

Investigating a Dark New Realm: Kris Verdonck's 'Untitled', 'In Void' and 'Something(Out of Nothing)' as Case Studies.

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Abstract: *The present paper draws on Belgian theater maker and visual artist Kris Verdonck as one of the influential and globally significant pioneers in the realm of New Media Dramaturgy. Diving into three of his recent, contentious performances, namely, Untitled, In Void and Something (Out of Nothing) as case studies, this paper examines Verdonck's ways of responding to the media saturated and technologically - constricted culture, with the aim of decoding the man - machine tension and unearthing the dark undertones, the innovative tools of intermediality, critique and agency manifested in the complex context of his likely to cause argument and disagreement multi- sensory performances.*

To better frame the way each performance establishes its performative strategy and translates its ideas into practice and compositional awareness, the present paper draws on two approaches - Anthropocentrism, as a human - centered philosophical perspective and Post humanism, as a mode of existential inquiry and deconstructive, counter project adapted by Verdonck for the sake of criticizing and undermining this anthropocentric value system.

This study reaches the conclusion that the selected performances are not nihilist works without a critical faculty. Arguably, instead, they critically reflect changes in performance, identity and politics related to culture, mediate humans' experience, machinic-driven current sick condition, and hold a critique on anthropocentrism by creating a post humanist performative encounter, a realm of visual experimentation in which the spectator is invited to feel time, space and objects differently.

Keywords: Post humanism - Anthropocentrism - New Media Dramaturgy - Performativity - The Uncanny - Actor Network Theory.

البحث في أغوار مجال سوداوى جديد : دراسة حالة "بدون عنوان " و "فى الفراغ" و "شئ من لا شئ" لكريس فيردونك

تتناول الورقة البحثية الحالية باقة مختارة من أهم أعمال الصانع المسرحى والفنان البصرى البلجيكى كريس فيردونك، باعتباره أحد أهم الرواد المتميزين والمؤثرين فى مجال "دراماتورج الإعلام الجديد" (الفن المسرحى للإعلام الجديد). كما تبحث الدراسة الحالية فى أساليب استجابة فيردونك وتفاعله مع الثقافة المشبعة إعلامياً وتكنولوجياً، وذلك من خلال تحليل ودراسة حالة ثلاثة من أحدث عروضه المسرحية المثيرة للجدل، وهم : "بدون عنوان"، "فى الفراغ"، و"شئ من لا شئ". الهدف من هذا التحليل هو تفسير الصراع بين الآلة والإنسان وكشف الطبيعة السوداوية والطرق النقدية المبتكرة والسياق المركب لعروض فيردونك المسرحية.

وفى محاولة لتجسيد طريقة كل عرض مسرحى فى إرساء استراتيجيته الأدائية وفى ترجمة أفكاره التوعوية، تتناول الباحثة فى هذه الدراسة نهجان وهما : "المركزية البشرية" (رؤية فلسفية تتمحور حول الإنسان) "وما بعد الإنسانية" (أسلوب تحرى وجودى ومخطط تفكيكى مضاد). تبنى فيردونك النظرية الأخيرة من أجل نقد النظام القيمى القائم على المركزية البشرية وإضعاف مكانته بل والقضاء عليه.

تستنتج الباحثة فى نهاية الورقة البحثية الحالية أن العروض المسرحية المختارة ليست أعمالاً عقيمة بلا أى ملكات نقدية، وإنما –كما تزعم الباحثة –هى أعمالاً تعكس بشكل نقدى التحولات فى العرض المسرحى وفى الهوية الإنسانية وفى السياسات المتعلقة بالثقافة الآلية. كما تنقل هذه الأعمال الواقع السقيم للتجربة الإنسانية بل وتنتقد أيضاً فلسفة "المركزية البشرية" –كل هذا من خلال خلق مشاهد أدائية لما بعد الإنسانية، وابتداع مجالاً تجريبياً بصرياً يدرك فيه المشاهد الزمان والمكان والأشياء بشكل مختلف.

الكلمات المفتاحية :

ما بعد الإنسانية –المركزية البشرية –دراماتورج الإعلام الجديد –مبدأ الأدائية –نظرية الغرابة –نظرية شبكة الممثل.

Investigating a Dark New Realm: Kris Verdonck's '*Untitled*' , '*In Void*' and '*Something(Out of Nothing)*' as Case Studies.

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The present paper draws on the influential and globally significant intermedial practices of the Belgian theatre maker and visual artist Kris Verdonck by diving into three of his recent, contentious works: '*Untitled*'(2014) , '*In Void*' (2016) and '*Something (Out of Nothing)*' (2019). Unearthing Verdonck's vision of a new paradigm theatre with new artistic forms and strategies in these works , this paper thus aims at examining Verdonck's ways of responding to the media saturated and technologically - constricted culture, interrogating human presence, and decoding the man - machine tension, while inspecting throughout how each work establishes its frame, sets up its post - humanist critique, develops its dark undertones and creates its new spaces, new bodies, new movements, and new kind of engagement.

This is accomplished by drawing on two approaches - '*Anthropocentrism*', as a human - centered philosophical perspective developed during the European Enlightenment, and '*Post humanism*', as a mode of existential inquiry and a deconstructive, counter project adopted by Verdonck for the sake of criticizing and undermining this anthropocentric value system. Once this ground work is laid, this paper then moves on to other forms of analytical philosophies and theorizations such as *Performativity*, *Actor Network Theory* (ANT), *New Materialism*, and *the Notion of the Uncanny* .The researcher's aim is to better construct a critical Post humanist frame work, resonating with the selected mediatized practices of Verdonck as perfect case studies, reflecting changes in performance, identity and politics related to digital culture.

