

**Fernando Belfiore. November 14.
D3US/x\M4CHIN4, Dansmakers
Podium.**

I saw Fernando Belfiore's *D3US/x\M4CHIN4* in Amsterdam, the day after the Paris terrorist attacks. There was a nervous energy in the air that evening. Not really fear, but something closer to social anxiety—was it *appropriate* to attend a contemporary dance festival, given the circumstances? The attacks felt too close to ignore, but too distant to really *feel*. My experience of the events was situated somewhere between my Facebook feed (all nearby friends declared unscathed by Facebook Safety Check) and my past impressions of the city, now colored strangely by the news. The whole thing was markedly intangible: a horrible narrative, a kind of vile dramaturgy, something like a particularly vicious Hollywood thriller. War in Europe! Hundreds dead!

I got the feeling that the audience at Dansmakers that evening was hoping to be shocked out of their numbness, longing for cathartic release, looking for the *real* of the situation. *D3US/x\M4CHIN4* delivered quite a different mode of topicality. Belfiore has crafted a kind of consumerist phantasmagoria, a cross-section of desire in the digital age. His dancers hold sincerity disdainfully at arm's length, like some mythological beast who has outlasted her usefulness. Dressed in futuristic silver, the four performers twerk, moan, pose, and drag each other around like wet towels, all while maintaining an impersonal distance from their own actions. They remain inaccessible, symbolically removed from view by plasticky face masks—empty vessels of pre-determined action, ritualistically executing a choreography of paint-by-numbers sex and warfare (when not milling about looking bored).

The movement in *D3US/x\M4CHIN4* was largely familiar, picked from a variety of televised and digital media (aren't those becoming indistinguishable, anyway?), but stripped of its gravitas and left to float, weightless and silly, a nebula of anesthetic simulacra. Belfiore plays with the way our expressive gestures rely on a very specific *mise-en-scène* to make them seem 'real.' One moment

in particular seems to point a finger at the vulnerability of our hermeneutic capacity faced with certain kinds of aesthetic window-dressing and not-so-subtle technologies of manipulation. Towards the middle of the piece, the dancers are huddled in family-portrait formation, yelling chilling war-cries at the audience, when the music suddenly cuts out, depriving them of a dramatic frame and turning their forbidding vocalizations into pathetic and inappropriate yammer. With the sudden change in staging, we see how much we rely on cinematic effect to provide us a 'point of entry': the soundtrack gone, warriors become heaving human bodies, weakly spouting nonsense, the 'reality' of their fierceness diminished, the epic trimmings stripped away. We are immediately alienated from them, and it feels as if the wind has been sucked out of the theatre, taking any narrative momentum with it, bringing us face-to-face with the constructedness of the situation.

Another piece of bio-cultural flotsam which Belfiore cuts disconcertingly free from its context is the infamous twerk. When people twerk in 2015, they refer back, on some level, to a technologically mediated image of twerking. Twerking now cannot stand on its own, self-referential; it is code for a good time, for sexual promise, for a whole set of cultural practices. When twerking is not fun anymore, the chasm between our foreknowledge and the situation at hand creates something like the uncanny. But where did this foreknowledge come from? Against which ideal booty-shake are we evaluating the one before us? Today, the gesture is always understood in reference to its depiction in media, and perhaps was even birthed through simulation; that is to say, the product of staging and not of some hypothetically 'authentic experience.' The gesture and the entirety of the mediaworld to which it belongs functions not as a record of reality but as kind of blueprint for the hyper-reality which we now find ourselves struggling to navigate. In other words, the Other has infected even our gestures. What is left of the self?

What is examined especially closely in *D3US/x\M4CHIN4* is the extent to which the actions we take to be most primal—those of sex and violence—can no longer be understood as

natural or self-referential, but always pointing outside of themselves to other performances (lived or aesthetic) of sex and violence, against which we measure their relative success. With the meteoric rise of the digital and the epidemic of the image, we are inundated with representations of every possible feeling and scenario, and both the way we choose to act and the way we choose to evaluate the actions of others have their roots in that representational regime. Writing in 1988, Jean Baudrillard was already warning of the destruction of the authentic through the proliferation of ultimately ir-referential information; now, the internet has exponentially increased the ubiquity of that information, and the inhabitants of the 21st century are reaping the consequences. Even on a corporeal level, we are colonized by models with no 'real' antecedent.

