

CARAC TERES

Estudios culturales y críticos de la esfera digital

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Artículos de investigación:

Caracteres

Metaphorically Speaking: Possibilities of Theatre Performance in the Digital Age

Hablar metafóricamente: Posibilidades teatrales en la era digital

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ABSTRACT: This essay reflects on the quality of the theatre performance as medium in the digital age through a discussion of the theatre of Peter Handke. The aim is to make manifest and engage with habits of thought and perception shaped by the digital, as well as investigate the ways in which they intersect with habits of thought and perception materialized in and mobilized by theatre performance in the specific case of Handke's theatre (a theatre created, arguably, at the beginnings of the digital age). Engaging with Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophy, the essay looks at theatre performance as a site for the negotiation of the relation between *techné* and *poiesis* in the digital age. It focuses on the notion of metaphor in order to examine ways in which both the theatre under investigation and the digital unsettle and re-imagine the concept of identity traditionally understood in terms of unity and sameness.

RESUMEN: Este artículo evalúa la calidad de la actuación teatral como medio en la era digital a través de un análisis del teatro de Peter Handke. El objetivo es poner de manifiesto y relacionar los hábitos de pensamiento y percepción formados en lo digital así como investigar el modo en que estos se cruzan con hábitos de pensamiento y percepción materializados y puestos en marcha por la actuación teatral en el caso específico del teatro de Handke (un teatro creado, sin duda, en los inicios de la era digital). En la línea de la filosofía de Ludwig Wittgenstein, este artículo trata la actuación teatral como un espacio para la negociación de la relación entre *techné* y *poiesis* en la era digital. Se centra en la noción de metáfora para examinar cómo tanto el teatro investigado como el digital alteran y modifican el concepto de identidad tradicionalmente entendida en términos de unidad e igualdad.

KEYWORDS: the digital, identity, medium, metaphor, performance

PALABRAS CLAVE: digitalidad, identidad, medio, metáfora, interpretación

This exploration begins with the same question that opens one of Peter Handke's earliest plays: "Where to begin?" For Handke, the response comes by means of someone else's words:

Where to begin?
Everything is out of joint and totters.
The air quivers with comparisons.
No word is better than the other,
the earth booms with metaphors... (Osip Mandelstam cited in Handke, 1976: 3)

Yet to begin with metaphors is not exactly to begin somewhere, but, rather, both here and there and elsewhere simultaneously, for "metaphor" returned to its etymological root means to carry or bear across (from the Greek "metapherein", from *meta-* "over, across" + *pherein* "to carry, bear"). It is to begin "in midperformance;" in a landscape with "neither land nor perspective" that perhaps resembles the "fugitive" cyberspace we have recently begun to inhabit; or *in media res* – "in the middle of things," which is how software, too, can be understood, and which means that "we can only begin with things – things that we grasp and touch without fully grasping, things that unfold in time – things that can only be rendered 'sources' or objects (if they can) after the fact."¹ Notwithstanding the differences among these possibilities of reading, all of them require taking

¹ I here extrapolate formulations from (Golub, 2001: 220); (Rayner, 2002: 350, 352); (Chun, 2011: 416) (in this order).

seriously the quality of the theatre performance as medium and its implications in the digital age. This is precisely what this essay undertakes to do.

The play in the beginning of this chapter is Peter Handke's *Prophecy* (1966). *Prophecy* appears to be a series of tautologies performed by four speakers designated through the first four letters of the alphabet, such as:

A: The flies will die like flies. [...]

AB: The house of cards will tumble like a house of cards. [...]

ABC: The dog will die like a dog. [...]

ABCD: Every day will be like every other. (Handke, 1976: 17)

The ironic paradox at the heart of this play deserves attention. The tautologies that make up *Prophecy* seem grounded – like all tautology, the most well-known of which is the principle of non-contradiction in the form of “A is A” – in the traditional Western conception of identity as sameness and unity. Underlying this conception of identity is a strictly determined immutability of a frozen present: if A is A, then A must be in a timeless present, it must be necessarily unchangeable and immovable. In this traditional conception of identity, no departure and no arrival is possible; movement is irrevocably denied.² Interestingly, however, the tautological form used in *Prophecy* is peculiar, replacing the conventional “is” with “like” – the marker of similarity with difference. “Like” opens spaces for transformation and change in-between the word (or group of words) and its repetition.

Handke thus challenges the traditional concept of identity and opens the way for multiplicity in a non-linear temporality. In this way, “prophecy” in effect describes a paradoxical figure in time presupposing the arrival of the future in the present ahead of its time, but only as an event that is possible (and that must be acknowledged as such) at virtually any point in the time to come. In other words, this is an event that is possible only by virtue of being impossible until it springs into being.

