When Presence & Absence Turn Into Pattern & Randomness: Can You See Me Now?

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Abstract

This paper looks at Blast Theory's award-winning [2] piece *Can You See Me Now?* produced in 2001 but still active today (August 2007). *Can You See Me Now?* is a chase game that takes place simultaneously online, within a virtual city in Cyberspace, and in the streets of a 'real', physical city. While exploring *CYSMN?* the author asks questions about the notion of distributed presence as both a concept and a tangible state-of-being. In the first instance she employs the notions of presence and absence to describe the condition and experience of situating (for presence) or excluding (for absence) one's corporeal body and 'aura' [3] within /from a specific spatio-temporal context and a set of relationalities that include (the) 'other'(s). She asks: What is the meaning of presence within a postmodern, posthuman, and 'post-media' context? What is at stake when presence becomes telematic, distributed and/or hybrid? What happens when presence becomes "impregnated with absence" (Derrida)? To address these questions the author refers to Lefebvre's treatise on presence/absence (*La Présence et l'Absence*) [4] and Hayles' influential book *How We Became Posthuman* [5] to argue that the oppositional strategies introduced by the presence/absence dialectic are not productive for the analysis of networked and distributed performance/gaming practices (or indeed, visceral performance as well as everyday life) unless complemented by the notions of otherness and relationality.

Can You See Me Now?

Since 2000, Blast Theory collaborate with the Mixed Reality Lab [6] in order to explore the convergence of Internet and mobile technologies and create "new forms of performance and interactive art mixing audiences across the Internet, live performance and digital broadcasting" [7]. This practice of mixing diverse audiences and media characterizes *CYSMN?*, a piece which verges on the edge of several genres such as gaming, interactive art and live performance, mixes physical and virtual spacetimes, and spreads its participants (runners, players, involuntary audiences) across these spacetimes and their unlike ontologies. In *CYSMN?* the players can be physically located anywhere in the world; by logging on the group's website they find themselves 're-located' within a virtual city together with other players and members of Blast Theory (called 'runners'). The presence of both the players and the 'runners' in the virtual city is avatar-mediated. At the same time, the 'runners' are located within the streets of a physical city, which they use as their game terrain /stage [8]. Each runner is equipped with a handheld computer connected to a Global Positioning System (GPS) tracker. The handheld computer sends the runner's location from the tracker over a wireless network to people playing online, whereas the positions of players online are passed back the other way and displayed on the screen of the runner's computer. Alongside this, online players can communicate with each other through text messaging and runners can communicate with each other trough walkie talkies. An audio streaming of the runners' walkie-talkies allows the online players to eavesdrop on the runners' discussions [9].

Blast Theory *Can You See Me Now?* (2001). A *CYSMN?* 'runner' in action, holding his computer. Copyright Blast Theory

The aim of the game is for the runners to chase and 'catch' the online players. Throughout the game the two cities, 'real' and virtual, meet and merge into one hybrid city built from overlapping layers of physical and digital spacetime, each with different qualities and behaviors. As Blast Theory put it "the virtual city (...) has an elastic relationship to the real city. At times the two cities seem identical (...). At other times the two cities diverge and appear very remote from one another." [10] From this process of merging and diverging, bringing together and tearing apart of the two cities, *CYSMN?* produces a new space which is neither physical nor virtual. It is, instead, hybrid and relational, that is, a space that pertains and belongs to the connection between physical and virtual, as well as a space created from the players' interactions with each other and their game terrain. This hybrid city cannot exist outside the relations that occur between the different layers of spacetime and the different people that 'inhabit' these through their involvement in the game.

CYSMN? uses the overlay of this emergent hybrid city to explore ideas of distributed presence and absence. The issue of presence-absence is posed from the very beginning of the game: when you log online to 'meet' the runners, you find a photo and the name of each runner, as well as a text introducing a person each one of them hasn't seen for a long time but still thinks about. For the presentation of *CYSMN?* at the Chicago Museum of Modern Art for example [11], Runner 1 - Matt talks about Lucy, a friend he hasn't seen for many years. Matt doesn't know where Lucy lives any more, but he occasionally thinks of her and misses her. [12] Runner 2 - Simon, talks about Dwielio, an illegal immigrant he met in Spain, whom he still thinks about and would like to speak to again. [13]

