Digital Scenography / Performing Space

DS/PS is a continuation of research conducted within the Sinlab and aims to create the conditions of experiment at the intersection of theater and technology, in collaboration with Cie Motus and students of Master Staging in Manufacture.

1. Research questions

As a means to satisfy the request for more specificity regarding research questions, I will revisit each of the proposed research questions in light of the selected source material:

Background
As selected with MOTUS, the particular source material that we will be using for this project is Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Notes Towards an African Orestes.* Pasolini's "notes" attempt to correlate the ancient Greek legend of the founding of democracy and the triumph of reason over animal nature onto the state of a "newly emerging modern Africa." Pasolini's attempt to map the narrative metaphor of western myth and his own Marxist ideas regarding the value of technology, progress and the working class onto an entire continent in order to satisfy a narrative is an awkward failure, but is perhaps doomed from the start. The result is a film which is hugely problematic but also enlightening, capturing a unique cultural/political perspective. Pasolini own film poignantly documents his failure in a group interview he conducts with a group of African students at a university in Rome. The students' physical reactions convey the discomfort that their carefully worded polite responses do not. In the end the film becomes a psychological, metaphorical and intellectual portrait the author, his camera and his way of seeing the world. This is true in spite of the fact that it's unclear that Pasolini intended this: we are only permitted to see the author on-screen for a few seconds, as a blurry reflection in a shop window which opens the film.

For this project we will begin with Pasolini's *Orestes* as a jumping-off point for the production of a play that will consider the role that personal digital media has played in documenting and changing the contemporary political climate across Europe. In particular:

● *In what way has storytelling fundamentally changed given the recent advent and now prevalence of mobile digital technology? Specifically, how has the widespread adoption of mobile networked cameras in the form of smartphones and social networking changed the way we perform and consume performance?*

From Arab Spring to the Occupy movement to the current economic situation in Greece, the role of mobile video has fundamentally altered the way that democracy works by changing the way stories are told. How? What are the differences in

documentary technique that Pasolini employed versus a contemporary young political actor on Instagram? How has the "documentary viewpoint" changed between then and now?

● *How have contemporary technologies reconfigured the relationship between audience and performer, and in what ways might scenography be employed in light of these changes?*

It's clear that the relationship between the audience and performer is different than it was when Pasolini's made his film, and certainly different from the way it was when the *Orestes* was written and Aristotle first described *skeongraphia*. Given this shift, how do we employ scenography on stage differently than before? What role does technology play in creating a setting for our narrative?

● *How do artists incorporate these changes into their work to more effectively convey their ideas to an audience?*

How can theatre companies (MOTUS), actors and directors (the students of La Manufacture), more effectively incorporate these sorts of changes into their own work? Beyond the theoretical, what does a play look like when it takes these issues into account? How can we take advantage of the performance-shift that digital media has presented us with?

• *What happens to the theatrical experience when a space itself becomes an actor capable of decision making?*

One characteristic of the digital shift is that the context around a narrative is unlikely to be seen as fixed. Rather, contemporary storytelling assumes the context is perpetually shifting, changing, responding, interactive and alive. In short, the space itself is an actor in a Latourian sense. What does this mean for theatrical performance? Who writes the rules that govern the changes? What types of interactions are most effective and why?

2. Objectives / outcomes / products:

Up until now, "Digital Scenography" has primarily meant video projection mapping on stage, which adds a visual element on top of a production. While this can be a powerful tool, with this project we are pushing the boundaries of the form past projection (which is often created after or in parallel to a production) and into *embedded development* for theatre. This form of collaboration is a cutting edge approach: not only light, sound and visual design but narrative design. This is the application of theatrical devising techniques to technology development.

This project will result in four very specific outcomes, each of which contribute directly to the production and practice of contemporary theatre:

1. A new technology for stage production
Developed specifically for the staging of *Orestes,* the technology will develop as the text is adapted, but will likely incorporate elements of video and projection.

2. A real theatrical work which demonstrates the use of technology on stage

The MOTUS production of Orestes, with the participation of the students of HETSR will ensure the technology encounters actual practice and addresses the needs of a real performance. This performance will also serve as a "reference implementation" for the technology: not as a demo, but as an actual example of how the technology changes the way we tell stories.

3. Theoretical documentation which situates the work relative to contemporary practice

Theoretical documentation of the work will address the concerns outlined above (research questions), but will be used to further the understanding of the role of scenography and technology on stage performance.

4. Technical documentation which is open-source

Technical documentation and open-source licensing will allow other practitioners to duplicate or better, build upon, the project themselves. This provides a practical basis for further exploration beyond the initial project and grant.

Methodology: Re-iterating the laboratory dimension of the project:

Given the nature of creating a collaborative, artistic work, the method of evaluation will be through *workshop*. At each stage of the project, time will be taken both as a group and on an individual basis to reflect on the progress using the stated research questions as a guide. These reflections will be recorded and adjustments to both the technology and artistic work will be made accordingly.

This process is a hybrid method of inquiry that is best described as *artistic research* and defined by seven characteristics as outlined in Mika Hannula et-als *Artistic Research: Theories Methods and Practices.*[1] This is the approach of a *bricoleur*, the technique that anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss calls *mythical thought.*[2] It is an approach which is deliberately "provisional and contingent" as described by designer and originator of the "Design Probe"[3] concept Blll Gaver in *"What Should We Expect from Research through Design?"* [4] Further information is available in this excerpt from my dissertation: *The Case for Hybrid Research" (Excerpt from Computational Shifts in Theatrical Space)*, available here:
http://digitalscenography.com/pdf/hybridResearch_sempere.pdf

This method of evaluation was successfully applied in previous work, including work done with both MOTUS and the students of HETSR, an adaptation of Paul Auster's *Leviathan* which resulted in the development of a distributed mobile video system for stage performance. Documentation of this work is available online at:
http://digitalscenography.com/projectbriefs/leviathan.

Source code for this project is available here:
http://digitalscenography.com/distribution/SyMix/

[1] Hannula, Mika, Juha Suoranta, and Tere Vadén. Artistic Research. Theories, Methods, Practices. Academy of Fine Art, Helsinki, Finland and Universiry of Gothenburg I ArrMonitor, Gothenburg, Sweden, 2005. https://www.academia.edu/2396657/Artistic_Research._Theories_Methods_Practices.
[2] Lévi-Strauss, Claude. The Savage Mind. The University Of Chicago Press, 1966
[3] Gaver, Bill, Tony Dunne, and Elena Pacenti. "Design: Cultural Probes." Interactions 6, no. 1 (1999): 21–29.
[4] Gaver, William. "What Should We Expect from Research through Design?" In Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems, 937–46. ACM, 2012. http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=2208538.

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