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Paper Presentation
Theatres for Enactment and Reception: Performance Art and Virtual Reality

This gazing dynamic in cinema, performance arts, and virtual reality, as practices, have what I think is a common conceptual underpinning in terms of the context in which a viewing takes place, that is, the ‘theatre’, that is, a theatre for particular forms of audience and/or participant reception. This seems fairly obvious, but what are the specific forms of audience reception within this context? And how might the parameters of the ‘theatre’ be plotted through relational markers between these different disciplines? I could position the correlation between the experience of cinema, performance art, and virtual reality as a ‘viewing environment’ as ensuing specific ‘enactments’, though perhaps this would be contingent on whether an enactment is acknowledged within a given environment, that is to say: did I notice the performance, did I know that I was in a virtual environment? (Taylor, 2003)

The paper explores how performance and virtual reality might be aligned and understood through a comparative process of analysis. It asks, what are the positions of viewers within these different environments and how is an environment put into affect and/or effected through an audiences’/participants’ viewing and enactment? The context of virtual reality is manifold in terms of its uses, so for the purposes of this paper I will speak to the issues of Head Mounted Displays Sets (HMDS) as forms of alternative mediated interactive theatres.

There is a sense of marvel at the spectacle display of head mounted display sets and how ‘real’ it feels, how close it comes to ‘reality’. Perhaps performance art might be said to more readily engage with this notion of reality in a postmodern sense. What I mean to say is that performance art often acknowledges the artifice, the constructedness of the work, and this can often become a central aspect of the work. Performativity lays bare its internal dialogue, its self-referentiality is enacted, so that the performance knowingly points out its method of representation. ‘In theatre the notion of performativity goes further than describing a denotative/connotative process since the term implies a self-aware theatricality and indicates a theatrical event which foregrounds the representational functioning of the staged event.’ (Taylor, 2003: 164 – 165)

The movement from the narrative and illusion of classical theatre to undoing an audiences’ immersion through to acknowledging the structure of a narrative’s delivery in performance art, is the usual distinction between performance art and theatre. The conflation of spectacle and hyperrealist technique drawn together through the drama of the moving-image in the head mounted display set seems to resemble the structure of classical theatre par excellence. And though HMDSs compose images in a way that a painted backdrop on-stage does, the marked difference is also encountered in the perspectival position of the viewer/audience/user. There is a sense that perhaps virtual reality experienced inside the head mounted display set comes closer to the notion of a liberating
theatre, where you are at once: actor/user/audience/activator/active/interactive participant with agency – a notion which performance art, established in the 1960s, has challenged through its political landscape. (Taylor, 2003: 166 -167)

When defining the theatre as an environment that ensues enactments, as a context that brings about enactments per se, from a cinematic perspective what might be brought into the frame here is the apparatus. The apparatus that plots the parameters of the theatre, by this I mean to say the cinema theatre’s contents. Though in Antonin Artaud’s sense of performance there may be no stage, no props, no script, only bodies/sensations. (Artaud, 1992) And although the stage may or may not be there, the stage is removed or negated in either case. I might begin by saying the stage should perhaps be undone: this is the postmodern set-up. And it is this condition, that sets-up the stage, or staging the location of the body in an environment, in a given scenography that gives rise to a dramaturgic event.

On one hand, a dramaturgic event, manifests the classical illusionary game of theatre which can be compared to HMDS 360 degree stereoscopic display, in which the viewer is immersed in the scenography without perceiving the mechanism driving the illusion; a field of moving-images like the spectacle of the phantasmagoria or the trompe l’oeil. On the other hand the performative element is the situation of the viewer, that is the person wearing the head mounted display set controlling the vista, altering the narrative track through their process of interaction. Michael Heim says,

> the “virtual” in virtual reality comes from the experience of being immersed in a world of entities that feel present when in fact they are not actually present, “virtual” meaning “in effect but not in fact.” It is this illusory quality of Virtual Reality that establishes its link with trompe l’oeil painting and the many variants of aesthetic realism. (Heim, 2012: 2)

