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Abstract

As digital design inscribes its own narrative from the outset of the rehearsal process, twenty-first century theatre artists and audiences are becoming more and more accustomed to porous dramaturgies, influenced by information technologies and digital articulations. This article explores the use of technology in contemporary performance from within the rehearsal room, interrogating the diverse functions of the multimedia element by touching on a number of theoretical and practice-related issues: how has technology affected performance both in terms of creative strategies and audience experience? What are some of the pleasures and dangers involved in the omni-presence of the media in today's theatre landscape? How has digital articulation enhanced, ironized or redefined structure and characterization? Under what conditions can the encounter of corporeal presence with an electronically interceded image provide meaningful experiences for the audience? Bringing in examples from different multimedia productions that I have directed, I will focus on the principles of compositional dramaturgy, where the philosophy that structures the *mise en scène* draws from the visual as well as ontological collision between the live and the mediated.

Keywords: digital performance; multimedia theatre; contemporary directing; theatre-making; digital dramaturgy

1. Context

The innate limitations of the live medium have established the theatre as the most humane of art forms. However, the representational possibilities available in traditional modes of theatre-making are finite and subject to relentless competition against the speed and potentiality of video and film. Marking a departure from the dramatic towards the postdramatic (according to Hans Thies Lehmann's analysis), the integration of digital media in the theatre has helped it transcend its irrefutable formal constrictions. Since the late twentieth century, performance has engaged with the aesthetic of the media, combining digital iconography, electronically intercepted voices, and filmic segmentation of story-telling. The media has created an "indetermi-

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nate status between the potential of the performance and its actualization", a "virtuality" (Remshardt 2010, 142) that takes several forms: from the use of video screens and microphones on stage to the application of gaming applications to telematics, robot theatre, and data bodies in performance. The present article examines prevalent uses of technology in performance from a theatre-maker's point-of-view. I use examples from my digitally-informed theatre work to provide an empirical account of some of the challenges that artists face in the process of developing multimedia projects.

Evidently, our experience in the theatre has been profoundly mediated for several decades, whether through microphones or video screens. The acceptance that "there is nothing more illusory in performance than the illusion of the unmediated" (Blau 1987, 164) goes hand-in-hand with the understanding that the expectations of a media-saturated audience keep changing dramatically, especially given that information technologies have established themselves as indispensable in nearly every sector of our private lives. Many contemporary theatregoers appear impatient with mainstream theatre narrative forms and, conversely, more comfortable perceiving things through the frenetic tempo of contemporaneity, which is constantly accelerated by technological progress and fresh forms of connectivity. To engage also younger spectators, who are addicted to the patterns of gaming, the expediency of apps, and the counterfeit intimacy of social media, the presence of technology in the performing arts sets out to create instantly recognizable spaces and rhythms, pitting the outside world against dated literary and performative conventions and the overall artifice of the theatre.

As a result, theatre practice has changed its priorities: revised interdisciplinary, hybrid modes of artistic research and expression are progressively emerging as important constitutional tools. These complex, 'porous' dramaturgies, "artforms that are uncomfortable, discontinuous, destabilizing, frenetic" allow for new information, theories, and discoveries in science and technology "to enter the domain of dramaticity" (Sidiropoulou 2018a, 117). While the integration of media into live performance updates theatre's "polyphonic system of information" (Barthes 2000, 263), it also attests to the genre's instinct for self-preservation, asking essential questions about theatre's ontology and the different manifestations of performativity in an era that valorises post-humanist expression. After all, "both human and non-human agents in contemporary performance can be said to possess a dramatic potency that is readable in terms of human experience" (Eckersall et al. 2017, 21). In this sense, "the [theatre] narratives have not disappeared but rather changed. Their operative force has just found more efficient spaces through which to flow. They increasingly operate through the invisible efficiencies of technological interfaces and their careful regulation of subjectivities" (Murphie 2003, 359).

2. Compositional Dramaturgy

To make the ambiguous, indeterminate space of virtuality work not as a foreign body but as an intrinsic principle of performative composition and perception, directors, actors and audiences alike were gradually trained out of long-held preconceptions about the nature of valid and meaningful works of art. In the framework of questioning existing evaluatory criteria for what could count as 'real theatre', a general reconceptualization of the role of the artist in excessively mediatized times is, I believe, necessary.

