

Of Actors and Automata: Hieroglyphics of Modernism

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The automaton, as capital, and because it is capital, is endowed, in the person of the capitalist, with intelligence and will; it is therefore animated by the longing to reduce to a minimum the resistance offered by that repellent yet elastic natural barrier, man.

—Karl Marx, *Capital*¹

Stage production operates in both a material and an ideological register: the theater works with (and against) emerging (and residual) social, political, legal, economic, and religious institutions not only to represent social reality—a vision of what is (and isn't), of what is (im-)possible—but to fashion human beings as subjects of/in ideology.² To consider the relationship between modernism and the theater, then, we must shift our attention away from an exclusive reading of "modern drama" to a more urgent inquiry into the ways that the forms and practices of theatrical representation produce modern spectators as subjects. The thematics of the "self" in the modern realistic theater are largely familiar: how the drama of Ibsen, Chekhov, or O'Neill, the acting and direction of Stanislavski, and other modes of modern theater represent the body in hysteria, as the symptomatized sign of a troubled interiority tracing its desire (almost) inscrutably on the physical milieu of the stage. As Judith Butler suggests in another context, the body on the modernist stage figures "on its surface the very invisibility of its hidden depth."³ What is striking, though, is that this staged body comes into being at the same moment that another body—the offstage body of the spectator—has become nearly dematerialized, hedged into a zone outside representation. This body, too, is by no means depthless. It also has its hidden dimensions, systematically encoded in the signifying relations of realistic representation: the darkened auditorium, the "fourth wall," the struggle for verisimilitude, the visual objectification of the stage.⁴ If the signs of the actor/character's body signify the mysterious depth that encloses a "self," the

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ostensible absence of the spectators' bodies asserts the presence, power, and authority of their private "experience"—a similarly concealed region of subjectivity. Both character and audience are assigned a subjectivity that counts as subjectivity because it is *not* articulate, objectified, available for revaluation in the economy of representation. The social "environment" framing the covert subjects of modern realistic theater—both the actor-characters onstage and the spectators in the audience—is traced, then, by a palpable anxiety, a concern to keep the "self" from becoming merely another property, another commodity of social and theatrical exchange. This concern for the commodified "self" emerges at all those moments where things and people become interchangeable: where, for instance, objects appear to assume a purpose unavailable to the characters (the manuscript in *Hedda Gabler*), where the subject is assimilated to mechanism (expressionist theater), or where—hauntingly—people are infiltrated by objects, like the dolls that rest beneath Aline's heart in Ibsen's *Master Builder*.

One of the places where the dialectical relationship between subjects and objects, people and things in the modernist theater comes most clearly into view is in the use of puppets, marionettes, or automata. At first glance, puppets might seem to literalize the functioning of the subject in capital, depersonalized by the alienated forces of the economy, history, and society, and modernist automata sometimes do work this way, particularly in expressionist and absurdist theater. But puppets are also understood instrumentally as well as mimetically, for their rhetorical rather than their representational work. Modernist puppets are often seen to channel a direct, nearly unmediated relation between author and audience, a transaction that avoids exchanging the commodified "personalities" of live performers. Puppet theater claims to construct its subjects outside the market relations of the wider society. The speaking statues of Yeats and Maeterlinck, Jarry's "living people pretending to be . . . wooden images of life which pretend to be living people," the anthropomorphized technology of the Italian Futurists, and possibly the dancing hieroglyphs of Artaud: these impassive, even inhuman faces work to claim an authentic and autonomous, human subject—often just offstage.⁵ In this essay, I will explore how stage automata participate in the modern theater's imaging of its audience, its ways of assigning subjectivity in order to produce both a certain kind of audience, and a theory of the audience's work in the theater.⁶

The use of artificial persons to trouble, evade, or epitomize the theatrical exchange, and so to figure the dense relations of theatrical subjectivity is not new to the modernist theater.⁷ We can illuminate the rhetorical work of modernist automata more sharply by bringing to bear an earlier use of puppets to figure the process of subject formation in the theater: I have in mind here Ben Jonson's 1614 comedy, *Bartholomew Fair*. At the end of the play, various wits, cits,

dupes, and crooks are brought through the whirligig of the fair to Leatherhead's puppet booth, to watch a puppet dramatization of *Hero and Leander*. The Puritan Zeal-of-the-Land Busy arrives, and in his effort to stop the play, enters into an extended argument with the Puppet Dionysus, leveling at him the Puritans' most familiar charge against stage acting: that in playing roles, specifically in exchanging the roles of women and men, acting subverts the order of Scripture and of created nature.

Busy: Yes, and my main argument against you is that you are an abomination; for the male among you putteth on the apparel of the female, and the female of the male.

Puppet Dionysus: You lie, you lie, you lie abominably.

Cokes: Good, by my troth, he has given him the lie thrice.

