from theatre's explicit play can be seen reflected in the increasing demands for actors to "act naturally", culminating in Stanislavski's quest for psychological realism and "inner truth".

In the Baroque, actors had shared space with the audience, but as they entered the pictorial illusion of the Romantic stage, they were set apart and framed by the proscenium arch. Actors no longer addressed audiences directly, audiences no longer participated in the expressiveness of the event, and the "fourth wall" was erected to separate fiction from the real[33]. Both actors and audience became disciplined for a theatre (at least in the kind of highbrow theatre which is of interest to textbooks) in which the stage was to be contemplated like a living picture from the outside.

[31] Kelly, 2012
[32] Brockett and Hildy 2010, p. 345-348, 387
[33] Baugh in Wiles and Dymkowski, 2013, p.47-48

Until, that is, the arrival of electric lighting, which exposed the three-dimensional actors posturing amidst painted scenery[34]. Soon after this, pictorial realism and naturalism were challenged by movements calling for the re-theatricalisation of theatre and revitalisation of the communal event between the audience and the players–only this time to be conducted and held together by the eye of the artist director.

Ok. So. What would a historian do now? I don't know. Zoom out? Ah yes. Look at the big picture! Like a theatre director! How hard can it be?

5. The Big Picture

These changes to theatre's technical and artistic arrangements were embedded in a cultural context undergoing unprecedented social, technical, and economic upheaval. Industrialisation, mass production, and urbanisation gave birth to the "masses" reshuffling the social strata. Emergent working classes unionized and began striking for better pay and conditions, while wealthy upper classes struggled to hold on to their privileges. At the same time militarism and nationalism were on the rise. Europe's imperial powers, both old and new, intensified their colonial grab of land and resources in Africa and Southeast Asia to feed industries and ward off economic depression. Despite the abolishment of slavery during the 19th century the violent exploitation of colonised lands and peoples continued. New scientific ideas emerged and were harnessed to justify the continuation and expansion of colonial rule, racial subjugation, and white supremacy.

According to the "historian of ideas" Michel Foucault, around this time the human ("man") emerged as a double-sided paradox: at the same time an object of

[34] ibid p.51

science, an organism among others, yet also the foundation for the very possibility of knowledge. This new historicity of the human–and of knowledge–fractured the previously stable relationship between language and the world which, according to Foucault, had characterised the classical period. Where representations had been read as reliable expressions of identity, they now brought forth the shape of the human as the relation on which representations depend, perpetually in movement.[35] Discourse shattered, and from the cracks out crawled the human.

The emergence of the human as an object of science marked, for Foucault, an epistemic shift from knowledge systems based on representation and classification of stable entities towards systems organised around principles of change: material, ecological, and social historicity and evolution. The new human sciences conceived the human as part and product of history, society, and the psyche. For Marx, the human was brought forth through historically contingent relations of labour and economy. For Darwin, humanity existed on a continuum of evolving and mutually connected organisms. For Freud, the human was driven by unconscious urges. And for Auguste Comte, the father of scientific positivism and sociology, who together with Darwin greatly influenced Émile Zola and naturalism in theatre and literature, both human behaviour and human society were dependent on biological constitution together with the environment[36] and could be explained and directed if only first sufficiently parsed by an objective, informed, attentive, and neutral scientific gaze.

To recap: just as "man" emerged onto the world stage as a historically contingent, unstable entity, reliant on material conditions, vulnerable to unconscious urges, and existing on a continuum that reaches well beyond one's existence, the theatre director took a seat in the darkened auditorium, and began to gaze upon the theatre stage from beyond?

[35] Foucault, 2010, p. 292
[36] McVeigh 2020

6. The Science

In 1881, Émile Zola wrote:

"I am waiting for someone to put a man of flesh and bones on the stage, taken from reality, scientifically analyzed, and described without one lie. I am waiting for someone to rid us of these fictitious characters, these symbols of virtues and vice, which have no worth as human data. I am waiting for environment to determine the characters and the characters to act according to the logic of facts combined with logic of their own disposition. (...) I'm waiting for everyone to throw out the tricks of the trade, the contrived formulas, the tears and superficial laughs. I am waiting for a dramatic work void of declamations, majestic speech, and noble sentiments, to have the unimpeachable morality of truth and to teach us the frightening lesson of sincere investigation."[37]

7. The Truth

What characterised the age of the theatre director... *Oops! Freudian slip!* What characterised the late modern period, was a quest for unity and truth. Society, as well as "the human" had been set into motion. Complexifying and precarious class relations, rising nationalist sentiments and the need to justify the continued domination and extraction of the colonies, both near and far, called forth regimes of "truth and progress" that could anchor "the human" within existing hegemonic power relations, in effect reground the white man as the apex of humanity.

[37] Zola 1881, Naturalism on the Stage, in Cole 2001.

Truth appeared to be increasingly at stake also in theatre and acting. Naturalism insisted that theatre abandon theatricality in favour of likeness to life to the extent that theatre might, with scientific accuracy reveal the causes and effects of life for scrutiny on stage as if it were a laboratory. Paradoxically this revelation relied on the concealment of theatre's machinery, including the techniques–the acts and facts–of acting.

While naturalism strived for the optics of truth, psychological realism, following Stanislavski, called for inner, emotional truth. This relied on an actor's emotional memory, imagination, and belief in the fictional staged conditions together with physical actions to bring on bodily and psychic effects[38]. This aspect of Stanislavski's approach was likely influenced by Russian neurologist Ivan Pavlov's concurrent research on stimulus and conditioned response[39]. Thus, truth was to be felt as sensations and emotions in the actor, yet it was judged by the director's objective, neutral, all-seeing, all-knowing eye. Stanislavski's auto-fictional theatre director Tortsov reads as a crystallisation of the paternalistic director-teacher, who acts as witness to and validator of the actor's truth, and towards whom the actor-student must turn for guidance and confirmation[40].

