

## Posthuman Perspectives and Postdramatic Theatre: the Theory and Practice of Hybrid Ontology in Katie Mitchell's *The Waves*

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**ABSTRACT:** Drawing connections between the theories of Hans-Thies Lehmann's postdramatic theatre and N. Katherine Hayles's presentation of posthuman ontology, where each responds to technologically-conditioned ways of knowing, experiencing, and being, this article interrogates changing models of theatrical forms and subjectivity. It argues that Katie Mitchell's 2006-2007 National Theatre production of *The Waves* constructs a particular kind of posthuman subject who is materially instantiated and formed by emergent processes. This hybrid being replaces the dualistically conceived sovereign subject/hero of the liberal humanist model typical of traditional drama, and articulates a world built of flatter structures of mutuality.

**Keywords:** posthuman, postdramatic theatre, Katie Mitchell, *The Waves*, ontology, subjectivity.

**RESUMEN:** Partiendo de los paralelismos entre las teorías del teatro postdramático de Lehmann y la presentación de la ontología posthumana de Hayles, que responden a los condicionamientos tecnológicos en las formas de aprehender la experiencia, el ser y el conocimiento, este artículo interroga los modelos cambiantes de la forma teatral y la subjetividad. Se sugiere que la producción de *The Waves* por Katie Mitchell en el National Theatre, UK, durante la temporada 2006-2007, construye un sujeto posthumano peculiar que se forma y sustancia materialmente por medio de procesos emergentes. Este ser híbrido reemplaza el concepto dualista sujeto / héroe del modelo humanista liberal típico del teatro tradicional y articula un mundo construido sobre estructuras de interdependencia no jerárquicas.

**Palabras clave:** posthumano, teatro postdramático, Katie Mitchell, *The Waves*, ontología, subjetividad.

British theatre, viewed normatively and unexceptionally, comes out of a tradition of the dramatic conception of the play text and its live, embodied enactment on the stage. The drama performed typically posits a hero centre stage who, reminiscent of the liberal human subject, is required to overcome personal flaws and challenge Fortune through a carefully and teleologically structured plot. However, a society implicated by technology and media is now changing that model, inside and outside the theatre, rendering it inadequate and inaccurate to lived human experience. The posthuman theoretical perspective is that technology is transforming the human into the posthuman – a being ontologically indiscrete and hybrid: a human-technology cyborg. For some, the posthuman continues to operate dualistically, formed of immaterial informational pattern (which replaces mind or soul) and prosthetic body. For others, being posthuman means a materialistic and embodied ontology where consciousness, formerly the foundation of the human subject, is rendered epiphenomenal, a «bit part» in a larger system of cognitive distribution. Both kinds of posthuman are becoming visible on the British stage, although the *embodied* posthuman is the figure chiefly to interest this study.

Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006: 182) contends, meanwhile, that the traditional theatrical form of drama is weakening, that it is no longer «in tune with our experience» of being and living in the world today, and that the rise of a new paradigm – that of *postdramatic theatre* – is a necessary response to the modern mediatized world in which our relationship to the world and to each other, and our *perception* of each, is changed. The form of postdramatic theatre shares with posthumanism a more chaotic and emergent structure than is known by either drama or humanism. The purpose of this study is to ask first, in consequence of changing epistemological models, what the implications of the new structures might be for the (post)human theatrical figure. Furthermore, where postdramatic theatre locates film and voice-altering techniques in juxtaposed and equal roles with the live presence of the performer on stage in ways that hybridize and reformulate the (post)human subject, the question arises as to what, precisely, are the new ontological formulations being conceived? Should we celebrate such emergence, or insist on the order and integrity of meaning constituted in humanism and teleological drama?

The study operates out of posthuman perspectives, drawing significantly from the work of N. Katherine Hayles, and the theory of Hans-Thies Lehmann's postdramatic theatre, which are employed to interrogate the British theatre director, Katie Mitchell's 2006-07 production of *The Waves*.

