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**Abstract:** *Unlike the technological virtual world, the world of the stage is exposed, and the individual body of every actor is vulnerable. Actors are confronted with the idiosyncrasies of the body. Actors are at their mercy. At the same time, the intelligence and dignity of their anatomy is obvious.*

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## The kiss of Olympia

The marriage of man and machine, of the living and the mechanical, is a theme that has pervaded the history of science and of the fine arts, literature, and theater from the very beginning. It both fascinates and repels us; it is invigorating and vitiating.

“Ah–Ah–Ah,” sighs the beautiful Olympia and gazes at the student Nathaniel “immovably in his face” – to the delight of Nathaniel, who has just declared his love for her. How else could Olympia look but immovable? She is a puppet, a marionette, a machine, an artificial prosthesis. But blinded by love, Nathaniel does not see how fixed her gaze is. He does not notice that he is staring into dead eyes, that Olympia does not return his gaze, that he is staring into nothingness. On the contrary. In his distorted perception, the dead gaze of the beautiful machine becomes the phantasm of his love. Only she understands him completely: “O thou splendid heavenly lady! Thou ray from the promised land of love – thou deep soul in which all my being is reflected.”<sup>1</sup> These words and more he whispers, spellbound, as his burning lips meet hers – which are as cold as ice! “He felt himself overcome by horror, the legend of the dead bride darted suddenly through his mind.”<sup>2</sup> This is E.T.A. Hoffmann’s tale “The Sandman,” which Freud uses for his interpretation of the uncanny.<sup>3</sup>

Finally, a kiss. At long last! Fantasized for so long, desired so greatly and then – instead of a soft warm mouth – ice-cold lips, without feeling, inanimate, almost dead. The idea of such a kiss is immediately repulsive to us, and the more realistic it is, the more revulsion it awakens. You feel it viscerally. Automatically your mouth, nose, and lips pull back in disgust. You have to shake yourself to get rid of the abhorrent sensation.

Nathaniel ignores all of his body’s alarm signals with fatal results. Without his noticing it, his kiss transforms from a promise of love into a promise of death. His blind gaze into Olympia’s empty eyes is a

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1 E.T.A. Hoffmann, “The Sandman” in Hoffmann, *Two Mysterious Tales*, trans. John Oxenford (New York: Mondial, 2008), 3–42.

2 *Ibid.*, 33.

3 Freud, *The Uncanny*.

foreshadowing of his own death; a moment's gaze into a death mask,<sup>4</sup> a disregarded memento mori.

The deadly fate thus sealed is revealed at the end of the story. Nathaniel seems to have recovered from his shock on learning that Olympia's heavenly visage was the wax face of an eyeless automaton. He is happily reunited with Clara, his clear-headed bride-to-be. They climb the town hall steeple, which casts a long dark shadow over the marketplace. Nathaniel takes an unfortunate peek through a telescope he happens to have in his pocket and is again thrust into delirium.<sup>5</sup> Delusional, he mistakes Clara for the puppet Olympia and tries to throw her from the tower. Not until the very last second is she saved by her brother, while Nathaniel himself jumps from the spire.

And so Nathaniel the man is shattered, just as Olympia is torn apart in a furious fight between her creators.

With one difference.

One end is bloody, the other is not. In one a human being breathes his last breath, while in the other the mechanics of an automaton are broken.

## Machine against man

In the natural sciences, in the arts, and in daily life, humans have long become disembodied via technology, media, and virtual reality. Whether positive or negative, questions arise. Polemical responses proliferate. Trade actors for avatars? Trade poor theater for big budget productions? Trade theater machines for empty space? Administrative bureaucracy has become anonymized, leading to Kafkaesque loops at every telephone call. *Please press 1 if you... if you... please press 2, if you, if you,*

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4 See Jean-Luc Nancy, "Masked Imagination," chapter 6 in *The Ground of the Image*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 80–100.

5 "Nathaniel mechanically put his hand into his breast pocket – he found Coppola's telescope, and pointed it to one side. Clara was in the way of the glass. His pulse and veins leapt convulsively. Pale as death, he stared at Clara, soon streams of fire flashed and glared from his rolling eyes, he roared frightfully, like a hunted beast. Then he sprang high into the air and, punctuating his words with horrible laughter, he shrieked out in a piercing tone, 'Spin round, wooden doll! – spin round!' Then seizing Clara with immense force, he tried to hurl her down." E.T.A. Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 28.