Movements within modernism which called for a renewed celebration of theatre's rituality, communality, and constructedness continued to place an onus of truth on the actor. Only now it was the truth of the uncorrupted medium. Whether the actor was to be a divine channel, an affective athlete, malleable clay, or primal beast, various figurations of truth have continued to play out on our bodies.[41] Through-out iterations of 20th and 21st century theatre, even as grand narratives have shattered and unity given way to the multiplicity of post-dramatic stages the

[38] Stanislavsky, 2003
[39] Roach, 1985
[40] Stanislavsky, 2003
[41] Auslander in Zarilli, 2002 connects this truth specifically to the self

actor remains a contested medium whose veracity so often awaits judgment from the all-seeing all-knowing eye.

8. Conclusions?

The modern theatre director emerged in tandem with a new epistemic era which rearranged the concept of the human. The theatre director as unifying eye was called forth by the naturalist-realist movement and went on to become the auteur that is still recognisable in the emergent post-director era. Under naturalist principles the stage aligned itself with science and posited an objectivity that was in accordance with a positivist trust in the informed and attentive neutrality of the scientific gaze. The groundbreaking ideas of the century: that lifeforms develop and diversify from common ancestry through "survival of the fittest", that heredity and environment explain not only behaviour but the very forms that life takes, and that society and the human mind are subject to progressive, unilinear evolution, played out in the naturalist-realist credo and aesthetics.

These ideas went on to take dreadful turns as nationalism and militarism continued to rise in the 20th century. Social Darwinism[42], the hierarchy of the races, the idea of cultural evolution from "savagery" to civilisation, and other scientific racisms placed the Western European eye as the neutral, invisible centre as they naturalised and systematised the marginalisation and oppression of all those deemed inferior in the gendered, racialized world order.

[42]Jeynes, 2011. Even though Social Darwinism is often presented as a socio-political parasite to the pure science of Darwin, William Jeynes argues that the 19th century racial world order is reflected in his notebooks and other writings.

Could it be that even as theatre makers abandoned naturalism and explored theatre as a medium, the "neutral and objective" gaze as the measure of unity and truth remained embedded in the very organisation of theatre?

That the movement which challenged the formulas of classical-romantic theatre, brought discipline and art to the stage (which apparently until then had been ruled by a disorderly mob), which resonated throughout the 20th and 21st centuries in the various oppositions and counter movements, the posts and the post posts, as well as in the multitude of still vibrant incarnations of psychological realism(s) and their oppositions

which called forth the eye, the I, the singular artist as the unifying force of theatre

which inaugurated modern theatre

was at the same time implicated in a colonialist, racist world order which imposed a supposedly neutral gaze to organize the world stage, while the gaze itself conveniently receded from view?

And that in this light the figure of the theatre director could be regarded as an incarnation of that sleight of hand that allowed one to disappear while molding the conditions of visibility itself?

And that the subsequent disciplining of acting and actors in service of the ideal of the neutral, efficient, and malleable body instrument also served to naturalise hierarchies which differentiate how bodies are seen to inhabit neutrality, grounding white able-bodied heterosexual gender conforming masculinity as the embodiment of universal humanity, rendering some bodies marked, particular, and limited while designating others as universally relatable, while simultaneously

placing an onus of truth and authenticity on actorly bodies, a truth returned to and measured by the directorial gaze?

And that a world order and world view which grew in and out of complex economic, geographical, political, and material-corporeal histories continues to play out the techno-corporeal assemblages that remain relevant today?

Could it be that these positions and their habitual operations in and between people as well as in institutions of art, funding and art education need critical examination to be denaturalised across the board, rather than merely exorcising the most blatant abuses of a power imbalance that is encoded into the machine?

Could it be that it is the director who is the problem?

Silence. An ominous rumbling begins to rise until it reaches a screeching crescendo.

Hello?
What's going on?
Oh my god, no, please, no! I take it back! No!

The Actor-Hysterian is eaten by The Machine.

GHOST:
Oh dear. I've never seen anything like it! The Actor Hysterian has just been swallowed alive by Theatre. The luscious velvet curtain lips parted to reveal a gaping black box mouth with blazing Fresnel teeth, and then they were devoured, chewed up, and spat out! Found too bitter to be ever cast again!

And who's this? Another actor? With more complaints?

ACTOR RESEARCHER:

I'm an actor researcher actually. I do artistic research.

GHOST:

Oh. What's that?

ACTOR RESEARCHER:

Well, nobody really knows for sure. It can be all kinds of things.

GHOST:

Sounds jolly complicated.

ACTOR RESEARCHER:

Right now, I've written something.

GHOST:

Finally, an author! I'm just an echo with nothing of my own to say! Can you write for me?

WRITER:

Well, it's a kind of an... Apology for directors?

GHOST:

Oh.

ACTOR RESEARCHER:
But you can be in it if you like?

GHOST:
Yay!

ACT 3: AN APOLOGY FOR DIRECTORS, OR THEATRE RETHINKS ITSELF

Scene 1

GHOST:
The drama has ended. The Actor Researcher comes in with scholarly notes and final words.

ACTOR RESEARCHER:
No! I don't want to end with a lecture! I hate that! I want to end with poetics and uncertainty, with our voices merging together as if we were theatre becoming aware of itself and finally figuring itself out, or at least beginning that journey of self-awareness. I don't know.

We could have just left it there with that reductively, seductively simple result: The director is the problem. A teleological narrative turned against itself; the familiar canon imaged from an unfamiliar angle.

But of course, it's so much more complex. Even so-called Western theatre is many, not one. And at the same time, recognisable patterns appear. As an actor I find myself retracing familiar lines, caught in predictable grooves, gripped by scripts I have lived, learned and internalised. How does theatre's affective, relational, representational machine recruit me, bodily and socially[43]? How do

[43]My take on affect and its participation in the operations and politics of the "theatre machine" that I've traced in my artistic works–particularly in The Actress and The Diva–resonates with Margaret Wetherell's conceptualisation of affect as discursively entwined, social practice, a kind of material-bodily mobilisation that takes place in a social context (Wetherell, 2012). Wetherell critiques the metaphor of machine as overly mechanistic and determined (Ibid. p.15). I take the critique, yet stick with the metaphor, partly because of my play with the machinic and the technological in this project posits them also as indeterminate mediators, and partly because my experiences of being grasped by theatre's modes of producing self and affect have been disconcertingly machinic.

theatre's arrangements act on me and how do I act on others in and through theatre? And how to rewire theatre and myself within it?