Once you log on to the virtual city as a player, you are also asked to identify the name of a person who is absent from your life but present in your mind. Once this person is identified (becomes 'virtually' present), no other reference is being made about her/him (considered absent) till the end of the game, when you are caught by a runner. To signify her/his victory, the runner says: "Runner 1 has seen ----------" speaking out not your name, but the name of the person you have identified (thus signifying a presence which contradicts /substitutes an apparent absence). My question is: what is the status of this person within the augmented, relational world of *CYSMN?*? Is s/he present or absent? Which layers of spacetime and memory is s/he present within? How is her/his presence manifested? Can s/he appropriate your distributed anatomy to re-emerge as present? And can your avatar appropriate her/his physical absence to claim a presence that is independent of yourself? Does the speaking out of her/his name in connection to a concrete fragment of space - virtually - situate her within the urban landscape?

This is just one occasion where the boundaries between presence and absence blur in a *CYSMN?* performance-game. For example, the online players are both present (in the hybrid city) and absent (in a corporeal form, from the physical city); the runners are present (in the hybrid city) and absent (in the proximity of the players). Finally, when a player is caught the runners take photos of the exact physical location where each player was "spotted". These photos, called 'sightings', are then uploaded on the website, functioning as an abstract but poignant documentation of each game. What do these fragmented, empty spaces stand for? I see the sightings as poetic acts of interweaving the digital, virtual and abstract into the physical, tangible and real, while augmenting the real with another layer of relationality. While weaving physical and digital (a bit like Benjamin's understanding of aura weaves time and space) [14], these sightings forever link both the (present-absent) player and the (absent-present) person in her/his mind to an anonymous square of a cityscape (which maybe none of them has ever physically visited). Thus the sightings interweave absence (as a potentiality) with presence (as a relational quality) as much as they interweave physicality with digitality, creating unique *loci* of hybridity. To my eyes, these photos are a succinct and poetic visual articulation of the distributed/collective present-absent state a posthuman, cyborgian creature finds herself in.

The player is here, in the picture, can you see her now? [15]

Blast Theory *Can You See Me Now?* (2001). A sigting photo from Sheffield: Kathy was seen here (2001). Copyright Blast Theory.

Blast Theory *Can You See Me Now?* (2001). A sigting photo from Tokyo: Yohei Tomiku was seen here (2005). Copyright Blast Theory.

Presence-Absence and Pattern-Randomness

Peggy Phelan, in her book *Unmarked*, claims that in performance "the body is metonymic of self, of character, of voice, of 'presence'" [16]. What happens though when it comes to mediated, networked, and other forms of technologised performance such as Blast Theory's *CYSMN?*, where the runners' corporeal bodies are dispersed across the urban landscape rather than concentrated within the proximity of the audiences/players? Does this mean that the runners are absent because their corporeal bodies are not physically present in the proximity of the players? And does the absence of the runners' bodies entail absence of the runners themselves?

Bodies Are

When it comes to the analysis of networked performance practices such as *CYSMN?* I ask, which body is Phelan referring to? The runners' corporeal bodies embedded within the urban landscape or their digital bodies manifested as avatars online? Are these intrinsically interlinked body-manifestations distinct from each other? In the case of the players too, are we talking about their corporeal bodies dispersed around the world or their digital avatars? Which of these bodies - if any - can be considered as 'metonymic of self'? Are analyses of 'the body' as a humanist site of identity and self still relevant? Can we afford to ignore the multiple discourses on the cyborgian, post-humanist body? Cybernetic conceptions of the body as a communications network [17], cyborgian "hybrid(s) of machine and organism" [18], or notions of the post-human that is seen, according to Giannachi

(...) as an entity able to participate in distributed cognition dispersed throughout the body, the environment, and possibly other bodies. (...) *the body becomes a distributed virtual community.* Although agency still exists, it becomes a 'distributed function' (in Mitchell and Thurtle, 2004: 245-6) whereupon my body could become yours and 'I' really could become 'you'. [19]

Are (any of) these bodies metonymic of presence –or not?

