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**“Any number is a shock”:  
figuring humanity in Caryl Churchill’s *A Number***

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After Churchill’s experimentation with plot and dialogue in plays such as *Heart’s Desire*, *Blue Kettle* or *Hotel*, the minimalistic play *A Number* (Royal Court, 2002) presented her audience with a sobering return to a realist form and a straightforward plot. The variations and simultaneous possibilities which had provided the dramatic structure of her recent work seemed to become the theme of her new play. When *A Number* was first produced in 2002, cloning was a much debated issue, since Britain had legalized the cloning of human embryos for therapeutic purposes in 2001. While cloning for reproductive purposes remained illegal, Britain was the first country to legalize it for research.

Churchill however does not only treat science as a technological force within society, but approaches it as a mode of self-representation. As her title indicates, she is interested in the language of science, the discourse it constructs about humanity – in this case the reduction of man to a repeatable formula. I will argue that this exploration of mathematized humanity brings the stage to question its own modes of enquiry and representation. Scientific knowledge thus provides a mirror in which the stage examines and defines its own role: what kind of figure should the theatre create for humanity, in a society where scientific representations are increasingly influential, and knowledge defined as quantification and mathematical description? Should the stage be a space in which knowledge of the human is constructed, or is it perhaps a space in which a certain type of analytical, rational approach is resisted? Throughout the play the frequent repetition of the verb ‘to know’ draws attention to its many different meanings, and its elusive quality for the audience.

I suggest that Churchill defines her theatre as an *unknowledgeable* space, a space whose function is to counterbalance logical, analytical descriptions of the human and to provide the possibility of an ethical gaze that is not hemmed in by rationalistic discourse. The ethical potential of *A Number* is visible in the absences and blanks of the text, in blind spots which invite the ethical gaze, rather than in the presence of a rational discussion of the issue. This paper begins by exploring the mathematization of identity at work in *A Number*, and the invasion of the dialogue by numbers and quantifiers. I then show that Churchill's stage defines itself in opposition to the scientific worldview it suggests, as a non-analytical space which disappoints the expectations of a play of ideas and resists the rule of *logos* and causal analysis by privileging non-epistemic modes. Finally, I analyse the failure of ethical relations within the play and examine to what extent it engages the responsibility of the spectator within the pre-logical space of the gaze.

### **Mathematizing humanity**

In *A Number*, the possibility of human cloning is explored through a series of encounters between Salter and three of his sons. One is his original son, two others are clones, and we learn during the play that a total of twenty-one clones have been made of this one original, although Salter himself had only asked for one “copy”, which was intended to replace his first son. Churchill is tapping here into a popular theme of science fiction, but the originality of her treatment lies in the fact that her characters' crisis of identity becomes a discursive crisis, a failure of self-expression and of narrative identity. From the opening lines, in which Salter does not ask *how* or *why* the cloning was performed, but *how many* clones there are, and then goes on to ask *how much* money can be made from them, the replacement of qualification by quantification is obvious. We shall see that it contaminates notions both of identity and of morality.

As Poincaré points out in his *Science et méthode*, mathematics is the art of giving the same name to different things: “[l]a

mathématique est l'art de donner le même nom à des choses différentes" (Poincaré 32). In *A Number*, this art is shown through its perverse effects, and one of the most striking linguistic features of the play is the absence of names within the dialogue. This absence is already suggested by the title and the printed text, where the first two sons are referred to as "B1" and "B2", and in the dialogue none of the characters ever call each other or refer to each other by their names. In the absence of names, numbers are omnipresent and function as a means, and sometimes the only means, of identification. The only initial description we are given of the characters is their age, and age is also the main distinguishing feature of other people mentioned in the dialogue. B2 refers to the scientists responsible for the cloning in purely quantifying terms:

SALTER. Who did you see?

B2. Just some young, I don't know, younger than me.

SALTER. So who did it?