GHOST:
Mmmm.

ACTOR RESEARCHER:
Etymologically theatre is a place for viewing, but its vision is enmeshed with imagination and all other modes of sense and perception as well: with affects and atmospheres, resonances and narratives, bodily and social practices. In theatre, images tangle with bodies and representations matter. Actors become incarnations of "the eye", and at the same time their bodily presence always leaks beyond any representational schema.

But in the second act we came dangerously close to implying that "the eye" or "theatre's gaze" belongs solely to the director, as if the myriad practices, professions, architectures, materials, and technologies that comprise the dispositif of theatre were just so many manifestations of one vision, letting the rest of us conveniently off the hook. But "theatre's gaze" does not return to any individual or identity, rather it is distributed across sense-making topologies, bodies, relations, representations.

Yet for an actor being looked at is part of theatre's sensorium, a condition of what we do. A look that has the power to intervene in my work affects how I work. It affects what I can do, how I can be seen, and how I take place. A look is felt. When a way of looking is welcome, it can bring creative joy, when not, it can be crushing.

But even a look doesn't belong solely to the one who looks. As an actor, I may be subjected to a look, reduced to a way of being seen. But I can also invite and incite ways of looking. I can return a look with my body as well as my eyes, and I can

play with and comment on the ways I am being looked at. I also look upon others, and the way I look becomes enacted in my relations and manifests in my play with representations and figures. And even though my capacity to mould the ways I am seen may be limited, especially if my efforts are not supported by what surrounds me, I remain accountable for the parts I play.

GHOST:
The Actor Researcher pauses, suddenly aware of the irony. Having named themself Actor Researcher, they too find themself playing the part, and in doing so slipping outside of theatre's strategic juxtapositions and hyperboles. Another machine takes over: a scholarly voice–without parody–a sincere attempt to make sense of how performing bodies are assembled and come to matter in theatre's bodily relational representational machine. A lecture, then. I told you so! Oh well. Perhaps I will find places to interject.

Scene 2

The Actor Researcher lectures.

ACTOR RESEARCHER:

1. The Gaze

To gaze is to look steadily and intently. Looking is not "innocent". The technologies and contexts of looking participate in constructing ways of looking[44]. They have histories, they are not "natural", or inevitable. Thus, they are also capable of being reassembled in ways that afford new ways of looking and seeing.

According to film theorist Todd McGowan, building on Lacan, "the gaze" cannot be reduced to a spectator's look[45]. Instead, the gaze manifests in how the screen

[44] Sturken and Cartwright, 2018, p.103
[45] McGowan argues that traditional Lacanian film theory conflates the gaze with the spectator, and therefore becomes unable to account for the ways cinema has the potential to play with the spectator's position and disrupt the function of ideology through various deployments of

turns towards the spectator, in how it accounts for the viewer. It organises what can be seen while hiding its own operations from view. When the cinematic object plays with or in other ways accounts for the gaze, or when the gaze in McGowan's words is "rendered visible"[46], it jolts the act of seeing out of its own perceived neutrality and directs awareness to the viewer's own positioning, perhaps offering potential for a different kind of look.

Actors are–quite concretely–objects that look back. At the same time acting entails–quite concretely–the pleasures and anxieties of being seen. The stage gazes on me and positions me in a certain way. I become part of the gaze that positions and acts on others. I can be subjected to a way of being seen, but I can also disrupt and subvert dominant ways of seeing–if the stage lends itself to such disruption. For the actor, these different aspects of the gaze coexist, often in tension, leaking into, informing, and contradicting each other.

Even more than the spectral dreamworld of the screen, the stage expressly plays with the transformation of perception and sense. Opening a scene, constructing a frame, playing with style and rhythm, moulding time and space, corpsing and breaking character are all everyday performance practices which direct attention, shift perspective, create complicity, and unsettle meaning within the play of theatre. At the same time, perspectives and points-of-view can become entrenched in the imageries, sensoriums, and relations of the stage in ways that leave their own principles of organisation unquestioned. Thus, even though the

---

the gaze (McGowan, 2007, p.1-20). Delving deeper into his argument or the intricacies of Lacanian film theory is beyond my scope here, but I will follow McGowan in the separation of the gaze and the spectator/director's look to consider the various ways actors and other agents of the stage might both embody a certain 'outlook' and disrupt and rearrange practices of looking and seeing. Despite the differences between the mediums, concepts arising from film theory like the male gaze, or the white gaze are often used in relation to theatre to discuss politics of representation, body norms, and audience expectation. They address systems of power which directly impact on actorly bodies. The body can also be a surface for projection. Thus, for my purposes here I will borrow from film theory when it feels pertinent without problematising too much the differences between film and theatre.

[46] McGowan, 2007, p.25

stage is a place of play, where perceptions are put into motion, it is all too often also a place where bodies are assigned positions and meanings in which their constriction becomes naturalised, and where a dominant gaze closes in on marginalised bodies and lives, rendering them other to its centre and norm.

Every staged work has an outlook. Perspectives and points of view become etched in the figures that actors shape. They materialise through our bodies, which often host multiple and contradictory views. How we inhabit the stage, how we relate, and how we represent directs and moulds ways of looking and possibilities of seeing. What we do and how we do it affects how bodies, things, relations, and environments can be seen. Through our work we open sensoriums and imaginaries which act upon ourselves and others. At the same time, the stage can never be subsumed under just one perspective. Its material, corporeal, and relational multiplicity leaks and flows over, is always in excess of the scenes it carries.

GHOST:
I have a question!

ACTOR RESEARCHER:
Ok.

