The Argentine theatre company El Periférico de Objetos’s recent production of Heiner Müller’s *Hamletmachine* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music—*Máquina Hamlet*—impressively highlighted the series of rifts inherent in Müller’s play: between texts and performances, characters and bodies, dialogue and voices. Fragments of Carl Weber’s English translation of *Hamletmachine* were projected as supertitles, putting Müller’s already difficult text in tension with the performance by suspending it above the stage, concurrent with the often riveting spectacle taking place below. The supertitle, ostensibly a means to create clarity, here produced a fracturing of the stage space. The titles (which were accompanied by distorted voices reading a Spanish translation of the German text) offered no clues to the action of the performers, but rather emphasized a sense of almost dizzying simultaneity, and, accelerating a design pervasive in *Hamletmachine*, helped to deflate the idea that words from texts necessarily govern theatrical performances. This textual instability was complemented with a deliberate confusing of the place of the actors on the stage as well. The performers’ bodies were largely secondary to a variety of dummies, ranging in size from mannequin to Barbie doll, which the performers manipulated, tortured, danced with, and gyrated against. The actors did not speak, but made sounds in the wake of the droning recorded voices that read excerpts from the text, as when, in an effective moment, three of the four cast members, outfitted in rat masks, squeaked as they scurried about a caged Ophelia, attempting to light her cigarette.

The sum effect of these mediations between the performers’ bodies and the audience—the dummies, the supertitles, the disembodied and verbally inarticulate voices, the masks—was to put us in a world without clear relationships between words and meanings, texts and performances, actors and audiences. Indeed, at one point, after a series of dance turns with life-sized puppets, the actors solicited applause, not for themselves, but for the lifeless forms, a Brechtian move to force renewed scrutiny in what exactly is transacted in theatrical spaces. Unlike Brecht, though, Müller was uncertain what audiences could legitimately get from theatre, even theatres of alienation. True to Müller’s aesthetic and political mode El Periférico de Objetos’s *Máquina Hamlet* did not deliver meanings but posed questions, most interestingly about the status of the text and the body in
performance. These are precisely the questions Müller was pondering in the late 1970s when he chose to interrogate them through *Hamlet*, and I am interested here in thinking about the particular ways that Müller’s text selects and adapts material from Shakespeare’s play. *Hamletmachine* is a species of intertextual performance, a script that consciously puts itself at the juncture of preceding dramatic forms and traditions. In this essay, I examine Müller’s use of Shakespeare in *Hamletmachine* to explore the cultural revision of literary authority that is staged in making *Hamlet* a vehicle for theorizing the relation between theatricality and political action.

If it is an interpretive cliché to begin any investigation of *Hamlet* with the question the play’s opening line poses for itself, “Who’s there?, asking that question of and through Müller’s *Hamletmachine* might reaffirm its interpretive force. *Hamletmachine*’s radically avant-garde aesthetic and its pointed refusal to present coherent, stable characters or settings responds to “Who’s there?” with a cacophony of indeterminate and contradictory answers. Müller engages Shakespeare’s play both to draw upon and challenge its status as a meaning producing mechanism, and in so doing demonstrates the potential of performance to revive and transform canonical texts.

*Hamletmachine*, despite its wide range of associations and connotations, is fundamentally a performance of *Hamlet*, and as such opens up a host of possibilities for rethinking and reinventing that play. To construct a performance text that takes off from *Hamlet* is to engage the Western dramatic tradition head on, citing and resignifying a legion of past and pre-formed behaviors and enactments. And yet the text of *Hamletmachine* seems calculated to vex translation to the stage. *Hamletmachine*’s means of enactment must continually renegotiate with theatre’s capacity to present the text. Its late and erratic use of speech prefixes (the first traditional indication of one occurs almost halfway through the play), its deliberate confusion of lines and stage directions (“Enters Horatio”) and the more unusual modes of embodiment the play suggests (“Ophelia. Her heart is a clock”) present a host of theoretical and practical staging quandaries (Müller, 54). Müller writes Brecht’s alienation effect into his playscript, so that what might be a familiar object, the text of a rewriting of *Hamlet*, is immediately disorienting, even shocking. This initial alienation, though, produces the realization that this text can only properly exist in performance. Transcriptions including “Ice Age” (58) and “The breast cancer radiates like a sun” (57) hover somewhere between incoherent stage talk and unimaginable stage directions, and are dependent on directors, actors, and producers to actualize them in some form.

