



Experiencing Posthuman Technoculture in Virtual Reality: A Theatrical Exploration of Kuro Tanino's Emergency Rework

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The COVID-19 pandemic impacted performing artists, compelling them to rethink how to create and present works. Many artists turned to digital technologies, maintaining a connection with audiences despite physical distancing. Virtual events emerged as a crucial platform, where performers engaged with audiences through video-sharing platforms and telecommunication services. However, this shift to digital performance lacked the human closeness that characterises in-person experiences. To bridge this gap and recreate the intimate connection between artists and audiences, virtual reality (VR) offers a promising solution to preserve the sense of intimacy and allows for reimagining the concept of 'technoculture', placing the audience in the performer's perspective and fostering a deeper immersive engagement.

This perspective paper explores VR's potential to transform theatrical experiences, focusing on the adaptation of the play *The Dark Master* by the Japanese psychiatrist-turned-director/playwright Kuro Tanino. The paper will argue how VR can create a symbiotic relationship between the audience and the artist, enabling a fluid shift in perspective through the lens of posthuman practices. By analysing this performance, the paper seeks to underscore how integrating technology into the performing arts can offer fresh insights into societal and individual conditions. In updating the 1960s–70s immersive performances of Terayama Shūji and Kara Jūrō interpreted as political statements about the people's need to reconnect with their senses and disconsolate unresolved feelings, Kuro connects to them by creating a cultural geography where the disfiguration is a main concern with its sensibility leading to sense irruption that plays with the senses to generate a psychic disturbance.



Introduction

The performing arts underwent significant transformations during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, with the forced absence of in-person performances led to the exploration of virtual and hybrid formats to maintain audience engagement and pave the way for new forms of experimentation. Instead of viewing this as a temporary fix during prolonged lockdowns, many artists began to explore the potential of 'digital stages' as a key part of cross-platform creative experiences. Artistic boundaries have become more fluid, with innovative practices emerging to broaden our understanding of what creative works can look like. The blend of digital and live performances has especially motivated struggling theatre companies to rethink storytelling through new platforms like Factory Theater producing radio dramas to engage audiences remotely and the Parsnip Ship offering sequential podcast-based plays on Spotify. Finnish composer Esa-Pekka Salonen's interactive project *Laila* integrates audience participation into its evolving narrative. Additionally, the virtual gaming platform Fortnite's Party Royale stage began to host performances by many artists, including rapper Travis Scott and EDM artist Kaskade, attracting millions of viewers (Kerr & Chandler 2021: 10).

In this context, the 2020 VR adaptation of *The Dark Master*, a play originally staged in 2003, by the Japanese playwright Kuro Tanino took advantage of virtual reality technology to offer a heightened, immersive experience in correlation with the immersive performances of Terayama Shūji and Kara Jūrō from the 1960s-70s, which have been interpreted as political statements addressing the public's need to reconnect with their senses and confront unresolved emotional turmoil (Sorgenfrei 2005; Eckersall 2006), creating a cultural landscape where disfigurement became a central theme, with its sensibility provoking a rupture in perception, intentionally playing with the senses to induce psychic disturbances. As this perspective paper will explore, Kuro's adaptation harnesses VR not merely as a substitute for physical presence but as a means to deepen the thematic resonance of the play, creating what could be described as a posthuman-technocultural theatre. This study seeks to explore how Kuro's adaptation reworks the traditional theatrical experience and, in doing so, invites audiences to engage with both the play's narrative and the broader societal implications of living in a technologically mediated world. By focusing on VR as a tool for creating intimacy, enslavement, and control within the framework of *The Dark Master*, this paper examines how Kuro's work prompts audiences to confront the implications of technological overreach, a theme increasingly relevant in our hyper-connected digital society.

Kuro Tanino and *The Dark Master*

Kuro Tanino, a former psychiatrist in a family of psychiatrists, decided to become a playwright in 2000 founding the theatre group Niwa Gekidan Penino,¹ making performances based on a surrealist, often grotesque theatrical style influenced by Marcel Duchamp and Salvador Dali that won him the Kishida Drama Award in 2015 for the play *Jigokudani Onsen, Mumyo no Yado (Jigokudani Hot Springs, Ignorance Inn)*, as well as directing adaptations from Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov. Also a painter and sculptor, he mentioned how Kara Jūrō understood the possibility of depicting the ‘pictorial beauty’ in play and making it living as ‘it [i]s like painting and film and music all rolled into one’ (Iwaki 2011). By considering all these influences, Kuro’s plays are made through highly visual, symbolic narratives to explore the human psyche.