## 1. Posthuman Perspectives

N. Katherine Hayles, in her seminal work, *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), articulates the posthuman as a point of view constructed within and by historically specific and emergent configurations of embodiment, technology, and culture. The following list of assumptions, which she itemises as indicative rather than definitive of the posthuman, serve as a convenient jumping-off point, not only for their significant epistemological denotations but for their contradictions and cross-fertilisations of supposedly dichotomous concepts, which implicitly inhere in the terms of humanism and its *post*. Hayles writes:

First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition long before Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals. (Hayles, 1999: 2-3)

This view of the posthuman illustrates some crucial similarities, as well as some radical breaks, with that of the human, where orientation for the human subject derives from the tradition of liberal humanism. Hayles's first and third characteristics operate out of a dualistic and hierarchical ontological model, one that positions insubstantial information and cognition over and above materiality, including the body, which is conceived as unintelligent stuff occupying the role of object. Here the liberal human subject's conception as a mindful and intelligent being, autonomous and sovereign, is preserved, albeit in a technologically and imaginatively new posthuman form. Hayles's second assumption, however, seems to operate differently as it relegates consciousness to an epiphenomenal status that functions according to deterministic and physical processes originating in embodied subjectivity. In this model, the posthuman is precluded any possibility of free will or agency as consciousness is posited as a small subsystem «running its program of self-construction and self-assurance while remaining ignorant of the actual dynamics of complex

systems» (Hayles, 1999: 286) behind and beyond it. Finally, the fourth assumption of the posthuman tradition listed by Hayles explicitly posits the potentially disturbing conception of the human as «seamlessly» configured with intelligent machines, which not only threatens the liberal human subject's boundaries but also his/her claims to autonomous will. It is this, perhaps, more than any other potential transformation of human ontology, which is viewed with unease, if not fear: the possibility that we, humans, will lose our centre stage and sovereign role to become ontologically equivalent and forced to share the world stage with intelligent machines. Composed of machinic and organic parts, where agency is multiple and variously located across formerly discrete borders, the human is replaced by the cyborg, and claims to hero and protagonist status, are withdrawn.

The implications of these characteristics are significant to our subjective evolution, to the question of how we are (becoming) posthuman in the Western world. In terms of British theatre and, more specifically, in *The Waves*, their ramifications are not merely observable in the *content*, but also as formal innovations, evolving the very *structure* of «plays» and their correlative relationship with audience reception.

## 2. *The Waves*: a Posthuman Analysis

The theatrical production under discussion, *The Waves* is remarkable for its departure from the normative British theatrical tradition, and for its interrogation of posthuman ontology. Not so much a play as a performance piece, it was collaboratively devised and adapted by Katie Mitchell and her ensemble of performers, from Virginia Woolf's 1931 novel of the same name, and performed at the Cottesloe Theatre in December 2006 – February 2007.<sup>1</sup> The focus of this discussion is the production's posthuman and dispersed presentation of subjectivity, where the unified and sovereign liberal human «hero» is replaced by a hybrid and ambiguous figure formed by multiple and separate machinic assemblages across language, technology, and embodiment. *The Waves* is concerned with going beyond representations of the world that already exist, towards possibilities that are as yet unknown, virtual, and uncharted to offer new ways of seeing and being. So, what posthuman hybrid becomings are being imagined here, and what methods does Mitchell employ to achieve them?

*The Waves* tells its narrative by means of the modernists' technique of stream of consciousness, a stream which meanders, irresolutely, from one

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1. I saw Mitchell's production of *The Waves* at the Cottesloe Theatre on 19th December, 2006.

character's point of view to another. Six characters, all friends, utter their ceaseless fragments of thoughts, which take us from their childhood to maturity. These thoughts are often unlinked, uncontextualised, apparently unstructured, and only punctuated, on occasion, by short, and apparently arbitrary, extracts of authorial commentary and description. We don't know why the characters are articulating their stories; they just *are*, and although their language is sensuous and evocative, this is anti-narrative and so void of dramatic tension or shape: apparently borderless.

