

Robot-Author. Composite dramaturgy in Stefan Kaegi's Uncanny Valley by Izabella Pluta

I. Introduction

In 2018, Stefan Kaegi, the Swiss director and member of the Rimini Protokoll group, created a performance halfway between an installation and a robotic show, entitled *Uncanny Valley*, which is a theatre play presented on the stage between a robot and an audience. The humanoid is the animatronic look-alike of the German contemporary writer Thomas Melle, who he embodies and replaces in this performance, giving a lecture on the phenomenon of instability. The presentation is also a pretext to talk about the writer's bipolar depression and the life of Alan Turing, the father of Artificial Intelligence, to whom the robot on the stage makes an implicit reference. Kaegi interweaves here dramaturgical materials of different types, extending between text, image, sound, and robotics and in this way, he builds a *composite dramaturgy*. In this study I want to analyse this composition in which the approach to the text is confronted with the complex technological device that not only brings its own logics of use but also of meaning. A need to identify this structure in the theoretical context of theatre studies and also in reflections dedicated to digital technology will become fundamental in my study.

II. Uncanny Valley and the dramaturgical question

One of Stefan Kaegi's stimuli to make this performance was the desire to collaborate with Thomas Melle (Zimann Gislou 2019: 298-309). The textual composition is based on a story written by the German writer and the Swiss director. It is the text conceived precisely for the performance that combines two main stories: the autobiographical testimonies of the writer and the life story of Alan Turing, a British scientist from the 1930s-1950s. And it is a narrative scaffolding for the performance. S. Kaegi superimposes other dramaturgical layers on it: textual, borrowing from transhumanist ideology, but also visual (through videos and photos), sound, and computer. In this way he builds what we call the "composite dramaturgy" in his performance (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. *Uncanny Valley*, conception and directing: Stefan Kaegi, 2018. Photo © Izabella Pluta.

It should be noted that the term "dramaturgy" is not only multi-faceted but was also broadened in the first decades of the 21st century. Already in 1985, Bernard Dort proposed a definition of dramaturgy that he himself considered «extremely vague» and which is «[...] everything that happens in the text and everything that happens from the text to the stage» (Dort 1985: 62). His term «dramaturgical state of mind» («l'état d'esprit dramaturgique»), was proposed a year later and is now fundamental for theatre studies, expresses his observation that «textual composition» is no longer at the centre of theatrical activity, but that «representation» is (Dort 1986: 8).

The paradigm of "postdramatic theatre" proposed by Hans-Thies Lehmann in early 2000 sheds further light on the issue. The author points out that the notion emerges and is stimulated by the development of new information technologies and notes that «[w]ith the end of the 'Gutenberg galaxy' the written text and the book are being called into question» (Lehmann 2002: 18 and 28). Lehmann analyses this new postdramatic situation that explores self-reflexivity, performativity, and the very process of perception by crossing arts and languages. The staging can become a writing in itself, a "stage writing" ("*écriture scénique*"), which is constructed during the creative process without being guided, ordered or supported by a prior text. Lehmann thus reinforces the theoretical state of the notion of dramaturgy, which always remains an open and vast term.

Joseph Danan joins the discussion and, in his book *Qu'est-ce que la dramaturgie?*, raises the notion of «dramaturgocentrism» («*dramaturgocentrisme*»), which allows for this broader understanding of dramaturgy as «not text-centred» («*non centrée sur le texte*») (Danan 2010: 31). It is not only a question of reflecting on the passage from text to stage, but on the relationship between the

dramaturgy of the text and the stage writing. The dramaturgy of the text consisting of «different dramaturgical categories» in a play that goes beyond «the textual» and the scenic writing that allows these categories to be implemented in a single stage performance (Danan 2010: 31).

As for the performance with a technological component, I agree with Florence Baillet who notes that the dramatic text changes its status in this type of context. It becomes a «protocol» or «frame» and in this form allows the play to be made (Baillet 2015: 150). A mixture of different discourses is also characteristic of Rimini Protokoll's work. This approach can already be observed in *Karl Marx: Das Kapital, Erster Band (Karl Marx: Capital, Tom 1)* from 2006 in which "experts" (amateur actors employed by the artists) recite excerpts from this book by Karl Marks, on stage. Hans-Thies Lehmann notes that with this procedure Rimini Protokoll is able to create not a traditional performance, but a creation based on frames in which «different records of reality as well as different forms of acquiring knowledge» are presented (Lehmann 2012: 138).

