

## **Doppelgangster's everybody loses: a dramaturgy for extinction**

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# Doppelgangster's Everybody Loses: A Dramaturgy for Extinction

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Tobias Manderson-Galvin and Tom Payne

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## Abstract

In 1957, the eminent herpetologist Dr Karl Patterson Schmidt was bitten by a juvenile boomslang snake (*Dyspholidus typus*) at the Chicago Natural History Field Museum. Over the next twenty-four hours, he recorded his increasingly horrifying symptoms in what was to become his 'death diary' (Buck). In UK/Australian performance company Doppelgangster's seventy-five-minute stage performance *Everybody Loses: The Death Diary of Karl Patterson Schmidt* (2017), Schmidt's account (Pope 1958) provides a narrative framework through which to interrogate the meta themes of climate change and the sixth great extinction. By staging Schmidt's catastrophic death and inviting spectators to 'linger' with the performer in the space between, myriad ecological antagonisms are enacted. In this essay, co-creators Tobias Manderson-Galvin (MKA Theatre of New Writing, Melbourne) and Tom Payne (Sheffield Hallam University) draw upon Timothy Morton's concept of "dark ecology" (2018) and the "dark ecology of elegy" (2012), as well as thinking from within the field of Performance Studies, to explore, situate and extend the "ecological thought" made apparent in *Everybody Loses*. In doing so, they offer an innovative dramaturgy for extinction.

**Keywords:** elegy, ecological dramaturgy, dark ecology, anthropocene extinction, Karl Patterson Schmidt, Timothy Morton

To be a thing at all – a rock, a lizard, a human – is to be in a twist. How thought longs to twist and turn like the serpent poetry.

*Morton, Dark Ecology 1*

The real truth about snake stories is that they are all too likely to be untrue.

*Patterson Schmidt 1<sup>[1]</sup>*

## Introduction

*Everybody Loses* (2017), by UK/Australian performance company Doppelgangster, is a seventy-five-minute stage performance in the form of a direct-address monologue. Written, directed, and designed by Australian playwright Tobias Manderson-Galvin and UK performer and academic Tom Payne, and performed by the latter, *Everybody Loses* draws upon postdramatic, verbatim, recorded delivery, new writing, multimedia, and site-specific performance techniques, to offer a surreal evocation of the final twenty-four hours in the life of the renowned American herpetologist Dr Karl Patterson Schmidt (1890-

1957). This essay draws upon Timothy Morton's concept of "dark ecology" (2018) and the "dark ecology of elegy" (2012), as well as thinking from within the field of Performance Studies, to explore, situate and extend the 'ecological thought' (2007) made apparent in this work. It offers a new dramaturgy for extinction and contributes to emergent models of research and practice within the domain of eco-theatre and performance that operates as a "means or a lens through which we can know the unknowable and grapple with the hope, despair and guilt of this ecological epoch" (Spalink and Winn-Lenetsky 5).

Doppelgangster formed in late 2015 following a two-week National Theatre Wales-led artist's residency at Broneirion country house and Girl Guides headquarters in Llandinam, mid-Wales (Wales Lab, Summercamp, 22 June – 3 July). The company's "flagship" production *Doppelgangster's TITANIC* premiered on 5 and 6 November in a laneway at the side of Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff as part of the contemporary arts festival Experimentica 15. This anarchic and satirical re-working of James Cameron's similarly titled 1997 disaster blockbuster *Titanic* took place at night, in, on, and around a "weeping" shipping container.<sup>[2]</sup> By drawing upon this ubiquitous icy metaphor for the climate crisis (Thanki; Cadman; Judge) and aligning itself with the co-star of Cameron's movie – prominent American actor and environmentalist, Leonardo Di Caprio – Doppelgangster sought to establish an oblique thematic relationship between its emergent theatre practice and contemporary work concerned with staging representations of the climate crisis.



Tom Payne and Tobias Manderson-Galvin in *Doppelgangster's TITANIC*. Presented at Experimentica 15, Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff. Photo: Warren Orchard

Born in Lake Forest Illinois in 1890, Schmidt was responsible for many significant scholarly contributions to herpetology, animal distribution, climate-change-linked species dispersal, and ecology (40). Schmidt's interest in snakes purportedly dated from 1915 (Goodnight et al. 39-40) and between 1942-1946 he was the President of the American Society of Ichthyologists and Herpetologists. For thirteen years, he served as the herpetological editor of *Copeia* (1937-49), a journal dedicated to the discipline (41). It was in *Copeia* that his personally recorded scientific account of his symptoms – dubbed his “death diary” (*Science Friday*) – was posthumously published in December 1958 (Pope). [3] Schmidt's demise occurred at the age of sixty-seven, one month after he was awarded the title of Eminent Ecologist by the Ecological Society of America (Goodnight 40). Schmidt died on 26 September 1957 due to internal bleeding, twenty-four hours after he was bitten by a South African boomslang snake (*Dyspholidus typus*) at the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History, where he held the title of Curator Emeritus of Zoology.

