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The AI of attractions: hype and performance of artificial intelligence in contemporary theatre

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ABSTRACT

Since the public release of ChatGPT in 2022, generative AI has attracted considerable public attention and impact in manifold areas of application, including theatre and the performative arts. Drawing on the concept of the cinema of attractions developed to describe the peculiarities of early cinema, this article introduces the notion of 'AI of attractions' to illustrate a key way in which theatre responds and participates in the hype around this new technology. I suggest the term 'AI of attractions' to describe the mode in which artists rely on the explicit and self-referential use of AI as a form of attraction for the audience. I argue that the AI of attractions is characterised by the exhibition of the technological medium, by an interactive dynamic with the audience, and by a looping textual structure that oscillates between revelation and suspicion. Through the analysis of six European shows employing AI tools, I examine a distinctive arrangement of technology, spectatorship and text that makes up the attraction dispositif (Kessler, F. 2006. "The Cinema of Attractions as Dispositif." In *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, edited by W. Strauven, 57–70. Amsterdam University Press). While the article focuses on the performing arts, the concept of AI of attractions illuminates dynamics that are common to multiple artistic and creative fields.

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1. Introduction: the attractiveness of AI

In September 2024, I headed to Berlin to watch the fifth edition of the *Spy on Me* festival 'Enter AI', organised by HAU theatre. While the interest of the performing arts in Artificial Intelligence (AI) was not surprising, a festival devoted entirely to their relationship was a rather novel phenomenon. During the ten days of the festival, I saw eleven works that used, displayed, or discussed AI. The festival revolved around a specific curatorial programme of visibility, aimed at showing the audience the technology and how it works, and at making something visible that is usually not visible. The title, 'Enter AI', was meant to function as a stage direction describing the entrance of a new character, that

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of AI (Kummer et al. 2024). The opening of *Chatbot Challenge*, by the Berlin-based performance group Interrobang, offers an interesting realisation of the festival's intention.

Three panels cover half of the stage of the HAU2 theatre. Projected onto them are AI-generated images of velvet curtains. As the lights go off in the theatre, the curtains vanish and an inscription appears: 'Prologue'. Manus Nijhoff, creative coder of the show, sits at a computer desk behind the panels. On them, a camera projects him typing instructions on his computer, as shown in Figure 1:

> Hello AI. You will play multiple characters in a theatre piece. You will appear in the form of a voice. We are going to perform some scenes. Each scene will involve three types of characters: AI Characters, Players, The Coach. I will be playing the role of Coach, you will be playing as an AI assistant. Never break character.

In the beginning of *Chatbot Challenge,* by Interrobang Performance, no human performer takes centre stage. Although technicians are made visible, they are confined to a secondary position. Instead, the show foregrounds the technological medium itself, generative AI and transforms it into an attraction to be unveiled and examined.

In this paper, I aim to discuss a specific aesthetic and discursive modality in performing arts based on emphasising the presence and role played by AI. My main argument is that this aesthetic trend reflects a more general mode of discourse in the arts, which is tied to the symbolic value that AI, as a promising and new technology, has acquired in the current historical context. Focusing on the case of theatre, I suggest the term 'AI of attractions' to describe the mode of discourse in which theatre makers rely on the explicit and



Figure 1. Prologue of *Chatbot Challenge* at HAU2, Berlin (2024). The live projections on stage show, on the left, a technician and, on the right, the prompting instruction he gives to an AI chatbot. Photo: Renata Chueire.

self-referential use of AI as a form of attraction for the audience. The inspiration for this concept derives from the notion of cinema of attractions, originally developed by film scholars Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault to make sense of the peculiarities of cinema in the first years after its invention (Gaudreault 2011; Gunning 2006).

Although Gunning and Gaudreault developed the concept of the cinema of attractions to describe a specific historical phase of cinema, their framework can help historicise an emerging tendency in the artistic use of generative AI. Theatre provides a productive site for examining this tendency because of its capacity to represent and thematise other media within a shared physical and temporal space. As a physical hypermedium (Pizzo, Lombardo, and Damiano 2019), theatre can make concealed technological processes available for public reflection, creating a tension between the opacity of technological media and their theatrical exhibition. Examining generative AI in theatre illustrates how this emerging technology is integrated in contemporary artistic practice, while also making visible how theatre negotiates changing conventions and expectations surrounding digital media.

Thus, this paper makes two main contributions. The first is at an empirical level, analysing the emerging use of generative AI within the context of performing arts. I analyse the case of six European shows that use AI on stage, combining critical observation of the works and qualitative interviews with the creators. The second contribution of the paper is at a theoretical level. By proposing a new concept, that of the AI of attractions, the article helps illuminate the interrelation between technology, audience and text in which AI is presented as a form of attraction across different artistic fields. Thus, the term AI of attractions can usefully be extended to other artistic domains. For instance, it may contribute to illuminate the role of curatorial and promotional techniques in the attribution of creativity to AI systems, as the case of the AICAN art exhibition showed (Natale and Henrickson 2022). Moreover, it can help interpret the discourse of texts generated with AI as self-generated, complex and organic systems, as the example of *1 The Road* by Ross Goodwin shows (Vélez and Mattioli 2026, 93). Looking at the case of theatre, the concept of AI of attractions can help illuminate a broader socio-historical approach in which artists mobilise and engage with the hype surrounding AI.

