Angles

New Perspectives on the Anglophone World

7 | 2018

Digital Subjectivities

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June Xuandung Pham

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/angles/752>

DOI: 10.4000/angles.752

ISSN: 2274-2042

Publisher

Société des Anglicistes de l'Enseignement Supérieur

Electronic reference

June Xuandung Pham, "Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*: Digital and Inhuman Subjectivities on Stage", *Angles* [Online], 7 | 2018, Online since 01 November 2018, connection on 06 June 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/angles/752> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/angles.752>

This text was automatically generated on 6 June 2022.

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June Xuandung Pham

Introduction: *The Nether* in Context

- 1 *The Nether*, a play by Jennifer Haley, is set in a near future in which, thanks to technological progress, the Internet has evolved into the Nether. Like its predecessor, the Nether provides its users with an infinite number of realms in which to work, get an education, or try anything one may want to explore — from killing a wild boar to having sex with an elf. The Nether has gone as far as asserting its role as a “contextual framework for being,” where “[e]ighty per cent of the population work in office realms, children attend school in educational realms” (Haley 2013: 17). The Hideaway, under police investigation, is remarkable since it is “the most advanced realm there is when it comes to the art of sensation” (Haley 2013: 24) but also because it provides room for individuals with pedophilic proclivities to “realize” their fantasies.
- 2 *The Nether* premiere on March 19, 2013 at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Los Angeles, where it was produced by Center Theatre Group. Afterwards, the play was performed in the UK, Turkey, Germany, Spain, the Philippines, South Korea, Australia, etc. It has also been translated into French and was broadcast in a France Culture radio adaptation in 2016. Considering its controversial theme featuring pedophiles, the play has surprisingly received mostly positive reviews¹ and was awarded the 2012 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize.

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- 3 Haley's work, which “delves into ethics in virtual reality and the impact of technology on our human relationships, identity, and desire” (“Biography”) sits comfortably with other contemporary narratives that address the opportunities and challenges emerging from the evolution of virtuality, such as the online role-playing game *Second Life* (2003),

Ernest Cline's novel *Ready Player One* (2011), or the British TV series *Black Mirror* (2011–present) and the American TV series *Westworld* (2016–present), among others.² Like these other narratives, the plot of *The Nether* points towards a paradigm shift in our conception of virtual reality and suggests the need for new terminology to reflect more accurately the nature of computer-generated worlds as well as their relationship to material reality. What sets *The Nether* apart is its medium, which underscores the importance of embodiment in thinking about the ethics of virtual reality, reaffirming the relevance of theatre in the discussion of technology. Rather than writing a moral play, Haley chose to address pedophilia from a variety of angles. In so doing, she aimed for an ethical approach that resists closure and encourages critical thinking. A police procedural play, *The Nether* compels us to contemplate the future of legal practices in dealing with crimes that differ from what we know, starting with a more thoughtful reflection on digital agents and a more open attitude to inhuman subjects.

Beyond Virtual Reality

- 4 As a digital environment that accommodates pedophiles, the Hideaway harbors a community of sexual deviants and provides them with a site in which conventional moral and social norms are reversed. The exhilarating feeling of freedom and inclusion when one is accepted into a close-knitted community is not the only reason that entices people to pay a substantial sum for an immersive experience in the Hideaway. The realm is alluring also because of its beauty, to which the real world no longer measures up.³ It is revealed that, for some unknown cause, grass has become a luxury in the real world and trees no longer exist. The audience gets a glimpse of this reality through the cold, barely furnished interrogation room, an emblem of a world now reduced to a barren environment. By contrast, the colorful scenery of the Hideaway, full of light, trees and details, offers much more desirable living conditions. The shift in stage settings between the two worlds acts as a visual cue to the spectator, pointing to the actual world in which events are taking place. Scenography, in a similar fashion, helps the spectator distinguish between digital subjects (avatars) and in-world subjects, even though they are both played by real actors.

