The manifestations of cyberculture in theatre: A posthuman reading of Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone*

Shaimma Elsayed Mohammed Mowafi

English Department, ElGazeera Higher Institutes, Cairo, Egypt

E-mail: shimaa_mowafi@yahoo.com

Abstract

Cyberculture in theatre is a fascinating and evolving field of research that explores the intersection of technology and the performing arts. It embodies a multifaceted landscape that has reshaped the way stories are told, performances are delivered, and audiences interact with the stagecraft. In this respect, the present paper intends to examine how digital technology has influenced theatre production, performance, and audience engagement. A posthuman analysis of cyberculture dramaturgies is attempted to delve into the intersection of theatre, technology and the evolving concept of being human in a digital era. Drawing on the posthumanist theoretical approach, which challenges the traditional notions of human identity, agency and embodiment, offers a rich and complex perspective on how technology can transform the theatrical experience as a whole. It can inspire a critical reflection on the role of cyberculture in reshaping the relationship between humans and technology in the theatrical realm. The paper has concluded that the inclusion of cybernetic technologies challenges the boundaries of the traditional stage and encourages the audience to engage in new levels of immersion, which can transform their role in shaping the theatrical narrative and dramatic perception. However, it's important to acknowledge the challenges as well, including potential technical issues, the risk of over-reliance on technology, and the ethical considerations of audience data privacy and consent, in addition to ensuring that the integration of non-human entities enhances the narrative rather than detracting from it.

Keywords: cyberculture, posthumanism, theatre, dramaturgy, Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone*

1. Introduction to cyberculture in theatre

The term cyberculture is often used in a versatile manner without a precise definition. In general, it pertains to cultural affairs associated with "cybertopics", such as cybernetics, automation, digitalization, and integration of technology with the human body. In its early stages, cyberculture emerged as a sociocultural phenomenon that coincided with the emergence of modern computer technologies and the discourses and narratives which framed them. It contributed to creating a revolutionary mythology ahead of its time that portrayed both hope and fear, shaping one of the most influential narrative chronologies of the eighties and nineties. This narrative is centred around the transformative force of the new technological

advancements, which had the potential to profoundly alter both societies and individuals as well. The story gained widespread acceptance and became a prominent part of mainstream Western culture. According to Lévy, Cyberculture encompasses "a set of techniques (material and intellectual), practical habits, attitudes, ways of thinking and values that develop mutually with cyberspace" (2000, p. 15). It involves "the study of various social phenomena associated with the Internet and other new forms of network communication. Examples of what falls under cyberculture studies are online communities,… the issue of online identity, …cell phone usage in various communities,…" (Manovich 2001, p. 16). The social anthropologist Arturo Escobar reflects, "any technology represents a cultural invention, in the sense that technologies bring forth a world; they emerge out of particular cultural conditions and in turn help to create new social and cultural situations" (1996, p. 11). However, in her book *Virtualities: Television, Media Art and Cyberculture* (1998), Margaret Morse argues that communication facilitated by digital informatics and computer-based networks is decontextualized, lacking personalization, warmth, and the fertility to form meaningful humane relations (p. 5). Thus, the present paper intends to answer the following questions: How does the integration of cyberculture affect the theatrical experience? And what are the pros and cons of technological intervention on modern dramaturgies and human connection?

The intersection of cyberculture and theatre represents a dynamic and evolving frontier where traditional performing arts merge with digital technology and virtual spaces. Introducing the concept of cyberculture in theatre involves exploring how digital technology and the internet have become integral components of contemporary theatrical practices, influencing production, performance, and audience engagement. Cyberculture in theatre reflects and influences broader cultural and social implications. It encompasses the digital divide, exploring how access to technology affects engagement with the performing arts. Social media, online communities, and digital storytelling mould modern-day individuals' shared cultural identities and experiences. It embodies a multifaceted landscape that has reshaped the way stories are told, performances are delivered, and audiences interact with the stage. This concept signifies a profound transformation in the theatrical experience, reflecting the broader impact of technology on our lives in the digital age. Cyberculture in theatre is characterized by some features, including the integration of digital scenography. Traditional stage designs are enhanced or even replaced by digital projections, LED screens, and interactive installations, which create immersive and visually striking environments that enrich the storytelling. The concept of cyberculture also introduces the notion of cybernetic performers. These may include robots, AI-driven characters, avatars or other non-human entities that coexist with human actors. The dynamics among these entities and their impact on storytelling evolve in the digital age. Virtual performances have emerged as a prominent feature of cyberculture in theatre. Digital tools facilitate collaborative theatre-making processes, allowing geographically dispersed teams to work together seamlessly. Playwrights, designers, and performers collaborate in virtual environments, leading to innovative productions. Actors and directors harness digital platforms like Zoom, live streaming, and virtual reality to connect with the audience worldwide, enabling remote participation and global collaboration. The digital age has also transformed the relationship between performers and audiences. Social media platforms and interactive apps open up the possibility to engage spectators in real-time shows,

inviting them to influence the narrative, ask questions, or make choices that impact the performance. This level of interactivity enhances immersion and connection, and strives to make performances more accessible to diverse audiences.