Schmidt's account provides a narrative framework through which Doppelgangster has creatively responded to American author Roy Scranton's provocative essay *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* (2015). The unofficial epochal designation “Anthropocene” was coined by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoemer in 2000 to “emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology” and to account for the “growing impacts of human activities on earth and atmosphere, and at all, including global, scales” (Crutzen and Stoemer 17). The Anthropocene extinction – also referred to as the sixth mass extinction (Kolbert; Cowie, Bouchet and Fontaine; Ceballos, Ehrlich and Raven), or Holocene extinction (Turvey; Stuart, Kosintsev, Higham; Burney, Robertson and Piggott Burney) – is notable because “the rate of species extinction is now as much as 100 times that of the ‘normal rate’ throughout geological time [...] a rare event [is] changing the environment so quickly that many organisms cannot evolve in response to it” (Ceballos and Ehrlich 1080).

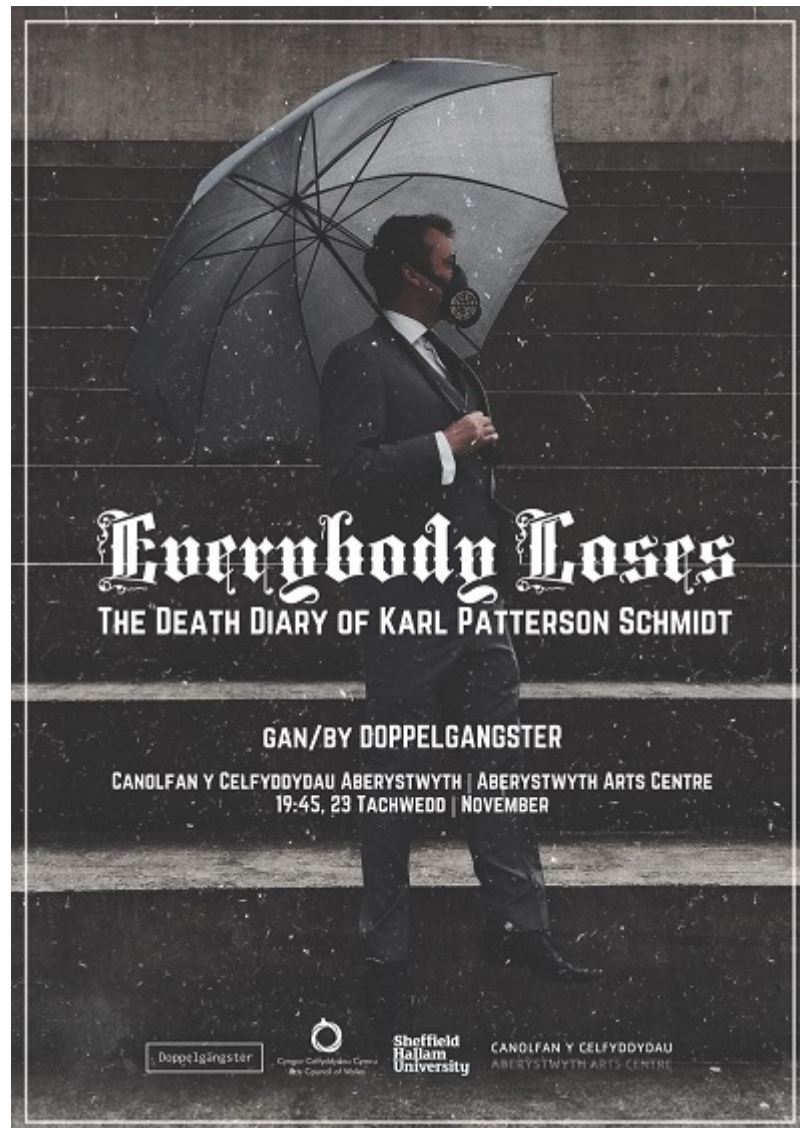
Scranton describes his experience as a United States soldier in the second gulf conflict in Iraq and indicates that he could only continue to function amidst the horror and destruction of war by drawing on Samurai philosophy and the thinking of Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, which enabled him to accept that he was, in effect, already dead (Scranton 22). When he returned from war it occurred to him that the severity of the climate crisis required a similar psychological manoeuvre:

The greatest challenge we face is a philosophical one: understanding that this civilization is already dead. The sooner we confront our situation and realize that there is nothing we can do to save ourselves, the sooner we can get down to the difficult task of adapting, with mortal humility, to our new reality.

