

Transiting between medial and real worlds

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That is precisely the reason why new media exert such fascination – digital video, for example: “It allows us to discover in it virtualities unknown to those who invented it and to those who pay for its production. And it allows us to steer its intended development in a different direction”.

(V. Flusser, *Gesten. Versuch einer Phänomenologie [Gestures. Attempt at a Phenomenology]*, Frankfurt am Main, 1997, p. 197)

Introduction

Both new and traditional media are tools. Videos, digital films, mobile phone cameras, live cameras or webcams, SMS and live chat are relatively new tools. A tool is an object that is made to serve a particular intent. This intent is intrinsic to the tool; the tool is moulded by the intent. However, irrespective of the intent the following question arises – particularly in the realm of the artistic: ‘What is it and what can we do with it?’ We have become accustomed to traditional tools, but when the tool is new, its problematic side comes to light. This is why we find these new tools so fascinating. On the one hand, their intent has not yet been fully exploited; we are not yet familiar with all virtualities inherent in these media. On the other, their true intent can still be deflected from its course. Deflecting it from its course is a means of finding freedom. In the realm of the artistic in particular, new media permit people to do things to free themselves from the manufacturers’ intent.

The festival productions* demonstrated many different ways of incorporating both new and older media – from new media being presented as themes in the play and the use

* The author refers to the Festival “Schultheater der Länder” (National School Theatre Festival) which was held in Nuremberg in September 2010. This is an annual national event in Germany. One student theatre-group from each of the 16 German states is chosen to participate in this festival every year. The theme of the Festival in 2010 was “Theatre and New Media”. (Editor’s Note)

of background images and films to enhance the moods on stage to virtually through-composed works in which media performance is tightly interwoven with the live performance. The artistic-aesthetic integration of these media, however, met with varying success. In this article, we will focus on *transiting between medial and real worlds on stage*. Against that background, we will discuss some relevant productions from the following aspects:

1. Spatial dimensions – interplay between film and actors
2. Time dimension – interplay between past and present
3. Retrospections – use of documentary elements
4. Simultaneity – use of media in real time.

Spatial dimensions – interplay between film and actors

The issue of transiting between video, digital film, mobile phone camera, live camera and so on and real theatre worlds concerns the four physical dimensions of space and time. These media are scenes that are stored in different ways on a linear surface. Therefore, they have only three dimensions: the two surface dimensions and that of the flow of time. Irrespective of the time dimension, the question arises of how to transit between two-dimensional images and the acting in the three-dimensional space.

In their collage of images, text, sound and music entitled “sea.sons@nd.daughters”, the Metamorphosists from Munich project nature and landscape films onto a surface composed of cardboard boxes. White costumes and actions involving the cardboard boxes serve to break through the two-dimensionality. Through simple means, the movements of the bodies and objects constantly create a link to the stage area. Conversely, the bodies also appear to dive into the landscapes in the film. At one point, an actor holds a polystyrene panel onto which a head is projected which then virtually mingles with the real actors on the stage. Whereas in many plays at this festival a screen merely reflects animated background images, the Bavarian troupe actually displays ways of penetrating film and drama that can definitely be developed further.

The Hamburg production *Haben wollen* [*The Urge to Possess*] goes one step further. Data projectors are carried through the venue in search of unusual projection surfaces so that the two-dimensional medial image appears distorted and fragmented when it is shown on three-dimensional objects such as cardboard boxes or balloons.

In this way, the actors take the new media into their own hands and act with full autonomy. The apparently “perfect” film is handed over to the actors, who treat the new media in a “dilettante” manner and thus destroy something that is “perfect”. The stage performance not only makes transparent the deliberate engagement with the medium, but also visualises liberation from the original, inherent purpose of these tools. (A data projector enlarges images by projecting them from a fixed point onto a surface.) The way in which the actors’ handle media and objects in the theatre blurs the transitions between the virtual medial and the real worlds as they repeatedly merge into a whole comprising the action on stage.

