

Becoming Deterritorialized: Reading Tim Etchells' *The BRoKen WoRLD* after Gilles Deleuze

Jan Suk

ABSTRACT

The philosophy of Gilles Deleuze is a complex and open system whose "anything-goes" or, to borrow Deleuze's own term, rhizomatic, i.e. interconnected and interconnectable nature constitutes a major potential of the theory for many areas of academic discourse. The application of Deleuze's thought on writing that is performative and performance-influenced thus seems constructive, since art, performance writing and philosophy have a transformative capacity via their ability to challenge the territory between the work of art and its recipient. The present paper elaborates on the productive quality of two crucial concepts of Gilles Deleuze, becoming and deterritorialization. In the second part of the article these concepts are applied to *The BRoKen WoRLD*, a novel by Tim Etchells. The conclusion of the paper suggests that Etchells' invitations to trespass the in-between territory among author, work and recipient is graspable via the theoretical apparatus provided by the Deleuzian creative machinic drive to rupture the fourth wall, with proximity and engagement provoking the exposure of the reader to nakedness, along with a sympathetic, deterritorialized series of becomings.

KEYWORDS

Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, becoming, deterritorialization, Tim Etchells, Forced Entertainment, *The BRoKen WoRLD*.

Becoming and Deterritorialization after Gilles Deleuze

"A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between."¹

Reading fiction through the lens of contemporary philosophy, especially the reading of performance-based fiction texts via the vitalistic and post-identitarian philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, is a transformative experience. Throughout his prolific writing career, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze considered his works pure philosophy, not criticism, since he pursued the creation of concepts that would correspond equally to the creative artistic practices of painters, filmmakers, musicians and writers. Deleuzian thinking is always correlated with something outside thinking, the "unthought in thought" which is a pure difference that cannot be assimilated into something we know. The confrontation with this "unthought" forces us to constantly re-imagine our own concepts. Thus this attempt can take place when philosophy is confronted with art, which also produces thinking, albeit not by formulating concepts, but by creating "affects" and "precepts."² Exploring the "unthought in thought" illuminates new

1 Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minnesota: Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 293.

2 "Perhaps this is the supreme act of philosophy: not so much to think THE plane of immanence as to show that it is there, unthought in every plane, and to think it in this way as the outside and inside of thought, as the not-external outside and the not-internal inside-that which cannot be thought and yet must be thought." In Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 59-60.

horizons beyond a relatively enclosed milieu, e.g. thinking about art in philosophical terms and vice versa. It may be also beneficial to consider thinking as a deterritorializing force literally relocating subject matter into new contexts which, however, can be quite distant from the original territory. Regarding thinking unthought in terms of contemporary fiction writing, “[t]hinking provokes general indifference. It is a dangerous exercise nevertheless” – challenging, fruitful yet slippery.³ Analogously, in this way I approach the complex nature of contemporary performance-based writings such as *The BRoKen WoRLD*, a novel by Tim Etchells which applies a Deleuzoguattarian critical apparatus. The complexity of Tim Etchells’ writing is derived from the author’s performance background; thus his texts logically reflect theatrical explorations of the relationship between fictions and the real, between the stage and auditorium, between art and life.

According to Deleuze, the complexity of life resembles philosophy; they are both in motion and duration, interconnected, yet located in a middle: “life does not itself have moments, [...] but only *between-times*, *between-moments*.”⁴ This interconnectedness, multiplicity and change-in-motion in Deleuze constitute the backbone of the most influential Deleuzoguattarian concept, the rhizome, a term originally referring to a plant system growing horizontally underground and sending out its roots and stems from many points.⁵ In the introductory chapter to *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari stress the rhizomatic relation *between* as opposed to the binary cause-and-effect nature of occidental thought. Rhizome “has neither beginning nor end, but always a middle (milieu) from which it grows and which it overflows,”⁶ thus rhizomatic thinking suggests non-hierarchy and multiplicity without clear origin (root) or centre as its source. A rhizomatic understanding of a text manifests a denial of the binary opposition between real and fictitious, reader and writer, text and the Other, and thus enables the inevitable coalescence of the (originally) two.