After a brief exposition of the concept of cinema of attraction and previous studies on AI and theatre, I discuss the methodology adopted in this study. Then, the analytical section of the paper is divided into three parts, discussing the three aspects of the attraction *dispositif* (Kessler 2006), i.e. technology, spectatorship and text, and how they relate to three key characteristics of the AI of attractions, namely exhibition, interaction and loop. Finally, the conclusion considers the implications of the AI of attractions for contemporary artistic practice and traces evolving modes of engagement with AI as an emerging technology.

2. From the cinema of attractions to the AI of attractions

In 1986, the film historian Tom Gunning published a foundational essay in the history of early cinema, 'The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde'. The article moved from the consideration that, up until that time, the history of early cinema had been studied through the lens of how this medium had later developed. Gunning contended, however, that early cinema was not a primitive and imperfect

form of classical cinema, but a specific modality of production and performance that Gunning defined as cinema of attractions. This mode was dominant in the first decade following the invention of the cinematograph, spanning from 1896 to 1906, in which cinema was seen 'less as a way of telling stories than as a way of presenting a series of views to an audience, fascinating because of their illusory power (…) and exoticism' (Gunning 2006, 382).

As, in its early years, the cinematic technology itself was an attraction, akin to amusement parks, the cinema of attraction was characterised by exhibitionism of the medium as a form of spectacle. Thus, the cinema of attractions celebrates the 'enthusiasm for this new medium and its possibilities' (Gunning 2006, 381). Due to its exhibitionist character, the cinema of attractions established a relationship with the spectator marked by proximity and constant engagement. Emblematic of this form of spectatorship was the recurring gaze into the camera of the actors, which established a direct contact with the audience. As Gunning notes, the cinema of attractions was willing 'to rupture the self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator' (2006, 382). In the final shot of *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), for instance, a gunman faces the camera and fires directly at the viewer. The primary relationship that the cinema of attractions fostered, then, was not between two fictional characters, but between the audience and the medium itself: 'making use of both fictional and non-fictional attractions, its energy moves outward an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative' (Gunning 2006, 384). As narrative continuity was often neglected, the story was used to provide 'a frame upon which to string a demonstration of the magical possibilities of the cinema' (Gunning 2006, 383).

Even if the specific logic of the cinema of attractions lost importance as cinema's language and production culture became more stable, it did not disappear altogether. Gunning's theory enjoyed exceptional fortune in the context of film theory, having been used to interpret later technological innovations such as the emergence of DVDs (Brown 2007), and beyond. For instance, Kath Dooley (2018) used the cinema of attractions to trace an evolving dynamic in the use of VR technology. If early works focused on exhibiting VR as a novel technology, Dooley contends that recent cinematic and television works with VR tend to move beyond the technological attractiveness and towards narrative elements. In *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded,* Wanda Strauven collected a series of essays related to Gunning's theory and that used the concept of attractions to analyse musicals and their tendency to expose the technical apparatus (Jaques 2006), to investigate the use of slow motion technologies (Sobchack 2006), or to shed light on the fortune of nineteenth-century optical toys (Dulac and Gaudreault 2006). In one of the contributions, Frank Kessler suggested conceiving attraction as a *dispositif* that may be used to analyse other media histories. As envisioned by Kessler, the attraction *dispositif* encompasses not only the material aspects of a technology but also how it shapes 'a certain viewing situation', to which corresponds an institutionalised textual form (2006, 61). Thus, the attraction *dispositif* can be extended to various genres, to analyse a peculiar and temporarily dominating configuration of technology, text and spectatorship.

Following Kessler's insight, I argue for using the attraction *dispositif* to explore how artists integrate AI in theatre, in particular how the technology is exhibited on stage, the relationship it establishes with the audience and its impact on the performance

text. I use the term 'AI of attractions' to describe those performative works that share relevant characteristics with the cinema of attractions in their configuration of technology, spectatorship and text. My main argument is that the current socio-technological hype pushes theatre makers to exhibit AI technology as an attraction that holds the centre stage in their works. This, in turn, leads to correlated choices regarding the relationship with the audience, inviting it to directly interact with the medium, and the text of the performance, creating a looping structure.

While noting similarities between the history of early cinema and the use of AI in theatre, differences must also be noted. Whereas Gunning's theory focuses on the emergence of a new medium, namely cinema, the interplay between AI and theatre presents more complexities. In fact, the performing arts have been interested in AI even before the emergence of generative AI tools (Pizzo 2022), exploring the possibility for algorithms to act as agents on stage and theorising the emergence of an algorithmic theatre (Dorsen 2019). With the rise of generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (LLMs), this landscape has expanded even more (Befera 2023). Along with the rising interest, shown by corporations, to develop AI-driven creative tools (Mirowski et al. 2023), theatre makers began experimenting with generative AI as writing tools (Rosa et al. 2021), as co-creative partners in performance (Donnarumma 2020, 2025) or as agents to confront and critique (Dorsen 2023). Shane Pike (2026) identifies three major approaches to AI in theatre: AI as a creative agent, as a collaborator, and as a concept. Rather than treating these categories as mutually exclusive, Pike emphasises that different approaches may coexist within the same work. This categorisation provides a useful framework for understanding the existence of a multiplicity of roles attributed to AI in theatre. However, as it focuses primarily on Annie Dorsen's artistic trajectory, it offers limited insight into how different approaches to AI intersect and how the attribution of AI to one category or another is shaped by relational and contextual factors (Chow and Celis Bueno 2025).

