



The Dramatization of the Cybersublime in Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*

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Abstract in English

The cybersublime refers to the feeling of awe, wonder, and fear in virtual environments. Unlike the Romantic sublime, which arise from the encounter with nature, the cybersublime arise from the overwhelming experience of the vastness and possibilities offered by cyber realms. The cybersublime as a concept, which is the core of this study becomes a topic of interest to many playwrights, such as Jennifer Haley, the American contemporary playwright. Her works like *The Nether* (2013) deals with the ethical concerns in virtual realms and its impact on human relations. The play is about the Nether, a futuristic version of the internet, where characters can inhabit a virtual avatars and satisfy whatever they want. It revolves around an interrogation concerning the ethical consequences of actions in the cyber realm. The paper is devoted to reflect the dramatization of the cybersublime, and how does it impact the individuals' frame of being in digital setting. It reveals that the cybersublime is not only a technological manifestation, but an altering power that reshapes human perception, needs, and morality.

Paper Info

Keywords

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1. Introduction

Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* (2013) illustrates a reality in which digital immersion surpasses traditional entertainment, transforming into a metaphysical threat to the legal and ethical demands of the physical realm. The play takes place in a technologically advanced civilization in the future. It highlights how virtual spaces might be places that make people experience wonder, dread, and a deep sense of freedom. The Hideaway, which is a precise private realm within the entire future virtual realm (the Nether), is a Victorian digital garden. It is a harbor for both amazement and horror, serves as a good example to refer to the cybersublime.

The focus on the Hideaway rather than any other sub-realm of the Nether is because it is the most advanced and sophisticated example of the Nether's immersive potential. It provides a degree of sensory immersion that, in contrast to other potential realms, encourages users to perceive the virtual environment as superior to the real world. Furthermore, the Hideaway is built around desires that are legally and socially forbidden, making it the place where moral transgression, accountability, and consequences become inevitable.

The Hideaway's well planned style makes the visitors feel like they are completely drowned and immersed in it. The moral stakes and ethical questions the play might highlights on are manifested at the point where sublimity and simulation meet. The play's delicate intermingling of simulation, desire, and moral ambiguity makes people raise questions about the virtual world. The protagonists' capacity for moral decision-making is eclipsed by the alluring attraction of the cybersublime. The drama that comes out of this is not only about how technology has changed, but also about the fundamental psychological and philosophical ramifications of living in settings where simulation is better than reality. In this backdrop, *The Nether* might be

a modern meditation on the cybersublime, which is a blend of digital wonder and existential threat.

In this case, technology has "a magnitude that both dazzles and destabilizes human perception" (Nye, 1994, p. 43). It shows how technology alters the human perception, by destabilizing the traditional boundaries and offering new possibilities. Haley's play delivers an excellent foundation for examining how the virtual elicits not only wonder but also significant moral and psychological distress. British and American drama in the twenty-first century increasingly employs technology as a site of derealization, where characters contend with unstable identities and perceptions (Sierz, 2011). It is true for the characters who are confronted with the digital sublime, in which they are unable to separate their virtual from real frame of being. Critics assert that the fields of modern theater are becoming progressively "fluid, mediated, and discontinuous," which necessitates innovative modes of spectatorship capable of navigating immaterial and metaphysical spaces (Fuchs, 1996, p. 12).

Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* is performed in 2013, and it immediately garnered a critical attention due to its exploration of digital culture and virtual ethics. The play became more well-known after it was performed in the UK in 2014 at the Royal Court Theatre in London, a venue known for its innovative and politically challenging theatre. Although some reviews expressed unease with the play's unresolved ethical ambiguity, the majority of reviews praised the play's intellectual ambition, moral complexity, and restrained theatrical style. Thus, *The Nether* is still discussed in academic and theatrical settings, which has contributed to the play's ongoing relevance.

