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'The Camera Chooses the Star': Trans-medial Ventriloquism in Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man*

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Despite its status as a largely wordless performance, Punchdrunk's 2013 production of *The Drowned Man* activates a ventriloquist paradigm to frame its engagement with *form*: both the physical body as performance media. *The Drowned Man*'s message about voice and form reimagines immersive theatre's multi-medial potential by invoking ventriloquism's cinematic and theatrical legacies. By staging the dummy's moment of self-awareness, *The Drowned Man* encourages its audiences to question the extent to which they, too, are invisibly controlled. The production distorts form in order to stage a self-reflexive dialogue about voices, bodies, and performance. The result is often uncanny, unsettling, bewildering and bewitching: much like ventriloquism itself.



Introduction

Ventriloquism is a performance practice with a rich history, in which a voice seems to emanate from somewhere other than its speaker. Many ventriloquists use dummies while talking, animating puppets through movement to create the theatrical illusion of speech. For the purposes of this article, however, I am also invested in ventriloquism as a critical metaphor: the practice of speaking through, or for, another being. I take up the ventriloquist paradigm to examine Punchdrunk's 2013 production of *The Drowned Man*. I argue that despite its status as a largely wordless performance, *The Drowned Man* activates the ventriloquist paradigm to frame its engagement with *form*: both the physical body and performance media. Through the use of ventriloquism, Punchdrunk's metatheatrical production highlights themes of exploitation and manipulation in performance. The uncanny nature of ventriloquism creates a space to (re)consider notions of embodiment— not only embodiment as critical to theatrical representation, but in thematic terms: what bodies are, what they can do, and how they rhetorically instantiate notions of 'the human.'

The Drowned Man invites spectators to roam freely within a 360-degree, meticulously detailed world. The production casts one character (Leland Stanford) as the figurative ventriloquist, while positioning its remaining characters as dummies. The choreography of *The Drowned Man* suggests that *characters* are being propelled by external forces, and the nature of this immersive production implies that the nearly-silent *performers* and *spectators* are controlled dummies. *The Drowned Man* is uniquely suited to address the ventriloquist paradigm across media, as it is a theatrical performance about cinema. By adapting the narrative of Georg Büchner's 19th century play *Woyzeck* within the context of Hollywood's Cinematic Golden Age, *The Drowned Man* harness both the theatrical ventriloquist-dummy relationship *and* the cinematic ventriloquist-dummy relationship, staging the consequences of each.

Historically, ventriloquism is depicted as awe inducing in theatre and fear inducing in cinema. Proof of this dichotomy abounds in our current century alone. For instance, three winners of *America's Got Talent* were ventriloquists, all of whom charmed audiences with highly skilled yet benign content.¹ By contrast, the ventriloquist pairings of contemporary film feature sinister relationships between ventriloquists and their dummies.² There may be a reason for these divergent traditions. A cinematic dummy seems less credibly produced by its ventriloquist, as the act doesn't happen live. Dummies in cinematic narratives are therefore more likely to take on a life of their own, implying that they either always had, or gradually gained, autonomous voices. By contrast, theatrical dummies remain in service of the ventriloquist's gifts, performing acts of technical mastery (opera singing, celebrity impressions) to reflect the technical

proWess of the ventriloquist. Theatrical dummies traditionally elicit laughter or praise, whereas cinematic dummies traditionally elicit terror. *The Drowned Man*— an adaptation of a stage tragedy that relies on cinematic tropes— fuses the resonances of both theatrical and cinematic ventriloquism.

Punchdrunk combines an eerie *mise-en-scène* with the technical prowess and buoyancy of professional dancers. These dancers supply the aptitude of the theatrical dummy whereas the production's environment supplies the sense of foreboding associated with the cinematic dummy. *The Drowned Man*, as a live theatrical event, nevertheless employs the mechanisms of cinematic sound. Rick Altman describes the 'collusion' between cinematic sound and imagery, in which they 'erase each other's mode of production' (Altman 1980: 71). This observation echoes Punchdrunk's desire to erase the visibility of proscenium stage conventions. In what Altman terms 'the sound hermeneutic' in cinema, he describes sound's 'fundamental enigmatic quality' that 'confers on the image the quality of a response ... the sound asks where? and the image responds here!' (Altman 1980: 74). *The Drowned Man*'s environment offsets sound and space, by incorporating what Punchdrunk's Sound Designer Stephen Dobbie calls 'sound zones.' One song in *The Drowned Man*'s soundtrack might straddle several different rooms, meaning that the same track adopts new resonances depending on the visual scene it accompanies. This production tactic reflects Altman's argument that 'sound's ability to be heard around a corner makes it the ideal method of introducing the invisible, the mysterious, the supernatural,' and that 'this very power of sound carries with it a concomitant danger— sound will always carry with it the tension of the unknown until it is anchored by sight' (Altman 1980: 73–4). As a practice, ventriloquism splits and reassembles two disparate elements. *The Drowned Man* effectively stages Altman's theory; positioning cinema as an ominous force that 'lures' and dupes its viewers and participants.