Scranton 23

Schmidt's scientific account of his own death is seen here as analogous to our ecological crisis. By staging extracts from his “death diary” the performance seeks to open a space in which to reflect upon the “new reality” that Scranton sets out. *Everybody Loses* explores the ways in which performance might enable the creation of a spectatorial encounter within which audiences might inhabit that space of learning, and commune with

the dead (92). It invites spectators to “absent from the present a conceptual reality transcending time and space” (95), thereby evoking the competing rhythms and spatiality of Anthropocene extinction. In so doing, *Everybody Loses* invites critical reflection on the death of the self and the death of civilisation.



Tom Payne in the promotional poster for *Everybody Loses*, Aberystwyth Arts Centre (2017). Photo: Wilson Liew

First performed in the Studio Theatre at Aberystwyth Arts Centre, mid-Wales (23 November 2017) *Everybody Loses* has since been re-configured in a variety of unconventional and traditional theatrical locations, including a former power substation (La Générale, Paris); the railway arches beneath Waterloo station (Waterloo Vaults, London); a boutique theatre in a former Victorian coach house (Tom Thumb Theatre, Margate); a former convent (La Universidad de Alcalá, Alcalá de Henares); an independent cinema (The Projector, Singapore); a former lawn bowls club (Backbone Arts, Brisbane); a rear garden veranda in suburban Prahran (MKA Pop-up Theatre, Melbourne); a fetish club (Kings Cross Theatre, Sydney); a post-industrial garage arts space (Apparat Athen, Athens); and a black box studio at the Performance Lab, Sheffield Hallam University, where it was presented as a keynote performance as part of the Standing Conference of University Drama Departments (SCUDD, June 2019).



Watch Video At: <https://youtu.be/qgUg41M8XKg>

*Everybody Loses* by Doppelgangster (Kings Cross Theatre, Sydney 2018).  
Cinematography by Sam Christie

In a different version of this essay, the relationship between the performance and the various contrasting places and spaces of exposition might be explored. It would be possible to draw from a “phenomenological or experiential understanding of site” (Kwon 3) to tease out ecological resonances and highlight incongruities in the ways in which the climate crisis is experienced in different locales. This account, however, takes an alternative route. Its primary thematic site (there are others) is eco-philosopher Timothy Morton’s concept of ‘dark ecology’; and our understanding of that site is based upon what art historian Miwon Kwon defines as “a discursive vector – ungrounded, fluid, virtual” (29-30). For clarity, this essay reflects primarily upon the studio-based presentation at The Performance Lab in June 2019, while descriptions of that performance and the dramaturgical strategies discussed might (in the future) be usefully remapped onto discussions about the performance in other contexts.

Site-specific paradigms are useful to this discussion because of the close linkage with the theory and practice of those concerned with theatre and ecology (Kershaw; Heddon and Mackey; Allen and Preece; and Lavery; Bottoms; et al.). This framework is also helpful because associated compositional strategies and tactics have been instructive in the creation of the work, specifically the practice and theory of performance scholar and site-specific theatre practitioner Mike Pearson, who describes technical approaches to the practice of dramaturgical composition (Pearson, *Site-specific Performance* 24-7), and offers a theoretical framework for repurposing existing theory as a tool for performance making.<sup>[4]</sup> This approach has been adopted in the creation of *Everybody Loses*. The scientific collides with the anecdotal; the recent historical with the ancient mythological;



and the autobiographical with academic prose. *Everybody Loses* is “writing in an indefinite series of creative and disciplinary linkages” (Pearson, *In Comes* 10). Drawing upon found sources, it is a multi-media:

assemblage – documentation works as dreamwork – forging and following connections in an indefinite network ... the space between materials, documents and narratives generates authentic insight. This is the place of interpretation.

*Pearson and Shanks 67*

While the following reflections on the application of Morton’s theory are instructive with regards to process, in keeping with the strange looping quality of “dark ecology” (Morton 6), the distinction between theory as a tool for making (prospective/heuretic), and theory as a tool for making sense of (retrospective/heuristic) is blurred. This essay does not claim to be a comprehensive account, nor is it a replicable guide to performance-making. Instead, in partially and imaginatively assembling selected remains of performance and process, mirroring the production, this account is a “heterogeneous assemblage” (Pearson and Shanks 55) of traces, subject to “small acts of curation” (Pearson *Site-Specific Performance* 42) with the aim of telling “the truth about [a] snake” story (Patterson Schmidt 1).