Apart from appreciating and being fascinated with the emergent interwoven paradigm known as *New Media Dramaturgy* (NMD) that has become a major field of interest in today's digital humanities, the researcher realizes that it is specifically the works of Kris Verdonck that require a more theatrical research. Positioning Verdonck's oeuvre at the center of the above-mentioned approach, the researcher does not only find a body of work that has stimulated a new form of media dramaturgy, but that is rich in thought and scope. Verdonck's incorporation of media technology on stage, his shifting corporalities in theatrical installations,

and his innovative strategies in reflecting on the dehumanization, objectification, and radical commodification that characterize the western society today- are among the appreciated guidelines.

Questions addressed in this paper, thus, include: What does the dramaturgy and practice of Kris Verdonck tell us about our contemporary human conditions? i.e, what exhibiting relations to culture and society do they make? Specifically, in what ways are his complicated, multi - sensory performances to be considered experimental forms of expression, ultimate stadiums of dehumanization, and innovative tools of critique, resistance and agency that are likely to cause disagreement and argument. Accordingly, what are the practices, aesthetics and thematic connections in Verdonck's works that have contributed to rendering these performances incredibly memorable, compelling, evocative, invigorating, and life- altering experiences for their spectators?

From this perspective , it is hoped that this paper would offer invaluable insight into some of Verdonck's bodies of work , add layers to his performances, and stimulate further future discussions of the issues raised.

To better frame Verdonck's analysis of the urgent question of what is to be human in an age of rapid, technological, scientific, cultural and social evolution, the researcher deems it appropriate first to detail several threads that are relevant to the development of the paper's line of inquiry. Accordingly, the present paper begins by laying a basis for understanding how contemporary technologies have led to the formation of post human beings, while examining the social implications of deep mediatization on the broad field of performance. Meanwhile, this paper develops an account of new media dramaturgy and its emerging transitional strategies in theatre making, elaborates the cultural and perspectival shifts that accompany such transitions, and investigates the different aspects relating to Kris Verdonck's body of work as a notable contemporary theater practitioner and visual artist.

Today's fast-paced society is constantly changing and ascendingly endorsing ways of multi-tasking and efficiency. One aspect that seems to change the most rapidly, frequently, unexpectedly and dramatically is technology. Almost every day brings announcements of a new, major scientific breakthrough than one could ever expect, keep up, predict, or even imagine. As such, with the advent of machine learning and the expansion of robotics, drones, the internet of things, and big data, almost every aspect of our everyday lives and every sector of our society have

been infiltrated by and crammed with modern day technologies.

However, as technology has been gaining momentum and as automation has been entering the inmost recesses of human existence, the lives of mankind begin to change - in some ways for the better, and in other ways for the worse. Regardless of machineries' ability to accomplish and automate everyday tasks, give humans easy access to information ,optimize their time management and, most of all, render their lives easier and much more convenient, these machineries have fundamentally altered what it means to be human (Leonhard 33-46).

Surviving in a technologically–besieged,fast-paced environment as this and allowing machines to independently and quite simply recursively go beyond their original programming, humans are thus led into a very worrisome territory where they are caught up in the swell. Continuing to make these advanced forms of technology smarter, more capable and more powerful, humans have thus allowed machines to take away their human drive and determination. Apart from changing the humans' habits and breaking the bonds that hold them together, machines have shattered the humans' sense of identity, have demolished their perception of reality, and have rendered them risk all the things they hold dear and dispense with all the values that give their lives meaning. As stated by Clay Shirky in his influential book 'Here Comes Everbody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations,'“ It's when a technology becomes normal, then ubiquitous, and finally so pervasive as to be invisible, that the really profound changes happen” (105).

Creating a kind of existential chaos, machines have thus left humans no place for reflection , have reduced them to disposable and useless objects - products or commodities, subordinated to particular functions or purposes. As such, the leading role is no longer for mankind but is set aside for devices and machines which have had now the capacity “ to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of human beings.” (Agamben14).

With these 21st century tremendous technological advances also came tremendously transformative changes and mega shifts in the domain of theatre. The challenge of digital technologies and the threat of automation have made the possibilities within the theatre to expand. Dramaturges have started to experiment more with technological objects on stage from the moment they became available , thus, stimulating the growth and progression of a new, different and interwoven approach - an emergent paradigm that is called *New Media Dramaturgy* 'NMD'. Creating new interactions and possibilities, technology thus has made

several contemporary theatre makers unlock alternative modes of expression and representation. This has been done by experimenting with the presence and absence of human performers, replacing these performers by performing 'technological' non-human objects, and changing their practices and ideas in performance for the sake of reviving the idea of critique as an event or action, a state or situation (Eckersall 68-75).

A collaborative work by three of Australia's leading scholars in theatre and performance studies, Peter Eckersall, Helena Grehan, and Edward Sheer, NMD is a new interweave of media technology, live performance and cultural practices - an approach to theater informed by what technology itself seems to want to say. Changing practices and ideas in performance, NMD undergoes dramatic transformations in the ways that these performances engage with aspects of politics, society and culture. Being shaped in other formats beyond the traditional theater, it is a practice that challenges formerly accepted artistic criteria and is ultimately cut loose from its traditional attachment to a pre-written text. Experimenting with technical and technological elements that are not merely scenographic, but central dramaturgical components, NMD utilizes high definition video projections, internet connections, advanced sound systems, drones and robotics - thus creating new forms of bodies, movements, atmospheres, spaces, interactions, possibilities, and affective states (Sigal 231-232).

