

DIGITAL PERFORMANCE IN NETWORKED PUBLIC SPACES: SITUATING THE POSTHUMAN SUBJECT

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This paper analyses how digital performances in networked public spaces situate the posthuman subject through a complex interplay of human and non-human elements, highlighting the importance of embodiment rather than privileging information over matter. Through empirical research on Blast Theory's digital performance *A Machine To See With*, I attempt to analyse this process closer through a performative account of posthumanism.

INTRODUCTION

Since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the city has become associated with a machinic organism through the rationalisation of urban space and living patterns and consolidated through major infrastructure networks. The advent of cybernetics through advances in computational processes has extended the machinic metaphor to human life in the form of the posthuman subject, where information is assumed to flow freely between computational devices and the body, and where embodiment is downplayed or erased altogether.

This paper argues that the experience of the posthuman subject in digital performances in (networked) public spaces is defined through assemblages where agency is distributed between human and nonhuman agents, reenacting embodiment rather than privileging information over matter. It also suggests that the embodied posthuman practices enabled by these performances are better understood through a performative (rather than a representationalist) account that overcomes the inadequacies of a static or advantage point of observation and of assigning agency to individual and self-operating agents.

Through research recently conducted on Blast Theory's digital performance *A Machine To See With*, I analyse the (posthuman) subject's experience of digital performances in networked public spaces through the embodied practices generated by the complex interplay between (but not limited to) participants, digital devices, networked public space, the performance's narrative and bystanders.

THE MACHINIC CITY AND THE POSTHUMAN SUBJECT

Since the late nineteenth century, the all-encompassing infrastructure networks of modern urban planning enabled what Steven Graham and Simon Marvin defined as the "[binding of] the metropolis into a functioning 'machine' or 'organism'". This process is famously illustrated by Haussman's nineteenth century 'modernisation' of Paris, described by Chaoy as an attempt to "regularise the disordered city [and] disentangle it from its dross, the sediment of past and present failures" [1].

In *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, George Simmel exposed the objectification of life through the rationalisation of living conditions in the emerging metropolitan areas of the early twentieth century, arguing that "modern mind has become more and more calculating" and the world becomes an "arithmetic problem". Simmel argued that the "calculative exactness of practical life" is the outcome of the desire to "fix every part of the world by mathematical formulas". For Simmel, this desire was intrinsically related

to the practices of the metropolitan life, with its "punctual integration of all activities and mutual relations into a stable and impersonal time schedule" [2].

In Simmel's account we can identify the emergence of a posthuman subject, merging the machinic processes of the city and the 'calculating mind' of the subject. This link was highlighted by the Futurist movement in Italy, which emerged a few years after Simmel wrote *The Metropolis and Mental Life*. In *The Manifesto of Futurist Mechanical Art* (from 1922), the Futurists proclaimed that: "we too are machines, we too are mechanized by the atmosphere that we breathe...This is the new necessity and the basis of the new aesthetic" [3].

According to Steve Dixon, the aesthetics of Italian Futurist performance theory and practice between 1909 have been highly influential in contemporary digital performance philosophies and aesthetic practices [4]. However, he sees a significant difference in approach between both. Dixon argues that the Futurist's glorification of the machine and their focus on embodied interactive practices and audience collaboration allowed "human excitement [to be] projected outward". In the 1915 *Futurist Scenography* manifesto, Enrico Prampolini argues that: "[Futurist Theatre] is alone in seeking the audience's collaboration. It doesn't remain static like a stupid *voyeur*, but joins noisily in the action [...] communicating with the actors". In contrast, Dixon argues that contemporary digital performance directs human excitement and creativity inward and into small screens, in what he defines as the "introversion of the computer paradigm" [5].

We must examine Dixon's argument against what Malcolm McCullough describes as a "paradigm shift from cyberspace to pervasive computing", where digital technology "pours out beyond the screen, into our messy places, under our laws of physics" [6]. This process brings computers into the messy, noisy and unpredictable 'real' world. The rising trend of internet-enabled mobile phones (also known as 'smart' phones) is perhaps the most visible reminder of this shift, which is also supported by: gesture-controlled videogames consoles, computer tablet devices and RFID (radio-frequency identification) tags, which attach readable digital information to objects.

