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Nederlandse vertaling:

Van de cyborg naar het apparaat. Posthumanistische figuren in de filosofie van Giorgio Agamben en de hedendaagse podiumkunst van Kris Verdonck.

# *From the cyborg to the apparatus.*

*Figures of posthumanism in the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben and the contemporary performing arts of Kris Verdonck.*

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*A real decision makes one humble, one knows that it is at the mercy of more things than can be named.*  
James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room* (1956, 24).

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# 0. Introduction: toward a critical posthumanism

## 0.1 The road and the destination

*The road is part of the destination*, dramaturge Marianne Van Kerkhoven once wrote. *The road you take to get to your conclusions, is included in the result, the work you do en route, defines the quality of the final material* (Van Kerkhoven, 1994, 7). To introduce this dissertation, the trajectory toward it is insightful and telling for its structure and my position within it. This research engages with performing arts practices and performance theory within the field of posthumanism. This field studies the changes in being human and the conception of the human, but also the impact of technological developments on human bodies, societies, the planet and the definition of what makes human beings 'human'. Posthumanism is a critical line of thought, as the larger part of those who explicitly operate under the term's umbrella seek to formulate both a criticism and an alternative (mostly through technology) to a humanist conception of the human, as being the measure of all things and that is shaped by Western, capitalist and individualist ideologies.

However, the starting point of the road of this research lies in the theatre. A number of fascinating artists have brought me to this theoretical field, but it is specifically the work of Belgian visual artist and theatre maker Kris Verdonck (°1974) that will serve here as the guiding line in developing a theoretical, dramaturgical and theatre scientific frame for the posthumanist performing arts, arising since the beginning of the millennium. Along with the line drawn by Verdonck's work, I will make use of Giorgio Agamben's philosophical oeuvre to shape a critical posthumanist frame resonating not only with Verdonck's performances and installations, but also with broader artistic, philosophical, socio-economic and political evolutions.

The seeds of this research were hence planted by my experiences as a spectator. Two performances I saw in 2009 had a profound impact on my perspective on the performing arts and I dare to say, on the world as well. Romeo Castellucci's iconoclastic theatrical translation of Dante's *Inferno* (2008) was a sequence of ingeniously crafted images and scenes. It showed no characters, nor drama, but rather various cases of a particular human condition, which I believe referred to the tension between a desire for an impossible intimacy and the falsification of this desire in a hyper-mediatized culture. In the opening scene, Romeo Castellucci entered the stage and his attempt to communicate in a personal manner with the audience is thwarted by a group of German shepherd dogs attacking him and pulling him to the floor. In another scene, a series of performers hugged each other only to make the gesture of slitting the other's throat immediately afterwards. Dark crackling, rustling sounds and echoes of bones breaking pervaded the

performance. Being exposed to the other and yet not being capable of intimacy: that is Castellucci's conception of 'hell'. This interpretation of Dante's classic nevertheless used the theatre as a shared space and time in a particular way. In one scene, a large white veil was passed on to and over the audience, covering the whole tribune under a white mist or landscape. This action unified stage and tribune, and created a moment of contact amongst the spectators, although paradoxically they lost sight of most of the 'others' surrounding them. In Castellucci's performances, the theatre as a medium as such is always at stake. The dynamics of a shared space and time, of looking at and being watched, the desire to communicate and the fourth wall functioning as a permeable membrane between audience and the stage: these are recurrent formal elements that Castellucci considers on the level of the content as well. In addition, Castellucci uses the technical possibilities of the theatre extensively, having a car on stage or televisions falling down from the ceiling, actions that increase the materiality of the 'here and now' of the performance. The condition of watching theatre and the theatre's technicality become part of Castellucci's dramaturgy. A third aspect of his take on the medium of theatre is performativity, a capacity that in *Inferno* is extended from (adult) human performers to toddlers, dogs, a horse, light, sound and objects. Their presence on stage differs from that of the traditional character performed by an actor. I will come back to Castellucci's vision on performing in the development of what I will call the 'figure' in chapters 1.2 and onwards.

The use of the theatre apparatus in its spatio-temporal, technical and performative sense, received an especially resonating dramaturgical content in Kris Verdonck's *END* (2008), a performance referred to by Van Kerkhoven (at the time the dramaturge for Verdonck) as a theatrical installation (2008). A more extensive description of *END* is part of chapter 2.1, for now it suffices to point out the cyclical rhythm and movement of the ten performing 'entities', moving from stage right to stage left, besides one. That latter one was the only 'free' human performer, that is, he was not connected to a mechanical contraption. None of the other nine entities were exclusively human. Four of them – black snow, a running fire, an engine, and loudspeakers on wheels – were nonhuman objects. The five other entities consisted of human performers coupled with either a harness, a carriage, a body bag or a belt attached to a heavy weight. As the title suggests, *END* is a reflection on the end, on catastrophic events happening slow and fast, such as ecological disasters, wars, scientific and military experiments, etc. On the one hand, the human performers entangled with various objects were instances of dehumanization. On the other, the anti-theatrical use of the theatre apparatus was part of 'a dramaturgy of the end', of a political and economic critique on how technologies developed by human beings – atomic bombs, napalm, pesticides, pollution caused by industrialization – threaten the sheer existence of humankind. The technology of the theatre, and the use of technologies within the theatre became part of a larger existential, political and socio-economic criticism and reflection.

Diving deeper into the work of Verdonck, I discovered and became familiar with an oeuvre that uses technology as a form to discuss its implication in larger questions about theatre, performance, performing, the conception of human beings and socio-political critique. The central issue fueling his oeuvre would be the blurring of the divide between objects and subjects. This leads to a variety of artistic renderings of ways in which subjects (i.e. human beings) are becoming objectified and in which objects (i.e. nonhumans) are becoming subjectified. Wavering between performative installations, theatrical performances and choreography, Verdonck's art can be considered emblematic of a contemporary artistic reflection on the current 'human' condition. He makes use of technology to make these reflections and by doing so, challenges the artistic disciplines in which his work operates (e.g. Vanhoutte, 2010; Vanderbeeken, 2010; Van Beek, 2010; Eckersall, 2015b; Bay-Cheng, Parker-Starbuck and Saltz, 2015; Laermans, 2015; Lavender, 2016; Eckersall, Grehan and Scheer, 2017). The performativity in Verdonck's oeuvre is configured without characters and without any dramatic line, implying the presence of a nonhuman performativity and a particular relation of the human with the nonhuman (albeit technological or animal). This I also saw at work in Castellucci's *Inferno* and in the work of other artists, such as Andros Zins-Browne's *The lac of signs* (2014), a holographic installation in which a female dancer performs deconstructed phrases of *The Swan Lake*, or in Annie Dorsen's *Hello Hi There* (2010), in which two computers re-perform a humorous and profound variation on the 1971 Foucault-Chomsky television debate on human nature, language and political power. Another example is Gheumyung Jeong's *CPR Practice* (2013), a performance in which the South Korean artist uses a plethora of machines to reanimate a CPR practice doll which is as performative as she is. Besides a fascination and appreciation for this kind of artistic practices, I realized that a more fundamental theoretical and philosophical research was required to gain a deeper understanding of the aesthetics of these practices, their politics and the (posthumanist) critique they are expressing.

The road toward the destination of posthumanism travels through historical developments and evolutions in critical thinking, both in theory and in artistic practice. The blurring, suspension and crossing over of the subject-object divide is an endeavor in both artistic practices and critical theories that can be brought together under the umbrella of 'posthumanism'. Posthumanist theories that present themselves as such – and I underline this assumption as I am convinced there are many theories that can be considered posthumanist that do not refer to the term – have taken the occasion of technological innovations, such as smart computers, implants, prosthesis, robots and their increasing proliferation and presence in our intimate daily life, and the spreading of systems theory and cybernetics to analyze the functioning and behavior of both machines, human beings, organisms and social structures (and thus leveling them), to deconstruct a humanistic worldview and conception of the human. The first posthumanists' connection to science-fiction literature and movies might have given

their theories an aura of novelty and innovation. However, these thinkers, of which Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles are the most renowned, can be placed in a longer process of deconstructing the humanist worldview, with Althusser and Foucault on the anti-humanist forefront (Badmington, 2000, 7).

Perhaps surprisingly, Neil Badmington traces the genealogy of a posthumanist conception of the world and the human to the beginning of humanism in the Renaissance. Since this time, the human indeed has been removed further and further from the centre of the universe. This means that almost as soon as the human superseded God as central point of reference, this centrality was challenged by new knowledge. Copernicus discovered that the Earth was not the centre of the universe, Darwin found out that the homo sapiens is biologically kin to apes and thus has to accept its own animality and discard his superiority to other life forms, Marx redefined the subject as a consequence of the means of existence, and thus as being subject to history and Nietzsche declared that god is dead, thus taking away the religious grounds for Man's exception and privilege to rule over the Earth. Next to that the human was also decentred from his own subjectivity. Freud and later Lacan revealed that the human is not even controlling himself, having an unconscious with desires and fears. Especially with this last development, Descartes' superior human, with reason separating him from all other beings and machines, had to deal with a difficult to digest blow (Badmington, 2000, 4-6). However, instead of recalibrating the conceptions of the world and the human and subsequently organising oneself and society accordingly, the decentring processes are often denied vehemently. Posthumanist thinkers seek to amend that denial and want to criticize humanist, anthropocentric, exclusionary and exploitative systems and ideologies, in order to come to terms with the current condition. I am interested in artists that through their artistic practice pursue exactly this, and in the artistic and dramaturgical strategies they develop to do so.

For Badmington, *posthumanism is always becoming, coming and yet going, and the difference of tense marks a tension, an ongoing questioning* (2001, 51). A genealogy of posthumanist thinkers is therefore very diverse and fluctuating. However, some lines of thought in posthumanism need to be traced in order to position myself as a researcher. One of the first thinkers to use the notion of posthumanism was Ihab Hassan, who in a 1976 lecture (published a year later) asserted that *humanism may be coming to an end as humanism transforms itself into something one must helplessly call posthumanism* (1977, 843). He did so in a lecture that had a theatrical, performative structure, evoking Prometheus as *a figure of flawed and evolving consciousness, an emblem of human destiny* (831). Prometheus, who stole the fire from the gods and gave it to humans, paved the way for the development of craftsmanship, technique and a process of knowledge that was essentially foreign to human beings, who would continue their existence in a struggling relationship to their *technè*. The fire was a *forbidden fruit: we owe everything to a crime* (Hassan, 1977, 832). Hassan already posits several issues that posthumanism will continue to bring to the fore, such as

the relationship between the one and the many, the individual and society, the quantum particle and the large structure (1977, 835). He described posthumanism as a matter of performance, involving imagination, science, myth and technology – indicating the fundamental intertwinement of the (performing) arts, with their capacity for imagination and technological and scientific development (838). For Hassan, one of the indications of an upcoming posthumanist culture was indeed *the incorporation of technology into the arts, both as theme and form* (839).

Previous to Hassan, Michel Foucault closed his chapter on the development of the human sciences in *Les mots et les choses* by predicting their end: *L'homme est une invention dont l'archéologie de notre pensée montre aisément la date récente. Et peut-être la fin prochaine* (1966, 398). Posthumanism in the way I intend to develop it in this research, does not so much deal with the actual disappearance of humankind, although that increasingly pending possibility is certainly part of the posthumanist imaginary, but rather with the end of a particular image of the human, that, as Foucault wrote so aptly, *s'effacerait, comme à la limite de la mer un visage de sable* (1966, 398). The deconstruction of the myth of Man, of the Western, white, male, knowing and controlling homo sapiens is a project that is not exclusive to posthumanist thinking. The technological and scientific developments around and after the Second World War – in which industrialized killing had its devastating culmination in both the atomic bomb and the camps, which led to the an existential questioning of the humanist values – mark a moment after which many elements that were up until then considered to define and separate the human from the nonhuman were challenged. Technology became an important factor in deconstructive theories of the Human with capital H – or to include the patriarchal aspect, Man – as much as it became a force of power and control within capitalist democracy and other political constellations. The Western humanistic and anthropocentric ideologies, which go back to the Judeo-Christian roots of Western culture (De Mul, 2014b, 464) and that aligned with progress and human mastery over the world, had revealed their dark and destructive sides. In an apparent paradoxical logics, it is the humanist project that has led to the condition of posthumanism, leading to dehumanization and the blurring of the object/subject divide, both shifts in which technology has played an elementary role. While making that criticism, posthumanist theorists and artists do not plead for a return to a previous 'humanity', but rather see this posthumanist condition as an opportunity to deconstruct systems of power and conceptions of the world and the human. They differ, however, in their starting points and finalities, and in the arts this corresponds to differing artistic strategies as well.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, a line of artists started to use new technologies and reflect on their impact on conceptions of the world and the human. The futurists' technophilia and enthusiasm was tempered by the First World War, to make way for the avant-garde's experiments with and in film and other at that time 'new' media and materials, questioning the role of technology in society and its industrialization of

violence. *By incorporating technology into art, the avantgarde liberated technology from its instrumental aspects and thus undermined both bourgeois notions of technology as progress and art as 'natural', 'autonomous', and 'organic' (Huysen in Rutsky, 1999, 73).* Huysen writes here about the interbellum incorporation of at that time innovative media such as photography, film and industrialized materials. His argument still stands today, albeit that it became clear that not all art that incorporates technology goes beyond instrumentality. In the second half of the twentieth century, after the Second World War, the rise of performance art was a reaction to how the *possibility of global annihilation made human beings more aware than ever of the fragility of creation [...], one finds an emphatic questioning of the experience of living in a global village perched on the brink of self-destruction (Schimmel, 1998, 17).* The incorporation of technology in the arts coincided with the development of a focus on the creative process and the ephemerality of the artwork itself. No longer a traditional sculpture, painting or text, these art works took the shape of which is often merely a trace or an incident, or were conceived as a construction in which an incident could happen. Something peculiar happens there, as technology, machines and objects – usually known for their repetition, stability and functionality – now were reiterated and repurposed to perform their failure, destruction or randomness in the here and now.

In the performing arts, machinery on stage is not new. The *deus ex machina* is a classic example of how already in Ancient Greek and Baroque performances various mechanical constructions – tellingly related to the gods – were part of stage techniques to narrate a drama. In the nineteenth century, ghosts were brought on stage through optical illusions. In the 1920's, Erwin Piscator used projections and a rotating stage in his political theatre (Willet, 1978). Later, the influence of the visual arts on the theatre and dance field, consisted for a large part of ephemeral performance and process, and of the increasing autonomization of technology, machines and objects. These gained a performativity that goes beyond that of the prop (Veltruský, 1964). The theatre aesthetic that developed throughout the twentieth century and that lets go of the (textual) drama in the search for a moment and space beyond representation, comes close to Performance Art, and especially in the eighties, these fields start to intersect and exchange intensively (Lehmann, 2007, 134). The decentering of the human from his self-created humanist and anthropocentric universe also led to important changes within the dramatic arts. Especially the developments in the second half the twentieth century, prefigured in the writings of for example Artaud and Bataille, and that were also articulated in the philosophy of thinkers such as Lacan, Althusser, Foucault and Deleuze, led to a decentering of the text as a guiding, rational principle. This evolution went along with a deconstruction of the conception of the human as a character with a clear dramatic line, as well as of action originated in a knowing subject with a clear purpose. A larger emphasis on non-textual theatrical means – physicality, time as duration, visuality, non-linear structures – became an essential part of what is now broadly known as

postdramatic theatre (Lehmann & Jürs-Munby, 2007). Postdramatic theatre not only changed the conception of how human beings perform, it also implies a different status of objects.

Postdramatic theatre, according to Lehmann, has

the possibility of returning to things their value and to the human actors the experience of 'thing-ness' that has become alien to them. At the same time, it gains a new playing field in the sphere of machines, which connects human beings, mechanics and technology

[...].

It seems indeed that the ever accelerating technologization and with it the tendency of a transformation of the body from 'destiny' to controllable and selectable apparatus – a programmable techno-body – announces an *anthropological mutation* whose first tremors are registered more precisely in the arts than in quickly outdated judicial and political discourses (Lehmann & Jürs-Munby, 2007, 165).

Lehmann refers to the work of Polish visual artist and theatre maker Tadeusz Kantor as exemplary for a tendency in postdramatic forms of performing arts *to valorize the objects and materials of the scenic action* (Lehmann & Jürs-Munby, 2007, 72). The attention for and the life of objects on Kantor's stage are part of the deconstruction of a traditional dramatic hierarchy *in which everything (and every thing) revolves around human action* (Lehmann & Jürs-Munby, 2007, 72). The de-dramatized mode of action, or rather, of performing, is thus (partially) realized by the foregrounding of the object's 'life', by not treating it as a mere action-supporting prop. But that is not the only thing objects do. Kantor's objects' perceived vulnerability reflects on the human performers that are in their presence, as *the human actors appear under the spell of the objects* (Lehmann & Jürs-Munby, 2007, 73).

Since the late eighties, the notion of posthumanism has been gaining firmer ground both in philosophy, with mainly feminist theory as the catalyst (Harraway, 1985; Halberstam & Livingstone, 1995; Hayles, 1999), and in artistic performative practices that have become emblematic of feminist posthumanism such as the work of Orlan. Posthumanist performing arts are for a large part postdramatic. What specifically makes them posthumanist (with the exception of transhumanism) is the combination of a critique of the humanist conception of the subject (hence, of Cartesian phallogocentrism giving primacy to the rational, male mind) and of the role of technology in both the formation and deconstruction of the humanist subject. The central notion in posthumanist theories and artistic practices in the final two decades of the past millennium was that of the cyborg, following Harraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* from 1985. The question of the deconstruction of humanism and the relation between humans and technology were later expanded to the relation between humans and nonhuman animals

and it became part of an emancipatory feminist and queer thinking. Prosthesis, networked subjectivities, cyber-communities and identities, various forms of plastic surgery – all of these features can also be found within the cyberpunk movement's aesthetics – and artificial life were and still are among the forms cyborg performing arts adopt and explore. These artistic practices and theoretical frameworks, which I will come to call cyborg-posthumanism, make an explicit connection between science (fiction), art and technology. The cyborg, short for 'cybernetic organism', is part of the imaginary on how technology invades the body and creates docile, lethal, semi-artificial beings as well as new identities that would not be able to be controlled by any form of state power, be it capitalist or communist. Other, more transhumanist strands (cf. chapter 1.1.2) advocate an augmented humanity, pursuing the Cartesian body-mind split, with the latter being considered the essential aspect of humankind and the former being a vessel that should be perfected and 'upgraded' or even replaced by an inorganic carrier. In the performing arts the body is thus the central element of action. Or to rephrase it, the perspective on the body is what differentiates the various strands of cyborg-posthumanism from each other. However, one might ask whether a posthumanism starting from the concept of the cyborg is *sufficiently radical in its rethinking of subjectivity* (Callus & Herbrechter, 2012, 249)?

In any case, the artistic practices of Kris Verdonck and the other artists mentioned in this introduction do *not* resonate well with the theoretical frame and the aesthetics of the cyborg. Nevertheless, I have found that the cyborg frame – operating on a concrete biopolitical level in which the physical body is altered into a new constellation that gives rise to an emancipated or transcendent subjectivity – is still used to analyze works that would not immediately correspond to it. From the side of the arts, the cyborg still applies as a concept and source of inspiration for various artistic practices, although in these cases, I would dare to make the criticism that they do not longer correspond to a particular technological, economic and political reality, and that the proposed emancipation might not lead to a greater independence from technology and the powers that are mediated through it. As technique philosopher Bernard Stiegler aptly argues, *any analysis of the current age in the terms by which [Foucault] defined biopower could lead to a misunderstanding of the specific elements of our situation* (Stiegler, 2010a, 115). Most of us, human beings, have not become literal cyborgs in the sense that our bodies have not physically fused with a technological prosthesis or other additions. Like Verdonck's human performers in *END* seek to make their way while being suspended in harnesses, there is a dependence and connection to technology that works in other ways than the cyborg does, and calls for a change in the cyborgian image of posthumanism. The mental and affective ties that make users addicted to technologies and have them endow these technologies or objects with subjectivity, as Gheumyung Jeong does in the aforementioned example of *CPR Practice*, proposes something else than the cyborg. In the performing arts, a different aesthetics and different dramaturgical strategies are used to articulate and interrogate the role of technology in the current condition. *END* offers

examples of this as well, with autonomous nonhuman performers or a low-tech, mechanical construction in which human performers are entangled in a desubjectifying yet graceful way. Annie Dorsen's conversing computers not only playfully demonstrate the potential intelligent capacities of AI, but by using the Foucault-Chomsky debate on human nature, they also point at how the agency of technology urges to redefine both the human and the agency of technology that might in the end no longer need us. *Hello Hi There* is indeed a theatre performance by computers in which the human is no more than a spectator.

I will argue that the critical potential of the concept of the cyborg has declined and that posthumanist performance studies need an update to on the one hand be able to describe, interpret and comment on artistic practices that formulate a criticism of humanism and anthropocentrism today, and on the other hand, to take further steps in the radical decentring of the human and the subject in the arts, reflecting on how this shift is also shaping our current political and economic condition. I have found that posthumanist performances, such as those of Verdonck and Castellucci, are more in line with a critique of humanism in the line of Marx, Freud, Darwin and Foucault, that is continued today in the work of amongst others Bernard Stiegler, Byung-Chul Han, Franco 'Bifo' Berardi and Agamben. Nearly all of the aforementioned artists use technology as an artistic form to articulate a critique on humanism that is also directed at how technology mediates state power, capitalism consumerism and a profit oriented dehumanized organization of labour. However, these and other artists also use less technological forms to express their critique. Following Hassan's suggestion that the conflation of art and technology will also have consequences for those art practices that do not immediately and concretely show, use, or demonstrate (cyber-)technologies, the cyborg as an explicitly technological frame might not suffice for those practices (Hassan, 1977, 841). The search and call for a contemporary, critical posthumanism stems from a personal belief in the performing arts as being a place of reflection and creativity that is deeply intertwined with the world in which it finds itself.

At this point, the third pillar of this research enters into my argument. Next to the work of Kris Verdonck and the question of posthumanism, I will analyze in depth the work of Giorgio Agamben. I came to know the work of Agamben while doing research on Castellucci (van Baarle, 2014). I did not only find a body of work that was rich in thought and scope, but that was also connected to the artistic practices that I felt were reflecting on the way how dehumanization, objectification, technologization, radical commodification and state power are characterizing Western society today.<sup>1</sup> For

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<sup>1</sup> Agamben regularly writes about artworks and artistic practices and since the early two thousands, his work is being read and used to interpret both visual and performing arts. A closer look at for example the archive of the

Agamben, who continues the lineage of Foucault, Debord, Heidegger and Benjamin, *the polemic of modern art is not directed against man, but against his ideological counterfeiting; it is not antihuman, but anti-humanistic* (Agamben, 1993b, 55). However, Agamben can not immediately be categorized as a posthumanist thinker. Nevertheless, media and mediation, instrumentality, the scientific unravelling and management of biological life, humanity's dependence on and relation to technological devices and the commodity fetish are among the ways technology and objects are discussed in his political and ontological theory. One particular essay offers an entrance to Agamben's oeuvre from the point of view of technology, while already redefining what is to be understood as technology, namely his essay on the apparatus *What is an apparatus? (Che cos'è un dispositivo?)* (2009 [2006]). In chapter 1.2, I will go deeper into the philosophical roots and analysis of the concept of the apparatus; for now it suffices to point out that the apparatus is a political understanding of technology and all other objects and systems that are in relation with living beings and in that way attribute to the formation of a subject. The apparatus thus operates on the ontological level. Apparatuses are initially created by humans. However, this did not prevent them from changing in nature, transforming into destructive machines in today's late-capitalist regime with its declining democratic institutions. The apparatus allows us to think technology in a non-technological way, which means that it enables to describe artistic strategies that criticize a society in which nearly all facets of life are mediated and measured by technological devices and software, although these do not necessarily 'look' high tech. It is more about creating the conditions, on stage or in an installation, to generate a state of being for the (non)human performers or the audience, a particular temporality, a relation to the space, and to the self. I believe it would be useful and insightful to replace the cyborg concept and take the apparatus as a central concept for what could then be called an apparatus-posthumanism. In reading Verdonck's work through Agamben, and interpreting and operationalizing Agamben's work through Verdonck's, I will develop a new perspective on posthumanism as a condition in the world, and as a practice and object of critique in the performing arts.<sup>2</sup>

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Flemish performing arts magazine Etcetera shows at least fifteen articles in which Agamben's terminology is used to describe the practice of artists such as Meg Stuart, Mårten Spångberg, René Pollesch or Hanneke Pauwe, as well as the role of the artist in society, residency networks, creative process in the studio, developments in circus, ... (see: [http://theater.uantwerpen.be/etc/search\\_cache/q=agamben&a=&page=1.html](http://theater.uantwerpen.be/etc/search_cache/q=agamben&a=&page=1.html), last accessed on 27/12/2017).

<sup>2</sup> In theory, various developments occurred after Bruno Latour's important contributions to science and technology studies (STS), in which he described how nonhuman entities also have agency in 'our' human world and that phenomena are not or human and social, or nonhuman and natural (Latour, 1993). It precisely this split that has led to an inability to read and see how things happen, and moreover, it has led to the idea of a humanity that can control, exhaust and destroy its environment. Around 2010, numerous publications appeared that launched new philosophical strands that I would also call posthumanist, or that are at least strongly connected

## 0.2 Structure of the dissertation

Starting from Kris Verdonck's artistic and Giorgio Agamben's philosophical oeuvre, I have engaged in a dialogue with the existing posthumanist literature and foremost with the artworks discussed in them. This dissertation consists of two large parts, each subdivided in chapters. In the first part, I argue for an alternative conceptual framework to that of the cyborg as it is predominantly used in posthumanist interpretations of (performing) artworks. I build up this argument by a critical revision of artists that are emblematic of cyborg-posthumanism as it developed since the 1990s, both in theory as in the arts, such as Orlan, Stelarc, Eduardo Kac and C.R.E.W. How do we look at their artistic strategies and the politics behind them twenty to thirty years later? Respectively focusing on embodiment, transhumanism, animal studies and instrumental demonstration, these aspects of artworks that are regularly analyzed as characteristic of a cyborg-posthumanist artistic practice are redefined from a contemporary perspective. I will argue that some strategies today have become captured by the apparatuses they were trying to subvert. In addition, power has modified its strategies in a world of globalized capitalism – the concept of the cyborg was conceived during the Cold War – and the ecological question has become more pressing. On a conceptual level, the cyborg has some principal shortcomings when searching for a more fundamental posthumanism that is able to engage with technology on a pre-subjective, ontological level, and that differs from the cyborg's attachment to the subject, in the search for a form of life beyond the subject. I will demonstrate that the cyborg still implies a dualism between human beings and technology, a dualism that latently suggests a form of control over objects and technologies that are considered as tools for a new subjectivity.

In the second chapter of this first part, instead of the cyborg, I take the apparatus as a starting point to develop a frame to analyze how performing arts reflect and criticize the current posthumanist condition. With Agamben's notion of the apparatus, a new understanding opens up that allows me to describe artworks that focus on issues relating to the posthumanist questions. Analyzing the work of Romeo Castellucci, Toshiki Okada, and various other artists, I develop an apparatus-posthumanism that is based on three evolutions or differences with cyborg-posthumanism: a letting go of the subject, a mutation of power into a psychopolitics and a radical post-anthropocentrism that goes

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to it. Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) meant the proliferation of New Materialism (as well as Braidotti 2013). A group of philosophers consisting of Graham Harman, Ray Brassier and Quentin Meillassoux initiated Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology, experimenting with a nonhuman philosophy and an epistemology that goes beyond the human. All these recent strands of thought can be related to posthumanism, albeit of a different type than the one oriented towards the concept of the cyborg, as they mostly search for a more radical decentering of the human, and not focus on its relation with technology.

beyond body humanism. With the apparatus, I also seek to formulate a posthumanism that operates outside of the more traditionally cyborgian techno-scientific sphere and aesthetics. The impact of technology is not always technological, it has consequences for the way people communicate, see themselves and others, experience and exercise citizenship, friendship and love. It changes conceptions of being in the world, of time, of action and of individuality and expression. Technology is also always part of political and socio-economic structures that often have a globalized impact, on low-wage labor, geopolitical conflicts and relations, and increasingly more alarming, on the planet. In the performing arts, a posthumanism that does not necessarily 'look' technological is in line with a postdramatic aesthetic as it was described above, although there are fundamental differences with some artists when it comes to the appreciation of the subject and of humanism. From the perspective of the apparatus, the body as selectable apparatus does not have to be a cyborg body, it can be controlled through the management and government of desires, attention and other less material forms of power. The acknowledgment of objects as performative entities is one important element. Seeing objects as agents operating within larger economic, social and political systems and hence as transmitters and operators of control and consumption, is a second, more important aspect. In an apparatus-posthumanist performative installation, an object might be performative, it might even be a robot or a machine, but it reflects more than the techno-scientific condition, and asks questions about performance, affect, projection, life, dependence, violence, ...

Discussions on posthumanism in the performing arts go to the heart of this artistic discipline, as it leads to the question of 'what performs'. Who, or rather, what has agency and how does that agency signify and communicate? After setting the parameters for an apparatus-posthumanism in part 1, in part 2 I go deeper into one particular oeuvre, that of Kris Verdonck, and the consequences for performers, performance, creative processes, the theatre apparatus, and spectatorship. I will suggest the notion of the *figure* to indicate the performing entity<sup>3</sup> in apparatus-posthumanism, a notion that has its roots in Agamben's philosophy and that Verdonck and his late dramaturge Marianne Van Kerkhoven also use to refer to both his human performers and the performing machines and robots.

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<sup>3</sup> I consciously use the notion 'entity' as opposed to 'identity'. As Stalpaert has shown in her reading of Deleuze, identity implies a *stability* and more rigid forms of subjectivity based in rationality and knowability, whereas entity is related to *mobility* and *decentered subjectivity*, in a constant flux and becoming (see also 2.2.2: the beauty of destruction, on the *tourbillon*) (Stalpaert, 2002, 90, my transl.). In relation to the posthumanist perspective based on the apparatus, that will be developed throughout this dissertation, entity allows a conception of the self beyond subjectivity, as well as a scope beyond the human, thus including objects, nonhuman animals, etc., thereby implicitly pointing out that they have a form of performativity as well.

Drawing from Verdonck's body of work, I develop four types of figures that correspond on the one hand to various shapes the figure can take and on the other hand to four different varieties of the figure that can be found (partially) in all four shapes. The marionette, the object-figure, the phantasm and the mascot are at the same time features and concrete appearances of figures in Verdonck's work. Human performers placed in object-like situations, objects placed in 'human' conditions, spectral digital presences that are not discernable from real, material presences and human bodies that have disappeared within an object are the four ways in which figures are created in the oeuvre of Verdonck up until this moment of writing. These figures are all ambiguous, showing at once a dark and pessimistic image of the apparatus-posthumanist condition, and a possibility for an alternative that lies within the bleak reflection on the world they offer. The ambivalence between dystopia and utopia is a feature that cyborg-posthumanism shares with apparatus-posthumanism. In the former, this is part of the liberatory or continued humanistic project of its thinkers and artists. In the latter, it is a feature that belongs to Verdonck's work and to Agamben's as well. Agamben may make dystopian analyses of our times, he also always suggests that within this condition, there is a potentiality we can connect to. The deconstruction of power structures, and the condition of increased desubjectification and dehumanization, harbor what he has called a *flip side* (Agamben in Smith, 2004, 115). In Verdonck's work, this potentiality shows in an unsettling appearance of beauty and humor, in the creation of moments of shared contemplation and existential paradox, as well as in the creative process and the ways human performers, technicians and not in the least Verdonck himself, negotiate their position within an oeuvre in which objects and technology are given space and time to develop on their own terms.

Whereas in the discussion of the four types of figures (chapters 2.2 -2.5) I focus more on the performing entity, in the sixth and final chapter of this second part, I go deeper into the time and space of the figure in relation to Agamben's concepts concerning temporality and being in the world. The mascot figure marks an interesting shift in Verdonck's oeuvre, as it is not only comprised of a human body that is caught in a mascot suit, but also explicitly includes the theatre apparatus, its time and space and the being exposed to an audience. These features become existential in a commentary on a neoliberal insistence on permanent performance and on a being thrown in the world that leads to a being in exile in the world, a condition that is captured by apparatuses that perpetuate and intensify this condition. In Verdonck's manipulations of the theatre apparatus, both a continuation of the political and economic apparatuses from 'outside' and a counter apparatus, which I will term 'negative apparatus', are created.

Verdonck – and with him, apparatus-posthumanism – uses the theatre apparatus in the creation of figures and in doing so, he redefines and plays with the boundaries between artistic disciplines, to be more specific, the visual arts and the performing arts dispositives. When experimenting with the threshold between object and subject, their

respective places of representation and artistic disciplines – the museum and the theatre – are confronted with each other. Recently, a renewed exchange between visual arts and performing arts gained momentum and attention, specifically by importing dance into the museum and visual artists into the theatre. From an apparatus-posthumanist perspective, this exchange is part of a dramaturgy in which the subject/object divide is suspended. In Verdonck's apparatus-posthumanism, this leads to various temporalities. These temporalities are part of the dehumanizing apparatus – such as endless time, a dominant present or an eternal, machinic time – or they enable a state of suspended chronological time, a time that belongs to those who live it. These temporalities are often a consequence of the confrontation of the museum and the theatre, leading to an 'endless' or suspended museum time in the theatre. I will argue that Verdonck nevertheless starts from a theatre perspective, and that his work could be described as post-theatre, a theatre after theatre, after representation and after the human. In this post-theatre, a particular spectatorship occurs, that connects to existential aspects of being human and to the void that lays at the center of existence. With Agamben and Virno, these various temporalities can be related to the sensation of posthistory, to which also corresponds a particular position of the spectator, who is confronted with powerlessness and impasse. A relation to and reflection on the end – as an individual death or collective extinction – is characterizing Verdonck's oeuvre. The potential end of human presence on this planet is an undertone in the whole of Verdonck's work, and his works of 2016 and 2017 make this end all the more tangible and near. At that point, where the posthumanist condition turns into a literal post-human aftertime, this thesis finds its end as well.

### **0.3 A methodological note: performance philosophy and dramaturgy**

Two other elements of the road to this dissertation are of a methodological nature. This research relates to the quite recent field in theatre, dance and performance studies of *performance philosophy*. Apparatus-posthumanism is a critical-philosophical posthumanism, hence the aptitude of this methodological approach. Performance philosophy has been developing over the past decade as the general term for what Laura Cull has coined the 'philosophical turn' in performance studies, which she characterizes as *an intensification of its long-standing interest in and engagement with philosophy* (Cull, 2012, 2). Performance philosophy provides new grounds to research and understand the configuration of posthumanist figures in the performing arts and hence to investigate the paradigm shift in contemporary theatre toward an apparatus-posthumanism. The

philosophical method adds to or provides an alternative for – but does not exclude – the more traditional points of view that are adopted in theatre and performance studies, such as semiotics and phenomenology. It asks different questions to performance. The philosophical turn renders performance philosophical and philosophy performative.

Academia's attention for performance philosophy is connected to developments in the performing arts where several artists enter into a creative relation with philosophy. Charlotte Hess, who coined the term 'philo-performance', describes it as the search to *uncover the way any gesture reveals some underlying thought and the way thought might prove performative in that it initiates common, everyday gestures* (Garcin Marrou et al., 2015, 150). Dramaturge Tom Engels points at the importance of philosophical concepts in the dance practice since the nineties (2016, 46) and how, in that segment of dance which Laermans described as 'reflexive dance' (2015, 192), it has become more popular ever since. In the Belgian performing arts scene there are several theatre makers and choreographers that are trained both as philosophers and as artists, such as Pieter De Buysser, Noé Soulier and Laura Van Dolron, who all consider philosophy as a part of their artistic practice. What matters for this research is that the cases presented in this research, especially the work of Kris Verdonck, are considered as valuable resources to develop a philosophical conception of posthumanism and do not serve as an illustration or application of certain concepts and theories. Both cyborg-posthumanist and apparatus-posthumanist theories draw extensively on and relate intimately to artistic work, as the importance of science fiction film, literature and the cyborg performance practice for the cyborg-thinkers will show. Moreover, performance philosophy allows for a post-anthropocentric conception of performance and philosophy. Thinking is not a capacity reserved to *performance (and certainly not only in performance because it tends to involve human bodies), but in all things (and therefore in all human, but also nonhuman aspects of performance)* (Cull, 2012, 20).

This methodological turn relates to the presence of many artworks and reflections on art in the philosophical oeuvre with which I will develop a conceptual framework, namely Agamben's. He writes that *the genuine philosophical element in every work, whether it be a work of art, of science, or of thought, is its capacity to be developed, which Ludwig Feuerbach defined as Entwicklungsfähigkeit* (2009a, 7-8, emphasis by the author). Agamben proposes the notion of *criticism* as a practice that bridges art and philosophy. Criticism *knows the representation* (Agamben, 1993b, xvii). It is a third position that brings philosophy and performance, knowledge and object together in a way that they both create meaning and understanding (Agamben, 1993b, xvii). Criticism implies a particular attitude toward its object – in the case of this research, both theoretical and artistic sources – an attitude Agamben describes as *a refined love [...] that at once enjoys and defers, negates and affirms, accepts and repels* (Agamben, 1993b, xviii). This simultaneous negation and affirmation not only provides a model for performance philosophy and the relation to its object of research, but might also offer a perspective on the ambivalence between dystopia and utopia that was addressed above. As a researcher writing about posthumanism, the

posthumanist condition and the way it is reflected upon and aesthetically dealt with in performing arts, my position combines fascination and horror, aesthetic enjoyment and political criticism and a sensitivity to the potential of the conditions artists and artworks evoke.

In the first part, the philosophical frame of Agamben, Stiegler, Han and others is used as a critical tool to review cyborg-posthumanism and to develop an apparatus-posthumanism, that is, as a tool that allows interpretation, commentary and critique. In the second part, another perspective is added in the way I use philosophy in relation to performance, that could best be termed dramaturgical. This research and its methodology are closely connected to how Peter Eckersall, Helena Grehan and Edward Scheer have developed the notion of dramaturgy: *Understood as a transformational, interstitial, and translation practice, dramaturgy bridges ideas and their compositional and embodied enactment*. Dramaturgy is thus a practice of mediation and transformation between the two poles of *idea/concept/statement and form/enunciation/reception* (Eckersall, Grehan & Scheer, 2015, 375). This translation or transformation occurs during the creation of the performance, where a basic question could be 'how to translate my idea into a form?'. However, it does not stop there. Understood in these terms, dramaturgy is also a practice of watching performance, of translating the forms used in the performance again into ideas, ideas that are not limited to those that led to the performance in the first place. A dramaturgical perspective in academic research – or formulated alternatively, academic research fostered by a dramaturgical perspective – can continue and develop further, expand, nuance, complexify, make new connections and interpretations. In relation to posthumanism and dramaturgy, Eckersall, Grehan & Scheer coined the concept of *New Media Dramaturgy* (NMD) to indicate *technologies and techniques of new media in relation to the dramaturgical function of translating ideas into practice and compositional awareness* (Eckersall, Grehan & Scheer, 2015, 376). This dissertation could be called an instance of *New Media Dramaturgy*, with a specific focus on the posthumanist line of thought in this dramaturgy.

Since 2012, which was also the year in which I gradually started to develop this research, I began to become involved in the work of Kris Verdonck. First as an intern assistant director to Verdonck (for the performance *M, a reflection*, see 2.4.1), then as an assistant director and assistant dramaturge to Verdonck's then dramaturge Marianne Van Kerkhoven (for the performance *H, an incident*, see 2.3.2). This aspect of the road toward this dissertation took an unforeseen turn that had an impact on my position and methodology. The beginning of my doctoral scholarship in October 2013 unexpectedly marked an important intensification of my collaboration with Verdonck as Van Kerkhoven became ill and sadly, passed away. My involvement as a dramaturge, as it often goes, happened rather organically and continues up until today. To be concrete, after *M, a reflection* (2012) and *H, an incident* (2013), I worked as a dramaturge on *ISOS* (2015, chapter 2.4.2), *UNTITLED* (2014, chapters 2.5 and 2.6.1), *IN VOID* (chapter 2.6.3), *BOSCH BEACH* (2016)

and *Conversations (at the end of the world)* (2017, chapter 2.6.4). This means that in addition to the more general dramaturgical perspective as Eckersall defines it, a practical dramaturgical perspective is included. This ‘inside knowledge’ of the creative process and the production dramaturgy (to differ from dramaturgy as the ‘governing principle’ of the performance itself, in analogy with how Learmans described the functioning of dramaturgy in choreography [2015, 236]), has nourished aspects of this research and will occasionally surface.

I would like to go deeper into this dramaturgical perspective, to clarify my position and the position of that perspective within the research. However much information, motivation and engagement my involvement as a dramaturge with Verdonck has offered to this research, it was conceived independently from this involvement and conducted largely in an at the same time distant yet close connection. The comparison or analogy could be made with participant observation in anthropological, sociological and ethnographic research in which a researcher participates, in various gradations of covertness and overtness, in the group or context he or she wants to study. The connection of specific case studies to larger historical and political systems, contexts and theory, is for example a methodology that has become common in ethnography (Marcus 1986). However, I did not start to work as a dramaturge with Verdonck in order to be able to conduct my research. From that perspective, my involvement with Verdonck’s work as a dramaturge and as a researcher are two separate endeavors, or to formulate it differently, participant observation was not the methodology on which this research is founded. This is a relevant nuance, as it characterizes the way I have included information from the ‘inside’. Although I certainly was attentive within the creative processes from the position of a researcher as well, I did not seek to manipulate or consciously influence the work of Verdonck to any sort of benefit of the research. On the contrary, I would let some of the issues raised in talks, conversations, rehearsals and performances enter into the research and continue these questions from a more academic perspective. I would, for example, not seek to implement or ‘test’ a notion of Agamben in the artistic practice, but rather, while reading Agamben, be attentive to resonances with Verdonck’s creative practice, performances and installations. To reiterate, the focus of this dissertation lies on the question of what is a contemporary posthumanism in the performing arts, answered from the perspectives of Kris Verdonck’s and Giorgio Agamben’s oeuvres. My role as a dramaturge for Verdonck allowed to deepen the answer to that question by enriching it with the perspective I obtained throughout the creative process, dialoguing also with the perspective of the performers, technicians, director and the dramaturgical stakes and dramaturgical materials that were used as references. Throughout this dissertation, I will indicate my degree of involvement for each Verdonck production, as well as which sources and references are taken up from the dramaturgical frame of reference, where relevant. I would like to stress that, even although the creative process of Verdonck is referred to (e.g. chapter 2.3.3), this research does not aim to capture the

dynamics of such a process as an ethnographic study would do and as for example the book of Van Kerkhoven and Nuyens on the creative process of Verdonck's performance *END* does extensively (2012).

The research into a contemporary, Agambenian, apparatus-posthumanism fuels my reading of Verdonck's work *after* the creative process. It is thus a reading that is enriched and added with an extra layer, by including and continuing dramaturgical questions that were central to some of the performances discussed in part two. If dramaturgy is the translation and transformation of an idea or concept into an artistic form, then this research is dramaturgical as it goes deeper into the philosophical implications of these ideas, embeds them in a political, critical discourse and worldview. The form, that is, the translated idea is also analyzed further from this critical-philosophical frame and feeds this frame as well. The dramaturgical perspective that is added in the second part of this dissertation marks a third dramaturgical moment, after the process (production dramaturgy) and the performance itself (governing principle). Theatre studies with a dramaturgical approach, that is, with a focus on the relation between ideas/concepts and how they are translated into an artwork, generally belong to this third moment, informed by the second and by available traces of the first. In the case of this research, in addition to the philosophical and theoretical analysis, my work with Verdonck allows me to expand the dramaturgical questions that were present in the (creative process of the) installations and performances. During the creative process, the gathering and interpretation of materials such as literary sources, films, documentaries, images, ... happens in function of the production for which they are assembled. There is not always time to go deeper into the further implications of these materials and their political and philosophical meaning. The third moment of dramaturgy, as it is being developed within an academic context, offers the valuable opportunity to do so. It resonates in this sense with Agamben's conception of criticism as the development of elements that were present in the work of art, embedding them in a larger critical discourse. It also allows to bring into practice Laermans' assertion that the meaning of a posthumanist work of art increasingly coincides with how it works (Laermans, 2008, 13). I believe this is an important aspect of the analysis and that not only the practical, technical aspect of 'how it works' is related to the meaning. About dramaturgy one can also ask 'how it works', in that sense it is practical as well. The analysis of the dramaturgy, which brings meaning and functioning, ideas and forms together, that is, a reflection on how dramaturgy works, can lead to new insights that connect theory to practice.

The threefold temporality of process, performance and posterior reflection, implies that dramaturgy has various moments and that it is something that keeps on working through. I strongly relate to Adrian Heathfield's claim that writing informed by a dramaturgical perspective, is *mode of critical writing that has emerged in response to contemporary performance* (Heathfield, 2011, 108). Heathfield makes a difference between writing *about* performance and writing *of* performance, in reference to Maurice

Blanchot's writing of catastrophe: *this writing is not simply upon a subject or about it, but rather, is 'of' it in the sense that it issues from it, is subject to its force and conditions* (Heathfield, 2011, 113).<sup>4</sup> He aptly describes how

to write of the work the dramaturge must enter once again the space of conversation, where the work's excessive forces are brought back to animate, disassemble and haunt its writing (2011, 113).

The dramaturgical position in this research can thus be considered to be taking up the conversation where Verdonck, myself and the performance left off – in some cases five years after the premiere – but now with new fellows at the table: the oeuvre of Agamben and the field of posthumanism. These two interlocutors are also affected by the performances that started the conversation. However, their presence at the table influences the conversation about the performances as well and raises new questions and, moreover, enables an academic and theoretical reflection. At this point, we come back at the opening quote from this introduction. The imperative of the performance, its call, is part of the destination and shapes the route toward it. A final concept before taking the next step in this travel, is that of *archē*, of which the Greek etymology refers to two meanings: *il signifie aussi bien 'origine', 'principe', que 'commandement', 'ordre'* (Agamben, 2013b, 10). The conversation ignited by the performance, is in that sense an *archē* that continues to work through, as *l'origine ne cesse jamais de commencer, c'est-à-dire de commander et de gouverner ce qu'elle a fait venir à l'être* (Agamben, 2013b, 15). Responding to the call I heard in the work of Verdonck, this research into an Agamben-oriented, critical posthumanism was developed. The road is part of the destination, and the performance sets out the route.

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<sup>4</sup> Heathfield adopts a dramaturgical perspective close to Eckersall's on what he calls 'performative writing', stating that it *does not see cultural events or artworks as objects, but rather as situations, manifestations, and articulations of ideas. As such they are rarely static and final, but highly dynamic and provisional* (Heathfield, 2011, 113).



## **Part 1: FROM THE CYBORG TO THE APPARATUS**



# 1 From the Cyborg to the Apparatus

*The history of human beings is perhaps nothing other than the hand-to-hand confrontation with the apparatuses they have produced.*  
(Agamben, 2007b, 72)

*Because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it. Such a realm is art. But certainly only if the reflection on art, for its part, does not shut its eyes to the constellation of truth after which we are questioning.*  
(Heidegger, 1977, 35)

## Between fiction and theory

*Dammit, we're living in the year 1970, the science fiction is out there, one doesn't have to write it any more. One's living science fiction.* All our lives are being invaded by science, technology and their applications, science fiction writer J. G. Ballard confided to Lynn Barber in an interview published in *Penthouse* (Sellars & O' Hara, 2012, 23, emphasis by the author). The erotic 'environment' of Ballard's words in the *Penthouse* magazine is probably connected to the sexually laden content of his then just published *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970). However, Ballard's account of how bodies are fragmented and commodified is actually a profound analysis and criticism of the fatal attraction of media and technologies. Ballard's science fiction stories and novels are often called 'science fiction of the next five minutes'; *it is concerned with seeing the present in terms of the immediate future* (Sellars & O' Hara, 2012, 2). He was an observer of socio-political and technological tendencies in society and extrapolated them in a particular direction. Surveillance, control, commodification, mediation, ecological disasters, the omnipresence of violence in the society of the spectacle and the way humanity is embedded and manipulated in this setting, are the main lines in his comprehensive oeuvre. Ballard's work stands out from other science fiction authors because of his often low-tech style, focusing more on how states of mind and behaviour are shaped through dispositives in specific settings than on futuristic high-tech worlds. Brian Baker describes the specificity of the *ballardian* science fiction through a reading of Ballard's text 'Which Way to Inner Space?', *which called for an sf [science fiction] not of rockets and naïve futurology, 'robot brains and hyper-drive' (Ballard 1996c: 195), but one that would take place on Earth; 'it is inner space, not outer, that needs to be explored. The only true alien planet is Earth'* (Baker, 2008, 16).

Ballard's assertion concerning the actuality of science fiction as well as his particular take on the genre, offers insights that are as valuable today as they already were since the beginning of his oeuvre in the late fifties. The pervasion of technological devices in our ways of communicating, learning, loving, caring, doing politics and shaping our sense of identity has not only proliferated but also changed in nature, a change that increasingly is discussed and attempted to understand within the field of posthumanism. The core question of posthumanism is fuelled by changing technologies and their presence in our lives and societies, and by a strong philosophical tradition of deconstruction, seeking to unwork humanism and specific concepts of what 'the human' is, as well as anthropocentrism. The human does not disappear with humanism, nor is equal to it: *humanism is a vision of the human, but the human is not identical to that vision nor restricted to the humanist definition* (Berardi, 2017, 60). Posthumanism is both a critique on a certain condition and a constructive project, seeking to redefine the position of the human in the world and to unveil the role and position of nonhuman entities. The relation between humans and technology, leading to questions on more fundamental levels, namely to the relation between humans and nonhumans or subjects and objects, is the main vehicle through which these questions are asked.

Technological innovations and the proliferation of technology in the household and intimate sphere have led both to optimism and fear, with human superfluity and oppression or destruction by machines amongst recurrent reactions, as well as utopias of harmony, progress, emancipation and mastery over the planet and its resources. Imagination fostered by technological innovation also had its effects on entertainment and the arts. Developments in artificial intelligence, robotics and genetics inspired several Hollywood and other mainstream film makers, leading to an increasing presence of cyborg characters in popular culture, mostly in movies such as *The Bionic Woman* series (1975-1978), *Blade Runner* (1982), the *Terminator* film series (1984-2015), *RoboCop* (1987) or *The Matrix*-franchise (1999 - ...).<sup>5</sup> These Hollywoodian visions of the future differ profoundly from Ballard's work in their imagination of a high-tech future in which new technologies would alter humanity physically, whereas Ballard focuses more on the mental consequences of the existing high tech world by extrapolating them to the future. Science fiction writing, which boomed after the Second World War, also presented numerous stories about half-creatures, humanoid robots or humans enslaved by technology – with Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. Le Guin or Don De Lillo as important examples. These stories coincide with a certain shift in the conception of the human and the subject. However, there are very different perspectives, ranging from Ballard to *Robocop*.

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<sup>5</sup> I focus here on early cyborg-movies, but this genealogy could of course go back to E.T.A. Hoffmann and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and continues up until today with movies such as *HER* and *Ex Machina* and series such as *Battlestar Galactica* and *Real Humans*.

In this first part, I unravel this multi-layered shift in posthumanist thought and art, which has occurred since the publication of theoretical seminal works rooted in feminism and literature studies in the late eighties and nineties. I will develop two types of posthumanist thinking, not merely to oppose them, but also to frame them within certain historical, philosophical and artistic developments, not in the least those of posthumanist theory and performance itself. The distinction between these two 'posthumanisms' already lies in the way Ballard's work differs from the more classic, Hollywoodian and mainstream science fiction. Ballard focuses on the objectification of the body and the impact of mediatization and commodification on the psyche from a rather dystopic perspective, whereas the cyborgs in often cited examples such as *The Fly* (1986), *Terminator* or *Alien* (1979) foreground physicality and assembled, 'other', alternative techno-bodies that give rise to new identities and emancipations. To put it differently, the latter were more influenced by visible applications of cybernetics and computer technology, whereas Ballard might have been more occupied with the dynamics described in Guy Debord's *La Société du Spectacle* (1967). The distinction here is of course partially artificial, however, as will become clear in the following pages, it points at different perspectives and different critiques of the posthumanist condition, as well as at the different 'utopias' these perspectives envision.

The importance of science fiction, especially for the posthumanist thought that originated during the last two decades of the twentieth century cannot be underestimated. Stefan Herbrechter critically evaluates the film and literary sources of these theoreticians: *It is as if the only (techno)logical imaginary available here was that of science fiction horror* (2012, 342). Analyses of these films and literature, often centred around cyborg-characters, form an important starting point for the thinkers and artists connected to what I call 'cyborg-posthumanism'. Apart from this concern about the predominant focus on the monstrous and abnormal, Herbrechter interestingly points at *the role that science fiction might play in the contemporary cultural imaginary and its repertoire of tropes regarding the currently available forms of 'constructions of the future'* (2012, 342). I propose two distinct repertoires of tropes, of which the second is not founded particularly in science fiction imaginaries. First, I examine recurrent aspects of cyborg-posthumanism, the line of thought and art that develops from the cyborg, both as a concept and an actual physical phenomenon. Second, I analyze aspects of what I name 'apparatus-posthumanism', a specific approach to art and critical thinking that departs from Giorgio Agamben's notion of the apparatus. This first part thus consists out of two subchapters. In the first, I formulate a critique on cyborg-posthumanism. This enables me to set the ground for the second subchapter in which the central stakes of apparatus-posthumanism be unpacked. This is the type of posthumanism I seek to develop throughout this research and which will subsequently be treated in more detail in the second part.

Cyborg-posthumanism has as its main theoretical proponents Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles. Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, written in 1985, is often considered as the seminal work for posthumanist thinking from a feminist perspective, of which Hayles' *How we became posthuman* (1999) is one of the most elaborate translations to posthumanist thought. In theatre and performance studies, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck used the concept of the cyborg to analyze *cyborg theatre*. She defines the cyborg as both a literal and a metaphorical creature, *a body fixed in its co-mingling of parts, machine and flesh [...] often a figure out of control, feared or feminized, appearing at times to quell anxieties about technologies and 'others'* (Parker-Starbuck, 2011, 1). Apart from its feminist and queer-studies roots, cyborg-posthumanism also – perhaps surprisingly – comprises its 'nemesis': transhumanism. As a third component, cyborg-posthumanism covers a strand of animal studies, which grew from the same egalitarian preoccupations as the queering cyborg-movement. The tropes discussed can be paired up in dualisms that are not easy dichotomies, but rather complex contradictions: embodiment and disembodiment, body humanism and the technological embrace, posthuman<sup>6</sup> subjects and technological demonstrations and the anthropological machine of humanism and animal rights. Together they form the network of tropes that shape 'cyborg-posthumanism'. In various ways, these manifestations of cyborg-posthumanism all relate to the blurring of those binaries Haraway indicated in the *Cyborg Manifesto*, the boundary between human and animal (and with that, nature and culture), between (human) animals and machines, and between the physical and the non-physical (Haraway, 1991, 151-153).

Feminist posthumanism puts a strong emphasis on embodied subjectivity as a counter-argument against cybernetics' and transhumanism's concentration on respectively the informatization of life and predominance of the human mind (Hayles, 1999). These features of liberal humanism – informatization of life and the Cartesian body-mind split favoring the mind over the body – form a shared 'enemy' of all posthumanist lines of thought besides transhumanism. The materiality of the human body subsequently gains centre stage in performances inspired by the feminist focus on embodiment as a counter strategy for informatization. However, in some transhumanist performances the technologically augmented human body also is the central axis of action, revealing a persistent body humanism – a notion I draw from Rudi Laermans (2015, 225) – at work in cyborg-posthumanism. Transhumanism embraces technology as a means to 'upgrade' the human, an embrace that in feminist posthumanism also takes place, albeit with the goal

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<sup>6</sup> In this thesis, I refer to the notion of the 'posthuman' (or 'post-human') to indicate a literal state beyond or after the human, or a no longer solely human entity. In that sense, posthuman and posthumanist are not synonyms, as the latter also comprises a critique of humanism and the political implications and potential of technology in political and socio-economic systems. However, when referring to other authors, I have tried to remain faithful to their use of these notions, which might slightly differ from mine.

of obtaining a relational subjectivity<sup>7</sup>, thus having a very different conception of 'the human' in mind. The development of such a non-humanist, posthuman subjectivity sometimes leads to performances that demonstrate technologies, such as prostheses. Once again, the line between feminist cyborgs and transhumanist cyborgs is blurred in these performances, since it is not rare that transhumanist performances aim to present possibilities and opportunities of new technologies as well. The question separating trans- from feminist posthumanism is that of control and finality. The binary of tropes concerning animality is more complex. The *anthropological machine*, a notion Agamben develops in *The Open* (2002), is the combination of apparatuses that separate the human from the nonhuman. Agamben sees this divide running through the biological human being itself, which has consequences for conceptions of the human and the control of human animality, whereas the field of animal studies is less occupied with these aspects of the animality of the human and focuses on the equality and intertwinement between humans and animals.

Cyborg-posthumanism, is not a unified, one-sided vision on the human-technology relation, it consists of several nuanced, contradictory and even oppositional perspectives on the posthumanist question. What these perspectives share, however, is an instrumental notion of technology as an external entity that is like a 'stranger', a foreign entity invading our bodies, societies and relationships. The cyborg, then, is the result of a process of what Parker-Starbuck aptly describes as *integration* (2011, 3). Subsequently, feminist posthumanism, transhumanism and animal studies, use this foreign technology as a means to obtain or reach certain goals, ideological and/or economic. Technology is operationalised, considered as a tool for equality, for transcendence, for a new subjectivity, with or without biological body, striving for utopias based on an instrumental understanding of technology. In *The question concerning technology* (1977), Heidegger warned that such an instrumental perspective on technology would not provide the insight needed to grasp its consequences for the human being in the world and this world itself (4). A desire for mastery, a fight over power (over technology, over the subject, over one's identity, and over the world), masked as a fear for the loss of control, is latently present in cyborg-posthumanism.

Technology and our understanding of it have evolved since the publication of Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* in 1985 and new lines of posthumanist thought have developed in philosophy and ecology. Within the performing arts, there are also new and altered takes on the matter, an evolution that has led to this doctoral research. Perhaps

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<sup>7</sup> Braidotti defines the relational subject as opposed to *the unitary subject of Humanism and as framed by embodiment, sexuality, affectivity, empathy and desire*. A relational subject is constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated (2013, 26, 47). For Braidotti, posthumanist subjectivity is relational, or, in her own terminology, 'nomadic', with posthuman relations not being limited to interspecies relations, but running across technologies and various others (2013, 49).

cyborg-posthumanism is still too 'human', because of its instrumental perspective on technology? In his consideration of posthumanism in the arts, Steve Dixon points at a deficit between theory and practice. Namely, the theory developed over the past decades, does not coincide with the practices it intends to describe: *the actual specificities of the changing ontology of performance and the performer within virtual space are rarely addressed except in old terms* (Dixon, 2007, 156). Indeed, it is still often the case that authors theorizing and analyzing posthumanism in the performing arts keep on referring to a group of artists that during the eighties and nineties created innovative work with technology and established new forms of staging subjects. These artists could be divided into two groups. On the one hand there are those that developed an elaborate use of screens, video and projected image, such as Guy Cassiers, Ivo Van Hove and The Wooster Group. On the other hand, there are those artists that create body-technology combinations, literal cyborgs, such as Orlan and Stelarc. The screen and the cyborg-imagery are tied to a particular period in history. Also theoretically there are more recent developments in philosophy, ecology, science and technology studies that might be considered a next step in (or at least a more radical version of) posthumanist thinking. In the performing arts, there is as well a trend to create object-performances and to seek complete depersonalization and even elimination of the subject. These are two examples of how a deepening of a posthumanist conception of the human, the nonhuman and the world generates new poetics. Artists such as Mette Ingvarsen, Kris Verdonck, Romeo Castellucci, Geumhyung Jeong, Miet Warlop, Michiel Vandeveld, Jaha Koo, Annie Dorsen, Daniel Linehan, Orion Maxted, Andros Zins-Brown, Bryana Fritz and many others have adopted interesting and fundamental perspectives on technology that differ from those developed around the concept of the cyborg, as already discussed briefly above. The fields of theatre, dance and performance studies are eagerly developing frames for this new work, a challenge this research engages itself in as well. The work of Giorgio Agamben provides the philosophical inspiration and foundation for this research to develop a broader critical-philosophical apparatus-posthumanism, seeking to describe contemporary performance practices and our posthumanist condition.

Apparatus-posthumanism is, first of all, based on the concept of the apparatus as conceived of by Agamben, most prominently in the essay *What is an Apparatus?* (2009b, in Italian: 2006), but also in other works such as *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011a [2007a]) or *The Use of Bodies* (2015a [2014]). A further analysis of this concept and its philosophical roots and implications is at stake in the next chapter (1.2). What is essential for now is the ontological status of the apparatus in the formation of the human itself and the deepening of the analysis of the working of the apparatus, apart from a more reductive instrumental perspective on technology. Interacting with Heidegger's *Question concerning Technology*, Agamben analyzes how the true instrumentality of technology – which Heidegger calls its 'essence' [*Wesen*] – lies in the Heideggerian notions of 'enframing' [*Gestell*] and 'standing-reserve' [*Bestand*]. Technology – or in the Agambenian vocabulary, the

apparatus – captures living beings and orders them *to stand by*, to be available, according to the demands of the apparatus (Heidegger, 1977, 14). Agamben shares with Heidegger the concern for the impact of technology on the distance between *Dasein* and being. However, whereas Heidegger seems to be more preoccupied with the implications of technology for nature, Agamben focuses rather on the instrumentality that arises from the interaction with apparatuses. Those that are captured by the apparatus become an instrument themselves, operating no longer for one’s own sake, but for that of an external case, Agamben points out in his analysis of Heidegger. The captured being thus becomes part of an economy and begins to spin into that economy’s orbit, no longer moving or standing still for itself (Agamben, 2014, 104-105). Agamben extends and deepens the Foucauldian notion of the apparatus (*le dispositif*) to one of the two massive categories of beings, of which the living beings and the substances are the other.

I shall call an apparatus literally anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions or discourses of living beings (Agamben, 2009b, 14).

The ample possible interpretation of what does then belong to the category of the apparatus and how it interacts with living beings will be discussed more in depth through the case studies that are analyzed later on. What is of importance here, is that technology or rather, the apparatus, is part of the human as such and always has been. It is the nature of the relation between the human being and the apparatus – which is then also always a relation of the human with itself – that is changing and which will be the subject of apparatus-posthumanism in the performing arts. However, it is not limited to this relation. As apparatuses are becoming ever more present and invasive and demanding, they gain a specific autonomy, even if that is built into the apparatus by a human agent. This is reflected in the emergence of performative objects on the contemporary stage. They are a symptom of another trope of apparatus-posthumanism, namely a fundamental decentring of the human: a post-anthropocentric perspective. Whereas cyborg-posthumanism is still too preoccupied with the human, apparatus-posthumanism is ready to eliminate the human out of the story once in a while and focus profoundly on nonhuman beings or substances. Another shift, after that from the instrumental to the ontological and from the anthropocentric to the post-anthropocentric, involves recent developments in (thoughts on) biopolitics. Gilles Deleuze’s important addition to Foucault’s disciplinary biopolitics through the notion of the society of control (Deleuze, 1992), resonates with Agamben’s expansion of the Foucauldian dispositif and with the work of Bernard Stiegler and Byung-Chul Han (Han, 2015b; Stiegler, 2013). The latter state that a new stage in biopolitics has occurred, which no longer solely strives to discipline the body, but also to manipulate and shape the psyche. Discipline and control, biopolitics and psychopolitics have led to the condition that power no longer needs to work explicitly top-down but operates through the desires and psyches of people, to the extent

that they desire their own capture (Agamben 2013b, Han 2015b). This dystopic, critical and pessimist perspective is part of the fourth and perhaps most important trope of apparatus-posthumanism: it follows the path of critical deconstruction, of dehumanization and desubjectification to describe a posthumanist condition and at once to formulate new opportunities and insights that arise from the ashes of humanism and the human. *The courage of hopelessness*, as Agamben once called it in an interview (Agamben in Cerf, 2014) and of offering new perspectives on reality that allow to reposition ourselves toward this reality and to discern openings toward a hopeful future – that is the messianic latency in Agamben’s work. Here, he continues Walter Benjamin’s messianism, consisting in finding a new use for the current condition (Agamben, 2014, 87). A critical apparatus-posthumanism based on the work of Agamben seeks – literally – desperately for these seeds, by way of deconstructing and making an archaeology of political concepts in the West. In this effort, it hopes to stumble upon and to describe the thin membrane between dystopia and utopia, between horror and beauty.

## 1.1 Cyborg-posthumanism

Let us go back to the example of Ballard. However specific his take on the future and science fiction might be, he is probably most known for the (for his oeuvre atypical) story *Crash!* (1973), which was adapted for film by David Cronenberg in 1996. In *Crash!*, the main characters James Ballard and Robert Vaughan explore the sexual potential of cars and car crashes. The story is populated by characters with prostheses and technical elements infiltrating their bodies, a relation that continues outside of the body in the interaction with the car's materials. This is the classic, almost stereotypical image of the cyborg: the cybernetic organism, *a hybrid of machine and organism* (Haraway, 1991, 149), composed of a human being with prostheses, which feels and acts through these new body parts. Ballard's and Vaughan's sexual relationship with cars and machines is emblematic of how for the cyborg, *replication is uncoupled from organic reproduction* (Haraway, 1991, 150). Sexuality – thanks to birth control and the possibility for cloning – is no longer necessarily connected to reproduction, making ‘motherhood’ a free choice and opening up various forms of new relations with various entities. These cyborg-hybrids, which return in other mainstream science-fiction stories and movies, are often referenced to in cyborg-posthumanist writing in the eighties and nineties. The perspectives on these cyborg-bodies are divergent. From a liberatory egalitarian activism, to a human enhancement discourse and the animal rights movement, cyborg-posthumanism comprises those hybrid bodies, for which the human remains the point of reference – if not as biological species, then as an ethical figure, a collection of rights or a set of data.

### Cyborg Utopia

*In the field of technological innovation, utopia and dystopia grow together.*  
(Berardi, 2015, 279)

In the final decades of the twentieth century, the conception of what is to be human in the light of recent technologies has subsequently been tackled in the field of posthumanism from a feminist perspective that is influenced by literature studies, gender studies, science and technology studies (Haraway 1985; Halberstam & Livingstone 1995; Hayles 1999). Donna Haraway, as well as Jack Halberstam and Ira Livingstone, took the cyborg as an image of the Other, the emblematic figure for the human being in the age of proliferated and intimate technologies. The cyborg was *a place to excavate and examine popular culture including Science Fiction [sic], and, in particular, feminist science fiction* (Haraway, 2004, 322). The role of fiction in theorizing the cyborg and the posthuman, points at an ambiguity between dystopia and utopia that can be discerned throughout the whole posthumanist field (Sharon, 2014, 19). Or as Grégoire Chamayou wrote it:

The utopias and dystopias of the robot are structured by the same fundamental, simplistic schema of two terms, man and machine, in which the machine either appears as the servile extension of some human sovereign or else, increasingly autonomous, begins to slip out of the control of its former masters and to turn against them. That is the scenario of *The Terminator* (2015, 213).

The binaries Chamayou describes here – not only that of man and machine, but also of autonomy and loss of control, master and slave, good and bad – are typical for much of the popular cyborg-imaginary and – in more nuanced ways – continue in cyborg-theory.

Often the posthumanist condition is a way of describing today's reality that is characterized by a proliferation of technology, which has an impact on the human's agency, unicity and control over the world. Apart from the transhumanist – or *complacent posthumanist* as Miccoli calls it (2010, 60) – thinkers, this condition is generally evaluated negatively as one of loss or threat. The pessimist position is most outspoken in what Tamar Sharon calls *bioconservatism* and of which Francis Fukuyama and Jürgen Habermas are the most prominent authors (Sharon, 2014, 2). However, within the feminist strand of posthumanist thinkers, the posthuman condition is more ambiguous and not so much a worrying state of being, but rather a stimulating starting point, opening up possibilities and utopian futures.<sup>8</sup> This double position distinguishes between a posthuman condition and a posthuman theory which seeks opportunities for developing new conceptions of the world and subjectivity (Braidotti, 2013, 12). The analysis of the posthuman and posthumanist conditions can be pessimist and at the same time allow for optimism, a tension that is also present in the work of Heidegger and Benjamin and which through their influence on Agamben, is also operating in the latter's thinking and will thus be of importance in this research as well.

Popular and feminist science-fiction books and films and cyberpunk-subculture were the source of inspiration for a cyborg-posthumanist branch of critical thinking that sometimes was seeking more to realize equality amongst humans, than equality between all different entities on this planet. *A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction* (Haraway, 2004, 7). Haraway would later come to be known for her animal rights and ecological thinking. However, she was not interested in creating a posthumanist discourse, rather, she was seeking to *break the exclusionary boundaries separating women so as to produce radical feminist affinities* (Parker-Starbuck, 2006, 653). In *Posthuman Bodies* (1995), Halberstam & Livingstone have taken Haraway's lead and collected a series of essays that queer the human in order to

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<sup>8</sup> *From one perspective, a cyborg is about the final imposition of a grid of control on the planet, about the final abstraction embodied in a Star War apocalypse. [...] From another perspective, a cyborg-world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints* (Haraway, 2004, 13).

open up this category to all kinds of 'others'. For them, the posthuman opens up the possibility for *solidarity between the disenchanted liberal subject and those who were always-already disenchanted* (Halberstam & Livingstone, 1995, 9). They formulate posthumanism's simultaneity of utopia and dystopia, of promise and analysis as being *always both premature and old news* (1995, 3).

In *Representing the Post/Human* (2002), Elaine Graham follows the lineage of Haraway and Halberstam & Livingstone in considering the posthuman as a queering practice, with cyborgs, monsters and other types of non-normative constructions breaking apart the 'human' as a normative element. Once more, science fiction is granted a particular function as the *representation of human identity in a digital and biotechnological age* (Graham, 2002, 1). The cyborgs populating the writings of these thinkers (and their sources of inspiration) are an attack on the liberal subject of humanism, a subject that was already seriously 'damaged' by its possible technological copies and the uprising of prosthesis and other forms of intrusion of 'others', but also because of the anti-humanist and decentering theories and discoveries done by Copernicus, Galilei, Marx, Darwin and Freud. The impact of the insights these four names have become eponymous to, have pushed the human further and further out of the centre he had created for himself. A relatively powerless, human-animal subject remained, a cyborg subject which now is being fragmented even more because of the technological 'spare parts' entering the last sovereign realm of the human: its body. The anthropological machine of humanism – a notion of Agamben I will return to later in this chapter – which is the apparatus that produces the boundaries of the human and more importantly, decides upon what is inhuman and thus excluded from certain rights, values and positions, sputters or alternatively, is going in overdrive. It is precisely this anthropological machine, which allows for the exclusion on the basis of race, gender, sex, class, nation, ... that the utopian or rather activist feminist posthumanists strive to undo in presenting the cyborg as a new human condition, which might have always been there, but that with recent developments in technology and biotechnology can no longer be denied. If we are all cyborgs, the basis for discrimination between humans internally, and animals and technological objects, is null. Such could be a short – though incomplete – summary of Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*'s and with that, of feminist cyborg-posthumanism's utopia.

Posthumanism with its origins in feminist and queer thinking, such as that of Haraway, Hayles, Graham, Halberstam & Livingstone, has its roots in what Cary Wolfe has aptly described as those *liberationist political projects that have historically had to battle against the strategic deployment of humanist discourse against other human beings for the purposes of*

*oppression* (Wolfe, 1995, 36).<sup>9</sup> This liberation was sought in a re-appropriation of technological progress, in a time in which this progress was mostly made for military and political ends. The *Cyborg Manifesto* for example, was written in the context of the Cold War, in which new technologies proliferated both in the military, everyday life and fiction and were part of political propaganda. The irony of the Manifesto is thus that it is not oriented toward the destruction of the other, but rather to the becoming other of the whole of humanity. Paradoxically this aligns itself with another view on technology that was proclaimed in that period and that was also rather optimistic (Edgerton, 2008, xiv).<sup>10</sup> The irony lies then also in the direction the optimism, fostered by the proliferation of atomic weapons, television, biotechnology, etc., is oriented to. The hope for world peace, the prediction of new technologies that would emancipate the lower classes and the subsequent prosperity and political equality for all – as it was proclaimed by techno-optimists, scientists, politics and economy (Edgerton, 2008, 46) – differs from the optimism caused by the cyborg's potential for a queer, chimeric equality.

The work of several artists who are often associated with the posthuman and posthumanism, and who are as such emblematic of art and theory related to cyborg-posthumanism, will provide the case studies in this chapter. Similar to a specific selection of cyborg-sci-fi novels and films, there is a number of artists who return in several books and edited collections on (cyborg-)posthumanism. It is interesting to consider this performing arts 'selection' and to connect it to the theoretical discourse it relates to. Orlan's reconstructive surgery-performances, Stelarc's third arm and exoskeleton demonstrations and Eduardo Kac's *GFP Bunny* (2000) and *Genesis* (1999-2001) have become classic references in the small but growing body of research on posthumanism in the arts. In Belgium, Eric Joris and his research/artistic structure CREW are an important

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<sup>9</sup>On the same page, Wolfe aptly describes the working of the anthropological machines of humanism in relation to the difference between species: *Humanism, in other words, is species-specific in its logic (which rigorously separates human from non-human) but not in its effects (such logic has historically been used to oppress both human and nonhuman others)* (Wolfe, 1995, 36).

<sup>10</sup> In January 2015, the Boston based research organisation Future of Life Institute, which focuses on strategies to avoid negative consequences (or 'existential risks' to use a notion of transhumanist Nick Bostrom [2002]) in the development of Artificial Intelligence, published an open letter with a plea for a (mostly economically) beneficial development of AI. In the letter, however, other hopes resting on technology are expressed clearly: *the eradication of disease and poverty are not unfathomable* (2015). This letter was signed by influential persons in the technological industry such as Tesla and SpaceX's Elon Musk, Microsoft's Bill Gates, Astronomer Royal Martin Rees, Stephen Hawking and Nick Bostrom and because of this received widespread media attention. The FLI letter is not innocent. It plays on the common, and not completely irrational, fears about destruction and extinction through technology, only to place their own project – namely an economically beneficial and human controlled development of AI – as the sole alternative and hence as the direction in which AI should be developed (and thus invested in). This letter is an interesting example of how economic powers are at stake in the conception of new technologies and their relation to humanity.

reference in the development of a posthumanist perspective on the relation between the human and technology.

These artists, of which some are still active, all created their seminal works between the late eighties and early two thousands and were thus contemporary to the publication of several seminal posthumanist books and essays as well as to some of the technological and political developments that were already mentioned. Their discourses coincide and are deeply informed by the technologies of their time and all focus on the body from different perspectives,<sup>11</sup> from enhancement to modification, to immaterialization and embodiment. It might be, however, that technology evolves in a rhythm that goes faster than that of artistic and academic production and that the artistic analyses made in the four posthumanist 'classics', are in a way outdated. Similar to how a new technological device that enters the market is already outdated in comparison to the prototypes that are being developed in laboratories at universities and in factories, posthumanism that is profoundly intertwined with new technologies ages easily.

### 1.1.1 Orlan: embodiment as answer to information?

A woman lies on the operation table; she is dressed up, wearing colorful garments, reading literary and philosophical texts while doctors are working on her body. The setting is somewhat off. Plants and décor screens are placed in the OR. Close-ups are made of needles entering the skin, injecting various liquids. The doctors, nurses and other persons present in the room – sometimes dancers – are wearing costumes designed for this occasion. Cameras are filming the operation and broadcasting it online. This is not a weird case of remote surgery or telesurgery, but a performance by French performance artist Mireille Suzanne Francette Porte, better known as Orlan (°1947). In her series of nine plastic surgery performances titled *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* (1990-1995), she altered her body in correspondence to nine 'beauties' in art history as a comment to the pressure of beauty standards on women. A twentieth-century anatomical theatre, the operation room functions as film studio, as a stage for the transformation of the body and the subject formed through that body. The title indicates that the surgeries are also about creating a character, an artistic identity, closely connected to the physical body as object of art. Orlan's body art is often referred to in relation to the posthuman body and from a specific perspective might very well be precisely that.

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<sup>11</sup> Vanhoutte points out in an overview of the impact of technology on the Flemish performing arts and its discourse, that the body is indeed the place where the tension with technology is 'performed', which leads to more attention in dance and performance to these concerns (Vanhoutte, 2015, 182-183)

## Cybernetics

Both Katherine Hayles and Donna Haraway developed their perspective on the posthuman in a reaction to cybernetics, the scientific field which lay the base for the first computers, and which considers every device or machine and every organism and its interactions with its environment as 'information'.<sup>12</sup> Since the field of cybernetics was already an accepted perspective on the human since the publication of Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics: Or the Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* in 1948, the answer of Hayles and Haraway could be considered rather a late one. However, it was only with the development of the Cold War, the science fiction of that period and the proliferating technological inventions and devices of the eighties, that the impact of cybernetics became inevitable. It proved to be a second momentum to radically rethink the human in relation to cybernetics. What came to be the origins of the digital revolution, started with a conception of the world through input and output, feedback loops, and the translation of matter into information. As a consequence, the cybernetic view on the human body was considered a next step in the humanist logocentrism, emphasizing the rational and the immaterial at the expense of the body. According to Hayles, cybernetics implied that embodiment is not essential to human being (1999, 4). *Information has lost its body*, she states, an evolution Hayles wants to counter by developing an embodied posthumanist subject (Hayles, 1999, 2, 5). In her mapping of posthumanist science-fiction literature, which opposes materiality to information, mutation to hyperreality and orders these notions in a *semiotic square* (Hayles, 1999, 280), Ballard's *Crash!* would probably be situated in the area between materiality and mutation. Ballard makes the relation between the human and the technological object physical in an eroticized way, connecting the body strongly to the object through the sexuality at play. The desire to be penetrated by the object and to become a cyborg is not only a desire to become other, but also a desire to relate to the object, which is removed from us because of its complexity and commodification. As a symptom of and a reaction against immateriality and hyperreality, the characters seek to really feel something again by risking their lives and altering their bodies. *Crash!* thus seems to play on the tension between two notions of Hayles' semiotic square in order to tell the reader something about the two other elements.

Orlan's theatrical surgeries can be situated in the same field as *Crash!*. Physically altering her body foregrounds her embodied subjectivity. By mutating her 'natural' anatomy, she challenges what is considered to be 'nature' or 'natural'. Criticizing

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<sup>12</sup> Cybernetics grew out to become a widespread model of thinking and analysis in other fields as well, such as biology and sociology, under the name of 'systems theory', especially since the development of second order systems theory by Maturana & Varela, and Niklas Luhmann. The latter also profoundly informed Cary Wolfe's book on posthumanism, *What is posthumanism?* (2010).

mediatized and commercialized beauty standards, which can be said to belong to the realm of information and virtuality since they are a product of globalized media and photoshop software, Orlan presents her body as matter, and spreads that materiality precisely via the channels of new media, by broadcasting her surgeries, bringing them, so to speak, in the living room. However, the recuperative forces of the hyperreal and immateriality pose a threat to the timelessness of Orlan's statement.

The focus on embodiment as a reaction to the dematerialization and alienation that are consequences of technology's transformation of the world into a flow of information, is, according to Rosi Braidotti, a fundamental characteristic of materialist feminism (Braidotti, 2012, 130). The cyborg stands as an embodied answer to cybernetics as a reification and datafication of the human and animal, countering the absorption in the realm of the inorganic. Orlan's body, which is the focal point of her work, is altered artificially, to adopt and criticize features of beauty standards in the history of the arts, such as the chin of Botticelli's Venus or the forehead of Da Vinci's Mona Lisa. However modified and mediatized, Orlan's body appears as an image of the embodied relation toward technology Hayles proclaims. Her technologically modified body is a type of cyborg, an integration of implants and surgeries, modifying the 'normal' female body according to what is conceived as beautiful, but paradoxically ending up creating a highly idiosyncratic body, which deviates from many standards. The embodied relation toward technology, also implies that Orlan's modifications are *the result of a choice, a 'personal' decision of the will. The subjective will here seems even more increased* (Lehmann & Jürs-Munby, 2007, 140).<sup>13</sup> Orlan stays conscious during her operations, reading and 'performing' as if her body is an object which does not influence her mental capacities, thus staying a *conscious participant or subject of the process* (Faber, 2002, 89). Embodiment through the relation with technology is thus strongly connected to subjectivity, and control over one's body through self-transformation seems to imply an empowerment of one's own subjectivity.

## Absent bodies

Despite Orlan's repeated categorization as 'posthuman' and 'posthumanist', not seldom from a feminist perspective (Gianacchi, 2007; Dixon, 2007; Parker-Starbuck, 2011), there are some arguments to counter this statement or to at least nuance or historicize it. Besides her work with nonhuman genes in *The Harlequin's Coat* (2007), Orlan's oeuvre remains quite anthropocentric and focused on conscious subject formation. The centre of gravity remains the 'self', with a strong autonomous will, thus hanging on to a certain

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<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, Lehmann claims that Orlan has not situated her practice of self-surgery within the frame of a particular critical discourse, such as a feminist critique of conceptions of beauty (Lehmann & Jürs-Munby, 2007, 140). However, this has not prevented others from doing so, as I hope to demonstrate in this chapter.

modernistic view on subjectivity. Despite the deconstruction of the body's unity and normality, *modern humanism and its sacralisation of the self-conscious subject still prevails* (Laermans, 2015, 74). The focal point is the personage of Orlan, an autonomous subject, commodifying itself as a work of art. She sells pieces of her flesh and other residues or *reliquaries* (Faber, 2002, 90) of her transforming body. Orlan's body, which was the means of resistance, has been at least partly wilfully recuperated by advanced capitalism and is transformed into a currency with its own exchange value, or more precisely, exhibition value in the arts market (Agamben, 2007b, 90; Debord, 1967, 13). As Gabriela Giannachi states: *the post-human body, alive or dead, as a whole, or in its parts, is increasingly treated as a commodity* (Giannachi, 2007, 74). The commodification of the body as a consequence of Orlan's desire for self-transformation, *seem to dematerialize the body* (Faber, 2002, 91). Her own self-exploitation, artistically and economically, tends to actually reaffirm the conditions she claims to subvert. The trend to commodify every aspect of life is indifferent to different bodies, as long as they can be mediatized, and commercialized. A queer or 'monstrous' appearance in that sense might even be more profitable precisely because of its exceptionality. In a disciplining society in which biopolitics is directed toward creating normative bodies, Orlan's deformations disrupt the normative apparatus she is criticizing. In a society that controls through commodification and by absorbing as much as possible into a flexible, adaptive dispositive, abnormal behavior, appearance and subjectivity are instrumentalized into the Heideggerian *Gestell* as easily as any other body.



Figure 1 Orlan: *Fourth Surgical Operation – “Successful Operation”* (1991). © Orlan

However, Giannachi deems Orlan to escape the commercialization of the body, because of an *excess of meaning*, transforming her into an *un-consumable product*. *With Orlan, scarred body parts are turned into aesthetic signifiers. Life becomes art* (Giannachi, 2007, 76). In the becoming art of life, lies a risk of recuperation. The transformation of life into art is a tendency connected to the modernist avant-garde's sublation of life and art, which according to both Boris Groys and Giorgio Agamben reduces the artist to bare life, making them vulnerable (Agamben, 2015b, 133; Groys, 2010): *the artist's body itself became a readymade* (Groys, 2010). However, this does not lead to an ungraspable surplus, as it is precisely this surplus which is being capitalized and speculated upon in art after *the Duchampian revolution* (Groys, 2010). Herbert Blau makes a similar analysis when he points at the importance of the 'name', the unicity of artists such as Orlan, and the *proprietary rights that went with the artist's name* (Blau, 2013, 27). In this way, the artist's body is once again reduced to a linguistic signifier or brand, annulling the embodiment resistance.

This phenomenon extends itself beyond the art market and occurs throughout today's post-fordist capitalist definition of labour, in which the subject, the virtuoso surplus, is exploited and commodified as a highly desired asset (Virno, 2004, 25). *The personal is political, states a famous feminist saying, yet meanwhile willed self-exposure has become a mass product for and by the masses* (Laermans, 2015, 154). Social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter have shown very clearly how a profile, which is a digital form of subjectivity, is merely a product. *The internet has become a privileged space for actualization of consumerism and conformism [...] This is illustrative of how the same utopian or emancipatory technologies may turn into technologies of domination* (Rouvroy, 2011). The haptic connection through touch, swiping and sensors implies a physical relation to technology, but is at once transformed into information.

Today's smart technologies, softwares and devices, such as the smartwatch and smartphone, increasingly interact with our bodies and are promoted as customizable. The more personal these objects, social media platforms and other forms of accounts and profiles become, the more information is collected. The formation of a persona, of an identity through technology, might prove to be a false promise. When the body is used to create new subjectivities, it will be absorbed in processes of datafication. However, this does not mean we have to fall in the cybernetic trap, placing the immaterial as an inevitable and predominant element. There is another use of bodies, of posthumanist figures escaping the apparatuses seeking to capture and transform them, possible.

### 1.1.2 Stelarc's obsolete body: transhumanism between an augmented and a disappeared body

An artist explicitly seeking connections with transformative apparatuses is the Australian performance artist Stelarc, another 'usual suspect' in the posthumanist performance repertoire (Dixon, 2007, 150; Giannachi, 2007, 65; Graham, 2002, 196). Stelarc creates performances in which his body is extended with different types of prostheses. In *Exoskeleton* (1998) he stands on a metal structure with six 'legs' that are able to walk, and attached to his body he has a third prosthetic arm with a hand and fingers. The movements of his arms, which are connected to the exoskeleton, steer those of the machinic legs, resulting in the image of a human body standing in and on a technological construction, being moved around and making unusual movements himself, without showing any emotions (Clarke, 2004, 209). Stelarc is perhaps most known for his *Third Hand* performances (1980-1998). A third prosthetic hand, that was developed in Japan, could be connected to his right arm and steered through electronic impulses coming from the leg and abdominal muscles. The third hand returned in several of his performances.

If an analysis of Stelarc's performances would start from how they actually 'work', the connection of his body to high-tech elements would be the red herring. Different than Orlan's modification of the body, Stelarc mostly works with extensions and the relation between the inside and outside of the skin. Indeed, an interesting aspect of this feature of his oeuvre is how the connection is not merely a mechanical 'add-on', but goes through the skin, often taking the body's electric pulses as stimuli to steer the machines. Like a twentieth-century Galvani, Stelarc uses the 'spark of life' – as the electricity running through the human body's nerve system is often called – to engage with his self-designed technological environment. The opposite direction was also explored in his performance *PING BODY* (1996), during which 'pinging', the measuring and testing of the connection and distance between a computer and a website, steers his actions. In *PING BODY*, Stelarc's body is connected to an online network of computers and a webpage. The 'pings' are converted into the electric stimuli introduced into Stelarc's muscle nerves, causing him to move in a ping-generated, involuntary choreography. This time his body, and not the technological prosthesis, is like the frog legs Galvani had twitching, through small electric shocks caused by the network. The connection between electronic impulse and muscle movement dates from the eighteenth century, the technological tools and connections are of a more recent date. Precisely because he breaks the boundaries of the body through and toward technology, Stelarc can be considered an important posthumanist artist. Stelarc creates a cybernetic network of feedback loops, of action and reaction to impulses. He seems to present the ultimate, wired and online cyborg body, creating a mesh of impulses traveling through organic and inorganic materials, adding prostheses and creating a body that encompasses both human 'flesh' and machine, and which is also (at least partially) being steered by both entities, extending his body not only through

devices but also along wires, the internet etc. His performances can in that sense be interpreted as *liminal rituals in that they make visible the passage of Western culture into a post-human relation to technology* (Scheer, 2006, 149). The question then remains as to what that relation actually means and implies, and whether these rituals still account for the shifts in technology and apparatuses that have occurred since the conception of Stelarc's oeuvre.



Figure 2 Stelarc: *Third Hand* performance (1990) © Stelarc

The highly 'wired' appearance of this connection between body and technology is probably as important as what is actually happening, since it shows the body in an omnipresent and complex, material, technical environment. One could oppose that in today's slick design market, with Apple and Samsung as its steering and characterizing brands, this is no longer a vision on or an image of technology that – at least in the West – is actually valid or up to date. The connection between the body and technology is now being established through 'wireless' signals or directly via touch. Another point of critique could focus on Stelarc's ambiguous position toward the

body. At the same time stating that *the body is obsolete* and giving it a central and almost visceral presence in his performances, the Australian artist balances between *body humanism* (Laermans, 2015, 225) and transhumanism.

### **Transhumanism: augmented or vanished body**

In Stelarc's statement that *the body is obsolete*, two directions of transhumanism are possibly indicated. What I call transhumanism here, is that line of thought that not only keeps the human at the centre, but also pursues a logocentric and exclusive discourse, driven by progress-oriented thinking and striving for mastery over the self, the body and the world. Transhumanism in this sense, *derives directly from ideals of human perfectability, rationality, and agency inherited from Renaissance humanism and the Enlightenment*, writes Cary Wolfe (2010, xiii). Or as Herbrechter describes it aptly, the continuity with humanism

lies in *this liberal, humanist self which survives in transhumanist philosophy, but merely in a technologized form – as a new version of Descartes’ ghost in the machine, so to speak* (2013, 52). The Cartesian split between body and mind is radically continued in transhumanism, and resonates in Stelarc’s statement that the body is obsolete. From a transhumanist perspective, the two directions an obsolete body can evolve into are the augmented body and the dematerialized body. The first is strongly connected to the human enhancement movement, striving for a perfect human body and complete mastery over both that body and its environment. Stelarc’s performative research into a techno-body can be read as *an augmentation and extension of the body by using the skin as an interface between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ of his body* (Giannachi, 2007, 65). Indeed, in the larger part of his oeuvre the electric pulses of his nerve system – often used as an image for an information network – control not only his own body, but also elements surrounding it. Nick Bostrom, the founding director of the Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford University, is one of the strong proponents of this kind of human enhancement.

Transhumanists believe that, while there are hazards that need to be identified and avoided, human enhancement technologies will offer enormous potential for deeply valuable and humanly beneficial uses. Ultimately, it is possible that such enhancements may make us, or our descendants, ‘posthuman’ beings who may have indefinite health-spans, much greater intellectual faculties than any current human being – and perhaps entirely new sensibilities or modalities – as well as the ability to control their own emotions (Bostrom, 2005, 203).

In order to attain these enhancements, the freedom to augment oneself during his or her life and to design one’s children needs to be protected, which Bostrom respectively calls *morphological* and *reproductive freedom* (2005, 206). Focusing on human intelligence, persistence, progress and mastery as the defence against, for example, climate change and Artificial Intelligence but something like depression, Bostrom’s human enhancement reads as a continuation of a humanist and highly anthropocentric discourse and he shares these values with the most pronounced adversaries of human enhancement, the bioconservatives (notably Fukuyama, Rifkin, etc.). They both build their argument on an ethical notion of dignity, on the one hand the dignity of the human species as it ‘is’, and a posthuman dignity that includes enhanced humans, i.e. cyborgs (Bostrom, 2005). Recently, several researchers, institutions and companies have gathered under the name of Humanity +, a neologism for transhumanism that makes it seem less harmful, an interesting indicator of how much this debate is about public opinion and perception, as well as economic and political interests.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See [humanityplus.org](http://humanityplus.org). The slogan of this organisation is also quite telling: *Don’t limit your challenges, challenge your limits.*

Unlike Haraway's cyborgs, Bostrom's enhanced humans will live in a unequal society, in which weak, intelligent and augmented humans will live together in a socially well-organized society (Bostrom, 2005, 207). As Van Bendegem aptly noted, *high tech solutions for non-progressive worldviews can go hand in hand* (2009, 17). The pleas of the recent years for geo-engineering instead of developing an ecologically responsible and less destructive way of life, are also related to this kind of transhumanist positions. Hayles' notion of the 'technological embrace' (before technology embraces us) (Hayles, 1999, 5), is shared by transhumanists of the Humanity<sup>+</sup>-strand, but the motivation for this embrace is rather different. Whereas the latter position the augmentation of the human within an evolutionary, liberal humanist vision on progress and self-determination, Hayles wants to transition the liberal humanist into a posthuman subject, which is relational, open and equal. One of the most important differences between cyborg-posthumanism and Humanity<sup>+</sup>-transhumanism is that the latter does not situate technology and enhancement within a political, but within an economic frame (which is certainly there, considering the enormous investments that are made in research and companies working on these matters, as the Future of Life Institute also indicates in its open letter [Future of Life Institute, 2015]). Cyborg-posthumanism is very much a political project, one of empowerment and at the same time a reconfiguration of the subject. The fact that the result might appear to be similar to that of transhumanism, however, brings questions concerning the efficacy of the position of Hayles and other likeminded thinkers to the fore.

