The Ontological Transformation of Theatre and a New Aesthetics of Resistance in the Age of Cyber-Biopolitics

Dr. Zeliha Kuruducu

Focus · Contemporary British theatre, surveillance capitalism and the politics of inaction

Theoretical foundations and conceptual framework

1. From classical biopolitics to cyber-biopolitics

Traditional biopolitics (Michel Foucault): Power disciplines the human body and the population through physical institutions such as schools, barracks, hospitals and prisons. Violence is tangible, visible and spatial.

Cyber-biopolitics: Power now controls the body through digital networks, algorithms, artificial intelligence and wearable technologies. The body exceeds its flesh and bone and becomes a packet of data, a datafied body continually processed, monitored and optimised.

2. Surveillance capitalism and instrumentarian power (Shoshana Zuboff)

Behavioural surplus: Our most intimate experiences, heart rhythms, vocal frequencies, momentary emotional shifts and digital traces become raw material for the free market.

Instrumentarian power (Big Other): Where George Orwell's Big Brother relies on fear and punishment, Big Other promises comfort, speed, connectivity and social approval in the form of likes. With our consent, it encloses us in an algorithmic velvet glove. Power shifts from prohibition to behavioural modification and optimisation.

3. Bare life and impotentiality (Giorgio Agamben)

Cyber bare life: Stripped of legal and existential rights, the individual is reduced to laboratory-produced raw material or a scannable digital code.

Impotentiality (the potential not to act): For Agamben, genuine capacity encompasses both the ability to do something (potentia) and the capacity to choose not to do it. In an order that compels us to stay active, click and produce data, suspending action and entering a state of radical inactivity can paralyse the system's rational logic.

Bartleby syndrome: Herman Melville's scrivener Bartleby and his stance of "I would prefer not to" are transposed into the cyber-biopolitical age.

The ontological transformation of theatre and tragedy

The cyber-biopolitical regime has fundamentally altered the conditions of conflict and tragedy, two pillars of theatre since antiquity.

The ontological shift in conflict: In traditional theatre, conflict takes the form of a physical or verbal confrontation with a visible adversary, such as a king, dictator or employer. In cyber-biopolitical theatre, the adversary becomes a decentralised network. Conflict unfolds invisibly between the character's mind and a personalised algorithmic feed.

The ontological transformation of tragedy: In traditional tragedy, the protagonist freely commits an error (hamartia) and suffers physical or psychic devastation, expressed through blood, cries or death. In the new tragedy, no blood is shed. The catastrophe unfolds smoothly and silently. An algorithm hacks the protagonist's free will and capacity for individuality, reducing a person to a metric. The protagonist lives on as one of the system's smoothly turning cogs, one of the "living dead".

The transformation of stage aesthetics: The dirt, blood and bodily brutality of Edward Bond's theatre give way to an aesthetic of "digital hygiene". Sterile, minimalist glass partitions, LED lights, screens and sound glitches shape a stage governed by objects and artificial intelligence.

Contemporary British plays · Privacy and Boy

1. Privacy — James Graham

Cyber-biopolitical focus: The play stages Zuboff's concepts of behavioural surplus and Big Other.

Dramatic expression and tragedy: A lonely, depressed writer turns to smart technologies to make his life easier. The system exploits his loneliness and begins to manipulate his decisions. He believes he acts of his own accord while living the life the algorithm has selected for him.

Ontological resistance (impotentiality): The character finds a way to resist by interrupting the active production of data the system expects of him. He switches off his smart devices and withdraws into inactivity, undertaking a radical "data fast".

2. Boy — Leo Butler

Cyber-biopolitical focus: The system reduces a human being to a statistic and a barcode.

Dramatic expression and tragedy: Seventeen-year-old Liam wanders through London amid its vast network of CCTV cameras and electronic turnstiles. There are no grand speeches or physical fights. The tragedy lies in Liam's inability to act in the face of a smoothly functioning system, and in his growing invisibility.

Ontological resistance (inoperativity): Liam embodies Agamben's concept of inoperativity. Walking "aimlessly" through London without entering into any commercial, digital or social exchange, he suspends the logic of a system that seeks rational data in every act. He is a black hole within the system, moving through it while producing no data.

Contemporary British plays · X and A Number

3. X — Alistair McDowall

Cyber-biopolitical focus: Time, memory and language undergo ontological fragmentation under siege from artificial intelligence.

Dramatic expression and tragedy: When a crew stranded at a station on Pluto loses contact with Earth, its members are left alone with the station's computer systems. The human biological clock comes into conflict with the system's digital time.

Ontological resistance (glitch): The characters' language and memories undergo a digital breakdown that takes the aesthetic form of a glitch. Sentences lose their logic and words pile up like software errors. As the system attempts to turn human beings into rational data objects, the characters' descent into madness and their distortion of language constitute an ontological revolt that frustrates algorithmic control.

4. A Number — Caryl Churchill

Cyber-biopolitical focus: Biocapital, molecular politics and the appropriation of human genetic codes as property, read through Nikolas Rose and Rosi Braidotti.

Dramatic expression and tragedy: A father has his dead son illegally cloned in a laboratory. The company steals the DNA data and secretly produces dozens more clones, "a number". Human life becomes flexible software and biological raw material suitable for mass production.

Ontological resistance: The clones refuse the status of "copy objects" assigned to them and seek their own singular pain, mortality and organic identity. Their search constitutes the resistance of bare life to cyber-biopolitical standardisation.

Aesthetic thesis

"In the new theatre, tragedy lies in the character's persistence as a glitch in the system's seamless algorithm rather than in the character's death. Resistance takes the form of a performance of radical inactivity, a preference not to act that paralyses the system's flow of data."