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*Driving a Driverless Train: Are We All Extras Now? Theatre and AI*

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## **Abstract**

The article examines automation and artificial intelligence through the prism of theatrical extras and supernumeraries. Theatrical extras are primarily valued for their aesthetic contributions, including their ability to enrich the *mise-en-scène*, manipulate lighting, or absorb sound within various visual and auditory landscapes. Drawing a parallel with the supernumeraries of 19th century spectacles, contemporary extras are, in essence, engaged in theatrical art labor. But in a contemporary context of automation, this labor undergoes notable transformation, shifting from the actual execution of tasks to a performative enactment of these tasks, akin to a driver who occupies the role of not driving in an automated vehicle. Automation often transforms work from actually “doing” a job, to performing, or “acting” to do a job, like a driver who is placed in the position of not driving an automated vehicle. At the core of this exploration resides the work of Samuel Beckett, whose oeuvre provides a ground for investigating the implications of posthumanism within the context of contemporary labor and performance. The inherent exhaustion associated with this seemingly labor-less labor arises from the notion that the non-driver within the so-called driverless train merely references labor that was once physically performed.

There is a story about driverless technology that is perhaps apocryphal or perhaps not, but it comes to us by way of a dramaturg who heard it from the theater director and visual artist Kris Verdonck,<sup>1</sup> who we assume read it in a reputable newspaper. As the story goes: when the Paris Métro began using automated trains, it left the drivers' chairs empty. It seems then that the sight of a driverless train pulling through stations caused a panic on the platforms. The riders and those waiting for trains could only comprehend the situation as lost, out of control, immensely dangerous. In order to stem complaints and potential chaos, the authorities at the Paris Métro hired people to dress as conductors to stand in the drivers' cars. These "conductors" had no job but to look like conductors—they were essentially hired to do nothing more than to be present in the place where a human had previously done the work that was now done by the driverless technology.

Naturally, the trains were not "driverless" with the new technology; the people in the position of the drivers were just no longer performing the work that had been to that point indexed to that position—operating the controls to accelerate, brake, and communicate with passengers and centralized systems. The humans in the driver seats were now stage dressing, part of the set, the scenery. They were extras hired to act as if (that magical theatrical phrase) they were doing work. Like the supernumeraries (Mayer 2009) hired to fill the stages of 19<sup>th</sup>-century spectacles, the people acting as conductors might have had experience as actual train drivers, but they were now hired to labor theatrically. The work was no longer driving a train, but playing as a driver. And it seems that not only was this type of actor needed in other metro and subway systems, but that the human performers were fairly believable in their roles.<sup>2</sup> The new service that the "drivers" were providing was that of a theatrical intermediary between human passengers and the self-driving machine. The service was that of a conciliator.

The same process is noticed across various modes of labor—from the industrial automation and mechanization of artisan goods to more recent attempts to automate intellectual labor of art, writing, and modeling with artificial intelligence. Whether it is with a train (Williams 2014), a chatbot (Poynton 2019), a talking CGI dolphin (Walker n.d.), a mechanical assembly line arm (ciel11.com n.d.), AI-sentence generators, or even therapy bots

providing online consultation using emotional reasoning and artificial intelligence (Vaidyam et al. 2019), we find many examples of shifting relationships between human labor and technology, where nonhuman collaborators seem more active and autonomous, and are supplementing (or replacing) positions that have historically been occupied by human bodies. Indeed, the recent interest in AI software that appears to replicate various aspects of intellectual labor (e.g., ChatGPT) marks a fascination, and an anxiety, that is widely shared. As intellectual labor is automated, just as many aspects of manual labor have been, people are left to fill roles as convincing extras mediating the encounter between AI or robot workers and the people they are working for.