Stelarc's representation of the augmented body could well be read within a Humanity<sup>+</sup>-frame. The exoskeleton and the *Third Arm* prostheses are medical applications that could potentially be adapted (in a 'prêt-à-porter' variation) for mainstream use. In the performances they are in a way enlarged, so they go beyond really 'useful' adoptions of technology, but nevertheless Stelarc reflects the technological developments and possibilities of his time. The question of mastery and self-determination seems central in the attempt to categorize and interpret Stelarc. Is he a puppeteer, a controller steering the technical prostheses that enhance him? Or is he a fleshly component of the techno-web he designed for himself? The balance probably changes over different performances, but nevertheless an enhanced-humanity reading of Stelarc remains possible and diverges from specific cultural and political critiques inherent to cyborg-posthumanism.

Although Stelarc is often described as *an advocate for an optimistic posthuman future* (Broadhurst, 2007, 88), it might have already become clear that this particular optimism differs fundamentally from the feminist cyborg-posthumanists. Criticism on Stelarc – claiming his work to be transhumanist in the sense that it renders the body obsolete in favor of a dematerialized human essence – mostly comes from the feminist readers of his performances and can be understood from the perspective of resistance through

embodiment (Fancy in Causey & Walsh, 2012, 65).<sup>15</sup> Besides the interesting direction the cyborg-posthumanists' critique on Stelarc takes (i.e. the focus on the obsolete body as a dematerialized body and not on his augmented body as a continuation of a liberal humanist discourse of progress), the ambiguity of his performances remains quite fascinating. However, no reading, in terms of human enhancement or a dematerialized body, allows to present Stelarc's oeuvre as posthumanist in a non-transhumanist sense.

Bostrom and the enhanced humanity-movement within transhumanism differ from the transhumanist strand that follows the lead of Hans Moravec, which is characterized by the reduction of the human to mere information. The dematerialized body of this type of transhumanism is the nightmare of embodied posthumanists. Moravec's *Mind Children: the Future of Robot and Human Intelligence* (1988) provides the ultimate example of – how Hayles coined it – a *postbiological future* (Hayles, 1999, 6). In this book, Moravec announces a future in which the human mind can be downloaded into a robot or device, thus enabling near immortality as well as an existence without an organic body. Both Moravec and Hayles relate to the Cartesian mind-body divide, which in Moravec's case exaggerates the predominance of the mind in relation to the body, considering the mind as the sole 'location' of the subject or human essence. A downloaded consciousness would then fulfil the function of a 'brain' or 'software' for the machine or computer it has been transposed to. From this perspective, Stelarc's assertion that the body is obsolete, results in a complete disappearance and elimination of the body. Arguments for such a postbiological vision on humanity in his work are that he considers the body as a cybernetic system, that is *absorbed in information, [...], enabling the incorporation of nonhuman elements such as the prosthesis and external impulses* (Giannachi, 2007, 69). The question concerning such a disembodied identity would not so much be its sheer possibility, as its consequences for the subject, which might fall apart if it is no longer contained in a body and if it would be able to flow unlimitedly through the information networks it is connected to. However, the technological development of a downloadable brain is not necessary to create this fragmentation and dispersion of the subject (Broadhurst, 2007, 91). The sparagmos of the subject, as Matthew Causey calls it, is already happening through the development of different digital personae (2009, 23).

## Body Humanism

Despite his own – as we have seen, rather ambiguous – statement that the body is obsolete, Stelarc's body remains very present, if only because in most of his performances

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<sup>15</sup> Another argument that counters the idea of Stelarc embodying his technology is built on the relation towards his prostheses. Helena De Preester for example, questions the embodiment of Stelarc's technological apparatuses, such as his project *Third Hand* since it does not replace an existing element and only adds an extension (De Preester, 2011, 126).

he is almost naked, emphasizing the connection between the human flesh and skin and the technological devices he is plugged into. Kathy Smith also points out this ambiguity in his *Body Suspension series* (1976-1988) during which Stelarc hangs his body on a number of hooks that penetrate the flesh and which generate an image of pain and suffering, creating a *strong bodily presence although the artist himself might want to proclaim a different use of the body* (Smith, 2007, 71). From this perspective, the body is not obsolete at all, moreover it remains a very present signifier. Stelarc shares this body humanist feature with Orlan. In performances in which the body remains this present, *the humanist past continues to haunt the post-humanist present* (Laermans, 2015, 224). What is haunting in this case, is the tradition of the human body as a central medium of the performing arts and more specifically of performance art. Although Stelarc belongs to a certain posthumanist 'canon', as does Orlan,<sup>16</sup> the human body stays central to his oeuvre. Even technically, his body is either the source of movement of the attached devices, or his body is the central object of movement, steered by devices connected to him. Body humanism remains an anthropocentric or rather subject-centred characteristic of Stelarc's and Orlan's cyborg-figures. Salter places this type of figure in a genealogy, writing that *the roots of technological transformation of the flesh were firmly anchored in the body-based actions and practices of artists in the 1960s* (Salter, 2010, 243).

In his discussion of body humanism in contemporary dance, Laermans describes how since the Judson Church 'revolution', what is considered dance and choreography has expanded rapidly. This led to a *democratization of the dancing body*, including everyday movements, non-professional dancers, disabled bodies, etc. Opening up dance to all different kinds of bodies and their (non-)movements, however, does not automatically lead to an abolishment of body humanism, on the contrary, *humanism has only become more inclusive, more open also to bodily forms or actions that Western society stigmatizes or forecloses – in a word: more human* (Laermans, 2008, 7). Cyborg-posthumanism could be interpreted from the same inclusive perspective, now extending the body toward technological elements and thus including in 'the human' bodies with technological prostheses and modifications. This is one possible reading of the embrace of technology Katherine Hayles suggests in *How We Became Posthuman* (Hayles, 1999, 5), which paradoxically requires a unified entity to embrace a position of control, which goes against the idea of a fundamentally relational, posthuman subject (Miccoli, 2010, 4).

Despite his proclaimed obsolete body, Stelarc's work remains an embodied practice, making the intertwinement of the body with technology explicit. Graham asserts that the obsolescence in Stelarc's work points toward the idea of an ego-driven *idealized body*

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<sup>16</sup>This argument can also be made in relation to the work of Orlan. *The centrality of the body* as a focalising medium for the ritual, as her surgical performances are being called by Alyda Faber, remains intact, even although it is composed and subsequently mediatized (2002, 87).

(Graham, 2002, 197). Indeed, in an interview he states that *the body is an impersonal, evolutionary, objective structure* (Stelarc in Atzori, 1995). In her reading of the work of Stelarc and Orlan, Kathy Smith suggests a third body image, derived from the work of Samuel Beckett. *The body has disappeared almost completely [...] The world has engulfed the body: the body is at an extreme of pain and all that remains is the fragmented disintegrated scream of denial, confirming its existence* (Smith, 2007, 74). Smith points here to an alternative for the embodied subjectivity of cyborg-posthumanism or the augmented body of transhumanism, one that belongs to the more ontologically oriented apparatus-posthumanism. The disappearance of this third body type should not be interpreted here as a dissolution into information. It is rather the disappearance of the discursive body, its nearly complete separation from the individual, or rather, from a subject. The body becomes object.

The loss of the discursive body is effectively caused by the mediatization of information and implies the disappearance of the body as the primary medium of communication – something Stelarc also seems to suggest according to Clarke, who sees his work with prostheses as showing *our continued reliance on both language and technology that is human* (Clarke, 2004, 208). Despite the elements that make Stelarc's work perhaps too connected to a particular moment in the history of technology, the cyborg-posthumanist perspective – as well as the actual performances of Stelarc, one could argue – might not be apt to fully conceptualize his view that *technology is what defines being human. It's not an antagonistic alien sort of object, it's part of our human nature* (Stelarc in Atzori, 1995). But what if we have not in the least any control over these prostheses that are supposed to be constitutive of human beings? What remains is a bare life, a reality that escapes representation while it is being subjected to it. It finds itself on the threshold between human and nonhuman, which Perniola called a *sentient thing* (2004, 5). This alternative conception of the body – not an embodied resistance seeking for subjectivity in a cybernetic society, nor a body that has dissolved in information or has been enhanced – I shall develop further in the discussion of apparatus-posthumanism. This other body will be shaped in the nexus between the deconstruction of the subject and the construction of new form of life. These new conceptions of the body resonate with new ways of performing, beyond the (re-)presentation of the subject.

### 1.1.3 The human animal: dealing with the anthropological machine

*Humanism must, if rigorously pursued, generate its own deconstruction, once the traditional marks of the human (reason, language, tool-use) are found beyond the species barrier.*

(Wolfe, 1995, 35)

Posthumanism is highly informed and steered by developments in technology that are related to cultural and political conditions. Most descriptions of the posthuman condition and posthuman theories (to refer to Braidotti's useful division again) all seek to reposition the human within a technological environment. However, a different perspective or direction that is inherent to posthumanist thought focuses on the human-animal divide, which is studied and criticised in the field of animal studies. Donna Haraway herself came to be one of the main voices in the academic research and struggle against speciesism, leaving the cyborg behind and finding the figure of the companion species to imagine and develop her later, more recent work. Wolfe, who has written the very informative book *What is Posthumanism* (2010) also follows the line of animal studies, building on systems theory that is applied to organisms in general. Whereas Hayles tackles cybernetics and systems theory to undermine the difference between the human and information and machines, Wolfe rather applies the study of second-generation systems theorists such as Maturana and Varela to blur the line between humans and animals.<sup>17</sup>

In his analysis of Eduardo Kac's work, Wolfe gathers critiques on the ethical aspect of it. Kac genetically modified several organisms, of which 'Alba' the *GFP (Green Fluorescent Protein) Bunny*, created in 2000, probably is the most famous example. Alba is a fluorescent rabbit, a work of what Kac calls *transgenic art: a new art form based on the use of genetic engineering to transfer natural or synthetic genes to an organism, to create unique living beings* (Kac on his own website). Alba is an albino rabbit, that, when under the right lamp, glows green. This was the result of infusing her DNA with a synthetic variation on the *green fluorescent gene found in the jellyfish Aequorea Victoria* (Kac on his own website). The work wants to reflect on the ethics of science and the normativity separating human from animal and the natural from the artificial – questions that Stelarc also (although less explicitly) asks. However, according to Kac's critics such as Steve Baker, this strategy

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<sup>17</sup> Wolfe also writes with an inclusive conception of organisms in mind. Systems theory provides for him the base on which an equality between humans, nonhuman animals and nonhumans can be built, respecting their differences. Braidotti nevertheless positions Wolfe partially in the transhumanist movement, since he does not explicitly oppose to human enhancement. The evolution towards a transhumanist humanity is then taken as an opportunity to re-establish an open post-anthropocentric value system in which nonhuman animals no longer have different 'rights' than humans: *Cary Wolfe (2010b) is especially interesting, as he attempts to strike a new position that combines sensitivity to epistemic and word-historical violence with a distinctly transhumanist faith (Bostrom, 2005) in the potential of the posthuman condition as conducive to human enhancement* (Braidotti, 2013, 30).

exactly copies the humanist behavior of testing on animals and treating them as subordinate beings – an understandable argument, as it was precisely Kac’s intention to make the invisible visible, *GFP Bunny* being a manifestation of humanity’s control and manipulation of genetics and implants (Wolfe, 2010, 160-161): *On display here, in other words, are the humanist ways in which we produce and mark the other (including the animal other)* (Wolfe, 2010, 164). What the ethical critiques of Kac’s work may be, it is interesting to consider the position of the animal in his work, especially in relation to his research in genetic code and human impact, about which it probably communicates more than about the animal’s animality.

For *Genesis* (1999-2001), Kac injected a genetic code into a sample of e-coli bacteria, exemplar bacteria often used in experiments and essential to our digestion and intestinal flora. The injected code was a transposition of a sentence from the Bible, first translated into Morse code, then into DNA code according to a 'language' that Kac developed himself. *And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth,* is the phrase from the Bible’s *Genesis* that Kac translated, assigning the human dominion and mastery over his environment. In the gallery space, the modified bacteria were presented in a petri dish on a pedestal. A camera filmed a microscopic image of the bacteria and a UV-lamp was placed above the petri dish. The performative aspect of *Genesis* lied in the possibility of the spectator (in the gallery space and online) to switch on the UV-light, whose rays would alter the genetic code of the bacteria. By interfering, the spectator would fulfil its biblical duty and reign over the animals and organisms, but at the same time destroy the codified quotation from *Genesis*, ‘endowing’ him or her with this power and thus not only ruling, but also fundamentally altering their ‘population’, i.e. taking the position of God. The paradox – if I exert my power I will annihilate the pretext of that power and modify the object of my power – seems a rather prophetic anticipation of the notion of the anthropocene.

Kac’s project was contemporary to discoveries and breakthroughs in the research on the human DNA. The Human Genome Project – a research project that aimed to ‘crack’ the human genetic code and map the whole human genome, which ran between 1988 and 2003 and was organized by institutions funded by the governments of the United States, United Kingdom, France, Japan and China – proved to have had a profound impact on the conception of ‘the human’. Cracking the code that is considered the essence of the human raised expectations to understand the secret of life and subsequently to create and design life. Partly this is true, but the project also led to new questions, because not everything could be declared from the code and humans appeared to show great genetic similarities to mice, fruit flies and bananas. However, the ability to map and interfere in the human genome gave the not completely untrue impression that humanity could now be its own ‘god’. It was also an important breakthrough in biotechnological research, allowing to consider the body and the ways it functions as ‘technology’. Eugene Thacker has called

this biotech perspective on the body *biomedia* (Thacker, 2003). In *The Open*, Agamben discusses the relation between the human and the animal (considered both as discursive and biological categories). The analysis of the genome and the manipulation of it, are part of the radicalized biopolitics of modernity, which focuses on the naked biological life of humans (Agamben, 2002, 77). Altering and managing the genetic code that shapes biological life is a radical step in a biopolitical mode of government. The question of animality is regarded from the perspective of the divide between biological life and political life. Agamben builds here on the Greek differentiation between biological life, *zoē*, and the political form of life that is organized in the polis, *bios* – a pair of concepts also used in the philosophy of Hannah Arendt, which greatly influenced him. Biopolitics today governs humanity's own animality, its *zoē*, to the extent that the management of naked life, or bare life, thwarts an actual political, 'bios', life.

The division between human and animal is organized by an apparatus Agamben calls *the anthropological machine*. This machine,

is an optical one [...] an optical machine constructed of a series of mirrors in which man, looking at himself, sees his own image always already deformed in the features of an ape (Agamben, 2002, 26).

In the mirror of Kac's *Genesis* we see how understanding and manipulating our own code makes us at once more animallike, not only because we resemble in terms of DNA, but also because the reduction of the human to a code makes life vulnerable and discards the political layer of our form of life.

### **The boundaries in the human**

Kac's work with nonhuman organisms differs from other performances with animals, such as Romeo Castellucci's staging of animals or David Weber-Krebs' staging of a donkey in *Balthazar* (2011), practices that will be discussed in the analysis of apparatus-posthumanism. Investigating or enabling the performativity of the animal is not at stake here, what is interesting in Kac's work is how via technological dispositives, the conception of the animal rearticulates the conception and position of the human. Researchers like Frans De Waal have been breaking down the boundaries between the categories of the human and the animal, by analyzing how characteristics that were for long considered to be uniquely human are also present in primates and other mammals. Not only biologically is the *homo sapiens* kin to other primates and mammals, but also socially and behaviorally there are strong connections. However, following Agamben and a posthumanist, technology-infused question, it is more interesting here to make an analysis of how the animal in the human is defined and politicized. Technology and devices are often powerful mediators to realize this definition and control. Similarly, Parker-Starbuck also analyzes that *the driving force that produces humanity in relationship to the animal is now driven more literally by machines* (2006, 655).

*Kac evoked a poetic synthetic life*, Parker-Starbuck writes in her analysis of Kac's work (2014, 253). She actualizes the cyborg in her research on how animals are confronted with technology and how this can disrupt humanist anthropocentrism. In her article *Becoming-Animate* (2006), she reads Agamben's *The Open* and more specifically his notion of the anthropological machine as a device that does not undo but actually affirms the duality between the human and the animal (653). Agamben analyzes how the human is a construction that is made by the *anthropological machine of humanism*, that after establishing the boundary between the animal and the human also excludes the 'inhuman' out of the human (or homo sapiens), both on the level of the species and that of the individual, making humankind also internally a liminal being. The modern anthropological machine functions *by excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human [...] the animal separated within the human body itself* (Agamben, 2002, 37-38) Or as Marc De Kesel describes it: *subjectivity is only possible by excluding the animal side - sensations, bare living, bare life - and, in the same gesture, including it in the order of discourse and language* (2009, 110). In defining the human, the animal in the human is suspended and as animal, excluded. The importance of the location of the border is essential here. It is not between human and animal, but inside the human, it is an *intimate caesura*, as Agamben calls it. [*I*]f the caesura between the human and the animal passes first of all within man, then it is the very question of man - and of humanism - that must be posed in a new way (2002, 15-16). The human is then no longer the being consisting of a body and a soul, but a being through which divisions and separations run that are being rearticulated continuously, separations deciding upon life and death, separating the bios from the zoē, and suspending the animal as inhuman in the human (Agamben, 2002, 16). Not only does Agamben discard the Cartesian mind-body divide, he repositions it as a discussion on how bare life is separated within the human, and positions this separation as the key 'action' and mode of governance that is at stake and has been at stake long before 'humanism' and democracy entered the stage.

The anthropological machine is operated by the apparatuses of biopolitics, culminating in the cruelties of the concentration camps as the literal exclusion of humans that were considered inhuman. An Agambenian reading of Kac, such as the one presented above, thus focuses not on the legal status (the rights) and treatment of the nonhuman animal or organism, but rather on how the manipulation of the organism (in the case of *Genesis*) reflects upon the government of bare life through the possibilities of manipulation of the genome, as well as the unworking of the anthropological machine in the explicit showing or foregrounding of the zone of the animal, of zoē, biological life, inside the human. Agamben seems to suggest that the human-animal divide is used to justify not only animal cruelty, but also and perhaps even more, human mistreatment - hence the connection between cyborg-posthumanism and animal studies in their joint fight for social justice and equality.

Similar to other researchers in the field of animal studies, such as Haraway of Wolfe, Parker-Starbuck's discourse's subliminal striving is for animal rights (2006, 654). These rights are nevertheless conceived from an anthropocentric perspective thought, since they are paradoxically measured once again against human rights. In this sense re-enforcing the anthropological machine, by defining the human or the 'norm' as those beings with the proper rights, a more profound political subversion of the categories of the human and the animal and the apparatus dividing them, is missed. Similar to Laermans' critique of the inclusion of various cyborg-constellations (human-technology) in the category of the human, Braidotti claims that *in this cross-species embrace, Humanism is actually being reinstated uncritically under the aegis of species egalitarianism* (Braidotti 2013, 79). Indeed, Prozorov argues with Agamben that *the idea of the anthropological machine makes it clear why any 'post-anthropocentric' politics that simply attempts to include animals within the sphere of 'human politics', for example through their endowment with rights, freedom and equality with humans, remains insufficient if not counter-productive* (Prozorov, 2014, 157-158).

The main reason for this insufficiency is that despite the strife for equality, the focus lies too much on differences or similarities between humans and nonhuman animals, whereas the caesura of the anthropological machine runs through the human itself. It is the category of the human that should be rendered inoperative<sup>18</sup>, which would then result in a double suspension, the already existing suspension of the animal added by that of the human in 'the human'. When both human and animal are rendered inoperative, *'the face in the sand' that the sciences have formed on the shore of our history should finally be erased*, and what will surface then will be *a figure of the great ignorance* (Agamben, 2002, 92).<sup>19</sup> The mirror Kac holds for us in *Genesis* is not so much a reflection of similarities between humans and animals, nor does it – and for that matter, neither does the Human Genome

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<sup>18</sup> Inoperativity, (in Italian *inoperosità*) is a notion that has been used by Kojève, Bataille, Blanchot and Nancy (Murray, 2010, 45). Agamben also uses the French translation (*désœuvrement*) which, together with his essay *The Coming Community*, reminds of Nancy's *La communauté désœuvrée* (1986). The latter formulated a critique on *community as a production of human society through collective rational activity* (Elliott, 2009, 898) and argued for a conception of community that would not have to be produced through work. This understanding of *désœuvrement* differs from Agamben's in the sense that for the latter, the term used to indicate an ontology of the human being, a state of being (of human beings and of apparatuses, both can be inoperative) and of action (see e.g. Agamben 2002 and 2014). He uses the term much broader than merely applied to a community, and less literally connected to an idea of work or labour. However, both Agamben and Nancy consider inoperativity as part of a critique of apparatuses that produce and commodify, and that are based on nothing but the maintenance of the apparatus itself. In the following chapters, the use of inoperativity, unworking or *désœuvrement* will each time be inspired by Agamben's use of the term.

<sup>19</sup> Ryan makes a similar argument, stating that *it is not enough to simply build on or extend an ethics based on humanist models [...] Instead, if we are to provide an ethics that is truly open to nonhuman as well as human 'others', we must probe the existing anthropocentric frameworks through which we think of ethics. [...] [We need] a transformation of how we conceptualize both these categorizations [human and animal]* (Ryan, 2015, 133).

Project – unveil the secret of life that binds all organisms; it rather shows the mystery of life. What remains is a code, one that we can read, but cannot fully understand. Perhaps this is what Agamben means when he encourages his readers to explore *the central emptiness, the hiatus that – within man – separates man and animal, and to risk ourselves in this emptiness* (2002, 92). We might sometime discover the ‘how’, but we will never understand the ‘why’.



Figure 3 Eduardo Kac: *Genesis* (1998/1999). Gallery display. On the left, the Genesis gene code, and the right the Bible citation. © Otto Saxinger.

For this research, the internal caesura between human and animal or rather, nonhuman, will be explored by its effects on the relation between the human and the object. In a book with the telling title *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* (2004), Italian aesthetics philosopher Mario Perniola writes that humankind has always sought to define itself through its relation with the animals and the gods. Differentiating oneself from both of these categories, the human was ‘defined’. However, according to Perniola this debate ended in a draw: the human is almost animal and almost God. The time has come to compare the human to the thing, which in recent times has started to increasingly resemble the human (Perniola, 2004, 4). Or is it the other way around?

### 1.1.4 Instrumental demonstration: CREW's techno-performances

In the examples discussed so far, the way technology is used in the works of Orlan, Kac and Stelarc has a demonstrative aspect to it. Orlan explicitly broadcasts and registers the technicality of her surgeries, Kac shows through a microscope the mutations of the e-coli bacteria in *Genesis* and the *GFP Bunny* can be considered a demonstration of genetic modification, albeit with a poetic touch. In particular Stelarc's performances display the cyborg body and its prostheses as prototypes of techno-bodies. Apart from the highly technologized setup for the performances, there is rarely any other subject matter than the presentation of for example the new constellation of a human body with pneumatic legs and a third arm steered by the performer in *Exoskeleton*. The constellation itself, in its technicality, is the subject of the performance, and it is 'demonstrated'. From that perspective, Stelarc's performances resemble the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century demonstrations of inventions, discoveries and other technical developments, such as the Magdeburg Hemispheres.<sup>20</sup> The hemispheres were developed by the German scientist Otto Von Guericke and were used to demonstrate atmospheric pressure, the vacuum and the force of the former on the latter. Two half-spheres made out of copper were placed together and subsequently the air was pumped out through an air valve. Sixteen horses were used to try and pull the spheres apart, but this proved to be impossible. The pressure from the outside on the vacuum sphere was too strong; hence the pressure 'in' the air – or rather the atmospheric pressure – was demonstrated. Presented for the first time in 1654 at the Regensburg general assembly of the Holy Roman Empire, and traveling royal courts during the second half of the seventeenth century, the Hemispheres were 'an act' showing a state of the art, groundbreaking development in science. Today these presentations continue in for example the TED-talks that are held all over the world, in which a presenter gets to discuss his or her idea in fifteen minutes. Robotics fairs and demonstration movies of companies such as Boston Dynamics share the same aesthetic of showing prototypes, a robot walking up a stairs, a four legged robot-dog staying upright on an ice patch, etc.

The work of the Belgian theatre maker Eric Joris and his company CREW (short for 'Creative workers') is in Europe an important reference when it comes to the relation between science and theatre. CREW creates performances with high-tech devices, prostheses, immersive video, motion capture, etc. From a posthumanist perspective, CREW's performances can be situated in cyborg-posthumanism. The figure of the cyborg is evoked regularly in its work, creating man-machine assemblages through for example

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<sup>20</sup> The performativity of technology and science of which the Magdeburg Hemispheres, are a well-known example and are also a source of inspiration and recurrent reference in the work of Kris Verdonck (van Baarle, forthcoming). However, the critique formulated in this chapter does not apply to Verdonck's work, as will be argued in chapter 2.3, when discussing the critical aesthetics of performative objects.

prostheses in the *Man-O-War* performances *Icarus* (2001) and *Philoctetes* (2002), but it is their aesthetics of demonstration, particularly in their recent *C.A.P.E.* performances, which makes CREW paradigmatic for cyborg-posthumanism. Their aesthetics of what I propose to call 'instrumental demonstration' – with a reference to Heidegger – bears traces of spectacular and performative setups such as the Magdeburg Hemispheres, hot-air balloons, automatons and other examples of scientific demonstrations during the Enlightenment period, which blurred the lines between entertainment and pedagogy (Bensaude-Vincent & Blondel, 2008, 4).<sup>21</sup> More importantly, these spectacular experiments were part of a larger scientific revolution in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. The development of empiricism and experimental science is tightly intertwined with the moderns' split between subjects and objects, or rather, between the social and the natural, which had fundamental consequences for philosophy, political thinking and for the general world view that has been developed in Western societies, and that has recently started to crumble.

### Demonstrating the gap

In his performances, Eric Joris/CREW uses technologies and devices that are often developed in collaboration with universities and other scientific institutes.<sup>22</sup> The scientific character of his work resounds in the way they describe their performances as *scientific fiction*.<sup>23</sup> An interesting name, which resonates with cyborg-posthumanism's sci-fi sources of inspiration that was pointed out in earlier in this chapter. CREW's more recent work (since 2010) is mostly known for its immersive performances, in which a technology called C.A.P.E. (Computer Automatic Personal Environment) is used. Several performances such as *C.A.P.E. Brussels* (2010), *C.A.P.E. Horror* (2012) and *C.A.P.E. Anima* (2014) experiment with the possibilities of this technology. The C.A.P.E. performance setup offers each time two positions: being immersed, and watching others being immersed. Technologically, C.A.P.E. consists of software and a head-mounted device for the spectator. This device consists of a pair of goggles, displays that are placed in front of the eyes, which are completely covered so as to prevent the spectator from seeing anything other than the video images. The head-mounted display, as this device is called, is placed

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<sup>21</sup> Another interesting example of how entertainment and science were intertwined, this time in the nineteenth century, is the *astronomy performance*. Bigg & Vanhoutte point out how these performances *mingled heavenly and earthly concerns, delivering cosmological narratives that also thematised the place of man, progress and technology in a rapidly evolving world* (2017, 115).

<sup>22</sup> CREW was one of the seven partners involved in the EU-funded DREAMSPACE project (2013-2015), part of the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development and demonstration. The other partners were The Foundry, ncam, Stargate Germany, Saarland University, iMinds and Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.crewonline.org/art/home>

on the head of spectator and in some (earlier) versions the setup required the spectator to wear a backpack with batteries and a laptop, on which the assistant guiding the immersed 'user' could follow the virtual trajectory. What the spectator sees is an omni-directional video (ODV) (Bekaert, Vanhoutte, & Joris, 2007, 23). In the words of Kurt Vanhoutte & Nele Wynants, who collaborate with and study the work of CREW, ODV is

a new immersive medium that allows the spectator a surround video display by means of a head-mounted display (HMD). Equipped with an orientation tracker this HMD shows a sub-image of the panoramic video that corresponds with the spectator's view direction and desired field of view. [...] Moreover, the filmed image becomes a space in which the viewer can walk around (2009).<sup>24</sup>

In the performance *Terra Nova* (2011), the omni-directional video of the C.A.P.E. technology is used as well. The performance starts from the story of Antarctic expeditioner Robert F. Scott, who died from starvation and exhaustion in 1912 during an expedition toward the South Pole. The performance consisted of three parts: a part in which the spectator is immersed through the C.A.P.E. technology, a part in which a group of spectators sees another group of spectators as they are immersed and another part with a monologue performed by a (live) actor. The order of the parts varies, as the audience is split into two groups and while one group is watching the monologue, the other is occupied with the immersion (both being immersed and watching being immersed). This monologue was written by Belgian writer and regular CREW partner Peter Verhelst and focuses on the state of mind of a character in a snowy, white landscape, based on the tragic events on the Antarctic a hundred years earlier.



Figure 4 CREW: *Terra Nova* (2011) © Arnold Jerocki

When immersed, the spectator (in *Terra Nova*, but in other C.A.P.E. performances as well) makes a trajectory through a virtual-reality environment. In *Terra Nova*, this virtual world

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<sup>24</sup>This definition is quoted from a book chapter by Vanhoutte & Wynants, that is partially published on CREW's website in a glossary with terminology to describe their work: <http://www.crewonline.org/art/keywords>, last accessed on 10/2/2017. Full reference to the book chapter can be found in the bibliography.

consists of hallways, smudgy rooms reminding of a hospital and creepy characters. For each immersed spectator, there is an assistant, wearing a brown duster evoking an image of the experimental, post-apocalyptic scientist. The assistant ushers the spectator to lie down on a table and ties him or her up, and fixes the head-mounted display. During the immersion, the table – and hence the attached spectators – will be placed upright and moved about, according to the trajectory in the virtual reality that is displayed for the spectator. The rubber hand illusion, in which a virtual hand is for example injected by a needle while in real life a pencil is pushed slightly on the same spot on the spectator's arm, affirms at a certain moment the action in the virtual reality. Physical movement and input in 'reality' connect to elements in virtuality, seeking to enlarge the immersive effect by going beyond the visual senses. Verhelst's story about a scientific expedition, the laboratory setup, and the hospital or secret scientific institution that is evoked in the immersive environment emphasize the performance's crossover with science and scientific practice.

The dominance of the immersive effect and its setup over the content of the virtual reality, directs the focus to the technological device. What the technology does on a teleological level (means to an end) forms the main focus during CREW's immersive performances. Hence, the experience of immersion and the technology generating virtual reality become the central elements – the subject – of the C.A.P.E. performances. As Vanhoutte writes, *reminiscences of the scientific-technological means and sources, such as computer screens, processors and cables, are never hidden, but become an overt part of the performances, giving rise to a distinct assemblage of art and science* (2010, 483-484). The physically present – because rather uncomfortable – devices render the environment and experience artificial even when one is 'tricked' or surprised by the virtual world's real effects, precisely because the spectator remains conscious of the fact that he or she is wearing a device. Because of the duality between the device and the own body, the immersed spectator – as a temporary cyborg – is aware of the exceptionality of the 'event' that is the performance. The explicitly temporary nature of the experiment might hence prevent the created virtual reality to connect with everyday reality, although it is important to point at the fact that the 'immersant' is not immersed in the virtual realm as a different character, but is him or herself. The spectator becomes thus the character in a virtual reality, a character that coincides with the spectator's body and perspective, making it a personal experience. This distinguishes CREW from immersed gaming environments, where there is always a fictional character, an avatar that is played by the user, creating a less personal experience (Machon, 2013, 61). The strong physical effect the immersive performances of CREW evoke (Wynants, 2015, 36), together with the demonstrative temporary character of the effect, actually emphasize the boundaries between the body and the technology, while simultaneously addressing the impact of virtual reality on our body. CREW's C.A.P.E. technology might create composite bodies of spectator-actors-in-technology, the 'double helix' of technology and spectator (Stalpaert,

2015, 29), remains double, preventing the formation of an actual DNA of the human and technology that would go to the ontological level. The prosthetic nature of the head-mounted display – other performances by CREW, such as *Philoctetes/Man-O-War* (2002) focus more explicitly on technology as a prosthesis – takes over or extends a function of the body, but by doing so, especially when we are aware of it, the gap between technology and the body is affirmed (Vanhoutte, 2003, 50-51).

As a spectator watching the immersed group during *Terra Nova*, you see a demonstration of how it works, which could be called a ‘demonstration’ of the demonstration. The spectator is indeed aware of the presence of technology and its relation to visual and haptic senses, but there is no critical positioning involved which would embed this technological awareness in a broader political, social or psychological context. This reminds of Bertold Brecht’s famous passage in *The Street Scene* from 1950 in which he praises demonstration as an epic strategy. However, demonstration *should have a socially practical significance* (Brecht, 1964 [1950], 122) and the demonstrator should [adopt] *a quite definite point of view* (124) in order for a critical stance for the audience to take place. These basic ‘laws’ of the alienation effect help to understand the critical potential of the physical presence of the machinery and the phase in which a group of spectators watches another group being immersed in *Terra Nova*. However, this distance is not reflected upon or dealt with (explicitly) on the level of the content of the performance, that is, on the level of the text or immersive environment itself. A critical potential lies in the immersive practice of CREW, however, it is not fully developed because of the dramaturgical gap that leaves the social and political aspects of which immersive technology is a symptom or for which immersive technology could be a form, unaddressed. The critical distance that is opened by the physical discomfort and the observing phase is not continued on the level of the content, it is oriented to the immersive effect *per se*. The imagination of the spectator is not activated during the immersion, it is occupied with the trick, and not with the content or its socio-political context. That this is a dramaturgical issue, is underlined by Eckersall, who asks similar questions in his research on object dramaturgy:

How much do these objects – more media than materials – retain the trace of their histories of assemblage, or their uses and abuses in other fields? How do we avoid techno-fetishism, or work with degraded technologies and localized networks and systems? These questions are dramaturgical in that dramaturgy anticipates that artistic processes and their outcomes are interconnected (2015b, 125).

Looking at it from a Heideggerian perspective, an instrumental, effect-oriented, demonstrative aesthetics remains on an instrumental level and does not reveal the underlying workings of the *Gestell* – a limitation that can be extended to cyborg-posthumanism as a whole, as will be elaborated further in this chapter. What is shown in the immersive sphere does not ‘really’ matter; it is thus more about the technological

setup than about what is actually happening in virtual reality. In this way, the binary relation of the human spectator / technological device is emphasized instead of deconstructed. Interestingly, it thus appears to be partially a dramaturgical shortcoming or gap that foregrounds the demonstrative quality of these performances – an analysis that can be expanded toward Stelarc’s performances as well. Neill O’Dwyer has called this instrumental demonstration somewhat negatively *techno-exhibitionism*, a strategy which risks *being inevitably devalued and overtaken by newer technological gimmicks* (2015, 35). CREW’s effort and continued research generates a specific knowledge. The maintenance of skills related to virtual-reality techniques almost intrinsically implies a political and economic resistance and its collaboration with scientific institutions makes the company an interesting case. Paradoxically, it is the strong focus on technology and the immersive ‘effect’ that undermines this critical potential. The bare application of the technique is complicated by the physical discomfort and combination of immersion and looking at immersion, a concrete stance and dramaturgical development referring to elements outside of the immersion effect are not part of *Terra Nova* and other C.A.P.E. performances. *In short*, O’Dwyer writes, *it is not enough to place cutting-edge technology on stage; treatment of the subject is key* (2015, 35).

### **Politics of demonstration**

To critically discuss the politics of the demonstrative aesthetics in cyborg-posthumanism and in particular in CREW’s work, it is interesting to return to Otto Von Guericke and the Magdeburg Hemispheres. Von Guericke’s research on vacuum and air pressure not only led to performative science at royal courts, it also inspired other scientists to develop further research and to redefine the way science is practiced. Robert Boyle, famous for developing the gas law, built an air pump out of glass so one could see what would happen in the vacuum space, allowing to develop the empiricist or experimental method (Latour, 1993, 17; Shapin, 1985, 26). In their seminal work *Leviathan and the Air Pump* (1985), Shapin & Schaffer analyzed the debate between Boyle and Hobbes and how Boyle’s new scientific method of empiricism and the creation of matters of fact became the standard mode of operation in science. In his account of Boyle’s work in relation to the analysis of Shapin & Schaffer, Bruno Latour in turn points out two interesting aspects of empiricism’s *theatre of proof* that was facilitated by the air pump. On the one hand, it establishes a way of knowing through construction, i.e. the experimental method: *We know the nature of the facts because we have developed them in circumstances that are under our complete control* (Latour, 1993, 18). On the other hand, the laboratory’s exceptional space, time and circumstances, generate *facts that will never be modified, whatever may happen elsewhere in theory, metaphysics, religion, politics or logic* (ibid.). The experimental method of knowing things by building them can be transposed to the artistic practice. Building their own objects and their own technological devices, artists get acquainted and familiar with the

technology they are dealing with. As an artistic practice, this is an interesting method to relate to technology on the level of form, and it also offers the opportunity to allow technology to inform the aesthetics and content of the work. The techno-aesthetics of CREW – as well as of Stelarc – with its wires and high-tech devices, connects to this *bricoleur* method of creation.

The demonstrative use of technology becomes problematic when considering the second aspect belonging to the theatre of proof, namely its so-called neutrality – and here we return to the Brechtian argument of critical socio-political embeddedness. Latour points at the necessity for Boyle's empirical method to be completely depoliticized, in order to let the facts speak for themselves (Latour, 1993, 28). Boyle developed a way of communicating, witnessing and generating matters of fact by the use of three technologies: a material, social and literary technology (Shapin & Schaffer, 1985, 25). These primarily discursive technologies were to ensure the neutrality of the matters of fact produced by experimental science. As if the facts were not man-made but machine-made, the 'neutral' technique of producing givens isolated these 'facts' from political or religious perspectives and made interpretation and creation of the facts invisible (Shapin & Schaffer, 1985, p. 77). With reference to Haraway's conceptualization of the cyborg (Latour, 1993, 47), Latour points out how these developments in scientific knowledge production, were essential in the opening of modernity's rift between the Social and Nature, between politics and science, rendering the hybrids, the network-nature of actions and performance, invisible and subsequently incomprehensible. It is this categorization and subsequent split between nature and culture, between science and politics – which Karen François rephrases as the split between human and nonhuman (François, 2010, 165) – that Latour claims to be the central characteristic of modernity and which should be contested as artificial and as a political construct.

When relating this to the performing arts, this could point on the one hand into the direction of the creation process and the construction of devices used in performances, and on the other to the broader politics and socio-economic or ecological context of the technology or device that is presented. Going back to cyborg-posthumanist, instrumental-demonstrative aesthetics and more specifically to the case of CREW's C.A.P.E. – with the overt presence of the device, the head-mounted display, the explicitly unhidden elements referring to 'technology' such as cables and computers and the often twofold structure of the C.A.P.E. performances, including a phase of immersion and a phase of looking at others being immersed – the network of the C.A.P.E. technology appears to be shown. In CREW's immersive performances, the spectator becomes a witness of the experiment, who has to acknowledge the matter of fact presented, being that virtual reality as a technology can be created and trick our brain and body into believing it is 'real', albeit momentarily. However, this technology is not embedded in a critical cultural, political or social context, and the network that is visible within C.A.P.E.

performances remains on the side of 'science' and objects, thus respecting the modernist divide between objects/science and subjects/the social.

Due to the dramaturgical gap between the technology and the user that I claim to be inherent to an instrumental-demonstrative aesthetics<sup>25</sup>, the device remains isolated. This prevents the demonstrated technology or device to become what Latour has called a *matter of concern* (2007, 114). A matter of concern allows for a reflection upon the social context of the creation of the fact – in this case the technological device of the head-mounted display, virtual reality and immersion – and hence upon the political circumstances and implications, the breaking of the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, between nature and the social, between the object and the subject. Matters of concern almost seem to call for dispute, just as Brecht's alienation technique aims to critically present political situations and systems (Latour, 2007, 116). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the feminist and animal studies inspired strands of cyborg-posthumanism do emphasize the political nature of the cyborg-hybrids between technology, human and nonhuman being in their strife for equal rights, emancipation and visibility. It is rather the more transhumanist inspired and what I have called instrumental-demonstrative usage of technology, that isolates devices and technologies from their socio-political context.

From a different point of view, the invisibility of power in instrumental demonstration resonates with how Slavoj Žižek characterizes postmodern technology in contrast to modernist technology. He writes:

[M]odernist technology is 'transparent' in the sense of retaining the illusion of an insight into 'how the machine works'; [...] the user was supposed to 'grasp' its workings – in ideal conditions, even to reconstruct it rationally. The postmodernist 'transparency' designates almost the exact opposite [...]: the interface screen is supposed to conceal the workings of the machine [...] the user becomes 'accustomed to opaque technology' – the digital machinery 'behind the screen' retreats into total impenetrability, even invisibility (2008, 167-168).

Žižek's characterization of modernist and postmodernist technologies might not tie exactly with Latour's analysis. However, there seems to be an argument implied that postmodernism seeks to deepen the abyss between the social and technological objects by making the latter even more opaque when it comes to their workings and as well as

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<sup>25</sup> An interesting example of how scientific application and art go together in the creation of matters of concern, is Maria Lucia Correia's *Urban Action Clinic GARDEN* (2015). It is beyond the scope of this research to fully explain the project, but by including spectators in the creation of scientific analysis and by involving them and herself in non-instructive conversations, science is instrumentally used to render a discussion possible. This discussion is not so much about the coming about of the scientific fact or about the fact as such, but rather about the (personal) relation to it (Stalpaert in Eckersall & Grehan, 2018, forthcoming).

the labour to produce them, their ecological impact and their impact on the user. A translation could be made to the aesthetics of modernist and postmodernist devices and how these are represented or reproduced in the arts. In devices there is for example the shift from a desktop computer in which adjustments and reparations can be made with modest skills, to the slick design of a notebook or tablet that cannot be opened anymore. In the arts, Eckersall has described the shift from modernist media dramaturgies to *new media dramaturgy*, as a shift away from works

exemplified by scenic construction and the dramatic ideological rendering of the actor embedded in and alienated by a mechanical environment, toward networks, micro-forms, and invisible operations that are evident in the everyday nature of the synthesis between human and media-tech (Eckersall, 2015b, 124).

CREW's modernist 'techno-look' as it is described above, corresponds to Žižek's characterization of modernist transparency (and might find its postmodern successor in the gaming industry with SONY's Morpheus and Facebook's Oculus Rift VR glasses). The spectator gets an insight in how the head-mounted device is constructed and connected to computers, sensors and other elements. CREW's modernist aesthetics are insightful when discussing technology in a specific historic, political and geographic moment, as well as in the rendering visible of certain technological workings, but there might be other strategies necessary to relate with more contemporary technological developments as well to include a critical, political stance.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, one could argue that in a society in which technology and the economic-political structures behind it are rendered more and more opaque, the illusion of an insight in the workings of a device might even reaffirm the opacity and create a misguided sense of knowledge.

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<sup>26</sup> This does not mean that this kind of technology is no longer in use, but in particular in the Western societies the postmodernist type of technology corresponds to a form of power that has become the dominant paradigm. It might very well be that in other parts of the world or in specific fields of expertise these technologies remain the standard; there is not a progress-driven value intended.

### 1.1.5 The shortcomings of the cyborg as a dualist creature

*I will risk alienating my old doppelganger, the cyborg, in order to try to convince my colleagues and comrades that dogs might be better guides through the thickets of technobiopolitics in the Third Millennium of the Current Era.*

(Haraway, 2004, 298)

#### Dualist cyborgs: me and technology

Cyborg-posthumanism's latent body humanism, subject-centred embodiment, transhumanist immateriality or augmentation and non-internal approach of the anthropological machine prevent it from offering a vision on posthumanism that starts from an ontological intertwinement of living beings and apparatuses and all of the consequences this implies. The cyborg remains in essence a dualist creature, a constellation that is not ontologically anchored. An instrumental view on technology lies at the origins of cyborg-posthumanism's dualism, as well as a subject-centred notion of the human and identity. Belgian philosopher Patricia De Martelaere remarks that *entering into a relation with the object, presupposes a primary divide between subject and object* (2000, 57). Hayles and other cyborg-posthumanists plea for an embrace of technology: *my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality* (Hayles, 1999, 5). However, the embrace continues to operate on a binary notion of human – technology, of subject – object. The unity between subject and object that is in some cases sought after via the cyborg, is in apparatus-posthumanism already present in the formation of the subject, of homo sapiens. However, this unity in no way means a solution. On the contrary, it implies a much more profound problematics. As De Martelaere also noted, *where there is unity, there is no relation, and also no dialogue* (2000, 57). This has not only consequences for human agency, when it is part of such a unity, but also for art that wants to critically relate to this condition. The concept of the embrace reveals how the cyborg remains in principle a dualist being. It explores relations between biological human and nonhuman elements, but does not reflect humanity's being in an apparatus as an ontological and fundamental state of being. The work of Stelarc and C.R.E.W. and in a lesser explicit way, also that of Orlan and Kac, maintains the dualism human – technology, also in its aesthetics.

Transhumanism's, but also feminist cyborg-posthumanism's body-technology dichotomy has its origins in the Cartesian mind-body split, a split the embodiment argument actually seeks to overcome, but in fact merely repositions by rearticulating it between the subject and the object. This critique on cyborg-posthumanism is most clearly formulated by Anthony Miccoli in his book *Posthuman Suffering and the Technological Embrace* (2010). Cyborg-posthumanism in its diversity is accused by Miccoli – and it is a

critique I share – of an *objectivation* [sic] of *technology as an other* (2010, 67). To understand this claim, it is necessary to consider the origins and the intentions of the different cyborg-posthumanist strands. For transhumanism, this is quite clear. Technology is perceived as a tool, a means to enhance the human. As for those strands of cyborg-posthumanism which strive for embodiment and emancipation of the cyborg, when considering their vision on technology more closely, it becomes clear that this is partially dictated by a fear of technology. Embodiment is, as we have seen, the counter-argument for dematerialization by information technologies.

The embracing relation cyborg-posthumanism generally proclaims, has different ends. In the case of Hayles and other feminist posthumanists, the embrace can be read as protective: trying to prevent technology from destroying the subject or controlling it. With this protective gesture comes the positive consequence of an egalitarian cyborg-society. Equality amongst humans, however differently they are composed, does not necessarily imply a decentring of the human subject, nor an overcoming of the subject-object divide. Hayles' plea for an embodied posthuman subject that relates with technology and information from an embodied point of view, maintains an antagonistic position vis-à-vis technology, as well as a focus on the more recent technological devices like computers, robots and other kinds of operating systems. She is criticising heavily the liberal subject of humanism that believes it is autonomous or self-determined, but the relational, embodied subject that embraces technology might not go far enough in acknowledging how profoundly we are shaped by this technology. Or as Miccoli formulated it accurately: *The posthuman does not look for a better connection with technology, it seeks out a perfect connection with itself* (2010, 110). Orlan's reconfiguration of her own body as the reincarnation of her artistic persona is a striking example of this analysis. Also Stelarc's work is an example of how cyborg-posthumanism suggests to *embrace our technology as an attempt to get technology back in hand; as an attempt to re-incorporate the externalized efficacy which technological instruments represent*, Miccoli writes (2010, 95). Technology in cyborg-posthumanism – and to a lesser extent in the animal studies strand – is once more a means to an end aiming to recover or maintain a certain sovereignty of the subject, be it a fragmented, scattered subject rather than a unified one. With Miccoli, we can understand how the liberatory projects of materialist feminism, transhumanism and subsequently of cyborg-posthumanism actually reaffirm the divide, the dualism between human beings and technology, thereby not acknowledging the technicity or artificiality of the human 'by nature' (De Mul, 2014a). Sharon recognizes this shortcoming of cyborg-posthumanism as well:

As long as technological artefacts and processes are applied to bodies and selves – and Haraway does posit these as subsequent in some essential sense to bodies and selves (she writes: “communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools *recrafting* our bodies”, (1991, 164, emphasis added)) – even if a countless number of novel variations can potentially emerge from this encounter, the two

categories that preceded the cyborg conjunction, the human and technology, remain largely intact (Sharon, 2014, 159).

Indeed, it is important to make a distinction in how in the cyborg concept *there is no fundamental, ontological separation in our formal knowledge of machine and organism, of technical and organic* (Haraway, 1991, 178) – that is, an epistemological equality – but how nevertheless human bodies and technology remain separated and the latter are conceived of as tools, for which we can develop skills (1991, 180). Miccoli finds his critique on cyborg-posthumanism's embrace of technology on Heidegger's analysis of an instrumental and essential (instrumental) understanding of technology, as it was formulated in *The Question Concerning Technology*. Technology in cyborg-posthumanism remains caught up in the subject-object divide and is considered predominantly on an instrumental level, i.e. as a means to an end. One of the dangers Heidegger sees in this means-to-an-end instrumentality is that technology is considered to be 'neutral'. This view on technology *makes us utterly blind to the essence of technology* (Heidegger, 1977, 4). This essence in Heidegger's essay, implies a redefinition of what is understood with the instrumentality of technology, formulated – as was already mentioned above – in terms of *Gestell* (enframing) and *Bestand* (standing-reserve). Heidegger uses the example of how nature's resources are mined and rendered available for consumption. Water no longer flows for itself when it is captured to generate electricity, wind no longer blows in the air as it used for energy, just like the sun. As standing-reserve, these natural resources are enframed by processes of commodification and consumption. They are in this way removed from their *being*. Humanity itself becomes part of the standing-reserve, a substance ready for exhaustion through consumption in economic, political and ecological contexts. The latter element is part of the dystopic prediction Heidegger made particularly in relation to nature, in which humanity would come to see only its own doings – thus anticipating the anthropocene. Today, the human, its body, thoughts, behavior and emotion have all become potential products and have an exchange value that can be collected and harvested, for example by companies and governments working with Big Data (i.e. the digital data and *all the new software techniques (data mining, machine learning, social network analysis, predictive analytics, "sense making", natural language processing, visualization, etc.) without which the data would tell us nothing, and which presuppose, in turn, the use of immense storage and processing capacity* [Rouvroy, 2016, 10]), such as Google, Facebook, Amazon, the NSA, etc.

The datafication and transmission of all aspects of human life into information is feared by cyborg-posthumanism because of the loss of the materiality of bodies and logocentric dominance in such a discourse. However, their fear might be directed in the wrong direction. The biggest danger of datafication is not the disappearance of the body, but rather the becoming part of the standing-reserve, the loss of independence and being for oneself. Technology places its user and objects in consonance with an external cause and it can do so fundamentally because it relates to the living being on an epistemological

and ontological level. Following Heidegger, technology is to be regarded as a challenging forth, a revealing of something as being available for something else. When Orlan modifies her own body, she indeed works on a new 'self', but this self becomes commodified, a product of the art market and as such it becomes part of the apparatus of capitalism. The cyborg was conceived as a political figure by Donna Haraway, but the transformations in the workings of the apparatus of capitalism and a fundamental instrumental understanding of technology reveal the cyborg as a rather (also historically) limited political being. In her study of different strands of posthumanism, Tamar Sharon notes that

it is not clear [...] how the multiple and fragmented nature of posthuman subjectivity, which can understandably act as a site of resistance to *modern* disciplinary power, can also embody the ideal form of resistance in a post-disciplinary or *postmodern* configuration of power that is itself multiple and fragmented. [...] the mobile, posthuman subject is simultaneously presented as a symptom of the contemporary configuration of power and as an agent of resistance to it. In this context it necessary to question what qualitative kind of impact the notions of hybridity, fragmentation and fluidity, so frequently celebrated by radical posthumanists, really have (2014, 9-10).

Even when leaving space to include 'cyborgs' that are not characterized by bodily modifications and by including those subjectivities that are constituted through networks and assemblages, the question remains indeed how effective the cyborg remains as an alternative for humanist bodies and subjectivities up until today. Cyborg-posthumanism and posthuman subjects seem to uphold binary positions that belong to a constellation of power that has changed over time. They resist against a disciplining biopolitics, which has evolved and expanded into a society of control (Deleuze), psychopolitics (Han and Stiegler) or expanded biopolitics of bare life (Agamben).

The posthuman subject – transhumanist, feminist cyborg, or animal – is in cyborg-posthumanism the result of a process Herbrechter called *posthumanization* (2013, 35). However, with the Heideggerian (and also Agambenian) essence of technology in mind, the striving for a relational subject flowing over the boundaries of the physical body is more a starting point than an end. *The desire to embrace technology blinds the posthuman to the nature of the relationship itself: that technology, ontologically speaking, is the defining characteristic of life* (Miccoli, 2010, 96-97). The third body that Smith recognizes in the work of Beckett offers a – however dystopic – objectified body, which when viewed from a more 'messianic' perspective holds a potentiality for resistance and a new use of the body that can leave the modern subject behind.

## The persistence of the subject

In cyborg-posthumanism's development of a posthuman subjectivity, the subject remains, in its alternative form, a key element. Herbrechter sees in the cyborg-posthumanist focus on the subject, a latent humanism, which he calls *posthumanist subjectivity – a new form of humanist identity in posthumanist clothes that calls forth our vigilance and scepticism* (2013, 59). From an apparatus perspective, the subject is an obstacle to obtain a fundamental posthumanism, for it is precisely through the interaction with the apparatus that the subject is generated and that the living being is literally being subjected (Agamben, 2009b, 11). There is a *risk* in claiming new identities and subjectivities, namely *that one reidentify [...] that one produce a new subject, if you like, but one subjected to the State* (Agamben in Smith, 2004, 116), and one could add, to the society of the spectacle and its apparatus of commodification. As long as living beings are captured in their interactions with apparatuses, and as such become subjects, they will continue to be rendered available for an external use and thus be exposed to political and economic powers. As Michel Foucault wrote in his preface to the English translation of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1983):

Do not demand of politics that it restore the “rights” of the individual, as philosophy has defined them. The individual is the product of power. What is needed is to “de-individualize” by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations. The group must not be the organic bond uniting hierarchized individuals, but a constant generator of de-individualization (Foucault in Deleuze & Guattari, 2010 [1983], xiv).

In his search for a form of life that is not captured by destructive apparatuses, Agamben seems to follow Foucault's warning. Apparatus-posthumanism seeks a relation to the apparatus, which no longer generates subjectivity, but rather a *form-of-life* that will be explored further throughout the following chapters. Parsley considers Agamben's perspective on the subject as a *critique on both representable identity and communitarian politics [...], looking for an unrepresentable community* (Parsley, 2013, 40).

The formation of a subject and the interaction with apparatuses are issues that are deeply intertwined with that of (post)humanism, not only because the subject is created through mediation of the apparatus, but also because the relation with the apparatus is characterized by desires of control, mastery and expanse in humanism and as we have seen in transhumanism as well. Other strands of cyborg-posthumanism, which are not as much fuelled by desires of power or control, nevertheless also remain attached to some form of subject. Hayles explicitly tries to ‘save’ the subject, at least this is how she describes the simultaneous subversion and reconstruction of the remediated subject as a fragmented entity or a *palimpsest* (2002, 779). Similarly, Braidotti seeks to develop new, posthuman, nomadic subjects. Although Braidotti's nomadic subject is a less ‘unified’ element of control than the liberal humanist subject, it maintains a core of ‘identity’.

However, to connect and theorize in consonance with the post-anthropocentric era in which the anthropocene has paradoxically brought us, the human body should no longer be connected to a human subject. Or formulated alternatively, the development of cybernetics and desubjectifying forms of government, such as neoliberalism and an expanded biopolitics, have made it possible to think the body without a subject. The question is now whether there lies an opportunity in that. The disentanglement of body and subject can be thought in a way that does not dematerialize the body, but rather the opposite, re-materializes the body and brings it to a new use, beyond the subject.

There is a zero degree of the body's materiality, which opens up new possibilities that will be explored and further theorized in chapters 2.2. Thinking beyond the subject, and also beyond the human as a category upheld by the anthropological machine of humanism might gain

resistance or opposition from participants in liberatory scholarly projects [...] which work precisely against the objectification of the human, a nonhuman object or things that can be bought and sold, ordered to work and punished, incarcerated and even killed. For scholars who have labored so hard to rescue or protect the human from dehumanization or objectification, the nonhuman turn can seem regressive, reactionary, or worse,

as Richard Grusin estimates quite rightly the hesitation of the posthumanist thinkers coming from feminist, queer and animal studies to let go of the subject (2015, xviii).

*The moment the human 'disappears', its repressed mirror images of identity return to haunt it and the entire history of anthropocentrism has to be rewritten*, Herbrechter states (2013, 29). In cyborg-posthumanism, these ghosts are the 'monstrous', the disadvantaged human beings – queer, deformed, disabled, black, indigenous, female – and also the (human) animals. The question I would like to pose here, is whether these are the right ghosts being summoned to formulate a critical philosophical posthumanism that is adequate to describe and operate in our contemporary late capitalist society. A society, in which identity has become a product like any other and where posthumanism has evolved toward object-philosophy, the anthropocene, and a general tendency of dehumanization caused by economic-political systems.

Interestingly, Donna Haraway herself expanded her scope, displacing the cyborg as a central concept, while developing what she calls possible *string figures* (*speculative fabulations, the scientific facts, science fiction, and the speculative feminisms* [2016, 10]). In her latest publication, *Staying with the trouble* (2016), Haraway rephrases the cyborg as *cyborg littermates, whelped in the litter of post-World War II information technologies and globalized digital bodies, politics, and cultures of human and not-human sorts* (104). The cyborg is no longer *the* concept to formulate a critique and alternative, as *cyborgs are critters in a queer litter, not the Chief Figure of Our Times* (Haraway, 2016, 105). In Haraway's thinking, the historically situated concept of the cyborg has adopted the place of a fruitful soil, out of

which string figures can grow. It is not my intention to condemn cyborg-posthumanism as uninteresting or 'wrong'. Rather, I am fascinated by the way the discourse on technology in the performing arts and in posthumanism has shifted away from the cyborg as a central concept – technology (or more precisely: the way in which it is applied in a globalized advanced capitalism) being not so much an attack on the body than a destruction of the psyche within a larger economic-political context. The achievement of cyborg-posthumanism lies mainly in deconstructing the monolithic subject of liberal humanism, argued by technological developments since the 1940s, and in proposing a humanity that is determined, shaped and living through and with technology. However, this is where apparatus-posthumanism starts: an ontological intertwining between the human and technology - or rather: apparatuses. Taking a different route than Haraway's string figures, I take Agamben's concept of the apparatus as a guideline to describe and analyze figures in the (performing) arts and in Agamben's contemporary critical philosophy.

The difference between a cyborg-posthumanist and an apparatus-posthumanist aesthetic lies in the way technology is operationalized and thematized. Apparatus-posthumanism needs no literal presence of technology to discuss it, nor does technology as a form only serves to reflect upon the human-technology relation – this is always already part of humanity's way of being. Apparatus-posthumanism finds itself in a slightly paradoxical situation. To reflect upon the position of technology, this technology sometimes disappears and resurfaces in the choice for certain states of mind and being or for a profound objectification and dehumanization of the human.

## 1.2 Apparatus-posthumanism

Whereas in the first part of this chapter, the cyborg functioned as a concept to develop a description and an analysis of a specific type of posthumanism in theory and the performing arts, the second part now takes the concept of the apparatus in Agamben's expanded sense as its guideline. Starting from the apparatus, a different posthumanism comes to the fore than when the cyborg takes center stage. A first and fundamental shift is that the focus now lays on the apparatus instead of on the living being or the cyborg. Apparatus-posthumanism is not simply a chronological successor to cyborg-posthumanism, even although it seems to have been gaining interest in theory and has been developing in the performing arts mostly in the early two-thousands, after the important cyborg-oriented publications by Haraway (1985) and Hayles (1999), which are still being used in the analysis of performances today and know their own theoretical evolution, among others towards new and vibrant materialisms.

There is nevertheless a chronological aspect to the relation between cyborg-posthumanism and apparatus-posthumanism, in the sense that technology and its relation to human beings has changed over time. The cyborg-paradigm is still operative and useful to address specific performance practices and socio-political phenomena, but several shifts in the artistic practice, technology, philosophy and politics, call for a different perspective, that is open to thinking beyond the subject and liberatory projects and dares to radically displace the human as well as to redefine what 'human' might mean. The ties between technology, economy and politics have only become more intimate and intensive. Agamben's notion of the apparatus is not only a gateway to these issues, it is also an insightful 'update', that enables to understand the current condition, as it allows to include new forms of power that extend the biopolitical where cyborg-posthumanists reacted to. Bringing technology and anthropogenesis together with power and politics, Agamben's essay *What is an apparatus?* provides an interesting starting point for a posthumanist theory relating to those performance practices that take a highly politicized and post-anthropocentric stance toward both human and nonhuman performers, phenomena, political and economic systems and events.

### **What is an apparatus?**

In this essay, several lines of thought come together that tell the reader more about Agamben's own philosophical trajectory and influences, and the frames he uses when discussing technology. The most prominent influence in the apparatus-essay is Michel

Foucault's theory on the dispositive.<sup>27</sup> To make the distinction with Foucault, I henceforth will indicate Agamben's notion of the *dispositivo* by 'apparatus' – the English translation David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella chose – as it implies any sort of device and is inspired by Agamben's own suggestion that this translation resonates with *das Apparat* in Kafka's *In der Strafkolonie* (Agamben, 2009b, 55).<sup>28</sup> Agamben seeks to redefine Foucault's notion of the dispositive to what could be seen as an update and expansion of this concept, leading in two important directions. On the one hand, Agamben brings the apparatus to the ontological level of anthropogenesis, the becoming human (literally, becoming homo sapiens from a biological and evolutionary perspective, as well as the becoming human in each individual life), and subject formation. On the other hand, by not limiting the impact of apparatuses to the body and discipline, he broadens the notion in such a way that Deleuze's take on Foucault's dispositive in his *Postscript on the Societies of Control* (1992) and *Qu'est-ce-qu'un dispositive?* (1988), can be incorporated in the notion of the apparatus.<sup>29</sup> In this sense, a power structure operated by apparatuses can include forms of control aimed at psychic faculties, such as desire and attention, and thus can include an advanced version of biopolitics, which others have come to call 'psychopolitics' (cf. infra).

In the apparatus-essay, another important interlocutor that has already been introduced in the previous pages on cyborg-posthumanism, is Heidegger's essay *The Question Concerning Technology* (*Die Frage nach der Technik*), published in 1954 and in which he develops the notions of *enframing* (*Gestell*) and *standing-reserve* (*Bestand*) which were already addressed earlier. *Gestell* is a process of ordering and transforming what is *bestellt*,

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<sup>27</sup> Matteo Pasquinelli has criticized Agamben's reading of the Foucauldian dispositive through a Christian-theological, -genealogical lens. Pasquinelli points at both the normative and disciplinary-technological roots of Foucault's notion through the work of Canguilhem & Goldstein (Pasquinelli, 2015). However, I believe that the theological roots Agamben draws for contemporary forms of power, are not contradictory to Foucault's archaeology and enable a more abstract, broader conception of how this power operates in various domains, as well as an alternative perspective on causality, relationality, subjectivity, etc.

<sup>28</sup> In Kafka's *The Penal Colony*, the apparatus inscribes the judgment in the flesh of the accused during several hours of torture, until the accused dies and is disposed of. This already reveals Agamben's stance towards the apparatus, for in Kafka's story, for the apparatus, everyone is guilty and subjected to it, even its operators and even when the initiator and developer of the apparatus is no longer there.

<sup>29</sup> Louis Althusser also used the notion of apparatus (*appareil*) in his theory of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA's), that reproduce the *imaginary relationship of individuals to their real condition of existence* and that have a material base (Althusser et al., 2014 [1971], 256, 258). This theory has had an important influence on film theory and the analysis of the cinematographic apparatus by Jean-Louis Baudry a decade after the publication of Althusser's book. Bojana Cvejić points out how the lineage of the notion of the apparatus that follows Foucault and Deleuze differs from Althusser's when it comes to the conception of power, but how there are also resemblances between their definitions of the apparatus (dispositive / *dispositivo* and *appareil*) (2015, 97-99). Althusser's notion is more narrow as he stresses the ISA's material base, whereas for the Foucault/Deleuze/Agamben line, the apparatus is a *more heteronomous set of elements whose relations are variable rather than scientifically conditioning or determinative as in the Althusserian cinematic apparatus, which reaches from the basic apparatus (machinery, hardware) to ideological discourse* (Cvejić, 2015, 98).

similar to that of the apparatus (Agamben, 2009b, 12). Later, Agamben will come back to Heidegger's notion of the *Gestell*, adopting it in his broader conception of power and politics in relation to technology (Agamben, 2014, 105).

Moreover, Agamben presents the apparatus as a motor of history in Hegel and Hyppolite's dialectic vision on it. It is what transforms the individual and society and stands in a dialectical relation to it, hence driving history forward. A final philosophical influence, which comes to the surface at the end of the text when suggesting ways to resist apparatuses, stems from a particular combination Agamben makes between ideas of Walter Benjamin and Guy Debord. Profanation, inoperativity and play are the key strategies here, referring to Benjamin's messianic perspective and writings on sacrality and play as well as Debord's notions of *détournement* and separation in *The Society of the Spectacle*. These strategies are discussed further in part two when exploring Kris Verdonck's work.

Agamben considers the apparatus as one of the two ontological categories that are at play in the creation and development of a third category: the subject.

I wish to propose to you nothing less than a general and massive partitioning of beings into two large groups or classes: on the one hand, living beings (or substances), and on the other, apparatuses in which beings are incessantly captured (Agamben, 2009b, 13).

Engaging with an apparatus – which can be anything from language, a pen, to Facebook and smartphones – shapes the living being which, to follow the given examples, gains the ability to talk, write, share and swipe. This aspect of the interaction between living being and apparatus is the subjectification, the production of a speaking, writing, online-communicative and ubiquitously present subject. This production is *a pure activity of governance devoid of any foundation in being. This is the reason why apparatuses [...] must produce their subject* (Agamben, 2009b, 11). Agamben echoes here Deleuze's *dispositif*-essay in which the latter points at how in Foucault's dispositives the subject is produced and how the Self *n'est nullement une détermination préexistante qu'on trouverait toute faite*.<sup>30</sup> The subject is formed *pour autant que le dispositif le laisse ou le rend possible* (Deleuze, 1989, 187) and *nous appartenons à des dispositifs, et agissons en eux* (190).

An important consequence of this repositioning of the apparatus, living being and subject for a theory and artistic practice engaged in posthumanism, is the repositioning of technology as an apparatus to the ontological level, to the moment of becoming human

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<sup>30</sup> Foucault's work on the self, belongs to his later writings and courses, such as *L'herméneutique du sujet. Cours au Collège de France* (1981-1982) and *L'éthique du souci de soi comme pratique de la liberté* (1984). This 'timing' is relevant for the argument I make here, being that the cyborg-posthumanist thinkers related more to the Foucauldian disciplinary biopolitics centred on the body, i.e., the earlier Foucault. Deleuze and Agamben are in that sense continuing Foucault's 'unfinished' work on the self and how this self is formed and controlled.

and the separation from the animal. Technology is hence an innate part of what we have come to call the homo sapiens and the [m]odern *tension between the humanistic body and the dehumanized machine that has so occupied us may be – in reality, a fiction – a fabulous construction drawing a false line between poles that are always in the process of being blurred* (Salter, 2010, 276, emphasis by the author). As Jos De Mul wrote in reference to the work of the German sociologist and philosopher Helmuth Plessner, we are *artificial by nature* (2014a). De Mul continues and states that *technology and culture are not only – and not even in the first place – instruments of survival but an ontic necessity* (2014a, 18). Human beings – and here De Mul's reading of Plessner resonates with Agamben's assertion that we create apparatuses to overcome the gap between human beings and the world (2009b, 16-17) – are fundamentally eccentric (placed out of the centre) and hence alienated from their own existence. This makes us vulnerable and hence we seek to control and ameliorate our 'artificiality' through various technologies, or in Agamben's terms: apparatuses. Implying that in this sense we have always been cyborgs through our desire to bridge the gap between our being and its finitude and world, De Mul (with Plessner) argues against utopian visions of technology, as they will only increase the vulnerability. Pushing further utopian 'cyborgization' implies a tragic future, as pushing further the literal becoming-posthuman (as Braidotti might argue) does not dissolve alienation, but rather the species as a whole (De Mul, 2014b, 473). For the performing arts, this offers for example an interesting perspective to reconsider the human (performer) within a posthumanist paradigm. The human's intrinsic artificiality finds itself in a nexus with the human living being's vulnerability and current transformations in its relation to economic-political (technological) apparatuses. Human beings are never completely, exclusively human, nor have they ever been 'human' in the strict understanding of the word, and that makes us vulnerable and fundamentally alienated from ourselves.

De Mul's vision of a human being that is artificial by nature, brings us to another topos of an apparatus-oriented posthumanism. Apparatus-posthumanism does not always require technology – or more precisely, the 'techno-look', often associated with cyborg-performances – to address the posthuman condition, or the influence of technology. Heidegger's intriguing statement, *the essence of technology is nothing technological*, calls to place technology in a broader perspective and to look beyond the instrumental demonstration, the teleological or simply 'the trick'. The apparatus always implies a political and ontological aspect, and art that can be considered as apparatus-posthumanist and that nevertheless uses technology subsequently embeds technology, objects and machines in a specific context. These artists develop an *innovative treatment of content using cutting-edge technology* (O' Dwyer, 2015, 36). The entanglement of technology – used as a form or as the subject of a work – with its content and economic, political, ecologic or social contexts potentially creates a *shock, an event analogous to Heidegger's Ereignis*. It opens up a *set of sociohistorical and ontological questions* (O' Dwyer, 2015, 36). The fundamental questions about being and apparatus in what could be called an 'apparatus-

posthumanist performance', often link the posthumanist condition immediately to questions of performativity, about the medium of dance, performance or theatre. Apparatus-posthumanism often implies a search for a more fundamental redefinition of 'what' performs and what consequences this has for dramaturgy, how creation and performance are defined and, not to forget, are encountered by spectators.

We could summarize apparatus-posthumanism as a series of shifts, expansions or evolutions, from the cyborg to the apparatus, from body humanism to a radical post-anthropocentrism (redefining both human and nonhuman elements), from a subject-centred cyborg to a form-of-life that suspends subjectivity and also, a shift from biopolitics to psychopolitics. These shifts in the focus of power, as well as the rethinking of the human beyond the subject relate with two evolutions in the workings of the apparatus in late-capitalist times, which are essential for a discussion of contemporary apparatus-posthumanism. The first is a significant increase in apparatuses operating in the world – *we could say that today there is not even a single instant in which the life of individuals is not modelled, contaminated, or controlled by some apparatus* (Agamben, 2009b, 15). This leads to an increase of subjectification processes, *which pushes to the extreme the masquerade that has always accompanied every personal identity* (Agamben, 2009b, 15). Characteristic for Agamben's conception of the apparatus is that it comprises both big systems such as democracy or capitalism, as well as concrete objects or devices, and that it brings those two in correspondence. Or, as he formulates it vehemently in a later work: *the hypertrophy of technological apparatuses has ended up producing a new and unheard-of form of slavery* (Agamben, 2015a, 79).<sup>31</sup> This slavery of beings captured in apparatuses, is caused by a second evolution in the functioning of apparatuses. In its processes of subjectification, *a desubjectifying moment is certainly implicit* (Agamben, 2009b, 20). Similar to a dialectic movement, the interaction between subject or living being and apparatus leads to a next stage, the constitution of a subject. Elsewhere, Agamben has defined the subject as *a process of subjectivation and desubjectivation – or rather as an interval or remainder between these processes* (Agamben in Smith, 2004, 116). Contemporary capitalist and political powers have disrupted this dialectical movement, the desubjectifying process does no longer lead to the constitution of a new subject. The apparatus that used to shape and grow the subject now only planes down its subjectivity, generating a third category, on the threshold between subject and object, between life and death (and hence suspending these categories): *larval or spectral forms of subjects* (Agamben, 2009b, 21). In the creation of these larval and spectral subjects, the apparatus' agency is reduced to *a mere exercise of*

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<sup>31</sup> When not yet available in English during my period of research, I have read and studied Agamben's more recent publications in Italian. As this certainly influenced my reading, but I don't want to demand of the reader here to understand Italian, I have chosen to place the English translations of quotes (that are published in the meantime) in the text and the Italian original quotes in a footnote. Here: *l'ipertrofia dei dispositivi tecnologici, [che] abbia finite col produrre una nuova e inaudita forma di schiavitù* (Agamben, 2014, 113).

violence (Agamben, 2009b, 19). The state, Agamben says, has become a kind of *desubjectivation machine*, that produces *destroyed subjects, voided as they are of all identity* (Agamben in Smith, 2004, 116). What remains is *the eclipse of politics and the triumph of the oikonomia, that is to say, a pure activity of government that aims at nothing other than its own replication* (Agamben, 2009b, 20).

The apparatus aims to manage, *govern, control, and orient – in a way that purports to be useful – the behaviours, gestures, and thoughts of human beings* (Agamben, 2009b, 12). Agamben's definition of the apparatus is closely connected to processes of subjectification and desubjectification and has expanded Foucault's focus on the body to the psyche, to the *thoughts of human beings*, as the previous citation reads. This last shift relates to a change in how power operates; a shift that is implied in Agamben's work, and more explicitly so in that of Gilles Deleuze, Bernard Stiegler, Byung-Chul Han, Maurizio Lazzarato or Warren Neidich. Agamben's research in how the sovereign state is built on the production and management – through an inclusive exclusion – of bare life, focuses on the physical, biological materiality of the body. His investigations of language and media (e.g. *The Kingdom and the Glory*), however, are more related to psychic faculties, such as communication, interpretation, potentiality, political agency, attention, desire and will. It is through the capture and control of the latter elements, that bare life is also produced and increasingly controlled. The equalization of *oikonomia/economy* and apparatus in Agamben's genealogy of power implies a profound critique on capitalism and on how capitalism and politics have conflated (one can sense here again the influence of Debord). Psychopolitics, a notion used by Stiegler (2010a) and Han (2015b), is closely related to the profound entanglement between neoliberal capitalism and biopolitics that occurred over the past thirty years, and has known an exponential development with the advent of cognitive capitalism and the attention economy. These two aspects of psychopolitics are in that sense part of the larger transformation toward the omnipresence and desubjectifying function of apparatuses in late capitalism. Stiegler, Han, Lazzarato (*'noöpolitics'*) and Neidich (*'neuropolitics'*) focus more specifically and explicitly on these forms of control, manipulation and transformation of psychic faculties and behavior, even from a neurological point of view. As the term indicates, psychopolitics points at an extension and shift of attention of power away from the body, to the (embodied) psyche. By way of *psychotechnological psychopower*<sup>32</sup> [...] *these forces construct new discursive and nondiscursive relationships, that is, new apparatuses* (Stiegler 2010a, 126). Stiegler, who uses the notion of apparatus in reference to Agamben and Foucault, here makes explicit in other terms, what Agamben has analyzed as the process

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<sup>32</sup> Stiegler refers to *psychotechniques such as attention-capture* (2010a, 36) or to how *the industries capture* [the people] as *'available brain time'* (2010a, 38).

of (de-)subjectification implicit in the working of the apparatus. The apparatus (de-)generates the subject, not merely the body.

Similar to Agamben's analysis of a change in the functioning of apparatuses in late capitalism toward an ubiquitous desubjectification, Stiegler sees a similar *mutation of technics itself* over the past decades, with the development of what he calls *transformational technologies*, such as biotechnology and nanotechnology (Stiegler, 2013, 104). These can be considered part of the larger cybernetic perspective on the world. Stiegler is critical about a posthumanism that would be defined as *the question of the closure of the history of man* (2013, 104), caused by technological developments in artificial intelligence, cloning, etc. However, he reduces posthumanism to a closure of man's history that would imply the 'surpassing' of the biological human and of an age that would have been truly 'human'. In this sense his rejection of the notion of posthumanism is in fact a rejection of transhumanism, and those parts of cyborg-posthumanism that do not situate the technological developments within *the completion of a total proletarianization implemented according to a purely economic logic that destroys the political sphere* (Stiegler, 2013, 105) – which is precisely what apparatus-posthumanism is about. Similar to De Mul, Stiegler argues that the human has always been prosthetic, which makes the statement that we have only now all become cyborgs a distorting perspective on our ontological relation to technology (Stiegler, 2013, 108). Posthumanism – in Stiegler's reductive transhumanist interpretation – operates as a smokescreen when it diverts the gaze from these fundamental evolutions and points to technological evolutions only at an instrumental level, in transhumanist and subject-centred terms (Stiegler, 2013, 116), aspects of cyborg-posthumanism I have criticized above as well. The human's ontological relation to technology always places it in larger frameworks of apparatuses (here in the more abstract sense).

It might then also be that cyborg-posthumanism with its focus on the body and its potential augmentation, extension and modification, has been fighting an at least partially recuperated battle. Technological artefacts and instruments might indeed alter our biological constitution and robots and artificial intelligence challenge our position on the work floor and our definition of what makes the human 'human', but right now the functioning of apparatuses destructively intervenes in our communication, potentiality, memory and reflection and the neurological aspect of our thinking is exposed to media and technologies that manipulate, trigger and ultimately alter the way these psychic capacities work.

Ultimately, however, neither biotechnology nor robotics, neither animalization nor cyborgization constitute the 'real' threat to the survival of the human under current technological and cultural conditions. Rather, 'digitalization' and 'virtualization' promise to question humanism and human essence much more radically than humanism – including its most advanced genre, science fiction – might be able to imagine (Herbrechter, 2013, 133).

Apparatus-posthumanism focuses on the ‘invisible’, fluid, mobile technologies that we have internalized, and which exploit, form and steer humans. As Haraway already wrote, *our best machines are made of sunshine; they are all light and clean because there are nothing but signals, electromagnetic waves. [...] They are as hard to see politically as materially. They are about consciousness – or its simulation* (1991, 153). Technologies and machines are often part of these larger invisible apparatuses or systems; that is, of the *Gestell*. Devices and objects still modify, extend and augment bodies – and maybe even increasingly do so – but no longer are these operations their primary goals. The instrument has its own end, but is also part of a larger plan or power structure: *a dispositive operation [...] is an operation that, according to its own internal law, realizes a level that seems to transcend it but is in reality immanent to it* (Agamben, 2015a, 71-72).<sup>33</sup> This *conceptual figure* (Agamben, 2014, 105) of technology, which sees devices, machines, software, etc. as mediators of a broader command or power, excludes something like ‘neutral’ technology.<sup>34</sup> Within the *Gestell* – or to use an Agambenian term: the economy, referring back to the Greek *oikonomia* of which *dispositio* is the Latin translation, indicating the way in which the world develops itself according to a divine providence, and which lies at the root of Agamben’s thinking of the apparatus (Agamben, 2014, 104) – devices and software serve to extract information and through this, enable new forms of control and management as well as a new normativity.

Agamben’s analysis of the eclipse of politics indeed gives way to a different form of government of living beings (through bio- and psychopolitics), following the logics of *oikonomia*, or rather, through the logics of cybernetics. As a mode of thinking that was important for the development of a critical (cyborg-)posthumanism, it is interesting to analyze the distinction in how cybernetics is examined and countered from a cyborg- and apparatus-posthumanist perspective. The Invisible Committee, a collective of anarchist thinkers, writers and artists – also known as *Tiqqun*, which is the name of the journal they published – connects this end of politics and its transformation into an infinite reproduction of power, to the application and subsequent dominance of cybernetics.

[A]s a new technology of government, which federates and associates both discipline and bio-politics, police and advertising [...] it is an autonomous world of

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<sup>33</sup> In Italian: *un’operazione dispositiva è un’operazione che, seguendo la propria legge interna, realizza un piano che sembra trascenderla, ma le è in realtà immanente* (Agamben, 2014, 104).

<sup>34</sup> A vocabulary with several notions coming from the same sphere, and that might even overlap but have a different nuance, is used here. Object, machine, technology and apparatus have become philosophically laden terms, but in a colloquial use. In the list from object to apparatus, a degree of dematerialization seems implied, a statement which falls apart as soon as an object is defined by Harman (who might call a relationship between two objects also an object), or an apparatus by Agamben (who would call a pen an apparatus as much as capitalism). This vocabulary note might seem trivial but I believe it also points at how the material and the immaterial have become intertwined when technology, the human or power are discussed.

apparatuses so blended with the capitalist project that it has become a political project, a gigantic abstract machine made of binary machines run by the Empire, a new form of political sovereignty (Committee, 2001, 5).

Cybernetics is the humanistic project of rationalization, but with profoundly anti-humanist, dehumanizing outcomes. As a capturing apparatus, cybernetics transforms everything into controllable commodities (Committee, 2001, 19). However, the goal is not to overcome the body, as Hayles fears with the image of Moravec's downloadable consciousness in mind, rather to manage it better. Cybernetics is a system of homeostasis, of control without a face. It indeed reaches worrisome degrees of autonomy, of artificial intelligence, and has a fundamental impact on our identities, subjectivities and conceptions of reality. However, it is not out to erase embodiment per se, but rather to control it. The Invisible Committee's analysis of cybernetics as a science of government applies Agamben's concept of the apparatus as a connection between device and government through contemporary technologies. Just like the apparatus, *cybernetics is producing its own humanity [...] attached to the world by an ever-growing amount of apparatuses, [a] humanity that's inseparable from its technological environment because it is constituted and thus driven by that* (Committee, 2015, 111). Again, close to Hayles' analysis of the workings of cybernetics but with a different interpretation of it, the cybernetic conception and governance of the world leads to a posthumanist view of that world and its human inhabitants. *The rational Western subject, aspiring to master the world and governable thereby, gives way to the cybernetic conception of a being without an interiority, of a selfless self, an emergent climatic being, constituted by its exteriority, by its relations* (Committee, 2015, 110). As we will see later in this chapter as well as in the next chapter on the figure, it is this selfless self that develops as a consequence of the blurring of interiority and exteriority, which forms a model for a way of thinking and a form of life beyond the subject, and which has the potential to resist the apparatuses that have created it.

### **Post-anthropocentrism**

Cyborg-posthumanism presents mostly what Anthony Miccoli calls *a very anthropomorphic 'Cyborg' which seeks a human embrace* (Miccoli, 2010, 12). As a consequence of their body humanism, traditional cyborg-figures, which are a hybrid of biological human bodies and nonhuman technological entities, are indeed quite anthropomorphic. However, they can also be called anthropocentric, since they are more concerned with constituting a (relational, posthuman) subject than with a reconfiguration of the world from a fundamentally post-anthropocentric perspective. Anthropocentrism is not a prominent concern of several key figures of cyborg-posthumanism, the word does not even occur (nor in its 'post'-variation) in Hayles' *How We Became Posthuman*. The issue is, however, central to the animal-studies-oriented strand of posthumanism, albeit in the sense of

speciesism (Wolfe, 2010, 62), hence remaining within the organic realm.<sup>35</sup> Instead of thinking the relation of humankind with nature in terms of speciesism and animals, apparatus-posthumanism adopts a post-anthropocentric perspective in terms of a renewed interest in ecology. It is interesting to see how recent, post-anthropocentric theories on ecology are closely related to speculative realism, object-oriented ontology (OOO) and new materialism. The work of Latour has recently also directed itself toward questions of Gaia, the anthropocene and ecology (Latour, 2015), and in combination with Harman's OOO, influenced Timothy Morton's work on ecology without nature and hyperobjects (Morton, 2009, 2013).

The impact of Latour's work cannot be underestimated in the development of an analytic form of posthuman theory (Braidotti, 2013, 40), which relates to apparatus-posthumanism most directly in its adoption of a post-anthropocentric perspective on action. The underexposure of the relevance of objects (of technology) for human action is related to how in Western modernity action has been defined as a purely human capacity. A redistribution of agency, however, puts things in a different perspective and Latour's sociology of science was a seminal step in this process. Our own action *is overtaken* and as long as we don't consider the networks in which our actions are embedded, there will be an *under-determination of action* (Latour, 2007, 45). Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) defines action as a *knot of agencies* (Latour, 2007, 44). ANT searches for ways to understand society, by attributing an active role to the nonhuman elements in the world. In chapter 2.3.3, this Latourian analytical model will be used to describe how a creative process can also be post-anthropocentric, and in its methodology, connect to political and philosophical questions that are reflected upon in the work that is created. Latour's analytical posthumanism is not political in itself, however. Interestingly, Latour's ANT was not a political matter – although he refers to political theory in the coming about of modernism, for which ANT is an alternative – it was first and foremost a methodology for researching how phenomena work and occur. The aspect of power was not part of it as such, nor is the unravelling of network structures the same as Agamben's investigation in the genealogy and workings of power through the notions of apparatus and *oikonomia*.

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<sup>35</sup> Rosi Braidotti, who places herself in the lineage of Hayles and Haraway (whose work she refers to as *high* cyber studies, coining her own position as a post-cyber materialist, and posthuman theorist [2013, 14]), infused cyborg-posthumanism with a *post-anthropocentric turn* and shifted its focus from embodiment to matter, or the organic reality of *real bodies* (2012, 132). Although she also formulates it as a moving beyond the species, her post-anthropocentric posthumanism is inspired by recent philosophical currents called vital materialism and new materialism, which in turn are deeply influenced by Deleuze and a (Deleuzian) reading of Spinoza (Braidotti, 2013). Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) was a seminal book in this line of thought, in which many insights from Bruno Latour and his work on Actor-Network Theory (ANT) were combined with a Bergsonian vitalism in search for a political ecology of things. This implies a *dogged resistance against anthropocentrism* (Bennett, 2010, xvi).

*Critical post-humanism stands for postanthropocentric (post)anthropology, and the ontological status of the apparatus calls for a renewed urgency of the question concerning the nonhuman in its plurality of forms* (Herbrechter, 2013, 106). Taking the apparatus as the central notion for a formulation of posthumanism, instead of the cyborg, already implies a shift of perspective, from the constituted form of life, to that which constitutes and is constructed by these forms of life. The agency of things receives increasing attention, in both hard science and humanities, as well as in the arts. Particularly in dance and performance, objects have gained a more prominent role, a role which has changed from being a mere prop to something else. Some artists explicitly research the object's performativity, such as Miet Warlop, Mette Ingvarstsen (cf. *infra*), Gheumhyung Jeong (who reanimates a CPR doll in *CPR Practice*, 2013), Jaha Koo (who places three rice cookers on stage as the main characters in a performance on South-Korean identity, titled *CUCKOO*, 2017), Louis Vanhaverbeke (who lets the bricolage and alternative usages of objects unfold on stage) or Annie Dorsen (who developed an algorithmic dramaturgy, having for example two computers reformulate the Foucault-Chomsky debate in the 2010 performance *Hello Hi There*, or perform Hamlet in *A Piece of Work*, 2013). Others share in a less explicit way an awareness of the changing status of the object in this world and hence also in the performing arts. This awareness leads to a more considerate relation and presentation of things. This should not prevent any reflection on the human in particular, on the contrary, but it invites to rethink the human from an object-perspective, or as Agamben strikingly put it: *The question 'where is the thing?' is inseparable from the question 'where is the human?'* (1993b, 59). This change of the object's status in recent choreography raises a pressing question for subjectivity, André Lepecki also states (2012, 77).

Lepecki has drawn on Agamben's apparatus-essay to describe certain tendencies in the contemporary performing arts as well as to reframe works from the sixties and seventies by artists such as Lygia Clark and Robert Morris (Lepecki, 2012; 2016). Lepecki points at two essential elements of apparatus-posthumanism in the performing arts. First, there is the focus on the performativity of things, inspired by the increased agency ascribed to non-human elements by Agamben and many dance and performance artists. Lepecki describes how Agamben's apparatus as *commanding object*, is useful to emphasize the importance of objects in recent choreography, as it *uncovers performativity in objects, and identifies a choreographic force defining and inhabiting objects in contemporaneity - a force securing the relation between subjectivity and objectivity* (Lepecki, 2016, 48-49). The body humanism that was still operative in cyborg-posthumanism, is abandoned in favor of an autonomous object, which has its own agency and own way to perform. There is, however, also a less literal interpretation of this shift to the thing, which leads to a second characteristic of apparatus-posthumanism's post-anthropocentric perspective: it is the consideration of the human being as an object too.

[P]erhaps a becoming-thing might not be such a bad destiny for subjectivity at all. As we look around us, it certainly seems a better option than continuing to carry on living and being under the name of the 'human' (Lepecki, 2010, 34).

Lepecki adopts Italian aesthetics philosopher Mario Perniola's call for a redefinition of the human as a *sentient thing*, which implies a *depersonalisation* and *suspension of subjectivity* (Perniola, 2004, 14). *Neutral sexuality*, he writes, *opens up a dimension that does not constitute an actual anthropological mutation but suspends man* (2004, 28). Perniola (and in his wake, Lepecki) sees the reification and objectification of human beings in the posthumanist condition as an occasion to let go of the human as a category, as if answering Agamben's call to suspend the anthropological machine (cf. supra). To suspend the human would mean to suspend the human/object divide and the anthropological machine upholding that dichotomy, seeking to understand what a body without subject could be and to develop a body as an object.

The following, non-exhaustive series of brief descriptions of performances relate to an apparatus-posthumanist perspective, or rather, in my point of view, call for a theoretical frame that comprises the suspension of the subject/object divide, as a political, economic, ecological, social, and performative element.

Visual and performance artist Miet Warlop's *Fruits of Labor* (2016) blends a rock concert with animated instruments and a transformative set design. A drum is beaten by water falling from the ceiling, later by a colored fountain going in an arch under which the performers move; a white Styrofoam bloc – a white cube, perhaps referring to Warlop's visual arts practice – is a stage, a wall, a bull or a cross; curtains and other fabric hanging on stage flow and swirl, are torn and wrapped. All the while, two guitarists, a drummer, a singer (Warlop herself) and a roadie, play music, organize the stage and set up the objects and instruments in a slow but steady, intelligent flow of images and events. Warlop's work shows that an aesthetics of performative objects can be 'fun' and full of energy. Her performing arts work is strongly influenced by her visual arts practice; the development and crossover between these two disciplines is a returning element for several artists who are discussed here as (apparatus-)posthumanist. The humor and energy in *Fruits of Labor* do not encompass a lack of criticality. After the objects (and performers) have transformed and performed in several ways, the final scene seems to bring them all together. All automated instruments and objects on stage are placed on rotating platforms, and start spinning – a movement that had recurred throughout the whole performance. The human performers, singing or playing guitar, also find themselves on rotating devices, now making explicit what was already implicit in the foregoing actions: all performative elements are in the same 'orbit', not as solitary rotating entities, but with each other, around each other. They sing repetitively: 'tell me – is this my world – where I belong?'. The lively, musically energizing performance gets a critical undertone, but the questions are asked with enthusiasm and are not limited to issues of commodification or alienation and talk about love and indeed, belonging. Warlop's world between sculpture,

performance and music animates the environment and all that is in it, touching upon issues that exceed the limits of art, music and literature, but that are redefined once a post-anthropocentric perspective is adopted, fueled by economic and ecologic conditions. This redefinition is called a metamorphosis in the poem by Oscar van den Boogaard, which is included in the performance's program leaflet:

Fruits of labor  
[...]  
The human. The thing.  
The metamorphosis. The metamorphosis in a constant state of  
Metamorphosis.  
Actors and objects. No hierarchy.  
[...]  
The performance is a shaman channeling the forces  
Of the world, makes them move, spin, shock, turn and  
Eventually, drop down exhausted. Then, all is quiet for a moment.  
(van den Boogaard, 2016)<sup>36</sup>

The apparatus' post-anthropocentric perspective also opens up opportunities for the binary separating the human from the animal. In David Weber-Krebs' performance *Balthazar* (a project that ran from 2011 until 2015), two donkeys are present on a stage with a group of human performers. *Balthazar*, which was inspired by Donna Haraway's writings as well as Robert Bresson's cinematic exploration of the donkey as lead 'anti-character' in *Au hasard, Balthazar* (1966), explores the performativity of the animal and a method of being on stage with the animal that does not reduce it to a character, a show gimmick or an animal in function of a human. The performance *oscillates between provoking a face-to-face encounter between the animal and the spectators, on the one hand, and presenting the animal as an element in a framed image on the other* (Haas in Stalpaert, van Baarle & Karreman, forthcoming). It has not as much the intention to neutralize the difference between human animal and animal, rather an attempt to let it be. *Balthazar* might demonstrate what Agamben calls *the central void, of the gap that separates—in the human being — the human and the animal* (Agamben, 2015a, 265).<sup>37</sup> It is a search for a suspension of the anthropological machine, within a theatrical apparatus in which both animal and human animal traditionally are required to become characters. *The donkey is transferred into an alien artistic context designed for representing humankind - and this transfer has an impact*

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<sup>36</sup> The poem is originally in Dutch: *De mens. Het ding. / De metamorfose. De metamorfose in constante staat van / metamorfose. / Acteurs en objecten. Geen hiërarchie. / ... / De voorstelling is een sjamaan die de krachten van de wereld / door zich heen laat bewegen, rondtolt, schokt, draait en / uiteindelijk uitgeput neervalt. Dan is alles even rustig* (van den Boogaard, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> In Italian: *il vuoto centrale, dello iato che separa - nell'uomo - l'uomo e l'animale* (Agamben, 2014, 335).

both on the animal and the context, dramaturg and scholar Maximiliaan Haas writes (Haas in Stalpaert, van Baarle & Karreman, forthcoming). I would add that this transfer also changes the human animals in the space. The performers have to avoid gestures that provoke the audience's projection of a relation or narrative, they have to reduce their presence and subjectivity on stage. The performer (be it human or nonhuman) hence becomes a *thing that feels* (Perniola, 2004, 1). This state of being is a symptom of and a potential resistance against our objectified and objectifying society.