The methods employed to articulate the stories are various. Having remediated the text from novel into theatrical form, and thereby directly implicating the «speaking figures» into new intermedial terrain, Mitchell next produces a sense of hybridity and fluid identities in her employment of set: a black box stage, with tables, chairs, microphones, a screen for projections, cameras, and objects for making sound effects, all of which conjure mixed contextual associations including those of a radio studio, a film studio, and even a panel for reading or discussion. This ambiguous space, and its use, functions to foreground not merely the material facts and devices of *theatrical* production (where these devices are traditionally employed by drama to create illusion), but also of our worldly processes of meaning-making. Performers, meanwhile – constantly substituting for each other – narrate Woolf's novel into microphones, which they read from the physical text – a text that is lit by a lamp and is thus positioned as an «actor» or participant in its own right in the production. The performers are not simply readers, however; they are also producers of sound effects, models, costume fitters, stagehands, filmmakers, and dancers, all of whom perform actions that apparently cohere to produce the «illusion», sometimes in the form of a radio production and sometimes in film, of the virtual and imagined world created by Woolf's text. For example, as the words on the page – those of the «character»- are read into the microphone by one actor, another actor performs the said character's actions while someone else produces visual effects (such as «rain» sprayed from a bottle onto a sheet of Perspex), all of which is filmed by other actors and projected live onto a screen. To this, music and attaching sound effects are overlaid to create the illusion of a totality. However, what this production highlights is that any suggestion of a totality is in fact actually a composite of quite disparate elements, which are only perceived as cohering as a result of convention, and have therefore become naturalised as such.

The first major point of interest in *The Waves* is how, while foregrounding consciousness as the very ground and subject of the piece; presenting it as thoughts in language tied to six voices, it actually functions to interrogate consciousness in its traditional form as immaterial and transcendental origin of an ontologically unique human subject. In place of a liberal humanist

perspective, the production postulates a hybridized subject, apparently devoid of mindful foundation but composed instead of multiple «parts, “schizzes” or impersonal and mobile fragments» (Colebrook, 2002: 5), which are generally misperceived as cohering. This posthuman subject is *not* a psychological type: the body of the performer is foregrounded and separated from any illusion of an essential identity or self. Bodies are coded and identities recognised according to what the body *does*, not what it *is*. This is not, however, to claim transcendental status for the body in place of the mind – a status that would have the body constituted as *the* constant or foundational element – because that would mistakenly conjecture a real-representation binary that *The Waves* actively rejects. Rather, Mitchell proposes, by the deconstruction of the subject (the separation of character/human elements - body, voice, sound), a *schizo* subject. She shows that human beings and the world have no ground, no originary or meaningful foundation, which is an idea that is tied to the piece’s derivation; for the novel originates in the imagination of a writer who comes to us from the discourse of history, whose words function as text for a performance that aims to demythologize human subjectivity and the human’s relationship to the world, and so manages to desubstantiate Woolf herself as an essential being or author of «the world». In this way, the borders between virtuality and reality are evaporated. There is no transcendental starting point; there are only ceaseless and singular becomings which form repeated machinic assemblages. As such, *The Waves*, by means of apparently autonomous and multiple sign systems (language, gesture, sound, film, music, and so forth), which operate independently of, but simultaneously with, each other, articulates a subject constructed and composed of paratactical codes, or parts, that are utterly inessential.

The second and related significant element arising from *The Waves* is the means by which technology refigures and reconstitutes the human into the posthuman subject, formulated within, against, and in-between media. Catherine Waldby’s argument regarding the openness of the human «to modes of engineering and techno genesis» offers a persuasive theoretical starting point for exploring the import of intermediality to human ontology. She contends that «the point of human origin [...] is susceptible to technical production» and that technologies render «the human not as inventor but as invention», crucially concluding that «the very category “human” owes its coherence to technologies which configure bodily morphology according to the medium-specific qualities of the archive itself – the book, the photographic archive, the computer archive and so forth» (Waldby, 2000: 161). On this view, any change in technology - its form or its function - where that technology is «employed by» or in some way images, formulates, or explains the human subject, serves to actively (re)configuration the human being. The consequence of this to the human subject in theatre can be illustrated in the specific technologies utilised, including, importantly, that of