Some directors will describe their shift to technology as one that stems from a rather natural impulse pushing them to explore several alternatives in creating performance. Personally, I have discovered that applying video, pre-recorded text, and animation in my work has liberated me artistically: I have become less cautious about subverting common structures of dramaturgy and more favourable towards unusual story-telling strategies, often surprising myself and my team. Since 2009, I have been applying video and film in productions of contemporary plays (*And God Said*, Lula Anagnostaki's *The City Trilogy* and Bryony Lavery's *Frozen*); also in productions of theatre classics such as Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and in free adaptations of popular myths (*Phaedra I—*) or of fiction (*Maria Borisova*, based on Dostoyevsky's novella "A Meek Girl"). More recently, I have been adjusting narrative and dramatic writing to a film format, working on mixed media adaptations conceived entirely for online streaming.[1] In all these projects, technology – in addition to creating an autonomous and dynamic visual environment, defining ever-shifting locales and situating the action in a literal sense – gave shape to a variety of mental states, sculpting psychic landscapes where the 'real' seeps well into the mind. I discovered that the associative properties of media imagery and sound layered story-telling in ways that brought to light aspects of the text that originally felt obscure and impenetrable.

The ability to change the meaning of a scene by tampering with visual and aural rhythms and manipulating the semiotics of the stage beyond what is instantly visible makes digital articulation a potent textuality. Technology teaches one that there are hundreds of ways to represent reality and build an autonomous universe on stage. That knowledge can be very attractive to theatre makers, rendering the introduction of divergent narrative angles even more legitimate and possible. From the point of view of the spectator,

[1] During the Covid-19 pandemic, I engaged with a visual-animation project based on Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *Troy, Too*, a contemporary short play by American writer Karen Malpede, currently being workshopped for a mixed media video adaptation with drawings by Biba Kayewich.

the ensuing experience of disorientation is also fascinating, as audiences invariably love to be awakened to new possibilities. Productions are now built jointly with the video/film/animation designers and the dramaturg in rehearsal. In this way, digital elements become a "means of research and models not only for narrative purposes, but for reality itself: of each individual interpretation of reality" (Liakata 2018).

As a method, compositional dramaturgy entails that image, text, and sound will emerge simultaneously, with one aspect informing and developing the other. Rehearsals, for example, are structured and managed to allow these individual threads of creativity to develop concurrently. The director, dramaturg (when there is one), actors, and the design team are expected to work together closely to coordinate the separate facets of the show. Clearly, as is the case in all collaborative processes of theatre-making, engaged dialogue and brainstorming of ideas are essential. It is also necessary for everybody to generate meaningful material by means of associating what the actors come up with – often by improvising – with a specific image or visual sequence that the director and/or the video designer had originally in mind for a particular moment in the play. For shared insights to develop, such associational work can only be open and generous. Rehearsals relying on compositional dramaturgy are usually quite collaborative every step of the way, the distinct roles of the different artists ideally blurring into one joint effort to produce an aesthetic structure that accommodates both the live and the mediated element. Understanding the function of framing, "the exegetic manipulation of verbal, visual-somatic, digital and aural configurations and elements of staging", is therefore valuable, because it can provide an effective solution for arranging different elements of staging in non-serial fashion. Set and digital design thus inscribe their own narrative onto the performance from the outset of the creative process, together with the text (Sidiropoulou 2020).

This mode of rehearsing prevailed during *Phaedra I—*, a Persona Theatre Company production that premiered at Tristan Bates Theatre in London in 2019.[2] In performance, the elliptical, palimpsestic text, which revisits Euripides' classical story of unrequited love, uses projections and mapping to establish a striking visual landscape: the performer's costume is her whole world and also functions as a projection screen, allowing her to interact with the other characters of the play, who are digitally represented. The scenographer/costume/video designer Mikaela Liakata was present during the work-

[2] Text-direction by Avra Sidiropoulou; set-costume-video design by Mikaela Liakata; lighting design by Anna Sbokou; original music by Vanias Apergis. The production was supported by the J. F. Costopoulos Foundation. Elena Pellone performed the role of Phaedra.

shop phase of the project, as the text was being devised and the environment of the play determined. After a period of intense work between the actor Elena Pellone and myself, Liakata returned to the rehearsal room till opening night. Initially, staging the play was largely dependent on making the video serve the actor and the text. However, as Pellone became increasingly confident in connecting with her electronically simulated world, traditional notions of digital semiosis as a means of shedding light on the text became irrelevant. After a while, we were less preoccupied with matching image with movement and more interested in exploring existing ruptures and interruptions in the story.

In the specific production, because the actor on stage interacts with the filmed actors on her costume/screen, Liakata, who was also responsible for the video mapping, dedicated a fair amount of time in rehearsal to ensure that the coordination between performer and projection made sense. In hindsight, we realized that having a choreographer with us would have helped the actor with her unique kind of movement – one that should appear natural and also be technically precise. It is worth noting that while the designer and I prepared the video sequences and mapping in our laptops, sometimes the video images refused to co-operate with the performer, slipping and hiding away in different folds and corners of her oversized dress. Thankfully, the actor quickly adapted to the quirks of technology, frequently improvising her physical responses to the rebellious video selves. Some of her acting adjustments provided extra layers of interpretation to the piece and, as result, were kept in performance. Technology's resistance to the changing, fluid, live reality of the stage was manipulated to trace the way the dramaturgy of the play evolved collaboratively.