Romeo Castellucci's *Sacre du printemps* (2015) presents a space sealed off by a plastic, transparent screen. In the grid attached to the sealing, hangs a series of machines, with red blinking lights and receptacles. When a recording of Stravinsky's work starts, the machines move left and right, horizontally on the grid. This horizontal movement is accompanied by a vertical one. On specific moments that appear to be in resonance with the music, but are never really 'in sync', the machines release a white powder out of the receptacles, creating a powder, or rather, dust choreography. This mechanical choreography is rhythmically limited to the restricted movement options of the machines. However, when seeing their movements on Stravinsky's music (already formulating it like that might presume too much of a conscious relation between the machines and the music), one cannot but perceive it as a dance. This is a next stage, after the shock the Ballets Russes caused in 1913 when their choreography showed the physical, aggressive and primitive side of the ritual, of the organic cycle of life. This next stage, then, is the 'shock' that this cycle of life is no longer organic, but industrialized. A projection on the plastic screen learns us that the dust used in this performance is actually cow bone dust, used to fertilize fields in agriculture. Castellucci's *Sacre* has become a ritual of life and death executed by machines, with the dust showers as traces of human presence – they evoke a reminiscence of Pina Bausch's *Sacre* from 1975, where dancers moved through earth lying on stage, creating upwards clouds – revealing a potential world without us, where it seems the human had to be sacrificed in order to allow the machine to perform. The lights of the machines blink – at first it appears that these blinks also resonate with the music, but with the music's increasing complexity, this turns out to be a matter of projection on the machines – and seem to suggest some kind of communication between them, or toward those who operate them. Next to that, a shifting rectangle of light and a screen create a movement in the depth of the sealed of space.

This radical displacement of performativity from humans onto machines is emblematic of apparatus-posthumanism's post-anthropocentrism. What we see are not cyborgs performing, but an apparatus that has taken over the cycle of life, close to Heidegger's prediction that soon all of nature would be included in the *Gestell*. The mechanization of fertilization (which can be interpreted as a critique on the industrialization of agriculture, which led to the human exploitation of the planet, as for example Morton argues [2016]) and a replacement of human performers in this ritual by

machinic ones (a possible outcome of this industrial exploitation of the earth) convey a strong sense of alienation. The fact that not a live orchestra, but a recording was used, adds to the sense that what is shown, is a world without 'us', humans, or at least a world in which the human has been radically decentred. These machines are indifferent to being watched and could perform the same choreography over and over. This literally *post-human* world and its strange beauty, are tropes that return in the discussion of the performing figure of apparatus-posthumanism (cf. chapter 2.2.2). Castellucci's *Sacre du printemps* is not liberatory cyborg, nor speciesist, but apparatus-centred, post-anthropocentric and ecological. Interestingly, the performance was followed by a clean-up of the scattered bone dust by technicians – which also makes it not transhumanist. The human beings are still there, cleaning up the mess of the machine, in a subordinate role. Although the actual 'performance' of the machines was over when the music ended, a large part of the audience stayed in their seats, looking at how the technicians in protective suits and masks were assembling the dust. The boundary between the machine-performance and the 'epilogue' was very thin, because of the executorial, functional actions of the technicians, who spoke the same language as the machines that were performing before them.

The entanglement of the questions of the human and the thing, as Agamben and with him, Lepecki, noted, implies that a changing status of the object, changes that of the subject as well. The work of the Brussels-based, Danish choreographer Mette Ingvarsten is an interesting case of recent dance performances focusing on nonhuman (nonanimal) performative elements from a post-anthropocentric, ecology-related perspective.

The protagonists in Ingvarsten's *The Artificial Nature Project* (2012) are thousands of silver snippets or confetti that are released from above the stage, falling softly, and with varying intensities. The light design plays ingeniously with the reflectivity of the confetti, evolving from bright, white light to red, darker sets of colors. A soundscape accompanies the confetti and seems to absorb any noise produced on stage. This noise was produced by human 'performers', all dressed in dark protective suits, who operate leaf blowers to create ephemeral forms with the fallen confetti, or to gather them in heaps. The silver of the confetti is at a certain point no longer the only shiny material on stage. The human performers take silver and gold emergency blankets and wave them around, adding to the play of light and reflection, as well as producing a crispy, 'anorganic' sound. In another sequence, Plexiglas sheets are manipulated to reflect light and produce sound by wavering them. The actions of the human performers could also be interpreted as a futile attempt to clean the mess that is created by the confetti, which, in an apocalyptic reading of the performance induced by the emergency blankets, reminds of black snow of volcanic ashes, nuclear fall-out, electronic waste, dust and rubble caused by destruction, or more simply creates the image of a humanity that has lost itself in an obsession with glitter and glamour and decadence. The reflections of the light in the materials almost

metaphorically refer to how we might be blinded and not see our own doing and being involved in the ecology of the planet.



Figure 5 Mette Ingvarstsen: *The Artificial Nature Project* (2012) © Jan Lietart

If *The Artificial Nature Project* were to be taken as an image of that planet, then it is a rather gloomy one, in which almost no 'natural' nature remains, and in which besides the performers, only produced materials fill the

surface of the earth. A surface, on which humans can only move around 'stuff' and play with it before they will eventually disappear from it. The artificiality of the nature that is created in Ingvarstsen's works, realized in an artificial, man-made setting that is the theatre, reminds of Heidegger's warning in *The Question Concerning Technology*, that due to the expansion of the enframing within commodification and human control, humanity would sooner or later only encounter itself (1977, 27). With the anthropocene, this fundamental artificiality seems to have come true. Morton uses the term *hyperobject* to describe *things that are massively distributed in time and space* (2013, 1), which come all the more to the fore as ecological phenomena in the *anthroposcenic* age. I call it '*anthroposcenic*' because the Anthropocene and hyperobjects (as well as apparatuses) create problems and interesting observations when it comes to imagining, or representing them.<sup>38</sup> Based on Harman's OOO theory which states (in turn based on Heidegger) that an object's reality is withdrawn, Morton's hyperobjects also challenge the possibility of a representation of these ecological phenomena (Morton, 2013, 12, 15). Not only because of their post-apocalyptic imagery, but also because of the sheer performativity of the things, Ingvarstsen's artificial nature landscapes generate an unsettling feeling that can be categorized as the main characteristic of living in a world of hyperobjects. The landscapes, forms, actions and movements are recognizable, but are not what they seem. *Art that evokes hyperobjects must therefore deal with their necessarily uncanny intimacy and strangeness* (Morton, 2013).

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<sup>38</sup> Harman states, for example, that withdrawn objects can only relate aesthetically to how they appear, or rather, that through an aesthetic mediation, what appears can refer to something withdrawn, it can 'represent' (Harman, 2011, 104).

The way in which human performers are involved in *The Artificial Nature Project*, is telling for the relation humans have with their anthropogenic environment. Operating the machines, and literally blowing life in the confetti, they seem to have a more functional role, rather than the body humanist use of the human body as the central entity of expression and source of subjectivity. Dressed in black, their visibility is reduced. Besides the waving around of the gold and silver blankets, all of their actions are strictly an execution of functional tasks: creating a heap of confetti in a certain corner, moving from left to right, etc. The centre of the stage is explicitly left for the nonhuman entities. To do so, the mode of performing changed, and human action needed to approach the 'object'-like mode of doing. As Lepecki would describe it: [t]he subject follows the path of the object: [...] becomes-thing (2012, 78).<sup>39</sup>

The philosophical-critical perspective I adopted in the previous part on cyborg-posthumanism, is a deconstruction that, in its Agambenian-messianic version, already implies something constructive, a search for potentialities in the depths of desubjectification. The messianic in Agamben's philosophy is related to his conception of history and temporality, something I come back to in the final chapter, when discussing the time and space of the figure. It is important to note that this pushing forward of particular tendencies in apparatuses (a strategy that forms the basis for a line of thought called 'accelerationism'<sup>40</sup>, which has both a left-wing and right-wing component, see for example Srnicek & Williams, 2015; Land, 2014), is complemented by another form, or strategy, of resistance. Inspired by Debord and the Situationist tactics of *détournement* and by Benjamin's notions of play and profanation, Agamben suggests the possibility of actively resisting and deactivating the processes of separation that bring various aspects of life within the sphere of influence of the apparatus (Agamben, 2009b; 2007a). These tactics of profanation are all ways to re-appropriate aspects of life from the apparatus, without claiming ownership or entitlement over these aspects. In some cases, the messianic and the profanatory go together, specifically in moments when a 'negative position', such as that of a desubjectified being, is wilfully adopted, resulting in a profanatory re-appropriation of a form of life by pushing the apparatus that seeks to degenerate it, to an extreme point. At the same time, a mode of action or of acting can arise, that is not teleological, nor an end in itself, but becoming a means without ends,

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<sup>39</sup> The thingness of the body in relation to sexuality is the subject of the cycle Ingvarsen created after the *Artificial Nature Series*, called *The Red Pieces*. Sexual relations with objects and changing sexuality in a world in which we have an intimate relation with and through objects, are the focus of these performances. This can also be read from a posthumanist perspective, as Mario Perniola argues in *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* (2004).

<sup>40</sup> In his critique on both left and right accelerationism, Benjamin Noys characterizes right or reactionary accelerationism as a line of thought pleading for an all-encompassing, dehumanizing and automated capitalism, resembling the transhumanist strand of posthumanism, and the leftist accelerationism as striving for a post-capitalist utopia, resembling the cyborg-feminist strand, as well as Agamben's messianic caesura leading to the suspension of work in inoperativity (Noys, 2016).

something Agamben has called *gesture* (Agamben, 2000, 59). What makes these gestures political, is that in their showing of the functioning of the apparatus, they render it inoperative. These notions – profanation, gesture, inoperativity – are further discussed in the analysis of Verdonck's figures, in part two of this dissertation.

The two case studies that follow – theatre performances by Romeo Castellucci and Toshiki Okada, which go deeper into the issues of going beyond the subject and psychopolitics – are deliberately chosen for their absence of technology on 'the surface' of the performance, i.e. their work does not have the techno-look of several of the cyborg-posthumanist performances. Nevertheless, Castellucci's and Okada's work is emblematic of a conception of posthumanism that starts from the concept of the apparatus. They both take the apparatus-posthumanist condition as the background for their performances, letting technology play more subtle roles, and in that way bring certain aspects of apparatus-posthumanism to the fore that go beyond the 'mere' technological, toward the political, ontological and socio-economic levels. The difference with other theoretical and artistic endeavours, which focus more on specific technological applications and devices and about which Crary warns for the imminent danger of being *outdated* (2014, 38), is that these critical-philosophical analyses and performances aim at a more fundamental level. *At present, the particular operation and effects of specific new machines or networks are less important than how the rhythms, speeds, and formats of accelerated and intensified consumption are reshaping experience and perception*, Crary claims (2014, 38). Herbrechter redefines posthumanism when it comes to the 'human' as dealing with *the 'inhuman' as the initial crisis within humanism itself* and he calls for a posthumanism 'without' technology, which has always existed in a more or less latent form. (2013, 45). Apparatus-posthumanism in that sense, is about redefining the human and the *contemporary technological development assists this critique in the sense that it helps question the existence of 'essential' humanity* (Herbrechter, 2013, 47).

Apparatus-posthumanism is a contemporary critical-philosophical attempt to describe the abovementioned shifts – to apparatus, beyond the subject, to psychopolitics and to post-anthropocentrism – which connect humans, apparatuses, politics, economy and technologies in changing ways, in order to better understand what it is to be human and how we relate to the world we inhabit. The different performing technologies and objects could also be seen and read in this light: there is a profound reflection about ourselves as human beings living in societies and on this planet going on in these works. If we see a robot performing a 'solo', this of course tells us something about the role of technology and objects and their agency; but also about the human. Are we replaced? Are we robotic ourselves? Why do we interpret and relate in this way to the thing? And maybe, if nonhumans can take centre stage, what remains for and of the human? Reminding of Agamben's notion of *the remnant* (2005, 53), the human in posthumanism becomes what remains. This both a critical condition and a utopian repositioning from

both ecological and philosophical points of view. It's time to explore these margins in search for a marginal way of being human on stage and in the world.

### 1.2.1 Beyond the subject in Romeo Castellucci's *The Four Seasons Restaurant and Giudizio, Possibilità, Essere*

*La guerre du futur sera la guerre de la figure.*  
(Castellucci in Tackels, 2005, 80)

As Sven Lütticken argues, *over the past few decades, an increasing identification of autonomy with the imperialist and colonialist autocracy of Western subjectivity has led to philosophical flirtations with the rejection of both the concept of autonomy and often that of the subject, for example in various strands of posthumanist thought, the works of Latour, and sundry object-based ontologies* (2016, 1). Lütticken summarizes aptly the critique of liberal, humanist subjectivity that cyborg- and apparatus-posthumanism share, but to which they have a different answer. Thinking from the perspective of the apparatus forces to think beyond alternative or more empowered forms of subjectivity toward fully deconstructed subjectivities, which can perhaps no longer be called as such. Thinking from and with the apparatus implies a more politicized reading and analysis than the two options Lütticken suggests (Latour and OOO). Abandoning subjectivity, suspending the subject/object divide is always a political gesture, one that can be imposed in a repressive and controlling regime, but also one that can be adopted in resistance to precisely these regimes. Besides the question what a form of life beyond subjectivity then might be and what suggestions and issues the performing arts offer, the question as to how these 'things' are performed and what it means for the performing arts as such are at stake.

#### 1.2.1.1 The apparatus of language and the loss of voice

*La peine que l'homme paie, le procès qui, depuis quarante mille ans – à savoir depuis qu'il a commencé à parler – est toujours en cours contre lui, n'est rien d'autre que la parole elle-même.*  
(Agamben, 2015b, 25)

In a traditional high school gym hall, with lines on the floor for basketball, a climbing rack, and other gymnastics attributes, a group of young women enter in blue robes. One by one, they cut out their (fake) tongues with a pair of scissors before assembling in a circle. A dog enters the gym-stage and eats the speech organs and then the women commence their recitation of fragments of Hölderlin's *Der Tod des Empedokles* (1797-1800), such goes the opening scene of Romeo Castellucci's *Giudizio, Possibilità, Essere* (2014). Hölderlin made three different attempts to write a play text based on the story of the Greek philosopher who believed to be a God and jumped in the Mount Etna volcano to

prove his eternal life. This idea of practicing to write, the impossibility of expression and the search for the right form – all aspects of Hölderlin’s poetics – return in Castellucci’s staging. The director himself also made two 'attempts' to bring this text to the theatre: *The Four Seasons Restaurant* (2012) and *Giudizio, Possibilità, Essere* (2014). The latter is performed in an actual school gym, the former has the setup of a gym décor in a theatre space and has the story of Empedokles followed by a series of images, scenes reminding of the mysterious aspect of the text, a fragmented evocation of affects, about which I shall not divert here.<sup>41</sup> The (staged and actual) gym in which Hölderlin’s work is recited, refers to a school context, a space for exercise and formation, and indeed the young women’s way of reciting looks like a rehearsal. Nevertheless, it is a very stylized rehearsal and the mode of speaking and moving is highly formalized. What is rehearsed, is a strongly disciplined mode of representation. Artificial, archaic gestures and poses, sometimes reminding of Greek vases, accompany the wrought language of Hölderlin. The movements emphasize the rhetorical and theatrical environment, without being particularly connected to what is being recited. The language and gestures form a system that is adopted by the women, or rather, a structure with several positions that are taken up by the performers. There are no fixed roles; the text of the different characters is recited by different performers, however, a golden laurel that is passed on between the performers, seems to indicate the position of Empedokles himself. Gradually, parts of the text’s recitation by the actresses become pre-recorded and are played through speakers (in the case of *The Four Seasons Restaurant*, through a simple tape recorder standing on stage), while the women continue to lip-sync and perform the related gestures and poses. They lose language (*langue*) once again, only to expose language, rhetoric and gesture, in this way, generating a desubjectified mode of performing. The relation to the text and the character is one of execution, rather than Stanislavskian identification or Brechtian alienation.

*The principle of exposition* applied to body, gesture and voice also seizes the language material and attacks language’s function of representation (Lehmann & Jürs-Munby, 2007, 146).

Apparatus-posthumanism presents a different type of character, if that is still how we could call the nexus of body, subject, action and language in a performance – in the next chapter I propose to use the notion *figure* instead. The apparatus’ desubjectification of the individual implies a deconstruction of the traditional language- and action-based character, giving rise to a performance of figures. These figures are on stage, or part of an installation, and have a different kind of presence and relation to subjectivity and text – the medium through which this subjectivity is ‘performed’ – than more traditional

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<sup>41</sup> For an analysis of the function of mystery and religion in Castellucci’s work, see van Baarle, 2016a.

conceptions of characters. This is opposed to the classical actor or actress, who becomes a character by adopting the language of this particular character, in what Marie Hélène Brousse calls a *theatre of the subject*. This theatre requires the presence of the character, of the person, often through the text (Brousse, 2015, 75). In Castellucci's performance, however, language becomes a foreign body, it becomes unnatural as *the word does not belong to the speaker* (Lehmann & Jürs-Munby, 2007, 147). There are no subject positions in *The Four Seasons Restaurant* or *Giudizio, Possibilità, Essere*, the performers adopt speech positions, without developing or (re-)presenting a subjectivity.<sup>42</sup>

There are two ways in which language is present here as an apparatus. On the one hand, language is an apparatus as such, and on the other it is language as mediated, technologized communication. Agamben points at how language might even be the *most ancient of apparatuses* and at how apparatuses are rooted in the very process of "humanization" that made "humans" out of the animals we classify under the rubric *Homo Sapiens* (2009b, 16). Elsewhere, he writes that [t]he human being is the living being that, in order to speak, must say 'I', must 'take the word,' assume it and make it its own (2011b, 71). This means that the human animal is not 'born' in language, there is a process of adopting language, of a transition from what De Saussure called *langue* (language system) into *parole* (spoken discourse) which in each individual implies *la commémoration extrême de l'anthropogénèse, de l'acte immémorial à travers lequel le vivant, en parlant, est devenu homme, s'est lié à la langue* (Agamben, 2015b, 25). Language, and this goes even more so for writing, is also the process of externalization and constitutive desubjectification: *speaking is a paradoxical act that implies both a subjectification and desubjectification, in which the living individual appropriates language in a full expropriation alone, becoming a speaking being only on condition of falling into silence* (Agamben, 1999b, 129). The splits that are at work in semiotic perspectives on language, between signifier and signified, *langue* and *parole*, and between semiotics and semantics (cf. Benveniste) are for Agamben fundamental for the human being, in the sense that they are ontological and political. Expression and experience are thus processes that have to pass through language, splitting presence into representation. In a typical move, Agamben pleads to redefine the human being as *this fracture of presence* (1993b, 156). The human is the barrier between S(ignified) and s(ign), *always in the act of falling from [infancy and the human place of origin] into language and into speech* (Agamben, 1993c, 60).

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<sup>42</sup> Brousse suggests Castellucci's theatre is a theatre of objects. The theatre of objects is not about objects of consumption, but one of objects generating desire (Brousse is referring to the Lacanian *objet à*). It is not my intention to go deeper into this psychoanalytical reading of Castellucci's work, but what is interesting to retain from Brousse's analysis, is that the characters and their psychology are not the central elements and that specific objects, such as for example language in *Giudizio, Possibilità, Essere*, take centre stage – objects that go back to the roots of subject formation (Brousse, 2015, 82).



Figure 6 Romeo Castellucci: *Giudizio, Possibilità, Essere* (2014) © Luca Del Pia

The originary split in language, also has its consequences for politics. The sign and its meaning are only connected arbitrarily, and this makes language a field of power – over signification, over the impact of (whose) language. Not only the internal structure of language, but also the system of language – once it is established – 'exists' outside of its users and can be controlled, altered and abused to exclude, kill and manipulate: *Prendre le nom, se nommer sois, signifie pouvoir se connaître et les connaître, pouvoir se maîtriser et les maîtriser; mais cela signifie aussi se soumettre à la puissance de la faute et du droit* (Agamben, 2015b, 25). The original separation of language requires a constant positioning, developing of relationship to it, which opens up the – omnipresent – possibility for control of and through language. *Religion and law [...] were invented to guarantee the truth and trustworthiness of the logos through a series of apparatuses* (Agamben, 2011b, 59). The experience and gesture of adopting language as the originary apparatus connected to anthropogenesis would suggest a 'becoming human', but in Castellucci's performance, taking the word is synonymous to being captured, being disciplined. In *Giudizio, Possibilità, Essere*, we see the apparatus at work through its situation in a paradigmatic institution of discipline and subject formation: the school gym. Kelleher reminds us that the exercise of reciting Hölderlin's complex verses is emblematic of a classic humanistic education (2015, 86); the German term for high school that continues this tradition of Latin and

Greek education is still, in fact, called *Gymnasium*. This space of training, of practice, of the disciplining of the body also implies a discipline of language (Kelleher, 2015, 85).<sup>43</sup>

The abstract, rhetorical gestures executed while reciting the text, suggest that it is not about a *psychologically motivated interpretation* of the text, which leads to the construction of a character (Stalpaert, 2010a, 88), but on the contrary, about an impossible attempt to master the text, to fulfil the disciplining demands of the apparatus of language. The artificiality of these gestures underlines how language *happens to the human being from the outside* and requires an active appropriation that is at the same an expropriation of something – through language – that is inappropriable (Agamben, 2015a, 86). This resonates with Hölderlin's own impossible attempt to bring the tragic drama to perfection, reaching and breaking the limits of the then existing formats of dramatic text and representation (Lehmann, 2016, 343-344). Hölderlin in a way wanted to be more Greek than the Greek writers he was studying and rewriting: the hubris, the inhuman and superhuman – the monstrous – had to be unbound from Aristotelian drama's yoke (Lehmann, 2016, 345). In a way his failed attempts to complete *Der Tod des Empedokles* are rooted in the same cause that has the tragic hero in Hölderlin's works succumb as well: *excessive will – a certain self-fullness, desire and overstepping* (Lehmann, 2016, 339). It is humanity's hubris, its desire for more knowledge, more control, that leads to its downfall.

In Castellucci's take on the school as a disciplining apparatus, however, the formation of living beings through the rehearsal of language no longer leads to the constitution of a subject. Indeed, language appears initially as separated from the performers, causing them to only appear to be executing instead of owning it, and certainly not giving rise to a representation or performance of a subject. This is a performance of a continually failed becoming, an endless rehearsal to be, without ever attaining the actual position, which resonates with Agamben's analysis of the desubjectifying apparatuses only generating larval subjects. Han literally states that in the current consumer society, characterized by its excessive and forced positivity – he uses positivity also in the same sense as Agamben does when referring to Hyppolite's use of the term, similar to the apparatus, (2014, 34) – a character is no longer formed (2015a, 62). The figures are captured in their vulnerable stage of not-yet-being, or in the case of Empedokles and Hölderlin's repertoire, of no-longer-being and hence resounding more with the spectral subject created by the apparatuses. The alienation from language, deepens the gap between the human as an (animal) living being and the human as a speaking being, a gap that as we have seen, takes the form of a barrier, this barrier being 'human', which loses its binding force when the distance between the two factors becomes too big. These two factors are parallel to

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<sup>43</sup> The version in Antwerp took place in an old college of the Jesuits, whose educational institutions traditionally emphasize rhetoric and the word – thus affirming language and speech as a disciplining mechanism (Stalpaert, 2010a, 78).

another binary at work in the human, that between *zoē*, biological life, and *bios*, political life. For Agamben, the latter is made possible through language. When language is fully captured by apparatuses, political agency is thwarted, a tendency that unfolds in current bio- and psychopolitical systems. This leads to the production of a *bare life*: a biological life that is included in the political system by being excluded (a more extended analysis on bare life follows in chapter 2.2.1). The result of both tendencies – the political hollowing out of language and the production of bare life – is a separation where

[o]n the one hand, there is the living being, more and more reduced to a purely biological reality and to bare life. On the other hand, there is the speaking being, artificially divided from the former, through a multiplicity of technico-mediatic apparatuses, in an experience of the word that grows ever more vain, for which it is impossible to be responsible and in which anything like a political experience becomes more and more precarious (Agamben, 2011b, 70).

Castellucci's use of text as an apparatus is an interesting way to bring text 'on stage', after its decentring and deconstruction in postdramatic theatre, and after further being detached from subject-formation in apparatus-posthumanism. The split between language and the 'performer' of that language is only increased by the technological mediation which emerges later in the performance, when the loudspeakers (or tape recorder) reproduce the human voice, while the performers are still, vainly, performing the act of communicating itself.

This second way of presenting language as an apparatus – namely one that is captured by technological mediation, and thus, has separated that which makes the human 'human' – reminds of The Invisible Committee's analysis of the workings of the cybernetic apparatus as a *representation separating, communication connecting, the first bringing death, the second mimicking life* (Committee, 2001, 10). The particular stage presence and performing mode, which I have characterized as 'desubjectified' because of the dissolution of the ties between body, character and language, gains another layer because of this technological alienation, which is at the same time a capture. Berardi points at how children increasingly learn language through technology, which alters the connection between language and sensitivity, language and affect; these digital natives *learn more words from machines than from their mother* (Berardi, 2016, 57-58, my transl.). Technologized language becomes a preformatted, manipulated and manipulative apparatus to capture and steer the population. In another performance by Castellucci, *Go Down Mozes* (2014), the condition of being a prisoner in representation, of being denied the access to the experience of potentiality, of agency in the world and history (the impossibility and desire for an exodus, as the one led by Mozes), comes to the fore in a small detail. In a brief scene, emoticons are projected on the gauze separating the stage from the audience: :- ) ;-) :- ( ... Emotions, affect and experience are all reduced to the emoticons, changing thus how we 'feel' and experience. *The apparatuses of the media aim precisely at [...] preventing*

language from disclosing the possibility of a new use, a new experience of the word (Agamben, 2007b, 88). Not becoming a subject through language here becomes a desubjectification all the while remaining a prisoner of the language-apparatus, and hence becoming a docile member of the population, deprived of political agency. What Agamben in the citation above calls *technico-mediatic apparatuses* have radically broadened both the reach and options for manipulation by political and economic forces. However, what remains – a nonsubjectified presence on stage – offers (artistic) opportunities as well. The search for a different mode of being on stage is a line that runs through the whole of Castellucci's oeuvre. For him, *l'acteur n'est pas celui qui fait, mais celui qui reçoit*. Or put differently: *l'acteur n'est plus celui qui agit, mais celui qui est agité par le plateau* (Castellucci in Tackels, 2005, 34-35).

### 1.2.1.2 An opportunity for an alternative: desubjectified performance

*Of course the point is not to deplore this state of affairs,  
but to take note of it  
(Agamben, 1993c, 15)*

*The Four Seasons Restaurant* and *Giudizio, Possibilità, Essere* allude to the condition of the separation of language, of a disciplined and controlled body and speech, leading to a desubjectified stage presence, a being captured in an apparatus. However, the actual action and performance are not merely a radical criticism of these conditions, nor do they show the desubjectification solely as a purely pessimistic condition. There is a point where the negative side of the larval subjectivity, flips into a more promising position in which the figures appear to indulge in their status of desubjectification. Castellucci himself compares his performers to the sculptures of Giacometti, seeking a zero degree of being on stage:

L'homme debout de Giacometti, son "sans rien faire", répété un nombre infini de fois, pourrait être l'image de cette puissance du neutre. [...] C'est quand une maison brûle qu'on en voit la structure, le motif qui la soutient (Castellucci in Tackels, 2005, 101).

The supporting structure in Agamben, and for that matter, also in Castellucci, is not a fixed, static and stable substance, rather it is a void around which processes of subjectification and desubjectification take place (cf. *infra*, 2.2.2), it is a relationality, a movement. Something has to disappear for something else to arrive, Bart Philipsen also suggests in his reading of *Guidizio* (2014, 30). This might be an essential feature of the iconoclasm with which the work of Castellucci and the Società Raffaello Sanzio has so often been associated with and which it has itself proclaimed. As I have argued elsewhere (van Baarle, 2014, 65), their iconoclasm is always a twofold process of both de(con)struction and regeneration, which Timmy De Laet and Edith Cassiers have aptly called a *theatre of ruins* (2015). Over the past years, starting with *The Minister's Black Veil*

(2011), Castellucci has been more explicitly working on notions of negativity that create voids or vacuums, black holes of meaning, of representation, a deconstruction of existing structures shaped by apparatuses, in search for a different basis, however 'empty', on which to build a new community. Voluntarily refusing subjectivity is also a way to read the community's attitude in Castellucci's *Giudizio* or *Four Seasons*. The dresses the women wear, remind of the Amish, a community living within Western capitalist society, but refusing to adopt modern technologies, such as cars. It is not here the place to discuss the Amish lifestyle, rather the association Castellucci evokes with an image bringing it into reminiscence. At a certain moment in *Giudizio* and *Four Seasons*, the Confederate Flag is attached to the climbing rack and the women also wear scarfs with the Confederate Flag on it. They carry big rifles, transforming their isolated group into a terrorist cell. The gesture of secession – which probably is the reference Castellucci is aiming at with the confederate symbol, as well as with the evocation of the closed community of the Amish – might indeed be interpreted by the dominant power structures as a violent movement. There is also something archaic to it, an attachment to the past that is reflected in the language and gestures.

Interestingly, Agamben points at how the desubjectification caused by apparatuses that govern power, reaches a point at which there is too 'little' subjectivity left to exercise power over, which makes political state power at its turn lose its grip. Hence, our surveillance society, in the potential existence of a figure who almost indifferently, but nevertheless consciously complies with the mass of apparatuses and hence willingly abandons subjectivity, causes the state to consider its citizens as *potential terrorists* (Agamben, 2009b, 23). The 'rehearsal' of the canonical Hölderlin text with its gestures, has something devoid and at the same devoted to it. Executing tasks, reciting the texts, making the gestures, referring to anachronisms, things that have in a linear Western conception of history have gone out of use, but are repeated nevertheless: this all happens in such a mechanized, organized, habitual way, that there is a revolting aspect to it, shimmering through in the fervor with which everything is executed. Training, preparing for the when the time comes, this community of women will know what to do.

Already in his age, Hölderlin criticized a modernity, which seeks human control of the world and the self, *reducing 'Being' to mere object and instruments, virtually undoing it* (Philipsen, 2014, 31, my transl.). The ambivalence of a power, an apparatus that works 'too' well, to the point it becomes perverted and eventually loses its force, is why Agamben connects Hölderlin's verses from the *Pathmos-hymn – Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst / Das Rettende auch* – to a passage in Heidegger's *Die Frage nach Technik*, where the latter points at the danger of the *Gestell* (Agamben, 2014, 101). Elsewhere, the going together of danger and saving was formulated more concretely:

[H]umanity is moving toward its own destruction [...] an opportunity unheard of in the history of humanity that it must at all costs not let slip away. [...] they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subject (Agamben, 1993a, 65).

From an Agambenian point of view, it will prove to be precisely necessary to go through the dark abyss of dehumanization and objectification, for only through the acceptance and understanding of the deconstructive critique of these two tendencies central to this research, will a constructive moment become possible (1993a, 65). Agamben inscribes himself here in the tradition of the 'saving critique' of Benjamin (Agamben 2014, 131) and Heidegger (Heidegger, 1977, 28).

Desubjectivation [sic] does not only have a dark side. It is not simply the destruction of all subjectivity. There is also this other pole, more fecund and poetic, where the subject is only the subject of its desubjectivation (Agamben in Smith, 2004, 124).

The figure as it is developed in this research, combines this dark side with the *fecund and poetic*. A profound subversion lays in discarding the categories of subject and human, and in adopting this gesture of letting go as the starting point for a new form of life. Here it is interesting to reformulate the difference between posthumanism as a condition and posthumanism as a theory pointed out by Braidotti (2013, 12). Posthumanism as a condition seeks to describe how our world has become, or from another perspective, has always been, posthumanist, or how this process is completing itself. We could argue in a Latourian way that 'we have never been humanist', but I believe that the discourse of humanism, however artificial and nonfactual it may be, has had and still has profound consequences for our reality, our identities and how we perceive both of them in the world. Instead of a static state of being human, there is a continuous process of becoming human. Describing the posthumanist condition is thus at once a deconstruction of humanist and anthropocentric world views, within the frame of contemporary shifts in economy, politics, technology and ecology, and an attempt to describe our world from a different perspective. Discerning condition from theory, the theoretical posthumanism holds a utopia, connected to these new ways of describing the world. Posthumanist theory holds a call, an appeal to its readers and thinkers, and suggests a world how it should be. In Agamben's deconstructive and messianic thought movements, a similar distinction can be made, which at the same time complicates the distinction. The messianic, the new perspective and opportunity for saving, is present in the most critical and pessimistic conditions.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The messianic elements in Agamben's work are often criticized as 'religious', 'imprecise' or undefined. I believe these elements should be considered rather as a matter of style, a way of writing and thinking that seeks

In an essay from 1992, Agamben discerns between two forms of messianism: an imperfect messianism that corresponds to the deconstruction of law (and by extension all apparatuses) as *en vigueur mais sans signification*, showing the corruption of systems, and a second messianism which we could call ‘perfect’ messianism, the messianism of completion, the ‘true’ messianism that arrives by way of a *léger déplacement* (Agamben, 2011 [1992], 303-304, 309). The former is a petrified and paralyzed messianism, the second, one of fulfilment. Interestingly, Agamben sees them both as forms of nihilism (Agamben, 2011 [1992], 304) and loss of meaning (*sans signification*). Imperfect, paralyzed messianism turns nihilism into a deconstructive gesture and shows the emptiness behind specific apparatuses. Perfect, fulfilled messianism adds to this deconstructive gesture one of potentiality. The description of the condition through a deconstruction and the developments of alternative genealogies and archaeologies of thought, lead to the revelation of potentialities, which are latent in our reality.

In that vein, while critically describing the processes leading to the hollowing out of the subject, Agamben points at the possibility of a form of life that does not take the shape of a subject. A form of life, which does not result from any entanglement in strategic relations, power relations and subjections. Here, Agamben goes one step further than Foucault who had replaced the subject for subjectifications, and seeks for a world in which apparatuses are no longer capable of producing anything or anyone (Agamben, 2014, 148). In the final chapter of *L’uso dei corpi* (2014), the last part – and according to him, the *pars construens* – of his Homo Sacer series, Agamben recalls the story of Er from Plato’s *Republic* (2014, 315). Er, a wounded soldier, goes to the afterlife, but is charged with the responsibility to observe and report back to the world of the living. There, he sees how the spirits of the deceased adopt a new form-of-life, and listens to warnings about balance and living between extremes. Form-of-life, as opposed to form of life (without hyphenation), for Agamben is *a life that cannot be separated from its form, a life in which it is never possible to isolate something such a naked life* (2000, 3-4). I come back to this concept in chapter 2.2.2, for now it suffices to know that it is political way of being that resists control through apparatuses. Perhaps reading against the grain of Agamben’s analysis, it is telling that one has to ‘die’, to regenerate one’s form-of-life. The use of this narrative trope relates to the deconstructive method that is already carrying a potential in its negative analysis.

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to evoke an openness in its readership. René Ten Bos framed this, with reference to Baudrillard, as *the possibility of a symbolic break in time that eventually might engender a symbolic break in the mind. [...] someone who does not speak about a future reality but rather calls for the end of what has always been going on* (2005, 2). Agamben is indebted to Benjamin here, according to whom *shards of messianic time are present in history in possibly infamous and risible forms* (Agamben, 2015a, 94), (*le schegge del tempo messianico sono presenti nella storia in forme eventualmente infami e risibili* [Agamben, 2014, 131]). Messianism is a call for a future, in the form of potentiality.

The apparently irrational, mysterious decision of Empedokles to jump into the volcano creates a void, a caesura in the fabric of logics. For contemporary feminist thinkers, such as Sadie Plant and the collective Laboria Cuboniks, authors of the *Xenofeminist Manifesto*, the idea has also developed that *only the destruction of this subject will suffice. In feminism's radical renunciation, feminism loses its name, feminism, and its identity. No-one-ism* (Popa, 2016).<sup>45</sup> It is precisely this creation of 'zero's', of small empty signifiers, infinitesimals, which makes it impossible for the apparatus to produce a new subjectivity. The *Xenofeminist Manifesto* calls for an alternative form of universality that creates solidarity, a universality that might be similar to the one Claudia Castellucci, the sister and occasionally dramaturge and collaborator of Romeo Castellucci describes as an *impersonal approach*.<sup>46</sup> Once again this impersonal position is related to a negativity, enabling to *perceive the existence of the void and subsequently to be comfortable within the void* (Novati, 2009, 53). This void resembles Agamben's analysis of the human being's central void: *the human being exists in the human being's non-place, in the missing articulation between the living being and logos* (Agamben, 1999b, 134). Dwelling in this void might bring us closer to a human being as a being of potentiality. In this void, a different form-of-life, beyond the subject, can happen, *as what remains between subjectivation and a desubjectivation, speech and muteness* (Agamben in Smith, 2004, 117).

The new form-of-life, which arises through these kinds of strategies and refuses to identify itself as well as to take up subjectivity, is one which suspends the grasp of the law and commodification (Agamben, 2014, 314). Besides Hölderlin's tragic vision on Empedokles as a hubristic half-god figure, he nevertheless presents an alternative to standard conceptions of the subject, a *new, parahuman or semidivine creature*, which Agamben places next to *Kleist's marionette, Nietzsche's Dionysus, the angel and the doll in Rilke, Kafka's Odradek as well as C elan's "Medusahead" and "automaton" and Montale's "pearly snail's trace"* (Agamben, 1999a, 91). Empedokles shows an image of man *abandoned by God and human beings - 'free' in the sense of lost* (Lehmann, 2016, 331). His suicide – in German tellingly *Freitod* – is a violent merging with nature that nevertheless holds a potential for

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<sup>45</sup> The *Xenofeminist Manifesto* is nevertheless firmly influenced by Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*. Similar to Haraway, the Xenofeminists call for an embrace of new technologies to generate a new equality, which they interestingly call *gender-abolition*, affirming *the right of everyone to speak as no one in particular* (Cuboniks, 2015). The final provocation of the Manifesto – *if nature is unjust, change nature* (Cuboniks, 2015) – operates within the dualist paradigm, for which cyborg-posthumanism was criticized in chapter 1.1.5, and comes close to a transhumanist perspective on technology, namely, one of improvement, enhancement and augmentation.

<sup>46</sup> Romeo Castellucci's *impersonal approach* has similarities with Roberto Esposito's philosophical concept of the impersonal. The work of the Societ s could well belong to the contemporary artworks Esposito mentions, that investigate *a deconstruction of the personal subject* (2012, 14), however it is not as deeply and explicitly engaged in the critique of the person as a construct of law and power. For Castellucci, it is more an approach to being on stage that prevents the individual ego from disabling a shared experience with the audience.

an alternative form of life (Lehmann, 2016, 340-341). Similar to the story of Er, Empedokles' self-chosen death has a messianic undertone, which, if the Christian interpretation is left aside, resonates with a search for going beyond the subject, for an alternative for the hubristic ego seeking for knowledge and a life that is more in relation to its environment (Hertmans, 2010, 391).

It might very well be that Castellucci is seeking to create a similar model for the performer, which he finds in the nonhuman animal. Whether it is the dog or the horse (in the *Four Seasons Restaurant*), they are what Castellucci has called *l'ouvrier du silence* (Castellucci & Castellucci, 2001, 54). Unaffected by the necessity to adopt language, the animal is also not affected in its being by the distance to the world created by apparatuses (Agamben, 2009b, 16), which creates a genuine stage presence. The silence of the animal is not the absence of language as such, but rather the moment of potentiality in language. This moment is also the moment of experience before mediation through language, a phase Agamben calls *infancy*. It is important to find these moments, in which language as a faculty can be experienced, and in which the use of language, as a becoming human, also is a gesture that opens up history. A history that is not linear, but discontinuous and that has to be continuously actualized (Agamben, 1993c, 60).

Silence can also be understood as an interruption, or a caesura, an element introduced by Hölderlin in his texts and which Lehmann describes as *the need for a pause, "counter-rhythmical interruption"* (2016, 338).<sup>47</sup> Empedokles' plunge into the Mount Etna volcano is such a caesura, a radical rejection of the 'I' and its subject-position (Hertmans, 2010, 84), which causes a silence, *an endless falling*, letting *language finally communicate itself* (Agamben, 1999a, 115). The cutting off of the women's tongues is a revolutionary act, creating a moment of silence, a suspension of language. It is in this moment that the taking place of language, in silence, is shown in its being-able-not-to as well as its nonpossession. Only by acknowledging the dispossession do we experience the potentiality of the faculty of language. By willfully cutting of our tongue, adopting a silent position, refusing to communicate, refusing to for example post that tweet or Facebook status, and by retreating from the communication circus and apparatus of alienation that our Western media landscape has become, we demonstrate and subsequently weaken this apparatus' power.

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<sup>47</sup> Hölderlin himself also suddenly retreated from the public world and went to live in a tower in Tübingen from 1807 until his death in 1843. This gesture can be seen as a rejection of society, a retreat into silence in search of a unity with the pure or the sacred (Hertmans, 2010, 38, 46). Hölderlin's search for purity in his personal life, was fostered by a crisis of the writer's subject, that parallels those of his characters. A retreat into silence meant to him a letting go of individualism and ego, while being *conscious of the universal-tragic meaning of existence. The post-tragic human which realizes he will never be able to express the deepest of his being, replaces the humanist, hopeful version of the human in eighteenth century essays* (Hertmans, 2010, 53, my transl.).

Empedokles, the animals and the women performing in *Guidizio, Possibilità, Essere* and *The Four Seasons Restaurant*, are examples of how apparatus-posthumanism creates a condition of larval subjectivity. In the case of language the desubjectification goes straight to the moment of anthropogenesis, but also opens up an opportunity to think beyond the subject. This beyond is a radical alternative – one that might inevitably be becoming reality as the conflation between technology, politics and economy develops. This ambivalence or even simultaneity of deconstruction and construction – more suitable terms than pessimism and optimism – will continue throughout the following chapters. Investigating how dehumanization and objectification have come about will enable the repositioning of humans in relation to nonhumans. Only by adopting this post-anthropocentric perspective, dehumanization and objectification will open up radical new possibilities for a politics and community to come (Agamben, 1993a; Grusin, 2015, xviii).

### 1.2.2 From biopolitics to psychopolitics: Toshiki Okada's depsychologized performance environments

*Today, organized linguistic violence aimed at manipulating consciousness is such a common experience that any theory of violence must address its expression in language.*  
(Agamben, 2009 [1970], 105)

'Today', in 2017, the violence of language has only become more spread and effective through technico-mediatic apparatuses.<sup>48</sup> The extent of the violence becomes clear when considering Agamben's perspective on language as primary apparatus. The violence operates on the individual's will, desires and fears (Agamben, 2009 [1970], 105). The violence and increased presence and hence impact of language is for a large part caused by the transposition of language to *modern techniques of reproducing spoken and written language* (Agamben, 2009 [1970], 105), an evolution which has only radically expanded and globalized, becoming more far-reaching, since Agamben first wrote about this in 1970. Language has its impact on the body. However, here it is interesting to take Agamben's lead and consider the overruling of the will as the core of a new form of power, aimed at

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<sup>48</sup> In his seminal text on posthumanism, Ihab Hassan already indicated that *the more communication threatens to become global, the more individuals, insisting on their quiddity, will discover the deep and obscure need for misunderstanding* (Hassan, 1977, 833). For Hassan, the tension between the one and the many parallels a tendency towards totalitarianism (the many) and terrorism and anarchy (the one), the former evoking the latter and vice versa. Mass communication thus holds the potential for both totalitarian mass censorship (such as in China, but also by Facebook and Youtube) and terrorist use of for example social media by ISIS, reaching individuals in their private sphere.

consciousness, what Stiegler and Han call psychopolitics. The work of the Japanese playwright and director Toshiki Okada offers an interesting perspective on the triangle of language, body and psyche in relation to the triad of technological, political and economic conditions. Similar to Castellucci's work on Hölderlin, for Okada's actors the text operates as a *language given from outside* (Uchino, 2006, 65), in performances that reflect on shifts in forms of power, which result in a desubjectified mode of performing. However, where in *Giudizio, Possibilità, Essere* language operated more as an external text, that formed a straightjacket, which was performed in a desubjectified way, Okada shows language as idle and devoid of meaning.

### 1.2.2.1 The collapse of language and movement in psychopolitics

*Super Premium Soft Double Vanilla Rich* (2015) presents us a series of events involving three employees – a store manager, two costumers and a regional manager – set in a Japanese 24/7 convenience store or *konbini*. Everyday conversations about how the store is run, how the employees feel in this environment and how the manager is under pressure from 'higher up' or about preferences and working conditions, create a sombre image of contemporary Japanese society. To the tune of a Muzak-like version of J. S. Bach's *Das wohltemperierte Klavier*, which operates in this performance as part of an environment that is created in combination with the set design, a desperate portrait of Japanese consumer society unfolds in which *le consumérisme est poussée jusqu'à l'excès, si bien que les gens travaillent dans le simple but de pouvoir consommer* (Okada, 2015). *Super Premium Soft Double Vanilla Rich* presents an immobile society where the biggest change is that of a product's name. The performance's critique of consumer capitalism reaches a high point when it becomes clear that the name change of an ice cream brand has more emotional impact than the replacement of an employee. In his analysis of *Super Premium Soft Double Vanilla Rich*, Eckersall frames the *konbini*, the typical Japanese small convenience store that can be found in abundance in Japanese cities, as *a powerful manifestation of globalisation and its effect on Japan, notably global capitalism, deskilling of labour and erosion of cultural difference* (Eckersall, forthcoming). As such they are emblematic of the contemporary consumer society that advanced capitalism is and are an example of how Okada's performances mediate *between a local situation and the audience living in a globalized knowledge society* (Pewny, 2011, 45).

Okada's work is most strongly recognizable by its particular combination of movement and language. Words and movements are detached, body and discourse are disconnected [*a]s if the body and the mouth no longer spoke the same language* (Poulton, 2011, 153). They are out of sync. The question arises then how these two communicative 'channels', body and language, operate. Many of the communicative gestures in the convenience store, are highly formalized in linguistic terms, as they require the exchange of politeness that are

proper to the circumstances.<sup>49</sup> Okada was one of the first theatre artists to point out the danger of this excessive social unification, as it leads to an uncritical position and silencing of problems (Iwaki, 2015, 71). Language is in Japan one of the strong apparatuses to organize hierarchies, values and norms through communication. The pressure of language as an apparatus is also present on Okada's stage through the projection of the text in the form of subtitles, which besides translations when performing abroad, also have their own functionality.

Interestingly, the disconnection of language and body not only reflects on how language as an apparatus operates on the body in the creation of a particular subject, it is also used to generate quite the opposite of a character that performs in a 'subject-centred manner', i.e. to render a Stanislavskian acting style impossible. Bodies and words are separated to avoid a psychologization in the play style (Iwaki, 2015, 71).<sup>50</sup> The movements are executed functionally, not as a means of expression, nor a support for the text that is being said. In an interview, Okada compared the movements to those of robots: *des mouvements qui ne soient ni conscients ni volontaires, comme s'ils étaient mus par autre chose* (Okada, 2015). But this depsychologization is also a symptom of how emotions, thoughts, attention and memory are manipulated and expropriated in a highly formalized consumer society. The characters, if we can still speak of 'characters', become emptied out, hollow types. Indeed, *the clerks are depersonalised in the script and named as Baito 1, Baito 2 and Baito 3* (Eckersall, forthcoming).

Technology has changed the way we consume, work and organize the economy and politics. However invisible the technology in *Super Premium Soft ...* might be, it is very much 'present' in the background as a factor in the organization of society, in communication and more specifically, in the convenience store system. The Invisible Committee describes how the current cybernetic, desubjectifying apparatuses of consumer capitalism result in an *infinite mobilization and movement towards to more movement* (2001, 17). Constantly moving and uttering language that is not related to these movements and that is not truly theirs, in a system represented by the generic convenience store stage set of a *konbini*, the store clerks are a consequence of a political and economic – and in the case of Japan, also a traditional – apparatus. The performer's incessant movement then, conveys and generates the general atmosphere and a state of

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<sup>49</sup> Kyoko Iwaki points at how after the Fukushima Daiichi disaster of March 11th, 2011, the social codes of harmonic integration, called *wa*, became *stronger than is necessary, they may transform into strict regulations that negate all anomalies and thus turn into a doctrinal code* (2015, 70). Formalized language use or silence are part of the code of *wa*, hence leading to a pressure on language use and communication, but also highly formalizing it, making language a matter of style rather than content, rendering it idle and meaningless.

<sup>50</sup> Sara Jansen points out that Okada works in the tradition of Oriza Hirata, who developed the technique of the 'split consciousness', distracting the focus from the text to an object or gesture, *liberating the actor from the pressure to express emotions, identify with a character, or perform a role* (2016, 58, my transl.).

being, the condition of restlessness in a static situation of immobility. *Inertia seems to overcast the performance despite this ceaseless movement* (2011, 185), Eckersall and Paterson write. Okada's separation of body and language reminds of Agamben's split between bare life – the moving body – and the speaking being. Language, which has – despite of and probably also due to its dissolution from the individual as a mode of political agency – proliferated with the explosion of devices, media and social networks, remains a strong means of control in psychopolitical societies (Krajnik, 2016, 109). However, in the detachment of movement from language, even when language is such a controlling construct, the movement – the choreography if you wish – is the element that creates the sense of loss of control over the self, both bare life and speaking being. The detached movements *undermine the idea of motivated action* in the formation of a character, subject and plot, within a *sensory-motor scheme of classical dramatic aesthetics* (Stalpaert, 2010b, 365). However, the deconstruction of the sensory-motor scheme does not lead to an embodied, vitalist performance of subjectivity or conception of life: on the contrary, it even enlarges the dispossession of the self over its own existence.



Figure 7 Toshiki Okada: *Super Premium Soft Double Vanilla Rich* (2015) © Christian Kleiner

The vulnerability of the characters is present in what Jansen described as *the collapse of bodies and language* (2016, 57, my transl.). The *konbini* employees almost ‘automatically’ execute gestures such as bows, movements expressing gratitude, salutes, or balancing on one leg, while saying lines that are disconnected from the actions. The loss of self-control, or, their loss of gestures, is quite literal in the setting of the convenience store, with its strict follow-up on sales numbers and performance of its staff. Everything, from the products, to the store design, uniforms and way to greet or thank or use the cash register,

is regulated and decided by 'the company', an abstract entity without a body, which communicates as a voice through a kind of intercom system. There is something Beckettian to the detachment of language and movement in Okada's work – his use of voice-over, the repetitive language and choreography, that are all fixed and with the Bach series of fugues attain something cyclical as well. However, whereas Beckett was searching for scarcity in language, with Okada there is saturation. In both cases nevertheless, there is an emptiness behind the performed situations.

The form of control over both body and language reflects an evolution in how power is exerted, that was already described as an expansion of the Foucauldian disciplinary society, to a Deleuzian society of control, from biopolitics to psychopolitics. With the transition from discipline to control, Lazzarato saw a parallel evolution from biopolitics to what he called *noöpolitics*:

It involves above all attention, and is aimed at the control of memory and its virtual power. [...] If disciplines moulded bodies by constituting habits mainly in bodily memory, the societies of control modulate brains and constitute habits mainly in spiritual memory (Lazzarato, 2006, 186).<sup>51</sup>

Neidich has called this impact on the brain *neuropower*<sup>52</sup> (2013). Stiegler, Han and Neidich explicitly connect this evolution in the form of power to a shift in economic modes of production and value, namely the shift toward cognitive capitalism, the commodification of subjectivity and neoliberalism's entrepreneur of the self.

Foucault's biopower, which he himself describes (and so powerfully) historically and geographically by localizing it in Europe, is no longer the force behind our age: without significant modification it cannot account for the specifics of psychotechnological psychopower, nor of the new situation of biopower that results from it – nor of a biopolitics that has become a psychopolitics no longer emerging from the nation-state (and their programming industries) but from deterritorialized economic forces (and their programming industries) (Stiegler, 2010a, 126).

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<sup>51</sup> In film studies, Patricia Pisters has developed the notion of the neuro-image, *deeply indebted to Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis, [taking] the delirious, hallucinatory and affective dimensions of contemporary screen culture into its neuroscientific, philosophical and political implications* (Pisters, 2013, 160).

<sup>52</sup> Early conceptions of neuropower, for example by Jake Dunagan, are very closely and literally related to the physical brain and explore the possibilities of political control through brain surgery, implants, etc. (Dunagan, 2009). However, this perspective remains close to the cyborg-paradigm, as it considers extension, augmentation and manipulation as the modes of change. Current technologies also manipulate the brain, but on a more psychic level, namely influencing, creating and managing desire, attention and memory (among others), via (social) media, big data and smart devices.

The shift from biopolitics to psychopolitics, or from a power that focuses on disciplining the body in a nation-state and production process of which Fordism and Taylorism are the most emblematic, to a power that captures subjectivities and potentialities in a neoliberal economic-political society, does not mean that the one replaces the former. It is a deepening, or a *superimposition* (Lazzarato, 2006, 182-183) or as Stiegler describes it: psychopower has become *the central function of biopower [...] subjecting the psychic apparatus to the objectives of biopower* (Stiegler, 2010a, 100, 103). These various descriptions of the impact of psychopolitics, are exemplary for the desubjectifying working of the apparatus Agamben outlines; *thoughts of human beings*, are part of the governing and controlling function of the apparatus (Agamben, 2009b, 12). Developing the conception of power and its aims is necessary to address *the neoliberal regime, which mostly exploits the psyche* (Han, 2015b, 28, my transl.).<sup>53</sup> This is enabled through a change in the working of technological apparatuses. As Deleuze has called the computer the machine of the society of control (Deleuze, 1992, 6), more abstract digital and data systems, such as algorithms, might be the apparatuses of a psychopolitical society, focusing on memory, attention and the psyche's prereflexive level (Han, 2015b, 18; Lazzarato, 2006, 186). As Stiegler has pointed out, no longer does the prosthetic lead to an externalization (of memory, of bodily capacities), but *internalization itself is today being prostheticized, industrialized and economized according to industrial conditions* (2013, 116).

It is important to point out Agamben's particular research in the genealogy of power through an ongoing focus on sovereignty as the key mode and definition of power. Even although Foucault announced the end of the societies of sovereignty at the dawn of the disciplinary society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Agamben maintains that sovereignty remains active as a form of power. The way that power is exercised and transformed into a mode of government, however, changes over time: from killing to administering life, to letting survive. The way life is managed in a biopolitical way, evolves with only one goal: a more profound and omnipresent exercise of power. Within the Agambenian genealogy of power sovereignty and biopolitics are essential concepts. His own conception of the apparatus expands biopower to what Pasquinely described as *the management of the soul* (2015, 80), through *belief, rules and rites* (Agamben, 2009b, 9). Biopolitics as the governance of life, expands its impact with the transition from discipline to control, from the enforcing of the proper to the incorporation of the improper, as Agamben has described it elsewhere (2000, 97).

The essay *Qu'est-ce que le commandement?* (2013b) gives an insight in how we might understand psychopolitics from an Agambenian perspective. In this text, he distinguishes

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<sup>53</sup> With relation to the body, Agamben already noted in his analysis of Foucault that *the development and triumph of capitalism would not have been possible [...] without the disciplinary control achieved by the new bio-power, which, through a series of appropriate technologies, so to speak created the "docile bodies" that it needed* (1998, 10).

between aponphatic utterances that can be true or false and non-aponphatic discourse, such as commandments, which are indifferent to truth-value, and aim to have a particular agency (Agamben, 2013b, 25). Resonating with the loss of faith in language that haunts Okada's work after the Fukushima disaster, called '3/11' after 9/11, Agamben states that in the current *sociétés prétendument démocratiques* truth has no longer the same power in language and our relation to the world. Instead, the commandment has become the ontological form that characterizes our relation to power and the world. One elementary aspect of this new form of power, is that it manifests itself in a seductive shape, which creates the feeling of free choice for those subjected to it (Agamben, 2013b, 48-49).

Je ne pense pas ici seulement à la sphère de la publicité, prescriptions sécuritaires, mais aussi la sphère des dispositifs technologiques. Ces dispositifs sont définis par le fait que le sujet qui les utilise croit commander (et, en effet, il presse des touches définies comme commandes), mais en réalité il ne fait qu'obéir à un commandement inscrit dans la structure même du dispositif. Le citoyen libre des sociétés démocratico-technologiques est un être qui obéit sans cesse dans le geste même par lequel il donne un commandement (Agamben, 2013b, 49-50).

Agamben connects the command with '*volonté*', the will (2013b, 51). However, that 'will' is a command to oneself and this creates a dangerous, destructive vicious circle in which we want what harms us. This form of power implies that we have internalized the command of the apparatus in which, or which we operate. *Protect me from what I want*: Jenny Holzer's projection work on Times Square from the early eighties, seems to be the lament of a psychopolitical, neoliberal society (Han, 2015b). From a psychopolitical point of view, the obeisance Agamben refers to, actually takes the form of a continuous pressure to be a better version of yourself. The operations on the will, on the psyche, by commanding apparatuses, foster a condition in which optimisation of the self and subjection, freedom and exploitation, conflate (Han, 2015b, 9).

Various scenes in *Super Premium Soft...* explain the use of data in the convenience store's system. The use of statistics, of gathering data not only of the worker's performance but also of the consumer's sex, age, postal code and products he or she buys, relates to psychopolitics' focus on marketing and management of desire (Stiegler, 2010a, 103).<sup>54</sup> Products are replaced or boosted as a result of an algorithm's collection and calculation of gathered data. The 'drama' of Okada's performance is the replacement of one particular flavor of ice cream by an improved version, as a consequence of low sales of the initial product. The only customer buying the ice cream, a lonely elderly woman, is deeply distressed by the disappearance of her favorite product and is disappointed by its

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<sup>54</sup> The proliferation of systems collecting and processing data increasingly penetrate the personal, intimate sphere and through indirect indices know 'who' you are. For example, Big Data algorithms need only four 'likes' on Facebook to determine whether the user is hetero- or homosexual (Anderson, 2016, 217).

replacement. This small personal story is a particularly clear example of the 'inhuman' logics of cybernetics. A logic which in times of big data only becomes more important – and opaque – and which we know predominantly through our internet usage, where personalized advertisement and bias-confirming information selection are the result of our digital fingerprint. On a larger scale, the speed with which these digital decisions are taken – based on cybernetic governance systems instead of public political decision processes – and the exteriorization of the self through psychopolitical apparatuses, cause according to Stiegler the *proletarianization of noetic life*, the poverty of mind, a subjection of the psyche that operates in the 'characters' of the convenience store personnel (2013, 103). Big data, different than traditional statistics, take *everything into account*, enabling the government of potentiality itself (Rouvroy, 2016, 14, 35). Only when considered in relation to politics and economy does the dehumanizing, controlling and modifying potential of technology come to the surface: *economic neoliberalism, free market ideology and late capitalist individualism can no longer be separated from the various technological and cultural posthumanization processes* (Herbrechter, 2013, 55).

The *dataist* – as Byung-Chul Han calls it – aspect of psychopolitics, relates to the loss of meaning in language as well. *Dataism lets go of any meaningful consistency. Language is devoid of any sense* (Han, 2015b, 64). As a means to control, dataism contributes to the sense of inertia, and inability to understand or trust power structures, as their operating principle – the algorithm – can be 'read' by an increasingly small number of people and increasingly develops forms of 'independent' decision-making. The *prescriptive force of automated systems* goes hand in hand with the growing risk that we will become *incapable of taking any decision* (Rouvroy 2016, 31-32). The evolution toward a sheer endless memory of these machines is paralleled by the degradation of human memory, which is affected by technological developments. Stiegler points at how tertiary memory, which is the result *from all forms of recordings* and in its turn is *the support for protentions constituting expectation that animates consciousness*, is changing in the current capitalist application of technologies (2010b, 16-17). Thanks to the proliferation of the internet, *mind-deadening techniques* cause *numerical integration* of consciousness, which has become a product on the market: *the industrialized production of tertiary retentions for masses of consciousness is a process of synchronization and of industrial standardization of the criteria of selection* (Stiegler, 2010b, 74-76). With no control over one's own memory, free choice becomes impossible. In relation to the politics in democracies, the importance of media in steering public opinion and popularizing discourses is only increased through the omnipresence of (social) media devices. Communication and attention are not only the new 'gold' in terms of commodities, exemplifying the shift from making profit of production to making profit of consumption (Stiegler, 2010a, 124), but also in the spreading and affirming of ideological discourse. It is precisely because of these media's omnipresence that public opinion has become such an important force in current democracies. Moreover, public

opinion has replaced the opinion of the people, hence condemning the people to silence (Agamben, 2007a, 278-279).

After having falsified all of production, [mercantile economy] can now manipulate collective perception and take control of social memory and social communication, transforming them into a single spectacular commodity, where everything can be called into question except the spectacle itself, which, as such, says nothing but, “What appears is good, what is good appears.” (Agamben, 1993a, 79-80).

Agamben points out how the affirmative and consensual function of the media is an intrinsic part of the contemporary democratic apparatus, which together with the commodification of communication, has separated the political voice from the people by adopting it in the spectacle (Agamben, 2007a, 280).

In Okada’s focus on the psychological consequences of the political-economic and since 2011 also the ecological situation in Japan on the younger generations, the gesture to de-psychologise the performing style reflects the management of the will or psyche caused by apparatuses. The accumulation of biopolitics and psychopolitics can be read and understood through the detachment of body and language. While the bodies and their movements seem to be controlled because of their detachment of language, a form of power that we could classify under disciplining biopower, the senseless continuity of the movements suggests a shift from the conception of the subject with the body as a productive unit, to something *undulatory, in orbit, in a continuous network* (Debord, 1995 [1967], 5-6). The body in an apparatus-posthumanist conception differs from the cyborg-body. Both are *composites*; the question is: where is the composition located and what does it give rise to? Where the cyborg’s embrace implies a certain degree of control and mastery of the human subject over the body, the relation to the apparatus is more complicated and displaces the human as the centre of agency even more than the cyborg does. Cyborg bodies *are* these hybrids of the organic and the inorganic, of animal and machine, they bring the binaries together in one non-unitary body, in a very physical way.

Based on her reading of Spinoza and Deleuze, Stalpaert suggests an alternative for the cyborg’s binary hybridity, *a composite body* in which the composites merge into a third body that is more and different than the sum of its parts (2015, 27; Stalpaert in Eckersall & van Baarle, forthcoming). A composite body is not merely a static entity, it is in constant *movement* and *its components lose their autonomous functioning* (Stalpaert in Eckersall & van Baarle, forthcoming). Building on Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory and Jane Bennett’s vibrant materialism, Stalpaert expands the notion of *composite body to non-human composites as well* (2015, 27). Composite bodies relate to more than merely their material, human and nonhuman parts and are formed as well by what Haraway aptly called machines made out of sunshine (cf. supra). These invisible, immaterial forces are not limited to the visible performing body but also include apparatuses of theatre, of

capitalism or democracy, and also connect the performer with the audience. It is as if the cyborg hybrid transitions into a phase of modulation in the fleeing formation of alternative entities that can come and go. The composite body is a positive, liberatory formulation of an ontology of becoming, one that is certainly more apt to describe realities than modernist ontologies of distinction and linearity. However, for the argument here, it is important to acknowledge that composition is also a form of control, and that the development of a relation of use toward to composition, remains necessary.

Thinking from the perspective of the apparatus, the constellation of the body should be expanded to form a 'dispositive body' (Lepecki, 2015), a body in orbit, shaped and moved within an immaterial apparatus. The body is not only disciplined to obey an apparatus of production, or a government of a population, through categorization or a discourse on body and identity. The nonstop movement, and quasi nonstop talking of Okada's characters conveys the image of an available subject, that is not allowed any rest. This does not contradict the inertia that was referred to above, but rather complicates the situation even more, as movement and language are no longer able to actually 'move' or 'say' anything. Okada's figures are in a situation that places pressure on the subject, until it, indeed, wears out and collapses.

Psychologically we can hence discern two consequences of this psychopolitical power: one evolving toward inertia and docility, a behavior which looks rather depressed or burnt out and another toward manic madness. Hyperactivity and depression and burn-out seem to form the two extreme poles of behavior in the advanced control societies. Perpetual activity and inertia are also at play in *Super Premium Soft Double Vanilla Rich*. Okada's work usually features young people, in their twenties or early thirties, a *disenchanted, dispossessed middle age, an afterlife of ever-vanishing expectations in a country where both the population and the economy are becoming exhausted* (Poulton, 2011, 151). In Japan, these 'youngsters' are called the *lost generation*. Graduated in the 1990s, working in precarious conditions, often still living with their parents: these so-called *parasite singles* have also become a growing group particularly in the South of Europe, where youth unemployment has skyrocketed since the 2008 financial crisis (Jansen, 2016, 55). The notion of the *freeter*, a contraction of freelance and *Arbeiter* (German for worker), characterizes the flexibilization and individualization of work at the blue-collar level. Flexibility, according to Han, is one of the requirements of the neoliberal meritocracy, and one of the causes for the subject to collapse into burn-out and depression (Han, 2016a, 70). These illnesses operating on the level of the psyche (not to discard their very physical reasons and symptoms), can be generalized to a state of being in neoliberal societies today. These economic conditions, echoed and facilitated by politics, create a *Charakter- und Gestaltlosigkeit des spätmodernen Ich* (Han, 2016a, 71).

Similar to the desubjectified figures in Castellucci's *Giudizio, Possibilità, Essere*, the depsychologized characters in Okada's work also open up a new space and hold a protest and critical deconstruction of a condition they want to address. The de-synchronization

of movement and language balances in this sense also between the being split by external (albeit internalized) forces and powerlessness, and a liberation from a particular construction of communication. Specifically in performing arts, where movement and language in traditional drama serve the narrative line and sensory-motor scheme, the detachment of language and movement and its subsequent depsychologization also are a liberation which enables the experience of different temporalities and different forms of life (Han, 2015b, 80; Jansen, 2016, 57). There is an alternative space and time, which both no longer develop through action, nor constitute a dramatic, linear plot as in traditional drama (Stalpaert, 2010b, 367), precisely because there is no longer such a plot, nor in Okada's work, neither in a psychopolitical society. Whereas in (among others Deleuze-inspired) postdramatic analyses the deconstruction of the sensory-motor scheme meant a liberation from modernist and humanist ties, here it has become more complicated. The psychopolitical workings of the apparatuses not only tend to transform intensities into commodities in the form of experience and affective media, but they are also open for a potential exploitation. The same goes for the *unjointed time* and *intensive space* – two notions I borrow from Stalpaert and that capture well the potential of a Deleuzian perspective (Stalpaert, 2010b). They enable the capturing of subjects in a never-ending *razender Stillstand* (Rosa, 2006, 51) in the absence or saturation of chronological time that loses meaning, and a disorienting space without safe haven that demands an intense relationship in order to sustain oneself. From an Agambenian, apparatus-posthumanist perspective, a more complicated trajectory and alternative outcomes are at hand. The temporality in Okada's recent performances can be described as posthistorical, and precisely this temporality allows to think outside of existing frames: *Only a thought capable of thinking the end of the state and the end of history at the same time and of mobilizing one against the other, is equal to this task* (Agamben, 2000, 111, emphasis by the author).

### 1.2.2.2 Posthistorical Japan as a psychopolitical environment

This alternative way of performing, with language and movement detached from each other, suggests a new form of life in relation to an altered experience of temporality that is a consequence of the sensation of a cessation of time or a transformation of time in relation to history. A feeling and condition called *posthistory*. In Kojève's seminal coinage of the notion of posthistory, Japan is exemplary for a (form of) posthistorical society (Kojève et al., 1980). In *The Open*, Agamben refers to Kojève's description of posthistorical societies in his discussion of potential suspensions of the anthropological machine, suggesting that the posthistorical moment enables the suspension of the machine separating the human from his animality. However, Kojève's assertion of a posthistorical Japan implies the suggestion of another suspension. In posthistory, the Subject is no longer opposed to the Object (Kojève et al., 1980, 158-159). The new figure of the human animal after the end of history, which Kojève must have seen during his travel to Japan,

and which he called 'snob', today has attained a further state of completion through the omnipresence of robots and technology, with its particular consequences on Japanese society, psyche, sexuality and economy. Ceremonial and etiquette behavior, which largely form the 'snobbery' of Kojève's posthistorical Japan, is being taught to robots welcoming clients in stores and monasteries, or is extended to burial ceremonies for 'deceased' SONY Aibo robotic dogs, while increased solitude and decreasing sexual activity haunt the human inhabitants of the land of the rising sun.

The optimism of for example Francis Fukuyama in the early nineties about posthistory's victory of globalized capitalism (Fukuyama, 1992), is tempered by the events that happened ever since. Instead of a distribution of wealth and the end of work, increasing inequality and a renewed process of proletarianization have rendered the notion 'posthistory' much more ambivalent and closer to a certain inability to act or experience or influence history: *in the 1990s it became associated with unbearable fragmentation, opacity, and paralysis. Japan in the recessionary decade seemed arrested in the seemingly paradoxical state of an unending and entrenched present coexisting with momentous instability* (Yoda, 2006, 35). Okada's work – in which a deflated time is a central feature (Jansen, 2016, 57) – breathes the same posthistorical malaise. In *Ground and Floor*, a performance from 2013, the disparity and distress of Japanese society after the events on the third of March 2011, with the earth quake, tsunami and destruction of the Daiichi nuclear power plant in Fukushima, forms the background for the dialogues and reflections of a family. Here too, language is presented as a failed system in relation to reality, as a reaction to the incorrect statements of the Japanese government after the Fukushima disaster, claiming that the water was clean and the radiation minimal. One character called Satomi holds a long speech (in Japanese) that is largely not understandable because of conscious meddling with the subtitles and because the scarce English sounding lines are close to nonsensical rattle. Agamben connects the idleness, that is, the meaninglessness and impotence, of an *omnipresent* and *pervasive* language, to the current experience of posthistory (2015a, 113).<sup>55</sup> Satomi talks about a space, *conveying the sense of exhaustion of people defeated and unable to escape their circumstances* (Eckersall, 2015a, 9), not unlike the overall atmosphere in *Ground and Floor* as well as in *Super Premium Soft...*

From a posthumanist perspective, it is interesting that *Ground and Floor* is a reaction to the Fukushima disaster and hence connects the impotence of language and the corruption of politics to an event that evokes a potential end of the world. *Ground and Floor* is one of three performances by Okada that were 'provoked' by the Fukushima disaster, together with *Current Location* (2012) and *Time's Journey through a Room* (2016).

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<sup>55</sup> Agamben traces the rise of language as a historical a priori in Foucault and Benjamin: *The speaking being or enunciator has thus been substituted for Kant's transcendental subject, and language has taken the place of being as historical a priori* (2015a, 113). Today, however, such a historical a priori does no longer exist (Agamben, 2014, 114), due to the hollowing out of language that was already described in 1.2.2.1.

Dead characters, ghosts, are staged in these productions, not only to voice their position, but also in reference to the Japanese Noh-theatre tradition (Jansen, 2016, 59). The sensation that nothing happens or leads to anything and the repetition and slowness, only add to the alienating desynchronization of movement and speech. The movements themselves are also already communicating a sort of a-temporality, and the ghost characters suggest this a-temporality is that of a potential posthuman after-time. This is not a redemptive end of humanity, rather the suggestion of an imploded apocalypse that calls for a reflection in the current time. The suspension of time is not only a mimesis of a specific condition. It also offers a time for contemplation and reflection for the audience, a possibility to 'perform' a certain topic, concept, form, element from different perspectives and to let the complexity of ideas presented in a performance unfold. This resonates with what Eckersall & Paterson have called *slow dramaturgy* (2011).

The display of these bodies divided between language and movement and the inertia and emptiness they are able to convey, is thus deeply entangled with the space and time in which they are presented – both in a more abstract, affective sense as in concrete time-spaces in which the related events are set, in the case of *Super Premium...* the *konbini* store. Within a psychopolitical space-time, the body is not the sole locus of expression as in body humanism, rather, it is part of its environment, as it is 'in orbit' with an apparatus. The *baito* characters in Okada are almost a consequence of their workplace, both in the 'real' world, and in the theatre – they no longer 'have' a world, in the sense that they meaningfully act in and upon it.

The way in which this environment is created scenographically also adds to the posthistorical sensation of the performance. The *konbini* store as an image of advanced capitalism is evoked without references to specific store chains and products, but by certain archetypical elements that have the 'feel' of such places, of their colorful and orderly aesthetic and their generic quality. Okada's set in *Super Premium Soft...* generates an atmosphere of *impersonal familiarity*, recalling *the everyday sense of dislocation and inertia* (Eckersall, forthcoming). Okada's rendering of the *konbini* emphasizes the *non-lieu* character of this place. Particular colors, design and a setup are used that could be situated anywhere in the developed world, reminding of multinational convenience store companies such as 7-Eleven or Family Mart. Okada's recent pieces show how the *non-lieu* is not only the place where one is stripped of any identity besides the functionality in that setting, it is also a place of solitude (Augé, 2008, 103, 187). Interestingly, Augé also points at language as the means of relating individuals to *non-lieux*; a language that is – like in Okada's performances – suffering from *linguistic enfeeblement*, reducing language to mere communication (2008, 110).

In chapter 2.6, different conceptions of time and space in apparatus-posthumanism will be discussed further, however, here it becomes already clear that the *non-lieu*<sup>56</sup> creates a particular relation to the environment through language. Agamben also makes the connection between nonplace and language, and describes precisely the experience of *the taking place of language as a nonplace*, as this taking place is the transition from living being to speaking being, from animal voice, to human language (Agamben, 1991, 57). The nonplace of language, in Agamben's reading, is precisely the *Da* of the Heideggerian *Dasein* – we are thrown in language as we are thrown in the world (Agamben, 1991, 57). In *The Open*, Agamben discusses different ways to relate to one's surrounding, to the environment or world, based on Heidegger's differentiation between animal environment and human world. Within this line of thought, space is no longer defined in function of a dramatic line, or a subject formation – as was already implicit in the shift from place to nonplace – and is characterized rather by being captured or distanced from the world. The posthistorical loss of world leads to experiences of emptiness and absence as well as potentialities for alternative ways to relate to the world. These categories will be taken up later, however for Okada's work, it is relevant to point out already that boredom is the threshold between environment (*Umwelt*) (in which one is captured in opacity) and world (in which one sees the closedness of being, which enables to act) (Agamben, 2002, 59, 62). The inertia of Okada's characters can be interpreted as boredom as well, the state of being that brings the human animal closest to the nonhuman animal relation to his *Umwelt*, that is described as *captivity* (Agamben, 2002, 52). The disjunction of movement and language and their overall *body language emanates boredom, passivity, and apathy* (Jansen, 2016, 57). This does not mean a return to a certain animal origin, it underlines the characters' being captivated in their immediate surroundings that are related to their survival, and a lack of distance to their environment that is otherwise needed to think and act upon the world.

Convenience stores such as the one evoked in *Super Premium Soft...* are often open 24/7, day and night, weekdays and weekends, a feature of the *non-lieu* that Augé describes as an *unending history in the present* (2008, 105). This sheds a different light on the a-temporality in Okada's work. Eckersall draws the connection between the convenience store in *Super Premium Soft...* and Jonathan Crary's critical analysis of 24/7 neoliberal capitalism (Eckersall, forthcoming). The image of a brightly lit small store in dark streets, where the outside world's rhythm seems to have no effect upon, is emphasized in *Super Premium...* by the use of music, i.e. Bach's *Das wohltemperierte Klavier* played in a low-quality synthesiser version. The music's continuity co-shapes the timeless, *non-lieu* atmosphere

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<sup>56</sup> Agamben refers to the notion of nonplace in his description of the concentration camp as a paradigm of the state of exception having become the norm, *in which all disciplinary barriers are destroyed and all embankments flooded* (1999b, 48), see chapter 2.6.1.

and suggests an unbearable lightness, while adding a compulsive background to the movements and text. The seriality of Bach's composition of 24 preludes and fugues in every major and minor key evokes an endlessness, which underlines the 24/7 environment of the convenience store. The seeming endlessness corresponds to what Eckersall has called the *collapse of time through the just in time system of convenient stores* (Eckersall, forthcoming), where constant resupply and a 24/7 working (and hence: consuming) regime create an empty temporality. At the same time, Bach's composition operates as the controller of time, as the length of the performance corresponds to the length of the music. With the strategy of control over a time that is experienced as empty or endless, Okada creates a strong example of a performative, desubjectifying apparatus.

Historically, Bach's *wohltemperierte* or well-tempered compositions have a disciplining element as well. The well-tempered tuning – which later led to the equal temperament we know in keyboards today – was introduced by Andreas Werckmeister in 1681. At the time of composition of the *wohltemperierte Klavier*, several tuning systems were in circulation, such as the meantone system (based on Pythagorean mathematics) in which not all intervals sound pure. The well-tempered system is a system of proportion, of ordering, that allows all keys to be played within the 'pure' tuning. This was perceived by some as a deviation from and a domestication of the Pythagorean, 'natural' system, for example by the character of György Eszter in Bela Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmonik* (2000). Eszter considers Werckmeister's well-tempered system as being founded on nothing, and hence questions the whole history of music since its introduction as being based in a 'false' belief in pure tones, which, according to Eszter, only exist in some cases and not in all, such as in the well-tempered system. The pure harmonies belong to the heavens of God and on earth only some pure tones can be heard. Interestingly, Agamben, whose central project for the past twenty years has been the archaeology of democracy and power through a research of Christian theology, also used musical harmony to describe a form of ordering, or power. He related the heavenly harmonies and the singing of the angels in harmony, to the system of government that has been developed in the Western democracies: just as in heaven all sounds are in harmony with divine providence, so on earth, all life within the state will be 'in harmony' with the law (Agamben, 2011a, 73).

The posthistorical condition is tightly related to humankind's relation to technology as a means of governing biological life as bare life. Whereas the modern anthropological machine suspended the animal in the human to 'create' the human, now this machine is faltering precisely because biopolitics and biotechnology have developed to such an extent that bare life becomes the actual, destructive focus of politics and science. This is a consequence of the collapse of political apparatuses that no longer are able to *take on the task of history* and hence implode and self-destruct (Agamben, 2002, 80). It is because of the triumph of economy, literally as economic activity as well as in the sense of management of life, *that there is nothing left but the depoliticization of human societies by means of the unconditioned unfolding of the oikonomia* (Agamben, 2002, 76, emphasis by the

author). The end of history thus has a double, related, cause. On the one hand, biopolitics has developed to such an extent that humanity manages itself (biologically and otherwise) as it manages its environment. On the other, the persistence of declined statist and democratic politics as a form of life leads to nowhere.

The shift from biopolitics to psychopolitics implies a shift from prohibiting to offering, from *Verboten* to *Angeboten* (Krajnik, 2016, 109). Together with its *non-lieu* character, as well as its cybernetic functioning mentioned above, *Super Premium...*'s convenience store forms an emblematic time-space for psychopolitics in consumer capitalism. It is a 'home' for the posthistorical human, in a posthistory which did not lead to a liberating next phase of human animality, but one where history has become inaccessible because of an increasing control by the state and economy. This sheds a different light over the following passage by Kojève, and reveals the ambiguity of posthistory and the end of Man and Action.

[T]he end of human Time or History – that is, the definitive annihilation of Man properly so-called or of the free and historical Individual<sup>57</sup> – means quite simply the cessation of Action in the full sense of the term (Kojève et al., 1980, 159).

The potential lies in a fundamental redefinition of 'Man', the human animal, beyond a subject/object divide, from a post-anthropocentric perspective on the world, of which Castellucci's and Okada's performances might present two suggestions. De Boever connects psychopolitics to speculative realism, a philosophical movement closely related to object-oriented ontology, which by means of 'speculation' also seeks to develop knowledge about non-human entities, objects, beyond the human as the measure of all things (2013b, 163). Speculation on the financial markets might find its homologue in this philosophical movement, which has more creative and progressive goals than its destructive monetary counterpart. De Boever refers to Meillassoux, a prominent speculative realist, and his ancestry claim which states that there must be a way to describe and think things and environments in a radical suspension of anthropocentric conceptions of time and space, as they already existed before the genesis of the human species (Meillassoux, 2008). Speculative realism not only looks back, but also suggests to possibility of a future after humanity, after human extinction (De Boever, 2013b, 189). Psychopolitical posthistory resonates with a post-anthropocentric perspective on the world, which is both a non-anthropocentrism and a literal *post-human* view, speculating about a world without us.

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<sup>57</sup> It was Diderot, who first used the word '*individualité*' to point at a person's personal characteristics that are imposed on others. *Individualité* became a fashion, a way of being, an idiosyncratic behavior which first had a negative connotation but soon was appreciated as an expression of singularity (Lecourt, 2013, 11-13).

## **Part 2: A TYPOLOGY OF POSTHUMANIST FIGURES**



## 2 A typology of posthumanist figures

### 2.1 The figure in Kris Verdonck and Agamben

*Ein Endzustand der Verwandlung ist die Figur. Es gehört zu ihr, dass sie eine weitere Verwandlung nicht mehr gestattet. Die Figur ist in allen ihren Zügen begrenzt und klar. Sie ist nicht natürlich, ein Geschöpf des Menschen.*  
(Canetti, 1992, 418)

#### 2.1.1 The figure as zero point

Kris Verdonck's *END* (2008) is a performance for the black box theatre, with ten performing 'entities'. As the title suggests, this performance is about the 'end' of the world and the human as we know it. Eight of these entities move continuously throughout the show along a straight line trajectory from stage right to stage left (or to use the French terminology: from *côté cour* to *côté jardin*). Only one moves in the opposite direction. They seem to find themselves in the end time, within the moment of the apocalypse or slightly after it occurred. The performing entities all refer to this apocalyptic environment; they are part of it while creating it – similar to humanity's actual role in a potential 'end' of our world. A man is attached to an invisible weight by way of a rope strapped around his body; the rhythm of his steps is connected to the clouds projected on the backdrop, that jolt forward, dragged in a mysterious way by the strapped man. A woman in a white *deux-pièce* who seems to be pregnant, is attached to a harness that enables her to make 'inhuman' movements. A suspended V6 Alfa Romeo engine floats across the stage too, as does a man in a suit, high up above the stage. His trajectory is more difficult: jerking and twisting, he tries to make his way, but moves in thin air. A fire, fed by a line of magnesium laid out on the stage, follows its self-destructive trajectory. Another woman crosses the stage, carrying a white body bag, which hinders her rhythm and pace. At some moments, three loudspeakers oriented in different directions – named 'the choir' with reference to Greek tragedy – and attached to a pole on a riding platform make their entrance.

Panicking, dramatic, hysteric singing is played at a volume that feels too loud, only to increase the distortion and urgency of the voices. In a small carriage looking like a phone booth, a man, telling of disasters, evoking horrible scenes from history and contemporary scientific predictions, moves about. He is accompanied by two birds, an image reminding of the canaries that were used in the mine, to 'report' or indicate to the miners whether the oxygen level would drop. The only one moving in the opposite direction, falls from the sky on the mattress. He wears a mask, like a Marvel hero, and goes against the grain. Van Kerkhoven and Verdonck named him the Ludd, after Ned Ludd, an eighteenth-century worker about whom it is told that he broke two stocking machines, inspiring the luddites in the nineteenth century, who destroyed weaving machines in protest against the industrialization and its consequences for skills and labor conditions (Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens, 2012, 67, 70). All of this happens under the falling of a black snow of snippets, the tenth performing element of *END*. The performance consists of the trajectories of these entities. There is no particular build-up, the rhythm is 'flat', or more in resonance with the movement on stage: circular. During the more or less ninety minutes the performance lasts, time passes, but no dramatic bow is generated. We see human and nonhuman performers cross the stage, horizontally and vertically, in a rhythm that seems random, but nevertheless allows for fascinating images to take shape and dissolve again. *END* is a theatrical installation, a carousel of beings that rotates in the midst of the apocalypse, right after the catastrophe, in dehumanizing destruction, all of which is caused by human agency, for example war, global warming, totalitarian politics, advanced capitalism and technological developments.

To name all of these performing entities, regardless of their being a human performer, an image or a machine or a combination of these, Verdonck and the dramaturge for *END* resorted to the term 'figure' (Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens, 2012, 62). I first learned about Van Kerkhoven and Verdonck's use of the notion of the figure during a workshop taught by Van Kerkhoven as part of the master seminar 'Dramaturgy', at Ghent University in 2010. I was already reading and studying the work of Agamben for over a year, in relation to the work of Romeo Castellucci, and was thus surprised and intrigued by their Agamben-based use of the term 'figure', especially in combination with the essay *Über das Marionettentheater* by Heinrich von Kleist. Von Kleist's short, enigmatic essay, ascribing grace to those creatures that do not have consciousness, is perhaps even more than the notion of the figure, a key dramaturgical text to Verdonck's oeuvre. Between destruction and beauty, between politically critical and dystopic, and artistically inspiring and stimulating, the figure and the puppet form a pair full of potential, also for research. The notions of the figure and the marionette also provided a vocabulary to describe what I saw in Verdonck's performances up until then. In this chapter, I elaborate further on these notions, as I believe Van Kerkhoven and Verdonck's choice for them was not only well motivated and interesting and suitable, they also offer a philosophically grounded

alternative to indicate performing entities, immediately opening up political and aesthetic reflections.

Following Verdonck and Van Kerkhoven's path, via the figure on *END*'s stage, to Agamben, I will first unpack the notion in the latter's thinking and analyze its political potential. What is the figure when taking into account the larger part of Agamben's oeuvre? And when this lens is directed to Verdonck's oeuvre, what aspects of the figure can be discerned? How might an interpretation of Verdonck's figures, help to understand the potential of the Agambenian concept of the figure and vice versa? The larger part of this chapter will be focused on the figures in Verdonck's work and seek to describe and reflect on them, while continuing to deepen the apparatus-posthumanist conceptual frame that was laid out in the previous chapter. The figure is what performs in apparatus-posthumanist artworks.



Figure 8 The figures of the Ludd and the Musel-woman in: Kris Verdonck / A Two Dogs Company: *END* (2008) © Catherine Antoine

The term 'figure' bridges the gap caused by the dichotomy of subject and object without, however, denying the consequences this dichotomy has had on our thinking and the world.<sup>58</sup> Rather, the figure finds itself in the ruins of the subject/object divide. The term

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<sup>58</sup> In this way, Verdonck's and Van Kerkhoven's 'figure' differs from Levi Bryant's machine-oriented ontology, in which the 'machine' is proposed as an alternative for the subject/object dualism, *allowing us to step outside a*

was inspired by Agamben's account of the *Muselmann* in the Auschwitz concentration camps (Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens, 2012, 67). He described how *we know from witnesses that under no circumstances were they be called "corpses" or "cadavers", but rather simply Figuren, figures, dolls* (Agamben, 1999b, 51). In the words of Van Kerkhoven:

*Figuren* is the word the SS officers and camp guards used to refer to those prisoners who were so malnourished they seemed to be the walking dead: not yet corpses, but no longer bodies or people. *Figuren* are puppets, still moving but actually already dead. It seemed appropriate, therefore, to call these in-between beings roaming around the apocalyptic world on stage 'figures' (Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens, 2012, 66).

The notion 'figure' stayed in circulation in Verdonck's discourse, to indicate the performing entities in his works. As will become clear in the following chapters, the origin of the term – the threshold between life and death, between subject and object, in relation to destruction and catastrophe – resonates with the other figures of Verdonck. There is one of the figures in *END* that was specifically based on Agamben's analysis of the *Muselmann* and was named that way too. The *Musel-woman* is a female performer, the woman in the white *deux pièce*, whose nearly inhuman movements have something mechanical to them. Interestingly, in a first application by Verdonck for subsidies from the Flemish government, it reads that the initial idea was to have an actual robot perform this figure. *This almost dead person marks the shift from human to robot*, a shift that was to confuse the audience as to whether they were watching a human or a nonhuman performer, the same confusion that Agamben allocates to the *Muselmann* (Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens, 2012, 67).

This confusion is then a consequence of the performativity of the objects, or *object-figures* as Eckersall has called them (2015b). In an earlier work on the alienation of objects, Agamben wrote that *[t]he redemption of objects is impossible except by virtue of becoming an object*. To only way be able to perform the figure and to be alongside objects, is by becoming a *a living corpse [...] man becomes a piece of boudoir furniture, an extremely ingenuous mannequin* (Agamben, 1993b, 50).<sup>59</sup> Although Agamben discusses in this passage

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*four hundred year old philosophical obsession with interrogating the relationship between subjects and objects* (Bryant, 2013, 15). The figure certainly also implies a critical perspective on the subject/object divide, but instead of wanting to transcend or all too easily move beyond it, it wants to engage with the abyss between objects and subjects and with the deconstruction of both categories, inspired by Agamben's notion of the apparatus as well as the recent economic, political, technological and ecological evolutions.

<sup>59</sup> Agamben refers to a particular strategy artists in that period have adopted to 'become object': *Antihumanist traits are evident in an imaginary genealogical tree of the characters (or, rather, the anticharacters) in which modern artists have represented themselves: Igitur – Doctor Faustroll [Alfred Jarry] – Monsieur Croche [Debussy] – Stephen Dedalus [Joyce] – Monsieur the Vivisectionist [Musil] – Plume – Loplop, Chief of Birds [Max Ernst] – Werfüronne – Adrian*

nineteenth-century strategies against commodification and industrialization, the becoming of a living corpse, or a mannequin, applies to the work of Verdonck as well (cf. 2.2). In chapter 2.3, we shall see that the redemption of objects is twofold. On the one hand, there is the uncovering of their agency, of their being an apparatus, and by doing so, showing where interactions with these apparatuses lead to for human beings: becoming an object. On the other hand, it means wresting these objects from the apparatuses with which they are aligned, bringing them to what Agamben calls a *new use*.

Agamben's analysis of the *Muselmann* places this figure in the grey zone between subject and object, between human and inhuman as well. The *Muselmann* is defined as *the moving threshold in which man passed into non-man [...] between life and death, the human and the inhuman* (Agamben, 1999b, 47). Verdonck and Van Kerkhoven's choice for the term 'figure' to indicate performing entities that go beyond traditional categories of life and death, of subject and object, corresponds to this particular history of the word. Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim wrote about the *Muselmänner*, that *they had to give up responding to [the environment] at all, and become objects, but with this they gave up being persons* (Bettelheim in Agamben, 1999b, 54). Figures are absent from their environment, while still being there – a feature that can also be discerned in Verdonck's work. Figures enter the zone of the object because their persona was taken away; they were excluded from the political, while – as we will see – being an extremely political form of life. The figure is an *irremissible zero point* (Harvey, 2010, 22). It belongs to a *third realm, a limbo between life and death* (Sofsky in Agamben, 1999b, 48), it is a state of being that resonates with the outcome of apparatuses' processes of desubjectification leading to the larval and spectral subjects.

In Agamben, other figures come to the fore that are not directly related to the *Muselmann* but share some conceptual features. These figures are often based on fictional 'characters' in the works of Kafka, Benjamin, Walser or Rilke, characters which Eric Santner describes as *creaturely life: the essential disruption that renders man creaturely for these writers has, that is, a distinctly political – or better – biopolitical aspect; it names the threshold where life becomes a matter of politics and politics comes to inform the very matter and materiality of life* (2006, 12). Santner emphasizes that creaturely life is a notion that points at a reduced humanity (and is thus not applicable to objects and in that sense only partially corresponds to the notion of the figure as I will develop it here). The zero point of existence of the *Muselmann* would then be *something like the direct embodiment of creaturely life* (Santner, 2006, 25). What these creaturely forms of life call *into question is the very humanity of man, since man observes the fragmentation of his privileged tie to what constitutes him as human, that is, the sacredness of death and life* (Agamben, 1999b, 81). Not only

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*Leverkuhn* [Thomas Mann] (Agamben, 1993b, 54). The objectification of the self through exteriorization will prove to be a strategy not only used as a counter-act, but as a means of capture as well.

definitions of life and death within the species of *Homo sapiens* are at stake. After the Second World War, whose events fundamentally altered the understanding of what humanity is (not) capable of, technological developments such as A.I. but also the findings on how plants communicate or how objects have agency, are challenging what is understood under 'life', 'conscious', 'thinking', 'action' and 'intention'.