Puppet Dionysus. It is your old stale argument against the players, but it will not hold against the puppets, for we have neither male nor female amongst us. And that thou may'st see, if thou wilt, like a malicious purblind zeal as thou art!

The puppet takes up his garment.

Edgeworth: By my faith, there he has answered you, friend; by plain demonstration. (5.5.86-96)⁸

Jonson's collocation of the fair and the stage and the lightning transformation both of the Puppet Dionysus and of Busy himself establish a keen reciprocity between the slippery effects of theatrical representation and the centrifugal force of commodity capitalism on notions of the human subject.⁹

By relating newly emerging social relations to new conceptions of identity, the puppet-booth finale lends a kind of closure to questions first raised in the Induction to *Bartholomew Fair*, where Jonson stages an elaborate critique of the effects of theater and capital on the representation of identity. In the Induction, the offstage poet sends his emissaries—a Book-keeper and a Scrivener—to write a "contract" with the theatrical public. Reading the "Articles of Agreement indented between the spectators or hearers at the Hope on the Bankside, in the county of Surrey, on the one party, and the author of *Barthol'mew Fair* in the said place and county, on the other party" (Ind. 57-60), the Scrivener runs through a series of unsurprising obligations. For their part, the spectators will

agree to keep their seats, and will judge Jonson's wares in comparison with similar plays; they will restrict their interpretation to the play's manifest meanings, and not search for covert sedition or blasphemy in the play. For his part, the "author promiseth to present them, by us, with a new sufficient play called *Barthol'mew Fair*, merry, and as full of noise as sport, made to delight all, and to offend none; provided they have either the wit or the honesty to think well of themselves" (Ind. 71-75).

As Jean-Christophe Agnew suggests in his searching reading of the play, by attempting to fix identities and relationships through the "conditional credibility" of a contract, the Induction realizes a prevalent anxiety regarding the reification of market relations as social relations.¹⁰ For the Scrivener both constrains the spectators to exert only as much judgment as they have paid for—"It shall be lawful for any man to judge his six pen'orth, his twelve pen'orth, so to his eighteen pence, two shillings, half a crown, to the value of his place" (Ind. 78-80)—and also forbids them to criticize on credit, to retail the judgment of others merely "upon trust" (Ind. 88). In the speculative market of the stage, the poet contracts the price of his wares by determining both the agents and the process of their valuation, since neither the wares, the agents, nor value have an intrinsic "identity" outside the process of exchange. As the Scrivener puts it:

And though the Fair be not kept in the same region that some here, perhaps, would have it, yet think that therein the author hath observed a special decorum, the place being as dirty as Smithfield, and as stinking every whit.

Howsoever, he prays you to believe his ware is still the same, else you will make him justly suspect that he that is so loth to look upon a baby or a hobbyhorse here, would be glad to take up a commodity of them, at any laughter, or loss, in another place. (Ind. 138-46).

The similarity between stinking Smithfield and the theater, and between the protean agents of capital and the volatile audiences of the theater, is what makes the contract necessary, and necessarily ineffective. For by working to fix the value of his wares by fixing the identity and relationship between the poet and the consumer, Jonson implies the impossibility of achieving such certainty. Like Marx, perhaps, Jonson recognizes that "Value . . . does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic."¹¹ If Jonson's stage wares are convertible with the babies and hobbyhorses of Smithfield, then our identity as spectators—or as actors, or authors—is perhaps subject to similar conversion. The theater is not only of the

marketplace, but definitive of it, the place where the actor's performance is the object of sale, and where "identity"—of the text, of the author, of the performers, of the audience—is subject to rapid and variable exchange.

In this sense, the puppet-play finale restates and clarifies Jonson's depiction of the chameleon subjects of theater, first brought into play by the Induction. In his argument with the puppet, Busy takes a position something like that of the offstage poet. Exchanging men's and women's garments, Busy argues, puts the order of the God-given body at hazard; the natural body is revalued by theatrical play. The puppet, however, seems hardly equipped to answer Busy's charge. Neither male nor female, the puppet differs from actors in undergoing no abominable ontological transformation: having no gender, he/she can hardly be said to change it. Yet it is precisely this absence of "identity," this sense of value entirely constructed by the theater, that makes the puppet the perfect hieroglyph of the theater's traffic in the flesh. The puppet shows that Busy's categorical distinction between male and female is untenable in the commodified relations of the theater-market, where everything is convertible into something else. Moreover, the puppet's demonstration not only models the function of actors in the theater, but the construction of spectators as well. When Busy finally admits "I am confuted; the cause hath failed me" (5.5.101), both the puppet and Leatherhead eagerly urge him to "be converted": "Let it go on," he agrees, "For I am changed, and will become a beholder with you" (5.5.104-5). While it is possible to take this transformation as the sign of the stage's triumph over Puritan narrow-mindedness, Busy's "change" from opponent to beholder, antagonist to spectator, confirms the theater's valuation of identity. In the endless exchange of the stage, the sexless puppet Dionysus emblemizes the extent to which all "identity" is waiting to "be converted."