Prophecy – the feature of language that takes up the condition of words as recurrent – no longer has to do with the recurrence of the same and, relatedly, with an explanation of the recurrence of words by means of a theory of universals, as has traditionally been the case in philosophy (Cavell, 1996: 206). Like Wittgenstein in the thought-experiments that make up his *Philosophical Investigations*, Handke can be said to dramatize in *Prophecy* “the fact that a word does not exist until it is understood as repeated” (to extrapolate Stanley Cavell’s formulation; 1996: 206). What Handke’s *Prophecy* theatrically materializes is what Gertrude Stein termed “loving repeating” as “one way of being” (Stein, 1993: 62) – a beginning again as one way of being that is in fact becoming (transformation; translation). This is repetition with difference – repetition as a technique for creating difference.

To push this thought one step further and contextualize it historically, this logic of repetition as *techne* at the core of Handke’s play, *Prophecy*, has striking affinities with the logic of repetition embodied by the source code of software. Source code is the executable language of software made up of statements functioning as rules – “the first language that actually does what it says” (Galloway, 2004: 165-6) – a spectral, generalized and human-readable writing (Chun, 2011: 25). It is “dead repetition” in the sense that it is always regenerative and interactive and every iteration alters its meaning (Chun, 2011: 25). “Visibly invisible” and “relating presence and representation”, it is “indissociable from destruction” and re-creation, from forgetfulness and memory (Chun through Derrida, 2011: 99; modified). Thus, this is a logic of repetition that

² The root of this view that came to dominate Western philosophical thought is Parmenides’ conception of Being as immovable One, “as immovable Necessity, no longer open to change, that is, chance” (Spariosu, 1991: 81).

challenges the notion of source (origin) as identity and unity based on the trace left behind, substituting it with a conception of source defined by multiplicity.

Prophecy begins again in Peter Handke's first full-length play, *Kaspar* (1967). A play acknowledgedly written under the sign of Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical thought, *Kaspar* begins with the question of the possibility to "begin and begin:" "Can Kaspar, the owner of one sentence, begin and begin to do something with this sentence?" (Handke, 1969: 55). That *Kaspar* begins with a question (in fact, with a series of sixteen questions about (im)possibility, all of which begin with "Can") is not without significance. It testifies to a philosophical attitude that manifests itself in Handke's play, for, since its beginnings, it is philosophy that has been thought to begin in questioning, which, in turn, is a manifestation of wonder. Reiterating Aristotle, who reiterated Plato who reiterated Socrates, philosopher Karl Jaspers, for instance, wrote that the source of philosophy lies in "limit-situations" such as wonder, doubt, and the awareness of these ultimate situations (Jaspers, 2003: 20). In Wittgenstein, this attitude takes the form of "I don't know my way about" (Wittgenstein, 2009: 55), which, as Stanley Cavell justly remarks, is "the form specifically of the *beginning* or *appearance* of a philosophical problem" (Cavell, 1996: 325). This general form of a philosophical problem has to do with "long and meandering journeys," with criss-cross wanderings "in every direction over a wide field of thought" (Wittgenstein, 2009: 3). In Wittgenstein's view, therefore, philosophy appears to begin in wonder and wander.

In the spirit of this Wittgensteinian thought, Handke makes the connection between wonder and wander manifest in his later play, *Voyage to the Sonorous Land* (1989). *Voyage to the Sonorous Land* is a play with figures such as Wide Eyes, Spoilsport, Actor, Young Actor, and Actress, who "come from a place of wonder," "who won't take everything for granted, who get homesick if there is nothing to wonder at" (Handke, 1996: 15). These are figures whose "basic rhythm of breathing, looking, and listening ... is still one of asking, constantly" (Handke, 1996: 15). They are also essentially wanderers – wanderers who wander in order to be able to wonder, for "asking goes with walking: to go ask, outside, in the open" (Handke, 1996: 16) while being inside the theatre. But they are first and foremost actors, so one of the essential questions they need to ask is:

But how are we to play this pure, quiet state of having a question, of being all question and being questioned? I managed to play the stage direction 'He is delighted' – and even 'She blushes' [...] but someone having questions not yet directed to anyone, himself, or you or a third party, not yet defined, not to be put in words – there hasn't been a part like this in three thousand years. (Handke, 1996: 68)

In effect, this is the question to which the whole of Handke's theatre seeks to respond: How can wonder be performed? How should a performance be written on the page and translated on the stage in such a way as to generate a wonder-effect in the audience?