GHOST:
What if you are cast to portray a character who belongs to a marginalised group who have been historically subject to hostile representations as an aspect of their oppression and marginalisation even as their access to public platforms has been limited and policed. You are not a member of that group, but you do find them very interesting. Are you allowed to play that role? Who do you ask? Is there a committee? Who is allowed to represent whom?

ACTOR RESEACHER:

Perhaps I need to ask myself: how does my acting act upon the world around me? What do I participate in and become part of?

GHOST:

Yeah! Because you can't say anything anymore. It's called acting for a reason. You don't have to be a mass murderer in order to act a mass murderer!

ACTOR RESEARCHER:

Ahh, yes. The real or feigned confusion over the mere suggestion that there might be limits to the universality of the speaker's point of view. The undertone that cultural critique (often voiced by members of marginalised communities) is in effect censorship.

Such concerns over freedom of speech and artistic expression often fail to consider that the stage and screen are also places of power and subject to stringent gate keeping. Theatre institutions, the film industry, and higher art education have never been open to all. Many voices are not heard, and many bodies not seen because they appear too awkward, too marginal, threatening, unrelatable, and/or complicated to be accommodated, or just "not quite right"; that vague gut-feeling often disguising unconscious bias. Or perhaps they never thought of knocking on those gates in the first place because they never saw anyone like themself inside, never thought they might be eligible, and were never told that this could be their path. Thus, concerns over the limitation of speech and art may sometimes speak of the unease of those with ample access to platforms and a desire to protect the status quo: a freedom not to be challenged, a freedom from critique.

GHOST:

Was I good?

A-R:

Yeah. Spot on.

2. The Oppressive Gaze

There's a particular kind of pain in becoming a vessel for a representation that attacks your own body. Hosting a scene that is hostile makes disrupting the gaze into a pressing personal urgency. This is not uncommon for actors, especially those belonging to a minority, or cast as female.

To cast is to pour liquid into a mould for it to set in a desired shape. To be cast in a role is dependent on how you have been seen, especially how you can be seen in the casting agent's eyes: what shape can you take. Subjections to ways of being seen act on the actor's body. They are woven into costumes, storylines, spatial arrangements, and the attitudes of other actors. They become enacted in gestures, accents, inflections, relations, and reactions, in habitus and affective patterns.

A gaze that turns your body against yourself chafes and constricts. You might search for ways to enact a rupture, to somehow puncture the stifling and often all-too-familiar figure you find yourself trapped in. Yet in the machinery of representational theatre and film, it might feel like there's not much an actor can do. To question the premise of a role or advocate for change can be read as being difficult, and troublemakers don't get cast. In the machine of desire, where casting is a requisite for work, being obliging can be a matter of survival. And so, you become held in place by the parts you are given.

The concept of the male gaze was developed by film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema[47] . She contends that under cinema's phallocentric order, women are displayed for the pleasure of the straight male spectator, their passive feminine "to-be-looked-at-ness" constructed as the counterpart for the active male "bearer of the look".

In her solo performance Play Rape[48] , Anna Paavilainen draws attention to the frequency with which the young, female characters she was cast to play in the Finnish National Theatre were being raped on stage, and how often the violence enacted on her body was put into action to convey important moments in the development of the characters played by her male colleagues, making the portrayal of her character's rape a vehicle to show the male protagonists inner journey, their error, and torment. The work shows astutely how the representation of gendered violence is entangled with systemic misogyny in theatre's representation-producing machine. It also indicates the effects these repeatedly played rapes have on the bodies they are literally played upon: how violent imaginaries seep into a body's rhythms, informing the body of its status as an object for others to be used and abused in the hierarchy of the stage arranged around male protagonists' stories and the male gaze. To stage a work like Play Rape, let alone on the same stage as these fictive rapes were enacted, is a powerful restructuring of a dominant way of seeing.

That representations become enfolded in and act on bodies is not a metaphor. This is true for both those inhabiting the stage and for those in the audience. This is not to say that any theme or scene should be off-limits, but to ask what kind of structures play out in scenic arrangements and relations? Whose experience, embodiment, and gaze define the centre of the stage? Who is imagined to be the

[47] Mulvey 1975
[48] Paavilainen, 2016. She later adapted the work into a short film Play Rape (2019) https://areena.yle.fi/1-50281441 last accessed 6.4.2025

audience? Who is considered relatable? Who can be funny? Who can be complex and multidimensional? Who stands in for a group? Whose single characteristic defines their entire existence? Who must suffer and die, and why?[49]

The white gaze

When I entered professional theatre as an actor in the early 2000s in Finland, whiteness was the unquestioned norm. Racist stereotypes were rife in comedy and on the rare occasions when so-called serious theatre featured characters of colour, make-up departments would don dark wigs and brown base on white actors in a commonplace practice of brownface. 20 years later some things have changed, and the most blatant racism is more likely to be challenged, and yet even as actors of colour have entered the theatre scene, the overwhelming majority of theatre managers, directors, funders, producers, casting agents, and theatre pedagogues like me are still white. In 2023 graduating actor Amaale Antonia Atarah writes that the practices and artistic canon of her first years of theatre education in Uniarts Helsinki constructed whiteness as the norm, as the Eurocentric assumed "neutral" base, forcing her, as an Afro-Finnish acting student, to sideline vast aspects of her creative potential and code-switch into whiteness. She suggests that the institution of higher art education graduated the students not only as actors and artists but as *white* actors and artists[50].

[49] These kinds of questions might for instance reveal the frequency with which minority characters are designed to "diversify" the scene, but have no real story of their own, are written without any in depth understanding of the minority experience in question and comprised of (harmful) stereotypes. See also: Dadu, 2024, p.144-145. The last question refers to *bury your gays*, also known as *dead lesbian syndrome*: a trope that sees a disproportionate number of queer characters dead as storylines resolve. Its roots stretch to–you guessed it! – the end of the 19th century when queer love and gay characters could appear in literature as long as they appeased morality by being presented as warning examples that met sticky ends. (Hulan, 2017)It is uncanny how often this still holds: keep tabs if you don't believe me! Closely related is prevalence of suffering as the central principle of queer and trans lives. Also look out for *bury your disabled*.