I spend so much time on this tiny scene because the puppet's performance in *Bartholomew Fair* provides an allegory of the construction of subjects in the early modern theater. The puppet's convertibility and Busy's reciprocal "change" imply that one way in which the theater participates in the unevenly emerging discourse of capitalism is by dialecticizing the privileged "subject" as an "object" of theatrical exchange. Like Shakespeare's Coriolanus, whose tragic demise expresses a frustrated inability to act "as if a man were author of himself" (5.3.36), Jonson voices a nostalgia for a fixed identity, a desire that none of his characters can realize in action.¹² Its spokesmen—like Busy—are either "converted" themselves, or (like the old Stage-keeper who opens the play longing for "Master Tarleton's time," Ind. 33) are forced from the stage by new forms of identification.¹³

In some ways, the modernist stage is partly continuous with Jonson's fairground puppet-booth. Modernist puppets and automata, and the more

widespread machining of live performers in twentieth-century theater, often signify not only the interpenetration of theater and market, but a nightmarish extension of Jonson's fundamental fear: the utter evacuation of the self, of "character," of "identity" by the commodifying process of capital and the transformation of social relations it produces (this is the burden, for instance, of plays like Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* and Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*). While Jonson's puppet lives at the intersection between theater and market, the depersonalized performers of Yeats, Maeterlinck, Eliot, Beckett—and possibly of postmodern epigones like Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman—enable a performance that strategically opposes the semiotics of the stage to the forms of life beyond the theater. Automata are enlisted in the service of an emphatically "art" drama, whose cultural capital lies precisely in its avoidance of verisimilitude, a repudiation of the commodified social world and the processes of subjection it entails. For this reason, playwrights often associate marionettes and marionette-like acting with an abstract, "poetic," or symbolic dramatic forms.¹⁴ Because stage acting is so deeply rooted in behavior, it seems to pull the performance back into connection with the world, particularly into a connection with the offstage social world from which stage behavior takes its meaning. Stage acting, that is, produces "character," and invites us to interpret "character," in much the way that it is produced and interpreted outside the theater: the actor's worldly body and personality—"this intrusive little personality," Arthur Symons called it in "An Apology for Puppets"—intrudes on the modernist ideal of a purely aesthetic discourse operating between art and observer.¹⁵ Replacing actors, the gesturing machines of the modernist stage appeared to bring about different relations of subjection in the theater, to imagine different ways of producing an audience.

In 1908, Gordon Craig's "The Actor and the Über-Marionette" programmatically announced many of the concerns that attracted others to puppets, dance, and mime at the turn of the century. Craig opens with the startling claim that "as *material* for the Theatre" the actor "is useless": "In the modern theatre, owing to the use of the bodies of men and women *as their material*, all which is presented there is of an accidental nature." Craig surprisingly argues that what renders the actors' performances "accidental" and not "Art" is precisely what we might think would qualify them for a postromantic aesthetic: the revelation of a distinctive and powerful individual voice, signalled through passionate expression. But for Craig, this *subjectivity* is precisely what disqualifies acting as a form of artistic creation: the actor's emotions and passions turn performance into "a series of accidental confessions."¹⁶

In the modern theater, confession is one of the principal means of asserting and mystifying the subject. The internality ascribed to the heroes of modern

drama often takes the form of a desire to mark out an authentic, romantic "self" independent of the forces of social exchange. In their broken and stammering confessions, characters from Ibsen's *Rosmer* to O'Neill's barroom bums to Miller's salesman to Beckett's disembodied voices claim a zone of transcendent privacy, even as the act of confessing it threatens to fictionalize or theatricalize it. As Craig rightly recognizes, "confession" both summons and objectifies the subject; "confessional" acting signals the commodified nature of the actor's stage identity, and of the transaction between author and audience it mediates. Craig's complaint that "there is nothing more outrageous than that men and women should be let loose on a platform, so that they may expose that which artists refuse to show except veiled, in the form which their minds create,"¹⁷ plainly registers his dismay at the exhibitionistic dimension of modern acting. He shares with many modern playwrights the sense that the individual privacy of the subject is what distinguishes aesthetic experience from the degraded routine of everyday social life. More important, in seeing the actor as giving value to the author's words through his or her own "confession," Craig sees the theater as instrumentalizing the live performer: the actor's privacy, that confessed interiority becomes the medium of exchange between author and audience. "Confession" of another's words, we might say, is the commodity-form of the actor's labor in the theater:

And so to-day we have the strange picture of a man content to give forth the thoughts of another, which that other has given form to while at the same time he exhibits his person to the public view. . . . But all the time, and however long the world may last, the nature in man will fight for freedom, and will revolt against being made a slave or medium for the expression of another's thoughts.¹⁸