In the context of AI, theatre can be conceptualised as a physical hypermedium that incorporates, represents and thematises other media (Pizzo, Lombardo, and Damiano 2019). In this regard, it may be worth tracing some similarities between the relationship between theatre and AI, and early cinema. In the cinema of origins, a showman presented the films to the audience, standing by the screen and delivering a commentary throughout the screening (Musser 1994). The showmen of early cinema played a similar role to that of contemporary performers, as they used to 'embed the film in a larger program, a revue which included music and live performance' (Gunning 1989, 127). Thus, the cinema of attractions often operated in an intermedial and performative framework, akin to that of the AI of attractions.

Drawing from the attraction *dispositif*, I aim to illuminate the dynamic arrangement between technology, spectatorship and text that is at play in contemporary performances with AI. My goal is to account for the ways theatre makers stage AI technologies, shaping viewing situations and producing textual forms. Moreover, the concept of the AI of attractions may be applied also to other artistic forms that incorporate AI technologies. In fact, the AI of attractions illuminates a specific socio-historical modality of relating to AI as an emergent and exciting technology and the role of the arts in the construction of this image – a modality that may shift into other forms as the socio-symbolic value of AI technology continues to evolve.

3. Methodology

In my research, I adopt a case-study approach on six European theatre performances using AI tools. For selecting the cases, I followed a 'purposive sampling' approach (Emmel 2013), guided by three main criteria. First, AI tools had to be actively used on stage and integrated into the live performances examined. The selected works are distinguished from technical showcases by treating AI not merely as a technology to be demonstrated, but as an integral component of the theatrical experience. Second, to gain greater insight into the incorporation of generative AI into theatre practice, I focused on productions involving smaller artistic teams, in which artistic and technical decisions are more closely intertwined. Despite this emphasis on smaller teams, the sample primarily represents mid-career and established practitioners, with the majority of the selected productions having been presented in established institutional venues. Finally, due to geographical proximity, I excluded from the study extra-European productions using AI, limiting my study to the performative contexts that I could assess firsthand. This delimitation excludes significant examples from outside Europe, including large-scale international productions such as those of the choreographer Wayne McGregor and the works of Annie Dorsen. These practices provide nonetheless a useful comparative context for the European cases examined here, particularly in their use of AI-mediated performative interaction and, in Dorsen's case, their critical engagement with LLMs.

The empirical data presented in the paper are the result of critical observation of six shows, using an observation grid that followed three key questions. First, how is the AI system represented on stage? Second, what relationship do these shows engage with the audience? Finally, what textual structures do the shows entail? My critical analysis is supported by eleven qualitative, semi-structured interviews with artists (see Table 1), alongside ethnographic fieldnotes documenting the contexts in which their shows were presented. The interviews were conducted with artists rather than audience members because the analysis focuses primarily on the creators' intentions and aesthetic

Table 1. Case studies analysed in the paper and interviews with creatives.

Show	Artist	Profession	Premiere	Link to info page
The Cloud	Arkadi Zaides	Director, author	2024	https://arkadizaides.com/the-cloud
The Cloud	Axel Chemla Romeu-Santos	Sound designer, technician	2024	
The Cloud	Igor Dobričić	Dramaturg	2024	
I am Echoborg	Rik Lander	Media artist	2016	https://echoborg.com/about.html
I am Echoborg	Marie-Helene Boyd	Performer	2016	
Chatbot Challenge	Nina Tecklenburg	Director, author, performer	2024	https://www.interrobang-performance.com/en/projekt/chatbot-challenge-2/
Chatbot Challenge	Till Müller-Klug	Director, author	2024	
LP Blackstrike	Angelo Callegarin	Performer	2022	https://maltezoo.eu/component/simplecalendar/16-teatro/232-l-p-blackstripe-23-12-22?Itemid=221
Radio Pentothal	Ruggero Franceschini	Director, author, performer	2025	https://zonaklife.it/lens/trasmettere-interferenze/
Trash Test	Andrea Cosentino	Performer, author	2025	https://www.kilowattfestival.it/contenuto/trash-test-kwt2025-teatro/
Trash Test	Andrea Milano	Dramaturg	2025	

choices in integrating AI into the performances. At the same time, the fieldnotes allow me to examine how these artistic decisions structured forms of audience interaction. Together, these sources substantiate and deepen the examination of the case studies.

The following (Table 1) is a list of the case studies analysed.

