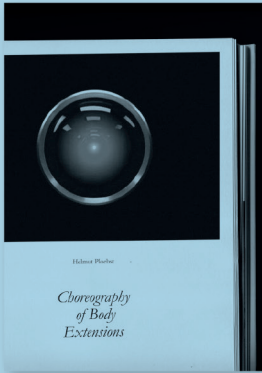


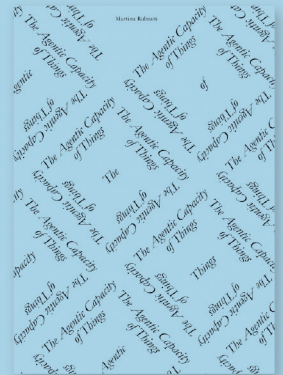
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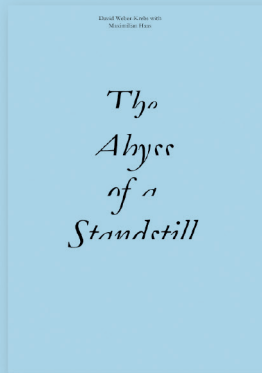
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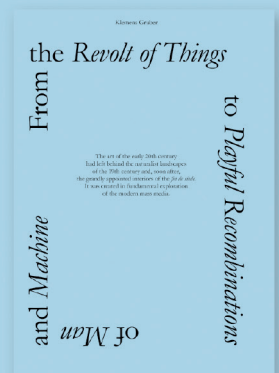
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*The
Abyss
of a
Standstill*



Thandie Newton as brothel madam Maeve in HBO's series *Westworld*.
First episode 2 October 2016.

Westworld is HBO's histrionic science-fiction thriller TV series of the moment. It takes place in a technologically advanced, Western-themed amusement park where high-paying visitors can let their fantasies run wild on a local population made up of perfectly humanlike synthetic androids. These androids are not programmed when connected to a computer but rather in oral communication with their human programmers, in what resemble private psychotherapeutic coaching sessions. These sessions function as a dramaturgical line through the first episodes. The frame stays in a close-up on the android, capturing all the expressions of his or her face, while the human's voice is heard off-frame. The human asks questions or gives commands and the android responds, alternating between friendly, submissive answers and long, immobile gazes into the void. The contrast between the two is fascinating. It is the contrast between the subtlety of the expressions that a human(like) face can produce and a standstill. Not a freeze, not a stop, but an immobility that, as viewers, we cannot interpret univocally. Is it the deep void of the stand-by mode of a machine? Is it a process of thinking? Is it a very dedicated action of listening? Or something of another order? The promise of a threat?

Sometimes things come to a standstill. Everything just suddenly stops. And all that remains is silence. Nothing but immobility and silence. And we who are the witnesses of this event, we are suddenly caught. We are taken. It is as if something is finally about to happen. Something true. Something real. We are sucked into the interiority of the being that just stopped moving. He is calling us. We are called. Invited. But this invitation is not an invitation for a meeting. It is the invitation to plunge into an abyss, an abyss we are drawn into by silence.

Balthazar is a theatre performance for one animal performer (a donkey) and five human performers. In the long opening sequence of the show, the human performers are walking together in a closed group. And because they are walking, the donkey walks with them. This sequence constitutes the paradigmatic action of the show. Walking is (in the literal sense of the term) a pedestrian activity that donkeys and humans share as the basic way of moving



Julien Bruneau, Alondra Castellanos Arreola, Philipp Enders, Sid Van Oerle, Noha Ramadan in *Balthazar*.

their bodies in space. Humans usually walk. Donkeys usually walk. Our intention with *Balthazar* is to let them enter into a process of communication with each other on a stage. It makes sense to do so with an extensive practice of walking.

The dramaturgy of this walk is fairly simple. In the beginning, the humans walk rather swiftly. The animal then sometimes follows them (his natural walking pace is slower than theirs). Sometimes they walk for quite some time in this way, the humans obstinately leading the march, the donkey following nonchalantly. Sometimes he quickly loses his interest in the choreography they perform together. When the group stops walking he usually stops as well, staying on the spot, but sometimes he catches up with them. Sometimes

they stop in front of the audience. So they all look at the audience. Besides choreography, this is also composed as a rhythmical music piece, layering the sound made by the hooves of the animal with the sound made by the shoes of the per-

formers, who alternate synchronous and asynchronous walks with each other and with the donkey.