Even as *The Drowned Man*'s environment invokes the eerie nature of cinematic ventriloquism by implying imminent danger, its performers exemplify theatrical ventriloquism by executing what appear to be externally imposed directives. Several instances of lip-synching occur in this production, in which characters ascend stages and mouth along to pop songs, seemingly at the behest of some greater controlling force. Few of the characters seem to be acting of their own accord. Much of the show's choreography creates the illusion of characters being tossed about by external forces. *The Drowned Man* performer Lily Ockwell describes the production's 'Big Brother sense that allowed all of us to be the puppets of this larger mechanism of power' (Ockwell 2021). Ironically, *The Drowned Man* performers must be utterly self-possessed and in control

of their own bodies to convey puppet-like lifelessness. Punchdrunk casts performers capable of executing dazzling choreographic feats and situates these feats within the context of a larger controlling mechanism or narrative, one that visibly guides the performers' movements. *The Drowned Man* draws attention to the ventriloquist stage tradition as one of technical precision, given the virtuosity and training of its dancers.

In the case of *The Drowned Man*, the production's theatrical source material, its material circumstances, and its cinematic premise conspire to suggest that the show's characters are reduced to something less than human. The unfinished *Woyzeck* script that serves as *The Drowned Man*'s source material was published after Büchner's death, with editors and translators assembling its disparate scenes into a presumed storyline. This biographical context inaugurates *The Drowned Man*'s themes of ventriloquism, as living writers endeavour to 'speak for' Büchner's text. The fragmented nature of *Woyzeck*'s script suits Punchdrunk's immersive genre, which is devised around a general storyline but offers no linear path for audiences. Punchdrunk performer Sam Booth describes *Woyzeck* as 'a case study of schizophrenia,' a condition in which 'you see the world broken down into fragments rather than integrated as a whole' (Booth 2021). *The Drowned Man*'s title undoubtedly references *Woyzeck*'s ambiguous ending, which suggests "that *Woyzeck* accidentally drowns" (Gritzner 2019: 46). However, it also alludes to the concept of 'drowning out' vocally, for Punchdrunk stages Büchner's text against a Hollywood Golden Age backdrop teeming with starlets and sound editors.

Building on the premise that protagonist *Woyzeck* was manipulated by societal forces, *The Drowned Man* stages two simultaneous versions of the fragmented *Woyzeck* narrative. The first occurs within the fictional Temple Studios, following protagonist Wendy as her husband commits adultery with movie star Dolores. The second, transpiring in a wooded trailer park beyond the studio gates, tracks protagonist William as his wife commits adultery with cowboy Dwayne. In both storylines, the betrayed spouse murders his or her partner in a jealous rage. This doubling device literalizes the concept of performance as a theatrical mirror and creates an eerie sense of predetermined fate as two puppet figures are controlled by the same narrative. Occasionally, Wendy and William's storylines intersect, causing the two characters to spot one another through a portal (such as mirror, window, or fence). Ockwell recalls: 'The highest frequency existed when these two worlds merged. You could feel the different forces that were the controlling puppeteers having a conflict in that moment' (Ockwell 2021).

The Drowned Man establishes its dual invocation of cinematic and theatrical worlds by setting its mirrored storylines across two different realms (one of them a film set). Together, Wendy and William represent the 'split subject;' a fractured consciousness that mimics *Woyzeck*'s fractured narrative. The production's labyrinthine set includes a

drafting room, which contains a charted scene-by-scene breakdown of everything that happens in the show, as well as figurines of each character. The presence of such a key suggests that despite its jumbled structure, all of *The Drowned Man*'s narrative action is premeditated or controlled like a film; one that does not move seamlessly from start to finish but is instead stitched together as a bricolage. This cinematic splicing echoes the play's source material, for cinema itself is a collection of fragments in which 24 frames per second create the illusion of fluid motion. In the world of Temple Studios, both performance media and characters themselves can be assembled in parts and sutured together.