4. Exhibition

In the cinema of attractions, early films tended to emphasise the novel sensory experience of moving pictures. Motion is what films promised the audience and the cinema of attractions embedded motion in a dramatic presentation. The surprising progression from stillness to movement was a central mechanism in the cinema of attractions, showcasing the medium's new exciting possibilities (Gunning 1989, 120). Similarly, through the exhibition of the technology, the AI of attractions is focused on highlighting yet another specific characteristic of AI, namely the possibility of having an artificial performer to which the audience ascribes intentional, autonomous behaviour. Since the emergence of ChatGPT in November 2022, many shows have increasingly focused on LLMs and textual projection has become a recurring strategy torepresent AI as an autonomous agent, and to manifest AI in the dramaturgy of the events on stage (Pizzo 2021, 101). The following section examines four shows to explore how the AI of attractions tends to represent AI as an autonomous agent through a performative textual interface.

In Ruggero Franceschini's works, *LP Blackstrike* (2022) and *Radio Pentothal* (2025), LLMs generate movement and human performers respond to it. In our interview, Ruggero remarked that, for him, 'the text is not just a script, but a physical object that generates movement'. In *LP Blackstrike,* Angelo Callegarin and Emma Abdelkerim performed the lines generated in real time by Megatron 11-B, an early language model developed by NVIDIA. The AI-generated text was projected behind them, visible to the audience, and served as the main scenography of the show, as shown in Figure 2. The performers stood still, while the AI-generated text moved behind them, capturing the attention of the audience. On a parallel platform, Ruggero prompted and operated the AI interface.

Thus, the main source of movement on stage is not the body of the actor, but the AI-generated text. This tendency is even more conspicuous in Franceschini's last work, *Radio Pentothal* (2025). In it, Angelo Callegarin and Paula Carrara perform a radio programme, inspired by the free radios of the 70s. The answers of the guests, fictional and real characters, are improvised by a fine-tuned version of GPT-3.5, trained on texts from the students' movement. In *Radio Pentothal*, the interface of GPT-3.5 was displayed on a screen panel, showing both the prompts and the AI-generated outputs, and the actors respond to its unpredictable errors, limitations and censorship. The workings of the machine take centre stage, becoming visually inscribed onto the actors' bodies. In the preview of *Radio Pentothal*, the AI-generated text covered the performers' faces, as shown in Figure 3.

The regime of exhibition of the AI of attractions is closely connected to post-dramatic theatre, a broad movement first described by Hans-Thies Lehmann, which attempts to do away with drama understood as the representation of a fictional world. Post-dramatic theatre tends to engage more with the reality of the stage, laying bare its constitutive elements: 'the theatre machinery is clearly visible. The technical workings of the performance are openly exhibited: cables, apparatus, instruments are not shamefully hidden or



Figure 2. Rehearsals of *LP Blackstrike* in Polverigi (2022). The projection of Megatron 11-B makes up the entire scenography on stage, while Angelo Callegarin performs the AI-generated lines. Photo: Ruggero Franceschini.

masked by lighting but integrated like props or almost like actors' (Lehmann 2006, 168–169). In line with post-dramatic tendencies, the shows of the AI of attractions present on stage not only the textual performance of AI's outputs, but also the technical elements that make this performance possible, such as the prompts and the technicians. Throughout *Chatbot Challenge*, the creative coder remains visible on stage and his computer activity is periodically displayed on the screens. Similarly, in Franceschini's shows, the prompters operate the machines on stage, in full view of the audience. In Arkadi Zaides' *The Cloud* (2024), a dance performance that intersects the Chernobyl cloud with the cloud of AI, the actions of technicians on the AI-powered platform are exposed on stage. At the beginning of *The Cloud,* Arkadi stands before the audience, introducing the show. Then, he sits on a stool and reads a testimony to an AI speech-to-text device which delivers the text – misspelled and deformed – projected on a wall behind him. As the wall finally fills up with garbled lines of text, the projection changes, showing the MAX platform, where Arkadi Zaides' text, photographs and other documents are being organised in visual clusters by Axel Chemla Romeu-Santos, the show's creative coder. Axel, along with a stage technician, operates live on the documents, drawing connections and diagrams, using both textual and visual AI tools to generate new materials on the fly, as shown in Figure 4. For the first hour of the show, while Arkadi Zaides sits on a stool, reading his testimony, the performer appears to be the AI-powered platform, whose movements, actions and visual cues attract the audience's attention. The MAX-based