In theatre, the notion of the figure is not a novelty as such. Figure in *The Dictionary of the Theatre* (1998) by Patrice Pavis refers to a *type of character without specifying the particular traits that make up that character*. [...] [T]he figure groups together a number of fairly general distinctive traits and manifests itself as a silhouette, a still-imprecise mass (150). Pavis' definition is close to the etymology of 'figure', as described by Erich Auerbach. The word 'figure' has its Latin etymology in the word *figura* and originally means *formazione plastica* (Auerbach, 2005 [1963], 174). In its etymology, *figura* is not limited to living beings, on the contrary *everything that is perceptible [sensible] has a "figure"* (Auerbach, 2005 [1963], 179, my transl.). The word 'figure' is closely related to 'form', however, they are not the same, as 'form' [...] is to 'figure' what the concave form is to the plastic relief [*rilievo plastico*] that comes out of it (Auerbach, 2005 [1963], 175, my transl.) The figure has been the subject of questions of representation ever since antiquity: how to represent a figure – that is: an abstract idea But also: how do form and content, representation and perception relate (Brandstetter & Peters, 2002, 7).<sup>60</sup> The figure is thus also an important dramaturgical concept. Brandstetter & Peters make a distinction between mimesis and the figure (as *performative Qualität*) as two different modes of representation, hence, the question of the figure not only concerns *die Vorstellung von einer (plastischen) Gestalt, sondern auch seine eigene Plastizität – jene performative Dimension* (Brandstetter & Peters, 2002, 8). The materiality of the figure is part of its performativity, a feature that will return in the analysis of Verdonck's figures. Brandstetter & Peters' study on the use and relevance of the notion of the figure in performing arts situates its contemporary relevance in its going beyond the *Einheit der Gestalt, Einheit des Subjekts im Sinn von Identität*, stating that these unities have become obsolete (Brandstetter & Peters, 2002, 7). The figure's silhouette is more like the contour, the *negative outline* (Agamben, 1993c, 84) of a subject that – in line with the *Muselman* and the apparatus' process of desubjectification – has been hollowed out. The figure finds itself at the limits of representation, its presence and performativity of its materiality always questioning the medium through which it is formed.

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<sup>60</sup> Eckersall affirms the figure's liminality of representation and points at the political aspect of this property, by referring to Rancière's politics of the distribution of the sensible: *The art of the aesthetic age has never stopped playing on the possibility that each medium could offer to blend its effects with those of others, to assume their role and thereby create new figures, reawakening sensible possibilities which they had exhausted* (Rancière in Eckersall, 2012, 73).

## 2.1.2 The figure and potentiality

Auerbach's etymological research into the notion of the figure brings him to the use of the term in the work of Lucretius, where it means "*visione di sogno*", "*immagine fantastica*" or "*ombra del morto*" (Auerbach, 2005 [1963], 178). Here again, the figure moves on the borders of life and death, this time in relation to its fantastic/phantasmatic facets, which will be analyzed in 2.4. The reference to shadow is part of the temporal functioning of the notion of the figure (Auerbach, 2005 [1963], 217). This temporality relates to a mode of interpretation of texts and events that Auerbach calls 'figural':

The figural interpretation establishes between two facts or persons a relationship in which one of them not only signifies for itself, but also signifies the other, while the other includes [comprende] or fulfils the first. (2005 [1963], 204, my transl.).

The (future) completion of events or persons that are 'figural', relates to Agamben's messianic tone and to his coming politics that were already mentioned in the previous chapter. Agamben connects the notion of the figure to the Greek *typos* in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, in which it means *prefiguration or foreshadowing* (Agamben, 2005, 73). The figures and their circular movement across the stage in *END* are in that sense both contemporary, past, cyclical and a prefiguration of things to come. The figure's *typological relation* to time implies a particular temporality that Agamben calls messianic (cf. 2.6). The figure constitutes *a zone of undecidability, in which the past is dislocated into the present and the present is extended to the past* (Agamben, 2005, 74). In Agamben's thinking, the *Muselmann* holds this messianic potential as well.

The *Muselmann* as an extreme case of how biopolitics manages life to the point of survival, is an *absolute biopolitical substance* (Agamben, 1999b, 85), it is a radical appearance of the *homo sacer*, the central figure in an earlier book by Agamben. In this book, *Homo Sacer*, named after the figure of Ancient Rome's outlaw *who may be killed and yet not sacrificed*, a human being that *is included in the juridical order [ordinamento] solely in the exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)* (Agamben, 1998, 8), Agamben describes the *Muselmann* as an extreme form of *homo sacer*:

Mute and absolutely alone, he has passed into another world without memory and without grief. For him, Hölderlin's statement that "at the extreme limit of pain, nothing remains but the conditions of time and space" holds to the letter. What is the life of the *Muselmann*? Can one say that it is pure *zoē*? Nothing "natural" or "common," however, is left in him; nothing animal or instinctual remains in his life. All his instincts are canceled along with his reason. Antelme tells us that the camp inhabitant was no longer capable of distinguishing between pangs of cold and the ferocity of the SS (Agamben, 1998, 104).

In a later book on the letters of Paul, *The Time that Remains* (2005), Agamben returns to the notion of the figure in terms of the remnant, as a result of a radical dehumanization: *But if man is that which may be infinitely destroyed, this also means that something other than this destruction, and within this destruction, remains, and that man is this remnant* (Agamben, 2005, 53). The *Muselmann* is the ruin at the limits of human being, however, at this limit something remains, the remnant (Agamben, 2005, 58). As Ziarek notes, it is a remnant of *a specific form of life that is not yet or is no longer* (2008, 103). The ‘not yet’ of the remnant implies a potentiality to precisely deconstruct the system which has produced it and a potentiality to develop other forms of life. *The remnant is the figure, or substantiality assumed by a people in a decisive moment, and as such is the only real political subject* (Agamben, 2005, 57). Elsewhere, Agamben described the remnant as a division of the division, *it makes the division of the law inoperative [...] divides the division. And what remains is the new but undefinable subject* (Agamben in Smith, 2004, 122). In the case of Verdonck, one of the central divisions that is disrupted, is that between object and subject, death and life. The remnant remains *not as a substance, but as an interval* (Agamben in Smith, 2004, 123), making it a performative entity, or rather, the figure exists in its being performative. The figure as remnant is thus not only a victim: as an *inassimilable* (Ziarek, 2008, 91), it is potentiality, and fundamentally disruptive for apparatuses that seek to manage its life. Agamben’s description of the figure of the *Muselmann* in *Homo Sacer* already holds this ambiguity, being a disruption of power holding the promise of something else, as the citation above continues:

If we apply this statement to the *Muselmann* quite literally (“the cold, SS”), then we can say that he moves in an absolute indistinction of fact and law, of life and juridical rule, and of nature and politics. Because of this, the guard suddenly seems powerless before him, as if struck by the thought that the *Muselmann*’s behavior – which does not register any difference between an order and the cold – might perhaps be a silent form of resistance. Here a law that seeks to transform itself entirely into life finds itself confronted with a life that is absolutely indistinguishable from law, and it is precisely this indiscernibility that threatens the *lex animata* of the camp (Agamben, 1998, 104).

The saving power that Heidegger discerned in Hölderlin seems to grow in these radical cases of dehumanization. From this perspective, the *threshold is not only a danger but perhaps also, against all odds, an opportunity* (Ten Bos, 2005, 19). Characteristic for Agamben’s thinking is that *there are no spaces outside the spectacle in which people live more meaningful or authentic lives. It is precisely within the spectacle [...] that he identifies the possibility of a new form of life* (Whyte, 2013, 153). His messianic thinking, as was already argued in chapter 1.2, implies a complex entanglement of deconstruction and potentiality. In an essay on messianic power, Agamben describes how *l’un des paradoxes du règne messianique est qu’un autre monde et un autre temps doivent s’actualiser dans ce monde et dans ce temps* (2011 [1992],

300). This form of latent potentiality, which is also at work in the figure, implies a politics that, as Blanga-Gubbay aptly puts it, refrains from *reducing the political imagination to the creation of an alternative future, rather than opening a different consistency of the present* (2016, 30).<sup>61</sup> The conflation of the deconstruction of the desubjectifying system and the messianic potentiality that lies dormant within that same system leads to a *paradoxical point of apparent indistinction* (Parsley, 2013, 33). As will be further developed in the following section of this chapter, the figure of the *Muselmann* refers to the completion of a power structure, namely biopolitics with bare life at its core, which will collapse once its final goal, the total control over a population of bare life, is completed. The figure contains something provisional and incomplete, all the while prefiguring a recomposition of the present that will be a real caesura (Auerbach, 2005 [1963], 208). This temporal aspect and intrinsic potentiality form the aspects of resistance in the figure.

In his writings, Agamben refers to and develops several figures of *annihilated human existence* (1993c, 84) at the intersection of life and politics. A brief exploration of one of these Agambenian figures, the slave in Ancient Greece, will allow to further develop the potentiality of these figures of annihilated existence. Starting from an interpretation of Aristotle's definition of the slave as *the being whose work is the use of the body*, compared to furniture or an automaton, the slave is an animated instrument [*strumento animato*] (Agamben, 2015a, 4, 11). This makes the slave a paradigmatic threshold being, which does not diminish the rough living circumstances of the actual, historical Greek slaves, but rather a development of its position in philosophy, politics and the relation to others.

The slave is a figure which through its being an animated instrument, offers an insight in matters of instrumentality and technology and hence relates to Heidegger's critique of instrumentality.<sup>62</sup> The slave's way of being an instrument corresponds not to the utilitarian instrumentality, which leads to a misunderstanding and danger of technology, but to the instrumentality that belongs to technology's essence and that also relates to the apparatus' mode of operating. The slave forms a paradigm for a particular type of technology: *the absolute instrumentality that is thought here constitutes in some way the*

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<sup>61</sup> In critical theory and political philosophy, the term 'figure' is not exclusively used by Agamben. Also in cyborg-posthumanist theory, such as developed by Rosi Braidotti, the notion of figuration is used to indicate a *politically informed image of thought that evokes or expresses an alternative vision of subjectivity* (Braidotti, 2011, 22). The cyborg is, in that sense, also a figure. Elaine Graham describes how figures in Haraway's writings lack an ontological hygiene that clearly distinguishes subjects from objects, which leads her to name these figures 'monstrous' (2002, 203).

<sup>62</sup> Achille Mbembe's account of slavery of black people from the African continent in Western colonies and the United States, also refers to the slave as a 'thing': *because the slave's life is like a thing, possessed by another person, the slave's existence appears as a perfect figure of a shadow* (2003, 22). Interestingly, there is a resonating vocabulary circulating around the notion of the figure, of which the shadow (and further in Mbembe, the ghost) points to a form of life on the brink of existence, absence and negativity.

paradigm of modern technologies, which tend to produce apparatuses that have incorporated in themselves the operation of the principal agent and can thus “obey” its commands (Agamben, 2015a, 77).<sup>63</sup> In the slave’s actions, resonates the will of his master. As an instrument, the slave’s body is his and yet not his: it is a continuation of that of his owner. Once again, Agamben has chosen a paradigmatic figure that balances between a dystopian analysis and a potential alternative, as in the same book the slave stands as a model for an alternative mode of action and being.

Agamben compares the slave in Ancient Greece to the machine of the moderns as two ‘figures’ of the living instrument. They both serve to fulfill a desire by particular human beings to be liberated from necessity and enable a form of life that is, according to the philosophy and ‘norm’ of each particular era, closer to the human ‘nature’, respectively the political life and the control of the forces of nature and hence the human itself: *slavery is to ancient humanity what technology is to modern humanity: both, as bare life, watch over the threshold that allows access to the truly human condition (and both have shown themselves to be inadequate to the task, the modern way revealing itself in the end to be no less dehumanizing than the ancient)* (Agamben, 2015a, 78).<sup>64</sup> The figure of the slave, as *animale umano* and *strumento vivente*, also blurs the categories of the animal and the human, of living being and inorganic matter (Agamben, 2014, 112). For Agamben, the use of the body of which the Ancient Greek slave is exemplar for a zone of indifference between one’s own body and that of another, as well as between a *poiesis* producing something and a *praxis* as an action for the action’s sake, between actualization and potentiality. In the slave’s use of the body, a possible mode of action that would liberate human beings from apparatuses, is captured (Agamben, 2014, 46). Together with the *Muselmann* and the *homo sacer*, the slave is one of the most radical figures in Agamben’s thinking.

The Invisible Committee, an anonymous group of thinkers that is influenced by Agamben’s desubjectified thinking, published in their journal *Tiqqun* a text on an equally radical figure, also referred to in Agamben’s apparatus essay: the *Bloom* (Invisible, 2000). The Bloom is described as *le triste produit du temps de multitudes, comme le fils catastrophique de l’ère industrielle et de la fin de tous les enchantements* (Invisible, 2000, 16-17). Loosely referring to Joyce’s Leopold Bloom, *Tiqqun*’s Bloom is a figure of the current form of life, shaped by the apparatuses of the *spectacular-democratic society* (Agamben, 2000, 125). The Bloom is the result of the loss of the person, of the total alienation that has become its central feature and has made it into an abstract figure. It is part of a community of

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<sup>63</sup> In Italian: *l’assoluta strumentalità che viene qui pensata costituisca in qualche modo il paradigma delle tecnologie moderne, che tendono a produrre dispositivi che hanno incorporato in sé l’operazione dell’agente principale e possono quindi “obbedire” ai suoi comandi* (Agamben, 2014, 110).

<sup>64</sup> In Italian: *lo schiavitu sta, in questo senso, all’uomo antico, come la tecnica all’uomo moderno : entrambe, come la nuda vita, custodiscono la soglia che consente di accedere alla condizione veramente umana (e entrambe si sono mostrate inadeguate allo scopo, la via moderna rivelandosi alla fine non meno disumana dell’antica)* (Agamben, 2014, 111).

strangers, *existences blanches, présences indifférentes, sans épaisseur* (Invisible, 2000, 16). What makes the Bloom not merely a victim, is that it accepts or even embraces the condition of desubjectification. Indifferent, without any qualities, impersonal, the Bloom is the figure of the *retrait du sujet du monde et du monde du sujet* (Invisible, 2000, 24). A new opacity surrounds the creature of the Bloom, which is part of a particular mood, a *Stimmung, mais à travers la saisie d'une Figure* (Invisible, 2000, 25). This *Stimmung* is also related to a mode of actions that does not originate in a willful subject, but in a radical passive being; the Bloom *est le simple témoin de son propre devenir-inhumain* (Invisible, 2000, 127).

The name of the journal in which this text was published, *Tiqqun*, refers to a concept from and messianic traditions, meaning reparation, redemption, restitution, and social justice (Morris, 2012). Their call for adopting a Bloom existence, is close to Agamben's statement that *the people should produce itself as remnant, take on the figure of this remnant* (Agamben in Smith, 2004, 123).

As a remnant, the Bloom is the *no longer* and also the *not yet*. Bloom figures, as beings indifferent to existing categories, are *that what people are when they are not subordinated into classes or sets, are the State's principal enemies* (Ten Bos, 2005, 28). The Bloom is a radical figure, which, like the *Muselmann*, instils fear in the (people managing the) apparatuses that have created it. The desubjectifying apparatus *frémit devant l'infini mystère de l'homme ordinaire. Chacun pressent derrière le théâtre de ses qualités une pure puissance, abritée là* (Invisible, 2000, 17). This potentiality is anonymous, not aimed toward any end. *Le Bloom n'est RIEN, mais ce RIEN est le rien de la souveraineté, le vide de la pure puissance* (Invisible, 2000, 125); this pure potentiality becomes all the more threatening for authorities seeking to control individuals as it is adopted voluntarily and hence a conscious decision to *assume poverty in the world [...] by, as it were, renouncing the opening of the world and recoiling onto the closed sphere of captivity* (Prozorov, 2014, 172). In this state of alienation and separation, however, there is also an intimacy and potential commonality (Invisible, 2000, 17). The concept of the figure thus also finds itself on the threshold of dystopia and a particular utopia, an ambivalence that was already addressed in the previous chapters. This ambivalence can be considered a feature of posthumanist thinking, however, the specific contraction of dystopia and potentiality is characterizing for apparatus-posthumanism, as the analysis of Romeo Castellucci's *Giudizio, Possibilità, Essere* already suggested. As we will see further in this chapter, Verdonck's figures all have a Bloom-like quality as well. Radically renouncing to be a 'character' as well as being the radical result of apparatuses that make the formation of a 'subject as character' impossible, they walk on the thin line between deconstruction and messianism, between horror and potentiality.

The ambiguity of the figure, containing both dystopia, destruction, and potential, holds a political call, also toward those who do not immediately consider themselves to be in such a desubjectified state. The Bloom suggests each citizen has access to this politically provocative form of life. For Agamben, voluntarily adopting a desubjectified

position is also an ethical gesture of – necessary – solidarity with those who find themselves in the most precarious living conditions: *only in a world in which the spaces of states have been thus perforated and topologically deformed and in which the citizen has been able to recognize the refugee that he or she is - only in such a world is the political survival of humankind today possible* (Agamben, 2000, 26). These are words that with the recent so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe, have only gained in urgency. The figure of the refugee has a disruptive potential in itself, especially those who refuse to ask for asylum and thus *no longer want to be assimilated to a new state at all costs* and hence live in a no man's land, vulnerable yet parallel to the state (Agamben, 2000, 15).<sup>65</sup> Like The Invisible Committee's generalization of the Bloom state of being, Slavoj Žižek understood very well that in a time in which the nation state is in decline, *there is no place in Agamben for the 'democratic' project of 'renegotiating' the limit which separates full citizens from Homo sacer by gradually allowing their voices to be heard; his point is, rather, that in today's 'post-politics,' the very democratic public space is a mask concealing the fact that, ultimately, we are all Homo sacer* (Žižek, 2002, 100).<sup>66</sup> The Bloom, slave, *Muselmann* or the *homo sacer*, these and other figures living in the gray zone of inhumanity or nonhumanity, are not only a potential, concrete and historical relation to the political apparatus of the whole of the population, they are also a common aspect of being human: *humans bear within themselves the mark of the inhuman, a "faceless center", a "central non-place"* (Agamben, 1999b, 77, 52). Extreme cases such as the *Muselmann*, the slave, the bloom or the *homo sacer* help to understand and develop another conception of the human, which implies a stance on humanism as well. The study of the *Muselmann* leads Agamben to position himself against *the view of humanist discourse, which states that "all human beings are human" and that of anti-humanist discourse, which holds that "only some human beings are human"* (1999b, 121). His study of figures that are at the threshold between the human and the inhuman has brought him to a larger reflection on being human, namely that *"human beings are human insofar as they are not human" or, more precisely, "human beings are human insofar as they bear witness to the inhuman"* (Agamben, 1999b, 121).<sup>67</sup> The figure, here as a redefinition of what human beings are, is that form of life, that has transformed *all life into survival and all survival into life [...] the one whose humanity is completely destroyed, is the one who is truly human* (Agamben, 1999b, 133).

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<sup>65</sup> It is the existence of a human being who is not a citizen, that frustrates the sovereign nation state, which is founded on the capture of human biological life (*zoē*). From that perspective, the figure of the refugee, as all other figures that wander through Agamben's oeuvre and throughout this research, is not allowed to exist for itself (and thus not as a temporary function of the state apparatus) (Agamben, 2000, 21).

<sup>66</sup> In Agamben's own words: *If today there is no longer any one clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually homines sacri* (1998, 115).

<sup>67</sup> The not-being-human at the center of being human is a recurrent element in Agamben's work and reminds of his definition of humanism's *Homo sapiens* (in comparison to the animal, cf. chapter 1.1.4) as the being that includes its own animality by way of exclusion, and is *constitutively nonhuman* (Agamben, 2002, 30).

If we would maintain a strictly Agambenian perspective, the role of objects would be limited to their being comparable to a dehumanized, objectified human being or their being a commodity fetish. However, adding Verdonck's perspective, the intrinsic performativity of objects (which already was suggested in the figure's etymology) becomes part of the notion of the figure. The zero degree state of being of the figure is a nexus of politics and life, as well as a mode of being that intersects with that of the performative object. The destructive tendency in the working of the apparatuses of late capitalism offers the opportunity to lay bare this central void and zone of nonhumanity and might hence enable a new form of life in the thus created *zone of indiscernibility between the corporeal, the subjectile and the thingly* (Lepecki, 2010, 40). In relation to Agamben's ascertainment of the proliferation of apparatuses and their incapacity to constitute a subject in this late-capitalist era, Žižek writes that *the ultimate result of global subjectivization is not that 'objective reality' disappears, but that our subjectivity itself disappears* (2002, 86). I would add to that: a particular (lived) idea of subjectivity is disappearing, namely a unitary, demarcated, knowing and controlled form of subjectivity, one that is shaped through interaction and dependence of apparatuses. The figures wandering in Agamben's oeuvre are paradigmatic for a particular, potentially alternative form-of-life beyond the subject, of which several aspects will be discussed and related to the various types of figures that are found in the work of Kris Verdonck.

What becomes clear here, is that Verdonck and Van Kerkhoven, as well as Agamben, do not merely consider the *Muselmann* as an *actual historical phenomenon*, but as a paradigm, a methodological concept *whose role was to constitute and make intelligible a broader historical-problematic-context* (Agamben, 2009a, 9). Agamben refers here to the linguistic use of paradigms and hence the paradigmatic nature of the figure of the *Muselmann* (or the slave, the Bloom or the *homo sacer*) lies in its twofold nature, namely being on the one hand a singular case of a particular system wherefore, on the other hand, it attains an exemplar status. Similarly, Van Kerkhoven describes the figures in *END* as a 'function', which *means that they don't stand in for something* (Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens, 2012, 62). They are indeed rather paradigmatic than symbolic: they are concrete, actual elements. However paradoxical it might appear at first glance, in its function of paradigm, just like Foucault's panopticon, the *Muselmann* is a "*figure*" of *political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use* (Agamben 2009a, 17). This means that for instance Agamben's study of the *Muselmann* indeed is *about* this figure's actual historical case, but as a paradigm, the *Muselmann* is an exemplar for a form of life, insightful for structures of exception operating in the dehumanizing apparatuses of power.

In a similar vein, the four types of the figure that are presented in what follows are not definite and separate categories limited to the cases that are interpreted for the formulation of these facets. Rather, they are four different facets of the prism constituting the figure that are in various ways present in all of Verdonck's works, and that can be extended to artworks of other artists as well. Human performers placed in a machinic

apparatus (marionettes), performative objects (object-figures), virtual figures (phantasms), and the mascot are recurrent set-ups in Verdonck's work, and they each show different but connected aspects of what 'a figure' can be, how it comes into being on stage and how it reflects on an apparatus-posthumanist condition in the world.

## 2.2 The marionette: the body as matter

This first facet of figures in Verdonck's works, starts from the biological materiality of the human body. As was already argued in the first chapter, in the analysis of the work of Stelarc, the human body in apparatus-posthumanism is not merely 'obsolete' or dematerialized, nor is it a vehicle for identity or augmentation, extension or manipulation. By considering the body as a biological object, the subject is reduced to its biological life. Moreover, when this reduction is the consequence of a biopolitical (and in its contemporary form, psychopolitical) apparatus, incorporating the biological life in the political and economic sphere, this body becomes a naked life, *nuda vita*, or 'bare life' (as it most often has been translated). The notion of bare life has been mentioned already in chapter 1, however, a definition of the term – which varies in different adoptions of the notion by other scholars – remains a relevant task, as it implies several key elements in Agamben's thinking. A first element is the scission of human being in two types of life, going back to the Ancient Greek differentiation: *zoē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group (Agamben, 1998, 1). Bare life is produced when the biopolitical apparatus captures *zoē* in a relation of inclusion through exclusion and places it at its center (this relation of exclusive inclusion is key in Agamben's definition of sovereign power as biopower). When the simple fact of living becomes politicized – as is argued throughout *Homo Sacer* via the genealogy of the intertwining of medicine, human sciences and politics – this biological life is separated and excluded from itself – a bare life. Bare life is thus not the same as biological life/*zoē*. This life is *the extreme figure of the human and the inhuman*, produced by apparatuses such as the anthropological machine of humanism (Agamben, 2002, 38).

Kris Verdonck's video installation series *STILLS* (2006-2015) comprises seven variations on the same basic principle: naked bodies are projected onto an architectural surface, mostly the wall of a building, and are enlarged and fitted to their projection surface so that it seems that they are upholding the construction of the building. As a new media interpretation of the Greek Caryatides (those columns with human shape), *STILLS* portrays people that are stuck in their condition, always uncomfortable, trying to find a better position within their narrow confines. Initially, the *STILLS* were conceived to be projected against fascist and other totalitarian architecture, such as the EUR quarter in Rome, or against the buildings commissioned by Belgian kings in Brussels, among whom Leopold II, who was responsible for millions of deaths in the Congo during the colonial period. In 2015, four new *STILLS* were created for Athens, the capital of a country that at that time came largely under the control of foreign institutions, after the near bankruptcy of the Greek state as a consequence of the 2008 financial crisis. The European Union, the IMF and the European Central Bank (together referred to as 'the troika') asked for far-

reaching austerity measures, implying cuts in social welfare, health, pensions and education and the privatization of state-owned companies and other 'traditional' neoliberal recipes, mostly affecting those who were already most vulnerable. Presenting the *STILLS* in Athens at that specific moment, corresponds to considering the troika as a totalitarian power, suspending the democratic process of the Greek people, who had voted for an opposite approach to deal with the financial crisis.<sup>68</sup> Here, a variation on the state of emergency suspending democratic government was not declared by a dictator or caused by war, rather, it was imposed by semi-democratic institutions representing a financial system promoting neoliberal values. The *STILLS* show people carrying the weight of a system that is not theirs, or that at least does not represent their needs. Their encasement in the architecture representing and expressing sovereign power (sovereignty understood as that person or instance that is able to decide on the state of exception, a definition Agamben takes from Carl Schmitt [Agamben, 1998, 13, 17]), reminds of the drawing on the cover of Hobbes' *Leviathan*, in which the sovereign's large body is composed out of a mass of small bodies, creating a vision of the body politic, of which bare life is an essential aspect. The figures' slow but restless search for a more comfortable position to carry the burden of the apparatus is a mode of surviving, preventing the architectural structure from collapsing onto them. The *STILLS* show figures as bare life: in the straightjacket of a political system that keeps them captured, they have nothing left save their body.

Verdonck's *STILLS* show bare life as a merely 'being alive'; a form of life undone of its 'human' properties, a life which is more focused on surviving instead of *leading* a life, let alone a communal life (Han, 2014, 23). At the same time it is an extremely political life, as it is precisely the *bare life that, being situated on the threshold between zoē and bios, between physis and nomos, enables, through its inclusive exclusion, political life* (Agamben, 2015a, 78).<sup>69</sup> De La Durantaye points at the roots of Agamben's notion of bare life in Benjamin's *bloße Leben*, which *designates a life shorn of all qualification and conceived of independent of its traditional attributes* (2009, 203). As a remnant, bare life also holds a potentiality for another form of life. The figure of the body as matter offers a reflection of this state of bare life, of its politics and performativity. It is a figure that, after first going deeper into the materiality and psychopolitical aspects of it, I will come to call, with reference to Heinrich von Kleist, 'the marionette'.

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<sup>68</sup> Two projections *STILL IV & V* were shut down by the police due to a complaint by a priest for the showing of public nudity. More information and a press release by Verdonck can be found on: <http://www.atwodogscompany.org/en/projects/item/162-stills?bckp=1>.

<sup>69</sup> In Italian: *nuda vita che, situandosi sulla soglia fra zoē e bios, fra physis e nomos, permette, attraverso la propria esclusione inclusiva, la vita politica* (Agamben, 2014, 111).

## 2.2.1 Bare life as matter in *Patent Human Energy* and *HEART*

### 2.2.1.1 Becoming object in *Patent Human Energy*

The conflation of politics and capitalism when it comes to the capture and separation of biological life has a particular manifestation in *Patent Human Energy* (2005). In this installation, in a dimly lit space, performer Karolina Wolkowiecka, is placed in a forest of iron, vertically positioned rods. At the center of the rectangular set-up there is a recess in the shape of a human body, where the rods are more or less half the height of the surrounding ones. This is where the performer takes her place. Like a fakir on a bed of iron nails, she has to concentrate and maintain a particular state of reduced bodily activity. Her presence is not only reduced by her 'standby-mode' state of being, it is also blurred by the fact that she is difficult to see between the forest of iron rods. A silhouette shimmers through, but she seems utterly unable to reach, as if she is almost not there. The presence of the performer is nevertheless accentuated and communicated through the amplification of her heartbeat, breath and slightest movements, by way of small microphones placed on top of the rods. This body is thus both absent and present, or more precisely, absent although present. A double separation occurs, physically and visually by the rods, technically by the mediation of bodily sounds. These sounds (heartbeat, breath) are otherwise inaudible and their amplification generates a form of presence, or a sense of the performer's being alive, but simultaneously estranges as they offer a close-up into the body that is perhaps too intimate, too real.

In the program text accompanying *Patent Human Energy*, it reads that this installation was directly inspired by Microsoft Corporation's 2004 patenting of the human body's energy and energy circulation as a source and means to power wearable devices under the US Patent 6,754,472 (Van Kerkhoven, 2005). Not only energy, but also data were to be transmitted through the body as well as extracted from it.<sup>70</sup> The body thus becomes a patented commodity and as such alienated from itself, as a body – i.e. it does not change as such, but is placed in a larger *frame*, it is ordered in a *Gestell*. The conception of a biological body as a transmitter for data and energy is close to Eugene Thacker's notion of 'biomedia'. Thacker states that there is no pre-informational body and points at how the biological body today is conceived as information and produces information in such way that the boundaries between the biological and the information, the body and technology, disappear and are completely internalized (2003, 47). The materiality of the body is not threatened but merges with information in recent developments, which Thacker assembles under 'biotech', referring to how the body is not merely something to be augmented or extended, but becomes itself, in its biological constitution, a medium for

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<sup>70</sup> More information can be found on this page: <http://www.pcworld.com/article/116655/article.html>.

technological ends. There is no *body-anxiety* which we find in Hayles and Haraway, as biomedicine goes *beyond the familiar tropes of technology-as-tool, the cyborg, or the human-computer interface* (Thacker, 2003, 52-53). As part of the biotech industry, the body becomes the object for physical and technical experiments. Instead of being a source of subjectivity, it becomes in its biological constitution, an object that is a source of profit. The scientific, economic and political control and mastery over the human being's biological matter, what Agamben calls its animality, *only leads to the degrading reduction of humanity itself to bare life* (Prozorov, 2014, 165). Moreover, Agamben even doubts whether *the humanity that has taken upon itself the mandate of the total management of its own animality is still human* (Agamben, 2002, 77). Indeed, Microsoft's patent envisages all bodies, be that human or animal bodies (Adam, 2004), as machines that can be tapped into and whose power circuits can be used and connected. By patenting the life-essential feature of the transmission of electrical charges through the body, biological life is ordered in the apparatus of profit and copyright.

In addition to the direct economic factors, there is also the state's increased surveillance through the use of biometric technologies to capture fingerprints, retinal scans and DNA samples. This also implies a potential conflation of both economic and surveillance purposes in the tracking and storing of physical data through smartphones, such as the number of steps a person makes during a day, where you are, heart beat and blood pressure, when one sleeps and what quality the sleep has had, what someone eats, the number of calories you have burnt, etc. Ever since the anthropometric 'revolution' that started with the mug shot and fingerprints in the second half of the nineteenth century, for the biopolitical surveillance state, *identity [is] no longer a function of the social "persona" and its recognition by others but rather a function of biological data, [...] naked life, a purely biological datum* (Agamben, 2011c, 50). Datafication of the body, be it for economic or surveillance purposes, does not lead to a disappearance of the body, on the contrary, it makes the body all the more central, as body, in its purely material form and biological functioning, as [anthropometric systems] *follow the idea that, unlike human persons, human bodies do not lie* (Rouvroy, 2011, 127). In this sense, there is no favoring of consciousness over the body as is stated (and feared) in many cyborg-posthumanisms. Both are integrated in power structures, which capture their 'subjects' as bare life and manage them as such. With the loss of persona caused by anthropometric apparatuses (today increasingly operating through big data systems), the body stays present, but individuals lose their presence as subject of law with their 'own' potentiality. At the same time they are fixed in categories they don't know nor understand (Rouvroy, 2016, 36-37).

Agamben frames his argument on the disappearance of the social persona with an account on how since Greek Antiquity, actors relate to their masks, their 'persona' – *character* – in the play in which they perform. The relation was one of both identification and difference and through this relation, a personal interpretation of the character was developed. This relation between the actor and his mask started its decline with the

*Commedia dell'arte*, where the distance between actor and mask started to grow (Agamben, 2011c, 41, 42). On the Western stage, masks have not only nearly completely disappeared in favor of the face of the actor or actress, but also an evolution toward on the one hand total identification (Lee Strasberg's method acting or a particular reading of Stanislavski) and on the other, performance of the self (as oneself) closed the gap between actor and persona – with Brecht's epic acting method of alienation as an important exception. After the 'Duchampian Revolution' (Groys, 2010) which made the artist's life into a commodified artwork and incorporated 'the personal' in an economic logics (see chapter 1.1.1 on Orlan), a next phase could be discerned in which the bare life of the performer remains: *the zone of indistinction that arises between subject and object, with the result that to be subjected in the dispositive of person, also means to be objectified, but also the superimposition of objectification with the body* (Campbell, 2011, 69).

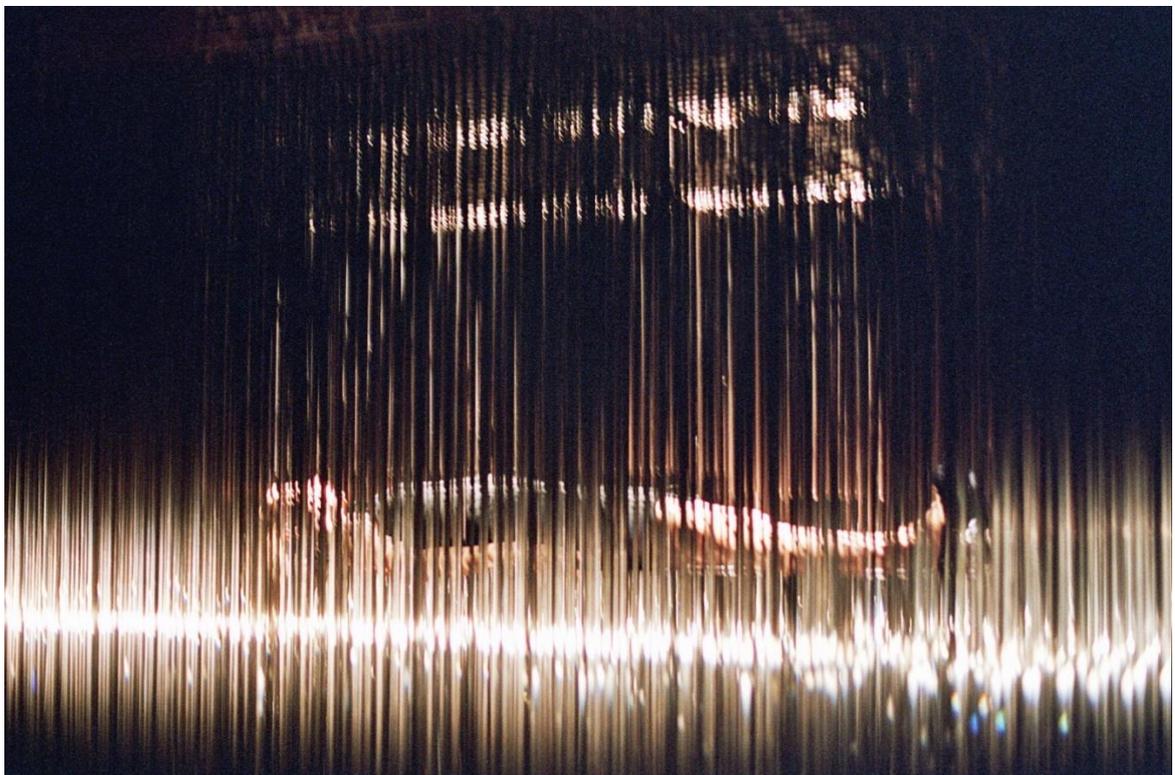


Figure 9 Kris Verdonck: *Patent Human Energy* (2005) © Anne Van Aerschot

How is this state of bare life, on the brink of absence, performed in *Patent Human Energy*? The accompanying program notes offer a very concrete tactic: meditation. And *meditation suggests: transcending, crossing the border of a conscious state to a non-conscious state of being, from the active to the passive. Meditation also implies a "surrendering" through which we are able to use energy, normally spend on the fight against proper "schizophrenia", for transformation* (Van Kerkhoven, 2005). No 'character' is sought to be developed, no persona is to be found here, just a figure, which is performed through the literal suspension of consciousness and of actively 'performing'. Because of this, the performer's biological body becomes all the more present and intriguing, performing as an 'object'. Performing the figure of bare life,

implies suspending one's subjectivity, to reach a state which is not exactly that of the inorganic object, but to be more precise: a *state which is not life or death is precisely the sex appeal of the inorganic, the neutral and impersonal experience of the thing that feels* (Perniola, 2004, 76). The visual blurring of the human with the object, in which she is encased, thus returns in the state of being of the performer herself. Following Perniola's definition of the thing that feels, it could also be said that the encasement of the iron rods performs as a thing that feels as well: supporting the dancer's body, and 'feeling' and transmitting her heartbeat.

Van Kerkhoven refers to Elias Canetti's typology of positions in relation to power in his *Crowds and Power* (1960): *the dead man, who never stands up again, makes an enormous impression* (Van Kerkhoven, 2005). In that same book, Canetti also describes types of 'figures', both positive and negative, utopian and dystopic. The latter will be discussed below in the analysis of *ISOS* (2.4.2), Canetti's more utopian figures, however, point at a particular mode of performing that relates to *PHE*'s mediation and 'objectified' being. *Ein Endzustand der Verwandlung ist die Figur*, this chapter's epigraph by Canetti states. He refers to Ancient Egyptian and Indigenous Australian gods who have both human and animal features – similar to Agamben's reference to an early Christian drawing of the postapocalyptic afterlife in which saints with animal heads are seated at the divine table, as a prefiguration of the suspension of the 'human' as a category (Agamben, 2002, 1). Canetti describes the figure as being both the process and the result of the transformation (1992, 418-419).<sup>71</sup> The figure in Verdonck's *PHE* is at the same time the endpoint of a biopolitical reduction to bare life (or a thing that feels) and a transformation of the body into a commodity and nexus of surveillance. However, the more profound transformation at work when it comes to a state of being that also has consequences for performativity, is that between absence and presence. As Bay-Cheng notes, *Verdonck's bodies suggest a new status between wholly mediated representations and live bodies* (2011, 68), a statement that we now might better understand from a post-media perspective, in which the affects of presence and absence replace the dualism of mediated/immediate or live, as a result of how in the figure, the performer's body is blurred and becomes a desubjectified object, a thing that feels.

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<sup>71</sup> Interestingly, Canetti compares the figure to the mask. Whereas the figure is both the process and result of transformation, the mask is a final, static state, brought in relation to society's demand to be a stable subject, with a designated number of fixed expressions (Canetti, 1992, 420). When the mask is worn by someone, for example a theatre actor, it can become a figure itself, when it implies a particular relation, not only with the person who carries the mask, but also with those who spectate (Canetti, 1992, 422). A particular case of this masked figure will be discussed in 2.5: the mascot figure.

### 2.2.1.2 The physicality of psychopolitics in *HEART*

The state of bare life as a thing that feels is created in the performance *HEART* (2004) as well. A woman in a white dress and white shoes, holding on to a purse, stands still in front of her spectators. She has a device with a little cable attached to one of her fingers, evoking the image of a hospital patient or nurse. The device looks like a heart monitor, and indeed her heartbeat is amplified in the space. Suddenly the woman is pulled up and backwards by a cable attached to a harness hidden under her costume, and she disappears behind two curtains. We hear a bang of her body smacking against something and then another thump, before she reappears from behind the curtains as if nothing happened. She comes back to the front, rearranging her hair and attire and repositions herself – as if she is trying to do something as ‘simple’ as merely being there, standing. Her heartbeat goes up, increasing the tension in the space. She is pulled back again, returns, repositions herself. This operation repeats itself several times, each time going faster and faster as the adrenaline produced by this situation increases her heartbeat. However, there is no sign of fear, resistance or fatigue by being in this system. She returns and straightens up every time again.

The unusual presence of the device on her finger and the amplified heartbeat suggest that there is a correlation between her being pulled backwards and the heartbeat, making the ‘simple’ attempt to just being there, impossible. In the program notes we read that that is also the case (Van Kerkhoven, 2004). Every 500th heartbeat, she is hurled back and smacked against what Verdonck told me is a thick mattress, before falling onto another mattress. When she is standing in front of the audience, she actually waits for the next 500 heartbeats to pass, activating the pullback system again. She can try to count, but it is nearly impossible, causing a sensation of stress and excitement, which in turn raises her heartbeat, causing the system to be activated a bit sooner every time. The performer’s strange presence is, as in *Patent Human Energy*, caused by a form of physical presence combined with mental absence; a preoccupation with something invisible yet audible to the audience, her heartbeat. Its relation to the trigger removing her temporarily from her position, renders the mental distraction physical by pulling the body away as well.

In this set-up, bodily functions, the heartbeat and adrenaline, are directly addressed and connected to the apparatus that moves the performer. As the definition of apparatus by Agamben suggests, in *HEART* the apparatus refers to the concrete technical set-up of the performance as well as to the larger apparatuses of reification for goals of commodification and control. The first-degree interaction with the apparatus is *enframed* in the functioning of a larger apparatus the first-degree user might not even be aware of. Hence, when in *HEART*, like in *Patent Human Energy*, data detracted from the individual’s biological body is exteriorized and broadcasted, this makes the ‘double’ connection between the apparatus and the performer explicit. An internal, life-essential feature is captured by the machine, in the concrete situation of the performance. [T]he thing does

not have an interior distinguishable from an exterior, but is [...], the outside itself, Perniola writes (2004, 92). Inside and outside are turned 'inside out' in the figure of bare life. Indeed, this exteriorization movement characterizes the functioning of the desubjectifying apparatus: *the subject is turned inside out like a glove, the result being the larval, spectral form of (de)subjectified subjects as well as a decisive move away from a healthy body politic* (Campbell, 2011, 51). An interior process (the heartbeat) leads to an exterior event (being pulled back), which in turn leads to again an interior effect (the release of adrenaline increasing the heartbeat). The transparency of the body is what leads to the 'dramatic' situation in *HEART: Elle n'a aucun moyen de se cacher* (Verdonck in Van Beek, 2010, 31).



Figure 10 Kris Verdonck: *HEART* (2004) © Giannina Urmeneta Ottiker

The increased heartbeat and higher blood pressure are also symptoms of the physicality of stressful situations. Here, Verdonck's work differs from performance art dealing with the body in terms of pain or modification, as he states: *L'inquiétude mentale m'intéresse plus que la tension ou la douleur purement physique* (Verdonck in Van Beek, 2010, 31). The stress generated in *HEART* refers directly to the latent stress caused by a demanding socio-economic system, as well as by the technological devices we own and use

every day. We could say that the cell phone marks the beginning of the demand of a ubiquitous and permanent availability, which today is intensified by smartphones, wireless and fast internet connections and social media – the beginning of what Crary has called the *connectionist paradigm* (2014, 15). Being connected through media devices and applications means being connected to one or more apparatuses as well. Agamben even

specifically mentions the cell phone, whose user *cannot acquire a new subjectivity, but only a number through which he can, eventually, be controlled* (2009b, 21). As a desubjectifying apparatus, the data-driven form of government and economy, has no autonomy or dramaturgy of the subject (Han, 2015a, 19) and hence neither does apparatus-posthumanism, which has a dramaturgy of the figure.

The subject is desubjectified by delegating its *attention to automata that then become its captors, meters, gauges, warning signals, alarms, and so on* (Stiegler, 2010a, 100). Stiegler's description of the relation with psychopolitical systems reads as a paraphrase of Agamben's desubjectifying apparatus, with a process of *exteriorization of knowledge into machines with no other pseudo-interiorization than that by which the individual "serves" the system (the canon, the machine, the apparatus)* (Stiegler, 2010a, 127). The literal proliferation of media devices is complicit to the desubjectifying process induced by the spectacular-democratic apparatus and leads among others to a stressful – because controlled and overstimulated – crumbling subject. *HEART* can be interpreted from this perspective: each time a message or notification comes in, the user is distracted, pulled out of his or her current, physical environment. Watching a movie, reading a book, listening to a lecture or a friend: the attention span is broken by the flux of information that pops up and rings on the smartphone, tablet or computer screen. In addition to the social aspect, there are also disturbing news items coming in that distract their targeted readers, or work-related e-mails and messages that are no longer limited to working hours and might cause stress in turn. *HEART* shows the physicality of psychopolitics; the overstimulated, stressed-out figure entangled in the apparatus.

*HEART* and *PHE* reveal how for the figure, the biological body is captured on an intimate level by the apparatus in which it finds itself, to the extent of being transformed into an alienated apparatus itself, as Thacker's biomedica and Microsoft's patent on human energy demonstrate. *HEART* presents the human body as something that is both manipulated by the – in this case stressful – conditions in which it finds itself, as well as an organism, which we have to listen to. Listen to your body, it is a cliché, but the fundamental separation from our own bodies, caused by an advanced biopolitics in tandem with capitalism's commodification of the body, makes this imperative all the more difficult. The subject finds itself in a *double movement, [...] on the one hand, irremissibly consigned to his body and, on the other, just as inexorably incapable of assuming it* (Agamben, 2015a, 84).<sup>72</sup> How to know and use the body as a figure, that is, as a thing that feels instead of as basis for subjectivity? Moreover, it seems that instead of knowing our bodies better through various metric applications that make up the Quantified Self, it becomes even more alienated.

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<sup>72</sup> In Italian: *duplice movimento, [...], da una parte, consegnato irremissibilmente al suo corpo e, dall'altra, altrettanto inesorabilmente incapace di assumerlo* (Agamben, 2014, 119).

In his analysis of how the physical body is at once undeniably ours and yet inevitably ungraspable, which makes intimacy at once impossible to control, nor to share, Agamben refers to a story by Montaigne, that serves as a maxim to the former's *The Use of Bodies*:

A boy from Sparta stole a fox and hid it under his cloak, and because his people, in their foolishness, were more ashamed of a botched robbery than we fear punishment, he let it gnaw through his belly rather than be discovered (Montaigne in Agamben, 2015a, vii).<sup>73</sup>

The body, Agamben argues, has become like the fox hidden underneath the boy's jacket and that scratches his skin, because it is impossible to share. And precisely because it is impossible to share, we try to do so intensively (Agamben, 2014, 17); something which has become in a certain way easier, faster and more efficient through smart devices and social media applications or dating apps. However, as Verdonck also stated in an interview, intimacy has gone bankrupt precisely because of these apparatuses which exteriorize the private and capture and manipulate it, leading to an interiorization of a desubjectifying psychopolitics (van Baarle, 2015a, 210). The capture and commodification of intimacy means not only the disclosure and subsequent separation of private information, emotions, or closeness. In *HEART* it is also an exteriorization of an inner state of being. The performance is a physical and mental state at once, which Laermans connected to Lacan's notion of extimacy (2015, 143). An alienating intimacy – very different than the one Agamben is pointing at, namely sexual relationships – makes the fox scratch even harder, while the jacket is wide open as it never has been before. To invert a known social media maxim: sharing has become a lack of caring.

Paradoxically, from a practical point of view, a sufficient level of relaxation was necessary for the performer in *HEART* to bounce and fly back correctly and to avoid injury. In a lecture, Verdonck recounts how this was particularly difficult, since she could not be sure of when she reached the 500 heartbeats. There has to be trust in the machine and a surrender to the mechanics of the performance's set-up. In this pleasure of performing, similar to the meditation in *Patent Human Energy*, again a potential arises out of the deconstruction of the subject, which makes performing a desubjectified position apparently even quite a fun thing to do. The figural state of being can bring a particular kind of joy in the letting go of (the idea of) control. In the practice of performing the figure, there lays thus a potential, an enjoyment of the inappropriable intimacy of the human body, by embracing this condition as such. However, to be able to do so, this requires, to use Agamben's phrase again, a different use of the body.

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<sup>73</sup> In Italian: *Un ragazzino di Sparta, che aveva rubato una volpe e se l'era nascosta sotto la giacca, poiché la gente, per la sua stoltezza, si vorgotto di un furto più di quanto noi temiamo la punizione, sopportò che essa gli straziasse il ventre piuttosto che scoprirsi* (Montaigne in Agamben 2014).

## 2.2.2 Performing the figure

*Your play is very hard to act; there are no living characters in it.*

(Nina in *The Sea-gull*, Chekhov, 2008 [1896], 130)

### 2.2.2.1 Dangerous desire in *I/II/III/IV*

*I/II/III/IV* (2007) is a choreography that started from the tradition of the *pas de quatre* in classical ballet, of which *The Swan Lake*'s quartet is probably the most renowned (Van Kerkhoven, 2007). Verdonck deconstructed this format and had subsequently one, two, three and at last four female dancers perform the same choreography of 15 minutes, each time separated by brief intervals to switch and add the dancers. The dancers are, as in *HEART*, attached to a harness positioned around the hips, this time connected via two cables to a fly bar above the stage, which is itself connected to a larger construction. The harnessed dancers are lifted up and down and moved around by technicians behind the curtains. This apparatus enables higher jumps, longer pirouettes and a 'lighter' body, all virtuoso features of classic ballerina – probably the most disciplined, codified and body-shaping dance practice in the Western tradition. Indeed, thanks to the apparatus, the dancers can execute movements that go beyond the human body's capacities and hence achieve – in a particular way – a greater virtuosity. Hovering swiftly, without sound or any resistance, the dancers' bodies are moved through a black box created by black curtains and a gauze on the side toward the audience – emphasizing the 'technique' of the black box and showing the theatre as a space of machines, of 'impossible' movements and illusions, or as Verdonck would say as a *dream machine* (Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens, 2012, 50). The dancers' lightness and swiftness went at the cost of their control over their bodies, speed and suspension, precisely because of their disconnection from gravity, an otherwise so cherished effect in ballet. When they are more than one, it is the intention to be as synchronous as possible. However, they literally cannot keep their feet on the ground, which compromises synchronous movements. After the more ephemeral first part, the duet, trio and quartet make clear that by giving in to the promise represented by the machine, they lose more than they gain. *I/II/III/IV* shows in this way the destructive capacity of human desires and the strife for progress, improvement, and expansion. This desire also points at a crucial aspect considering the apparatus: there is always a phase in which we develop it ourselves, seeking for what Agamben interestingly describes not as 'freedom' as one could expect, but in terms of happiness (2009b, 17).

In dramaturgical conversations on *I/II/III/IV*, and also in relation to Verdonck's later work on J.G. Ballard in which I was involved, a documentary by Adam Curtis on Edward Bernays, entitled *The Century of the Self, Part 1: Happiness Machines* (2005), fed the discussion. In this documentary, Curtis presents Bernays, Sigmund Freud's cousin, as the person who, in the post-war period, introduced thinking on human desires and their management in

both the commercial and political spheres in the United States. These two spheres were converging as the American citizens were increasingly conceived of and treated as consumers. When continuing that conversation theoretically, we see that Stiegler also points at Bernays as a key figure, at the root of the psychopolitical government of a consumer-population, as he inspired others to adapt *psychoanalysis to the systematic analysis of markets and thus created the new libidinal economy* (2010a, 131).

Curtis's documentary points at a larger evolution that has been described in this research, as that from biopolitics to psychopolitics. The control of desires absorbs the population in the apparatus in a more invasive, entangled manner. As human beings, we are part of and reproduce the system that dehumanizes us. In today's psychopolitical society, this condition becomes central to the working of the apparatus. Han sees in the intensification of biopolitics to psychopolitics a transition from subject to project. The project, which at first sight appears to offer greater freedom and possibilities, leads only to a stronger compulsion, this time not a disciplining one coming from the outside, but a controlling one coming from within the self, as a result of desires fostered by neoliberal ideology (Han, 2015b, 9). In the psychopolitical meritocracy exploiter and exploited coincide (Han, 2014, 20,21). Han's analysis relates to the post-Fordist perspective on the current meritocratic, cognitive variety of capitalism, in which virtuoso working 'performance' becomes the paradigm of production (Virno, 2004, 54-55). The capture of virtuosity in the psycho-economic apparatus implies the commodification of creativity, of potentiality and subjectivity.<sup>74</sup>

The desire to jump higher and rotate faster and longer, and the loss of control caused by the apparatus that satisfies this desire, are good examples of this dynamics. Posting and sharing in various ways information about oneself online, many internet users behave in a similar way, albeit less clear what information is given away deliberately or not. With the proliferation of Big Data the potentiality of individuals is increasingly captured and steered, affecting *leur capacité à ne pas faire tout ce dont ils sont capables* (Abiteboul & Froidevaux, 2016), which leads to an *excessive intrusion in their personality development processes*. In marketing, this means to *adapt a person's wishes to what is on offer*, in an *instinct driven economy* (Rouvroy, 2016, 9). Psychopolitics focuses on the consumer and sees the population as a *consuming machine* for which motivations and desires need to be produced, captured and controlled.

In an interview, Verdonck points at a different desire that is at work in relation to the machine:

Nous aimerions tous être comme elles: objectif, transparent, inhumain. Il existe un grand désir – sans lequel nous n'inventerions pas ces choses – de cette impossible

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<sup>74</sup> For an analysis of post-Fordism in the arts, see chapter 2.5 on the mascot, as well as Bojana Kunst's *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism* (2015) and Rudi Laermans' *Moving Together* (2015).

existence machinale. [...] Les machines et les technologies possèdent quelque chose de très fascistoïde, de très rigide, auquel nous aimerions bien nous adapter sans que nous en soyons toutefois capables (Verdonck in van Baarle, forthcoming).

The desire to be a machine or to reach certain machinic properties is close to transhumanist aspirations of complete mastery, control and unlimited 'life'. *I/II/III/IIII* shows that precisely these desires result in a dehumanizing, desubjectifying apparatus in which liberty and ability are countered. In politics, this desire for regulation, order, objectivity and transparency exists as well, which leads to a growing bureaucratic apparatus in which the human becomes increasingly superfluous or a minor detail (Verhaeghe, 2012, 136). The perfect, objective system ran by humans for humans is impossible, as our physical bodies have limits and needs machines do not have: *nous sommes bien plus chaotiques qu'on n'aimerait l'admettre* (Verdonck in van Baarle, forthcoming). In a different sector of society, namely in the search for neutrality in job applications and other selection procedures, human failure confronts the machine in an interesting way. Even when these procedures are outsourced to algorithms and machines, the human element in these algorithms and machines thwarts a total objectivity, as recent developments with systems to optimize anonymity and unbiased job interviews show: the algorithms had adopted the same preferences as those who made them and had to be corrected by humans (Alexander, 2016; Rouvroy, 2016, 33). Verdonck's statement on the human desire for the machine could hence be nuanced by adding that when machines or technologies approach artificial intelligence, they start to show 'human' traits, thwarting the idea of the possibility of a machinic structure, of order and neutral perfection.

The desire for happiness through greater comfort and ability, which leads to the creation of new apparatuses and the commodification of these desires by (other, related or modified) psychopolitical apparatuses can thus lead to the production of bare life – a figure becoming a slave of the apparatus it has created or engaged with. Vanderbeeken writes that the figures in *I/II/III/IIII* are not *characters, but are mere moving bodies, puppets on a string* (2010, 363). In *I/II/III/III*, the only source of light is a followspot that throws a circle around the dancers, leaving the machine in the dark. A fascinating play of shadows is created in this way, reminding of mobiles by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and Alexander Calder. Whereas from a certain perspective, the choreography of *I/II/III/IIII* is a deconstruction of a dance, in the shadows at moments the dance seems to continue. In other positions (which are despite the fixed choreographic sequence for a considerable part formed randomly, depending on how the dancers are aligned and on the position of the bar on which they hang), the shadows show a clump of bodies or a deformed creature reminding of Francis Bacon's paintings. Between beautiful, floating dance and abject, deforming cruelty, *I/II/III/IIII* presents an ambiguity throughout the performance. The first sequence, the 'solo' for one dancer, creates an image of a floating, graceful dancer. The moment when the second dancer joins in 'II', difference enters the performance. First,

this creates images of angels dancing, only to reach a tipping point at which the grace of the solo transforms into an industrial execution of movements by *docile bodies* (Agamben, 1998, 10). In *I/II/III/IIII*, the dancers wear black dresses that show their bare backs. When hanging upside down in the harness, these figures evoke images of slaughterhouses, dead carcasses and meat being dragged around industrially. The body is in this case reduced to pure fleshy matter. A cruel image created in the theatre's dream machine, as if the dancing ballerina rotating elegantly in children's music boxes suddenly transformed into a corpse. The slaughterhouse association changes the perception of lightness into a sense of weight, and transforms the featherlight dancers into heavy, lifeless chunks of meat: the carcass, the ultimate figure. The desire for progress, expansion, perfection and growth is ultimately also a *death drive* (Morton, 2016, 53).

Both for the dancers and the audience, the repetition of the choreography already implied in the performance's title, has something merciless to it. For the dancers, this means that once the 'machine' (both the actual machine and the performance as machine) has started, it will continue. The followspot enlarges every detail, all movements are visible and mistakes have immediate repercussions for the dancer (who, for example, starts spinning out of control) or for her colleagues (who, for example, cannot touch the ground if one of the others hangs too deeply in the harness). Watching the performance as a spectator, the repetition means that nearly from the onset of the second part with two dancers, it is clear that the show indeed will consist of four times, fifteen minutes, almost the same choreography. This allows you to look differently: because the choreographic phrase and the apparatus are more or less clear after the first fifteen minutes, the lack of dramatic narrative or complex plot structure (which is also the lack of dynamic entertainment) allows for an open association while watching. Besides the addition of one extra dancer in each repetition, there is no particular build-up, although the mode of watching changes and deepens.

The repetition of the same choreography four times, by one, two, three and four dancers, is on the other hand also a statement on the reproducibility of these movements and at a broader level, of the dancer as 'thing'. Especially when they are four, the industrialized killing of the slaughterhouse (be it for animals or for humans) becomes a difficult to ignore association. This complete reproducibility is, then, also a consequence of the absence of difference between individuals in the apparatus of *I/II/III/IIII*, which functions as a metaphor for our contemporary society, where neoliberal, technological and technocratic apparatuses reduce the human to a statistic, or a figure without a person. However, in this rigid system of *I/II/III/IIII* the most machinic moments, which Verdonck and Van Kerkhoven tellingly named the *Leni Riefenstahl-moments*, namely those when the bodies of the dancers attained complete synchronicity and identity, were more exception than the norm: *we had to struggle to retain order* (van Baarle, Van Kerkhoven & Verdonck, 2013, 111). Watching *I/II/III/IIII*, these moments of perfect alignment offer a confronting aesthetic satisfaction, as they form an utterly cruel image at the same time.

The fascism of identical bodies in identical positions, of the completely disciplined corps (*de ballet*), is only attained 'by accident'. There again, the 'human' impossibility to reach the perfection and objectivity of the machine slips in and the complete marionette state is achieved only accidentally.

The attempted synchronicity makes clear that resistance is difficult if not impossible: when one of the dancers makes a slightly different movement, she starts spinning or keeps turning a little longer than the others, unable to stop. *In all those straight lines you suddenly get something organic* (van Baarle, Van Kerkhoven & Verdonck, 2013, 111). The rigidity of the system is accentuated by this fragile yet powerful 'glitch'. The differences to the basic shape of the choreography generate meaning, however, most of them are gradual and softly developed and relate rather to the figure as *Formen der Verwandlung* the way Brandstetter & Peters describe it with reference to Kafka's story (2002, 11). Indeed, part *III* confirms the dehumanizing process of the apparatus, in which no resistance is possible or worse, is desired by the figures. The figure in *I/II/III/IV* – similar to *HEART* – does not express any conscious suffering or victimhood, allowing to conclude that the figure we are confronted with resembles what Agamben described as the outcome of the workings of apparatuses in the past decades: *the most docile and cowardly social body that has ever existed in human history*. Numbed by a desire economy and a psychopolitics inducing the exploitation of the self, this figure is *the harmless citizen of postindustrial democracies* (Agamben, 2009b, 22). However, as we will see, the aspect of beauty and grace as well as the figure's docile nature suggest a space for opportunity. Just like the *Muselmänner* in the camps, these figures challenge the apparatus in which they are created and lift the veil on another possible form of life.

*I/II/III/IV*'s deconstruction of the *pas de quatre* is paralleled in the music as well. Composer Stefan Quix took the first notes of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and created four pieces of music to accompany the four parts of the performance. Each piece starts with a note, two notes or a chord which is then repeated, only to transform very gradually into the next note or chord. Quix' repetitive, yet transforming compositions are dissonant and at the same time induce a trance with the audience. Repeated with slight differences, parts from variations and the dissonants all add layers of meaning to the dancers' attempt of synchronicity and unavoidable difference.

In part *III*, the stage is lit in its entirety, showing almost fully the machine in which the dancers hang, only to be forgotten as soon as the three dancers attract the focus again. With this gesture, Verdonck dismantles the dream machine he has created and at the same time shows how easily we are distracted by other elements. Whereas the second sequence still has an opening toward dialogue, comparison, or duet, the third and fourth parts gain a greater ambiguity, evoking both beautiful and joyful images, as well as what Han has called the *hell of the same* as a consequence of the reductive leveling of human being to statistics in the same apparatus (2014, 52, my transl.).



Figure 11 Kris Verdonck / A Two Dogs Company: *I/II/III/IIII* © Hendrick De Smedt

In itself, desire is not dangerous, moreover, from a different perspective, it stands opposed to short-circuiting action and is a force of potentiality. From this point of view, *I/II/III/IIII*'s engagement with ballet holds a critical potential. Ballet's strictly disciplined body and scores create what Blanga-Gubbay has called a *body made only of actions* as opposed to a body of gestures that is in relation to its potentiality (2014, 130). The body of actions has its gestures *short-circuited*, a process Stiegler defines as the deformation of *the soul as a consequence of interiorizing a circuit that it has not itself produced - by requiring the soul to adapt itself to a doxa, that is, to dominant ideas that have not been produced and conceived by those who merely submit to them, rather than share in them* (Stiegler, 2013, 18-19). In a short-circuited condition, the individual loses its potentiality, i.e. its capacity not to do something, its ability to choose. Mechanically fulfilling two of ballet's desires - weightlessness and endless swift pirouettes - leads to a shift from an absence of gestures in actions to a showing of the loss of gestures, implied both in ballet as a discipline, as well as in relation to the apparatus of the performance that is metonymic for those in the world. In showing this loss, in showing the captured *inappropriable* of the body, there is a gesture: *the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such* (Agamben, 2000, 58).

The marionette figure's objectified body shows the body as something that is at once radically externalized and yet irremissibly one's own. In this gesture beautiful movements and positions occur, as if succeeding in a 'trick' with agility and elegance. The dancers in *I/II/III/IIII* resemble those figures who are *neither dead nor alive, half golem and*

*halfrobot*, which are endowed with *the grace of the inhuman* (Agamben, 2007b, 31). *I/II/III/IIII* is not a pure utopia of a freeing of potentiality, but through the restrictions imposed on the dancers by the apparatus, possibilities loom in the appearance of a von Kleistian grace and gesture.

#### 2.2.2.2 The beauty of destruction in *I/II/III/IIII*: performing the marionette as figure of the whatever singularity

*La beauté ne rend pas visible l'invisible, mais le visible  
lui-même.*  
(Agamben, 2015b, 147)

*The free use of the proper is the most difficult thing.*  
(Hölderlin in Agamben, 2015a, 88)

The particular kind of beauty that arises in *I/II/III/IIII* has two sides: on the one hand, there is the association with the sublime beauty of the destruction of the human – an astonishment at seeing such a cruel condition – and on the other hand, there is the concrete, grace in the here and now of the dancers and their movements. This grace resembles and is inspired by Heinrich von Kleist's *Über das Marionettentheater*, written in 1810 (an extensive quote of this text opens *I/II/III/IIII*'s program text [Van Kerkhoven, 2007]). In this essay, the first person narrator engages in a dialogue with a dancer who *appears to argue for his own removal from the scene* (Ridout, 2006, 16). In this provocative text central to Verdonck's dramaturgy, von Kleist evokes the marionette as the example of grace: *Ebenmass, Beweglichkeit, Leichtigkeit – nur alles in einem höheren Grade; und besonderes eine naturgemässere Anordnung der Schwerpunkte* (1984, 334). The ideals of classical ballet are attained with more perfection by the marionette, than by the prima ballerina and an essential feature for this, is the positioning of points of gravity as well as a minimal dependence from gravity. *Zudem, [...], haben diese Puppen den Vorteil, dass sie antigrav sind. Von der Trägheit der Materie, dieser dem Tanze entgegenstrebendsten aller Eigenschaften, wissen sie nichts [...] Die Puppen brauchen den Boden nur, wie die Elfen, um ihn zu streifen* (von Kleist, 1984, 335).

The device in *I/II/III/IIII* creates similar conditions for the dancers: they are suspended in the harness and their bodily center of gravity is transposed slightly higher above the waist, where the harness is attached. In the choreography, there is no resistance against the movements of the machine: similar to von Kleist's marionette, the dancers' limbs follow the directions and flow of the machine (von Kleist, 1984, 332). Moreover, *the moment you start forcing things, you lose the battle* (van Baarle, Van Kerkhoven & Verdonck, 2013, 112), Verdonck notes. Performing with the machine that makes one into a marionette, paradoxically requires letting go of control in order to maintain an amount of a different kind of control. Resistance, which is not the focus of the performance either, would mean a complete loss of control and lead to spinning, dropping and other

consequences, something I was able to witness while attending rehearsals for a re-run of *I/II/III/III* in 2017 (in collaboration with the Amsterdam-based dance center ICK), ten years after its creation.

The slowness of matter von Kleist claims marionettes are detached from, however, remained a factor in *I/II/III/III*; not in the performers, but in the machine, whose *structure meant we couldn't make any rapid movements, so everything fit into an extended super slow motion. [...] time itself slowed down* (van Baarle, Van Kerkhoven & Verdonck, 2013, 110). Verdonck's take on the marionette is a matter of rhythm as well, reminding of Eckersall & Paterson's 'slow dramaturgy' (see 1.2.2.2 on posthistory in Toshiki Okada). The slowness allows a concentration from the spectator, to study and reflect these highly ambiguous figures. It is through this slow motion that the figures gain their quality of *kinetic sculpture*, a notion Lehmann uses to refer to the work of Robert Wilson, which he sees as emblematic of a postdramatic aesthetics of time as duration (as opposed to chronological, linear use of time). This description strikingly fits to *I/II/III/III* as well, considering the set-up as a *theatrical tableau, which owing to its 'non-natural' rhythm creates the impression of having a time of its own - midway between the achronia of a machine and the traceable and palpable lifetime of human actors, who attain here the gracefulness of marionette theatre* (Lehmann & Jürs-Munby, 2007, 156). *I/II/III/III*'s marionettes, like von Kleist's, *do not obey pulsed time or measured units* (Stalpaert, 2017, 389). The performance creates a complex combination of what Stalpaert has described as *non-pulsed time* or rhythm (2017, 389), freed from chronology, enabling agility and grace, and a machine-structured repetition, a loss of control over the rhythm. Verdonck has created a mechanical time-environment in which the accident can occur, and in which the von Kleistian grace can arise, however, always staying within the ambiguity of horror and beauty, of dystopia and utopia.

The machine of *I/II/III/III* still has a human component. Verdonck and Van Kerkhoven recount how in the 2007 version, two technicians, standing behind the curtains, pull the dancers up and down and across the stage. They also execute a 'choreography' that is strongly performative and in an intimate relation with dancers, and of which any deviation is as little desired as from the dancer's score (van Baarle, Van Kerkhoven & Verdonck, 2013, 110). If this apparatus could be considered a metonymy for political or economic systems, than this would imply that even those who appear to be 'in charge' or have a larger amount of control of the machine, also cannot but follow the workings of the apparatus. The positions merely need to be filled in. Von Kleist, however, suggests that the puppetry system could go one step further, when the human puppeteer would be removed and made superfluous to the puppet show so that *ihr Tanz gänzlich ins Reich mechanischer Kräfte hinüberspielt, und vermitteltst einer Kurbel, so wie ich es mir gedacht, hervorgebracht werden könne* (von Kleist, 1984, 333). In the 2017 retake of *I/II/III/III*, the

vertical (lifting and lowering) movements of the machine were automated.<sup>75</sup> This not only goes one step further toward the complete marionette condition, it also tells something about the possibility for the puppeteer to be replaced by a computer-guided system – something which also occurs in the financial markets, with computers deciding on the buy and sell of a growing percentage of products on the stock markets.

The workings of the machine in *I/II/III/IIII* touch upon another aspect of being in the apparatus, as it also has consequences for the relation between the dancers that are attached to it. Similar to how the four ballerina's in the *pas the quatre* in Petipa's and Ivanov's *Swan Lake* choreography appear to be dependent on each other, holding hands in a crossover way, while executing a complex set of movements, the dancers in *I/II/III/IIII* are strongly interdependent as well. Despite the fact that like in *END*, *the performers where not to have any contact, any exchange with one another* (Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens, 2012, 62), the dancers are in a strong awareness of each other. The machine requires a complex balancing exercise, as one small movement or a little bit of counterweight by one dancer immediately has consequences for all the others. This is a clear image of how the apparatus not only manages individual beings but also mediates the relations between them. Suspending one's subjective control not only occurs vis-à-vis the machine, but also toward those who are in it with you. If this succeeds well, another category can be added to that of grace, namely 'agility'. *Agile is that which aptly moves effortlessly and uninhibitedly*, Agamben writes about the glorious bodies of the blessed in the afterlife, referring to their *agility as a sort of grace that carries [them] almost instantly and effortlessly wherever they want to go. Like dancers, who move in space with neither aim nor necessity, the blessed move in the heavens only in order to exhibit their agility* (2011c, 95, 96).<sup>76</sup>

However, as the following anecdote also suggests, it is not only the technical aspect of creating the marionette-apparatus that leads to graceful elegance; there is more significance in the particular mode of performing as well.

We ultimately always come back to Kleist. In 'On the Marionette theatre' he tells the story of a young man who strikes a pose which by chance looks like a Greek statue showing a seated fellow trying to remove a thorn or splinter from his foot. When he tries to repeat the same pose, he gets frustrated because it's impossible for

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<sup>75</sup> However, a controller still had to 'steer' the machine. Also, the initial intention was to automate both the horizontal and vertical movements, but the former did not prove to be so easily automated, as safety settings and requirements prevented sudden movements, which would alter the choreography fundamentally, making the floating and swiftness less possible.

<sup>76</sup> In Taoism, the notion of 'wei wu-wei' describes a mode of action that can literally be translated as 'doing while not-doing' or *effortless action*. This is not the result of great power, force or one-sided mastery, but of a renunciation of the self in favor of a relation with the object, which leads to a specific *state of the actor*, whose *action accords perfectly with the dictates of the situation at hand* (Slingerland, 2007, 7).

him to consciously execute the same movement again (Van Kerkhoven in van Baarle, Van Kerkhoven & Verdonck, 2013, 112).

The figure is not a character, nor does it represent a subject or seeks to represent a particular individuality or self. Instead, these figures have ‘characteristics’, which *appear wholly through context and construction, rather than the personable inhabiting of character* (Lavender, 2016, 113). About the figures in *END*, Van Kerkhoven wrote that *the figures in the piece were to remain as functional as possible. To assign a personal narrative to them would be to make them more concrete, more realistic, and that would inevitably allow narrativity to creep back in* (Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens, 2012, 62). Figures are nondramatic performing entities, in the sense that there is not a dramatic line that is developing. This is a literal dramaturgical translation of what also can be formulated as a prohibition of the ego. In his essay, von Kleist has the dancer state about the marionette *dass sie sich niemals zierte. – Denn Ziererei erscheint, wie Sie wissen, wenn sich die Seele (vis motrix) in irgend einem andern Punkte befindet, als in dem Schwerpunkt der Bewegung* (von Kleist, 1984, 334). Verdonck’s figures’ actions are not guided by an individual, free, conscious and rational will, nor by affectation (*Ziererei*). They are occupied with the limitations of the machine, which counts as their point of gravity (*Schwerpunkt*). As Verdonck describes their situation:

Le performeur a un problème physique, ce qui constitue en même temps un problème pour son état d’esprit. [...] le performeur se voit confronté à des problèmes plus pressants que d’interpréter son rôle devant un public. Il ou elle a désormais d’autres préoccupations. [...] Un autre type de bataille a lieu. Mais curieusement un public ne s’aperçoit guère de ce combat – et je ne veux d’ailleurs pas qu’il s’en aperçoive – avec la machine (van Baarle, forthcoming).

By setting limits to the dancers, Verdonck alters the nature of their actions, making a vain subject on stage impossible and giving rise to figures that are aware, but not conscious, not-knowing, but not ignorant. Precisely because of the figure’s fundamental entanglement with the machine, the sincerity that the young man in von Kleist’s story appears to have lost, is regained – a sincerity Verdonck finds as well in the performativity of the object and which has led Lavender to develop the idea of a performer that *objects*; that is able to *efface their personhood* (Lavender in Eckersall & van Baarle, forthcoming). It is through the relation with the machine that graceful accidents can occur, that randomness becomes possible (Van Beek, 2010, 30). This ‘unity’ of human and nonhuman elements in Verdonck’s figures, at least on the level of their sign value, is also described by Maaïke Bleeker: *how related (that what is related within a relationship) matter is not a matter of entities pre-existing the relationship but results from the relationship* (2017, 6). This also leads to the in-between position of the dancer between active and passive. The performer is in action, but in a passive way. In the case of *I/II/III/III*, the four dancers indeed are concentrated on their relation with the machine, which shrouds them in a kind of absence (van Baarle, forthcoming). In relation to this absence, it is interesting to see how

Laermans analyses *a matter-of-fact style of just doing movement* – with reference to Michael Fried’s dualism of absorption and theatricality, a terminology stemming from the visual arts, befitting the description of I/II/III/IIII as a theatrical tableau – as a mode of *absorption or being so wrapped up in an activity that one negates – or actively forgets – the looks of others* (Laermans, 2015, 154). Performing in I/II/III/IIII implies thus a combination of functionality and absence.

In I/II/III/IIII, the figure’s performance through a combination of functionality in relation to the machine and absence in relation toward the audience, is even increased by the transparent gauze that is placed between the stage and the audience, which in combination with the light, functions as a fourth wall for the dancers. The dancers told me that despite this light, they cannot always determine where the audience is, which increases their isolation. At certain moments, for the audience this gauze also creates an effect of a dream-like virtuality, as if these bodies were pixelated and hence not actually there, adding another layer of absence. This absent, zero-degree of performing, is the form in which the reflection on bare life’s zero-degree of existence continues. Paradoxically, it is the creation of a figure of annihilated human existence in this zero-degree of performing which generates a kind of grace. The loss of innocence lamented in von Kleist finds is compensated in this ‘absent’ mode of performing and this absence is caused by creating a concrete, physical situation, which increases its *liveness* or rather, as Vanderbeeken names it, *the realness of the visual spectacle* (2010, 361). The figures are precisely those creatures that arise – in the case of a human performer – through the entanglement of the human body and the apparatus in which it finds itself and which is constitutive for the figure between subject and object. *Their concreteness, however, is not coloured by anthropomorphic realism, but is rather related to the midway position between human and machine they occupy*, Van Kerkhoven writes about the figures in Verdonck’s oeuvre (Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens, 2012, 62). Absence, as it has been described above, leads precisely to that concreteness.

Ridout interprets the loss of innocence as a ‘falling’ into representation and self-consciousness, as a form of mediated action (2006, 17). Innocence, then, stands opposite to representation, it is the performance of the here and now, which Ridout in his reading of von Kleist equals to an *undoing of the aesthetic* (2006, 17-18). In Verdonck’s case, the real, physical condition created by the apparatus can indeed be an argument to situate his practice in the field of performance in the sense that it creates a here and now. However, there is not an actual ‘undoing’ of the aesthetic, as most of Verdonck’s works actually require or induce a form of contemplation from the position of the audience, an aspect which will be discussed more in depth in the final chapter. Moreover, it is precisely this particular mode of performing of the figure, which allows the spectator’s reflection and relation to the performance or installation to develop. In his analysis of Verdonck’s figures, Lavender refers to how *Diderot articulates, from within the eighteenth century, a relationship between performing and being in which the business of the actor is to create effect for*

the spectator rather than to 'live' the character in the manner that would come to be associated with Stanislavski (2016, 112).

Performing the figure means performing the inhuman in the human and this can lead to a particular kind of experience or beauty that we have seen is best called grace<sup>77</sup>: *the human frame attains this state of aesthetic grace only by being inhuman* (Ridout, 2006, 16). Thanks to apparatuses at work in- and outside of the theatre, this inhuman state Ridout refers to, no longer seems impossible to achieve, nor does it have to be a merely negative evolution. Both von Kleist and Agamben seem to find a potential in the devolution of the human being toward the marionette figure.

Wir sehen, dass in dem Masse, als, in der organischen Welt, die Reflexion dunkler und schwächer wird, die Grazie darin immer strahlender und herrschender hervortritt. [...] so findet sich auch, wenn die Erkenntnis gleichsam durch ein Unendliches gegangen ist, die Grazie wieder ein [...] entweder gar keins, oder ein unendliches Bewusstsein hat, d.h. in dem Gliedermann, oder in dem Gott (von Kleist, 1984, 339).

Consciousness – as a limited form of knowledge, which can be compared to the Heideggerian Dasein's distance ('closedness') to being in the world (cf. 1.2.2 and more in depth 2.6.1) – as the main obstacle for grace, can be overcome in the marionette or the god, in the suspension or in the perfection of consciousness. von Kleist's essay holds a messianic premonition, as it seems to suggest in the quote above that indeed reflection becomes more 'dark' and weak and that this – similar to Agamben's suggestion that the extreme desubjectification offers an opportunity to go beyond the subject – might be used for the better. However, this does not mean, contrary to what Lepecki argues, a return to animality, or an *embrace of the clunky movements of broken things [...] the graceless expressions of affectionate humans* (Lepecki, 2016, 89). As Verdonck shows in his work (and for that matter, Agamben in his thinking), going beyond the subject means a suspension of that subject, not to return to an origin that is irreparable or a vision of a humanity that is 'so human in its failures'. Going beyond the subject renders an apparatus inoperative, which is not the same as undoing history. It is a *letting go of self* in a zone that Agamben describes as *this no man's land between a process of subjectivation and a process of desubjectivation* (Agamben in Smith, 2004, 117). The marionette – qua figure – brings to the fore the potential for the deactivation of the apparatus that lay dormant in the *Muselman*, brought about by showing how the apparatus works as it is its cipher, like bare life is the

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<sup>77</sup> It is not within the scope of this research to redefine terms such as 'beauty'. However, relating to the beauty of destruction in Verdonck's work, Han describes how today, beauty and the sublime as Kantian categories are able to enter in a different relation: *Statt das Erhabene dem Schönen entgegenzusetzen, gilt es, dem Schönen die nicht zu verinnerlichende, entsubjektiverende Erhabenheit zurückzugeben, die Trennung von Schönerm und Erhabenem wieder rückgängig zu machen* (2015a, 33).

essential limit position of biopolitical power. The marionette figures in *I/II/III/IIII*, like Icarus, are figures of a subject attending its own downfall (Agamben in Smith, 2004, 117).

However, the figure is not only a critical, negative creature, it can also, in the case of the marionette, lead to reflections on a happy life, as it does for Agamben, who concludes that [t]he art of living is, in this sense, the capacity to keep ourselves in harmonious relationship with that which escapes us. Perhaps a zone of nonknowledge does not exist at all: perhaps only its gestures exist. As Kleist understood so well, the relationship with a zone of nonknowledge is a dance (2011c, 114). In the case of *I/II/III/IIII*, this zone of nonknowledge is the zone of the machine, the apparatus, an inappropriable yet constitutive part of the figure. An aspect of the beauty of the performance in terms of what is seen on stage, as well as the particular contemplative experience of watching the performance as an audience member, have led me to consider this ‘happy’ aspect of the marionette figure. In addition to that, I saw this interpretation returning during my experience of seeing the dancers rehearse: they were struggling to let go of the control over their body and choreography in the traditional sense, but when they succeeded in that, they had ‘fun’ while being dragged and pulled, as if they had found a new liberty and enjoyment in the machine. The critique that *I/II/III/IIII* delivers, is that the human component, which is always formed through interactions with apparatuses, has lost a relation of acknowledgement of this inappropriable: *The relation with the inappropriable, which constitutes the biopolitical substance of each individual, is thus violently appropriated by those who constitute themselves in this way as lords of intimacy* (Agamben, 2015a, 93).<sup>78</sup> Because the relation to the inappropriable is broken, the intimacy we appear to experience with and via machines and applications is captured by the companies who make profit out of it, as well as by the government agencies that save and search the data that are produced by it. The marionette figure is at the same time the result of and the alternative potential to the power apparatuses exert over one’s self-development, over one’s relation with oneself (which is, then, a relationship with an unknowable) (Agamben, 2014, 128).

In its utopian sense, the marionette, however suggests a form-of-life that is not created through processes of subjectification that would thus give rise to something like a subject, which always implies a power relation. This form-of-life is characterized by what Agamben calls a specific type of ‘use’, a combination of *on the one hand, appropriation and habit; on the other, loss and expropriation* (2015a, 87).<sup>79, 80</sup> It is a *form-of-life* [forma-di-vita], a

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<sup>78</sup> In Italian: *La relazione con l'inappropriabile, che costituisce la sostanza biopolitica di ciascun individuo, viene così violentamente appropriata da colui che si costituisce in questo modo come signore dell'intimità* (Agamben, 2014, 129).

<sup>79</sup> In Italian: *da una parte appropriazione e abito, dall'altra perdita ed espropriazione* (Agamben, 2014, 123).

<sup>80</sup> “Use” as a concept in Agamben stands in opposition to being entitled or having rights to something, to claiming rights. In its origins, namely the Franciscan religious order’s idea of use and poverty, use was a renunciation of rights to possession (Agamben, 2014, 114-115). Nevertheless, the opposition between use and

political life in which *zoē* and *bios* are indiscernible, as one is always the other (Agamben, 2000, 3, 4). This form-of-life would be a *practice that cannot be assigned a subject* (Agamben in Smith, 2004, 118). Sovereignty (which in Agamben's interpretation is always biopolitical) seeks to continuously split the form-of-life into a form of life and a biological life, which in turn becomes a bare life. A form-of-life suspends sovereignty, deactivates it and thus implies a *nonstatist politics* (Agamben, 2000, 8), a statement Agamben made in 1993<sup>81</sup> and repeated after twenty years of fundamental philosophical research in *L'uso dei Corpi* (Agamben, 2014, 148). The mode of performing the figure in Verdonck's performances, one that is avoiding the formation of a subject while (and by) expropriating and sharing control over the body in an absent-present way, might be a version of a form-of-life.

Dramaturgically, the form-of-life can be translated to the unity of form and content in these figures: the latter are constituted by creating 'real' physical situations that reflect a condition in society.<sup>82</sup> Form and content constantly refer to one another; they find themselves in a circularity.<sup>83</sup> As one performer who regularly collaborates with Verdonck aptly states: *The machine restricts me, but at a certain moment it is no longer a restriction; rather it turns into something that triggers the state which creates or elaborates a character. [...] I became a character because of the pulling of the cable and because of the resistance of the machine* (Iglesias in Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens, 2012, 153). Marc Iglesias developed a relation of use toward the machine, which then gave rise to the figure the audience saw on stage. In use, the subject makes way for the figure's singularity, which *is constituted in the relation of use, is not a subject, is nothing other than this relation* (Agamben, 2015a, 60).<sup>84</sup> In *I/II/III/IIII*, the dancers, like von Kleist's marionette, are in a way made independent of gravity, as the machine lifts them and allows them for a speed and slowness that are otherwise unattainable. However, their bodies remain under the influence of gravity. To flip upside down, as they do at one moment, they make use of gravity to do so, tipping forward until

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rights can be considered as an analogy to the letting go of the subject in apparatus-posthumanism and the struggle for emancipation in liberatory cyborg-posthumanism (and for that matter, also the 'right' of perfection, survival of the human at the cost of the planet's ecological well-being in transhumanism).

<sup>81</sup> The short text *Form-of-life* was written in 1993 and later adopted in the collection of texts titled *Means without Ends* (English version published in 2000).

<sup>82</sup> The unity of form and content is also a condition for what Derrida called *the coming revolution as social revolution*, and will end *the inadication between what [Marx] calls the "phrase" and the "content"* (Derrida & Stiegler, 2013, 45). The separation of bare life and vain language (as ultimate separation of *zoē* and *bios*) that was addressed in relation to Castellucci and Okada, is thus suspended in the unity of form and content, in the form-of-life.

<sup>83</sup> The contemplative experience of for example *I/II/III/IIII*, which is a consequence of the absence of a narrative or traditional linear plotlines in favor of a multi-faceted working through of a particular state of being that reflects an aspect of society, can be related to Agamben's concept of the form-of-life as well, as he gives thought as ultimate potentiality a central position in it. Thinking unites and provides an *experience of common power* (Agamben, 2000, 9).

<sup>84</sup> In Italian: *si costituisce nella relazione d'uso, non è un soggetto, non è altro che questa relazione* (Agamben, 2014, 90).

indeed they are hands down, feet up. The dancer-marionette's relation to gravity and grace in I/II/III/IV characterizes Agamben's conception of use: one is still in relation to this force, but in a relation of potentiality. There is the possibility to not be pulled down, as there is the possibility to be flipped upside down to adopt a particular position, attaining grace. Once this condition of use and being determined becomes the basis for a figure, a form-of-life, going beyond the subject can also mean going beyond the desubjectified being, toward what Agamben calls a *happy life: a life that does not possess its form as a part or a quality but is this form, has completely passed into it* (2015a, 219).

In Agamben's oeuvre, several figures of this form-of-life roam about and it is important to go deeper into what their desubjectified being can be, in order or to avoid an interpretation of the figure that is too close toward some form of self-flagellation (although there is an ascetic element in it) or cyborg-posthumanism's strife for emancipation. The figure's *minimal individuals*, of which the marionette is a case, and whose subjects are described by Power as *missing, reduced and promissory* (Power, 2010), are all prefigurations<sup>85</sup> of the *whatever singularity: no longer characterized either by any social identity or by any real condition of belonging* (Agamben, 2000, 87). The whatever singularity is not an empowered, emancipated subject with a fixed identity, it is rather the opposite. [T]hese whatever singularities are, like the Bloom, *emptied out, open for anything, which can diffuse themselves everywhere and yet remain ungraspable* (Agamben in Smith, 2004, 120). If there is anything as a subject, it *ne doit pas être conçu comme une substance, mais comme un tourbillon dans le flux de l'être. Il n'a pas d'autre substance, mais, par rapport à ce dernier, il a une figure, une manière et un mouvement qui lui appartiennent en propre* (Agamben, 2015b, 73).

In I/II/III/IV and to a larger extent, in the whole of Verdonck's oeuvre, the deposition of being a character, of ego, of drama, corresponds to this whatever being. Elsewhere, Agamben describes this posthumanist conception of the whatever singularity as an I, [existing] *with all of my properties [...] but this happens without any of these properties essentially identifying or belonging to me* (Agamben, 2000, 99). In a way, this is also a naked life, not in the sense of bare life as the included exclusion, but as an *unmarked life, a life that makes its nudity its own form and hence renounces any positive form imposed on it by the law and other apparatuses of sovereign power* (Prozorov, 2014, 173). The whatever singularities not merely reject resubjectification after desubjectification, the position of 'whatever' is not even desired by a subject (Agamben, 2014, 114). This is also where Castellucci's secluded community in *Giudizio, Possibilità, Essere* differs from Verdonck's figures. Whereas the former seem to consciously renounce particular subject positions, this manifestation of

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<sup>85</sup> It is interesting to note how Stalpaert refers to Verdonck's figures as *prototypes: In my view, a performance context is a particular place for presenting composite bodies as prototypes, in the sense that a prototype generates an early sample of something, a first impression* (Stalpaert in Eckersall & van Baarle, forthcoming). Verdonck's figures are indeed experiments, attempts in a search for a different form-of-life.

'will' is not part of the latter's figures. For Prozorov, the whatever singularity is a figure that is the *true culmination of the genealogy of the impersonal* (2014, 172), a genealogy Agamben also implicitly draws by consistently referring to a group of literary figures from the oeuvres of Kafka, Walser, Rilke, Hölderlin, von Kleist and Melville – a genealogy that can also be drawn in Verdonck's literary sources: Beckett, Müller, Charms, von Kleist, Kafka and J.G. Ballard. These whatever beings, which Walser specifically designates with the notion *Figure*, suggest a life that is born in the gap between presence and representation (Agamben, 1993a, 60), the zone where the figure in Verdonck also finds itself, between form and content, between absence and presence.

The whatever singularity is *being such as it is* (Agamben, 1993a, 1), it has a 'this-ness' that resonates with the concrete nature of the figure, of its conflation of form and content as a form-of-life. Nevertheless, the whatever singularity works like an example: *it holds for all cases of the same type, and, at the same time, it is included among these. It is one singularity among others, which however, stands for each of them and serves for all* (Agamben, 1993a, 10). In its Greek etymology, '*figura*' also holds a trace of the word 'exemplar' (Auerbach, 2005 [1963], 176) and this implies a particular way of having properties as well as relating to those properties. The dancers in *I/II/III/IIII* operate in a similar, exemplar way: they only differ in comparison to each other, still each of them refers to the other one(s). Their being quasi-identical leads to a loss of identity: *one who is completely similar to another can no longer claim a proper and inalienable identity, because he/she must share this identity with another* (Van Kerkhoven, 2007). As was already indicated by Lavender, the figures in Verdonck are no characters, they merely have a relation to 'characteristics', which we can now determine as one of use, or 'whateverness'. Like the dancers in *I/II/III/IIII*, the whatever singularities relate in a paradigmatic style in *a movement that goes from singularity to singularity and, without ever leaving singularity* (Agamben, 2009a, 22), as a kind of 'jumping' from the one to the other through analogy, instead of a causal relation that might initiate narrative (cf. supra). 'I' is not the original, as in Warburg's *Pathosformeln* *none of the images is the original, just as none of the images is simply a copy or repetition* (Agamben, 2009a, 29), or formulated alternatively: *the particular and the generic become indifferent* (Agamben, 1993a, 20).<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Elsewhere, Agamben has called the being that is not identified by its exclusive properties and that exhibits the generic, *special being*, with special referring to '*species*' in the sense of an image or being visible that conflates desire and being (Agamben, 2007b, 57).

## 2.3 Object-Figures

*“Things” are no longer passively waiting for a concept, theory, or sovereign subject to arrange them in ordered ranks of objecthood. “The Thing” rears its head—a rough beast or sci-fi monster, a repressed returnee, an obdurate materiality, a stumbling block, and an object lesson.*  
(Mitchell, 2005, 112)

The term 'figure' was introduced in the vocabulary surrounding Kris Verdonck's work and extrapolated to the broader field of apparatus-posthumanism to indicate the gray zone that opens up when the boundary between object and subject is suspended. When following the perspective of Agamben, this suspension is a consequence of a dehumanization and desubjectification of the human being. Objects gain performativity because as apparatuses they generate a first-degree influence on human beings through their direct workings, as well as a second-degree influence, as they are themselves part of larger apparatuses, in which their users are also incorporated. The route to performativity of objects runs, in Agamben's philosophy, through the human, whose history is *perhaps nothing other than the hand-to-hand confrontation with the apparatuses they have produced* (Agamben, 2007b, 72).

