

School of images: theatre and new media

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Introduction

What opportunities are opened up by the use of new media in the theatre? The answer to that question depends on the underlying understanding of the term "media". In the following article, new media are described as triggering experiences of indeterminacy, unfamiliarity and uncontrollability. From that perspective, new media are ideally suited to summoning up "indeterminate situations" in drama – an ideal that is particularly prized in the contemporary theatre and has both aesthetic and pedagogical potential for school drama.



In 1818 the French teacher and politician Joseph Jacotot accepted a part-time position as a lecturer at the University of Louvain. In the decade following the Revolution, Jacotot had made a career for himself in Paris but was forced to leave his French homeland following the return of the Bourbons and was then glad to be granted asylum and even a modest livelihood as the teaching professor in the liberal Netherlands. As the philosopher Jacques Rancière reports in his book *Le maître ignorant: Cinq leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle* (*The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, Stanford University Press, 1991), Jacotot's time at the Flemish university turned out to be a veritable pedagogical experience of awakening and that awakening to a new understanding of teaching and learning was directly connected with new media.

1. New media – new teaching

The new medium encountered by the Frenchman Jacotot in Louvain was the language of tuition, Dutch (Flemish), of which he had no knowledge. Jacotot's pupils, whom he was supposed to give lessons in French literature and culture, knew no French, while he understood no Dutch at all – and so the teaching had to start from a constellation of mutual incomprehension. Both parties, teacher and pupils, had to deal with what was to them a completely new medium, the foreign language, the other's language, which seemed to loom like an immovable obstacle on the path to successful teaching. Rancière goes on to describe how this complicated initial situation grew into a mysterious – and for both parties extremely successful – learning process. As he could not explain anything to them, Jacotot allowed his pupils to work entirely on their own. At that time a bilingual, French-Dutch edition of Fénelon's adventure and apprenticeship novel *Les aventures de Télémaque* [*The Adventures of Telemachus*], which dated from 1699, had just been published in Brussels. Jacotot pressed this book into the hands of the course participants and instructed them to learn the French text with the help of the translation. One sentence at a time, they were supposed to work out the French syntax so that at the end of the course they could give a talk about the contents of the book – in French. For the rest of the semester Jacotot did without any explanation at all. The outcome was astonishing: just a few months later, the Dutch-speaking pupils began to form their own sentences in French and to express themselves in the foreign medium so that Jacotot could understand them perfectly. On the basis of that experience Jacotot proceeded only to offer courses on topics of which he actually knew nothing and which therefore forced him into an emancipating style of teaching, in which the pupils had to acquire the material themselves.¹

Rancière was fascinated by this example as proof of the possibility of doing away with any kind of explanation in teaching sessions – not so as to make it artificially difficult to learn well, but so as to turn teaching into an experience of equality. The uninformed teacher is for Rancière not some kind of incompetent charlatan but rather someone who assumes that all human intelligence is fundamentally equal.

A kind of Sarrazin's* opposite. The stumbling block of the teaching profession lies for Rancière in the paternalistic attitude of explaining: 'The person giving explanations needs the incompetent person, not the other way round. He is the one to make the incompetent person precisely that. Explaining something to someone means first showing him that he is unable to understand things for himself. Before the explanation becomes an act by an educator, it is a metaphor for a world that is divided into those who know and those who do not, into mature and immature minds, the able and the incompetent, the intelligent and the stupid.'² By contrast, Rancière presents his universal principle of equality: 'The equality of intelligences is the unifying bond of humankind, the necessary and sufficient condition for the existence of a society of human beings.' And in a masterly fashion, Rancière adds the following restriction: 'True, we do not know that people are equal. We say that they are perhaps equal. That is our opinion and we set ourselves the task of verifying it with people who think like we do. Yet we know that this is perhaps what makes a society of human beings possible.'³

The example of Jacotot illustrates, however, not only the agreeable principle of equality – which is, to my mind, worth considering for all kinds of teaching – but also makes it abundantly clear what new media are or how they can be defined. There have been new media in every period in history. Every era knows its own new media. Media with which we are not yet familiar, that we do not know how to handle and about the use of which we lack knowledge are always "new". Therefore, if new media are used in the theatre, regardless of whether it is in the school setting or elsewhere, they generate unfamiliarity, uncertainty, lack of knowledge – and it is precisely in these experiences of not knowing that their particular value lies. There could now be different ways of justifying this value more precisely. I would like to suggest an explanation related to drama theory and media theory and start with the media theory.