B2. He's dead, he was some old and they've just found the records and they've traced

SALTER. So we sue the hospital. (*A N*, 6)<sup>1</sup>

Age replaces other forms of description, names and even nouns disappear, and this numerical identification is confirmed in the last scene, when Salter's mathematician son tells him about his children: "boy and girl twelve and eight and now a baby well eighteen months" (*A N*, 43). The inability to name is a recurring stylistic feature whenever the characters speak about the cloning or their own identity: naming is replaced by impersonal, neutral words such as "thing" or "it", and nouns are often suppressed or delayed by Churchill's stuttering, overlapping dialogue.

In the opening scene, B2 tells his father he has just learnt he has "a number" of clones, but does not know how many exactly:

B2. I didn't think of asking.

SALTER. I can't think why not, it seems to me it would be the first *thing* you'd want to know, how far has this *thing* gone, how many of these *things* are there?

B2. Good, so if *it* ever happens to you

SALTER. No you're right

B2. No it was stupid, it was shock, I'd known for a week before I went to the hospital but *it* was still

SALTER. It is, I am, the shocking *thing* is that there are *these*, not how many but at all

B2. Even one

SALTER. Exactly, even one, a twin would be a shock

B2. A twin would be a surprise but *a number*

SALTER. A number any number is a shock.

B2. You said *things*, these *things*

SALTER. *I said?*

B2. You called them *things*. I think we'll find they're people.

SALTER. Yes of course they are, they are of course.

B2. Because *I'm one*. [...] we just happen *to have identical be identical identical genetic* (*A N*, 3-5, my emphases)

The disappearing nouns are either erased (“these...”, “identical identical genetic...”) or replaced by “things”, deictics (“it”, “these”) and quantifiers (“a number”; “I’m one”), and the word “clone” is noticeably absent, and indeed never appears in the play. This opening exchange contains several stylistic principles that will be observed throughout the play: on the one hand the dialogue’s reliance on aposiopesis and progression through repetition and accumulation; on the other, the difficulty of naming and the disappearance of nouns, leaving an impression of vagueness and an increased focus on quantifiers, thereby highlighting the reduction of people to objects. By using numbers to designate her characters, Churchill inscribes the haunting presence of the Holocaust and its reification of humanity in the text of her play. Although this analogy is not explicitly developed, Salter’s sons are repeatedly reified: B2 describes B1 as “something terrible which is exactly the same genetic person” (*A N*, 29), Salter tells B1 that he abandoned him because “you were this disgusting thing by then anyone in their right mind would have squashed you” (*A N*, 40), and later Salter tries to provoke his third son, Michael Black, into expressing an opinion by insisting that “there are things there are things that are what you are” (*A N*, 48). When people are not reduced to things, they belong to categories introduced by indefinite articles: B1’s mother for example becomes “a person under a train” (*A N*, 30).

Talking about human beings has thus become problematic, and numerical description gradually replaces failing narrative identities. In each scene, the relations between the characters depend on a request for a story: in Scene 1, B2 asks Salter about his origins; in Scene 2, B1 asks him about his childhood and his haunting memory of shouting for his father in the night; in Scene 3, B2 asks Salter again about his mother; in Scene 4, Salter asks B1 for an account of the murder he has just committed and for memories of their years together, which he himself “doesn’t remember”; finally, in Scene 5, Salter simply asks Michael Black to “tell him about himself”. However, none of these desires for narrative are satisfied. They are answered by silence, lies, or answers which remain incomplete. The characters are unable to construct their narrative identities, and B2 emphasizes that “we can’t know what we’re it’s too complicated to disentangle all the causes” (*A N*, 35). This narrative breakdown is finally confirmed in Salter’s encounter with his mathematician son, who provides a numerical definition of humanity in which narrative identity has disappeared completely and syntagmatic progression is replaced by paradigmatic variation:

MICHAEL BLACK. We've got ninety-nine per cent the same genes as any other person. We've got ninety per cent the same as a chimpanzee. We've got thirty per cent the same as a lettuce. Does that cheer you up at all? I love about the lettuce. It makes me feel I belong. (*A N*, 50)

