ADORNO, BECKETT…WAGNER, ARTAUD: REFLECTIONS ON STEFAN SORGNER'S *PHILOSOPHY OF POSTHUMAN ART*

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Abstract
This essay reflects on the question of posthuman(ist) art by way of Stefan Sorgner's book, *Philosophy of Posthuman Art*, which makes an important initial contribution to the nascent investigation of the significance of creative and imaginative expression from a critical posthumanist perspective. From the understanding that we cannot (yet) do without the subject as ground of the self, I elaborate a theory of the dynamic *subjective trinity* (self, other, and transcendent subject) underpinning the occidental aesthetic experience construed in visual-spatial terms, exemplified in the cinema. From this basis I explore two possible avenues of posthumanist aesthetic expression: First, the secular *via negativa* represented by Samuel Beckett's 1958 novel *The Unnamable*, one of the most radical modernist interrogations of the discursive limits of subjectivity, of the self unspeaking itself. Second, Antonin Artaud's 1932 "Theatre of Cruelty" manifesto, which stands amongst the most radical modernist alternatives to the Wagnerian total art work. For both artists, the through-line and the historical dividing line alike is the Holocaust as a limit-case for investigating what a meaningful posthumanist aesthetic ideology might look like: an aesthetic in response to a world that is making itself ready to do without the human, even as the human propensity to treat other humans as less-than-human clears a space for the emergence of a properly posthumanist subject.

Keywords
Posthumanism, art, subjectivity, the self, mediation, Beckett, Artaud

1. The Post-humanist Subject

These reflections on Stefan Sorgner's *Philosophy of Posthuman Art* (2022) address the question of art in a posthumanist era, and the persistence of the human(ist) subject therein. Like Sorgner, I am responding to a contemporary climate in which the *human* is under unprecedented scrutiny, and where the investigation of the significance of creative and imaginative expression from a critical posthumanist perspective is still in its nascent stages. Sorgner's book makes an important initial contribution. In elaborating my own thoughts about posthuman(ist) art, I refer both to specific contemporary theoretical works and to older critical and philosophical texts and ideas that may be out of fashion, despite their foundational status for current posthumanist theory. I thereby hope to indicate how the agendas of critical posthumanism have for some decades now been pursued under other headings, such as avant garde modernism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, or the postsecular. What counts in the end is not only what this brief history tells us about the place and function of *art* today, but what our art continues to tell us about ourselves. I should also add that, for reasons of space, I completely avoid any reference to transhumanism, the possibility of AI-generated art, and the like.

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In the twenty-first century, art, as critical-analytical category, is as nebulous as ever. Sorgner frames his theory of posthuman art as a response to Theodor Adorno's aesthetic theory, in which the autonomy of the artwork becomes another kind of artistic totalitarianism. I also invoke Adorno here, but in reference to a different, more specific, debate, around the very possibility of aesthetic representation or expression after an event like the Holocaust, which creates the conditions for the emergence of a uniquely negative posthuman subject

Whatever is meant by *art* has no meaning or value outside of the medium in which it is conveyed, preserved, distributed, and consumed. The understanding of art I adopt is therefore grounded in close attention to the formal properties of a given work or text, without losing sight of an artwork's ineluctable embeddedness in a specific cultural, historical, or ideological context. A truly, meaningfully posthumanist art would require a basis of specific formal or aesthetic or stylistic features, unique to the period or episteme of the Anthropocene. My examples here favour a wide range of media: visual and audiovisual, especially cinema, and verbal-textual, including the novel, as well the graphic novel as hybrid form. Like Sorgner, I also invoke theatre, particularly theories of performance and spectatorial engagement. Performance and performativity retain their original sense here alongside their productive appropriation by theorists of gender and feminist new materialism (See e.g. Barad, 2003, 2007; Butler, 1993). As with Sorgner, the agential aspect of performance is at the heart of this discussion of posthumanist art.

Agency invokes subjectivity: the subject, human or otherwise, that continues to haunt such discussions. Agency, subjectivity, consciousness, the self: once the property of the human species, with the exception of the last, these qualities or capacities are now rightly extended to the larger non-human world around us. Such terms focalize the long-standing human arrogation of power and authority to itself—hence, the *self*—the exceptionalism and anthropocentrism that critical posthumanism seeks to deconstruct in the realm of ideas, while in practice this arrogance remains very much the human status quo.