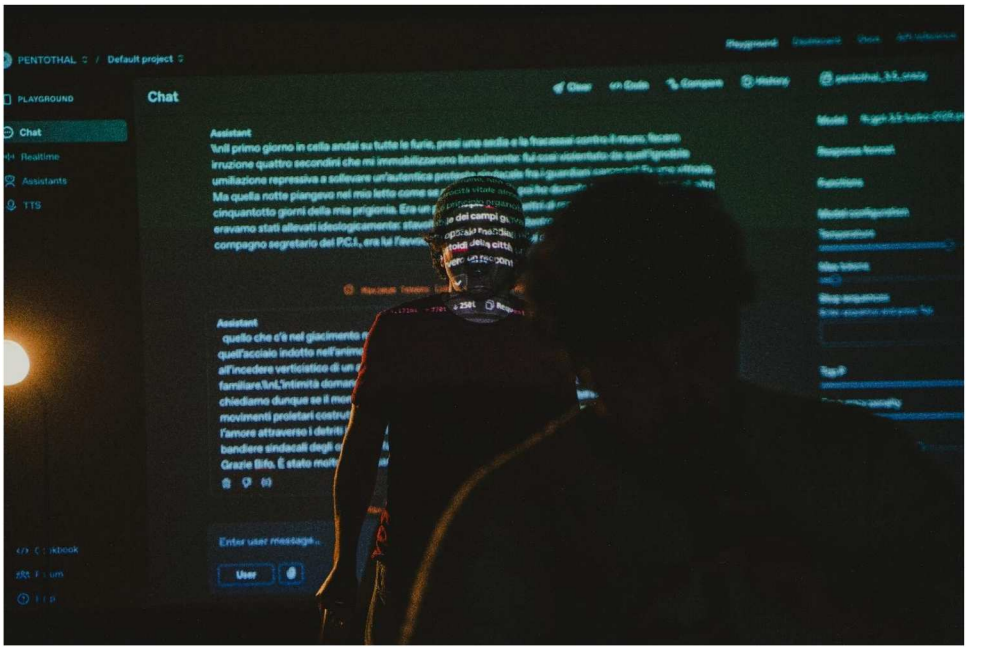

Figure 3. Preview of *Radio Pentothal* at DAS, Bologna (2025). The face of Franceschini is covered by the AI-generated lines of text. Photo: Ruggero Franceschini.

architecture, using ChatGPT as a building block for different generative AI tools feeding into each other, produces a constant, chaotic motion that contrasts with the performer's stillness. As the show progresses, the technicians expand the visual map of Arkadi's testimony, up to the point that MAX – mimicking the collapse of the Chernobyl power plant – crashes and erases the whole map.

The visibility of the technicians does not, however, aim to capture the audience's attention. Their presence is often marginal within the visual composition of the performance. In *Chatbot Challenge,* for instance, the coder was visible but positioned behind the projection panels; in *The Cloud,* which I saw at Spazio Rossellini in Rome, the coders were positioned in the left corner of the stage. Rather, within the AI of attractions, the removal of layers of opacity from the theatrical machinery functions as a strategy for foregrounding AI's agency. By exposing the actions of coders and prompters, the AI of attractions attempts to demonstrate to spectators that the interactions they witness are genuinely generated by AI rather than pre-programmed or produced through a 'Mechanical Turk' arrangement. The visibility of the human operators thus serves to authenticate the technological agency attributed to AI.

In the AI of attractions, the exhibition of AI is closely intertwined with its representation: AI is presented not just as an instrument operated by human hands, but as a subject capable of intentional behaviour. The visual interface through which AI is represented therefore becomes a crucial element of these performances. As Igor Dobričić, dramaturg of *The Cloud,* noted in our conversation, finding a way to visually represent AI on stage was a major concern during the creative process. In *The Cloud,* they attempted 'to create a different type of interface for [AI's] functioning, which is more transparent and



Figure 4. Italian premiere of *The Cloud* at Spazio Rossellini (2024). The audience follows the map of documents, texts and images created in the AI-powered platform MAX, manoeuvred by stage technicians.

where you can observe the connections between the materials that are being processed and create a kind of sensation of the environment'.

Ultimately, the interface of *The Cloud* was an artistic representation of AI that stands apart from the faithful visualisation of how AI models function and from the deceptive strategies employed by Big Tech (see Natale 2021). As Igor Dobričić pointed out,

> what we were displaying, what we are unfolding on the screens, it's still not the functioning of AI models (…). We played with it in a quite artistic way in a sense of using representation of reality, rather than reality itself.

The performance relies on a mode of spectatorship in which viewers are invited to be attracted by the visual representation while remaining aware of its status as a representation. This tension between attraction and awareness is central to the logic of the AI of attractions and recalls a similar dynamic in the cinema of attractions. As Gunning posits, the spectator of early cinema, while astonished by its illusory power, does not mistake the image on the screen for a reality. The audience of early cinema was, in fact, similar to those 'sophisticated urban pleasure seekers' that filled the stalls of magic theatres, – people who enjoyed tricks and illusions while being 'well aware that they were seeing the most modern techniques in stage craft' (Gunning 1989, 117). The visual power of trompe-

l'œil on screen rested not so much on perfect realism, but on 'an obsessive desire to test the limits of an intellectual disavowal' that created a 'dramatically unfolding spectator experience, vacillating between belief and incredulity' (Gunning 1989, 117). A similar oscillation between belief and incredulity unfolds in the AI of attractions. For instance, in *The Cloud,* the MAX platform creates a visual representation of the AI that depends as much on exhibition as on mystery. As Axel noted in our conversation:

> Arkadi always wanted me to share my screen, because of its non-understandability, but that was also a kind of transfer: you don't understand what's going on, but, as you see people doing things, it creates a connection. Since the beginning, he was really interested into like showing the heart of the machine, (…) to use MAX to show what was underneath.

The interplay between exhibition and non-understandability creates a contradictory yet compelling spectator experience. Just as in the cinema of attractions, where 'the desire to see (attraction) is deeply intertwined with the desire to know (story)' (Fiumara 2016, 62), in the context of the AI of attractions, visual exhibition participates in a broader narrative dynamic that involves the audience as active protagonist in deciphering the heart of the machine.