Tom Payne in *Everybody Loses* by Doppelgangster. Presented at the Standing Conference of University Drama Departments, The Performance Lab, Sheffield Hallam University (2019). Photo: Becky Payne

Documentation and recollections from disconnected moments in time are presented to tentatively articulate an ecological dramaturgy that exemplifies what performance theorist Carl Lavery describes as “weak theatre” (231). Lavery sets this in opposition to what he terms “strong theatre,” namely theatre that makes grand claims for efficacy and change, “largely fêted as a progressive force – an activity that supposedly produces a more democratic world by stressing the iterability and contingent nature of all identity and reality” (232). In opposition to this, “Weak theatre refuses to serve a purpose [...] content, merely, to reproduce itself, again and again theatre’s doing [...] is always to some extent an ‘undoing’, a coming to terms with weakness and inadequacy” (233). As a spectatorial event, *Everybody Loses* highlights fragility and misplaced optimism. “[A]s an art of weakness,” the performance aims to “corrode” “the real [...] to make the world problematic, multiple and complex” (233), doing so through the interweaving of chronologies, histories, and competing themes and narratives, and by striving dramaturgically after a dark ecological awareness that is equal parts “depressing,” “uncanny” and “sweet.” Perhaps after Morton, and with acknowledgement of the work of others within the performance discipline,<sup>[5]</sup> we might refer to it instead as *weird theatre*.

In *Dark Ecology* (2016), Morton argues that ecological awareness in the age of the Anthropocene “is weird: it has a twisted, looping form” (6). According to Morton, this “strange loop is one in which two levels that appear utterly separate flip into one another” (7). In designating a starting point for the Anthropocene, Crutzen and Stoemer argue that James Watt’s patenting of the steam engine in 1784 marked the beginning of “the period [the past two-hundred years or so] when data retrieved from glacial ice cores show the beginning of a growth in the atmospheric concentrations of several ‘green- house gases’, in particular CO<sub>2</sub> and CH<sub>4</sub>” (Crutzen and Stoemer 17-18). For Morton, the patenting of the steam engine enabled the “industrial turn” (8) and marked the beginning of a period of dark elegiacal mourning; one that runs counter to the established poetic tradition of mourning for the already lost. Morton explains:

In elegy, the person departs and the environment echoes our woe. In ecological thinking, the fear is that we will go on living, while the environment disappears around us. Ultimately, imagine the very air we breathe vanishing – we will literally not be able to have any more elegies, because we will all be dead. It is strictly impossible for us to mourn this absolute, radical loss.

*The Dark Ecology of Elegy* 253

In *Everybody Loses*, the moment that Schmidt is bitten by the snake is analogous to the patenting of the steam engine, and the effects of the venom on his body akin to the rapid transformation of the environment as a result of industrialisation. Schmidt’s scientific documentation of corporeal deterioration and cognitive dissonance in response to the localised symptoms and their relationship to his body is analogous to the scientific documentation of our failing planet and our collective failure to avert catastrophe. By enacting his subsequent death spiral *Everybody Loses* elides dissociative scientific imperialism with themes of industrialisation and colonisation, highlighting differential responsibility and offering an implicit critique of the Anthropocene.<sup>[6]</sup>





Tom Payne in *Everybody Loses* by Doppelgangster. Presented at the Standing Conference of University Drama Departments, The Performance Lab, Sheffield Hallam University (2019). Photo: Becky Payne

Schmidt's scientific account of the symptoms leading to his death because of snake envenomation is regarded as a rare contribution to understandings of the effect of an untreated bite (Pope 280). So unique are the circumstances, that the precise cause of Schmidt's death continues to occupy the attention of medical research scholars (Pla et al.). In December 1958, Schmidt's notes were published with an accompanying critical context by fellow herpetologist Clifford Pope in "Fatal Bite of Captive African Rear Fanged Snake (*Dispholidus*)". In Pope's account, Schmidt describes his attempts to perform an identification of a 30-inch African snake brought to the museum from the Lincoln Park Zoo when, according to Pope, he "absent-mindedly" gave it the "opportunity to bite" (280). Schmidt narrates:

I took it from Dr. Inger without thinking of any precaution, and it promptly bit me on the fleshy lateral aspect of the first joint of the left thumb. [...] The punctures bled freely and I sucked them vigorously, but did not think of...

280-81

Schmidt's diary continues with a series of standard time entries that include a brief description of his subsequent train journey home, and symptoms such as "strong nausea," "shaking" and "fever" (281). These continue throughout the night and into the following morning. They range from the bloody ("Urination at 12:20 AM mostly blood, but small in amount. Mouth had bled steadily as shown by dried blood at both angles of the mouth" (281)) to the mundane ("Ate cereal and poached egg on toast & apple sauce &

coffee for breakfast at 7” (281)). Pope reports that, on the morning following the bite, Schmidt appeared to have made something of a recovery, and that “he felt so well at about 10:00 o’clock that he telephoned the Museum to expect him at work the next day” (281). However, shortly after midday he developed severe breathing difficulties and was transported to the hospital, where, upon arrival shortly after 3 PM, he was “promptly pronounced dead from respiratory paralysis” (281). At this point in the account, Pope takes over and relays the grisly findings of the autopsy performed by the coroner’s physician in Cook County, Illinois, on the morning of 27 September 1957, which revealed:

extensive internal bleeding [...] hemorrhages were evident in the eyes [...] Multiple, often small hemorrhages were found in the brain [...] small bleedings had occurred in the heart wall and in the lungs [...] Death was ascribed to cerebral hemorrhages caused by ‘venom from the snake bite.’