We are constrained to retain the category of the subject, if only because it provides a philosophical or psychoanalytic or other basis or ground for the self—a historically tenacious construct, as distinct from all that is not-self. With its antecedents in classical antiquity, the self of occidental culture emerges in the wake of centuries of Classical and Christian influence, figures like Augustine (1988) in his *Confessions* refining the self in relation to God through the modality of prayer or dialogue with an Other, laying the ground for the emergence of the modern self. With Descartes and the advent of modern philosophy, the subject-object relation is inverted, and the "metaphysical foundation is no longer claimed to reside in a form, substance, or deity outside of the human intellect but is rather found in the human being understood as a subject" (Critchley & Dews, 1996, p. 5). By the supposedly secular eighteenth century, this dialogue had evolved into a colloquy with a reader, as in Rousseau's *Confessions*—but, in either case, prayer or intersubjective dialogue, the onus is on an *internal* colloquy, a dialogue between the self and itself. As elaborated by Bakhtin (1981) in his theory of novelistic discourse, the self is radically dialogical, although in the capitalist age this feature of selfhood is generally subordinated to the illusory primacy of the singular ego.

Under German Romanticism the new modern self, *das Ich*, is raised to the status of metaphysical principle, the triumph of individual selfhood paving the way for the Enlightenment humanist (masculine) subject. The self as *Ich* even finds its way into modern psychoanalysis, in the guise of the Freudian *ego*: from Romanticism to the Oedipal family romance. The triumph of the self (in Occidental culture, at least), brings about a transformation in aesthetic ideology, a shift in emphasis from mimesis, the reflection or imitation of outward forms, to *expression*: the possibility of expressing or externalizing the self's true self, an artistic impulse that perdures through nineteenth-century lyric poetry to inform movements such as German Expressionism, which manifested in painting, theatre, and film. Subsequent tendencies in the visual arts, e.g. American abstract expressionism, still subordinate abstraction as stylistic approach to the external expression of the (male) ego in painterly form. Even avowedly mystical abstractionists, such as Mondrian, or Hilde af Klint, fail to fully disentangle their work from a human-centred notion of art practice. Whether in terms of the mimetic realism of theatre and photographically based film, or the more subjective expression of painting or the modernist novel, the self remains at the centre of cultural life, the basis of what would become late capitalism's cult of the individual, through the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries.

I have discussed elsewhere the persistence of the subject in the image-saturated mediascape of contemporary popular culture, which remains not merely anthropocentric but spectacularly anthropomorphic (Kilbourn, 2021). This is only one side or face of the equation, however, as the expressionist model implies. *Subject* is now what Claude Levi-Strauss (1950/1987) calls a "floating signifier" ready to do service in a variety of different discourses and disciplines. The subject is not limited to the hero or protagonist of the story (including the story that is each person's life); the subject is also the *transcendent* entity that controls the discourse, narrates the story, determines meaning. Finally, there is the one who stands in some kind of relation to the protagonist-subject, the self properly speaking—this third subject is the most problematic, as this is also, simultaneously, the position of the other, or of the human as object.

This dynamic *holy trinity* of subjects is evident, for instance, in Laura Mulvey (1975/2000) model of the male gaze, so influential in decades of film theory, just as it is the basis of the *cinematic apparatus* (to be discussed below)—although it also structures the experience of reading as much as looking, or whenever there is a subject engaging with a text produced by another that involves the representation of a third. In this respect, cinema, and the *apparatus* of its production, distribution, and consumption, is a better example of the complex constellation of subjectivity underpinning contemporary culture than, say, the museum-going experience, wherein the viewer stands before and contemplates an artwork, completing its meaning, as if in a closed two-way circuit of looking and being-looked at. As John Berger (1972/2008) showed in 1972, however, even this seemingly straightforward relationship of (masculine) spectatorial mastery and (feminine) objectification is more complex than it appears, providing the basis, as it happens, to the complex visual-ideological structure that Mulvey (1975/2000) a few years later analyzed as the male gaze.

Foucault had already predicted the end of *man*, "like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (1966/1973, p. 387), making way for the hegemony of the text, while Barthes' "death of the author" had allowed for the "birth of the reader" (1981/2001, pp. 212–213). In each case we see the postructuralist deconstruction of the heretofore hegemonic subject in the categorically specific terms of what would become a postcolonial, feminist, queer, or other critique that would gradually transform into a fully blown posthumanist critique of the Enlightenment subject. The shift in emphasis away from the producer-authorial figure to the reader or another second or third entity illustrates my point about the inescapability of some kind of subject as dynamic visual-spatial *position*—even one that allows for intersectional identities to flourish or be repressed, as the case may be. In this triangle of subjectivity the third position is the most precarious, disempowered, or even de-subjectivized (as object, or *other*). As will be explored, the Holocaust provides the ultimate example of the third term or leg of the triangle: the other, who, or which, is always under threat of objectification, despite the fact that this other, in the modern age, is another person, another subject, properly speaking. The danger always lurking in this model is made manifest, literalized, in the Holocaust's infernal catachresis: human beings as *pieces* (*Stücke*), objects, numbers, things to be destroyed, the remains recycled or discarded.