3. Digital Scenographies as Landscapes of the Mind

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the media aesthetic has become almost inseparable from theatrical design, creating visual and narrative collisions, whether through a simple projection of still photography on the back wall of a stage, a pre-recorded action played on a screen or more sophisticated 'mediaturgies'. Perhaps the most conspicuous and common use of the media has been its function as a visual/pictorial feature, which can add background and detail in places where the live medium alone proves inadequate. The digital component brings film closer to the live arts, producing hybrid scenographies which redefine and empower the narrational, sensory and emotional properties of stage images (Sidiropoulou 2018a, 158).

Technology is very often a simple and most eloquent way of providing scenography; not only because it saves the production the hassle of con-

structing sets, but also because there is nothing to interrupt its capacity to represent actual spaces and sites, no matter how distant or bizarre these may be. Besides the imaginative use of lighting, the introduction of photographs or video projections serves the 'willing suspension of disbelief' further. The artifice of the theatre act is enthusiastically accepted because the means that are employed to build its illusion are now updated further to match the audiences' multifarious arsenal of visual, audio and media references.

In *City Trilogy*, a triptych of three allegorical one-act plays by modern Greek writer Loula Anagnostaki (1965), which I directed as a staged reading at the Cyprus Theatre Organization in 2018,[3] video was used both in order to situate the physical action of the plays more clearly but also as a way of exploring subtext in theatre scripts that are notoriously elliptical, ambiguous, and highly parabolic. The projections functioned as pictorial background to the action narrated, providing a visual constant: because of the nature of the production (a staged reading), the actors in *Poli* (*The City*) were seated around a table in what seemed to be the interior of a house. The still image of a single naked bulb burning was projected in full screen at a large grey background surface, indicating a living room wall. In *I Dianykterefsi* (*The Overnight Stay*), the interior of a train which travels at seemingly zero speed documents the journey of the female protagonist to an unknown destination, but also references her internal voyage. In *I Parelasi* (*the Parade*), the most allegorical and dystopic of all of Anagnostaki's plays, an expanse of sky with immovable clouds provides the only visual escape for the two young siblings (locked in their attic room by their father), who will in the course of the performance become witnesses to a gruesome execution scene. Although these elements served a predominantly scenographic function, they also suggested a mood of mental and psychological stagnation for the characters – all of whom were held literally or symbolically captive.

Understandably, digital design has been a popular way of generating startling visualities, since it passes the practicalities and financial quandaries of having to build elaborate sets. This functionality notwithstanding, multimedia narratives also encourage ambiguity and abstraction to travel us into remote regions of human imagination. There are times when what is understated in the text is revealed through a simple yet 'transgressive' visual or auditory reference. This was the case with one of Persona's[4] earlier

[3] The trilogy was staged at the Nea Skini of the Cyprus Theatre Organization. It was directed by Avra Sidiropoulou and was performed by Vassiliki Kypraiou, Stelios Kallistratis, Victoria Fota, Yorgos Anagiotos and Andreas Koutsoftas. The original music score was by Anna Chronopoulou.

[4] Hereafter, all references to Persona Theatre Company will use the short form "Persona".

productions, in which a media aesthetic was employed. *And God Said*,[5] produced in Istanbul in 2010 and travelling to Tehran in 2011, was a bilingual (English and Turkish) piece about a dystopic world hit by an unnamed ecological catastrophe. The production design was driven by the need to evoke a post-apocalyptic universe where foggy memories and hallucinatory visions come together. Animation (by the now defunct Istanbul-based arts company Silo 1) was used amply to produce associative images that represented the turmoil in the afflicted characters' minds. In recalling the night when the enigmatic destruction hit, the male protagonist is haunted by nightmarish images that are expressly projected as a backdrop of the set design. As the other protagonist (the woman) emerges into the nuclear-like environment, she tries to piece together a plan for her uncertain future, while making a real effort to remember who she is and where she comes from. The animation conjures up a cosmos of shapes and colours that reinforce the sense of devastation the two characters experience, as they are stranded in a surrealist no-place, left with nothing but random recollections of a cherished past and dreams of a better life to come.