Figure 1. Jaime Adler as Iris and Ivanno Jeremiah as Woodnut in 2015 West End's Duke of York's Theatre production of Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*.

Credit : Johan Persson. Source: <https://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/the-nether>

- 5 In the productions at the Royal Court in 2014 which was then transferred at the West End's Duke of York's Theatre in 2015 (See Figure 1), the setting⁴ as well as the costume of the characters in the *Hideaway* are unmistakably reminiscent of the Victorian era. This is not only historically salient⁵ but also throws into relief a curious parallel between nostalgia and virtual reality. Nostalgia is built on dichotomies between reality and fantasy, between authenticity and inauthenticity, which are precisely those that have plagued contemporary discourse on virtual realities generated by computer technologies.
- 6 These dichotomies are at the heart of Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* and are embodied in all three characters — detective Morris on one side, Sims and Doyle on the other. In Scene 3, Morris is baffled by the amount of time Sims devotes to the Nether (an average of fourteen hours a day) and wonders "What can be gained by spending so much time in something that isn't real?" (Haley 2013: 16). To this Sims replies, "Just because it's virtual doesn't mean it isn't real [...]" As the Nether becomes our contextual framework for being, don't you think it's a bit out of date to say it isn't real?" (Haley 2013: 17). Morris represents the common understanding of cyberspace as hyper-reality, a simulacrum that now threatens the integrity and the existence of its model.⁶ Sims, on the other hand, truly believes that the space he created allows individuals the freedom to live according to their desires, no matter how socially or morally unacceptable they are.

Sims. Look, Detective, I am sick. I am sick and have always been sick and there is no cure. No amount of cognitive behavioral therapy or relapse deterrent or even chemical castration will sway me from my urges toward children. I am sick and no matter how much I love him or her I would make my own child sick and I see this, I see this — not all of us see this — but I have been cursed with both compulsion and insight. I have taken responsibility for my sickness. I am protecting my neighbor's children and my brother's children and the children I won't allow myself to have, and the only way I can do this is because *I've created a place where I can be my fucking self!* (Haley 2013: 19, emphasis mine)

- 7 Thus, the Hideaway turns out to be a site where people with sexual deviance like Sims can be their *true* selves (without causing harm to real children), while the selves they display to the real world are but a performance, a falsifying scheme constructed and maintained to conform to social conventions and moral standards.⁷ In other words, the in-world body of these individuals is already a site of simulacrum, which is precisely how Deleuze views the human body. As explained by Rosi Braidotti,

The embodiment of the subject is for Deleuze a form of bodily materiality, not of the natural, biological kind. He rather takes the body as the complex interplay of highly constructed social and symbolic forces. The body is not an essence, let alone a biological substance; it is a play of forces, a surface of intensities; pure simulacra without original. (Braidotti 1994: 112)

- 8 Accordingly, the subjects' avatars in the Hideaway are no less real than their "normal selves" in the material world. Furthermore, since the participants value the experience and relationships they have in the virtual world more than those taking place in non-virtual society,⁸ the "realness" of virtuality can no longer be discarded. For Pierre Lévy:

No reference, authority, dogma or certitude will remain unchallenged by the future which awaits us. We are now discovering that reality is a collective creation. We are all in the process of thinking in the same network. This has always been the case, but cyberspace renders it so evident that it can no longer be ignored. (Lévy 2005: 191)

- 9 Instead of lamenting the threats posed by cyberspace as Baudrillard would⁹ or refusing to acknowledge the breach in social fabric prompted by computer technologies, one could envision the medium of the digital for what it is, which Massumi (2002: 137) terms "possibility, not virtually, and not even potential." The possibility that Massumi refers to lies in taking the new world of simulation one step further, "to the point of no return, to raise it to a positive simulation of the highest degree by marshaling all our powers of the false toward shattering the grid of representation once and for all" (Massumi 1987: 97).