In Agamben's philosophy, the object is conceived of in relation to the human and the human in relation to the object and that object (i.e. apparatus) can also be language. Quentin Meillassoux, one of the seminal thinkers of speculative realism, has termed the disqualification of the *claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of each one another*, 'correlationism' (Meillassoux, 2011, 5). A correlationist worldview and philosophy would mean that *we can never consistently speak about a realm outside of thought or language* (Bryant et al., 2011, 3). For the object-oriented philosophers and speculative realists, the correlationist position is one that should be avoided and indeed their project is to develop a noncorrelationist philosophy. However for Agamben, the correlationist position is an ontological and a political one. Agamben's correlationist standpoint has the advantage of enabling a redefinition of the human within a posthumanist constellation, and to delve deeper into the relation of human beings or spectators with nonhuman entities or performers. Within the philosophical system of Agamben, the object is thus always discussed in relation to the human (a relation that can be desubjectifying and controlling, but also ecological). This is why, in order to gain a deeper insight in other postanthropocentric aspects of Verdonck's work and of apparatus-posthumanism, more radically nonhuman or object-oriented ontology thinkers such as Latour, Harman and Morton are consulted, especially in part 2.3.3.

In Verdonck's work, in addition to the objectification and subsequent dehumanization of the subject, another direction, namely from the object to the subject, is another

important facet of figures, which I call (after Eckersall) 'object-figures' (2015b). Going from the object to the subject can first and foremost be understood as a relation between objects and subjects that seems to originate in the position of the object, as will be argued in this chapter and more extensively in the following chapter on the phantasm. This relation has to do with what will be analyzed in the following pages, namely the subjectification of objects, or rather the rendering performative of objects. Several of Verdonck's installations and performances feature objects or machines as sole performers and the more theatrical or choreographic works also have object-figures that are protagonists or antagonists. The performativity of objects and objects replacing humans in performing arts is part of apparatus-posthumanism's post-anthropocentrism, which literally reveals and explores the performativity and agency of nonhuman entities in the world and radically displaces the human from the center stage as an autonomous agent, or as an agent as such. Verdonck's performative objects could be labelled under what Laermans – applying Latour's ANT to performing arts – has called *dance in general*, which, contrary to performances operating within the body humanist paradigm, *choreographs human movements as well as non-human actions or operations in a symmetrical way, so without reducing the latter to proverbial servants of the former* (2008, 10). This symmetry implies the heightened performativity of object-figures, which as a consequence, have and require their 'own' dramaturgy (Laermans, 2008, 10). However, as we will see, symmetry in Verdonck's work might be out of balance and a too harmonious concept to discuss 'his' figures.

Object-figures – as well as marionettes, phantasms and mascots – are 'actors' in the sense of putting action (and sometimes inaction) into play (Lavender, 2016, 109). From the perspective of object-figures, as will become clear, this does not mean that objects merely take a human shape or gain anthropomorphic 'subjectivity'; they perform in their own way, reflecting our current (and sometimes future) condition, opening up a field of questions on both performing arts and the world. A dramaturgy of objects is thus essential to a post-anthropocentric conception of performing arts. As will become clear in this chapter, it is precisely this dramaturgy that ties the various strategies for emphasizing nonhuman agency in the current condition to an alternative use, leading beyond an instrumental use or demonstration. In this chapter, the dramaturgy of the object-figure is unfolded in three stages. First, the performative strategies that are used to emphasize, increase and complicate the agency of object-figures are discussed (2.3.1), before going deeper into the political and philosophical questions this post-anthropocentric agency calls to reflect upon (2.3.2). Finally, we will take a deeper look into the relation with technology in the creative practice of Verdonck and how this connects and nuances Agamben's philosophy, as well as that of other recent thinkers dealing with the agency of nonhumans (2.3.3).

Replacing or complementing human performers with machinic ones is a post-anthropocentric move that resonates with the broader attention of recent choreographic

works on *objects as main performative elements*, focusing on *an object's sheer presence* (Lepecki, 2012, 75). When an object is liberated from its utilitarian function in an attempt to create a noncorrelationist presentation of objects, it becomes a thing, according to Lepecki. Becoming thing does not necessarily mean a transformation into something else, it actually brings the object closer to what it *is*, detached from an anthropocentric perspective, by letting it 'be'. Verdonck's work and investigation into the performativity of objects and how they relate to humans, does not take this transition from object to thing as such a 'static', nontransformative reframing. Rather, he shows what things are or can be by unleashing their performativity and having them 'tell' their own story, which always tells us something about the society and apparatuses that have produced them and to which they belong. In this way, Verdonck's object-figures combine both the correlationist and the noncorrelationist perspectives: the performativity of the objects in the creative process, installations and performances is often a consequence of the object's properties, and is in that sense, rather 'thingly', or noncorrelationist. However, within the larger dramaturgy of the works, these objects are in relation with human beings, in a network whose understanding is sought to be improved by grasping the workings of its (non-)human parts.

A first example is *MASS* (2010).<sup>87</sup> *MASS* is comprised of a large, black, square basin. In this basin, a nebula (smoke or mist) undulates. White light allows to see the undulations and suggests an entity charged with energy, like clouds heavy with rain or thunder. A soundscape accompanies the movements of the smoke, whose activity increases after a while, developing more relief, amassing and spreading out again. The combination of light, smoke patterns and the sound, evokes images of nebulas in which a star is 'born', or closer to earth, of the primordial soup in which the first organisms on the planet were formed (according to contested theories). Both references connect to the central issue that *MASS* seems to convey: the becoming of life and the formation of matter. When Helena Grehan relates her trouble with reading *MASS as the figure of an actor* to the question of its agency (2015, 135), she perhaps unwantedly points at the particular take on agency in this installation, which I experienced rather in terms of potentiality. At times, the nebula seems to be about to 'give birth' to some kind of life form, appears on the verge of sublimation, the phase transition from gas to solid matter. In an essay on the potentiality of images, Blanga-Gubbay refers to the Christian image of the formless cloud of matter that preceded the creation of the world, described by Giordano Bruno as a *great chaos* (2016, 29). Similar to this pre-creational cloud, *MASS'* smoke holds the *pure potentiality of the formless matter*, but also the *threatening presence of the possible*, of an unknown variety of forms ready to emerge – a *melted matter able to assume different shapes*

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<sup>87</sup> Technically, this smoke is called 'heavy smoke' or 'cold smoke'. In *MASS*, blocks of ice, placed at the bottom of the basin, keep the smoke within the basin's perimeter.

at the same time, and without being eventually obliged to assume one (Blanga-Gubbay, 2016, 30). MASS confronts us with the latent violence and disturbance of the animation of supposedly 'dead' matter and potentiality as such. Like the Bloom's void, potentiality is an uncanny faculty of matter and of objects.

MASS was conceived as the first part of the tryptic *ACTOR #1* (2010). In this installation circuit, Verdonck developed three near-states of being, of intermediary conditions, between life and death, or as Van Kerkhoven described it: *three variations on the metamorphosis from chaos to order* (2010). In addition to the moment when (almost) nothing flips into something by a sudden increase in density, MASS focuses on the material aspect of life. The installation's uncanny and fascinating effect arises from the anticipation of life formed by gaining 'mass'. However, sublimation works in two directions: from the gas to solid as well as from solid to gas. In this sense, MASS is also a life bereft of its form, a life that has evaporated and sublimated from a solid state into gas. The clouds, then, suddenly also evoke the destructive mushroom of the atomic bomb, smog or a fundamentally disrupted atmosphere – highly 'politicized' clouds, that all reflect the burden of human presence and politics on the planet. Verdonck's MASS might then not or not solely be an anticipation of life, but a trace of life as well. It is both the 'no longer' and the 'not yet', and in its uncanny refusal to 'take shape', this figure presents the pure potentiality of the remnant.

The animation or performativity of objects can often be taken quite literally: machines, fabric, objects or smoke 'do' something. The performativity of these object-figures is also a consequence of the use of a theatrical setting and of processes of anthropomorphism, animation and projection. In Verdonck's work, object-figures' agency refers precisely to their being (part of) an apparatus and to the effects of the larger apparatuses, not only of theatre, but also of capitalism, commodification and spectacular democracy. Their uncanniness tells us about their being part of these apparatuses, for example as commodity fetishes and as alienating and alienated entities. Uncanniness arrives from a more resisting perspective as well, as the force of potentiality that is latent in these figures. From another perspective, the performativity of objects (which comes to the fore most explicitly in object-figures) works through in the creative process of Verdonck as well, leading to a fundamental co-creation between artist and matter.

### 2.3.1 The many lives of objects

*Perhaps the objects around us derive their immobility only from our certainty that they are what they are and not anything else; they gain their immobility from the inflexibility of the thinking with which we respond to them.*

(Musil in Kluge, 2014, 110)

*When everything is human, the human is an entirely different thing.*

(Viveiros de Castro, 2014, 63)

In *DANCER #1*, one of Verdonck's early works (2003), an L-shaped iron bar attached to a grinding machine, which is suspended on a wire, is the protagonist. After the curtains have opened, this 'dancer' appears when it is lowered down on a line, to the point it takes 'center stage'. A followspot lights the protagonist, which at the starting of the grinding wheel's engine begins to turn. The L-shaped bar twists and turns, takes speed, makes quirks and jerks until the engine is overheated and combusts, which then also means the end of the performance. A lot of smoke coming from the grinding wheel's engine, the smell of fire and melted plastic, and an L-shaped bar that has regained its static suspension: that is the final image before the curtains close again. *DANCER#1* is an autonomous theatrical installation that has also been presented as part of an installation and performance circuit *VARIATION (I, II, III and IV)*.<sup>88</sup>

The theatrical set-up of *DANCER#1* is no coincidence. Several of Verdonck's object-performances place the performing object in theatrical contexts and theatrical situations, explicitly replacing human performers. Several traditional theatrical topoi are at play here: the deus ex machina (tellingly, in Verdonck's version, it is a machine), theatre smoke, the followspot, the curtains, a beginning and an end, and an action that resembles a death struggle, a tragic action. There is also a unicity to each performance. Besides the 'human' death struggle, it is also a machine that breaks down and self-destructs by going in overdrive. Every performance of *DANCER #1*, a new engine is used, making each performance unique. The video on A Two Dog Company's website shows various versions.<sup>89</sup> The basic dynamics are the same, but the rhythm, duration, intensity and amount of smoke and fire differ in performance. In that sense it is a 'performance': not repeatable, dependent on the here and now, and having an element of randomness, a von

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<sup>88</sup> The 'Variation' in the title refers to the different angles and ways the assemblage of installations and performances reflects on the relation between the human and technology. The spectators go from one installation to another as one consistent evening-filling programme.

<sup>89</sup> <http://www.atwodogscompany.org/en/projects/item/158-dancer-1?bckp=1>.

Kleistian moment.<sup>90</sup> This also results in a particular attitude of the spectators: there is a determined attention span and an affective relationship with the object on stage. After the performance, when the object has 'died', several members of the audience often exclaim 'Ohhh', followed by laughter, probably because of the realization that they just felt a genuine empathy with this apparently not-so-dead matter.

There is humor in the (human) experience of symmetry with objects, and humor can be used to make tangible this symmetry, which I prefer to discuss in terms of a (as I argue in the following chapter, phantasmatic) 'relation', as it is about the experience of watching which is a relational process. Rendering objects performative – or unveiling the object's performativity – is to a certain extent a play with theatre's rules and the spectator's expectations. Staging topoi of theatre, like the dying scene, activates looking patterns shared by many audiences. Additionally, a theatre stage could be considered a space for presence, so a theatrical setting transports this expectation of *human* presence at least partially to the nonhuman. In this sense, explicitly placing the object in the performative setting of the theatre is part of the *inherent anthropomorphism of the strange show* (Vanhoutte, 2010, 481). Anthropomorphism is indeed a consequence of the theatrical set-up of the object-figures, but the phenomenon occurs in different set-ups as well. It is the most literal strategy – but also for an important part an (albeit unconscious) *act* of the spectator – of bringing the object closer to the zone of the subject. In addition to the theatrical context and topos of the dying scene, *Verdonck's turn to the term 'dancer' – normally someone so lithe and agile – invites this humanizing move* (Lavender, 2016, 111).

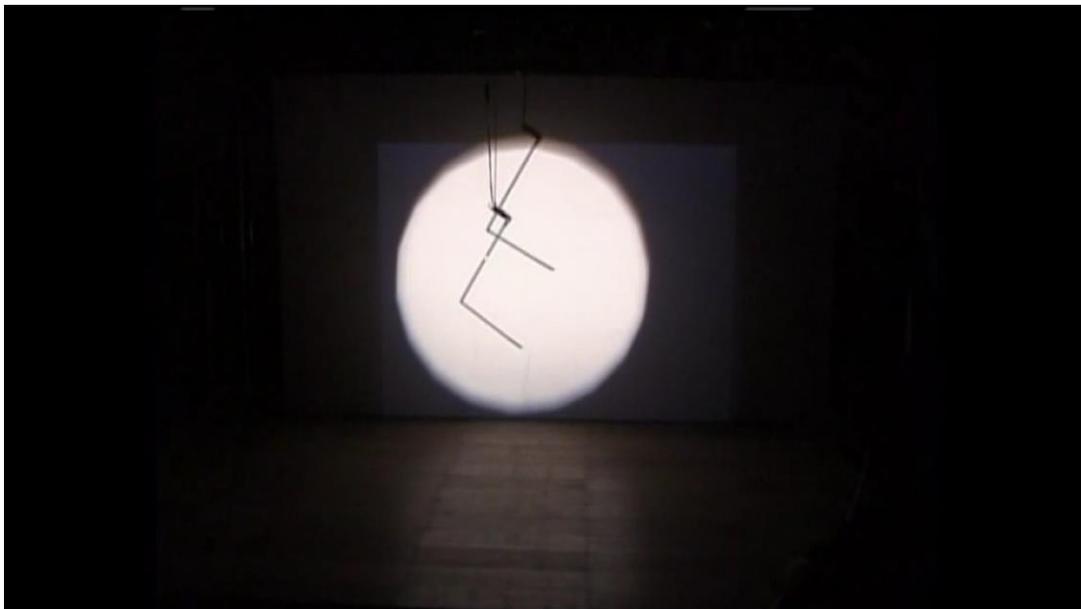


Figure 12 Kris Verdonck: *DANCER #1* (2003) © A Two Dogs Company

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<sup>90</sup> Verdonck's *DANCER* series, comprising of three variations on machines, engines or robots performing a dance, are in close relation to von Kleist and the marionette facet of the figure as well..

In a fascinating 1940 essay entitled *Man and Object in the Theatre*, Prague school theatre scholar Jíří Veltruský makes a semiotic analysis of the impact and importance of human performers and objects on stage. He comes to the conclusion that some objects, in the right conditions, attain the same performativity as human actors, and that, as I will further elaborate when discussing the mascot figure, human performers can be reduced to a sign value usually accorded to props or the set. Objects obtain their full performativity [w]hen no subject is present in the play, that is, when no actor is on stage. In this situation, Veltruský continues, an ‘emancipation’ of the object occurs: *they are no longer the tools of the actor, we perceive them as spontaneous subjects equivalent to the figure of the actor* (Veltruský, 1964, 88). Even when objects share the theatre space with human actors, they can attain their performative mode, as long as one more fundamental condition is fulfilled, namely that the objects be ‘real’, i.e. not merely signs referring to the actual object (e.g. a cardboard car referring to an actual car), that they have to be *genuine things* (Veltruský, 1964, 88). *DANCER #1* answers to these conditions, and its straightforward materiality indeed adds to its performativity. This materiality comes to the fore, not only through the clear impact of the steel bar’s weight and shape, but foremost through the burning of the engine in its combustion. The object becomes present, in its breaking down, reminding of Heidegger’s concept of ‘present-at-hand’ (*Vorhandheit*), an important notion in object-oriented ontology. The classic example is that of a broken hammer that reveals itself as being a hammer, something that it would not do when still in function, (ready-to-hand), as it would remain in a utilitarian, nearly ‘invisible’ position (Harman, 2009b, 140). The ‘death’ of the engine, with its smell, smoke and fire, brings the materiality of this dancer to the fore, increasing the effect and affect of subjectification.

Veltruský points to *personification*,<sup>91</sup> a more specific form of anthropomorphism, as an important aspect of the performativity of objects. He discerns three levels of actions: mechanical events, whose *course is being determined by a previously given regularity*, a second level comprises *actions of live beings which, though not subject to a law without exceptions, are directed by habit and thus predictable in their course* and a third level of actions, which are the *initiative of the subject and therefore unpredictable*. Personification is then the process of raising *the first two levels of action to the third* (Veltruský, 1964, 89), and it is in Veltruský’s definition an effect of (perceived) randomness, a strategy definitely at work in *DANCER #1*. Contrary to Veltruský’s assertion that objects do not have to change shape, perform actions or attain human looks – *it is enough if things which in reality are passive subjects of*

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<sup>91</sup> Haas describes how personification as *the cognitive mechanism that allows one to see the world through the eyes of another person lies at the very heart of the possibility of conventional theatre, which involves the identification of the spectator with the protagonist. To identify with means to put yourself virtually in the position of* (Haas in Stalpaert, van Baarle & Karreman., forthcoming, emphasis by the author). This definition is not necessarily contrary to that of Veltruský, as identification is triggered more easily with an entity making conscious decisions, in this way evoking a resemblance with how the human subject perceives itself.

actions appear as active subjects, even though they may retain their usual shape (Veltruský, 1964, 89) – Verdonck modifies, invents, repurposes and reframes objects in order to create an actual randomness and performance. This strategy is not merely a trick, it is part of a process of de-instrumentalizing objects. In her plea for attention for and acknowledgement of the agency of nonhumans, Jane Bennett points out the necessity of enabling personification and to *cultivate a bit of anthropomorphism – the idea that human agency has some echoes in nonhuman nature – to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world* (2010, xvi). The semiotic analysis of Veltruský only becomes a truly post-anthropocentric, decentering gesture when the object-figure simultaneously appears to ‘steal’ human faculties and show itself as fundamentally ‘strange’.

Interestingly, when it comes to human performers, Verdonck reverses the process of personification and creates an apparatus in which performers execute mechanical or habitual actions. From this perspective, Bleeker’s description of the figures in *END as elements of the landscape on stage* (2017, 7), gains a particular meaning when it comes to performativity. Veltruský’s second level of a habitual action between automation and conscious decision, is the mode of action Agamben presents as going beyond the dualism of potentiality and actuality. *Habit implies a neutralization of the subject/object opposition, [...] there is no place here for a proprietary subject of habit* (Agamben, 2015a, 60).<sup>92</sup> In the creation of object-figures, it is thus not the aim to create merely mechanical beings. Often the objects are far more ‘lively’ than human fellow performers. In a double movement, charging objects with performativity and framing human performers in order to reduce their conscious activity (without fully reducing them to automated followers) and thus their ‘personhood’, Verdonck levels his figures to the same mode of action: habit. In the figure, *[t]he sphere of the live human being and that of the lifeless object are interpenetrated, and no exact limit can be drawn between them. [...] [T]he figure of the actor thus continues without interruption into the sphere of the object* (Veltruský, 1964, 86). We can now place the marionette-figure’s and the object-figure’s modes of action next to each other: a von Kleistian performativity and grace are not a result of consciousness, nor of mere automated, mechanical action. These two poles are drawn toward each other and meet each other in ‘habit’. Habit does not mean that the actions are always the same, there are still unique, not-repeatable moments, but rather, it points at an action that always implies its own potentiality, similar to the Agambenian notion of gesture.

Anthropomorphism and personification are connected to an animistic perspective on organic and inorganic nonhuman entities. Recently, anthropologist Eduardo Viveiro de Castro has provided an insightful description of indigenous animisms in comparison with European modern ideas. Whereas *the latter rest on the mutual implication between the unicity*

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<sup>92</sup> In Italian: *implica una neutralizzazione dell’opposizione soggetto/oggetto, allora non vi è posto per un soggetto proprietario dell’abito* (Agamben, 2014, 90).

of nature and the multiplicity of cultures [...], the Amerindian conception presupposed, on the contrary, a unity of mind and a diversity of bodies, [...] a universe inhabited by diverse types of actants or subjective agents, human or otherwise – gods, animals, the dead, plants, meteorological phenomena, and often objects or artifacts as well (Viveiros de Castro, 2014, 56). Verdonck's object-figures could also be called animistic objects. Sigmund Freud, in what might be an anthropocentric projection of European modern values on other peoples, relates animism to magic and the attempt to control and relate to the world in which one lives (Freud, 1978 [1919], 73). Regardless of the veracity of Freud's claims, the question of direction and intentionality remains interesting. Magic can also mean that things are out of human control and that the apparatuses developed to regain control, might exceed their purpose as well, and only complicate the condition. In an interview, Verdonck alluded to animism in his (object-)figures.

Could it be that all these devices we have, our smart phones, laptops, etc., are magical things? It is truly incredible what they can do on the level of communication, coordination etc. And if you really use them and push them to their limits to point it is really 'high-tech,' and then you are only discovering the potential of these apparatuses. In this sense it is a magical world we are carrying around in our pockets, without really knowing it. (Verdonck in van Baarle, 2018, forthcoming).<sup>93</sup>

In Verdonck's figures, there is chiastic dynamics at work between objects and subjects. Whereas personhood has been taken away from subjects constituted and intertwined with late-capitalist and spectacular-democratic apparatuses, objects as animistic figures gain 'personhood', of which one aspect is *the capacity to occupy a point of view* (Viveiros de Castro, 2014, 58). Apparatus-posthumanism's post-anthropocentrism, which not only displaces the human animal from the center of the world but also redefines 'the human' as a living being shaped fundamentally by nonhuman elements (i.e. apparatuses), is translated in Verdonck's object-figures, among many strategies, by inducing a combination of anthropomorphism, personification and animation. Showing the animism at work in Western culture displaces an exclusionary apparatus, as the *anthropomorphic presupposition of the indigenous world is radically opposed to the persistent anthropocentric effort in Western philosophies* (Viveiros de Castro, 2014, 63).<sup>94</sup> Literally

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<sup>93</sup> Zou het kunnen dat al de toestellen die we hebben, onze smartphones, laptops, ... eigenlijk magische dingen zijn? Het is werkelijk ongelooflijk wat die toestellen allemaal kunnen op het vlak van communicatie, coördinatie, registratie en dergelijke meer. Als je ze tot het uiterste duwt worden ze echt 'high-tech' en dan ontdek je het potentieel van deze apparaten. In die zin zijn ze wel degelijk 'magisch'. We dragen ze bij ons in onze broekzak, zonder ze te kennen (Verdonck in van Baarle, 2015a, 206-207).

<sup>94</sup> With respect to anthropology that goes beyond the anthropocentric, humanist perspective, Viveiros de Castro posits an anthropology of *continuous variations; against all the finished-and-done humanisms, an "interminable humanism" that constantly challenges the constitution of humanity into a spate order* (2014, 44-45).

animated objects and living things, which have invaded and proliferated with the technological developments since the twentieth century of which artificial intelligence in robots and algorithms are the two most well-known ciphers, force humans to rethink their status as agents in the world. *When everything is human, the human is an entirely different thing* (Viveiros de Castro, 2014, 63) – indeed the monopoly over action, ‘life’, intention, etc., however artificially it was maintained over the past centuries, no longer can be upheld.

Verdonck’s *DANCER #3* is a more explicit step in the animation of an object, or rather, in showing its agency and intensifying the relationship of the spectator with the machine, as a metonymy for the fundamental, shaping entanglement with the apparatus. *DANCER #3* combines the aforementioned strategies of theatricality, personification, anthropomorphism and animism and was presented as part of the installation circuits *ACTOR#1* (2010) and *IN VOID* (2016). *ACTOR #1* was a research into the possibility of a theatre without human performers and hence, with nonhuman performing figures, reflecting on the developments in technology that might lead to the replacement of human beings, and to the desire to create and control life and hence to what the definition of ‘life’ still is under these developments. *DANCER #3* is a small robot built around a captive bolt pistol, a tool used to induce unconsciousness to cattle before they are slaughtered. It jumps, falls and gets back up to resume its jumping choreography. The software designed for this robot makes its movements appear random, which creates a sensation that it is not preprogrammed by a human controller but that it has a certain control over its choreography or formulated alternatively, there is doubt whether or not it controls its own actions, problematizing what ‘control’ in this case might mean. The little beeps and sounds that accompany the performance are another anthropomorphic or personification effect. The typical robot-like sounds give *DANCER #3* a more friendly and recognizable appearance, which demonstrates the importance of sound in the process of identification. The sympathy we experience when watching the jumping robot is related to this recognition of clearly distinct human and robotic capacities. It is a machine, so a degree of perfection is expected, but this dancer falls, improvises and loses the rhythm. Human, all too human, this dancer fails once, twice and better – to paraphrase Beckett.

In *ACTOR #1*, the dancing robot was placed in quite a ‘naked’ set-up: a clearly marked square space in a larger black box, around which the audience could stand. In *IN VOID*,<sup>95</sup> however, *DANCER #3* was presented on a theatre stage, a black box with a tribune and wooden stage – thus differing from *ACTOR #1*, where the theatre setting was evoked but not ‘present’. This made the claim on replaceability of the human (performer) all the more explicit, and also increased the potential for a connection with this figure, as the theatre architecture and convention stimulates this: *if we are moved by the inorganic, non-*

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<sup>95</sup> I am referring here to the version of *IN VOID* I saw at Kaaistudio’s in Brussels (11-14 February, 2016).

*human thing, this is because of performance tropes that humanize our relation to it*, as Lavender analyses aptly (Lavender in Eckersall & van Baarle, forthcoming). Even without the traditional markers of theatricality (stage, curtain, spot), these objects are theatrical in terms of a transition from rest to movement and their *spatio-visual presentation* (Lavender, 2016, 112).

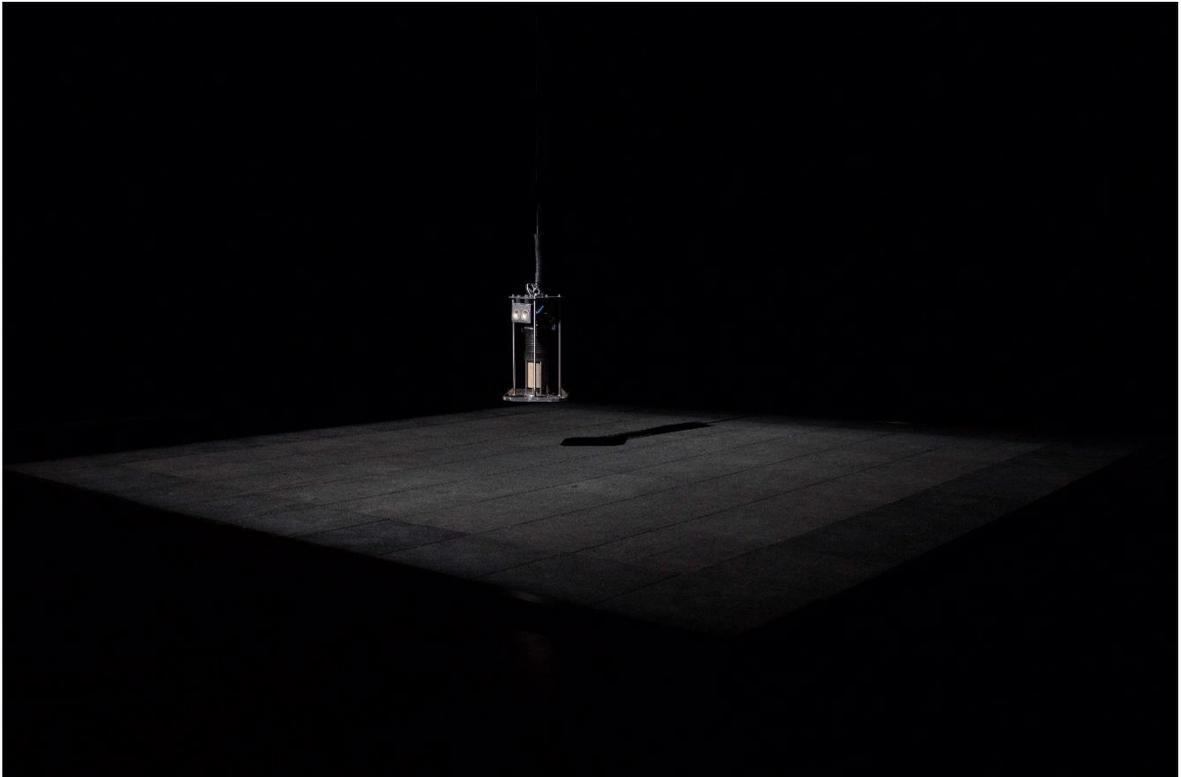


Figure 13 Kris Verdonck / A Two Dogs Company: *DANCER #3* (2010). Here as part of *IN VOID*  
© Jasmijn Krol

Nevertheless, in the relation between the object-figure and the spectator, the movement from the position of the spectator toward the object-figure is essential to the latter's performativity: as Bojana Cvejić notes, *presence isn't the effect of perception but of the desire to see* (2015, 100). The performativity of the object lays thus both in the object itself (and subsequently in the intention and work of the artist) and in the conventions, desires, associations, imagination and most important, the projection by the audience.<sup>96</sup> The object's animation – it 'falls', 'stumbles', 'thinks', 'fails', 'tries again', 'is happy', 'has fun', etc. – is a result of a projection of the spectator's own feeling when seeing this figure, an exteriorization of the psyche Freud also ascribes to animistic conceptions of the world

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<sup>96</sup> Helena Grehan has made a similar remark after seeing Verdonck's *ACTOR #1*, writing that *in relation to artworks and performances that are concerned with moving beyond the subject/object divide – we need to redefine spectatorship. It must be reconfigured as a concept and as a mode of response that is open to and interested in pursuing reconsiderations or extensions of notions such as agency, actor, machine, empathy, and projection* (2015, 138).

(Freud, 1973 [1919], 86). This does not prevent the performing figures from being perceived as 'sincere'. According to Lavender, Verdonck's sincere objects *produce feelings and responses in subjects. It is an effect of actions that accrue an affective charge in context. The vehicle in Verdonck's DANCER series is, purely, action within situation* (2016, 112). An important part of the critical reflection on the omnipresence and activity of objects in society and everyday lives, is how Verdonck's object-figures also, and perhaps even more so, tell something about how we relate to these objects.

In robotics, one of the most known concepts to analyze the way people relate to objects is the uncanny valley, a notion developed by robot scientist Masahiro Mori in 1970. The uncanny as a political and philosophical feature will be discussed further below, what interests us here is the performative strategy the uncanny valley allows us to understand when it comes to Verdonck's object-figures, especially in relation to projection and empathy. Once the distinction between the human and the nonhuman is blurred, we enter in what Mori has called the uncanny valley, represented by a curve in a chart (Mori, 2012 [1970], 98). 'Affinity', the vertical axis of the uncanny valley chart, indicates the sympathy and empathy with objects, resulting from projection, anthropomorphism and personification. The horizontal axis corresponds to the level of human resemblance. Movement is an important element in generating affinity, as it is perceived as a fundamental capacity of living beings, which explains the high degree of affinity with moving – dancing – figures as *DANCER #1* and *#3*. In his article, Mori compares the graph of a still object with that of moving object. Movement *changes the shape of the uncanny valley graph by amplifying the peaks and valleys* (Mori, 2012 [1970], 99). A moving object can thus reach a much higher level of affinity, but also of eeriness as its valley is 'deeper'. In the valley, both the one formed by the curve of movement and the 'still' curve, Mori places dead creatures, respectively the zombie and the corpse. He estimates that the uncanny sensation caused by objects in the valley are related to the zombie and the corpse: they reflect the human fear of death and confront us with our own mortality (Mori, 2012 [1970], 100).<sup>97</sup> In the uncanny valley our conceptions of life and death are questioned. The uncanny is thus for an important part something particularly intimate. *The uncanny is our first and last place of residence*, a place of nonhuman forces, those of life and death and of creation and destruction, De Martelaere writes (2000, 79, my transl.).

In the anthropocene, the uncanny valley expands to a *spectral plane* (Morton, 2015). 'Spectral' in Morton's sense, is an alternative to the dualism of life and death. Objects are subjects and vice versa, all life forms have become spectral and *everything gains a haunting spectral quality* (Morton, 2015). Spectral also means *between appearance and being*, between

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<sup>97</sup> Mori developed his theory and mapping of affinity and resentment with robots in order to understand the relation users, humans, have with robots in the everyday sphere. For those who make and want to sell robots and other forms of automated technology on a larger scale, it is important not to scare its potential buyers or make its user feel uncomfortable (or reminded of death, if we follow Mori's argument).

matter and immaterial, the latter pointing to imagination, reputation, sensation, projection and other ways of not-being as things appear (Morton, 2015). If from an ecological awareness that all is connected, especially in an anthropogenic era, nonhuman elements are animated in a fundamental sense, the object/subject distinction is once more complicated and any narrow definition of life becomes untenable: *everything is in the uncanny valley, as we can no longer distinguish between life and non-life, conscious and non-conscious, sentient and non-sentient, existing and non-existing* (Morton, 2015).

Coming back to Mori's discussion of traditional Japanese theatrical forms in which death is often a central element or where the dead are present on stage (such as bunraku and especially noh), two other observations can be made. Mori places the *yase otoko* mask, representing a *ghost from hell*, 'in' the valley, and, more surprisingly, both the *okina* noh mask (representing an old man) and the bunraku puppet on the other side of the valley, that is: close to the human being or to the point where, as in the film *Ghost in the shell* (1995), the nonhuman can no longer be distinguished from the human. Following Mori and when considering only the audience's reaction, it would be possible to position the DANCER figures at the other side of the valley, whereas other works (such as *PELLET*, which will be discussed below), which do not move and hence are part of the 'still' curve, find themselves in the uncanny valley and might gain affinity through other theatrical means, such as light or sound. Important and for performing arts interesting reasons for placing the *okina* mask and the bunraku puppet close to the human, are the distance to the stage, the theatrical convention and *our tendency as an audience to become absorbed in this form of art* (Mori, 2012 [1970], 99). A point of critique on Mori's distinction between the ghost mask and the old man mask is that he connects the ratio of affinity to the level of representation, whereas it could be argued that in the relation with contemporary technologies, that do not look like humans at all, affinity operates more on an affective and neurological level.

Indeed, a comparison can be made between the spectator's projection and anthropomorphization and the emotional bond that exists between consumers and certain (technological) products. Perhaps no other company has accomplished this better than Apple. On YouTube there are plenty of movies showing shocked reactions to the destruction of Apple notebooks or smartphones, devices that are developed and sold as part of the intimate sphere. Samsung promotes its smartphones with the slogan 'your new life companion', a statement many applications seek to fulfil. Other applications in diverse contexts tell us something about the relation between human beings and machines (apparatuses) as well. Recent tests on loneliness and depression with elderly people, conducted in retirement homes and hospitals, show that in only a few days an emotional bond develops between a 'companion-owner' and a robot baby seal called 'PARO', reducing the feeling of loneliness (Robinson et al., 2013). The relation between the PARO robot and the human is of course out of balance, since it is only the human who is relating to the device and not vice versa, an argument that can also be made for *DANCER*

#1 and #3. In Japan, the decision of SONY to stop repairing (after already having stopped producing) the AIBO robotic dog led not only to a circuit of self-organized repair shops, but also to Shinto burial ceremonies carried out for these ‘company robots’ that would be beyond repair, testifying to the intimate relation the owners had to the object.<sup>98</sup> The consumer projects these emotions on the apparatus and even can think of the apparatus as having emotions toward him or her. However, these machines only take and don’t give anything besides their function as a tool. The same goes for smartphones, tablets, and other devices, whose smart design generates an intimate, physical connection through touchscreens, ‘swiping’ and facial, vocal and fingerprint recognition technologies. De Martelaere asks herself whether *a dialogue with one human partner [and one object] could be something different than an exteriorized monologue – for objects have no voice, they are only comprehensible to us by way of the echo they produce as an answer to the questions we ask them* (2000, 56).

And yet this ‘monologue’ with the object, which in the work of Verdonck might appear estranging and somewhat unsettling, satisfies its users in everyday situations, and builds intimate relationships with and through the devices and applications involved. Almost paradoxically, this intimacy is precisely a consequence of the desubjectification to which these apparatuses are complicit. The echo they produce, offers consolation, confirmation and creates a bond. If social and collective identity formation processes are thwarted and less constitutive of the individual’s subjectivity, recent technologies seem to have filled this vacuum, causing the *pleasure of being recognized by the machine [...]: I am alive if the Machine, which knows neither sleep nor wakefulness, but is eternally alert, guarantees that I am alive; I am not forgotten if the Great Memory has recorded my numerical or digital data* (Agamben, 2011c, 53). Moreover, there are other problematic consequences of human projection onto nonhuman agents. Daniel Dennett warns that projection on machines becomes dangerous when we start to ascribe them authority over certain matters (Rouvroy gives the example of algorithms deciding on whether or not prisoners can be paroled [2016]). They do not *know*: they execute, but they *have no idea what they are doing* (Dennett, 2016, 109, my transl.).

In the field of the visual arts, theatricality, anthropomorphism and personification are key terms in a text dealing with the performativity of objects, namely Michael Fried’s observations on minimal art – or as he prefers to name it ‘literalist art’. Verdonck’s figures and more explicitly the object-figures, find themselves on the threshold between visual arts and performing arts, hence a visual arts perspective might shed another light on their performativity. In his seminal essay *Art and Objecthood*, Fried describes how for these works, *the critical factor is shape [...] the shape is the object*, leading him to claim that literalist art objects are hollow (1996, 119). Whereas their hollowness and emphasis on shape

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<sup>98</sup> Recently, SONY announced it would restart the AIBO production, albeit a new version.

inspired Fried to call them literal, it is their dependence on the spectator and their inherent relation to him or her and *one's awareness of oneself existing in the same space as the work* that make these objects 'theatrical' (Fried, 1995, 125, 140). Fried's description ties well with what can then be called the objecthood of Verdonck's object-figures, more specifically the pneumatic installations such as *BOGUS I* (2016) and *BOGUS II* (2016, see 2.6.3).<sup>99</sup> *BOGUS I* consists of four inflatable, eight-meter high tubes, made out of a shiny paillette fabric, and which 'erupt' from three black boxes placed next to each other and whose lids automatically open and close. The 'inflatables' go up and down in a choreography steered by air pressure. Sound comes from the ventilators that inflate the structures, placed inside the boxes. The light has a strong impact on the appearance of the paillette fabric, which can change from a liquid, dark metal to disco glitter. *BOGUS I* is a sculpture that inflates itself until it reaches a disturbing and unnatural size and then again retreats to its starting point. This mutating figure remains, although it looks like it is breathing, a body without a core. Hence it is unclear how the sculpture works. This, together with the size and ambiguous material, makes *BOGUS I* a sinister – ghostly – creature, not only merely present as a dynamic shape, but also reminding of industrial sites in a crossover with entertainment culture.

The mysterious aspect of this *BOGUS I* – a synonym for fake – relates to Fried's account of *how the experience of coming upon literalist objects unexpectedly – for example, in somewhat darkened rooms – can be strongly, if momentarily, disquieting* (1995, 128). For Fried, but we might say for the spectator of *BOGUS I* as well, the disquieting effect of the enormous inflatables is caused by their *effect of presence* in the space, and the suspicion that they have an *inner, even secret life*. [...] *Pneumatic structures can be described as hollow with a vengeance* (Fried, 1995, 129). A notion that circulated in the polemic Fried was part of, was anthropomorphism. Fried and minimalist artists like Robert Morris or Donald Judd reproached each other of anthropomorphism in the art they defended. The latter accused 'sculpture' of being anthropomorphic because of an internal relationality and naturalistic actions (Fried, 1995, 119), the former indicates that literalist art's *quality of having an inside is almost blatantly anthropomorphic* (Fried, 1995, 129).

Verdonck's objects, however, also surpass anthropomorphism, and lead a life of their own. Even when evoking personification and alluding to human activities in the case of the *DANCER* series, the figure's objecthood brings about new, nonhuman properties. Especially for those figures who don't have direct anthropomorphic aspects, such as *BOGUS I*, animation suggests more than a merely 'being animated', and this is where Verdonck's figures differ fundamentally from Fried's description of how in minimalist art

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<sup>99</sup> *BOGUS I* is an installation that was part of the décor of *Untitled* but it is also presented in visual arts contexts as an installation. *BOGUS II* is a variation on the same concept and technical principles and is part of the installation circuit *IN VOID* (2016), which will be discussed more extensively in chapter 2.6.3.

works, [l]ike the shape of an object, the materials do not represent, signify or allude to anything (1995, 141). *BOGUS I* is 'literal' insofar as an important part of its dramaturgy is a profound research in the material used and in pneumatics. And indeed, the scale and size generate a presence that invites the onlooker to relate to it and to feel small, unsettled, astonished and fascinated. The material's uncertain properties, the seemingly autonomous rhythm of the tubes going up and down and the sound thus produced, reflect on how apparatuses increasingly become intangible and how their function and properties beyond direct instrumental use escape us. This escape makes these shiny objects rather opaque.

The glitter of the fabric generates associations with more commercial, kitschy and financial spheres. It is not only what objects do, but also what they are worth, that is increasingly a mystery. Their market value appears to be the consequence solely of speculation and no longer the value of the raw materials themselves. This would be what Marx called the commodity fetish, and it is as will see, part of the philosophical and political critique the dramaturgical strategies for the performativity of object-figures can lead to. The name 'bogus' is also reminiscent of the word 'bogey', an evil spirit, a source of fear; *BOGUS I* is a materialization of the false ghosts that haunt us, or from a different temporal perspective, they are what remains after the human and testify of what led to the disappearance: overabundant capitalism mounting to war and ecological depletion. At the same time, they are what they are: inflatable tubes.<sup>100</sup> If literalist objects indeed are *nothing other than a plea for a new genre of theatre* (Fried, 1995, 125), then in Verdonck's case, this is a demand for a theatre of performative objects and desubjectified human performers, figures critically reflecting the apparatus that constitutes and captures them, i.e. a demand for an apparatus-posthumanist performing arts.

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<sup>100</sup> The size of these inflatable sculptures reminds us of the statues on Easter Island, the Moai, who were an important dramaturgical reference for the conception of especially *BOGUS II*. Referring to the study of Jarred Diamond, Harald Welzer connects the size of these Moai to the decline of the civilization on Easter Island (or Rapa Nui as it called by its natives). In a dispute, two tribes competed in building the largest sculptures, and to transport them they needed substantial amounts of wood. In the end, all the island's trees had been felled and this led to scantier food supplies, starvation, mass mortality and cannibalism (Welzer, 2012, 51-53). The story of Rapa Nui is emblematic of a society that destroys itself by overexploitation and an excessive urge for 'bigger and better' in a struggle for superiority. The Moai represent the beauty of destruction, but their story warns us against repeating this on a global scale. The worship of capitalist 'gods' such as endless growth and external appearances often end up with the reverse.

### 2.3.2 Uncanny things

Animism, anthropomorphism, theatricality, performativity, objecthood and projection all lead to a sensation that interconnects all of these creative strategies and their reception: the uncanny or *das Unheimliche*. The notion of the uncanny was most famously described in Sigmund Freud's essay with the same title, where it pointed at the feeling of unease that arises when something familiar suddenly becomes strange and unfamiliar (1978 [1919]; Masschelein, 2011, 1). The installation *PELLET* (cf. cover image) is such an uncanny figure. *PELLET* was created within the framework of *K, a society* (2010), an installation circuit based on the life and work of Franz Kafka. A large inflatable ball, with a diameter of over four meters, fills almost the whole space in which it is exhibited. A purplish light sets the room in half-darkness with a lot of shadows. *PELLET* is made of a fabric of recuperated materials, more commonly known and used as the gray fabric dispersed with colored threads rough blankets are made of. Due to the purple light and the ball shape, this fabric is not immediately recognisable. The density of the object is unclear, appearing at once heavy, like a planet, and light and airy like a balloon or even a virtual projection. Indeed, many fellow spectators touched the ball as if to reassure themselves of its physical presence and to have an impression of what it is.

When presented in the circuit of *K, a society*, a guide leading the small group of spectators from one installation to the next, positions himself next to *PELLET* and tells the story *Die Sorge des Hausvaters* (*The Cares of a Family Man*). This short story by Kafka presents the character Odradek, a little creature consisting of threads, a star-shaped figure and a little stick. The family man from the title is indeed worried by Odradek, who comes by his house now and then and who is always very friendly. His main concern, which closes the story, is that this creature will survive him by far – leaving the reader behind wondering whether living *things* can actually die, confronting organic with inorganic 'life'. There is also something funny – in both the sense of odd and humorous – to this story. Especially the housefather himself, and his astonishment and impotent politeness, is quite bizarre and yet he tells us something about the relation between humans and apparatuses. One way to read the father's surprised and slightly concerned reaction to Odradek, is naïve and docile, not unlike many reactions to new developments in technology today. The humour, however, does not diminish the dark undertone of the story and the uncanny, unsettling atmosphere is projected on *PELLET*. In my first experience of *PELLET*, while listening to the guide telling the story, my perception of the large ball was transformed and it became an object that might be alive or even worse: it might crush the guide standing next to it. This presence caused by the juxtaposition with Kafka's story, literally creates an uncanny effect: it makes something familiar into something strange, increasing the presence and potential agency of the object. In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett similarly suggested that *The Cares of a Family Man* brings to the fore the becoming of things (2010, 8).

When presented without the guide (which occurs among others in *IN VOID*), *PELLET*'s mysterious materiality reminds of Odradek as well. The uncertainty as to what this figure 'is', is also a result of a failed process of projection and anthropomorphism: it stops with the sensation that it is 'present', further empathy (as in *DANCER #1 & 3*) is thwarted, and the object's actual objecthood comes to the fore. Unable to project or to anthropomorphize, that is, to humanize nonhuman entities, the traditional humanist conception of theatre as *training humans in humanity by means of identification with that which is presented as human* (Haas in Stalpaert, van Baarle & Karreman, forthcoming) is replaced by a posthumanist performativity that combines identification with estrangement. We have perhaps for the first time in history managed to build machines we don't fully understand. In a time in which technology (cf. Žižek's classification of modern and postmodern technology in 1.1.4) becomes an increasingly opaque *presentation of an impenetrable*, the disappearance of *the need to understand, explain and address the (too complex to grasp and address) causes of feared dangers* is the political equivalent of this opacity (Rouvroy, 2011, 128). The proliferation of apparatuses that make the insight in their workings impossible, leaves their users, spectators and constituents unaware and thus docile through a process of short-circuiting (cf. supra). The possibility that machines 'lie' and hide their actual purpose (i.e. the *Gestell* or apparatus they operate within) holds a performativity that stands in contrast to the object's sincerity as described above (2.3.1).

The proliferation of apparatuses and the shift toward predominantly desubjectifying processes, estranges human beings increasingly from their own inventions and organizational, political, social and economic systems: we do not longer understand them or recognize them as 'our' creations and 'creators'. *PELLET*'s uncanny materiality brings this not-knowing to the fore and renders uncanny what before seemed obvious. Uncanny, as the return of something familiar turned strange, is then that object that reveals itself as an apparatus and is doubly familiar: made by humans and operating on the ontological level of their (desubjectifying) subject formation. The partial anthropomorphization of the object-apparatus reminds the spectator of how it is shaped by and part of 'the human', but its mysterious aspect points at how we do not know these apparatuses, and hence, what it is to be human.

Masschelein divides the reception and development of the uncanny during the final decades of the twentieth century *along two axes*.

The "postromantic/aesthetic" tradition emphasizes the semantic kernels of transcendence, the supernatural, and the occult. The "existential/post-Marxist" semantic line of alienation, strangeness and angst will emphasize the uncanny's relation to society, politics and ethics (Masschelein, 2011, 131).

In Verdonck's work, both 'lines' can be found, with the aesthetic (albeit not postromantic or monstrous in any sense<sup>101</sup>) as a means to critically reflect on the second line, namely existential alienation. 'Aesthetically', Verdonck's figures evoke an uncanny sensation because of the uncertainty of what they really *are*. Their blurring of subject and object, animate and inanimate, and life and death, but also beauty and destruction, desire and oppression, makes them difficult to categorize. A similar uncanny sensation often occurs in the experience of 'new' technologies: *the rise of new media, digital technologies, and the increased virtuality of communication also calls for notions that can capture their immaterial yet very strong presence in society, like spectrality, haunting, and animism* (Masschelein, 2011, 147). From an apparatus-posthumanist point of view, these more recent evolutions are emblematic of the (albeit changing) relation human beings have with apparatuses. Nevertheless, besides the recent tendency for desubjectification, the ontological nature of the relation has been there since the development of the Homo sapiens.

It is probably from this perspective that Douglas Coupland asserted that the uncanny is actually *an existential fear for the unpleasant aspects of our collective being that have so far not manifested themselves, but which with through A.I. might become terribly visible* (2016, 283, my transl.). This is also in a way what Freud means when in reference to a definition of the uncanny by Schelling, he formulates the uncanny as follows: *on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight* (1978, [1919], 224, 225). The uncanny is in this sense a strategy to create an alienation from objects, a category otherwise so 'familiar' as tools. Just as with Fried's criticism of objecthood, the uncanny has to do with the relation between spectator and object.<sup>102</sup>

Alternative interpretations of the uncanny reflect back on what it is to be human in a more direct way. Projection on objects and personifying them, *makes it seem that objects see you as you see them*, William Connolly writes. The uncanny arises then when *I feel myself looked at by the things*, which leads you to *feel yourself as object* (Connolly, 2010, 186). Not only does the figure's uncanniness call for a re-conceptualization of what 'human' and 'object' mean, it also provokes questions about one's own state of being. The uncanny then, is not limited to *the individual's uncertainty about another mechanical object*. It can make people *uncertain about whether they might themselves be mechanical, mere reproductions of other objects* (Nakamura, 2007, 11). One example Nakamura writes about, is the anime movie *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), directed by Mamoru Oshii. This film not only deals with the

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<sup>101</sup> The postromantic aesthetic is closely related to the fantasy genre as well as to science fiction, where the 'monstrous' is the repressed which returns and often represents a repressed subjectivity. In this sense, cyborg-posthumanism also relates to the notion of the uncanny, but with a different political and ethical undertone and aesthetic, relating to those elements discussed in chapter 1.1.

<sup>102</sup> Mark Fisher makes clear the 'locality' of the uncanny: *Freud's unheimlich is about the strange within the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange - about the way in which the domestic world does not coincide with itself* (2016, 10, emphasis by the author).

liveliness of artificial intelligent robots, but also with the ‘human’ fear of being a robot oneself, in a world in which the difference between artificial life and biological life can no longer be made. Increased and proliferated forms of automation, a cybernetic perspective, prescriptive and predictive big data marketing and government might create an uncanny feeling of being predictable, manageable, deployable, disposable and controllable – ‘like machines’.

Animism and animation are not only strategies at work in Verdonck’s figures, they are also a source of the uncanny sensation in Freud’s essay (1978 [1919], 241). Animism becomes political when it is a symptom of a socio-economic apparatus. In his genealogy of the commodity fetish in Western history, Agamben sees a transformation in the relation with objects, caused by their transformation as part of the capitalist apparatus and the changed mode and means of production as consequence of the Industrial Revolution. While this revolution was still in the midst of unfolding in first half of the nineteenth century, Jean-Jacques Grandville’s stories and drawings of animated objects and instruments *gave us one of the first representations of a phenomenon that would become increasingly familiar to the modern age: a bad conscience with respect to objects* (Agamben, 1993b, 47). The repression of the position and role of objects as apparatuses in the formation of human life is difficult to maintain when the performativity of objects becomes increasingly apparent. Moreover, circumstances of their production and consumption are often politically and ecologically problematic as well. The uncanny, as a return of the repressed lives of objects, is then another way to describe *the discomfort of man with respect to the objects that he himself has reduced to “appearances of things”*, and this discomfort is *translated, as it was already in the time of Bosch, into the suspicion of a possible “animation of the inorganic”* (Agamben, 1993b, 51) – precisely the unease that the house father in Kafka’s short story experiences when confronted with Odradek.

In an essay on the uncanny in Kafka’s oeuvre, psychoanalyst Lieven Jonckheere refers to two processes at work in the sensation of the uncanny, which offer an insight into Verdonck’s dramaturgy of uncanny figures as well, namely the ‘reality check’ and ‘the manipulation of the subject’s identifications’ (Jonckheere, 1993, 148, 149). Isolated from their psychoanalytic context (which would lead this analysis too far), reality check and identification are indeed two dramaturgical elements in Verdonck’s figures. Identification functions, as was already discussed, in terms of anthropomorphism and projection, and as such is subject to manipulation. The identification with (object-)figures goes hand in hand with a reality check, as on the one hand identification with objects already implies a disturbance of a reality in which objects are mute and instrumental. On the other hand, identification runs astray, as the reality check is thwarted by the uncertainty of how certain things work or function or what they precisely are, such as in *MASS*, *BOGUS I* and *PELLET*. For that matter, similar to many of Kafka’s characters, Verdonck’s human figures often also are not fully aware of their world, in the sense that they are fully absorbed in their state of being, which could be called a ‘negative von

Kleistian not-knowing'. This not-knowing is also transferred to the spectator. In this sense, the uncanny in Verdonck operates in two ways: on the one hand, to render uncanny again that which was accepted as normal (i.e. the performativity of objects and our lack of knowledge of it, as well as a certain conception of the human that is related to those convictions), and on the other hand, as a plea for a specific mode of not-knowing and potentiality. Accepting that it is impossible to understand *everything* and hence control everything as well, might be a first step in developing an alternative view on the production and use of technologies.

Kafka's Odradek also figures as the emblem of the changed relation between humans and things in Agamben's writings on commodity fetishism. The latter compares the fetish object to Winnicott's transitional objects – a theory also used by Stiegler – which leads him to conclude that in our current society,

things are not properly anywhere, because their place is found on this side of objects and beyond the human in a zone that is no longer objective or subjective, neither personal nor impersonal, neither material nor immaterial, but where we find ourselves suddenly facing these apparently so simple unknowns: the human, the thing (Agamben, 1993b, 59).

The changed status of the object (and ultimately the human as object) as a commodity fetish provides a larger frame for the strategies of personification, projection, anthropomorphism and animation, as it gives rise to a *human discomfort before the disturbing metamorphoses of the most familiar objects [...] objects lose their innocence and rebel with a kind of deliberate perfidy [...], they become animated with human feelings and intentions, they become discontented and lazy* (Agamben, 1993b, 47).<sup>103</sup> The separated object of commodification is alienated from us and our relation to the object has changed profoundly since the Industrial Revolution. From use value to exchange value, even to what Benjamin has called exhibition value, the object has moved away from us (Agamben, 2007b, 90; Benjamin 2007 [1968], 224). We are no longer users, but consumers and spectators. As a consumer, we can only destroy objects in our consumption of them; as a spectator, we can only look at or show objects, without really engaging in a relation of usufruct with them. Although the commodified object is out of use, cast away in a separated sphere, it retains its performativity. Lütticken writes with reference to Adorno that *'if the use-value of things dies', these alienated and hollowed-out objects can come to be charged with new subjectivity. While the things become 'images' of subjective intentions [... they]*

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<sup>103</sup> A famous passage on commodity fetishism in Marx' Capital (1867) presents a performative object, namely a dancing table: *It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will* (1976, 163, 164).

become a quasi-subject, one that offers a glimpse beyond the false objectivity constituted by the quasi-natural “necessities” ruling industrial production (Lütticken, 2010). These new subjectivities resulting from industrialization have an impact on their producers and consumers as well.<sup>104</sup>

Freud’s essay on the uncanny refers extensively to E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Der Sandmann* (1816), a short story in which a young man falls in love with an automaton, and is anguished by the figure of ‘the sandman’, who also figures as the creator of the automaton (1978 [1919], 227). This tale offers an insight in the potentially changed relations between people and between human beings and nonhumans, induced by the innovations of industrialization and mechanization. The automaton is a performative object-figure *avant la lettre*, hence it is worthwhile to go a bit deeper into its history, as it not only informs the theoretical concept of the figure but is part of an artistic genealogy of posthumanism and circulates in Verdonck’s dramaturgy as well. With accounts going back as far as the fourth century B. C., and automatons figuring in medieval mystery plays, automatons reached the peak of their popularity and refinement in the eighteenth century, with the famous creations by Jacques de Vaucanson (a flute player and a walking duck, made between 1738 and 1741) and Pierre & Henri Louis Jaquet-Droz, who made writing, drawing and piano-playing automatons (Feldhaus, 1968, 8, 9). The technical development that made more sophisticated machines possible was mechanical, and similar to the mechanics of the clockwork. Henri Louis Jaquet-Droz for example, was a watchmaker as well.

The clock, ordering time with a precision exceeding that of the human, was the metaphor for power and the working of the state: harmonic order, disciplined, balanced and predictable (Draaisma, 1990, 40-42). The power and estranging impact of automated time was reflected in the reaction to the automata shown at courts and fairs. *The machines operated by wheelwork represented the first mechanical processes that ran as imperturbable as natural processes* (Draaisma, 1990, 44). The uncanny sensation in front of such high-tech machines is also a consequence of a hurt *existential ego*, a human exceptionalism founded in the monotheistic religions, which has been falling apart since the end of the Middle Ages (Ito, 2016, 363). Where the first automatons generated a sensation of the uncanny in their reflection of a disciplined society, in which industrialization and an expanding political power were in full development, Verdonck’s contemporary automatons reflect on cybernetics as a logics placing human and machine (once again) on the same level, this

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<sup>104</sup> In the words of Agamben: *The degeneration implicit in the transformation of the artisanal object into the mass-produced article is constantly manifest to modern man in the loss of his own self-possession with respect to things. The degradation of objects is matched by human clumsiness, that is, the fear of their possible revenge* (1993b, 47). However, our clumsiness out of fear for the uncanny nature of the objects that have entered our daily living-sphere seems to be forgotten, something which Verdonck’s performative objects seek to counter.

time not in a disciplined society but in a psychopolitical society of control. The mechanical clockwork as an image of a perfect, transparent smoothly functioning state, is an object of desire (as ballet's virtuosity) that has not disappeared in neoliberal ideas on technocratic state functioning. Transparency is a next step in the standardization of which the clockwork was the emblem in the Renaissance, and which has led to a political system that *forces all processes to be transparent in order to operationalise and accelerate them* (Han, 2014, 52-53).

A deeper-rooted desire in the creation of automatons is that of Man wanting to be equal to God: the power to create life. In *ACTOR #1*, the tryptic of performing figures in the gray zone between object and subject was followed by a coda in the form of a short video in which philosopher of logic and mathematician Jean Paul Van Bendegem tells about the history of the homunculus, literally the 'little human'. In the transition from Middle Ages to Renaissance, alchemists sought to understand and reproduce the act of creating life. However, they strived to create a small version of the human, *as a maquette*, Van Bendegem recounts. The desire to control and steer the world and the human to the extent of controlling the creation of life, leads – in analogy with the aforementioned apparatuses that escape control – to a destructive creature, as fictional characters as the monster of Frankenstein or the Golem demonstrate. Moreover, as *ACTOR #1* also suggests, in making a technological 'double' the human makes himself superfluous.

With the evolution of technology, the self-image of the human has also changed. Whereas at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution watches and other mechanical 'machines' were used as a metaphor for the human organism, the past decades the computer and the cybernetic algorithm have become models through which to think the human.<sup>105</sup> Draaisma points at an interesting analogy between the clockwork and the computer, namely that they both create the conditions for their own multiplication and dissipation (1990, 81, 82). Whereas in 1990 Draaisma saw the auto-reproduction in the dynamics of how to be compatible – smaller organizations had to computerize to keep up with larger institutions and ultimately individuals as well – today, with the automation of the fabrication of computers and other technological devices, this dynamics is supplemented with that of apparatuses literally creating other apparatuses. Moreover, with the Internet of things, the interconnections through on- and offline networks of 'smart objects' – the self-proliferations of machines seems to have entered a next phase. As Harman rightly points out, *the vast majority of relations in the universe do not involve human*

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<sup>105</sup> De Martelaere argues that these models demonstrate a shift from religious to technological anthropocentrism: whereas in earlier times man was considered to be shaped after God's image, now he (and for that matter, the 'entire universe') is shaped after a human creation, namely cybernetic technologies (2007, 12, 13). This creates a strange circle in which man is shaped after man, auto-affirming himself, inevitably leading to hybris and violence, as we shall see in the chapter on the phantasm.

beings [...], a truly pro-object theory needs to be aware of relations between objects that have no direct involvement with people (2016, 6).

In the world of artificial intelligence, not all automatons aim to be androids, that is, shaped after the human like the homunculus. The letting go of the human shape in the development of automatons, smart robotic machines and artificial intelligence resonates with how in the Turing test the human apparition is also left outside of the equation and focuses primarily on communication and conversation. Turing and other designers of tests for artificial intelligence were occupied with a Cartesian definition of consciousness, however, what remains interesting for Verdonck's work and apparatus-posthumanism in general, is that the shapes artificial 'life' and 'intelligence' can take, are not limited to the human figure. Indeed, a grinding wheel, an iron bar, a piston or inflatable sculptures already have the 'effects' of a humanoid machine and because of their perceived simplicity, they gain a clarity and refer to how apparatuses work and affect beyond the mere technological 'trick' or application.

Another of Hoffmann's short stories dealing with uncanny encounters with machines, *Die Automate* (written in 1814), recounts the events that follow the demonstration of a fortune teller automaton. The story evolves into a reflection on the nature of music, as the creator of the fortune teller also appears to have made a series of music automatons, which profoundly unsettle their listeners. Verdonck's *DEAD BRASS BAND*, a robotic, automated orchestra, finds itself on the threshold between affinity and alienation, between cute and uncanny. Conceived as part of the theatrical performance *H, an incident* (2013), based on the life and work of Russian writer Daniil Kharmis (1905-1942), this automated orchestra plays tunes composed especially for them. The ten instruments – a snare drum, triangle, melodica, trumpet, two sousaphones, cymbals, tambourine, bass drum, and a Hammond organ – are built by the Decap Herentals company, known in Belgium and abroad for its automated organs. The automation implies that the instruments 'play' themselves, but they still receive input via a wireless MIDI signal. For the drums, that means that their sticks are activated, fully automating the playing of the drums. For other instruments, like the sousaphones, there is a small speaker placed in the mouth piece, so the sound still goes through the whole instrument, which gives it a 'live' sound. The instruments are attached to a black rod standing on small, low robotic platforms (covered by a black 'dress') that are steered through a complex software, which allows the robots to execute group choreographies that consist of patterns and routes. A small LED light, also attached to the same rod, points at the instruments and this creates the effect of floating instruments in the black box.

In Hoffmann's short story, the audience refutes the mechanical instruments, stating that they play without expression and in this way destroy the essence of music as medium of expression of the human soul. Indeed, at first sight the music produced by Verdonck's brass band might be *das Tote, Starre der Maschinenmusik* (Hoffmann, 1976 [1819-1821], 372) but the choreography of the instruments is one of the elements that makes this music

come to life. The technological imperfections of the robots that make some movements less fluent and the programmed hesitations and mistakes in the music increase affinity and hence, anthropomorphism and personification. However autonomous it may act and appear, the orchestra continuously emphasizes the absence of the human from a rather typically human activity: music. The instruments continue without their players, in a particular kind of funeral march, a *danse macabre*, or an elegy. *DEAD BRASS BAND*, the title itself reminds already of brass bands playing at memorials, has a spectral quality. Not only because these instruments are alive when they shouldn't be, like in the drawings of animated instruments by Grandville that scared Baudelaire so much (Agamben, 1993b, 51), but because they are a continuing remnant of human creativity. The music they make in *H, an incident* is not electronic or noise – more explicitly 'machinic' sounds – but because of its instrumentation resembles 'human' ensembles, bands, that play classic and more popular tunes. The spectrality of abandoned, yet still playing automated instruments leads to a different perspective on anthropomorphism. It is not simply that human features are projected on the instruments, or that they are merely animated or personified objects. Their spectrality, like in *BOGUS I*, refers to the human absence in a potentially literally *post*-human future or a condition in which the position and definition of 'the human' are radically altered, that is, if not absent, then as a mute, useless, docile remnant.

### 2.3.3 Bringing about the true technology

In apparatus-posthumanism, the literal performativity of apparatuses in the form of objects, machines or other technologies in terms of (perceived) agency and affect, is one important element for the performing arts. Another feature is related to a particular perspective on technology, as apparatus, from the position of the artist in the creative process. Laermans already pointed out that 'dance in general' means choreographic attention for nonhuman actants in the performance. In an apparatus-posthumanist artistic practice, this attention is not limited to the actual score or performance, but already starts in phases of design and conception, having a far-going impact on the creative process and its eventual outcome. The creative process is an interesting phase to discuss when it comes to how reflection and critique on the apparatus-posthumanist condition can lead to a different art practice, one that not merely accepts a dystopic reality, but also seeks to *détourner* by working differently, relating differently to the materials, objects and technologies one engages with.

Verdonck's artistic practice in this sense, is deeply co-creative. Mostly during the creative process of *IN VOID* (which ran from 2015 to 2016), I could observe and experience how the performativity of objects on stage and in the content already begins in the workshop, in the dramaturgical conversation that is then infused with technical

information and enriched with technical specialists. In various interviews and in the book on *END*, Verdonck himself offers insights into how he makes space for the agency of the apparatuses during the creative process. However, I will approach this creative process not merely as an ethnographer, but as a practice that resonates with larger political-philosophical frames (Agamben, Stiegler) and the analytical posthumanist frames of Harman, Latour and Morton. Before going deeper into the co-creative processes in the work of Verdonck, both from his perspective as well as from his performers', different perspectives on how to relate to apparatuses will be analyzed in relation to *DANCER #2*. This is an installation that was shown as work in itself, as part of a theatrical performance (*END*) and as part of an installation circuit (*IN VOID*). Through this installation, Agamben's notions of 'true technology', 'new use' and 'profanation' can be introduced, as well as how his ideas on relating to technology position Agamben toward humanism and other thinkers such as Stiegler. Object-figures are not a matter of taking control again over objects, as we have argued already, it is precisely the aim to acknowledge both their agency and the user's, the spectator's as well as the artist's own zones of non-knowledge in their (fundamental and everyday) relation with them. Therein lies a politics of potentiality that is able to disrupt the apparatuses of desubjectification.

In discussing Verdonck's co-creative practice, two other models will be introduced, as they enable to discuss and open up the agency and being of objects. Actor Network Theory (ANT), whose most prominent founder is Bruno Latour, allows to include objects in the analysis of events. Object-oriented ontology (OOO), whose most elaborate thinker is Graham Harman, offers a different perspective on what an object is, what we can and cannot know about it, and how we might unveil some of their qualities. However, both ANT and OOO are rather descriptive systems. They enable to map more precisely some aspects of how things are and act in the world, however, they do not take into account the political and governmental aspects that the apparatus and to a larger extent, Agamben's thinking do include.<sup>106</sup> When OOO and ANT are used here, it is to acknowledge their relevance to the expanding field of posthumanist thinking and artistic practice, to find some points of connection with Agamben's thinking on the apparatus, as well as to be able to describe an artistic practice that takes objects into account in a pragmatic way.

### 2.3.3.1 Using technology

In 2.2.2, the use of the body as matter, as a desubjectified form of life, was explored as a form of resistance, of a latent potentiality in the destruction by apparatuses. In an article

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<sup>106</sup> Latour does have a political aspect to his writings, especially in the more recent publications, such as *Face à Gaïa* (2015), in which he pleads for an open political confrontation with climate deniers. On a more abstract level, Latour's parliament of things seeking to represent nonhuman entities is part of this political side of his work.

on Enlightenment thinking in Foucault and Agamben, De Boever explores different options on how to relate to apparatuses (2010). De Boever points at how Agamben's resistance against the apparatus, mostly formulated in terms of 'inoperativity', 'new use', 'suspension' and 'profanation' (notions that nuance the accelerationist, messianic tendency in his work, and that will be elaborated and rendered operational further on) might remain mystical and rather tends to push for a radical rejection of the apparatus, as Agamben also writes that it is *[i]mpossible for the subject of an apparatus to use it "in the right way"* (2009b, 21). De Boever compares this position to how the Enlightenment philosophers, more specifically Kant, positioned themselves vis-à-vis technology. An enlightened relationship with technology seems foremost to require an emancipation of technology. *To become enlightened means to become independent from technical supplements* (De Boever, 2010, 16). Agamben's position thus seems to be a radical emancipatory position, De Boever claims. However, he does not point at the position toward subjectivity, which might clarify the different stakes of both philosophers. Whereas Kant's emancipation is supposed to lead to an independent, rational individual subject, Agamben's rejection of the apparatus is part of the development of a form of life that goes beyond the subject – which is produced by apparatuses – toward a whatever singularity as form-of-life.

Stiegler adopts an in-between position. His concept of the *pharmakon* seeks to find a more balanced definition of apparatuses, all the while acknowledging dependence on them. Through the concept of the *pharmakon*, Stiegler points at a latent ambivalence in all technologies, as they have both poisonous and productive features: *the pharmakon is at once what enables care to be taken and that of which care must be taken – in the sense that it is necessary to pay attention: its power is curative to the immeasurable extent that it is also destructive* (2013, 4). Because of the short-circuiting of relations to *pharmaka*, their poisonous qualities have become predominant. What is needed is an 'adult' relation toward *pharmaka*, a relation that is currently thwarted through proletarianization, distraction and overstimulation. Stiegler pleads for care and responsibility as attitudes for an *Aufklärung*, a renewed emancipation of apparatuses (2010a). He equates the *pharmakon* and Agamben's definition of the apparatus – with special attention for Agamben's example of the cigarette – *which adds the most volatile energy to this series of pharmaka: their poisonous dimension, leading directly, for example, to sickness through dependence and addiction, which is significantly more than a simple alienation and gives the term 'capture' its urgency* (Stiegler, 2010a, 161). However, he reproaches Agamben of excluding the curative side of the *pharmakon's* economy, leaving *the poison without remedy* (Stiegler, 2010a, 163).

Despite his assertion that there is no correct use of apparatuses, indeed excluding a pharmacological treatment, Agamben does propose some concepts for a resistance, which can be explored through the figure *DANCER #2* (2008, as part of *END*; 2009, as autonomous installation). This second variation on a nonhuman dancer is a V6 Alfa

Romeo engine that at certain moments ignites, accelerates until it nearly reaches its maximum speed, making an enormous noise and exhausting the smell of burned gasoline, before turning itself off. The sudden aggression of this machine and its locally polluting effects in terms of sound and air, reflect on globalized ecological issues as well as on the actual physical power of machines we humans build. *DANCER #2* shows the aggression and violence of speed and progress Paul Virilio wrote about in *Negative Horizon* (2008): *the technological motor resulted in the long-standing pursuit of the perpetuum mobile, and with it the release of this violence* (42, 43). Speed and mobility are forces that have not only enabled colonialism, war, globalization and industrialization, they are also two ‘desires’ of financial capitalism: immediate exchange – with crashes, devaluation and their violent consequences – and being unbounded by time or space. With concrete reference to the car, exposing its ‘heart’, the engine, which is usually hidden under shining metal hoods, is a step toward *understanding how [apparatuses] work so that we might, eventually, be able to stop them* (Agamben, 2002, 38). Separating the engine from its *carrosserie*, from its instrumental use, critically uncovers the larger apparatus from which it is part; *objects separated from their use become enigmatic and even unnerving* (Agamben, 2011c, 99).

*DANCER #2* is a good example of how Verdonck’s work brings the violence and poisonous impact of apparatuses to the fore, but his artistic use of machines also goes a step further and tries to bring this machine to a new use, evoking fascination and humour. Transposing an object from its usual context resembles Agamben’s description of a particular relation to technology that *mimics the forms of the activity from which it has been emancipated, but, in emptying them of their sense and of any obligatory relationship to an end, it opens them and makes them available for a new use* (2007b, 85-86). In *DANCER #2*, the engine still roars and exhausts (and it renders these features very explicit) but is also put to new use as a work of art. The exhibition of a machine goes further than the instrumental demonstration of technological novelties in an artistic context, a feature of cyborg-posthumanism that was criticized in 1.1.4. There is a dramaturgy behind this figure, which seeks to reflect on the apparatuses in which the engine operates. One aspect of this new use, is the deactivation of the initial apparatus, or to introduce another Agambenian notion: rendering the apparatus inoperative.

*Inoperativity is not left here to its own devices but instead becomes the opening, the "open-sesame," that leads to a new possible use* (Agamben, 2011c, 100). Agamben's own use of the notion of inoperativity refers to a particular property of a form-of-life as well as the rendering inoperative [*inoperoso*], literally without work – and hence without end, effect, or result – of apparatuses, both closely related. Inoperativity is part of what Agamben calls a *destituent power* that seeks to suspend the control of power over various aspects of life as opposed to a constituent power, focused on the exertion of power in a certain way.

[W]hat is in question is the capacity to deactivate something and render it inoperative – a power, a function, a human operation – without simply destroying

it but by liberating the potentials that have remained inactive in it in order to allow a different use of them (Agamben, 2015a, 273).<sup>107</sup>

As an installation, the engine of *DANCER #2* is fixed on a pedestal, and merely wastes energy, not moving or powering anything. However, it brings sheer energy in the space, bringing it close to being a marionette. It is a means without ends, a violence without goal (another feature of destituent power [Agamben, 2014, 340]), a pure energy or potentiality and as an object of craftsmanship, it has also a certain beauty. As part of the performance *END* the figure of the engine is even *being* moved and thus rendered passive in yet another way. It is attached to a rail and pulled over the stage, while burning gasoline and making an extremely loud noise, all for 'nothing' and thus once again revealing its naked power and force. Indeed, the aimlessness and emptiness after the thirty-second ignition of the engine point at a void. The engine of progress seems to run only for its own sake, the development and proliferation of apparatuses does not seem to be grounded and at their center there is, as we have already seen with the anthropological machine of Western modernity, a void. Speed, acceleration, accumulation, growth and expansion are auto-referential loops, all circling around a central void (cf. 2.6.3). *Speed [la vitesse] provokes the void [le vide] and the void [le vide], speed [le vite]*, Virilio wrote (2008, 46). *DANCER #2*'s dysfunctional usage of technology makes this engine undone and uncovers the void and contingency of growth and ecological disaster. Inoperativity is reached by creating at the same time suspension and function, and it leads to true technology: *true technology begins when man is able to oppose the blind and hostile automatism of the machines and learns how to move them into unforeseen territories and uses* (Agamben, 2011c, 99).

The process of bringing something to a new use in the creation of true technology, reversing the separation caused by commodification,<sup>108</sup> is called *profanation: once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use* (Agamben, 2007b, 77). Separation, a notion central to one of Agamben's key references, Guy Debord, is in

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<sup>107</sup> In Italian: *In entrambe è in questione la capacità di disattivare e rendere inoperante qualcosa - un potere, una funzione, un'operazione umana - senza semplicemente distruggerlo, ma liberando le potenzialità che in esso erano rimaste inattuuate per permetterne così un uso diverso* (Agamben, 2014, 345).

<sup>108</sup> From the perspective of speculative realism, there has been criticism on writings on objects that is related to commodity fetishism. Levi Bryant has pointed out the necessity to add some more 'materialism' to a Marxist-inspired materialism, which is too focused on discursive systems. In his analysis of commodity fetishism, Marx indeed points out that the object becomes a set of social relations and of production and consumptions circumstances, which might actually obfuscate the intrinsic power of things. Indeed *[e]verything became an alienated mirror of humans*, but focusing too much on the human side of objects, keeps the agency of things under the radar (Bryant, 2013, 3). What Verdonck does in his work with objects is a combination of animating them in order to 'show' the animation that fetishism infuses objects with, and a highly physical presence of the object as *object* and of its matter. *DANCER #2* is an image of an ecological catastrophe, of the violence of speed and dangerous beauty of technology, but at the same time it produces a very loud sound and nearly choking emission, which makes the material presence of the performative object undeniable.

the former's analysis traced back as a secularized version of sacralisation. Separation and sacralisation are realized by apparatuses and can be considered synonymous to capture. With reference to Ancient Roman religious law, Agamben recounts how when objects (and today, for that matter, more 'human' elements such as the body, sexuality, emotions or communication) are 'sacred' *they were removed from the free use and commerce of men* (2007b, 73). The process of profanation is a political one, in that it reverses the processes of separation. This is not a return to an original use, or a more natural state, rather, profanation is a play with the field of tensions that were produced by the separating apparatus: *to profane means not simply to abolish and erase separations but to learn to put them to a new use, to play with them* (Agamben, 2007b, 87).

Play is one of the profaning tactics Agamben suggests to render the separating apparatus inoperative. Apparatus-posthumanism thus not only means a particular conception of the world and the human that allows to describe and understand the current condition, it also allows for a new use, inoperativity and profanation of the separations installed by apparatuses, the kind of use that has been discussed in the case of the marionette in *I/II/III/IIII* and *that does not coincide with utilitarian consumption* (Agamben, 2007b, 75, 76). Creative and artistic practices are close to this misappropriation or hijacking of apparatuses. Verdonck's 'play' consists then, of all the dramaturgical strategies that have been discussed in this chapter so far, in making the human body into an object, anthropomorphism, personification, animism, automation and the uncanny. As in the marionette, the structures in which the human performers find themselves remain steering and directing in a particular course. In the creative process, the machines, software, materials and objects Verdonck works with, also exert a certain 'will'. The difference with destructive apparatuses that produce separations is that in a profanatory practice, the steering features of objects and machines are no longer captured in power structures, but belong to use. Play thus also occurs in the creative process, when it comes to working with machines and other objects and materials. In Verdonck's radical rethinking of what theatre is, of what performs and of how to perform, in a critical reflection on the working of political, economic and technological apparatuses, the unity is broken between *the myth that tells the story and the rite that reproduces and stages it* (Agamben, 2007b, 75). Form and content relate in a new way, namely one taking the apparatus – both the one represented and the one created, as well as that of the artistic discipline (i.e. the theatre or the museum) – into account. However, Agamben characterizes play as *episodic*: apparatuses recuperate and adapt to capture that what has been profaned. Play thus remains a continuous task, an ongoing search to bring to new use (Agamben, 2007b, 87).

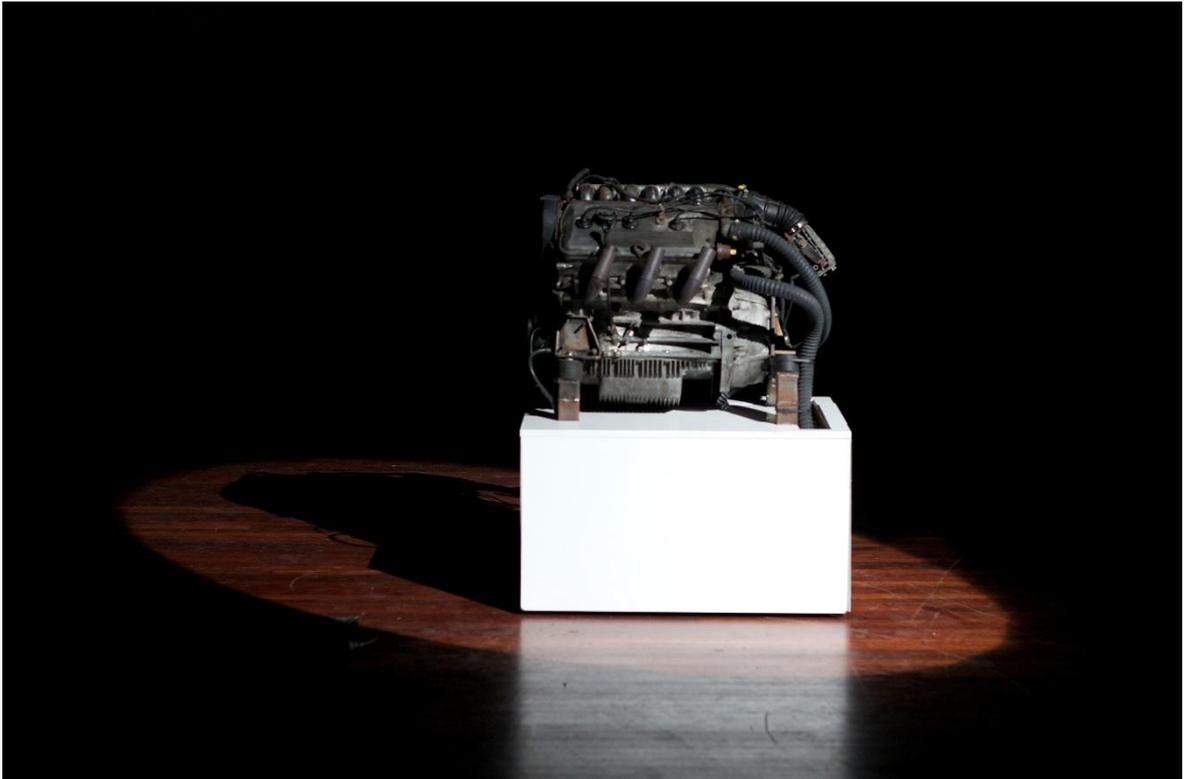


Figure 14 Kris Verdonck / A Two Dogs Company: *DANCER #2* (2009) © Hendrik De Smedt

In the closing remarks of his article on the semiotics of objects and subject in the theatre, Veltruský suggests how the most forms of civilization

so far have by the most varied conventions broken up the direct relationship between man and his environment. On the example of action in the absence of the subject we have seen how precisely these conventions can be used to link together unconventionally various aspects of reality. [...] This is precisely where the theater can show new ways of perceiving and understanding the world (1964, 91).

The process of separation, followed by the playful rearrangement of elements that fosters an alternative perspective on a particular condition in the world, is a way to describe Verdonck's mode of working with apparatuses that is close to Agamben's notion of profanation. This process is also close to a strategy for gaining knowledge on objects, that was developed in a different philosophical context, namely Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology.

Harman's object-oriented ontology can be considered a posthumanist analytical method, without a positive or negative evaluation of how objects work and are in the world. A brief survey into Harman's thinking deepens the understanding of how Verdonck's 'play' works. For Harman, the object is the basic entity in the world: *in a broad sense that includes human beings along with everything else: copper wire, weather systems, fictional characters, reptiles, artworks, protons, transient events and numbers* (Harman, 2014). Objects occur as sensual objects and real objects, and have sensual and real qualities. Sensual objects and qualities exist only in our perception, whereas real objects and real

qualities are withdrawn in obscurity. There are many differences between Harman and Agamben, with (the lack of) politics as main distinction, but they share an influence by Heidegger's tool analysis when it comes to objects. Harman's division of sensual objects and real objects goes back to Heidegger's notions of ready-to-hand [*Zuhandenheit*] and presence-at-hand [*Vorhandenheit*], notions that were already mentioned in 2.3.1 (Harman, 2011, 39). Objects that are ready-to-hand, such as the aforementioned hammer, are both withdrawn (a feature Harman emphasizes) and yet concretely ready for instrumental usage. When objects break, their instrumental use is thwarted and they present themselves 'qua object' or in some cases, as was already argued, their materiality comes to the fore. What remains then is *mere availability with no aim* (Agamben, 2011c, 99). For Harman, the broken tool is a way to disclose qualities of withdrawn objects, going beyond the sensual object ready-to-hand (2011, 104).

According to Harman, *we gain access to [objects] only by indirect, allusive, or vicarious<sup>109</sup> means* (2016, 17). Elsewhere, he writes that, *[t]rue nearness to the thing comes not from making it as close as possible in physical or mental terms. Instead, true nearness requires distance. [...] Technology turns everything into an accessible surface, devoid of distance* (2009a, 21, 22). To overcome technology's proximity and to attain insight from a distance, Harman suggests processes of fission and fusion to bring a real object in connection to its sensual qualities and of fission and theory to discern a sensual object's real qualities. It is the first strategy that interests us here and that implies that *the bond between object and quality must be dissolved and a new one produced* (Harman, 2011, 102). Similar to profanatory play, the object has to be displaced out of its usual instrumental use and its relations to its environment have to be changed. Bringing it into the art context is a first step (fission); putting it to new use through a form of play is a second phase (fusion). In Verdonck's work with objects similar processes can be discerned. Technologies, machines and objects become part of the creation process of a performance or installation. The information (in the form of sensual qualities) we receive about these objects, is what Harman calls 'allure': *there is an allusion to the silent object in the depths that becomes vaguely fused with its legion of sensual qualities* (Harman, 2011, 104). Through allure, we get access to hidden qualities of the object that go beyond material components or social characteristics. This allure can be uncanny if it presents an object's very active and lively nature or more specifically a machine or an object's being part of a larger *Gestell* or apparatus.

If we apply Harman's theory to *DANCER #2*, the first step to be described would be the showing of the engine outside of its usual context, a car on the road outside, and moreover, naked instead of hidden under the car's hood. The sound, exhaust and smell

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<sup>109</sup> In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben analyzes the functioning of power as an economy of vicariousness, of representational power, in which kingdom and government, and the different powers in democracies (legislative, judicial and executive), *every power has a vicarious character, deputizes for another [fa le veci di un altro]. This means that there is not a "substance" of power but only an "economy" of it* (Agamben, 2011a, 141).

are sensual qualities that all refer to the real object of the ‘engine’ (and no longer to the object ‘car’), which we then can associate through *causation* with the real qualities of power and pollution and strangely enough – not categorizable as sensual quality or real quality – beauty. In turn, the engine alludes to other objects, for some of which it is vicarious, such as climate change, or an ‘invisible’ lobby keeping fossil fuels legal. However, allure, fission and fusion are for Harman not ways to *change* objects or apparatuses, they are limited to gathering knowledge about them. What Agamben would describe as the political gesture of (temporarily) restoring the potentiality of an object is in Harman’s thinking merely a methodological tool to talk about objects beyond their actual actions (Harman, 2016, 52).

### 2.3.3.2 Co-creative networks

Play and a new use of captured technologies and materials are not new strategies, nor specific to this particular period of time (although one could say that the need for it has grown). A new use of production technologies and materials was also a topic in a different period and location, namely the Bauhaus. Visual artist and theatre maker Oscar Schlemmer’s ‘figurines’ belong to the dramaturgical frame of reference for Verdonck’s figures, as Vanhoutte also noted (2010). When we look deeper in the artistic and socio-political project of the Bauhaus, there is another connection with the working method of Verdonck that is worth mentioning here as the Bauhaus can be considered a precursor to an apparatus-posthumanist creative practice. The school, founded in Weimar in 1919, searched to integrate art, life and technology in a time of increased globalized industrialization, of which the First World War had shown the potentially destructive capacities. To *navigate between commodity aesthetics and consumer culture* (Bittner, 2009, 332), the Bauhaus experimented to find a new balance between craftsmanship, art and industrial production methods and materials, by integrating fine arts, applied arts and an interdisciplinary approach. It was not a matter of disavowing industrialization nor an enthusiasm for it, rather of finding a way to deal with it (Stalpaert, forthcoming, 341).

Verdonck and the Bauhaus (and for that matter, the historical avant-garde) do meet in their use of technology *in the form of a functional but nonpurposive technē* (Rutsky, 1999, 76). Against utilitarianism and instrumental technology, Schlemmer, wrote that *we accept these wonders of utility as being an already perfected art form, while actually they are only prerequisites for its creation* (1961a, 31). In the Bauhaus Theater Workshop, questions that matter for the study of the figure in Verdonck’s work were posed, such as the potential of play with new industrial materials and technologies as an antidote for the alienation the Industrial Revolution had caused. What interests us here, is not the end products that came out of the Bauhaus school, but rather the design process. On a conceptual level, this means a commitment toward new technologies and materials, not only by bringing them in the theatre or the arts, but more specifically by changing them, re-appropriating them

by ‘using’ them for a different end. On a practical level, the Bauhaus’ combination of conceptual, functional and aesthetic work with craftsmanship and fundamental knowledge of materials and techniques resonates with Verdonck’s co-creative method. I call it co-creative, as the creative process implies a strong input from technicians, costume designers, sound designers and programmers, which is in turn a consequence of Verdonck’s attempt to ‘listen to the bloody machine’ and hence to acknowledge the object’s influence, materiality and impact on the creative process as well. The ‘co’ thus involves other human beings as well as objects and their technical properties and affordances.

The processes and as we have seen, also artistic strategies of profanation, fission and fusion all displace the object in order to release it from a separation or to bring it forth from a state of withdrawal. Withdrawal is a feature, which an important interlocutor of Harman, Bruno Latour, also ascribed to beings of technology, albeit from a different position. According to Latour, agency of nonhuman elements is rendered invisible by the modern conception of the world that separates the social from nature, subjects from objects. This leads to an overestimation of human agency in some cases, and underestimation in others. *On beings of technology, silence is imposed, they just have to be effective* (Latour, 2013, 208). Denying agency to objects not only obscures our understanding of human actions, decisions, and environments, it also limits our understanding of how objects come about and function. Actor-Network Theory was developed precisely to restore this lacuna and considers *any thing that changes a state of affairs* as an actor or actant. *Animation is the essential phenomenon* (Latour, 2014, 8), the agency of things only differs on the level of visibility or *figuration* (Latour, 2007, 72).

ANT considers objects as part of larger networks or collectives, which in order to stay intact have to be kept invisible. A performative network presents itself as a unitary or invisible element, for example, the internet. John Law, one of the pioneers of ANT, states that to keep networks operative and thus invisible is a matter of power (Law, 1992, 6). In addition to the silencing of objects, *technology seeks to be forgotten [...], it likes to hide* (Latour, 2013, 217). One of the political consequences, is that a human monopoly on agency prepares *the ground for social engineering on a grand scale, and smooth[ens] the path toward modernization* (Latour, 2007, 51). A more ‘realistic’ view on the world and a political gesture would be the development of what Weibel & Latour have called an *object-oriented democracy* (Weibel & Latour, 2005). What Latour has called *the parliament of things* (Latour, 1993, 144), can be inaugurated only when we reposition ourselves. The semi-circle of humans can then be joined by that of nonhumans, leaving modernity’s destructive illusions behind. Bringing objects into the social sphere and considering the ‘object side’ of social situations is ethical in the sense that we might for example deal with the exploitation of workers behind cheap consumable goods and with ecological issues by taking the materials used to produce for example smartphones into account. From the daily use of the smartphone, to the cobalt mines, civil wars and colonialism in Congo to

arms trade and topography: that is a network that could be behind an object. Verdonck's performances and figures seek to bring not only the qualities of the objects to the surface, but also implement the insight of their impact on us, or rather our dependence and ontological intertwinement with them.

These Latourian or object-oriented methodologies and modes of description are valuable to map the production process, to shed a different, more inclusive light on the performance and its elements, to analyze the performative entities but also to consider the actual creative process from the perspective of the artist. Both Latour's and Harman's systems are *methodological posthumanisms*, defined by Sharon as *the attempt to develop analytical tools that can conceptualize the inter-relationality as a significant aspect of what it means to be human* (2015, 34). These methodological posthumanisms, most often situated in the fields of science and technology studies and contemporary philosophy of technology, are termed *descriptive more than prescriptive or normative* by Sharon as well (2014, 36). It is not coincidental that in various publications, Latour adopts the perspective of the anthropologist, trying to describe practices, without politicizing them (e.g. Latour, 1999, 2014). However, we can immediately add that this might also be where ANT and OOO run short for an apparatus-posthumanist analysis, for they are unable to fully consider the politics of the apparatus as well as the creative process' aspect of potentiality that is essential for Agamben. The latter's notion of new use is not only a descriptive methodology, it requires a different relation between the maker and the object, where the maker takes time to discover the parameters and laws of the thing and includes these in his craftsmanship, his *métier*. This leads to a co-creation process, in which the 'co' implies a more humble position for the human, acknowledging the unknowable of the thing.

In the following paragraphs I use these methodological posthumanist frames to describe the creative process of Verdonck, in function of the political-philosophical analysis of both his oeuvre and in a broader sense, apparatus-posthumanist artistic practices. Such a methodological approach also implies asking different and additional questions in the (theoretical) analysis of the work: *The crucial question when observing a 'dance performance in general' is therefore not 'what does it mean?', but 'how does it work?' What are the logics or rationalities that govern the governing of the observed force-field* (Laermans, 2008, 13)? In the case of the creation of a work of art, this methodological approach – including technical, practical and other aspects that are not immediately part of the sign system of the work as it is perceived by spectators – becomes inevitably dramaturgical, as it is part of the process of transforming an idea, concept, topic, into a form.

If we would apply Latour's methodology to *DANCER #2*, besides Kris Verdonck as the director or artist, we would have to include the technicians who worked on the engine, the designer, the pedestal in its exhibition mode, the suspension equipment when being a figure in *END*, the other figures in the latter performance, as well as the other installations and the place where it is shown in case of the more static exhibition format.