Yet, in the train car performance, as we know from theater, actual work is still being performed. The trains still run, independent of what has happened in the conductor booth, yet the human “stand-in” is also at work performing the role of the conductor. Indeed, the human extra performing as a driver has the important purpose of pointing out, emphasizing, and reiterating the work that the machine is actually doing. In light of such shifts, and in writing this article here with a group of authors in different cities and countries, we might say that we are performing a kind of manual intellectual labor.<sup>3</sup> That is, we could at this point ask ChatGPT to write an article on automation, performance, and labor and then “stand in” as the theatrical authors like the former train drivers-turned-models. We thus see space for theater and performances studies to think with these ongoing automated changes, especially in light of the potentially radical intervention of technologies like ChatGPT to upend and trouble intellectual labor. Here we explore the interface between automation, theater studies, and labor “even” after the dream or utopia of automation through the historical theatrical extra, Samuel Beckett’s potentially posthuman dramaturgy, and the implications of each on our own authorial processes of writing collaboratively about theater and performance.

Labor, work, and the expenditure of physical and mental effort are explored here through Marx’s focus on the capacity to produce goods and services. Though, as Jaehee Kim’s (2014) study of Gilbert Simondon suggests, as technology develops, the relationship between labor and the object of labor has shifted, where neither the laborer nor the capitalist

will directly engage with a product or the physical tools to make it. So what happens to the laborer when they not only lose a connection to production, but assist machines (or stand in to pretend to do the work of machines) rather than use machines as tools? What happens when we ourselves become theatrical extras to full automation? The driverless train and its workers are central to this idea in that automation transforms work from actually “doing” a job, to performing, or “acting” to do a job, like a driver who is placed in the position of not driving an automated vehicle. Maybe this state resonates with Marx’s alienated worker, so disconnected from the product of their labor that there is only a mere “act of labor” itself (see Boyle 2017).

The notion of “conductors” resembling human conductors in the context of driverless technology resonates with the ideas of the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon. Simondon’s work, particularly his concept of “individuation,” sheds light on the evolving relationship between humans and technology, which is pertinent to the post-labor condition (2005; 2017). In Simondon’s philosophy, individuation refers to the process through which entities, including technological systems, evolve and become more complex. He emphasizes the need for a harmonious integration between humans and technology, wherein technology becomes an extension of human capacities rather than a replacement. Simondon’s vision of post-labor conditions is rooted in the idea of humans transitioning from mere operators of technology to becoming symbiotically integrated with it. In the context of the driverless train, the “conductors” represent a transitional phase where the human presence is still deemed necessary, though their role has shifted from active labor to a performative representation. They are essentially hired to mimic the role of human conductors, highlighting the persistence of human presence in an automated environment. Simondon’s philosophy invites us to contemplate the evolving dynamics between humans and technology in such post-labor scenarios, where the boundary between human and machine blurs, and the role of humans transforms into one of coexistence and orchestration alongside technology. The question is, however, whether mimicking labor is a sustainable mode of coexistence and whether instead of post-labor, we should start thinking in terms of posthuman labor, as Kim suggests.

There is something developing here with a labor that is so de-skilled that only a physical presence is necessary, especially when it is coupled with the exploitation of hope for something different—the labor is exhausting. We understand exhaustion through D’Hoest and Lewis’s defining contrast between exhaustion and mere tiredness. After tiredness comes rest, “and rest is possible only because there is already some rest: not everything has been buried in the activity, something remains”; tiredness results from doing something (D’Hoest and Lewis 2015). Exhaustion, however, lingers—you are used up entirely and exhausted already. The exhausting nature of this apparently labor-less labor, we argue, stems from the idea that the labor now required by the non-driver in the so-called driverless train is just a referent to labor once performed—more theatrical labor than performative labor, appearance without an object or physical product. And yet (or perhaps because of this) the laborer is used up, required to perform their essential humanness. Being human becomes exhausting labor.

But what to make of the fact that the stand-in driver, while devoid of the tangible or outward physical exertion often associated with labor, still undergoes a form of depletion and exhaustion? Here we might make a link between contemporary concepts of *jouissance* and labor. *Jouissance*, stemming from Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic framework, denotes a heightened, often contradictory form of pleasure that extends beyond mere enjoyment. Traditionally, within the context of labor, this connection manifests as a nuanced interplay of power and control, satisfaction and recognition. Many forms of labor are characterized by tangible physical exertion, typically lacking immediate pleasure but driven by economic necessity. However, in the digital age and modern work settings, some forms of labor may appear devoid of physicality yet still yield a sense of accomplishment akin to *jouissance*. This fusion of labor and pleasure challenges established definitions of both, underscoring the intricate evolution of our understanding of work and pleasure dynamics