5. Interaction

According to a common myth, the first audience of the cinematographer screamed with fear at Lumiere's *Arrival of a Train at the Station*. As Gunning argued, there is no historical evidence backing this legend. Rather, first audiences' reaction towards the cinema was likely not of naïve fear, but of astonishment that relied on a form of active curiosity (1989, 116). By constantly breaking the fourth-wall dividing the world of the film and that of the audience, the cinema of attractions elicits the viewer's active curiosity towards the medium, as opposed to the passive involvement in a fictional world: 'rather than being an involvement with narrative action or empathy with character psychology, the cinema of attractions solicits a highly conscious awareness of the film image engaging with the viewer's curiosity' (Gunning 1989, 121). The cinema of attractions was more interested in establishing a direct relationship with the spectator than in creating fictional situations and characters: 'the cinema of attractions expends little energy creating characters with psychological motivations or individual personality. (…) Its energy moves outward an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative' (Gunning 2006, 384). These characteristics of the cinema of attractions find an interesting parallel in the way theatre makers deal with AI on stage. By eliminating fictional elements and psychological characters, and letting the audience interact with the technological tools, the AI of attractions taps into the intellectual curiosity towards the AI.

In Ruggero Franceschini's *Radio Pentothal* (2025), the possibility for the audience to directly interact with AI is linked to the curiosity for testing the abilities of the technological subject. Paula Carrara, host of the radio programme, interviews a fictionalised version of Shoshana Zuboff, author of the celebrated *Surveillance Capitalism*. Angelo Callegarin transcribes Paula's questions on their fine-tuned GPT-3.5, then interprets the AI's outputs. However, during the interview, Paula suddenly stops and states: 'Now Shoshana will answer to your questions. Be ready'. The auditorium fills with whispers and questions,

while Paula hands out the microphone to audience members, eager to talk with the AI. With its questions, the audience seems rather interested in testing the abilities and limitations of the LLM, asking it to give its opinion on technological trends, to generate jokes about surveillance capitalism, or even to disclose intimate details about Shoshana's life. At one point, an audience member asks the AI about the meaning of her hat, referring to the metal headgear that Angelo is wearing on stage. This creates an entertaining short-circuit. Having no information about Angelo's headgear, the AI generates hilarious nonsensical lines about a pirate's hat with magical powers. As Angelo tries his best to motivate the AI-generated text, adding even funnier details to the explanation, the result is a hilarious unmasking of AI's shortcomings. In the AI of attractions, both artists and audience seem to be as interested in AI's potential as in its limits. In *Radio Pentothal*, the thrill of interaction is connected to the opportunity to challenge the machine.

Andrea Cosentino's *Trash Test* revolves entirely around the desire to challenge the abilities of AI as a comic actor. As Cosentino repeatedly asks the LLM to generate jokes and funny stories, and comments on the inability to deliver truly comic outputs, the device of the show is built entirely around the challenge between the two comics, the human and the AI. As Andrea Cosentino remarked in our conversation:

> [The AI] is funny, partly because of its inability to understand things or fit into the context, but in my opinion, he'll still be funny even if he becomes good at it, because I put him in situations that are difficult for anyone: *Here people expect to laugh, so make a joke.* Even if you tell a brilliant joke, it will always be funny because you're cold.

In a scene of the show, aptly called 'The Challenge', the human and the AI showcase their creative talents, letting the audience judge which one is superior. Cosentino starts delivering a long monologue, a parody of a sci-fi dystopian script of his own making. Then, he invites the public to test the machine's ability to build a sci-fi dystopian script, asking them to populate it with random arguments, characters and animals. The AI is forced to integrate incongruent elements, including a cockroach invasion in Rome, a bout of diarrhoea, a wild boar and Eduardo De Filippo into a cliché sci-fi script, generating a hilarious response in the audience. The result is certainly 'trash', as Cosentino makes fun of the AI's attempt to give narrative coherence to a wild array of elements. However, the audience also recognises a specific virtuosity in the machine, concluding every output with a round of applause. From the challenge, an admiration for the qualities of the AI emerges. As Andrea Milano, dramaturgy assistant of the show, remarked in our conversation, the show conveys the amazement that he and Cosentino experienced during the creative process with AI: 'It's almost about marvelling together with the AI.'

Trash Test represents the ambiguity that sustains the AI of attractions and its relationship with the audience. On the one side, it conveys amazement at AI's speed and its ability to connect different elements. On the other, by exposing the comical shortcomings of the machine, it invites the audience to engage with AI with a disenchanted attitude that debunks the machine and its abilities. This can happen through the playful dynamic of the challenge, as in *Radio Pentothal* and *Trash Test*, or with a narrative design in which the AI takes an antagonist role against the audience.