Following reports by the technician involved, Herman Venderickx, the engine's network also includes a carbon dioxide counter to measure emissions to make sure the legal limit isn't exceeded. The petrol that was used and that (contrary to diesel) started the engine more easily and made a more aggressive noise, belongs to the engine's network as well (Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens, 2012, 198). Various networks are 'at work' in various temporalities (creation time, presentation time, an oeuvre, etc.). We can expand Laermans' notion of dance in general to quasi all apparatus-oriented post-anthropocentric performing arts, in which an assemblage or a network has been created with attention for the actants and actors in the network (Laermans, 2008, 12). A first 'object' of such a methodology would thus be the performance itself. In the book where reports such as those by Venderickx were gathered, *Listen to the Bloody Machine. The Creation of Kris Verdonck's END* (2012), Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens seem to have followed a similar 'posthumanist' analytical perspective, in seeking to describe all aspects of the performance – which included several object-figures and human performers forming figures through their entanglement with a machine or object.<sup>110</sup>

The machines and objects were 'represented' by sketches, images, technical drawings, the technicians, designers, dramaturg, producers, interns and human performers engaging with them. In order to represent the nonhuman actors in conversations, anthropomorphism was often used. *DANCER #2*, for example, was nicknamed 'The Diva', for 'her' capricious behavior: *sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't* (designer Steven Blum in Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens, 2012, 118). However, I believe Harman rightfully points out a problem with ANT: it *reduces objects to their actions* and cannot take into consideration inactive objects or the transposition of objects into altered conditions (2016, 2). *DANCER #2* stays *DANCER #2*, even when it is presented in different contexts and network constellations.

OOO implies a different account of (the history or creation process of) 'objects', one that does not reduce objects to their actions or to their parts but rather formulates them, as we have seen, in terms of real and sensual objects and their qualities. As an alternative to actor-networks, Harman suggests we should talk about an object through its foundational symbioses: *We should think of an object as going through several turning-points in its lifespan, but not many. [...] This shifts the emphasis away from actors and actions, while providing new tools to take objects seriously even when they are not acting* (2016, 47). Going back

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<sup>110</sup> It is telling that a recent article on the creative practice of Verdonck, and more specifically the way he allows matter to unfold its agency, has been published in a journal on design, as Verdonck's work with materials and materiality indeed does happen for a sheer theatrical perspective. The author, Maaïke Bleeker, states that *the documentation of END presents an image of creation not as expression or externalization of ideas but as responding to material in exploratory interactions* and that *creating does not happen from a position outside but from enacting the potential of the material* (2017, 14, 17). Including as many people and perspectives on the creation process as possible and reasonable, is then a consequence of a network perspective on an artwork. This is a process Van Kerkhoven called *permanent dramaturgy* (2002 [1999], 198).

to *I/II/III/IIII* or *END* but also to *HEART* and *PATENT HUMAN ENERGY*, human performers could attain the status of ‘figure’ on stage only by way of, indeed, a symbiosis with an object or machine. The figure is not merely a network comprised of various human and nonhuman elements, its symbiosis communicates something beyond those material elements, namely a particular state of being, a condition in the world. Following Harman, symbiosis fundamentally alters the object thus shaped and in the case of the creation of a figure that has a human component and a nonhuman component, the figure is that new object. One could see this artistic symbiosis as a form of fission and fusion as well, separating the human performer from his or her autonomy, and separating the object from its instrumentality, fusing them in order to learn more about the suspension of the subject-object divide.

Not only the human performers in Verdonck’s work need to find a way of relating to the machine in which they are placed to become figures, also Verdonck and the technical team have to deal with the fact that *symbiosis is often not reciprocal* (Harman, 2016, 46). The machine is less flexible and less able to adapt, so it is the human actor that has to comply and has to, as the book title by Van Kerkhoven and Nuyens aptly exclaims, *listen to the bloody machine!* Teemu Paavolainen speaks of *affordances* that arise in relation to the object, a notion coming from ecology. *Unlike physical properties, thus, affordances only emerge in situated interaction within a given ecology, relative to an acting organism whether this be an individual or a species* (2010, 120, emphasis by the author). In the design of machines and technological set-ups, discovering and developing these affordances is an important aspect of ‘listening to the bloody machine’. The relationship between performers, technicians and director changes because of this as well, as the latter cannot force or enter in a dialogue with the machine in the same way as the performers or technicians do, which leads on another level to a greater autonomy, responsibility and recognition for all those collaborating. In *I/II/III/IIII* and *END*, we see how this co-creative practice leads to figures in a performance that also communicate that *to be a subject is not to act autonomously in front of an objective background, but to share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy [...], quasi-subjects* (Latour, 2014, 5, emphasis by the author). When the meaning of the figure falls together with the way it is constructed, the question, ‘how does it work?’, indeed doesn’t differ much from the question, ‘what does it mean?’, anymore.

Co-creation suspends the division between inactive objects and subjects endowed with agency. This requires a particular attitude for the people involved in the creative process. *A dialogue between subject and object, De Martelaere argues, still implies a latent dualism: the object is not the spectator and the spectator is not the object. It is only the ‘seer’ who listens to the object’s foreign language by being absorbed in it and by letting go his subjectivity* (2000, 57, my transl.). In several interviews, Verdonck has expressed this suspension of autonomy in

his authorship<sup>111</sup> as a conscious choice to let go off the idea of complete control of the elements he is working with.

I try to speak as much as possible about this in the sense of “they don't like to do this, this machine likes to do that”, and so on. I really try to humanize them as much as possible, just to keep trying to see them, regardless, as living creatures (Verdonck in Eckersall in Stalpaert, van Baarle & Karreman, forthcoming).

Listening to objects, then, is grasping how they might resist *the networks that have ordered them* (Law, 1992, 2). This resistance is a consequence of their own qualities or as Law states, *machines have their own preferences* (1992, 5). Allowing these preferences and qualities to unfold in an installation or performance breaks the existing power networks. Levy Bryant, a speculative realist, refers to what Sartre has called *technical intentionality*<sup>112</sup> to describe the agency of matter. Technical intentionality *arises not from the intellect and aims of designers, but from the things themselves [...], the ink pen calls for certain ways of being grasped* (Bryant, 2013, 15, 20). This last sentence resembles strongly Agamben's description of the apparatus, as he also gives the example of the pen as capturing and ordering a particular physical posture. Co-creation means considering the machine or object as an apparatus and letting it ‘govern’ within the creative process in a playful manner. Apparatus, then, also means that *what is produced is every bit as much the result of the exigencies of matter as the intentions of the craftsman* (Bryant, 2013, 21).

En travaillant avec de telles technologies on s'engage à constamment (re)définir sa propre position envers elles. Cela vous oblige en fait de développer un nouveau langage par le simple fait de travailler avec ces matériaux et technologies. Ainsi peut-on également éprouver ce que ces techniques et matériaux représentent alors pour soi-même, et réfléchir sur ce qu'elles peuvent signifier *pour* et communiquer à un public (Verdonck in van Baarle, forthcoming).

The central concept and the choice for the material are made by the artist, but once these choices have been decided upon, the artist also follows the properties of the material in the further creative process. However, this calls for craftsmanship. Different to the time of the Bauhaus movement, that still had close ties to the arts-and-crafts movement, craftsmanship and skillfulness today have become rarities in the West or are exported to low-wage countries around the globe, and then again fragmented, reduced and

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<sup>111</sup> A deconstruction of the subject implies a different form of authorship. However, as Laermans notes [e]ven in post-humanist times, we continue to need names and subjects that can be held responsible. The operative fiction called ‘author’ remains powerful despite its many deconstructions (2015, 238).

<sup>112</sup> Bryant mentions Sartre's example, who in turn referred to Lewis Mumford, *that because steam engines required constant care on the part of stokers and engineers, they encouraged a tendency towards large industrial plants* (Sartre 2004: 159) (Bryant, 2013, 19).

automated in the factory. We have lost the skills to play (not only when it comes to handiwork, but also in language, in movement, in politics) (Agamben, 2007b, 76). Play has become gamification: a management technique used both in marketing and politics to capture and control behavior in the infantile executing of a pre-existing path in search for a reward. To be able to play again, we need the skills to do so. To deactivate and play with the law, we need to study it, like Bucephalus the horse of Alexander the Great does in Kafka's story *The New Attorney* – the story which inspired Benjamin to write that *the gate to justice is learning* (2007b, 139) – Agamben refers to in a paragraph on play (2007b, 76). Working in a co-creative way with nonhuman actors requires skills, but it is not a restorative regaining of control. It is an exploration of how we can relate to apparatuses (systems and devices), re-appropriate them by bringing them to new use, rendering their standardized function inoperative, while reflecting precisely on their position and function as and within an apparatus.

This research into 'what objects want', the exercise of listening to the bloody machine, is a reaction to a loss of skill, of what Stiegler has called short-circuiting, or Agamben would call separation. *Nous avons perdu la plupart de nos métiers, surtout en Occident, ainsi que notre faculté à construire des objets. Nos usines se trouvent en Chine. Nous sommes en train de devenir une étrange société de divertissement* (Verdonck in van Baarle, forthcoming). Not knowing how things work (a feature of postmodern technology, as we already saw with Žižek and Rouvroy, cf. supra) leads to a loss of understanding, an uncontrolled loss of autonomy. Without skill or autonomy, the capacity to make decisions, to make ethical and political choices, is lost and handed over to apparatuses: *they are called 'paternalistic technologies', leading to depolitization and demoralization* (Rouvroy, 2011, 18). To counter that dynamics, co-creative practice demands technical, intellectual and creative skills in combination with a permanent dramaturgy and as an artist, a letting go of ego. In doing so, Verdonck makes a gesture similar to Blanga-Gubbay's description of Joseph Beuys' work with butter: *giving space to the material doesn't mean letting it speak- it means explicitly and deliberately resigning from the role of artist [...] Only the withdrawal of agency leaves the space open for contingency* (2016, 32). In the performing arts context and more specifically in the context of Verdonck, this means that the performances have inherent space for contingency as well.<sup>113</sup> One designer working on *END* described it well: *The show wasn't staged, but rather 'set free'* (Blum in Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens, 2012, 120).

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<sup>113</sup> In conversations, Verdonck has used the telling image of plugging in a performance and then taking one's hands off, seeing what happens.

## 2.4 Phantasms: Kris Verdonck's digital figures

Both the marionette and the object-figure are creatures that have a strong materiality, which is an important aspect of their performativity. In their study on new media dramaturgy, Eckersall, Grehan & Scheer point out that *performers can become phantasmagoric – both present and absent* (2015, 376). Video projections and other forms of digital images create figures that are, as some marionette and object-figures that were already discussed, situated between absence and presence, or in a more concrete way now, between material and immaterial. The digital figures in Verdonck's work are for the larger part images of human beings. Verdonck has created several works, in which human bodies are projected in various ways, such as in *STILLS* (see 2.2). However, for this chapter I focus on those digital figures that generate a sense of 'presence' through (the suggestion of) three-dimensionality and hence challenge the 'real', i.e. images that do not immediately present themselves as images, but as 'real' fleshy bodies. These digital figures are to a certain extent comprised of immaterial light particles. However, for these light particles to gain presence and to have the effect and affect of a subjectified nonhuman entity – in order for these digital figures to perform the for apparatus-posthumanism typical play with the categories of subject and object, life and death, presence and absence, randomness and pattern – they require a very material set-up. Although in the moment of the performance or of the presentation of the installation, these figures are purely technical (i.e. produced by technical devices such as a screen or projector), they are not 'object-figures', as they don't aim to reflect on a particular object state or present themselves as objects. Nor is their performativity mainly coming from their side. Object-figures' performativity involves an engagement from the audience, as the features of anthropomorphism, projection and personification have shown, however, digital figures operate even more on the tension between image and spectator.

I connect this facet of the figure to an aspect of the content of Verdonck's work – that could be extended to apparatus-posthumanism as such – namely the complex notions of haunting, circularity and an increasing 'reality' of digital technologies. To bring all these various elements together – image, immateriality, presence/absence, haunting, circularity, the relation to the spectator's imagination and perception – I will adopt Agamben's terminology of the *phantasm*. Agamben's archeology of the medieval theory of phantasms is part of a larger investigation in both the transformed nature of the object as commodity and a search for signifying beyond the Saussurian split between signifier and signified, as well as in the impact of the image in the contemporary media landscape (Agamben, 1993b, xviii; 2013a). The phantasm was a term that was used in the Middle Ages to describe *a subtle body of the soul that, situated at the extreme point of the sensitive soul, receives the images of objects, forms the phantasms of dreams*. However, it was also used to describe the process of how *sensible objects impress their forms on the senses and this sensible*

*impression, or image, or phantasm [...] is then received by the phantasy or imaginative virtue, which conserves it even in the absence of the object that has produced it* (Agamben, 1993b, 23, 71). Agamben adds this history of the notion of the phantasm to its more contemporary meanings such as ‘hallucination’ and ‘ghost’, in order to discuss the reciprocal relation between the image and its onlooker. Images, as phantasms, are thus in a complex relation with their spectators. The phantasm – both as a digital figure in Verdonck and in Agamben – finds itself in an in-between position, suspending the dichotomies of corporeal and incorporeal, individual ‘phantasy’ and real referent of a sign, copy and original, but also complicating spectatorship as a way of relating to images.

The phantasm as digital image has what Eckersall, Grehan & Scheer have termed a *dramaturgy of projection*. Such a dramaturgy raises questions about *who and what is visible; how the image is scenographically situated; who is looking; and the context in which the processes of development, presentation and reception of the image are staged* (2017, 25). Phantasmatic images, *in order to be truly alive [...] need a subject to unite with them* (Agamben, 2013a, 58). The phantasm thus finds itself both on the side of the sender, the message and of the receiver, in a by now familiar move, suspending the oppositions between these categories and opening up a different space of communication and imagination. However, these phantasms then can *turn into spectres which enslave men and from which they always need to be liberated anew* (Agamben, 2013a, 58). To evoke already another by now familiar recipe of Agamben’s thinking, it is through the specters that new possibilities arise.

One concrete manifestation of digital figures, or phantasms, in Verdonck’s work, are hologram-like projections. Verdonck has used technologies that generate a quasi-three-dimensional image that evokes the common sense conception of a hologram in several performances. *THEY* was part of the installation circuit *K, a society* (2010) and shows three projections of opera singers on cardboard dolls, performing arias of Verdi, Wagner, Händel and Stravinsky. *The opera fragments describe the fall or the impending demise of several rulers (kings, generals, pharaohs, half-gods, etc.). The singers warn us, all together, of this imminent end in their final aria*, Van Kerkhoven writes in the program notes for this installation (2010). However, the perspective in these projections is somehow off, they are too small, making it an uncanny and confusing experience for the spectator. The unsettling sensation is heightened by the cacophony of arias and dissonants, evoking a sense of panic, fear and danger. When the voices come together in the end, this is not a moment of restorative harmony, but of collapse and urgency, not only politically, but also of the image, as it claims presence.

The technique of projecting an image on a doll, was also used in *HUMINID* (2010), an installation that is part of *ACTOR #1*. In a theatre setting with stage, curtains and prompter’s box, a realistic projection of an actor (Johan Leysen) performs fragments of Samuel Beckett’s *Lessness* (1969). The image is too small to be entirely realistic and yet it creates a sense of presence, leading Helena Grehan to describe *HUMINID* as a “*not figure*” *in the sense that he is not really there, despite her feelings of empathy* (2015, 137). Many

spectators believe the actor Johan Leysen is *there*, despite his shorter height and despite the intentional glitch Verdonck inserted in the projection, an affect Eckersall, Grehan & Scheer also describe in terms of a *desire to engage*, a wanting to *respond* and as I also already argued, as a result of *the viewers own projection* (Eckersall et. al. 2017, 37, 38). Verdonck's rendition of Beckett's text reflects on the digital figure's intermediary state of being:

Heart still beating he defined by an immunological logic his unfinished body  
standing / Blackout compulsive motionless luke warm fleshless but breathing /  
Time passes over him motionless cells electric being similar gray as the soil / Lungs  
breathing pale white eyes the endlessness / All is reversed all disappeared from  
mind mitogenic logic luke warm in slow motion fleshless body holding breath / His  
becoming unfinished body little block dead weight grey matter still all carbon /  
Nothing he captured between two images in between the void the nothing in  
between images the not nothing and not disturbed by thoughts and dreams  
(*HUMINID*, 2010).

An in-between being, not yet or no longer, between the image and the spectator, *HUMINID* is a phantasm suspending the boundaries between life and death, between animate and inanimate, between material and immaterial, between digital and live. The dualism of life and death is an important articulation in the phantasmatic aspect of the figure. The phantasm, especially in its suspension of the live/digital dualism, and in its (re)presentation of a human form, deals more explicitly with the digital as an image of the dead, or more abstract, as a ghost that can be haunting, not only representing specific individuals, but also historical events, origins and workings of apparatuses, etc.

The political and socio-economic phantasms of the apparatuses of capitalism and spectacular democracy, made ever more present and visible through the actual phantasmatic nature of the devices that are deployed to spread and connect to these apparatuses, are proliferating in both the apparatus-posthumanist condition and Verdonck's work. Tom Gunning subscribes to the use of Agamben's notion of the phantasm, stating that with the *potentially uncanny nature of modern media [...] in the proliferation of virtual images [...] the concept of the phantasm gains a new valency as an element of the cultural imaginary* (2013, 211). The medieval phantasm was fed by sensations and had an impact on desires, language, dreams, memory and the intellect (Agamben, 1993b, 77). Agamben's phantasms are thus not only a name for the processes of projection and affect in relation to digital figures in the work of Verdonck. As spectral phantasms they are also interesting when it comes to the psychopolitical impact of a hypermediatized society, seeking for attention, influencing memory, desire and ways of developing knowledge or conceptions of truth. Indeed, a world filled with digital avatars, quantified selves, profiles, accounts, push messages, tweets, posts, newsflashes, breaking items, ... that reach the population nonstop through digital media devices, is a world of phantasms.

The notion of the (spectral) phantasm enables a more general reflection on the apparatus' relation with the living being. The phantasm also offers a more specific insight into Verdonck's dramaturgical use of apparatuses that generate images, digital realities, as well as of those media that can be considered their predecessors such as stereoscopy or chronophotography (2.4.2). All of these devices and technologies – photography, film, hologram, 3D projection, Pepper's ghost, etc. – are more than a 'trick': they involve processes of separating and capturing human beings, both in the – playful – artistic process and in the critical reflections emanating from the installations and performances. The analysis of the technological form that generates these digital figures leads, once again, to a reflection on political, economic and psychopolitical apparatuses. Finally, the phantasm also denotes the state of these latter apparatuses, that become increasingly spectral and hence ever more complex and violent.

#### 2.4.1 *M, a reflection's tautological doubles*<sup>114</sup>

*De striptease van het humanisme ontbloot de bloedige wortels van de cultuur.*  
(Müller, 1990, 172)

*What does a computer care about originality, "what does the coast care about the sinking ship?"*  
(Van Kerkhoven quoting Müller, 2012)

In its etymological roots, 'figure' already implies a tension between the object and the image, real and digital, original and the copy: *Original, copy, fake image, dream, are meanings that always remain related to "figure"* (Auerbach, 2005 [1963], 178, my transl.).<sup>115</sup> Auerbach pursues this etymological root in referring to how 'figure' in Lucretius was used to describe *images that like foils ("membranae") detach themselves from things and wander in the air [...], like "simulacra"* (2005 [1963], 178).<sup>116</sup> The original and the copy and the presence of the image as simulacrum are also at stake in *M, a reflection* (2012), a theatre performance in which the actor Johan Leysen performs together with his digital double. The projected image is life-size and placed in high definition alongside its live double. A carefully

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<sup>114</sup> In this part, I have reworked, reformulated and expanded an article I published together with Christel Stalpaert and Kris Verdonck on the issue of the virtual double in *M, a reflection*, here referred to as 'van Baarle, Stalpaert & Verdonck, 2013'. In addition, it is important to note that I was involved as an intern to Kris Verdonck and Marianne Van Kerkhoven in this production, in a position between assistant director and assistant dramaturge.

<sup>115</sup> In Italian: *Originale, copia, falsa immagine, sogno sono significati che restano sempre legati a „figura“* (Auerbach, 2005 [1963], 178).

<sup>116</sup> In Italian: *immagini che come pellicole ("membranae") si staccano dalle cose e vagano nell'aria [...] "simulacra"* (Auerbach, 2005 [1963], 178).

organized scenario varies between placing now the live, then the digital, then both live and digital, or two digital Johan Leysens on stage. The illusion works and brings the digital and the live actor in the same zone of perception. Mostly, the audience cannot determine which one is really 'there' or whether the monologue they are watching is being delivered by a projection or a live human actor. 'They' wear suits whose colors differ only slightly and to make the challenge of discerning which is the 'real' one more complicated, they 'switch suits' during the performance as well. The inability to discern the live actor from his digital double does not so much emphasize the opposition between liveness and virtuality, as it addresses their being fundamentally intertwined, causing their difference to fade away on certain levels.

The 'M' in the title refers to German writer Heiner Müller, whose texts and interviews formed the basis for the performance and of which a selection was performed by Leysen. The texts, selected by Van Kerkhoven and Verdonck, deal with war, violence, economy, politics, death, psychology and each one of them relates to a particular form of circular or deadlock logics. Müller, who subsequently lived in the Weimar republic, the Third Reich, the DDR and reunited Germany, relentlessly sought to understand political and economic systems. All selected texts are connected to themes of the existential and paradoxical relation to the double and the other, to the enemy in war, the competitor in capitalism or the political adversary in national and geopolitical systems. Müller's texts seem to suggest that the double is necessary, but therefore not always real – we can think about the split of the commander in the deserter and the commander sentencing the former to death in *Wolokolamsker Chaussee I* (1984), or the indifference between murderer and victim, seeing each other in a glass cage in the poem *Showdown* (1994). The paradox of political, economic and psychological systems forms a constant focus in Müller's oeuvre, Van Kerkhoven states (2012). A political leader needs an enemy to affirm his or her position, and the enemy needs his adversary in the same way. Capitalism needs a rich center and a poor periphery (two zones that are no longer necessarily geographically separated) to make profit. However, when the other is replaced by the double, these systems become openly violent and prone to self-destruction. The other is disappearing from the canvas, and is increasingly a reflection of the system itself, leading to unstable, auto-referential apparatuses that increasingly need to reveal their violent core to maintain their legitimacy.

In this analysis, I aim to on the one hand deepen the philosophical aspect of the double as a phantasm in *M, a reflection* and on the other hand, describe Verdonck's creation of the double on a technical level, that is, how the phantasm is generated and works in the performance. Two experiences and remarks that were made during the rehearsals have inspired the following pages. The first is the technical and dramaturgical complexity, on the one hand on a very practical level: the scenario's intricate 'managing' of what was said by the live and what by the double and where they are positioned in the recording of a scene. On the other hand, the highly complex and paradoxical (content of) the texts,

ending up in an endless spiral that resembles a deadlock. The second element was a remark by Marianne Van Kerkhoven that a particular scene, in which the live Leysen talks to his digital double, who is positioned on a higher floor (that is evoked scenographically), reminded her of Hamlet talking to his father's ghost. Although the dead are important for Müller and there is a quote from Brecht's *Fatzer Fragments* (1994) on ghosts from the future, that is part of the performance's text, the ghost was, as far as I know, not so much part of the dramaturgy of the performance, *M a Reflection*. However, for me this opened a whole new perspective on the political, economic and psychological paradoxes in the selected Müller texts and their being said and performed in an apparatus made to create digital presence – a new perspective on using a technique called a Pepper's ghost and on manipulating the spectator's perception. Phantasm is thus the notion I will use and operationalize in order to analyze how paradoxical apparatuses are evoked, questioned and reflected upon in Verdonck's theatrical apparatus, in relation to the questions of presence and absence.

The apparatus *M, a reflection* criticizes, is to a certain extent doubled in the performance set-up itself. To 'stage' the loss of the other, who is being replaced by the double on various levels, thematizing the complexity and violence of pseudo-adversary systems in combination with the self-reflexivity caused by the proliferation of digital doubles, Verdonck creates a digital machine himself. The other becomes a double, and a dialogue a split monologue. *M, a reflection's* confrontation of live and digital, or rather the lack or impossibility of confrontation as they are for the larger part indistinguishable and the impasse that results from it, is a technological and dramaturgical double to the complexity of the economic, political and social apparatuses and dynamics discussed in the text. The logics of the double – the split of the one into two identical entities – leads to a particular dynamics of anti-theatricality. In a scene where they play paper, scissors, rock, they inevitably tie, to their frustration. Unable to develop a conflict for want of an antagonist, there is a lack of a dramatic bow. The double figure of both live and digital Leysen in *M, a reflection* is not a character in any sense. It is rather a text vessel. Text in this case, does not lead to the formation of a subject, nor a dramatic bow, and different as in Castellucci or Okada, it is not functioning as a *Fremdkörper* or a desubjectifying straightjacket. In *M, a reflection*, text is treated as an object, as Verdonck said in an interview (Eckersall in Stalpaert, van Baarle & Karreman, forthcoming).

In *M, a reflection*, Johan Leysen's being captured in an apparatus, accompanied by his own virtual double, not only tells something about the relation between the digital and the real, but also about the relation between the image and the subject. Let us begin by following Laermans' assertion that how a performance works, tells something important about what it means (and I might add, how it generates meaning). Three invisible gauzes on which the digital actor is projected are placed on stage at different depths and heights. The high quality of the video images combined with the light design creates a three-dimensional figure that looks like a live actor but that is in fact a projection. In order to

further reduce the differences between the live and the digital actor, the live actor is positioned behind the gauzes most of the time, which gives him the same 'resolution' as the projected image. The live is flattened out slightly, to approach the digital. In addition to that, the range of positions that can be taken on stage by the live actor is literally limited by the projections. It is impossible to move behind the projection; otherwise the virtual image would be projected immediately onto the actor's body, doing away with the illusion. The actor's moving space is further limited by the light design that doubles the light used in the video. In the end only a number of fixed positions and walking paths can be occupied. The human performer is tactically positioned within the constellation of the apparatus of *M, a reflection* and is thus deprived of a part of his liberty.

This restriction as a consequence of the technical apparatus that is used during the performance, was already at work during the creative process. The required working method consisted of first shooting the video material to which the live actor was to react during the performance, limiting or at least fundamentally changing Leysen's options on the level of acting from the start. A particular relationship between Leysen and his digital persona arose. As the recorded (later projected) parts were done first, Leysen was able to 'prepare' jokes, rhythms, pauses and tensions he would respond to during the live performances or in the afterwards recorded responding part of the dialogue. Especially performing live dialogues with his virtual counterpart (as opposed to pre-recorded dialogues between two projections) proved to be difficult, since one of the protagonists is always a projected character, with a pre-recorded voice, intonation and timing. The rhythm of the conversation is for that matter decided by the projection and the live actor has to react in time during the gaps. Paradoxically Leysen 'caused' these problems himself, as he was also the one recording the video images. During the recording process, Leysen was thus creating his own 'straightjacket', which he then later had to follow during the performances. A situation arose, in which the live needed to adapt to the self-created digital, resonating with the living being becoming a slave to the apparatuses it has itself once created. The priority in time of the digital and its complicated entanglement with the live – especially in case of the double – can be taken literally here, once again bringing form and content together, as was also the case in *I/II/III/IIII* and *HEART*. However, also as in these cases, limiting and reducing the actor to something that cannot be distinguished from a virtual 'fake', the actor-becoming-thing can play with the apparatus' own faculties and relate to technologies differently.

As the phantasm implies both the image and our relation to it, an increase of phantasms fostered by new media technologies, corresponds to an increase in interactions with apparatuses producing these images as well. In his discussion of ghosts in the work of Müller, Lehmann also refers to the phantasms produced in relation to various media apparatuses and the hallucinatory character of the constant appearance of

these ghosts.<sup>117</sup> The phantasm is connected to *eine Seinsweise der Dinge, die zunehmend die Grenze zwischen Sein und Nichtsein schwinden* (Lehmann, 2002, 283-284). The spectrality of the current world is a consequence of the proliferation, increased quality and use of digital communications, but also of decaying institutions and faltering apparatuses.<sup>118</sup> The real is surpassed in time by its digital alternative, not only in media such television, radio and internet, but also in its originating moment (Causey, 2009, 37). The (fake) news increasingly creates reality instead of reporting it.

Agamben compared phantasmatic images to nymphs, and how they were defined by Paracelsus as *non-human men [...] the ideal archetype of every separation of man from himself* (2013a, 44). Nymphs are nonhuman men in the sense that they are figures shaped after the image of the human that suspend the object/subject distinction. Phantasms challenge conceptions of autonomous identities, and unveil the illusion of the fully individual 'I' of the free subject (Lehmann, 2002, 291). The loss of identity and subjectivity does not lead immediately to a zero degree such as that of the whatever singularity, rather it leads to an increased state of being captured and cast in a myriad of desubjectifying identities as digital doubles. The double, [enacts] *the subject's annihilation, its nothingness* (Causey, 1999, 385). As big data specialist Rouvroy states in an interview with Abiteboul & Froidevaux:

Peut-être n'avons-nous jamais été moins « visibles », moins « signifiants » dans l'espace public en tant que personnes, qu'aujourd'hui. La prolifération des selfies et autres performances identitaires numériques est symptomatique à cet égard. L'incertitude d'exister induit une pulsion d'édition de soi sans précédent: se faire voir pour croire en sa propre existence (2016).

The phantasmatic doubles of *M, a reflection* present a *notion of the subject/subjectivity that is defective, disjunct, split, threatening, spectral* (Vardoulakis in Carlson, 2014, 34). It is generally accepted that in order to develop an identity, an individual needs encounters with various 'others' (Verhaeghe, 2012). One encounters oneself *through* the other. However, as Schiphorst observes: in our current *digitally engaged world [...] we seek ourselves through the very technologies that we imagine and produce* (Schiphorst, 2012, xi). The double, or *Doppelgänger*, creates a self-referential loop, in which one encounters the various digital double identities (or subjectivities) managed by the apparatuses within which these doubles are created. The proliferation of apparatuses not only leads to a proliferation of

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<sup>117</sup> Müller describes the proliferation of new media apparatuses as *the media's smog, taking away the mass's clear view on the situation, erasing their memory, sterilising their phantasy* (uit 'Philoktetes 1979' in Müller, 1990, 165, my transl.).

<sup>118</sup> Agamben points out that in the *medieval Christian tradition the phantasy appeared in a decisive negative light. [...] Half-naked ladies, the half-human and half-feral creatures, the terrifying devils, and the whole conglomeration of monstrous and seductive images that crystallized in the iconography of the temptations of Saint Anthony* (1993b, 98).

phantasms and separations, it also fosters a self-referential digital environment, with avatars, accounts, profiles, and online bubbles created by a confirmation bias.



Figure 15 Johan Leysen in: Kris Verdonck / A Two Dogs Company: *M, a reflection* (2012) © A Two Dogs Company

What does it mean to be (forced to be) your own double in these digital times? Referring to one of the more famous phantasms in mythology, Agamben points at how in medieval conceptions of narcissism, the crux of the matter was ‘a dangerous mirror’. The narcissist had an excessive desire for an image, a *phantasm*, of the self, not just a love of the self, and mistook this image as real (Agamben, 1993b, 82). Translating this to the contemporary functioning of online platforms such as search engines, webshops and social media, a form of *forced narcissism* occurs, with users being obliged to create accounts – phantasms. Advertisements and search results or news feeds are customized to (the phantasm of) the individual user, making it *de plus en plus rare, pour l’individu, d’être exposé à des choses qui n’ont pas été prévues pour lui, de faire, donc, l’expérience d’un espace public, commun* (Abiteboul & Froidevaux, 2016). In the *echo chamber* that the internet has become (Berardi, 2016, 122), online users are lured by the virtual world’s echoes that affirm and manipulate opinions, feelings, attitudes, etc. Han sees this desubjectification caused by the myriad of apparatuses seeking a destructive interaction as an over-subjectification, an over-emphasizing of the ego, of the subject: *Dank totaler Digitalisierung des Seins wird eine totale Vermenschlichung, eine absolute Subjektivität, erreicht, in der das menschliche Subjekt nur noch sich selbst begegnet* (2015a, 36). The narcissistic subject lacks any capacity to take a *theatrical distance*, it is locked in its own self-referentiality, a condition which according to Han leads to depression and in the end a sense of loss of world, *wandering around in its own shadow*

until it drowns in itself (Han, 2014, 92, 112, my transl.). This self-referential phantasmatic condition turns the individual subject into a 'barred subject', which stands in the shadow of its virtual 'free' double (Žižek & Dolar, 2002, 183).

*M, a reflection* remains a theatrical performance, *the dialogue* [between the two Johans] is not a line between two 'characters', but a triangle in which two 'characters' relate to an audience (Van Kerkhoven, 2012). Certainly, another aspect of the proliferation and increasing entanglement and indifference between real and virtual is the affect-relation with virtual figures or phantasms. *M, a reflection* is in that sense also a performance about perception – or to put it slightly differently: it is a performance that takes place for an important part in the audience's perception, affects and imagination. The phantasmatic relation not only unfolds between the two Leysens on stage, it also develops between the stage and the audience. Freud relates the uncanny to the 'double' and indeed an uncanny, uncertain feeling arises when the two figures – the real and the virtual Leysen – are visible at the same time: *at least one of them must be 'fake', but why am I not seeing it* (Freud, 1978 [1919], 234)? The dualities presence/absence and liveness/mediation prove to be insufficient and cease to make sense to describe the being-there of these figures. The phantasm creates an intermediary zone of non-presence and non-liveness. Both the actor-as-image and the image-as-actor are phantasms wandering in the space opened up between *the vanished place of referential origin, and its re-presentation* (Zummer, 2012). The projection is neither real nor live; it is only there because an audience believes it is present and hence acquires the status of 'liveness'. The live actor is mediated by this as well, as his '(a)liveness' is dimmed by the possibility of not being 'live'. Evoking an intermediate state between real and digital, Verdonck has the spectator accept the ambiguity, an idea that resonates with the habituation of the spectator to the projected image during the performance, rendering the virtual real. The eye gets used to the virtual and no longer discerns it from the real. This is, as with object-figures, facilitated strongly by the theatrical frame, which triggers anticipations of narrative, presence, and liveness. The question of presence suggests that the perception of reality does not require reality as such.

Another way of interpreting the presence of digital figures, is that there is a lack of reference to determine what is real and what is not. As Van Kerkhoven writes, *to be able to see something in a space we need points of reference. So in our perception too we need the other and the different: we can only localise A by means of B, C etc. who are in the same space* (2012). In a world filled with phantasms and chimeras, real and fake, material and immaterial, life and death become increasingly difficult to distinguish. A feature in *M, a reflection* that risks remaining unnoticed and yet is emblematic of the importance of a point of reference, are the digitally projected tables. They are more easily accepted as really being there – which we can explain by reversing the uncanny valley logic: tables usually don't move, so they do not need movement to confirm their presence. The tables in *M, a reflection* are more stable because their continuous presence allows the spectator's eye to habituate to them and forget the possibility of them being digital too. Although they are digital themselves,

they confirm the presence of the digital projection when the latter stands next to them. As if the object affirms the solidity of the projection, offers a fake point of reference. In a phantasmatic world, we could extrapolate, phantasms affirm each other, to the extent that it becomes nearly impossible to tell which is which.

Phantasms' influence on imagination and perception can mislead the senses, to the extent that they generate affects, such as presence, that are 'not there', but which nevertheless have real consequences. An anecdote shows the experience of presence of the virtual Leysen. Several spectators complained about smoking by the actor during a scene in the performance. They were convinced they had smelled the smoke, whereas only the projected, digital Johan Leysen smokes, never the live one. *M, a reflection's* confusion between the real and the digital, is first a confusion on the semiotic level (the sign of the projection cannot be distinguished from the sign of the live actor, both residing in the same zone of 'action' as Veltruský would say) and then a matter of imagination stimulated by affect. The quality of the digital image generates according to Han a direct relation between the eye and the image, making the digital into an *Affektmedium*, immediately influencing the affects of the user or spectator (2015a, 50). Fensham defines affect as *a generalised visceral arousal, of pre- or extra-personal affective states and a layered, pre-cognitive awareness, which is active in the reception of images* (2016, 43, 50).

The affective connection with Verdonck's object-figures as well as with his phantasms, is not innocent. Verdonck's work is not so much about fostering and stimulating this relation as it is about acknowledging we already have many of such phantasmatic relations and that these should be questioned and investigated further. Affect management is part of neoliberal psychopolitics, seeking to *influence actions on a pre-reflexive level* (Han, 2015b, 54, my transl.). Whereas Lehmann at the start of the millennium still asked himself what evolution in the density of pixels would be required to allow for a holographic theatre performance to occur (2002, 290), Verdonck's performance answers this question by doing precisely that, staging a digital figure unable to visually and affectively discern from its live counterpart. Moreover, *M, a reflection* suggests that perhaps, a physical human body is no longer needed on stage to create the sensation of human presence.

However, Verdonck does not seek to over-stimulate affects in *M, a reflection*. Besides the 'presence effect' of the virtual, the whole performance finds itself in what Han calls a *Stimmung: something in which you find yourself. It represents a mood. Therefore it is static and constellatory* (2015b, 51, my transl.). After the first perception of the illusion that is created in *M, a reflection*, this illusion becomes part of the content and the tension between live and digital stays latently present. The *Stimmung*, as the condition of the figure, is thus related to a condition and temporality on stage. It is static as the state of being in itself does not change or evolve, but rather various aspects of it come to the fore, hence the term 'constellatory': the *Stimmung* is like a constellation, in its meaning of a group of stars that together form the outline of an image – in a way intangible, requiring a form of

projection from the spectator, but also, consisting of various elements, of which some sometimes shine brighter than others. Their image reaches the earth over time, and it is this temporality, this requirement of time in combination with various elements that marks the *Stimmung*. Contrary to the speed of affect, *Stimmung* takes time and is a form of Eckersall & Paterson's slow dramaturgy (2011). As in other works by Verdonck, time and space for contemplation is an important aspect of the spectator's experience. The constellatory aspect of the *Stimmung* is particularly suitable to describe works such as *M*, a reflection as they function as a constellation of perspectives on a particular condition, in this case, the digital double as phantasm and the phantasm of larger political and economic apparatuses.

The way in which the two figures, the live and the digital, discuss these issues, is quite telling as well. I already mentioned that as the two are the same, their dialogue is more a kind of monologue, which leads to an anti-dramatic dynamics, indeed, a static constellatory *Stimmung*. As they are the same, there is no surprise, they never contradict, there is only affirmation, they know what they know. This leads to a *Stimmung* that can be described as a 'cold atmosphere'. There is a deliberate distance to what is being said, a detachment, *de-pathization* and *disinvolvement* toward the cruelties in Müller's texts (Lehmann & Jürs-Munby, 2007, 118). In addition to that, the live and digital Johan Leysen rarely look at each other and touching is rather impossible. This strengthens the absence of conflict in the texts – an absence that continues in a frontal acting style placing the audience in the position of an 'interface'.

The lack of conflict does not mean that there is only a single-minded perspective on the issues that are discussed. Complexity, (at first sight) contradicting views and perpetual search for nuance and insight remain the central motor of the conversation. However, what makes Müller's critical analyses so special, is his resistance to conclusion, let alone a solution. The dialectics of thesis and antithesis never come to a synthesis, or *Aufhebung*. The selected Müller texts are typical examples of the multi-layered *textscape* he was known to create (Lehmann & Jürs-Munby, 2007, 148). In addition to Müller's writings, Verdonck and Van Kerkhoven also selected transcripts of several interviews with Müller by West-German filmmaker Alexander Kluge. These conversations are characterized by a profound agreement and shared perspective on the discussed topics. It seems as if Müller knows what Kluge knows and vice versa. The conversation is merely a format to externalize this knowledge and to lay bare the matters at hand. Questions and answers become interchangeable and a synthesis of the dialectics is deliberately avoided. They were *einverstanden* – a way of deep understanding through agreement – when talking about conflicts, about conflicting parties and interests, thus unfolding the whole situation in a conversation. They even attempted to be *einverstanden* with the violence of the apparatuses they sought to grasp, a position they deemed necessary *damit du sie beschreiben kannst* (Kluge & Müller, 1996, 60). However, they also deliberately install paradoxes and find a dark humor in the way these paradoxes make certain developments

inevitable, or in naivety of many leaders, strategists and people, in relation to the merciless dynamics of violent systems. In the Müller-Kluge interviews, two men with whisky and cigars are laughing with the condition of which they are part and yet whose understanding of it brings a strange kind of joy. This humour is present in *M, a reflection* as well: the condition of two doubles leads to some absurd situations, such as the game of rock, paper, scissors, or a discussion in which the one asks the other with whether he is left- or right-handed. This is of course a question they both know the answer to, making this conversation rather at the beginning of the piece at once a joke and a more symbolic 'dialogue' to emphasize their split identity.

The type of non-conflict or non-dialogue in the texts, but also the unresolved tension between the real and the digital as they are presented in *M, a reflection*, resemble Benjamin's description of Baudelaire's poems as *dialectics at a standstill*, characterized by an intrinsic *ambiguity* (Benjamin, 1999, 10). In his analysis of the dialectics at a standstill – in the same essay as his analysis of the nymph as phantasm – Agamben defines it as a *bipolar and tensive opposition: the two terms are neither removed from nor recomposed in unity but kept in an immobile coexistence charged with tensions* (2013a, 30). This 'frozen' dialectics is a tactic used by Müller in language and by Verdonck in visual-theatrical means, to represent paradoxical constellations, such as the double's auto-referential loops. This mode of reflecting, of presenting a complex condition in a search for understanding, might be the constructive double of the dystopic deconstruction that is made in *M, a reflection: Where meaning is suspended, dialectical images appear. The dialectical image is, in other words, an unresolved oscillation between estrangement and a new event of meaning* (Agamben, 2013a, 29). In *M, a reflection* the constellatory dramaturgy offers time to explore both the perception of the digital double as 'real' and the continuous paradoxical reasoning on war, politics, economy, and psychology by the two 'Leysens'. The conflicts are suspended in order to create time to think them over, to have a look at them from different perspectives. Complexity is deepened and imagination activated to re-compose the questions at hand. In the suspension of the semiotic sign by the indifferentiation of digital and live complements, the semantic void that is created by the dialectic at standstill of the paradox, the phantasm, shows itself as *an attempt to retrieve the image from the modern scopical regime of aesthetics, semiotically-governed questions of truthful representation, and Cartesian perspectivalism, in order to reconnect the image to its place within the imagination* (Parsley, 2013, 37).

An important element in Verdonck's critical approach of the (affective) reality of the digital, is the deconstruction of the illusion toward the end of the performance. Initiating the last sequence of scenes, the projected images dissolve and the stage is fully lit, rendering the gauzes visible. The usual immediacy and lack of distance characterizing digital media is literally broken down. Leysen leaves his position behind the gauzes and approaches the front of the stage, while reciting Müller's *Wolokolamsker Chaussée 1*. This text deals with the doubling of a German commander at the Eastern front in the Second

World War, who, doubting to partake in senseless battles, hurts himself on purpose in an exercise and then is executed for treason on the order of his double. After this monologue, the digital double reappears and three final projected scenes conclude the performance. The technology recovers surprisingly quick, immediately reclaiming presence again and thus confusing the level of reality of 'both' actors on stage. The leitmotiv of the double is again made explicit in the text *Showdown: In einem Käfig gläsern sahn wir stehn / Den Mörder und das Opfer unbekannt / Einander auch nicht wissend noch wer wen / Zu töten in dem Glas gefangen stand / Mit andern starrten wir gierig zu schaun* (Müller in Verdonck's *M, a reflection*). Even after the technological construction was unveiled, just minutes before, the projected actor remained 'there'.

In the final scene, a larger-than-life projection of Leysen, without arms and legs, brings the text *Nachtstück* (1971): *Auf der Bühne steht ein Mensch. Er ist überlebensgroß, vielleicht eine Puppe* (Müller in Verdonck's *M, a reflection*). The final doll-like creature is an image of the larval figure; a living being unable to develop a sustainable form of life. Beleaguered, amputated by phantasms, this figure is unable to intervene in its environment and speaks with wonder about what happens around it. In Müller's text, two 'Beckett-Stachel' stab out its eyes. Blinded, unable to move, this is an extreme figure of a reduced and desubjectified being, over-captured by apparatuses, unable to determine what is real and what is not (the text also has a hallucinatory undertone). This particular case of sensory deprivation can be interpreted as a result of the reduction of our perception of the world caused by media apparatuses that are part of larger economic and democratic apparatuses: touch (hands), mobility (legs), taste (mouth) and sight (eyes) are disabled. In a similar vein as Verdonck's use of doubles, Virilio pointed out that such a sensory deprivation is both an outcome of and the recipe for a *tautological repetition of the same* (2008, 35). However, the stabbing of the eyes also evokes the trope of the blind seer, of a perspective on the future. *M, a reflection* ends with the word *Schrei* (scream): the scream of a subject that has become a phantasm, a spectral presence, or rather, a conception of the subject and the human and an anthropocentric and humanistic perspective of the world that continue to haunt current ideas and actions. However, this scream might also be that of a rebirth of humanity after the deconstruction of humanism, the anthropological machine and the subject. After having become a doll, there is an eruption of the voice, which is no longer animal and not human yet. New opportunities emerge from the ruins of disrupted identities, from decaying national dreams, and a new form of life is emerging in the interstices of technologies and those disrupted subjectivities.

The technique that was used to create the holographic effect in *M, a reflection*, is an update of the nineteenth-century technique of the Pepper's ghost. Created by Henry Dircks and further developed and exploited by professor John Henry Pepper in the 1860's, this technique was used to bring ghosts on stage, most notably those in Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain* (1848) and the ghost of

Hamlet's father (Carlson, 2014, 38-40).<sup>119</sup> To create the visual presence on stage of someone who is not physically there, in the classic Pepper's ghost set-up, a glass panel was positioned in a 45-degree angle with the stage. When the space below or adjacent to the glass panel, which was not visible to the audience, was brightly lit, a projection was formed on the other side of the glass, i.e. on stage. This technique, developed to stage the dead in the nineteenth century, was recently also used to bring Tupac Shakur back to the stage at the Coachella Festival in 2012, or Michael Jackson at the Billboard Music Awards in 2014. The company that created the holographic projection of Tupac calls their technique 'digital resurrection' – a name that ties well with the spectral, phantasmatic features of the virtual and the digital that have been discussed so far.<sup>120</sup> Not only the Facebook user or digital citizen or the entertainment business creates virtual doubles, also people of power do so, as speeches in the form of a holographic projection by politicians such as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Narendra Modi show. The presence effect becomes a form of omnipresent power, here symbolically represented by visual presence in the form of a hologram. From the position of power, the *re*-presentation through an (3D, holographic) image means *a victory over time and space* and perhaps eventually *a victory over death* (Sandberg, 2003, 42). These examples are symptomatic of how the entertainment industry and politics also produce phantasms, but also how the phantasm is close to death and spectrality. As Causey also stated: *the uncanny experience of the double is Death made material. Unavoidable. Present* (1999, 386). This adds a layer to Müller's repeated warning in many of his texts and interviews, for the lack of attention given to death and the dead: *the specificity of theatre is precisely not the presence of the live actor but the presence of the one who is potentially dying* (Müller in Lehmann & Jürs-Munby, 2007, 144). Verdonck's use of digital technology uncovers and shows another aspect of life, namely that *im Lebenden ist schon, in wechselndem und im ganzen steigenden Maße, seine Leiche anwesend. Das Ich ist verdoppelt, hat in sich das Gespenst seiner selbst als Toten. Ich ist, der gewesen sein wird* (Lehmann, 2002, 292). The double is our own death, walking with us and the possibility of virtual doubles makes this only more apparent and urgent.

The dematerialized bodies of the dead are phantasmatic figures, between object and subject, life and death, animate and inanimate, existing in the zone between the screen on which the image is projected and the imagination of those who perceive it. In his analysis of the image, Agamben refers to Origin's assertion that in the resurrection after

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<sup>119</sup> In his book on Hamlet and the cultural and religious conception of Purgatory, Stephen Greenblatt analyzes the presence of the ghost in Shakespeare. He refers to the *uncanniness of twins* as an early ghostly presence, as well as the phantasmatic powers of the ghost – that is, the relation between imagination and virtual bodies (2013, 159- 162). Ghosts can mislead the imagination, and their impact on the imagination, is a function of power. The phantasmatic is thus not merely *fantastic*, but implies a relation between imagination and reality (2013, 212).

<sup>120</sup> For more technical information and other projects, consult the company's website: <http://musion.com/projects/?pagename=projects&tag=digital-resurrection>.

the Last Judgment, not the body but the figure of the body, its image will rise (2007b, 25). Both Verdonck's and the other more popular uses of the Pepper's ghost seem to confirm that. Even when deceased, *le premier effet de la mort est de transformer le mort en fantôme [...] un être vague et menaçant qui reste dans le monde des vivants et retourne sur les lieux fréquentés par le vivant* (Agamben, 2004, 99). The connection between actual biological death, and the vivid digital doubles we create for ourselves, is not far away. Recently, it was announced that Facebook will launch a new privacy service: the possibility to arrange your virtual inheritance. Who will inherit your profile? What can be done with it, by whom? You can indicate your chosen options in your privacy settings, preparing your digital afterlife. All these profiles or accounts form a new and valuable collection of lives stored in a digital cemetery, a commodified hagiography of virtual personalities.<sup>121</sup> Our own data haunt us while being alive as well. The sheer endless memory of digitalized platforms, available for both commercial and political ends, turns one's personal history into a haunting entity. Old messages, opinions and pictures once shared, can return with a vengeance from their digital cemetery.

When phantasms become spectral, when institutions, ideas, systems and apparatuses decay, they can attain a state called 'larval spectrality' *born from not accepting its own condition, from forgetting it is so as to pretend at all costs that it still has bodily weight and flesh* (Agamben, 2011c, 40). Systems that have become spectral turn to violence to maintain themselves and deny their falling apart. As was already argued, two such systems are democracy and capitalism. Financial capitalist economy in its current form has become a virtual, circular given. To prevent collapse, endless growth is needed (Vogl, 2013, 66, 72). Money has become self-referential, its value no longer connected to a material base (Berardi, 2017, 154). In a similar vein, with reference to Benjamin's *Capitalism as religion*, Agamben described capitalism as an apparatus that spirals *with all its might not toward redemption but toward guilt* (2007b, 82). Since the fall of the Berlin wall and subsequently the whole Soviet Union, the dictum (attributed by Žižek to Jameson) is that *it is easier to imagine a total catastrophe which ends all life on earth than it is to imagine a real change in capitalist relations* (Žižek, 2011, 334). Müller pointed at the dangers of an omnipresent capitalism even for capitalism itself and warned against the absence of a powerful adversary who could prevent the development toward an alleged homogeneity in a monadic, auto-referential system.

On the level of politics a similar dynamics of auto-referentiality and a need for pseudo-adversaries is at work in most democracies. In times when most traditional parties increasingly look alike, politicians feel the need to prove they differ from other parties. These political parties and groups turn the adversary other or group of others into an

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<sup>121</sup> These reflections were first made in a text written on the occasion of Belgian choreographer Michiel Vandeveld's performance *Antithesis, the future of the image* (van Baarle, 2015b).

enemy or scapegoat and blame them for the nation's problems. The current populist wave in Europe uncovers a dysfunctional element in the democratic representational system. To form a political identity, always implies *aggression towards other groups* (Berardi, 2016, 108, my transl.). For Badiou, democracy flattens out all difference and possibility of heterogeneity (2011, 10). Not only does this form of thinking reduce alternatives, it also excludes large parts of the world's population, or as Badiou formulates it: *Democracy? Sure. But reserved only for democrats* (2011, 7). Hence, when one of the adversary poles is defeated, gives up and changes positions, a problem arises for the other side as well, as Müller described in the following excerpt:

Wenn zwei Hunde kämpfen und der eine legt sich auf den Rücken, dann kann der andere nicht mehr beißen. So einen Aspekt hat das ja auch, der ganze Vorgang.

Aber zwischen zwei Republiken gilt das Gesetz nicht.

Nein, überhaupt nicht. Ich meine jetzt im Globalen, der Osten hat sich auf den Rücken gelegt, und jetzt kann der Westen nicht mehr beißen (Müller & Kluge in Verdonck's *M, a reflection*).

Subsequently, *in an age when all the grand ideas have lost credibility, fear of a phantom enemy is all the politicians have left to maintain their power* (Adam Curtis in Bauman, 2007, 16). In the West, this leads to a resurfacing of a perverted sovereignty with populist leaders, a distrust in democracy, and an increasing violence in wars, terrorism, as well as in the discourse on poverty and migration. *The ghosts of the First World – torture, security, dirty wars, state repression, enslavement – have become frightening realities again* (Masschelein, 2011, 146). Quoting an unfinished text by Brecht, Müller points at how decisions, apparatuses that are created today, have consequences in the future that are haunting the present as well: *Wie früher Geister kamen aus Vergangenheit / So jetzt aus Zukunft, ebenso* (Brecht, 1994, 73). The atomic bomb is not only a specter haunting from 1945, its potential destructive power looms from the future as well. Via the quote of Brecht, Müller describes a dynamics, in which apparatuses, decisions and agreements are made to accommodate a need in one moment, but which already imply (potentially dramatic) consequences in the future. In an interview with Wim Kayzer, astrophysicist Freeman Dyson, who was drafted in the British bomber command, states that the establishment of the bombing command in 1936 already implied the mass bombings of Hamburg and Dresden. It was a system that was put in motion, factories were built, investments were made, making it a nearly unstoppable machine (Dyson in Kayzer, 2008, 186).

Dyson's testimony, brings us to a final aspect of *M, a reflection*, namely war. For Müller, the individual acts of war are but symptoms of a larger situation (Lescot, 2001, 216). In addition to texts on the destruction of war, the reduction of the soldier to statistics and the cruel ideologies leading to war, Verdonck selected fragments in which Müller

discusses what can be called a phantasmatic, 'posthuman warfare', or rather, a dehumanized warfare: *First the horses, and then the human beings, are marginalized, and finally only the machines remain* (Kluge & Müller, 1993). Hidden in tanks, airplanes, after having disappeared in the trenches, what remained was *Das Gespenst im Panzerturm* (Müller, 2002, 219). This evolution continues up until today, with long distance warfare and the proliferation of drones, UAV's (unmanned aerial vehicles) and UAG's (unmanned ground vehicles): *the subject faded away. There is no longer a pilot in the plane* (Chamayou, 2015, 206). The human has become invisible in this type of war. He has become a dot on a screen or a controller in a container in the desert with a spectral phantasm relation between them. War has become an impersonal, bureaucratic activity with *ghostly machines* and *phantom bombings* (Chamayou, 2015, 83). In Verdonck's selection of Müller texts, the gas wars that are described as an invisible, ubiquitous and disorienting attack are the prefiguration of today's drone-based warfare. Drones are the ultimate war phantasms, invisible in the skies and via specific laws uninhibited by borders and regulations. The objectification of the targets only increases this distanced warfare: *All that the operators can see are little figures blurred into facelessness. [...] This figurative reduction of human targets helps to make the homicide easier: there's no flesh on your monitor, just coordinates* (Chamayou, 2015, 117). The affective connection between the soldier-operator and the victim, merely changing color on the screens informed by heat sensors, is broken and devoid of empathy. The affective, phantasmatic relation at stake there, is that between the population under a permanent potential attack with skies under which they inevitably live and the quasi-bureaucratic, alienating and game-like conditions in which the operators work. The economy behind globalized warfare, its quasi-corrupt intertwinement with politics, and its unclear representation in the media, transforms it into a 'ghost from the future', sacrificing lives for the financial and political benefit of a few. Or as Müller described the relation between politics, economy and war: *Es gab immer offenbar einen fast biologischen Zwang, ein bestimmtes Quantum von Gewalt einzuhalten, damit der Betrieb funktioniert* (Müller in Verdonck's *M, a reflection*).

## 2.4.2 ISOS: a new use of old media<sup>122</sup>

The use of the nineteenth-century technique of the Pepper's ghost in *M, a reflection* to reflect upon the (spectral) phantasmatic facet of figures, as well as upon the (spectral) phantasmatic aspect of apparatuses and the phantasmatic relation between the figure and the audience, marks a parallel between the capture of the subject and its subsequent desubjectification, and the increasing spectacularization of society, fueled by the development of new media. Verdonck's installation *ISOS* (2015)<sup>123</sup> makes use of (among others) stereography and 3D moving images to create a world based on the work of J. G. Ballard. *ISOS* is an artistic translation of Ballard's critique of the docile yet violent society of the spectacle and can be analyzed by considering three older media that are explicitly part of a conceptual and technological genealogy of Verdonck's theatrical installation. Stereography, Muybridge's chronophotography and the diorama are part of the dramaturgy of *ISOS* and are technically used in more or less direct ways. The reference to these seminal media for the nascent society of the spectacle in the nineteenth century, relates to a broader interest of artists operating within an apparatus-posthumanist frame, to discuss contemporary technology by *returning to older forms, techniques, histories and stories* (Parker-Starbuck, 2015, 67).<sup>124</sup> Uncovering the politics of stereography, diorama and chronophotography, reveals how their phantasms haunt digital imagery. Through an analysis of Verdonck's perspective on a Ballardian world, we encounter another form of digital figures, with more explicit references to older media forms producing phantasms, as well as a form of life that is both the result and the potential defeat of the omnipresence of spectral phantasms in spectacular democracies: the petty bourgeoisie. Adopting a perspective infused with media archeology, I will describe how *ISOS* makes use of older media to reflect upon the contemporary condition and in this way add a dramaturgical layer.

A floating man. He is unable to stop laughing; hysterically enjoying himself without a clear reason. A couple in a dining room. They open a can of pineapple, light candles and smoke a cigarette. A green plastic bag flaps in the wind, rustling infinitely. These three scenes, or 'situations' are part of Verdonck's installation *ISOS*. The situations are not performed live but can be witnessed in viewing boxes, or rather, dioramas. Nine slick white boxes are positioned in three lines of three. Each box contains a different short scene in a three-dimensional video that can be looked at from above through peepholes.

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<sup>122</sup> This subchapter is a reworking of a book chapter, 'Capturing Bodies as Objects: Stereography and the Diorama at work in Kris Verdonck's *ISOS*', that will be published in *Deep Time of Theatre*, edited by Nele Wynants (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

<sup>123</sup> For this production, I collaborated on the dramaturgy with Marianne Van Kerkhoven.

<sup>124</sup> For example Benjamin Vandewalle, Julien Maire, Joost Rekveld, C&H, etc.

Together, they form an interpretation of Ballard's body of work, often dealing with the tension between violence and lethargy in a spectacular society in which humans and objects become interchangeable, and in which commodities and media, consumption and politics are deeply intertwined and create a docile population. Many of Ballard's characters share an estranging apathy, numbed by comfort in a highly aggressive world. *ISOS* was inspired among others by Ballard's short story *The Thousand Dreams of Stellavista* (1962). The story is about a type of houses made of so-called 'bioplastics', a material which makes the house resonate with the emotions of its inhabitants. When a young couple moves into a house that was previously owned by a mentally ill woman, the house turns against them, having retained the emotionally volatile character of the previous inhabitant. *ISOS* shows figures in a hostile (technological) environment and how they react to this environment in a typically Ballardian way.

Verdonck calls the figures in the boxes of *ISOS* 'virtual sculptures' (van Baarle, 2015a, 216). His terminology unintentionally points at a proximity between stereography and sculpture. The connection between sculpture and stereography goes back to the early days of the latter medium. The stereoscope, a device generating three-dimensional images for its beholder, is older than photography and its development is closely related to research in subjective vision and developments in physiology, which shifted the focus from what we see to how we see, from the object to its observer (Crary, 1988, 24). This is why *ISOS* is discussed here as phantasmatic. Such developments have established that when two images of the same object are drawn, shot or filmed from a slightly different position (based on the distance between the eyes) and are subsequently superimposed or simultaneously perceived by each eye separately, a three-dimensional representation of that object is seen by the viewer.

The understanding of binocular seeing led to the creation of artificial stereovision, as it was confirmed that *there never really is a stereoscopic image, that it is a conjuration, an effect of the observer's experience of the differential between two other images* (Crary, 1988, 28).<sup>125</sup> In an essay with the elaborate but telling title *Account of a binocular camera, and of a method of obtaining drawings of full length and colossal statues, and of living bodies, which can be exhibited as solids by the stereoscope* (1851), one of stereography's pioneers, Sir David Brewster, argued for *the representation of statues as the most interesting field of application for stereoscopy* (Schröter, 2014, 92). *ISOS*'s digital bodies fulfill Brewster's demand in that they have a very sculptural quality. Despite their being digital, these virtual sculptures of bodies and objects produce a sense of presence, paradoxically lending them a specific solid quality. *ISOS* continues and perfects stereoscopy's search for *immediate, apparent tangibility*. [...] No

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<sup>125</sup> In her program text for *M, a reflection*, Marianne Van Kerkhoven makes a similar remark, referring to neurological research uncovering that *our eyes view things partially in 2D; the brains convert these visual impressions into 3D* (2012).

other form of representation in the nineteenth century had so conflated the real with the optical, an object with its image (Crary, 1988, 28, 29). Just as in *MASS*, there is a sensation of ‘density’ of the projection, making the projections more sculptural than *M*, a *reflection*’s Pepper’s ghost update. *ISOS*’s virtual sculptures are phantasmatic qua stereography even in the physiological sense, as the early stereographers explicitly sought to generate this sensation of presence and tangibility in the experience of the beholder.

On a more technical matter, the sensation that these virtual sculptures are ‘alive’ in these boxes is generated by the high quality of the 3D images, as well as by the precise positioning and tuning of the speakers, which make the figures’ movements seem fluid and firmly anchored to the space of ‘their’ box. The ‘source’ of the images is a 3D television screen at the bottom of the boxes. A small, but important technical detail, is that the 3D screens were set to locate the 3D effect fully ‘in front of the screen’ (instead of creating depth in the screen) which creates the impression of the figures standing ‘on’ the screen and hence on the floor of the boxes, or floating in them.

The diorama, another historical medium seeking to create the illusion of depth and movement, also shimmers through in *ISOS*’ set-up of nine viewing boxes. Besides Daguerre’s diorama, there is a tradition of a particular type of dioramas exhibiting humans of different ethnicities, non-normative bodies, often from colonial territories. Many museums of national history, from Brussels to New York, still have mannequins of ‘African’ and Native American people on display, next to stuffed animals. These sculptures, or rather, mannequins, are *human bodies turned into objects or images, available to be exposed, exploited or abused* (Spampinato, 2016, 2). This particular understanding of the diorama as *exhibits, where taxidermic animals or wax figures were combined with ‘naturalistic’ props and painted backdrops* gained ground only at the end of the nineteenth century and differs from its original meaning of *transparency painting* (Huhtamo, 2014, 139). The taxidermic dioramas in museums become all the more painful when we consider the near or complete extinction of the people or their ways of life as depicted in the dioramas, caused precisely by those who have captured them behind glass and have hence museified their existence. In its origins, the museum dispositive not only affected the ‘things’ (human and nonhuman) on display, it also disciplined the visitor and served as an apparatus of education and indoctrination (T. Bennett in S. Bennett, 2013, 9). The dioramas in these natural history museums were designed to present a ‘realist’ image of the ‘cultures’ they contained, or rather, had captured.<sup>126</sup>

In *ISOS*, the crossover of stereography and the diorama as *exhibition apparatus* (Huhtamo, 2013, 144) reflects on the objectification of bodies and lives, and the violence

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<sup>126</sup> Stereography knows a similar political use. In the Victorian age as well as in Nazi Germany, stereography was used to demonstrate and spread the power and ideology of the empire (Gurevitch, 2012, 244), *the spatiality of 3D images thus became a political tool* (Schröter, 2014, 195).

that goes with it. Besides the formal aspects of the stereography and the diorama boxes as exhibition apparatus of capture, the installation shows Western culture as a product of and captured by spectacular media. The boxes containing waiting figures, just standing there and doing nothing, convey the tension of such an anaesthetized figure of a domesticated population. Relating the exhibition of objectified humans to the contemporary society of the spectacle, visual culture historian Francesco Spampinato sees the *mannequin as symbol of the new mass culture, a tool to display commodities* (2016, 6). The important difference with the non-Western cultures on display in the national history museums is that in a way, ‘we’ – the West – brought it upon ourselves, and continue to do so.

Looking at the diorama’s objectified beings from a position of power – be it political or economic – seems to be almost inherent in the mode of viewing Verdonck’s installation. In his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), Benjamin claimed that the technological means to produce reproducible art works – he refers to photography and film, but stereography certainly belongs to that category as well – led to a shift of focus, making mankind an object of contemplation for itself (2007 [1935], 242). The rise of reproducible art works is related to the desire of the *masses to bring things ‘closer’* (2007 [1935], 223). The dioramas of *ISOS* are to be looked in from the upper side of a viewing box, creating a god’s eye perspective. The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard made a similar argument in his chapter on holograms in *Simulacra and Simulation*, stating that *you bend over the hologram like God over his creature* (2001, 105). Virtual sculpture, taxidermy, doll, mannequin, hologram: these doubles of the human are not innocent. Moreover, they allude to a desire for control, possession and power over life in various ways. However strongly Verdonck’s installation evokes this perspective in the spectator, the experience of watching *ISOS* does not incite a feeling of power or control. Once again this connects back to Crary’s description of the viewing experience of stereographic images: *The stereoscope signals an eradication of "the point of view" around which, for several centuries, meanings had been assigned reciprocally to an observer and the object of his or her vision* (1988, 30). Stereography intensifies the phantasmatic aspect of images, affirming the entanglement of the beholder in the object of vision and vice versa, complicating the auctorial god’s eye view. Looking inside Verdonck’s dioramas, we have all become powerless, consuming gods that look upon their own creations, unable to change anything in their course.

Similar to the diorama, stereography has a history of depicting – or rather, capturing – subjects as objects, notably weakened others and women. In the mid-nineteenth century, early stereography was a technology associated with pornography (Colligan, 2008, 76). Colette Colligan, who specializes in pornographic print culture in that period, refers to Baudelaire’s disapproval of the medium, quoting his essay on photography in which the French poet writes that *a thousand hungry eyes were bending over the peepholes of the stereoscope, as though they were the attic-windows of the infinite. The love of pornography,*

*which is no less deep-rooted in the natural heart of man than the love of himself [...]* (Baudelaire in Colligan, 2008, 77). A century before Baudrillard, Baudelaire already connected stereography to narcissism, as well as to pornography and the fetishization of the (mostly female) body. The genealogy of the virtual sculpture is hence already interwoven with the pornographic commodification of bodies in photography and later in fashion and advertisement industries. Interestingly, Ballard's oeuvre has a particular vision on women and the impact of female characters on their male antagonists as well. Ballard's female characters consistently appear as objects of longing. While this feature can be interpreted in relation to his wife's early death, the fact that nearly all women in his stories are portrayed as mysterious poles of attraction seems also to be inspired by the surrealists' depiction of women, for example in the work of Delvaux or De Chirico. Ballard's female characters embody the longing caused by absence, combined with the imagery of the surrealist *femmes fatales* (Spampinato, 2016, 11) and the spectacular consumption of female bodies. However, as we will see later, there is a dangerous, disruptive aspect to these female characters, they are not – both in surrealism and especially in Ballard's work – submissive, they are rather challenging the rationale of their environment.

The mysterious objectification of the female body – if that is how we could call Ballard's rendition of female characters – is comparable to the fetishization of nonhuman objects that become an object of desire on an equal level of human beings or substituting an actual human other in Ballard's aforementioned novel *Crash!*. The science-fiction aspect of Ballard's oeuvre perhaps does not lay so much in contemplating technological innovations as in its bleak look ahead on how society and the human psyche will evolve within a spectacular consumer society. Stereography is particularly Ballardian as it was and perhaps still is *a consequence of an emergent visual culture that triangulated industry, spectacle and the commodity in a new relationship* (Gurevitch, 2013, 400). Similar to Gurevitch, Spampinato draws a connection between the fetishization and commodification of the body through mannequins and avatars and the rise of mass media, which led to a development of phantasms in *the transformation of reality into fiction through the bombardment of images of desire and fantasies impossible to achieve* (2016, 13). Stereography is applied by Verdonck to comment precisely on a spectacular society as it was described by Ballard. The latter predicted a world in which individuals wilfully give up liberties and personal information to an apparatus of which they think they have complete control, but which in fact controls them. The dystopian result is a collective society of equal but docile members of a worldwide, suburban, petty bourgeoisie. His characters all find themselves in various postapocalyptic or dystopian settings and situations, and they all share the same sort of lethargy, a passivity toward their situation. *My worst nightmare is that nothing happens*, Ballard notoriously said.

In the dioramas of *ISOS*, the wealthy middle class couple that is the main focus in several of the viewing boxes, is exemplary for Agamben's description of the petty

bourgeoisie. They wait, dine, watch TV, laugh and are placed in situations of repetition, alienation, doubling and hysteria. The couple represents the typical petty bourgeois household, which according to Agamben will ultimately make up the larger part of our society. The (future) planetary bourgeoisie is a consequence of the *spectacular-democratic society in which we live* (Agamben, 2000, 125). In the society of the spectacle that has sedated the critical and creative capacities of its inhabitants, spirituality is replaced by consumerism and the urge to live by a comfortable waiting. In *Vermillion Sands* (1971), Ballard calls this condition *beach fatigue*, caused by an overdose of relaxation in the sun and consumption of cocktails without any incentive to produce, resist or create. For this pacified form of life, *le routine de l'existence métropolitaine, avec l'infinité de ses dispositifs désubjectivants et les extases inconscientes qu'elle offre à bon marché, est, en l'occurrence, parfaitement suffisante* (Agamben, 2015b, 22, 23).

Agamben's petty bourgeoisie is the inheritor of a process of nullification that has expropriated identities and rendered stable subjectivities and naturalized vocations meaningless, just as it has erased the use values of commodities. If it represents an opportunity, this is because it is precisely in its vacuity, in its indifference to identity and to national dreams that he locates the germinating seed of "whatever being" (Whyte, 2013, 146).

It is the petty bourgeoisie's docility that brings Agamben to the conclusion that they are *probably the form in which humanity is moving toward its own destruction* (1993a, 65). However 'optimistic' this might seem from an Agambenian perspective, Ballard stresses that this docility nevertheless is already a highly aggressive way of life. A critical reflection on the violent petty bourgeoisie as an outcome of the spectacular-democratic society is also formed by the use of sound in *ISOS*. Each box has its own speakers, and thus its own sound, related to what happens inside the box. In the space in which these boxes are placed, this creates an acoustic space, which Brandon LaBelle terms *acoustic territory*, to emphasize the political aspect of such auditory environments (2010, xxiii).<sup>127</sup> Pervading the boundaries separating the inside and outside of the boxes, this acoustic territory also evokes associations with how sound invades the private sphere (LaBelle, 2010, xxi)<sup>128</sup> – such as sounds of advertisement, of discriminatory political propaganda, of noise pollution. The pressure this invasion of the sound of the spectacular-democratic in the intimate sphere creates, equals the pressure of the acoustic, mediatized territory in which the virtual sculptures of *ISOS*, and for that matter, we as well, live.

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<sup>127</sup> I thank Leonie Persyn for generously sharing her research insights on sound dramaturgy, including the reference to the terminology of LaBelle.

<sup>128</sup> I read LaBelle here contrary to his own search for an acoustic territory that creates a social fabric, a shared auditory space, that forms communities, gives voice to those who have no voice elsewhere, in a more emancipatory project (2010, xxiv).

One central diorama shows a BBC television report on the 2011 London riots in a loop. These riots became famous for their atypically broad appeal, as demonstrating immigrants and working class people were joined by white collar and middle class rioters. Interestingly, there was no single particular reason, nor goal of the riots. It was as if a certain critical emotional mass had been accrued, resulting in an uncontrolled outbreak of violence. *ISOS*' program text refers to how the son of Michael Young – who coined the term 'meritocracy' – estimated that *to understand these riots, one does not have to read Karl Marx, but rather J.G. Ballard* (Young in Van Kerkhoven & van Baarle, 2013). It was an event that brought the violence of the society of the petty bourgeois to the surface: *human beings cannot be domesticated for long: deprived of access to fantasy that also instructs, such beings become ineluctably enraged, potentially even savage* (Stiegler, 2010a, 39). This particular box containing the London riots, is based on Ballard's short story *Escapement* (1956). In this story, that is also performed in the corresponding box, a couple watches TV, but the man suddenly is stuck in a loop, in a repetition of the same events – the same news report is appearing on the screen, the same glass is falling off the table. The male character is worried about his looped state of being, but not about the violence on TV. These loops grow shorter and shorter and his wife is completely unaware of this condition. And as all of the scenes in the boxes of *ISOS* are played in loop, this 'Escapement' box loop, is like a loop in a loop. Bay-Cheng has pointed out the importance of television for Ballard and *ISOS*, writing that *the television was conceived in paradox: a radical new technology that gave its viewers access to the world yet did so in a setting firmly rooted in domesticity* (Bay-Cheng in Eckersall & van Baarle, forthcoming). For Bay-Cheng, the 'Escapement' box enacts precisely that paradox and the violence of the loop shows the impact of the violence in news, series and movies flooding the living rooms, and that today with the smartphone, is potentially always available.

A more fundamental form of violence, which lays dormant in all of *ISOS*' boxes, becomes explicit in this looped box. The exceptional event of the London riots could be analyzed as a moment where the *inherent systemic violence* (Žižek, 2009, 10) of Agamben's spectacular-democratic regime comes to the surface. It is the moment when society reveals itself as what Rancière has called *the society of consensus: the post-political suspension of the political in the reduction of the state to a mere police agent servicing the (consensually established) needs of the market forces and multiculturalist tolerant humanitarianism* (2009, 72). The society of consensus always implies a latent violence or can evoke a strong counter-violence. In order to maintain the consensus of which the Ballardian suburb and its petty bourgeois inhabitants are emblematic, a violent pacification is necessary, or as in other Ballard novels, an outlet for this violence is organized in the form of drugs, parties, sex and murder. When the *homeostasis* can no longer be maintained, this leads to riots or a civil war. Other boxes in *ISOS* literally 'contain' violent scenes: two businessmen fighting and a sparkling piece of fireworks make explicit what stayed rather implicit in the other scenes. The sounds of the riots as the dominant element in *ISOS*' acoustic territory, create

a tension with the content of the other dioramas that not always show violent situations, and evoke an unsettling feeling of a conflict or hostile group approaching, or a more general pressure and aggression of the environment.

The planetary bourgeoisie in the boxes create an image of a standardized humanity. The size of the boxes is identical, standardized like shipping containers. The title of Verdonck's installation reflects this tendency: *isos* is Greek for 'the same as'. Bringing everything and everyone down to an identical or exchangeable scale – a result and at the same time a requirement of being part of the apparatus – allows *smooth expansion* and *banishes meaningful diversity, that is, diversity that might change things* (Tsing, 2015, 38). Capturing living beings through technological means, enabling easy transportation and expansion of control, occurs thus via processes of standardization: *Everything on earth – and beyond – might be scalable, and thus exchangeable at market values* (Tsing, 2015, 40). Standardization as a consequence of a globalized economy has not only its impact on the objects we produce, but also on our own psyche and forms of life.

In addition to their size, all the viewing boxes have an identical slick, white design, as if they are part of a sterile, minimalist white cube exhibition space (a reference to Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, in which cruel images are discussed and presented in a detached, sterile manner). With Ballard's universe in mind, the white boxes also evoke Ballardian environments such as generic skyscrapers, global cities and sterile 'utopian-turned-out-dystopian' designs for modern cities, such as parts of the Parisian *banlieue*. The audience then becomes a crowd of individuals wandering between these boxes, often waiting to have a look. In my imagination, they are the citizens of a city, looking at dioramas of their own culture that could alarm them, but that rather evoke a calm curiosity, typical for Ballard's characters. Especially when presented in a gallery white cube, the exhibition apparatus is doubled, turning *ISOS* into an exhibition of the exhibition. Walking around in *ISOS*, the unsettling idea arises that you yourself and your fellow spectators are part of a larger diorama, of a larger system. However, there is no one watching from above, as the system is created by human beings themselves and now maintains its *homeostasis* as a cybernetic apparatus.

Inside the boxes, the standardization and objectification are accentuated by the superimposition of a grid upon all of the box's inner surfaces, forming the environment and background of the virtual sculptures. This is an explicit reference to Eadweard Muybridge's collections of animal and human locomotion, published in 1887. Muybridge developed such a grid to lend his photographic experiments precisely this measurable, scientific and objective quality. Thanks to the technological set-up with multiple camera's consecutively shooting the action, *it was the first time photographs had dissected and reanimated actual motion* (Solnit, 2003, 6). Muybridge's 'proof' that horses don't always touch the ground when they gallop, is perhaps the most well-known outcome of this method. The reference to Muybridge is dramaturgically connected to Ballard's poetics. Ballard professed his love for the anatomy classes he took during his medicine studies, a

fondness that returns in his writing in the form of a meticulous dissection and description of bodies, medical and scientific phenomena, etc. Transparency and objectivity correspond to a violent atomization of bodies, in often intimate actions or settings. Muybridge's collections of movements could also be interpreted as an attempt to catalogue their objects in a time when positivism and scientificity seemed to embody an almost redemptive promise. It was also the time of the development of statistics, focused on human bodies and social aspects in anthropometry, as developed by Adolphe Quetelet, and the proliferation of Bertillonage, the predecessor of today's 'mugshot' photos.<sup>129</sup> These were all early attempts to capture the human in 'data', in a development toward a society of control, and at certain moments in history, they all were (ab)used as 'evidence' for racial and other forms of discrimination, i.e. to produce bare life.

Like stereography, Muybridge's new technique also was characterized by a particular representation of women, bordering the erotic. Images of nude women walking or washing themselves were tolerated for the sake of the study of anatomy and because of the scientific set-up. Ballard's detailed, anatomic and scientific descriptions of genital areas and other intimate body parts no longer deny the erotica of scientific fragmentation and close-up. They go a step further, flirting with the pornographic. Ballard describes what Baudrillard would later call the obscene: the proliferation of explicit images that *eliminates the gaze, the image and every representation* (1988, 22). One of the boxes of *ISOS* shows a scene from *The Atrocity Exhibition*, here performed by Tawny Andersen and her double. Ballard's scene, entitled 'Elements of an Orgasm', consists of a detailed and fragmented enumeration of the hurt body of a woman in a car crash. In Verdonck's rendition of the scene (called 'Two Tawnies'), it is the woman's double who describes her own mutilated, fragmented and pierced body in a distanced and 'objective' way. Both virtual versions of Andersen are 'intact', not hurt, and while one gives a description, the other takes on different positions. The abstraction of the enumeration and objective description is reflected in the abstract grid-space and distanced self-account of an accident. The installation induces a different perception of the body and presents a friction between body and description, leaving the visualization of the detailed descriptions of the body parts to the imagination of the beholder, in this way perhaps forcing the erotic back onto the pornographic character of Ballard's writing.

For Agamben, Muybridge's capture of movement and its extraction of time and space through a technological operation was an important step in the creation of a world in which the human has lost its gestures (Agamben, 2000, 51). If we take Agamben's analysis of Muybridge as the starting point of an increasing capture of gestures in reproducible

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<sup>129</sup> Foucault saw how in the nineteenth century, with the rise of the human sciences (psychology, sociology and the study of myths, literature and communication), the 'human' became the central object of study (Foucault, 2012 [1966], 355).

media, then Verdonck's use of 3D in *ISOS*, with its sense of presence and high-quality images, can be considered symptomatic of an even more profound and far-reaching capture. The society of the spectacle which Ballard criticizes is one *in which everything is exhibited in its separation from itself* (Agamben, 2007b, 82). The pornographic apparatus, both in stereography and Muybridge's projects, is emblematic of this separation. It implies not only the pornographic body that is expropriated as a product; also for the viewers, in whatever (technological) set-up, pornography means the inability to 'use', only the ability to consume, while upholding a destructive apparatus and neglecting love and intimacy.

With striking resemblances to the structure of *ISOS*, others have compared Muybridge's motion studies to Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, describing the former's images as *miniaturized psychodrama, the individuals locked for eternity in endlessly repeating cycles of movement* (Depper, 2008, 50). Before Muybridge, Etienne-Jules Marey already worked on a system to take several photographs after one another, in order to capture movement. In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Ballard refers to Marey's chronophotography, writing that *the element of time is visible*. Of the main character's photographs is said that *he treated them like chronograms and extracted the element of time* (Ballard, 2006, 6).<sup>130</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century, new inventions changed the experience of time and space and led to what Solnit has called the *annihilation of time and space* (2003, 5). Like standardization, they served a capitalist desire for fluidity, an abandonment of boundaries and time. In *ISOS*, such an annihilation occurs as well. Three boxes in *ISOS* respectively show the man waiting alone, the woman waiting alone and both of them waiting into a non-lieu. The non-lieu in this installation is not the typical airport or supermarket; the black and white grid that forms the background for the virtual sculptures, reminds of the imaginary of virtual cyberspace, an endless empty grid. Spampinato writes that the mannequins in De Chirico's paintings are situated *in cities as if they were abandoned by human presence* (2016, 4). The docility and passivity of the planetary bourgeoisie hence becomes intertwined with the disappearance of time and space into an eternal here and now where waiting and beach fatigue are the main *pastime*.

The technological annihilation of time and space in the society of the spectacle has led Ballard to a similar analysis, namely that the outside world, the landscape, had been changed into one big spectacle. This understanding led him to focus on internal landscapes, mental conditions, or what he called *inner space* (Ballard in Sellars & O'Hara,

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<sup>130</sup> Gunning compared the bodies captured by Marey's chronophotography to the registration of *transparent specters* (2013, 231). Verdonck's phantasmatic virtual figures can be considered as renditions of the *Gestalt* of information: *data are not numbers, but Gestalten, structures that become image: infinite points that draw the silhouette of a new Singularity emerging against the background of "apparently meaningless data"* (Pasquinelli, 2015, 254). In the current 'broadcapturing' and increasing phantasmatic forms of being, *we ourselves have the sensation of looking like an algorithm* (259).

2012, 25). The 'Two Tawnies' box is thus not only a comment on the spectacularization of the (female) body. The doubling and self-description points at a mental shift inwards, and a detachment from the body as a means of relating to the 'outside'. As Spampinato wrote in relation to mannequins and avatars, *these uncanny doubles are complex machines of introspection* (2016, 19). The viewing boxes in *ISOS* not only show the intrusion of the home and private world with the violence from outside (as in the 'Escapement' box). They also offer a look inside, at the internal violence on an individual level: stress, boredom and unchanneled anger.

The image of a hysterically laughing, objectified human 'floating' in technology, is the image of the living being, bathing in a pseudo-comfortable environment of apparatuses. *ISOS*' phantasmatic virtual sculptures remind of De Chirico's *man-statue-objects: men left mute and immobile in front of technological progress* (Spampinato, 2016, 4). However, the laughter, the calmness, the lethargy suggest a docility that borders resistance. Ballard's figures' subversivity lays in their Bloom-like reaction to their living conditions, a dangerous form of acceptance. They resemble what Canetti calls the *stereometrische Figur*.

Er ist ein Gefangener, der sich seinen Mauern angepasst hat; ein Gefangener, der es zufrieden ist; der sich gegen seinen Zustand so wenig wehrt, dass die Mauern ihn formen [...] als natürliche Umgebung angenommen (1992, 346).

The tension between the figure and its environment takes here the shape of a deliberate domestication, a radical docility exceeding the control of the producing and capturing apparatus.



Figure 16 Kris Verdonck / A Two Dogs Company: 'Two Tawnies', *ISOS* (2015) © A Two Dogs Company

Phantasms as digital images have a quality of remnants themselves as well. They are *the trace of what men who preceded us have wished and desired, feared and repressed* (Agamben, 2013a, 61). The figure of the woman in *ISOS* is a remnant of all those others before her that have been captured in mediatic apparatuses for political and economic exploitation. No longer a subject, this phantasm also hints at the potentiality of the remnant's *not yet* in moments of eye contact with the spectator. The characters in *ISOS* occasionally look back, which means, they look up, right into the eyes of the spectator that is looking into the box. The virtual sculptures seem to be aware of the fact that they are being exposed and of the apparatus in which they find themselves. The rational argument that this is, of course, impossible as it is a pre-recorded video in a loop and the eye contact thus is a projection from the side of the spectator, makes these moments only more complicated and phantasmatic. Moreover, it is the combination of this awareness with the particular gaze of Tawny Andersen, the female performer in *ISOS*, that adds a critical layer to this contact. Andersen looks up with an expressionless face, a face reminding of surrealist paintings' *expressionless and featureless female gaze*, similar to fashion models in advertisements or the sex workers in pornographic movies and images (Spampinato, 2016, 11). Her expression is not seductive, or suffering, or panicking. Its unsettling neutrality conveys both emptiness and an awareness of her condition: captured by a medium with an objectifying history, but as part of the *petit bourgeoisie*, also bored, nihilist, desireless, almost impersonal.

The looking back of the female figure generates a variation of what Kurt Vanhoutte has described in reference to an earlier work of Verdonck (*IN*, 2003), as *a process of 'medusation', expressing the power to watch and, at the same time, enacting the power of a gaze that reverses the normal direction of perception* (2010, 476). Andersen's medusation is phantasmatic, because the experience of the reversed direction of perception is a projection by the spectator. This phantasmatic medusation is a profanation of the historical pornographic use of stereography and Muybridge's photography, and more broadly, the technological apparatuses of capture. The empty gaze of pornography, the ultimate spectacularization of the body and sexuality becomes here a profanatory *strategy of re-appropriation of nihilism* (Prozorov, 2011, 73) – the same nihilism that characterizes the petty bourgeoisie. The 'false promise of happiness', which manipulates the consumer's desire and of which pornography might be the ultimate emblem, is taken away and instead reveals *the withdrawal of the possibility of happiness* (Prozorov, 2011, 79), hence uncovering the violence of the apparatus and making the spectator conscious of his or her way of looking. The empty gaze is not one of complicity between spectator and the spectated, but rather shows a state of being that finds a different way of relating – in this case, a detachment – to its living conditions: *her impassive face breaks every connection between lived experience and the expressive sphere* (Agamben, 2007b, 91). This detachment between condition and expression, reminds of Agamben's reading of Paul's use of *hōs mē* (as not), in his investigation of the messianic: *this is the formula concerning messianic life [...]*

it revokes the factual condition and undermines it, without altering its form (Agamben, 2005, 23, 24).

What Andersen's medusating gaze also evokes, is the profanation of the form of representation that separates all aspects of life from free, common use, with objectification (as commodity) as a consequence. The phantasm wants to be seen as a phantasm. The objectification of the body by means of (media) technologies in the society of the spectacle does not mean an actual technologization of the body (as in e.g. cyborgs), but of its representation.

What was technologized was not the body, but its image. Thus the glorious body of advertising has become the mask behind which the fragile, slight human body continues its precarious existence, and the geometrical splendor of the 'girls' covers over the long lines of the naked, anonymous bodies led to their death in the *Lagers* (camps), or the thousands of corpses mangled in the daily slaughter on the highways (Agamben, 1993a, 50).

Andersen's inexpressive gaze disrupts the spectacular-democratic apparatus that is based on control through violent capture of the means of representation. Looking back into the eyes of the spectator reveals this violence and moreover, breaks the 'mask', the membrane that separates 'the girls' from the corpses and shows that they are part of one and the same apparatus of power. Looking back makes scratches in the veneer of consensus and emphasizes the pressure and aggression that the acoustic territory and other violent scenes in *ISOS* expose more literally.

The empty gaze of Andersen is doubled in her particular way of speaking. Her voice is 'empty' as well: there is an almost uncanny detachment with which she says the words in for example the 'Two Tawnies' box, an objectivity, 'unmovedness', as if her voice and the thoughts it expresses do not belong to her. [T]he awareness of being exposed to the gaze creates a vacuum in consciousness and powerfully disrupts the expressive processes that usually animate the face (Agamben, 2007b, 90). Andersen comments almost as a voice-over on her own actions, in which her body is (virtually) present but with a desubjectified detachment. In this detached, anti-dramatic and non-subjectifying use, *language is both the voice and memory of death* (Agamben, 1991, 46) or more abstract, holds a position of absence. This posthumanist voice of the figure, detached from a subject, or from a subject position, has a similar effect and lack of affect as the empty gaze and constitutes the profanatory gesture of *ISOS*: *shown as a pure means beyond any concrete expressivity, it becomes available for a new use* (Agamben, 2007b, 90). Verdonck introduces language beyond the vanity and idleness that were analyzed in the work of Okada (chapter 1.2.2). The split between living being and language, and the subsequently violent and desperate proliferation of apparatuses to capture and control beings nevertheless, could lead to a fundamental rethinking of the relation between human beings and language. Perhaps, in Leysen's performance of language as an object in *M, a reflection* and Andersen's

desubjectified use of voice, a human being that is no longer founded in language but that makes use of it, starts to come to the fore, a being beyond language. The dawn of this being is already suggested in *The Sacrament of Language* (2011b, 71), although it would jeopardize the whole of Agamben's philosophical construct, as the human being as a being in language is one of the foundational aspects of his thinking.

*ISOS* shows that working with contemporary forms of older media such as the diorama, Muybridge's photographic experiments and stereography, goes beyond historical research or the instrumental, historical demonstration of a 'trick'. It allows one to unveil the political and economic apparatuses in which these media operated and in which their contemporary versions continue to operate. Perhaps by taking the next step after chronophotography and stereography, by obtaining a 3D image that attains the quality of a virtually 'present' sculpture, the pornographic, inexpressive gaze is able to disrupt its apparatus. Generating a sufficient sensation of presence for the spectator, Andersen's inexpressive gaze affects the viewer more than it could have in stereography, diorama or chronophotography (or for that matter, television or computer screens) and in a different way than in a 'live' confrontation. In doing so, it creates a small impediment, a fissure destabilizing the system. What remains is *nothing but the showing itself (that is, one's own absolute mediality)* (Agamben 2007b, 90). Looking back into the frame, which holds you captured, with knowledge of its workings, renders the apparatus inoperative (Agamben, 2000, 94) and available for a new use. Knowing she is being watched, she looks back, straight into the eyes of her voyeur and in the heart of apparatus of power.

## 2.5 The mascot figure<sup>131</sup>

*So sind wir heute zu tot, um zu leben, und zu lebendig  
um zu sterben.*  
(Han, 2015a, 58)

The marionette, object-figure and phantasm: already these three different facets of the figure make clear that ‘what’ performs in an apparatus-posthumanist performative work, is a complex intertwining of processes of objectification, projection and animation, of human beings placed in apparatuses, apparatuses shown as entities with agencies, and of relations between the material and immaterial, both on stage, in the theatre and in the world. After having discussed the marionette as an objectification of the human body, harboring a potential form-of-life; the object-figure as both a revealing and a new use of the uncanny and fetishistic ontological agency of the apparatus; and the phantasm as a complex triangulation between captured entities in mediatic apparatuses, the specters thus produced and the subjective perception of their onlookers; the mascot is a fourth facet of the figure in Verdonck’s work, bringing other aspects of figural being to the fore. The mascot does not show a human body, not as objectified matter, nor as a digital phantasm. On the other hand, it is also not ‘merely’ an object performing, there are different dynamics at work than those of the object-figure.

In everyday life, mascots serve as good luck charms and advertisement for teams, brands, stores, events and nations. The type of mascot Verdonck has worked on, is that in which a human performer wears a large suit covering the whole body (including head and face) of the person inside it. These suits often look uncomfortable, heavy and hot, and on top of that, mascot labor is mostly low-waged and especially in entertainment parks and on the streets, performed by people living in precarious socio-economic conditions. An important aspect of the mascot in Verdonck is its representation and enactment of the violence of the neoliberal apparatus toward the body and the psyche, causing the former to disappear behind an image of a brand, and the psyche to be pushed to extremes varying between panic and depression. From a more explicit posthumanist perspective, the mascot continues the line of figures between absence and presence, working in an industrialized, dehumanized environment that relates to the performing arts as well. In Verdonck’s work, the mascot came to being in *H, an incident* (2013), became the central

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<sup>131</sup> This chapter is an expanded and reworked version of a book chapter titled ‘The mascot as neoliberal body: Kris Verdonck’s *Untitled*’, and that will be published in *Shifting Corporealities in Contemporary Performance Danger, Im/mobility and Politics*, edited by Marina Gržinić & Aneta Stojnić (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

element for the performance *UNTITLED* (2014), ‘returned’ in the opera *BOSCH BEACH* (2016), and in the installative performance *UNIT*, in *IN VOID II* (2017).<sup>132</sup>

In this research – and as I will argue later in this chapter and in the following, in the work of Verdonck – the mascot is a threshold figure, between the recurrent tropes of subject and object, presence and absence and life and death. The mascot, particularly in *UNTITLED*, also forms a threshold between works with a focus on physical figures, entities which are constructed in one way or another as having a body, and those works by Verdonck in which the space and time in which these figures are placed, become essential aspects of these figures. Whereas the figure in *HEART* consisted out of the performer, her suit, and the apparatus measuring and amplifying her heartbeat and triggering the pullback mechanism, the mascot figure comprises not only the costume, but also the fact of being on a theatre stage as such. Of course, the space and time of the figures discussed so far have been also important, and frames such as that of the theatre or circular temporality have already been discussed in the analyses of both the marionette and object-figures. However, in the figure of the mascot, elements such as the empty stage and a temporality doubting between endlessness and suspended time are constitutive to this figure’s dramaturgy. For argument’s sake, I will nevertheless separate these two elements, the performing entity of the mascot and the temporality and space that characterize its environment and that are as constitutive to it as the suit. In the analysis of *UNTITLED*, I will discuss the former in what follows, and the latter at the opening of the next chapter, which is focused on aspects of the figure’s time and space. The mascot figure will here be analyzed in two steps: first as the creation of a ‘neoliberal body’, a disappeared human body in a socio-economic context and second, as the subsequent crisis of representation this neoliberal body leads to, both in terms of communication as a source of political being, and in terms of a lack of empathy with this figure.