The use of digital technology in traditional theatre productions has significantly transformed the world of live theatre. Most theatre companies attempt to embrace technology as a tool to enhance the theatergoing experience and meet the evolving needs of their audiences. The impact of digital scenography on stage design and production techniques has been profound, revolutionizing the way theatre is conceived, designed, and executed. It has expanded the creative possibilities available to directors, designers, and performers. Digital scenography, which includes the use of virtual sets, digital projections, multimedia, and computer-generated imagery, has introduced new dimensions to stage design and production. These technological advancements allow for the creation of dynamic and adaptable stage environments, enabling artists to push the boundaries of storytelling and audience engagement. According to Kaye (2011), "projection mapping, also known as video mapping, involves projecting images or videos onto three-dimensional surfaces, transforming static objects into dynamic displays. This technique has been employed to create mesmerizing visual backdrops and to alter the perception of space on stage" (p. 779). While traditional stage design often relies on static sets, digital scenography transcends these limitations, enabling designers to create virtually any setting, from realistic landscapes to fantastical realms. Instead of relying solely on physical backdrops and props, theatres can use projections to create dynamic and versatile settings. "Projection mapping allows us to create an entire world on stage. It adds layers of depth and movement, transforming the traditional set into a living, breathing entity", explains set designer Sarah Johnson (qtd. in Kaye, 2011, p. 779). High-resolution projectors and 3D rendering can immerse the spectators in the play's realm and allow for precise alignment with set elements, enhancing realism and depth. They can enhance the emotional impact of a scene and establish mood and atmosphere by projecting images, colours, or patterns onto the stage. Audiences can feel as though they are inside a painting, moving through different environments, or even witnessing events from multiple perspectives. They can also provide historical or cultural contexts to the audience, helping them better understand the time and place in which the play is set. This contextualization of temporal, special, and formal cues enhances the audience's engagement with the narrative. In terms of cost-efficiency and sustainability, digital scenography can reduce production costs by eliminating the need for extensive physical sets, which require storage and maintenance. This cost efficiency can make theatre productions more accessible and financially sustainable. The reduced reliance on physical sets also has environmentally beneficial implications. Fewer materials are needed, and less waste is generated, contributing to a more sustainable and eco-friendly approach to theatre production.

Digital scenography also enhances the possibilities of lighting design, which can be integrated with digital projections to create intricate and impactful visual effects that complement the narrative and emotional tone of the production. Digital lighting systems, including LED lights and programmable fixtures, can provide rapid and dramatic changes, and offer precise control over colour, intensity, and movement. According to Kaye, "Interactive lighting systems can dynamically respond to the performers' actions or cues, enhancing the atmosphere and emotional impact of a scene" (2011, p. 781). Quick shifts from darkness to brightness, for

example, can create moments of surprise or tension. This lighting technology is also more energy-efficient than traditional lighting, reducing both energy consumption and production costs. LED lights, in particular, have a longer lifespan and require less maintenance. As for sound, digital soundscapes utilize advanced audio technologies to create rich, multi-dimensional sound environments. The use of high-quality, realistic sound effects can reinforce the actors' voices and ensure that every audience member can hear clearly, even in large theatres. Advanced sound systems can also reproduce spatial audio, allowing sound to move around the theatre. This immerses the audience in the action and enhances the overall audio experience, making it easier to project convincing environments and adding a new layer of depth to live performances. Composers can create and manipulate digital music compositions, offering a wider range of musical possibilities and experimental approaches to score creation for theatre productions. Designers can also synchronize projections with lighting cues and sound effects, creating a more cohesive and immersive experience. For example, captioning and translation can be integrated into projections, making theatre more accessible to diverse audiences. Projections can provide audiovisual cues and sensory adjustments for relaxed performances, making theatre accessible to individuals with sensory sensitivities or disabilities.

The use of technology in theatre has opened up new avenues for experimentation and collaboration, attracting audiences who are interested in innovative narrative and storytelling approaches. Live motion capture is one such technology that has transformed theatrical performances. It involves real-time tracking of performers' movements and translating them into digital avatars or projected characters. The integration of non-human and digital entities may also offer new dimensions to narrative construction and constitute significant implications for stage dramaturgy and audience interaction. Incorporating robots, AI characters, and digital avatars can represent non-human perspectives, supernatural beings, or even embodiments of technology itself. They provide a platform to explore themes such as the intricate relationship between humans and machines, technology, cybernetic identity, and artificial intelligence, serving as allegorical representations of all these perceptions. The inclusion of non-human entities also blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction, opening up new narrative possibilities. Audiences may question what is real and what is simulated, leading to more immersive and thought-provoking theatrical experiences. These entities can add layers of complexity to the narrative, in the sense that a human protagonist may interact with AI-driven characters or a digital device in a virtual world, creating a narrative within a narrative or multi-layered narratives. Audiences may also engage in real-time conversations with AI characters or interact with digital avatars, influencing the course of the story and facilitating a new level of interactivity and participation. Non-human or digital entities in mixed-reality productions can enhance audience immersion by adapting their responses based on audience input, creating personalized experiences for each spectator, thus enhancing audience agency and engagement by making the narrative feel more tailored to individual preferences. The presence of non-human entities can also prompt audiences to reflect on the role of technology in their lives, the ethical dilemmas surrounding artificial intelligence, and the boundaries of humanity. Cybernetic theatre experiences are also marked by their expanded accessibility, in the sense that they can reach wider audiences, including those who may have physical limitations or geographical constraints that prevent them from attending traditional live performances.

Although the integration of technology into live performances brings numerous benefits, it also presents various potential challenges and risks that theatre makers and companies need to navigate carefully. Integrating technology can be costly, requiring investments in hardware, software, training, and technical personnel. Smaller theatre companies may face budget constraints. Thus, careful budgeting and resource allocation are required to ensure that technology integration aligns with the available financial resources. Ensuring the reliability of technology constitutes another challenge. Overreliance on technology can make productions vulnerable to unexpected technical failures or external factors. Theatre makers may lack the technical expertise required for complex technology integration, leading to errors or suboptimal implementation. Technical glitches, failures, or malfunctions can disrupt the flow of a live performance, causing delays, confusion, or even show cancellations. Adequate testing, maintenance, and backup plans are essential to mitigate this risk. In addition, overuse or improper integration of technology can distract the audience from the narrative or live performance. It may overshadow the artistic elements of a performance and attention may shift from the actors to screens or devices, leading to concerns about authenticity and the essence of live theatre. Thus, balancing technology with artistic intent is crucial. Technology-driven audience participation can vary in quality and effectiveness, potentially leading to disengagement or confusion. Creating seamless and intuitive interactive experiences that enhance rather than disrupt the audience's engagement with the narrative can be challenging. Theatre makers should use technology as a tool to enhance storytelling rather than detract from it. Certain technology-dependent experiences may exclude individuals with disabilities or those who lack access to the required devices or digital platforms. Thus, ensuring inclusivity and accessibility for all audience members is essential. This involves providing alternatives for those who cannot fully participate in tech-driven aspects of the performance. Moreover, implementing robust data privacy and security measures is critical. Collecting and using audience data, particularly in interactive or immersive experiences, raises privacy concerns and the potential for data breaches. Thus, theatre companies must navigate the ethical considerations of data collection and storage responsibly.