Instead of experiencing the *jouissance* of traditional labor, the exhaustion of those laboring as extras stems from the act of preserving and upholding the illusion or representation of *jouissance* itself. In this role, they become custodians of a carefully constructed facade, ensuring that others can partake in the vicarious enjoyment of labor, even if it is divorced

from the authentic physicality of the experience. This unique form of depletion underscores the complexity of contemporary labor dynamics, where the boundaries between tangible and performative labor blur, raising questions about the nature of work and the preservation of its symbolic value.

Therefore, in the relatively simple example of a “driverless” train we see many theatrical considerations, including the very notion of creative and intellectual labor. We attempt to think with these phenomena by connecting our contemporary relationship to labor and labor in performance to 19<sup>th</sup>-century stage directors and modern theater, asking how we might imagine the relation between actor and extra, performance and work. This move from character to extra captures how many of our performances are closer to the position of the extra (put to work for aesthetic and affective means), rather than to that of the character with our own plot, backstory, life, agency, skill, motive, and attention. And yet, a posthuman understanding also reminds us that the extras in our examples here are not simply extra, but are doing essential work. Their physical presence is active and agentic to the atmosphere, and the scene (as it were) completely depends on the work of their material presence and performance of attention. The extra’s body becomes valued for its aesthetic qualities—the way it fills out the *mise-en-scène*, reflects light or absorbs sound, rather than the things it enacts, and so the laborer experiences a double disposability (see Mayer 2016). They don’t “do” anything, but pretend to, and they could be replaced by a different body or perhaps a different machine, without recourse.

### **Theatrical Extras and Exhausting Things**

To us as theater scholars, it is striking how the performance of a train driver echoes early twentieth-century theatrical experiments. The person standing in for the train driver that is no longer needed performs what early directors and theater artists knew: that extras are a kind of laborious scenography.<sup>4</sup> They create a tone or a mood, they are a shifting and malleable stage picture, they act and react, and, importantly, they are visibly working. The role of the train drivers reminds us of the large casts necessary for classic naturalist plays such Hauptman’s *The Weavers* (1894) or the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, who introduced the pictorial assembling of crowds<sup>5</sup> in his search for greater and greater realism in the theater,

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and subjected what he called “supernumeraries” (Mazer 1984) to specific casting policies sectionalized under the leadership of actors. In these configurations, the extras themselves acted as authentic visual elements, becoming one way to craft a believably “real” environment. This same inclination toward realism also inspired such examples as David Belasco’s buying out the interior of a dilapidated lodging house room, when the “proper scenery” for *The Easiest Way* (1909) couldn’t be built by the scene shop, and the hanging of real meat onstage to believably transport the audience to a butcher shop in Ferdinand Irces’ 1888 *The Butchers* (Carlson 2016, 11, 95). In other words, and perhaps preempting posthuman theories of performing objects, human extras and objects onstage function similarly in the stage picture. In an analysis of the intensity of semiotic signs ranging from subject to object, Prague School theorist Jiří Veltruský distinguishes the human prop, an extra that has no real story, and a merely functional role (in bourgeois drama: servants and other silent figures), from the zero-level register of action. These figures are reduced to “their posture, stature, make-up, costume.” It follows then that “people in these roles can be replaced by lifeless dummies” (1990, 86; see also Veltruský 1983 and Meerzon 2019).

While naturalism was a fascination on theater stages, early cinema found documenting reality apparently easier to achieve. Anthony Slide (2012) argues that the origin of the film extra might be traced back to the early Lumière Brothers film *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895), which documents workers streaming out of a factory gate. Slide suggests that “the entire company performs as extras. At the same time, one cannot but question whether individuals in a film constitute extras when there are no stars for them to support” (15). But what if the factory and by extension here the proto-factory of filmmaking is rather the star of this production? That is, the machines are performing the work, and through the lens of the camera the people become extra to it. The people leaving their workplace are, of course, still working, but they are turned into workers anew. Now, they are completing a different job for the lens of the camera, not unlike those extra train conductors of the Paris Métro. Of course, the machinery of the factory itself does not run without these (now) filmic extras, but the transposition of the camera or a theatrical space shifts the relation between work and extra. Slide notes that the precedent for film extras can be found in the stage supernumerary or super. One major distinction between the two, however, is that



most supers in the theater were involved in some way with the theater, either through training or family affiliation, whereas in early film, most extras were not otherwise involved in the film industry or even trained as actors or performers (18).