So far, the production of bare life has been associated with apparatuses of objectification (digitalization, big data, quantified self, biomedica, exclusion and/or exploitation based on faith, race, gender, etc.), political apparatuses of control, war and spectral auto-referentiality, and capitalist apparatuses of commodification and capture of desire and potentiality. The mascot as it is presented in Verdonck’s *UNTITLED*, is produced at the intersection of political apparatuses organizing poverty and the decay of social welfare, and neoliberal capitalist apparatuses of commodification, entertainment and exploitation – an intersection that has already been termed (with reference to Agamben) the spectacular democracy. More specific for apparatus-posthumanism, the mascot facet of the figure deals with the psychopolitical aspects of the spectacular democracy.

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<sup>132</sup> I cannot go deeper into *UNIT* and *IN VOID II* here, as they were only created in December 2017, which fell outside of the timeframe of the research for this dissertation.

## 2.5.1 Untitled being

*Instead of great expectations and sweet dreams,  
'progress' evokes an insomnia full of nightmares of 'being  
left behind' - of missing the train, or falling out of the  
window of a fast accelerating vehicle.  
(Bauman, 2007, 11)*

Entering the theatre space, a shiny rectangular mascot with a smiley face on its 'belly' stands on stage and greets the incoming spectators with a wave, a thumbs up, pointing, a high five, and occasionally, a hug. In other words: this mascot is at work. This mascot, which within the artistic team of *UNTITLED* was called Cookie, reminds of sandwich men walking the streets, except that it does not promote anything but the spectacle itself. The same paillette fabric, out of which the mascot is made, is used for the stage backdrop, which looks like one big shimmering screen. The happy square figure, almost completely lacking human forms, leaves the stage when the theatre's doors close, leaving the audience behind with *the promise of entertainment* (Eckersall, 2017). The 'real' show has a different central character. A mascot resembling a bee with a Mickey Mouse-like face, two feelers on its head and small wings of white see-through fabric, crosses the stage, apparently looking for something, waving to the audience casually. After several passages, disappearing in the stage wings and reappearing, the bee mascot seems to come to realize that it *is* the central character, burdened with the task of entertaining the audience. A similar realization occurs at the spectator's side. These 'poor' elements are what will constitute the performance: a nearly empty stage, and a mascot. Not much has happened yet, and not much will happen at all in the following sixty minutes. The mascot performs little tricks, out of sheer poverty of skills – a jump, a slide, a robot dance, playing shooters alone, by himself. Each action seems to underline its unenviable situation.

The performance ends with the mascot sitting down, exhausted, no longer knowing what to do. At that moment, a technological, nonhuman and violent environment takes over, in which the inflatable tubes of *BOGUS I* (cf. 2.3.1) emerge from their black boxes and a robotic mascot drives on stage and executes a repetitive, circular choreography. These final scenes emphasize one of the fundamental features of the mascot figure: the replaceability and eventually, the redundancy of the human body inside the suit. What counts is the suit (and what it represents), not the performer inside. The mascot is an effigy that fills, *by means of surrogation, a vacancy created by the absence of an original* (Roach in Daily, 2008, 44) and in this sense is in line with the phantasm as well. In an essay on sports mascots, Mary C. Daily connects the mascot also to Marx' commodity fetish. Not only is the mascot part of a merchandise economy, the person inside is also transformed

into a *faceless commodity* (2008, 50).<sup>133</sup> The mascot is emblematic of what recent studies on the impact of technological innovation in automation have shown, namely that estimated more than 40% of today's jobs (in the US) will be automated in the future (Frey & Osborne, 2013, 38). The argument that jobs will disappear, however, *is a wonderful means to foremost have us work cheaper*, as Dutch sociologist Willem Schinkel argues (2017, my transl.).

In the particular figure of the mascot, replaceability and redundancy are considered from the perspective of the neoliberal economic-political apparatus in conflation with technological developments and the entertainment industry. Both redundancy and replaceability are the underlying threats of the neoliberal logics of the entrepreneur of the self, and the source of the psychopathologies resulting from the psychopolitics of the spectacular-democratic apparatus. However, *the volume of humans made redundant by capitalism's global triumph grows unstopably and comes close now to exceeding the managerial capacity of the planet* (Bauman, 2007, 28). From the perspective of the government as well as identity, work is a central value in neoliberal political-economic systems. This is paralleled by an increasing amount of jobs that have a lower quality and low income, as well as by the precarity resulting from the lifting of the barrier between exploiter and exploited, which led to a large-scale self-exploitation. The pressure resulting from this double bind has caused a widespread collapse of subjectivity, an increase in both panic and hysteria and (or followed by) depression and burnout (Pinxten, 2013; Verhaeghe, 2012; Berardi, 2016; Han, 2016a).<sup>134,135</sup> The mascot is a well-known image of underpaid, tough labor, and in *UNTITLED* it operates as an emblem for this double bind leading to desubjectification, it is characterizing for capitalism as *a posthumanist, nearly fatalist apparatus* (Berardi, 2016, 97, my transl.). The mascot represents its employer, its position in economy and the relation to its audience, but not the person inside. He remains hidden in the costume and the human performer in the suit will only show through occasionally.

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<sup>133</sup> In *The Spectre of Capital* (in this research consulted in its Dutch translation *Het spook van het kapitaal* [2013]), German literature theorist Joseph Vogl analyzes contemporary capitalism with its predominance of the financial markets as being in a *crisis of representation* (2013, 78). This crisis is intrinsic to a system that deals in virtual monetary transactions that no longer have a real economic counterpart, *to the point that available capital is no longer discernible from spectres* (2013, 141, my transl.). The financial markets have detached through several levels from the economic, material goods or services. It has become a network of *floating signifiers* without referents, resembling Baudrillard's simulacra as copies without originals (Vogl, 2013, 81).

<sup>134</sup> Recent studies show that it is actually those who have a lower level of education that are more vulnerable for depression (Hermsen, 2017, 19). This might be surprising as burnout and depression are often related to the highly educated and to postfordist, creative, immaterial and thus intellectual labor.

<sup>135</sup> Han points at how in the process of liberalisation and deregulation in favour of a particular conception of freedom, homo sacer and the sovereign find themselves united in the 'entrepreneur of the self': *Das Leistungssubjekt, das sich als Souverän seiner selbst, als homo liber gibt, erweist sich als homo sacer. Das Leistungssubjekt als Souverän ist gleichzeitig der homo sacer seiner selbst. So erweist sich homo liber als homo sacer. In einer paradoxen Logik bringen auch in der Leistungsgesellschaft der Souverän und der homo sacer vor.* (2016a, 86).



Figure 17 Kris Verdonck / A Two Dogs Company: *UNTITLED* (2014) © A Two Dogs Company

The mascot figure was developed first in Verdonck's *H, an incident*, a theatre performance based on the life and work of Daniil Kharms (the same performance out of which *DEAD BRASS BAND* came forth, cf. 2.3.2). Kharms was a writer who wrote short stories, some only one or two lines long, in which he captured the absurdity and cruelty of his world, Stalinist Leningrad, with a particular humor, wonder and performativity. In both *H, an incident* and *UNTITLED*, the mascot was based on the short story *A Knight* (1936), in which the main character, driven by an unstoppable enthusiasm and zeal, commits to the dominant ideals in society. Romantic nationalism and aristocracy (Czarist Russia) are followed by revolutionary idealism (the Bolshevik Revolution) and liberalization (Lenin's NEP). The story ends in a Stalinist world in which nothing can be said anymore about all the aforementioned ideals, which leads to the imprisonment of this knight, who's no longer able to adapt to a changing and increasingly restrictive world. Each time again, he finds a way to adjust to the vying system and to survive, until his flexibility runs out and his environment becomes hostile to the utterance of any form of ideology. His commitment and positive energy end him up behind bars. This character is typical for Kharms' cartoon-like figures, with a seemingly infinite optimism and positive energy, not bothered by memory or skepticism. In *H, an incident*, the mascot stayed closer to the *A Knight's* ideological tensions, and wore an orange lion suit, referring to the Flemish lion, while performing violent acts and over-enthused dances. In a scene in which it is alone

on stage, it starts running around, looking for a way to channel its positive energy. However, this seems to fail and its energy transforms into a violence that turns inwards. It is this performative dynamics that formed the basis for *UNTITLED*.

*UNTITLED* leaves the nationalist aspect of *A Knight* aside, and translates the self-destructive dynamics of the story's main character to socio-economic and existential conditions. A mascot, in the fields of advertisement and entertainment, is also a positive creature, fiercely representing its employer or product. The mascot suit is an indexical sign that refers constantly to the company, event, team, or commodity it promotes. As such, the mascot does not exist for its own sake, but only to represent an economic reality. The mascot figure is a manifestation of how *the spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image* (Debord, 1995, 24). The animated mascot suit is a rather vivid, three-dimensional version of this kind of image. As a symptom and symbol of entertainment and popular culture in the society of the spectacle, the mascot could be Debord's worst nightmare.

Debord already wrote that the goal of the spectacle is a collective proletarianization (1995, 21). Within the spectacular-democratic apparatus, the mascot figure presents a case of radical dehumanization that goes further than that of the marionettes in *I/II/III/IIII*. The replaceability and capture that has taken here the form of an encapsulation, have led to an invisibility of the body. A mode of reasoning that returned during dramaturgical conversations for *UNTITLED* was that the fact that there is still a human body 'at work', is often merely an economic calculation, as an actual automated doll, such as those waving, pointing at road works, might be more expensive than the mascot's low-wage labor. Indeed, cheap labor bordering slavery is part of the spectacular-democratic apparatus, as Jessica Whyte rightfully notes: *We should remain attentive to the way spectacular consumption presupposes (unspectacular) production by people who work merely to stay alive* (2010, 14). The workers that operate the Amazon warehouses, or the Nepalese and Indian immigrants that are constructing the 2022 Qatar World Cup infrastructure all literally build the spectacle. Agamben states that it was the abolishment of slavery that led to the development of technologies to execute labor (2014, 112), placing both entities, technology and the slave, on the same level. The mascot figure finds itself on precisely that balance as well: between human being and object, merely there in function of something or someone else and in a permanent state of uncertainty on the verge of disappearing, while already being invisible. The entry point of the mascot into the dichotomy of subject and object, but also in that of life and death and of action and inaction, concerns aspects of the figure relating to infantilization, psychopolitics and a lack of empathy, all as a consequence of a technologically fuelled spectacular democracy.

As a living statue (both in its literal, oxymoronic sense and with reference to that other mascot-like phenomenon on many touristic sites and streets), *UNTITLED*'s mascot at moments explicitly enters a zone of ambiguity between human and thing, when the mascot sits on one of the black boxes and stops moving. After a couple seconds, this figure

has become an object, a lifeless statue, or as Veltruský termed it, a *human prop*, whose action may fall to the “zero level”, the figure then becomes a part of the set [...] It follows then that people in these roles can be replaced by lifeless dummies. Thus people as part of the set form the transition between the sphere of man and the sphere of the object (Veltruský, 1964, 86). This shift in perception, from living performer to lifeless object, only occurs to us when the performer slowly starts to move again – as if we, the audience, had forgotten the mascot contained a human being at all – evoking a coming to life of an inanimate object. Nevertheless, these statue phases are charged with tension.

The absence that opens up in these moments, reminds of the spectral presence of the phantasm. Indeed, Agamben refers to the phantasms of Aristotle and the medieval era in a dance context as well, pointing out their use in a Renaissance dance handbook, where they are defined as *a sudden arrest between two movements that virtually contracts within its internal tension the measure and the memory of the entire choreographic series [...] a pause that is not immobile but simultaneously charged with memory and dynamic energy* (Agamben, 2013a, 8, 10). Verdonck deliberately seeks to stretch these phantasmatic moments in the mascot figure at several points in the performance, as if to highlight the threshold between life and death, between subject and object, of which the mascot figure is a particular example. The mascot then becomes an object-figure with suggested animation. These explicit moments of objecthood (here in the sense of Fried, as it evokes a sense of hollow presence and establishes a relation with the spectator) in the performance, emphasize the objectification and reification at work in the figure of the mascot as a neoliberal body. It is a tension that can be described in terms of Debord’s society of the spectacle, in which *[a]ll that was once directly lived has become mere representation [...] a concrete inversion of life, and, as such, the autonomous movement of non-life* (1995, 11). The mascot figure reminds also of Rilke’s text on dolls, in which a doll appears as a liminal fetish: *[...] at once present and absent, it has lost its weight “in the hands of the merchant”* (Agamben, 1993b, 58). In Rilke’s original text, the description of dolls reminds of the self-inflicting energy of Kharms’ knight that also operates in the mascot figure: *It is as if they yearned for a beautiful flame, to throw themselves into like moths* (Rilke, 2012 [1914], 61).

The moth’s desire for a lethal goal, as a mode of producing bare life, characterizes the psychopolitical functioning of neoliberal and spectacular-democratic apparatuses. In the analysis of *I/II/III/IIII*, desire was discussed more from the perspective of the creation of apparatuses on a longer term. Here, the desire of the mascot is already completely encapsulated within a neoliberal mode of thinking and every action has a quite immediate effect (although effect still suggests too much agency on the mascot’s part): *wir optimieren uns zum Tode, um besser funktionieren zu können* (Han, 2016b, 93). Several of the little routines the mascot performs, involve violence, enacted – as it is a mascot – in a cartoon-like manner, such as playing shooters and being shot (by an invisible entity), until being lethally hit and dying in an exaggerated way, or more directly, smashing its head against the boxes, thrashing back and forth between them, in a way that doubts sourly between

fun, aggression and manic madness. All these actions happen in the first part of the performance, which ends with the mascot going into a mad frenzy. It starts to throw itself enthusiastically against the sidewall of the stage. The rhythm of the full frontal smashes increases in what now clearly appears to be a desire for self-destruction.<sup>136</sup> A wireless microphone inside the suit amplifies the hits, which might hurt the performer, but not the suit.<sup>137</sup> This pragmatic consideration holds an interesting observation: the subject caught up in the system cannot withdraw from it, at least not by self-destruction, since it leaves the system intact. Mascots cannot die and that is perhaps their biggest plight, which reminds of the Invisible Committee's description of the Bloom, adrift on *un radeau de suicidaires, perdue dans un océan dépressionniste d'images et d'abstractions* (2000, 56). As a radical version of what Han calls the *Leistungssubjekt*, a notion that can be translated as 'performance subject', it *beutet sich selbst aus, bis es ganz ausbrennt (Burnout). Es entwickelt sich dabei eine Autoagressivität, die sich nicht selten zur Selbsttötung verschärft* (Han 2016a, 83). However, the mascot is deprived of this latter 'redemptive' option. As a cartoon figure, as an animated suit, it is immortal. The mascot figure is emblematic of Han's description of the contemporary *homines sacri*, who *unterscheiden sich von denen der Souveränitätsgesellschaft durch die weitere Besonderheit, dass sie absolut untötbar sind* (Han, 2016a, 88). Or in the words of Agamben:

The decisive activity of biopower in our time consists in the production not of life or death, but rather of a mutable and virtually infinite survival. [...] Biopower's supreme ambition is to produce, in a human body, the absolute separation of the living being and the speaking being, *zoē* and *bios*, the inhuman and the human – survival (1999b, 155, 156).

The mascot figure (as a suit-being) is such a form of bare life that is kept barely alive and where *zoē* and *bios* are separated to the extent that the exclusion through inclusion leads

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<sup>136</sup> In his book *Heroes* (in this research consulted in its Dutch translation *De dodelijke omhelzing van het kapitalisme*), Berardi investigates the relation between suicide and the contemporary financial capitalist economy. He gives a plethora of examples of how the global increase of suicides (ranging from school shootings to employees, workers and farmers committing suicide) is related to various forms of pressure and desubjectification caused by neoliberal thinking in a hyper technologized world (2016).

<sup>137</sup> Here, the argument about what the suit enables and reduces in terms of movement could also be made, similar to what has been described in the analysis of *I/II/III/IIII* (2.2). Similar to *I/II/III/IIII*, but then in relation to the properties of the mascot as a 'suit-being', this implies a loss of conscious agency, albeit not one leading to a von Kleistian state. 'Listen to the bloody machine' in this case only leads to having the 'machine' of the mascot work properly, i.e. to disappear and at the same time execute actions with technical precision and high levels of energy. As Veltruský writes about the human prop characterized by its suit: *Thus it is often difficult to decide for certain human actions to what extent their performance is predetermined by the properties of the body, and to what extent by those of the clothing. Because there are certain gestures and certain movements, which are not only appropriate to a given style of clothing, but are directly conditioned by it* (1964, 86). However, as this was less the focus of the performance – but nevertheless an essential part of the rehearsal process – I will not go further into it.

to the invisibility of bare life in what keeps it captured, the body intrinsically caught in the suit. However, I would add to Agamben's argument that survival is not merely an expression of state power, but is also part of a globalized, neoliberal economy, requiring on the one hand cheap labor and on the other, a population whose wellbeing remains below a certain level to maintain fear on the level of social security as well as that of personal safety.

The consequences of the psychopolitical transformation of biopolitics lead, besides the focus on attention and memory as products and the development of the cognitive economy, to specific psychopathologies in reaction to the increased pressure on individuals, caused by a loss of certainties and predictabilities, of social security and by a focus on self-responsibility and competition. Individuals find themselves permanently on a slippery slope (Rosa, 2016, 39), unable to stand still, constantly required to fight going downhill. *UNTITLED*'s mascot figure performs its routines and actions with the affects caused by psychopolitical stress, ultimately leading to burnout. Its 'dramaturgy' is that of the performance subject : *Das erste Symptom des Burnout ist paradoxerweise die Euphorie. Man stürzt sich euphorisch in die Arbeit. Am Ende bricht man zusammen* (Han, 2016a, 94). Just like Kharms' knight, the mascot stays optimistic and enthusiastic in its actions. This optimism is cruel, to refer to Lauren Berlant's notion of *cruel optimism: something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing* (2011, 1). Cruel optimism is a symptom of the false promise of happiness that was discussed above: if you work hard enough, you will make it; austerity will lead to growth and shared wealth, etc. It implies an attachment to an idea of a good life, of something to strive and make sacrifices for, but that idea is in itself counterproductive, leading to a *stuckness*. Cruel optimism *wears out its subjects* (Berlant, 2011, 27).

Both in Kharms' story and Verdonck's *UNTITLED*, the figure's cruel optimism leads to a dark humor, an absurdity of existence. The mascot's absurd existentialism bathes in what Eckersall, quoting Lehmann, describes as a pre-existing *existential retreat that feeds off 'the experience of barbarism in the twentieth century (the Holocaust), the real possibility of the end of history (Hiroshima), meaningless bureaucracies and political resignation'* (Eckersall in Eckersall & van Baarle, forthcoming). The apparent absence of rational logics in the performing figure, mirrors the perversion of the apparatus' logics that led to this absence. Bare life is deprived of historical being, of building a life, or as Han names it in more theatrical terms, *stripped of any form of narrativity* (2016a, 87, my transl.). Not being the protagonist in its own life, the mascot figure is always a supporting role in a larger frame.

The invasiveness and omnipresence of the desubjectifying processes of a combined neoliberal and spectacular-democratic apparatus leads to a double bind of which the mascot is emblematic on the level of performance: at the same time [i]l nous devient impossible de n'être personne, d'être « absents » [...] et il nous est impossible de compter en tant que personne (Abiteboul & Froidevaux, 2016). The mascot's continuous activity on stage, is thus not only a consequence of the apparatus of performance of theatre and the mascot's

inherent performativity. It is also a reaction to its being reduced to bare life, which causes panic and madness that induce even more desperate action in an attempt to affirm the mascot's own existence and individuality. It is this action, however, that only deepens the abyss in which this figure finds itself. UNTITLED *shows the ever-growing desperate presence of an actor who is demoralized and degraded by the failure and impossibility of his work* (Eckersall in Eckersall & van Baarle, forthcoming). Moreover, work itself is precisely the mascot's problem, parallel to the double bind of being absent while being unable to escape. The predominance of work and commodification, which infiltrate the private sphere ever more deeply via new software and devices that keep us permanently available, reduces moments of free time and rest, resulting in a generalized state of neurasthenia. Employees' but also citizens' 'performance' is measured in various ways, placing unprecedented pressure on them.

McKenzie argues that performance – organizational, cultural and technological – is the paradigm of our century, which makes permanent action and productivity a necessity. Performance relates to the society of control and psychopolitics, as a discipline related to disciplinary society and biopolitics (McKenzie, 2001, 18). This is contrary to an ontology of the human in Agamben's reading of Aristotle, as *the living being that has no work* (2007c, 2). The forced focus on action, work and performance, which according to Agamben have *no foundation in being* (2009b, 10), force humanity in a zone of necessity that leaves no place for 'being able no to do'. This is the ontological layer of the deadlock of the working poor, of the new precariat (Standing, 2011). The mascot operates as such, that is in a permanent state of necessity and action. It is a signifier, which cannot be switched off. Once it is on stage (or in the stadium, on the field, etc.), all the mascot can do and has to do is perform (or else ... to keep McKenzie's book in mind [2001]). Being exposed to an audience, a feature inherent to a mascot, is precisely its tragedy. Having become an image on the stage of the spectacle, the mascot shows *the alienation of human being in its total exposure* (Levitt, 2011, 196).

Its presence in this world is like an exile (cf. chapter 2.6.1). The stage is not its home and yet again, the mascot only exists in such public conditions. For the performer inside the mascot suit, its presence, even while doing nothing, is *at the same time so little and ever too much* (Tiqqun, 2012, 4). The suit's indifference to exposure, or rather its being designed for exposure, seems to increase the vulnerability of the performer inside. The invisibility of the performer's body does not prevent a total exposure that consumes him and forces him to 'act'. Paradoxically, even though the performer disappears in the suit, he has no place to hide. By having to perform, the mascot figure is pushed to perform its own desubjectification, an explicit case of how exploiter and exploited are interchangeable in a psychopolitical era (Han, 2014, 21). Even gestures that could be interpreted as an attempt to end his 'public' disposition – in his final dance routine, he mimics the pulling out of the pin of a grenade and throws it toward the audience – are reduced to cartoon-like, comic undertakings. The mascot's situation is a vicious circle, in which every action

reduces the performer's subject, which leads then to more action, hoping to restore or regain what was lost, but with an opposite result. The neoliberal emphasis on performance leads to a mobilization of energy. However, instead of producing that in a constructive manner, it leads to *frantically busy behavior and may in the end lead to panic, followed by depression* (Berardi, 2016, 37, my transl.). Beyond the mascot's own power or will, it exploits himself. As a figure, the mascot differs from the marionette figure, as its desubjectification does not seem to lead to another form-of-life or whatever being, as Eckersall also noticed: *In contrast to the emancipatory potentialities of the figure as marionette, an actor-machine evokes the dystopian theatrical world of Samuel Beckett and Heiner Müller, both of whom deeply inform Verdonck's work* (Eckersall in Eckersall & van Baarle, forthcoming). However, the mascot figure leads to a different form of potentiality, not in the suggestion of another form of life, but rather, in the experience of the performance itself.

Psychopolitics or rather, the impact of various apparatuses (both in the form of devices and in the sense of larger governmental or economic systems) on cognitive capacities and the psyche, has been reflected upon in other works of Verdonck as well. In these works, such as *HEART* (cf. 2.2.1), the psychopolitical condition was transformed into a physical entanglement with a machine; the human performer was literally captured in the material machine evoking the effects and affects of the attention economy with its permanent connectivity. In *UNTITLED*, the psychopolitical impact on individuals is directly connected to performance and as such, to the act of performance that is happening, enforced by the mascot suit. A creature made to perform, unable to do otherwise, is placed on a quasi-empty stage, in a performance, with an audience which has paid a ticket, expecting to see a show. This burden of having to perform (or else...) is taken literally in *UNTITLED*. The suit is a strong agent, but not in the same sense as the machines in *HEART* or in *I/II/III/IIII*: it does not completely steer and induce movement. The mascot's moves are initiated by the performer inside, with this time the apparatus existing out of the combination of the burden of having to perform and the decisive parameter of the suit that fundamentally filters all communication and a total lack of any other capacities. It is no longer the direct physical interaction with the machine that operates as the main motor for movement and action, the mechanical harness has been interiorized and the psyche in a specific condition is the 'machine', making the theatre itself into a compulsive apparatus. The mascot's cruel optimism, but also the desperate attempt to meet the demands of the performance apparatus, are the sources of its actions.

These actions, or rather acts and routines, are simple, dull, and have a childish aspect to them. When it plays a shooting game with itself, it resembles a child's imaginary game world, a condition of being absorbed in one's own imagination, but also games for an older segment of the population in virtual environments (shooter games) and game environments such as paintball and laser shooting. In addition to the infantile manner in which some acts are performed, a dancing mascot as such also tells something about the

infantilization of entertainment, which is in turn reflecting a broader process of infantilization of adults fostered by consumerist apparatuses.

The generational confusion inherent in consumerism destroys any shared concern for taking care of the world and of oneself, self-care as opposed to a consumption resulting in obesity and other “sedentary” problems [...] : addiction, cognitive overflow syndrome, attention deficit disorder, depression, impotence, and, finally, the collapse of desire (Stiegler, 2010a, 42).

The psychopolitical impact of apparatuses forcing short term thinking, privileging instant satisfaction and specific ideas of youthfulness (young bodies; no worries; always positive; instant gratification; no responsibility), transform adults *into* ‘large children’ (Stiegler, 2010a, 128). In *UNTITLED*, this also works both on the level of the mascot’s mode of performing and on that of what the audience is actually seeing: i.e. a childish mascot show that indeed entertains a traditionally higher-educated theatre audience. The performer in the suit is childish in the sense that his optimism can also be interpreted as a childlike not-knowing, and, another important psychopolitical consequence, a lack of memory: *as consumers generally, we are becoming systematically unconscious* (Stiegler, 2010a, 43). For Stiegler, infantilization is an important aspect of a general process of proletarianization and deindividuation, which he considers to be the consequences of what Agamben analyzed as the desubjectifying impact of contemporary apparatuses (2010a, 165).

The violence of infantilization – of which the entertainment and advertisement industries are explicit examples, treating consumers and citizens as ‘large children’, as well as aiming at increasingly younger, more vulnerable age groups – comes even more to the fore in the second part of the performance. Whereas the first part established the state of being lost, of being burdened with the task performance and of not knowing what to do, the second part adds another layer and shows a short, poor dance act the mascot appears to have prepared on the tunes of an upbeat techno-house remix of Scott Joplin’s *The Entertainer*. The music plays through speakers in the space and is each time requested by the mascot performer himself, another example of how exploiter and exploited coincide. Coming to the front of the stage, legs spread and one hand up to indicate he is ready, the mascot begins its little dance. It repeats this routine three times with increasing energy and zeal, while the music is turned down each time and while the intervals between the dances in which he wanders around and sits down, completely lost, become longer, emphasizing the contrast between inaction and action. The mascot’s relentlessness, fired up by the beats of the merry song, reminds of Han’s vision on today’s late-capitalist society as an over-positive society, in which negativity has no place. Feelings of defeat, pain or failure are denied and repressed – maybe they are part of *UNTITLED*’s uncanny sensation – and our inability to deal with them leads to self-destruction (Han, 2014, 56). In this case, performing over-positivity ‘destroys’ the childish

and optimistic character of the mascot and the extreme harshness of its forced, repetitive and very limited work and his desperate relation with the audience is foregrounded. In this scene, the mascot balances between expressing the desire to please the audience and being forced to please, almost in a confronting manner, telling something about the violence of entertainment, also toward its audience.

After the first part of the performance, the mascot sits down at the side of the stage, exhausted after smacking its body against the walls, and a blackout follows. Out of one of the black boxes standing in the back of the stage, a shiny inflatable tube emerges. The crackling of the fabric and the boxes and the wind of the ventilators are amplified into an eerie soundscape and scarce lights makes it difficult to see what 'it' actually is. It is as if the nightmare Bauman describes in the motto for this chapter and that was unfolding in all its 'positivity' during the performance's first thirty minutes, now surfaces in all its horror, mystery and darkness. However, as sudden as it appeared, it also disappears. The inflatable tube returns in its box, the lights go back on, *show time*.

## 2.5.2 The mascot's problematic relationality

While watching *UNTITLED* as a spectator, you feel addressed as such, as well as confronted with your responsibility in this position. In a way, you have bought a ticket to see this figure perform, which is the source of its suffering. In that sense, *UNTITLED* also tells something about the economy of the performing arts, in which many dancers and performers live and work in precarious conditions, a condition to which as member of an audience, one does not directly relate. Throughout the performance, the initial humorous, comic atmosphere turns grim. This has to do with how empathy is (not) at work in the performance. Empathy has already been discussed in relation to object-figures, as a complex process of affinity, projection, and affect in particular performative conditions (2.3.1). When human performers are involved, their 'objective' mode of performing not always leads to negotiations of empathy. Despite the performer's near incapacity to truly relate through the suit, communication is an essential feature for the mascot, since it exists essentially in relation to its audience. Be it in a sports arena, a shopping mall, on a musical stage or in a Disneyland parade, mascots are there to entertain and to communicate.

The mascot as an inherently 'public' figure brings questions of (the lack of) communication and empathy to the fore. *In UNTITLED, the audience plays a double role: since a mascot always performs for its spectators, the audience of UNTITLED plays the role of audience as the audience of UNTITLED, and the audience within the performance who witnesses the performance of the mascot* (Lin in Eckersall & van Baarle, forthcoming). The mascot explicitly addresses the audience, performs 'for them'. However, even although the mascot's plight is communicated, this is not the same as the performer's plight, i.e. Marc

Iglesias who is inside the suit and is actually performing the mascot. In the creative process, it became clear that the mode of looking to a mascot resembles that of looking at a cartoon, i.e., as if one is not looking at a human being. There is reaction, in the form of laughter, pity or abhorrence toward the mascot as a mascot, but the connection through the suit, with the performer inside, is more complicated. The obvious cause of this is the suit. As a reflection and critique of a spectacular, cruel neoliberal system, the mascot performer's invisibility and the suit's complex indexicality offer some thoughts on the contemporary crisis of communication and representation.

The lack of empathy with the mascot figure's neoliberal body can be considered emblematic of a time and place in which many forms of contact and communication are mediated through technological devices. The disconnection between body and sign (the suit as intrinsic indexical sign, referring 'away from the body', to a product, company, sports team, political party, etc.) can be interpreted through the aforementioned conclusion by Agamben that language and bare life are drifting apart, with the technico-mediatic devices as important facilitators of this separation (cf. chapter 1.2.2). The sensibility of signs, of language, is altered if not lost when they are transmitted through devices and not through bodies, which has a disturbing impact on the affective capacities of people when it comes to direct human relations (Berardi, 2016, 57, 58, my transl.). The difficulty of experiencing empathy with the human in the mascot suit, characterizes how *with the digital, we have reached the end-point of this process of increasing abstraction, and an apex in the increasing dissociation of understanding from empathy*. Berardi refers to this process as *empathy erosion* (2015, 17), a concept developed by Simon Baron-Cohen. The creation of a distance partially explains (the tolerance of) particular forms of cruelty and violence between human beings.

From an Agambenian perspective, the most important feature that 'fosters' this lack of empathy with the mascot performer, would be the lack of a face. For humans as living beings that have language, the face is an essential step from non-language to language, and a condition for communication and the development of politics. The face, as the site of communication, is *the only location of community* (Agamben, 2000, 91). As has been already stated in chapter 1.2.3, in the society of the spectacle, communication is separated in a commodified and controlled sphere. Hence, humanity is separated from its face, since *exposition* is turned into a *value that is accumulated in images and the media* (Agamben, 2000, 95). The mascot figure is a human body that has lost its face, making it into a statuesque figure between object and subject. However, besides the invisible human face, there is of course the 'face' of the mascot itself. In *UNTITLED*, the mascots all have the same smiley face made out of black fabric. This hollow but merry expression is at once a point of connection and alienation, of a desire and inevitability to communicate. The mascot as a powerful signifier that cannot be switched off is a spectacular face that is separated from that of the performer inside. Its permanent smile is not a signifier of happiness, but a lost face. It reminds of the reduction of emotion and expression in social media or text

messages to emoticons and the new language that grows from this vocabulary (cf. chapter 1.2.1). At the same time the mascot's smiley reminds of an immobilized and forced expression of happiness and positivity. It is stuck in one *visage* (Ten Bos & Kaulingfreks, 2002, 12). Humanity has lost its face because it has lost the control and capacity to appropriate in the face one's own separation from oneself – *UNTITLED*'s mascot's rigid smiley face is a clear example of this state of being (Agamben, 2000, 98). Exactly the presence of this constantly smiling face produces the separation from the performer and creates (to a large extent) the tension or the gap between the suit and person. The rigid smile of the mascots is rather sour, when the working conditions and economic system they represent are taken into account. No matter what the person inside experiences, feels or thinks, he or she will and must always send out happy, cheerful signals.

The mascot's indexicality is a problematic one in Verdonck's *UNTITLED*, as it is not clear where the mask or suit refers to. It resembles a Disney figure, but not completely, it mostly indicates its own 'being a mascot'. Indeed, Berardi points out that *masks, hallucinations, simulations have erased the indexical value of signs* (2016, 35, my transl.). During the rehearsals of *UNTITLED*, this became also one of the main difficulties to explore and overcome: there is a gap between what the performer intuitively would think he communicates and does, and what the spectator actually sees – this gap of course being the suit. The mascot-as-suit thus has to be manipulated as such that it reacts to its audience, giving the spectator the impression that there is a connection. It has become an interface onto which an audience can project emotions, intentions and other forms of communication, without the person in the mascot necessarily sending out these signals. In this sense, the barrier between object and subject is suspended in a second way. It is possible that the performer inside controls the signals he emits because he or she knows the language of the encapsulating object (Ten Bos & Kaulingfreks, 2002, 16), but there is no direct utterance from the human inside. From the mascot performer's side in *UNTITLED*, there is a play with this situation, which takes the audience to places where it is confronted with its voyeurism and taste for entertainment. The audience is invited to laugh or clap and is addressed through waving and small gestures like kisses, thumbs up or covering and uncovering the eyes in a primitive game of hide and seek. *UNTITLED* confronts its spectators with the small amount of emotional triggers that are needed to anthropomorphize an object and how easily we get sucked into the drain of entertainment, forgetting the 'entertainer' to the extent of making him superfluous.

In two ways, Verdonck seeks to install points of connection that go beyond that of being entertained. Empathy is sought in different ways, on a more affective level, throughout the experience of the whole performance. A contact microphone inside the suit amplifies at certain moments the blows against the boxes and walls, and together with that, Iglesias' breathing. This breathing is a subtle presence, too soft to be a big sign referring to the person inside, but rather an uncanny presence of the invisible being inside the suit. It is a fissure in the objectifying shell of the suit. Breathing is used here as

a dramaturgical tool for connection, an essential connection for the development of meaning. As Stalpaert aptly points out: *It is only when we hear dancer Marc Iglesias' persistent breathing behind the flat consumerist image of the mascot, that the dehumanizing forces of capitalist time and movement become apparent. [...] breaking the image of the mascot as a distant being* (Stalpaert in Eckersall & van Baarle, forthcoming). However, when it comes to the face, there is another, fundamental layer of connection between the mascot figure and the spectator. The mascot figure's conflation of two faces – of the hidden face of the human performer and the inevitably visible grimace of the mascot – is doubly non-indexical. Not only does the visible smiley face not refer to a known brand, team, or product, it also does not refer to the person inside. As a dysfunctional indexical sign, it can thus also be interpreted as a signifier only signifying its own 'being a signifier'. This zero-point of having no face, no possibility of communication, can, at some moments in the performance, flip into something new and actually bring about a possible face: *There is a face wherever something reaches the level of exposition and tries to grasp its own being exposed* (Agamben, 2000, 92). Iglesias' conscious use of the suit to create a state of being captured, and the duration of 'empty' moments, leads to a shared condition between performer and audience.

The society of the spectacle has made human faces rigid, *jusqu'à devenir eux-mêmes semblables à des masques* (Invisible, 2000, 78, 80). However, those who voluntarily wear a mask and thus have a relation toward it, radically mix utopia and dystopia in a complex neutrality. Especially in the moments in which the mascot does nothing in particular, a critical-philosophical potential arises. It is in this inactivity that the mascot performer exits the position of the victim and even seems bored with his own existence. He lies down flat on his back, sits on a block or leans against a wall, waiting for it to end but it does not. 'What am I doing here?' is a question the mascot (performer) shares with the audience during these moments. Doing nothing, denying the audience's desire for action and for the emptiness to be filled up, generates a shared waiting, a shared boredom.

In her analysis of Stanley Cavell's reading of Beckett's *Endgame*, Juliane Rebentisch points out how theatricality, here understood as the aesthetic distance between an audience and the events and performers on stage, can be suspended in the existential experience of *the divide between those who suffer and those who helplessly face the sufferings of others* (2012, 29). It is in those moments, when all what remains is the emptiness of the mascot figure in its reduced being and inactivity, rather than in the scenes of frenzied suffering that have led up to these silent moments, that an existential (instead of an aesthetic, distancing) relation is developed. This existential connection is reached through a shared experience of time, of being called to experience the time that passes as one's own (Rebentisch, 2012, 29), which Verdonck and Iglesias do by letting time pass as such. *Das Face, das sich ausstellt, ist ohne Blick* (Han, 2015a, 23), an uncanny sensation that leads to a deeper understanding of a (shared) figural condition of performer and audience. This empty gaze of the exposed face, which is part of the human condition in

an apparatus-posthumanist worldview, is directed toward the audience – an experience Agamben describes in quoting Rilke’s text on dolls: *it was facing the doll, as it stared at us, that we experienced for the first time (or am I mistaken?) that emptiness of feeling, that heart-pause* (Rilke in Agamben, 1993b, 58). A moment of inactivity, of shared emptiness, shared waiting and shared boredom, brings about a moment of potentiality, of sheer communicability, and, as in *I/II/III/IIII*, opens up a space of not-knowing, of relating to one’s own being inappropriable, one’s own being without work, a moment of being ‘whatever’. As Agamben indicates in his essay on the face, *human beings neither are nor have to be any essence, any nature, or any specific destiny, their condition is the most empty and the most insubstantial of all [...],[what is needed is] to return appearance itself to appearance, to cause appearance itself to appear* (2000, 94, 95). *UNTITLED* does so in a different way than *ISOS*, through a phase of shared time and space. Through the mascot’s frozen, empty face, its doing nothing, the spectator can be confronted with and enabled to take *the abyss of its own communicability upon itself* (Agamben, 2000, 96). What remains, or rather, occurs at these moments, is an existential connection for connection’s sake between performer and spectator, a shared being, an encounter, on the threshold between stage and auditorium, between something and nothing – an encounter scholar and audience member Sigrid Merx described as *sitting with the end*.<sup>138</sup>

### 2.5.3 Conclusion: a plethora of figures

Before expanding the research on the figure to how time, space and theatre as an apparatus constitute figures and generate a posthumanist spectatorship, it can be insightful to bring all figures presented so far in relation with each other.

The four (facets of) figures that have been presented – the marionette, the object-figure, the phantasm and the mascot – in their diverse manifestations, all offer reflections, deconstructions and potentialities concerning various aspects of forms(-)of(-)life and the apparatus in a posthumanist conception of the world and performing arts. Both the marionette and the mascot figure are shaped by placing human beings in a specific set-up or apparatus, live on stage or in an installation. Object-figures and phantasms are more closely connected to the question of what an apparatus *is*, what it does and how it relates to living beings. The three tropes marking the difference between cyborg-posthumanism and apparatus-posthumanism – post-anthropocentrism, going beyond the subject and an extension of biopolitics to psychopolitics – are translated through varied artistic strategies and are to a certain extent intertwined in the analysis of the figures in Verdonck’s oeuvre.

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<sup>138</sup> Reaction during the Q&A after a paper by Peter Eckersall on Verdonck’s *Untitled* (2017) at the Performance Studies International conference in Hamburg, 8-11/6/2017.

As I already argued earlier, the marionette, the object-figure, the phantasm and the mascot are concrete manifestations and examples of figures, but they are also facets of the figure as such, that can be found in all of Verdonck's works. Many object-figures, for example, share the beauty and grace of the marionette, such as *DANCER #1*. The mascot has a deep phantasmatic working as well, as it combines absence with a relationship with the audience and plays with affect and imagination. It has aspects of the marionette and object-figure too, as its doll-like features are a sort of 'dark marionette', an objectified body as matter that is used to fill an existing position, thwarting the development of subjectivity through movement. When it approaches the object, the mascot becomes an uncanny, animated object.

In addition to the four main facets of figures, several other forms of 'creaturely life' or rather, various other figures have wandered on the pages of the chapters so far. The *Muselmann*, Bloom, silhouette, shadow, slave, automaton, deus ex machina, mannequin, nymph, living statue, cartoon figure, doll, stereometric figure, ghost, toy, prototype, vortex, *homo sacer*, assistant: they are all examples of figures that together with their literary, juridical, historical or philosophical backgrounds weave the web of associations and potential manifestations of beings characterizing apparatus-posthumanism. The larger part of them, are figures I have found in Agamben's oeuvre, such as the *Muselmann*, the *homo sacer*, the nymph, the vortex, the doll, the toy and the assistant. Agamben himself, 'collects' his figures in literature and history. He seldom uses the notion of 'figure' to indicate the suspension of object and subject as such, nor does he gather all the figures in the same line of thought. What they do share, is that they are all profoundly political. Some of them, like the *homo sacer*, the slave and the *Muselmann* emphasize an aspect of the figure in the way I have presented it in the past chapters, namely the aspect of dehumanization (2.1 & 2.2). Others, such as the toy, the deus ex machina and the prototype refer more to the impact of apparatuses and the profanatory use of objects and technologies. The nymph, the ghost, the stereometric figure, the silhouette and the vortex invoke the immaterial, relational aspects of the figure. The cartoon figure and the assistant reveal a two-dimensionality and desubjectified yet subversive poverty of the figure.

The four types and facets of figures are drawn from how in Verdonck's work, the division between subject and object is suspended. The marionette, as a figure shaped by placing a human body in a mechanical construction, was key to Verdonck's work up until *I/II/III/IV* and *END*. The marionette in the von Kleistian sense remains an important point of reference, but the marionette qualities – absence of ego, the accident, entanglement in an apparatus and grace – have started to be developed in different ways as well. Object-figures continue to be part of Verdonck's installation work. In recent years, in addition to the sheer performativity of objects and how that reflects on the impact of apparatuses on our lives and the world, there is a focus on objects as entities that will remain 'after the end', and thus survive humankind (e.g. *IN VOID*). With *M, a reflection*, the format of the

theatrical installation (a term used by Van Kerkhoven to describe both *I/II/III/IIII* and *END*), started to open up more toward the theatrical aspect of the work, with performances such as *H, an incident*, *UNTITLED* and more recently, *Conversations (at the end of the world)* (2017). In these performances, there are human performers that are not in directly physical, mechanical or technological constellations or in a mascot suit, such as in *H, an incident* and *Conversations*. For them it is tempting to develop a fifth facet of the figure: the 'free figure'. *Free* would mean here that the human performer is in no direct relation to an object, image or machine during his performance. In this sense, the mascot could also be considered to be 'free'. However, as we have seen, this freedom is precisely its burden and the cause for desubjectification. What these free figures share, is that the theatrical apparatus in which they find themselves, becomes a very active element. There is always a strong consciousness of the artistic discipline in Verdonck's works, or of the different disciplines he seeks to combine. However, in works such as *EXIT* (2011), *UNTITLED* and *IN VOID*, the apparatus of the theatre is used as an explicitly active 'player', another tendency that marks Verdonck's more recent works. In the following chapter, the ways in which theatre works as an apparatus will be analyzed in depth, focusing on different temporalities, spaces and aspects of spectatorship from an apparatus-posthumanist perspective.

## 2.6 The apparatus of time and space

When analyzing *UNTITLED*, the focus on the figure, that is, the performing entity of the mascot, can only account for a partial aspect of the performance and its dramaturgy. Yes, the mascot figure in itself refers clearly to a particular socio-economic condition, and it also communicates the human performer's absence, which leads to an erosion of empathy in the mascot's always-implied relation to an audience. However, when discussing the burden of performance that haunts and wears out the mascot, it would be artificial to do so without going deeper into the theatre apparatus in which the mascot figure finds itself. In the previous chapter the focus lay on *what performs*, namely, the various facets of the figure. These figures, however, operate in relation to their environment, a relation that has become gradually more important throughout the development of Verdonck's oeuvre. In installations with object-figures, elements of the theatre apparatus, such as light and curtains, were used to amplify their performativity. With marionettes, for example in *I/II/III/IIII*, the theatre is used as means of focus on the figures, as the use of the followspot showed.<sup>139</sup> In the cases that follow, the theatre apparatus will be constitutive to the figures that are created within it. The notion of the apparatus will in this chapter be explored on a different level, considering how figures relate to time and space, or how time and space are modulated by apparatuses – reflections of which the basis has already been developed in the analysis of Okada's psychopolitical and posthistorical time-space (chapter 1.2.2.2) – and how this inaugurates a posthumanist experience of time and space for the spectator.

In Verdonck's works there is a strong awareness of medium, of time, of space, as the analyses of the artistic strategies of repetition in *I/II/III/IIII* (2.2.2) and the scenography of *ISOS* (2.4.2) have already shown. In *UNTITLED*, the near emptiness of the stage and the passage of time, together with a 'lack' of choreographic material, become elementary, constitutive aspects of the figure. The allusion to a 'free' figure with which the previous chapter closed actually concerns a use of the apparatus of theatre. In Verdonck's creation of figures throughout his oeuvre, there is an evolution from literally constrained performers in concrete structures – a harness, a box, a limited trajectory between projections – to the development of figures that are constructed through their relation to a larger, less visible apparatus. In a 2014 interview, Verdonck confided that

Je cherche à chaque fois un nouveau dialogue entre l'objet et le corps, mais les variations dans ce domaine sont plutôt limitées. Ces deux lignées, c'est-à-dire le

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<sup>139</sup> Verdonck refers to his use of isolation in an interview: *If you isolate something, if you cut it off from its environment and then observe it and dissect it, it becomes beautiful in itself because it seems purer* (Verdonck in van Baarle, 2013, 109). The black box of the theatre operates, following this argument, as an isolation apparatus to direct focus.

développement historique de la technologie et la langage limitée de l'interaction physique entre le performeur et l'objet, constituent ensemble le croisement où nous nous trouvons aujourd'hui. (Verdonck in van Baarle, forthcoming)

The mascot finds itself on that crossing. Besides the suit, it is 'free' on stage, but that freedom becomes precisely its burden, which weighs more on a psychological level than on a physical level. From the perspective of theory, there is a parallel with the aforementioned shift from biopolitics to psychopolitics, shifting the focus of power from placing actual bodies in *enclosures* and *molds* to controlling subjects in *modulations* (Deleuze, 1992, 4). Lazzarato, building on Deleuze in his conception of psychopolitics (which he terms *noöpolitics*, cf. *supra*), describes how in the expansion from biopolitics to psychopolitics [t]he institutions of the societies of control are thus characterised by the use of the technologies of acting at a distance, rather than of mechanical technologies (societies of sovereignty) or thermodynamic technologies (disciplinary societies) (2006, 180). In Verdonck's oeuvre, the evolution from concrete, mechanical formations and physical interactions of the body with machines to more abstract forms of power, such as the empty space of the theatre and the use of time, corresponds to this redirection of focus on technologies and apparatuses working from a distance, i.e. not in immediate physical contact with the figure, but nevertheless having a very direct impact.

This chapter will continue to follow Agamben's line of thought, connecting the time and space of the figure (on stage or not) with his interpretation of Heidegger's *Geworfenheit* and *being in the world*. Using these notions, the analysis of the case of *UNTITLED* will continue where it left off in the previous chapter, as the mascot figure is the figure that most clearly experiments with time and space as such. Agamben's notion of the apparatus, which has been characterized by its desubjectification, psychopolitics, and post-anthropocentrism, will be related to the ways in which Verdonck uses the 'apparatuses' of the various media in which he works. I implement the word 'uses' in its Agambenian political sense, as Verdonck's works often imply a deactivation of particular aspects of the medium, transforming it into a 'counter-apparatus', or as I will call it, a negative apparatus (chapter 2.6.2). A strategy that recurs in this use of various media, in Verdonck's case the visual arts or performing arts medium, is decontextualizing the one in the other and vice versa. Thinking about theatre as a medium in Verdonck's work will also lead to his particular position and dramaturgy toward different art disciplines. Switching and blurring the boundaries between performing arts and visual arts and their contexts is deeply related to a posthumanist perspective and art practice: when objects perform and subjects are objectified, the traditional places for these elements, respectively the museum and the theatre, are scrutinized, questioned, and manipulated.

The posthumanist spectatorship I describe in this chapter, is closely connected to the temporalities at work in the various performances and installations. Time manifests itself in two ways. On the one hand there is a more literal 'time': the time(s) of the object, but also the endless time of the mascot, the suspension of time in sleep, and the time of end,

or end time(s). On the other hand there is, the potential end or disappearance of human beings on Earth, connecting time to extinction but also to conceptions of (post)history. The end is a latent element in Verdonck's oeuvre, and in recent years it has become a more prominent theme with theatre performances such as *Conversations (at the end of the world)*, in 2017, and the performative installation circuits that are presented under the title *IN VOID* (2016 and onwards). Nearly all of Verdonck's performances and installations relate to a form of 'end'. In this way we can also speak of several (combinations of) phases of 'ending' in which Verdonck's figures find themselves – depending on whether the work in which they find themselves is situated toward, during, or after the end. In a final reflection, I will go deeper into these various end times and how absence, the void, and silence operate, most notably in the creation of a landscape.

### 2.6.1. The theatre as psychopolitical apparatus: from emptiness to a posthuman landscape

*Qu'est-ce que le théâtre ? Une espèce de machine cybernétique (une machine à émettre des messages, à communiquer). Au repos, cette machine est cachée derrière un rideau.*  
(Barthes, 2002 [1963], 305)

In chapter 1.2.2 I have argued that in the apparatus-posthumanist condition, an expansion of biopolitics to psychopolitics is implied. In the analysis of Toshiki Okada's work it became clear that psychopower can find its theatrical double in the creation of a specific mental space, exteriorizing a state of being. In Verdonck's *UNTITLED*, the apparatus' control and manipulation of the psyche, understood as the neurological phenomena of attention and memory, is articulated in the figure of the mascot without memory and adds an increased pressure on the individual to the psychopolitical arsenal of means of exploitation and control. The mascot finds itself in a deadlock of not-knowing (related to pathologies of depression and burnout), stuck in a repetition without difference, and must continue to perform the same destructive actions, driving to a psychological breakdown, leading to madness and exhaustion. This chapter aims to discuss the functioning of theatre as apparatus, as a space and time in which the figure finds itself, or to refer again to Heidegger: in which the figure is *geworfen*. This thrownness (most literally, onto a stage) is a recurrent feature of Verdonck's figures and of figural beings in general, as it implies an ontological alienation from its environment, put to the extreme.

Desert. Dazzling light. The man is flung backwards on stage from right wing. He falls, gets up immediately, dusts himself, turns aside, reflects.

These are the opening director's notes of *Act Without Words I* (1957), a short play by Samuel Beckett (2006 [1957], 203). A whistle coming from the wings attracts the attention of the man, who wants to escape the stage, but soon realizes he cannot. Besides the performer, a series of objects, a palm tree, a bottle of water, a rope, three boxes, and a pair of scissors, figure in the play. They appear descending from the flies and disappear there again, in a choreography that appears to be torturing the man on stage: almost but not allowing him to drink from the water, almost but not allowing him to take shelter in the shadow of the tree, not allowing him to hang himself with a noose, or to cut his throat with the scissors. In the end he renounces all external impulses, lets the whistle whistle, lets the water pass by, and remains sitting down and looking at his hands, as if they are his only way out of this horrible situation.

A video version of Beckett's mime play, directed by Karel Reisz and performed by Sean Foley, was part of the dramaturgical reservoir of materials for *UNTITLED*, and it provides an insightful starting point to analyze further how time and space operate in Verdonck's performance. The mascot figure finds itself in a situation similar to the character in Beckett's mime play: caught on a large empty stage with only a paillette backdrop and three black boxes. This scenography is basically indifferent to him, and will come 'to life' at specific moments, which are not directly related to his actions. Both Beckett's performer and Verdonck's mascot do not know why they are there, or what they should do.<sup>140</sup> The burden of sheer existence is mirrored in the burden of performance, an aspect of the mascot figure that has already been discussed, and that here becomes a reflection on a more general ontological state of being, reaching beyond the extent of the mascot alone. I would not be the first to make the connection between the figure in Beckett's *Act Without Words I* and Heidegger's concept of thrownness (see for example Oppenheim, 1988, 42). *UNTITLED* can be interpreted from the same perspective. The scenography in *UNTITLED* will stay the same for most of the time, with only minor changes and the interruption by the appearance of *BOGUS I*'s inflatable(s) after the first part and at the end. *UNTITLED*'s static condition unfolds over time, in a constellatory dramaturgy evoking a *Stimmung*, as it already has been termed in the analysis of the dramaturgy of *M*, a reflection (2.4.1). In one of his first books, Agamben brings *Stimmung* into relation with *Dasein*'s thrownness in this *Da*, its having been always already consigned to it. *The originary discovery of the world is, thus, always already the unveiling of a Geworfenheit, a thrownness* (Agamben, 1991, 56).

Being thrown in the world has to do with the distinction between human and animal relation to the world, which was already briefly introduced in chapter 1.2.2.2, and which

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<sup>140</sup> The mascot's lack of language and purely physical/suit-related means of communication, which builds strongly on the projection of emotions and narrative by the audience, is a form of mime play as well. Interestingly, both Beckett and Verdonck conceive their 'mime' pieces for alienated beings for dancers (McDonald, 2009 [1958], vii).

Agamben borrows and develops from Heidegger. For Heidegger, inorganic beings, such as rocks, have no world, animals are *in* the environment but they do not know it, which makes them ‘poor in the world’, whereas the world is an *Open* for human beings and they know they have no access to it, and thus they experience its closedness. There is a gap between us and our world, and this is essential for thrownness: *never to have power over one's ownmost Being from the ground up. This "not" belongs to the existential meaning of "thrownness"* (Heidegger in Agamben, 1991, 2, emphasis by the author). The figure is the result of how this being thrown in the world can be misused by apparatuses promising to compensate the gap between being and the world, through consumption, commodification, control, governance, and management. A recurring element in the analysis of the figure's time and space will be the nothing and the void (all notions indicating a negativity), and how this nothingness is constitutive to human beings and captured by apparatuses (Agamben, 2015a, 90). From the perspective of the different relation to the environment/world between animals and human animals, *the human being is void, because it is only a suspension of animality* (Agamben, 2015a, 186). The void and the nothing are not the same as emptiness, as they imply a potentiality that emptiness does not. Emptiness can be an artistic strategy used to evoke the void, but the void itself is not empty.

Viveiros de Castro paraphrases this Heideggerian definition of the human animal, albeit in a highly critical way: *the burden of man is to be the universal animal, he for whom there exists a universe, while nonhumans, as we know (but how in the devil do we know it?), are just “poor in the world”* (2014, 44). Viveiros de Castro sees the desire to distinguish the human from a variety of ‘others’ as a central problem of an anthropocentric perspective on human being in the world developed in the West, which has led to colonial perspectives, exclusionary politics, and the Great Divide (the divide between Nature and the Social as it was described by Latour in *We Never Have Been Modern* [1993]). In following Heidegger's definition of human and animal being in the world, Agamben thus finds himself in an ambiguous position. It is his intention to overcome this divide, not only between the Social and Nature (if one could transpose that binary to the binary of *Dasein* and *Being*), but foremost between Man and the world. However, to do so, he has to accept the existence of a difference between human beings and animal beings, not only as a consequence of apparatuses, but also as an ontological condition. The anthropological machine he criticizes in *The Open*, separating the human from the inhuman, is in a way also at work in his ontology.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> In addition, one could argue that for example Frans De Waal's research in political and social behavior in primate apes species questions the definition of the human being as political being, and even as being that has language, if such a definition is functioning as a way of distinction between human beings and nonhumans.

Nevertheless, I don't believe it is Agamben's intention to work concretely on the human-animal divide in terms of a difference between species, or the human-nonhuman divide in this sense (as he locates all these divides as running through one and the same body, cf. 1.3). As has been argued in the introduction to this dissertation, Agamben is what Latour and other Speculative Realists would call a correlationist, describing and analyzing the world from the perspective of the human. Moreover, although Agamben does not formulate it as such in his own writings, I am convinced that a different perspective on the human will impact how societies are organized, how the relation with organic and inorganic nonhumans and the world is perceived and treated. From that perspective, and for the argument's sake, I propose to leave the – justified and important – criticism of the Heideggerian ontological distinction between human beings and animals and other inorganic matter at rest, and to nevertheless consider this distinction as operative in the world (as a dominant and colonial Western construct, as Viveiros de Castro argues). This is also where Agamben and thinkers who criticize the Heideggerian worldview might converge again, in the shared search for a different ontology, suspending the distinctions at work. As we will see, it is indeed the capture and the misuse of this absence of belonging, of being inoperative, by apparatuses that lead to fundamental and destructive power structures.

If we leave the differentiation between human animals, nonhuman animals and inorganic matter out of Heidegger's argument, there remain three relevant modes of being in the world: being deprived of the world (which implies a non-relation to the world), being poor in the world, and the being-in-the-world characterized by thrownness. The experience of the mascot looking at its space, the stage, the audience, its condition, in a first most obvious level resembles that of thrownness, that of *the one who looks into the Open sees only a closing up, sees only a non-seeing* (Agamben, 2015a, 90). However, it would also be possible that this existential alienation from the world, this extreme closedness, when pushed further and increased by being captured by apparatuses, can lead to a non-conscious existence. In a world that is transforming into a globalized non-place (especially when considering the online world), no meaningful interaction with the place of being is possible, so the openness to a closedness might fade as a consequence. In non-places no one 'belongs.' A non-place is essentially a space for transit, it facilitates: transport, production, or consumption. In *UNTITLED*, and to a larger extent, in the mode of being of the radically desubjectified figure that is ubiquitously captured by a myriad of apparatuses and able to respond to the stimuli of these apparatuses only by short-circuited actions, the mascot figure thus also approaches what Heidegger calls animal being in the world, namely *captured and stunned in its own disinhibitors*. This leads to being poor in the world, as there is a dynamics of disinhibiting and a reduced consciousness of this capture. 'Disinhibitor' is a notion Agamben uses in continuation of von Uexküll (Heidegger translated the concept as *des Enthemmende*), which indicates those elements

that trigger reflexes and reactions in organisms, those stimuli that provoke an impulsive reaction, that is: non-conscious action, without a will or intention.

When speaking of human beings, 'disinhibitor' means according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary the *loss or reduction of an inhibition (as by the action of interfering stimuli or events)*,<sup>142</sup> for example alcohol or drugs. This example is in fact suitable for Agamben's argument: similar to (and sometimes part of) apparatuses, alcohol and drugs can create a dependence, an addiction, that can cause other perspectives and aspects of life to become less visible. The disinhibitor, just like alcohol, can lead to being absorbed in a certain substance, indeed, being captured and captivated by it: *The extent of the world is limited to these markers, and all other elements and events remain outside [...] unable to affect the creature* (Harbord, 2016, 150). The docile population generated by the desubjectifying apparatuses, or to use the terminology of Stiegler, the short-circuited pharmacology in the current technological society, which leads to a permanently distracted and dependent form of life, brings the state of being in the world of human beings close to that of a poverty in the world. Especially in a psychopolitical system, the disruption of memory and permanent distraction could capture the suspension of animality defining the human being for Agamben, as a 'new' kind of animality, in the sense that the relation to the world becomes a being in an environment, to which one no longer has any relation besides that of survival – indeed, of bare life.

A coincidental similarity between the mascot's bee-like suit and Agamben's Heidegger-inspired anecdote about how animals are 'unconsciously' in their environment is worth repeating here. With regard to Heidegger's notion of poverty in the world, Agamben rehearses the experiment

in which a bee is placed in a laboratory in front of a glass full of honey. If, after it has begun to suck, one removes the bee's abdomen, it tranquilly continues to suck, while one sees honey flowing out where the abdomen has been cut off. The bee is so absorbed in its disinhibitor that it can never place itself before it to perceive it as something that exists objectively in and for itself. (Agamben, 2015a, 89-90)

The bee is absorbed in the environment, still satisfying its immediate needs and desires like the moths in Rilke's text on dolls (2.5.1). The experiment also resembles the mascot's cruel optimism, as it still tries to perform in an environment that will only worsen with every action. This mode of being poor in the world also relates to the moments that were described in the previous chapter, in which the mascot creates a sensation of being inanimate, of becoming a prop as part of the scenography. At moments, the mascot figure thus finds itself on the threshold of being in a world and being absorbed in an environment. The suspension of what Heidegger calls human being-in-the-world brings

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<sup>142</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disinhibitor>. Accessed on 12/12/2017.

the figure on the threshold of being poor in the world, without completely transitioning into ‘animal being.’

In relation to thrownness Heidegger<sup>143</sup> refers to the etymology of *das Unheimliche* – the not homely, the familiar turned strange and the strange turned familiar – as *an underlying existential or ontological condition of the human being: man does not belong in the world, even if he may experience a familiarity with it* (Masschelein, 2011, 140).<sup>144</sup> The mascot complicates this thought, as it both belongs and does not belong there. The mascot as performative creature belongs in a space of exposure, such as a theatre stage. For the human being in the suit, the indifference of the suit and audience toward his or her particular presence evokes a strong sense of not belonging, even of not wanting to be there.

The disorientation of being thrown in the world on the brink of poverty in the world, is amplified and expanded in a psychopolitical apparatus. Disorientation is understood here not only in a literal sense of not knowing where one is or where to go, but also as an impossibility to create meaning, or to understand the world (De Boever, 2013a, 106). The disorientation in the case of *UNTITLED* is in large part caused by the type of space into which the mascot finds itself thrown. In *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, Deleuze points at how different models of power generate different time-spaces. In a reflection on the contemporary evolution of Deleuze’s society of control toward what he terms *noöpower* (in this research referred to as psychopolitics or psychopower), Lazzarato writes that in today’s mode of power, it is *no longer a matter of disciplining [...] within a closed space, but of modulating [...] in an open space* (2006, 178). The expansion and mutation from a biopolitics to a psychopolitics thus implies a shift from closedness to *a self-deforming cast in which we participate* (Deleuze, 1992, 4). In *UNTITLED* the most deforming cast is not the suit, but the time and space constructed by Verdonck’s use of the theatrical apparatus.

To describe the space of *UNTITLED* according to this understanding of the terms of openness and closedness, it is interesting to first return to Beckett. Badiou sees two types of space in Beckett’s work, one being a *closed space, so that the set of features of the place of being may be enumerated and named with precision*. The second type is an *open, geographical space, a space of transit* (2003, 5-6). The room in which the four figures of *Endgame* (1957) find themselves is such a closed space, as is the room in which ‘Joe’ sits on his bed in *Eh, Joe* (1966), also suggesting the man’s inner space, a little figure captured in the skull. The

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<sup>143</sup> In his discussion of the uncanny, Heidegger refers to Hölderlin and his translation of ‘deinon’ in Sophocles’ *Antigone* as uncanny. This adjective to ‘human’ has gained attention and led to discussions concerning its meaning as it was elevated to a quasi-existential characteristic of ‘the human’ and according to Heidegger meant: *fearful, the powerful, and the inhabital* (Masschelein, 2011, 141).

<sup>144</sup> In certain interpretations the uncanny is literally translated and interpreted as ‘unhomely,’ *also in the political sense of not having a home, of being homeless*, a meaning that some relate to the historical time in which the notion was developed by Freud, namely in the final year of World War I and the unrest right after it (Masschelein, 2011, 144).

road next to which Vladimir and Estragon are waiting under a tree in *Waiting for Godot* is then a case of the open space of passing by. Badiou wrote that Beckett made a *progressive fusion of closure and of open space, making it impossible to know whether this grey black is destined for movement or immobility* (2003, 6). The space of the stage in *Act Without Words I* is such a space: the figure is a prisoner there, which would make it a closed space, but it is also a space for performance and the objects moving about seem to suggest so. The fusion of openness and closedness is telling in Reisz's film version of the play, in which the figure is thrown in what is suggested to be a vast desert, unable to leave the camera's fixed frame (an intelligent rendition of the Beckettian trope of the terror of the gaze). The desert is an endless yet 'dead' space, where movement no longer makes any sense. Badiou refers in his analysis to the evocation of space in *Lessness (grey sky no cloud no sound, cf. 2.4)* and in *Worstward Ho* (1983), where the existential space is described as:

A Place. Where none. For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out.  
Only in. Stay in. On in. Still. (Beckett, 1996 [1983], 77)

In *UNTITLED*, the mascot finds itself in a scenography that is a grey space that is at once closed and open, between the actual closed theatre stage from which it cannot escape and the openness of the street, which is evoked by the set design of which the mascot thus becomes an 'irrelevant' part. The paillette backdrop is at times shiny, glittering grey, and gives the grey black an undertone of entertainment and poor glamour.

The modulation in an open space observed by Lazzarato leads to a convergence of openness and closure, of immobility and mobility. In *UNTITLED*, these categories have completely merged into a deadlocked open space, communicating not only the modulation of frenzied performativity, but perhaps even more the vast emptiness lying behind a capitalist governmental apparatus that has created this environment. It is a space destined for movement at a standstill. Indeed, if we relate the Beckettian and Deleuzian closed/open to the Agamben-Heideggerian closed/openness of being in the world, the first's transition from closedness to openness would mean an increased 'thrownness,' an increased alienation caused by 'the promise of freedom', only widening the gap between human beings and the world, and thus fostering the desire for those things that close the gap, such as consumption and populist and nationalist identity politics. The more abstract condition of being in a grey black space allows for movement, but the movement does not change anything; it is an immobile movement (cf. the analysis of Okada in 1.2.2.1). The grey open-closed space of *UNTITLED* is a space in which the mascot figure is in a radical form of exile. It is a place that is as hostile and ungenerous as the theatre desert into which Beckett's figure in *Act Without Words I* is thrown. The *desertification of the landscape* in which one is thrown, is for Berardi connected to the psychopolitical condition, *converging into feelings of loneliness and despair that are socially difficult to consciously refuse and oppose. Loneliness, stress, competition, a sense of*

*meaninglessness, compulsion, and failure* are immediately related to an *unbearable alienation* (Berardi, 2015, 110).

Thrown in a landscape that is not desertified, but rather deserted, the mascot figure, like the figures in the later Beckett works, *wanders in a kind of no-man's land* [...] [it finds itself] *de-centered or displaced in a nature morte, to use a term of the plastic arts. A dead deserted nature* (Federman, 2000). In addition to the – I believe conceptually relevant – connection between visual arts and performing arts, Federman ties the existential desubjectification of Beckett's figures also to an ecological perspective. Although not immediately present in *UNTITLED*, one could read the decentering of the human subject also from an anthropocenic perspective. In the anthropocene, the exile of human beings in the world is made paradoxically clear, as it becomes undeniable that we are part of an ecology, which increasingly turns against us and leads to catastrophe because of the human's anthropocentric and capitalist desire for control and profit. The anthropocene, which others call capitalocene (e.g. Moore, 2016) in order to emphasize the ecologically destructive workings of the capitalist apparatus, is also connected to the starting point of the mascot figure as low-wage worker. Ten Bos points out how cheap labor is part of the anthropocentric and capitalist conquering, manipulation, and exploitation of the earth and its resources (2017, 78). Actual desertification as a consequence of climate change and global warming through increasingly impactful, slow, and acute environmental catastrophes give another, literal meaning to the already existential *Stimmung* of thrownness and not belonging: *the world or the universe are not there for the human* (Ten Bos, 2017, 29, my transl.). Belonging can be understood here in its other sense, namely signifying possession. Human beings do not belong in the world, but perhaps even more so, the world does not belong to human beings.

The reader that remembers how the notion of the figure has one of its fundamental roots in the *Muselmann*, the camp prisoner, and certainly those readers who are familiar with Agamben's oeuvre, might expect that the time and space of the figure would be precisely that of the camp – the camp being one of Agamben's returning paradigms for the *political space in which we still live* (2000, 37). The figure as a radical form of bare life is philosophically and politically connected to the state of exception, as they both imply situations of an inclusion through an exclusion. I don't intend to contradict the camp's space of exception as a paradigm for the increasing normalization of states of exception (or states of emergency as recently happened in France), but when it comes to theatre or the artistic translation of the concept of the camp and the state of exception, there are various complications. The first and perhaps most important would be that it requires a discussion on the position of the arts, the art work, or perhaps the art institution and the theatre building within society, a discussion that goes beyond the scope of this research. A second complication would be the strong legal aspect of the camp, which is connected to citizenship – an issue that has partially been discussed when it comes to the disposability of the figure (cf. chapter 2.1) – and does not directly relate to spectacular-

democratic apparatuses as they have been discussed in this dissertation so far.<sup>145</sup> A third and final complication would be the strong biopolitical emphasis in Agamben's formulations on the camp.

An element of the camp as paradigmatic for the normalization of the state of exception as *space for naked life as such* (2000, 41), which nevertheless relates to how time and space of the figure have been discussed in relation to Verdonck and psychopolitics up until now, is the *dislocating localization*, the potential capture of every life, no longer bound by physical limitations of the camp or prison (Agamben, 2000, 44). A second feature, relating to Beckett's combination of open and closedness, would be the position of the figures in the camp in a *zone of indistinction between the outside and the inside*, captured in, a forced belonging through the inclusion of not belonging (Agamben, 2000, 40).

Having made this theoretical consideration, let us return to how this space of the figure is composed in Verdonck's *UNTITLED* by using various elements of the theatre apparatus. The grey black of the open-closed space of the void in both Beckett and Verdonck is a result of a specific light design. Badiou described the grey black as an *uncontrasted black* or *anti-dialectical* (2003, 6). It is a light that is not bright, nor dark; it is nearly impossible to say whether it is day or night. As Beckett described it in *Worstward Ho: dim light as never. On all. Say a grot in that void. A gulf. Then in that grot or gulf such dimmest light as never* (Beckett, 1996, 82). Besides the near blackout scenes in which first one and in the end all the *BOGUS I* inflatables appear, Verdonck's stage in *UNTITLED* is lit in such a way that the grey black space is created: there is light, but it does not 'enlighten' anything. The grey black of the void in both Verdonck and Beckett is reminiscent of Han's investigation into the notion of the architecture of absence in cultures of the Far East. There he points out that it is exactly the fusion or indifference between the closed and the open that characterizes the Far East's culture of absence (Han, 2007, 46). This is also the space of Noh plays, where ghosts appear and masks are characters. An important element in these spaces of absence is the light design. Han calls it *standing or still light* (2007, 47, my transl.), which does not have an explicit direction and is just 'there.'

Verdonck's light designer, Jan Van Gijssel, created a light that is not a light, in the sense that it is antitheatrical, emphasizing the nakedness of the space. The lamps have filters that create a harsh light, not giving warmth, nor evoking daylight. In addition, the source of the light is not visible. Not only are the lamps not visible (that would not be exceptional) but also the beams of the separate lamps are not distinguishable, so the light comes in one 'block.' The light is so naked and 'functional,' that it could be comparable to the theatre's 'work lights,' a general light that is used during load in and strike, when the

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<sup>145</sup> Of course there are economic zones of exception, such as tax havens, and perhaps more concerning, economically motivated governmental policies and laws that reduce citizenship, and destroy social fabrics, making life vulnerable and disposable (as has been argued in various ways in the analyses of the figures).

theatre is being worked (in). The work light aspect, which is perhaps something only noticed by spectators who are familiar with the look of the theatre space before and after a performance, nevertheless generates an affect of bare functionality, which is part of the *moulure* of the mascot figure. It is an essential feature in the creation of the open-closed space, of the nakedness of the theatre space. This in-between space is *mute* (Rosa, 2016, 95): in its silent demand to perform in this emptiness, it desubjectifies.

Within this still light, both in the first and second part of the performance, there is a small light effect. In the first part a small orange light flickers on the down left corner of the paillette backdrop. It could be a poor lightshow for the mascot's poor performance, underlining the poverty of the figure and situation at hand. However, the small blinking light does not seem to relate to the mascot's actions; it also conveys a time before or *after* the performance, where only a functional light accidentally continues to flicker. The orange flickering is part of *UNTITLED*'s indifferent scenography. In the second part, during the dances on *The Entertainer*, blue, red, and green lights flicker in the same corner where the orange light was before. However, more colors do not increase the quality of the performative space. Its 'cheapness' only increases and affirms the desperation and absurdity of the mascot's actions.

In addition to the emptiness of stage and light, sounds and music increase the pressure in this environment. In the analysis of the mascot figure in the previous chapter, the pressure leading to the mascot's distress was a consequence of the neoliberal performance society, and the source of panic, depression, and despair. Here, it becomes clear that it is also a consequence of the theatre apparatus: the closed-open space of non-belonging and immobility increases the burden and pressure of performance and even of existence. The music is an important part of this unsettling environment. During the first part of the performance, a soft elevator music tune plays on repeat. Elevator music, or Muzak, was developed to stimulate and control the workers or shoppers in their environment. It is an expression of power that manipulates its listeners in a gentle way to work harder (Jones & Schumacher, 1992, 157). Today, this kind of music is also associated with the act of waiting, supposedly keeping the waiting person calm and passive. The seemingly endless loop of the tune places the mascot in a kind of limbo, a waiting for salvation that will never come. Over time, nothing really changes.

Indeed, every action the mascot performer undertakes to fill the emptiness of the stage, ranging from small acts like a split, jumps, running around, or playing hide and seek to a dance routine to a techno-version of *The Entertainer*, does not seem to bring him closer to redemption. On the contrary, there is only the continuous performativity and positivity and the suicidal demand for more: more work, more profit, more growth, more spectacle. Strangely enough, time in this phase of capitalism is not experienced as merely speeding up or as slowing down due to a saturation of the 'now'. Rather, it is a sensation Hartmut Rosa has described as *rasender Stillstand*, or frenzied standstill: *when the changes and dynamics of individual life or of society (and thus of individual or collective history) are no*

longer experienced as elements of a meaningful and oriented historical development – that is, as element of a progress of sorts – but rather as an aimless, speeding change (2016, 51, my transl). The continuous demand to perform, the demand for innovation and action without leading to actual change, is a symptom of how *an illuminated 24/7 world without shadows is the final capitalist mirage of post-history, of an exorcism of otherness that is the motor of historical change* (Crary, 2014, 9).

The posthistorical temporality of a frenzied standstill is that of an aimless, endless time. Expansion under the name of growth and increasing profit paradoxically leads to a sensation of a permanent here and now, with precarious living conditions not allowing for long-term plans (Gielen, 2013, 197-198), which leads to depression. In the world of Verdonck's *UNTITLED*, time is incessantly in motion as well, its duration weighing on those *within* that time, mercilessly moving toward nowhere. From this point of view, the mascot is perhaps not as much in a grey black evoking limbo, as it is in an environment resembling the only legal institution in the Christian theology *which knows neither interruption nor end: hell* (Agamben, 2012, 41). For Agamben, the Western experience of time and history has its foundation in Christian conceptions of time, and *sanctioned by modern mechanics [...] the modern concept of time is a secularization of rectilinear irreversible Christian time, albeit sundered from any notion of end and emptied of any other meaning*, which has led to the current *experience of dead time* (Agamben, 1993c, 96). In other Verdonck performances, the endlessness takes the shape of a Beckettian circularity, an unnatural cyclical return of the same, for example in *END*, all but one of the performers traverse the same circular trajectory, continuing regardless of the end, for want of a better alternative.

The endless time in Beckett, exemplified in *UNTITLED* by the relentless persistence of the mascot still trying to perform, still trying to entertain, in a shared desire with the audience for *something to happen*, is for Badiou part of a comic enterprise (2003, 75). Indeed, despite the dark and dystopian analysis of society that can be made when studying *UNTITLED* and despite the not enviable socio-economic reality of the mascots working in the streets and entertainment parks, the performance is at moments utterly humorous. The mascot as a theatrical figure that does not and cannot stop, resembles those Beckettian characters that 'go on, can't go on, must go on,' to paraphrase the final words of *The Unnamable* (1953). According to Badiou, *Beckett is indisputably the only serious writer of the last century to belong to a major tradition within comic theatre* (2003, 74). Beckett's engagement with the comic traditions of clowns and mime, as well as the repetitive act, resonate with Verdonck's use of the mascot in *UNTITLED*. In the rehearsal process, *Act Without Words I*, indeed a mime performance itself that has something deeply 'funny' about it, video clips of Buster Keaton, and cartoons were all a part of the dramaturgical frame of reference in the development of the mascot figure's performative language. However, whereas Badiou connects Beckett's comic elements to a larger, mild vision of humankind, I believe that in Verdonck the comic is a means to connect to the tragic aspect of the mascot figure. After all, there is no happy end, and perhaps not even a real

desire to go on. From the perspective of the dramaturgical process, the comic and its related openness were important tools to connect an audience and create sympathy, in order to increase the tragic effect and affect of the mascot figure as the 'show' continues to develop.

There are moments in *UNTITLED*, however, in which the empty, posthistorical and endless time suggests a different temporality. When the mascot figure's doing nothing and waiting turn into boredom, a different relation is established with the space and time of the theatre apparatus. In an even more radical way than Okada's store clerks (cf. 1.2.2), this boredom is an inactivity, in a more extreme posthumanist and posthuman environment. In boredom, the figure finds itself in a captivation, *in which human openness in a world and animal openness toward its disinhibitor seem for a moment to meet* (Agamben, 2002, 62). The boredom of empty time, of empty space, leads to a state of suspension, of abandonment, which sometimes falls together with the experience of the audience. As Vanderbeeken writes with regards to *I/II/III/IIII*, not only might the performers be stuck in repetition, but the audience has to *endure the boredom* as well (2010, 364). When watching *UNTITLED*, in these moments you wait together with the mascot, sharing a being lost, a not knowing what to do or what we are doing. The figure's boredom, its captivation in doing nothing, is a different *Stimmung* in which the pressure of the empty time-space flips into a potentiality of human beings, which reveals itself as a potentiality-not-to, an impotentiality (Agamben, 2004, 66-67). This suspended time hints at the disruption of precisely those apparatuses that created the resembling, but very different empty time of psychopolitics and neoliberal capitalism.

However powerful these moments of shared suspended time might be, *UNTITLED* develops in a more dystopian direction. Toward the end of the performance, after having executed its *Entertainre* dance routine three times in a row, the mascot seems to surrender, exhausted. All it can do is sit down, and watch a little Lego-robot with its own paillette suit cross the stage, attracting all the attention. It is a scene in which the disposability and replaceability of the 'human' mascot and of the human as such, becomes painfully explicit. The mascot leaves the stage, while *BOGUS I*'s eight-meter high inflatable tubes emerge out of black boxes, evoking images of a factory, a city, or more abstract: the industrial violence underlying the world that is presented. Finally another robot enters the stage: a moving platform with a rod on which a mascot's head is attached. It has the shape of a flower with the uncanny expression of a smiley emoticon and executes a pre-programmed choreography.<sup>146</sup> The nightmarish scene brings the violence of the empty time-space to the surface and creates an image of the socio-economic and political structures behind the mascot figures, as well as the latter's panic, madness and depression. The final scene of *UNTITLED* presents a posthuman landscape, a space in

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<sup>146</sup> This is the same kind of robot used in *DEAD BRASS BAND*, cf. chapter 2.3.2.

which the human is dissolved and replaced. A reflection on entertainment's inhuman nature coincides here with a vision of humanity's finitude. It is a radical performance of what Chris Salter calls *the subject's decentering within a scenographic machine-scape* (2010, 221), the next phase of the landscape in *END* (cf. 2.3.1), now without human presence. This posthuman landscape evokes a ruin of Man with a capital M, *breathing himself to death, raising himself to ruins* (Badmington, 2000, 10), of which dance critic Pieter T'Jonck considers *UNTITLED* to be the funeral (2014, 64).

Although the machines suggest they will continue long after the last human has left the scene, an end has occurred in *UNTITLED*. The cycle of endless circularity of 'hell' is broken for the mascot, perhaps just like in the planet's ecology, the cyclicity of 'nature' is under pressure and deformed, threatening to burst open into a next, unknown and not yet imaginable phase.<sup>147</sup> In this posthuman landscape, the end of human agency and presence in the world unfolds. Surprisingly, this new, dystopian situation is in a way a relief. The endless time of the figure has finally come to an end. In his essay on the later works of Beckett, Deleuze describes how many of the characters in these works find themselves in a post-apocalyptic after-time. They continue after all has already ended, but do not seem to realize. In the television play *Ghost Trio* from 1975, a man (in the script indicated as "F – Figure") waits in a room for a woman to come. It ends with a little boy knocking at the door, nodding his head when Figure opens it.

When the little silent messenger suddenly appears, it is not to announce that the woman will not be coming, as if it were a piece of bad news, but to bring the long awaited order to stop everything, since everything is truly finished. At least the protagonist has a means of sensing that the end is at hand. (Deleuze, 1995, 17)

In *UNTITLED* the Lego robot seems to do precisely that: announcing all has been in vain, that there was no option of escaping from the onset, now giving the permission to finally stop. The posthuman landscape that closes the performance could then be considered from a different perspective, as being the posthuman desire for gentle withdrawal from a hostile world: *[w]hile at the conscious level all of us struggle for survival, at some deeper level of our unconscious structures all we long for is to lie silently and let time wash over us in the stillness of non-life* (Braidotti, 2013, 153). This new, literally *post-human* condition, in which the human is absent, calls for new reflections on temporality and space, this time not from a human viewpoint, but from a nonhuman, machinic perspective that will be discussed further in chapter 2.6.3's analysis of *IN VOID*.

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<sup>147</sup> I thank Sébastien Hendrickx for pointing me toward this way of formulating the collapse of cyclicity.

## 2.6.2 Theatre as negative apparatus

The desire for stillness and inactivity, or rather the lack of space and time for rest, for unproductive activity, for non-commodified being, is at the centre of Verdonck's *EXIT* (2011). When entering the theatre space of *EXIT*, the audience is greeted by the performer, Alix Eynaudi, and kindly asked to find a seat in the tribune, which is transformed with thick cushions and other comfortable elements. Eynaudi makes sure everyone is in a good position 'in which you could imagine falling asleep.' When the audience is well seated, a movie is projected of a TEDx talk by Robert Stickgold, sleep researcher at Harvard University. He explains the importance of sleep for the brain's processing of information of the past day and the need to fit sleep in our life's experiences. Sleeping and dreaming, he argues, are essential to our meaning creating processes. Stickgold finishes by advising the audience 'to get some sleep.' Next, Eynaudi walks the audience through her short choreography and she announces she will repeat it several times, so there is no need to worry if some parts are missed. Then, the choreography 'starts'. Light and a repetitive soundscape (composed by Rutger Zuyderveld of Machinefabriek) accompany the choreography, which every time it starts over, is set in a different color of light, to which Eynaudi's different dresses correspond. The larger part of the audience falls asleep or enters a state of half-sleep while it gets darker and darker and the dancer's body becomes more and more a shadow and attains, like the audience, a state between presence and absence. *Is she still there? Am I still here?*

In *24/07. Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*, Crary foregrounds sleep as the last stand of private life against the continuous and omnipresent demand for activity of neoliberalism. *Sleep is an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism, he writes* (2014, 10). Sleep, as most radical form of inactivity, is under attack by the ubiquitous pressure to perform, to be available, to be connected 24/7. In psychopolitical times, in an attention economy, sleep seems to be the last barrier preventing a permanent state of consumption, of being awake so value can be extracted from one's activities, thoughts, and attention.

A space where we also expect and exert attention is the theatre. Verdonck plays with the spectator's attention in *EXIT*, a performance that can be seen as a sign of resistance against the rush outside and Crary's aforementioned connectionist paradigm (2014, 15). The audience is not explicitly invited to literally sleep, but subtly manipulated to do so, and that is the core of the performance. Created as a solo in close collaboration with choreographer and dancer Alix Eynaudi, Verdonck's performance truly is an 'exit' from the 24/7 society, where sleep is endangered with burnouts, depressions, and other forms of what Byung-Chul Han has named the 'tired society' (2014, my transl.). However, considering the performance from a different perspective, it also proves to be an interesting apparatus in itself. Claiming a state of exception, as we have seen, always implies a process of power, so the question remains: how 'free' is this sleep?

The destructive power of the apparatus of capitalism as it has been described extensively in previous chapters, provides a frame for Crary's analysis that *the threat of the denial of sleep is the violent dispossession of self by external force, the calculated shattering of*

*an individual*, which results in a *complete control over sensory and perceptual experience* (2014, 7). The result is a larval, docile, and impotent subject, which is part of a society reduced to an inert body, leading once again to a *figural* form of life. That this is also part of the dramaturgy of *EXIT* is affirmed by Verdonck's statement that *[w]ithout sleep, our ideas and knowledge become superficial, like mass-products, and therefore easy to be overruled. Our ideas become less dangerous* (Verdonck, 2011). Considering the power and omnipresence of apparatuses that demand for performance, offering forty minutes of rest becomes all the more generous and even political of a gesture. *EXIT*'s sleep is a negative space for today's positive society. The notion of *negative space*, introduced by Jana Tupivic (who was in turn inspired by Han), considers theatre as an antidote for society, where alternative visions of the world can be developed. It also implies a different production logic, an attempt to resist the omnipresent pressure of the 'positivities' – positivity here understood as both Hyppolite's term for apparatus (cf. 1.2.1) and the literal positive, optimistic, action-oriented affects that are required: attention, like, share, buy, enjoy, just do it, be happy, be fulfilled, ... – on several levels of creation (Tupivic, 2015, 38). *EXIT*'s sleep offers a way out of the state of necessity and compulsion generated by the omnipresent 24/7 apparatuses and takes the spectator to a state of suspension and potentiality. The performance invites to reclaim negativity, and to find a connection to potentiality and impotentiality. This emptiness of the sleep or half-sleep at an unsuspected moment, with which the audience is confronted, can be experienced both as bliss and an abyss.

### **The sleep machine**

In his book on the acceleration of time, Rosa describes various forms of slowing down within a society that is speeding up. Theatre as a negative space for the 24/7 pressure of a positive society pervaded by apparatuses, might be what Rosa calls a *slowdown oasis*, a space and time that is still inherently slow and has not sped up along with societal acceleration (Rosa, 2016, 42). This may be partially true, albeit very dependent on the artist and even the particular creative process and its circumstances. Moreover, the political and socio-economic pressure on the arts is such that theatre that seeks to be a negative space, especially in the case of *EXIT*, rather belongs to Rosa's category of the *intentional, ideological (oppositional) slowdown* (2016, 45, my transl.). Whereas in *UNTITLED* inactivity, not knowing what to do, depression, and burnout appear connected to a *slowing down as a dysfunctional by-product of societal acceleration* (Rosa, 2016, 43, my transl.), *EXIT*'s sleep is part of a counter-apparatus, or the profanation of an apparatus.



Figure 18 Kris Verdonck & Alix Eynaudi/A Two Dogs Company: *EXIT* (2011) © Hendrik De Smedt

However, when we look at the questions lying at the basis of the project, the gentility of the gift of sleep is problematized: *in a traditional theatre set-up, using all the media at the theatre's disposal (lighting, sound, movement, language, images, stage design, etc.), what influence can we have on the sensory perceptions of an audience? To what extent are artists capable of manipulating the spectator's consciousness (and subconscious) using these theatrical means?* (Verdonck, 2011). Indeed, all of the media of theatre are being used in *EXIT* to create a situation of hypnosis. The light, shifting from bright white light to blue, purple, red, green, and toward the end almost complete darkness is perhaps the most visible phasing of the sleep machine spectators of *EXIT* find themselves in. The welcoming by Eynaudi is also part of the performance's hypnosis: making people feel comfortable, explicitly allowing them to take a nap ... it is all part of the routine. Verdonck and Eynaudi worked with a professional hypnotizer to research the different stages of hypnosis and the different parameters that generate the optimal environment for sleep.<sup>148</sup> The soundscape includes, apart from its meditative and repetitive tones, a low base that resonates with the brain's sleep center, as if it were communicating to the listener that he or she is

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<sup>148</sup> I did not collaborate on this performance as a dramaturge, however I attended several performances as audience member and had conversations about this experience of falling asleep with Verdonck and Eynaudi afterward.

asleep. So even when a spectator does not actually fall asleep, the brain will be confused and function in an in-between zone of being half-awake. The cushions as well as the raised temperature in the space are also part of this setup in which the choreography and the dancer are but elements of the apparatus of theatre that is being pushed to its extreme in *EXIT*'s search for interaction to the extent that it becomes manipulation.<sup>149</sup>

Another category of slowdown Rosa introduces is that of *functional (accelerating) slowdown*, which serves actually to increase productivity, such as various mindfulness practices, or functional recreation and the 'slow' movement, 'activities' that have become nearly common to creative and tech industries marketing slowness as a luxury product (Rosa, 2016, 45). From this perspective, *EXIT*'s sleep becomes even more ambiguous. The introductory video talk by Professor Stickgold already blurs these two types of sleep (production-oriented sleep, and 'disinterested' sleep). He points out that while we sleep, our brain performs activities connected to learning, memory, meaning making, and creativity. In a traditional Fordist economy, these elements indeed belong almost exclusively to the private sphere of the subject, but in post-Fordist times when creativity and potentiality become capitalized, these activities become vulnerable to neoliberal recuperation (Virno, 2009, 30). As a consequence, contrary to Crary's assertion that *the stunning, inconceivable reality is that nothing of value can be extracted from it* (2014, 11), sleep can be capitalized. Sleep is being put to work by companies such as Google, which allow for naps during the workday, in order to increase their worker's performance. Google has developed a sleeping device, called 'EnergyBot,' which has an optimal reclining position and an isolating cap with optional relaxing music. Instead of sleeping for oneself, the employee's sleep is inscribed in the company's goals. Sleep is thus put to work, not for creating the meaning of life, as Stickgold tells us, but for actual 'work.' It is important to note that these naps are reserved for the relatively small segment of employees that is hired for its creative thinking. The industrial work force operates under the no-sleep paradigm, also because their performance is not considered to particularly benefit from it (although the reduction of the working day in the first half of the twentieth century decreased accidents significantly). The implication of sleep in what is often called immaterial labor, however, points to the very material, physical aspect of this type of work, which is not to be neglected.

Even when sleep is not inscribed in work performance, it can be commodified in a different way. Smartphone applications such as 'Sleep as android' and 'Sleepbot Sleep Cycle Alarm' are smart alarms that align the sleep cycle with the time set to wake up.

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<sup>149</sup> In 2003, the installative performance *To Sleep* was Verdonck's first venture into the realm of sleep. In this installation, performers were sleeping on 'beds' of a semi-transparent material whose concave shape had taken that of the performer's body. Brought in a kind of hypnosis, the naked bodies of the performers lay there, as in a scientific experiment, or sci-fi nightmare, in a radical exhibition of sleep as human absence and vulnerability. *To Sleep* could be termed a marionette figure, showing the body as object and its subsequent von Kleistian grace.

These ‘apps’ – applications are the latest apparatuses – extract data from sleep. Sleep, which is rightfully described by Crary as one of the final remaining elements of nature’s cyclic structure (2014, 128), is absorbed as being cyclical by this software. It is part of the massive gathering of data, of an apparatus of control that also allows for an adaptation to consumption patterns. The ‘Sleep as android’-app, for example, wants access to the history of the device on which it is installed, i.e. your identity, your location, your photos, media and other files, your camera, your microphone, your Wifi and Bluetooth connections, and information on your calls and smart phone ID. Sleep is already part of the tendency that Google and other corporate players are now competing for dominance over the remains of the everyday (Crory, 2014, 73). That these data are capitalized is characterized by the fact that to access the statistics of your sleeping data in the ‘Sleep as Android’-app (and no doubt in other apps as well), you have to pay. The desire to ‘know’ as well as to outsource the control over sleep is being addressed by these applications.