2. **Posthumanism and its relevance to the theatrical realm**

Posthuman theory, often referred to as posthumanism, "denotes a philosophical position concerned with reconceptualizing what it means to be human" (Cuddon, p.551). It is a theoretical framework that challenges and deconstructs traditional concepts of human identity, agency, subjectivity and embodiment by questioning the fixed, stable, and anthropocentric view of humanity. It proposes more fluid and complex reflections on the concept of being human in a technically-mediated and digitally-interconnected world. It emerged in response to the rapid advancements in science, technology, and philosophy in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, which have raised questions about the boundaries between humans and non-humans, the impact of technology on human existence, and the idea of a singular, fixed human nature. It appears as a deconstruction of humanism, in the sense that it rejects the traditional humanist view, which places humans at the centre of the universe with unique attributes such as reason, consciousness, and agency, is no longer sufficient to capture the complexities of the contemporary world. Instead, it encourages a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of existence and acknowledges the existence of multiple subjectivities, including non-human

ones. It recognises that different entities experience the world in diverse ways and challenges the idea of a universal human perspective. In this respect, posthumanism appears as a deconstruction of the human-centric paradigm by questioning the long-held belief that humans are the pinnacle of existence and that human attributes define the measure of value. It challenges anthropocentrism, the idea that humans are the centre of moral, ethical, and metaphysical considerations. Posthumanism expands the notion of agency; as it considers agency not as a uniquely human trait but as a distributed quality across various entities, including non-human actors such as animals, machines, and even ecosystems. It also embraces the idea of multiplicity and hybridity, in the sense that identities and subjectivities are fluid and multifaceted. It explores the coexistence of human and non-human elements within a single entity and acknowledges that individuals can have multiple, overlapping identities. It also recognizes that non-human entities can have intentions, actions, and effects on the world. By transcending biological limitations, posthumanism explores the blurring boundaries between humans and machines, embracing the idea of human enhancement and augmentation through technology. It raises questions about the potential merging of human biology with technology, which may include the creation of cyborgs (cybernetic organisms) or the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into human cognition.

Posthumanism is highly relevant to theatre because it encourages a reimagining of the theatrical experience, performance, and audience engagement, challenging conventional notions of human identity, agency, and embodiment in the performing arts. Theatre can utilize technology to engage the audience in new ways, which can transform the audience's role in shaping the narrative. By expanding the notion of the performer, posthuman theory challenges the traditional role of the human actor as the central performer in theatre. It encourages theatre to engage with technology more deeply and opens the door to the use of virtual reality, interactive digital elements, and immersive experiences that challenge the boundaries of the traditional stage. This includes non-human or posthuman performers, such as robots, AI-driven characters, Avatars or digitally augmented actors in theatrical productions, which share the stage and agency with human actors. Such inclusion of new and diverse forms of subjectivities allows for the portrayal of characters or entities with hybrid or augmented identities. This questions the fixed nature of human subjectivity and challenges the traditional perception of human actors as the sole agents of performance. In addition, posthumanism raises ethical considerations within theatre, particularly regarding the treatment of non-human performers, issues of data privacy and surveillance in digital performances, and the impact of technology on the audience's emotional and cognitive responses. Thus, posthumanism's relevance to theatre lies in its capacity to open up new creative possibilities, question established norms, and provoke critical conversations about the evolving relations among humans, technology, performance and engagement of audience. It encourages theatre to critically reflect on the posthuman condition to embrace the diversity and multiplicity of identities and agencies in the contemporary world and explore the complexities of a world where the boundaries between human and non-human entities are increasingly blurred.

3. Sarah Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone*: Man and technology at crossroads

Dead Man's Cell Phone is a play by Sarah Ruhl who is an American playwright, poet, and essayist. The play made its world premiere production in June 2007 and received Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding New Play. It narrates the tale of Jean, a woman in her late thirties, who answers the ringing cell phone belonging to a stranger, Gordon, a recently deceased man. The story begins in an ordinary café where Jean is startled out of her seclusion by the buzzing cell phone of a man sitting at the adjacent table. It is after many efforts to rouse him that Jean recognises he has passed away. At that very time, she abruptly and unexpectedly decides to stick by his side "for as long as you need me" (Ruhl, p. 12). When Gordon's phone re-rings, she replies, starting a string of unfortunate events and setting in motion a series of mishaps. She meets Gordon's lover, his widow Hermia, his mother Mrs. Gottlieb, and his alienated brother Dwight, who all think Jean was once one of Gordon's associates. Although Jean didn't initiate the deception, she didn't refute it as well. She becomes a friend for them all, assuming a faux-Pollyanna character and fabricating stories of Gordon's affection for them in an attempt to ease their grief. Jean's sentiments for Gordon change as she delves deeper into his history and learns more about his filthy past, uncovering his dubious business dealings, practices and involvement in human organ trafficking. In an effort to atone, a growing sense of guilt propels her on a voyage that takes her to South Africa, the afterlife and beyond, all in an attempt to make amends. Beneath the flurry of action and the chaotic events is a prevailing theme that everyone in the play is essentially a stranger to one another, not even Gordon's family is fully aware of his true nature and his opinions and feelings towards them. The play highlights Charles Dickens' idea that "every human creature [...] is a mystery to each other", suggesting that technological advancements expose this truth rather than facilitating it (qtd. in Ruhl, p. 5).