Similarly, in *Phaedra I—*, the visual element absorbed scenographic semiosis entirely. Throughout the play, the video stills and projections offer indications of location. In the opening sequence where Phaedra interacts with the chorus of women, the long white dress is imprinted with a video likeness of an ancient Greek pillar, which takes us straight to the mythic past of Greece. Phaedra's private, corporeal self grows into a public space. Images of urban life but also of natural catastrophes from the recent history of Greece ironize the clash between the country's past and present. Significantly, the fire spreading images at the opening carry the audience through to the final impression of scattered debris in a land field in the closing of the play.[6]

4. Factual Information and the Inner World

In a relatively unequivocal manner, the media can introduce into the live action missing or background information through explanatory imagery and

[5] The production was written and directed by Avra Sidiropoulou and set and costume designed by Tomris Kuzu. The original music was by Vanias Apergis, the lighting by Cem Yilmazer and the animation by Silo 1. It premiered at garajistanbul (Istanbul Turkey), featuring Derya Durmaz and Teoman Kumbaracibasi and was an invited production at the 28th International Fadjr Festival in Tehran (Sangelaj Theatre), performed by Derya Durmaz, Cihangir Duman and Mohsen Abolhassani.

[6] Those sequences had a special emotional significance for the Greeks among the London audience members, as the play was performed just a few months after the catastrophic wildfires in the Attica region of Mati in July 2018, which led to the death of 102 citizens, and left the entire country in a state of national mourning.

relevant newsfeed. Video footage is then used as a background for clarifying elaborate or ambiguous parts of the spoken text and for providing details of exposition.[7]

Beyond this basic and common use, digital storytelling also furnishes layered commentaries on the text by means of iconistic symbols and sophisticated metaphors that develop along the text and the actors' performance. It is a strategy that builds parallel story lines, which, far from being descriptive or merely substituting for missing text, can offer "additional emotional and cognitive content" (Liakata 2018). In Persona's production of *Maria Borisova*,[8] an adaptation of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novella "A Meek Girl" (Studio Mavromichali, Athens 2013), the title protagonist's suicide is depicted on a scrim which covers the entire upstage area, a physical as well as psychological border that divides the world of the young woman from that of her emotionally estranged husband. Video projections are used also to convey actual or imagined moments from the married couple's life. In one particular sequence, the actress is video-captured pointing a gun at her husband, but the moment is deliberately ambiguous – the audience remains unsure whether this dreadful event actually took place or was simply another paranoid scenario playing in the mind of the male character. Towards the end of the show, the title protagonist steps towards her mediatized death, appearing to jump into the void. Here, the pre-recorded sequence of the actor (Artemis Grympla) jumping out of a window frame plays out the character's suicide.

In my staging of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*[9] (Technochoros Ethal, Limassol and Theatro Apothikes, Nicosia, 2019), working on the scene which has Nora play fondly with her children, the video designer (Emy Tzavra-Bulloch) and I conceived of a video sequence that staged a merry-go-round game between the character and her kids. The practical difficulties of working with children and having them perform in the show forced us to think of alternatives, such as filming the children beforehand. Further to solving a practical problem, however, the sequence made Nora's conflicted realities even more poignant: the picture-perfect life of apparent comfort and familial pleasure – depicted in the video of Nora interacting happily with her children – was

[7] This may explain why digital technology is used broadly in performances of documentary theatre.

[8] Adaptation and direction by Avra Sidiropoulou; set and costume design by Alexia Theodoraki; original music score by Vanias Apergis; video and lighting design by Christos Alexandris; performed by Nikos Georgakis and Artemis Grympla.

[9] Produced by Ethal; translation-adaptation-direction by Avra Sidiropoulou; set and costume design by Yorgos Tenentes; video design by Artemis Tzavra-Bulloch; original music score by Vanias Apergis; lighting design by Aleksandar Jotovic; performed by Vassiliki Kypraiou, Neoclis Neocleous, Fotis Apostolidis, Thanassis Drakopoulos, Myrto Kouyali, Maria Povi, Leonidas Ellinas.

violently interrupted by the sudden, alarming entrance of the blackmailer Krogstad, whose presence harbingers Nora's downfall. Digital representation served to communicate the fleeting nature of joy as well as the shaky foundations of the Helmers' marriage and was strongly contrasted with the palpable carnality of the blackmailer's intrusion into Nora's household.

Similarly, the characteristic Tarantella dance that leads up to the climax of the play had Nora stand on top of the cyclical structure centre-stage against video projections of the actress frantically and freely moving to the music. The Tarantella holds a prominent position in Ibsen's text, as it demarcates the beginning of the end for Nora, a moment which is soon to culminate in the play's Aristotelian crisis that will eventually lead the protagonist to her enlightenment (recognition). In our production, the actor playing Nora stands on top of a revolving disc centre stage, quite still, but keeping a ballerina position, as if on display in a toy shop. While every other character in the play stands by admiring but also admonishing her to follow the dance's steps more accurately, the audience is watching a video of the filmed version of the dance, in which, clearly, Nora lets herself go, surrendering to her on-growing despair at the forgery allegations that threaten to overturn her life. At the end of the sequence, the actor collapses on the circular surface, exhausted. The contrast between the physical stillness of the performer and the nearly demonic dance captured on video, is highly ironic, as it illustrates the rift between her internal condition of paralysis and the effort to 'keep the show going' for her husband and her social circle.