Furthermore, I ask: do these augmented/expanded/displaced/dispersive/shared bodies differ that radically from our corporeal ones? The question is - to an extent - a rhetorical one, and the answer is rather obvious: yes they do. Their differences are perceptual/conceptual, ontological, physiological/proprioceptive, phenomenological and metaphysical, to say the least - as we well know - and I do not intend to argue that corporeal and cyborgian bodies coincide. What I want to ask though is, where do these bodies meet? Where do they overlap? Are flesh-bodies to be reduced to actualities? Do cyborgian ones need to be rooted within humanist analyses for them to be defined (celebrated, demonized) as counterparts of *the* sacred-versus-obsolete body? Is it productive to operate within such binaries (which are always constructed, according to Lefebvre, as logical and linguistic phenomena –and thus away from body-centric discourses)? [20] Hayles has demonstrated how this binary has long become extinct since we have all become posthuman (where both humanism and posthumanism are articulated as historical constructions). [21] Even before our bodies(/selves) became posthuman though, were they not both actual - tangible and concrete in their corporeal presence - and virtual - in their *potentiality*? Massumi has argued that

The body is as immediately virtual as it is actual. The virtual, the pressing crowd of incipiencies and tendencies, is a realm of *potential*. In potential is where futurity combines, unmediated, with pastness, where outsides are infolded, and sadness is happy (...). The virtual is a lived paradox where what are normally opposites coexist, coalesce, and connect (...). (...) The body is as immediately abstract as it is concrete; its activity and expressivity extend, as on their underside, into an incorporeal, yet perfectly real, dimension of pressing potential. [22]

Phelan's discourse in *Unmarked* clearly refers to visceral performances staged in physical space, where the body-self is corpo*real*: the one-and-only, 'original', auratic, humanist body that exists "in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability" [23]. In Blast Theory's *CYSMN?* uniqueness, originality and aura have been replaced by multiplicity, dispersion and networks. Nevertheless, I would like to suggest that the bodies engaged in *CYSMN?* are metonymic of both self and presence. This is not because cyborgian bodies prescribe to humanist qualities and values. Rather because, following Massumi, the 'apparent' flesh-bodies in Phelan's discourse are as virtual as the cyborgian ones that Blast Theory's performers and players incarnate. And the other way round, Blast Theory's bodies become actualized - though they are often neither visible nor available - through their performance. What these bodies have in common is, as Massumi poignantly points out, a 'perfectly real dimension of pressing potential'. And this is where performance comes into play: performing bodies, whether visceral, dispersed or otherwise, are bodies attaining to this dimension; bodies striving to fulfill a little of this 'pressing potential'.

...Metonymic of Presence

If we accept that the performing bodies of Blast Theory and their players are metonymic of presence, we might also have to ask: what is presence within this context?

N. Katherine Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman* discusses situations that occur in virtual reality environments, where "the avatar both is and is not present, just as the user both is and is not inside the screen." [24] Hayles points out that when it comes to such environments [25] "questions about presence and absence do not yield much leverage". [26] As demonstrates the performance of *CYSMN?* in networked, distributed encounters the bodily presence, self-evident in its corporeality - the pure, 'absolute' presence of the physical world (that is, the opposite of absence) - mutates into something else. This new morphing of 'presence' is no more situated within a single humanist subject and is no more distinct from - let alone opposed to - absence. Within this context presence can be plural; it can also be perceived as absence and the reverse. Instantiations of presence and absence become multiple and interwoven, impossible to disengage: they become *'presence-absence(s)'*. These paradoxical presence-absence(s) are hybrids between relative [27] physical absence or dislocation (of the corporeal body in relation to other corporeal bodies) and relational presence (distributed moments of presence as dynamic connections rather than material engagements). I suggest that these hybrid states-of-being call for new understandings of presence in performance.

New, or just re-newed.... In the same way that bodies have always been virtual as well as actual, I would think that the presence-absence dialectic has never held much leverage as a binary within performance analysis as well as life. Lefebvre has argued that the two terms cannot be seen as oppositional and, as that, are not sufficient on their own. He has deemed necessary the introduction of a third term, and has suggested 'other':

La présence et l'absence ne peuvent se concevoir comme la double face, le recto et le verso, d'un

même fait mental (ou social ou naturel). (...) Au surplus, comme deux termes ne se suffisent pas, il fallut introduire un troisième terme: l'inconscient, l'imaginaire, la culture. (...) Le troisième terme, ici, c'est l' *autre*, avec ce que ce terme implique (*altérité*, rapport avec l'autre présent/absent – *altération-aliénation*). [Presence and absence cannot be conceived as the two sides, front and back, of the same mental (or social or natural) phenomenon. (...) Furthermore, as the two terms are not sufficient, we must introduce a third term: the unconscious, the imaginary, culture. (...) The third term, here, is the *other*, with everything this term implies (*otherness*, relationship with the present/absent other –*distortion-alienation*)]. [28]