Ruhl's cybernetic play *Dead Man's Cell Phone* invites a posthuman reading by challenging conventional notions of identity, agency, and human-technology relationships. This posthuman reading may offer a new perspective on the play's themes, characters, and narrative technique. Posthumanism challenges the traditional notions of human identity, agency, and embodiment, which can provide unique insights into this peculiar work. The posthuman theory prompts an exploration of hybrid identities, and Jean's character embodies this idea. She becomes increasingly entwined with Gordon's life through his cell phone, blurring the boundaries between their identities. Her own identity transforms as she takes on roles and responsibilities associated with Gordon's connections. As Jean becomes entangled in Gordon's life, she discovers his connections and secrets, ultimately leading to a complex exploration of the boundaries between life and death, technology and humanity. Posthumanism explores the concept of multiple subjectivities. In the play, characters have complex and shifting identities, influenced by their interactions with technology and each other. Jean, in particular, assumes various roles and subjectivities as she immerses herself in Gordon's world. Posthumanism challenges the idea that only humans possess agency. In the play, Gordon's cell phone takes on a life of its own, becoming a conduit through which he continues to influence the lives of those around him even after death. In the play, the cell phone takes on a quasi-personal role, and the characters grapple with how to respect and honour Gordon's memory through the device. This raises questions about the ethics of dealing with the digital remnants of the deceased and challenges the traditional notion of death as the end of agency. The cell phone

serves as a mediator between characters, highlighting the role of technology in human communication. It becomes a means through which characters connect, communicate, and confront their vulnerabilities. The play also prompts ethical reflections on the treatment of non-human entities, raising questions about the extent to which technology mediates people's relationships and shapes their interactions. Through its characters and narrative, it prompts audiences to consider the evolving relationship between humans, technologies, and the concept of the posthuman in a world where digital connections persist beyond the grave.

A contrast between the tangible world of paper and the realm of digital data is introduced early in the play, particularly when Jean starts an engaging communication with Gordon's brother, Dwight:

> **Jean:** I want to remember everything. Even other people's memories.
> **Dwight:** These digital cameras – you know – and all the digital – stuff – the informational bits – flying through the air – no-one wants to remember. People say I love you – on cell phones – and where does it go? Remembering requires paper. (Ruhl, p.47)

Although the theme of memory looms large throughout the play, the frequent shifts in styles and genres give the impression of a play constantly erasing its own identity. *Dead Man's Cell Phone* persistently reinvents its form by moving among romantic, comic, realistic and absurd scenes. This artistic appeal is extended to modern dance when Jean, after stumbling upon Gordon in the hereafter, looks down from heaven to see the living performing and engaging in a "cell phone ballet" underneath:

> *People moving through the rain,*
> *with umbrellas, talking into their cell phones,*
> *fragments of lost conversations floating up.* (Ruhl, p.87; original emphasis)

In her clues for the play's onstage performance, Ruhl recommends that these "fragments of lost conversations" be played during the dancing sequence and merged into the musical background, ideally derived from real cell phone recordings. In this scene, the voices seem to be rising toward the heavenly domain, while the dancers seem to be separated from them. They react to something indiscernible yet palpable called the "air remembering" (Ruhl, p. 47).

Much like the performers in the ballet, the play's protagonists, Jean and Gordon, can be seen as posthuman entities. Their identities are intricately intertwined with the digital system that encompasses them, expanding their existence beyond their tangible entities and the conventional limitations of spatial, temporal, and humanist principles. They exist not only in the physical bodies of the actors portraying them onstage but also within the play's aesthetic realm, linked and dispersed via their technological equipment. Most importantly, the playwright accomplishes this through textual cues encompassing movement, lighting, props, costumes, sound, dialogue, scene shifts, and clothing, which allows for a more flexible use of spatial, temporal, and character development. Jean's journey metaphorically exemplifies Ruhl's departure from the Aristotelian storytelling paradigm. Ruhl uses a storytelling approach reminiscent of the Roman poet Ovid, which she characterizes as "one thing transforming another," as a substitute for following a psychologically motivated character development. Ovid's work consists of poignant and joyful little changes, "I like plays that have revelations in the moment, where emotions transform almost inexplicably" (qtd. in Lahr). Despite drawing inspiration from Ovid, this form suggests a posthuman subjectivity in the play by aligning the

characters' "small transformations" with their technological apparatuses and presenting their identities and physical entities as "receptacle[s] [...] waiting to be filled" (Ruhl, p. 83). Throughout the play, Jean takes on various roles and identities as she interacts with different callers on Gordon's phone. Her identity undergoes abrupt changes, shifting from a stranger to a mistress, to a coworker, to a human-rights activist, and so forth. This fluidity in identity mirrors the posthuman concept of multiple subjectivities and challenges the notion of a fixed, singular identity. She adapts to fit the demands of the situation and adjusts to the circumstances both consciously and subconsciously, embodying the several constituents that make her a posthuman subject, even when these components occasionally conflict with each other, creating a disparate self.

