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Staging the Algorithm: Artificial Intelligence and the Posthuman in Caryl Churchill's A Number

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes Caryl Churchill's A Number (2002) in relation to its engagement with the philosophical and theoretical issues of artificial intelligence and posthuman subjectivity. What Does It Mean to Be Human, Or Not, in the Era of Cloning What It Means to Be Human is set in the speculative world of human cloning, and the play questions what it means to be human in an age where subjectivity can be cloned, reshaped, and technologized. Based on posthumanist theories and current AI discourses, this article contends that Churchill enacts the algorithmic logic of reproduction and computation not to celebrate the marvel of technology, but to draw attention to its ethical ambivalences and to its psychological implications. The play's minimalistic form and fractured dialogue reflects the logic of algorithmic processing, offering up cloned characters as volatile simulations of personality. Using a close reading informed by posthumanism and AI theory, this article demonstrates how A Number dramatizes the unfinished of the humanist ideal, configuring identity as recursive, affective, and computationally produced.

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تمثيل الخوارزمية: الذكاء الاصطناعي وما بعد الإنسان في مسرحية A Number لكاريل تشرشل

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المستخلص:

تحلل هذه المقالة مسرحية (A Number) 2002 لكاريل تشرشل من حيث تفاعلها مع القضايا الفلسفية والنظرية المتعلقة بالذكاء الاصطناعي وما بعد الإنسانية. في عالم افتراضي يتم فيه استنساخ البشر، تطرح المسرحية سؤالاً جوهرياً: ماذا يعني أن تكون إنساناً، أو ألا تكون، في عصر يمكن فيه استنساخ الذات وإعادة تشكيلها وتحولها إلى تكنولوجيا؟ بالاعتماد على نظريات ما بعد الإنسان والخطابات المعاصرة حول الذكاء الاصطناعي، تؤكد هذه المقالة أن تشرشل لا تستخدم منطق الخوارزمية والتكرار والنسخ للاحتفاء بالتكنولوجيا، بل لتسليط الضوء على التباساتها الأخلاقية وتبعاتها النفسية. إن الشكل البسيط للمسرحية والحوار المجزأ يعكسان منطق المعالجة الخوارزمية، حيث يتم تقديم الشخصيات المستنسخة كمحاكاة متقلبة للهوية. ومن خلال قراءة تحليلية تعتمد على نظرية ما بعد الإنسان والذكاء الاصطناعي، توضح المقالة كيف تقوم المسرحية بتفكيك المثالية الإنسانية التقليدية، وتصوير الهوية بوصفها عملية تكرارية، عاطفية، ومنتجة حسابياً.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كاريل تشرشل؛ A Number؛ الذكاء الاصطناعي؛ ما بعد الإنسان؛ الاستنساخ؛ الهوية؛ الذات الخوارزمية؛ أخلاقيات التكنولوجيا؛ نقد الإنسانية؛ الذات الحاسوبية.

Introduction

In recent years, the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) theory and literary studies has helped to reimagine the extent to which drama probes the limits of the human and the machine, biology and code, memory and simulation. With the new pre-eminence of these societal, ethical and epistemological categories has come a desire to on stage the psychological and philosophical tensions that we feel in a posthuman state and, in largely traditional terms, the theatre is a singular space in which to do this. One of the smartest dramatists to engage with this intersection has been British playwright Caryl Churchill, whose 2002 play *A Number* dissects the ethical and emotional implications of human cloning and borrowed identity. Set in an alternate world in which a father orders the cloning of his son, the play examines how copying, loss and trauma cloud traditional notions of identity, memory and human volition.

Caryl Churchill (b. 1938) is one of the most influential and historical women in the modern British playwriting. Her over-six-decade career has been offered in formal innovation, political radicalism, and resolute fidelity to feminist and post-structuralist issues. Churchill's work frequently fractures linear narratives and disrupts conventional definitions of character or identity, as in *Top Girls* (1982), *Cloud Nine* (1979), and *Far Away* (2000). As Aston (2003) notes, Churchill's dramaturgy is "characterized by a fierce sense of ethical enquiry and an ongoing experimentation with theatrical form" (p. 5). These traits manifest in the play as spare-staged scenes and heavily repeated dialogue, reflecting the circularity of algorithms and the psychological chaos of father and clones alike.

In this study I draw on AI theory and posthumanist thought to investigate the ways in which *A Number* enacts the crisis of human uniqueness in a technologically replicated world. The central research question that inform this analysis is: How does Churchill play reflect and criticise both the posthuman condition and the algorithmic reproduction in the age of artificial identity? The essay argues that the play stages a posthuman dramaturgy that mirrors the present considerations of embodiment and authorship in the age of the digital, based on a close reading guided by theorists such as Hayles, Braidotti, Herbrechter, and Gunkel.

Literature Review

The convergence of artificial intelligence (AI), posthumanism and current forms of theatre has recently received a growing amount of critical interest as texts and performances contemplate the various ramifications of digital and algorithmic forms of existence. Studies that explore Affected AI in narrative often concentrate on speculative science fiction or visual culture, so English drama has largely been left out in the interrogation of posthuman identities and technological fears. The article reviews recent examples of AI, posthuman theory, and the stage and, with specific reference to theatrical experimentation, technological determinism, and the deconstruction of human subjectivity, it considers Caryl Churchill's *A Number* (2002).