The introduction of Lefebvre's uncanny 'otherness' in Phelan's equation (body equals self equals presence) opens up a conceptual space where analyses of performances like Blast Theory's *CYSMN?* can unfold beyond the constraints of oppositional discourses. Following Lefebvre, body/ies equal(s) self *and other*, presence/absence *and* otherness. As well as introducing a welcome complexity into the discourse, otherness also introduces a relational dimension into the presence/absence dialectic that is particularly useful for the analysis of networked performances. The *CYSMN?* runners, players and 'memory-people' (the people both runners and players are asked to remember) are always present/absent not as a pure state-of-being, but in relation to an-other. It is this relationship with the other that defines one's state-of-being.

Like Lefebvre, Hayles in *How We Became Posthuman* also argues in favor of a more complex dialectic that can operate beyond the oppositional strategies of the presence vs. absence binary. Hayles argues that our information society is more closely identified with pattern and randomness rather than presence. Pattern/randomness is not a binary opposition (like presence/absence) since randomness is not the absence of pattern but the ground for pattern to emerge. For that reason, the pattern/randomness dialectic does not follow the same set of oppositional strategies as presence/absence. Instead, pattern and randomness are bound together in a dialectic that makes the two terms complementary to one another. [29] We thus do not need to distinguish between pattern *or* randomness: a system can and normally does integrate both.

Hayles suggests a shift of focus towards the pattern/randomness dialectic as this is more appropriate for the discussion and analysis of hybrid states-of-being. She approaches pattern as the outcome of our interactions with the system and other users (as complementary to presence); and randomness as the outcome of the noise created by stimuli that cannot be encoded within the system (as complementary to absence). [30] By defining pattern as the outcome of our interactions Hayles, like Lefebvre, introduces the other and, through that, the notion of relationality. In Hayles' case, as she discusses networked and virtual environments, the other can be a (post)human or a system such as a virtual reality environment. In both cases, pattern-presence is not a situation that can exist independently of the society or, in performance, the audiences/players. Rather, one's pattern-presence becomes the mapping of one's relationships (with others and one's environment): to be, you are with.

Conclusion

In *CYSMN?* Blast Theory operate a dramaturgy of layering: layers of physicality and digitality overlap and interweave to generate hybrid spaces; layers of past and present come together to confuse linear timelines; layers of actuality and virtuality interweave to generate hybrid bodies and presences. In so doing, Blast Theory open up 'lines of flight' [31] towards dimensions outside the system of the performance (memory, urban landscape, involuntary audiences) that divert,

interconnect and disappear to disrupt the unity of the performance *per se*, as well as unified concepts of the body, the self, and presence.

I suggest that any attempt to apply the presence/absence binary in the analysis of networked performance practices such as *CYSMN?* can only lead to unproductive polarizations and conceptual dead-ends. I want to argue that the pattern-randomness dialectic as articulated by Hayles and the notion of relationality this introduces, is essential for the analysis of networked and distributed performance encounters. That is not only because this dialectic, when introduced as complementary to presence/absence, facilitates the appreciation of the complexity and nuances inherent in the layered dramaturgy of a piece such as *CYSMN?*. It is also because, as Hayles argues, the dialectic of pattern/randomness - unlike presence/absence - does not assume a coherent origin and a pre-loaded set of meanings, which allows for such systems to evolve towards unpredictability. [32]

This absence of meaning – and thus moral judgments – in the pattern/randomess dialectic creates a vacant, hollow space, which allows for the unforeseen to occur. I suggest that this 'lack' (as in absence/otherness) promises to liberate the potential of phenomena that are emergent and still in-flux, such as networked, distributed performance encounters. Following that line of thought, one can describe the *CYSMN?* participants (runners, players, memories) at any given moment throughout the game, as 'more present than absent' (and the reverse), that is, as 'producing more pattern than randomness' (and the reverse) through their connections and engagements [33] with the system and other users. Patterns develop as the performing bodies strive to fulfill their potential (or virtuality) through an-other; as noise intervenes these patterns gradually fade into randomness, which again coalesces into pattern, and so on. This is not unlike my own experience as a performer on a physical stage, as a visceral body similar to the ones in Phelan's analysis.

Nothing new there, then?