2. Disappearance media

Although there has long been agreement that a universal, timeliness definition of the term media cannot exist and does not need to exist, media scholars repeatedly like to become involved in definitional discussions. In recent years, for example, the Berlin philosopher Sybille Krämer has inspired such debates by proposing a clear distinction between "media" and "signs".⁴

When we see a sign, to summarise and simplify Krämer's position, we see the sign vehicle, while the meaning remains invisible. For example, we see a combination of letters and have to come to our own conclusion about what they mean. We see a wooden cross and start to search our memory for specific religious meanings. We see a traffic sign, nice and red

* Thilo Sarrazin, German politician whose theories on education in his bestselling, anti-immigrant book are derived in part from the experiences of his school teacher wife, Ursula. He even uses her school as an example of education reform gone bad. The teacher has long been criticised by parents for being too strict. (Source: Spiegel ONLINE International, 20/01/2011, <http://bit.ly/RLSALz>). (Editor's note)

and made of metal, but we cannot see the associated traffic rule: we have to have learnt it at some time or another and dredge it up from our knowledge of rules. The same thing applies to all these examples: the sign vehicle, the material aspect of the sign, can be seen, whereas the meaning to be conveyed remains invisible. According to Sybille Krämer's thesis, things are completely the other way round in the case of a medium. The message seems to come straight at us while the medium itself remains in the background or even tends to disappear altogether. What makes media so fascinating, but at times also so dangerous, is precisely their ability not to push into the foreground but to remain unobtrusive and only become visible when something goes wrong, for example when a breakdown occurs. We notice that we are watching television when the picture flickers or the sound breaks off. We notice our radio when the static becomes too loud. We remember that we are wearing contact lenses when a lens slips out of place. Under normal circumstances, signs tend accordingly to be something visible, whereas a medium tends to be something invisible.

A few criticisms of that understanding of media can be made but it is well suited to pinpoint what is special about new media and to reflect on the function of the arts with regard to media. New media are frequently more visible for us than old media. New media often resist disappearance, which Sybille Krämer sees as a typical feature of media. Precisely because we have not yet acquired enough practice in handling new media, because handling new media is repeatedly bound up with breakdowns and problems, new media are not so easily overlooked or forgotten.

Therefore, if the aim is to cultivate a conscious approach to media, new media are full of opportunities. On the other hand, new media may perhaps render invisible and obscure things in a way that is for us as inexperienced users particularly lacking in transparency. This is where the arts could come into play: they open up an opportunity to engage in an unfamiliar, irritating and disrupting use of media. That is not a rule, nor is it a necessity, but the development of the arts in the twentieth century, from the end of "pleasing" arts and the orientation of the avant-garde artists towards experiences of irritation, shock and disturbance can leave one with the impression that the relationship between arts and media could be defined, if nothing else, as a form of dissonance and alienation.

3. Alienation theatre

The term "alienation" implies a drama theory approach to the topic. When the contemporary theatre uses new media, when it works with intermedial experiences, then the basis is not always but in many cases alienation strategies. Bertolt Brecht said that a "theatre in the scientific age" should confront audiences with an alienated world so as to make world structures conspicuous and to present them as changeable.⁵ He was concerned with meaningfully distorting, through drama, familiar images which determine our attitude to the world. Image distortion progressed with Brecht to become a basic tenet of the modern theatre, which many directors still consider important today.

A straight line leads from this postulate of image distortion to the use of new media and to intermediality in the contemporary theatre. We can speak of intermediality in the theatre when we come up against something alien in the performance, the impression of an alien mediality, such as the mediality of film, television or the Internet, which we would not initially expect to find in the theatre. Without this sense of alienation, there is no experience of intermediality. So, as the theatre can alienate other media, other media – such as film, television or the Internet – can conversely make the theatre alien to us.