In order therefore to formulate a concept of posthumanist art that confronts the issues at stake in a posthumanist critique of the humanist tradition, it is necessary to think beyond the bounds of the largely audiovisually determined subject of contemporary socially mediatized culture (Kilbourn, 2021). That is to say, it is necessary to think about an artistic practice—whether visual, literary, cinematic, sculptural, theatrical, musical, or other—that is *not* predicated on this subject, or does not rely on it for its operations, or which tries to undo it altogether. In this light, I invoke specific counter-tendencies in various art forms or media, whether literary, dramatic, or visual-spatial, but all with a common investment in a radically negative logic of form.

The second half of the nineteenth and the first two decades of the twentieth century coincided not merely with European modernism but also saw the ground laid for the decentering of the human subject from the ontological and epistemological centre of things, leaving the door open, through the question of gender (and other identity categories), to a theory of the posthuman(ist) subject (Ferrara, 2020, p. 3). In a line reaching back to Leopardi (among others), Irish writer Samuel Beckett's protagonists variously embody what Maurice Blanchot calls "subjectivity without any subject" (qtd. Boulter, 2019, pp. 12–13). Beckett is exemplary in his admission that in writing he is faced with "nothing to express, nothing with which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (Beckett, 1965). Beckett's project is a radical literary modernist elaboration of the long-standing tradition of exploiting language's potential for productive negation, of expressing or representing that which escapes capture in discourse, image, or other medium, exemplified, in a pre-modern mystical theological context, by *God*. From the early medieval period to modernity two incompatible modes of negation have dominated: (1) a determinate negation that ultimately affirms in a sublation or Hegelian *Aufhebung* (metaphysical transcendence), and (2) the non-determinate negation (of apophasis or negative theology) that negates by affirming—a radically negative discourse that issues, in the postsecular era, in Beckett's "I can't go on. I'll go on" (1953/1991, p. 414). Modernist epistemology—how do I know who I am? gives way to postmodernist ontology: how is my self determined by the discourse in which it is expressed? Being and language are inextricable, in this model, as for the original apophatics, although now the suspicion is that this is all there is, and any other subjects (including the transcendent) are a function of the same discourse.

In his proto-postmodernism, Beckett anticipates the nascent posthumanism of critical theory's classical period, exemplified in Derrida (1967/1977; 1967/1978) and Lyotard (1987; Wolfe, 2010). For Lyotard (1987),

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. (p. 81)

Ultimately, Lyotard valorizes the postmodern attitude or impulse (to assay, as opposed to what he characterizes as the modern attitude of regret), as the most effective means to defend against what he sees, pejoratively, as realism; a certain nostalgia, the desire for totalization. Lyotard succinctly but rather enigmatically refers to this as a return to *terror*: not in the positive sense of the affective product of the experience of the sublime, but what Deleuze and Guattari (1972/1992) name as the danger of fascism, the dissolution of ego, *Schwärmerei*.

It is no coincidence that of all canonical modernists Beckett is singled out by scholars as a proto-posthumanist writer, as much for the form as for the content of his later works (e.g. Boulter, 2019). Mid-century Beckett exemplifies the later literary modernism that sought to leave realism behind in its relentless interrogation of the limits of verbal representation. This also occurs in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust as world-defining event, a world-historical ground zero, forcing a radical re-calibration of our notions of time and memory, moral-ethical responsibility, the limits of representation, and what it means to be human.

2. Posthumanism and Postmemory: The Holocaust as Limit Case

The example of Becket as modernist heir to the apophatic counter-tradition justifies my focus on the question of the relative value of silence or absence, of negativity, nothingness, the sublime, and the like, as the most *appropriate* response to ostensibly objective phenomena/events, especially those which by their very nature resist or short-circuit the usual channels of aesthetic expression, and which therefore, by virtue of this very inexpressibility, acquire a *universal* signification. Often the hallmark of the more radical and avant garde movements, the apparent nihilism of such responses flies in the face of contemporary cultural mores. For, in spite of the powerful legacy of the modernist avant garde and abstraction in the arts, mimesis, realism, and reference come roaring back in the twenty-first century because of events like the Holocaust, reinvigorating old debates with a new urgency that has not diminished in the intervening 75-odd years. This period is punctuated by Sept. 11, 2001 (the end of irony, at least in a humorous sense), November 1989 (the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Cold War, the *End of History*), and May 1968 (the last time, arguably, when utopian revolution was taken seriously). Each of these moments, for members of the current youthful generation, although not yet lost to living memory, is nonetheless utterly historical. It is therefore important to note the chronology of the texts marshaled here, in relation to the end of WWII and the liberation of the camps in May 1945. My point is not to force the discussion about posthuman(ist) art into the framework of Holocaust studies, but rather to invoke the Holocaust as a limit-case for investigating what a meaningful posthumanist aesthetic ideology might look like: an aesthetic in response to a world that is making itself ready to do without the human, even as the human propensity to treat other humans as less-than-human clears a space for the emergence of a properly posthumanist subject—if only by begging the question: What do we *ever* mean by *human*? By its very nature as a historical event, the Holocaust crystallizes all the issues and debates around the representation, mediation, transmission, distortion, or misrepresentation of atrocity on an unimaginable scale. In my view, it is not that we should *not* try to represent the Holocaust because it is unimaginable or, as Elie Wiesel (1989) holds, unspeakable. Rather, to cite Italian author (and Hungarian Holocaust survivor) Edith Bruck's trenchant words, "[n]obody will write enough about [the Holocaust] *because* it is unspeakable" (qtd. Maceri, 2007, p. 609; my emphasis).

