

*Dramatic Space and Performer's Body, a Case Study*¹

MARINA CRISTEA*

Abstract: Mediated images alter the perception of the real, then again, they emphasize themselves in a dynamic manner arising critical attitude, for they compel the spectator to consider all the images entering his/her visual field, and to integrate them into his/her own reference system. As recorded images offer the possibility of simultaneous representation of parts of actors' bodies, an interaction between virtual images and real / optical images occurs, interaction which, whether demonstrates itself compulsory, acquires a powerful dramatic finality, since the existence of a viable relation between the stage images, either virtual or real, is a *sine qua non* dramatic condition.

Keywords: performer's body, degree of presence, subjective reality displacement, field of perception, mixed media performance, media oriented design

Consequent upon the reformation of the theatrical space in the 1960s and the validation of the poetics of the image in the 1980s, the use of digital images in staging dramatic texts - peculiar mark of "mixed media performance" (Grübel - Grüttemeier - Lethen 2001, 73; Lehmann 2006, 26, 151- 152) -, is but one of the many ways contemporary theatre succeeds to reinvent itself in its relation to reality, a reality furthermore intrinsically mediated.

Mixed media performances posit a reality whose meaning apparently eludes the spectator by reason of reorganizing his/her visual field, where

The visual field is a kind of introspective experience contrasted with the naive experience of the visual world", whereas the field of view is "a fact of ecological optics. (Gibson 1986: 114)²

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* Marina Cristea, Phd candidate at Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Theatre and Television, e-mail: marinabaumgarten@gmail.com

² At page 48, see the distinction between physical optics and ecological optics, as in considering an illuminated object, a luminous body or a reflecting surface.

Mediated images alter the perception of the real: "Technology alters our perceptual mechanisms, it changes the way we see and more importantly, the way we think. (...) The external form no longer gave a hint as to its function." (Aronson 2005:46)³, whereas „the theatre is precisely that practice which calculates the place of things *as they are observed*: if I set the spectacle here, the spectator will see this; if I put it elsewhere, she/he will not, and I can avail myself of this masking effect and play on the illusion it provides." (Barthes 1977, 69)⁴ Limitation or reconfiguration of the visual field, as well as perspective cancellation, considering for instance, what Berger 1972, 18 says: "Perspective organized the visual field as thought that was indeed the ideal. Every image that used perspective proposed to the spectator that he was the unique centre of the world. The camera and more particularly the movie camera demonstrated that there was no centre. The invention of the camera changed the way men saw.", or new reference frames⁵ are possibilities multimedia technology particularly grants.

At the same time, this "new" reality emphasizes itself in a dynamic manner favoring a critical attitude towards the images thus presented, for it compels the spectator to consider all the images entering his/her visual field and to integrate them, somehow to fold them into his/her own reference system. Critical attitude usually arises when there is something that does not fit in, or when the authenticity of the object of his/her own perception becomes questionable, and he/she begins to search beyond the image „the other" reality⁶ or „the other" space⁷.

Unlike physical spaces, cyberspaces are „problematic to identify spatially", they „possess radically different properties", but they produce maybe not so radically different effects, although „their power is of a different order than that of a physical space." (Aronson 2008, 25), as a result of their lack of boundaries, dimensionality or measurability.

³ See also Crary 2001, 4: „(...) it is important to emphasize that an immense social remaking of the observer in the nineteenth century proceeds on the general assumption that perception cannot be thought of in terms of immediacy, presence, punctuality."

⁴ See also Barthes 1977, 70: "The *tableau* (pictorial, theatrical, literary) is a pure cut-out segment (...); the *tableau* is intellectual, it has something to say (something moral, social), but it also says that it knows how this must be done; it is simultaneously significant and propaedeutical, impressive and reflexive, moving and conscious of the channels of emotion."

⁵ See, for instance, Aronson 2005, 89.

⁶ Cfr. Causey 2006, 15, See also Van Den Berg 2006, 57 apud Oberender 2004, 25" Once we accept any visual representation as authentic in its own right, a new kind of space becomes open to perception: a mediated world in which the „real" space perceived through one's immediate senses is but one among many variables, which are all set in relation to one another."

⁷ See Aronson 2005, 89.