281

In providing a contextual framing for the diary and the coroner’s report, Pope describes Schmidt’s account as having been “written by Schmidt out of curiosity and in a characteristic spirit of optimism” (280). He goes on to state: “that Dr. Schmidt’s optimism was extremely unfortunate is proved by his death, but it must be admitted that there was some justification: The boomslang was very young and only one fang penetrated deeply” (281). What makes Schmidt’s case even more intriguing is that he reportedly refused medical attention for fear that it would disrupt the symptoms that he was recording. In 2015, Schmidt’s account and other related documents (including newspaper articles and physician’s records) formed the basis of an eerie documentary short, entitled *Diary of a Snakebite Death*, which described the story as “a grizzly cross between a Rod Serling tale and an Edgar Allan Poe short story, except it’s all true” (*Science Friday*).

The studio version of the performance in question occurs on a rectangular set with white walls to the rear and a crisp ‘hospital’ white floor. The playing space is approximately seven metres wide, two metres high, and a metre and a half deep. The audience sits opposite on raked seating. In the corner of the playing space (upstage right) is a coil of bright white LEDs lying in a loop on the floor. Like a snake, its tail extends out to the edges of the scenographic backdrop and runs high along the rear wall. The lights are wrapped around the stage like an ouroboros, the snake eating its own tail; an ancient symbol denoting the endless cycle of destruction and rebirth. Schmidt is caught in a loop, “a universe of finitude and fragility, a world in which objects are suffused with and surrounded by mysterious hermeneutical clouds of unknowing” (Morton, *Dark Ecology* 6); or perhaps this is just vapour leaking from the two haze machines waiting in the wings.



Tom Payne in *Everybody Loses* by Doppelgangster. Presented at the Standing Conference of University Drama Departments, The Performance Lab, Sheffield Hallam University (2019). Photo: Becky Payne

The setting is minimal and abstract. It could be the study/library of his family home. It is reminiscent of an operating or lecture theatre. Perhaps it is where he brings students and his children to teach them about amphibians and reptiles. It could be the back of the ambulance that transports him to the hospital where he dies. Or the sterile corridor in the hospital along which he travels as he is taken to the morgue. Or, possibly, it is the lecture hall in the building where the bite occurred. At various points in the performance, it fleetingly becomes all and none. A thin chain runs at waist height from one side of the stage to the other, the fourth wall of the museum or gallery, a fragile snaking barrier that we ought not to cross.

Schmidt sits upright on a white chair upstage left. He is still, his attention fixed somewhere in space. He is dressed in a black suit, with black tie and black shoes; what literary critic John Harvey describes in *Men in Black* (1995) as the nineteenth-century “dress of death [...] a sombre mystery” (Harvey 23).<sup>[7]</sup> Black has other meanings, but its “most widespread and fundamental value lies in its association with darkness and night, and with the ancient natural imagery that connects night with death” (41). Schmidt’s mourning attire presents a paradox, in that he, the subject of mourning, is not yet dead. In this way, his funereal clothes chime with Morton’s description of ecological elegy, which “asks us to mourn for something that has not completely passed” (Morton, *The Dark Ecology of Elegy* 254). In the special world of this performance, we cannot mourn for

Schmidt, he is not dead, nor can Schmidt mourn for himself, because, as Morton states, “we cannot mourn for the environment because we are so deeply attached to it—we are it” (253).

Woven into the fabric of Schmidt’s dark trousers and blazer is a fine snakeskin print. Black stitched into black. At the best of times, black, “is a colour to be handled with care, it is the colour of dark matters and not safe for everyone” (Harvey 41). Schmidt’s black lizard-like attire is all the more threatening. It references the “aberrant” snake (Pope), and signals that the two are – as we are to the environment – “deeply attached” (Morton, *The Dark Ecology of Elegy* 253).

I think. I am feeling a little like I’m losing my mind.  
Worse for wear. Perhaps it’s the snakeskin suit.  
I thought it’d add something, me to the snake.

Schmidt stands before us, inhabiting the snake’s skin, just as the snake punctured his flesh, entered his body, and dispersed venom: they are entwined, causative and caused upon. Dressed as ‘serpent’ in mourning clothes, in anticipation of his own passing, Schmidt manifests “a dark ecological loop: *a strange loop* [...] weirdly weird: a turn of events that has an uncanny appearance” (Morton, *Dark Ecology* 7).