Time dimension – interplay between past and present

In film, yet another ontological difference exists vis-à-vis live performers. Whether the actors themselves act out scenes in the film or whether it simply consists of shots of scenery or recordings borrowed from film and television, the medium of film presents them as an electronic memory, belonging to a different plane of reality than the live onstage drama.

The nature films in “sea.sons@nd.daughters”, for example, are a separate product that has nothing to do with the drama production. In this case, its production lies in a time long before the drama production, making it historical; the shooting location is also remote from the place where the play is performed. Lamentably, the nature films, which were not produced by the performers themselves, merely enhance the mood, serving as a sort of atmospheric background image accompanying scenes. The possible ways of playing with these images and generating content references appear to have been anything but exhausted. The question of the dramatic function of the landscape images and of how their aesthetic effect can be made useful to the content remains unanswered. No discernible references to the distant virtual

locations and the historicity of the images are generated in the play. Here and there, the members of the audience will create connections for themselves, yet transitions between the real world and the virtual world in the dimension of time are not rendered visible.

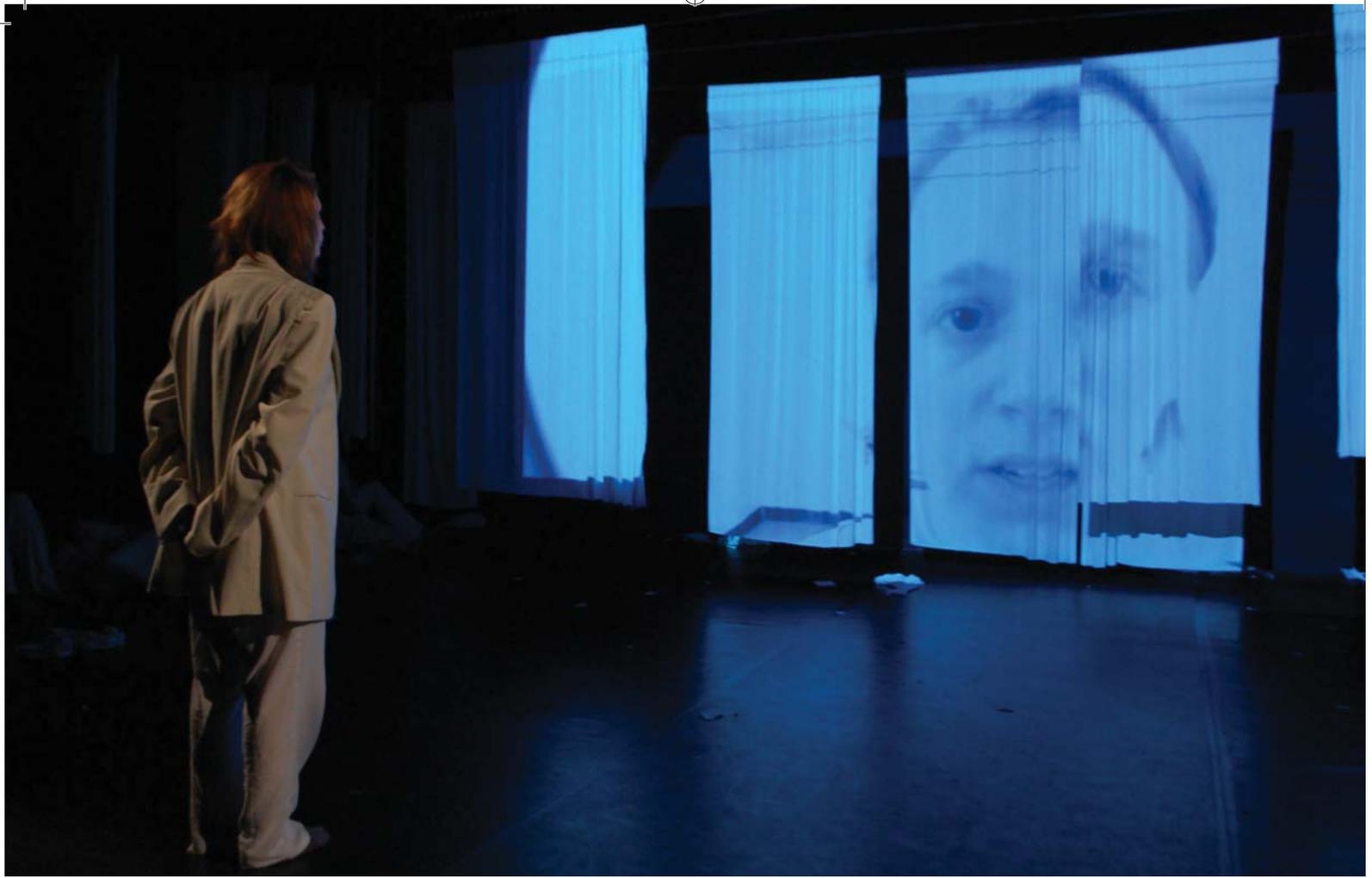
If the film is produced directly for the theatre, digital technologies open up possibilities. The filmmaker is looking at the monitor as if they were looking at the scene to which their decisions relate. Their decisions can be made both in relation to the film scene and within the scene. For the film in a theatre production, this means that the filmmaker can make their decisions in accordance with the theme being acted out on stage.