In *Phaedra I—,* the apparently domestic scene between Phaedra and Theseus, where the former shares her sentiments of boredom and disenchantment to the latter, features a video of an elegantly positioned cluster of male and female naked bodies writhing languidly in white sheets. In this case, the image visualizes the subtext underneath Phaedra's *post-coitum* musings. The integration of dialogue with the visually absent Theseus' pre-recorded voice also serves to that effect. Later, in a nightclub scene, where Phaedra meets Hippolytus for the first time, a projection of the bottom half of a woman's body in short skirt and fishnet stockings, seated on a bar stool, captures both setting and mood. The way Phaedra crosses and uncrosses her legs, while the performer continues to sit still underneath her huge costume, resonates with a surrealistic, comedic feel. At the same time, what appears to be Hippolytus' male torso sneaks into the projection, creating a sensual ambience, which is well matched to the soundscape of mixed tipsy voices castigating Phaedra's lust for her young stepson. In fact, the video also follows Phaedra's fantasy: it portrays a voluptuous dance with the object of her desire, represented by two male hands that move slowly and intimately up and down parts of a glittery dress.

Here, technology also acts as an affective machine: some of the digital

images serve to unearth different stereotypes of femininity and the prejudices of the judgmental chorus about their queen: the visual of Phaedra's sexy dangling stilettos luring Hippolytus into small talk alternates with pink rose petals that in the video fall over Phaedra as she sings a country ballad and dances in a moment of teenage elation. Such images are meant to reflect the chorus' own projections on Phaedra's 'picture-perfect' life and her role in reinforcing the patriarchal narrative of marriage as an institution from which women can benefit socially and economically. Highlighting the protagonist's conflicting emotions, the sequence entitled "Contempt" follows Phaedra's transformation from a love-torn, dejected woman into an enlightened character, who philosophizes on the nature of rejection and on being human and vulnerable. Phaedra's costume is digitally transformed into a barren, cracked piece of earth that trembles throughout, suggestive of earthquake tremors, while her speech is nearly synchronized with the quavering landscape. The combination of image, intermittent sound and staccato sentences emphasizes the scene's disjointed sensation.

5. Relativizing Time

Digital technologies deepen and expand the perception of time (and space), altering our "perceptual mechanisms" and changing "the way we see and, more importantly, the way we think" (Aronson 2005, 46). Moreover, as Liesbeth Groot Nibbelink and Sigrid Merx argue, in intermedial performance, perceptual expectations are often played with or even explicitly deconstructed, thus producing "sensations ranging from subtle experiences of surprise or confusion, to more uncanny experiences of dislocation, displacement or alienation" (2010, 219). A "disturbance of the senses" and a "blurring of realities" is the manifestation of the "clash between digitally influenced perceptions and embodied presence" (ibid.).

By virtue of its mediating properties, technology introduces heterotopic zones of endless possibilities, inviting allegory to enter the realm of the private. Engagement with the media also reinforces the heterochronic element. Because mediation oscillates between realism and abstraction, it can travel the spectator to alternately existing or imagined places, where past and present blend into one a-historic, almost mythical dimension. Digital story-telling sets out to cover the entire expanse of history through to the present, deepening and distending our perception of time. Spaces buried in our memory can be reinhabited, and significant facts of personal or public history revived. Such certainly felt to be the philosophical premise of *Phaedra I—*, where the popular story of a classical heroine was developed into an a-temporal commentary on the perennial hunger for excitement and renewal.

As I have discovered by experimenting with the digital, beyond applying video projections as a mere background, beyond even using multimedia to produce jarring images and sonic environments, mediation can influence the entire make-up of the theatre narrative. In addition to sharpening the usage of visual and auditory signs, film is a compelling means of shaping temporality and structuring performance in non-realistic, non-linear ways: it allows for the action to move backward and forward, to be paused and repeated at will. Essentially, the digital narrative is more resistant to structural regularity, vanquishing standard representational conventions, pursuing unorthodox angles and, often, a cubist interweaving of different time frames. This involves more mental work but also more excitement for the audience, who must now produce the missing links in co-constructing the reality of the play.