Jean's transformation gradually manifests with every bit of knowledge she takes in from the technological realm that encompasses its existence. As the play opens, she appears vacant and "insular" (Ruhl, p. 7), but she converses with both simultaneously after finding that the guy is dead and that he is speaking with his wife on the other end of the line. After this first meeting, Jean is not the only one who drives the play's subsequent events; rather, the information she obtains from the network plays a crucial part. It steers her toward subsequent interactions with Gordon's mistress, mother, wife, brother, and client. Thus, the catalyst and the driving power behind the progression of the play are not exclusively human; rather, they comprise a cyborg-like fusion of grid and human traits, embodying the essence and representing the very core of posthumanism. The play portrays a world in which characters frequently surpass conventional humanist bounds thanks to technology gadgets. In a conversation with Gordon's brother, Jean discloses that she has been struggling with the very idea of having a cell phone for a long time owing to the obscurity they introduce:

> You know what's funny? I never had a cell phone. I didn't want to always *be there* […] But it's like – when everyone has their cell phone on, no one is there. It's like we're all disappearing the more we're there. (Ruhl, pp. 52-3; original emphasis)

Jean is mainly concerned with existential issues, particularly those which are concerned with the loss of temporal stability and the blurring of other distinct boundaries. Her concerns are shared by Michel Serres, who contends that modern technology has redefined the borders of living and dead, challenging the formerly perpetual concepts of agency and morality:

> We now inhabit humanly constructed and global systems whose cognitive and agentive capacities not only exceed us but also transform us […]. Reshaping our relations to space and time (through digital technologies, satellite networks, mobile communications, cyberspace) to intelligence and agency (through cybernetics, artificial intelligence, robotics, prosthetics) to life and death themselves. (qtd. in Carlson, p. 138)

The play's central theme is reflected in this quote, which highlights the significant impact of technology on people's conceptions of time, space, intelligence, agency, and even life and death. As for Jean, the cell phone represents only one component within this unsettling existence. Her subsequent revelation of Gordon's involvement in the organ trafficking business further challenges and calls into even more questions regarding her humanitarian convictions. However, Jean manages to adjust to this confusing state of affairs for a significant share of the play, even coming to embrace some of its characteristics. As she addresses Dwight, she reflects on her feelings and impressions towards Gordon's phone:

> But when Gordon's phone rang and rang, after he died, I thought his phone was beautiful, like it was the only thing keeping him alive, like as long as people called him he would be alive. That sounds – a little – I know – but all those molecules, in the air, trying to talk to Gordon – and Gordon – he's in the air too – so maybe they all would meet up there, whizzing around –those bits of air – and voices. (Ruhl, p. 53)

Jean's evolving recognition of her posthuman existence can mirror Michel Serres's notion of "hominescence", which describes the human subject as "irreducibly inceptive, inchoate, and ever-changing [in] character" confined in a techno-scientific contextual environment (qtd. in Carlson, p. 15). Serres argues that "The life of the human entails its continual departure from any fixed place, whose discrete boundaries and fixed markers spell death" (qtd. in Carlson, p. 137) and *hominescence* is the outcome of the technological advancements allowing such borders to dissolve. As explicit in her attachment to Gordon's phone, Jean's growing fondness for the digital realm does, in fact, lead to more palpable challenges in the physical world, exemplified through the use of Gordon's phone prop. She grows increasingly preoccupied with Gordon's digital presence and deeply engrossed in the digital device she holds while Dwight endeavours to win her affection. She answers the phone, discovering that it's Gordon's widow, whom she goes to meet despite Dwight's protests. Jean eventually finds out the truth about Gordon's engagement in organ trafficking from Hermia. Before she can fully absorb this shocking revelation, she gets another call from a customer who is waiting for a kidney in South Africa. Jean processes this new information in less than half a page of conversation and rushes off once more, this time travelling to Johannesburg. Thus, Jean undergoes a series of transformations with each new data she acquires in her journey, propelling her forward through subsequent scenes. Yet, the questions remain: Where does the grid initiate, and to which end will Jean terminate? And who is really in charge of this journey? Through the textual cues provided by stage properties, sound effects, and verbal exchange, the drama alludes to a posthuman interchange that combines the agency of both biological and digital traits. It draws attention to the idea that Jean's path is moulded by the intricate interaction between her human desires and the influences of the digital network, blurring the lines between where one ends and the other begins.

Gordon's phone remains at the centre of the ensuing scene, propelling the action forward. Jean encounters the client, an unidentified woman, at Johannesburg airport, and attempts to back out of Gordon's organ trafficking deal, proposing to offer her kidney instead. The woman, upon hearing this proposal, insists that Jean must hand over Gordon's phone, as it contains numbers she needs to retain. Once Jean declines, a gunfight erupts over the data stored on the phone:

> **Stranger:** You know nothing of Gordon's work, do you? It's big business. You're in over your head.
> **Jean:** No – I'm afraid you're in over your head.
> *Jean kicks the gun out of the stranger's hand.*
> *Jean kicks the stranger on a special part of her leg so that she crumples to the ground.*
> **Jean:** (*surprised at her own daring*) Whoa! (Ruhl, p.79; original emphasis)

Jean loses her battle with the stranger and is finally rendered unconscious. When she regains consciousness, she finds herself in the play's opening scene, with Gordon by her side in an unremarkable café. This turn of events signifies that Jean has been transferred by Gordon's phone into a virtual afterlife. The play reaches its emotional climax as the spatial and temporal boundaries disintegrate. The café transforms into a sort of purgatory, where Jean and Gordon

find themselves "*doomed to repeat their first encounter over and over again for eternity*" (Ruhl, p. 80). Gordon tells Jean that after death, "you go straight to the person you most loved, right back to the very moment, the very place, you decided you loved them" (Ruhl, p. 81). Jean quickly realizes that she and Gordon are not destined to be connected forever because of his dubious moral choices, which are inconsistent with her expectations of him as a brother, husband, and son. In a pivotal moment, she decides to open up to Gordon about his mother's sorrow, expressing Mrs. Gottlieb's resolve to grieve him daily for the remainder of her life. Gordon is profoundly moved by this realization and experiences love for the first time in his life. He is "*sucked into a cosmic pipeline attached to his mother's hell*", fulfilling his earlier prophecy that he would die (Ruhl, p. 89). Eventually, the feeling of loving and being beloved liberated him from his attachment to the phone, setting his soul free from the digital realm. This scene highlights the complexities of human relationships, even in a posthuman, digital afterlife, and how powerful love can be.