language and its form, in the different models of theatre. Whereas the dramatic play text functions to locate human form «in» words and dialogue where the intended material instantiation (of performer) is substitutable, open, and secondary to the primacy of mind, the postdramatic text can be theorized as positing a materially significant and specific manifestation of human ontology that refuses a foundational premise. In postdramatic theatre, the technology by which the human subject is mediated renders it/him/her hybrid and open to new ontologies. In the chora-graphic space of *The Waves*'s stage, bodies, voices, gestures, movements, looks, and postures are all ripped from their spatio-temporal continuum and «newly connected, isolated, and assembled into a tableau-like montage» (Lehmann, 2006: 151). The electronic manifestation of the language in amplified voice and dubbed over the film image tears voice from presence and language from human being, resulting in the creation of a kind of «voice mask that “ghosts” the “character” and renders him/her a spoken “it” as opposed to a speaking “I”» (Lehmann, 2006: 10). Language is rendered akin to an exhibited object as it is read over a microphone, amplified, and translated into a kind of specific physical and motoric act and thus «an *unnatural, not self-evident* process», provoking by «bringing to light that the word does not belong to the speaker. It does not organically reside in his/her body but remains a *foreign body*» (Lehmann, 2006: 147). Furthermore, when the filmed image of the body is overlaid by the autonomous voice, so the human body is re-articulated as a kind of de-psychologized speaking machine, rendered coherent and unified only by the spoken text. By such methods of technologically mediated disunification of human embodiment into separate parts, the comprehension of subjectivity is changed, as formerly «natural» bodily coherence is ruptured into pieces at the same time as these pieces cross ontological borders from the organic to the technological. As such, the human form loses its borders, its uniqueness, and is opened up to hybridity and shared ontology: rendered a posthuman cyborg.

The third discussion point located in the production's interrogation of the process of meaning-making: epistemological models are «played» with as the audience is encouraged to reflect on its processes of reading and knowing, by means of the production's formation of the intermedial and schizo subject who is constructed across and in-between technologies. On the one hand, the posthuman subject's apparent openness to alternate mediatization into sound and film suggests an unfixity and an immateriality that continues to operate out of traditional dualistic conceptions of subjectivity, and a concomitant front-loading of meaning into the epistemological system: on this perspective, informational pattern replaces consciousness as immaterial ontological foundation; on the other hand, the production's very foregrounding of autonomous media forms in their specific material instantiations function to counter the immaterialising

impulse, and instead highlights the differences effected in the audience's reception and reading of the subject: we perceive and understand the posthuman subject differently according to his/her various and particular manifestations. For example, in *The Waves*, our reception of the virtual world of film is starkly contrasted to that of the physical «reality» of live bodies doing (for example, the shooting of the film). The film projections in *The Waves* conjure specific and coherent meanings and emotions; the actions on stage and of the narrative itself, meanwhile, refuse coherence, operating in scarcely distinguishing frames, or units, of embodied action or «story». While the novel and the stage action lack any privileged centre, instead working with multiple viewpoints and lines of becoming, the film image provides a neat and pre-packaged point of view. Film is starkly presented as creating coherence out of chaos and meaning out of arbitrary and simultaneous actions and systems. In this way, Mitchell's production subjects audience reception to self-scrutiny; it highlights the liberal human's desire to attribute meaning to the world by the fact that preference is found in the narrow frame of the film rather than in the wider frame of the live and embodied stage, which is more chaotically constituted and unfocused, with multiple actions. Incidentally posited, here, too, is the idea that meaning does not exist in any transcendental sense, and that any meaning we ascribe is a thing desired and virtually, rather than actually, constructed.