(...) the ontology of the performance (liveness), which exists before and after mediatization, has been altered within the space of technology. (...) The question of the drama is not one of representation, of the thing and its reflection, but rather of the splitting of subjectivity. (...) the combination of video and live images is a visual metaphor of split subjectivity. (Causey 2006, 16, 21 and 23)

As recorded images offer the possibility of simultaneous representation of particular spaces or of parts of actors' bodies, an interaction between virtual images and real / optical images occurs, interaction which, whether demonstrates itself compulsory – "With some notable exceptions, projected scenery, especially film and video, does not work – does not function- on the stage. (...) Unless the intent is specifically to create a sense of dislocation and disjunction (...) the placement of such technology and imagery on the stage is tantamount to carrying on a conversation in two languages." (Aronson 2005, 87) –, acquires a powerful dramatic finality, since the existence of a viable relation between the stage images, either virtual or real, is a *sine qua non* dramatic condition.

The sets for *Phaedra's Love* staged in 2006 at the Studio Hall of Arad Classical Theatre by director Mihai Măniuțiu and designer Doru Păcuraru, are a case of mixed media performance⁸, and in a lesser degree one of media - oriented design⁹, although the scenic space is configured in order to emphasize the role and function the different medial tools have during the staging.

The stage design here discussed has a twofold aspect, that of a marine monster thoracic cavity¹⁰ and that of an aircraft or submersible ambiguous interior, interior converging on the surface of a projection screen. It seems a depth structure that evolves horizontally, along a central cat walk, that together with its restricted height gives an idea of the "thermal space" (Hall 1990: 54). Nevertheless, the projection screen, whose very bidimensionality is doubled by the lack of depth of the stage, is a frame¹¹ between the world seen and the world unseen, the open-closed limit to another space¹², invisible to the spectators, whose access is permitted only by means of the images the

⁸ The video images are signed by Lucian Moga, Vava Ștefănescu and Eduard Goia.

⁹ Syntagma coined by Van Den Berg 2005, 53.

¹⁰ Possibly referring to Theseus' curse following which Hippolytus falls a prey to Poseidon.

¹¹ See Pavis 1998, 155 definition of theatrical frame, "as not only the type of stage or space in which the play is performed. More broadly, it also refers to the contextualization of the fiction represented. Frame is to be taken both literally (as a «boxing-in» of the performance) and abstractly (as contextualization and foregrounding of the action.)"

¹² "The «submedial space» as Boris Groys called it, is that space of perception which " lies behind or beyond the images present on the stage, and which becomes open to perception through the fault lines between different ways of seeing offered by different kinds and levels of imagery." (Van Den Berg 2005, 55)

periscope - camera that Phaedra maneuvers offers. But these black and white images do not describe Hippolytus' objective world¹³, rather his solitary, subjective space¹⁴, and have therefore an illicit, voyeuristic character.

What the spectator sees is not real time events or the performer's real body, but Phaedra's selection, in other words, a continuous subjective view, a „voracious" search for the «*punctum*» with apparently no regard to «*studium*». Barthes 1982, 55-56, uses the term «voracity» in order to contrast the «pensiveness» photography allows: "(...) in front of the screen, I am not free to shut my eyes. (...) I am constraint to a continuous voracity; a host to other qualities, but not pensiveness (...). Yet the cinema has a power which at first glance the Photograph does not have: the screen (as Bazin remarked) is not a frame but a hideout: the man or woman who emerges from it continues living: a «blind field» constantly doubles our partial vision. (...) yet once there is a *punctum*, a blind field is created (is divined)."

The two following terms, *studium* and *punctum*, are coined by the same, at pp. 26-27, in reference to photography. At p. 43: "Yet the *punctum* shows no preference for morality or good-taste: the *punctum* can be ill-bred.", at p. 44: "(...) the *punctum* has, more or less potentially, a power of expansion. This power is often metonymic." and at p. 51: "The *studium* is ultimately always coded, *punctum* is not." Nonetheless, for Barthes, the *punctum* is the very tangency point of the two, photography and cinema.¹⁵

Within both the stage space and the dramatic staging, the video media technology has a constitutive role, designed in order to fold the invisible spaces (whether they are subterranean, as those "inhabited" by the singing supernumeraries, or aside, or behind the stage, wherefrom Phaedra, Hippolytus or Theseus appear), whose degree and function become perceivable as the theatrical performance evolves.