1. 2 Theoretical Framework

In order to comprehend the virtual and immersive reality of *The Nether* it is crucial to illuminate the theoretical framework pertaining to the cybersublime. The term signifies a unique critical progression. However, it originates from various interconnected traditions. It explains how modern settings can make us feel a mix of awe, fear, and confusion about what we know. It emerges within the framework of the digital age, to describe the feeling of awe and amazement that results from the technological advancements. Unlike the Romantic sublime that results from nature vastness. The digital world with its immersive and endless opportunities can be labeled in relation to the sublime (Mosco, 2004).

The terror and admiration that were associated with nature is turned by now to be relevant in cybernetic spaces, with its virtuality, simulations, and artificial intelligence. These characteristics promise an encounter with the metaphysical dimension of technology, one that surpasses the human perception. The cybersublime might be realized in terms of the effects of hyperreality. While hyperreality indicates the collapse of boundaries that divide the real and the virtual, cybersublime illustrates why this collapse is met with an overwhelming feeling. Thus, it refers to the aesthetical emotion that accompany a hyperreal experience.

Turkle (2011), an American reasearcher, in *Life on the Screen* highlights the duality associated with cybersublim “the line between the virtual and the real increasingly porous,” producing excitement but also a new form of disorientation (p. 212). When confronted with the immersive digital experience, users are unable to decode the ideological messages. They are drowned in the grandiose experience of terror and admiration by which losing any chance of critical engagement. As a result,

the creation of a copied experience engulfs the senses in a way that renders it superior to the original physical one.

Mosco (2004), a professor of sociology, coined the term "the cyber sublime" in his book, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace*. He contends that modern culture views cyberspace as a "mythic space," defined by unrealistic expectations and idealistic promises (Mosco, 2004, p. 5). In this scenario, digital worlds expand into realms of transcendence, where human limitations seem to be suspended. The manifestation of sublimity, technology not only astonishes but also overwhelms the individual, destabilizing their connection with their corporeal existence, reality, and ethical obligations. The sublime transforms into the technical through the disintegration of reality, but via the hyperreality, "the distinction between the real and its representation has become obsolete" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6). When the digital world is more coherent, appealing, and emotionally resonant than the actual world, the cybersublime happens. In the digital age the sublime resides not in nature itself, but in its imitation.

The British playwright, Grochala (2020) suggests that contemporary theater often examines "dislocated realities," (p. 129). Thus, the characters navigate several versions of reality, intensifying the dramatic tension between their genuine and virtual personas. In *The Nether*, characters navigate and switch between real bodies and avatars, creating a destabilizing sublime based on disembodiment. Some critics infer that theater after 2000 increasingly engages with the "spectacle of immaterial worlds," suggesting that digital simulation has gained a fundamental aesthetic influence in modern drama (Rebellato, 1999, p. 33).

Jenkins (2006), an American media scholar, in his examination of participatory culture, contends that digital environments may promote "collective empowerment"

instead of alienation, allowing users to discover identity and agency (p. 124). The Hideaway allowed people to experience many identities. However, the serious ethical violations display how digital spaces can be a suitable place to practice forbidden desires and prohibited needs. The cybersublime is more than just a technological wonder. It is an emotional and philosophical state in which digital spaces go beyond the usual boundaries of the real self and the avatar, simulation and reality, and desire and consequence.

2. The Cybersublime in *The Nether*

Haley's *The Nether* (2013), dramatizes not only the simple virtual area. It is an allegory for an experience that goes beyond what people can see and feel. The artificial Victorian garden is the appropriate shape for the sublime, it gives characters a backdrop that is more attractive, stable, and vibrant than the real life settings. Baudrillard (1994) may refer to these places by describing them as "more real than the real" (p. 12). The hyperreal site where the consciousness loses its ability to distinguish the real from its simulation. The Hideaway turns digital realm into a space that is so flawless to satisfy all needs and aspirations. The play has a transcendent effect because of its beautiful, well-chosen appearance, which includes blooming fruit trees, soft light, and seasons that mesmerize the mind.

