

# Uncanny Autofiction on Stage. About Rimini Protokoll's *Uncanny Valley*

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## Abstract

This paper investigates Rimini Protokoll's interpretation of the Gothic genre in the 2018 play, *Uncanny Valley*. In this work, the German-speaking theater collective refers to Mashairo Mori's research on the human reception of humanoid robots to reflect upon human nature and social norms. The play features a naturalistic cyborg resembling the writer Thomas Melle, a co-author of the play. This article will analyze the group's deployment of the Gothic and uncover the significance of the genre's entanglement with autofictional narrative in the play. The paper will illustrate the image of Gothic that emerges from the play and investigate its contribution to Rimini Protokoll's theatre research.

## Keywords

Gothic, Uncanny, Strange, Autofiction, Authenticity.

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## Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, Rimini Protokoll theatre collective has established itself as one of the most interesting voices on the German theatre scene. The members – Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi, and Daniel Wetzel – work collaboratively, individually, and in pairs, sharing a common method, «a method that consists of making the process of creation visible to take the reader or the audience on the search, on the research journey» (Schipper 2021: 4). The objective of their endeavor is two-fold. Firstly, it is concerned with the comprehension of certain prevalent issues, evolving dynamics, and incessant transformations that effect the contemporary world. Secondly, it examines the theatre itself, its influence on society, and the artistic tactics that ensure its continued relevance and vitality. Central to their mission is the concept of protocol in all its possible meanings, such as: an agreement on formal behaviors that establish theater's semiotics; scientific procedures that ensure the reliability of research; and agreement on the best research practices in a specific investigated field. According to Christie Wahl, Rimini Protokoll's theatre can be considered as a form of applied sociology. She writes,

Im Unterscheid zu vielen anderen Theaterkollektiven, die konkret aktivistisch und häufig interventionistisch arbeiten, ist der Blick von Rimini Protokoll ein phänomenologischer-soziologischer. [...] Erkenntnisgewinn funktioniert bei Rimini Protokoll komplett unpädagogisch und in jedem Zuschauerkopf individuell, über die vielfältigen Verweisungszusammenhänge, die sich im Laufe des Abends zwischen den Figuren und Positionen entfalten. (Wahl 2021: 46-47)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My translation: «In contrast to many other theatre collectives, which take

In Rimini Protokoll's works, the author's conventional role is subverted. As explained in their Saarbrücken Poetics Lectureship, elaborated in keywords, authors don't provide a fixed narrative, they create a framework within which spectators engage in the act of interpretation, thereby generating their own meanings. Rimini Protokoll explain this concept with the word *Wirkung* (effect). They write, «Die wichtigste Inszenierungsarbeit geschieht im Kopf des → Zuschauers, die macht er selbst mit seinem Blick. Wir sind dafür zuständig, den Blick zu richten und das Denken im Fluss zu halten – Entertainment im besten Sinne» (Haug – Kaegi – Wetzel 2012: 160)<sup>2</sup>. Accordingly, they prefer the English word, *actor*, over the German, *Schauspieler*: «Actor – Handelnder. Das bessere Wort als → Schauspieler. Aufführung nicht als Abbildung, sondern als Tätigkeit» (*Ibid.*: 5)<sup>3</sup>. The theatre is conceived as a fragment of reality, framed and presented to direct the attention of the audience. Actors are not professionals trained to perform texts written by others, but rather are "experts of the everyday" who share their stories and knowledge with the audience. The audience, however, is carefully kept at a necessary distance to understand the work and, as Helgard Haug asserts, get to emotions through reasoning (See Müller 2016: 126). This distance is maintained even in the case of immersive performances that involve direct interaction with the audience, such as in *Call Cutta*. In this performance, audience members are provided with mobile phones and are then guided through Berlin by call center agents in Calcutta. This technique's potential, which is to make reality more complex rather than more immediate, consists in multiplying the perspectives and ideas that coexist in the space of the theater. «We do prefer complexity to polemic» (*ibid.*: 132), stated Kaegi in an interview, emphasizing that the point is not to impose a single, clear, and potentially divisive vision of reality, but rather to generate questions and reveal the complexities of real situations. Along these lines, even the authenticity of shared stories is essentially irrel-

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a specifically activist and often interventionist approach, Rimini Protokoll takes a phenomenological and sociological view. [...] The way Rimini Protokoll gains insights is completely unpedagogical and takes place individually in each spectator's mind, through the diverse contexts that unfold between characters and positions over the course of the evening».