In *Phaedra's Love*, Sarah Kane reverses the original formula of the myth by role inversion: Hippolytus is the decadency in person, but in his monstrous tediousness hypocrisy abhors him, while Phaedra, vacillating between disgust and tenderness, falls prey to the passion for her step-son; her suicide is not revenge, but the only gift Hippolytus would appreciate, whereas director Mihai Măniuțiu operates both a restoration of myth's formula – for Hippolytus

¹³ An universe that other stagings of Kane's text depict, for instance, that of director James MacDonald. (see Urban 2001, 42) The correspondent "Firstspace, perceived space". (Soja 2000, 17)

¹⁴ Somewhere between the "Secondspace, conceived space" and "Thirdspace, lived space" (Soja 2000, 18, 21-22). We consider these terms as denominating degrees of the space, specific and at the same time, convertible, fluid, not determined once and for all.

¹⁵ See the quotation above, Barthes 1982, 56.

keeps his integrity, in Măniuțiu's staging, the incest is not shown, but suggested, and takes place only as a result of Phaedra's will, during Hippolytus' moments of syncope that Phaedra provokes to him by evoking Lena's name, possibly his «catastrophic», impossible love – and a transgression: Phaedra's suicide is not only a skillful frame-up, but part of a therapeutic process that helps the character definitively elude her eternally tragic destiny. We might affirm Phaedra's case is that of „the prisoner” surviving „the concentration camp”.

In her interviews, Kane confesses the impression made on her by the discussion between Roland Barthes and Bruno Bettelheim about the “amorous catastrophe” (see Barthes 1990, 48-49: “The amorous catastrophe may be close to what has been called, in the psychotic domain, «an *extreme situation*, the situation experienced by the subject as irremediably bound to destroy him»; the image is drawn from what occurred at Dachau. Is it not indecent to compare the situation of a love sick subject to that of an intimate of Dachau? (...) Yet these two situations have this in common: they are, literally, panic situations: situations without remainder, without return: I have projected myself into the other with such power that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, regain myself: I am lost, forever.” Though first appalled by such a comparison, Kane concludes Barthes meant “the loss of self. And when you lose yourself, where do you go? There's nowhere to go; it's actually a kind of madness.” (in Urban 2001, 42-43)

Phaedra eludes tragic since she manages to make an instrument out of it: she tries to exorcise her affects by fighting instead of consuming the «image – repertoire»¹⁶ that obsesses her. We are not to forget Phaedra's mythological background, a dramatic character Euripides created, took over by Seneca and other dramaturges and poets: Zeus' nephew and Minos' daughter, Ariadne and Pasiphaes' sister, and Theseus' third wife, is a Cretan woman of royal origin, of a passionate and wild nature, that chooses the suicide both because of her searching of the heart and as a last attempt „to morally rehabilitate herself”, as Augoustakis 2007, 416 affirms in his review of Armstrong 2006.

She uses the recorded images in order to manipulate (see, for instance, the feigned suicide and the game of its alternatives, as an ironic quotation of Bazin' s metaphor¹⁷) or to exorcise herself within the frame of an assisted therapy process within the strict but connive relationship patient-doctor – that consists in hypnosis, exposure, autosuggestion, pain inducing and pain confronting techniques (for instance, the reiteration of voyeuristic images), and

¹⁶ Syntagma belongs to Barthes. See for instance, Barthes 1990, 95.

¹⁷ Cinematographic image is also seen as a «fenêtre ouverte sur le monde» on account of its powerful realistic force.

pain annihilation (see the visual self-referential technique) entailed by the elimination of its very causes, at the end of her «periodic» clinical evaluations. The passion for Hippolytus is also a reverse of Theseus' absence, hence the death of both of them resolves the problem. Placed in self-defense, Phaedra has no remorse, for she chooses between being a victim by letting the passion consume her, and fighting it, even with the price of liquidating the others. She finally survives an impossible love. In Măniuțiu's staging, in the end, Phaedra drops the mask worn by an anonymous character in the prologue, another victim of ambiguous identity, or maybe the embodiment of hers or Hippolytus' twisted soul. In other terms, a double unmasking: that of the feminine nude character in the prologue and that of Phaedra, at the end of the show.