Similarly, Deleuze’s understanding of deterritorialization as located in fragmented, multiple, decentred systems supports the idea of fluid boundaries and a multiplicity of flows. In pursuing rhizomatic thinking within the reterritorialized space, the equally important Deleuzoguattarian concept of human subjectivity no longer supports the subject-object dichotomy, but invites heterogeneity. This interconnectedness is famously exemplified in *A Thousand Plateaus* in the relationship between the wasp and an orchid, both of which compose a rhizome which is transitory and blurs spatial boundaries or “limitations” of the two: “a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp.”⁷ To highlight interconnection, in this paper the relationship of a becoming and an object is signified by the expression *becoming-object*, as in a similar way the hyphenated *in-between* is the crucial concept of this paper.

Deterritorialization, another crucial concept for the present paper, can best be understood as a movement producing change. Deleuze and Guattari argue that a “positive value of deterritorialization [is] the ability to form new abstract machines.”⁸ As exemplified above, rhizomatic thinking as well as deterritorialization manifests the

3 Deleuze and Guattari *What is Philosophy?*, 41.

4 Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 29. Emphasis added.

5 Damian Sutton and David Martin-Jones, *Deleuze Reframed* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2008), 4.

6 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 21.

7 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 10.

8 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 190.

Deleuzoguattarian concern to overcome the dualistic framework which underpins western philosophy (being/nonbeing, life/death, original/copy and as argued below, reality/fiction or writer/reader). The rhizome can also be useful in dealing with this concept, e.g. in explaining deterritorialization via the metaphor of a forest: the force of new trees naturally uses sprouts and reseeding to deterritorialize; the forest thus complements the shift with its organic and slow process of reterritorialization. This very metaphor proves essentially powerful in considering all vanguard trends in modern art, where the avant-garde simply deterritorializes the order only to be later snatched up by the terminology of academia, critics and the overall critical art discourse.

It might be illuminating to note certain developments in the concept of deterritorialization. Originally, in *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari refer to deterritorialization as “a coming undone.”⁹ Later, in *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari regard it as a transversal process that “defines the creativity of an assemblage: a nonlinear and nonfiliative system of relations.”¹⁰ In rendering the crucial Deleuzoguattarian axiom of the undesignatable borderline between art and life, another phenomenon becomes applicable, the *becoming*.

With deterritorialization, the issue of becoming inevitably appears. Treated chiefly in *A Thousand Plateaus* but originally in *Anti-Oedipus*, becoming highlights “being” rather than to “be,” in other words, the fluid nature of identity. Sutton similarly argues that becoming - the result of the constant movement of identity leads to the creation of the rhizome.¹¹ As already stated, this implies that becoming as well as deterritorialization both carry productive quality and operate on the basis of continual change and connection. In his introduction to *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze argues that the goal of (literary) machines is always to produce something.¹² Thus the nature of a machine is to be active. Later, in *Anti-Oedipus* both Deleuze and Guattari postulate that between the metaphysical process and historical process of social production “there is nothing but an ongoing process of becoming that is the becoming of reality.”¹³

Because of its creative character, becoming is always positive. Becoming has a transformative capacity to produce alliances. It is a fluid process, “not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification.”¹⁴ According to Deleuze and Guattari, becoming is the pure movement evident in changes *between* particular events, often deducing differences between beginning and end, and also between the presence of the present and the absence of the past.¹⁵ Becoming is “involutionary, involution is creative. [...] But to involve is to form a block that runs its own line ‘between’ the terms in play and beneath assignable relations.”¹⁶ Laura Cull further stresses that for Deleuze minorities are closer to the

9 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (1977; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1992), 322.

10 Adrian Parr, *Deleuze Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 71.

11 Sutton and Martin-Jones *Deleuze Reframed*, 46.

12 Deleuze and Guattari *Anti-Oedipus*, 2.

13 Deleuze and Guattari *Anti-Oedipus*, 34.

14 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 237.