Müller’s script works to “relocate the function of the text in the performance, conceive the text as material for labor, for the work of production” (Worthen, 1098). Staging the play challenges traditional and even avant-garde notions of theatre and foregrounds performativity—the continual practice of making a citable, loosely defined “text” real—as a precondition to experiencing the play. This foregrounding of performativity is partly achieved through *Hamletmachine*’s refusal to “look” like a citable playscript. But an emphasis on performativity is also embedded in the idea of Müller’s project, which is in the end one of sublation: he preserves and annuls
Shakespeare’s text in presenting us with a Hamlet play that both reiterates and remakes the classic story. It is through his rethinking of Ophelia in particular that he manufactures a novel approach to Shakespeare. *Hamlet* is a function, a meaning producing machine that Müller, from a postmodern, pre-1989 European perspective, attempts to *recalibrate* through performance.

I. “I’M NOT HAMLET”

As Kafka reminds us in his parable of the leopards, acts of desecration have a way of mutating or being redirected into acts of veneration, and Müller plays with this doubling potential throughout his short script, in which he simultaneously challenges and reaffirms *Hamlet’s* position as the ur-text of modernity. *Hamletmachine* asserts *Hamlet’s* centrality to the Western imagination, citing it as a starting point for posing questions about the status of the postmodern condition, solidifying it as iconic, even transcendent. However, Müller’s play also challenges *Hamlet’s* capacity to offer us meaningful answers. It has a profoundly ambivalent attitude towards its parent text and is at times as hostile to its ghostly ancestor as Hamlet is in awe of his. *Hamletmachine* is finally both an act of iconoclasm and idolatry.

Müller’s own identification with *Hamlet* was professional and personal. *Hamletmachine* bears obvious traces of his frequent work as a translator of Shakespeare, notably of *Hamlet*, while his troubled relationship to his real and his many artistic fathers made the play resonate for him in a deep and emotional way. He explains in an interview: “For thirty years *Hamlet* was a real obsession for me, so I tried to destroy him by writing a short text, *Hamletmachine*” (Kalb, 108). But *Hamletmachine* is less an act of destruction than an act of intervention and negotiation. At one point early in *Hamletmachine*, the initial speaker, addressing a possible projection of his father’s ghost, cries out “What do you want of me?” (54). Like its parent text, Müller’s play provokes the question of what debts the living owe the dead, to what extent the past can be revisited and remade through performance, and, in its alienating self awareness, points finally to *Hamlet’s* own status as a text that begs to be read meta-theatrically.

The overlay of iconoclasm and idolatry in *Hamletmachine* is literalized on stage when, at a critical moment, Müller’s own photograph is torn. Müller’s “presence” in the performance of the play calls our attention to his attempt to write himself and his speakers into dialogue with Shakespeare and a host of other authorial ancestors—including Brecht, Artaud, and Genet to name a few—as a response to political and social tyranny, while the dismembering of his image effaces the efficacy of such acts of self-interpellation. The tearing of the photograph is metonymic of Müller’s larger project of sublation, as he preserves and annuls his own authority while preserving and annulling the authority of *Hamlet*. Non-representational, *Hamletmachine* is itself a kind of representation—a stand-in for *Hamlet*—but is engaged in a struggle to displace and reinvent representational theatre as a space for political action. In problematizing the representation of truth and legitimate power while
concluding with a vision of aborted resistance to tyranny, *Hamletmachine* suggests both the limits and the potential efficacy of a deliberately non-representational theatre to make political critiques.