In this view, live acting replicates the commodification of subjects in the world beyond the theater. Yet, if the sphere of art is to be circumscribed as an autonomous zone of human "freedom," it will have to stand apart from this process: the modernist effort to define a properly "artistic" theatrical representation distinct from the performative aspect of social life requires a persistent disavowal of the conventional theater's ways of producing its subjects, both on the stage and in the audience. This repudiation takes many forms; even Stanislavski's fetishizing of the actor's interior "life in art"—the "state of 'I am'" that results from the actor's successful "work on himself"—is conceived as a way of mitigating the actor's function in the exchange of public performance, "the foisting on us of the acts and words prescribed by an author."¹⁹ For Stanislavski, the "reality" of the subconscious life produced onstage is the index of the

production's achieved verisimilitude; Craig's übermarionette, on the other hand, gives shape to a desire for a culturally privileged aesthetic sphere held to operate outside the political, economic, and ideological channels of social life, a theater that doesn't "confuse us into connecting actuality and art."²⁰ For it is not merely the "character" that the übermarionette represents who is spared the tawdry process of market-like exchange. By claiming to relate author and audience by means other than exchange, Craig's marionette reveals the more ambitious goal of this theater: to refashion the audience by subjecting the spectator to a distinctive interpretive activity, the autonomous discipline of art.

In spite of its preciousness, Craig's theater is related to the more widespread "machining" of modernist performers, the formalization and abstraction of human gesture and movement characteristic of a range of experiments from Maeterlinck and Yeats to Beckett, Wilson, and beyond. Although the machine may at first seem antithetical to "Art" drama of the kind associated with Craig, the signifying work of the modernist puppet is in some ways reminiscent of the relations of industrial modernization, and points to an uneasy imbalance between modernist aesthetics and cultural change. Writing about machines in *Capital*, Marx suggests that machinery ("as capital, and because it is capital") animates a desire to render "the weak bodies and the strong wills" of the worker obsolete and irrelevant. The crushing, alienating force of surplus-value production arises from "the longing"—instrumentalized by machines—"to reduce to a minimum the resistance offered by that repellent yet elastic natural barrier, man."²¹ Marx's depersonalized dystopia is a familiar trope of modern art, captured in the factory scenes of Lang's *Metropolis*, or—with a sentimentality perhaps rivalling Marx's—by the image of Chaplin caught among the cogs in *Modern Times*. This vision, of course, inverts the industrial utopia promised by the agents of modernization: a utopia in which machines make labor easy or nonexistent, supporting a leisured class whose relation to commodified labor really is transcendent, a utopia in which the demands of life approach the volitional condition of art.

The dialectical relation between machines and the modernist subject is visible in the theatrical arena most readily identified with the worship of machines, Futurist performance. In many respects, of course, the style of Futurist performance worked to disrupt the aestheticized passivity attributed to the spectators of symbolist experiments like Craig's or Maeterlinck's. In their famous manifesto "The Futurist Synthetic Theatre" (1915), Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Emilio Settimelli, and Bruno Corra call for Futurist production to be brief and shocking; to replace the narrative order of conventional theater and cinema with a montage of striking and disjunctive images; to repudiate mimesis by staging an autonomous and purely theatrical reality; to excite sensation in the

audience rather than intellectual or interpretive activity.²² The subject of modernism works to construct coherent experience from brief moments of disconnected perception, fragments shored against ruin. In this regard, the Futurists' stylistic agenda is cognate with modernist literary practice more generally, from *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land* to the novels of Proust and Joyce. But the Futurists extended this agenda to the stage, through a massive refunctioning of the semiosis of theater. As Michael Kirby notes, "It is tempting to make the generalization that with the Futurists stage decor became a machine that replaced the actor while acting and costuming turned the performer into a machine and an element of scenic design."²³ In his "Futurist Scenography" (1915), Enrico Prampolini outlines one such design:

The stage will no longer be a colored backdrop but a *colorless electromechanical architecture, powerfully vitalized by chromatic emanations from a luminous source*, produced by electric reflectors with multicolored panes of glass, arranged, coordinated analogically with the psyche of each scenic action.

With the luminous irradiations of these beams, of these planes of colored lights, the dynamic combinations will give marvelous results of mutual permeation, of intersection of lights and shadows. From these will arise vacant abandonments, exultant, luminous corporealities.²⁴

Prampolini's description concisely captures the distinctively Futurist effort to displace the human subject as an agent of the spectacle, either as author or performer. As he remarks in "Futurist Scenic Atmosphere" (1924), "I consider the actor as a *useless element* in theatrical action, and, moreover, dangerous to the future of theatre. The actor is the element of interpretation that presents the greatest unknowns and the smallest guarantees."²⁵ As they did for Craig and, later, for Beckett ("The best possible play is one in which there are no actors, only the text"), actors represent a challenge to modernist aesthetics, an elastic natural resistance to the full objectification needed to situate the spectator as a thoroughly autonomous observer.²⁶ As Marjorie Perloff suggests, the Futurists' "dispersal of what Marinetti called 'the obsessive I,'" operates through the objectification of interiorized psychology, of emotion, of the "subject"; in her apt phrase, "Emotion, no longer personalized, is projected onto the world of objects."²⁷

