

Digital media in contemporary theatre and concepts for a theatre of the future



“J'ai toujours beaucoup aimé le théâtre et pourtant je n'y vais presque plus” (“I have always loved theatre and yet I almost don't go there anymore”) is one of the most used Roland Barthes quotes when it comes to a discourse about new forms of performativity on stage in general and especially about postdramatic theatre. (1)

Postdramatic theatre is not only defined by the absence of dramatic texts, classical acting and linear storytelling but also by aesthetic and technical experiments with new, electronic and digital media e.g. video, sound and light. It is evidently more than that: besides its reflected function, it questions current dispositions and deconstructs manifested ideas of space, authorship and perception. (2)

While conventional theatre directors used and still use technical devices as means for the purpose, independent performance groups and artists like Rimini Protokoll, Christoph Schlingensiefel or Heiner Goebbels work interdisciplinary, assemble different art genres on stage (and also off stage e.g. site-specific) and give those elements new tasks and meanings. (3)

However, after decades of combining (live-)video screening, lightshows and attempts with digital soundscape recording on stage, these artistic means were established as a common aesthetic part of nearly every contemporary mainstream production which are not postdramatic at all but are so-called “Capitalist realism” at the Berliner Schaubühne by its artistic director Thomas Ostermeier. (4)

Digital techniques are used gradually to build scenography, create a distancing effect and tear down the fourth wall between stage and audience.

Basically, avant-garde media of the 80's and 90's and Brecht's idea of an "Epic Theatre" are now indispensable in European State theater productions. (5)
Underground performance artists influence the mainstream and become a part of it. The chain of action is long when it comes to changing the public opinion on theatre, often it is restricted to a select circle while the rest keeps its image of an old-fashioned stage.

There are several good reasons for this phenomenon. Contemporary theatre is neither easily consumable like music, nor entertaining like cinema, which for most people replaced the live performance.

New possibilities to work with new technologies becomes a task of several art academies and theatre studies institutes since acting and stage schools are preoccupied with conserving old values. (6)

Young artists, theorists and spectators became tired of watching and experiencing drama without having any connection to the play, seeing an imposed, staged relevance to the actual world. Therefore Barthes' thesis became popular and inspires to create alternative plays, performances, games, productions, projects and festivals. (7)

The afore mentioned German artist collective Rimini Protokoll which has been founded at the "Institute for Applied Theatre Studies" in Gießen and oscillates between documentary theatre, installation and live art uses digital media in their work in different ways:

Their audio walk "Remote X" takes place in cities all over the world. The concept is simple "Hordes of people who have never met in the real world swarm out on virtual treasure hunts when playing online games. In "Remote X" we're a horde of people wearing radio headphones, swarming out into the real city (...). It composes a soundtrack to streets, parking garages, churches and backyards. Each new city-specific version builds on the dramatic structure of its predecessor, writing more storylines for new sites." (8)

Another work called "Situation Rooms" gives the audience full control of action by equipping it with Tablets and Headphones and moving around the installation. "Around the corner stands another spectator in the role of a doctor carrying out amputations in Sierra Leone, while in the room next door a press photographer sorts pictures of German army missions in Afghanistan, only to stand in the shooting range himself a little later to do exactly what he was able to observe in passing just a while ago, thereby becoming a subject for observation himself. The audience gradually becomes entangled in the film set's spatial and material labyrinth; each individual becoming part of the re-enactment of a complicatedly elaborated multi-perspective "shooting". (9)

The importance of digital media in the context of performative arts increases since our everyday life and big parts of our communication is based on mobile devices, uninterrupted internet access and social networks. However, live arts did not take over social networks. The topic has been depicted only as an advertising platform, which can be compared to the function of crowdfunding campaigns. Artists used it in the way it is told to be used but have not been thinking in any other category and integrating networks as an equal part of their work. The only mentionable example of doing so is Davis Freeman's recent performance "Some things only become clear much later" in which he simultaneously used the online sex chatroom "Chaturbate" and filmed himself being on stage. (10)

There are different possibilities.

Besides the new "live" functions on Instagram, Facebook and YouTube which allow users to share moments during the action only, Snapchat seems to be currently the most hyped app. Being first crowded by young adults and teenagers it became an equally important marketing platform for cultural institutions (BIT Teatergarasjen) big companies (H&M, Adidas), sport teams (FC Bayern München), magazines (VICE) and politicians (Michelle Obama) to share their "stories".



Including Snapchat as a part of a live show would be a new form of combining digital media and performance.

Imagine a fictitious profile of a character. Imagine the character lives in your town. Imagine you are not aware of this character being an invented art figure. Imagine he or she posts funny, amusing, entertaining videos and pictures. Probably there are plenty of videos of his or her everyday life, adventures, trips, parties etc. You recognize the locations, you recognize even some of the people, you feel connected to it and you follow. You never see this person itself - you don't even know if it is a real person but you assume it is because you have proof every single day. The videos do not stay for long, though. They disappear after 24 hours. After a while you gather more information about this figure. What it likes and dislikes, what it wants, its past and what it does for living. It is a young man, living currently in your town for a little while and having a good time. He works as a travel agent and has his own small start-up company. The company works online trying to win new clients, advertising trips to unusual, not very touristic regions. You cannot find Bangkok or Melbourne on the list. Actually there is no list and there is no destination to choose. The trips are highly customized and only available for individuals or small groups up to three people. You cannot book them, you cannot buy them, you can only give your best and apply for them. The application is partially based on the snapchat stories and communication but you also have to show presence if you are interested in being part of the upcoming adventure. The travel agent you have been following, opens irregularly a pop-up store for a few hours on one evening. He is getting around quite well, knowing people and having followers everywhere. His new opened-place in your town is always different and always improvised. Sometimes it is part of another event, sometimes it is supported by investors, friends and other independent places. When you join, you always enter a small office with a few other people. It is not limited to anyone at this point. The agent speaks to his potential clients about his former journeys to the Altai Mountains, The Republic of Khakassia, Nakhchivan and his nights in Ashgabat.

Meanwhile his identity stays safe and unknown and no-one knows if the stories are fact or fiction. His narratives remain a puzzle, non-linear and clearly full of secrets for the audience.

After his report, people can come and see him individually to talk and to do the application form and test which varies and is an experience on its own. In the end of the evening the agent announces the next participant and destination who has then the opportunity to be part of the journey.

The agency is represented by MyOddysea.com and posts videos and pictures during its odysseys on snapchat and until the next participant and group is willing to go and so on. The destination is not necessarily an unknown middle east country but can also be a mutual night in Dublin.

The project does not only clearly refer to Odysseus' journeys and themes, which are significant for young individuals humanity knows since Homer's publication. It contains elements of Joyce's Ulysses and translates it into the language of the 21st century. Also it allows the spectators to focus on getting a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

Furthermore it questions the limits between reality, virtuality and fiction. The research claims to explore three different spaces: the digital space (app), the performative or produced space (agency) and the "real" space (in town or during travels).

They work independently but become one big picture when you are willing to go through the whole performance.

This is a work in progress and it is still in a conceptual state. Details due to content, a corporate identity, scenography and a visual concept are part of the work. It may be shown in summer in Bergen and in Berlin afterwards.

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(1704 words)

(1)
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(2)
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(3)
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