Certain critical approaches to the challenge of representing the Holocaust help to clarify the emergence of the current interest in the posthuman as one in a series of *posts*. A good example is Marianne Hirsch's (2008) theory of postmemory. According to Hirsch (2008), the *post*

> in "postmemory" signals more than a temporal delay and more than a location in an aftermath. Postmodern, for example, inscribes both a critical distance and a profound interrelation with the modern; postcolonial does not mean the end of the colonial but its troubling

> continuity, though, in contrast, postfeminist has been used to mark a sequel to feminism. We certainly are, still, in the era of "posts," which continue to proliferate: "post-secular," "post-human," "postcolony," [sic] "post-white." (p. 106)

Postmemory was initially inspired by Hirsch's reflections on the power of Holocaust survivors' family photos in the context of collective memory shared across cultural and generational lines, where the Jewish identity of the victim is assumed. Like many, Hirsch grapples with the legacy of Adorno's infamous injunction against writing poetry after Auschwitz, where *poetry*—actually "ein Gedicht", one poem (Adorno, 1967/1997, p. 34)—was broadly construed to stand in for various approaches to the aesthetic mediation of atrocity. For Hirsch, poetry was supplanted by photography, emblematized by the three family photographs included in Art Spiegelman's two-volume graphic novel *Maus*. These photographs

> first elicited the need for a term that would describe the particular form of belated or inherited memory that I found in Spiegelman's work... Indeed, the phenomenology of photography is a crucial element in my conception of postmemory as it relates to the Holocaust in particular. To be sure, the history of the Holocaust has come down to us, in subsequent generations, through a vast number of photographic images… . (Hirsch, 2008, p. 107)

Hirsch's invaluable analysis is one of many predicated upon the binary of visual and verbal media in their respective, relative capacities to effectively communicate the *truth* of the Holocaust. (One knock-on effect of Hirsch's coinage of postmemory is its appropriation by non-Jews and non-victims—what is more universal than the family photo?) Spiegelman's (1991) graphic novel of course partakes as much of words as it does of images, an uneasy relationship to which the book self-reflexively draws attention.

In the second volume's most revealing meta-textual episode, Spiegelman foregrounds the obligation to bear witness to *History* by means of memory: individual and collective, ineluctably mediated. This is most evident in Spiegelman's (1991) crucial choice to represent human characters as various animal species: the Jews as mice, the Germans cats, etc. Spiegelman (1991) includes himself, a human wearing a mouse-mask, as he visits Pavel, his "shrink," an older New York Jew who, like Spiegelman's father, Vladek, is a Holocaust survivor (Pavel is also drawn as a human wearing a mouse-mask). In the throes of creative and moral-ethical anxiety, the artist depicts himself struggling to complete the book we are reading, a graphic translation of his father's eye-witness account, as he also struggles with the more general problem of his second-generation Jewish identity as child of a survivor:

> Pavel: "[Y]ou think it's admirable to survive. Does that mean it's NOT admirable to NOT survive?
> Artie: "I think I see what you mean. It's as if life equals winning so death equals losing."

> Pavel: “Yes, life always takes the side of life, and somehow the victims are blamed. But it wasn’t the BEST people who survived, nor did the best ones die. It was random! […] Anyway, the victims who died can never tell THEIR side of the story, so maybe it’s better not to have any more stories.” (Spiegelman, 1991, p. 45)

Artie responds with a quotation from a 1969 interview with Beckett (1969): “Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness” (p. 210). This is followed by a panel in which the two sit without speaking. “On the other hand,” Artie eventually continues, “he SAID it.” To which his analyst responds: “He was right. Maybe you can include it in your book” (Spiegelman, 1991, p. 45).