15 “A line of becoming is not defined by points that it connects, or by points that compose it; on the contrary, it passes *between* points, it comes up through the middle... a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination... A line of becoming has only a middle.... A becoming is neither one nor two, nor the relation of the two; it is the in-between. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 293. Emphasis in original.

16 Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 238-239.

creative, self-differentiating powers of life and share the “resistance to death, to servitude, to the intolerable, to shame, and to the present.”¹⁷ This said, becomings carry the quality of permanence and operate in the presence, as a kind of anti-memory.

The usefulness of the Deleuzian concept of becoming in the context of the relationship between artist, artwork and viewer is obvious. Adrian Parr stresses that becoming enables us to conceptualise the transformativity of the work’s witnessing as well as the process of the subjectification of performance by designating non-linear dynamic processes of change within their inter-relations - “the concept of art’s becoming is a fourfold becoming-minor of the artist, viewer, artwork and milieu.”¹⁸ This implies that artworks and milieu are equally interconnected and share corresponding proximal potentiality. Becoming is an operation of the social as well as personal identity which works through contagion, as Damian Sutton puts it.¹⁹ One can become-anyone through the operation of multiple mutual elements, from which the milieu, the spatiotemporal coordinates of here and now, is necessary for the transformation to become.

Becoming is the result of constant movement of identity, which leads to the creation of the rhizome. “To appreciate becoming as a fact of life, a stage of critical self-awareness, or even an ethical response is to appreciate how identity itself is formed through opposition, alterity and difference,”²⁰ Deleuze argues. As it seems, becoming as well as deterritorialization carry productive quality, both for those text-producing and those text-reading. The following part illustrates the transformative potentiality of recent fiction texts by Tim Etchells.

The BRoKen WoRLD by Tim Etchells

Tim Etchells is a well-known British artist, writer and the director of England’s renowned experimental theatre troupe Forced Entertainment. Etchells’ first and only novel so far, *The BRoKen WoRLD*, was published by Windmill Books in 2009 both as hardcover and paperback. At 432 pages it is by far his most elaborate literary project. Using this book I would like to illustrate the deterritorializing force of the environment which affects the main character’s identity, which inevitably towards the end of the book morphs into a becoming-avatar, a becoming-fiction. *The BRoKen WoRLD* by Tim Etchells depicts a process of writing online instructions how to complete a game called “Broken World” – a complex adventure game of several levels and many possible endings. As the main protagonist, the writer of the guide becomes more absorbed in the game, with his personal life inside / outside of it seeming more and more questionable and problematic. The story follows a typical Etchellsean illogical structure, yet the pattern is more-or-less linear, with the reader catching a glimpse of the end of the game at the end of the book.

The main protagonist, who remains unnamed throughout the book, is a social outcast who devotes his life to gaming; that he listens to heavy metal music, works in a “cooked circular food” (pizza) place and is dating the suburban girl Tory represents the only information provided about him. Due to his involvement in the game, his relationship with Tory is not particularly flourishing. Broken World, the computer game, is in fact a complex epic life-like maze where the main protagonist can choose to

17 Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* 110 cf. Laura Cull, *Theatres of Immanence: Deleuze and the Ethics of Performance* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 12.

18 Parr, *The Deleuze Dictionary*, 30.

19 Sutton and Martin-Jones, *Deleuze Reframed*, 49.

20 Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 46.

control one of two avatars, Roy and Rachel, who need to be periodically swapped out in order to complete the game. Both avatars embody stereotypical attributes of computer game characters: Ray is clever and brave, whereas Rachel can be described as Tory puts it “If You Have Got IT Why Not Flaunt It,” apparently a kind of Lara Croft progesterone-charged avatar. There is slippage and interconnectedness among the characters, the narrator/gamer versus two game avatars of different genders.