- 10 Taking it one step further is what best characterizes Sims' intention when he created the Hideaway. His code is "the closest anyone has come to perfecting the art of sensation" (Haley 2013: 31). Judging from recent technological developments, it is just a matter of time before something like the Hideaway comes into existence.¹⁰ As Claire Larssonneur (2015) aptly puts, "The entertainment industries and everyday gadgets no longer focus on producing digital representations but rather on the design of digital environments where real and digital bodies are superimposed." At this point, it appears that the term "virtual reality" is no longer adequate to describe the Hideaway, if by "virtual" we mean digital representations that exist solely in a computer-generated environment. It is, therefore, necessary to come up with new terminology to describe this paradigm shift. Artist and theorist Monika Fleischmann has suggested the concept of "mixed reality," first coined by Paul Milgram and Fumio Kishino (1994), as an alternative for "virtual reality." According to Fleischmann, mixed-reality facilitates "a more accurate understanding of our relation to cyber technologies, in which material bodies, their virtual representations, the human imagination, and computer hardware and software all interact to produce a reality that has both 'material' and 'virtual' elements" (quoted in Brians 2011: 125). Identifying a world as mixed-reality, thus, gives us a way to escape from the authenticity-inauthenticity dichotomy that has plagued discourse concerning cyberspace but also signals a new direction in thinking about how the body is situated in the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of digital

subjectivities. At the same time, since mixed-reality complicates the notion of subjectivity, we need to extend our ethical reflection to digital agents, both in relation to non-digital subjectivity and as an independent, separate mode of being in the case of fleshless posthumanism.

Theatre as Mixed Reality

- 11 The Hideaway allows people to create new identities, new selves by taking simple steps. There is no restraint on who one can become in terms of gender, age, race, or physique. Morris, a young female detective, chooses to represent herself as a man (in the 2014 and 2015 productions in London, Morris is Caucasian and Woodnut, her avatar, is a black man in his 40s). Doyle, a middle-aged male becomes Iris, an eight-year-old girl. Even though the guests are supposed to choose from a set of prescribed looks, it can be surmised that the number of these looks is extensive enough in order to satisfy the needs of individuals with vastly different preferences. The use of an avatar is meant to protect the participants' real identities while simultaneously extending their sense of being through the multiplicity of selves. The digital avatars in the Hideaway, at first sight, appear to be detached from the flesh as well as from all the external forces that shape and constrain the physical body.
- 12 A second look at these subjects, however, reveals that they are far from being fleshless on two counts. First, the avatar, though it can be transformed with greater ease, is still created with all the fundamental elements of a physical body, including age, gender, and precisely defined body parts. David Velleman argues that "an avatar under one's direct control serves as a proxy for one's entire body: it is one's embodiment in the virtual world" (Velleman 2013:14). Lieve Gies furthers this seemingly contradictory point:

[i]t is true to say that even in extreme cyber fantasies the body still matters in such projections as something to be reconfigured so as to allow for an intensification of its pleasures and the disappearance of its many discomforts. What superficially appears to be a desire for disembodiment is often a desire for re-embodiment and the elimination of the physical burden of the material body. (Gies 2008: 320)
- 13 This leads to the second reason for claiming that a digital subject must be grounded in embodiment. In *The Nether*, an avatar does not exist in a vacuum but is necessarily linked to a living body, even in the extreme case of a "shade" — a person who has decided to cross over to the virtual world full time and has to be hooked up to life support. The ability to experience vivid sensations in the Hideaway as avatars, thus, is not the proof of a successful ontological separation of body and mind. Quite the contrary, it accentuates the persistent significance of the body through a process of disembodiment and re-embodiment.¹¹ Albeit the digital body is the one interacting in the virtual world to create sensory experiences, the material body remains the final destination of these experiences.
- 14 The dialectic between the physical body and the digital one, between the real world and the Hideaway in *The Nether* echoes the back-and-forth movement between the audience's social reality and the dramatic world on stage — two worlds that coexist in the same space. Likewise, while the characters engage in constant role-playing through their avatars in order to cross the border, the actors also immerse themselves in dramatic personae to conjure up a de-realized reality. As such, Haley's discussion of the

real and the virtual is energized not only by the content of the plot but also by the medium of theatre. The self-reflexive and meta-theatrical dimension of the play amplifies the relevance of theatre in a digital society as well as the necessity of understanding new technologies when discussing theatre. This explains how, without resorting to virtual reality devices in staging the Internet, *The Nether*'s dramaturgy still recalls computer-generated virtual reality.