Tom Payne in *Everybody Loses* by Doppelgangster. Presented at the Standing Conference of University Drama Departments, The Performance Lab, Sheffield Hallam University (2019). Photo: Becky Payne

Schmidt's pre-recorded voice is heard over the PA system. At a slow tempo, he sings the lines from the traditional Scottish folk song *Froggy Went A-Courtin'*. He delivers it in a deep drawl, reminiscent of the American singer-songwriter Tom Waits:

Frog went a-courtin', and he did ride, uh-huh uh-huh  
Frog went a-courtin', and he did ride, uh-huh uh-huh  
Frog went a-courtin', and he did ride  
With a sword and a pistol by his side, uh-huh uh-huh

During the song, the large screens display opening titles. These are interspersed with the image of Schmidt in a grey three-piece suit and black rubber respirator who can be seen hunched on the ground next to an orange shipping container located in a gloomy industrial landscape.

Next to come in was a big black snake, uh-huh uh-huh  
Next to come in was a big black snake, uh-huh uh-huh  
Next to come in was a big black snake  
Ate up all the uranium cake, uh-huh uh-huh

During the song the version of Schmidt in the video stands and slowly walks towards the camera, exiting the screen as the song concludes.

The music and lights precipitate a shift in tone and Schmidt stands up, before stepping slowly towards the centre of the stage where he pauses behind an attractively styled Shure Model 55 Unidyne. A smaller version was synonymous with American rock and roll singer Elvis Presley.<sup>[8]</sup> Schmidt presses his mouth to the metal, raises his right palm to the air and inhales as he prepares to speak...

That moment, when your whole life flashes before your eyes.

Dear Diary.

If we're going to spend this time together, learn something from all this, it's worth considering the numbers.

He continues with little pause for the next seventy-minutes. The performance that follows defies conventional dramatic form, it frequently shifts in tone of address; a lecture, an elegy, a memorial service, a work event, a 1950s healing revival. At times we hear the words of Schmidt, at others, we hear different authorial voices, including those of Pope and Doppelgangster. This polyvocal approach complements the layered and looping dramaturgy drawn from Morton's dark ecology, making the experience weirder still. This seemingly chaotic approach to composition is organised technically using a "*stratigraphic model*" (Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* 167).<sup>[9]</sup>





Tom Payne in *Everybody Loses* by Doppelgangster. Presented at the Standing Conference of University Drama Departments, The Performance Lab, Sheffield Hallam University (2019). Photo: Becky Payne

In *Everybody Loses*, the primary elements include a pre-recorded audio score containing the lines, blocking instructions, atmospheric music and sound effects that are to be heard by the performer only, and intended to both drive and condition the live performance. In addition, a continuous musical score created by Melbourne based experimental jazz duo Maria Moles and Adam Halliwell adds atmosphere to the text spoken live and is heard by the audience over a prominent public address system. Alongside this are parallel video projections that bookend either side of the playing space. These play an identical video feed featuring cinematography from Wales-based environmental filmmaker Sam Christie; and a series of phrases, titles, and numbers in crisp white font on black background. These strata have been prepared using compositional approaches more akin to audio or video production than theatre making. Audio, video clips, titles and music are “recorded separately, then run together and mixed” (169) in video and audio editing software. At times “layers have different relative thicknesses, threatening to overwhelm each other” and at others they are “minimally present, or entirely absent” (169). This compositional work primarily takes place at a computer rather than the rehearsal room.

From its inception, Doppelgangster has adopted something akin to the recorded delivery’ technique associated with verbatim theatre. In this method – named after Alecky Blythe’s theatre company Recorded Delivery (2003) – audio recordings of interviews are played to the actor through an earpiece.<sup>[10]</sup> Doppelgangster’s use of the technique was initially adopted as a way of rapidly progressing text to performance without the need for learning lines. As their work has developed, they have sought to use the technique to produce an



anti-realist separation between the performer and the character that they are portraying; meanwhile, the very real task of 'staying on track' gives the performer an uncanny urgent quality, that of someone perpetually in the moment as they attempt to hang on and respond to a rapid stream of instructions. In this context, authenticity is not derived from adhering faithfully to the voice of an interviewee – the actor listens primarily to their own voice reading a text that is polyvocal in composition – but in the task of staying on track, which is authentically performed.

In a *Vanity Fair* article Hollywood actor Johnny Depp responds to media criticism that he uses an earpiece when filming *Pirates of the Caribbean* because he cannot remember his lines:

I've got bagpipes, a baby crying and bombs going off [over the earpiece...] It creates a truth. Some of my biggest heroes were in silent film. It had to be behind the eyes. And my feeling is, that if there's no truth behind the eyes, it doesn't matter what the fucking words are.