Müller has said that the figure of Hamlet represents “the intellectual in conflict with history” (Müller, 50). The first section of *Hamletmachine* explores this conflict through a speech that is bereft of a speech prefix, the words coming from no determinable origin, transmitting a harrowing rehearsal of Hamlet's basic components. Müller titles his opening “Family Scrapbook,” an appellation that emphasizes the text's concerns with kinship and memory, and the individual's confrontation with historical fragments that are arranged together but do not necessary announce a coherent narrative. The speaker begins “I was Hamlet. I stood at the shore and talked with the surf BLABLA, the ruins of Europe in back of me,” a gesture toward identification that simultaneously establishes historical topicality and distance. The speaker can place himself within the age-old fictional persona of Hamlet, but is living in the aftermath of World War II and the instantiation of communist rule in the East. In the center BLABLA cries out as a symbol of the confusion and inarticulation this gesture produces. He delivers his version of his father's funeral as an invective diatribe in which “murderer and widow” comprise a couple, in which he himself carves his father's dead flesh and dispenses it to the crowd while his mother and uncle have sex on the casket: “LET ME HELP YOU UP UNCLE, OPEN YOUR LEGS MAMA” (53). The speaker “was Hamlet” but he knows Hamlet's story already and is not eager to follow it precisely. He demands of his dead father “What's your corpse to me?” (54), anticipating and pre-empting any attempt to galvanize him to action, even going so far as to announce “Tomorrow morning has been canceled,” a fantasy of stopping time that is more explicitly fleshed out later in the play.

This move toward effacing a linear progression toward some kind of confrontation or conclusion is at heart a desire to sever any sense of duty to the future or the past—and yet as we see later in *Hamletmachine*, the eternal present does not offer much solace either. Müller has emphasized in interviews his belief in the importance of maintaining the lines of communication with the past—in particular, a “dialogue with the dead” (Kalb, 15). “Family Scrapbook” traces the failure of such dialogue ever really to take place, and emphasizes the masturbatory quality the attempt takes on. Müller has also said that *Hamletmachine* represents for him a stopping point for his career because that work marks an era in which “No substance for dialogue exists anymore because there is no more history” (Kalb, 107). The postmodern acceleration of the long-standing project to problematize history as a linear, rational record of impartial facts and events leaves Müller's speakers uprooted and adrift. They are unable to reconceive their position in accordance with attempts to deconstruct what our relationship to history means, particularly a history that is constructed to facilitate a corrupt order. The speaker's confrontation with the dead and the absent is a monologic rant, full of fear and self loathing and confusion about exactly what constitutes the past and what the past constitutes. The imbrication of the family
story and the state’s story has produced a vituperative and solipsistic interiority that causes the speaker to shout out to a nightmarish landscape of memories, ghosts, and fractured selves—but significantly, not to the present or embodied sources of his angst.

As the initial pronouncement “I was Hamlet” transforms quickly into “I was playing Hamlet” (54), we are reminded of the moment in Act V of Shakespeare’s play when, observing his usurping uncle, transgressing mother, and rival Laertes mourning the drowned Ophelia, Hamlet steps forth to deliver the strange and politically saturated line “This is I, / Hamlet the Dane,” a self announcement that comes at the moment of his potential dissolution as a subject. This moment of self-affirmation fails to really propel the course of events towards anything like a logical or directed resolution. The chaotic ending of Hamlet—best summed up by Horatio as a spectacle of “carnal, bloody and unnatural acts”—affirms that Hamlet has not managed to assume a self directing agency or subjectivity that allows any degree of control over the unfolding of events. His desire for Horatio to remain to tell his story signals his realization that what he leaves behind is an incoherent narrative that will speak only too clearly of the bizarre and unstable course of his troubled recent past. Hamlet’s two dying wishes conflict, however. Horatio remains ready to tell Hamlet’s story and recuperate his potentially wounded name, while Fortinbras, to whom Hamlet gives his “voice” for the Danish throne, takes up that position only to assert his own discursive agency over the prince’s narrative. Newly installed as arbiter of authoritative discourse, Fortinbras characterizes Hamlet’s story as one that never takes place, making an official pronouncement on its meaning even before Horatio provides his unique knowledge of the play’s events. Ordering Hamlet’s body to be taken up and given military honors he says: “Bear Hamlet like a soldier to the stage, / For he was likely, had he been put on / To have proved most royal,” a strange temporal construction that articulates but also denies Hamlet’s drama and even his coming into being as a subject. The exclamation “This is I, Hamlet the Dane” is quite as far as Hamlet ever gets in telling his own story, and the apparent confidence of selfhood it exhibits is belied by his proto-existentialism throughout.