When he catches up with the group, the donkey often stops behind them. The public often finds this funny (or moving) because we (as the public) mentally project his possible wish to become part of this group, to be one of them. They stay there for a moment. And then they carry on. This sequence lasts for a while. At the end of it, the donkey — whose real name has been Felix, Simone, Lily, Sam, Charles, Carlotta and Hugo — is baptized on stage. We give him the name *Balthazar*, a reference to the movie *Au hasard Balthazar* (1961) by Robert Bresson. In the overall dramaturgy of the performance, this is the moment when, by receiving a name, the donkey is officially welcomed as being fully part of the group. The performers then no longer lure the animal into a dance, they rather give *Balthazar* the initiative, as a sort of ›rite de passage‹.



Concept, direction: David Weber-Krebs. Concept, dramaturgy: Maximilian Haas.

It is here that these epic standstills often take place. *Balthazar* sometimes takes a few steps and then stops. He petrifies. And the performers petrify along with him. For a long time, nothing seems to happen on that stage. Nothing seemingly other than those immobile bodies positioned there.

They are before the action. They are after the action. Yet this standstill is anything but nothing. It is densified time. It is an open abyss of lost thoughts. We mentally project intense activity into this immobility. We transcend it. We interpret it as thinking. We think that we see *Balthazar* think, here on the stage, right in front of our eyes. But we don't know what he is thinking of or about. Maybe about the next step he is going to take. We anticipate this step. We see it coming.

But we are still sucked into the open abyss of lost thoughts that is the standstill.

In *Sous le soleil de Satan* (1987), the marvellous movie by Maurice Pialat based on the eponymous novel by Georges Bernanos, the devout priest Donissan (played by Gérard Depardieu) rebels against God in an outburst of rage. He shouts all his despair to the sky, haranguing God himself: »But there is nothing up there! There is nobody!« We would be tempted to have the same response regarding the interiority of the animal that we crave to understand at this moment: »I will not be fooled by this cheap trick. Who do you think you are dealing

with? There is nothing in there. Nobody!« But no. We dig in. We plunge. The donkey stands there, immobile, waiting for I don't know what. His power is great. Without him, nothing is happening on that stage. He knows it.

So he makes us wait. And we wait. And by waiting, we dig and dig and dig into that abyss. And when something finally moves again on stage, it is a relief. We are out of the standstill, ready to be light-hearted.



Animals are commonly defined as self-moving things. A mere non-living thing like a stone or a hammer is only moved by external forces, while animals move of their own accord, oriented towards individual goals. Nevertheless, according to common opinion, animals do not really *act*, at least not as we humans do. This is because their movements are not based on rational considerations and conscious intentions as is (sometimes) the case with us.

Yet this distinction is problematic. If a movement passes as an action, this is based on speculation. Rationality and intentionality are inner phenomena, not properly detectable from an objective standpoint; viewed from the outside, they do not manifest themselves as such, but only in their effects.

What happens when an animal on stage remains still? One might think that it transforms into a mere thing. But that is not the case. On the contrary, it seems to transform into a subject. Why is that?

If an animal moves on stage, it interacts with its environment. When it stops moving, it ceases to interact. It thus becomes self-reflexive, at least seemingly. We start to wonder about what is going on in its head, about its thoughts. But indeed, thinking cannot be detected from an outward perspective. It only manifests itself in its effects, which usually take the shape of articulations or actions—thus demonstrating the hidden dynamics of this head.

Only is that really the case? Does a head at rest necessarily make us wonder about its thoughts? A man lying on the beach? Not usually. A woman watching a movie? Probably not. Maybe the argument only applies to people in a communicative situation. The immobile only becomes self-reflexive in a situation that usually demands articulation or action. The stage is a prime example of such a situation. One might say that stage equals articulation and action.

Self-reflexivity is the very process of subjectivity. Subjects not only do, an »I do« principally accompanies their doings. At least this is the concept of subjectivity used to philosophically separate humans from animals. And it is this model of subjectivity that we project onto the donkey in the moment he ceases to do and stands still. We project ourselves into his head and

start to reflect on the situation from his position. Instead of perceiving him as a mere object, we perceive him as a larval subject.

In these moments of not doing that suddenly interrupt the course of action and articulation, the »I do« seems to emancipate itself from the subject's doings and to acquire a stand-alone existence—even with animals, at least on a theatre stage.

*

David Weber-Krebs and Maximilian Haas' lecture presentation
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28 March 2014 at the Tanzquartier Wien in the context of
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