The Drowned Man suggests that a fragmented being without a voice becomes a puppet to be manipulated at will. The production's themes of splicing, voyeurism, and dissection are made explicit through the Doctor character, a figure borrowed from Büchner's source text. In *The Drowned Man*, the Doctor colludes with the head of Temple Studios, Leland Stanford, to manipulate the bodies of other characters.³ William degrades himself for money at the behest of both Stanford and the Doctor, subbing in as a 'body double' for the former and acting as a 'test subject' for the latter. William spreads his arms and legs and adopts the posture of Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man (an anatomy sketch), while standing in front of the Doctor's projector. The projector is a device that straddles the worlds of cinema and anatomical study, and Stanford's 'test screenings' adopt the medical language of the Doctor's examinations. In a later scene, Wendy submits to the Doctor's strip search and adopts the same Vitruvian posture. The projector's light creates a translucent screen, in which the Doctor is visible on one side and Stanford on the other— together, they embody two forms of voyeuristic exploitation. The Doctor's scenes suggest that after losing vocal agency, characters like William and Wendy are meant to be inspected but not heard— a self-reflexive inflection, given Punchdrunk's physical, word-less language of choreography. Without a voice, a Hollywood hopeful becomes a mute object of spectacle.⁴

While the majority of the show's characters are positioned as dummies, Stanford represents *The Drowned Man*'s reigning ventriloquist figure. As a markedly cinematic figure, Stanford emits the evil connotations of ventriloquism in film. His disembodied 'God voice' often echoes throughout the production's 100+ rooms, speaking lines and directing other characters. Most of *The Drowned Man*'s characters have made Faustian bargains with Stanford, surrendering their authentic voices for Hollywood's eternal youth and beauty, so that their bodies are now under his control. These characters lip-synch to dubbed lines, and Stanford reprimands them whenever they go 'off-script'. Stanford is the dark side of Hollywood made manifest: a seductive and sinister ventriloquist who has his ear to the ground. In what is known as a Punchdrunk

‘one-on-one’ scene, Stanford invites an audience member into a secluded room with him. This one-on-one involves Stanford placing an orange slice into the audience member’s mouth so that she is forced to produce a citrus grin. Here, Stanford uses the orange slice to manipulate an audience member like a dummy— altering her visual expression (smile) while stifling her vocal expression (speech). Stanford is *The Drowned Man*’s own mouthpiece; a figure that seems to control, yet is ultimately controlled by, the theatrical conventions of the show. His character thereby unites the production’s theatrical and cinematic legacies.

Stanford enacts the all-consuming power of cinematic ventriloquism: his vocal directives actualize to determine the fates of the other characters. For example, Stanford gives Hollywood hopeful Romola Martin her big break; a motion picture involving a tragic car accident. Stanford sends a bewildered Romola off to hair and makeup to prepare for her big scene. As the makeup artist applies fake bruises and cuts to her face, Romola begins to feel physical pain. She reviews her script for the car accident scene, only to discover that it dictates her actual death. In another scene, Foley artist Lila encounters Stanford in the flesh, and is unnerved by the presence of both his embodied voice and his all-powerful ‘God’ voice that narrates and determines the course of their scene. Her eyes dart between the real (flesh-and-blood man conversing with her), and the reel (the machine from which his voice is also emanating). This scene dramatizes a critical moment of revelation: Lila realizes that she’s being manipulated and understands that ventriloquist mechanisms have dictated her actions up to this point. Lila’s epiphany is a comment on the circumstances of the production as a whole, which controls its unwitting spectators as well as its characters.

The Drowned Man’s silent spectators and nearly silent performers exemplify both the conditional efficacies and the conditional restraints of the dummy figure. Typically, Punchdrunk shows are lauded for their sensory excess— a barrage of sight, smell, sound, taste, and touch. *The Drowned Man* achieves this excess, with a difference. By using ventriloquism as its primary metaphor, *The Drowned Man* accentuates what is absent or lacking from most Punchdrunk productions— the voices of performers and audience members. The inhabitants of Temple Studios are themselves overpowered: effaced and de-faced with the donning of the signature Punchdrunk masks. Because spectators must refrain from speaking and must wear masks that obscure and limit their facial expressions, they are much closer to ‘dummies’ than comfort might admit— despite immersive theatre’s promise of unfettered self-direction. The eerie cinematic context of *The Drowned Man*, in which mute characters discover they are being controlled by a sinister ventriloquist figure, encourages spectators to reconsider their own supposed

freedom within the production. Arguably, *The Drowned Man* dramatizes the dawning realization of the dummy figure's limited condition, for audience members as well as performers.

