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'The Terrible Things I've Done': undisciplined subjectivity of the cyborg within intermedial performance practice

Abstract

In 15-minute slots, theatre company Invisible Ink invited participants to enter a room by themselves, make a call on a rotary phone, and tell an answering machine about a terrible thing they had done and how they felt about it. In this paper I argue that the body of each participant, in the moment of speaking into the phone, became a cyborg body, producing a new form of cyber-subjectivity by revealing an abjected story. I examine this moment as an instance of rupture in the disciplinary processes of self curation through the strategic use of intermediality.

Keywords

abject, cyber-subject, cyborg, facilitation, intermediality

Hello. Welcome. Thank you for taking part.

Alan and Sita are making a new show and would love your help. We would like to ask you a few questions. The answers to which may or may not be in our show....

When ready, this is what we'd like you to do:...

Describe a terrible thing you've done... (Calvert-Ennals and Harris 2015)

In 15-minute slots, theatre company Invisible Ink gave participants a plain brown envelope that read 'please open' and invited them to enter a small, dimly-lit room by themselves to have a cup of tea and examine the contents of the envelope. The letter inside contained instructions to make a call on the red rotary phone in the room, and to record onto an answering machine a terrible thing they had done and how they felt about it.¹ They were assured anonymity: a computer would digitally scramble their voices before the artists listened to the stories, and no story would be able to be linked to the storyteller in any future iteration of the project. The evening was originally intended to be a research-gathering exercise by Invisible Ink Co Artistic Directors Sita Calvert-Ennals and Alan Harris at Bristol Old Vic's January 2015 Ferment showcase. It unexpectedly became, in the words of Calvert-Ennals, an 'event' in and of itself that opened up new possibilities for how the artists might approach a developing piece that would examine forgiveness. Everyone who recorded a story had transgressed ethical norms - each story involved emotional or physical harm intentionally inflicted by the teller on an animal or another human. For most participants, the act of telling this story was new; many, on leaving the room, told Calvert-Ennals and Harris 'I'd never told anyone that before.'

To allow for this act of revealing a previously-untold story, Invisible Ink carefully facilitated the space of the sharing. Privacy was assured. The lighting in the room was low and indirect: a lamp and a string of fairy lights. A tea kettle, tea cups and plate of biscuits invited participants to slow the pacing of the moment by associating it with the relaxing ritual of a tea break. The red rotary phone - the central technological object in the room - was chosen, according to Calvert-Ennals, to create a sense of event; it was a 'beautiful object' that would contribute to an awareness of the material aesthetics in the space. It would additionally ensure that every action involved in the storytelling would be a choice, as the effort of dialling each number on the rotary phone required awareness of the physical body interacting with the object.²

¹ The letter, the beginning of which is quoted at the start of this paper, invited participants to tell either a terrible thing they had done or a terrible thing that had been done to them. All participants chose the former. The letter also gave the option of writing down the story on a piece of paper, and later iterations of the project invited stories by email. For this paper I analyse only the process of gathering recorded responses.

² A practitioner process and reflection blog about the project, created by Sita Calvert-Ennals in connection with this article, can be accessed at www.invisibleinktheatre.wordpress.com.

In this paper I argue that the body of each participant became a cyborg body in the moment of speaking into the phone, producing a new form of cyber-subjectivity. I identify the participant's body in this moment as cyborgian, as the act of storytelling depended upon the human-technological interface: the human hand held a phone, the human voice spoke into the receiver, the liveness of the voice existed simultaneously with its transmission onto an answering machine. The body's intertwining with these technologies was inseparable from the human speaking their story aloud. For most of the participants who admitted to never having told this story before, therefore, it was not part of their normal performance of self; they could *only* produce these stories through their hybrid cyborg status. I examine this moment as an instance of rupture in the disciplinary processes of self curation - the intentional presentation of self through both live and digital performance - that produce a socially acceptable subject predicated upon exclusion of the abject, arguing that Invisible Ink made strategic use of intermediality to access abjected stories. By replacing the physical presence of the facilitator/theatre artist, as well as routine technologies such as smartphones, with familiar-yet-outdated analogue technologies juxtaposed with the promise of interface with the digital scrambler, the intermedial space enacted a rupture with habitual processes of self curation. The process thereby displaced forms of self curation that produce a disciplined subject, allowing for the telling of abjected stories.

Background: cyborg bodies, cyborg theatre

In her well-known 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' (1991, originally published 1985), Donna Haraway calls for the cyborg as a feminist metaphor with productive potential to disrupt binaries that hold up hegemonic notions of subjectivity. The binaries that Haraway identifies include that of human/technology; the cyborg, whose body is intertwined with both categories, complicates the assumption that each component of the binary can be clearly identified and demarcated from the other. The cyborg, according to Haraway, is a 'boundary creature' in a world that is post-human and therefore post-gender (1991, 21-5). Through its ability to create multiple and shifting alliances, the cyborg allows for new subjectivities that complicate ideas of the universal subject. Drawing on Haraway and subsequent feminist techno-theorists, Jennifer Parker-Starbuck (2011) proposes 'cyborg theatre' as a term of analysis that uniquely foregrounds the intersections between bodies and technologies onstage, positioning theatre as a site of becoming-cyborg. This relationality between bodies and technologies, Parker-Starbuck argues, produces 'new forms of agency and embodiment' on stage (46).