Gordon's transformation also triggers a change in Jean who realizes that she loves Dwight. She tries to reach out to him from the hereafter via Gordon's phone, but the signal fails to get through:

> Hello, Dwight, if you get this message,
> I am alone on my own planet,
> And I might be here for all time because I didn't tell you I love you
> […]
> STUPID, STUPID PHONE!
> She throws the phone down.
> *She bangs it on the ground until she destroys it.*
> *It is the first time in a long time she has let herself cry.*
> Z!
> Z!
> *She disappears.* (Ruhl, p. 90)

Like Tim's laptop in *The Sugar Syndrome* and Johnny's virtual self-stab in *I Love You, Bro*, Jean's decision to destroy the phone and the liberating and purifying relief that follows serve as an emotional climax. By doing so, she attempts to dismantle her presence in the digital dimension in a bid to seek solace within the humanist boundaries. This act symbolizes a rejection of the complex and boundless digital world in favour of more intimate and human connections. When Jean returns to the earthly realm, she finds out that she has been gone for several months. Gordon's cell phone, with its time-bending capabilities, has not only reshaped her relationship with space but with time as well. Given the temporal shifts she has experienced, Dwight and Jean's relationship requires a fresh restart. Having crossed over from the realm of the dead, Jean now finds herself in a critical situation in which she has to choose between the digital grid that gives her a sense of independence and the physical constraints that bind her. Ironically enough, it's her love for Dwight that enables her to reconcile both of these aspects. At the end of her journey, Jean chooses to prioritize the human over the digital, returning to the fundamental aspects of the human experience even in the age of technology. It celebrates the enduring strength of human interactions and contends the very idea that meaningful connections can be forged in the shadow of the machine.

The play can be conceived as a posthuman moral piece. As Pamela King has pointed out, in traditional English morality plays, the central character was often a symbol representing

humanity as a whole, having names like "Everyman" or "Mankind", moving away from and then back toward God in a manner that echoed Christian mores of being first innocent, then tempted, fallen, guilty, and finally redemptive (p. 235). In line with this concept, it's not surprisingly difficult to see Gordon as an 'Every(dead)man' of cyberculture and the digital age, with the drama chronicling his redeeming change by seeking his mother's love, as facilitated by Jean's help. In most parts of the play, the audience is informed of Gordon's identity via his digital device instead. Gordon's cell phone assumes a life of its own, disturbing crucial moments in the play, including Gordon's funeral, his brother's romantic relationship, and even his mother's expression of grief: "I call him everyday. I keep forgetting that he's dead" (Ruhl, p.25). Finally, Gordon's physical body is given the chance to address the audience, using a strikingly posthuman rationale to defend his organ trafficking dealings. This highlights the intricate and multi-layered moral and ethical aspects that the play explores, questioning accepted ideas of what is right and wrong and offering a moral framework for a posthuman society.

> I wouldn't really say that I sell organs for a living. I connect people. […] A man in Iran needs money real bad but he doesn't need his own kidney. A woman in Sydney needs a new kidney but doesn't need her own cash. […] There are parts enough to make everyone whole: it's just that the right parts are not yet in the right bodies. (Ruhl, p. 58-59)

Gordon's perspective reconstructs the human body as a machine, a congregation of interchangeable constituents to be relocated as needed. In a conversation with Jean, he states, "The point is, Jean, we're two peas in the proverbial pod. In-coming calls, out-going organs, we're all floating receptacles – waiting to be filled – with meaning – which you and I provide" (Ruhl, p. 83). As Amy Holzapfel has pointed out, Gordon's posthuman statement deals with the human body as a digital apparatus, "a hollow vessel, into which information is passed, carried, and transmitted, […] merely a container for the transference of fragmented parts over disparate times and spaces. The body, if you like, becomes a phone" (p. 119-120). The irony here lies in the fact that Gordon becomes a machine himself by converting the human body into a digital one. This posthumanist viewpoint is akin to Martin Heidegger's concept of Gestell or "enframing" in "The Question Concerning Technology". Heidegger argues that in technological contexts, the subject turns out to be an object, and the master becomes subservient to the engine (p.19). Gordon's experience illustrates the potentially dehumanizing consequences of reducing human existential presence to digital components. His perception of the human body as a machine causes him to become a machine in a cyclical pattern.

Gordon's affiliation with the digital realm transcends his conscious awareness, reflecting the discrepancy between his self-knowledge and the others' knowledge about him. This metaphorical split symbolizes the broader gap between human beings and the technological environment that surrounds them. This technological unconscious assumes a mystical quality, bearing resemblance to a spiritual presence that lingers over and encompasses the main action of the play. However, this presence remains mainly behind the scenes, and it is only alluded to through a number of textual cues. Although Gordon believed he knew his family members, and they thought they knew him, this revelation is only made clear by Jean's account of his mother's devotion after his death. It is through Gordon's cell phone that Jean has been channeled to the hereafter, and in doing so; she becomes aware of what the digital ether seemed

to know all along. This highlights the very idea that the digital environment possesses a vast reservoir of information and connections that is often hidden from individual human awareness. This virtual reserve can play a pivotal role in revealing and (re)shaping perception of the world and ourselves. Gordon embodies Taylor's conception of the posthuman as a "mind distributed throughout the world" (p. 230), most vividly in the play. His "half-dead" identity goes beyond the limitations of his physical body and extends into the data stored in his digital device, existing both "in the air" and on Earth. Similarly, Jean's identity is also dispersed, shaped not only by her physical body but also by the digital network surrounding her. Thus, in the cybernetic environment that encloses them, they both represent posthuman subjects that are "indeterminate, relational, and endlessly adaptive" (Carlson, p. 230). Through their interactions and transformations, these characters offer a provocative examination of the posthuman situation and its ramifications, highlighting the intricate interplay between the human and the digital.