Finally this quantification is also applied to ethical values, which are perverted into *value* in the singular – financial gain – and emptied of their meaning. In Salter’s lines, moral words are travestied into the lexical field of lawsuits and money. Terms such as “value”, “rights” are redefined as countable assets:

SALTER. But it’s you, part of you, the value

B2. The value of those people

SALTER. Yes

B2. And what is the value of

SALTER. There you are, who knows, priceless, and they belong

B2. No

SALTER. They belong to you, they should belong to you, they’re made from your

B2. They should

SALTER. They've been stolen from you and you should get your rights (*A N*, 6-7)

As a consequence, the lexical field of acquisition contaminates the dialogue and human beings are referred to as possessions which can be acquired. B2 imagines the cloning as a commercial transaction, "there were a number a number of us made somehow and you were one of the people who acquired, something like that" (*A N*, 12), and Salter protests that the additional cloning "wasn't part of the deal" (*A N*, 14). Moreover, when B2 and Salter talk about his responsibility, valuing words such as "good" are emptied of their meaning, as the deterministic vision of man cancels out the possibility of free will or ethical action: as Salter repeats "I was good I tried to be good I was good to you" (*A N*, 34), the repetition only hollows out the word into an empty shell haunted by forgotten meaning.

Genetic science is thus not the only target of Churchill's play: cloning functions as a metonymy of a technological, calculating society, in which the hyperrationalization of human behaviour threatens the possibility of ethical discourse. Reflecting on the difference between rationality and calculation, Edward Bond suggests that our society has replaced the former by the latter, as it struggles to see clear in the "shadow" or the "dying light" of the Enlightenment: "[n]ous vivons dans l'ombre des Lumières ou dans leur crépuscule [...]. Au lieu de raisonner nous calculons" (Tuailon 7). This expression could well describe the characters in *A Number*, as calculation has invaded their attempts at self-definition and ethical positioning. But whereas Bond's remark springs from his vision of the stage as a rational space, Churchill's play does not provide any rationalized criticism of the calculations she portrays. Her stage responds to the threat of science by becoming a non-analytical space.

### **The stage as a non-analytical space**

Churchill's stage presents three characteristics which prompt me to describe it as non-analytical: the absence of a theoretical

position, the preference for non-epistemic modes within the *fabula*, and the disabling of the analytical gaze.

Genetic science and scientists are notably absent from *A Number*. The voice of research remains silent, and the “doctors” are only a ghostly presence, a science-fiction cliché: “some mad scientist” according to Salter (*A N*, 4). With the exception of Michael Black’s percentages, the play does not contain any genetic discourse, and the vocabulary used by the characters remains commonplace, based on an average person’s knowledge of genetics. The only description of cloning is provided by B1’s evocation of the act, which is contaminated by its moral and emotional implications: “they take this painless scrape this specky little cells of me and kept that and you threw the rest of me away” (*A N*, 16). The stage is thus defined as an unknowledgeable space, one which defeats the theoretical position. The word *theoros* in Greek refers to an observer, and the concept of *theoria*, which leads to our modern conception of *theory*, suggests a knowledge founded in detached spectatorship, unimpeded by subjective involvement. In *A Number* however there is no such thing as a theoretical viewpoint. The characters’ discourse about the clones is constantly subjected to the test of “feelings”, and attempts at rationalization are disrupted by bodily reality.

Such tensions between knowledge and the body are a recurrent feature of contemporary science-related theatre. Jean-François Peyret, who has directed many productions in collaboration with scientists, points out that the stage is a space which allows the body to “object” to thought: “le théâtre, c’est l’objection du corps à la pensée” (Peyret & Vincent 187). In *A Number*, this objection is embodied by B1’s disruptive physicality: his material presence is highlighted by Salter who refers to him as “genetic material” and “raw materials”, and his reactions are systematically physical (“my heart, people pay trainers to get it up to this speed”; *A N*, 15). B1’s memories of his childhood centre on the act of shouting, in other words the dissolution of language into unformulated distress, and in his first confrontation with Salter his violent ravings clearly show a collapse of logical connections, giving in under the pressure of violence. In their second encounter he



becomes a silent body, refusing to answer his father. His presence thus resists logocentric, discursive knowledge, and opposes it with bodily awareness and suffering.