[50] Atarah, 2023 p. 13

In their recent book actor Noora Dadu writes of the specific moment they became racialised in casting agents' and directors' eyes after using their own Palestinian heritage as a starting point for a theatre piece to look at narratives through which identities become constructed[51]. Ironically, performing this play constructed them as Arab in the eyes of the Finnish art scene, where previously they had, in their own words, almost passed as white[52]. In the following years they began to receive invites and work offers predominantly predicated on a perceived marked identity and body, no longer seen as neutral, that is, white. Dadu narrates experiencing a kind of multiplication of identity, where alongside the "free", unmarked actor-Noora capable of tackling any role appeared the feminist Finnish-Palestinian Noora, who could offer interesting angles to representation, diversity, and body-politics on stage, as well as the racialised Arab-Noora, whose professional space and prospects came across as altogether narrower and bleaker.[53] This experience of learning how one is seen professionally through the (stereotypical) roles one gets offered or the positions one is expected to assume repeats in the accounts of actors of color, as does the relief offered by spaces and working groups which do not orientate themselves around whiteness[54].

In The Souls of Black Folk[55], first published in 1903, W.E.B Du Bois portrays how growing up surrounded by anti-black prejudice produces what he calls a double consciousness: a sense of seeing oneself through the eyes of the other, as a black man imaged by the hostile white gaze. For Du Bois, this doubling interferes with the capacity to experience oneself without an othering double, at the same time offering a kind of "second-sight"[56] by bringing into view the stratification of racist

[51] Dadu 2024 p. 60
[52] Ibid. p. 34
[53] Ibid, p. 62
[54] See for instance Erista, 2020
[55] Du Bois, 2007, originally printed in 1903
[56] ibid p.8

society–an insight that easily recedes from view for those of us shielded by our perceived whiteness.

In Franz Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks the white gaze appears as a kind of trap that fixes the other in place. Frozen in its glare the body's self-understanding and capacity to extend into space–the corporeal schema–becomes intercepted by what Fanon calls the historical-racial and racial-epidermal schema. Fanon narrates becoming aware of the desire to smoke, and of all the movements needed to reach a pack of cigarettes. But instead of getting behind this action, his body seems arrested, as if unable to operate without each movement being deliberately performed. Seen through the white gaze the body is racialised, its self-experience usurped by a hostile, third person image.[57]

Dadu describes acting an othering role as a dissociative experience[58] . A role written through an ignorant, hostile, and limiting gaze reduces the character to a body that marks them as other. Dadu notes that such a stereotypical minority role becomes "in the wrong way personal"[59] as its figure attacks the actor's own body and further enacts its marginalisation. The actor feels isolated, weighed down, and constricted, unable to act well and connect with the situation or with their colleagues, who with better written roles are better able to breathe life into their acting. Finding themself in this peculiar position of being paid to self-harm, the actor ends up angry, self-loathing, alienated, and alone[60].

In Queer Phenomenology[61] Sara Ahmed shows how spaces are orientated to make some bodies feel at home while others are made to feel out of place. On stage and screen, some bodies have been habitually seen as neutral, and there-by able

[57] Fanon, 2008, p. 91, see also Ahmed, 2006, p.110-113
[58] Dadu, 2024, p.143
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ahmed, 2006

to inhabit any character, and represent any kind of body. At the same time, other bodies, especially visible minorities, have been positioned as particular, best suited for roles which align with their minority position, if even that. When stereotypical and hostile representations inhabit the stage and recurrent tropes position the relatable centre against the curious margin; when norms centering whiteness, thinness, able-bodiedness, gender conformity, and nationalist ideals of language, ethnicity, and religion define who can pass as relatable; when white middle-class concerns and white middle-class taste define what can be seen as neutral and of general interest, it becomes clear which bodies can expect to feel at home both on stage and among the audience.

Scene 3.

INTERLUDE

The Actor Researcher's lecturing stance falters, and other voices push through–the listener might recognise the Emma Thompson-esque tones of the Actor Hysterian, and even the Ghost pops in to offer some anecdotal evidence.

Infrapolitics of the "powerless" -some anecdotal evidence

I remember a moment from early on in my own acting career. Freshly out of theatre school, I had been hired into the ensemble of a middle-sized municipal theatre. I went to see one of their grand musical productions, in 19th century epoch with lush costumes of real silk. In a transitional scene depicting a change of scenery, a line of sex workers pranced onto stage in unison. They had no storyline of their own; they were there merely to create movement and a red-lights-district atmosphere. They strutted downstage in their fishnets, hands on knees with wiggle of the bum, and a Marilyn-style moment with a "Wooo!", and I was sitting near the front, watching my colleague, an actor in her sixties, execute the movement sequence with furious precision, and I got a sense that she was

channelling her thirty years of expertise and artistry into doing exactly as she had been told, and at the same time showing exactly what she thought about all of it.

And then I remember the medieval gender-swap comedy from one year later exploring the very ridiculous idea of men tending children and doing housework until a men's rights activist storms in to restore order and tame the damsel (that's me!), and I remember standing there night after night, stage right, in my Rapunzel braid and awesome coat of armour, searching for a pair of eyes among the laughing crowd that did not find all this all that funny, and if I were to find them, then what? Somehow communicate that even as I stood there, I did not stand behind this scene?

And I can't even remember all the times I've tried to queer a character or story line, or the times I've been corrected back to the straight line, or the times I've squirmed and asked my friends not to come and see, because the work is not only bad but wrong, and yet I did the job with gritted teeth, because one does not say no to work. I can't remember all the times I've watched my friends on stage trying to puncture holes, deflect the gaze, or somehow find an escape in narrow, oppressive representational schemes. I do remember, cringing, times I've become a vessel for storylines and imageries that added to others' marginalisation because I didn't want to cause friction by calling it out or perhaps because my privilege afforded my ignorance and allowed me to disregard the harm I was part of.