Perhaps it is in this move to extras in and as labor, in which workers perform their labor for a different, aesthetic, or affective purpose, that we see a resemblance to the concerns today regarding AI, wherein the intellectual and creative labor of writing or artmaking is transposed by the machines in the background. If we understand the particular labor of the extra to be aesthetic or affective, then we can find other examples in theater of human presence being turned into labor, perhaps disconnected from their intention or understanding.

Expanding on this notion, we can draw parallels between the mechanization of the train, factory, and technologies like ChatGPT and the intricate machinery at play within immersive performance spaces, as articulated in Claire Bishop's (2012) concept of "artificial hells." The juxtaposition between these various contexts underscores the multifaceted nature of mechanization and its implications for human agency and engagement. Moreover, this discussion raises questions about the mechanistic underpinnings of educational institutions as idealized sites of intellectual (rather than mechanical or physical) labor. The examination of these diverse instances of machinery, from the theatrical stage to the university, invites a comprehensive exploration of the evolving dynamics between humans, technology, and labor in contemporary society.

In theater today, for instance, audience members in immersive and other performances also become extras to complete the experience for others in the theater space. Jenn Stephenson (2019) suggests that in entering such performance spaces, "we contribute labor as we explore the world of the performance" (163). The audience becomes the background for other audiences, workers milling about the immersive theater factory. She continues: "In groups, we act as scenography or as 'supernumeraries' for other immersed audiences. Audiences become collaborative and are recast as co-contributors to the performance. Through our actions, we become actors" (163). This attention to the active agency of the

audience's physical presence suggests a similarity between human and nonhuman actors in the space. In both cases, the material reality of the human and nonhuman actors is communicating to the audience, through their aesthetic and agential qualities, without the need for human action or intention. As Edward Scheer (2015) argues, a subject's or an object's performative potential is an inchoate agency as well as an actual kinetic function. We, as audience members, as extras, become more objectified, called to act in ways not unlike other things in the space. We animate the performance by performing as humans in the performance. Thus, extrafication or superification is a highly theatrical problem, spanning early stage experiments with realism and naturalism and contemporary immersive environments. It is not something that has gone overlooked by theater artists, who have explored the relative autonomy of performers and their relation to the things and objects onstage.

In one example of a highly visible nonhuman performer, a play from Oriza Hirata and Hiroshi Ishiguro's Robot Theatre Project, *Sayonara*, places a robot center stage, opposite a single human actor.<sup>6</sup> In the Robot Theatre Project's work, the robots acting on stage are pre-programmed and don't have AI, so they are set on their course at the beginning of the show. This means that the actors who share the stage with them must also remain strictly choreographed, down to the timed length of a sigh, or the speed of standing up. There's no room for improvisation or spontaneous creativity beyond repetition of the choreography. Bryerly Long, the actress across from the robot in *Sayonara*, describes her process as a little robotic. Oriza Hirata's style of direction is strict in that "he wants the actors to get the timing he wants and then he wants them to perform it exactly the same way, everywhere, for the whole run of the play" (in Karolak 2018). The only time they are required to improvise is when the robot glitches or breaks, solving problems for the seemingly faultless technology.<sup>7</sup> Bryerly Long has admitted that she eventually grew to like working with the robot, because she developed "a strong bond with the people working around the robot" (in O'Keeffe 2015). Long's comments underscore the labor necessary in designing, programming, transporting, setting up, and caring for the robot throughout the production process and the show's tour. While the robot is central in the performance, here both the

labor of the other actor and the robot's team are pushed to the periphery, as technological support, even as they remain essential to the reality of the production.