Frozen,[10] Bryony Lavery's 1999 play – which I directed at Theatro Skala in Larnaca and Theatro Dentro in Nicosia in 2020 – brought together three interconnected stories of a paedophile serial killer, the mother of one of the girls he abducted and murdered and a psychiatrist who investigates the biological roots of evil. The three narrative points of view make for a structurally complex text, with a temporally and geographically expansive narrative. The design team and I opted for an elliptical style, resisting the temptation to have video simply illustrate the rapidly shifting locations, as the action in the play moves across different geographies and spaces during the span of twenty years. Instead, the imagery revealed subtle emotional temperatures associated with the suffering, confusion, rage and redemption, which are in the heart of the text. Some footage was more literally connected to the events of the plot: such was, for example, the video of a van crossing an expanse of empty space when the male protagonist recounts his method of capturing one of his victims. More than anything, video design became instrumental not only in allowing fact and fiction to co-exist, but in exposing in a non-hierarchical manner three divergent outlooks about a single incident.

To that end, different video motifs were created and linked to each character's engagement with the principal dramatic event, namely, the abduction and killing of the ten-year-old Rona. Nancy, Rona's mother, who joins a missing children's organization immediately after her daughter's disappearance, always speaks to the public under the watchful eye of her daughter in a video projection. Twenty years later, when the police inform her of the new findings in their investigation, she follows the officer to a run-down shack, where the body of the girl had been found. By using video we wished to amplify the emotional impact of special moments in the play and make

[10] Produced by Theatro Skala; translated and directed by Avra Sidiropoulou; set and costume design by Yorgos Tenentes; video design by Emy Tzavra-Bulloch; lighting design by Miroslav Stanchev; performed by Monika Meleki, Stelios Kallistratis, and Lea Maleni.

them resonate with psychological nuance. All through Nancy's suspenseful itinerary, the video projects fragments of the girl's image – of hands and face – and there is an impression of a body drowning. The same projection – this time in black and white – is played against the action of the shack being demolished, an operation which Nancy decides to attend as an opportunity for a final farewell to her daughter. The fading image of the girl emphasizes the inexorability of her death. When Ralf is present on stage, his scattered thoughts range from reminiscing the actual event in his home, and later in the prison, and reliving it moment-to-moment in what seems to be a constant nagging present. The video projections follow his state of mind, as they alternate between the van journeying towards his victims and a muddier, anarchic video collage of several young girls enjoying happy childhood moments. Gradually, their faces dissolve into visuals of neurons of the brain system, which, in turn, become tree trunks in an eerie forest. All three referents (girls, brain, trees) point to the sick act and the assumed locale of abduction, violation and killing of the victims. At the same time, Agneta, the psychiatric researcher, conducts her keynote lecture using visual references to Ralph's damaged brain. The image of a blinking brain is projected behind the sexual predator, during the scenes in which he is examined by the expert psychiatrist. This visual serves to underline the neurological basis of the text's main argument – the possibility that the criminal brain is physically damaged.

6. Updating

Technology proposes fresh conventions of contemporary naturalism by facilitating connections with the here and now. In recalling Philip Auslander's idea of "televisual intimacy", according to which a contemporary audience whose existence is dominated by moving video images sees in those images a more convincing representation of the real than a live theatrical performance (1999, 12-16), Peter Campbell argues that the intimacy and shared space and time of live theatrical performance, ironically, becomes less "real" because it is "less familiar than the hegemonic media to which many of us are now accustomed" (Campbell 2021, 230). This perceptual shift is notably present in updated readings of a classical works, where digital media reframes the correspondence between their timeless properties and the contemporary spectator's needs in a particular moment in time. To resolve whatever may feel foreign, incomprehensible or irrelevant in the source (the original) text, it proposes new criteria for accepting the 'other' as 'own.' The practice of applying current and familiar visual references in performance is certainly

widespread.[11] The cultural coordinates of a global society we all can relate to through language, sounds and images daily broadcasted and reproduced in the mass media, continue to appear in many theatre experiments. By intersecting with diverse dramatic traditions and styles, such digital references can generate geographies, time frames, and identities that may inform and illuminate those embodied by the live performers and experienced by the live spectators.

During this revisionist process, the media is essential in recontextualizing setting and story and undermining existing representational conventions and modes of characterization, as well as in tampering with perspective and making things appear either bigger or insignificant, intimate or distant. Digitally induced patterns may contrast ironically with what is physically taking place on stage. Other times, they give detail and depth to those actions performed live, serving as a kind of subtext to what is happening in the foreground. In *Phaedra I—*, for example, the protagonist's existential anguish is reciprocated by Aphrodite's mediated presence. The play opens and closes with the dominant presence of the goddess, who appears as a constant vocal reference but who is also portrayed as a mirage of fire spreading wide and setting up the scene for the drama to unfold. Here, technology both domesticizes the 'other' and defamiliarizes the banal.