On the contrary, Hippolytus, the son of Theseus and Antiope, the queen of the Amazons, whose chastity is beyond doubt, as he devoted himself to Artemis, tries to furnish his inner vacuum, his irrepressible dissatisfaction resorting on decadent metaphors, on „imagined” but never uttered narcissistic dialogues (see, e.g., the ingenious *mise en abîme* of his anniversary, a second degree dramatic space, folded through this very device). The fact theirs is a mediated interaction reveals their impossible relationship, the communication failure caused by characters' incapacity to see beyond the image they offer one another¹⁸: at first, Phaedra can't overcome Hippolytus' image as well as the latter cannot forget Lena's. The other characters: the Doctor, Strophe, Theseus have complementary functions: the Doctor seems to use Phaedra's case, but he is not the one leading the game; similarly, Strophe and Theseus are but dramatic pretexts, whose alienation the staging suggests. Lena is the only evoked character.

On one hand, the recorded images are a distance measuring device, and on the other hand, they render the invisible relationship of the two characters, precisely, their emotional reference to one another, expressed in a manner that differs from the usually postmodernist dramatized discourse, making us ask ourselves whether the spaces the virtual images fold are but dramatic mental spaces, and not purely, always dramatic, spaces as we might consider them at a glance, if the stage box itself is a first degree dramatic space folder, whereas dramatic mental spaces are second degree ones.

Inserting recorded images in theatrical set design leads to a more nuanced configuration, richer in meanings by integrating events that take place in different spaces and moments to a single field of perception: “The

¹⁸ “(...) we are often fooled by visual experience that turns out to be illusory, an inclination generated perhaps by our overwhelming, habitual belief in its apparent reliability. Here the compensating sense is usually the touch, as we ask confirmation through direct physical contact.” (Jay 1994, 8)

space of sight is accordingly not Newton's space, absolute space, but Minkovskian event-space, relative space." (Virilio 1994, 62)¹⁹

The visual frames refer to spaces mentioned by the dramatic text (as the burning of Phaedra's alleged corpse is), spaces hidden by the stage structure or props, spaces intentionally excluded from the visual field (for instance, Hippolytus inaccessible world) or the inherent interventions, insertions or deviations from the dramatic text specific for a staging. In the black and white bitter comic anniversary episode rendered on screen as silent film cuts, camera duplicates²⁰ ironically the scenic space in a oppositional structure, the real scenic space being reproduced specularly, and fragmented, whereas the virtual one is unfolded and then re-proposed as a whole. As Causey 2006, 27, affirms: "The contrast of screen and real object (...). The linkage is to suggest that one operates at the behest of the other, not separately, or in cancellation of the other, but in a symbiotic relation; no illusion, no reality, and vice versa." These are cases in which recorded image becomes complementary, by modifying the course of the text and producing other meanings (for instance, the suicide attempts recorded versions cumulated or considered separately).

By means of recording, the effects dramatic situations nevertheless produce are enhanced. If a spectator is not in any sense a voyeur, his/her sight reaching spaces and watching gestures intended to be seen, he/she explores private spaces of characters not meant to be shared with other characters – e.g., the voyeuristic episode of Phaedra watching Hippolytus absent from the stage: on the screen is projected that part of Hippolytus' body Phaedra envisages.

Thus, spectators share with Phaedra both/either the sight and intimate space of Hippolytus, his "tactile space"²¹ (a first degree space), and/or her

¹⁹ See also, Berger 1972, 29: "The meaning of an image is changed according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it." and Van Den Berg 2005, 52

²⁰ Van Den Berg 2005, 58-59, identifies and analyzes four types of video camera instrumentalization in German director Frank Castorf and set designer Bert Neumann discussed productions, i.e. video camera as a surveillance, voyeuristic, research and citation device.