Other contemporary examples highlight the nature of endless labor in light of nonhuman and mechanical tools.<sup>8</sup> The performer becomes an extra, thanks to nonhuman performativity, in the case of Mette Ingvarsen's *Artificial Nature Project*, when tons of shiny confetti fall from the sky and the dancers—wearing protective suits—attempt to blow them aside using leaf blowers. In Romeo Castellucci's *Sacre du Printemps*, robots and machines also execute the choreography, and following the show, people, again in hazmat suits, come to clean up the bone dust the machines have spread across the stage. The humans are left to clean up a mess made by machines—and although it technically isn't even part of the show, the audience keeps watching and it becomes part of the event. Perhaps here it's not only that the human actors are made into extras, but that the nonhuman co-actors create more necessary labor on the to-do list. We are working doubly, performing one kind of labor in an aesthetic sense, while also continuing to work as the clean-up crew or emergency squad ready to fix problems the new technology creates.

### **Choreographic Labor and Beckett**

Thus, extras are performing labor on multiple levels and areas of labor. Indeed, this theatrical labor of extrafication merits more analysis, to understand both the nature of it and the effects this state might create. The creative potential of being an extra is perhaps a foundational element of Samuel Beckett's work, reinventing genre by exhausting the very medium he is working with. What do we do now that we are doing nothing? (And perhaps especially, if that “doing nothing” is simply laboring at being human as our means of income: watching a machine doing your previous job all day, standing in the conductor's booth, or like the bricklayers having to watch a machine laying bricks)? Doing nothing is quite an exhausting activity without meaningful constructions, no stories, no drama, no characters. If you asked ChatGPT to write a play like Samuel Beckett, it might come up with the line: So much to do, just to do nothing.

The exhaustion of possibilities is Beckett's fundamental artistic strategy, as Gilles Deleuze (1995) argued, and according to this reading his art is an art of exhaustion—exhaustion, that is, “not of the artist, but of his resources and not with the particular artist, but with art itself, always at the mercy of decomposing and perverse media” (24). The writer's aim is to endorse failure, disjunction, dis-function within his given medium and his work foregrounds schematization, de-individualization, bodily constriction and reduction, fragmentation and rapid extortion of speech, as well as expressionless (and occasionally unintelligible) delivery. The performers are pushed and scripted to representational limits against the logics of playwriting, of character, and of acting—becoming, perhaps, extras to stand in for the machinery of the play itself. This was Beckett's way with every artistic medium that he worked in, as Daniel Albright (2003) argues, “to foreground the medium, to thrust it in the spectator's face, by showing its inadequacy, its refusal to be wrenched to any good artistic purpose” (1).

Beckett's experiments in representing this crisis and exhaustion play with the material nature of the human that we've noticed in the performances mentioned above. In Beckett's work actors might appear as mouths, as figures, or traces, something aesthetic and affective if not a fully realized, autonomous subject. Beckett's concern with the limits of the human discloses his preoccupation with history and humanity, yet in an inverted manner (via negativa); in negative representation. Jonathan Boulter (2008) argues that in Beckett's work, “the figure of the posthuman is always a figure of the boundary or limit: she exists just at the threshold of the recognizable at the limit of what we expect to be the human (the figure of the ghost, the specter—the literal post-human)” (12; see also Boulton 2018). The posthumanism we refer to here is defined as the theory that radically critiques the idea that the individual subject is the center of all things, the beginning and end of all knowledge and experience. Thus, this is a radical critique of humanist philosophy, as Boulter argues, “Posthumanism begins by countering humanism's belief that the human is self-producing, self-coincidental, that it is somehow responsible for the production of its world and its experience of the world” (13). Instead, the human is among the world, another material creating effects on the other materials around it.

Beckett's final piece of discursive writing considers the exhaustion of possibilities as a fundamental artistic strategy in the face of the limits of the human to know and to create worlds. Ultimately, Beckett's impact on contemporary artistic practice lies in the dilemma between expression and abstraction, as well as in the desire to "exhaust the possible" (Goudouna 2018). Beckett's desire to "exhaust" the art object points to a desire to expose the exhausted project of modernity while the dramatist looks into emptiness and absence so as to problematize the modernist aims and concerns by taking the artwork to new levels of complexity and to new meanings beyond the objectification of the formal constituents of a given medium. But, as we see on other contemporary stages as well as while performing labor elsewhere, we now find ourselves embedded in a full-fledged existential tech-induced absurdity of labor, beyond what Beckett may have imagined.