*please press, please press, 3, 4, 5... please hold the line, the next... beep, beep, beep.* Transplantation, organ trafficking, genetic modification, cloning, patients perpetually attached to machines. In some hip clubs, “chipping” or “tagging” is in. You can have a microchip implanted (long a common practice for animals) that gives you VIP status and saves you the bother of carrying a credit card or cash.<sup>6</sup> Big Brother is smiling. What else? Artificial Intelligence, computer games, Second Life, blogging, Twitter, Facebook, cybersex. There is no world like the virtual world.

Is the artificial human the definitive aim of evolution? Dream, phantom, shadow, angel, *Übermensch*, demon, Golem, Frankenstein, robot, cyborg, hybrid, avatar? Has there been a turn, have the old stories of transformation, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, become a trope in new myths? Perhaps a manifesto by Donna Haraway? Is, for example, Lara Croft, that icon of computer game avatars, a feminist variant of Olympia? Seductively beautiful, seductively perfect. A feminine ideal. How many Nathaniels have already lain blindly at her feet? Virtually, of course, not in real life. In real life they would lie shattered on the pavement in a pool of blood, painfully distorted, a dead lump of flesh, perhaps with a broken skull, their brains running out. Not a pretty sight. Not at all. Reality has not been faked. A real hit. A painful hit. A deadly hit. Ah – Ah – Ah! As it is, our modern Nathaniels are safe in the virtual world, with no risk of a meeting in real life and its uncontrollable consequences. They sit in a comfortable chair in front of a computer. Maybe their hands sweat a little, maybe somewhere in their bodies they feel arousal. Sure, why not? the screen is the telescope that imagines female beauty for them.<sup>7</sup> But

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6 For example, in the Netherlands (Rotterdam), Spain (Barcelona: Baja Beach Club), Scotland (Edinburgh: Bar Soba) and the United States (Miami: Amika Nightclub). See Harald Neuber, “Das Konto im Oberarm.” <http://www.heise.de/tp/r4/artikel/17/17707/1.html>. Accessed August 25, 2015.

7 “He took up a little, very neatly constructed pocket telescope, and looked through the window to try it. [...] Involuntarily he looked into Spalanzani’s room; Olympia was sitting as usual before the little table, with her arms laid upon it, and her hands folded. For the first time he could see the wondrous beauty in the shape of her face; only her eyes seemed to him singularly still and dead. Nevertheless, as he looked more keenly through the glass, it seemed to him as if moist moonbeams were rising in Olympia’s eyes. It was as if the power of seeing were being kindled for the first time; her glances flashed with constantly increasing life. As if spellbound, Nathaniel reclined against the window, meditating on the charming Olympia.” Hoffmann, *The Sandman*, 28.

unlike Nathaniel, at the end they turn it off with a click of the mouse, the software shuts down, the screen fades, and the machine powers down. They do not fall to a painful death. They are still alive and kicking. There is no pool of blood under them, at most a wet stain from Coke or beer or something else...

## The actor's trump card

The physical body of the actor is the central cipher of the theater – his singular bodily presence of flesh and blood, the exposed vulnerability of a being that has a name and only one life. Even if the human body can be replicated and faked by means of technological reproducibility and virtual simulation – up to and including its complete absence, where the actor appears only as a non-presence<sup>8</sup> – the singularity of the actor at hand remains the fascination of the theater. Intractable, theater – disregarding the cultural phenomenon of increasing disembodiment – continues to insist on the physical presence of the actor, and thus on the idiosyncrasy of the body and the vulnerability of the flesh. On stage, there is no hiding, no making a taboo of or faking the body, its vulnerable exposure. The body is open to scrutiny. Either way.

In acting, the actor risks no less than life and limb. There is no safety net. You may, of course, roll your eyes and think, excuse me, which actor risks his life? That only happens in other arenas. Bloody, cruel, truly lethal. That is true, of course. And nevertheless, in his own sphere, the actor's ante is his self, from head to toe. That is what is at stake when the wheel of fortune turns. Maybe he is not a tightrope walker who risks falling to his death if he makes one false step, but he is in more danger than it might seem at first sight. Even if it is only theatrical blood, even if the dead stand up and take their bows when the performance is over, it is still legitimate to describe this playing with the truth as a violent physical act, maybe even as an act that perforates the skin.

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8 See, for example, Martin Arnold *High Noon Loop* and *Deanimated: The Invisible Ghost* or Heiner Goebbels's new musical *Stifters Dinge*.

Why?