Severing the expressive bond between author and art-object, though, the Futurists paradoxically claim to transform the spectator into a kind of participant. In "Futurist Painting and Sculpture" (1914), for instance, Umberto Boccioni

remarks, "A picture is not an irradiating architectural structure in which the artist, *rather than the object*, forms a central core. It is the emotive, architectural environment which creates sensation and completely involves the observer."²⁸ And yet the kind of involvement assigned to the observer perhaps suggests that much as the author's emotions have been projected onto objects, so too the audience of Futurist performance has been rendered as object, locked in the automatic embrace of the stage machine. Prampolini's discussion of acting in "Futurist Scenography" recalls Boccioni's objectified canvas:

In the final synthesis, human actors will no longer be tolerated, like children's marionettes or today's supermarionettes recommended by recent reformers; neither one nor the other can sufficiently express the multiple aspects conceived by the playwright.

In the totally realizable epoch of Futurism we shall see the luminous dynamic architectures of the stage emanate from chromatic incandescences that, climbing tragically or showing themselves voluptuously, will inevitably arouse new sensations and emotional values in the spectator.

Vibrations, luminous forms (produced by electric currents and colored gases) will wriggle and writhe dynamically, and these authentic actor-gases of an unknown theatre will have to replace living actors. By shrill whistles and strange noises these actor-gases will be able to give the unusual significations of theatrical interpretations quite well; they will be able to express these multiform emotive tonalities with much more effectiveness than some celebrated actor or other can with his displays. These exhilarant, explosive gases will fill the audience with joy or terror, and the audience will perhaps become an actor itself as well.²⁹

Fulfilling Craig's conception of theater, Prampolini transforms his actors into mechanized signifiers in a technological landscape. Similarly, his audience no longer participates in the transaction of theatrical meaning and value; as an observing consumer, the Futurist audience's cathartic joy and terror, its *acting*, is fully programmed by the apparatus of the stage. For all the effort to appeal to a mass audience, and to reinvent the dynamic of modern industrialized life as a mode of popular art, Futurist performance finally can offer its participants only the illusion of participation. The machining of the stage necessarily becomes a device for machining the spectator: the dialogue of authority is a one-way conversation in the Futurist theater, in which the maestro of the stage manipulates the lights, the actor-gases, and the responsive audience as well. Although actor-

machines replace the tawdry commodification of the actor's personality, Prampolini's theater is a total institution, in which both the stage performance and the "experience" of the audience are objectified products of an absent though palpable design. In Jonson's public theater, the spectator's performance is expected, unscripted, participatory: that's the joke (like most jokes, not really a joke to Jonson) behind *Bartholomew Fair's* Induction. Futurist theater may invite the audience to "become an actor itself," but it legitimates only a certain kind of performance. As in the conventional, realistic theater the Futurists claimed to oppose, the Futurist spectator emerges only as a register of aesthetic, emotive response. Like the nightmare victim of some visionary home of the future, where labor-saving machines create a prison of enforced leisure, the spectator of Futurist theater is a captive of consciousness, a gassy essence subject to the design of machines.³⁰

Much as in Craig's übermarionette theater, Futurist performance erases the value-creating work of the performer in order to claim a privileged form of aesthetic consumption, one that appears to avoid commodifying the "identity" of the participants. If Jonson's puppet booth questions the relational "identity" of its protean subjects—actors *and* audiences, Dionysus *and* Busy—it never questions their agency; in the Futurist theater, the audience appears finally as the product, not the agent, of theater. In this sense, the radical disruptions of Futurist performance style mask a fundamental complicity with the rhetoric of bourgeois realism, a rhetoric that works to produce a "disinterested" observer of the status quo. Both stigmatizing and objectifying the work of actor and audience, the Futurist theater literalizes the ideology of industrial modernization as its theatrical rhetoric: as machines replace actors, the audience is liberated into a zone of fully internalized "experience," experience which is at once privileged and denied agency, and so denied the capacity to create value.