The Beckett quote in *Maus II* puts a literary modernist spin on the equivalent question of the aesthetic or ethical limits of representation to which Adorno refers in his injunction, or to which Ludwig Wittgenstein (1922/1995) alludes in the 7th proposition in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, wherein *silence* is recognized as a general principle in a moral-ethical response to specific kinds of phenomena: “Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.” Writing in the late 1980s, Wiesel evoked this axiom in the debate around the moral propriety of representing the Holocaust:

> Wittgenstein said it: whereof one cannot speak, one must not speak. The unspeakable draws its force and its mystery from its own silence. A nineteenth-century Hasidic teacher put it his own way: the cry unuttered is the loudest. Then, it defeated culture; later, it defeated art, because just as no one could imagine Auschwitz before Auschwitz, no one can now retell Auschwitz after Auschwitz. The truth of Auschwitz remains hidden in its ashes. Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge. (Wiesel, 1989, p. 1)

Here Wiesel crystallizes the twentieth century’s most extreme position vis-a-vis the moral-ethical responsibility of artistic representation or expression, predicated on the understanding that, in certain, limit cases, the temptation to represent, to express, to give aesthetic form, should be resisted. Moreover, in the most extreme cases, this kind of response is not even possible, since what would result would be wholly inadequate to the truth of the past in question—in this case, the Holocaust. Such a response would yield, in Beckett’s words, only “an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness,” the latter being (in Wiesel’s fundamentalist terms) the morally responsible response to this particular ethico-aesthetic challenge.

Sorgner’s theory of posthuman art is largely a response to Adorno’s aesthetic theory, which, although an *attack* on totalitarianism, Sorgner (2022) characterizes as “totalitarian itself, as it is founded on a categorically ontological duality which claims to be universally valid” (p. 13). Here is Adorno’s (1967/1997) aforementioned injunction in full:

> Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric

> [Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch]. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today. Absolute reification, which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements, is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely. Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation. (p. 34)

The more famous line about poetry, vis-à-vis the "dialectic of culture and barbarism", overshadows the qualification that follows. For Adorno, the longer-term impact of the Final Solution upon the moral-ethical condition of postwar European society was to short-circuit the capacity to understand this impact, and therefore to translate and communicate it via aesthetic means. Adorno claims that even the mind, human consciousness and reason, are doomed to be swallowed up in the inexorable complementary processes whereby non-human objects are reified, granted subjective human attributes, while human beings are objectified, reduced to something less-than-human, which is to say a highly specific (negative) instance of the posthuman.

The irony is that, in *Maus*, as in Beckett, something still (always) gets said, or shown, or both: in speaking about the Holocaust's unspeakability, one is speaking of it, as Spiegelman economically demonstrates. As in Beckett, *Maus*'s radical self-reflexivity serves a radical moral-ethical purpose, but in response to the problem of representing (speaking of or about) the Holocaust: speaking about something by *not* speaking about it, or by speaking about something else. This contrasts with Wiesel, who also quotes Beckett to make the opposite point: that in order to say something about the Holocaust it is necessary to *not speak at all*, to remain silent. This dichotomy between speaking and not speaking, between saying something and remaining silent, is at the heart of this discussion of the possibility of a posthuman art after a posthumanist critique, where to choose to go on *speaking*, which is to say making some kind of art, expressing one's self artistically, transmitting some kind of meaning—even when that meaning turns away from the world and back upon the artwork's form—is to remain within the compass of a humanist discourse. By contrast, the choice of saying or making *nothing* is, in this light, the truly, radically posthumanist gesture: the disappearance of art as the most responsible response to the (necessary) disappearance of the human.

3. Posthuman(ist) Performativity and the 'Total Work of Art'

Like many of its modernist antecedents, the posthumanist aesthetic proposed above appears to be nihilistic, devoid of political engagement or commitment ("silence and nothingness"). To be sure, the thrust of Beckett's literary-modernist approach is away from any kind of shared, social experience in favour of a radical discursive deconstruction of the self, in a kind of aesthetic and political cul-de-sac. Laudably, Sorgner strives to imbue his understanding of posthuman art with an enlightened ethico-political consciousness. The performative—in its original, theatrical or dramatic sense—is at the heart of Sorgner's theory of posthuman art (Taylor, 2016). This manifests, for instance, in frequent references to Richard Wagner's revisioning of nineteenth-century opera as *Gesamtskunstwerk*, the total, totalizing, and, potentially totalitarian, work of art. For Sorgner (2022), a "unified total work of art requires a communitarian community in which the values and symbols represented are shared" (p. 104). But, as he asks, if such a community tends to devolve into a "strongly paternalistic totalitarian society" (p. 107), does a "total work of art" in a posthuman(ist) context necessarily betray "totalitarian implications?" Does it make any sense in the twenty-first century to "aim for realizing a *Gesamtskunstwerk*?" (p. 104). Can a posthuman(ist) total work of art resist the temptation to provide "an ultimate solution or answer," becoming, at best, a kind of secular sacred text, or, at worst, a fascist screed, leading not to dialogue or co-relationality but to the dissolution of individuality, to *Schwärmerei*? For Sorgner (2022), "the attempt to revive the ancient tragedy can also be called the invention of the opera" (p. 105).