I expand Parker-Starbuck's positioning of the cyborg within the theatrical event to identify the cyborg body in Invisible Ink's 'Terrible Things' project not as a body on stage, but as one that exists within a carefully facilitated theatrical space marked by liminality. The event in the room is painstakingly facilitated yet there is no facilitator physically present; the moment of storytelling is already part of a future theatre piece but in an uncertain way; the story told in the room simultaneously has no audience (it will never be told directly and the storyteller will always be anonymised) and multiple audiences (the space of the room, the answering machine, the artists listening to an altered version of it at an unspecified time in the future, possible future audiences of a theatrical event, the storyteller her or himself). To analyse this event through the

metaphor of the theatrical cyborg, therefore, I draw on the liminality of the figure, its status as a boundary creature. This can be linked to the 'inter-' of intermediality, identified as a space of productive potential when the human-technology binary is broken down, allowing for 'new forms of agency and embodiment' to emerge.

Revealing the abject through cyber-subjectivity

Following the Ferment showcase, Invisible Ink developed a second phase of research and development for the project that took the event to public spaces outside the theatre. In July 2015 I attended one of these events at a coffee shop in Cardiff, and participated by recording my own story (onto a dictaphone as there was no phone line). I was struck by the contrast between the human-technology interface using technologies of my childhood (rotary phone, answering machine, dictaphone) and the more familiar cyborgian performances with the smartphones that everyone around me in the coffee shop, myself included, carried and interacted with like appendages. When using these smartphones to share details about ourselves online, we were participating in self curation (Garner 2012, Warfield 2015), a practice that has become largely habituated for users of social media. That the simple request to tell a story about oneself produced such strong affective responses (many participants were deeply moved, and most described having difficulty entering the room) contrasted sharply with the ease with which the same participants would type a Facebook update and click 'post', or even post online anonymously. I unpack this below by suggesting Invisible Ink's intentional displacement of habitual interface with technologies and perceived listener produced a unique experience of performing the self, marked by a heightened liminality that produced the cyborg hybrid of undisciplined subjectivity, a cyber-subjectivity that reveals the abject in a new way.

Parker-Starbuck's taxonomy of the theatrical cyborg (2011) includes the abjected body made visible through the human-technology interface. Drawing on the role of the abject in subject formation by theorists including Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler, in the context of cyborg theatre Parker-Starbuck is most interested in the abject's transformative potential in producing, through the abjected body's links with technology, new bodies and subjectivities that challenge norms (61). The disciplinary processes that enact subject formation require the exclusion of the abject to produce norms of bodies and subjectivities; disciplined subjectivity is therefore predicated upon what has been abjected. The stories of terrible things, untold as part of the performance of the self and marked by shame, can be usefully understood as abjected in this context. The curated self depends upon having something to hide; the moment of revealing that which must remain hidden produces a new subjectivity, a cyber-subject situated at the interface of human, technology and (uncertain) listener.

Alternate routes for the telling of abjected stories - such as online or email anonymity, anonymous handwritten notes or journaling, the therapist session, the Catholic confessional - differ in significant ways from this moment in the room. Anonymous emails and handwritten notes or journaling - which Invisible Ink also collected in the research and development process - both use already-habituated technologies of typing and handwriting; significantly, Calvert-Ennals reported that these submissions lacked a depth that the vocally-recorded responses had. The therapist session and Catholic confessional both ask for the immediacy and vocalicity of

the act of storytelling/confession, yet incorporate a known, live listener. While abjected stories can emerge through these processes, the performance of self in these moments is enacted within the context of recognisability - of technologies, of listener - that the Invisible Ink process intentionally displaced.

The liminality of the familiar-yet-outdated technologies of the rotary phone/dictaphone demanded a non-habituated physical encounter from the participant. The outdated technologies required a human-technology interface that was both understood (everyone knows how to dial a rotary phone or hold down the record button on a dictaphone, meaning the technology was not a barrier) and unfamiliar (very few people do these actions as part of their daily encounters with technology). While the one-handed typing onto a smartphone has become a technology interface that most of the project's participants have learned to engage with unconsciously, using the rotary phone/dictaphone requires a degree of cognitive awareness absent within habituated behavior. The intended listener is similarly uncertain: as I told my story I imagined Calvert-Ennals and Harris listening to it in a future moment, knowing, however, that they would not be hearing 'my' voice but one digitally scrambled. I also imagined a future audience for the show, but as I could not clearly locate my story in the imagined future event - knowing that it would have undergone unpredictable transformations, and may or may not even be included in the final iteration of the project - this imagined audience was similarly uncertain. The recording device itself was the only true 'listener' in that moment, an identification complicated by its simultaneous status as non-human object and as imagined human listener(s). My own experience of telling my story uncovered forgotten details of memory and allowed me to reconcile, in the moment of speaking, the story with my ongoing process of self-narration. Previously the story had functioned as the abjected flip-side to my sense of self; that which was not really 'me'. After telling the story through the phone's receiver, aware of my simultaneous privacy and the potential public sphere to which the story would travel, my relationship to it altered. It is now simultaneously my own private story and one that has been (and will continue to be, in significantly uncertain ways) told; this juxtaposition integrates it in shifting, unstable ways into my narrative of self.

This hyper-conscious engagement with technology alongside the uncertain status of the listener produced a new cyber-subject in the moment of telling the story, allowing for a moment of undisciplined subjectivity outside the norms of self curation. While abjected stories have multiple routes to being told, most draw on habituated technologies and known listener(s). Through this event Invisible Ink facilitated a unique process marked by the liminality of the cyborg human/technology hybrid, a hybrid composed of human storyteller, unfamiliar technologies, and uncertain listener(s). These displacements made the moment more uncertain, more cyborg, than other routes to revealing the abject, producing new forms of agency and embodiment - the transformative potential of the cyborg - within the space of the room.

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