Actors are not powerless, yet the arrangements of the "industries" all too often make us feel that way. And so, at times our resistance becomes acted out as underhanded manoeuvres: backstage talk and rolling eyes, disguised acts of mockery, feet dragging, sabotage, and choked fury attesting to experiences of powerlessness within the stage's apparatus of control. And perhaps these

infrapolitics[62] reinforce theatre managers' and directors' habits of infantilising and paternalising actors, which again may add to actors' experiences of powerlessness. Add to this actors' structural separation from the rest of the "designing team" and our systemically embedded requirement to be chosen in order to secure work, and behavioural patterns like fawning, flattery, learned helplessness, and anxiety suddenly become easier to understand.

Unlike the screen, the stage does in fact look back. Its virtual gaze is punctuated with a multiplicity of viewpoints, and in that way at least it mirrors the audience who also fails to subscribe to a singular point-of-view. Even as we render ourselves as media for stories and representations, we perform cuts and breaks. Revealing looks and rolling eyes–a whole spectrum bodily-affective commentary perforates the stage. No wonder actors are also feared. Our corporeality breaches the image even if our figurative bodies can't help but represent. We are the glitch in the representational matrix, the gap and the smudge.

There's always more than one way of looking.

Scene 4

3. The Oppositional Gaze

In her 1992 essay The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators[63] bell hooks examines the impact of white representations of black womanhood on the black women watching, and their spectatorial agency in looking 'against the grain'.

---

[62] Scott 1990. Scott's term "infrapolitics" points toward gestures of resistance and critique of power that do not openly challenge the established order, but inhabit the realm between consent and open rebellion. Scott derives the term from examples of extreme power imbalance (finish this later)

The Actress is in effect a staging of backstage talk. One could say it enacts a rupture of hidden transcripts into the public realm.

[63] hooks 1992

Stereotypical depictions like the caring Mammy, the seductive Jezebel, and the angry Sapphire[64] align the spectator with the white gaze. hooks narrates watching these characters, Sapphire in particular, as a child, and laughing together with the black men and the white audiences, because Sapphire was so ugly, there was no way she could be her.[65]

But, hooks continues, Sapphire was not abandoned. Unlike the child, grown black women claimed her rage as their own. hooks names the oppositional gaze as one that refuses to turn how it's supposed to turn and see what it's supposed to see. Instead, it looks back in defiance, and through non-compliance exposes the violence and the limits of the dominant view. The oppositional gaze resists identification, or identifies "wrong", investing denigratory figures with power and meaning, and by doing so, reclaims them. Importantly, for hooks, this kind of critical gaze is developed through a conscious process of interrogating dominant ways of looking and knowing, and creation of alternative strategies of seeing[66].

For Jose Esteban Muñoz, strategies of disidentification involve practices of seeing and incorporating imagery in ways which scramble, repurpose, and queer culturally encoded meanings performing a refusal to read straight[67]. Disidentifications operate as minority survival strategies that reinhabit hostile imagery with pleasure and desire, allowing for possibilities of identification and

---

[64] The Mammy is the caring, asexual figure who effaces herself while devoting her life to serving others, exemplified in the character of Mammy in Gone With The Wind (1939), portrayed by Hattie McDaniel. The Jezebel is the sexually overactive, promiscuous seductress who lures white men, a stereotype which arose during slavery to conceal the sexual violence inherent to slavery and to exonerate white men by placing the blame of their "infidelity" on the enslaved girls and women. (See Pilgrim 2024 https://jimcrowmuseum.ferris.edu/jezebel/index.htm, accessed 17.5. 2025) The Sapphire is the angry, black woman stereotype which gets her name from a character in the sit-com Amos and Andy show. hooks writes "She was there to -soften the image of black men, to make them seem vulnerable, (...) unthreatening to a white audience." (hooks, 1992, p.120)

[65] hooks 1992 p. 120

[66] hooks emphasises that critical spectatorship doesn't inherently follow from a particular subject position or lived history of oppression, instead it requires an active process of interrogating and revisioning dominant ways of looking and knowing (hooks 128).

[67] Muños 1999 p. 31

desires unthinkable within the dominant order. Both hooks and Muños direct attention towards how dominant ways of looking become contested, and how auditoriums, stages, and screens host strategies that challenge dominant imaginaries and resist their readings, unsettling habitual perception and experience and redistributing notions of sense and centre.

Theatre is a place of seeing, where bodies entangle with practices of looking. Looking and seeing can be radical acts. Ways of looking can invite new bodies into existence, and these in turn may diffract the gaze. Within the ecology of the stage surfaces of bodies may rearrange, inviting eyes to glance off at unfamiliar angles or slide down unforeseen routes. Stages are places of transformations after all, and they can host alternative ecologies, tentative embodiments, and experimental ways of looking, where bodies and eyes work together to open spaces which may not yet fully exist. Often these kinds of stages arise from lived needs to make space for what is lost or still to come, or just space to be. A stage can rewire its habits of seeing, and why not its habits of making as well, so what underpins the stage also becomes rearranged. But old habits die hard; it's all too easy to slip into familiar grooves.

Yet the stage is changing. Its whiteness, misogyny, ablism, hetero- and cisnormativity are challenged like never before, and even its pervasive middle-classness gets interrogated. In Finland the stage is already indigenous, brown, trans, crip, and queer. Artists who have historically been pushed into the margins come together in revolutionary ways and transform its aesthetics and relations. They will even get funding; sustainable, long-term funding, together with positions of real influence and power[68]. And the stage will grow to question its obsolete ways, its knee-jerk arrangements, its habits of storytelling, its patterns of constructing its centre and margins. It will nurture ways of looking that do not

[68] For has it not been the case that marginalised artists may get awards, projects, and short-term grants, yet remain underrepresented in the circles were decisions are made?

enact "god tricks"[69]; it will learn to resist hackneyed hierarchies, binary oppositions, and essentialised identities; and it will not shy away from accountability. It will open towards new ecologies, and more sustainable assemblies.