7. Constructing and Perceiving the Digital Double

Significantly, digital media instigates fresh ways of looking at character and interrogates the multiple ways in which we perceive identity today: faces can be split and merged; voices are intercepted, substituted, altered and regained. In this sense, technology is a determining factor of identity construction. Decomposing body from image, authentic voice from its sonic reproduction, it also stimulates a tension in the audience, who needs a creative leap in order to bridge those clashes into a credible 'character whole'. The competition between the corporeal self, the bodily voice and their digital reincarnations is taxing, if also exciting, in that it forces the spectator to work doubly in order to make meaning out of this duality.[12]

[11] One also recalls Lehmann's conceptualization of the "real" and the "extra-aesthetic" in postdramatic theatre:

> The aesthetic cannot be understood through a determination of content (beauty, truth, sentiments, anthropomorphizing mirroring, etc.) but solely – as the theatre of the real shows – by 'treading the borderline', by permanently switching, not between form and content, but between 'real' contiguity (connection with reality) and 'staged' construct. (Lehmann 2006, 103)

[12] For more on how the body and its double pervades digital performance, see Dixon 2007.

In the production of *A Doll's House*, visual and auditory framing was crucial, given that some performers became both actors in and observers of the world on stage. During the two fraught meetings between Nora and Krogstad, the characters' video portraits looming over the performers blur the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, as the mediated images take over not just as a visual correlative of the live narrative but also as an essential, ontological agent, which dictates the actions of the two opponents. Causey reflects on the "uncanny" use of screens in performance as a "space wherein we double ourselves and perform a witnessing of ourselves as other" (2003, 384), pointing out that "the question of the drama is not one of representation, of the thing and its reflection, but of the splitting of subjectivity" (386). As the two actors enter the scene of crisis, their digital doubles hanging above them appear to be dictating their arguments and prepping their actions. Their presence on stage is highly authoritative: in their stillness they assume a power that neither the nervous, if resistant Nora, nor the coercive, if emotionally injured Krogstad, can own in their carnal presence, alone. Furthermore, in the final, most iconic scene of the drama, the path to Nora's future emancipation is revealed in the video projection of a young girl who – arms wide open – rushes out to a wheat field. While using these video sequences as a mechanism of ironizing the play, we also wished them to generate affective impact, either by juxtaposing live and mediated storytelling or by revealing the essence or mood of the scenes in a particular form or scale. In the end, video addressed the question of how many conflicting identities one person can hold and for how long one's different selves can co-exist surreptitiously before they eventually surface to fight against one another in moments of extreme personal crisis.

Sometimes, digital media concretizes and validates missing characters on stage. In *Phaedra I—*, technology adds an further layer of interpretative complication to the original premise that the title character vocally incorporates all characters present in the myth, who are actually indicated as separate *dramatis personae* in the script. Auditory manoeuvring further recalibrates representations of selfhood: the performance is interspersed with alienating voice-overs by means of pre-recorded voices that stand for Aphrodite, the chorus of women, the mixed crowd in the nightclub, and Theseus. The audial evocation of character works hand-in-hand with digital embodiment. On stage, the performer interacts with herself as performer and the projected snapshots of her life, but more importantly, with her other selves. In fact, she constantly addresses her electronic counterparts, caught in an internal conflict to reconcile different personas as well as subjectivities. Each scene conveys this narrative convention in different ways. The absent actors are bestowed a digital body and a face. In most cases, this is a fragmentary identity, torn into pieces scattered all over Phaedra's costume and adding to the

overall impressionistic effect of the show.

However, Phaedra's antagonist, Hippolytus, stands out from the rest of the characters. He is given a full (digital) body, his mediated carnality drawing attention to Phaedra's sexual fantasies. In the play's most emblematic scene, in which Phaedra confesses her love to her stepson, also speaking his lines, the male character is digitally personified in the video images of three different men's semi-naked bodies crawling up and down Phaedra's body. The body multiplication is there to suggest that Phaedra is enamoured not with one specific person, but with the idea of falling in love and being sexually fulfilled. The division/multiplication of the self ultimately destabilizes our spectator's perception. The fact that the self can now be split, multiplied and manipulated at the director's will no longer concerns the "death of character"[13] but rather the "character's rebirth or re-incarnation as a hybrid, existing in a state of liminality between corporeality and imagination" (Sidiropoulou 2018b). The paradox of seeking completion through division is, after all, a recurrent trope in mediatized performance. Inevitably, the audience wavers between empathy and estrangement, which produces a kind of "nostalgia for the pure body", uncontaminated by the "noise" of mediation (ibid.). Such nostalgia falls into what Lehmann understands to be "a quest for anthropophany", an impulse to "realize the intensified presence ('epiphanies') of the human body" (2006, 163).