Similarly, also the interconnection of the labyrinthine world of the game can be considered a rhizome, an expanding world leading out without restricted points of access or a defined centre. Exploring the territory of such a rhizome is in fact not an act of colonisation/reterritorialization, but of manipulation and transformation of the space, therefore deterritorialization, as will be exemplified below. David Martin-Jones points out that when gaming we usually experience a game via an avatar. This deterritorialization from the gamer’s identity is executed, since “while learning to play more effectively, we transform ourselves.”²¹ This positive transformation occurs via the gamer’s immersion in the game, which results in the liberation of gamers from their usual identity. This positive deterritorializing liberation happens inevitably to the main protagonist of Etchells’ novel, whose identity becomes deterritorialized through this becoming-avatar. He eventually gives up his entire existence outside the game in the task of completing it.

Arguably the greatest strength of the book is exactly this amorphous dynamic permeating reality and PC game. Analogously to his theatrical praxis, the fiction literary works of Tim Etchells create certain palimpsests – his texts are rhizomes discreetly referenced throughout other works of both *Forced Entertainment* and *Tim Etchells*. The rhizomatic non-linearity can be perceivable as the author of the guide slowly starts to digress from the main task – a highly symptomatic element of Etchells’ writing; during the process of writing the walkthrough, the text becomes penetrated with deeper philosophical and seemingly unimportant details. The reality of the PC game comingles with the reality of the character, the description of whom is sometimes disturbed by the reality of book writing. Book writing/book reality/walkthrough writing in fact evolves in a twisted way into a life walkthrough gone-bad. Thus what happens is that the gamer is deterritorialized from the fictitious world which reterritorializes in his real milieu.

Written in “ich form” and *hic et nunc*, the text is very direct. Sometimes in the process of writing the walkthrough, the narrator becomes highly confessional, combining direct reader address with the here and now:

We are all so fucking fragile. I am breathing and I try to imagine you also breathing. Maybe your mouth – without speaking – makes the shapes of the words that my fingers are writing on the keyboard (sic). I guess that you and me are alone together. So fucking fragile, going forward in time(s).²²

This metatextual aspect illustrates how authorial appeal based on fragile confession deterritorializes the readers’ attention from the page. These immanence-provoking techniques are further observable based on the main protagonist’s subjugated nature, which evokes sympathy. The book is a collection of mistakes, glitches, imperfectness – “[t]o me they are just errors, not part of some big plan.”²³ The reader of Tim Etchells’ books as well as the spectator of *Forced Entertainment* productions is confronted by the absurdity of disengaging reality from the fictitious. Bizarre commands

21 Sutton and Martin-Jones, *Deleuze Reframed*, 16.

22 Etchells, *The BRoKen WoRLD*, 83.

23 Etchells, *The BRoKen WoRLD*, 97.

permeating real and computer life include the scene in which the game avatar and the gamer interconnect – “[d]o not Panic. Ray knows somehow if you are panicking and then the things start to get worse.”²⁴ A reader’s sympathy with the main protagonist extends to the degree to which she becomes more involved in the process of computer gaming. The author in his own words has a problem with “DETAIL. Like I cannot figure out which details really matter and which it’s better to ignore.” (sic)²⁵ Another distancing element is the inadvertent capitalization throughout the text, manifestations which according to the walkthrough writer could be intentional or unintentional, such as “PLEASE, CHECK THE BODY”²⁶ or the title of the book itself, *The BRoKeN WoRLD*, which is the result of a broken caps lock key. The chaotic capitalization appears comically authentic, since it highlights the flaws of the main character writing the guide.

Ennui, the mundane and boredom is a typical Etchellsean motif which also frequently appears in *The BRoKeN WoRLD*, in which the character describes how he must leave the game / game guide writing for three weeks.²⁷ In these moments of the game and actual guide nothing happens. In the book itself, however, readers are provided with more space to become acquainted with the writer’s philosophical contemplations. The approach “Look and you will not find. Keep that Don’t-know Mind,”²⁸ is a key to approach the game as well as to the book. In the game, Broken World avatars simply sometimes have to wait. Some participants have completed certain parts of the game without even moving for three week). Correspondingly, Deleuze’s notions of immanence, becoming and deterritorialization prove again useful. Martin-Jones highlights the interpretation of many critics of video gaming as metaphor for capitalism with its consuming, completing of tasks to collect points.²⁹ However, Broken World is a game of inactivity or non-causality, therefore anti-capitalistic. The total immersion in Broken World can be a positive experience for gamers of inner life, immanence, or simply “to lose themselves [in the game] for a while in a new identity,”³⁰ as Martin-Jones advocates, i.e. to deterritorialize.