Therefore, rather than taking Dixon's account of the 'introversion of the computer paradigm' at face value, we must test it empirically against the innovative practices that digital performance enables through embodied practices. These involve a constant dialogue between participants, digital mobile devices and the surrounding environment, mixing virtual and physical environments and screens and the outside world. In contrast to the Futurist's extrovert approach of provoking their audiences through physical reactions, contemporary digital performances such as Blast Theory's *A Machine To See With* provoke and challenge the audience through much subtler techniques, such as automated phone messages directed to their mobile phones. While in this case the techniques and actions might be internalised, the participant's are by no means less challenged than in the Futurist's plays: they must deal with these messages while navigating the 'messiness' of urban public space, eventually generating unusual or uncanny situations that must be dealt with in a public arena. Therefore, the performative experience of the participant is neither lost nor diminished, and is perhaps more challenged than in the Futurist's collaborative theatre plays.

TOWARDS AN EMBODIED AND PERFORMATIVE POSTHUMANISM

An embodied and performative posthumanism challenges the desire to control and/or predict the body's responses through normative and synchronised processes. Performing is always already a transformative, iterative and unpredictable process and highly context dependent. While modern urban planning attempted to control the body by standardising and synchronising the flows of infrastructure networks and the circulation of people through the city (as in Haussman's 'disentangling of the city'), the cybernetic movement emerging after the Second World War envisioned the control of the body through the control of flows of information.

As Katherine Hayles reminds us, the construction of the cyborg as a (posthuman) "*technological artifact and cultural icon*" was supported by the "conception of information as a (disembodied) entity" where "protein and silicon operate as a single system" and information flows are free from physical constraints. Yet Hayles points out that information is "*always instantiated in a medium*". She argues that in cybernetic posthuman accounts, the body is no longer identified with the self; it becomes a universal object "for control and mastery rather than [...] an intrinsic part of the self" [7].

Defining the body as a universal object entails that it is "primarily, if not entirely, a linguistic and discursive construction" rather than a performative body. Therefore we must distinguish body from embodiment to understand how the linguistic domain has attempted to control the body. According to Hayles while body is constructed through normative assumptions that define a stable and normative set of criteria, "[...] embodiment is contextual, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture, which together compose enactment" [8]. Therefore, embodiment denies the possibility of reducing the subject to linguistic interpretations. In her defense of a posthumanist performativity, Karen Barad argues that "language has been granted too much power" and that "the only thing that doesn't seem to matter anymore is matter" [9].

Barad proposes a posthumanist notion of performativity that incorporates both "material and discursive, social and scientific, human and nonhuman, and natural and cultural factors" [10]. However, she argues that this is only possible if "agency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity" [11]. Therefore, posthumanist performativity recognises that it is unfeasible (and possibly undesirable) to resist the impact of machines in our environment and our own bodies, while at the same time acknowledging the importance of embodiment (or body in context) against the linguistic and normative construction of the body. This is enabled by a posthuman subject that, in Hayles' words, constitutes "a dynamic partnership between humans and intelligent machines [that] replaces the liberal humanist subject's manifest destiny to dominate and control nature" [12].

DEFINING DIGITAL PERFORMANCE IN NETWORKED PUBLIC SPACES

Digital performances in networked public spaces foreground the embodied posthuman subject envisioned by Hayles. The term *digital performance* encompasses works where both embodiment and electronic flows converge. It also avoids the limitations of using categories such as locative media, or digital interactive installations, which suggest a focus on a specific (and stable) technology or infrastructure.

I employ the term *networked public spaces* to describe the convergence of (private and public) urban and electronic flows. Public space cannot be reduced to a fixed arena where the 'public sphere' is enacted in an orderly manner or— as many contemporary social studies suggest—portrayed as 'dead

space' [13]. Public space has always already been networked, however the advent of digital technologies has foregrounded and accelerated this process.

Mobile phones in particular have enabled embodied posthuman practices that support performativity in public spaces through its multiple capabilities: phone calls, SMS (short message service), mobile Internet and locative media applications. These have generated high hopes of a renaissance of the 'public sphere' and of public space, however these arguments remain speculative and largely untested.