For the Hamletmachine speaker, identity and identification fracture at precisely the moment that politics, time, and space impinge upon his attempts to identify with Hamlet. At the moment when rage is confronted with the potential of action, and the “now time” of a revolution, the speaker announces “I’m not Hamlet,” from the speech prefix “THE ACTOR PLAYING HAMLET” (56). The speaker’s announcement that “I don’t take part anymore,” accompanied by textual prompts indicating that stagehands are moving props in and out while he delivers his lines participates in the play’s self awareness of itself as a textual construct but also goes well beyond a gesture at meta-theatricality. The abnegation of the Hamlet identification specifically precedes the speaker’s return to a vision of the “plot” as it exists in Hamletmachine—the place of an Eastern European intellectual in the face of corrupt authority and possible revolt. The ACTOR PLAYING HAMLET’s disavowal of a Hamlet-like position comes through contemplating the moment of revolution and the possibility of coming into being as a subject that this moment presents. What
the moment of revolution in fact produces is a split sense of self. The speaker envisions himself both with and against the crowd, as both revolutionary and reactionary: “I string up my uniformed flesh by my own heels” and more explicitly “My drama, if it still would happen, would be on both lines of the front, between the frontlines, over and between them” (54). He looks on at an imagined landscape of overturned cars and overturned police officers in which he is by turns passive and active. In his fantasy of revolution his split sense of self is immobilizing: “I shake my fist at myself who is behind the bullet proof glass” (56).

The abnegation of Hamlet as an identity in Hamletmachine is in part an abnegation of the passing of time. For THE ACTOR PLAYING HAMLET “My drama doesn’t happen anymore.” This thought, coupled with the crucial pronouncement, “My drama, if it still would happen, would happen in the time of the uprising” (56) creates a troubled temporality where linear progress and the eventness of history is suppressed and deferred, and mutates into an eternal present of nausea. The word “nausea,” repeated several times as the text becomes increasingly fragmented, helps mark out THE ACTOR PLAYING HAMLET’s own trajectory into utter fragmentation and inertia. The descent into nausea is defined as the condition of the intellectual who is paralyzed to act, decide, or even think coherently any longer. This powerlessness is the extreme realization of Hamlet’s own famous dilemmas. Both plays are fundamentally about the failure of drama to take place and the struggle to articulate and make sense of this failure through discourse, foregrounding the inability of a subject to locate a stable sense of identity as a mobilizing point for action. But Hamletmachine radically accelerates Hamlet’s troubling of the coherent subject by reducing the competing voices to the projections of a single speaker. Hamlet needs Horatio to tell his “story” properly, as a validation of his actions, and Fortinbras arrives to impose his reading of Hamlet’s pre-empted subjectivity. THE ACTOR PLAYING HAMLET is both the paralyzed subject and the narrator of his paralysis.

At one point, Müller has a speaker declare “The script has been lost . . . In his box the prompter is rotting,” (56) calling attention to the Hamletmachine world’s lack of stable referents or desirable models of action from which to derive a sense of self. More profoundly, at this moment Müller troubles the idea of Hamlet as an effective cultural “prompter.” Practically, this means that the confrontation of the two texts exposes the failure of the type of literary typology that Müller’s notion of Hamlet as the “intellectual in conflict with history” posits. It is a failed identification that is articulated as such within Hamletmachine, with the announcement at the moment of revolution of “I’m not Hamlet.”

Müller, it has been argued, is interested in complicating Brecht’s drive to produce a morally explicit play, or a moral at all, a move one critic reads as an attempt to replace the “closed” form of the Brechtian parable with ‘open’ dramatic forms” (Kalb, 19). Müller challenges the notion that defamiliarization and alienation render “moral” lessons legible. Hamletmachine is an alienated performance of Hamlet, and this alienation foregrounds, contrary to Brecht’s impulses, the lack of moral in
Shakespeare’s play. (Brecht’s reading of Hamlet in *A Short Organum on the Theatre* imposes a moral pattern, applicable to his contemporary moment, onto the play.) The confrontation between the texts makes the equivocal nature of *Hamlet*’s ending clearer when juxtaposed with the more direct and frightening conclusion to *Hamletmachine*.