Nye (1994), an American cultural critic, argues that the technological sublime usually emerges when industrial or digital systems that seem to "go beyond the limits of human scale and human temporality" (p. 74). This transcendence of limitations is what the Hideaway offers. It appears like an eternal pleasure that will never expire due to time, consequences, or briefness. It allows actions to be repeated away from change or aging. Being a virtual realm, it is devoid of any physical and legal constraints. It offers a place to exercise desires without social or legal judgments. This is another dimension of living makes people feel both amazed and scared. The conversation between Sims who is the creator of the Hideaway, and Morris who is the detective in charge of investigating the Hideaway, illustrates the cybersublime:

Sims. Come on, you're missing out....

It's nothing but images. And there is no consequence.

Morris. Images – ideas – create reality. Everything around us – our houses,

our bridges, our wars, our peace treaties – began as figments in someone's mind before becoming a physical or social fact. (Haley, 2013, scene 7)

The passage serves as a remarkable manifestation of the concept of cybersublime, where the advancement of technology evokes both fear and awe, this encounter with technology provokes fear and admiration that arise from digitalism rather than nature in Romantic frame of mind, so this play, *The Nether*, is described by its characters as:

Sims. Just because it's virtual doesn't mean it isn't real. Eighty per cent of the population

work in office realms, children attend school in educational realms – there's a realm for anything you want to know or do or think you might want to try. As the Nether becomes our contextual framework for being,... (Haley, 2013, scene 3).

However, this admiration covers the horror behind dissolving the ethical boundaries between good and evil, right and wrong, dark and white. This erosion of traditional notions of ethics and morality exposes how the virtual simulation can cause an ethical decay.

The Nether offers a free space to practice all forms of desires and tendencies that are prohibited or constrained in real life by social or juridical laws. Papa asserts that it is "An opportunity to live outside of consequence." (Haley, 2013, scene 4). The hideaway is another dimension of being away from all these in real world consequences. Thus, the advancement is usually accompanied by horror of chaos and violence of the unlimited freedom offered by immersive and overwhelming experience of digital realms. However, Baudrillard's hyperreality, an image without

an original that illustrates how the posthuman subject surrenders itself to delusion, is shown in the *Hideaway's* endless appeal (Baudrillard, 1994).

The Nether's cybersublime is a virtual demonstration that is both ecstatic and dangerous at the same time. The sublime here is not natural but algorithmic. Experts in contemporary drama explain how this works. Hence, digital settings in theater create "worlds-within-worlds" that contest conventional notions of theatrical space, prompting audiences to interact with several ontological dimensions of reality simultaneously (Grochala, 2020, p. 112). The contemporary theater's employment of technology often makes "spectacles of immaterial architecture," which are locations that seem to have depth and dimension because they are so intangible (Rebellato, 1999, p.29). The *Hideaway* is similar to this intangible construction that it makes you feel grand not by being gigantic, but by being appealing accurately to your senses. Nonetheless the *Hideaway's* perfect appearance and satisfaction for desires cannot be separated from its moral uncertainty. Its beauty hides the violent urges that are practiced inside it.

The *Hideaway* turns into a magnificent trap that is gorgeous enough to enchant, ordered enough to soothe, and unreal enough to liberate its visitors from their duties. However, some critics contend that being fully absorbed in digital media doesn't always mean you're in danger of doing anything wrong. Jenkins (2006) states that virtual worlds can help people be creative and be themselves in new ways. The dialogue between Morris and Doyle, illustrates the hyperreal characteristic of this advanced realm:

Doyle. That we are trying to cast off the limitations of physicality and become pure spirit.

Morris. Is that how you see crossing over? Becoming pure spirit?

Doyle. Something like that. (Haley, 2013, scene 9)

From this perspective, the Hideaway's stunning beauty might be regarded not as a mere deception but as a liberation from material constraints. Subsequently, the Hideaway is a superb instance of the cybersublime. It is a place where the idea of virtual perfection renders actual life unstable, pulls individuals into greater forms of disembodiment, and blurs the line between aesthetic wonder and moral horror. Haley uses this setting not only as a technological backdrop, but also as a dramatic trigger that reveals how quickly the sublime may become the horrible when it is cut off from the limits that define human experience.