The rise of locative media as "the next big thing" was accompanied, as Tuters and Varnelis point out, by practitioner's claims that "it can reconfigure our everyday life [...] by renewing our sense of place in the world". Yet at the same time, locative media has been criticised by many theorists for its apolitical nature and dependence on technology: while Andreas Broeckman accused it of being the "avant-garde of the 'society of control'", Coco Fusco argued that artists have substituted an "abstract connectedness for any real engagement with people in other places or even in their own locale" [14].

TOWARDS A PERFORMATIVE ACCOUNT OF THE POSTHUMAN SUBJECT

Such contradictory accounts highlight the importance of understanding embodied practices to situate the posthuman subject's experience in digital performances in networked public spaces. We must take into account: the subject's prior experiences of (networked) and everyday media practices through their own social and cultural contexts; the technologies involved, which are subject to failures and misunderstandings; and the unpredictability of the networked public space with its complex assemblages of bystanders, weather and mobility patterns, urban furniture, traffic flows and other participants.

A performative account of the posthuman subject in digital performance enables a non-linear narrative that "[articulates] the posthuman as a technical-cultural concept" and refutes metanarratives about "the transformation of the human into a disembodied posthuman" [15]. As Barad points out, performativity "[shifts] the focus from linguistic representations to discursive practices" [16]. This is evident in digital performances such as *A Machine To See With*: while it is based on a linear narrative with a clear chain of pre-scripted events, it is reshaped by the 'performance' of unpredictable assemblages of embodied practices.

The audience of such performances presents another complicating factor. While in traditional theatre plays (including the avant-garde performances of the Futurists), the audience was allocated a fixed area—and expected to react to the play through predictable patterns of engagement—in performances such as *A Machine To See With*, the audience is not only fully mobile, but performing the roles of both the actors and spectators. Therefore, despite the narrative being pre-scripted, it is impossible to predict participants' reactions. This challenges the understanding of these events and highlights the need for new methods of observation and analysis.

Barad suggests a shift in focus from representationalist understandings of events towards an active approach that reinforces the inseparable link between "observed object" and "agencies of observation", denying the possibility of a static or advantage point of observation. As the posthuman subject performs, the observer of such events must also 'perform'. In her view, discursive practices must *produce*—rather than simply *describe*—"the 'subjects' and 'objects' of knowledge practices" [17]. While Barad's framework proposes a posthumanist account that must be 'performed', it also questions the

human/nonhuman dichotomy and the privileging of human agency as the main trigger of events. A performative framework is particularly suited for understanding the embodied practices of the posthuman subject enabled by digital performances in networked public spaces.

In the following section, I discuss my attempt at performing observation during my field research on Blast Theory's digital performance *A Machine To See With* in Brighton during September 2011 towards an understanding of the posthuman subject's experience in digital performance in networked public spaces.

CASE STUDY: BLAST THEORY'S *A MACHINE TO SEE WITH*

"We needed to know whether you are a person who could step through a door and become someone completely different, and now we know. Your eyes are machines to see with and I am a machine to see with. This film is now yours. Is this the ending you want?" [18].

Participants are confronted with the quote above at the end of *A Machine To See With*, a digital performance by Blast Theory that reflects on our posthuman nature and the influence of machinic processes on our everyday lives. Blast Theory is an artist collaborative led by Matt Adams, Ju Row Farr and Nick Tandavanitj based in Brighton that has been creating innovative and challenging performances for the last twenty years. They describe their work as "explor[ing] interactivity and the social and political aspects of technology" and using "performance, installation, video, mobile and online technologies to ask questions about the ideologies present in the information that surrounds us" [19].

A Machine To See With invites participants to take part in a simulated bank heist that involves walking through public space while following pre-scripted instructions relayed by an automated phone system to their own mobile phones. Six participants start together following different routes that include a stopover in a public toilet (to answer questions given by the system while waiting inside a cubicle) and eventually converge onto the roof of a private (and usually busy) car park where they are told to enter a car. At this stage, one of the other participants is invited to join them in planning an attempted bank heist, which involves, among other things, betrayal, an aborted countdown, an escape route and a pledge to give money to a complete stranger.