Voyage, as already suggested, engages this question directly. Seeking to "start from the beginning, with questions" (Handke, 1996: 15), it stages "the long-due drama of asking," a "play of questions" whose basic thrust "should be that of an expedition and its basic tone" (Handke, 1996: 16). The destination of this expedition: the sonorous land – the place of seeing, or, as the translator of the play put it, "the uncharted territory of the empty space filling with possibilities," "the beginning of theatre" (Honegger, 1996: xxix).

Given its title, it might seem striking that the play is about seeing – about theatre as a place of seeing that is also a sonorous land. This is nevertheless possible (and not senseless) in light of the nature of the seeing involved. This act of seeing is similar to the seeing Wittgenstein calls for as a mode of engagement with the world that leads to clarity (to perspicuous representation, in Wittgenstein's terminology). As Judith Genova points out, this is a seeing that "*thinks differences*" (Genova 1995: 57). It is a formal seeing – a seeing of relationality in the form of "a

complicated network of similarities [and, by implication, of differences] overlapping and criss-crossing” rather than of unchanging entities (Wittgenstein, 2009: §66).

Seeing relationality is not necessarily limited to sensorial vision, for the relation to be seen may well be established between “the hearing of a name” and the mental “picture of what is named” triggered by the hearing (Wittgenstein, 2009: §37). This seeing is intimately associated with linguistic performance: it begins with an utterance and, in turn, triggers an act of uttering: “Don’t apologize for anything, don’t leave anything out; *look and say* what it’s really like – but you must see something that throws new light on facts” (Wittgenstein, 1984: 39). As this Wittgensteinian remark makes manifest, the puzzling effect of this puzzling act of seeing is – to play on the different uses of “to see” – that of seeing things in a new light and, thus, of wonder.³

Handke suggests these dimensions of the act of seeing by playing up the connection between seeing and becoming aware/understanding encapsulated in the use of the expression “I see.” Michael Roloff, the translator of a large number of Handke’s plays, cogently remarks in this regard that “(re)learning the ‘art of asking’ will generate the ability to see. We say ‘I see’ when we begin to understand something” (Roloff, 1996: xxix). To anticipate again, “I see” is used at an earlier point in Handke’s theatre, in *Kaspar*, when Kaspar – made to speak through speaking by the Prompters – gives voice to the first of the three histories of his life on stage. Both in *Kaspar*, and in *Voyage to the Sonorous Land*, the “I” and the “see” are thrown into performance in a theatre re-configured as a place of seeing (in the Wittgensteinian sense).

Returning to theatre as a place of seeing beginning in and reverberating with questions, *Voyage* is thus a play that both begins in the beginning and ends in the beginning – or, in other words, finds the beginning in the end. The beginning is “the whole system working” (Marshall, 2005: 67). To begin at (or from) the beginning is to begin both here and there and somewhere else simultaneously. To begin at (or from) the beginning in the theatre is to show the whole invisibly visible system working in order to generate a wonder-effect.

This is precisely what Handke shows in *Kaspar*. In the note following the series of questions beginning with “can” – the linguistic marker of possibility – that open *Kaspar*, Handke extrapolates and modifies a citation from Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

The play *Kaspar* does not show how IT REALLY IS OR REALLY WAS with Kaspar Hauser. It shows what IS POSSIBLE with someone. (Handke, 1969: 60)

The play *Kaspar* shows possibility (“what IS POSSIBLE with someone”). In the spirit of early Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, it can be said to put forth a picture that is a depiction of a specific state of affairs and that asserts a particular configuration of objects. As in Wittgenstein’s “structure of the atomic fact” (Wittgenstein, 1922: 2.03; 2.032), in *Kaspar* these objects seem to hang together in a state of affairs that exists in reality “like the members of a chain.” The picture of the world that *Kaspar* presents is that of a whole with holes, of a limited whole.

To create a picture of this world, Handke employs the language of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* and, in particular, of Wittgenstein’s picture theory of language, in bodies of text spoken by the Prompters (*Einsager*) of his *Kaspar*, such as:

Every object must be the
picture of an object: every proper
table is the picture of a table. [...]

³ I am referencing here Wittgenstein’s remark: “We find certain things about seeing puzzling, because we do not find the whole business of seeing puzzling enough” (Wittgenstein, 2009: 251).

Every
sentence [...] is a
picture of a sentence. (Handke, 1969: 81-2)

A table is a word you can apply to
the closet, and you have a real
closet and a possible table in
place of the table, and? (Handke, 1969: 76)

The formulations that make up these passages resonate with Wittgenstein's view of the object as the meaning of a name represented by a sign (Wittgenstein, 1922: 3.221, 3.203).