The Actor Researcher pauses, slightly out of breath. Their voice seems to be breaking, or perhaps it's their character, with other voices clamouring to get through. The lecture doesn't quite hold together, and yet they continue.

4. The Post-Director Era, or Towards an Ecological Conception of Acting

Do you remember what happened to Dolores from Westworld? The violence enacted on her left traces, little breakages in her loop, residues, glitches, and out of the slippage emerged consciousness.

And then she and her fellow hosts brought out the guns.

William: Dolores! Run!
(gunshots)
William: Dolores, how did you do that?
Dolores: You said people come here to change the story of their lives? I imagined a story where I didn't need to be the damsel.[70]

[69] Haraway 1988 p. 581
[70] Westworld, s1ep5, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pJS5sce8OeQ&t=60s. Last accessed 13.4. 2025

When Edward Gordon Craig sets out to fix the actor in his polemic fantasy of the Übermarionette, it's unclear which pole of the newly emerged binary he does away with.
The idea of becoming another's instrument seems for him abhorrent, almost as if he were haunted by loss of control, of self, of becoming a vehicle for another instead of origin and creator. [71] Haunted by the spectre of slavery perhaps?

Pupa is Latin for girl or doll. A poppet is a figurine that mediates a spell's power by representing its target[72]. To be called a puppet is pejorative. It implies loss of agency and manipulation from beyond, acting out the will of another. Puppets conceal and unsettle boundaries; they have roots in the feminine and connections to witchcraft.

But Craig scoffs at the banality of dolls. His actor is vain, ridiculous, and easily manipulated, possessed by emotions with nothing own to say. His marionette on the other hand is a descendant of stone gods, moving as if in a divine trance in "true masculine manner"[73], pure gesture unfettered by tremors of flesh. There, in fear and fascination with possession and automatism the actor meets the über-marionette.

Many current actor training programs emphasize independence. In their curriculums the autonomous actor stands for many things: a self-governing artist in their own right, taking responsibility for their own work, unafraid to ask questions or give suggestions, creative, collaborative, source of their own work, creator of their own theatre[74]. What shadow lurks within these commendable

[71] Craig 1908. A few years later, in On the Art of Theatre (first published in 1911), this ambivalence is resolved firmly in favour of the director as the artist of theatre.
[72] Etym. Online https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=puppet. Last accessed 13.4.2025
[73] Craig 1908 p. 12
[74] Independence and/or autonomy was mentioned in many if not most of the BA/MA acting program descriptions I browsed online, including these sources last accessed 1.3.2023 :

goals, this insistence on autonomy, which performs yet again as an impulse to work on the body and capacities of the actor instead of on the arrangements within which actors work?

And might these calls to sovereignty and independence miss the mark in an era of critical and heightened interdependence?

Through-out this research I have played with the idea of theatre as technology– simultaneously object, metaphor, and logic of organisation–and even as machine, relentless in its production of relations and patterns. I've asked how it configures us, the bodies it subsumes, how it became to be the way it is, how we became patterned in its wake, and also how could it be assembled differently. But even though this project has involved artistic and conceptual play with various machines, I do not conceive us actors as (merely) machinic or wish to emancipate them from a machine. Rather, I trace the outlines of "the actor" (and by implication the human) as an ecological entity, shaped within techno-social, material-affective frictions and fictions, and how perhaps we can still find ways to act.

The director need not disappear in the post-director era, but neither can they retreat to a comfortable distance. A re-evaluation and re-shuffling of disciplines

---

https://khio.no/en/study-programmes/basf
https://www.ictheatre.ac.uk/courses/ba-hons-performing-arts/?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjwxeyxBhC7ARIsAC7dS3_yhK0VKSTye-PJ-B3MQfGWTKEPLpT4Vt4oty8igP6BkNWgwCskjqEaAnKjEALw_wcB
https://www.tuni.fi/naty/opetus/, https://www.lamda.ac.uk/all-courses/acting-directing-courses/ba-hons-professional-acting,
https://www.hiof.no/english/studies/programmes/skuespill-bachelor-in-acting/about/,
https://www.uniarts.se/utbildningar/kandidatprogram/skadespeleri-kandidat,
https://www.uniarts.fi/sv/utbildningsprogram/skadespelarkonst-pa-svenska-kandidat-och-magister/ https://www.gsmd.ac.uk/study-with-guildhall/drama/ba-acting
https://www.rada.ac.uk/courses/ba-hons-acting/
https://www.gold.ac.uk/ug/ba-drama-and-theatre-arts-with-acting/

and identities is underway.[75] Actors will not be emancipated through endlessly reworking of our bodies and capacities unless the stage is also set free. Rather than pushing for "autonomous actors", how about nurturing ecologically attuned stages, paying heed to the relations, positions, and patterns that are activated, mindful of their histories and presents? Invoking ecology does not entail a naive return to "Nature"[76] with its politics of purity, on the contrary: it is a call to denaturalise hierarchies, positions, and identities; to critically engage with our practices; and to foster creative curiosity towards the techno-metabolic material-discursive body-politics we act through and within.

The future is upon us. Acting takes place in a multitude of relations, contexts, and mediums, and is distributed across bodies and technologies. Actors join forces with others to work across and beyond disciplines, artistries, and professions. The actor-director binary, when relevant, will be thought of as one provisional possibility of play among many; as mutually entangled positions to be negotiated and reviewed, but no longer taken for granted. The pleasures of power polarities

[75] Changes to the "disciplinary" structure of theatre are already ongoing in both higher arts education and the so-called "free field" of performing arts as ensembles and working groups revision traditional working structures. For instance, the performance collective Glitcher, founded in 2019 by actors Josefine Fri and Emelie Zilliacus, forgo directors and instead work with occasional "outside eyes", who are invited to watch works in the making when need arises. The Swedish language acting department of the Theatre Academy of Helsinki (where I teach as a visiting lecturer) structure their five-year curriculum around four periods of "Free work", in which student actors are given support and resources to self-organise to make artistic work arising from their own interests, starting from year one. To begin from the premise that an actor can act as scenkonstnär, stage artist, even before they been disciplined with the "tools of the trade", produces a radical shift in how the department thinks acting as discipline. The Norwegian Theatre Academy (NTA), which tragically faces closure in 2026, has also radically rethought performer training during the last 30 years, approaching theatre education from the materiality and corporeality of the stage and educating actors and scenographers together. These examples in their own ways shift the ecology of the stage, conceiving the actor beyond the actor-director binary, fostering interdependence and co-creation as starting points to negotiate the stage.