While *Hamletmachine* does trace an anti-moralistic trajectory, in my view it nonetheless produces a “lesson”: Müller reconstitutes the Brechtian fable by transmitting what might be called an “open” moral in *Hamletmachine*, open because it is rooted in the transformative potential of intertextual performance. This potential in the case of *Hamletmachine* and *Hamlet* is dependent on definitive breaks between the plays. Beyond his complication of the Hamlet figure, it is Müller’s reworking of Ophelia that produces this rupture between text and ur-text, providing a characterization through which he explores his fascination with the violent forms of resistance the exercise of authority creates.

**II. THE OPHELIA FACTOR(Y)**

Müller juxtaposes THE ACTOR PLAYING HAMLET’s disavowal of identity with a bold assertion in Section Two, “The Europe of Women”: “I am Ophelia” (54). Ophelia is presented as a speech prefix, but also as a split persona, the script reading “OPHELIA (Chorus/Hamlet).” From this indeterminate origin, a history quickly emerges, one that takes off from associations with *Hamlet* but quickly moves into a series of identifications with women silenced through what appear to be acts of self-violence:

> I am Ophelia. The one the river didn’t keep. The woman dangling from the rope. The woman with her arteries cut open. The woman with the overdose. SNOW ON HER LIPS. The woman with her head in the gas stove. (54)

The speech prefix’s double quality puts the assertion of identity in question, so that we are left wondering how stable or coherent the speaker is, and gestures toward collapsing the play’s presentation of Ophelia and Hamlet, both radically unstable identities. Through emphasizing the utterance’s gender-specific origins—“I’m alone with my breasts my thighs my womb”—Müller both complicates further the confused speech prefix and foregrounds the significance of the gender and sexuality issues organized around the figure of Ophelia. Ophelia’s sexuality is obsessively discussed and monitored throughout *Hamlet*. Polonius and Laertes take a patriarchal interest in preserving Ophelia as an unsullied feminine commodity of exchange, while Gertrude, in a strange and morbid moment, tosses flowers on Ophelia’s grave, wishing they had instead decorated a wedding bed. For Hamlet, Ophelia’s participation in her father’s surveillance scheme confirms his darkest misogynist attitudes: “I have heard of your [women’s] paintings, well enough. God hath given you one face, and you make yourselves another.” As with certain other moments I have discussed,
Hamletmachine works here to distill a fundamental point out of Hamlet, reminding us of the play's investment in confronting male horror at female sexuality. And yet Müller also fundamentally reinvents Ophelia's characterization by giving her a voice that speaks back to everyone who is preoccupied with her body and her potential desire. “The Europe of Women” moves from this brief opening self-announcement to a powerful and surprising series of violent and horrific images and actions:

I smash the tools of my captivity, the chair the table the bed. I destroy the battlefield that was my home . . . I smash the window. With my bleeding hands I tear the photos of the men I have loved and who have used me on the bed on the table on the chair on the ground. I set fire to my prison. I throw my clothes into the fire. I wrench the clock that was my heart out of my breast. I walk into the street clothed in my blood. (54–55)

According to the play's putative stage directions, Section 4 takes place in “Space 2, as destroyed by Ophelia” (55), indicating that her words were accompanied by corresponding actions. Each speech act is literalized and endows Ophelia with a heightened sense of agency to produce effects in the world. In Hamlet, Ophelia's abjection and frustration over her brother's absence, her father's murder, and Hamlet's inscrutable behavior are internalized to the point of madness and eventual self-violence. In Hamletmachine, this frustration and abjection is exteriorized and her violence is directed outward. This rechanneling of violent energy is enacted most explicitly in Hamletmachine's last scene, in which, identifying with an archetypal avenger, she delivers the play's final words:

This is Electra speaking. In the heart of darkness. Under the sun of torture. To the capitals of the world. In the name of the victims. I eject all the sperm I have received. I turn the milk of my breasts into lethal poison. I take back the world I gave birth to. I choke between my thighs the world I gave birth to. I bury it in my womb. Down with the happiness of submission. Long live hate and contempt, rebellion and death. When she walks through your bedrooms carrying butcher knives you'll know the truth. (58)

