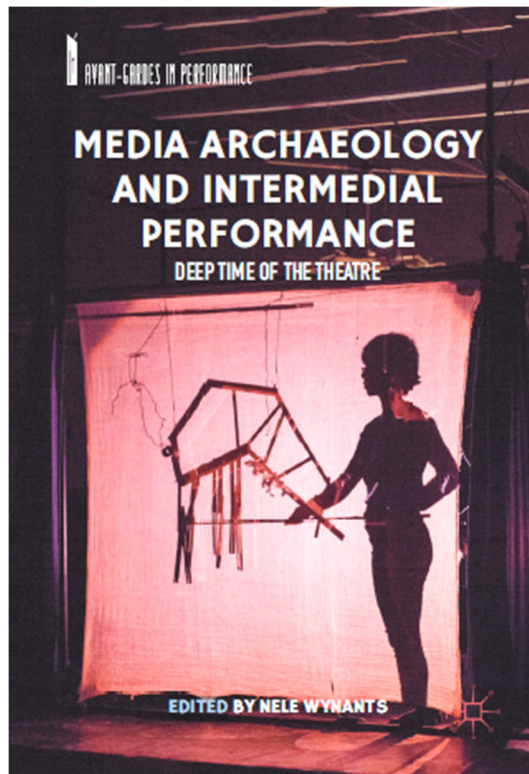


Layers behind the moment

Book review: Nele Wynants, ed., *Media Archaeology and Intermedial Performance* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)



Stating that theatre is an evanescent art, the production “living” only for the brief interim between the audience’s entry and its departure, is a shibboleth commonly employed as an excuse for a certain lack of analytical rigor or objectivity in theatre criticism and history, both often approaching the phenomenon from either a literary or an anecdotal angle.

While the myth of capturing a theatrical event in its entirety has fascinated artists and theorists alike, from Keir Elam's dramatological analysis to Peter Brook's remediations of his own productions or even Grotowski's attempts at fixating and reproducing the "total act", such "capture" has never been entirely successful. After all, it is the undeniable impossibility to revisit a performance that, while defining the art's very nature, makes any attempt of analysis focus not on the actual analysandum, but on the analyst's subjective memory thereof.

In this context, *Media Archaeology and Intermedial Performance*, a collective volume edited by the young Belgian scholar Nele Wynants, aims to present multiple applied methodologies of looking at contemporary theatre and performance through the lens of the strata of traces of the interplay between art and technology they rest upon. Inspired by Siegfried Zielinski's¹ anarchic, or "anarchaeological" approach to media history, itself a metaphorical extrapolation of the geological concept of "deep time", Wynants' book attempts, to challenge and question both established historical narratives, and the boundaries of what we call theatre, performing arts or public spectacle.

In geology, the concept of "deep time" refers to a model for the formation of earth's structures through a continuous dynamic of sedimentations and erosions. Likewise, the editor posits in her introduction, we can investigate the present of theatre (and its elusive presence) by studying the traces its "sedimentations and erosions" have left behind. In her own words, "a media-archaeological approach can therefore open new directions for theatre historiography, particularly when it starts with material traces and records"².

Starting with the assumption that, paradoxically, theatre, a conservative art form, has always been, from its beginnings, eager to embrace new technological innovations, from ancient machines to modern special effects, the book is a collection of studies by fourteen researchers and artists attempting to trace the present in light of the material remains of the past.

1. Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006).

2 Wynants, *Media Archaeology and Intermedial Performance*, 7.

The volume is structured in three parts, “Stage Scenery and Technology”, that concerns itself with old stage machinery, with their functioning and performativity, “Embodied Technics”, dealing with the body-technology interface, and “Expanded Theatre” dealing with borderline and unconventional forms of public spectacle. prefaced by an ample introduction by the editor.

In an ample essay, *Mechanisms in the Mist: A Media Archaeological Excavation of the Mechanical*, Theater American professor and media archaeologist Erkki Huhtamo attempts to approach an often-forgotten theatre form from the early 19th century, the mechanical theatre. Noting the scarcity of historical records, the author appeals to old tourist guidebooks, leaflets, engravings, posters, tour programs and snippets of information from newspapers in order to reconstruct the development and operation of French and German mechanical theatres of the late 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries, which offers us “glimpses of the cultural logic”³ behind the modern obsession for virtual or augmented reality. Other studies in this first part deal with the intermediality of the stagecraft construction of illusions in 19th century French féeries (Frank Kessler and Sabine Lenk) and with the technologies employed for creating the vanishing effect in stage magic performances (Katharina Rein).

In part II, starting from a 2013 performance by Violaine de Carné, *Parfums de l'âme*, Érika Wicky, a French art historian, attempts to trace more than a century of olfactory theatre history by analyzing technologies employed (from flowers to scent synthesizers), their reception by the audience and their evolution. Kara Reilly, in her essay *Robots and Anthropomorphism in Science-Fiction Theatre: From Rebellion to Domesticity and Back Again* explores the cultural and theatrical implications and representations of robots and anthropomorphic creations from RoboThespian, the famous android actor, to automatons, Čapek's *RUR*, Frankenstein's monster, the golem of Prague, going as far back as the Book of Genesis, highlighting the uneasy and anxiety-generating relationship between creators and things/beings created in their image.

3. Erkki Huhtamo, “Mechanisms in the Mist: A Media Archaeological Excavation of the Mechanical Theater,” in *Media Archaeology and Intermedial Performance*, ed. Nele Wynants (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 66.

The final part comprises three studies focused on three technologies seemingly unrelated to live performance: the movie projector, the distorting mirrors and the microscope. The most thought-provoking is the one signed by the editor herself, *Mediated Visions of Life: An Archaeology of Microscopic Theatre*, in which Nele Wynants, starting from the dissection videos of Belgian artist Sarah Vanagt, discusses anatomical and scientific public spectacles from the early 19th century and the microscope as a medium for exciting audiences' imagination.

Theatre historians tend to capitalize on the glamour of glorious successes or the shock of catastrophic failures, leaving the in-betweens aside. By looking at the traces, in a media archaeology way, a new history of the theatre emerges: one of obscure experiments, enthusiastic illusionists, macabre anatomists, stench-masking chemical perfumes, automatons and grandiose machines, all building layers upon layers under today's performances, discretely influencing them and their audiences. While geological strata rest locked inside the earth, waiting for their geologist to appear, now or in a thousand years, time takes its toll on the theatrical traces. Posters fade, old machines rot and buildings collapse. This makes Nele Wynants proposal to explore theatre form an archaeological (or rather anarchaeological) perspective an urgent one, worthy of ample consideration by all scholars in the field.

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