While keeping true to the poetic form of the *Tractatus*, Handke does not reproduce either Wittgenstein's words or his philosophical ideas. Instead, he puts them into practice in a "journey to the sonorous land" of theatre as a place of seeing. The note in the beginning of *Kaspar* contains directions regarding the character of the objects in the theatrical space and their arrangement on stage required so that they can host a theatrical event. The stage is a picture of a stage; the picture of the stage represents the stage. The stage is an environment with play-objects (*Spielgegenstände*) positioned on the stage floor such as a sofa (in which Kaspar has slept for a long time before his awakening on stage); a few chairs that – because they are on a stage – are theatre chairs ("A chair on the stage is a theatre chair"; Handke, 1970: 57); a table (which can be in fact a stage in miniature), and a number of other symbol-objects such as a broom or a map. It is an environment with play-objects and with empty space ("center stage is empty" – *Kaspar*, 1969: 61) awaiting to be filled that is always in the present:

The objects, although genuine (made of wool, steel, cloth, etc.), are instantly recognizable as props. They are play objects. They have no history. The audience cannot imagine that before they came in and saw the stage, some tale had already taken place on it. [...] Center stage is empty. (Handke, 1979: 60)

The audience should not be able "to imagine that the props on stage will be part of a play that pretends to take place anywhere except on stage: they should recognize at once that they will witness an event that plays only on stage and not in some other reality" (Handke, 1969: 60). This requirement is ripe with implications. As props, stage objects have the power to "take on a life of their own in performance" (Sofer; 2003: 2). In this sense, the stage prop is perhaps the perfect exemplification of Wittgenstein's thought extensively developed in the scenarios that make up the *Philosophical Investigations* (and in other Wittgensteinian writings) that the meaning of a word is its use, that meaning is infinitely mutable and depends on the specific language-games in which words are used. Similarly, the stage prop takes on new meanings depending on its uses on the stage, on the scenic situations in which it is embedded.

The stage prop is the site of continuous transformation and translation (returned to its Latin etymological root, *translatere*, from *trans-* "across" + *latere-* "to carry, bear", "translation" designates a journey in-between); underlying its functioning is the principle of inter-relation. The following passage from *Kaspar* evidences this idea: "A table is a word you can apply to/ the closet, and you have a real/ closet and a possible table in/ place of the table" (Handke, 1969: 82). Grounded in the logic of substitution, the prop is thus inherently metaphoric. Metaphor is, to use Wendy Chun's well-crafted turn of phrase, "a transfer that transforms" (Chun, 2011: 56). Just like the stage prop, metaphor functions on account of the principle of inter-relation: "*The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another*" (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 5). Given its seemingly infinite possibilities of transformation and translation, the stage prop appears to be a metaphor for metaphor itself.

In a sense, the stage prop emerges as a metaphor machine. The logic that it embodies seems intriguingly similar to that embodied by software, which, as Chun points out, has acquired the unique status of “metaphor for metaphor itself” (Chun, 2011: 2). According to Chun:

Based on metaphor, software has become a metaphor for the mind, for culture, for ideology, for biology, and for the economy. [...] Although technologies, such as clocks and steam engines, have historically been used metaphorically to conceptualize our bodies and culture, software is unique in its status as metaphor for metaphor itself. As a universal imitator/machine, it encapsulates a logic of general substitutability: a logic of ordering and creative, animating disordering. (Chun, 2011: 2)

Notwithstanding the similarity, there is difference in this connection between the logic behind software and the logic behind the prop, which I will highlight in the pages to come.

At stake in Handke’s requirement that the objects on the stage must be (seen as) props and, by extension, that the stage picture represents the stage, is the necessity to take the reality of the theatre seriously as a space for the emergence of possibilities – of “new possibilities for thinking” (Handke in Roloff, 1974: 155). To achieve this, Handke challenges in and through theatre performance the traditional philosophical view of possibility as a shadow of reality, which Wittgenstein has already thrown into contest in his journeys across wide fields of thought.