One of *The Nether's* most stimulating aspects about the cybersublime is how it looks at disembodiment, which is the process of suspending or reinventing one's physical identity in digital spaces. Haley sets up the Hideaway as a place where bodies are not just shown, but also changed. Users can become avatars that free them from age, gender, death, and the stress of being seen by others. This freedom corresponds with the concept of the “informational body” articulated by posthuman theorists (Hayles, 1999, p. 2). It is used for denoting an identity that is created not by physical form but by data and performativity. In *The Nether*, immersion in the virtual realm not only enriches experience but also deconstructs the traditional notion of the body. Sims, the creator of the Hideaway, expresses this longing for physiological transcendence through his avatar, Papa. The shocking difference between his real-life body, and the Internet persona he adopted shows how the virtual world stimulates drastic identity conversion.

Baudrillard (1994) offers an essential theoretical framework for comprehending this transition. Within the framework of hyperreality, the body itself may be substituted by visuals that feel more authentic than the tangible self. Sims' avataric

existence exemplifies this principle, in which the simulated body assumes greater emotional resonance than the physical body. This effect is equally unsettling for Woodnut, the adult real-life teacher. When Woodnut is compared to Iris, the child avatar that he inhabits in *The Nether*, the comparison illustrates how immersion induces users to disregard the physical environment they occupy.

The British theater critic, Sierz (2011) declares that drama in the digital age often looks at characters that "exist in multiple versions," broken up across different platforms and realities. The innovative realm created by Sims allows users to adapt various identities. It guarantees them privacy and freedom, as declared by Sims when he states:

Sims. It's not the same way of being! It's imagination! People should be free in their own imagination! That is one place, at least, where they should have total privacy! I grant them that. My identity encryption is so profound, even I don't know who comes to the Hideaway... . (Haley, 2013, scene 7)

In *The Nether*, these altered versions of identity make it hard to distinguish the real from the simulated experience. The greatest danger is not that users lose themselves, but that they come to favor identities that never genuinely were. Nevertheless, it is crucial to acknowledge that certain theorists regard disembodiment as a potentially liberating process. Hayles (1999) posits that digital posthumanism may facilitate novel kinds of agency. Thus, permitting individuals to transcend deterministic narratives associated with race, gender, and physical constraints. From this standpoint, Sims' reinvention may be interpreted as a freeing endeavor—an effort to transcend a physical identity he perceives as restrictive.

In this context, disembodiment emerges as a terrifying consequence of the cybersublime. The Hideaway's deep sensual and emotional allure causes individuals to ignore the ethical dilemmas related with virtual existence. *The Nether* does not portray immersion as an escape from reality, but it depicts it as a means to deconstruct and reconstruct it. The Hideaway's posthuman existence provides liberation while simultaneously eradicating the ethical foundations that limits that liberation. The play illustrates exactly how the fragmentation of the body harmfully affects both identity and the ethical principles governing interactions.

The Nether, can be viewed in terms of surveillance and control that is being practiced affects both the real world and the online world. Hence, the cybersublime might intensify disciplinary institutions by concealing them beneath aesthetic enjoyment in virtual worlds observed by the ruling regimes. The conversations between Morris and Sims during the questioning display how the state uses force.

Morris. You seem to be quite up on laws and statutes.

Sims. It is my business

Morris. This is our business, too. The Nether is home to many businesses, with an obligation to protect the needs of our community. And our community has decided that realms such as yours are impermissible-.

(Haley, 2013, scene 3)

Morris says that her job is to protect people by making sure that the ethical lines that virtual immersion can cross are still in place. The play makes this moral certainty more complicated by showing that real-world surveillance is just as intrusive as digital violation. Andrew Milner, a literary critic, says that contemporary theater often displays surveillance as an "emotional economy of watching," where viewing is

linked to need and dread (Milner, 2009, p. 84). The play shows that surveillance systems rely on people's concerns as much as on their beliefs.