III. *Autobiographical narrative*

Uncanny Valley begins when the audience enters the space of performance. At that moment, the audience sees a white screen on the left of a square carpet and on the right, there is an armchair on which a humanoid robot is sitting next to a laptop on a small table. When everyone is seated, the stage is bathed in light. The humanoid introduces itself: «I am Thomas Melle». He tells us that we are here for his lecture on instability and the "Uncanny Valley" phenomenon. A few photos of his younger days appear on the screen, which illustrate the story of what type of child he was and his questions as to his identity during his adolescence. In 2016, he published the book *Die Welt im Rücken (The World at your Back)* in which he talks about his illness and gives his definition of this psychological dysfunction (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. *Uncanny Valley*, conception and directing: Stefan Kaegi, 2018. Photo © Izabella Pluta.

This book was a finalist for a German Book Prize due to the quality of his writing and his courage to touch on the taboo subject of bipolarity, especially in Germany, which made him very famous and particularly in demand for interviews and lectures. Melle confides in the performance while being absent on stage. He is represented by a robot that embodies his absence. Melle only appears on stage as a video image, but gives his voice to the dubbed robot, especially in the German version. Louis Patrick Lerrooux speaks in the context of theatre that stages an autobiography of the artist's desire to give an "individualised, sincere and true" word, even though it is staged and performed (Lerrooux 2004: 85). He makes an interesting remark about this type of stage narrative:

«The autobiographical 'I' is not only a question of the nature or accuracy of the story, but also of the autobiographical act, i.e., a deliberate decision to reveal oneself, even if only in a veiled manner. By assuming the 'I' on stage, we move into the autobiographical act» (Lerrooux 2004: 85).

This Melle's autobiographical storyline then gives way to the story of Turing. The screen then projects photos of this researcher as well as diagrams of his work. Melle-robot tells us the story of Turing's journey, linking his world-renowned scientific achievement with his deeply tragic personal life. We learn that Turing studied the language capabilities of the machine, which made him visionary in his conception of a future Artificial Intelligence. Known today as the "Turing Test", it tests our ability to distinguish whether we are dealing with a human or a machine. His personal life is marked by a dramatic history relating to his homosexuality, as he had to undergo hormone treatment since at that time his sexual preference was considered a disease. Medicine tried to *reprogram* his body with violent medication, and the estrogen he received gave him very feminine features. Finally, in 1954, Turing bit into a poisoned apple, laced with cyanide, and thus ended his life.

S. Kaegi then builds this story in the performance on a narrative that interweaves two biographies: one conceived in the first person and the other in the third. We can see that they fit into the perspective of «autobiographical theatre», which Patrice Pavis first distinguishes from autobiography, as a «retrospective prose narrative» (Pavis 2002: 361). In his attempt to grasp the characteristics of autobiographical theatre, the author proposes three categories (Pavis 2002: 362):

1. the «life story» («*récit de vie*») performed by an actor who is also the author of this story and who recounts events from his past;
2. the «immodest confession» («*confession impudique*»), which focuses on a recent experience, such as an illness, and is performed by an actor who is suffering from this illness (e.g., he is HIV-positive);
3. the «play with identity» («*jeu avec l'identité*») which is a «research in act» («*recherche en acte*») dedicated to sexual, ethnic, cultural identity, during which the artist "tries on" fictional selves.

In my opinion, Stefan Kaegi draws on these three categories by staging Melle's illness, tragic events in Turing's life, the latter's sexual quest, but also the question of identity linked to the android and the implanted human, which concerns human identity confronted with Artificial Intelligence.

IV. *Dramaturgy and theory on stage*

It is worth mentioning that the title of the show symbolises the key notion of robotics as the term «uncanny valley», introduced by Masahiro Mori in the 1970s, refers to the anxiety felt when faced with a humanoid robot (Mori 2012: 26-33). It echoes the «uncanny strangeness», the title of an essay by Sigmund Freud (*Das Unheimliche*), published in 1919 (Freud 1933: 163-210). For this psychoanalyst, it is the feeling of unease that we experience in the presence of anthropomorphic objects that appear to be alive, such as dolls, mannequins, or puppets. Stefan Kaegi places this phenomenon at the heart of his show, as he does not try to convince the spectator of the perfection of the robot, but rather to arouse doubt. On the one hand, it incorporates tics that are considered human traits: e.g., throat clearing, whereas on the other hand, its body is partially demystified as, from the stage, it is possible to see that the back of the skull is removed, revealing the operating mechanisms (Fig. 3).

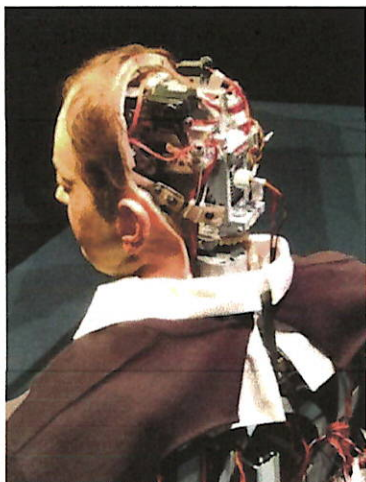


Fig. 3. *Uncanny Valley*, conception and directing: Stefan Kaegi, 2018.
Photo © Izabella Pluta.