- 15 The parallel between theatre and mixed reality in the play perhaps can be best characterized by the Foucauldian notion of heterotopia. In his lecture notes "On Different Spaces," Foucault specifically mentions theatre as an example of heterotopia, having "the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves" (Foucault: 181). In theatre, a performance frames an alternative chronotope, with the audience's body situated in two sets of different space and time — that of the dramatic world on stage and the other of the material world in which time is measured by the clock. Correspondingly, a body logged in to the Nether occupies two seemingly incompatible chronotopes — the fantasy world of virtual reality and the reality accommodating that physical body.
- 16 Another characteristic shared by both theatre and mixed reality is their promise of effecting a catharsis. According to Aristotle, the function of tragedy lies in bringing into fruition catharsis through pity and fear — it enables the purgation of unhealthy emotions or pathological conditions from which the audience emerges purified (Butcher 1902). Both the audience viewing *The Nether* and the characters immersed in the virtual world actively seek a cathartic moment through their participation; but it soon becomes clear that the promise of catharsis remains elusive. In the case of the characters, despite their high hopes, they do not emerge from the tragedy purified or restored. Rather, the experience leaves them more confused and damaged than ever, especially in the case of detective Morris. Likewise, despite the fact that the transgressors in the play are eventually punished and moral order is reestablished, the audience does not attain the pleasure of emotional or intellectual certainty. That is because, in *The Nether*, Haley delivers a love tale set against the backdrop of pedophilia and its horror, in an attempt to encourage the audience to think critically and ethically rather than morally.

Digital Subjectivities: Legal and Ethical Concerns

- 17 Belonging to the genre of the trial play, *The Nether* compels us to contemplate the future of legal practices in dealing with crimes which differ drastically from those we know and for which current laws are deemed inadequate. According to detective Morris, "The Nether is no longer some great Wild West. We have a political body that is just as real as anything in-world. And we're making our own laws, with our own form of prosecution" (Haley 2013: 18). The play ends with Doyle's suicide and Sims being punished for his crime according to the laws of the Nether, in which the Nether is considered as an independent entity separated from the real world. Yet, it is hard to say whether justice has been served, as there is simply no established legal basis to deal with digital and non-digital subjects in a mixed reality. This underlines the importance of not merely considering cyberworlds as having their own political and judicial bodies but rather, of coming up with a legal framework capable of addressing the complex and interwoven nature of the digital and the material worlds.