Accordingly,

> in contrast to traditional total works of art, [posthuman artworks] do not regard their own suggestions as true ones which claim universal validity. It is this element which distinguishes them from Wagner's total work of art concept which has highly problematic totalitarian implications. Posthuman works of art can be characterized as non-totalitarian total works of art. (Sorgner, 2022, p. 38)

Cinema, as pre-digital photo-chemically based medium, presents the epitome of the technically mediated subjective trinity or triangle elaborated above (twenty-first century digital video, as it is typically consumed today, presents the ever-present possibility of collapsing the objectified third term into the *transcendent* second in the interface of the screen-cum-projector.) Cinema, or more precisely what post-1968 Marxist-inflected film theory called the cinematic apparatus, rapidly became the early twentieth century analogue of *Gesamtkuntswerk* as total/totalizing *medium* for the age of technical reproducibility (See e.g. Baudry, 1970/1986). This shift from nineteenth-century opera to twentieth century cinema is a shift in emphasis from the *artwork* per se to the medium of expression, the language of *art* and also the critical language of art theory. The notion of the *apparatus* in this context (adapted from Althusser's Marxist critique of capitalist ideological state apparatuses) implies a holistic ideological critique that was out of fashion in film theory by the 1980s, but which had an indelible impact on the emergence of 1990s Cultural Studies. In Baudry's formulation, the cinematic apparatus encompassed the circuit of film camera, darkened theatre space (with strict divide between audience and screen), projector, the spectating subject, and, in a quasi-theological gesture, the transcendent subject of the narrative/the narrating subject (1970/1986, p. 288). This complex dynamic structure, which embodies the subjective trinity outlined above, is analogized with a Marxist political economy (the ideological determination of identity) and with Plato's cave allegory (from *Republic*, book 7), as well as with Jacques Lacan's mirror stage model of psychic emergence out of self (mis-)recognition. This constellation allows for cinema to be framed as a mode of cultural production demanding specific habits of consumption, concealing its own material-technical base (its technical mode of production), indoctrinating the viewer with a specific aesthetic ideology in order to produce a certain kind of always-already interpellated spectator-subject that willfully participates in its own subjugation. This only works, of course, as long as the viewing subject is in a state of mystification about the identity of the objectified subject visible before it, and ignorant of the *transcendent* source of these images (which is also a function of the apparatus).

While he does discuss media broadly speaking, Sorgner mostly excludes cinema from his theory of posthuman art, giving attention instead to older forms such as theatre and opera (see e.g. chapter 6, on music, for an exception). Curiously, as evidence for his reading of the emergence of a state of permanent *becoming* as symptom of the posthuman condition—and therefore, in a second-order sense, of posthuman(ist) art practice—Sorgner (2022) marshals the very evidence that in fact proves the ongoing *persistence* of the subject-object binary as basis of modern post-Enlightenment art practice and theory, up to and including Adorno (p. 13). According to Sorgner (2022), mimesis

> can also help the audience to [adapt] to becoming by means of getting rid of inappropriate traits, responses or resonances which can go along with these insights. Aristotle has characterized the relevance of tragedy with the event of *katharsis* during which the recipient is torn between pity and fear. It is an intense experience, as the spectator is directly…confronted with the death and suffering of a protagonist who is just like the spectator, which brings about fear. At the same time, the spectator realizes her role of being a spectator, and, hence, of being separate from the protagonist who has to endure the suffering, which makes the spectator feel pity for the protagonist. This mixed emotional response can enable the spectator to adapt to the permanent becoming which constitutes the *conditio humana* in the posthuman age. (p. 72)

Mimesis means that *becoming* is trumped by the separation crucial to the subject-object duality. With his focus on the role of the audience, Sorgner inadvertently introduces another internal contradiction, insofar as the dialectical relation he valorizes is a decidedly humanist structure:

> Here the recipient is confronted with posthuman musical creation in the form of the audience. The audience…senses, and experiences posthuman thinking and at the same time can distance itself from it in order to reflect on it. It is a dialectical interplay between lifeworld experience and the distance that enables reflection, which the recipient experiences during the performance. (Sorgner, 2022, p. 109)