Stefan Kaegi furthermore debates the boundaries between human and machine in relation to people with disabilities and prosthetics. One of the documentary excerpts from the performance introduces us to Thomas Melle, who meets Enno Park, a deaf person with a cochlear implant, who co-founded the Cyborg e.V. association in Berlin in 2013. Melle-robot asks: «Is a deaf person with an implant, a human machine?» Indeed, the question of cyborgization that arises during this performance acquires its true scope here. If a cyborg is a half-biological, half-technological organism, as defined by the doctor José Delgado in the 1950s and 1960s, then is a person implanted with a pacemaker, a cochlear implant or an eye implant a cyborg? In turn, Melle wonders whether a person who functions with the help of technology, as he did during this conference, do they lose some of their humanity? In this way, the Kaegi wishes to discuss the issue of the cyborgization, as announced by Donna Haraway (Haraway 1999: 271-292), as previously advocated through the amplified man of which Marshall McLuhan spoke and whose senses will be extended by the communication media as well as by increasingly complex technological objects (McLuhan 1968). McLuhan sees the technological age as the apogee of this amplification because it would offer the technological simulation of consciousness. For Haraway, a cyborg is a contemporary figure of a monster and the place where the technical, textual, organic, mythical and the political potentials merge (Haraway 1991: 21-26). «We are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology» (Haraway 1999: 272) – she expresses this now emblematic phrase in her feminist and highly critical *Cyborg Manifesto* signed in 1984. She sees the body as a biotic component or cybernetic communication system. Neuroscience and implantology give their own answer to the subject of merging the biological body with electronic elements in the framework of reparative medicine. Nevertheless, the performance incorporates statements and questions that confront the audience with some ideas of transhumanism. We hear from the stage: «And if you realise that somewhere there is a technology that can help you get closer to who you really want to be, who you feel you are – a bit like a person deciding to change their sex – well go ahead and get that technology» (Theatre, 2019). These questions correspond to several axioms linked to transhumanism, a current that is coupled with posthumanism and is both a philosophy and an ideology. Its mission is to increase human capacities on a physiological, genetic, intellectual, and psychological level and to extend life considerably and even exceed mortality (Koest 2015). Ray Kurzweil, the pioneer of transhumanist thought has this to say about the notion of human limitations: «For me, the essence of the human

is not in our limitations – although we have many – but in our ability to overcome them» (Kurzweil 2007: 334).

Without giving answers, S. Kaegi in turn raises several questions from this field which he confronts with the consciousness of the spectators: the union of the biological and the technological, the Turing Test as well as the perhaps most fundamental question: Can a robot replace a human and become a robot-artist? The alternation of addresses: Melle's "I" and the "You" thrown at the audience several times blur the stage boundaries of spectatorial identification as well as anthropological ones. Stefan Kaegi constantly confronts us with the blurred boundaries between human and machine (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. *Uncanny Valley*, conception and directing: Stefan Kaegi, 2018. Photo © Izabella Pluta.

The dramaturgy of this performance is built on the confrontation of textual formats with different tones, drawing on true stories but also on theoretical and scientific statements from philosophy, anthropology, and robotic engineering, among others. Joseph Danan makes an interesting remark when it comes to a scenic approach linking a variety of discursive formats, he specifies that there is «dramaturgy as soon as in contact, actual or anticipated, with the stage, a thought seeks and orders itself by searching for its signs» (Danan 2010: 33).

V. *Dramaturgy and technological device*

Uncanny Valley is a work that relies strongly on the robotic device represented by the android, but also on a technological device with other tangible elements (speakers, projector, screen, and control room) that allows the manipulation of all these heterogeneous components of the performance. It should be noted that it is not only one element among others but is situated at the center of the dramaturgical development (Magris, in print). As Florence Baillet notes, Rimini Protokoll's starting point in several of its performances is not a text to be staged, but a device «that can include textual elements», as is the case in the performance *Cargo Sofia*, for instance, where the audience is invited into a semi-glazed truck or in *Situation Rooms*, where spectators enter a large container construction with situation rooms (Bailler 2015: 147-155). In *Uncanny Valley* the device is both a framework for the author's text and a fundamental dramaturgical carrier.

The theatre director explains in an interview with Giórgio Zimann Gislón that he wanted to see in this performance the limits of the integration of technology in a stage work (Zimann Gislón 2019: 298-309). «How far can the machine take an important place in a performance and place the human actor on the periphery?» – he asks himself. The animatronic double is the main actor of this performance and is an exact copy of the German author elaborated according to the parameters of his body mainly by Andreas Matijat of Chris Creatures Filmeffects GmbH and a mask taken from his face made by Tommy Opatz (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. *Uncanny Valley*, conception and directing: Stefan Kaegi, 2018. Photo © Izabella Pluta.