Changing the status of the pre-written text as the primary source of theater, NMD disintegrates notions of character, dramaturgy and unity and gives way to improvisation and other means of theatrical composition and creation - thus suggesting new ways of integrating presence and current societal phenomena. As Hans Thies - Lehman notes in his seminal book of Post Dramatic Theatre (2006), the incorporation of technology also impacted contemporary dramaturgy and the literary text lost its prominence. Interweaving a much wider variety of elements and transforming them into a single art work, NMD stimulates the growth of interdisciplinarity in performing arts and opens way for the development of hybrid genres that intersected theatre with film, dance or installation art (17-19).

Dealing with new types of audience that perceive and consume art at a much faster rhythm, and more informed and more keen to take part in art, NMD changes the experience of live arts for the spectators by negotiating their roles as spectators and critics. More precisely speaking, in NMD, as Adrian Heathfield explains, "wherever there is a performance

taking shape there is a set of dramaturgical questions being asked and dramaturgical principles being tested" (115). No longer dramatic texts, NMD - using new media as a means of aesthetic innovation and compositional awareness - speak to altered ontological and epistemological conditions of the media - saturated, globalized world, thus changing the experience of live arts for the spectator. Hardly working within one specific medium anymore, New Media practitioners combine context, content, form and audience, upgrade, and mutilate media in order to generate interesting mutations.

Among the theatre practitioners who challenge the artistic disciplines by creating new interactions, possibilities and potentialities on stage is the Belgian theater maker and visual artist Kris Verdonck.

Defying any categorization, most of Verdonck's large and ever-growing oeuvre brings the moral and psychological perplexities raised by technology to the fore, thus making audiences question the dangerous beauty and poisonous impact of technology, and the little ways in which it has infiltrated our lives. Producing new dramaturgies that waver between performative installations, theatrical performances and choreographies, Verdonck's body of work provokes questions like : How do humans tend to make themselves superfluous, redundant and replaceable? How do they create their own machinic doubles that will eventually be able to substitute them in ways humans cannot foresee now ? What space remains for humans here? And, what is to be human in an age of rapid, technological, scientific, cultural and social evolution?

Freeing himself from the primacy of the text in favour of the energy of bodies, movement and material, Verdonck makes use of various media technologies and incorporates sophisticated technological devices to blur binary distinctions between time and space, animate and inanimate figures, and materiality and immateriality. Instead of being just instruments, objects, machines, robots, mascots, projections and internet connections populate Verdonck's theatre in such a way that have become the performers, or more precisely speaking, be part of Verdonck's work. The marionette, the object figure, the robot, the phantasm and the mascot - in their diverse manifestations, all offer reflections, deconstructions and potentialities concerning the machine in the post humanist world.

Emphasizing the aspect of dehumanization and referring more to the profanatory use of objects, machines and technologies, all these figures do share the fact that they are entities that will remain 'after the end', and thus survive human kind. Hence, for as long as Verdonck's performances last, these figures are not things or objects but entities - reminders that humans have become unnecessary and unmindful, that

they might no longer have strong monopoly, and that this situation of performing robots and devices, without the help of any human is the decisive future. An ultimate stadium of dehumanization, Verdonck's whole (complicated) technical constructions thus - apart from being a process that mediates our experience, knowledge, actions or interactions - have no other goal than to question scientific and technological innovations as much as they incorporate them.

Aiming to generate a challenging experience for a contemporary spectator living in a digital era, Verdonck's post humanism leads to other artistic renderings of ways in which subjects (i.e. human beings) are becoming subjectified and rendered performative objects. One of these strategies is the blurring of the boundaries between subjects and objects, animates and in animates, life and death, beauty and destruction, and desire and oppression. Constantly intertwining objects (dead matter) and subjects (people, living matter), Verdonck often makes objects carry out dramatic actions and put humans on display in the museum. Aesthetically, this blurring, suspension and crossing over the subject - object divide renders Verdonck's figures difficult to categorize. The uncertainty of what these figures really are thus creates an uncanny 'living dead' - an uncanny sensation and an endeavor that can be brought under the umbrella of '*Post humanism*'. As Heiner Muller once said in an interview with Alexander Kluge: "what occupies the space, can change all the time. It does not have to be a human being, it can also be a computer or a herbal substance." (105) As a consequence, when objects perform and subjects are objectified, the traditional places for these elements, respectively the museum and the theatre, are scrutinized, questioned, and manipulated. Dramaturge Marianne Van Kerkhoven, who used to work with Kris Verdonck, coined the term '*theatrical installation*' to name his work which constantly presents humans in a museum - setting and objects in a theatrical space, i.e , the in -between space where the subject and object mix and where the uncanny has its name (Eckersall 68-75).

The central issue prevailing Verdonck's oeuvre is the idea of humans' absence and conceivable finitude. This fact renders Verdonck configure his series of installations without characters and without any dramatic line, and to feature objects and machines as solo performers in a potentially literally post-human future. All that remains are machines, objects, projections, sound and light. Turning the theatre building into machines' habitat, Verdonck ,thus, made machines operate autonomously. This leads to a haunted space, empty of humans, or in which the humans

remain present in a spectral state of being, with the objects themselves come fully to life, play the leading role, and the spectator is given a supporting role. Performed by non-human entities, Verdonck's theater is the perfect place to reflect on human absence, hold a critique on anthropocentrism and the omnipresence of technology, and alter radically the definition of the 'human' into a mute, useless and docile 'remnant' (Van Baarle 1-12).

Filling his spectators with emptiness, satiety, stagnation, resignation and slow extinction, Verdonck, thus, bares the true weight of humans' existence. Inspired by the traditions of two historical theatre genres that literally stage ghostly entities: the real ghosts in the traditional Japanese Noah theater and the specters of memory of objectified actors in Samuel Beckett's Absurd theatre, Verdonck's performances as well aim at creating an environment where the absurd and the hallucination of a world beyond the end can unfold. As with Beckett's and Noah's theater, all means in Verdonck's installation do share this condition: where everything is past, void, empty, and negative, and where all that are left are ghosts and memories in a performance that is actually already over. They also do offer sites of resistance, of profanation, and of rendering inoperative.