The "distance that enables reflection": as heir to the Wagnerian *Gesamtkuntswerk*, cinema is the foundation of the twentieth-century extension of the modernist-humanist spectating subject dating back to the eighteenth century, at least. Whenever the key components of the basic cinematic apparatus are present, then the subject-object binary still holds, no matter how radical the subject matter or form of the artwork. This is true of the Platonic and Aristotelian as it is also true of alternative traditions, such as Bertolt Brecht's (1948/1977) theory of *epic* theatre, which calls for the rejection of *Aristotelian* conventions (the basis of theatrical and cinematic realism) in favour of the self-reflexive laying bare of the means of production. Arguably, only in the live, in-person, performative format of artistic expression does it become possible to conceive of an escape from the subject-object binary underpinning the dynamic subjective trinity—one reason to privilege, like Sorgner, theatre and other live media over cinema and its progeny. To truly escape this dualistic humanist structure, one must look past any manifestation of traditional theatre practice, past Brecht, to one of the most powerful instances of a live, in-person, performative approach: Antonin Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty", which goes unmentioned in Sorgner's book (the manifesto appeared in 1932; *Theatre and its Double* in 1938). Artaud's theory and practice together constitute an early example of a disindividuated, immersive, performative theatre experience that de-privileges the sovereign humanist subject, but which also avoids the Romanticist traps of Nietzsche's Schopenhauerian formulation of the Dionysian in *The Birth of Tragedy* (cf. Sorgner, 2022, pp. 70; 91), where the latter is another route toward a proto-fascist dissolution of individuality, but without the posthumanist critique of the human subject that must precede this undoing. According to Sorgner (2022), "there has been a particularly close connection between the body, non-duality and music, if one takes Schopenhauer's and Nietzsche's philosophies of music into consideration" (p. 91). In this approach, "[t]he gods of the ring can be interpreted as transhumanist posthumans, and the use of language in Wagner's musical dramas as an effort to move away from an ontologically categorial-dualistic conception" (p. 117). As a close study of an opera like *Tristan and Isolde* shows, however, it is Wagner's *music*—in the *Liebestod* especially—that subverts such dualistic conventions, and not the opera's language or staging, insofar as the latter involves actor's discrete bodies, faces, voices, etc.—not to speak of the *gods* as characters (See e.g. Kilbourn, 1998; Reiman, 1998; Wagner, 1968).

Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" is already what Sorgner (2022) calls a "metaformance, and not a performance, as performances presuppose the categorical distinction between audience and performer, which a metaformance attempts to transcend" (p. 24). A metaformance reveals "the non-duality of ontology, a non-dualistic ontology of permanent becoming in all respects. Christian and Kantian traditions distinguish between objects and subjects and hold that these are categorically distinct and separated from each other" (p. 25). But, outside of live theatre, is this is ever really possible? Is there not always the basic duality of body and technological prosthesis? Is it possible today to avoid or escape mediation altogether? No theory of contemporary posthuman/ist art can avoid this question. For the most part, Sorgner is aware of this fundamental limitation, which he frames in terms of the cultural expression of the dualistic basis of post-classical occidental culture. He describes the "institutionalization of tragedy which came along with the construction of the Theatre of Dionysus":

> Originally, there were no theatre buildings, there was no stage and there were no spectators who were separated from the stage. Before the institutionalization of tragedy, there were only groups of human beings singing and dancing together without a rigid dualistic spatial separation between the actors and the audience. … Secondly, a distinction between the chorus and the protagonists was introduced. On the one

> hand, there was the chorus, and the task of the chorus was to sing and dance together. On the other hand, there were the individual actors whose task was to recite their roles. Hence, the duality between audience and actors was amplified by further introducing the duality between protagonists and chorus. (Sorgner, 2022, p. 16)

For Sorgner (2022), "it seems plausible to claim that this event was a central stepping stone during the historical process of the birth of dualistic media" (pp. 16–17). This fundamental "categorically dualistic ontology" (p. 20) is the basis of the western metaphysical tradition, famously the prime target of the deconstructive project of 1970s and 1980s poststructuralism.

In a classic example of an unconsciously nostalgic, modernist gesture, in his "Theatre of Cruelty" Artaud demonstrated that in order to innovate it is often necessary to return to the past. In Artaud's theory, there is a return to an approximation of the primal, non-dualistic, condition of theatre as it evolved in ancient Greece, where the innovation of the individual actor emerged only long after the original group of dancers, who linked the subject on stage with the spectating subject in a collectivity that is no longer possible:

> In addition to actors and spectators, there was a third element of the performance, one older than either of these two. It was the chorus—a Greek word that means 'dance'; the chorus of Greek tragedies sang, but it was also and had been in origin a group of dancers… […] [The] chorus was always there, and it has an important function: it is an emotional bridge between spectators and actors. An anonymous crowd with only a group identity—Theban citizens, inhabitants of Colonus or whatever—it functioned on stage as if the audience itself were part of the action; all the more so because, unlike the professional actors, the chorus consisted of citizen amateurs, representing their tribal group in the dramatic competition. (Sophocles, 1982, p. 20)

Occidental theatre originates out of the amorphous mass of the dance, yielding to the originary trinity of actor, spectator, and chorus. At the other end of the *totalized artwork* spectrum, Artaud famously advocated for a theatre as de-centred, integrated, "total spectacle", in which the spectator was placed in the midst of the action, which was dominated as much by sounds and gestures as by words or text (Artaud, 1958, p. 86).