*Desta*

While Depp's retort is intended as a defence against the perceived inadequacy levelled at himself and other prominent actors who have used earpieces to avoid 'floundering' on stage (Soloski) – it is seen here as illustrative of a different approach to achieving 'truth' in performance by subjecting the performer to tasks and experiences that condition their response but are hidden from the spectator. Sound effects and blocking instructions are incorporated into the recording and these moments are aligned with the music and video score so that Schmidt's speech and movement are precisely timed and percussively punctuated, generating further uncanny moments of alarming synchronicity across all media and within the live performance:

The whole night is pretty much this. Check the notes. Trust me. I wrote them. Can read them aloud.

To you. Whisper them. Record them onto a file and you can listen to it as you sleep. You can dream about it. Your dreams will be the notes. And this...

Everyone dreams. The same dreams. About dreaming. Everyone.

Schmidt's grey costuming in the video is congruent with documentary images. At all times, he wears a black rubber respirator, suggesting that the Schmidt we see in the video is the Schmidt attended to by the inhalator squad on the morning of his death. Seemingly trapped in a protracted moment in time, he pirouettes and poses for the camera, taking up position in various locations in an unidentifiable industrial landscape.



Tom Payne in video still from *Everybody Loses* by Doppelgangster. Cinematography: Sam Christie

At times we see Schmidt in longshot – full frame – at others, a hand or shoe fill the screen. Whenever we see Schmidt’s face, he stares back through the lens and out towards the audience accusingly. Over the course of the performance, the daylight grey concrete backdrop gradually gives way to night, and static objects are replaced by flames and flares. Schmidt appears increasingly distressed, his eyes rolling back in his head. The video plays only occasionally and is interspersed with black and the occasional word, phrase, or number, often appearing precisely in the moment that the words are uttered by Schmidt. At times he appears to be recounting past events, at others he describes them in the present; a “strange loop.” The bite and his account of it repeat at intervals throughout the performance as he interrupts, deconstructs, and flies away from, into, and around his own thoughts, ideas, and activities. His personal account is elaborated scientifically by drawing upon the words of Pope, as he slips in and out of reporting his experience in the first person.

You know that thing where you’re all alone and you look in the mirror and you see your true self. Well, he looks exactly like me. And a little like – if anyone – I’d say – my father, only younger than he is now, and a bit like he looks in photos when he was my age. If he was looking in a mirror.

His narration is interspersed with biological science, astrophysics, and historical events associated with global industrialisation and the large-scale distribution of carbon that marked the moment, beginning in around eighteen-hundred, that human activity became “so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of Nature and are pushing the Earth into planetary terra incognita” (Steffan, Crutzen and McNeill 614). His narration frequently moves between the present moment, and distant serpent mythology:

For most of these ancient nations these creation myths contain warnings against digging the land in a particular part of the Northern Territories of Australia – an area the size only of a city that most haven't visited in thousands of years – a land filled with deserts and swamps alternately, and men and man-eating crocodiles, usually alternately also, but they don't get called 'man-eating' as a turn or otherwise of phrase; a land most have no reason to visit — and yet these multitudes warn not to dig in this place because if you are to dig there then a great serpent will rise from the ground, wrap itself around the earth, and crush it. And that will be the end of this.

The “dark ecological loop” in *Everybody Loses* extends beyond Schmidt's appearance, and into the looping structure of the performance text which becomes increasingly fragmented, and, at times, contradictory as he slips from one ecological thought to the next:

Seizure. Sucking on my thumb. Back at the beginning. Juvenile. Daydreaming with zero effort. The two pieces of toast. People saying, don't I want medical attention and me saying, “no that'd ruin the symptoms”. The cloud of radiation sitting over Europe. The poisoned waters of the Pacific. The countless tiny clots across the entire body... If anyone would like to contribute, I've been talking a fair bit, and it'd be great to hear from you. Please make a submission via our postal address. The industrial waste pits, the bleached reefs, or if anyone would like to get bitten, get deeply envenomed, hemotoxicated, documented. The snake bite and the serpent biting itself forever. We called it. Someone called the inhalator squad. I had zero signs of life. I had you.

From the moment that the snake first bites, *Everybody Loses* holds open a space in which elegiac ecological thought might occur. In keeping with Morton's prescription for “Ecological elegy”, *Everybody Loses* repeatedly operates to “undermine a sense of closure” (Morton, *The Dark Ecology of Elegy* 253), looping around to, and re-enacting the moment of the bite, again, and again, each time moving further away from Schmidt's description into parallel imaginative threads, without offering any dramatic resolution at the conclusion of the performance.