Once the distinction between the human and non-human is blurred and the interplay between absence and spectral presence is done, the uncanny then becomes an essential feature of this type of performances. We thus enter into what Masahiro Mori has called the 'Uncanny Valley' (98-100). The uncanny as modern predicament is linked to the industrialization that has occurred over the past three centuries and which has brought with it even more subtle ways of creating visual realities, inspiring fear and wonder. The theater space without actual human performance feels empty and uncanny, and hints at the possible absence of humanity, not only on stage, but also in the world. Nevertheless, more than fear and awe, Verdonck's works call for some humility, for a reconceptualization of what 'human' and 'object' mean. Thus, he renders humans uncertain about whether they might themselves be mechanical, mere reproductions of other objects.

Forming a post-humanist (i.e., past, void, empty, and negative) landscape of performative objects, Verdonck has never shown anything other than the end. It is the end we are waiting for, the end that comes for us and the end we survive. Verdonck artistically explores various dramaturgies of this end by rendering his performances predominantly performed in terms of absence, extinction and catastrophe. For all their differences, what these performances have in common is that they are all, in their complex ways, empty. Nothing is happening there, because either

the event is still to come (towards the end), or we are living through it without realizing (during the end), or it has already happened (after the end) (Verdonck 2017).

Arguing that the advances of new technologies correlate with evolving modes of intermedial performances, the present paper thus draws on *Anthropocentrism*, a human-centered point of view developed during the European Enlightenment. *Anthropocentrism* is a philosophical perspective arguing that the human being is the central or most significant entity; the only, or primary, holder of moral standing, and the dominant source of agency in the world (Weitzenfeld 3-27). A basic belief and a main paradigm of thought, embedded in many western societies, religions and philosophies, *Anthropocentrism's* roots go back to the Creation story told in the book of Genesis in the Judeo - Christian Bible, in which humans are created in the image of God and are instructed to "subdue" earth and to "have domination" over all other living creatures (Johnson 176-178). A large cultural framework, *Anthropocentrism* - as a line of thought - is not limited to Jewish and Christian theology, it can be found as well in Aristotle's poetics and Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy.

Since the inception of anthropocentric thinking during the Renaissance, the human is typically regarded and constituted as: (a) a special, privileged and an autonomous entity compared to other living beings, given the intellectual faculties of the mind that controls the body ,(b) the only source of knowledge, uniquely capable of and motivated by speech and reason,(c) an exceptional animal that is superior to other creatures, being the sole holder of moral values (Grey 463-475). Involving diverse dimensions that collectively justify the attitude of human domination and supremacy over nature, the anthropocentric value system thus regards humans as separate from and superior to nature, while other entities (including animals, plants, mineral resources, objects, machines, ecosystems, etc.) are means to human ends and resources that may justifiably be exploited for the benefit of human kind.

Beginning in the twentieth century, *Anthropocentrism* began to decay whereas a new way of understanding began to arise. Whereas an anthropocentric perspective frequently assumes the human is autonomous, conscious, intentional, and exceptional in acts of change, a Post humanist approach - a counter, controversial interdisciplinary perspective, but also an original and promising one – emerges, with the aim of decentering 'humans', undermining their exceptionalism, and overcoming the coordinates of anthropocentrism.

Assuming that the human being is not its main object of analysis, *Post humanism*, instead, shifts the focus towards the multiple relationships between the human and the non-human, and considers these connections as the distinctive object of its investigation. Most simply, the Post human can be defined as the condition that represents the death of the humanist subject, i.e., being a special, superior, privileged, and stand-alone entity that possesses unique characteristics that make it exceptional in the universe (Miah 71-94). More specifically, the Post human is the projected state of humanity and its primary relationship to digital technology where there is no meaningful difference between humans, animals, objects, aliens or intelligent machines - i.e., where human exceptionalism is dead (Bennett 347-372).

Having multiple variants of definition and multiple modes of application, *Post humanism* often connects to other forms of analytical philosophy and theorization such as *Performativity*, *Actor Network Theory* (ANT), *New Materialism*, and *the Notion of the Uncanny*.

Largely influenced by Karen Barad's *Performativity* (2003), Verdonck engages and contextually relates his performances through this lens. In Barrad's *Post human Performativity*, she argues that there is an extricable entanglement between non-human matter and human beings that allow the two to exist and constantly shape each other (801-831). Because of this entanglement, Barad sees it possible to think of humans "not as independent entities - with inherent properties but rather beings in their differential becomings, particular materials, (re)configurations of the world with shifting boundaries and properties that stabilize and destabilize along with specific material changes in what it means to be human." (818). On the other hand, Barad argues, matter is not "a substance," but intra - activity, and that "agency" is not an exclusively human attribute, but rather the "enactment of iterative(repetitive) changes" across large and small-scale levels of matter (826).

Related to Barad's *Performativity* is Bruno Latour's *Actor Network Theory* (ANT). Opting for a non-human object functioning as a performer to let the audience focus on the symbolic universal instead of presenting a fully developed human character, Verdonck calls on Latour's theory manifested by him in his book 'Resembling the Social' (2005). Enabling a view of non-human objects as an addition to our social world, Latour's (ANT) maintains that where non-human entities have traditionally being considered passive conductors or neutral carriers of actions whose source should be found elsewhere - in an intentional and conscious human actor or in an overarching and distant structure, ANT - on the other hand - grants them agency, i.e., the ability to modify a given state of affair. More precisely, each human and nonhuman entity is deemed capable of

generating transformations and triggering unexpected events along the chain that links it to other. As a result, action is redistributed: the actor is never alone in acting. It is made to act by many others (45-47).