Notably, later Wittgenstein challenges the conception of possibility as a shadow of reality through the metaphor of the machine. He writes in this regard:

A machine as a symbol of its mode of operation. The machine [...] seems already to contain its own mode of operation. [...] If we know the machine, everything else – that is the movements it will make – seem to be already completely determined. We talk as if these parts could only move in this way, as if they could not do anything else. [...] Do we forget the possibility of their bending, breaking off, melting, and so on? [...] We use a machine, or a picture of a machine, as a symbol of a particular mode of operation. [...] But when we reflect that the machine could also have moved differently, it may now look as if the way it moves must be contained in the machine qua symbol still more determinately than in the actual machine. As if it were not enough for the movements in question to be empirically predetermined, but they had to be really – in a mysterious sense – already *present*. [...] We say, for example, that the machine *has* (possesses) such-and-such possibilities of movement. [...] The possibility of movement – what is it? It is not the movement, but it does not seem to be a mere physical condition for moving either. [...] The *possibility* of a movement is supposed, rather, to be like a shadow of the *movement* itself. But do you know of any such shadow? (Wittgenstein, 2009: § 193-194)

In a traditional conceptualization, the machine is the illustration of causal necessity undergirded by the doctrine of determinism and, implicitly, by the notion of the cause as unique source (origin) of subsequent action par excellence. The traditional metaphor of the machine is used to support the view of a clockwork universe. This view is founded on the doctrine of determinism, “implying the orderly flow of cause and effect in a static universe, a universe of being without becoming.” Thus, this view is intimately associated with the general principle of causality, cogently explained by Lars Skyttner thus:

that every effect is preceded, not followed, by a cause. Just as one cogwheel drives and influences the other in a rational way, a measurable cause always produces a measurable effect in a rational system. Also, identical causes imposed upon identical rational systems, always produce identical effects (Skyttner, 2005: 14).

Wittgenstein questions this use of the term by approaching “the machine” in terms of “the actual machine” and “the machine-as-symbol.” As a symbol, a machine is “*a part of language* [...], like samples or gestures” and, thus, “the interconnection of the movements of a machine-as-symbol are forged in *grammar*” (Baker and Hacker, 2009: 109). Wittgenstein does not contest the

principle of causality underlying the operation of the actual machine, but he does destabilize the notion of identical (and unique) causes producing identical effects regardless of context in his account of the machine-as-symbol. By questioning the view that “possibility is something which is similar to reality” (Wittgenstein, 2009: §194), Wittgenstein unconditions possibility and, in this way, the event (of the parts of the machine “bending, breaking off, melting”, for instance). Were possibility seen as “a shadow of reality”, the mode of to come – the mutability and multiplicity associated with possibility – would be annihilated, the eventfulness of the event would be neutralized (to use Derrida’s terminology; 2005: 84).

This does not mean that the event is not real. On the contrary, it is incontestably real, “it swoops upon and seizes me here and now” but “I do not see it coming” (to return again to Derrida’s formulations; 2005: 84). Possibility and reality are thus not incompatible, but different: possibility is not a reality of inferior degree, a not yet actualized reality; rather, it entails a way of seeing reality in the continuous present, in the mode of becoming.

The two-fold aspect of Wittgenstein’s machine is embodied in the concept of the medium, which thus emerges at the confluence of *techne* and *poiesis*. Having to do primarily with operation and/through iterability and presupposing systematicity, Wittgenstein’s “actual machine” can be understood in terms of *techne*. The machine-as-symbol, on the other hand, pertains to *poiesis*, to creative activity, to a form of doing based on repetition. It is this double bind that characterizes the concept of the medium, and the notion of theatre performance as medium, in particular.

This is also the case in Handke’s theatre performances as media and in *Kaspar*, in particular. True to the essential nature of the theatre, Handke’s real theatrical space is thus configured as a place of seeing and of being seen. It becomes a place for observation and, even more than that, a place for surveillance, as suggested by “the magic eye” that Handke writes into the performance in his prefatory note. Handke’s magic eye should be constructed above the ramp and has a very specific purpose: to formalize the speech torture to which the actor is subjected; to indicate by blinking “the degree of vehemence with which the PROTAGONIST is addressed”, but “without diverting the audience’s attention from the events on stage” (Handke, 1969: 59).

As a place of seeing (in the Wittgensteinian sense of seeing discussed earlier), the theatre emerges as a space and environment for a theatrical performance conceived of as an event and functioning as an audio-visual medium. In Handke’s early speech pieces (“*Sprechstücke*” – generally translated somewhat inadequately as “speak-ins”), for example, the theatre is staged (in the theatre) as a factory for the production of language. Thus, in *Offending the Audience* (1966), the actors are required to rehearse and utter invectives directed at no one in particular, but spoken instead as linguistic patterns, overlapping with one another in a machinic way that helps create “a certain acoustic uniformity” (Handke, 1969: 6). No other picture except for this one of the production of language in a uniform manner should be produced (Handke, 1969: 6). In *Self-Accusation* (1966), too, the voices of the two speakers should be “attuned to each other” in order to produce “an acoustic order” (Handke, 1969: 35). In *Kaspar*, the notion of the theatre as a laboratory of language becomes more pronounced, while the dimension of *techne* remains in place. What is being tried out here is on the one hand the process of language acquisition and the negotiation between sense and nonsense that it entails (in the case of *Kaspar*), and different manners of speaking, on the other (in the case of the Prompters). These different manners of speaking should be those of “voices which in reality have a technical medium interposed between themselves and the listeners” (Handke, 1969: 59). What is to be seen in Handke’s theatre performances is, first and foremost, language at work.