The sites of conflict in the play not only serve as the drama's incentive but also propel it even further. Jean's questioning in the second last scene, "Can we go home? Do I have my kidneys? Does knowing someone help to love them best, or does it all happen in one millisecond?" (Ruhl, p. 91) encapsulates the core themes of the play. The play forces the reader/audience to consider what it truly means to love someone in a world where technology has revealed the mysterious essence of every species. If people are unable to connect virtually, does that mean they cease to exist no more? In this respect, the play presents a reality where conventional humanist concepts have decayed, and even death's absolute finality has gone astray. It blurs the line between the living and the dead, making us wonder how much of a person is truly gone and how much of him continues to be present, whether in the physical or digital realm. Only after his digital element was demolished, Gordon's mother reveals that she has eventually been aware of her son's death. At the play's very end, she reflects: "You know, I've tried to call Gordon but his voice is no longer on the out-going message. I call his old number, and no voice. And somehow – now – I feel he's truly dead" (Ruhl, p. 95). This moment highlights the play's exploration of the shifting boundaries of life and death in a posthuman era, where the destruction of digital elements can signify a form of finitude. In this realm, to be "truly" dead entails a dual death—both in the physical realm and in the digital ether. Thus, the play explores the tensions that develop in the digital era between people and machines and delves into the ethical, psychological, and existential ramifications of posthuman subjectivity. Gordon's omnipresent cellular existence is only made possible when digital technology allows the crossing of human boundaries. Identity here is depicted as a hybrid of digital and biological elements, where complete control over one's own identity exists no more. This sheds light on the profound ways in which technology is reshaping human experience, raising questions about the nature of identity, existence, and morality in an increasingly digital and interconnected world.

The play serves as a thought-provoking reflection on the impact of cell phones and digital connectivity in today's society. It reflects on the idea that as human beings become more connected via their phones, they may also experience a personal disconnection from each other. The storyline, with Jean discovering a dead man's cell phone and becoming fixated on rectifying his past, highlights the potential consequences of interconnected digital lives. The

play's theme is further reinforced by the ironic and humorous in-text clues to create a compelling narrative that prompts the audience to reflect on the role of technology in today's lives and its impact on human relationships and personal connections. The use of interruptions involving cell phones serves as a recurring motif that adds a comedic and ironic layer to the play. Jean's attempts to connect with Gordon's contacts are repeatedly thwarted by her own cell phone or by the ringing of Gordon's phone. One early example of this is during Gordon's funeral. As Gordon's mother delivers his eulogy, his phone begins ringing, interrupting this solemn moment. Just as Mrs. Gottlieb attempts to contain her feelings and continue her melancholic speech, Gordon's phone rings again. These interruptions not only add humor to the scene, but also highlight the pervasive nature of cell phones and digital connectivity in modern societies. Temple Lang's both humorous and straight-faced address to the audience about phone usage, even in a funeral, further emphasizes this point, underlining how cell phones have become a part and parcel of people's daily routines. This use of interruptions effectively underlines the play's posthuman morale of how interconnectedness through cell phones can lead to disconnected and sometimes inappropriate actions in various situations. The interruptions caused by cell phones in the play highlight the theme of how digital connectivity can both connect and disrupt human interactions. In the eulogy scene, Jean's possession of Gordon's phone not only disrupts the reverent and solemn atmosphere of his funeral but also emphasizes how she is carrying on his life through the phone at the expense of real humane connectivity. The romantic scene between Jean and Dwight, Gordon's brother, further exemplifies this duality of connection and disruption. While they share a close bond facilitated by Gordon's phone, their romantic moment is also interrupted by the persistent ringing. As a digital device, the cell phone not only obstructs both affection and grief but also gives Jean the chance to start anew. This disruption illustrates the technology's double-action, and how it can both positively and negatively impact a person's life, in the sense that it can both foster connections and disrupt personal moments in a manifestation of the complexities of modern relations.

In Ruhl's play, the cell phone takes on a life of its own and plays a symbolic and central character-like role that carries on different implications and significances for each character in the play. Its pivotal role helps to explore various themes related to technology, human connection, and the changing dynamics of modern society. For Jean, the cell phone initially represents her curiosity and desire to connect with the world around her. It disrupts her daily routine and leads her to interact with various characters connected to the dead man. It becomes a means of getting into Gordon's life, a man she barely knew in person but becomes intimately connected to through his digital presence. The cell phone also serves as a catalyst for Jean's journey to correct Gordon's past misdeeds and contributes to her own personal transformation as well. As for Gordon, the cell phone is a lifeline, even after his death. It symbolizes his ongoing existence in the digital realm and his hidden, secretive life, including maintaining a mistress, conducting illegal trade, and fulfilling his familial responsibilities. Through the cell phone, the audience learns about his nasty business dealings and involvement in the organ trade. It reflects how technology can be used to maintain a dual life, one that is hidden from the people who know us in the physical realm. Dwight initially views the cell phone as a source of disruption. However, it eventually becomes a connection to his deceased brother and an

avenue for his relationship with Jean to develop. Regarding other characters in the play, the cell phone also has different meanings and impacts. It serves as a reminder of Gordon's absence and as a source of grief for some, while for others; it reveals shocking truths about his past life. Thus, the cell phone lies at the play's posthuman intent because it symbolizes the transition into the digital age and the ways in which technology has become a central aspect of modern-man lives. It highlights the impact of mobile devices on individuals and society, as well as the consequences of the increasing reliance on them for communication, connection, and even maintaining secrets. The theme of sincerity in communication is explored in the play, showing how people may use mobile phones as a means to mask their true identities or feelings. The limitations of digital communication can sometimes lead to insincere or superficial interactions. This raises questions about the authenticity of relationships and the role of technology in shaping them. It reveals that while these devices can provide opportunities for new knowledge and connections, they can also disrupt people's genuine, in-person relationships and create hidden worlds that impact their lives in unexpected ways. The play ultimately explores the moral and ethical implications of the use of digital devices, like cell phones in society and how they affect the way people relate to each other. The cyborg-like nature of modern life, as depicted in the play, often leads to reduced face-to-face interactions, which can create barriers to effective human communication.