Maintaining that objects that cannot communicate can become part of a social network, ANT, in addition, rejects the idea that entities have inherent attributes qualities, or properties. So, the form entities have is a consequence of the relations they entertain with other entities. When entities come together - associate - they interfere with each other's course of action by modifying their respective goals or functions or by offering one another new possibilities. Hence, there is a network - relations - among human and non-human entities, and it is through these relations that power is enacted, circulated and sedimented (Latour 45-71).

Accepting humans as well as non-humans equally as actors, Latour's theory - in collaboration with the Post-humanist thought - sheds new lights on the complex relationships between humans and non-humans as well as between humans themselves. Latour's theory has made Verdonck give more space to an interplay between objects and humans, and thus also to non-humans on stage. Objects have not only become actors as they execute actions, but have also become actors in the theatrical meaning of the word.

Calling on Bruno Latour's philosophy, Jane Bennett's foundational work on *New Materialism* argues as well that things, objects, and assemblages, become agents of their own accord with the ability to "make difference, produce effects, [and] alter the course of events" (Vibrant Matter ix). Like *Post humanism*, Bennett's new materialism works to resist the "narcissistic" tendency of humanistic thinking by allowing matter its due as an active participant, having the capacity to create agency and interact with a force. Giving these "things" life, Bennett thus gives a dynamism to the static object - centered ontologies of media, and looks at them as agents for change and specifically change on human perception. Affected by Bennett's argument in 'Vibrant Matter : A Political Ecology of Things' (2010), Verdonck included non-human objects or things into the scope of his performances to better understand today's deep mediatized world where the communication technologies have become more than mere tools but integrated and integral parts of contemporary social systems (xii).

Another part of the artistic lineage of *Post humanism* and an essential feature in Verdonck's 'absence' performances is *the Notion of the Uncanny*. This notion offers an insight in the potentially changed relations between human beings and nonhumans, induced by the

proliferation of apparatuses and the shift toward predominantly desubjectifying processes. A modern predicament, the Uncanny - as Freud maintains in his essay "The Uncanny"- belongs to all that is terrible, to all that arouses dread, fear and creeping horror, and to that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar (195). The question is: In what circumstances the familiar can become uncanny and frightening? Devising the 'Uncanny Valley' to bring empathy for objects in relation to their similarity to man, the Japanese robotics professor, Masahiro Miro claims that the more the objects resemble the human, the more empathy we (the humans) experience for them. What is however critical - according to Mori - is that the familiar dead thing becomes too real or 'living' and thus it generates fear and literally becomes 'uncanny, unheimlich beings' (98-100). In other words, when human beings become increasingly estranged from their own inventions - no longer understanding them or recognizing them as 'our' creations and 'creators', the uncanny materiality brings this not knowing to the fore and thus renders uncanny what before seemed obvious and familiar - a category otherwise so familiar as tools (Freud 254-267). Verdonck's uncanny materiality and the mysterious aspects of his objects point at how we do not know these apparatuses, and hence, what it is to be human, and hold a critique on contemporary technologies that create in between creatures, blur the boundaries between life and death, subject and object, animate and inanimate.

Presenting a case of radical dehumanization in a critical Post humanist performance, *Untitled* (2014) is a solo performance articulating Verdonck's critique on the neo-liberal and cruel apparatus that controls and manipulates the human body and psyche.

A central figure to this solo performance, the mascot - the human performer, this time, is somehow 'present' in his absence. Emblematic of the unpleasant combination of entertainment and modern slavery and continuing the line of figures between presence and absence, the mascots - be they in a sport arena, a shopping mall, an amusement park, on a musical stage or in a Disney land parade - are inherently public figures that are there to entertain and communicate. With their vocabulary of movement they encourage spectators to cheer and rejoice. However, they are not 'merely' objects performing. There are different dynamics at work than those of the object - figure. They look very human, but in reality there is very little about them that is human. Wearing such a smelly warm suit, entire herds of unemployed people living in a precarious socio-economic conditions are condemned to this type of low-waged, tough mini-job to get a living (Berardi, *Deadly Embrace* 97). Deprived of their

own identity (behind an uncomfortable, heavy and hot laughing mask), disguising their tiredness with repetitive, mechanical steps, and always have to cheer up the others-it is this duality that Kris Verdonck puts on in his overwhelming production, *Untitled*.

Very witty, pathetic and unrecognizable in his black and silver bee suit, with Mickey Mouse - like face, the mascot appears on stage with a smiley face on its 'belly', greets the incoming spectators with a wave, a thumbs up, pointing a high five, and occasionally, a hug. In the show dance that the mascot performs, there are clapping and sing-along moments without there being spectators who go along with it. In a scene in which it is alone on stage, the mascot starts running around, apparently looking for something - looking for a way to channel its positive energy. However, the bee mascot-after several passages, disappearing and re appearing-seems to come to realize that it is the central character, burdened with the task of entertaining the audience. Performing little tricks, out of sheer poverty of skills - a jump, a slide, a robot dance, playing shooters alone, by himself, the bee mascot then comes to realize that each action seems to underline its inevitable situation - precarity without end (Eckersall, Theatre's Slow Time).