The actor's role in the train driver's car does not produce an object of labor through the collaboration with the technological tool, nor does it assist the technology in its own labor. The actor's role instead requires the bare presence of their body, and that appearance is the work itself. Elinor Fuchs (1996) already saw in *The Death of Character* how theater authors and makers moved past drama to place emphasis on total conditions and situations, on space and landscape, instead of individual characters that are shaped by the plot's actions (106). Characters become "figures," or, extras in their environments.

The work of the human performer, then, is as simple as being a human—providing a sense of humanness that translates the work of the machine to the human sphere. That is, the labor of standing in the conductor's cabin or leaving the factory for the camera or being part of the audience at an immersive theater or performing onstage with a robot or following Beckett's sometimes intensely detailed stage directions is, in fact, the labor of being human. The people now hired to perform such roles are performing essential affective work in this formulation—the work of humanness. The panic of people riding on the train does need to be mitigated, and the sheer presence of the body, dressed in appropriate costume, achieves this goal. But perhaps, as we see with Beckett, the work being done is actually exhausting the medium itself, reconfiguring our very sense of humanness, and pushing through the limits of labor and automation. Understood through a

posthuman lens, the material of the body is mined for its information and effects and the human performer is called only to perform *as if* they were human.

### **Exhausting Ourselves**

At this point, I think it is safe to say that we are exhausted as extras without worrying too much about overextending that “we.” That is, everyone is exhausted right now. Of course, we are exhausted in different ways and modalities and there are certainly degrees to and differing “urgencies” to exhaustion, but we *are* exhausted. Indeed, there is something seductive about the driverless train and the robot performer and ChatGPT and Beckett’s sometimes disembodied bodies. Perhaps all of our jobs could be made driverless, as it were. Even writing this, on the one hand, we wondered what might come out of a prompt fed into ChatGPT. There clearly is an appeal to the idea of a driverless prose generator that writes new work and moves ideas from our brains to the page as we stand by. Maybe we would even then dress for the parts of academics and artists—some maybe more convincingly than others, some not having to don a costume, and some wearing a formal graduation gown at a candlelit desk or some other exaggerated notion of scholarly or academic production. In any case, we think we would be convincing stand-ins as the algorithmic or mechanical essay writing device delivered words to the editors and readers. Maybe it is not too bad to be an extra. Or, at least, that seems to be the popular appeal of the makers of such software. All you have to do is play the part and be on camera leaving the (university intellectual labor) factory.

In its irony, this idea proposes a kind of radical “self-extrafication” as protest, reminiscent of *The Theory of Bloom* (2010), which describes how people become alienated from each other in a capitalist society. It is a theory that can be attractive but also controversial due to its determinism and finality: what do you do, now that you’re just an extra? To what extent is self-extrafication still a tactic of disruption? In the end, the “hunger artist” is forgotten and gone. The conjecture is that the extra plainly suffers, and rather functions as a paradigm that we have to be attentive to, to understand the dynamics we are also part of. Yet, the extra’s anonymity carries a radical potential, as the *Theory of Bloom* notes: “Nothing is simple. Nothing is complex. Nothing is faceless. You will find many

labyrinths, dead-ends, portals and ladders in this text. But above all, if you are a discerning reader, you will glimpse Nothing. You cannot give Nothing a face. You cannot articulate what Nothing is. Nor can we” (5). Performing the extra in an artistic context or considering the radical possibilities of the extras surrounding us, we might consider the scenography of our cities and institutions as harboring a disruptive potential, but the extras simply expire into history if that potential is not activated.

Being an extra is certainly exhausting. Like the train conductor, or rather the extra playing the train conductor, the technologies that might automate anything do require attention or, again in the case of the “fake” conductor, require that the extra be available for the attention of others. So, if the driverless prose generator might function like our driverless train, we would likely all have to sit here in front of our computers (perhaps wearing our academic costumes), for hours and hours, days even, realistically sipping tea from prop mugs and paging through our prop books and making typing gestures that seemed realistic, every once in a while fixing an error or cleaning up afterwards. And then, we ask, wouldn’t it just be easier to write the article ourselves?