Witty, bizarre tender, and spiritual all, Ruhl's off-kilter reality has been thoroughly peeled back and exposed questions of morality, mortality, affection, and technological force. The play presents an agonizing parable on the contradictory features of contemporary digitally-driven societies. Ruhl's drama soars forward among technological critique, metaphysical discourse, and ethical considerations, as she seamlessly combines mystical aspects with the clamour of cell phones to induce the tinny brink of those who are still alive and those who already died. It delves into how technology mediates and, at times, distorts human relationships. This technology-mediated communication reveals both the potential for connection and the limitations of genuine human interaction when digital devices act as intermediaries. The play underscores the complexity of emotions in a world increasingly shaped by technology. The play's narrative is approached with great attention to detail, and the whirlwind of characters changes so quickly and frequently in terms of sentiment. Intricate sensations give way to locate comic intervals, which allow for dynamic fascination and lively intrigue, fostering components of an engaging exploration of the ethical dilemmas facing the digital era. In this work, Ruhl employs an almost existentialist approach that successfully blends genuine realistic conversation with conflicting metaphorical concepts. How far would one go to make amends for the wrongs of someone who never met—at least not in person? This is the decision that Jean has to make when she comes upon a dead Gordon's ringing phone. Despite being flimsy at the beginning, Jean's strong will and stubbornness make her an enthusiastic ambience looking for meaning and purpose. As she becomes fully entangled in Gordon's inscrutable existence, her self-compulsion grows almost to the point of obsessive preoccupation, effectively compelling her to attempt to diffuse his family's anguish, ease wrath at his misdeeds, and lessen the menace of his business activities.

To conclude, *Dead Man's Cell Phone* is indeed an insightful cybernetic drama that delves into the posthuman subjectivity it explores. Ruhl's artistic choices contribute to a posthuman narrative and challenge the traditional notions of identity and existence. Her work is marked for its whimsical and unconventional tone, and in this play, she uses elements like a lack of emotional, chronological, and formal homogeneity to push the boundaries of human existence and agency. The play gives rise to a posthuman subjectivity that transcends the traditional human experience and extends the main characters' identities and agencies beyond their corporal entities, reflecting the technoscientific environment they inhabit. This approach introduces a temporality to the various plot twists, as the events in the play do not adhere to a distinctive linear or chronological order, contributing to the sense of a posthuman consciousness. In this respect, both living and dead characters are portrayed as having immaterial, posthuman consciousness, as the play blurs the boundaries between life and death, suggesting that human consciousness can exist beyond the physical realm. In this respect, Gordon experiences a sort of cyclical existence, while Jean undergoes a transformative process, adapting to new information in a way that makes her identity seem endlessly malleable. Her adaptability, which reflects a posthuman sensibility, represents an integral part of her characterization. The cell phone, which Gordon holds in his dying breath, is the central plot device through which the minds of both characters extend into the world and beyond as if they are distributed throughout the universe. This variability in time and space is achieved through formal and technical in-text cues, rather than relying on literal representation. The play paints a picture of a world where previously distinct boundaries, whether in terms of space, time, the physical body, or humanist morality, are blurred and transcended. This fluidity is affected via the prevalence of smart machinery, creating a distinctly posthuman scenery.

4. Conclusion

Posthuman performances have pushed the boundaries of theatre aesthetics, challenging traditional notions of human presence and storytelling. These performances often incorporate technology, interactive elements, immersive environments, and non-human entities to create innovative and thought-provoking experiences. Technology has had a profound impact on audience perceptions and expectations in the realm of theatre and live performances. As technology continues to evolve, it shapes how audiences engage with and experience theatrical productions, influencing their expectations and the way they perceive the art form. In essence, the introduction of cyberculture in theatre represents a fusion of traditional theatrical artistry with the digital tools and platforms of the 21st century. It has opened up new possibilities for artistic expression, audience engagement, and immersive experiences. It celebrates innovation, accessibility, and interactivity, while also posing challenges related to ethics, security, and the nature of performance itself. The integration of digital devices and non-human entities into theatre narratives and performances constitutes a collaborative effort that involves the creative input of directors, writers, technicians, and performers. It requires a careful balance of storytelling, technology, and choreography to create immersive and engaging theatrical experiences that challenge traditional notions of human presence and agency. Digital scenography has had a transformative impact on stage design and production techniques in the theatre. It has expanded the creative horizons of designers and directors, offering new methods

and means to tell stories and engage audiences. This integration of digital technology not only enhances the visual and immersive aspects of theatre but also contributes to cost-efficiency, sustainability, and accessibility, making the art form more inclusive and vibrant. Yet, while the integration of technology in live performances can enhance storytelling and audience engagement, it also introduces challenges and risks that require careful consideration and planning. Theatre companies and artists must strike a balance between leveraging technology's capabilities and preserving the essence of live theatre while addressing ethical, technical, and logistical challenges. Proper preparation, testing, and a commitment to audience experience are essential in successfully integrating technology into live performances.

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