Not much has happened indeed or will happen at all in the following sixty minutes except for the little tricks. The performance ends with the mascot sitting down, exhausted, no longer knowing what to do, and going into a mad frenzy. In that moment, a technological, non - human and violent environment takes over, in which shiny, inflatable tubes emerge from their black boxes and a robotic mascot drives on stage and executes a repetitive, circular choreography. It is as if the nightmare now surfaces in all its horror, mystery, and darkness. However, as suddenly as it appears, the inflatable tube also disappears and returns in its box (Verdonck 2014). Presenting one of the fundamental features of the mascot figure, these final scenes emphasize the replaceability and, eventually, the redundancy of the human body inside the suit. What counts is the suit (and what it presents: the socio - economic context), not the performer (the human) inside. The mascot, thus, is an image that fills, by means of substitution, a vacancy created by the absence of an original.

Regarding the mascot's situation, *Untitled* shows the ever growing desperate presence of an actor (a human) who is demoralized and degraded by the failure and impossibility of his work. Remaining hidden in the costume, the human performer in the suit will only show through occasionally. The mascot's permanent hollow, but merry, smile is not a signifier of happiness, but a lost face. This rigid smile is rather sour, when

the working conditions and economic system it represents are taken into account. His suit is an indexical sign that refers constantly to the fact that the mascot does not exist for its own sake, but only to represent an economic reality. Moreover, the suit's indifference to exposure seems to increase the vulnerability of the performer inside. The invisibility of the performer's body consumes him and forces him to act. A creature made to perform, to act, and is unable to do otherwise, the mascot figure has no place to hide and is pushed to perform its own subjectification (Han 21). His gestures and actions are reduced to cartoon - like, comic undertakings, leading to frantically busy behavior and may in the end lead to panic, followed by depression (Berardi, *Deadly Embrace* 37).

Erasing the indexical value of signs, the mascot's suit, of course, has made a gap between what the performer communicates and does, and what the spectator actually sees. Giving the spectator the impression that there is a connection, the mascot as a suit has thus become an interface onto which an audience can project emotions, intentions and other forms of communication, without the person in the mascot necessarily sending out these signals - there is no direct utterance from the human inside. In this sense, the barrier between object and subject is suspended in a second way. A dysfunctional indexical sign, the visible smiley face not only does it refer to a known brand, team or product, it also does not refer to the person inside.

This zero-point of having no face and no possibility of communication generates an uncanny sensation - a shared condition between performer and audience, a shared waiting, a shared boredom, a shared inactivity, a shared emptiness and an existential distancing relation is developed (Agamben, *Means* 92). '*What am I doing here?*' is a question the mascot (performer) shares with the audience during these moments - thus bringing about a moment of not - knowing, of relating to one's own being inappreciable, of one's own being without work, a moment of being 'whatever'. As Agamben indicates in his essay on the face, human beings do not have any essence, any nature, or any specific destiny, their condition is the most empty and the most insubstantial of all (Means 94- 95). He further indicates that the untitled mascot's rigid smiley face is a clear example of this state of being - humanity has lost its face because it has lost the control and capacity to appropriate in the face one's own separation from oneself (Means 95-98).

Parallel to the problem of lacking communication, the permanent state of necessity itself is precisely the mascot's problem. The predominance of work and commodification infiltrate the humans' private sphere ever more deeply via new software and devices that keep them permanently available, reduces moments of free time and rest, places

unprecedented pressure on them, forces focus on action, work and performance - a zone of necessity that leaves no place for 'being able not to do'. Operating as such and enforced by his suit, the mascot is in a permanent state of necessity and action which cannot be switched off. Once it is on stage, all the mascot can do and has to do is perform its own desubjectification (McKenzie 2001).

A key element in *Untitled* is its specific nature of time and space. Inspired by the nature of space in Beckett's work, Verdonck creates a post human space - a grey black space in which the mascot figure is thrown in a radical form of exile, and in which the human is dissolved and replaced (Badiou6). Hostile, deserted and ungenerous, this space is connected to the psycho political condition of humans: condition of loneliness, stress, despair, competition, meaninglessness, failure and unbearable alienation (Berardi, Phenomenology 110). Following Beckett's progressive fusion of closed and open space, Verdonck merges completely the two spaces thus creating a space of absence that has become the nothing, the dim, the void - the deadlock of the Post human humanity.

A place. Where none. For the body. To be in.
Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out.
Only in. Stay in. On in. Still (Beckett 77).

Making it impossible to know whether this grey black is destined for movement or immobility, Verdonck thus communicates not only the modulation of frenzied performativity, but perhaps even more the vast emptiness lying behind a capitalist, neo-liberal system and its technological innovations that have created this environment.

Time in this Post-human space is manifested in two ways - the 'now' (the time of the object) and 'never' (the endless time of the mascot). One could situate this time (the never) as a time after: after the human, after destruction, after replacement. This hour of 'never', or of post history, is essential to affirm that the nature of human presence has changed profoundly, might have disappeared, or become indeed spectral. Strangely enough, time in Verdonck's *Untitled* is not experienced as merely speeding up or slowing down due to a saturation of the 'now'. Rather, it is a sensation described by Hartmut Rosa as a still stand or frenzied standstill-an aimless, endless time. Weighing on those within that time, time's duration in capital is mercilessly moving toward nowhere. Placed in this utterly useless Post human environment and post-apocalyptic after-time where he doesn't know why he is there, what he is doing there and for how long it will last, the mascot feels profoundly lost. That's why panic, despair, exhaustion and finally surrender characterize

his actions in his Post- human space.

Following his *Untitled's* line and continuing his same constant obsession that has marked his career, Verdonck goes deeper into the redundancy of human beings and the emptiness of their human action in an end time that doesn't seem to end through his installation circuit presented under the title, *In Void* (2016).