²¹ On distance and space perception, see also the distinction the painter Braque makes between the tactile and visual space, as Hall 1990: 60, cites "the tactile space separating the viewer from objects while the visual space separates objects from each other. M. Balint describes two different perceptual worlds, one *sight oriented*, the other *touch oriented*. Balint sees the touch oriented as both more immediate and more friendly than the sight oriented world in which *space* is friendly but is filled with dangerous and unpredictable objects (people). In spite of all that is known about the skin as a information - gathering device, designers and engineers have failed to grasp the deep significance of touch, particularly active touch. They have not understood how important it is to keep the person related to the world in which he lives."

mental images (a second degree space). These rudimentary images put in light details usually imperceptible on stage, by both spectator and actor (for instance, the way the scene representative for Hippolytus decadent behavior is filmed and the way the same situation is represented live on stage: the compressed, folded, supposed space rendered by the virtual images unfolds on stage, revealing thus also another degree of presence, that Georges Banu states as a mutual dependence between the investigations of the theatrical space and the efforts to gain the „effect of maximal presence“ which was, as Banu affirms: „Beside the variety of the spaces, in all experiences, what was searched for. Therefore, the renewal of the dramatic spaces was constantly accompanied by a rediscovery of the body.“ (Banu 2003, 11)²²

The presence of the *double* takes place through mediated duplication: the simple moment when a live actor confronts his/her mediated other through the technologies of reproduction. I propose that the experience of the self as other in the space of technology can be read as an uncanny experience, a making material of split subjectivity. (...) the inclusion of the televisual screen in performance and the practice of performance in the screened world of virtual environments constitutes the staging of the privileged object of the split subject, that which assists in the subject's division, capturing the gaze, enacting the subject's annihilation, its nothingness, while presenting the unrepresentable approach of the real through the televisual screens (Causey 2006, 17)

This staging restitutes the typical visuality of this dramatic text both by the interplay between images of real and images of feigned, virtual facts, and by the correspondence, even though not always effective, between virtual images, «image – repertoire», and feigned dramatic reality. In *Phaedra's Love*, but not only (see *Blasted* (1995) and *Cleansed* (1998)), Kane shows instead of evoking or describing (our underlining) violent actions, which enhances the visuality degree of her writing – for instance, tragic events take place on stage. Nevertheless, these virtual images appear to be more „true“, i. e., more complete, than the conventional scenic images, since they offer the viewer a twofold perspective: of watching a filmed, mediated scene and of confronting or integrating two or more unmediated scenic images²³.

If in this case, video technology is used to enhance the direct exchange between actors and audience, also its „purpose (...) serves as a unifying factor to tell stories (...)“ (Dundjerović 2009, 47)²⁴, not as a conceptual weapon. The

²² If not otherwise specified, the translations are ours.

²³ See supra, note 25, the mentioned director Mihai Măniuțiu's stagings using the virtues of multimedia technology. See also, in *Job Experiment* (2003), the references to *Kaiserpanorama* (Berlin, 1880) (Crary 2001, 135) and Duchamp's installation *Etant données* (1929).

²⁴ See also Dundjerović 2009, 48.

turning to technology of this production²⁵ deals possibly with that sense of subjective reality displacement whose grounds are to be searched only partially in the very technology of image-making. Subjective reality displacement is a *avant-garde syntagma*, defining one of the breaks and also the transition from Modernity to Postmodernity:

When the camera reproduces something, it destroys its uniqueness. As a result, its meaning changes. Or more exactly, its meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings." (Berger 1972, 19)²⁶

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²⁵ For the role and uses of recorded images and media technology in theatrical and Opera productions of director Mihai Măniutu, see *Woyzeck* (2005), *Ecclesiastes* (2007), *Otello* and *The Rest* (2008), *Walpurgisnacht or the Steps of the Commodore* (2009), *Life is a Dream* (2012). (Photos and videos of the mentioned stagings are available at www.maniutiu.com/portfolio) See also Modreanu 2010.

²⁶ See also Causey 2006, 23: "The doubling technologies of mediation act as a *sparagmos*, fragmenting the subject, displaying its fabrication and remembering what is other." Or Phelan 1996,148: "Performance in a strict ontological sense is nonreproductive."

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MARINA CRISTEA is an *Accademia di Belle Arti in Rome (Scenography)* graduate. She holds a BA in *Classical Philology* and is a PhD candidate in *Theatre Studies*, "Babeş-Bolyai" University Cluj-Napoca, with a research theme in *History of Ancient Theatrical Performance (Greek tragedy)*. She is a freelance visual artist.