Yet *The Drowned Man* activates the subversive potential of the dummy by highlighting the power of non-verbal communication, as dancers convey narrative without relying on text. An unfavourable critic could interpret the word-less nature of Punchdrunk's immersive work as employing performing 'dummies'. Viewed another way, Punchdrunk cannot be accused of ventriloquizing or 'putting words' into their performers' mouths. When I interviewed performers from *The Drowned Man*, few spoke about text and language at all. Reflecting on the show's one-on-ones (which are the most text-oriented scenes in any Punchdrunk production), Ockwell remarks: 'The text is a vehicle. It's not necessarily the words that are so important; it provides a way to make people feel intimate' (Ockwell 2021). Booth agrees, in language that emphasizes *The Drowned Man*'s themes: 'we're using fragments of phrases rather than full sentences ... it's talking that's not meant to be heard,' but instead 'lips are moving, like a silent movie' (Booth 2021). The lines uttered in the show are 'never supposed to be essential for storytelling. It's not information, it's much more like music' (Booth 2021). According to performers, the text functions as an act of intimacy, comparable to the act of removing a spectator's mask during a one-on-one. Far from being the centrepiece of the production, words become another aspect of Punchdrunk's multi-sensory ambiance. Text becomes texture.

By demonstrating the efficacy of non-verbal communication, *The Drowned Man*'s characters and performers showcase the dummy figure's guerrilla tactics. The production's extratextual engagement 'relies on perception that comprehends the details of an event corporeally; its conceptual and thematic dimensions as much as its physical textures' (Machon 2016: 45). Punchdrunk 'encourage(s) the interactor to understand the work on an embodied level,' in ways that may depart from 'cerebral intellect' (Machon 2016: 46). Machon's description of Punchdrunk's visceral communication parallels Altman's description of ventriloquist performance: 'whereas the head-voice speaks the society's polite language, the body-voice speaks a more sincere, personal, and unguarded language, a language no longer watched over by the censorship of the conscious mind' (Altman 1980: 78). Ventriloquism relies on the simultaneous engagement of both of these 'languages': audiences must consciously know what the ventriloquist is doing in order to appreciate her skill, while allowing themselves to submit to the subconscious illusion of an inanimate puppet speaking.

There is a seductive quality to ventriloquist performances, for they stage a productive tension between the act's reputed star (the ventriloquist) and its theatrical star (the dummy). Arguably, a spectator's 'conscious mind' appreciates the ventriloquist, yet a spectator's 'body-language' and primary sense of wonder responds to the uncanny movements of the puppet. *The Drowned Man* strives for a super-sensory engagement of its spectators, in which a greater suspension of disbelief in its immersive world yields a greater depth of experience. As silent, masked faces with all-watchful eyes roaming Temple Studios, audiences determine the success of *The Drowned Man*'s theatrical illusions. Hence Stanford's recurring line: 'the camera chooses the star.'

Notes

- ¹ Teri Fator: Season 2, Paul Zerdin: Season 10, and Darci Lynne Farmer: Season 12.
- ² See: *The Great Gabbo* (1929), *Dead of Night* (1945), *Devil Doll* (1964), *Magic* (1978), *Dead Silence* (2007) for sinister ventriloquist-dummy relationships. Several documentary films, such as *Dumbstruck* (2010) and *Nina Conti: Her Master's Voice* (2012), feature amiable, sympathetic ventriloquists. However, these are real stage ventriloquists, not fictional ventriloquist characters devised for film.
- ³ Stanford's name is taken from the historical figure Leland Stanford (1824–1893). The real Leland Stanford was a powerful American industrialist and politician, who later founded Leland Stanford Jr. University, or Stanford. He was also a great lover of horses, which led him to commission Edward Muybridge to create *The Horse in Motion*: a series of automatic electro-photographs that represented an important step in the development of motion pictures.
- ⁴ This experience of dehumanization is evident in Büchner's play: 'The Doctor can only regard the racked and increasingly disordered mind of Woyzeck an object of experimental curiosity, just as the court officer 'is only able to see the body of the murder-victim as nothing more than a corpus delicti, a focus for his specialized forensic skills' (McInnes 1991: 34–5).

Competing Interests

In accordance with academic policy and my ethical obligation as a researcher, I am reporting that I have previously been employed as a performer in a Punchdrunk production (*Sleep No More NYC*), which may have influenced the opinions expressed in this paper. This statement represents a disclosure of that potential competing interest.

Author Information

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