- 18 This legal framework, in turn, can only emerge from carefully reflecting on the ethical dilemmas involving digital agents. From the very beginning, the audience is informed that Sims — the creator of the Hideaway, as well as its participants, both employees and guests, are being investigated for solicitation, rape, sodomy and murder. The repetitive nature of these offences and the revelation that their victims are children only heightens the feeling of indignation and repulsion directed towards the accused. However, as the play progresses, the audience is urged to reevaluate their judgment and find themselves increasingly unsettled by the dilemmas they are presented with.
- 19 The first ethical dilemma has to do with the existence of the Hideaway itself. In the epigraph of the play text, Haley introduces three definitions of the Nether Realm: “another world for mythical creature,” “demon worlds,” and “a dimension of Evil or Imagination” (Haley 2013: 10). The last description is particularly intriguing and problematic, for it implies that Imagination is another word for Evil. This definition may be key to understanding the philosophy of the play, for the whole plot of *The Nether* revolves around the struggle between evil and imagination, when the characters attempt to draw a clear distinction only to find the task impossible, as evil and imagination cannot be defined or framed.
- 20 As he later confesses to Morris, Sims views the Hideaway as a solution to channel his pedophilic urges so that he can restrain himself from acting on his desire.¹² It is his way of taking responsibility for his sickness and creating a win-win situation in which he can live as his true self while no real children are hurt.
- Sims. My realm is clearly designated Adult. There are adults behind the children and adults behind the guests. My background checks are thorough in the extreme to make sure we don't involve users who are underage. This is in accordance with the statute on consensual role play — (Haley 2013: 18)
- 21 The Hideaway, according to Doyle, “draws people who are broken” (Haley 2013: 54) and gives them “an opportunity to live outside of consequence” (Haley 2013: 21), to forget who they think they are and discover who they might be. To the extent that the art of sensation in the realm is so advanced that the participant's morbid desires can be fully satisfied, preventing him from seeking real children, the existence of the Hideaway is a positive alternative space. One cannot help but be anxious about what follows after the Hideaway is shut down, and what its members will do to release their sexual urge for children. The suicide of Doyle is but one example of how the dissolution of a virtual community as close-knit as the Hideaway could have negative impact on its members.
- 22 Unfortunately, things are not so simple. Considering what takes place in the Hideaway as consensual role play does not exclude it from ethical scrutiny, especially when the realm's perfect art of sensation no longer makes it possible to separate the avatar from the person behind it. It is true that the “children” in the Hideaway can choose to feel only as much pain as they want to when they are sodomised, abused, or butchered. Yet, it does not mean that there is no psychological harm, nor is the agent completely free from responsibility just because he/she is inhabiting an avatar. Writing on contemporary gaming environment, Castronova argues that users' duties towards others within virtual worlds “have nothing to do with the fact that moral agents are interacting through their characters in virtual reality; it has everything to do with the fact that they are moral agents, interacting” (Castronova 2003:17). Similarly, Thomas Powers (2003: 193) writes, “Because what an agent says, intends, and achieves is real, it is the subject matter for moral judgment, even when his or her agency is mediated by

computers.” The nature of the Hideaway as a mixed-reality has established that what takes place there and the digital subjects who perform actions there, are all real. Accordingly, this fact demands an even higher level of ethics encompassing both the avatar and the agent. In Sims’ and Doyle’s mind, being in this realm is not the same way of being, for “It’s imagination! People should be free in their own imagination!” (Haley 2013: 32). Nevertheless, when imagination is used to promote violence, to cause trauma, and can be understood as another word for Evil, then, it would be unethical to allow such imagination absolute freedom.

23 The ethical dilemma of the Hideaway necessarily leads to another dilemma in the way we judge those involved in pedophilic practices in that space. As the demarcation between victim and perpetrator is blurred, the spectator faces contradictory emotional responses and may find it increasingly difficult to cast ethical judgment on these characters. Should we be repulsed by, or feel sorry for, Doyle the school teacher, whose participation eventually evolves into real emotional attachment? Are we to empathize with Sims and Doyle as the victims of their own making or to be critical of these individuals because of who they are? These are questions that have no clear-cut answers and therefore, demand continual reflection on the part of the audience.

24 *The Nether* also frames a third dilemma through Morris’ father — a “shade.” If for Sims and Doyle, the virtual dimension presents a site where one can act freely on one’s forbidden desires, for Morris’ father, it is a place of perfect containment where his desires are suppressed and kept in check. The digital avatar of Morris’ father does not engage in any unethical act but instead seeks peace in solitude. After becoming a shade, the only realm in which he spent his time before his death is, curiously, “a small, cosy room with an armchair and a fire,” where he saw himself as a “wizened gargoyle” (Haley 2013: 49). The highlighted passage in the book he left on the table, the final stanza of a poem entitled *In a Dark Time* by Theodore Roethke, gives us a clue as to what led him to a reclusive life.

Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire.
My soul, like some heat-maddened summer fly,
Keeps buzzing at the sill. Which I is I?
A fallen man, I climb out of my fear.
The mind enters itself, and God the mind,
And one is One, free in the tearing wind.

25 The audience is not given enough information to know for certain the nature of Morris’ father’s dark desire. From the bits and pieces revealed by Morris when she is Woodnut, such as “He never looked at me when I was a child,” or “He never touched me” (Haley 2013: 49), one may deduce that this desire is more or less similar to Sims’ and Doyle’s taboo desire for children. If Sims resists temptation by immersing himself in the task of creating and perfecting the Hideaway, and Doyle by giving in completely to his desires in the virtual space, then Morris’ father resolves to self-imposed exile and imprisonment in order to keep his daughter and other children safe.

26 Compared to the ethically problematic Hideaway, Morris’ father’s room appears to be a more acceptable solution for individuals with pedophilic proclivities. Nevertheless, one cannot help but wonder whether it is truly ethical to suggest that all pedophiles should follow his footsteps, seeking an extreme way out by locking themselves in, waiting for personal transcendence. The idea is also problematic from the practical point of view. It will be naively optimistic to believe that everyone is capable of such self-discipline, and even if they were, there is no guarantee that this would have no

repercussions. Morris' father's decision is perhaps meant to protect his daughter, yet it is not completely harmless, judging from the psychological and emotional injury that she suffered as a result. What she wanted most from him was a relationship on this earth (Haley 2013: 55); by becoming a shade, he neglected her. Living free from the consequences on one's actions, either in the Hideaway or in a cell, proves just as elusive as the Cartesian dream of an ontological separation between body and mind.

The Shade: Inhuman Subjectivities

27 The shade in *The Nether* bears strong resemblance to the Dreamers in the movie *Inception* (2010) by Christopher Nolan. Like the shade, Dreamers see their physical bodies as a means to support their virtual beings. Both are the articulation of a strand in posthuman thinking — fleshless posthumanism. Yearning to be freed from the physical body finds its most extreme manifestation in *San Junipero* (2016), the fourth episode of the third season of *Black Mirror*. Here, the dying can choose to upload their consciousness to San Junipero — a simulated reality — and stay there permanently as the younger versions of themselves, without having to fear pain, aging, or death, unless they choose so. *San Junipero* is the epitome of the human's dream for immortality; at the same time, it affirms the Cartesian dualism of body and mind, demonstrating that the human mind can be severed from its body and remain intact.

28 The two examples from *Inception* and *Black Mirror*, while being thematically relevant to the discussion here, are different in terms of medium and therefore, of representation. In both *Inception* and *San Junipero*, we actually see the Dreamers and the aging body of Yorkie plugged in. Contrariwise, in *The Nether* the shade never appears on stage. Its existence is evoked by language, through Morris' narrative alone. Haley thus assigns a spectral quality to her creation of the shade in her refusal to render it through a visual representation. Defining the spectre, Derrida writes:

C'est quelque chose qu'on ne sait pas, justement, et on ne sait pas si précisément cela est, si ça existe, si ça répond à un nom et correspond à une essence. On ne le sait pas : non par ignorance, mais parce que ce non-objet, ce présent non-présent, cet être-là d'un absent ou d'un disparu ne relève pas du savoir. Du moins plus de ce qu'on croit savoir sous le nom de savoir. On ne sait pas si c'est vivant ou si c'est mort. (Derrida 25-6)

29 The spectre, neither dead nor alive, neither present nor absent, defies knowledge and threatens the foundation of our human notion of scientific progress, which largely relies on an epistemic approach. Fredric Jameson further elaborates on this point as he explains that a belief in specter has nothing to do with believing in the existence of ghosts, either literally or metaphorically.

Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us. (Jameson 1999: 39)

30 The power of a spectral figure, thus, lies in its ability to expose the limitations of the living present, the porous fabric of the world we live in and with it, all known power relations. In the case of *The Nether*, it is only apt to invest in the shade a spectral quality if it evokes Lyotard's Inhuman in both senses: the dehumanising effect of technology

and the potentially positive forces that are repressed or excluded by a normative humanistic ideal.¹³ The existence of Morris' father as a shade is inhuman, not only because it is a symbol of the dehumanising effect of technological advancement — the ability to transform the body into a mere tool for virtual existence in this case — but also because it prompts us to rethink our humanistic value judgments. While there is no denying that witnessing one's father hooked up to life support is neither pleasant nor reassuring, Morris seems to overlook the possibility that such inhuman existence is capable of generating new meanings, new definitions of life and happiness. In her refusal to acknowledge such possibility, simply because these new meanings and definitions do not subscribe to the conventional humanistic ideology, she missed the only opportunity to better understand her father and reconcile herself with him. Morris' father, like the Dreamers in *Inception*, are Inhuman subjects who, rather than demanding our sympathy or pity, prompt us to ask ourselves: "What can we do to mitigate the dehumanising effect of science and technology in society?" and "Should we extend our understanding of the human in order to effectively account for all the repressed positive, generative forces that will inevitably return in disruption?" *The Nether*, as such, opens up a space for lasting reflection on the ethics of digital and Inhuman subjectivities.

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Films/TV

- Black Mirror* (2011–present). Series. Created by Charlie Brooker. Channel 4.
- Inception* (2010). Film. Dir. Christopher Nolan. 158mn.
- Ready Player One* (2018). Film. Dir. Steven Spielberg, 140mn.
- San Junipero* (2016). Series episode. Season 3 Episode 4 of *Black Mirror* (see). Dir. Owen Harris. Writer: Charlie Brooker. 61mn.
- Westworld* (2016–present). Series. HBO/Warner.

NOTES

1. See Laura Barnett's (2014) review for *The Guardian*, Ben Brantley's (2015) review for *The New York Times* or Sumit Paul-Choudhury's (2015) review for *New Scientist*.
2. *The Nether* is not Haley's first opus about virtual worlds for the stage. In 2008, she also wrote *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom*, a play addressing the dangers of video games.
3. The concept of the Hideaway (an artificial environment where people can act on criminal fantasies) echoes the pitch of *Westworld*.
4. *The Nether*'s stage designer, multi-award winning Es Devlin, plays a great part in amplifying the play's ideas. Commenting on her work, she writes, "The Nether is a world made out of computer code, so we had to give a sense that all the people and objects are wireframe figures created out of code. Despite appearances, it's a very simple design, not at all hi-tech. It's all plastic trees and string: classic smoke and mirrors" (Jays 2015).
5. Child sexual abuse and exploitation were a widespread phenomenon during Victorian times. See Jackson (2000).
6. Detective Morris reveals that progress in technologies supporting crossing over mean we are at the edge of what could become "a mass migration into the Nether" (Haley 2013: 31).
7. The character's name strongly suggests this interpretation, as "Sims" is commonly used to denote virtual character "simulations", or avatars — a usage derives from the widely popular life simulation game series of the same title, *The Sims*.
8. This is true for all three characters: Sims (Papa) cares for Doyle (Iris) more than for his real wife; Doyle's relationship with his daughter is cold and distant while his attachment to the Hideaway and its avatars prompts him to crossover permanently; and Morris (Woodnut) finds herself more emotionally invested than she wanted when going undercover to investigate the Hideaway.
9. Massumi is highly critical of Baudrillard when he writes: "The work of Baudrillard is one long lament. [...] He cannot clearly see that all the things he says have crumbled were simulacra all along: simulacra produced by analyzable procedures of simulation that were as real as real, or actually realer than real, because they carried the real back to its principle of production and in so doing prepared their own rebirth in a new regime of simulation. He cannot see becoming, of either variety. He cannot see that the simulacrum envelops a proliferating play of differences and galactic distances" (1987: 97).
10. In a 2018 article published in *Variety* that compares today's VR technology to that in the recent movie *Ready Player One* (2018), based on Cline's 2011 novel of the same name, the movie's far-out technology was revealed to be actually closer to us than we may think. From wireless VR headset (HTC Vive and Oculus Rift, Samsung's Gear VR), tactile gloves and bodysuits (HaptX Gloves), to VR communities (Second Life, Sansar, Microsoft's Altspace VR), the industry is heading toward increasing believable immersion in terms of sensory experiences.
11. In one of the most disturbing scenes of the play, Woodnut, under the pressure of Papa (Sims), uses an axe to slaughter Iris (Doyle), in order to prove that he is not getting too close — in other words, that he has not invested too much emotion into the relationship. In his frantic attempt to make sense of his action, Woodnut raises the axe to kill Iris again and again, only for her to reappear every time, unharmed (Haley 2013: 53). This ritual in itself represents the process of disembodiment and reembodiment experienced by each subject when he/she enters the virtual world.
12. Sims tells Morris, "I almost did it, once. The daughter of my neighbor down the street. [...] One night I got her alone in her own room. We were laughing, and I reached over and grabbed her, and she looked at me — so startled — and I... found it in myself to let her go. I went home, to my computer, and that's where I've stayed." (Haley 2013: 63)