Immediately after the recording, the stored scene can be viewed by the participants. Within the scene, they are not necessarily just actors but also recipients, subjects and objects. The actors are stored and are the ones who store. This opens up a dialogue between the self and the scene. The film becomes the dialogue memory of the theatre producers.

One thing remains problematic, however: the finished recording is a linear code. Its line has to be followed. It is a discourse about the scene as something that happened in a time before the current performance and it initially prohibits an immediate dialogue between the film and the live performance.

In the play *4.48 Psychose* [*4.48 Psychosis*] produced by the Herderschule in Kassel, such transitions work well. While the psychiatrist and the patient enter into a perceived dialogue on stage, in the background a film showing the actors themselves in a hospital waiting room is projected onto long, white banners. The silent film scenes are accompanied by recordings of noises made by tablets in the form of a “musique concrète”. This scene composition is repeated several times between strings of monologues, words, number chains with fragmented utterances and animated body images. The film event gathers intensity with every psychiatrist-patient session. The people waiting step closer to the camera each time, increasingly turning it into the surveillance camera in the waiting room. The “musique concrète” which is played simultaneously intensifies in the same way. It begins with the sound of tablets being pushed out of a blister pack, then tablets fall into a bowl and, finally, a percussive tablet rhythm is heard.

Although the film and the onstage action take place simultaneously, they remain independent. The film is shorter than the psychiatrist-patient conversation. The protagonists on the stage do not have to follow the linear code of the film in any way. Rather, it appears to be the other way around, as if the film were trying to enter into a dialogue with the scene on stage. Initially, connections are made between the past and the present: so this is where the patient waited before – here, outside in the waiting room in the film. The more the film becomes a surveillance camera monitor, the more the film and the live acting merge to form a simultaneous display of the two planes. While the psychiatrist and the patient are speaking to each other, the audience can watch the waiting room as a proxy for the psychiatrist. It is obvious to the audience that the actors in the film do not know who is watching them, and this was probably the case during the shooting as



well. This interplay visualises the one-way communication of such media, illustrating the omnipresent public surveillance mania.

Rather than the actors being subjugated to the parameters of the film or having to follow its timeline or sequence of events, it is the film that serves the acting, becomes the tool of this production and adds another plane of space, time and content, allowing the medium itself to become the theme.

Retrospections – use of documentary elements

The documentary use of media is usually left to film. While film as an “artistic tool” represents something, as it does in *Psychose*, it can present things as a documentary recording. It presents statements on something that happened before the play as a historical document.