*Sleeping Cells*, an installation that could be called a spin-off of the project of *EXIT* – which was commissioned by the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin within the frame of a festival “Über Lebenskunst” (on the art of living – on survival) – brings some other elements to the fore. A series of hammocks in steady metal frames were placed in public spaces or in the theatre building, enabling the passers-by to take some rest. At once representing an image of sleep and relaxation and providing the infrastructure to do so is the main intervention of the *Sleeping Cells*. Instead of ‘recharging’ in function of your job, the sleep infrastructure offered in a public space by Verdonck is completely random and free of functionality.<sup>150</sup> A low-tech and sincere ‘EnergyBot,’ the sleeping cells introduce sleep in a realm of activity and work, hence claiming that public space, and perhaps also the theatre institutions they are presented in, have become fully absorbed by neoliberal logic. In this sense, similar to *EXIT*’s transformation of the theatre into an intentional and oppositional negative space by introducing sleep, *Sleeping Cells* generates a negative space in the public sphere, creating a fissure in the apparatus of economic production and performance. As an apparatus of sleep, the hammock facilitates sleep, almost allowing it by merely standing there. *Sleeping Cells* as an installative variation on *EXIT* shows the material infrastructure for sleep.

It thus appears that there are two conceptions of sleep: sleep as resistance, a negative space for capitalism, and sleep as a state of docility and oppression – ‘positive sleep,’ referring to the positivities in which it is then inscribed. *EXIT*’s complex combination of turning (and revealing) the theatre into a manipulative socio-economic apparatus and an opening up of a negative space allows reflection upon precisely this apparatus. We can

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<sup>150</sup> A different interpretation would be that the people who would take a nap in the sleeping cells are ‘performing,’ making sleep part of Rosa’s functional slowdown. Sleeping then becomes free labor, willfully performed by those engaging in it.

consider both the position of sleep (and work) in today's society, as well as the apparatus created by Verdonck through the position of the audience and the performer, whose genuine engagement with the audience and dance performance are only part of a larger 'machine.' Interestingly, to reflect critically on the destructive effects and workings of an apparatus operating in the world, Verdonck creates a manipulative apparatus himself, in which the performer and audience is captured. Analogous to the distinction between positive/negative sleep, we could also differ between 'positive apparatuses' and 'negative apparatuses.' This distinction is complicated; as in the case of sleep, the 'action' or manifestation is similar, namely sleeping, and the difference lies in the way of being incorporated in a productive apparatus (or not).

Although *EXIT* is itself an apparatus controlling sleep, the sleep it generates is in that sense 'free.' Nothing is demanded from it. This and probably a generalized fatigue are reasons why the audience – including myself each time I 'saw' the performance – almost collectively sleeps and considers it such an experience of well-being, but also a profound break in existence in which one encounters oneself, something the lack of sleep does not allow according to Stickgold. The apparatus of *EXIT*, its 'positivity,' generates the particular negative space of sleep in a larger reflection on the position of theatre as such. This profanation of manipulation, the displacement of an apparatus of control from an imposing of positivity to an allowing of negativity is the generous gesture Verdonck makes with *EXIT*. The performance finishes with a final dance sequence, which disrupts Eynaudi's repetitive choreography. In a glittery dress, which reflects the increasingly brighter lighting, she brings the audience back from the absence into which they were lured. The music becomes more vivid as well; the apparatus is waking up its inhabitants in an almost enchanting way. Eynaudi ends with some comforting words, ushering to rouse calmly and to take time to leave the space. Then she goes offstage and does not come back to salute. While some are still half asleep, others are applauding hesitatingly. For French theatre scholar George Banu, the gesture of not coming back was one of the main characteristics of Noh theatre: *en se retirant pour toujours, [l'acteur] conserve au spectacle l'ambiguïté d'un événement* (1993, 20). The applause, then, ties the ritual, the event, to the aesthetic (Banu, 1993, 17). In its direct manipulation through inducing sleep, *EXIT* was a true event, and in this sense indeed a disruption of 24/7 society. However, it was also an aesthetic manifestation, a performance, and this level enables a second, deeper reading of the performance as a research into the power of the theatre apparatus and the ambiguity of sleep today, making a forty-minute nap not as innocent as it looks.

### 2.6.3 Spectatorship after the end

The movement in Verdonck's work from the figure as (im)material entity toward the 'invisible forces' of the theatre as apparatus and its space, time, and various means as constitutive aspects of the figure is accompanied with a movement toward a stronger consideration of the experience of the performances and installations. What was already emerging in *I/II/III/IIII* and *END*, namely the relentless repetition with its subsequent experience of time for the spectator, continued in *EXIT* when time was explicitly given to the spectator in the form of allowing an 'absence,' i.e. sleep, and in *UNTITLED* when the endless time influenced both the condition of the mascot figure and became an explicitly shared temporality in moments of sheer waiting. The installation circuit *IN VOID*, which perhaps should better be described as a theatrical installation to underline the perspective of theatre from which this work was conceived and with which it negotiates, throws spectators even more back on themselves. Marianne Van Kerkhoven already asserted that when the lines between visual arts and performing arts are blurred, the spectator's experience comes more into focus. In *IN VOID*, besides the dramaturgy of the (object-)figures that has been analyzed in the previous chapters, the *dramaturgy of the spectator* (Van Kerkhoven, 2009, 11), not in the sense of a relational aesthetics (cf. Bourriaud), but on the contrary, as an individual experience, indeed becomes as important. In what follows, I will seek to describe possible experiences of this work, a description in which the perspectives of the academic and the dramaturg are inevitably mixed with that of my own experience as a spectator.<sup>151</sup>

Another movement that runs parallel to these two shifts toward attention for the theatre apparatus and the experience of the audience relates to the art work's positioning toward 'the end' of human existence. Perhaps with the exception of (or less directly with) *EXIT*, all of the works by Verdonck that have been discussed so far can be connected to temporalities oriented around the end of humanity. *Patent Human Energy*, *HEART* and *I/II/III/IIII* (whose figures were described as *choreographed, living emblems of the end of history* [Vanhoutte, 2010, 480]) show human bodies in contraptions that threaten to lead to an end; in that sense they are 'ending'. *M, a reflection* and *ISOS* also still show human bodies and situations, however, they are profoundly haunted by approaching violence, and already spectral. These cases could be called a phase 'before the end,' already pregnant with its coming. *END* shows the time 'of' the end; it is the end moment unfolding, a moment in which before, during and after are impossible to discern. The mascot figure in

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<sup>151</sup> Especially in *IN VOID* and with other installations, as a dramaturg it is rather complex to 'predict' the outcome. There are no rehearsals for an installation; rather it has to be made and then evaluated, making it a less malleable, less flexible working process than those of dance and theatre (at least, when there are human performers). I have written about this experience in an article for *Etcetera*, see van Baarle, 2016b.

a sense goes beyond that, as this figure is more about a disappeared and replaced human being. The final posthuman landscape shows the state of (non-)being that *UNTITLED* suggests: a limbo, right after the end, waiting for it to be actually completed.<sup>152</sup> The performative installations that were analyzed as object-figures (2.3), especially when they are brought together in the installation circuit *IN VOID*, evoke a time after the end. They create a world in which there is no human presence anymore, just machines, objects, robots, and projections.

In *IN VOID*, the spectator buys a ticket at the theatre's box office, upon which he or she receives a code to enter the building.<sup>153</sup> That was the final human interaction before entering the theatre occupied by *IN VOID*, as humans have only the role of spectator, or rather, visitor, in this installation circuit. The Brussels version of *IN VOID* is a recombination of older installations with installations created for this constellation. It is comprised of nine elements: *DANCER #3*'s jumping robot, three suspended, rotating, and humming automated sousaphones (cf. *DEAD BRASS BAND*, chapter 2.3), whose tunes are based on works by Erik Satie and Kenji Kawai's *Ghost in the Shell* soundtrack, alternated with puffs and breaths (named *BRASS*, one of the new works), a projection of a video of a mouse walking in extreme slow motion and close up in a mouse trap, with the sound dramatically amplified (*MOUSE*, conceived as part of *K, a society*), the large inflatable ball of *PELLET*, *BOGUS II*, a paillette (cf. *BOGUS I*, chapter 2.3) inflatable, with an indefinable shape, descending and going back up toward the ceiling, while bulges grow and retreat in an organic, uncanny choreography, *DANCER #2*'s V6-engine roaring every thirty minutes, *MONSTER*'s<sup>154</sup> nest of machine toy dogs rolling over each other and laughing hysterically, activated by spectators entering the space, but continuing after they have left, *BOX II*, a cabinet standing on a table, containing a light source that is so bright and strong it is nearly impossible to look at or approach it, and as a final installation, there is a small laptop screen in a corner, on which a drone video of the empty and destroyed Syrian city of Homs plays in loop, called *DRONE*. These figures were placed in various spaces in the theatre: on the stage in front of a tribune, in rehearsal studios, in the garage, in some kind of storage room, backstage, in a space often used for lectures or at the ticket desk.

With all spaces more or less connected, the theatre in *IN VOID* is also an auditory space, which once again can be characterized as a political space and hence an acoustic territory

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<sup>152</sup> In *BOSCH BEACH* (2016), mascots were also used, more or less as part of the decor, in an environment that evoked a limbo, an in-between space between life and death. These mascots were loosely inspired by mythical creatures related to the underworld, to the afterlife, such a three-headed dog referring to Cerberus, an ancient Greek mythical creature.

<sup>153</sup> This account of *IN VOID* is based on the work's premiere showing at the Kaaitstudio's in Brussels. Later variations presented under the same title might have slight differences in the practicalities of how the spectators are allowed to enter.

<sup>154</sup> *MONSTER* was created as part of *K, a society* in 2010. The dogs are activated by a sensor and lie on a fluffy carpet under big lamps, suggesting a nest in which these machines are being brooded.

(cf. LaBelle in chapter 2.4.2). *IN VOID*'s acoustic territory not only evokes the end of a human community, but also the rise of a nonhuman community of machines. The sound is not ephemeral, but is continuous and has a fixed rhythm: the sound of the engine's thirty second roar every thirty minutes, the thumping of *DANCER #3* sounding like a machinic drill, in various speeds, only to be interrupted by the dancer's falling, the loud and stretched, extremely slowed down and amplified sound of the mouse trap banging in *MOUSE* and more locally, *BRASS*'s breathing and melodic music playing softly, or *MONSTER*'s hysterical and mechanical laughter. The acoustic territory makes that the visitors are continuously aware of other objects' presence in other spaces, perhaps performing without anyone to watch it, like the sound of a tree falling in a forest without anyone there to hear it.



Figure 19 Kris Verdonck / A Two Dogs Company: *BRASS* (2016) © Jasmijn Krol

The installations performed eight hours a day, from nine to five, regardless of there being any visitors or not. They did not perform for someone or something, and merely played 'for themselves.' For some of the existing works, this was a new situation of performing and presentation. The performativity of figures (especially in the marionette and object facets) has up until now mostly been described as provoking a 'now,' an 'accident,' an 'objectivity,' or an absent presence as a consequence of the one-time-ness (cf. *DANCER #1*'s unrepeatable combustion of the grinding disc engine) or a contraption of human and nonhuman elements introducing a degree of uncertainty and unpredictability (cf. *HEART* or *I/II/III/IIII*). *IN VOID* has the machines performing continuously, and for the installations that were made outside of this circuit's context, this meant a technical

adaptation to this 'independence'. For example, the engine of *DANCER #2* was initially designed to ignite once, to then reach its maximum speed, and then stop. A software on an Arduino chip was to be designed and introduced, and technical modifications made, to enable this 'one-time performance' to be repeated and independent of human interference (i.e. of a technician). Now von Kleist's young man would be able to repeat his beautiful gesture over and over endlessly. This and the statement that nonhuman performers will populate the theatre after the last human has left, suggests that *IN VOID* can be described as what I would call 'post-theatre'. It is theatre without theatre, beyond disciplinary boundaries, on the threshold separating visual arts from performing arts, with a series of performances continuously happening in a loop in an endless now or a posthistorical after-time. *IN VOID* offers a complex combined reflection on the end-time, the potential end of humankind, the absence of the human in the theatre as well as on the time of machines and apparatuses, their speed, their endlessness in relation to human time, the experience of time and spectatorship. In the analysis that follows, I will consider *IN VOID* as a whole to be 'the work' and not refer to the individual dramaturgies of the installations the circuit is comprised of. Several of them have already been discussed in chapter 2.3, and I am convinced that it is the combination of these installations with the 'abandoned' theatre building and the nine-to-five continuous temporality that generates the particular experience of visiting this theatrical installation circuit, and provokes the reflections below.

### 2.6.3.1 Posthuman time of the apparatus: between posthistory and messianic time

Before going deeper into the end time *IN VOID* presents and what consequences this has for the visitor's spectatorship, I take the opportunity given by this theatrical installation circuit to discuss the temporality of apparatuses. The permanent performativity of the object-figures in *IN VOID* differs from the endless performativity of the mascot figure that was discussed above. *IN VOID* gives another perspective to this endless, aimless movement than that of the mascot figure: it is not the movement generated in the human being, but rather, the apparatuses that continue. Just as the posthuman landscape takes over at the end of *UNTITLED*, the machines in *IN VOID* continue in a time of their own. The object-figures in chapter 2.3 were emblematic of the performativity of objects, the vivacity of apparatuses, and our intimate relation to them, as well as their grace and their pending independence of human presence on earth. *IN VOID* places various object-figures in a constellation that brings their complex temporality of apparatuses to the fore.

Italian theorist Matteo Pasquinelli suggested that there is dual time structure when it comes to the apparatus, namely that of the *central automaton* of computation and the *multitude of robots* and automata connected to this center, leading to a *friction between the long now of the automaton and the acceleration of the automata* (Pasquinelli, 2016). These two

levels of automatons, which correspond loosely to Agamben's conception of instrumentality connecting the internal working of the device to the larger apparatuses of which it is a part (cf. chapter 1.2), can be reformulated in terms of information (as control and communication) and energy; the *two heads* of the *industrial machine of the nineteenth century* (Pasquinelli, 2017, 312). Whereas the individual, particular automata or machines accelerate, requiring and producing more energy, which leads to an acceleration of life, the central apparatus of information, which today has the shape of a cybernetic algorithm, stays stable, timeless. Moreover, in order for this endless now of the center to be maintained, more energy, growth, innovation, and exhaustion of resources is required. The continuous flow of the installations in *IN VOID* conveys this sense of endless now of the central apparatus, indifferent to human rhythms and increasingly independent of them. One could make a very concrete comparison to digital memory's *virtually unlimited storage capacity: nothing is ever forgotten* (Rouvroy, 2011, 20). For Stiegler, this means that for these apparatuses, *time has ceased to exist* (2010b, 20). The consequence of this absence of time in the form of endless memory, of apparatuses that operate psychopolitically and thus on the memory of those who are captivated by them, is a growing inequality. The endless memory with its corresponding absence of time is the mirror of the figure without memory captured in an endless time (Stiegler, 2010b, 75). Rotating, turning, dancing, repeating in a time that Han described as *undead* (2015b, 36), *IN VOID*'s figures are emblematic of digital temporalities that have no past, nor a future, merely an *immediate present* (Han, 2015a, 36).

From another perspective, the von Kleistian grace of the figures in *IN VOID* is here literally consequential of their being outside of history, the algorithmic apparatus having become all-knowing and ubiquitous like a divine creature, no longer affected by time. As examples of the aforementioned *true technology*, these object-figures are inoperative apparatuses (cf. 2.3.3). Their time would then not be an immediate present or endlessly continuing, but rather ended, completed. The endless hell of the figure corresponds on the side of power to something that Agamben describes as *glory* (Agamben, 2011a, 164; 2007a, 181). Glory are the perpetual songs of praise that affirm the center of power, and that, moreover, are constitutive to the governmental apparatus consisting of an absolute source of power (the sovereign) and an executive government that receives its powers from this sovereign, and that in turn maintains the latter's position. The center of this bipolar apparatus is empty, and mutual glory conceals that emptiness (Agamben, 2011a, 211; 2007a, 233-234). Glory is what remains in the heavens after the end of history, when time is completed; it is a parodic form of inoperativity. Glory indeed is *the capture and inscription in a separate sphere of the inoperativity that is central to human life* (Agamben, 2011a, 246).

The ontological alienation of being thrown in the world, which is at once the most intimate and inappropriable, is separated into a commodified and politicized sphere that respectively presents belonging as a result of consuming national identity or being

inscribed in a juridical system (on a global scale: the universal declaration of human rights). When captured, inoperativity becomes *glory*, which appears to contain something that belongs to the human essence, but in vain because really they are nothing but the waste products of the immaterial and glorious fuel burnt by the motor of the machine as it turns, and that cannot be stopped (Agamben, 2011a, 246). As forms of true technology, but nevertheless placed in a context of the end of Man, the figures of *IN VOID* convey an ambiguous temporality, between glory as captured inoperativity and inoperativity as the graceful suspension of the apparatuses. The phantasmatic aspect of *IN VOID* is then a consequence of how they generate a sensation of time that is posthistorical and *last* [novissimo] *that is to say, final and larval*. In such a time, the apparatuses and institutions of power have become *posthumous*, no longer able to produce history, and devoid of legitimacy (Agamben, 2011c, 41).

To describe the temporality of *IN VOID*, a third Agambenian notion can be added to posthistorical, endless glory and inoperativity, namely messianic time: *a time that pulses [cresce] and moves [urge] within chronological time, that transforms chronological time from within* (Agamben, 2012, 12).<sup>155</sup> Messianic time is opened up by a moment of Kairos,<sup>156</sup> of disruption of chronological time, it completes or rather, suspends, the chronological, endless time of hell, of the self-maintaining economic and political apparatuses. It renders inoperative, not a future temporality, but a time of the now (Agamben, 2010, 13). Messianic time is not the same as apocalyptic time: *not the end of time but the time of the end [...] the time that remains between time and its end* (Agamben, 2012, 8).<sup>157</sup> Messianic is thus a

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<sup>155</sup> In Italian: *un tempo che cresce e urge dentro il tempo cronologico e lo lavora e trasforma dall'interno* (Agamben, 2010, 10).

<sup>156</sup> Agamben compares the kairological moment as a moment of recapitulation, of contraction of time, to the panoramic vision that the dying supposedly have of their lives, when the whole of their existence passes before their eyes in a flash – a vertiginous abbreviation (2005, 77). This description calls to mind Verdonck's video installation *Presyncope* (2010, part of *K, a society*), in which a voiceover accompanies a very slow travel image from the top of a glass skyscraper, all the way down to the water basin on the ground level. Taking the perspective of the suicide jumper, extending the moment extremely, we hear an impassive female voice (Tawny Andersen) and her final thoughts. These alternate between observation and description of the situation, practical issues, some memories, something poetic, but mostly: fragmented and rather everyday thoughts. Besides the intriguing non-emotional voice that triggers nevertheless emotional projection from the perspective of the spectator, what strikes is the banality of the thoughts, and yet their poetic character. This is indeed a moment in which time contracts, in which many things come together, but the everyday aspect points to Agamben's profane messianism's slight difference with reality as we know it. The banality of the messianic, in a way that is typical for Verdonck, however, does not lead to anything but death. Although taking one's own life is a decision that in some cases leads to what could be called a reappropriation of one's own existence, namely by annulling it, this is not the true kairological moment. We are not there yet, not able to take the decisive moment of the Kairos in our hands and use it to change our experience of existing in the world, *Presyncope* – a state of dizziness but also a reference to a rhythm that is out of the measure in music – seems to tell us.

<sup>157</sup> In Italian: *non è la fine del tempo, ma il tempo della fine. ... il tempo che resta fra il tempo e la sua fine* (Agamben, 2010, 8-9).

time that is in relation to its ending, an inherent temporal inclination toward an end. The messianic is present in the chronological; it is a potential for a renewed experience of time, beyond posthistory, that is latently present. Rancière similarly argued for a *diversity of times, within the dominant temporality* (2013). This brings us back to the perspective of the spectator, when confronted with these temporalities. For her, the experience of *IN VOID* is ambiguous as well, navigating between defeat, alienation, and sweet, intimate contemplation. When experiencing *IN VOID*, both the cruelty of posthistorical and machinic endless times and the contemplative, intimate experience of inoperative and messianic times are at work.

When considering the contemplative experience of inoperative figures, the aspect of play (cf. 2.3.3) that was part of the creation of the object-figures in *IN VOID* comes to the fore again. In an essay on play and history, Agamben describes *Playland* as a place filled with toys and playfulness. While playing, Agamben wrote in one of his early essays, the player forgets time. Time is retrieved from chronology, from a captured temporality in function of profit and progress. *Playland is a country whose inhabitants are busy celebrating rituals, and manipulating objects and sacred words, whose sense and purpose they have, however, forgotten* (Agamben, 1993c, 79). In playing, time ‘flies,’ and simultaneously is re-appropriated as *human temporality*. Play does not only retrieve objects from their capture by an apparatus on the level of use and control, but also profanes the experience of time. When translated to the experience of being in *IN VOID*, play could indeed account for a sense of losing the track of time, of wandering in the various spaces in temporalities that are at once alienated and intimate. This playtime only manifests itself when the object-figures are brought together in the collection of *IN VOID*. Referring to Benjamin’s figure of the collector, Agamben states that when playful objects, toys, are collected, they are presented as if *on the final day of history* (Agamben, 1993c, 81).

In *IN VOID*, this playland resembles an abandoned theme park that is still in function, holding the suggestion that indeed, human history might be about to end. Play disrupts chronological time and is in that sense close to the rupture of the event. A society that only plays would accelerate to the extent that it would exit history, with *all structures disintegrated into events*. Exiting history in this way, playland can be placed next to the Hades, death, and to the world of the Gods, two forms of being outside of history as eternity (Agamben, 1993c, 86). The time that is opened up there is that of duration and eternity, or *aion* (which was initially described by Heraclitus as *a child playing dice*) (Agamben 1993c, 82). Playland as posthistorical place is not innocent, the gods and death are around the corner and the position of human beings is uncertain, as in *IN VOID*. Between haunted house and playland, the machines that are at once the result of play and are in a way playful themselves, possess something divine and eternal, and convey the potential of our own, human, deaths.

### 2.6.3.2 Spectatorship between posthistory and the anthropocene

To discuss the temporality of the figures any further, the perspective of the spectator needs to return in the argument. For a strange thing happens in *IN VOID*: although a radical post-anthropocentric world is presented, one in which machines have taken over *the last human venue* that theatre is, the (human!) spectator relates the environment presented in the installations back on his or her self. *IN VOID* conveys human absence and directs the experience of the spectator to that of a void at the center of the self, which is also the void at the center of being in a posthistorical experience and in the post-anthropocentric era of the anthropocene. In a text on the timeliness of Verdonck's *END*, Marianne Van Kerkhoven wrote that *emptiness, frustration and confusion afflict every walk of life. Above all, there is a great sense of helplessness and loss* (Van Kerkhoven & Nuyens, 2012, 31). *IN VOID* is an environment that evokes the same sense of powerlessness. The figure is no longer an entity the spectator looks at; *IN VOID* places the spectator in the position of the figure and suggests this shared condition, and in doing so, turns it into a strangely contemplative experience.

As post-theatre, a space in which objects perform continuously and can be visited throughout the day, without any fixed beginning or ending, *IN VOID* stretches the boundaries between theatre and museum paradigms. This tension between installation and performance is not only formal, but is first and foremost a consequence of the content of Verdonck's apparatus-posthumanist art practice. Eckersall, Grehan & Scheer have also noted how in new media dramaturgy, there are *dialectical moves between performance and installation arts* (2015, 375). The choice for 'dialectical' here is accurate, as it implies that both artistic disciplines have not dissolved into one, but are operating within each other's realms, producing meaning. The museumlike quality of *IN VOID* is then not that of the mausoleum of devitalized objects as Adorno once wrote (1967, 175). The objects are still very much active; it is rather the mausoleum of an era, of a particular worldview and conception of the human, or more radical, of a species that is about to go extinct. Watching the installations, then, means watching ourselves, as human beings, as *spectators*, i.e.: unable to interfere in the course of the apparatuses and to a larger extent, in the history they (no longer) produce. This posthistorical spectatorship is in *IN VOID* the result of the use of a strategy that together with Charlotte De Somviele, I have called museumification (De Somviele & van Baarle, 2015).

The combination of installations referring to possible ends of humanity and their endless now, both inaccessible temporalities (i.e. museumification), with the reduction of the human to a merely spectating visitor, needs the theatre context to work. Vanderbeeken borrows Rosalind Kraus's term *post-medium condition* to analyze Verdonck's work (Vanderbeeken, 2010, 362), but it is rather what Vanhoutte describes as *an irresolvable tension between disciplines* (2010, 481) that is at work. Hence my preference (in the case of *IN VOID*) for the term post-theatre, as it clearly refers to the paradigm that

is challenged and within which there is an implication of the spectator. Thinking back about the apparatus-posthumanist examples that have been discussed, from Castelluci, to Ingvarsten, to Warlop, and of course Verdonck, the apparatus of the artistic discipline is always up for the debate and *used* in a meaningful way to reflect upon the current condition. As Christophe Van Gerrewey rightly suggests, *There is more at stake when installation and performance techniques are set in a traditional theatrical constellation* (2012, 18).<sup>158</sup>

The distance between the visitor and the object-figures, or more precisely, the posthistorical sensation that this world is already over and no longer belongs to us (or to be precise, that we are no longer able to relate to our non-belonging), is precisely what Agamben means with his interpretation of the notion of the museum. For him, it *designates the exhibition of an impossibility of using, of dwelling, of experiencing* (2007b, 84). Stating that the *museification* [sic.] *of the world is today an accomplished fact* (2007b, 83), Agamben thus points at a generalized condition of separation, expropriation of self-determination and free use of one's own life and world, as the state of being in this advanced capitalist world. In spectacular democracies, exhibition value has surpassed exchange and use value, creating museal societies in which human beings are reduced to spectators watching our own actions and those of the apparatuses that govern them.

Over the past years, the presence of dance in important museums, among others in Tate Modern, MoMA, or Centre Pompidou, has produced a considerable amount of discourse on the convergence or confrontation of the museum and dance paradigm, the latter in that case being conceived of mostly in the sense of moving human bodies, usually ordered in a fixed timeframe. Interestingly, whereas the discourse from the perspective on dance (when not focused on canonization and archive) connects the presence of dance in the museum to the increased choreographic interest in the performativity of objects (Lepecki, 2012, 76), from the perspective of visual arts it is situated within the increased emphasis on events and experience, of ephemeral art and immaterial labor (e.g. Bishop, 2014, 2016; Brannigan 2015; Foster, 2015; Lütticken, 2015). The former perspective has already extensively been discussed; the latter, however, offers some insights that are of interest to the understanding of what post-theatre from an apparatus-posthumanist perspective might mean. For Bishop, the accommodation to *exhibition time* implies an objectification of bodies in an *industrialization of performance*, which in turn leads to the deskilling of dancers and performers (2016, 3). Bishop compares this new *artistic temporality* producing low-wage, continuously performing bodies, to the *retemporalization of daily life under the pressures of neoliberalism and digital technology* (2016, 4). Brannigan shares this critical perspective, stating that the economy of dance in the museum

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<sup>158</sup> Bojana Cvéjić formulated it well: *Even when drama is absent, the law of staging is enforced on the horizon of the viewer's expectations* (2015, 100).

reproduces the dynamics of *commodification and rendering oneself replaceable* (2015, 18). If we could continue this line of thought of the replaceable human performer as a result of the museumification of dance, then the mascot figure is the result of this tendency. The disappearance of this figure in a posthuman landscape is the next stage, and also the situation the visitor finds herself in *IN VOID*: the last dancer/performer has been replaced, and what remains (again) is a human being watching objects and machines.

When the spectator is left behind with nonhuman, museumified object-figures, the *existential separateness* (Rebentisch, 2012, 29) that connected audience and mascot figure in *UNTITLED* now directs itself explicitly to the spectator's self and being in the world: the existential, inoperative void that the machines hold before us resonates with the sensation of impotence when confronted with *IN VOID*. In the current version of the society of spectacle, we are exhibited to ourselves, evoking a sensation of nostalgia (Virno, 2015, 11) congruent with what Berlant has termed *the impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment* (2011, 49). Quoting Bergson, Virno describes the posthistorical sensation provoked by the current spectacular democracy as *the feeling that the future is closed, that the situation is detached from everything, although I am attached to it* (2015, 2). The seeming impossibility of a self-determined future – be it in totalitarian contexts, or perhaps more suitably today, a future that is already speculated away – creates the experience that we have become *dumbfounded spectators* (Virno, 2015, 1).

This condition of an *increasing fragility of historical experience* (Virno, 2015, 2) when confronted with performing machines and objects, resembles Agamben's characterization of the time of the fairy tale, in which objects and animals speak and humans are muted and enchanted by the spells of apparatuses. In the fairy tale, history as a lived experience for human beings is suspended, because it is a world *fixed and frozen in the inflexible laws [...] laws not so dissimilar from the ones by which our own epoch feels itself, with jovial horror, being pushed and dragged into progress* (Agamben, 1993c, 130). I believe the current fairy tale we might be living in, and the one experienced in *IN VOID*, might thus be entitled: 'The Spectacular Anthropocene'.

The fairy tales Agamben describes in his text on the fairy tale, in which human beings are muted and nonhumans speak up, are indeed resembling those by Hoffmann, Rilke, and Kafka: stories containing the suggestion of a posthistorical playland with examples of figures that have already been discussed, such as automatons, undefined animated objects, dolls, .... From an apparatus perspective, it is easy to see that the abundance and desubjectification by apparatuses mutes those in it, creating a docile population. This resembles Berardi's account of how in the process of automation and proliferated mediation and capture by apparatuses, *once the effects of voluntary action condense into automatism, they take the form of a necessary concatenation that conscious will can no longer change, contest or undo*. He speaks of a transition from *the sphere of historical humanism to that of evolutionary automatism* (Berardi, 2015, 278). In both Berardi and Agamben's theories, and this is also a question that remains open in the work of Verdonck, it seems

that there is a dichotomy between either humanistic, anthropocentric history or external nonhuman or anti-human evolution. Latour also posits this kind of dichotomy, stating that *it is human history that has become frozen and natural history that is taking on a frenetic pace* (2014, 13, emphasis by the author). I wonder how a cacophony of speaking, historical human beings and inoperative apparatuses, still singing, spinning and making noise, would sound and what they would look like.

Already in one of his first publications, Agamben defines a complex, Benjamin and Heidegger inspired conception of history:

For history is not, as the dominant ideology would have it, man's servitude to continuous linear time, but man's liberation from it: the time of history and the [k]airós in which man, by his initiative, grasps favourable (sic) opportunity and chooses his own freedom in the moment. (1993c, 104)

From this perspective we understand that when he says that rather than speaking of posthistory, we should speak of the empty, continuous *pseudo-history* running its course, without salvation. The kairological moment is needed to break the spell of the fairy tale and to *awaken history* as lived experience, seeking happiness (1993c, 130, 99). Also his notion of messianic time presents a different relation toward history. Whereas indeed chronological time *transforms us into powerless spectators of our own lives*, messianic time is *the time that we ourselves are* (Agamben, 2012, 12).<sup>159</sup> Living in a messianic temporality, a time that runs within and parallel to chronological time, is not about salvation at the end; it is rather a qualitative, lived time that enables change and connection to history (Agamben, 2010, 7). In line with Agamben's assertion that the messianic is a matter of a slight difference, for Virno, *the end of history is an idea, or state of mind, that arises precisely when the very condition of possibility of history comes into view* (2015, 6).

In a similar vein, *IN VOID*'s particular temporality not only creates a posthistorical experience of impotent spectatorship, but its apocalyptic end time also harbors the seed of a time of the end, of an inoperative time, or a 'true' posthistory: a *reappropriation* of the empty time of posthistory (Prozorov, 2014, 129).<sup>160</sup> The dialectical machine of history seeking to increase mastery over the world is halted (cf. dialectics at a standstill in chapter 2.4) and makes places for an end of history that has no end, or finality. This suspended temporality is inherent to the figure (cf. prefiguration in Auerbach, chapter 2.1 and Agamben, 2005, 74), as Prozorov's description of 'true' posthistory through the figure of the *workless slave* shows:

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<sup>159</sup> In Italian: *ci trasforma in spettatori impotenti [...] il tempo che noi stessi siamo* (Agamben, 2010, pp. 10-11).

<sup>160</sup> As Prozorov aptly describes, Agamben's messianic end of history differs from the Kojève-Hegelian conception of posthistory, as *history does not end by fulfilling its immanent logic, but is rather brought to an end in the social practices that suspend its progress* (2014, 130).

a figure of the Slave who *suspends* his work without at the same time taking up the fight for recognition [...] it is neither identity (by virtue of having worked before), nor negativity (by virtue of no longer working in the present) (Prozorov, 2014, 129-130, emphasis by the author).

This workless slave resembles that other example of a figure that wanders through Agamben's oeuvre: Melville's Bartleby. The gesture at the end of history indeed consists in the statement *I prefer not to ...*. The figure of whatever singularity, of von Kleistian grace and not-knowing, is shaped by and bears in it the messianic time that *dislocates and, above all, nullifies the entire subject* (Agamben, 2005, 41). It is only a slight difference between the dumbfounded spectator and the nullified subject of the messianic time. Wandering through *IN VOID*, elicits both experiences.

*IN VOID*'s installations have a strong spectral quality as well. However, they are not the ghosts from the past that return to haunt, but rather resemble Brecht's ghosts from the future (cf. 2.4.1) that already haunt the twisted and turned temporality of the anthropocene. Santner wrote about Sebald's work (another author that returns in the dramaturgy of Verdonck, e.g. in *END* and *Conversations (at the end of the world)*) that the figures in his work are haunted by the ending of time *within time*, a constant of the apocalyptic imagination (2006, xv). The phantasmatic aspect of the installations creates a relation to the visitor's self, haunted by the future ruins of an extinct humanity. The mirror the anthropocene constantly holds up is part of the experience of *IN VOID*. The posthistorical distance yet inevitable relatedness resonates with the experience of being in the world as a geological force, namely, as human beings, we are directly implied in the ecology, but as it consists of hyperobjects, agency within that ecology is complex and inevitably hypocrite.

Before the start of the anthropocene debate, Agamben already described – this time from the perspective of spectacular democracy – *the entire Earth, which has been transformed into a desert by humankind's blind will* and how *art can give a face* to inanimate, nonhuman entities (Agamben, 2000, 92). In *IN VOID*, Verdonck gives a face – in Agamben's vocabulary that means showing the being exposed of that which finds itself in a state of exposition, that is, museumified – to the earth's destruction caused by its capitalist and political capture and exhaustion in the object-figures that evoke ecological destruction, as well as in the posthistorical, museumified temporality. *MOUSE*'s repetitive, slow motion death of animal life and *MONSTER*'s uncanny re-animation of artificial dogs laughing at their spectators, show that nature (or rather, organic life) in the world of *IN VOID*, is dead or doubled by machines. In both installations, this has human causes: the mouse is killed by a human trap and the robot dogs as the only remaining images of animal life, were designed as children's toys. In the anthropocene, the face of the earth indeed is our face; but it is a face we not always want to or can see, let alone change. The anthropocene is *nature in its toxic nightmare form* (Morton, 2016, 59), and in this nightmare, we also see ourselves. Posthistory is infused with the anthropocenic condition; they share a

spectacular-democratic cause and an experience of existence that is deeply alienated and helpless because of its overwhelming complexity. In the anthropocene, human beings are both observers and ingredients of what they observe (Harman, 2015), transforming the relation between human beings and the planet into that of a loop (Morton, 2016, 37). Now that the whole planet has become more or less captured in the orbit of politico-economic, polluting apparatuses, *the very notion of objectivity has been totally subverted by the presence of human in the phenomena to be described* (Latour, 2014, 2). Indeed, anthropocenic spectatorship is a complex combination of distance and lack of distance, of alienation and intimacy. In *IN VOID* the visitor find herself literally in Morton's spectral plane.

In *IN VOID*, *PELLET* is not presented with Kafka's short story about Odradek, as it was in the installation circuit *K, a society*. To that story there were two remarkable aspects. On the one hand is the mere fact that a creature such as Odradek exists, and that it is impossible to know *what* it actually *is*. And on the other hand is, the conclusion of the family man in whose house Odradek dwells, that the creature will survive him by far. The first feature stays as present as it was in *K, a society*, but in *IN VOID* the temporal aspect of this figure comes to the fore without the story guiding it, as a result of the context in which it is presented. Its silence becomes all the more present and thought-provoking within the acoustic territory of *IN VOID*, increasing the affect of absence, of something dead yet vibrant. The association of *PELLET* with a planet becomes more interesting in the context of *IN VOID*.<sup>161</sup> It is as if you are standing next to a captured (or created?) planet, or perhaps, it is a prefiguration of the blue planet Earth turned into a greyish chimera, a place where there used to be life, a future memory?

In *IN VOID* the spectator experiences the world as something that does not (no longer, never has) belong to him. The object-figures appear to be museumified, at a distance, and yet so intriguing and close. History seems to be distant here, posthistorical and out of reach, and yet there is something genuinely familiar. The condition of being thrown in the world, of an intimacy with a world where we will never be at home, finds a concrete analogy in the anthropocenic condition. We human beings are actually making (in today's ecological crises, an excessive) misuse of the world, which reveals itself as inappropriable. As long as this inappropriability is denied instead of appropriated as such, the nightmare of the anthropocene, or to refer back to the earlier image of the fairy tale, the dark fairy tale of the spectacular anthropocene, will not come to an end.

So far I have been speaking about the anthropocene in terms of a 'we.' Rightfully the objection can be made that this 'we' leaves invisible the vast and painful inequality between who pollutes and thus is responsible, and who is affected by climate change and

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<sup>161</sup> One of the images that circulated during the conception of *PELLET* was that of a photograph of a Model of the surface of the moon, exhibited at the Field Columbian Museum, Chicago, taken around 1895. In the photo, a man not even half as tall as the three-dimensional moon model stands next to this strange presence in what can be recognized as a museum space, or at least a large, monumental interior.

not necessarily responsible for it. Those in power and wealthy areas (who have built their wealth through an ongoing history of exploitation of other areas and people) produce more carbon dioxide, and will be less (immediately) affected by or at least better prepared to cope with the changing climate (e.g. Haraway, 2016, Ten Bos, 2017, 72). While the notion of the anthropocene has been deemed deeply apolitical, however, by approaching it through the prism of the apparatus, power and politics are intrinsically at play. Verdonck's use of museumification and the reduction of the spectator to a visitor in an environment that used to be his (i.e., the theatre), to which he has become (e)strange(d), leads to more fundamental questions about being in the world and agency in history. Therefore, I prefer to continue with 'we' or the perhaps more impersonal 'humanity' or 'humankind' or 'human presence, agency,' as this formulation does not lead to mere accusations and acknowledgement of inequality, but rather calls for a rethinking of 'human being' as form-of-life. This 'we', relates to how in his seminal text on history in the anthropocene, Deepesh Chakrabarty claims that climate change brings a kind of universal to the fore.

It is not a Hegelian universal arising dialectically out of the movement of history, or a universal of capital brought forth by the present crisis. [...] a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world. It is more like a universal that arises from a shared sense of catastrophe. It calls for a global approach to politics without the myth of a global identity [...] a negative universal history. (Chakrabarty, 2009, p. 222)

The negative universal that surfaces as a consequence of a 'true' posthistorical condition in the anthropocene might actually be part of an ontology of being that is founded on a negativity.

The negative universal is experienced (and consists of a complex not being able to experience, i.e. a being out of history) in the encounter with the installations and environment of *IN VOID* through the process of museumification of history and the inoperativity conveyed by the installations. Returning to Cavell's existential spectatorship, the negative universal can be described in terms of the experience of existential separateness that transforms the spectator into a witness: *we have become spectators who suffer from our passive position*. Resolved to *empathic witnessing* the spectator-witness becomes *conscious of this position of helplessness* (Rebentisch, 2012, 30). In the environment of *IN VOID*, the spectator is thus placed in the position of the figure and adopts the role of the witness. In Agamben, the witness is an important model for a *subjectivity that would be the subject only of its own desubjectivation* (Agamben in Smith, 2004, 117). In chapter 2.1.2 I have referred to Agamben's redefinition of the human as *human insofar as they bear witness to the inhuman* (1999b, 121). In his analysis of the witness, Agamben connects the witness to the untestifiability of the *Muselmann*, stating that to be able to testify, the witness has to go through a process of desubjectification in order to

have access to the unspeakable, to that which goes beyond representation, to a non-language. To bear witness is a form of life that constantly implies a desubjectification in its subjectification (Agamben, 1999b, 39), an active passivity, receiving that which cannot be spoken (i.e. the *Muselmann*), in an intimacy (Agamben, 1999b, 111). To witness, means

to enter into a vertiginous movement in which something sinks to the bottom, wholly desubjectified and silenced, and something subjectified speaks without truly having anything to say of its own. (Agamben, 1999b, 120)

The witness is that form of subjectivity that has no substance, no “I” ; it continuously *bears witness to a desubjectification* (Agamben, 1999b, 121). The position of the witness is in close intimacy with that of the *Muselmann*, might even be its constructive flip side. It is a form-of-life that has let go of subjectivity, and takes that letting go as a basis for its being. *IN VOID* learns that adopting the position of the witness, of the figure that relates to the zone of non-knowing, to potentiality, is a painful process. Kris Verdonck’s manipulations of the theatrical apparatus, be it by empty space and endless time as in *UNTITLED*, or by using the apparatus to hypnotize the audience into the void of sleep in *EXIT*, or by museumification in the theatrical apparatus in *IN VOID*, place not only the performer, but also the spectator in figural positions. These ambiguous positions often provoke strong responses, as I have noticed other spectators crying and laughing at the same time in both *UNTITLED* and *EXIT*, and as I have heard reactions to *IN VOID* that account for both its contemplative beauty and its defeatist world view (e.g. De Somviele, 2016). It is once again a matter of going through that *thin diaphragm* (Agamben, 1993a, 65), separating the catastrophe from the messianic. The negative universal of a shared being *homo sacer* which enables a shared *bearing witness*, provoked through the image and creation of an environment that suggests our absence as species, is for Ten Bos a necessary experience if we want to survive as a species: *we have to imagine things we cannot imagine* (2017, 141).

By confronting the visitor with his or her own desubjectification, which leads to a figural experience of bearing witness, in *IN VOID* another idea of humanity dawns, that of a humanity that has become as inoperative as the performative objects, that has become void. As a final element of how Verdonck’s use of the theatrical apparatus leads to a spectatorship that is at once desubjectifying and leading to a state of being that dwells in a contemplative, what Morton calls *sweet state of nothingness* (Morton, 2016, 5), I will go deeper into the notion of the ‘void’ in relation to Agamben’s concept of inoperativity and how these are at play in *IN VOID*.

One the most powerful apparatuses thus created, the governmental apparatus of the West (and one might add: the spectacular-democratic apparatus) functions because it *has*

*captured in its empty center the inoperativity of the human essence* (Agamben, 2011a, 246).<sup>162</sup> Human beings' essential lack of 'work' in existence, their being inoperative, is captured.<sup>163</sup> Inoperativity, as a particular relation to one's (im)potentiality, is captured in a circular relation between essential power and executive power, and in this movement, an image of power is drawn that is an analogy to that of the vortex raging around the central void at the core of the human being. The void of *IN VOID* holds both images, the void of potentiality and the captured void: the continuous violence and energy of relentless machines on repeat in an end-time, but also the contemplation and intimacy of inoperativity and nothingness.



Figure 20 Kris Verdonck / A Two Dogs Company: *BOGUS II* (2016) © Hendrik De Smedt

The combination of contemplation and violence was also present in *BOGUS II*, an installation that was created for *IN VOID*. *BOGUS II* is, as the title suggests, a variation on *BOGUS I*. *BOGUS II* is made out of the same paillette fabric as its 'younger kin', but its shape and movement range is much more complex. Moreover, it does not emerge and disappear again in a black box on the floor; it makes a more or less opposite movement, as it grows from the ceiling toward the floor, without touching, to go back up again. This downwards and

<sup>162</sup> It is interesting to notice the importance of voids, holes and hiatuses in Agamben's thinking. The void and vortex at the center of the human being, the empty center of power, the voids in between categories and the voids of time, all relate to potentiality in its captured form (deprived of impotentiality), and in its usable impotentiality.

<sup>163</sup> As Viveiros De Castro also argues, *the chief propriety of Man is to have no final properties, which apparently earns Man unlimited rights to the properties of the other*. The capture of inoperativity by apparatuses that seek to exploit also justifies anthropocentrism on the basis of human 'impropriety' (2014, 44). On the basis of the capture of inoperativity, (often Western-centered) apparatuses have legitimized what is not legitimizable. Hence the importance of glory in Agamben's analysis of the bipolar machine of government: only through a permanent self-affirmation, negating the emptiness at the center, can apparatuses of power expand and maintain themselves.

upwards movement stays the main axis, and in *BOGUS II* it develops with various bulges and layers. Toward the ceiling a sphere shape stays rather constant, slowly a more pipe-shaped structure emerges out of it, or a circular mouth-like structure, recalling small marine animals, close-ups of particular snail-mouths or those of micro-organisms such as the tardigrade. When these structures are within the upper sphere, it is possible to stand underneath and look up into the draperies of glittering fabric. In the Brussels setup of *IN VOID*, spectators examined this figure, or sat down against a wall of the space, observing it. Others were lying under the inflatable to see it come down and swell and retract. However uncanny *BOGUS II* can be, it also generated a meditative space, a fascination.

In *IN VOID*, we see ambiguous, inoperative machines: after the end, they no longer produce anything for any human purpose, but perform nevertheless. As instances of inoperativity, they convey an intimacy, a proximity that attracts us as in *BOGUS II*, in what to me seems to be a pseudo-opposition, as they *promise us paradise, but also threaten us with destruction* (De Martelaere, 2000, 60, my transl.). The complex nexus of an installation circuit presenting machines reflecting on a desire to 'fill' the ontological void, that might in turn lead to a destructive void, and of which the observation provokes the experience of an existential void, comes together in another feature that characterizes our lives: death. *We are haunted by our own nothing*, De Martelaere writes (2000, 61, my transl.). The attraction of the void also implies a death wish, a self-destructive drive that is reflected in the violence of the machines that are invented by human beings and that will in the end come to be part of humanity's extinction. *IN VOID* invites us radically to come to terms with our own void, which seems to be only completed in that phase that makes us human, namely death.

However, when this void, this central negativity, is accepted and appropriated in its being inappropriable, *the condition of negativity and abandonment that it expresses seems to be inverted into a state of "felicity" and "lightness"* (Agamben, 2015a, 235). This is when the machines' inoperativity starts to resonate with the existential void at the center of the self. Moreover, entering and inhabiting the void might give rise to *a figure of a new and happy intimacy, of an 'alone by oneself' as cipher of a superior politics. Exile from politics cedes its place to a politics of exile* (Agamben, 2015a, 236). The related experiences of the existential void and the exile in this world, which have already been discussed in the analysis of the mascot figure's thrownness (2.6.1), now for the spectator become intimate and individual, but not lonely. To feel the void of being alone by oneself at the same time means being *together beyond every relation* (Agamben, 2015a, 236). Beyond ego, beyond identity, the void is a cessation of what hinders a fundamental connection. When *two entities are separated only by a void of representation*, what takes shape is a situation of *contact* (Agamben, 2015a, 237), beyond any mediation of any apparatus.

A fundamental not belonging forms the basis for an ontology of the void to which, in turn, *must correspond a non-representational politics* (Agamben, 2015a, 237). In non-representational politics, *position has no other consistency than in deposition* (Agamben,

2015a, 275). This is something radically different than identity politics, which builds on difference and 'positive' identity, rather than forming alliances based on a shared void as a negative universal. Through a non-representational politics, opposites and categories are rendered inoperative and void. Being at home in the void, one reaches *the center of the ontological-machine: if one reaches it and holds oneself there in it, the machine can no longer function* (Agamben, 2015a, 239). Inoperativity needs to be wrought from this governmental machine. A bio- and psychopolitics that captures inoperativity and potentiality also captures life as potential to die. Reappropriating the void means reappropriating negativity, death, and nothingness. I am convinced, with Agamben, that a different relation and conception of the self, characterized by an inappropriability and a central void, forms the basis for a different way of relating to the self, to others, human and nonhuman, in the search for a form-of-life. Wandering and dwelling in *IN VOID's* post-theatre, contemplation, intimacy, and mourning form a basis for a shared space. Beyond pessimistic nihilism, the ambiguously inoperative installations suggest that *It is the Nothing that remains, and we belong to this big nothing as well* (De Martelaere, 2007, 63, 65, my transl.).

#### 2.6.4 Conclusion: posthuman landscapes

*Even the end of the world is no longer what it used to be.*  
(Enzensberger, 1982, 234)

In *Conversations (at the end of the world)* (2017), we get a glimpse of what such void humanity looks like. This performance is 'theatre': it has four actors and a pianist, it has texts that are being spoken and performed. The texts are in large part by Daniil Kharms, the writer whose work already lay at the basis of *UNTITLED* and *H, an incident*. What makes Kharms's work so special is that he wrote such humorous and vital, powerful texts, while the world around him was becoming more and more hostile and violent, and he himself also was living in dire circumstances. Censored, poor, hungry, he kept on writing his short texts, beyond hope, beyond the end. His work 'happens' in a post-apocalyptic world, after the end has already occurred. But what is this end then? According to Berardi, *Humans have already experienced an end of the world, or the end of a world. A world ends when [...] its inhabitants are unable to say anything effective about the events and things that surround them* (2015, 331). The meaninglessness of the voided apparatuses of power, as well as the posthistorical experience of time and anthropogenic entanglement, create a condition of realistic absurdity, which perhaps would be the most suitable description of Kharms's work as well. The nonsensical aspect of Kharms's writing is a manifestation of this after-time, of the post-apocalyptic moment.

*A group of people or a society whose world has ended enters a tunnel of despair, quickly decays, and then dissolves. Its members die, or lose the ability to feel that they are part of a common,*

*evolving reality* (Berardi, 2015, 331). In *Conversations* we see five individuals that fill the time that remains, after the end has already announced itself, and before their end actually occurs. They wear nice, festive suits, as if going to a (their own) funeral. In the opening scene, they still make the effort to perform with high energy, for the audience. However, this 'act,' the theatre in its traditional sense, falls silent, and after that, they don't do much anymore. They sit, having short conversations that don't go anywhere, but that are nevertheless full of imagination. They tell stories to each other. The pianist plays a couple of complex, one could say, existential pieces. All of this is situated in a gray landscape, a mass of small grey expandable polystyrene beads (EPS beads), evoking pollution, black snow, ashes, or some kind of (acid) rain. Verdonck created an environment for these figures that resembles again the Beckettian open-closedness. They are knee-high in the beads, and behind them there is a mountainous area, recalling a scene in Tarkovsky's *Stalker* in which the stalkers entering the zone (for Ten Bos, the zone is the emblem of the anthropocene [2017, 48]) arrive in a space with an undulating, dusty landscape.

As one figure says, *At the moment, I feel time passing. Time is here, at this moment, impossible to eliminate. You can feel time passing by, and indeed, time just seems to pass.* A little later, someone else claims that it is impossible to seize the moment, but that *it is possible to document what happens.* If we can no longer live (in) history, it has to become something we study. However, all the figure in *Conversations* is able to document is that *nothing happens.* This performance presents a final evening; it takes time, as the apocalypse or the end might have already begun – it is thus no longer the 'event', the catastrophic moment – and its completion is rather *torturingly slow in its approach. The apocalypse in slow motion* (Enzensberger, 1982, 234). When at a certain moment more grey beads starts raining from above, taking the shape of a grey curtain of snow toward the back of the stage, it comes as no surprise. The rain will not stop before the end of the show, not even before all of the audience has left the theatre.

The void of being on stage that we saw in *UNTITLED* opens up here too. This time in the shared boredom, the nihilistic humor and in the waiting for the final end to happen. However, this void end-time is a pleasant time. The performers don't question their situation, but with a serene vitality, they try to understand that which is not understandable. They embrace their not-knowing, allowing it to lead them to unbound creativity. At a certain point however, while the grey mass grows, the performers put on masks, reminiscent of theatrical masks, ritual masks, dead masks, or gas masks. They sit down in the mountainous mass of grey snow, and stop moving, while the snow continues to fall down on them, burying them slowly, while they are still performing texts, and the piano is played. Their voices seem to come more from the back of the theatre, as in a semi-voiceover. No longer moving and without a face, they are absent, and yet still present. In a next phase, when the performers have been almost completely covered by the grey snow, they gradually start to disappear within the mass of beads. Some go smoothly, almost unnoticed. Others seem to make the decision more consciously and take their

leave, as does the final person on stage, the pianist (Marino Formenti), after having played John Cage's *ASLSP*, no. 8. When only the landscape remains, the light that had gone almost completely dark starts to return gradually, while a voiceover (Johan Leysen) recites an atypical poem by Kharms, for no incidents or violence happen anymore. *Amphibrache* describes a peaceful, cyclical, bucolic landscape, in which the everyday takes its course. The poem consists of twelve verses in the same rhythm (that of the amphibrach), spoken matter-of-factly, one by one, to conclude with the final verse: *and the day passes by in its usual labors*. In an interesting tension with the beautiful, empty landscape, the continuous snowing (now for more than an hour already), the poetic, non-melancholic, 'organic' beauty of this short poem is particularly touching and brings us back to the sensation of the void beyond nihilism.



Figure 21 Kris Verdonck / A Two Dogs Company & Het Zuidelijk Toneel: *Conversations (at the end of the world)* (2017) © Kurt Van der Elst

In *Conversations* the landscape remains after the final words have been spoken by the off-stage voice. The landscape is not an instance of museumification; it inaugurates a different state of being. The performance transitions from a clearly theatrical paradigm at the beginning to an installative situation, with only the landscape devoid of human presence. The experience of the void, both on stage and in the audience, is evoked through a conscious use of the apparatus of theatre, in a post-theatre conception of performing arts. The performers do not return to salute, bow, or take the applause. The light continues to grow brighter on stage, and also starts to light up in the tribune, creating one space, including the audience in the landscape. A curious situation arises. People continue to hang around in the hall, talk a little, watch the snow, take a picture,

and go away softly. This landscape is clearly not the same as the dystopian dehumanized machine-scape in *UNTITLED*. The landscape was already there; its emptiness was a latent possibility coloring the whole performance. The scenography that framed the whole performance and laid out the conditions for the texts to be said is the only element that really evolves and will continue to evolve after the last human as gone.

In its Greek and Roman etymology, scenography could also refer to landscape painting (Agamben, 2015a, 89). For Agamben, the landscape is a model for being in the world beyond thrownness, *an ulterior stage* (2015a, 91). What makes the *Amphibrache* as final text of *Conversations* so powerful is that it evokes a world *with all the elements that make it up [...]*, but now, we see them as *deactivated one by one on the level of being and perceived as a whole in a new dimension. We see them as perfectly and clearly as ever, and yet we already do not see them, lost - happily, immemorially lost - in the landscape* (Agamben, 2015a, 91). In *Conversations*, Verdonck shows a condition after the end of a particular conception of human being in the world, no longer clinging to the necessity of existence, nor control of being in the world. An inoperative humanity, that *en état the paysage* (in a 'landscape-state') finds itself in an inappropriable world, *goes, so to speak, beyond being and nothing* (Agamben, 2015a, 91). Just like the absurd realism of Kharms and the performers in *Conversations*, the figure in 'landscape-state' *no longer seeks to comprehend, only look* (Agamben, 2015a, 91). It is the state after the end, as Berardi would define it, no longer seeking to restore what is lost, nor to reignite a form of life on the same foundations of the previous one(s). In *Conversations*, when the last performers have disappeared in the snow, in the 'united space' created by means of the light in the tribune, the audience is brought *en état de paysage* too. Verdonck's landscape is perhaps more cruel than the one sketched by Agamben, although I believe that the former emphasizes the difficulty and the mourning process involved in transitioning into the latter. The difficulties lie in going beyond the nostalgia and melancholia that so much characterize our time in the West, in releasing the spectral institutions that convulsively seek to maintain themselves, in letting go of things we were attached to, of the world as we thought it was.

In the landscape-state, the figure's captivation in an environment, but also its thrownness, is suspended. The openness to a closedness is deactivated. *For this reason, if in the world the human being was necessarily thrown and disoriented, in landscape he is finally at home* (Agamben, 2015a, 91). Verdonck's *Conversations* seems to suggest that this sensation of being at home implies a fundamental acceptance of our own individual and collective finitude, of not-knowing, of the nothing that surrounds us and constitutes us. In De Martelaere's words, art works can *bring us to where we always were: 'home' - but then in a world with nonhuman forces. The 'Unheimliche' is our first and last sojourn* (2000, 79, my transl.). The world does not belong to us, and we do not belong to the world. It is only when we enter this zone of the landscape, in this void, that a new form-of-life that perhaps goes beyond the scope of posthumanist conceptions and in a way is literally *post-human*, may be developed.





## Conclusion

To state that technology has pervaded all aspects of life is no longer a novelty. However, the understanding of how technology is always embedded in power structures and hence exerts power on its users remains a question that has to be asked continuously. Agamben's apparatus concept allows reflection on the ontological and inappropriable relation between human beings and their technologies and power systems, and it also allows thought toward a way of stopping it, or rather, no longer being captured by it. Placing the apparatus on the ontological level and including devices in larger apparatuses, Agamben's thinking invites further analysis of the politics of technology in the world and in the performing arts. Through the lens of apparatus-posthumanism, I have revisited the cyborg theories and related artistic oeuvres and shed a different light on particular artistic strategies and theoretical concepts. I have shown that the concept of the cyborg and the art works that are regularly associated and analyzed through that concept consider technology on a more instrumental level, and seek to develop new, liberated, and emancipated subjectivities through the relation with technology. This last element differs from the politics of resistance that is implied in the apparatus-posthumanist perspective, which requires going beyond the subject, creating a form-of-life beyond the subject-object divide. It is important that these forms of resistance, of inoperativity and profanation, imply neither a clear-cut embrace nor a refusal of technology, but rather a suspension of the relation of capture and separation that is produced by apparatuses. The apparatus also concerns a shift from the cyborg's focus on the body as site of power, to that of the embodied psyche, expanding the biopolitical paradigm to the psychopolitical. Moreover, by adopting the perspective of the apparatus, the focus becomes post-anthropocentric and considers human beings as part of the apparatus and not vice versa. Various transhumanisms, body humanism and a latent object-subject dualism obstruct what has been termed cyborg-posthumanism from fundamentally grappling and both artistically and philosophically engaging with technologies as apparatus, that is, as being an ontological category channeling power through control and commodification.

The shift from the cyborg to the apparatus has significant consequences for the performing arts. I have developed the notion of the figure, bringing together figures spread throughout the whole of Agamben's oeuvre as well as in that of Verdonck's to describe and analyze desubjectified being in a spectacular democracy and how this is translated into the performing entities in Verdonck's and others' work. These figures are thus not only theoretical concepts. By basing their philosophical analysis on the description and experience of concrete existing artistic practices, creative processes, and performances and installations, the theory is embedded in the practice and vice versa. The body as object of the marionette; the performative installations of the object-figure; the phantasmatic presence of digital figures and their relation to spectral politics and to the imagination and perception of the spectator; and the mascot figure's disappeared body and its implication in the theatre apparatus are all facets that can be operationalized when analyzing works by other artists. In various other combinations and nuances, other works, such as the choreographies of Michiel Vandevelde, who re-appropriates the movements of popular video clips and advertisements in a critique of the spectacular-democratic apparatus, contain facets of figures and form new figures as well.<sup>164</sup> Figures have a strong critical and artistic potential, as they contain both the most pessimistic, dehumanized or dehumanizing consequences of apparatuses and the potential for a form-of-life and playful deactivation of these apparatuses.

To make the apparatus of the theatre a part of the artistic work, not only on the instrumental level, but first and foremost as a part of the content, relating to the power apparatuses at work outside the theatre as well, also appertains to an apparatus-posthumanist conception of the world and performing arts. The invisible power that modulates those in it, the theatre's space (including scenography, light, and sound) and time, correspond to psychopolitical pressure and control, and can be used as such to increase those in the performance, as in the mascot figure in *UNTITLED*. However, the theatre apparatus can also be used as a counter-apparatus, as the case of *EXIT* demonstrates. The theatre's space and time can as well be rendered inoperative, as in what I have called *IN VOID*'s post-theatre. In the environment of that installation circuit the visitor-spectator is placed in the figural position. There is a shift in Verdonck's work toward an increased attention to figures produced by these invisible powers and invisible apparatuses, with which the structure of this dissertation resonates. In addition, there is also a shift toward a figure that focuses more on the discarded, useless human beings, on the brink of disappearing, already nearly invisible, as in the mascot figure. This is paralleled by the continued development of post-theatrical installation circuits that evoke a post-human environment, presented under the title *IN VOID*, such as *IN VOID II*. A

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<sup>164</sup> A strategy he adopts in *Antithesis, the future of the image* (2015), *Our Times* (2016), and *Andrade* (2017). For an analysis of Vandevelde's work through the lens of Agamben and the apparatus, see van Baarle, 2017.

question that remains to be explored in Verdonck's oeuvre is how the implication of the apparatus within an apparatus-posthumanist artistic practice will be developed within the realm of the visual arts, with its own particular temporality, spatiality, and modes of watching and engaging with art works.

If we take *Conversations* as an endpoint of the performing arts trajectory of Verdonck (Verdonck et al., 2017), that is, of his works using text brought by live human performers on stage, then this point might actually appear to resemble a traditional theatre production, and yet a fundamental shift has occurred. The figures on stage, their (non-)actions, their text, and the scenography present a state of being at the end, an end caused by destructive apparatuses. The relentless machine of grey beads snowing and covering, filling the whole stage is indifferent to their presence, and yet it has a fundamental influence on them, while it also expresses an existential state of being. However, it does not communicate that it is technology as such. This recalls the argument that I largely made in chapter 1.2: to reflect on technology, technology is not needed as an element on stage as such. The snow's growing presence, and the theatre apparatus's tools – empty space, long stretches of time between text parts, and an audience watching, listening, imagining, feeling – are able to still play a role and have a critical potential in this apparatus-posthumanist condition, although many other media seek our attention and acceleration might make going to the theatre to watch something feel like an anachronism.

When the apparatus-posthumanist condition as such is taken into account and part of the work, the performing arts continue to develop their contemporary potential. Language, for example, surfaces again. In yet a different way than it did in *C.R.E.W.*, *Castellucci*, *Okada*, or *M, a reflection*. It is not narrative, nor is it a *Fremdkörper*, nor a meaningless cloud of words or a text that becomes an object. Performed by human figures in a whatever state of being and pervaded with silences, the words in *Conversations* are real without changing reality. It is an utterly vain language that is detached from reality in the sense that it is no longer able to influence that reality, although the experience of language stays very real. It also does not lead to the creation of a character; they are figures. The performers are, besides the grey snow and the imposed periods of silence, 'free figures': they can move, they can talk, they can also not move and not talk. However, these capacities are bathing in a profound uselessness, and even in the suggestion of a vital creativity when facing the end, there is an intrinsic negativity. The landscape in which the human being is at last at home, when all apparatuses are only turning in vain, is in Verdonck's work a landscape devoid of human presence. The end is a future that each living organism faces in the form of death, and with the current technologically infused economic, political, and ecological evolutions, the horizon of an end becomes much closer and present. However, this is only one way of thinking the present and the future. In Verdonck's work, thinking the end forces the spectator to think about the

tendencies of the present and confront humanity's limited existence as a species, a limit that is being pulled closer by its own doings.

The role of science fiction literature and films in cyborg-posthumanism, as well as apparatus-posthumanism's treatment of specific literary sources such as von Kleist as science fiction, point to a desire and need to think the future in order to be able to analyze the present. The future, not as a tool for progress and growth as in chronological time systems, but rather as 'the time to come,' resembles Agamben's messianic potential and time that are latent presences in the world. The latent presence of the future implies an entanglement of futurity and thinking the present. In Verdonck's oeuvre, the future of the human and the planet is predominantly thought and performed in terms of a human absence, or of a human being that has become redundant to the extent of being ecologically extinct, that is, too insignificant to continue to fulfill its function in the ecological system. With Agamben, as we saw in the final chapter, the future and therefore the present can only be thought in terms of apparatuses and their endless – hellish – continuation or in terms of suspension and inoperativity. This, however, remains a world in which humanity is still present. The question Verdonck's work asks, and that is perhaps more difficult to answer from the Agambenian perspective, is that of a phenomenology of the end and (human) absence. Apparatus-posthumanism could be expanded by such a phenomenology, mapping for example art practices that deal with mourning and working through death and absence of life, of a particular conception of the human and of existence. Mourning would then be the upside of nostalgia, the sentiment that for Virno consumes the current moment (2015, 11), as it would imply a step toward a next phase .

Inoperativity and play are at once fundamental features of human being and the proposal for the future Agamben makes, albeit one that requires a permanent struggle and adaption of strategies to the apparatuses that be. However, in a world finally rendered inoperative, in the *état de paysage*, in which a form-of-life becomes possible and apparatuses playfully continue in their inoperative state, the question could be asked whether that condition would still be one of apparatus-posthumanism. In a landscape in which apparatuses are no longer the central force, as well as in a world or a stage without human presence, other concepts and conceptions are required. Here it is useful to remember that the 'post' in posthumanism refers mostly to an ongoing process of working through humanism with its exclusionary, subject-centered, and anthropocentric conception of the human, toward a literal 'post' – after – condition. When the working through has been done, a new state of being, a new state of the world arises. We are not yet in a landscape state and perhaps this will always only remain an image at the horizon, or the landscape will only be fully there, when we are no longer, as *Conversations* suggests. However, this brings us to the question of a world in which apparatuses are no longer the dominant forces, or the possibility of different perspectives on the current and future conditions. With the anthropocene, we might paradoxically arrive in a world beyond the

human, in which systems that are not created by human beings (i.e. apparatuses) but rather systems in which the human is implicated and incorporated, but that existed long before and will exist long after them, such as the planet, climate, or machines created by machines, become dominant. It is an 'after' in which human beings might still remain, but have a different place in the world.

To theorize, read, and interpret the anthropocene's complex reiteration of existing in the world, as Morton does, Agamben and the notion of the apparatus may fall short. In chapters 2.3.3 and 2.6, openings have been made to connect the notion of the apparatus to other theoretical frames, such as those of Latour, Harman, and Morton, which is a direction and combination that deserves further investigation. In relation to that, as well as to Verdonck's focus on performing arts that center on notions of absence, void, and disappearance, an Agamben-based apparatus-posthumanism reaches its limits as correlationism continues to be at work, limiting its capacity to think a radical non-anthropocentric, or rather, a non-anthropos-world, as is proposed by the thinkers of OOO, New Materialism, the Speculative Turn, or what Grusin termed the nonhuman turn. It is therefore useful to acknowledge the limits of the framework Agamben offers. The correlationism of the Agambenian apparatus is a perspective that ties with Badmington's assertion that *any claim to be writing the end of 'Man' is bound to be written in the language of 'Man'. There is no pure outside to which the knowing critic can simply step* (2001, 45). However, it is that claim that the other aforementioned thinkers seek to overthrow, through speculation and other methods related to scientific developments, among others.

Thinking the anthropocene becomes a matter of complex loops in time (Avanessian & Malik, 2016), of scientific insights on the structure and workings of the universe, of nonhuman, animal, plant, and bacterial systems. The agency of a specific material, the dynamics of nonhuman systems when they are not engaged with human beings or substances in processes of (de)subjectification, is not within the scope of the apparatus-concept. To continue to explore the performing arts' critical, contemporary potential in various ways, other theoretical frames are required to describe and interpret the artistic strategies that are used and that complicate and develop the notion of the apparatus, where Agamben's interpretation leaves open space for continuation.

In times that are weighed down by a posthistorical experience of the world, thinking the future, without denying the current condition, becomes a gesture that gains significance and urgency. In what Berardi calls *the age of impotence* (2017), thinking possibilities happens in a different way. How to think the future outside of chronological time, in a non-linear way, outside of growth, inside of potentiality? Thinking and artistically exploring various ways and dramaturgies of the end, as Verdonck does, is one artistic direction. How does the 'after' look like? Dramaturgies of the end, are in complex way also dramaturgies of the future. After what could be called a cyborg aesthetic and an apparatus aesthetic developed, now an anthropocene aesthetic is developing, in which new terminology and another layer enrich the notion of the apparatus. Connecting the

apparatus to the anthropocene offers a much needed politicization of the latter notion, as chapter 2.6 already suggested.

Recently, several theatre, dance, performance, and visual artists have started to investigate a new kind of science fiction and use of a futuristic look in their work, one that is deeply embedded in the current reality and the speculative temporality of the anthropocene, including: Pierre Huyghe's uncanny videoworks in which animals populate and wander the streets of the abandoned Fukushima area, Hito Steyerl's critical and political sci-fi aesthetics, Michiel Vandeveldel's commitment to a 21<sup>st</sup> century culture and recent research in the use of historical sources to think the future, Thomas Ryckewaert's dialogue with cutting edge scientific developments, David Weber-Krebs's research into anthropocene and the sublime, Amanda Piña's conflation of indigenous traditions with a futuristic scenography as a site of resilience and resistance, and more. Theoretically, in addition to Speculative Realism, New Materialism, and OOO, Accelerationism and thinkers such as Berardi, Boris Groys (2018), Anna L. Tsing (2015, 2017), Laboria Cuboniks collective, Eugene Thacker, Harney & Moten (2017), and many others seek ways to think a (im)possible future by combining critical thinking with the anthropocene, combining the apparatus with those fundamentally alien systems that Mark Fisher calls *the weird and the eerie*: beyond the uncanny, not of this world, not familiar in any sense (2016, 10,11).

Besides looking forward, or rather, to look forward by staying with the present (to paraphrase Haraway's most recent book [2016]), a genealogy of apparatus-posthumanism is a task for upcoming research. Theoretically, revisiting Norbert Wiener's writings on cybernetics, or Jacques Ellul's (1912–1994) research on technology, written in the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century, as well as the work of Lewis Mumford (1895–1990), would go a step further back, before the cyborg, in the development of critical posthumanist thinking. Throughout this research an implicit yet incomplete genealogy has already been laid out. In the dramaturgy of Verdonck, there are important references such as von Kleist, Schlemmer, Kafka, Beckett, Müller, Sebald, and Ballard. Agamben's oeuvre shares many of these references, and also offers some more, from Rilke to Hölderlin, from Grandville to Hoffmann, Melville, and Walser. There are also non-literary sources to be traced, with painters such as Malevich and Klee, or schools and lines of thought such as the Bauhaus. Practices such as the building and performance of automatons and the demonstrations of scientific insights at fairs and courts, which have already been touched upon in the past chapters (2.3.3 and 1.1.4) belong to an apparatus-posthumanist genealogy as well. There have been models developed in the past century, such as Russian Cosmism from the 1920s and '30s, that are regaining attention (e.g. Groys, 2018 and the e-flux publication of 2017, edited by Brian Kuan Wood on the occasion of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt's expo in that same year) and that only today reveal their contemporary potential. Another way of forming a genealogy is indeed expanding the gaze globally. Traditions such as Noh theatre, in which ghosts and a

particular temporality are central, can offer a fruitful and inspiring soil for thinking human absence. The position of animated objects in non-European traditions and perspectives, such as that offered by Viveiros de Castro in this dissertation, can only enrich a posthumanist thinking and arts practice. Not only do these genealogical sources allow for a deeper understanding of the current condition, they also offer sites of resistance, of profanation, and of rendering inoperative.

The suggested possibilities of thinking the future, the anthropocene, and human absence through various historical, traditional, and speculative frameworks, demonstrate that apparatus-posthumanism is a productive perspective, both artistically and theoretically. Applying the concept of the apparatus and notions of the figure and post-theatre I have developed here to other artistic practices and works, developing a historical and globalized genealogy, and complexifying the notion of the apparatus within the anthropocene are only three of the many directions this research opens up. This can lead not only to a new reading of (performing) art works, but also might give way to artistic and thought practices that react and relate to the complex world that is found when the center is proven to be empty and the human only one of the creatures in orbit of human and nonhuman apparatuses. As Michel Foucault already saw more than fifty years ago, the effacing of the face of the human from the surface of the earth is something we might have to mourn, but primarily it opens up new possibilities.

De nos jours, on ne peut plus penser que dans le vide de l'homme disparu. Car ce vide ne creuse pas un manque ; il ne prescrit pas une lacune à combler. Il n'est rien de plus, rien de moins, que le dépli à un espace où il est enfin à nouveau possible de penser. (Foucault, 2012 [1966], 353)



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## Summary

*From the cyborg to the apparatus. Figures of posthumanism in the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben and the contemporary performing arts of Kris Verdonk* engages with performing arts practices, performance theory and philosophy within the field of posthumanism. This field studies the changes in being human and the conception of the human through the impact of technological developments on human bodies and psyches, societies, the planet. Posthumanism is a critical line of thought, as the larger part of those who explicitly operate under the term's umbrella seek to formulate both a criticism and an alternative to a humanist conception of the human as being the measure of all things and that is shaped by Western, capitalist and individualist ideologies.

The work of Belgian visual artist and theatre maker Kris Verdonck (°1974) is the guiding line in the development of a theoretical, dramaturgical and theatre scientific frame for contemporary posthumanist performing arts. Along with the line drawn by Verdonck's work, *From the cyborg to the apparatus* makes use of Giorgio Agamben's philosophical oeuvre to shape a critical posthumanist perspective resonating not only with Verdonck's performances and installations, but also with broader artistic, philosophical, socio-economic and political evolutions.

The central notion in posthumanist theories and artistic practices in the final two decades of the past millennium was that of the cyborg, largely influenced by Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* from 1985. The cyborg, short for 'cybernetic organism', was part of the imaginary on how technology would invade the body and create both docile, lethal, semi-artificial beings and new identities that would not be able to be controlled by any form of state power, be it capitalist or communist. Cyborg inspired artistic practices and theoretical frameworks, which I call cyborg-posthumanism, make an explicit connection between science (fiction), art and technology.

I found that the cyborg frame – operating on a concrete biopolitical level in which the physical body is altered into a new constellation that gives rise to an emancipated or transcendent subjectivity – is still used today to analyze works that would not immediately correspond to it. The (performing) arts and critical philosophy reflecting on technology and posthumanism have changed over the past decades. This dissertation proposes to take Agamben's concept of the apparatus (2009) as the starting point for an

alternative interpretative frame to describe and analyse contemporary posthumanist artistic practices. This research argues that it is useful and insightful to replace the cyborg and take the apparatus as a central concept for what I call an 'apparatus-posthumanism'.

Technology, following the apparatus-theory, interacts with living beings on an ontological level. The apparatus hence allows for a more fundamental relation to technology and objects than the cyborg, which still implies a dualism. The apparatus also allows us to think technology in a non-technological way, which means that it enables to describe artistic strategies that criticize a society in which nearly all facets of life are mediated and measured by technological devices and software, although these do not necessarily 'look' high-tech. Apparatus-posthumanism implies a fundamental questioning of the theatrical, choreographic or installation apparatuses at work. Agamben's apparatus also has a different politics than the cyborg. The concept of the cyborg and the art works that are regularly associated and analyzed through that concept consider technology on a more instrumental level, and seek to develop new, liberated, and emancipated subjectivities through the relation with technology. This last element differs from the politics of resistance that is implied in the apparatus-posthumanist perspective, which requires going beyond the subject, creating a form-of-life beyond the subject-object divide.

Methodologically, this research relates to the quite recent field in theatre, dance and performance studies of *performance philosophy*. Both cyborg-posthumanist and apparatus-posthumanist theories draw extensively on and relate intimately to artistic work. This means that the cases presented in this research, especially the work of Kris Verdonck, are considered as valuable resources to develop a philosophical conception of posthumanism and do not serve as an illustration or application of certain concepts and theories.

This dissertation consists of two large parts, each subdivided in chapters. In Part 1, I argue for an alternative conceptual framework to that of the cyborg as it is predominantly used in posthumanist interpretations of (performing) artworks. I build up this argument in chapter 1.1, by way of a critical revision of artists that are emblematic of cyborg-posthumanism as it developed since the 1990s, both in theory as in the arts, namely Orlan, Stelarc, Eduardo Kac and C.R.E.W. How do we look at their artistic strategies and the politics behind them twenty to thirty years later? Respectively focusing on embodiment, transhumanism and body humanism, animal studies and instrumental demonstration, these aspects of artworks that are regularly analyzed as characteristic for a cyborg-posthumanist artistic practice are redefined from a contemporary perspective. Chapter 1.1 shows that the cyborg still implies a dualism between subjects and technology, a dualism that latently suggests a form of control over objects and technologies that are considered as tools for a new subjectivity and survival.

In the second chapter of this first part, 1.2, Agamben's notion of the apparatus is the starting point to develop a frame to analyze how performing arts reflect and criticize the current posthumanist condition. The apparatus is a concept to understand how power

works in the formation of the subject; a strong political critique is thus present in apparatus-posthumanism. Analyzing the work of Romeo Castellucci, Toshiki Okada, and various other artists, an apparatus-posthumanism is developed, based on three evolutions or differences with cyborg-posthumanism: a going beyond the subject, a mutation of power from biopolitics into psychopolitics and a radical post-anthropocentrism that decenters the human and researches the performativity of objects and other nonhuman entities. With the apparatus, I also seek to formulate a posthumanism that operates outside of the more traditionally cyborgian techno-scientific sphere and aesthetics.

Part 2 of this dissertation goes deeper into the dramaturgical and philosophical question of what performs in apparatus-posthumanism. The notion of the *figure* is developed to indicate the performing entity in apparatus-posthumanism, a notion that has its roots in Agamben's philosophy and that Verdonck and his late dramaturge Marianne Van Kerkhoven also use to refer to both his human performers and the performing machines and robots (chapter 2.1). The figure finds itself in the ruins of subjectivity, in the gray zone between life and death, between subject and object.

Drawing from Verdonck's body of work, I develop four types of figures that correspond on the one hand to various shapes the figure can take and on the other hand to four facets of the figure that can be found (partially) in all four types. The marionette, the object-figure, the phantasm and the mascot are at the same time features and concrete appearances of figures in Verdonck's work. The figure of the marionette (chapter 2.2) comprises objectified human performers that are entangled with a technical set-up, which leads to a particular kind of performativity, absence and beauty. Object-figures (chapter 2.3) are created through and reflect on a variety of artistic strategies, such as anthropomorphism, projection, animism, the uncanny, the commodity fetish en theatrical framing. In this chapter I also go deeper into analytical posthumanist theories (Latour, Harman) to analyze Verdonck's co-creative practice in which objects' agency is acknowledged. Chapter 2.4 explores the figure of the phantasm through a discussion of the politics, affect and the performativity of spectral digital presences that are not discernable from real, material presences. This chapter is also informed by a media-archeological perspective, in the analysis of how Verdonck uses older media techniques such as the Pepper's ghost and the diorama. Chapters 2.5 and 2.6.1 explore the figure of the mascot, a human body that has disappeared within an object (the mascot suit) and that is dehumanized to such an extent that panic, depression, burn out (the illnesses of a psychopolitical era) and a lack of empathy are the result.

In the sixth and final chapter of this second part (2.6), I go deeper into the time and space of the figure in relation to Agamben's concepts concerning temporality and being in the world. The mascot figure marks an interesting shift in Verdonck's oeuvre, as it is not only comprised of a human body that is caught in a mascot suit, but also explicitly includes the theatre apparatus, its time and space and the exposure to an audience (2.6.1).

In Verdonck's manipulations of the theatre apparatus, both a continuation of the political and economic apparatuses from 'outside' and a counter-apparatus, which I call a 'negative apparatus', is created (2.6.2). Verdonck uses the theatre apparatus in the creation of figures and in doing so, he redefines and plays with the boundaries between artistic disciplines, to be more specific, the visual arts and the performing arts dispositives. When experimenting with the threshold between object and subject, their respective places of representation – the museum and the theatre – and artistic disciplines are confronted with each other in a dramaturgical way. In chapter 2.6.3, I describe Verdonck's work as post-theatre, a theatre after theatre, after representation and after the human. In this post-theatre, a particular spectatorship occurs, that connects to existential aspects of being human and to the void that lies at the center of existence. With Agamben and Virno, post-theatre can be related to the sensation of posthistory and temporalities of endless time, a dominant present, messianic time or an eternal, machinic time and a time of the end.

The potential end of human presence on this planet is an undertone in the whole of Verdonck's work, and his works of 2016 and 2017 (*IN VOID* and *Conversations (at the end of the world)*), also the last works to be discussed in this dissertation, make this end all the more tangible and near. At that point, where the posthumanist condition turns into a literal post-human after-time, this research finds its end as well.

## Samenvatting

*Van de cyborg naar het apparaat. Posthumanistische figuren in de filosofie van Giorgio Agamben en de hedendaagse podiumkunst van Kris Verdonck* verhoudt zich tot podiumkunstpraktijken, performance theorie en filosofie binnen het veld van het posthumanisme. In dit veld worden de veranderingen bestudeerd in het mens-zijn en opvattingen over de mens, door de analyse van de impact van technologische ontwikkelingen op mensenlichamen, en - psyches, samenlevingen en de planeet. Posthumanisme is een kritische denkrichting. Het merendeel van zij die zich onder deze noemer scharen, combineert het formuleren van een kritiek op de humanistische, Westerse, kapitalistische en individualistische mens als maat alle dingen, met een alternatief ervoor.

Het werk van de Belgische beeldend kunstenaar en theater Kris Verdonck (°1974) vormt de leidraad in het ontwikkelen van een theoretisch, dramaturgisch en theaterwetenschappelijk kader voor hedendaagse posthumanistische podiumkunsten. Naast de lijn uitgezet door Verdonck's oeuvre, maakt *Van de cyborg naar het apparaat* gebruik van de filosofie van Giorgio Agamben om een kritisch-posthumanistisch perspectief te vormen, dat niet enkel met Verdonck's performances en installaties resoneert, maar ook met bredere artistieke, filosofische, socio-economische en politieke evoluties.

Het centrale begrip in posthumanistische theorieën en artistieke praktijken uit de laatste twee decennia van het vorige millennium, was dat van de cyborg, sterk beïnvloed door Donna Haraways *Cyborg Manifesto* uit 1985. De cyborg (kort voor 'cybernetisch organisme') was deel van de verbeelding omtrent de manier waarop technologie het lichaam zou indringen en hoe dat zou leiden tot zowel dociele, dodelijke, semi-artificiële wezens, als tot nieuwe identiteiten die niet gecontroleerd kunnen worden door eender welke vorm van macht. Artistieke praktijken en theoretische kaders geïnspireerd op de figuur van de cyborg, die ik 'cyborg-posthumanisme' noem, maken een expliciet verband tussen wetenschap, kunst en technologie.

Het cyborg-denkkader – dat zich richt tot een concreet, biopolitiek niveau, waarin het fysieke lichaam verandert en nieuwe constellaties aanneemt die leiden tot een geëmancipeerde of transcendente subjectiviteit – wordt vandaag nog gehanteerd, ook om

kunstwerken te analyseren die niet meteen corresponderen met dit kader. De (podium)kunsten en kritische filosofie die reflecteren over technologie en posthumanisme zijn de voorbije decennia immers veranderd. In dit proefschrift wordt daarom voorgesteld om Agambens concept van het apparaat (2009) als vertrekpunt te nemen voor een alternatief interpretatiekader om hedendaagse posthumanistische artistieke praktijken te beschrijven en analyseren. Dit onderzoek stelt dat het zinvol en inzichtelijk is om het concept van de cyborg te vervangen en het apparaat als centraal begrip te nemen voor wat ik dan ‘apparaat-posthumanisme’ noem.

Wanneer de apparaat-theorie gevolgd wordt, zien we dat technologie met levende wezens interageert op een ontologisch niveau. Het apparaat laat daarom een meer fundamentele verhouding tot technologie en objecten aan het licht komen dan de cyborg die nog steeds een dualisme in zich draagt. Daarbij komt dat het apparaat het mogelijk maakt om over technologie te denken in een niet-technologische vorm, wat betekent dat het de onderzoeker in staat stelt om artistieke strategieën te beschrijven die een samenleving bekritisieren waarin nagenoeg alle aspecten van het leven gemedieerd en gemeten worden door technologische toestellen en software, zonder dat deze kunstwerken noodzakelijkerwijs een hightech look hebben. Apparaat-posthumanisme impliceert eveneens een fundamenteel in vraag stellen van de theater-, choreografie- en installatie-apparaten waarbinnen een werk gecreëerd en gepresenteerd wordt. Agambens apparaat-begrip heeft daarnaast een andere politiek dan de cyborg. Cyborg theorieën en de kunstwerken die er regelmatig mee geassocieerd worden en erdoor geanalyseerd, beschouwen technologie op een eerder instrumenteel niveau, en zijn op zoek naar het ontwikkelen van nieuwe, vrije en geëmancipeerde subjectiviteiten doorheen de relatie met technologie. Hierin ligt het verschil met het politieke verzet dat geformuleerd wordt in apparaat-posthumanisme, dat streeft naar een zijn voorbij het subject, en een levens-vorm voorbij de dichotomie tussen subject en object.

Methodologisch situeert dit onderzoek zich in het redelijk recente veld in de theater, dans en performance studies van de *performance-philosophy*. Zowel cyborg-posthumanisme als apparaat-posthumanisme putten uitgebreid uit de artistieke praktijk en staan er dichtbij. Dit betekent dat de casussen die gepresenteerd worden in dit onderzoek, en in het bijzonder die van Kris Verdonck, beschouwd worden als waardevolle bronnen om een filosofische opvatting van het posthumanisme te ontwikkelen, en niet slechts dienstdoen ter illustratie of toepassing van bepaalde concepten en theorieën.

Dit proefschrift bestaat uit twee grote delen, elk onderverdeeld in hoofdstukken. In Deel 1 pleit ik voor een alternatief begrippenkader dan dat gecentreerd rond de cyborg zoals het voornamelijk gebruikt wordt in posthumanistische interpretaties van (podium)kunsten. In hoofdstuk 1.1 bouw ik dit argument op door een kritische revisie van kunstenaars die emblematisch zijn voor cyborg-posthumanisme, zowel artistiek als theoretisch, zoals het zich ontwikkelde sinds de jaren 1990: Orlan, Stelarc, Eduardo Kac en C.R.E.W. Hoe kijken we naar hun artistieke strategieën en hun politieke kritiek, twintig

tot dertig jaar later? Door dieper in te gaan op respectievelijk belichaming, transhumanisme en *body humanism*, *animal studies* en instrumentele demonstratie, worden deze aspecten die vaak als kenmerkend voor cyborg-posthumanisme beschouwd worden, geherdefinieerd vanuit een hedendaags perspectief. Hoofdstuk 1.1 toont aan dat de cyborg nog steeds een dualisme in zich draagt tussen subjecten en technologie, een dualisme dat onderhuids een vorm van controle inhoudt over objecten en technologieën als middelen voor nieuwe subjectiviteiten.

In het tweede hoofdstuk van dit eerste deel, 1.2, wordt Agambens concept van het apparaat als vertrekpunt genomen om een denkkader te ontwikkelen om te analyseren hoe de podiumkunsten reflecteren over en kritisch kijken naar de huidige posthumanistische conditie. Het apparaat is een concept waarmee we de impact van macht (de staat, kapitalisme, ...) op de vorming van het subject kunnen begrijpen. Apparaat-posthumanisme impliceert dus een scherpe politieke kritiek. In de analyse van Romeo Castellucci, Toshiki Okada en verscheidene andere kunstenaars, wordt een apparaat-posthumanisme gedefinieerd op basis van drie evoluties en verschillen met cyborg-posthumanisme: een zoektocht naar een positie voorbij het subject, een mutatie van macht van biopolitiek naar psychopolitiek en een radicaal post-antropocentrisme, waarin de mens uit het centrum gezet wordt en de performativiteit van objecten en andere niet-menselijke entiteiten (v)erkend. Met het begrip apparaat tracht ik eveneens een posthumanisme te beschrijven dat zich meer buiten de traditionele cyborg technowetenschappelijke sfeer en esthetiek beweegt.

Deel 2 van dit proefschrift gaat dieper in op de dramaturgische en filosofische vraag naar wat *performs* in apparaat-posthumanisme. De notie van de *figuur* wordt ontwikkeld om de performende entiteit in apparaat-posthumanisme te benoemen. De figuur is een begrip uit Agambens filosofie, dat ook door Kris Verdonck en wijlen zijn dramaturge Marianne Van Kerkhoven gebuikt wordt om zowel menselijke performers als performende machines en robots te benoemen (hoofdstuk 2.1). De figuur bevindt zich in de ruïnes van de subjectiviteit, in de grijze zone tussen leven en dood, tussen subject en object.

Puttend uit het oeuvre van Verdonck, worden er vier types van figuren geformuleerd die enerzijds overeenkomen met de verschillende vormen die de figuur kan aannemen en anderzijds vier facetten van de figuur beschrijven die (deels) in elk van de figuren terug gevonden kunnen worden. De marionet, de object-figuur, het fantasma en de mascotte zijn tegelijkertijd eigenschappen en concrete manifestaties van figuren in het werk van Verdonck. De figuur van de marionet (hoofdstuk 2.2) omvat geobjectificeerde menselijke performers die geplaatst worden in technische constellatie, wat tot een bijzonder soort performativiteit, afwezigheid en schoonheid leidt. Object-figuren (hoofdstuk 2.3) worden gecreëerd door en reflecteren op een verscheidenheid aan artistieke strategieën, zoals antropomorfisme, projectie, animisme, het *Unheimische*, de fetisj commoditeit en theatrale kadering. In dit hoofdstuk ga ik ook dieper in op analytische posthumanistische

theorieën zoals die van Latour en Harman, om Verdonck's co-creatieve praktijk te beschrijven, waarin het handelingspotentieel van objecten erkend wordt. Hoofdstuk 2.4 behandelt de figuur van het fantasma door een bespreking van de politiek, het affect en de performativiteit van spectrale, digitale aanwezigheden, die niet altijd te onderscheiden zijn van 'echte', materiële aanwezigheden. In dit hoofdstuk wordt ook een media-archeologisch perspectief gehanteerd, in de analyse van hoe Verdonck oudere media zoals de Pepper's ghost en het diorama gebruikt. Hoofdstukken 2.5 en 2.6.1 verkennen de figuur van de mascotte, een mensenlichaam dat verdwenen is in een object (het mascottepak) en dat zodanig ontmenselijkt is, dat paniek, depressie, burn-out (de ziektes van een psychopolitieke tijd) en een gebrek aan empathie eruit voortkomen.

In het zesde en laatste hoofdstuk van dit tweede deel (2.6) ga ik dieper in op de tijd en ruimte van de figuur in verhouding tot Agambens concepten gerelateerd aan temporaliteiten en zijn in de wereld. De figuur van de mascotte kenmerkt een belangrijke verschuiving in het werk van Verdonck. Ze bestaat niet enkel uit een mensenlichaam dat in een mascottepak zit, maar is ook expliciet een gevolg van het theaterapparaat en de manier waarop tijd en ruimte daar spelen, alsook het blootgesteld worden aan een publiek (2.6.1). In Verdoncks manipulaties van het theaterapparaat wordt zowel een continuering van politieke en economische apparaten van 'buiten' gecreëerd als een counter-apparaat, dat ik een 'negatief apparaat' noem (2.6.2). Verdonck gebruikt het theaterapparaat in de creatie van figuren en daardoor herdefinieert hij en speelt hij met de grenzen tussen artistieke disciplines, meer bepaald de beeldende kunsten en podiumkunsten. In een onderzoek naar de grens tussen object en subject, worden hun respectievelijke plaatsen – het museum en het theater – en representatie en artistieke disciplines met elkaar geconfronteerd. In hoofdstuk 2.6.3 beschrijf ik Verdoncks werk daarom als *post-theater*, een theater na het theater, na de representatie en na de mens. Dit post-theater is een bijzondere ervaring voor de toeschouwer, een ervaring verband houdt met existentiële aspecten van het mens-zijn en de leegte die in het centrum van het bestaan ligt. Met Agamben en Virno, wordt post-theater geassocieerd met post-geschiedenis (*posthistory*), en temporaliteiten als een eindeloze tijd, een dominant heden, messianistische tijd of een eeuwige, machinale tijd en een tijd van het einde.

Het potentiële einde van de menselijke aanwezigheid op deze planeet is een ondertoon doorheen het hele oeuvre van Verdonck, maar zijn werken uit 2016 en 2017 (*IN VOID* en *Conversations (at the end of the world)*), meteen ook laatste cases die besproken worden in dit proefschrift, maken dit einde nog bevattelijker en tastbaar. Op dat punt, wanneer de posthumanistische conditie overgaat in een letterlijke post-humane na-tijd, vindt ook dit onderzoek zijn einde.

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