8. Permission/Seduction/Indulgence

In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Lehmann identifies the break of the theatre dramatic mode and the turn towards the postdramatic to be theatre's response to the "caesura of the media society" (2006, 22-23). In analysing the new landscape of media-saturated performance, he interrogates the fascination that the image exerts on the spectator, pondering on what "constitutes the magic attraction that seduces the gaze to follow the image when given the choice between devouring something real or something imaginary" (170). Answering his own question, he argues that "there is something liberating about the appearance of the image, which gives pleasure to the gaze", as the image is "removed from real life". It is the gaze, Lehmann thinks, that can "liberate desire from the bothersome 'other circumstance' of real". The gaze, in fact, can produce bodies and transport desire to "a dream vision" (ibid.).

Multimedia performance can transport audiences to sites of desire and fear, to a haunting liminality, an in-between space of vulnerable corporeality and imagined spaces of potential. As such, it can be invariably entic-

[13] An idea introduced by Elinor Fuchs in her seminal title study (1996).

ing, enigmatic, addictive and slippery. The seductiveness of the non-defined, the abstract, the fusing qualities of intermedial strategies on stage may well have to do with a permissive attitude to both making and perceiving art. By reconceptualizing the notions of reality and representation, technology alleviates the director's pressure of having to comply with familiar conventions and meaning-making structures. This is not so much an 'anything goes' attitude to creativity, but rather, an opening up of creative vistas. As far as the spectator is concerned, the virtual present provides a field of endless possibility. In fact, "the electronic image allows and demands to see even the most impossible things. There is no void of another efficacy here, only evident reality" (Lehmann 2006, 174). The reaching out and grasping of other realities, the experience of the interminability of representation is a major source of pleasure. As semiotician Anne Ubersfeld points out in her essay "The Pleasure of the Text":

> Making this exciting pleasure possible, letting all kinds of images appear, leaving the spectator with the feeling that his pleasure of seeing has not been exhausted, that a whole series of signs has not been fully analysed or really seen, that he could have looked elsewhere, focused on something different – do we not have here some of the distinctive traits of good staging? It is the pleasure of the ephemeral and of the struggle against the ephemeral.
> (1982, 130-1)

The kind of pleasure Ubersfeld describes involves an element of transcendence, a struggle to capture the intangible (what is not palpably *there* but can be reached through imagination) and, subsequently, an effort to keep it well sheltered in one's mind and soul. In other words, it is a pleasure that is active and committed.

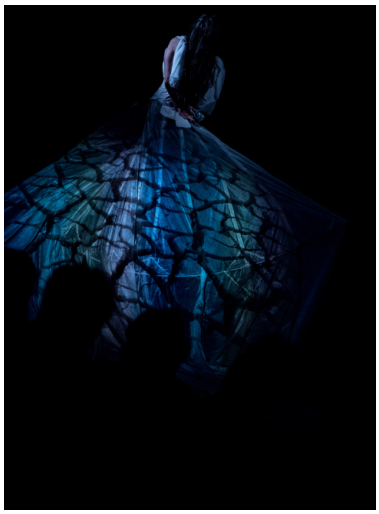
Passive pleasure, on the other hand, leads to overindulgence. Using technology purely as a means of flaunting spectacle and production values can either oversaturate interpretation or make it irrelevant. On the artist's part, it can paradoxically slacken imagination, limited as it is to showcasing the medium's diverse possibilities instead of generating an experience of visceral engagement. For the audience, while digital wizardry is undoubtedly seductive, this seduction is ephemeral, and perhaps ultimately devoid of the promise of change, which almost always accompanies a transformational theatre experience. Infatuation with technological acumen can lead to experiments "undertaken to present new technological paradigms for performance, rather than creating an intellectually or dramatically fulfilling piece of theatre" (Dixon 2007, 392).[14]

[14] Dixon is here referring to more advanced and pervasive uses of digital technologies, which often use performances as a pretext to demonstrate "complex and fascinating software research" (2007, 392).

In the recent years, theatre has been inadvertently placed in a position where it has had to cross hard representational boundaries in order to keep up with the speed of film and the efficacy of the media. As contemporary performance keeps metamorphosing, theatre virtuality continues to propagate heterotopic zones of hybridity and fragmentation Fresh notions of dramaturgy as an operation of theatre-making rather than of textual analysis call for revised ways of training the spectator to appreciate mediatization as a compelling factor of narrative construction and of sensual engagement. In this new landscape, far from being a self-reflexive staging tool, technology becomes a vital compositional language in both the *mise en scène* and the dramaturgy of the artwork, reflecting on the complexities of our mediatized experiences on and off the stage.

1. *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen. Directed by Avra Sidiropoulou. Technochoros Ethal, Cyprus, 2019. Photo Credit: Christos Avraamides.

2. *Phaedra I—*. Text-direction: Avra Sidiropoulou. Tristan Bates Theatre, UK, 2019. Photo Credit: Michael Demetrius.



3. *Frozen* by Bryony Lavery. Directed by Avra Sidiropoulou. Skala Theatre, Cyprus, 2020. Photo Credit: Sofoklis Kaskaounias.

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