Translated to the stage, this vision of the human is a bitter pill to swallow. But if Belfiore had organized his dancers in a way that used the tropes of contemporary spectacle (read: pop culture) for their intended ends—if we had been carried away nodding by a wave of mono-perspectival grandstanding—then he would merely be parroting the very manipulative simulation that he seems to want to critique. What we receive instead is the uncomfortable image of our own expectations faced with a theatrical night-out: 'let it be anything as long as it satisfies my desire for the authentic.' And what if it intentionally does nothing of the sort? What if it proposes that the authentic has ceased to exist?

It's strange that, even in the context of a contemporary dance festival, this self-undermining was met with a certain incredulity, as if the modernist concept of dance as vital personal expression hadn't been long debunked. At the bar: "yes, but I didn't *feel* anything. It went on too long. I didn't have an a-ha moment. I couldn't tell if they were joking..." Perhaps it had something to do with the events of the day before, which we all felt were—whether consciously or merely structurally—a reaction to the very kind of capitalist Western decadence which Belfiore chooses to expose but refuses to condemn.

Paradoxically, *D3US/x\M4CHIN4* really 'worked' for me precisely because of this refusal to satisfy our desire for absorbing drama. From the very start of the piece, when the dancers are vainly swinging their hair about and the music is slightly too quiet, I read comedy into the situation: what is funnier than a badly-framed attempt to be cool or sexy? What is funnier than our disappointment at their failure to seduce? This was the thing that kept me 'in' the performance: precisely its train-wreck quality, the space for laughter that it leaves open for us to actively fill or passively ignore.

I am fully aware that this is a very particular manner of extracting satisfaction: not everyone reads performance through a lens of ironic remove. Glancing sideways that evening, I tried to scan the room for other spectators who were 'in on the joke,' but I saw a lot of earnest faces. Perhaps, then, I understood the piece from a uniquely queer perspective. *D3US/x\M4CHIN4* is exactly the kind of cultural object queer scholar David M. Halperin has in mind in his discussion of the slippery link between feminine glamour and social abjection in gay culture, and its connection to our "distinctive violation of the generic boundaries between tragedy and comedy, specifically the practice of laughing at situations that are horrifying of tragic" (2012, 159). Again, this has to do with what Baudrillard terms the "precession of simulacra" (1988, 1): because, for example, the model of heterosexual loss and grief is still the representation of authentic tragedy *par excellence*, "no would-be gay tragedy can escape a faint tinge of ridiculousness" (Halperin 2012, 181). Consequently, as kind of defense mechanism, gay men have a tendency to assume this ridiculousness and then project it back at the world, and especially at the exaggeratedly theatrical women that gay men both laugh at and identify with (Lady Gaga, Cher, et. al).

Apparently, not everyone at *D3US/x\M4CHIN4* was self-deprecating enough to identify themselves "in the distorted mirror of devalued femininity" (182). For someone who believes in a deep, natural self, I can imagine that the dancers of *D3US/x\M4CHIN4* might be particularly difficult to relate to, neither really tragic nor really comic: merely superficial. I strongly believe, however, that with the ubiquity

of social media and the increasingly explicit performativity of personality, we can all develop a certain queer, genre-flexible sensibility. To be clear, this has nothing to do with becoming homosexuals: it's more about treating cultural objects as open spaces for association and activity, rather than as monolithic entities closed to appropriation. If we can sensitize ourselves to the impossibility of the authentic and the hilarity of our own empty gestures, then maybe we can re-gain some of the agency that has been taken from us by the authority of unchallenged simulation. But this queering is not happening quickly enough: it is a step that requires reflection, and many get stuck at the point of self-hypnosis.

D3US/x\M4CHIN4 is not a panacea for our wounds, but a hard look at the elusive problem at hand: the failure of religion, science, philosophy and culture to provide us a solid ground upon which to build unassailable meaning and shining truths. In some ways, the terrorists who perpetrated the attacks in Paris last week were responding to the same crisis of meaning that Belfiore seems to concern himself with: how can a Godless system of values claim to base itself on anything but illusion? But while terrorism essentially seeks to re-inject the unreal of lived experience with the reality of death, replacing one regime with another, the power of art is to expose the workings of illusion so that we can make better decisions about how to live with integrity within it. Given the destabilizing events of the day before, it is understandable that the audience that evening would have craved union, consensus, and direction; instead, we were confronted with the fact of simulation, the circulating citationality from which 21st-century libidinal investment increasingly takes its cues. At this historical juncture, it is too late to go back to a pre-technological state of innocence: rather than denying the current state-of-affairs, it is crucial that we map the effects that information overload has on our self-perception, so we can responsibly move towards the future.

Sebastian Kann, 2015.

Works Cited

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