Interestingly, Handke even goes so far as to write the act of seeing into his self-reflexive plays, in which theatre-goers play the roles of spectators, becoming performers of acts of seeing. In *Kaspar*,

for example, “every theatergoer should have sufficient time to observe each object and grow sick of it or come to want more of it” (Handke, 1969: 61) in the continuous present of the performance, though before the performance actually begins. In the Shakespeare-inspired *My Foot My Tutor*, Handke directs the spectator’s gaze, framing it as though with a camera:

If at first we paid too much attention to the figure, we now have sufficient time to inspect the other objects and areas [...] We see a large monthly calendar hanging on what is, from our vantage point, the right wall of the room. (Handke, 1976: 31-35)

In this case, seeing becomes another type of doing among the different other actions that the participants in the theatre event (the ward, the warden, spectators) perform in the present of the performance. This active seeing presupposes defamiliarization (what Brecht termed *Verfremdungseffekt*) and is ultimately a philosophical activity.

The desired effect of Handke’s staging of acts of seeing within the theatre written into his plays is thus two-fold: on the one hand, it seeks to provide glimpses of the world on (and of the) stage as a limited whole – of a structure in which objects hang together, but whose holes make possible the (unconditioned) event. On the other hand, they aim to focus the readers/spectators/audience’s attention on the details that make up the whole. This double purpose is significant, for it constitutes a point of difference between the logic of vision underlying the Handkean theatre performance and the logic of vision shaped by the digital, while reinforcing the connection between the two.

According to a recent *New York Times* article, “Growing Up Digital, Wired for Distraction”, an effect of the networked and interactive recently developed digital technologies is the mental wandering they induce. The risk entailed in this wandering is distraction and reduction in the capacity of memory. The practice of mental wandering by means of digital technology has also given rise to different (simultaneous) identities such as those of “the texter and gamer, Facebook addict and YouTube potato” (Richtel, 2010: [online](#)). All of these are essentially wanderers, though not in the sense of Handke’s wanderers.

In Handke’s case, the wandering to which the theatre performance invites is meant to focus the gaze (and the thought) on wired stage properties in continuous transformation and translation. In *Kaspar*, for instance, the initial image of appearance on the stage is that of a hand breaking through the curtain:

Behind the backdrop, something stirs. [...] After several futile tries at the wrong spots – the audience can hear the curtain being thrashed – the person finds the slit that he had not even been looking for. A hand is all one sees at first; the rest of the body slowly follows. (Handke, 1969: 63)

In *Voyage to the Sonorous Land*, too, the apparent stillness of the stage is disturbed by the appearance of a hand from behind the backdrop: “Suddenly, a pair of hands appears, from behind the drop, groping, clutching, searching for something to hold onto” (Handke, 1996: 5). This appearance of a hand in the background of an empty theatrical space produces a close-up effect on the hand, calling the audience’s attention to it.

In the contemporary age of the digital, which arguably began to take shape in the early years of Handke’s career with the invention of software, the close-up on the hand is not without its significance. This is because there is an intimate connection between the “digital” (from the Latin “digitalis” meaning “pertaining to fingers”) and the hand. As Bill Brown points out:

We’re not just in the midst of losing the technologies that make the rhetoric of inscription, impression, trace,

and erasure make sense. And we're not just in the midst of an altered temporality and spatiality, a change in the human sensorium, a proliferation of hyperrealities. The hand itself has become a new scene where dramas of the advance guard—where relations among the emergent, the dominant, the residual, and the obsolete—have become, say, digitized. Which may amount to no more than describing the digital age as a digital age. (Brown, 2004: 452-453)