The late-modern theater scrutinizes the "collapse of public and private boundaries" and demonstrates the influence of technology on individuals' personal lives (Rebellato, 1999, p. 22). Haley embodies this collapse: the state invades individuals' private thoughts, while Sims enters the essence of its users' identities. The twenty-first-century theater examines the growing connection between political power and digital culture, showing how both use invisibility to maintain control (Sierz, 2011). The dialogue between Morris and Sims exemplifies the connection between politics and the digitalization of life as they state:

Sims. So you can trace me to my server? No, I would not.

Morris. Then you'll just have to trust I'm telling the truth. Sims leaps to his feet.

Sims. Trust you? Who are you?!

Morris. The Nether is no longer some great Wild West. We have a political body that is

just as real as anything in-world. And we're making our own laws, with our own form of prosecution. You ask what authority I have?

Look around. There's no Hideaway here. Now I suggest you sit down.

(Haley, 2013, scene 3)

In *The Nether*, this lack of visibility is what causes moral deterioration. This is especially true in a situation where violence can happen or be shown without any consequences. Therefore, digital ethics critics say that virtual spaces need to be watched over since they could make dangerous desires seem normal if they are not (Turkle, 2011). The justification for surveillance is erroneous, as individuals can

obscure their identities, modify their histories, and utilize several avatars. The play displays a world where observation might be used to control others. However control becomes impossible in a world created to express desire, and desire moves through systems that can no longer tell the difference between fact and illusion. The cybersublime deconstructs not just physical and spatial barriers, but the moral ones too. Its appeal is tied to its ability to satisfy all the desires despite its violent nature.

The play illustrates the tension between human aspiration and ethical concern, and that digital situations can erase the distinction between the real experience and the simulated (Pham, 2018). The cybersublime is both attractive and harmful. It provokes contemporary concerns about digital culture, monitoring, and the unclear lines between public and private spaces. The play's existential threat is both private and public, since it erodes the essential social and moral structures. The virtual theater functions as "a mirror for our techno-cultural moment," demonstrating that environments that provide freedom may simultaneously obscure mechanisms of control (Yeadon, 2018).

The cybersublime in *The Nether* goes beyond just being an aesthetic experience and becomes an existential force that blurs the line between reality and the virtual world. People are drawn to *The Hideaway* not only for its hyperreal aesthetics and immersive quality, but also because it makes virtual interactions more emotionally and sensually engaging than real life. Baudrillard's hyperreality corresponds with this dynamic, which posits that when simulations cease to reference reality, they ultimately displace it (Baudrillard, 1994). The cybersublime sheds light on the polarized vision of existence caused by the digital factors, as the conversation between Iris and Woodnut illustrates:

Woodnut. It's so beautiful here. Why do we have to bring in something

terrible?

Iris. Beautiful. Terrible. It's like life. (Haley, 2013, scene 13)

Hence, *The Nether* exemplifies the cybersublime via immersive digital worlds, disembodied avatars, and hyperreal pleasure to show that simulation can be both attractive and destructive.

In the play, the virtual world obtains ontological authority, changing how people see things, what they want, and how they judge right and wrong.

The existential consequences of invasion of the virtual experience are illustrated in Morris conversation with Sims:

Morris. They're enticed by its beauty. By sensations they can no longer experience in the

real world.

Sims. Is it my problem the real world no longer measures up? (Haley, 2013, scene 7)

This conversation shows a basic contradiction in the cybersublime. Hence, people see the unreal as more "real" than real life. Modern historians classify Haley's work as an example of "virtual theater," which combines reality and fiction through the use of digital technology and performance to create immersive, appealing, and mixed environments (Yeadon, 2018). In these environments, time, existence, and identity are flexible, resulting in cognitive and emotional disorientation that reflects the characters' inherent instability.