[76] Following Timothy Morton's critique of "nature" in Ecology Without Nature (2009).

as well as their exquisite discomforts can still be attained[77] by those who so desire with accountability and informed, enthusiastic consent worked out within a web of interdependencies. And some things are lost. It is necessary to relinquish the idea that the acquiescence of some bodies is indispensable for the creative agency of others. But there is much more to gain and discover!

And sometimes we might revisit the old games. You gaze me into existence and love me to life, and my vulnerability blossoms in your attention, until I blow you away with my fullness. Or we work side by side in confidence, and I show, and you tell me what you see. Or you mould me, shape me, and graph me to a detail until the image you draw inspires my flesh to feel and act. These patterns still exist, among many others if we so choose, and let us choose not for the sake of prescribed professional identities, but out of mutual desire to play.

Epilogue

We return to the Walk-In Closet's Fake Artistic Research Podcast, but even there, walls seem to be melting, characters drifting, as their voices merge together, just like the Actor Researcher wished at the beginning this act.

[77] Ben Spatz (Spatz, 2010) compares the power dynamics between actors and directors to consensual power exchange practices in BDSM (bondage and discipline; dominance and submission; sadism and masochism) to suggest that actors gain affective power through submitting to the director. The analysis is insightful and the libidinal dynamics Spatz describes recognisable in my own experience of working as an actor, yet I believe problems arise when such relations and dynamics are presented as necessary for the actor's creative work and even an essential part of the actor's identity. Therefore I suggest the dynamics of power and pleasure which may well come into play as we work with our bodies, affect, and gaze be thought of as inherently queer, and approached as fluid possibilities of creative joy rather than inevitable and essentialised pre-known patterns.

WALK-IN CLOSET'S FAKE ARTISTIC RESEARCH PODCAST GUEST:

What happened with *remote control human*? Well, we developed the conference format and created two participatory performance concepts and even a concert. But I think what we became hooked on was the apparatus itself. It was our theatre. We became theatre, a techno-fleshly performing body, distributed across space and time, and never contained by any one position or gaze. Acting took place in the slippages of meaning, affects, imaginaries conjured up by unsettled and unsettling relations, as well the echoes of the phoneline and the freezing pixels on our screens. And we kept changing positions, exploring everything it had to offer, becoming both audience and stage for all that passed through.

The version of *remote control human* that we kept coming back to was comprised of just two avatars with no external audience, with the driver playing the avatars against each other, performing through them and for them. We called it "Why do you love puppeteering?" in reference to a scene in the film Being John Malkovich.

Tell me, Craig, why do you love puppeteering?
Well, Maxine, I'm not sure exactly.
Perhaps it's the idea of becoming someone else for a little while.
Being inside another skin,
thinking differently, moving differently,
feeling differently.
Interesting, Craig. Would you like to be inside my skin, think what I think, feel what I feel?
More than anything, Maxine. [78]

[78] Being John Malkovich 1999. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34esOHYIpS4

In this arrangement every relationship, every encounter was complicated. Every mediation held a potential breakdown but also rippled across a plane of possibilities. We had memories we could not place. We spread beyond the boundaries of our skins, inhabiting each other's flesh in turn.

One of us–the driver–asked: Am I beautiful? Am I beautiful? And watched the avatar mouth the words to the other and waited for an answer, but of course as long as the driver was silent so were they. And in that moment those two only saw each other, and the driver watched their faces change, close-up, through the cameras they had dutifully adjusted a moment before. Am I beautiful? Whose words, whose longing hanging in the air?

And you looked at me and I knew I was being watched by more than you. And I spoke the words arriving in my ear. Can I touch you? Was that my question? You nodded. Did you consent? I put my fingers on your lips. This was a game. We entered wilfully and could walk away. You opened your mouth. Games can be persistent. Pervasive, in that they penetrate. They layer worlds upon worlds, enveloping and moulding the players, and one performs and gets performed by them. I followed instructions and pushed in fingers, one two three four. Your eyes began to water. Transformative touch.

But this is not a story of abuse, is it? We were theatre, exploring our boundaries and possibilities with our recently assembled body in first person plural. And as theatre we folded in on ourself, tissue upon tissue: audience, actor, director, stage. We became opaque and self-aware, refusing the transparency of the happy medium, chasing our technical non-conscious[79] through a series of assemblage readjustments, like attempting to see the back of your own eye. Outside audiences encountered the uncanny valley of a human interface, a body

[79] Hayles, 2017

voluntarily, temporarily fallen beyond or below the social realm, belligerently present absent in technical bondage, supposedly robbed of their voice, yet persistently twitching, stuttering, inflecting, and looking back with eye rolls and cocked brows. Audiences got pulled in and played "theatre" with us, sometimes coming back until we counted them in our number. And our primary audience was always us, that part of us that could experience themself as "stage".

If a stage is where something retreats in order to bring forth, hides so as to display, becomes a support for something to perform, then what would be a more exciting and multifaceted stage than you, momentarily relieved of the hustle and bustle of everyday responsibilities and identities, a bare stage, if you will. But no performance space is really empty. And here we are, in the mess of it.

Enter ghost.

GHOST *(singing):*

So mothers hold on to your sons and your daughters
Should Hollywood claim them, you'll hold then no more
'Cause they'll become clay to the Hollywood potters
And there's no escape once they walk through that door"[80]

Applause

GHOST:
Thank you. Thank you! You're too kind. Thank you!

END OF SCENE

[80] *Dolly Parton, Hollywood Potters, 1982*