<sup>2</sup> My translation: «The most important staging work happens in the mind of the spectator, who does it himself with his gaze. We are responsible for directing the gaze and keeping the thinking in flux – entertainment in the best sense».

<sup>3</sup> My translation: «Actor – doer. A better word than Schauspieler. Performance not as a representation, but as an activity».

evant. As Wetzel stated, «In the end we really are not interested in whether someone is telling the truth, but rather how he presents himself and what role he is playing» (Drysse – Malzacher 2008: 38). This approach is predicated on recognizing the dramatization of reality. To accomplish this, Rimini Protokoll present images and media in flux, thusly generating the primary aesthetic of their unique approach to theater. Particularly interesting is their sociological and theatrical approach to self-representation. The “everyday experts” on stage are selected for their ability to offer insights on a specific theme that the group is seeking to analyze in collaboration with the audience. The authors of the group then create an interpretative framework within which these experts openly self-represent their own stories, thus generating and feeding a self-renewing research process.

Probably one of the most extreme and interesting examples of this process of self-representation and exposure of fiction is *Unheimliches Tal* (*Uncanny Valley*), written by Stefan Kaegi with the German writer, Thomas Melle, and staged by Kaegi for the first time in 2018 at Münchner Kammerspiele. The title of the play draws upon the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori’s study on human responses to human-like robots. According to Mori, humans tend to react emotionally to machines that bear a resemblance to humans, but their positive response is limited. Once robots reach a higher grade of anthropomorphism, a repulsion mechanism is triggered, resulting in their perception as uncanny. Visualized on a graph, the fluctuation between attraction and repulsion constitutes the “uncanny valley.” In their play, Kaegi and Melle update and adapt Mori’s research for theatre. *Uncanny Valley* not only deals with the reception of humanoid robots, it also tests human empathy with machines via the robot on stage. Sitting all the time on a chair with his legs crossed, the humanoid communicates with unnaturally slow movements of his arms, hands, eyes, and mouth. Both the slow movements, sometimes suggestive of zombies, and the general appearance of the robot reveal its non-human character. It mimics relatable emotions, however, for example, greeting the audience with an air of insecurity, clearing its throat, and stammering. For almost the entire performance, the humanoid is only visible frontally, dressed as an anonymous and unremarkable bourgeois character. Its back, on the contrary, shows the chips, boards, and electronic components that make it function.

On the stage, which resembles a conventional lecture setting with a large monitor, the robot sits on a chair next to a small table with a laptop and a theatre machine. The monitor displays interviews with various experts on robotics and mechatronics, as well as images related to the life of Alan Turing, the English mathematician and progenitor of computer sci-

ence, and videos featuring Thomas Melle, whom the robot was made to resemble with sufficient inaccuracy to generate an uncanny response. It should be noted that Melle is widely known for his autofictional novel, *Die Welt im Rücken* (*The World at my Back*), which is referenced extensively in the play and addresses his bipolar disorder. Melle utilizes the humanoid on stage to outsource himself in a different way in the public sphere, creating a new form of autofiction.

Melle's autofictional story is interwoven with the biography of Alan Turing. A number of elements bind these two narratives together. Both Turing and Melle were marginalized by society due to their failure to align with prevailing social norms. Furthermore, the presence of a humanoid on stage coupled with Turing's research on the distinctions between humans and machines prompts reflection on the distinction between human and nonhuman. Topics such as authenticity, the distinction between copy and original, between real and fiction, and the very possibility that a non-fictional original exists, are investigated through the tandem unfolding of Melle's autofiction and Turing's biography. These issues are related to Mori's research on human-machine empathy, and are dramatized by the theatrical proposition, «[H]ow come you are so certain that you can check the box 'I am not a robot' whenever your computer asks you to» (Schipper 2021: 111), which the robot provocatively asks.

The play, therefore, transposes two different genres to the theatre: autofiction and Gothic. Autofiction is referenced by Melle's novel. The allusion to Gothic motifs of the uncanny and the double is evident in the title itself and in the animatronic robot representing Melle on stage. Relevant is also the motif of the strange and abject, that «disturbs identity, system, and order. What is not constrained by the boundaries of established positions or rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite» (Kristeva 2024: 4). Melle and Turing with their stories question the established norms as well as the very idea of norm. While the interest in autofiction aligns with the sociological and metatheatrical research that characterizes the poetics of Kaegi and Rimini Protokoll in general, the reference to the Gothic genre may seem more surprising. Notwithstanding, as noted by Justin D. Edwards, «Gothic has endured the history of modern Western culture, primarily because its uncanny figures have consistently offered us a systematic process for determining but also disguising our hidden fears and repressed desires» (Edwards 2015: 40). Gothic reveals a discernible sociological dimension in the articulation of both collective and individual fears. Moreover, the motifs of the double and the uncanny, characteristic of the Gothic tradition, enable Kaegi to undertake research on *Wirkung* and

fiction, in turn informing the poetics of Rimini Protokoll in an innovative and radical fashion.