This process is also visible in Vsevolod Meyerhold's experiments with Constructivist staging and biomechanical acting in the 1920s, which refigured the actors' bodies in ways resembling the Italian Futurists' use of machines. Calling for a theater "based on the general physical laws of technology," Meyerhold machined his performers as a way of valuing their acting as labor in a post-revolutionary workers' theater.³¹ Clothed in similar overalls, using gesture to emphasize architectural features of the set, often acting in unison in routine or machine-like ways, Meyerhold's actors were not vaporous vagaries, but workers in the factory of theatrical production. The Futurists sublimate labor, represent the spectator as a zone of aesthetic response; Meyerhold, in contrast, appears to bring the spectator to the shop floor. Indeed, through a "Taylorization of the theatre," Meyerhold—like Craig—hoped to displace the distracting personality of the individual performer, subjecting his workers to a regimen of signification

in which there was no wasted effort, each gesture a "hieroglyph with its own peculiar meaning" immediately decipherable to the audience.³² Yet although the Taylorizing of actor-workers displaces the performer's privileged "subjectivity" (most immediately, the "I am" of Meyerhold's teacher/rival Stanislavski) as the justifying focus of stage production, it creates an effect much like that of Futurist theater: a modernist "theater-product," a sense of theater as an objectified thing-to-be-viewed, rather than—as it might have seemed to Jonson—as a process, in which the position and power of the performers (actors, characters, spectators) are negotiable, changeable.³³ Like Craig's übermarionettes and the Futurists' scenic machine, Meyerhold's workers are themselves machined by the machines-for-acting they appear to operate. Regarding "the art of the actor" as "the art of plastic forms in space," Meyerhold produces his actors as hieroglyphs to be read, rather than as valuing and transforming "art" through the process of their own labor.³⁴

Machines, in this sense, dialecticize the subject. They produce the commodified subject of surplus-value production, supporting the work of machines, objectified as a machine; and they produce the aestheticized individual subject of capital, released from work, and so from the material body altogether. The use of acting machines in the modern theater is part of this dialectic of subjection and animates even the apparently revolutionary theater of Artaud. I want to turn now to a final instance of the exchange of subjects in the modern theater: the signifying bodies of Artaud's "theater of cruelty." Negating the boundary between "theater and culture," Artaud's theater not only claims to stand apart from the productive process of social exchange, but to be a theater entirely without a product, and so without exchange between producers and consumers, actors and spectators.

We can take Artaud's remarks "On the Balinese Theater" as an instance of how the body-in-cruelty is rendered as something not "accidental" to the theater but essential to it. What impresses Artaud about Balinese dance is that its signification arises "only in proportion to its degree of objectification *on the stage*." The event is not governed by a text, an author, a logos, whose offstage meaning or intent is re-presented and so revalued by theatrical discourse. The dancers, those "animated hieroglyphs," use a conventional system of signs that has meaning only in theatrical production itself. As a result, we register the experience of the Balinese dancers as "a precise meaning which strikes us only intuitively but with enough violence to make useless any translation into logical discursive language."³⁵ Much as the performance does not represent something else translated into the currency of the stage, so too performance cannot be represented, exchanged in another language or discourse. Pure theater is purely autonomous, its meaning and value latent within it, consumed by it. For this

reason, Artaud himself is speechless before this "pure theater," able to characterize it only in a synaesthetic language that realizes the subject (himself) as a kind of absence: "all the senses interpenetrate, as if through strange channels hollowed out in the mind itself."³⁶ Since this "superabundance of impressions" is generated "in a language to which it seems we no longer have the key," our experience reciprocates the autonomy of the performance as a whole: it speaks "a language of gesture to be developed in space, a language without meaning except in the circumstances of the stage."³⁷

Craig's puppets simplify and objectify recognizably human behavior; Futurist machines reduce the author's expression to a program of lights and sounds; Meyerhold's Taylorized actors are emplotted in a schematic economy of efficient motion. Artaud's Balinese dancers employ a "regulated and impersonal" discourse with their bodies, a "systematic depersonalization" that keeps confession at a distance.³⁸ Yet as with the übermarionettes, the machining of the dancers' bodies, the application of a purely theatrical technology of gesture, has the effect of liberating the audience into a nearly indescribable, purely subjective realm.³⁹ Much as there are "no more masterpieces," there are no agents of representation in Artaud's theater, no actors, no spectators: in our ecstasy, "the magic identification is made: WE KNOW IT IS WE WHO WERE SPEAKING."⁴⁰ Artaud extends the Futurists' claim that the objects onstage absorb and involve the spectators, placing the audience's experience at the center of the performance environment; in Artaud's theater, we become the subjects of theater by being transformed through an unspeakable process into signifying machines ourselves. It may be that Artaud's theater breaks down the boundary between theater and culture, but in suggesting that the audience is identified with/through those machined performers, Artaud seems to literalize the exchange relations of production in the world at large. Eliding the "elastic natural barrier" between machine and man, Artaud's signifying machines produce a spectator whose only freedom is the freedom of consciousness.