Overlaying associations with Greek tragedy, Lady Macbeth, European terrorist groups, and the Manson family, Müller produces a chilling finale in which the language of subversion and active resistance is coded as pathologized violence, in effect providing the play's moral. Ophelia's comments, all directed on some level as a strike against hegemonic inscription, signal her as not merely unruly but monstrous. Her abnegation of motherhood, nurture, and other cultural expectations of femininity mark her as the Lady Macbeth-like “unsexed” woman, whose ambition and lust for power borders on the demonic, while her identification with Electra positions her as relentless, single minded, and willful in seeking a vengeance that is outside prescribed social codes. It is the play's final line that reverberates most powerfully. Müller's Ophelia appropriates the language of the Manson family, the monsters of 1960s American counter culture. It is through this appropriation and
symbolic identification that Müller is able to expose the ability of authoritative power structures to produce resistance strategically and for their own ends.

The Manson family was at heart a counter-cultural social movement. Obsessed with American race relations and bourgeois individualism, Charles Manson’s imagined Helter Skelter was an apocalyptic vision of overturning and reinventing normative social structures—a time when the “pig Christian wealthy Americans” were going to be taken down. It was also fundamentally unfocused, irrational, and barbaric. In its overt repulsiveness the Manson movement—perhaps due in particular to its confused and disturbing racial component—was conservative America’s ideal symbol of radicalism’s destructive and horrific nature, and provided a rationale for the maintenance of a strong normative order. Ophelia’s engagement with this rhetoric participates in Müller’s fascination with the violent forms of resistance the exercise of authority creates. European terrorism and American extremism were topical to Müller’s writing of Hamletmachine, and the play’s last line, a quote from Squeaky Fromme, held for Müller a “truth” which stands out as the kernel of meaning the complicated and overdetermined husk of the text contains (Müller, 51).

Performance opens up spaces to rethink and rework what is being cited. Ophelia’s emergence as a threatening voice of defiant rage politicizes Hamlet’s gender issues and forces us to confront the reality of symbolic and literal violence against women as a condition of tyranny. Ophelia’s words are evocative of systematized rape and torture and her reaction is both inspiring and troubling. Her conviction to resist her incorporation into patriarchal structures could be read as a gesture toward a feminist recuperation of Ophelia, while her appropriation of the language of terrorism creates her as a figure with whom identification provokes uneasiness. Müller further complicates his depiction of Ophelia by creating tension between her language and her embodied status on stage. While she delivers her final lines, she is immobilized in a wheelchair, as men wrap gauze around her, leaving her virtually covered “from bottom to top” (58). Müller explicitly symbolizes the way in which her words actually further restrict rather than liberate her, as the language she employs makes her such a radically alienated and unsocialized subject that her suppression by the state comes to be seen as proper and even necessary.

Müller has said that his “Ophelia character is a criticism of Hamlet” (Müller, 50), and Hamletmachine is indeed a powerful intervention into the Hamlet story in its careful attention to gender and violence against women as a potential point of resistance. Hamlet is a play filled with misogyny and an abject fear of female voice and desire while Hamletmachine confronts and explores the troubled negotiations and contests with which female voice and desire are entangled. However, Ophelia’s turn from internalizing her frustration and imploding in Hamlet to externalizing it and striking out in Müller is ultimately coded as fundamentally wrong-headed. Ophelia’s violence is a response to oppression but it is a regressive response that provokes state sanctioned violence to restore order, initiating a perhaps endless cycle
of violent transactions between rulers and the ruled in which a state’s claim to the right of a monopoly on “legitimate” violence gains validation through the confused and irrational forms of resistance it produces—working as an ideological control to ensure that aggressive resistance is localized and criminalized.