This paper aims to investigate how the postmodern character of Gothic emerges in *Uncanny Valley* with particular reference to the problematic distinction between human and machine. The parallel between Gothic and autofiction created by Kaegi and Melle will be discussed. Furthermore, the article will analyze how Gothic elements like the uncanny, the double and the strange offer an interesting perspective on Rimini Protokoll's theatre. Key points of entry for this inquiry are: interactions amongst different literary genres, the importance of research as a process in Rimini Protokoll's poetic, which seeks to raise questions rather than to provide answers in order to involve the audience in collective reflection.

### *Uncanny Valley*

As explained, Rimini Protokoll work with "experts of the everyday". But what expertise is brought to the stage in *Uncanny Valley*? On a superficial level, several interviews with different types of experts are screened on the on-stage monitor such as a person wearing a cochlear hearing aid, developers of mechanical prostheses, a university professor discussing how machines are programmed to become slaves in the service of man, incapable of feeling emotions because they have no body, and the developers of Melle's animatronic double. Despite their heterogeneity, these interviews collectively underscore the historical and pervasive utilization of technology to overcome human deficiencies. The concept of deficiency, however, is presented critically, suggesting that modifications to the human apparatus are heavily conditioned by social norms, and that standards dictating the criteria of imperfections are artificially determined. This idea is embodied within the two biographies presented in the play, those of Melle and of Alan Turing, who are "experts" in the sense that they have a story to share. This story is about othering processes and deviation from the norm.

In narrating the life of Alan Turing, the play directs as much attention to the brilliance of the scientist as it does to the inhumanity of how he was treated by society. Complying with Gothic conventions, emphasis is put on artificial changes in his body, which altered his self-perception and conjure the theme of monstrosity. In fact, after being sentenced for his homosexuality, Turing was compelled to take estrogen supplements, which had a profound impact on his body. As conveyed by the humanoid on stage, after this treatment, Turing had developed pronounced breasts and his testicles had shrunk. He was no longer able to recognize himself in the mirror.

This resulted in feelings of depression and alienation, which ultimately led him to commit suicide with a poisoned apple. As the robot also points out, Turing had been captivated by the image of poisoned apples since seeing the Disney film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. He frequently hummed a tune that reminded him of the words of the wicked witch: “dip the apple in the brew, let the sleeping death sip through.” In the play, the tune is set to simple music, which is heard in the background during transitions from Turing’s story to other clips, contributing a sense of tension to the Gothic atmosphere. The spell experienced by Snow White upon ingestion of the poisoned apple alludes to the slumber of oblivion to social conditioning. Turing himself was probably not fully aware of the conditioning he was exposed to until he became victim of violent homophobic discrimination. The imitation game, of which the Turing Test was a variation, and which was based upon binary distinctions (male-female, machine-human), had turned against Turing himself. Melle recounts how Turing had changed research disciplines in the last years of his life, turning to biology and writing a treatise on morphogenesis, the development of forms in nature. Turing had observed that irregularities and deviations were fundamental to this process and found beauty in irregularity. This model of nature, however, did not save his life, which had already been deeply compromised by external interventions upon his body. Social norms had prevailed over his own nature.

Bipolar disorder is also normally regarded as an irregularity, and a deviation. The Melle robot positions this illness as a conspicuous anomaly and focal point of general discourse. It is explained that Melle’s autofictional novel was written to create a representation of this disease directed at those who were reluctant to deal with it. This is not the only aspect, however, that emerges in the play. Melle appears instead, via his animatronic double, to reflect upon the very process of self-staging to adhere to social norms.