The power of machines is seductive, and the power they seduce us with is the power to be like them. Jonson's puppet booth claims the identity between the sexless puppet and the spectator: the "self" is readily convertible in the theater's open market. Artaud liberates the audience from "Occidental" culture by fusing a different identity between performers and spectators: *both* emerge as automata within the hermetic, "autonomous" process of theater itself. How else *can* we describe these uncanny beings, whose relentless signification serves only to problematize them as agents, as legible subjects, to hollow out an untranslatable presence that appears as an absence? Fredric Jameson suggests that modernity can be taken to "describe the way 'modern' people feel about themselves; the word would seem to have something to do not with the products (either cultural

or industrial) but with the producers and the consumers, and how they feel either producing the products or living among them."⁴¹ Acting machines—Artaud's as well as Prampolini's, Meyerhold's, or Craig's—point to a slightly different question, one about how we feel producing the products or *being produced* by them. Modernist puppets claim to produce the spectator as a transcendent subject, momentarily inhabiting an aesthetic sphere apart from the sphere of commodity production, the sphere in which we live. The puppets can't speak to us, and Artaud's victim can only send illegible signals through the flames: the difficulty of using such machines in the modernist theater to point to a transcendent subject is the difficulty of suggesting what such transcendence would look like, feel like. To raise the question of agency in this way also implies a continuity between modernist stage automata and the work of cyborgs and cyberculture in contemporary accounts of culture and subjection, where the opposition between machine and organism is reconceived as an undecidable boundary, figuring the extent to which the body itself is now the site of technocultural struggle.⁴² Whether understood as a strategy of resistance or a mode of capitulation, such "cyborgian yearnings" (Dery 522) seem to flow from a fully modernist anxiety.⁴³ As the actress-in-the-machine of Beckett's *Not I* discloses, the machining of the body onstage produces only a hellish desire to avoid identification, presence, the "subject" altogether, the final refining of that repellent yet elastic natural barrier: "what? . . . who? . . . no! . . . she!"⁴⁴

Notes

I would like to thank my colleagues Susan Manning and Frank Whigham for several comments which sharpened my thinking about modernism, performance, and automata.

1. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1972) 405.

2. On ideology, see Göran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology*, (London: Verso, 1980), chapter 1.

3. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) 134.

4. On the rhetoric of realism and the production of the spectator, see W. B. Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of Theater* (Berkeley and London: U of California P, 1992) chapter 2.

5. Arthur Symons, *Studies in Seven Arts: The Collected Works of Arthur Symons* (New York: Martin Secker, 1924) 9: 238.

6. There is a kind of modernist performance that seems more immediately to resonate with aesthetic innovation in other fields: the kind of performance associated with dance, with Dada and surrealist performance, and (though I would disagree here) with Futurism. Such spectacles, much like "performance art" today, often took place in a cultural space largely, though vaguely, differentiated from the space of the dramatic theater and the performance of plays. This differentiation—both between spheres of "performance" and their subsequent separation in historical accounts of modernist

theater—points to the difficulty of accounting for the ideological work of "performance" modes with a vocabulary and methodology derived from a strictly literary history.

7. On Hobbes's use of "artificial persons," and on theater and market relations generally, see Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1570* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1986); as will be clear from my discussion of *Bartholomew Fair*, I am more generally indebted to Agnew's account of the play.

8. Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, ed. Eugene M. Waith (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1976). Subsequent references to this edition are incorporated in the text.

9. Jonson's habitual lampooning of audiences, the inclusion of plays (though not *Bartholomew Fair*) in his folio *Works* of 1616, and his lifelong search for patronage and status, point to a desire to situate the "Author," and his creation beyond the huckstering of an increasingly commodified literary and theatrical marketplace. The puppet's "plain demonstration" is conventionally taken as a defense of the stage; more recently Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have argued that Jonson's staging of the fair is part of a wider negotiation of the status of authorship, both a repudiation of the degrading marketplace of the emerging book trade and an invocation of its grotesque, subversive power. In this view, Jonson sees authorship "in accordance with the ideal of the individual which was emerging within bourgeois culture. . . . Authorship became a visionary embodiment of this ideal to the degree that it represented itself as transcendent to the 'common' place of the market"; see *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986) 77. Indeed, as Joseph Loewenstein argues, Jonson's Induction "purports to change the literary market contractually" by representing Jonson, rather than the players, as "the true publisher of the play"; see "The Script in the Marketplace," in *Representing the English Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Berkeley and London: U of California P, 1988) 267.

10. Agnew, *Worlds Apart* 111.

11. Marx, *Capital* 1:322.

12. William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington (Glenview: Scott, Foresman, 1980).

13. To put a finer point on it, Jonson is nostalgic not for fixed identity, but for a more stable network of social relations within which a sense of identity can emerge; as Peter Stallybrass has argued, in seventeenth-century England, "individuality" was conceptualized largely as a relational term; see "Shakespeare, the Individual, and the Text," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) 593-610.

14. Marionettes are also associated, for similar reasons, with the formalized surface of the classical tradition. As Arthur Symons suggested in "An Apology for Puppets" (1903), "it may be instructive for us to consider that we could not give a play of Ibsen's to marionettes, but that we could give them the 'Agamemnon'"; "An Apology for Puppets," in *Plays, Acting and Music: A Book of Theory*, rev. ed. (New York: Dutton, 1909) 7.