But even as we write this article together and as ourselves and without relying on ChatGPT, even as we work across time zones and on a shared Google Document, we do wonder if we are not really just extras in the university and academic exchange of exhaustion between departments, bodies, and managerial structures. The driverless train of the university similarly needs its stand-ins and theatrical conductors to churn out papers on theatre and performance, and also microscopic organisms, weather patterns, cognitive psychology, art history, etc., etc., etc. Scholars of Beckett and performing robots and performance writing about extras and driverless trains are readily replaced by scholars of Joyce and Foucault and texts about famous actors and the act of walking or stage curtains or any other such topic.

In the end the provost does not really care if you are publishing scholarship on performance art or cellular replication in fruit fly wings or the thermal mechanics of drying paint as long as you are producing work, as long as you are able to present the world with an image of

an academic that will not panic the board of trustees or the state, who ultimately just want the institution to run as efficiently as an automated train. But this is not particularly new either. De Certeau (1985) seemed to understand this tendency of the university to reabsorb all work, even subversion, quite well. In his *Practices of Everyday Life*, he points to “the wig,” or what in France is called le perruque:

La perruque is the worker’s own work disguised as work for his employer. It differs from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen. It differs from “absenteeism” in that the worker is officially on the job. *La perruque* may be as simple a matter as a secretary’s writing a love letter on “company time” or as complex as a cabinet maker’s “borrowing” a lathe to make a piece of furniture for his living room. (25)

The university seems to be a machine that provokes people to commit a perruque in which they redirect their attention to structural inequalities, then neutralizes this by means of a flood of relativizing information. “The now-harmless critique is administered to classrooms as a sort of vaccine against outbreaks of mobilizing rage, while technologies of cathartic distraction expel the remainder safely from the system” (CrimethInc. 2013). But even if the university may have some neutralizing effect on the content of the work itself, the labor-intensive process of thinking and writing together may be a kind of perroquet. Alecks Ambayec, Renata Gaspar, Sozita Goudouna, Jan-Tage Kühling, and Simon Probst remind us that “the manipulation of the figure of the author towards collaborative authorship as a speech act is made tangible by the performance itself—the performative artwork is the performance of a composite subjectivity” (2021). That is, the act of collaborative writing performs a kind of labor that is something more than the sum of its parts. We are not isolated conductors or lone scholars typing away solitarily, acting the part of humanity, but we are rather emphasizing the labor of working together.<sup>9</sup> Of course, we are still collectively exhausted. The question perhaps is how to actually leave the factory and manage to avoid being turned into an extra.



<sup>1</sup> Kris Verdonck narrates a brief version of this story (and other variations) in an interview that is published: see Verdonck and Van Bendegem (2020, 83).

<sup>2</sup> A small-scale study on driverless trains conducted in Europe has shown that 93% of female and 72% of male respondents think that a theatrical driver room should be present (Fraszczyk, Brown, and Duan 2015). See also Levy 2018 and Allinson 2022.

<sup>3</sup> In the majority of academic writing, the work of research and writing are abstracted from payment. We are not aware of an academic press that pays a living wage to its authors, even as the expectation might be that one works for an institution that then supports such work that is not otherwise directly remunerated. But, the relationship between authorship, AI, and economic remuneration is very much part of the recent Writers Guild of America strike that began on 2 May 2023.

<sup>4</sup> See Holt (2017) for the rise of the director and supernumeraries; and Mayer (2009).

<sup>5</sup> For more on the crowd scenes, see Carlson (1961). And for an example of discussion on the other workers in the theatre, see Davis and Davis (2009).

<sup>6</sup> For writing on *Sayonara*, see Lucie (2019) and Sone (2016).

<sup>7</sup> Ulf Otto (2021) has written about this need to perform with the glitch in android and animatronic performances.

<sup>8</sup> See Poynton (2020) for thinking about playwriting with chatbots.

<sup>9</sup> For more on collaborative writing, ends, and exhaustion, see Ambayec et al. 2024.

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