These complex issues bring to mind Michel Simonot's reflection on the digital creative context:

«The digital requires its own 'dramaturgy', which is articulated with that of the staging, whereas the projection of images (like the broadcasting of music) on stage is only ever the introduction of additional elements within the specific logic of the staging. The computer artist produces logic, dramaturgy by the very fact of writing a program» (Simonot 2005: 67).

Here, computer language even appears explicitly in the form of diagrams and images, but also through the specificity of the place, which is a technological laboratory and its own gesture.

Melle-Robot admits that he has a media image of himself that has been transformed by his celebrity and is so distorted that he no longer recognises himself in it. S. Kaegi brings this situation into play and explores the idea of doubling up, which is not only summed up in the presence of the robot on stage, but also in the mediated appearance of the writer as his images scrolls across the screen. Here, the original is mixed with the copy, both in terms of identity and media, raising the question of identification, authenticity, and falseness. The documentary extracts integrated into the performance, testifying to the elaboration of the animatronic doppelganger, add an interesting layer to this subject. We watch Melle visiting several research spaces and experimenting, for example, with the functioning of a bionic arm. These video materials have a double status: not only do they illustrate what we hear through the speakers, but also become a structure in itself. Here we find what Arnaud Rykner defines as a characteristic of contemporary theatre: here the device «enhances the visual and plastic stakes of the stage» (Rykner 2008: 92-93).

In this performance, visual and auditory elements, but above all the performance of the robot, involve the work of the programming and the technical team. It should be explained that the operation of the robot here requires both a programming engineer and a puppeteer, in this case Stefano Trambusti, supported by Daniel Stiber in controlling the robot. This also confirms that the relationship between human collaborators, programs and a robot build new dynamics, but also «specific dramaturgical potentialities» (Magris in print). We agree with Erica Magris, who notes that dramaturgy converges towards programming, a programming that summons all the «partial dramaturgies» (*dramaturgies partielles*) of performance, «including that of the spectator» (Magris in print).

VI. *Towards a composite dramaturgy*

It is important to underline that the artists are questioning here the role of the playwright in a stage creation, but especially his replacement by a machine (Fig. 6). The application of different layers of silicon on the Melle's face to freeze his prints, the process we see on the screen as a documentary extract, is a telling metaphor. «It was a symbolic death for me» – explains Melle-Robot and indeed Melle-Man is seen to disappear under the synthetic mask. Certainly, the removal of this siliconized form is a metaphorical return to the writer's life. Moreover, an imprint of his own face is a symbolic act of transmitting his physical features to his double.

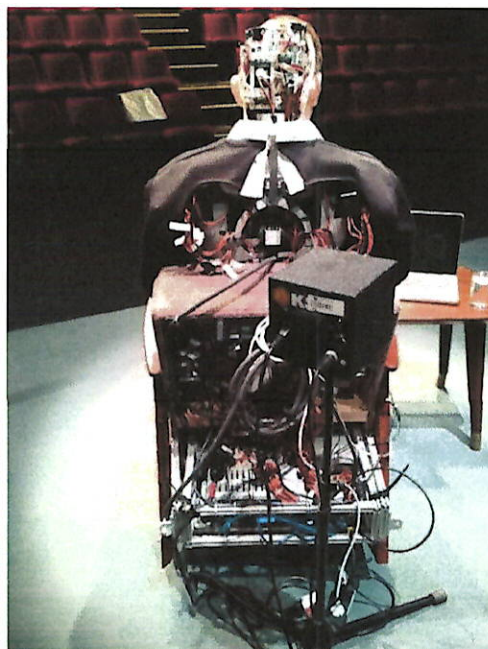


Fig. 6. *Uncanny Valley*, conception and directing: Stefan Kaegi, 2018. Photo © Izabella Pluta.

Patrice Pavis points out that contemporary dramaturgies have a considerable influence on the process and manner of staging. For him, it is perhaps the return to narrativity. He specifies: «Writing also progresses through its intertextuality, its formal research, in particular in its autofictional dimension. [...] A new way of telling leads to another way of staging, and vice versa» (Pavis 2012: 132-133).

We can consider *Uncanny Valley* as an example of a *composite dramaturgy*, the operational term we have proposed for this study, belonging to the postdramatic, but reinforced by innovative elements, complemented by dramatic models of autobiographical theatre, influenced by robotic devices. As Joseph Danan notes, the grasp of the dramaturgy always escapes because it is «to be

recreated» in every stage work, and even «to be created» when the theatre play does not refer to the dramatic (Danan 2010: 32). *Uncanny Valley* is a performance where, despite everything and regardless of its dramaturgical complexity, a story is told.

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