The Dark Master,² debuting in 2003, is a play based on an indie manga by Marley Caribu (born Garon Tsuchiya) and tells the story of a jobless backpacker who is hired by the mysterious proprietor of a bistro. The ‘Dark Master’ implants an earpiece in the protagonist, enabling him to give orders remotely, turning the protagonist into a quasi-puppet who executes cooking instructions. Working tirelessly day and night, the young man adjusts to his new life, consumed by work. He spends nights sleeping at his workplace, picks up smoking and drinking, and indulges in occasional paid relief, courtesy of his boss’s pocket money. As in *Jigokudani Onsen*, *The Dark Masters* explores the darkness within human nature and how we are bound by society and our desires, driven by the greed that society both expects and nurtures in individuals, setting the play in a Japanese environment to symbolically and metaphorically summarise the contemporary history of ordinary Japanese people. Themes of domination, control, and the loss of autonomy are central to the narrative, reflecting broader critiques of contemporary Japanese work culture, including overwork, isolation, and societal disintegration (Kimura 2021).

The Use of Virtual Reality in *The Dark Master*

In Kuro’s VR adaptation, titled *The Dark Master VR*, the audience is equipped with headsets that allow them to look through the eyes of the protagonist and experience the narrative from his perspective (Figures 1, 2). The play is not merely viewed; it is experienced, with the audience becoming part of the protagonist’s world, being surrounded by his environment and perceiving elements such as odours, fire, obscurity, noise, and silence. This shift from passive spectatorship to active engagement transforms the traditional theatre space into an intimate, participatory experience, blurring the boundaries between the audience, the protagonist, and the narrative world so that the



Figure 1: Point-of-view of the protagonist serving a single customer in *The Dark Master VR*. Photo: Japan Society, New York, 2021.



Figure 2: A perspective of the restaurant's group of customers as experienced through a VR headset in *The Dark Master VR*. Photo: Japan Society, New York, 2021.

spectator can feel ‘the strength of the physical experience’ of VR and the ‘weakening of the emotional feeling’ of the dramatic text (Nomura & Tsuboike 2021).

The immersive environment made through virtual reality creates a sense of immersion that amplifies the play’s themes of control and enslavement, as the audience members themselves are placed in a position where their agency is constrained. The narrative’s power dynamics are no longer abstract concepts; they are felt viscerally by the audience, who are physically separated from each other by acrylic plates and placed in small, box-like spaces resembling manga cafés or internet booths (Figures 3, 4)—both sites of private consumption in Japanese culture that carry connotations of isolation and voyeurism that are connecting them with horror and ghost stories. In this sense, the figure of a sex worker visiting the restaurant transforming into a demon reminds Japan’s *ero-guro* art³ which took a different meaning in the post-war time when the contemplation of dark violence and sexual transgression was associated with the memory of war trauma, reminding how history can haunt the present (Eckersall 2022: 175, 177).

The VR environment allows the audience to experience a 180-degree view of the play’s action, with images shot in advance to create a seamless virtual experience. Unlike traditional theatre, where the audience remains physically distanced from the performers, the VR adaptation breaks down the ‘fourth wall’, drawing the audience into the action and blurring the line between performer and observer. As the narrative unfolds, the audience is subjected to the same isolation and vulnerability as the protagonist, allowing them to fully empathise with his plight and fostering a deep,



Figure 3: The audience of *The Dark Master VR* sits in a seat separated by an acrylic plate and wears VR goggles. Photo: Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre, Tokyo, 2020.



Figure 4: Top view of *The Dark Master VR* audience. Photo: Tokyo Metropolitan Theatre, Tokyo, 2020.

personal connection to the story. In this way, Kuro's work updates the immersive theatrical performances of Terayama Shūji and Kara Jūrō to use sensory engagement and provoke an emotional response in his audience. By placing the audience in the protagonist's shoes, Kuro's adaptation creates a cultural geography in which the disfiguration is a main concern with its sensibility leading to a sense of irruption that plays with the senses to generate a psychic disturbance (Wakeling 2018: 59, 61), inviting for a reflection not only on the protagonist's circumstances but also on the audience's own experiences of control and agency in a technologically mediated world.

Technocultural Perspectives on the Performing Arts

The use of VR in *The Dark Master* situates the play within the broader context of posthuman-technocultural discourse, examining the intersections of technology, culture, and human experience to challenge the traditional humanist notion of the individual as a distinct, autonomous entity, instead emphasising the fluidity and interconnectivity of human and technological systems. In the proto-political projects of technoculture described by Andrew Ross, people 'make their own independent sense of the stories that are told within and about an advanced technological society' to 'turn techno-commodities into resources for waging a communications revolution from below' (1991: xv–xvi).