An installation in the form of critical reflection , *In Void* is a theatrical setting - an intriguing experience - that confronts its viewers with a series of new and existing installations. Combining archaic stage techniques with new multimedia techniques, *In Void* thus breathes new life into and gives shape to these 'virtual presentations.' Putting humanity in a new position, *In Void* creates scenes from a world that sounds like science fiction, where the anthropocene is over, Man is absent, machines take Man's place and Man's role is limited to the margin. Among these scenes we see three grumbling horns playing themselves in an open dance studio; automobile engines sputtering on museum pedestals and roaring every 30 minutes; a drop hammer jumping and falling on the empty stage; an impressive ball in a narrow black box; and three rotating and humming saxophones. We see, also, a large inflated ball and an inflatable, undefinable shape descending and going back towards the ceiling; a jumping robot; a projection of a video of a mouse walking in a mouse trap; and a 'nest' of toy dogs rolling and barking in a circle and laughing hysterically, activated by spectators entering the space, but continuing after they have left. Relating to these installations, the spectators look at them but these installations do not relate to them. The spectators are, at most, the chance explorers of entities that only play for themselves, regardless of the spectators' presence. Even their role as audience is denied (Verdonck 2016).

In this ghostly theatrical installation - with its variations on absence, Verdonck fashions a theatre setting - a 'nothing', a 'void', a 'haunted house,' in a post human after - time and space where the human performers are missing and where objects, machines and projections occupy the stage and operate autonomously. Characteristics or skills that we like to refer to as typically human - presence, dancing, music - appear to be anything but exclusively the terrain of man. On the other hand, machines and objects - the only things left - play the leading role, turn the theatre building into their habitat, and manage very well on their own. The spectators, however, are set aside and given a supporting role for these things and machines. In other words, any hope of harmony between humans and machines is dashed: the more present the objects are, the more transparent the human beings become. The greater their freedom of

movement, the more immobile they become (De Somviele 2016).

A route in which every installation stands entirely on its own and every space has its own atmosphere and balance, *In Void* embodies the seeds of future disasters and offers allusions to the coming catastrophic consequences caused by pollution, violence, genetic modification, technological apocalypses, or human extinction caused by complete superfluity. In a post historic condition of satiation, stagnation, resignation and slow extinction, the objects and machines - which perform indifferent to the human gaze watching them - are the only remnants left. Meanwhile, human beings are still roaming spaces that are already haunted by their absence, causing disorientation and an experience of being lost. Hoping that the viewer, walking through that rather dark world full of silent or moving machines, realizes what the world could be like after the apocalypse, Verdonck thus makes this doomed vision - the void, negativity, death and nothingness - at the heart of *In Void*. Bearing the true weight of human existence, this installation originates in the sensation that one is not at home in this environment, or rather that there is no longer a place called home.

The third variation on the fragility of human absence and presence that - together with the other two works - from an uncanny, end - of - time landscape is Verdonck's new performance : *Something (Out of Nothing)* (2019). Interested in existential questions and post- apocalyptic scenarios, Verdonck brings museum and theatrical presentations together in a show that dares to be hopeless and black. Giving no answers anywhere, the performance reflects on the physical, psychic and mental state of being in the face of approaching extinction.

Consisting of two parts, *Something(Out of Nothing)* literally overflows from the museum to the theatre and vice versa. Each part is accompanied by a voice over resembling that of the Angel of History and speaking from a haunted position. Together with this voiceover, four dancers share the stage with several large inflatable (organically growing and shrinking) sculptures, a cello - noise and a robotic drum - all add to the tension between presence and absence, and give shape to the space and time after the human - after the end. Where people see single events or progress, the angel - looking back in time and with his back to the future - perceives nothing but ruins and catastrophe. A clear female voice tells how much she would like to go back in time, to clean up things. But the woman can do nothing but watch the world go down.

Staging the downfall in the form of a magnificent noise concert, Verdonck builds the feeling of inevitability, and of a definite end. Like in nature, things change slowly but surely until there is no way back. The human figures, meanwhile, are relaxed and uninhibited. They fiddle around, playfully dance, chase each other or monkeys. At the same time, a world of much larger bodies precedes the human figures. A genesis of soft, breathing forms which, while transforming, play an increasingly prominent part and turn the stage into a wonderful landscape. The human figures certainly enjoy it, even though they are regularly very tired and sometimes have trouble getting off the floor and doing something. Characterized by boredom or listlessness, the humans' behavior seems averse to any form of ambition or responsibility. While nature, or mother earth, does not seem to care much about these human figures.

The plagues then increase, the ruins of black snow get more and more vicious and the corpses pile up, according to the voice over. Eventually, the four dancers appear with equally beautiful, black - and - white masks and do some ritual dances. This seems to herald a new beginning, a new spring, a cleaning, as well as a return to the beginning of time. But this too should not have any emphasis. Finally, the feeling of discomfort lingers (Verdonck 2019). Do we have to pay the price of progress? Until the very last moment, *Something (Out of Nothing)* is marked by an undramatic, unscrupulous light-hearted tone.

In a landscape that is automated, that is no longer natural, and that is indifferent to human presence, inflatable objects, machines, projections and humans are the performers in this reflection on the end of mankind. Wandering around in the theatre and in the museum, between the objects and machines, the dancers in this performance are often no more than silhouettes, shadows, living sculptures - a negative of life. Running through each other, living and dead matter share the same stage and are hardly distinguishable from each other, or even from the scenery. They are the ghosts that are the consequence of the destructive dynamics between humanity and the landscape. Presenting Man, the performer, as a ghost in the world who is himself increasingly 'hastened' by technologies, imminent destruction and catastrophes, Verdonck thus makes these performers look for a possibility to escape from the cycle of cause and effect, and at the same time crushed by it.