III. WHO’S (STILL) THERE?

In the same way that Baz Lurhmann’s film version of Romeo and Juliet playfully and radically asserts its fetish for pervasive citation and its remove from the “original” text, Hamletmachine references everything from T.S. Eliot to Coca-Cola, and establishes its postmodern Cold War context as a point of tension with the ur-text that must be negotiated (Worthen, 1104). Hamletmachine follows Hamlet’s interest in interrogating the relationship between individuals and ruling structures, but reconstitutes that struggle by playing it out in the context of Cold War Eastern Europe. Hamlet responds to corrupt authority with an inner struggle that is exteriorized in subversive speech and rash actions: he is an unruly subject and a threat to normative power structures but his inability to mobilize around a strong sense of identity prohibits him from producing any truly meaningful resistance. The overturning of corruption that the play depicts is largely accidental and what we know of Fortinbras, the new leader that emerges, hardly predicts the beginning of a new moral order. Hamlet, then, offers an equivocal message about the potential for subjects to be able to resist illegitimate structures of authority. Hamletmachine’s speaker identifies with Hamlet as a mode of dealing with his condition as an intellectual in the face of the postmodern totalitarian state, but this identification ultimately fails to yield a mobilizing point for any kind of resistance or even compliance, instead producing a radically alienated subject who descends into fragmented inertia. Unlike Hamlet, the Hamletmachine speaker never holds any threat toward the power structures that disgust him because he cannot confront or even locate them. He instead confronts a series of fractured memories and self projections. The normative order that hovers over Hamletmachine is ubiquitous and unavoidable, but insidiously dispersed and barely visible.

Violence as a response to tyranny is perhaps the most provocative intertextual issue that emerges from a consideration of these texts. Hamletmachine shares Hamlet’s bloody thoughts, so that in both plays violence is a constant undercurrent. Müller reworks Hamlet to more explicitly emphasize the extent to which all transactions between rulers and subjects are imbued with symbolic and literal forms of violence: law and counter-law, domination and resistance, affirmation and transgression, all involve the deployment of violent acts. “I don’t want to die anymore, I don’t want to kill anymore” (57) says THE ACTOR PLAYING HAMLET at a point of mental and discursive exhaustion, a fantasy of escaping from the cycle of killing or dying in the name of or in defiance of normative authority. And yet he cannot avoid the realization that “Somewhere bodies are torn apart so I can dwell in my shit . . . somewhere bodies are being opened so I can be alone with my blood” (57); the
violent exercise of power is a condition for his existence, which in his self-loathing has been reduced to a state of utter abjection.

Anger, contempt, and violence saturate *Hamletmachine*, a move that reminds us of *Hamlet*’s own dark and dangerous texture, but that more explicitly asserts the violent character of the exercise of power. Hamlet dies knowing that there are inexorable limits to the extent he can assert discursive control over his story, that for him, “The rest is silence.” Silence is an end for Hamlet and a precursor to a new externally imposed order for Denmark. Müller’s characters are faced with a whirlwind of images, discourses, and past texts, a maddening heap of meanings and pressures that exert a violent restraint over individuals, producing either nausea or futile and bloody resistance. Müller’s text argues that for the postmodern subject the rest is alienation, frustration, and violence.

Although the play itself delivers a dark moral—and this was likely Müller’s sole intention—the text becomes an enabling device in that it demonstrates the potential for remaking through intertextual performance. Müller engages Shakespeare as a monolithic meaning producing machine and exposes the extent to which Shakespearean texts fail to deliver closed or stable meanings. The failure of *Hamlet* as such a machine frees us from feeling bound to it for deriving a sense of self or a model of action. The Ophelia character’s departure from the parent text implies that past texts, scripts, and performable objects are never stable or fixed and always subject to re-negotiation. Through re-opening *Hamlet* and simultaneously re-emphasizing and re-directing its underlying concerns Müller calls our attention to the possibilities for transformation that performance promises. However, despite the iconoclasm of challenging *Hamlet*’s status as a source of cultural authority, Müller’s text does confirm its iconic status. *Hamletmachine* affirms the need to revisit and engage with past texts and asserts that such engagements are a means of coping with the histories of the present that we continually write and revise.

“Who’s there?” remains a vexing question. We ask it of texts and texts force us to ask it of ourselves. Müller’s approach to *Hamlet* seeks answers to that question from Shakespeare, from himself, and from his audience. *Hamletmachine* does not return a clear answer but it revives the question and perhaps even remakes it in a fundamental way. It asserts the force of “Who’s there” as an interpretive tool, but reminds us that it is an open-ended question that acknowledges open-ended and multi-layered answers. Müller’s play is an act of re-signification that reaffirms much of what we already take from *Hamlet* but that also re-inscribes our understanding of it in a postmodern cultural context, so that in its enactment we see the potential for new subject positions to emerge from and in old texts.
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