Melle’s reflections on authenticity and self-representation begin with a remark on two photographs of him as a child. The first depicts him as a child sitting at a school desk with a sullen expression. The humanoid remarks that the schoolboy’s sullen face does not represent his attitude towards school realistically. Rather, he says, individuals seem to perceive social pressure even at this early age. The second photograph, which is blurred and greenish, was taken about 17 years later. In the context of bipolar disorder causing feelings of detachment and vagueness, the blurred image is framed as a metaphor for this condition. The first picture suggests that, due to social conditionings, even a clear image can present something

artificial, while the technically imperfect second picture can be a more accurate representation, as it captures nuances beyond the scope of the naked eye. This comparison problematizes authenticity and the distinctions between reality and fiction. Melle's humanoid double also expands the perspective and prompts the audience to ask itself whether memories can be authentic, or are constructed from inputs of the present. Similarly, a comparison is drawn between machine programming and human education, encompassing not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the learning of languages, including gestures, which are the foundation of human communication. With reference to human-machine communication, computational linguistics and Natural Language Processing are discussed as potential instruments to enhance the use of machines in the domain of natural languages. At the same time, the robot cites computational linguistics' revelation of language's constructedness and unnatural character, as well as the potentially diminished diversity of language due to the influence of machines. Underscoring this, the play remarks upon the restricting impact of social conventions on communication, language, and expression and suggests a parallel between social norms and machine programming. Again, authenticity is presented as loaded concept.

But it is above all with reference to the novel that the theme of fiction is addressed. Melle's humanoid stresses that through the means of literature, the author managed to gain control over himself in the face of his mental disease, and that addressing his illness had both a social and an individual function. From a social perspective, readers with bipolar disorder were able to identify with his literary character and reflect upon their own condition. From an individual perspective, the process enabled the author to become identical with himself, thereby healing the internal rift caused by his illness. By adopting an external perspective, Melle established a connection with his own identity. The act of self-observation engenders a distance between the writer and himself as subject, thereby reaching an elevated level of artificiality which, paradoxically, enables deeper authenticity. Melle appears to see authenticity not as a natural and intrinsic quality, but as constructed, an ideal accessed through art. His comments on his autofictional novel align with the theatrical poetics employed by Rimini Protokoll, offering the audience valuable insights that enhance their comprehension of self-reflexivity leading to a split between social and private selves. This is further accentuated as the play transitions to discuss the impact that promoting the novel had on Melle. The author confronts yet another form of fiction at public readings that trivializes the novel and its production. The particular ways in which public



situations cleave the internal and external codes of individuality leave the author with the feeling of being a machine. This sense of artificiality is shown as a consequence of a lack of comprehension regarding the nature of literary fiction and the specific characteristics of autofiction. While in more conventional forms of autobiography events are presented as factual, in autofiction events are described within a fictional framework. Some rhetorical elements of non-fiction are present, yet they are undermined by the invocation of the fictional narrative. Thusly, the reader is prompted to reflect on the concept of fiction throughout the reading process. On stage, the Thomas Melle who manifests on the monitor, almost resembling a phantom, engenders a polarity between reality and fiction, subsequently sharing the screen with the purely mechanical components of his robot, devoid of the silicone mask that imbues it with his features. In his appearance on video, Melle recounts how often he fantasized about using a humanoid in stressful social situations, such as public readings, also allowing the audience to generate and project its own version of the author. In situations in which social norms demand constraint and compliance, Melle explains, he already behaves like a robot to overcome panic and to forget about the misinterpretations of his work. Thusly, Melle underscores the permeable nature of the boundary between reality and fiction, the profound influence of social conditioning, and the ephemeral nature of authenticity due to social norms. Social conventions have a stronger impact upon life than do scientific innovations exactly because they are passively accepted without being questioned. Unlike technologies, their artificiality isn't perceived as either uncanny or problematic, until their impact on human beings – on their lives and their bodies – is revealed. The acquired awareness of social conditionings on self-development and inauthentic nature of the self engenders uncanniness.

At the beginning of the play, the robot states its intention to deliver a lecture on the theme of instability and the overcoming of the uncanny valley. Constructing the narrative within the frame of Gothic, Kaegi and Melle stress that abnormalities constitute an inherent part of human nature, even though this can be scary. As Jerrold E. Hogles explains,

The Gothic clearly exists in part to raise the possibility that all “abnormalities” we would divorce from ourselves are a part of ourselves, deeply and pervasively (hence frighteningly), even while it provides quasi antiquated methods to help us place such “deviations” at a definite, though hunting distance from us. (Hogles 2002: 12)

Like other forms of deviation studied in morphogenesis by Turing, Turing's and Melle's deviations from social norms testify the complexity of nature and its beauty.