In the production from Cottbus entitled *Alle Helden sterben zu früh* [*All Heroes Die Young*], witnesses of the East German era are interviewed on camera while film clips of youth programmes from that time round off the historical image. The interviews show subjective facets of memories of the East German era. The onstage performance then picks up and re-enacts a point taken from the documents or the interrupted performance is resumed. However, because no visible connection is made between these historical documents and the reality of the actors’ lives onstage, the play remains trapped in its historicity and does not genuinely evolve into a confrontation with the past, particularly that of their parents.

Documentary elements are also used in *Aus Spiel wird Ernst!* [*The Serious Side of Play!*], performed by the Berlin primary school group. The actors themselves, parents, educators and others are interviewed on camera on how to handle conflict situations. During the film scenes, the actors themselves sit down in front of the screen, thus conveying to the audience ‘Look here, we are watching and listening to what we, our parents and teachers have to say about the topic of “violence”’. Unfortunately, here too the filmed documents fail to genuinely connect with the acting in the here-and-now. The spectator continues to harbour serious doubts whether the non-violent disposition of the interviewees has actually entered their inner being, or whether it is the result of a sort of catharsis – perhaps brought about by the drama performance. The spectator can believe the statements or not. The only convincing moment is when a girl admits on camera that she occasionally resorts to violence but will make an effort in the future to solve conflicts peacefully...

What both plays lack is the dialogic integration of the film medium by the actors, for example to qualify the statements that are fixed in the film and therefore have absolute meanings. Now, how can transitions be made between the documentary elements of the film and the here-and-now in the theatre?

The documentary film presents remembrances in the form of an electronic memory. It is a linear code that cannot be changed. The memory pictures are unreelable, so to speak. Yet the film must remain a tool at the service of the play. This also means that the intent inherent in this tool should be de-

flected from its direction in the interest of the play so that the actors on the stage can set themselves free from the dictates of the film and determine the artistic-aesthetic use of this tool themselves. They could then conduct themselves in congruence with the content of the documents; they could take a stand not just physically and verbally through attitudes and comments but also intervene in the process of unreeling, stop the film, rewind and fast-forward it, make statements ad absurdum through repetition and hence take possession of the recordings. The document would then become a re-constitution of theatrical meaning, a critical re-contextualisation. The actors could have taken action in keeping with their role or even interfered privately. Actively shaping such transitions is the task and remains the property of the drama group; after all, it bears the responsibility for the content and aesthetics in front of an audience in the here-and-now.

Simultaneity – use of media in real time

Two productions use media in real time. In the play entitled *Medea*, performed by the secondary school Domgymnasium Merseburg in Saxony-Anhalt, the play is projected onto a surface via a live camera in order to show what is described in the programme as “an additional alienation in the midst of today’s information explosion”. It projects the scenes from an almost fixed perspective from the right-hand side of the stage onto a screen to the rear of the stage. The actress operating the camera determines what the camera should focus on. In that way, the audience is also occasionally filmed.

However, the intentions, motivations, cinematic comments and statements cannot be deciphered, the spectator is not given any visible links between the actions, events, contents, figures or actors and the motivations of the camerawoman, who also appears to be acting as a television reporter on the stage, capturing every event no matter how banal it is and transmitting it live in reference to the information explosion mentioned in the programme. However, reporters intervene, disturb and publicise events. In doing so, they change them. The actors onstage could have then reacted to such encroachments, could have changed their behaviour and possibly their style of performance. In fact, there are many ways of making the medium of live video a theme on stage. Instead of encroaching, in *Medea* the drama performance and the live video run in parallel without connecting.

A completely different artistic-aesthetic use of media is illustrated in the mobile phone performance entitled *Cell-phone Slaves*. The medial performance from Flensburg uses two dialogic media, mobile phones and the online medium Facebook, through data projection. The provocative and high-risk performance addresses the medialised world of adolescents and reflects their correspondingly altered communicative behaviour.