*The Waves*'s schizo subject and figuration across media offers a bottom-up orientation for the posthuman, positing consciousness as epiphenomenal, a subjective and experiential consequence of physical processes, which leads to the fourth point of this discussion: how material and posthuman ontology renders a realist epistemology irrelevant, replacing it with reflexive and autopoietic models. For some researchers in the field of Artificial Life (which Hayles attests as fundamental to our evolving negotiations with what it means to be human), the bottom-up organisation of the (post)human is key to our ontology. Researcher Rodney Brooks at MIT claims that the essential property of the human being is not essential consciousness or mind or intelligence, but «the ability to move around and interact robustly with the environment» (Hayles, 1999: 235). Of course, *The Waves* enacts this very point of view with its presentation of human and non-human stage activity that is explicitly shown as the origin of any experience of consciousness. This theory, meanwhile, gestures towards Humberto Maturana's own thoughts, which insist that the body cannot be dispensed with and that the particularities of embodiment are entirely significant to cognition; in short, that mind and body are not separate but a «unity». This theory shakes the empirically constituted realist epistemology, which posits a «reality» out there that exists distinctly from the (human) observer. Maturana's key insight is to show that «reality» exists for all living creatures, including humans, «only through interactive processes determined solely by the



organism's own organization» (Hayles, 1999: 136). Precise material instantiation and organisation is the key to perception and relations with the world. The observer cannot describe absolute reality, for such description «would require an interaction with the absolute to be described, but the representation that would arise from such an interaction would necessarily be determined by the autopoietic organization of the observer [...] hence, the cognitive reality that it would generate would unavoidably be relative to the observer» (Maturana, in Hayles, 1999: 136).

Such autopoietic structure and closure, as it is evidenced in the production of *The Waves*, is critical to this discussion of posthuman subjectivity and epistemology for two reasons: firstly, where the stage activity and use of technology shows the physical manifestation of a subject formed of multiple schizzes that are specifically affective,<sup>2</sup> it demonstrates that cognitive reality is derivative of particularised material instantiation – the result of the very specific physical organisation of parts; secondly, where the observer is shown to be an integral part of the picture, which s/he is by implication of her/his own particularised material instantiation, bodies cannot be claimed to be constituted of information/mind alone: information cannot be divided from matter. In fact, consciousness is specific to experiences of embodiment. There is no reality «out there». *The Waves*, in effect, in its precise use of forms, argues that the production, the subject, and, by implication, the world, are formed of specific organisations which alter the very terms of cognition or consciousness.

Such ways of perceiving ourselves and the world are challenging because traditional ontology is turned on its head: *The Waves* suggests that the subject is posthuman, a specifically and materially instantiated hybrid being, whose ways of thinking, perceiving, and being are consequent of physical and emergent processes. In Mitchell's world, there is no transcendental subject formed of mind and body. Wholeness is a fiction; there is no dramatic beginning, middle, and end that give shape and teleology to history. There is no single privileged spectacle, character, or point of view. Life is not about one privileged point – the self-contained mind of «man» - representing some inert physical world; there is, on *The Waves*'s model, only movement and difference and becoming in which the actant and spectator are equally imbricated.

In one view, a humanistic view, the «new» ways of perceiving and thinking the world inspired by this production are disturbing, for they refuse humankind its taken-for-granted position at the centre of the theatrical and world stages. The ontological and epistemological changes prompted by technological and media

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2. Affective, in this usage, signifies an affect of feeling freed from interested or organising subjects, as set forth in Deleuzian theory. For a fuller and accessible description of affect, read Colebrook (2002: 27).

evolutions may be unsettling as they refuse the subject his/her essential character as a conscious, autonomous, and intelligent, being located in a meaningful world. A need to re-navigate his/her very ontology and function as posthuman is necessitated, for s/he/it is now reconstituted as a being formed in and of a comprehensively physical world of chaotic dynamics and emergent structures lacking the teleological security of, for example, the narratives of religion built upon an idea of soul. On another perspective, however, Mitchell's production is beautiful and offers a posthuman way of being that surrenders hegemonic control and posits, in its place, mutual and interdependent intelligent action between beings and objects. Indeed, despite the uncomfortable readjustment required of the audience in situating itself for a production that refuses common expectations (of a play and of the human subject), *The Waves's* conjuring of an other way of being and seeing the world, modelled on hybridity and fluidity, is seductive and importantly allows us to imagine potential futures of mutuality of which Hayles (1999) and Haraway (1991) might approve.

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