Posthumanist critics such as Braidotti (2013) and Herbrechter (2013) claim that experiences of artificial intelligence and algorithmic systems have challenged the nature of our self. Hayles (1999) introduces the concept of the "posthuman," to describe produced subjectivities as having been shaped by information flow and cybernetic systems, rather than the humanist desire for fixity and coherence. This ontological transition leads us to some of the implications for the genre of drama, which has historically been dependent on coherent character identity and psychological realism. Plays such as *A Number* enter this philosophical domain by representing fragmented selves, simulated bodies, and collapsed authorship.

Although Churchill's engagement with cloning, bio-ethics, and identity has been studied, even less work has been done on Churchill from the AI theory/post-humanist perspective. Almaarof (2024) examines the experimentation with theatrical language in Churchill's plays and Muzahim Abdulrazzaq and Almaarof (2024) particularly place the present play within the discourse of technological alienation. However, these contributions do not directly address AI ethics or algorithmic cloning. Through the lens of soft power Jassim and Almaarof examine the formation of gender identity, providing a methodological approximation but concentrating on different dramatic texts (2024). This is an area of critical inquiry that the current study attends to, by applying posthumanist and AI heuristics to a thematic and structural analysis of the text.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study takes a qualitative, interpretivist methodology grounded in close reading and critical theory. Taking guidance from posthumanist theorists well as N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, Stefan Herbrechter, and AI theorist David Gunkel, the paper will explore dramatic structure, character and linguistic style in *A Number* to and elicit how posthuman identity is dramatized in it.

Hayles (1999) underscores the posthuman transition “from presence to pattern, from the dividual self to the distributed subject” (p. 13), and this framework informs my analysis of how Churchill positions informational identity. Braidotti (2013) describes the posthuman subject as relational and ethical, produced out of multiplicity and as vulnerable. (10) Herbrechter (2013) stresses the fictional and performative status of the posthuman subject, but also its character as always already mediated, as he speaks of subjectivity: “no longer the primary mode of inscription” (6). Citation: Gunkel D (2021) *Thinking Otherwise: AI, Alienation, and the Death of Human Exceptionalism*.

Close reading is used to analyse Churchill’s repetition, disintegration and minimalist form as structural responses to algorithmic logic. Clone figures are interpreted as metaphorical manifestations of information systems that exemplify the ontological and ethical considerations of AI and posthuman theory.

Analysis and Discussion

Caryl Churchill’s *A Number* (2002) offers a bleak depiction of the posthuman condition, mediating the ethical and emotional implications of cloning and algorithmic reproduction. The play’s recursive dialogue and fragmented characters reflect the logic of neural networks, where identity is iterated rather than inborn.

In Scene 2, Bernard 2 says to his father: “So who was the original, who was the first one?” Salter answers, “I don’t care, I don’t care” (Churchill, 2002, p. 15). Salter’s avoidant species mirrors a fear of the diminution of the father and of authorship in a world where replication has outstripped origin. As Hayles (1999) explains, for the posthuman subject, “there are

no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation” (p. 2).

The play has the same looped structure as an algorithm. In Scene 3 the clone Michael Black, a seemingly unaffected individual, says “I’m not very interested in what I’m a copy of, I think I’m me” (Churchill, 2002, 35). This mirrors Braidotti’s (2013) posthuman subject, whose ethical base is relational, rather than original. Michael’s serene detachment stands in contrast with Bernard 1’s existential rage, illustrating how affective ecologies differ among repeated tinkering of the object, each one informed by different milieu.

Salter’s ambition to create a “better” son resonates with Braidotti’s condemnation of the posthumanist fantasy of control: “The techno-logical drive towards control and predictability betray[pt]s an anthropocentric wish to overcome limitation” (2013, p. 82). His moral fall illustrates Gunkel’s (2021) worry that AI systems are rewriting moral responsibility and driving human responsibility in technologic mediated activities.

Perhaps above all, Churchill stages the demise of the Enlightenment ideal of the coherent, self-possessing subject. The clones, not quite people and not really even people yet — not quite emotionally stable, not quite autonomous beings — represent the ontological instability of living as data, as being versions and not people. (Please note that quite generally to speak of the ‘posthuman’ is to suggest a ‘ghosting of the human’, “always already caught up in simulation and deferral” (Herbrechter, 2013, p. 129)).

Conclusion

Churchill’s *A Number* is a potent theatrical meditation on the dissolution of humanist subjectivity in the age of artificial intelligence. By way of recursive form, multiplicities of characters, and minimalistic dialogue, the play stages central posthuman concerns: identity as iteration, affect as unstable, and ethics as diffused. Engaging with posthumanist and artificial intelligence theory, this article demonstrates how the play challenges the algorithmic logic that shapes today's interpretations of the human. And “Churchill not only comments on cloning, she stages a wider crisis of meaning in a world in which data displaces essence and replication trumps origin.” Her play insists that the theater can still

interrogate the most urgent questions: what is left human when the algorithm starts speaking?

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