I don't know exactly where it is that I am: this is what happens when we are in the dark. You cannot tell where the limits of your body are, or where the limit with the outside world is. A vertigo, of becoming space. Are you alive or not? (Lepecki, 129-140)

Animals and plants, as well, are no longer of any importance.

Ecologically extinct, they have lost their function. Their impact of the environment has become so minimal, and-being no longer there, they still produce fruit that is no longer eaten.

Generally speaking, imagining for a long time that the ability to develop and control technology was one of the defining features of their conditions, humans were thus assured that they are the measure of all things. Ironically, their long-held belief in the infallibility of their human power and their arrogant sense of superiority are later challenged by the very technologies humans have sought to create and control.

Developed to uncover this man - machine tension and the insurmountable challenges associated with the prospect of becoming Post human, this paper has managed throughout to address the question that lies at the base of Verdonck's new, intense and contemplative theatre experience : What is to be human in an age where the perceptions of human superiority and uniqueness are challenged, the boundaries between man and machine are eroded, the latent qualities of human intelligence have been surpassed, and the potentialities of machines have independently and quite recursively gone beyond their original programming ?

In the first place, the researcher has spared no effort in laying a basis for understanding how contemporary technologies led to the formation of a Post- human construct of human beings. This is - hopefully - achieved by highlighting the transformations underway in live performance, especially the emergent paradigm of NMD and its transitional strategies in theatre making that have become increasingly prevalent in societies that operate under deep mediatization. Correlating with this, the researcher has mapped how the concept of 'anthropocentrism' as a human - centered philosophical perspective has been developed, assumed, implied and appropriated, then has framed her analysis using critical Post humanism.

Examining how '*Post humanism*' as a condition in the world and as a deconstructive counter - project has been constructed within a range of contemporary philosophical and critical theorizations, the present paper then goes on identifying and analyzing different aspects relating to Kris Verdonck's artistic practices, architectures and aesthetics that have made tremendous, mega shifts in the domain of NMD. By doing so, this paper thus supports the claim that Kris Verdonck's oeuvre has contributed to the rhetoric of *Post humanity* by its new spaces, new bodies, new movements, new dark undertones, new kind of engagement, and new

ways of responding to current societal phenomenon.

Recognizing the invisible agency of technology and believing that man is moving at warp speed towards a world that may resemble a paradise, where he may no longer have to work for a living, where most problems are solved by technology, and where he enjoys a kind of amazing possibilities, Kris Verdonck thus adapts *Post humanism* as a perspective, practice and object of critique in his large and ever growing oeuvre.

Showing different modes of theatrical and performative events that serve as different strategies of human absence in Verdonck's non-human inter medial dramaturgies, the three case studies analyzed in this paper lay the ground work for the future of humanity: a post-apocalyptic environment, a landscape of performative objects and machines that have continued without humans and have taken proportions humans couldn't have imagined or comprehend until now. Acting as ultimate stadiums of dehumanization, these three case studies - i.e, the solo performance, the installation circuit, and the choreography-together, they deconstruct essentialism, undermine exceptionalism and refuse to grant humans agency. Instead, these works suggest that humans are at a critical juncture by generating a presence of the performer while being absent, alienated, commodified, ignored, dehumanized, disembodied, irrelevant, outmoded, deskilled, dehumanized, and tolerated as pets or as necessary nuisance at best. Outsourcing their thinking, their decisions, and their memories to ever cheaper machines and devices, humans-Verdonck contends- have thus come to recognizing themselves as merely systems integrated with other systems; i.e, making digital technologies morphing quickly from knowing us to representing us, to being us.

A penetrating and overwhelming production, *Untitled* reflects on the absence or spectral presence of humans. Replaced by lifeless dummies, the mascot or the person inside, i.e , the performer (the neo-liberal body) is not only a part of a merchandise economy and mediatized culture but is also pushed to extremes varying between panic and depression. Disappearing into his work clothes - behind an image of a brand (a socio - economic context), the mascot thus becomes a faceless commodity, a lifeless object, a human prop, and a part of the set.

An intriguing and another uncanny experience, *In Void* continues to build on Verdonck's idea of human absence. Transforming the theatre into a Post-theatre (an after-theatre or meta-theatre) where the human performer is missing and where the objects, machines and devices occupy the stage and acquire the value of human beings, Verdonck thus fills the spectators with emptiness and directs their experience to that of an existential void - the void of human absence, the void of the end of the

world, and the personal, intimate void.

Meanwhile, the human performers in *Something (Out of Nothing)* find themselves in the same paradoxical state of *Untitled's* mascot: being eliminated yet still active, and are thus literally '*unheimlich*' without a house, out of place, out of time. Living in an end which has become an increasingly tangible reality and having no point of reference, the figures on stage vainly look for meaning in a world beyond the human scale. Though it no longer matters, they do something for the sake of doing it. After denial and resistance, however, there is - as in a mourning process - acceptance.

To conclude, the selected performances are both reports from the future and passionate calls to stop and think, to decide and plan before the dystopian scenario - before all humans get swept up in the magic vortex of technology and eventually become less than human. Analyzing the above case studies, this paper maintains that these performances' nightmare is a culture inhabited by post humans - by ghosts who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being. Verdonck's dream through these performances' instead, is a version of the post human that embraces the possibilities of information technologies, without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of the human beings, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity - one on which we depend for our continued survival.

To put it briefly, the three selected case studies are very effective in the interchangeability of visual art and performing arts, in staging absence and indifference, in blurring the line between living and dead matters, and precisely in arousing wonder, organizing interest and meaning in a suggestive way. With disconcerting stage landscapes, arresting visuals and powerful sounds Verdonck succeeded in suggesting that the future is dark as long as technology is not only a tool, but a decision - maker.

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