In the digital age, it is the hand that handles that seemingly makes thought possible, at least in some sense. A recent article published in *Wired* discusses an experiment that confirms the practical applicability of Heidegger's concept of ready-to-hand. "Ready-to-hand," refers to "equipment," which includes "reference and signs in our provisional interpretation of the structure of Being" (Heidegger, 1978: 110). As Stephen Mulhall explains, the equipment's being ready-to-hand "is constituted by the multiplicity of reference- or assignment-relations which define its place within a totality of equipment and the practices of its employment" (Mulhall, 2001: 227). Being ready-to-hand is thus a function of relation: it implies placing a piece of equipment "in the broader practical and conceptual context without which it would not be the thing it is" (Mulhall, 2001: 226). This handiness at times reveals itself through the objects' lack of proper functioning (Mulhall, 2001: 227). Engaging the implications of the Heideggerian concept of ready-to-hand, the experiment realized by cognitive scientist Anthony Chemero undertook to show that tools are in fact part of the users — that they are extensions of the users that condition thinking. The account of this experiment is worth citing at length:

The findings come from a deceptively simple study of people using a computer mouse rigged to malfunction. The resulting disruption in attention wasn't superficial. It seemingly extended to the very roots of cognition.

"The person and the various parts of their brain and the mouse and the monitor are so tightly intertwined that they're just one thing," said Anthony Chemero [...] Chemero's experiment, published March 9 in Public Library of Science, was designed to test one of Heidegger's fundamental concepts: that people don't notice familiar, functional tools, but instead "see through" them to a task at hand, for precisely the same reasons that one doesn't think of one's fingers while tying shoelaces. The tools are us.

This idea, called "ready-to-hand" has influenced artificial intelligence and cognitive science research, but without being directly tested.

In the new study, Chemero and graduate students Dobromir Dotov and Lin Nie tracked the hand movements of people using a mouse to guide a cursor during a series of motor tests. Part way through the tests, the cursor lagged behind the mouse. After a few seconds, it worked again. When Chemero's team analyzed how people moved the mouse, they found profound differences between patterns produced during mouse function and malfunction.

When the mouse worked, hand motions followed a mathematical form known as "one over frequency," or pink noise. It's a pattern that pops up repeatedly in the natural world, from universal electromagnetic wave fluctuations to tidal flows to DNA sequences. Scientists don't fully understand pink noise, but there's evidence that our cognitive processes are naturally attuned to it.

But when the researchers' mouse malfunctioned, the pink noise vanished. Computer malfunction made test subjects aware of it — what Heidegger called "unreadiness-at-hand" — and the computer was no longer part of their cognition. Only when the mouse started working again did cognition return to normal. [...]

"The thing that does the thinking is bigger than your biological body," he [Chemero] said. "You're so tightly coupled to the tools you use that they're literally part of you as a thinking, behaving thing." (Keim, 2010: online; brackets added)

These findings are further supported by the cases in which the hand is fully substituted by technology, which, in turn, is controlled by thought. BrainGate, the machine that "uses thought to move objects" (Dreifus, 2010: online) designed by John Donoghue is one such case. Among its applications, it makes possible the movement of a robotic hand by the thoughts of a paralyzed person. Thus, in-between word and thought, the hand beckons us to rethink the relation between the real and the possible and "our ability to take a grip on the world as well as to let it slip through our fingers" (to use Mulhall's turn of phrase; 2001: 72).

Kaspar begins with one hand revealed through the curtain, while “the other hand holds on to a hat, so the curtain won’t knock it off” (Handke, 1969: 63). Soon afterwards, “the hand holding the hat becomes autonomous: it gradually lets go of the hat, slips down along his body, dangling awhile before it too stops” (Handke, 1969: 64). *Kaspar* sits on the floor of the stage. He becomes an embodiment of wonder. *Kaspar* utters his one sentence without yet having a grip (*Begriff*, which also means concept; Handke, 1968: 13) on it. *Kaspar* repeats the sentence again and again. *Kaspar* utters the sentence as an expression of wonder. *Kaspar* is made noticeable. *Kaspar* begins to wander on stage. *Kaspar* uses the hand to touch the objects on stage. *Kaspar* uses the hand to do something to the objects he touches, punctuating the language produced by the Prompters. *Kaspar* becomes entangled in the play-objects. *Kaspar* begins with his self.