At the same time, overcoming the uncanny valley, the authors seem to suggest, is not about empathy with the machine. It is rather determined by the recognition of artificiality in human nature. The humanoid addresses the audience directly, stating that if they have come to see an actor, they are in the wrong place. And if they have come to see the authentic, they are also in the wrong place. Accordingly, the play, he asserts, is not about him, but about the audience. Normally the audience is a co-author in Rimini Protokoll's plays and directly engages with the "experts of the everyday", often via different kind of technical devices. Sometimes even the physical distance between stage and audience disappears. In *Uncanny Valley*, instead, the audience remains seated throughout the performance. It doesn't actively use any technical devices; it is lectured by a highly technological humanoid and finds itself applauding a robot. It enjoys the shared emotions and knowledges conveyed by the play, but ultimately experiences this enjoyment as ritualized, programmed behavior, a proof of the uncanny likeness between humans and the technologies they create. The audience's lack of active participation, which is atypical for Rimini Protokoll's works, reinforces this idea of human passiveness and automated character. The uncanny element, therefore, is not only derived from Mori's observation of the inability to fully empathize with machines. Rather, it is derived from an augmented awareness that human beings and machines are not, in fact, radically distinct from each other. It is equally possible to program a machine as it is to condition a human. Along these lines, one might posit that overcoming the uncanny valley consists in redefining the boundaries between human and artificial, elucidating the role of imperfections in the redefinition of these boundaries, and exposing the porosity of the boundary between real and fictional.

### ***Uncanny Valley* as a Gothic autofictional play**

In *Gothic-postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity*, Maria Beville affirms that Gothic-postmodernism is a hybrid genre which combines Gothic elements and postmodernist fears, putting forward the blurred distinction between the real and the fictional via metafiction. In consideration of the foregoing definition of Gothic-postmodernism, *Uncanny Valley* can be regarded as an interesting example of this literary genre. To elaborate further, given its investigation of the role of new technologies, *Uncanny*

*Valley* may be associated with those subgenres of Gothic-postmodernism that concentrate on human relations with technological developments, which can be defined as technogothics (see Edwards 2015). This relationship – and the manners in which Gothic works explore it – has been subject to a variety of interpretations. For instance, Isabel van Elferen's research focuses on the concern that new technologies will progressively erase the distinction between humans and machines. In order to preserve this distinction, she affirms, «Gothic hauntingly repeats one ontological question: What is human Being?» (Holges 2014: 143). In contrast, J. A. Weinstock offers a different interpretation of the relation between humans and technologies. According to Weinstock, Gothic narrative elements like the uncanny and the *doppelgänger* epitomize this response, deploying narrative as a philosophical investigation of the «entanglement of human beings with the nonhuman world» (Weinstock 2023: 4). He defines Gothic materialism as a

rethinking of the nature of the human and the relationship of the human to the nonhuman with dread, rendering matter as sinister and menacing, human mastery of the natural world a fiction, and human existence as precarious. (*Ibid.*)

In Weinstock's view, the Gothic representation of new technologies does not merely serve as a pretext to accentuate the modernity of a text. Rather, it is «the panicked response of the human to its own decentering» that leads to introspection (*Ibid.*: 8). In other words, Weinstock's interpretation posits that the fears about technological advancements pertain not to their inherent nature but to their preeminent status. In *Uncanny Valley*, instead, the Gothic-postmodernism assumes a sociological character: it is not an abstract speculation on humanity, it is a reflection on fears, social conditionings and their impact on the understanding of humanity. Kaegi and Melle's investigation does not concern with an examination of human nature in itself nor with the potential human decentering through technological means. Instead, they use postmodern technogothics to reflect upon social conditioning and its constraints on human beings. Uncanniness is not exclusively or primarily generated by sudden perception of the artificiality of the cyborg on stage (as Mori's studies might suggest), nor by ontological questions highlighted by van Elferen, nor by the perception of the animatronic robot's animacy as underscored by Weinstock. In *Uncanny Valley*, uncanniness is aroused by an increased awareness of humans' similarities with machines. Like machine programs, social norms determine

human choices and behaviors, limiting their possibility and authenticity. In displaying the constructedness of social norms, they make also the arbitrariness of the distinction between “normal” and “strange” apparent. In fact the “strange” as Gothic element in *Uncanny Valley* assumes a socio-critical character and is used to stress the haunting character of the arbitrary distinction between “normal” and “strange”, reinforcing Rimini Protokoll’s critic of society. Melle’s cyborg on stage is a projection of his fears about social standards and the tendency of individuals to function in a manner more akin to machines, devoid of any imperfections. Melle’s animatronic *doppelgänger* on stage arouses the audience’s uncanny awareness of social conditionings. In an interview, Kaegi used the metaphor of mirror to elucidate his understanding of theatre (see Müller 2016). He posited that theatre functions as a mirror for the audience, thereby enabling them to perceive themselves from a different perspective. In *Uncanny Valley*, this theatrical mirror reflects an uncanny image. In the play, Gothic elements constitute a theatrical frame that engenders uncertainty regarding the radical distinction between social humans and programmed machines.