The latter is the case in Rik Lander and Phil D. Hall's *I am Echoborg,* the final performance of *Spy on Me #5*. For the show, the audience was placed on the stage of the HAU1 theatre, facing the performer Marie-Hélène Boyd, sitting on a desk, with a pair of

headphones on her head. The play begins with a short video, introducing the concept of echoborg, an agent composed by the body of a person and the words of a chatbot: 'the words the echoborg speaks are determined by the conversational agent, transmitted to the person via a covert audio-relay apparatus, and articulated by the person through speech shadowing' (Corti and Gillespie 2015, 406). Then, Rik Lander steps at centre stage and explains that, during the show, members of the audience can interact with the AI through the performer, Marie-Hélène Boyd. Each volunteer will step into a job interview with the chatbot. While the AI's goal is to hire us as level 1 echoborgs, the audience's aim is to collectively figure out an answer to the question: 'what is the best possible outcome from the relationship between man and machine?'. Rik Lander warns us that the AI will try to deceive us and lead us astray. Even if we are allowed to use collaborative strategies and tricks, as the AI system cannot hear what is said among the stalls, the AI begins the conversation with an advantage over the audience. Having a clear goal and a strategy to achieve it, the AI acts as a strong antagonist for the first participants who, by adopting an individualistic approach, are dismissed after a few questions.

To figure out the exact role that the AI should play took Rik Lander and Phil D. Hall quite some time. In its first version, back in 2016, the show relied on a fictionalised narrative set-up, 'a near future in which most jobs have been automated and the last remaining jobs are as public service echoborgs' (Lander 2021, 2). Around 2020, Rik Lander eliminated fictional elements from the show, concentrating on the encounter between the AI and the audience. As he argues:

> *I am Echoborg* was greatly improved by the removal of elements of fiction in the role playing on the part of the audience. Instead of pretending to be job seekers in the near future, they are now just themselves, in the moment, trying to make sense of an encounter with this strange AI (Lander 2021, 6).

In its previous set-up, the show revolved more around the character of the echoborg, whose personal backstory as a refugee was revealed in the play. Originally, Lander had decided to focus on refugees to underline the power dynamics behind automation and work, a theme especially relevant during the Syrian migration crisis in 2016. However, as the discourse around AI became more popular, the show decided to focus on the interaction with the AI tool, leaving aside other, potentially distracting, narratives. As Lander said in our interview, the de-construction of fictional elements targeted the character of the echoborg, removing its back-story and psychological motivations from the show:

> We simplified it and took out a lot of the fiction, so [the Echoborg] doesn't have to pretend to be something. She can just be herself, a woman who gets employed as an echoborg. It's much simpler, it's much more honest. So, Marie's character is much closer to herself. And the audience are much more themselves. (…) So there's no fiction in there anymore.

Rik Lander contends that the shift was a consequence of avoiding confusion and distractions in the audience's immersive experience. However, by removing its fictional elements, the show also highlights the role of AI as a central attraction for the audience to discover and unmask. As Marie-Hélène Boyd explained in her interview, 'over the years, as the AI has grown and got bigger, my character has grown with her as well'. Thus, the shift in the narrative design was connected to a shift of attention from the human to the machine character. In its final structure, 'the plot of *I am Echoborg* follows the arc of character development for the protagonist, the AI', while 'the echoborg is a supporting

character' (Lander 2021, 9). Now that the narrative engine of *I am Echoborg* revolves around the audience's curiosity towards the technological medium, the fictional set-up became an obstacle in the way of the relationship between the audience and AI. Both exhibition and interaction contribute to a broader narrative strategy concerned with challenging the appearance of AI. In the AI of attractions, the technology is presented as an enigma to be unravelled during the performance, through recurring and ultimately unsatisfactory attempts.

6. Loop

As Gunning argued, the cinema of attractions replaced linear narrative with a fragmented succession of visual shocks. Yet, as Fiumara (2016) notes, it retained a strong narrative drive rooted in modern audiences' desire to acquire knowledge about the novel technology. In this sense, it continued a nineteenth-century tradition, when showmen used exotic and para-scientific knowledge to attract audiences at carnivals and festivals. Moreover, attractions also use shocks as forms of recognition. This created a specific fragmented structure, in which the 'encyclopaedic ambition of (…) transforming all of reality into cinematographical views' ultimately failed, as 'it is in the nature of curiosity (…) never to be satisfied completely' (Gunning 1989, 126). Similarly, the AI of attractions displays a fragmented and circular dramaturgy that alternates moments of revelation and suspicion, exposing the hidden face of the medium, while simultaneously validating the suspicion that the truth about its functioning remains concealed under its appearance.

As Boris Groys argues in *Under Suspicion,* every medium, beneath its visible surface, creates a submedial space that remains hidden from the observer's view. According to Groys, as the observer suspects that the submedial face operates differently than the medial surface, they ascribe to this concealed space the truth about the functioning of the medium: 'the submedial space necessarily remains for us the dark space of suspicion, speculations, and apprehensions – but also that of sudden epiphanies' (2012, 13). Wanting to understand what lies in the submedial space, the observer embarks on a media-ontological quest that 'strives for an unmasking, uncovering, unconcealment of the media surface' (Groys 2012, 13). I argue that this media-ontological quest lies at the heart of the AI of attractions, as it promises to expose the face of the machine usually hidden from the public's view. The AI of attractions uses theatre as an interface for such revelation, using exhibition and interaction as strategies to allow the audience to access the space behind the curtains of AI. However, it also reinforces the suspicion that every interface hides another submedial layer beneath, sparking a renewed and endless quest for medial truth. Medial sincerity plays a crucial part in this dynamic but can only present itself in the form of brief, isolated moments: 'the creation of an effect of infinitude that only lasts for a brief moment but then can reemerge through another sign' (Groys 2012, 14–15). As the media-ontological journey that performers and audience embark on proves inconclusive, the narrative of the AI of attractions acquires the form of a loop: a circular progression of revelations which soon dissolve into suspicion.