Donna Haraway's notion of the 'cyborg' (1991) blurs the boundaries between human and machine, suggesting that identity and experience are not fixed but rather shaped by

technological and cultural forces, making any individual a one who can embody different entities and understand the world from multiple, heterogeneous perspectives. In *The Dark Master*, the protagonist's experience of enslavement through the earpiece can be understood as a metaphor for how technology shapes and constrains human agency. The protagonist's inability to act without the master's orders reflects the broader condition of individuals in contemporary society, where technological systems exert increasing control over daily life. From social media algorithms that dictate what we see to surveillance systems that monitor our movements, technology increasingly mediates human experience, often in ways that are invisible or difficult to resist. Arguing how technology adaptations would create a consensus of human experience by extending the individual sensory field beyond the existing culture limits, Marshall McLuhan claimed how 'the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense-ratios and patterns of perception steadily and without resistance' (1964: 18).

Katherine Hayles' work on the relationship between information technology and embodiment further illuminates the themes of *The Dark Master*. According to Hayles (1999), information is often seen as disembodied—an abstract, digital entity that exists independently of the human body. However, she argues that information cannot be separated from the embodied practices through which it is produced and consumed. In the case of *The Dark Master*, the protagonist's bodily autonomy is compromised by the earpiece, which symbolises how technology can colonise the body and mind. At the same time, the VR experience for the audience underscores Hayles' point that technology is always mediated through the body: the audience's physical immersion in the virtual environment makes them acutely aware of their own embodied presence within the narrative. Virtual reality worlds can be seen as models for human cognition that are basically metaphoric, letting them be understood as an exteriorisation of our neural processes (Porush 1994).

Implications for Contemporary Society

Kuro's adaptation of *The Dark Master* is not merely a commentary on individual agency but also a critique of the societal structures that enable and perpetuate systems of control. The play's focus on enslavement and isolation resonates with broader concerns about the role of technology in contemporary society, particularly in the context of labour and social relations. In many ways, the protagonist's experience mirrors that of workers in late capitalist economies, where technology is often used to monitor, control, and exploit labour. The sense of isolation and alienation that the protagonist feels is exacerbated by the technological systems that mediate his interactions with the world, reflecting the experiences of many individuals in an increasingly digitised and atomised society.

The VR adaptation of *The Dark Master* also raises questions about the role of technology in shaping cultural memory and identity. The play's setting—a bistro that is on the verge of being sold to a Chinese businessman—points to how Japan's economic decline and changing relationship with China have influenced national identity and cultural heritage (Kimura 2021). The figure of the 'Dark Master' can be seen as a symbol of the forces that threaten to erase Japan's cultural distinctiveness, while the protagonist's struggle to maintain his autonomy reflects the broader struggle to preserve cultural identity in the face of globalisation and technological change.

In the final line, the protagonist breaks the fourth wall, directly addressing the audience with, 'Hey, you! Why don't you do this job?' (Ibid.) This rhetorical question is laden with critique, challenging viewers to confront their agency—or lack thereof—in shaping individual and collective destinies. Rather than being merely entertained, the audience is nudged to interrogate the societal structures that influence their choices and behaviours. By questioning the control they perceive they have, the line invites viewers to reflect on the mechanisms of external influence and consider the extent to which self-control is an illusion shaped by powerful institutions, social expectations, and cultural norms. In this way, the protagonist's final challenge serves not only as a commentary on the narrative itself but also as a broader call for introspection about autonomy and the potential for meaningful change.

Conclusion

Kuro Tanino's *The Dark Master*, reimaged through virtual reality, exemplifies how technology can transform the theatrical experience and create new opportunities for cultural and social critique. By immersing the audience in the protagonist's world, Kuro's adaptation encourages a deeper engagement with the play's themes of control, enslavement, and technological mediation. At the same time, the use of VR raises important questions about the role of technology in shaping human experience, both in the context of theatre and in contemporary society more broadly. As we continue to navigate the complexities of a technologically mediated world, works like *The Dark Master* remind us of the importance of critically examining how technology shapes our lives and our relationships with others.

By employing a posthuman-technocultural lens, this paper has argued that *The Dark Master* offers a powerful critique of contemporary society, inviting audiences to question their roles within the systems of control that govern their lives. Kuro's innovative use of VR not only enhances the theatrical experience but also serves as a call to action, urging individuals to reflect on how technology shapes their perceptions, identities, and agency within a rapidly changing world.

Notes

- ¹ Literally 'Garden Theatre Company Penino', it is named after a nickname that mixes his name with the word 'penis' (Harris 2019).
- ² *Daaku Masudaa* in the original Japanese title.
- ³ Artistic genre emerged in the 1920s that puts its focus on eroticism, sexual corruption, and decadence to grotesquely 'celebrate the degradation wrought by sensual pleasures while ignoring the pleas of party politics and the unharnessed militancy in the streets' (Silverberg 2007: xv).

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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