The elements that mark the twofold dialogue – the plea, responsibility, recognition of the other and in the other – are mercilessly shattered by text messages from the mobile phone, which is actually a dialogic medium. This is triggered by the dialogic delay and textual reduction of the text message. The circular dialogue – the publication, the exchange

and the search for new information – is not only constantly interrupted but is also confused by delays in the network and on the part of the recipient. The same is true of online media such as Facebook. However, through it adolescents, in particular, develop a completely new kind of communicative behaviour which is demonstrated and disclosed in this play. The actors carry out instructions that they receive from the audience by text message; they act, text back, reject brutal or obscene contents or ask spectators for help. Spectators, however, are also subjected to text message bullying, with the actors projecting sentences from text messages. This creates a balancing act in the theatre. The performance threatens to fall apart as the actors become entangled in this medium while the cacophony and communicative breakdown spreading in the venue increasingly holds up a mirror to the audience. At this point it also becomes clear that the rules of the game need to be defined more clearly in terms of the artistic-aesthetic intentions.

Since the telephone was invented, the technical structure of such media allows behaviour permitted by no other dialogic medium. The other party can be cut short by turning off the device or the programme (by hanging up). And here the actors just barely manage to pull things off because the protagonists in this play hang up so as to demonstrate, ‘Ultimately, I will not be terrorised; I will retain my autonomy.’ This hanging up is done with a brutal gesture, as in “trash”, by destroying the mobile phones. (Unfortunately and unnecessarily, the actors’ priggish statements at the end leave a stale aftertaste.)

In contrast with the title, the actors here ultimately do not turn into slaves, which is what appears to happen to the active members of the audience. The actors consciously remain those who operate and control their mobile phones. Transitions in this performance are direct; the dialogic media are an inherent part of the actions performed. This use of the media in “real time” on stage, the creation of references between media and actors and the transparent use of the tools are crucial factors in finally erasing the dividing line between virtual and real worlds on stage.

This exciting, risky media experiment definitely offers opportunities for further development. It permits the notion that spectators and actors could be interconnected with each other through such media in order to show how we could free ourselves from the grip of the power behind the devices by demonstrating and experiencing the autonomous use of communication tools and by creatively and individually seizing the potential to shape the dialogic media.

Conclusion

Why are new media in theatrical performance constantly perceived as too powerful, perfect and absolute? Because we actors, in awe of their technical perfection, do not dare to disturb them in their programmed function. We prefer to follow the timing of the film, move chairs and leading actors on stage aside so that the picture can fully unfold in large format. As long as we actors allow ourselves to become enslaved by the new media, the tools will dominate us. Should

the tools not be our servants? Should we not creatively use and, if necessary, deform these tools in accordance with our ambitions and intentions? Should we withhold from the spectator how we intend to handle the tools?

This means that transitions between the medial and the real world can be created only by the actors themselves. It is up to them to show that as creative artists they place these media, as tools, at the service of their art. Fundamentally, new media are nothing more than tools on stage, just as traditional media such as a ladder, which is used to reveal something to the audience. However, we have to be able to handle them and explore their possibilities with curiosity, which is certainly a more complex and multi-layered process than with a ladder. Nevertheless, it will give rise to a new quality of drama.

This new quality is hinted at in productions such as *Haben wollen* from Hamburg or *4.48 Psychose* from Hesse as well as in the medial performance *Cellphone Slaves* from Schleswig-Holstein. It originates from a dialogic interaction with the new media, which concerns itself with aspects relating to mastery of the technology as much as with the significance of these media in everyday life and their artistic-aesthetic transformation on stage. The discovery of transitional points on the dividing line between the virtual-medial and the real world on stage is inevitably an important criterion for the successful artistic-aesthetic use of these media.

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