Acting demands that the body remembers and reactivates its porosity, that it again becomes permeable, that it opens all senses. This is not possible without power and prowess. Actors need to take their heads out of the sand, ignore conventions, and leave any resentment behind. Their eyes and ears must be open so that they can be all ear and all eye. Their breath, their speech, and their movements must flow freely. To achieve all this and more is, surprisingly, much more difficult than it sounds in theoretical musings. It is a drawn-out, denuding process.

European history of the analysis of the subject has favored analytical thinking over ecstatic corporeality. This is demonstrated on every stage and at every public appearance. It is demonstrated by those who step onto the stage, by everyone who has learned to understand the language of the body and not only that of discourse. Actors are a case in point. The actor cannot ignore his body nor does he have it completely under control. At the mercy of his own instability and fragility, he experiences in his own body that he is neither one of Heinrich von Kleist's marionettes, which, floating, ignores the laws of gravity, nor is he Kleist's fencing bear, which parries every thrust. Rather, he is painfully conscious of his place at the side of Kleist's graceful youth who has become aware of his gift of grace. When, however, the youth tries to secure this gift and prove to himself and the others that he has it, he has the misfortune of losing it completely:

He was unable to duplicate the same movement. [...] An invisible and inexplicable power like an iron net seemed to seize upon the spontaneity of his bearing.<sup>9</sup>

No matter which way we look at it, no matter what we do, the fact remains that the exposure of being on stage is a highly vulnerable situation for all actors. They are exposed to the fear of, perhaps one could even say to the pain of, illusory omnipotence. Heiner Müller even goes so far as to say, in a discussion with Alexander Kluge, that one of the most important characteristics of theater is that it subjects both actors and audience to death:

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9 Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre," trans. Thomas G. Neumiller, *The Drama Review, The "Puppet" Issue* 4/16 (1972), 22–26.

*The essence of theater is transformation. Death. And everyone's afraid of this final transformation, you can count on that fear, you can build on it. It's the actor's fear and the audience's fear. What's singular to theater is not the presence of the living actor, or the living audience. It's the presence of someone who could potentially die.*<sup>10</sup>

This is theater's trump card: that it can, to the point of mortality, create universal porosity. On stage, we see with our own eyes just how exposed we humans are, how vulnerable our bodies. The actor demonstrates this exposure with his own flesh and blood, and when his acting succeeds, he reminds us of our condition. Theater gives his body back the singularity and dignity that are his birthright. Presented to us in the abstract, masked by the media, this is so quickly and so easily ignored, so brutally disregarded. The actor's vulnerability, his mortality, no longer get under our skin. They no longer come close. They remain abstract, merely theoretical.

The most extreme forms of postdramatic theater confront us directly with bodily pain as a warning signal, a reminder of the bareness of our existence. In them, the deformed, tortured body is exposed to the point where performer and audience are no longer able to stand it. They push the body to the boundary of its lethal endangerment.<sup>11</sup> These are archaic acts, inspired by Dionysian bacchanals. Think what you will of them. Every quest, every act of conjuring, every provocation of the offensive eventfulness of art must follow its own path, if it wants to follow a path at all. And not every one of these paths requires an actor. He can be replaced by other artists who work in other art forms, or in other, less threatening types of theater that use laypeople, experts of reality who are situated in daily life rather than in the performative arts, or by theatrical concepts with other aesthetic or political priorities that do not involve the embodied "apprehension of existence returning upon itself."<sup>12</sup> That is not everyone's thing. Then be my guest, Mr.

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<sup>10</sup> Kluge and Müller, *Ich bin ein Landvermesser*, 95.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Viennese Actionism or, among others, Marina Abramovic's *Lips of Thomas* or *Rhythm 0*, the Societas Raffaello Sanzio company or the American performance artist Chris Burden's *Five-Day-Locker-Piece*, *Shoot* or *Through Night Softly*. Discussed in Fischer-Lichte, 90ff.

<sup>12</sup> Klossowski, 94.

Everyone, Ms. Everyone, go ahead and download your private lives onto the stage.

This text is an unequivocal examination of the *professional* actor. Of his pathos. Of his pain. Of his felicity, his infelicity. Of the vulnerability of his flesh. Of his Dionysian fragmentation. Of his particular art and special ability, as aptly evoked by Jean-Luc Nancy in *Corpus*:



*Jean-Luc Nancy: Corpus*

*We often tend to think that the body is a substance, that something bodily is substantial. And opposed to this, or elsewhere, under another rubric, there would be something else – for example something like the subject – that would not be substantial. I'd like to show that the body, if there is a bodily something, is not substantial, but a subject.<sup>13</sup>*

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<sup>13</sup> Nancy, *Corpus*, 123.



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