“Not knowing” is a recurrent motif in Churchill’s plays, and striking examples of this lack can be found in *The Skriker*, in which Lily is incapable of giving the Skriker the technological knowledge she craves, or in *Lives of the Great Poisoners*, where a chemist repeatedly and inadvertently poisons the world with his inventions<sup>2</sup>. The state of not knowing is inherent to the society of knowledge depicted by these plays, and constitutes a disturbing paradox within the context of technological progress, as if ignorance were an essential component of the knowledge provided by scientific discoveries. In *A Number*, this lack is emphasized by the dramatic structure: the realm of the possible takes over from that of the certain, and the state of ‘not knowing’ is extended to the spectator by the avoidance of narrative completion. If we follow the analysis of possible worlds logic as it has been developed by Umberto Eco in *Lector in Fabula* (and extended to drama by Keir Elam in *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*), the *fabula* contains three different types of worlds: the actual world of the drama, the subworlds or propositions expressed by the characters, and the subworlds or propositions imagined by the spectator (Elam 114-117). Each subworld is a proposed state of affairs, and depends on a propositional attitude, that is to say it is founded on a particular modality: that of the knowledge, wishes, beliefs, fears, commands etc. of the characters or spectators. If we examine the propositions of Churchill’s characters in *A Number*, we can observe that the epistemic mode (the mode of knowledge) is reduced to a minimal presence compared to other propositional attitudes. None of the characters obtain the answers they are looking for, and when answers are given they remain possible rather than certain. When Salter finally answers B1’s question about his shouting in the night, the answer he gives simply repeats all of B1’s hypotheses: “Sometimes I was there, I’d sit and listen to you or I’d not be in any condition to hear you I’d just be sitting. Sometimes I’d go out and leave you” (*A N*, 40).

The epistemic mode is not only weakened in the characters' propositions, it is also reduced to a minimal role in the spectator's propositions, since the audience's hypotheses can never crystallize into a single thesis. The plot structure of *A Number* disables the analytical gaze, thus defeating an Aristotelian conception of the tragic play as a linear chain of causes and consequences. Although the play contains some elements of tragic structure and appears to explore the consequences of Salter's original failure with his first son, the plot in fact disrupts the chain of causality and sabotages any attempts at logical conclusions. As spectators, we expect to be presented with the consequences of cloning and to be able to arrive at a moral conclusion, from which an ethics may be induced. But Churchill deliberately confuses the moral issue by combining two different situations: child abuse and cloning. Salter's declarations suggest that the reason he resorted to cloning in the first place was the desire for a fresh start, after neglecting and abusing his first son. As a result, B1 and B2's reactions to their cloned identity cannot be separated from their reactions to B1's traumatic childhood. The combination of a whole series of reprehensible acts (child abuse, cloning, and the doctors' additional cloning without Salter's permission) creates a web of causes which cannot be simplified. This resistance of experience to causal analysis is thematized by B2, who emphasizes the impossibility of separation and division, and hence of an analytical view:

SALTER. But it felt

B2. It felt

SALTER. It felt as if I tried I deliberately

B2. Of course it felt

SALTER. Well then

B2. It feels it always it feels doesn't it inside that's just how we feel what we are and we don't know all these complicated we can't know what we're it's too complicated to disentangle all the causes and we feel this is me I freely and of course it's true who you are does freely not forced by someone else but who you are who you are itself forces or you'd be someone else wouldn't you? (*A N*, 34-35)

The plot thus disables the analytical approach and prevents us from constructing a chain of cause and effect, as does the addition of a

happy third clone in the final scene. Whatever we have observed before cannot be considered to be the direct consequence of cloning, since the third son provides a test case which negates any previous induction, and his reactions to his identity are quite different from those of the others.