While conducting field research on the event during its premiere in Brighton during September 2011 I attempted to employ a performative account of the posthuman subject participant by remaining close to the "observed object"—as Barad puts it—and using multiple and mobile points and methods of observation [20]. This approach involved: observing participants taking part in the event while making audio notes; taking pictures and videos of key moments; interviewing participants; taking part in the event myself; taking part in preliminary tests conducted by the artists; and attending project development meetings.

My performative observation of *A Machine To See With* highlighted the importance of embodied practices in reshaping the posthuman subject's experience of the event. Despite the linear narrative script of the automated phone system, the participant's experience was always unique and dependent on several unpredictable factors, such as the mobility of participants, their prior knowledge of Brighton, their interpretation of the messages received, the interference of bystanders, the surrounding urban space and the engagement of other participants.

For example, in one occasion a participant ended up in the wrong car park after failing to understand an instruction given by the system and decided to ask a bystander for help. While that might have been a frustrating event, he identified that moment as a highlight of his experience: while he hid for twenty minutes behind a bin in the wrong car park (the phone system told him to be discrete) waiting for a car that never turned up (which was stationed in the correct car park), he observed in the distance how the incoming sea fog (a nonhuman agent) gently enveloped a nearby building. He described it as the highlight of his experience—an event that was triggered by a failure in the relay of information.

The reality of the everyday life of Brighton constantly infiltrated the linearity of the pre-scripted narrative, challenging the perception and experience of participants: unexpected clouds of fog suddenly enveloping the car park; desperate bystanders knocking furiously on the public toilets' cubicles where participants were present; curious teenagers provoking participants as they exited the car; close calls with the passing traffic. Participants reacted very differently to these different experiences of embodiment. For example, while resorting to the escape route after the aborted countdown during the bank heist, some participants ran promptly, while others calmly walked away.

While employing a performative account allowed me to gain several insights into the experience of the posthuman subject taking part in the performance, it also highlighted the challenges of this approach: the difficulty of making notes and following the observed subject while moving through the public space of the city; identifying ideal points of view along the way while trying to remain 'invisible' to participants; dealing with the suspicion of bystanders; and losing track of late, absent or stealth participants.

CONCLUSION

A performative account of digital performances in networked public spaces enables a better understanding of the experience of the posthuman subject participant through the embodied practices that are triggered by assemblages of human and nonhuman agents. Such events are better understood through a methodological approach where observed object and agencies of observation are interlinked, and where embodiment plays an important role in both the participant's and the observer's experience.

Although employing a performative account exposes the observer to similar difficulties encountered by participants—which have to be dealt with dynamically—it allows for a dynamic approach that avoids the pitfalls of narrow descriptive accounts based on static or advantage points of observation and of assigning agency exclusively to individual agents.

A Machine To See With highlights the importance of embodiment in the posthuman subject's experience of digital performances in networked public spaces against a linguistic and normative construction of the body where information is privileged over matter, enabling emerging forms of embodied interactive practices and audience collaboration.

References and Notes:

- 1 Graham and Marvin, *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition* (London: Routledge, 2001), 53 – 55.
- 2 Wolff, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (New York: The Free Press, 1950), 412–413.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 63.

4 Dixon, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 9.

5 *Ibid.*, 58–64.

6 McCullough, *Digital Ground* (Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 2004), 9.

7 Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2–13.

8 *Ibid.*, 192–196 .

9 Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28 (3) (2006), 801.

10 *Ibid.*, 808.

11 *Ibid.*, 826.

12 Hayles, 288.

13 see for example Richard Sennett's *The Fall of the Public Man* and Marc Augé's *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*

14 Tuters and Varnelis, "Beyond Locative Media: Giving Shape to the Internet of Things", *Leonardo*, 39 (4) (2006), 358–360.

15 *Ibid.*, 22.

16 Barad, 807.

17 Barad, 814 – 819.

18 Blasttheory "A Machine To See With, Banff", Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cD26y4ncDe4>

19 Blast Theory, "Biography", http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/documents/Blast_Theory_Biography.pdf

20 Barad, 814.