This aspect is accentuated by the fact that in *Uncanny Valley* Gothic elements like the strange, the uncanny and the double are interwoven with references to another example of postmodern culture, i.e. autofiction. Autofiction, highlights Anna Thiemann, testifies the «increasingly experimental and subversive autobiographical forms» (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2019: 778) typical of Postmodernism. Its strong metafictional character highlights the unstableness of identities and narratives about the self, as well as their fictionality. In fact, as noted by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, autofiction oscillates between the fictional and the factual «in order to reflect on the fictionality of the factual and the factuality of fiction» (Effe - Lawor 2022: 35). Like Gothic, also autofiction assumes a sociological character in *Uncanny Valley*: it shows that not only it is impossible to avoid fictionality in narrating the self, it is also impossible to be truly authentic in everyday life, because social norms impose a certain degree of self-staging and inauthenticity. The entanglement between autofiction and Gothic fictional elements puts forward the uncanny lack of authenticity in what is called ‘human nature’, whose artificial, socially conditioned character prevails.

While with their specific use of Gothic-postmodernist and autofictional elements Kaegi and Melle offered an innovative perspective on contemporary Gothic and self-fictional aesthetics, *Uncanny Valley* gives also a significant insight on Rimini Protokoll’s theatre and deepens our understanding of it. As noted by Frederik Le Roy, «when Rimini Protokoll initiate a project, they do so not only out of interest in the subject matter or

in the experts on stage, but always also to explore the codes of theatre» (Le Roy 2012: 155). Accordingly, it can be affirmed that the use of Gothic and autofictional elements, as well as their entanglement, aims not only to serve Rimini Protokoll's sociological research from a thematic point of view, it also aims to expand the means of theatre to establish formally effective theatrical frameworks for the investigated subject. References to literary genres like Gothic and autofiction expand the scope of two seminal aspects of Rimini Protokoll's poetics, i.e. their understanding of the audience's response to performances and their conception of the "experts of the everyday". Firstly, the uncanny completely overturns the traditional principle of identification in theatre, a principle which had already been questioned by Bertolt Brecht's *V-Effekt*. As noted by Daniel Wenzel in an interview, their spectators participate in another way than observing from their seats: «This is what our theatres were built for, to include citizens in the reflection on larger social processes» (Müller 2016: 127). Rimini Protokoll's plays are designed to stimulate a critical attitude in the audience which becomes an active part of their theatrical work. The uncanny, however, as delineated by Sigmund Freud in his seminal essay, is predicated on the abrupt sensation of strangeness towards something which was previously perceived as familiar. This implies a strong emotional response characterized by attraction and repulsion, as well as a distancing that may enhance the audience's response to the performance, adding an emotional component to the critical one. The uncanny shakes profoundly old certainties, haunts the audience and prompts their critical reflection. *Uncanny Valley* reveals this aspect of Gothic postmodernism's potential within theatre –the potential contributed by the uncanny to create an active mode of viewership as mean of collective reflection. Secondly, the Gothic motif of the double gives new perspective to the question of authenticity, central to Rimini Protokoll's poetic. «The exposure of fictitiousness establishes new ways of looking at reality and examines certainties and convention of perception» (Dreyse-Malzacher 2015: 97), writes Myriam Dreyse. In *Uncanny Valley* this feature of Rimini Protokoll's poetic is accentuated using a robot on stage as "expert of the everyday" and double of a famous writer. Melle's animatronic double makes more apparent the fictionality of all stories brought to stage. The autofictional components of the play foreground the Gothic meaning of the uncanny narrow border between human and non-human by analogizing it with permeable borders between reality and fiction. Thomas Melle's animatronic double reflects upon the porous link between fiction and reality, on the limits of authenticity, and on the unconscious tendency to conform to social norms.

Thusly, it can be affirmed that through interaction with autofiction, in *Uncanny Valley* Kaegi and Melle offer an original interpretation of Gothic-postmodernism thereby strengthening the interpretation of Gothic as a literary genre with a strong sociological potential. Furthermore, this innovative use of Gothic and autofictional elements at theatre expand Rimini Protokoll's poetics and our comprehension of its fundamental concerns.

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