What position does Caryl Churchill construct for her spectator, if not an analytical one? Although the play does not contain any explicit lessons, the failures represented in *A Number* engage the spectator's responsibility in an ethical gaze.

### **Ethical failures and the gaze as a space of responsibility**

As it does not provide either moral debate or analysis, *A Number* shifts the possibility of ethical relations into the pre-logical space of the gaze. The act of looking at and recognizing the other is frequently called for, and the ethical failures denounced by the play are systematically presented as failures in spectatorship. *A Number* thus echoes and develops the idea of passive spectatorship and lack of involvement that Churchill had outlined in the "Genetic Engineering" scene of *This is a Chair*<sup>3</sup>.

*A Number* is peopled by failed spectators, who refuse to hear or to see the other. In his evocation of his childhood, B1 focuses on an original scene, endlessly repeated, in which he shouted in the night and his father never came to him. This traumatic memory becomes the main image of paternal failure within the play, to which the characters return over and over again: even Michael Black asks Salter "[i]s that the worst you did, not go in the night?" (*A N*, 49). Salter's lack of reaction becomes the symbol of his neglect, but it is also a central image of ethical failure, since his refusal is a refusal to respond, to endorse responsibility. This failure is both a past and a present crime, since Salter also refuses to *remember* these scenes when B1 describes them. Moreover, Salter's position in these memories when he finally recognizes them clearly designates him as a figure of the spectator: "I'd sit and listen to you or I'd not be in any condition to hear you I'd just be sitting. Sometimes I'd go out and leave you." (*A N*, 40). By refusing to respond, he literally refuses to be his son's audience. In most of her recent plays Churchill has indicted the

audience's ignorance of the catastrophic world surrounding them, and *A Number* is no exception, since Salter's original act of ignorance (ignoring his son) thus inevitably suggests our own. The moral failure of a blind audience is also suggested by B1's description of his mother: "she'd be there but she wouldn't help stop anything" (*A N*, 23). And the urgent need for the gaze is expressed by B2, who repeatedly asks Salter to "keep looking" at him, and to let him look in return, and suggests that he killed B1 because his brother failed to see him. When Salter questions him about the murder he has committed, the only answer he gives describes this blind gaze:

B1. When I was following him there was a time I was getting on the same train and he looked round, I thought he was looking right at me but he didn't see me. I got on the train and went with him all the way. (*A N*, 41)

Within the blanks they provide, these failures suggest the responsibility of the spectator, and indeed the connection between seeing and being responsible. There is however no role-model for the audience, only a hollow, or rather a blind spot, for it to fill.

The play denounces not only the failure to see the other, but also the denial of otherness within the self. In the terms defined by Paul Ricoeur in *Soi-même comme un autre*, Churchill's characters limit their definitions of the self to an *idem*-identity, that is to say an identity based on sameness, and neglect the *ipse*-identity, the part of identity which does not depend on sameness but on reliability in our relation to others, and which is manifested in actions such as promises and responses:

Dans la section consacrée à la problématique de l'identité, nous avons admis que l'identité-ipséité couvrait un spectre de significations depuis un pôle extrême où elle recouvre l'identité du même jusqu'à un pôle extrême où elle s'en dissocie entièrement. Ce premier pôle nous a paru symbolisé par le phénomène du caractère, par quoi la personne se rend identifiable et réidentifiable. Quant au deuxième pôle, c'est par la notion, essentiellement éthique, du maintien de soi qu'il nous a paru représenté. Le maintien de soi, c'est pour la personne la manière telle de se comporter qu'autrui

peut *compter* sur elle. Parce que quelqu'un compte sur moi, je suis *comptable* de mes actions devant un autre. Le terme de responsabilité réunit les deux significations : compter sur..., être comptable de... Elle les réunit, en y ajoutant l'idée d'une réponse à la question : « Où es-tu ? », posée par l'autre qui me requiert. Cette réponse est : « Me voici ! » Réponse qui dit le maintien de soi.