15. Symons, "An Apology for Puppets" 3.

16. Edward Gordon Craig, "The Actor and the Über-Marionette," in *On the Art of the Theatre* (London: William Heinemann, 1911; New York: Theatre Arts, 1957) 56, 58.

17. 58.

18. 60. In an essay on "The Histrionic Temperament" (1892), the London theater critic A. B. Walkley plainly stigmatizes the likeness between the staged self and the commodity, in ways that imply a similar resistance to the commodification of the off-stage subjects in the audience: "to make a public show of yourself for money, to be always expressing ideas not your own, and emotions which you do not feel . . . is to violate the dignity of a citizen and a free man, to resign the 'captaincy of your soul'"; "The Histrionic Temperament," in *Playhouse Impressions* (London: William Heinemann, 1892) 235-36.

19. Constantin Stanislavski discusses the actor's "work on himself" in *An Actor Prepares*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts, 1936) 275; he mentions the relationship between actor and author in *Building a Character*, trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (New York: Theatre Arts, 1949) 279.
20. Craig, "The Actor and the Über-Marionette" 81.
21. Marx, *Capital* 1:405.
22. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Emilio Settimelli, and Bruno Corra, "The Futurist Synthetic Theatre," in *Futurist Performance*, ed. Michael Kirby, trans. Victoria Nes Kirby (New York: PAJ Publications, 1986) 196-202.
23. Kirby, *Futurist Performance* 91.
24. Enrico Prampolini, "Futurist Scenography," in *Futurist Performance* 204-205.
25. 229.
26. Beckett is quoted by Deirdre Bair in *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 513.
27. Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1986) 41.
28. Boccioni is quoted in Perloff, *The Futurist Moment* 101. On the Futurists' rhetorical involvement and construction of the audience, see Perloff's excellent chapter, "Violence and Precision: The Manifesto as Art Form" 80-115.
29. Prampolini, "Futurist Scenography" 206.
30. On the maestro at the machine, see Kirby's discussion of Giacomo Balla's staging of Stravinsky's *Feu d'Artifice* in 1917: "Balla filled the stage with what might best be described as a tremendously enlarged three-dimensional version of one of his non-objective paintings. Irregular prismatic forms jutted up at various angles to different heights above the stage floor. These solid forms were made of wood; Balla's working drawings for their construction still exist. They were then covered with cloth and painted. On top of most of these large irregular shapes were smaller forms covered with translucent fabric and painted with brightly colored zigzags, rays, and bars. These smaller forms, which occupied the central areas of the stage composition, could be illuminated from inside. The entire grouping of shapes was displayed against a black background.
- Balla built a 'keyboard' of switches in the prompter's box, so that he could watch and listen to the performance while he 'played' the lights"; *Futurist Performance* 83-84.
31. Meyerhold is quoted in Edward Braun, *The Theatre of Meyerhold: Revolution on the Modern Stage* (New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1979) 165.
32. Vsevolod Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, ed. and trans. Edward Braun (London: Eyre Methuen; New York: Hill and Wang, 1969) 199, 200.
33. Meyerhold, of course, was well aware of Russian Futurism, and the similarity between the Constructivist stage and Futurism is captured by the designer Alexander Fevralsky's description of the design for Meyerhold's production of Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe*: "My approach to the production was cubist. I saw the box-stage as the frame of a picture and the actors as contrasting elements (in cubism every object is a contrasting element in relation to another object). Planning the action on three or four levels, I tried to deploy the actors in space predominantly in vertical compositions in the manner of the latest style of painting; the actors' movements were meant to accord rhythmically with the elements of the settings"; qtd. in Braun, *The Theatre of Meyerhold* 150. This brief account of one phase of Meyerhold's notoriously varied career necessarily simplifies the range of influences on his machining of actors, influences which certainly qualified their stage performance; I have in mind not only Meyerhold's earlier involvement with symbolist experiments, but also his deep and long lasting attraction to circus and *commedia dell' arte*.
34. Meyerhold is quoted in Braun, *The Theatre of Meyerhold* 165.

35. Antonin Artaud, "On the Balinese Theater," in *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove, 1958) 53-54.

36. 57.

37. 57, 61.

38. 58.

39. Of course, in Craig's theater the nullity of the puppet enables an aesthetic communication between poet and spectator, and Artaud is naturally suspicious of what this extra-theatrical authority implies: that the stage mediates between subjects (author, spectator) constituted elsewhere. For an Author, like the "masterpiece," necessarily renders theatrical production secondary, a process for reproducing, retailing something not fully present in the theater. For the classic, if troubled, statement of this issue in Artaud, see Jacques Derrida, "The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978) 232-50.

40. Artaud, "On the Balinese Theater" 67.

41. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) 310.

42. See also Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

43. Mark Dery, "Cyberculture," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 91 (1992): 522.

44. Samuel Beckett, *Not I*, in *The Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove, 1984).

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