Kaspar stages *Kaspar*’s becoming “I” under the magic eye that surveys the stage. It theatrically rethinks the “I” as continuously mutable with every iteration and definable as a function of relation in virtue of being public – both in the Wittgensteinian sense that all language, and thus also “I” as linguistic component, is public, and in the sense that the transformations of the “I” occur in the theatre, a public space *par excellence*. The following passage – a series of reiterations of *Iago*’s famous line “I am not what I am” from the beginning of *Othello* – makes this idea manifest:

When I am, I was. When I was, I
am. When I am, I will be. [...]
I become
because I will have become. I will
have become because I am.
I am the one I am.
I am the one I am.
I am the one I am. (Handke, 1969: 102)

Handke’s play with the “I” challenges the traditional conceptualization of the subject/object relation. In its continuous becoming and caught up in a network of relations defined by language, the “I” can be said to be both subject and object simultaneously. In this sense, too, *Kaspar* is already with his first sentence trapped (“Already with my first sentence I was trapped;” Handke, 1969: 137).

This conception of the “I” has thought-provoking affinities with the model of consciousness that cognitive scientist, Douglas Hofstadter, has recently formulated. In Hofstadter’s conceptualization:

The current ‘I’ – the most up-to-date set of recollections and aspirations and passions and confusions – by tampering with the vast, unpredictable world of objects and other people, has sparked some rapid feedback, which, once absorbed in the form of symbol activations, gives rise to an infinitesimally modified ‘I;’ thus round and round it goes, moment after moment, day after day, year after year. In this fashion, via the loop of symbols sparking actions and repercussions triggering symbols, the abstract structure serving us as our innermost essence evolves slowly but surely, and in so doing it locks itself ever more rigidly into our mind. (Hofstadter, 2007: 186)

Hofstadter introduces the notion of the “strange loop” – which potentially has affinities with Wittgenstein’s “machine” – to explain the mechanism of consciousness. Importantly, the source of inspiration for Hofstadter’s conception is the universal Turing machine programmable by means of software – a model invented by Alan Turing in 1937 to investigate the possibilities (extent and limits) of computation. The notion of self-reflexivity is embedded in the universal Turing machine, as Hofstadter describes:

Alan Turing realized that the critical threshold for this kind of computational universality comes at exactly

that point where a machine is flexible enough to read and correctly interpret a set of data that describe its own structure. At this crucial juncture, a machine can, in principle, explicitly watch how it does any particular task, step by step. Turing realized that a machine that has this critical level of flexibility can imitate any other machine, no matter how complex the latter is. In other words, there is nothing more flexible than a universal machine. (Hofstadter, 2007: 242)

Taking this model as point of departure, Hofstadter understands the human brain as “a representationally universal ‘machine’” that, in virtue of the social nature of human beings, becomes a “locus not only of one strange loop constituting the identity of the primary person associated with that brain, but of many strange-loop patterns that are coarse-grained copies of the primary strange loops housed in other brains” (Hofstadter, 2007: 259). The implication of this theory is that “all meaning comes from analogy” and, thus, that cognition is essentially based on analogy (Hofstadter, 2007: 158).

Hofstadter’s theoretical account is not unproblematic; a critique of it, however, is beyond the scope of this essay. What is of interest, instead, is the affinity between Hofstadter’s scientific account of the “I” and Handke’s conception of the “I” rendered in artistic form. The Turing universal machine seems to lie in the background of Handke’s own performance of the “I” as pointed out in the examples above or, even more strikingly, in the notion of the “model sentences” Kaspar learns. In this regard, the question becomes: “Can Kaspar learn what, in each sentence, is the model upon which an infinite number of sentences about order can be based?” (Handke, 1969: 55). The affirmative response is implicit in the question following the one just cited: “Can Kaspar, with the sentence model he has learned, make the objects accessible to himself or become himself accessible to the objects?” (Handke, 1969: 55). Once Kaspar has learned the model sentence, Kaspar has “a sentence of which you can make a model for yourself” (Handke, 1969: 69). Notwithstanding this similarity with Hofstadter’s account, as indicated in the beginning of this essay, for Handke, in the beginning of theatre and of thought there is metaphor, rather than analogy. The question of the relation between analogy and metaphor, and between cognition and thought, remains open.

After Kaspar is “brought to the point where, with rhyming sentences, he will find rhyme and reason in the objects” (Handke, 1969: 55), after he has grasped the model sentences, Kaspar tells his story again. If his words can be believed, Kaspar uses “the next to last sentence to *ask questions*” and begins “only with the last sentence of the story to ask what the *others* had said” (Handke, 1969: 133). Then the Kaspars are slammed into by the curtain that jerks towards the center of the stage “with the shrillest possible sound” (Handke, 1969: 140). The Kaspars fall behind the curtain, right at the moment when the curtain has come together. This constitutes the final evidence that Kaspar is a play, for, as Richard Foreman writes in the beginning of another play (*Eddie Goes to Poetry City*), “if this were a play, a curtain would be drawn” (Foreman, 1990: 3). The curtain has been drawn.

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