Many theatre directors work in both directions at the same time: on the one hand, they use the theatre to make television formats, for example, alien and conspicuous. And, on the other hand, they use new media to give audiences an entirely new experience of the theatre. There is virtually no one who has as masterly a command of this twofold strategy as the theatre director and filmmaker Christoph Schlingensiefel, who died recently. The complex use of new media that can be observed in Schlingensiefel's work has been less perceived and debated by theatre critics or theatre scholars than, for instance, the use of media by Frank Castorf or René Pollesch. The label "artistic synthesis" has been all too casually applied to the specific intermediality of Schlingensiefel's productions – particularly, of course, his late music theatre productions such as *Mea Culpa* (Burgtheater, Vienna 2009). For various reasons, this classification seems to me to be incorrect. It is misleading because the term "artistic synthesis" conjures up images of a "master director" at the control desk, who holds all the strings of the production in his hand and makes the puppets dance. We believe that there is a master plan behind the artistic synthesis and that every movement and every action is previously recorded in that master plan. In Schlingensiefel's productions, none of that was the case. Schlingensiefel could not sit sovereignly behind the control desk because he was far too often in the picture for that. He loved to stand on the stage in his productions and be surprised by the unforeseeable evolution of his arrangements. He was no advocator of total chaos but designed his productions so contingently that no one really knew how things would develop in the next moment.

The media used were vital to the uncontrollability of the overall situation. They allowed Schlingensiefel to give destabilising motivations whenever necessary. For example, he liked to use the theatre's microphone system or – in the open air – a megaphone to call out irritating instructions during the dialogue between his actors.⁶ Every kind of conventional dramatic representation of dialogue began to bore Schlingensiefel after a few minutes. So he built in dissonances and that very principle of dissonance also affected the way he used the digital camera.

Since Castorf's famous "Volksbühne" productions in the 1990s, the digital camera has been frequently seen in the theatre and can almost no longer be classified as a new medium. It can be used to duplicate, contrast, mirror, extend or distort what is happening on stage. It can irritatingly confront the members of the audience and the actors "live" with their own appearance. It is often used simply for emphasis as wherever the camera points is where we almost unavoidably look. For

instance, Schlingensiefel could often be seen filming without a break, stumbling through his own productions with the camera in his hands – focusing on this and on that. In a sense, that was an “epic theatre” technique: Schlingensiefel became the narrator of what was happening on stage, adopted perspectives, pointed out details and steered people’s attention. But that narrator was a passionately disruptive element, which did not introduce narrative threads but, conversely, confused things wherever patterns were beginning to take shape.

4. Image distortion theatre

Schlingensiefel spoke more frequently about images than is usual among theatre directors. It is apparent from his texts and interviews as well as from his productions to what extent Schlingensiefel thought in pictures. For him, social conflict, cultural trends and social agonies assumed the form of images; and his primary concern as theatre-maker was to disrupt those very images.

That concern must inevitably have led him to the media. The images meant by Schlingensiefel are medially constituted. These are the sharp, almost glaring images of everyday comedies and tragedies that are on offer to attentive television viewers. If one looks back to the Schlingensiefel productions of the 1990s, it is possible to reconstruct the precise television format that he saw as embodying the present – quizzes, election broadcasts, adverts, reality formats and, most of all, talk shows were what produced the images that prompted him to intervene. And if such interventions are to succeed, one needs to have a technical mastery of the source material. Consequently, Schlingensiefel, a film-lover, began by searching the depths of television production. In productions such as *Talk 2000* (Volksbühne Berlin 1997), *Bitte liebt Österreich* [*Please love Austria*] (Viennese Festival 2000) or *Die Piloten* [*The Pilots*] (2007) the digital camera was a permanent accompanying figure. Schlingensiefel reached a climax of technical complexity in the Viennese container action, which tackled reality television so sovereignly by means of stylistic devices that the real “Big Brother” container subsequently looked like conservative television for schools. Schlingensiefel never used media for them to disappear but always as a disruptive tool, cumbersome surgical instruments that were needed to thoroughly deform the smooth images of everyday media.

If Schlingensiefel had gone into schools more often, he would certainly have tampered with school as an institution in the same inspiring manner as he successfully dealt with the theatre as an institution. A theatre that sets out to distort images has to confront those institutions that are responsible for the production of images in society. Similar to the theatre, schools are also image machines, which easily produce powerful images of society and culture that they then pass on to schoolchildren. Schlingensiefel resorted to strategic principles when faced with such institutions. Those principles did not include wishing to do away with large institutions such as the theatre or the state cultural beacons. Rather, Schlingensiefel tended to acquaint himself with the rules of the institution in question so that he could then use them artistically in a new manner. For example, he was fully