En opposant polairement le maintien de soi au caractère, on a voulu cerner la dimension proprement éthique de l'ipséité, sans égards pour la perpétuation du caractère. On a ainsi marqué l'écart entre deux modalités de la permanence dans le temps, que dit bien le terme de maintien de soi, opposé à celui de perpétuation du même. (Ricœur 195-196)

In his notes to this passage Ricœur points out that his description of responsibility is inspired by Emmanuel Levinas's *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*. His distinction between the *idem* and the *ipse* within human identity is thus based on the *response* that the *ipse*-identity can give when faced with the other's ethical demand, a demand which in Levinas's philosophy arises precisely in the space of the gaze. In Ricœur's reflection these two "poles" are not systematically opposed, and within human identity the *ipse* can either correspond to the *idem* (when identity is synonymous with identification and the preservation of the same) or separate itself from it in an ethical response to the other. His evocation of this response as a "Here I am" in answer to the other's "Where are you?" confirms our analysis of Salter's lack of response towards his son as an original ethical failure.

Ricœur's description also suggests that any reduction of identity to a core of sameness amounts to a denial of the self's ethical relation and responsibility towards others. He links, in effect, the recognition of the *other* to the possibility of *otherness* within the self. Salter's actions, however, are founded on the refusal of otherness within identity: "I wanted one just the same [...] I wanted the same" (*A N*, 14). This obsessive sameness is reflected in the play's poetics of return and haunting: in each encounter Salter tries to reproduce the conversation he has had with the previous son, and B2 is literally haunted by B1, who follows him before finally killing him. The sterile reduction of the self to the same is also expressed in

the very numbers of the play: the reduction of humanity to numbers defines identity as mathematical sameness, and the number of sons, counting the original, is 22, a self-repeating number which is also precisely the number of homologous pairs of chromosomes in a human cell. Human beings have, however, one extra pair of chromosomes which is not homologous: the sexual pair XY. The sexual chromosome is thus absent in *A Number*, as are women, and its absence points towards this otherness which is silenced.

Cloning thus becomes a metaphor for humanity's refusal to engage both with the other and with otherness within the self. Indeed, *A Number* forces its audience to recognize a certain otherness within itself when we realize that the monsters of the play are not the clones, but the "normal" people, Salter and B1. In many ways, *A Number* works as a reversal of the most familiar narrative in biomedical debate, the *Frankenstein* blueprint. Churchill does not provide us with a scientist to accuse, and the monster is not the creation, but the original man. Responsibility is left as a collective, unattributed burden, since monstrosity does not lie in the creations of science, but in a violent humanity eager to forget its own past and to live without taking responsibility for it.

*A Number* thus redefines drama as a non-analytical mode of representation, shifting the locus of ethics away from the rational, deontological space of discourse towards the unformulated space of the individual gaze. No moral lesson is given, and the spectators are called upon to engage with the responsibility of their gaze, both inside and outside the theatre. To a certain extent, Churchill's ethical appeal and criticism of mathematical humanity may be weakened by her caricature of the mathematician in Michael Black, and by the way in which the play simultaneously refrains from analysis and yet restricts itself to a realist and systematic format. But the appeal remains, and the visual simplicity of *A Number* only enhances the urgent need for an active gaze. The ethical failure which is finally denounced is not the immorality of science or even of cloning, but our own blindness – our refusal to endorse responsibility in the

evolution of contemporary society, and our reluctance to see both its violence and its amnesia.

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1 Caryl Churchill, *A Number*, London: Nick Hern Books, 2002. This edition is referred to as *AN* throughout this article.

2 The contradictory desire to know and to unknow is explored explicitly in *Lives of the Great Poisoners*: the line "I do not know" concludes the spoken part of the play.

3 In "Genetic Engineering," a couple argue over whether or not that they have heard a bomb go off in the street, but finally do nothing about it. The scene follows the general principle of *This is a Chair*, in which the titles of the scenes seem completely unrelated to their content, and the contrast between

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the two emphasizes the divorce of ordinary lives from the political and ethical issues which, literally, frame them.