The Nether may investigate the digital subjectivities, showing how immersion guarantees users to explore identities without being constrained by social or physical norms (Pham, 2018). The cybersublime alters the traditional frame of being by making avatars more expressive and emotionally powerful than real people. *The*

Nether provides a hyperreal pleasure that highlights the ethical ramifications of virtual immersion. Thus, while the Hideaway provides complete absorption, superior sensory engagement, and freedom, this freedom enables moral evasion.

The digital idealization and mediated simulation in online settings can have a larger impact on feelings sometimes more than the real world (Laist, 2019). The play's theatrical demonstration, making audiences to confront the appeal and danger of a sublime. Hence, it transcends human dimensions, physical constraints, and ethical command. The cybersublime poses an existential threat that transcends mere disorientation, leading to profound philosophical and ethical disorder.

3. Conclusion

The Nether explores the unique digital metaphysics, wherein the prevalent impact of simulation. It perpetually constructs and deconstructs notions of reality, embodiment, and ethics. The play depicts the Hideaway as a technologically sophisticated utopia with limitless satisfaction of needs yet it is morally questionable. The cybersublime may retain the capacity to deconstruct fundamental classifications that support ethical, and it captivates the individuals via sensory excess.

The Hideaway demonstrates this destabilizing impact of the cybersublime. It offers users an atmosphere where needs are satisfied without immediate, tangible accountability, and repercussions are deferred. The play's reflections of disembodiment highlights the ethical and psychological vulnerabilities brought by a technologically mediated existence. Characters navigate the Hideaway as if it were ethically and emotionally parallel to reality. Hence, the complete immersion in a virtual environment complicates the line between genuine experience and mere illusion.

The interrogation room poses a challenging ethical dilemma. It stresses the tension between the alluring adaptability of virtual identity and physical existence. The cybersublime represents a departure from physical limitations and positions a threat to the stability often provided by embodiment. *The Nether* contributes to the exploration of themes such as shattered identity and the ambiguity of reality. The play sheds light on the profound conflict in virtual settings simultaneously challenge traditional ethical paradigms and unveil creative opportunities. *The Nether* constructs a captivating environment that drives individuals to reflect on their interactions within an algorithmically directed realm.

Ultimately, *The Nether* demonstrates that the cybersublime constitutes an ontological force rather than merely a technological outcome. It influences individuals' observations of the world around them and the substance of their identities. The play is one of the essential works that relates to contemporary debates around immersion, responsibility, and the blurred boundaries between the real and the virtual.

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Abstract in Arabic

يتناول هذا البحث تصوير مفهوم "السمو السيبراني" درامياً، وهو الشعور بالدهشة والإعجاب والخوف في العوالم الافتراضية. على عكس السمو الرومانسي الذي ينبع من مواجهة الطبيعة، ينشأ السمو السيبراني من تجربة اتساع وإمكانات العوالم الرقمية الطاغية. يستعرض البحث هذا المفهوم من خلال مسرحية *The Nether* (2013) للكاتبة الأمريكية المعاصرة جنيفر هالي، التي تتناول القضايا الأخلاقية في البيئات الافتراضية وتأثيرها على العلاقات الإنسانية. تدور المسرحية حول "النذر"، نسخة مستقبلية من الإنترنت، حيث يمكن لشخصيات المسرحية تقمص شخصيات افتراضية وتلبية أي رغبات يشاؤونها، ويركز النص على استجابات يتعلق بالعواقب الأخلاقية لأفعالهم في هذا العالم السيبراني. يبدأ البحث بمقدمة لتوضيح الفكرة الرئيسية، يليها التحليل، ثم الخاتمة التي تعكس جوهر البحث، مسلطاً الضوء على كيفية تصوير السمو السيبراني درامياً وتأثيره على وجود الفرد في الفضاء الرقمي، كاشفاً أن هذا السمو ليس مجرد تجلٍ تقني، بل قوة محوّلة تعيد تشكيل إدراك الإنسان واحتياجاته وأخلاقه.