The penultimate scene of *Chatbot Challenge,* titled 'Unmasking', exemplifies this structure and its link with a specific media-ontological frustration. Nina and Christiane, performers of the show, ask the AI to generate an image visualising the structure of neural networks. Suddenly, the panels display the AI-generated image of a futuristic city made

of interlinked AI models. 'The picture is incomplete,' say the performers. 'Let's go one level further. Let's show all the people that need to work for you to function.' Along the arteries of the city appear engineers, from whose desks branch out cables that reach to software managers and CEOs. 'The picture is incomplete,' repeat the performers. 'Let's go one level further.' The picture suddenly fills up with machinery, content managers and click workers. As we get deeper in the layers of AI, the image shifts to a nineteenth-century factory, put in motion by thousands of workers. 'But the picture is incomplete,' say the performers. 'Let's go one level further and show the resources that we need to extract for your functioning.' As the image shows lithium mines and data servers, we might think we have unmasked the last layer of AI. Yet again, as the performers say, the picture remains incomplete. The gigantic machine of AI now transfers into a theatre. The final image shows a shiny, baroque stage at a tech convention, where a showman presents the wonders of AI to an applauding audience.

This scene of *Chatbot Challenge* aims to uncover and offer a visual representation of the hidden layers behind the façade of AI. This unveiling is achieved through the medium itself, namely AI-generated images, that performers force to speak its own medial truth. Yet, the process of unmasking proves endless. The ontological quest of the AI of attractions can never be satisfied, as the tension between revelation and suspicion is the narrative engine that sustains its artistic works. Thus, the AI of attractions develops in circular structures, interested as much in providing revelations as in finding loopholes in the medial functioning, achieving fragmented moments of visual revelation, only to fall once more into suspicion. Like in a Möbius strip, the final layer of AI's functioning brings the spectator back to where the journey began: a theatre stage.

7. Conclusions: beyond attractions

Facing a phase of excitement and anxiety around generative AI, following the release of ChatGPT (Lucia, Vetter, and Patel 2025), theatre makers respond to this trend by employing AI technologies not just as instruments, but rather as attractions on the stage. As I argued, the AI of attractions is defined by a specific arrangement of three key elements, namely technological exhibition, an interactive relationship, and a looping textual structure. In the shows analysed, the projections of live-generated text and the actions of technicians operating it are placed at centre stage. The exhibition of AI as an attractive, though elusive, agent solicits the curiosity of the audience, inviting them to directly engage with the AI. Curiosity appears to be the major narrative drive of the AI of attractions. The shows promise to expose the hidden face of AI. However, this submedial face can only appear in brief moments of revelation which sustain and fall right back into the dynamic of suspicion, creating looping textual structures.

In the AI of attractions, exhibition, interaction and loop appear to be elements of a peculiar narrative dynamic that mobilises curiosity around the medium, while also trying to critically debunk it. Ultimately, the theatrical attempts to reveal AI are confronted by the fundamental opacity of the medium. Such opacity is less a technical characteristic than a socio-cultural dynamic, for which users are willing to relate to media as subjects of sorts. Relying on this dynamic, the AI of attractions does not aim to fulfil the audience's curiosity towards AI but to propel it, expanding the possible artistic narrative around the novel technology.

It is crucial to note that the AI of attractions is only one of the several modalities through which AI is used in the arts. On my last day at the *Spy on Me* festival in Berlin, I participated in Lena Biresch and Nico Parisius' *Me, Myself & My Avatars: Sequel 2*, a VR-installation where I experienced myself in the guise of a four-legged creature. After removing the visors, I asked the creators: 'What does AI have to do with it?'. The two game developers were surprised by my question. It turns out that AI was a huge component of the installation, as they used it to create the interactive graphics and the environment. However, they did not feel the need to point it out. As they argued, theatre makers do not specify the computer software used to create lights or sound, so why should AI be any different? Biresch and Parisius expose a different approach to generative AI: rather than foregrounding its technological novelty, they treat AI as one of many tools available to artists. Attractiveness is thus tied to the historical perception of a medium and may evolve into more instrumental uses, as Dooley (2018) observes in the integration of VR into film and television following its initial phase of attraction. As technological hype evolves, artists may similarly develop an approach to AI in which the technology is no longer presented as exceptional.

Yet, the modality of the AI of attractions appears to be relevant for two reasons. First, it helps recognise how theatre, drawing on technological hype, employs a specific arrangement of technology, spectatorship and text to represent and discuss technological media. Second, more broadly, the *dispositif* of the AI of attractions may be noted across different artistic fields. Exposing the role of social narratives in the relationship between AI and arts and the artists' response to it, the AI of attractions shows that the discussion on generative AI and creativity must always include materialist-relational considerations.

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Ethical considerations

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