References

1. The title refers to Blast Theory's well-known installation /performance /gaming piece *Can You See Me Now?* (2001-ongoing), see http://www.canyouseemenow.co.uk, last accessed 8 November 2006.

2. Interactive Art, Prix Ars Electronica 2003 among others.

3. 'Aura' is, according to Walter Benjamin: "A strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance...". Walter Benjamin "A Small History of Photography" in *One-Way Street and Other Writings* E. Jephcott and K. Shorter (trans.) (London: NLB, 1979) , p. 250.

4. Henri Lefebvre *La Présence et l'Absence: Contribution à la Théorie des Représentations* (Tournai: Casterman, 1980)

5. N. Katherine Hayles *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago ´ London: University of Chicago Press, 1999)

6. Based at the University of Nottingham, see http://www.mrl.nott.ac.uk, last accessed 8 November 2006.

7. Blast Theory *Can You See Me Now?* http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_cysmn.html (last

accessed 8 November 2005)

8. Unfortunately, I think, there is a clear distinction between the artists-'runners' who are based on the streets of the physical city, and the audiences-players who can participate online but cannot become runners themselves. The players, although they can interact with the runners, are not invited to immerse themselves within the urban environment and are thus limited to experiencing the game through a computer-screen interface. This is not the case in other works of Blast Theory such as *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003), see http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_uncleroy.html, last accessed 8 November 2006.

9. See http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/bt/work_cysmn.html, last accessed 8 November 2006.

10. See ibid.

11. On 3-5 November 2005, see http://www.canyouseemenow.co.uk/chicago/en/intro.php, last accessed 4 November 2006.

12. See http://www.canyouseemenow.co.uk/chicago/en/runner01.php, last accessed 4 November 2006.

13. See http://www.canyouseemenow.co.uk/chicago/en/runner02.php , last accessed 4 November 2006.

14. See footnote (3)

15. To see her/him visit: http://www.canyouseemenow.co.uk/sheffield/sightings.html, http://www.canyouseemenow.co.uk/v2/photos.html, http://www.canyouseemenow.co.uk/tokyo/en/sightings.php, http://www.canyouseemenow.co.uk/koln/, last accessed 8 November 2006.

16. Peggy Phelan *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993) p. 150.

17. Wiener as cited in David Tomas "Feedback and Cybernetics: Reimaging the Body in the Age of the Cyborg" in Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows (eds.) *Cyberspace/ Cyberbodies/ Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment* (London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995) p. 25.

18. Donna J. Haraway "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991) p. 150.

19. Gabriella Giannachi *The Politics of New Media Theatre: Life®TM* (Oxon & New York: Routledge, 2007) p. 83. (original emphasis)

20. See Lefebvre ibid, p. 227.

21. See Hayles ibid.

22. Brian Massumi "The Autonomy of Affect" in Paul Patton (ed.) *Deleuze: A Critical Reader* (Oxford, UK & Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996) p. 224. (original emphasis)

23. Phelan ibid, p. 150.

24. See Hayles ibid, p. 27.

25. Hayles specifically refers to VR environments but I suggest that the same applies to augmented and other hybrid environments.

26. Hayles ibid, p. 27. Hayles is not the first to observe the failure of the presence-absence dialectic to adequately describe and/or serve to analyze situations that occur within such encounters. Theorists such as Sherry Turkle, Sandy Stone, Machiko Kusahara, Ken Goldberg, and artists such as Stelarc and Eduardo Kac, all have discussed the shortcomings of established notions of presence and absence within such contexts.

27. I am referring to 'relative physical absence' as I consider that physical presence depends not just on the corporeal body but also on a socially constructed self situated within a specific social and spatio-temporal context, which overlaps with but also exceeds and expands the body.

28. Lefebvre ibid, p. 225. Translation my own.

29. See Hayles ibid, p. 25

30. See Hayles ibid, p. 27.

31. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* B. Massumi (trans.) (London and New York: Continuum, 1987) p. 25

32. Hayles argues that presence/absence systems evolve towards a known end because they have been front-loaded with meaning. Pattern/randomness systems on the other hand evolve towards an open future because of their lack of a stable origin and thus any front-loaded meaning. In such systems meaning becomes possible, though not inevitable, through evolution. See Hayles ibid, p. 286

33. According to Anna Munster - who quotes Steven Shaviro - connection is to the network and away from sociality, whereas engagement is an active and ongoing social confrontation. See Anna Munster *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics* (Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2006) p. 152.