13. In *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, Lyotard poses two important questions: “what if human beings, in humanism’s sense, were in the process of, constrained into, becoming inhuman (that’s the first part)? And (the second part), what if what is ‘proper’ to humankind were to be inhabited by the inhuman?” (2). As a result, he emphasizes the need to distinguish between two kinds of inhuman, “the inhumanity of the system which is currently being consolidated under the name of development (among others)” and “the infinitely secret one of which the soul is hostage” (Lyotard 1991: 2).

ABSTRACTS

In this article, I analyze Jennifer Haley’s 2013 play *The Nether* through the lens of digital subjectivities. I contend that the play addresses the swift evolution of the definition of “Virtual Reality” and of the possibilities it offers. I also examine the specificity of the medium, theatre relating to new technologies, to demonstrate the relevance of theatre in a digital society through a case study. As a police procedural play, *The Nether* compels us to contemplate the future of legal practices in dealing with crimes that differ by nature from those we know, starting with a more thoughtful reflection on digital agents and a more open attitude to the Inhuman subjects.

Dans cet article, j’analyse la pièce de Jennifer Haley, *The Nether* (2003), à travers l’objectif des subjectivités numériques. La pièce aborde l’évolution rapide de la définition de la « réalité virtuelle » et des possibilités qu’elle offre. J’examine la spécificité du médium, théâtre lié aux nouvelles technologies, afin de démontrer la pertinence du théâtre dans une société numérique en prenant un cas pratique. *The Nether*, pièce policière procédurale, nous oblige à envisager l’avenir des pratiques juridiques pour traiter des crimes qui diffèrent par nature de ceux que nous connaissons, en commençant par une réflexion plus approfondie sur les agents numériques et une attitude plus ouverte envers les sujets Inhumains.

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Mots-clés: théâtre, technologie, éthique, hétérotopie, inhumain, Derrida Jacques, Lyotard Jean-François, Foucault Michel, posthumanisme, sujet numérique

Keywords: digital subjects, ethics, technology, posthumanism, heterotopia, inhuman, Derrida Jacques, Lyotard Jean-François, Foucault Michel, mixed reality, theatre

AUTHOR

JUNE XUANDUNG PHAM

June Xuandung Pham is a PhD student at Sorbonne University (Paris IV) and a member of the VALE research group (*Voix Anglophones: Littérature et Esthétique*). She is currently writing a thesis on contemporary British dystopian theatre, with an emphasis on negation and the Lacanian Real. Her research interests also include the poetics and ethics of failure in performance, the

representation of trauma and violence, the posthuman condition, as well as the relationships between theatre and ecology, or theatre and technology. Contact: [June.pham52\[at\]hotmail.com](mailto:June.pham52[at]hotmail.com)