aware of what he gained from established theatres such as the Volksbühne on Rosa Luxemburg Platz, the Schauspielhaus in Hamburg or the Bayreuth Festival: such institutions have financial resources, provide space and attract attention – all of which are invaluable criteria for a Schlingensiefel-style theatre policy. In retrospect, what is still remarkable about his *Parsifal* adventure in Bayreuth (2004) is how brilliantly he managed to work the strings of the conservative opera industry. Schlingensiefel talked to the right columnists, effortlessly managed the huge choir and orchestra machinery and was always ready with the necessary praise for the vainest singers and the even vainer festival management. He coolly presented a bill for what he expected from Bayreuth in return: a globally unique stage for his idea of a ritual theatre that was to address the major topics of guilt, fear, fellowship, death and redemption and at the same time break them with irony. If a project of that kind was to achieve broad visibility, it could not be placed in just any opera house in the provinces, but could be taken nowhere else than to Bayreuth. But that was not enough: that Bayreuth institution also had to put off its stride and be pushed to its limits, its limitations revealed. That is exactly what Hans-Thies Lehmann requires of truly contemporary theatre: in his view, theatre has to transform itself, take itself to the limit – it has to go to its own limits and to those of society.⁷

There was doubtless something anarchistic about Schlingensiefel’s relationship with institutions. In carrying out his actions as well as through his own appearances in the actions, he embodied a kind of anarchism of the theatre, as has been cultivated by other exponents of the theatre in recent decades – Pina Bausch, Einar Schleeff or Frank Castorf, for instance. That kind of anarchism can find expression in various misdemeanours, such as not keeping the date set for the premiere, extending rehearsal times, surprising the actors in the performance with obstacles or turning the members of the audience into actors. That anarchistic approach also presents a major challenge for school drama, as school drama can only enter into a relationship with contemporary forms of theatre if it appropriates to a point their anarchistic stance. However, that would mean nothing more and nothing less than taking the anarchism of the theatre into schools. It is not possible to spell out in general terms what that idealistic postulate might mean. However, great moments in school theatre occur whenever pupils and teachers actually talk about what it might mean to create art in schools. And approaches to anarchistic strategies become apparent when a drama course seriously begins to take the time that its own project actually requires in the day-to-day life of the school. Pupils then start to sense that art involves a certain unconditionality, a determination to break out of the institutional mould where necessary if the own project so demands.

It is only in appearance that such considerations lead away from the topic of the theatre and new media. New media are characterised by unfamiliarity, unconditionality and uncontrollability. That is precisely why new media often come into play – and not only with Schlingensiefel – when the task is to undermine pre-established institutional frameworks. New media are frequently used in the contemporary theatre in order to create indeterminate situations (Carl



Hegemann) – that is, situations in which we do not know whether we should bemoan or ridicule them, whether they are the theatre or everyday reality, whether they are to be understood as play-acting or as dead serious. In the art there is a tendency towards such indeterminate situations because they seem to open the door to experiences that are beyond the ordinary. From the pedagogical viewpoint, however, it is questionable whether, when and under what circumstances children and adolescents should be deliberately confronted with undetermined situations. Such situations do not encourage self-confidence, do not increase expressive ability and do not guarantee key qualifications. One probably needs to go even further: situations that are artistically valuable are not necessarily also educationally valuable – at times quite the opposite. The term “drama education” is therefore something of a productive contradiction: drama and education are two different things, they are not equal – and bringing together and relating those unequal partners with each other is hard work and an endeavour that can release energies and that presents an invitation for reflection.

Notes

1. See Rancière, J. (1991). *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. Stanford University Press.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. See Krämer, S. (1998). Das Medium als Spur und als Apparat. In S. Krämer (Ed.), *Medien – Computer – Realität. Wirklichkeitsvorstellungen und Neue Medien* (pp. 73-94). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
5. See, in particular, Brecht, B. (1949). *A Short Organum for the Theatre from 1948*. First published (in German) in Sinn und Form, Special Publication, Berlin.
6. Schlingensiefel loved the megaphone; it turns up in many of his major productions. One can only speculate about what he liked so much about that old medium of agitation: perhaps it was its special

accountability – one of Schlingensiefel’s favourite terms – to which the megaphone forces the speaker. Unlike the microphone, the megaphone leaves the amplified voice at the location of the speaker. Listeners immediately know where the announcement is coming from. The power relations are also clear: the person with the megaphone is the one in charge.

7. See Lehmann H.T. (2002). *Das Politische Schreiben* (p.14). Berlin: Theater der Zeit.

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