Tom Payne in *Everybody Loses* by Doppelgangster. Presented at the Standing Conference of University Drama Departments, The Performance Lab, Sheffield Hallam University (2019). Photo: Becky Payne

*Everybody Loses* cycles structurally through the layers of Morton's "dark-depressing," "dark-uncanny" and "dark-depressing" layers of "ecological awareness" (Morton, *Dark Ecology* 5). Schmidt returns to the aperture and, as the moment of his passing promises to occur, does so again. The audience is invited to linger in moments of what Morton proposes as constituent parts of the dark ecological experience: "guilt" (131), "shame" (133), "melancholy" (135), "horror" (136), "the ridiculous" (144), "the ethereal" (145), "the hollow" (147), "the sadness" (148), "the longing" (152), and "the joy" (153).

Infinity. It's not a number, but an abstract mathematical concept, often represented by Lemsip, no lemniscate – 'lemniscate', meaning decorated with ribbons. And it's also sometimes represented by that trickster snake in loop form, eating its own tail. Ow!!

Dear, dear, dear, dear, diary. We've had some times. Oh ho what times!  
Bet you're thinking oh, what a time we've lost!

Next time. There's always a next time! Unless there isn't.

The smoke is still going. It builds now.

Schmidt sings.

Next to come in was a big black snake, uh-huh uh-huh  
Next to come in was a big black snake, uh-huh uh-huh  
Next to come in was a big black snake  
Ate up all the uranium cake, uh-huh uh-huh

pause

I had a great time. I wouldn't do it again. Will- *\*normal voice\** Ow!

*Looks at his thumb. Then back at us.*

Yours for now,

Dr Karl Patterson Schmidt.

FIN. BEGIN AGAIN. FIN.

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## Endnotes

[1] The opening pages of eco-philosopher Timothy Morton's *Dark Ecology* (2) feature a drawing of an ouroboros, an ancient symbol depicting a serpent eating its own tail. A similar drawing appears at the beginning of herpetologist Karl Patterson Schmidt's text *The Truth About Snake Stories* (1929). Inside Schmidt's ouroboros is a second snake. Coiled between two tufts of grass it appears to be spitting venom. This essay joins the work of Schmidt with that of Morton, creating a "strange loop" (*Dark Ecology* 6). Something snakelike emerges from the centre...

[2] A drainage pipe with holes drilled along its length was rigged above the doors at one end of the shipping container. Water flowed into the pipe and leaked through the holes, creating a wall of water that covered the opening for the duration of the performance.

[3] Short extracts from the article are included here and in the performance with kind permission from the American Society for Ichthyologists and Herpetologists. *Copeia* is now entitled *Ichthyology and Herpetology*.

[4] Pearson adopts Gregory Ulmer's "mystory" as a method that "blurs the boundary between critical and creative writing, autobiography and cultural history, one text and the next: the author is located within an intertextual network of cultural references" (Pearson, *In Comes* 9). Pearson uses Ulmer's heuristics as "a generative experiment leading to the production of new work" (10). In this context, Ulmer's generative theory (Ulmer 82-112) is similarly applied, to repurpose Morton's concept of 'dark ecology' as a dramaturgical resource for performance making.

[5] Theatre academic Patrick Lonergan (2020) discusses Ella Hickson's *Oil* (2016) through the lens of the "weird" in Morton's Dark Ecology (6), noting how Hickson's "use of theatrical form registers the sense of 'weirdness' that arises from ecological awareness" (38).

[6] The term Anthropocene which implies whole species responsibility for the climate crisis has been widely criticised, with some labelling it "analytically defective" and "inimical to action" (Malm and Hornborg 67), and others highlighting a need to "rewrite the epoch's causes in order to see what forms agency takes and which mediators entangle it" (Woods 140).

[7] See Pearson (2012) for an alternative discussion of the colour black with reference to costume in the multi-site performance *Raindogs* (Cardiff 2002).

[8] This rugged public address microphone was used in speeches by prominent twentieth century political figures, including Fidel Castro, Martin Luther King, and Harry S. Truman. It is the declamatory tool of choice for 20th century politicians and activists.

[9] "In a *stratigraphic* model of dramaturgy, site-specific performance is envisaged and executed as distinct strata or layers. Of the transitory component, performance, these might include text, physical action, soundtrack and scenography, the latter to include all scenic installation, lighting, amplification, prerecorded media, technological and technical aspects" (Pearson, *Site-Specific Performance* 167).

[10] In productions such as *The Girlfriend Experience* (2008) and *Do We Look Like Refugees?* (2011) Blythe's performers listen attentively to recordings and attempt to copy what they hear with the aim of achieving an authentic representation of the voice of the interviewee. At the same time, the headphones act as a constant reminder that the lines are being fed to the actor and that these are not their own words. This approach can be understood within the wider sphere of documentary theatre, which some argue functions "to complicate notions of authenticity with a more nuanced and challenging evocation of the 'real'" (Forsyth and Megson 2). Critics argue that the headphones are a distraction from what are otherwise convincing performances by actors who evidently know their lines (Salisbury 2009).



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