However, the narrative, or the text, is set-up with a limited number of possibilities. Given that the scenography - the painted backdrop in theatre, the trompe l’oeil, the 360 stereoscopic image in a head mounted display set - is fixed to a point, in as much as it “dresses-up” the scene to contextualise the vista, the moving-images in HMDS veil the mechanism that creates the illusion. Though I feel the weight of the head mounted display set and the tightness around my eyes “I can’t see it”. The instrument is felt but unseen, and the mechanism makes great efforts to prevent foreclosure of its construction through the brilliant spectacle of images. The scene is scripted as the narrative driver. The scenography that is the scene that is painted on a backdrop in theatres, in HMDS (the image) is the outcome of code/algorithms. But what conducts the narrative landscape in the HMDS? I think the director of narrative interaction is the spectacle itself, the backdrop, dictating/scripting the limit of user response. This goes a long way towards immersion but perhaps of a disembodied form, whereby visuality takes over and entrances the user. In Crary’s words:

> The same time “visuality” can easily veer into a model of perception and subjectivity that is cut off from richer and more historically determined notions of “embodiment”, in which an embodied subject is both the location of operations of power and the potential for resistance [...] spectacular culture is not founded on the necessity of making a subject see, but rather on strategies in which individuals are isolated, separated, and inhabit time as disempowered. Likewise, counter-forms of attention are neither exclusively nor essentially visual but rather constituted as other temporalities and cognitive states, such as those in trance, or reverie. (Crary, 2001: 3)

Perhaps the entrancement of the viewer inside the head mounted display set is brought about by the denial of their (possibly tangible) relation to their location. Inside a head mounted display set there is no stage per se, there is no frame, there
is no ‘edge’ by which to delineate/distinguish what is ‘real’, or at least partially locatable, graspable. As Lyda Hart says:

The extent to which we recognise the presence of the edge of the stage may determine what kind of performance we are enacting, but willing ourselves to forget the stage altogether is not to return to the real; as s/m opponents would have it, rather this will to forget is classical mimesis, which Derrida points out is ‘the most naïve form of representation. (Hart, 1996: 52 – 53)

Perhaps it is in this sense that the experience of HDMS is also valuable in so far as it has the potential to produce relief from the apparatus as its invisibility conjures perfectly ‘believable’ images of a (hyper) reality. This sets up a double bind because the invisible is politically problematic, as pointed out by Donna Haraway, in terms of how knowledge is produced and understood. (Haraway, 1988) Perhaps we are used to negotiating the edge, whether it is the edge of the stage in theatre/performance art, either rejected or co-opted, or the edge of the frame as the limit of the image in so far as what is tangible within the frame. Butler gestures that in contemporary installations of moving-image based artworks, these images are defined by what is outside and/or beyond the frame.

Contemporary artists have returned to the ‘frontal flat image’ and to narrative and illusionist conventions, replacing the earlier emphasis on the ‘off-screen’ (the virtual or fictional space implied beyond the frame) [...] it is not as a confrontation with cinematic illusionism but as a confrontation with the limits of representability, gesturing in the words of Gilles Deleuze towards ‘a more radical elsewhere, outside homogenous space and time. (Butler, 2010: 306)

In the same way as the edge of the stage is negotiated, the edge of the frame in the contemporary gallery film and video installations is considered in terms of its reach into reality. It is another elsewhere, whether through the fourth wall that represents the outside ‘reality’ of on-stage representation, or what has not been captured on film as defining the image, that is ‘the’ site of representation. So these notions of representation and reality in terms of theatre, whether cinema or performance, are considered in terms of their entangled realities and representations – how these entanglements meet in that liminal zone at the edge of a continually renegotiated on-stage enactment or off-frame image beyond the screen. Head mounted display sets explodes this liminal zone, this border between what is real and representational in terms of the parameters, or the ways in which we have framed or staged representations and realities in these disciplines. HMDS has no frame, no stage, no performance, yet there is a scenography and there are roles to be inhabited.

Thus the body does not have organs, but thresholds or levels. Sensation is not qualitative and quantified, but has only an intensive reality, which no longer determines with itself representative elements, but allotropic variations. Sensation is vibration. Likewise sensation, when it acquires a body through the organism, takes on an excessive and spasmodic appearance, exceeding the bounds of organic activity. It is immediately conveyed in the flesh through the nervous wave or vital emotion. [...] When sensation is linked to the body in this way, it ceases to be representative and becomes real. (Deleuze, 2003: 45)

So perhaps the absence of the stage/frame; in what may be our usual measure of space and time in representations, obfuscates our relation to portable markers of realities in the landscape. And perhaps with this our relation to the context (the stage’s/frame’s edges) can temporarily anchor to tones and levels of reality. Without these ‘edges’ the already blurry cartography slides out of view and inside the head mounted display set the edges of our body are renegotiated, smudging outwards towards a body of sensations, affecting and pulsing new waves of experience and ‘felt’ intensities.
Bibliography

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