The explosion of Etchells’ “giddyding fantasia” is apparent in his use of places, characters and attributes of the game: frozen time, museum of failures,³¹ deep freeze of history, special keys for slowness, weapon of silence – for example The Silence That Says I Am No Talking to You or The Silence That Says I Don’t Care If You Are Talking To Me or Not Asshole,³² time grenade, collection of discarded ifs,³³ a page from the *Tempest* (Shakespeare), wings of Icarus. Bizarre locations in the game include: NOWhere, Echoing Vaults of Never, Vacuum Chamber, Empty level, emptiness, the Jungle with its own language, mirrors of truth and mirrors of untruth or Jujitsu. Etchells also provides

24 Etchells, *The BRoKeN WoRLD*, 124.

25 Etchells, *The BRoKeN WoRLD*, 288.

26 Etchells, *The BRoKeN WoRLD*, 5.

27 Etchells, *The BRoKeN WoRLD*, 135.

28 Etchells, *The BRoKeN WoRLD*, 135.

29 Sutton and Martin-Jones, *Deleuze Reframed*, 20-21.

30 Sutton and Martin-Jones, *Deleuze Reframed*, 25.

31 Note the analogous relationship between the museum of failure with the Institute of Failure, established by Tim Etchells and Matthew Goulsh. See <http://www.institute-of-failure.com/> The penchant use of failure in the work of Forced Entertainment is treated in Jane Sarah Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure: Forced Entertainment, Goat Island, Elevator Service* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

32 Etchells, *The BRoKeN WoRLD*, 42.

33 Etchells, *The BRoKeN WoRLD*, 347.

the game with many unusual and unique skills, absurd to imagine: Obfuscation, Subterfuge, Hapsichord skills, Marauding, Dowsing, etc.³⁴ Like in other books by Tim Etchells, characters with palimpsestuous names appear, e.g. General Die Die, General El-Terminator, General Dare-to-Execute,³⁵ Zeus or “Judas” Serious Killer.³⁶ Besides introducing characters with unusual names, Etchells makes extensive use of metatextuality:

*[J]ust take a second to look at the security monitors. [...] If you stare at the monitors long enough you will soon see other things too – i.e. Glimpses of the Future and Glimpses of the Past. Look and be patient – then you will see [...] – it’s only a Glimpse of the Future or Past, but that’s more than just people get.*³⁷

The idea of “more just people get,” beyond its textual or theatrical essence is what makes the texts of Etchells make something; participants deterritorialize from the page (or stage), not only in terms of content, but also form. References beyond linear time and beyond the actual book challenge the dimension of spatiotemporal boundaries of book reading the use of reader-provoking tools such as metatextuality, direct address and formal provocations.

The language in *The BRoKen WoRLD* also proliferates with abbreviations, such as ppl, plz, bbq, IM, abt, Bro, LOL, LMAO, BS, which remind the reader of a computer-generated reality. The fragmentary nature and anti-textual meta-drive of the text is also apparent in crossed out instructions,³⁸ lines without text with merely a series of -----.³⁹ The book’s absurdity and authorial experimentation culminates on pages 224-232, where nonsensical symbols appear as if to resemble programming code, such as “TFGYU”“¥†⊗”“√√¥©”“”.[□] In the game the nonsensical symbols occupy almost four pages and present the actual instructions to make it through a certain level of the game. The same types of graphics are used in the *The BRoKen WoRLD* webpage.[□] The visual quality of the book’s frontispiece as well as the entire webpage aesthetically resemble the visual part of *Void Story* (2009), a performance by Forced Entertainment which premiered around the same time as the book publication. This description of the performance is also highly suggestive of the book:

A beleaguered pair of protagonists on a rollercoaster ride through the decimated remains of contemporary culture. Navigating one terrible cityscape after another, mugged, shot at and bitten by insects, pursued through subterranean tunnel systems, stowed away in refrigerated transport, shackled up in haunted hotels and lost in wildernesses, backstreets and bewildering funfairs, they travel to the centre of a night so intense that there are no stars to be seen.[□]

The gloomy post-apocalyptic atmosphere and disconcerting violent drive of both the performance and the book can be likened to other unsettling texts by Tim Etchells such as his short story collection, *Endland Stories*. Peter Billingham highlights Etchells’ “subversive re-dreaming of the social, cultural, and political world of late-twentieth-century and early-twenty-first-century Britain.”[□]

34 Etchells, *The BRoKen WoRLD*, 55-57.

35 Etchells, *The BRoKen WoRLD*, 185.

36 Etchells, *The BRoKen WoRLD*, 416.

37 Etchells, *The BRoKen WoRLD*, 24.

38 Etchells, *The BRoKen WoRLD*, 153.

39 Etchells, *The BRoKen WoRLD*, 213-214.

Finally, at the end of the game the player must kill their avatar and become a nonentity in order to win and to become himself again, to reterritorialize in his real life. At the end of the Broken World a voice narrates: "When I was small I thought that forests and the jungle were heaven."⁴⁰ Then everything explodes. This bombastic gesture signalling clear closure through reterritorializing not only resonates with the In-Yer-Face aesthetics but ultimately underpins what in connection with contemporary British theatre Anette Pankratz and Ariane de Waal call "the disappearance of the holy trinity of plot, character and the situation [which] appears as disturbing as the representation of pain and brutality."⁴¹ The absurdity of a kind of unity appearing out of disarray seems paradoxical, yet this situation manifests a certain aspect of the fragmented and brutalised aesthetics of Britain in the 2000s. Similarly to *Endland Stories*, the novel provides a sardonic computerized image of England at the turn of millennium, using a coalescence of the Etchellsean elements of rhizomatic connections, palimpsests, the use of proxemics via an intimate address to the readers/audience as well as twisted tacky aesthetics, all of which leads to a deterritorializing effect of the book-reading experience.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to demonstrate the idiosyncratic tools of writer and director Tim Etchells through which he explores the capacities of language and its possible performative effects and affects beyond the textual limits and spatial boundaries of the page. The dramaturgy of non-linearity and architecture of chaos inevitably stem from Etchells' lengthy devised creative process, which is analogous to his work with the Forced Entertainment company. The dynamic and seemingly illogical result stems from the collaboration of all theatre members and inevitably invites a reading through Deleuze and Guattari. The open systems of both the work of Deleuze/Guattari and texts by Etchells highlight potentiality and process, rather than straightforward solutions.

The ultimate pinnacle of Etchells' creative strategy – the rhizomatic interconnection between texts, theatre, the author and the recipient – contributes to the liminal experience of the in-between. Such an approach, which upsets expectations and challenges the recipient, manifests a figure of pure freedom. Such is the performative force of language of Tim Etchells - theatre & (its) life. Like the way that main character's life in the PC game called Broken World deterritorializes inside the game, the liminal space between the reader and the work of the text potentially deterritorializes the reader's identity, which always remains in motion. However much the gamer (or the reader) is colonising (reterritorializing) the space, the participant must manoeuvre (deterritorialize) to avoid being reterritorialized (captured or killed). Like the game, Etchells' texts create a rhizome, endlessly deterritorializing as the avatar moves into unknown territory.

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⁴⁰ Etchells, *The BROken WoRLD*, 224.

⁴¹ See thebrokenworld.net

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Jan Suk teaches at the Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Education, University of Hradec Králové. He has taught, lectured and published internationally on immersive theatre, Live Art, Gilles Deleuze & performance, especially within English context. His most recent research interests include performance and/as pedagogy, or performance and ecology stemming from the rich practice of contemporary British experimental theatre Forced Entertainment.