> We abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will become the theatre of the action. A direct communication will be established between the spectator and the spectacle, between the actor and the spectator, from the fact that the spectator, placed in the middle of the action, is engulfed and physically affected by it. (Artaud, 1958, p. 96)

In Artaud's manifesto the onus is on an immersive, de-hierarchized performance, contradicting centuries of traditional theatre practice based in Aristotelian principles of temporal and spatial continuity. Brechtian theatre practice is also based in a conscious critique of such *realist* conventions, although the result was more or less the opposite of Artaud, who sought to eliminate rather than amplify the epistemological distance between spectator and onstage action, producing a non-*psychological* theatrical experience dominated by embodied affect rather than critical distance (see e.g. Artaud, 1958, p. 85). Artaud's is thus arguably one of the earliest expressions in twentieth-century theatre of something like a posthumanist theatre practice, in which the Enlightenment Humanist subject, thrust into the centre of the action, is ironically de-centred on the conventional-axiological level. It is noteworthy that Artaud, like Brecht, first formulated his ideas before the outbreak of war, and well before anyone outside of occupied Europe knew of the looming catastrophe of the Final Solution. It must not be overlooked, however, that (also like Brecht), as a function of his wholesale rejection of traditional western theatre practice, Artaud drew inspiration from non-occidental traditions, such as Balinese theatre (Artaud, 1958, pp. 53–67), an attitude toward cultural alterity that can be read as either appropriative, an extension of a colonialist impulse, or as appreciative of genuine otherness—or, more realistically, as a combination of the two. Artaud recognized in such non-western forms an emphasis on collective affective rather than individual subjective features; the spectator is denied the conventional supports for what in film theory is variously called identification, allegiance, or alignment (Mulvey, 1975/2000; Smith, 1995). The human subject is literally de-centered, the spectator displaced physically from the position of visual-perspectival sovereignty, the art-historical legacy of Renaissance Humanism (Baudry, 1970/1986, p. 286). This repositioning puts the onus on the spectator's immersive physio-affective engagement with the theatrical spectacle, going beyond the experience implied by conventional approaches to staging and acting, in which the spectator feels variously implicated and distanced. The danger for the spectator in Artaud's approach inheres precisely in this flagrant (albeit temporary) rejection of the social-cultural structures that uphold the Enlightenment humanist subject. In the chapter on the privileged term Metahumanism, Sorgner (2022) claims that

> [h]erewith, we attempt to finally overcome the Cartesian split between body and mind, object and subject, by proposing a view of the mind as an embodied relational process, and of the body as relational movement, that operates from the molecular and bacterial, through the individual and psychic, to the social, planetary and cosmic levels, and in other dimensions of experience. (p. 26)

But such a blatantly utopian transhumanist vision runs counter to the actual potential of a posthumanist critique of this dualist metaphysical basis.

> We challenge [Sorgner continues] the Cartesian split that situates us as subjects external to an objective reality and to other subjects. Through reappropriating and subverting technologies of perception we may dissolve the condition of exteriority and therewith anatomy and the destiny of the body, not for the sake of a new anatomy, but of a postanatomical body. (Sorgner, 2022, p. 27)

It is not clear from this, however, how the subject-object relation, or interrelation, is dissolved or abandoned, whether in practice or, more significant here, in mediated form. The very fact of mediation, rather, ensures the ongoing maintenance of this very dualism.

4. Coda

Mediation is the irreducible factor in any aestheticized communicative act, whether painting, novel, or live theatrical performance. And, as compelling as Artaud's ideas may be, a realized "Theatre of Cruelty" may be indistinguishable from controlled mass hysteria—"an anonymous crowd with only a group identity"—in which individual responsibility and the significance of difference are subsumed into a collective experience in which the awareness of mediation disappears, and life and its double can no longer be distinguished. Beckett's radical interrogation of the limits of subjective expression, moreover—the self's unsaying of itself and everything else but the voice that speaks—threatens to evacuate art's potential for political commitment. And, as Jacques Derrida once noted, "it is always easy to mimic the technique of negative theology" (1992, p. 75), implying that, in the modern period, the equivalent discourse of radical negativity, in which the self discursively negates itself in deference to a wholly *other* 'Other' outside the discourse, looks a lot like parody, apophatic self-abnegation giving way to the deadly serious ironies of the post-war era. Beckett and Artaud stand on either side of a line in history marked by the Holocaust, where to be 'post-' signifies not 'to come after' but an ongoing condition. To adapt Lyotard, in this context, the Holocaust represents a threat "with which modernity is pregnant definitely and endlessly" (Lyotard, 1987, p. 4; Franklin 2013, p. 61). We can't go on. We'll go on.

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