

Fast and Furious: the need for speed in media.
Peter Missotten

Peter Missotten (°Hasselt 1963) trained as a video artist (one of the students of Chris Dercon at St. Lukas Brussels). He worked all of his life in and around theatre spaces - starting as a light designer for 'The Cement Garden' in 1983. This started a long and passionate stage designer relationship with Guy Cassiers, which went on and off during some 25 years (Wasp Factory, Sunken Red, Rage d'Amour, Fliegende Holländer, Onegin... to name just a few).

In 1994 he cofounded de Filmfabriek - a company dealing with the crossover between digital and performance arts - with Anne Quiryne and Anne Heyman. They worked intensively on projects with artists as William Forsythe, Wim Vandekeybus, Guy Cassiers and Georges Aperghis. Artists as Wies Hermans, Bram Smeyers, Kurt d'Haeseleer and Ief Spincemaille joined them over the years.

From 2000 on, Peter Missotten evolved from a designer of digital media art for the stage into a director for performance arts and opera productions. In 2009, he directed the world creation of 'KEPLER', an opera by Philip Glass for Linz09 at the Landestheater Linz. In 2010 he created 'MONTEZUMA - FALLENDER ADLER', an opera by Bernhard Lang for the Nationaltheater Mannheim. He designed the stage and light concept of several dance performances of the choreographer Guilherme Miotto, by example 'The New Factory' for Dansgroep Amsterdam and 'In memory of a projection' for Korzo. He recently directed the world creation of 'DER GOLEM' for the Nationaltheater Mannheim 2016. It's a new opera by Bernhard Lang, based on a video libretto by Peter Missotten.

Nowadays he specialises in contemporary opera creations, media installations and radical performance projects.

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As I've been working on very different media throughout my career, as an artist I became hyper sensitive to the different qualities and strategies of each of them. What to tell on which medium?

Throughout the years, I developed several analogies or metaphors on how I - as an artist - could see media. For example: one could consider them as territories of a technology, struggling in a fight for survival.

Borrowing from 'dromology' - the theory of speed by Paul Virilio, the survival strategy of a medium in this view, is speed. The quickest technology conquers a bigger territorium and is more likely to survive. At one point, the fax machine had quite a big territorium (although, strangely enough very few artists ever used it's potential), but that shrunk drastically with the arrival of the internet and email. These struggling technologies try to postpone their extinction by piggybacking on other technologies: the fax became part of the 'multifunctional'. It's obsolete, but still exists, hidden inside a multitude of unused functions of the multifunctional, as a dormant medium.

Another analogy could be the 'density' of a medium. As with physical media, the density alters the behaviour of light (and therefor speed and/or time) within the medium. How strongly is 'time' influenced by a medium? 'Time' being the most fascinating and illusive physical entity by far. Let's apply this concept to some media...

A photograph or a figurative painting stops time. A photograph does so almost instantly and more often than not has the suggestion of speed in it. It's time stopped in it's tracks. Frozen, but suggesting that it somehow could be unfrozen in time. It is a very heavy medium.

A figurative painting stops the time by condensing it's - often quite lengthy - creation process. In an abstract painting, only this condensed creation process remains. It's almost a singularity, a moment outside of time, screaming with silence. In this analogy, a painting - as a medium - has the density of a black hole. It is both extremely slow and extremely dense. That's probably it's unique feature, which makes a good fine arts museum a place outside of time. It tries to defy the existence of time. That's quite an achievement, in a society hooked on the need for speed.

Music punctuates time. It chops it up into tangible bits, interfering with our own biofunctional rhythm. It can be extremely powerful - if it wants - in messing up our timing, inducing an almost physical distress which we sense as 'emotions'. Listening to music, we loose track of time and somehow trying to adapt to the induced pitches and rhythms. Watch youngsters wearing headphones almost all the time, evading the timing of unmediated reality. They carry their own time zone on their heads. Cutting of their music, they seem to land quite abruptly and dazed on the timing of reality.

Movies are extremely apt in accelerating time. Stories that would take up days, months or even years in real life, are hyper condensed into an hour or two. A movie compresses perceived events in a very similar way as our brain would. It's a pre-compressed reality. It's the hamburger of the media (a commercial hamburger being some kind of pre-eaten food). A movie mimics our observation and storing of reality in a very convincing way. That's why video art, often refusing to use this fictionalising pre-compression trick, can be so unsettling, awkward and discomforting. It shows the coulisses of the magic trick our brain plays with reality. We fictionalise reality all the time - it's the basis of our memory (and as such the basis of the noble science of history). Add music to a movie, and you get an extremely powerful medium, imperceptibly flexing time. The synchronicity of sound (music or else) with image is a fundamental component of the trick: a movie without any sound is almost unwatchable. Strangely enough, any music or sound on any image does the trick. Each sound track drastically changes the meaning of the movie, but is does the trick.

For my latest opera, 'Der Golem' by the Austrian composer Bernhard Lang, I made a 'video libretto'¹. It's a dead silent abstract fiction film, very loosely based on the book of Gustav Meyerinck. It was a concept that popped up during the long talks in preparation of a new opera project with Bernhard Lang. We wanted to break with the usual concept of providing a mini-theatre piece to which the composer would write the music. As I generally try to start from light and space in the conception of my performance projects², we tried to do something similar. A 'video libretto' sounded fancy enough to give it a try. I tried to make the story on 'Der Golem' into a cabalistic enigma, a riddle, a play of free associations. As such, it's almost unwatchable, screaming for sound, which makes it quite effective as a music libretto³.

At the extreme of the 'time bending' spectrum of media, the Internet is the speediest of all. It deconstructs time in endless, parallel streams of chopped up and displaced 'times'. It's a shredder of time and as such it's the twin brother of a painting. I would call it a black Hole at Warp speed. It generates streams of singularities, of parallel worlds where we can freely jump from one to the other. It's our daily Star Trek experience. It could be seen as the apocalypse of media. An extremely speedy ending, a standstill at the speed of light. In his analogy, it can be seen as light itself.

¹ You can watch the movie online at <http://vimeo.com/104054401>

² I'm in good company: God did that too...

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. (Genesis 1-3)

In my view this is the first rule in the creation of tragedy.

³ To be fair, Bernard Lang - a connoisseur of cabala, tarot and Meyerinck at the same time, reintroduced the original story by Gustav Meyerinck as a story line.

What is the position of a live performance in this myriad of analogies? I see a live performance in its 'purest' form, as a non-medium. In recent history, a live performance has lost all its time shaping tricks to other media. Fiat best, it now just adds reality to reality, it generates new live-timed realities. It is catapulted back to its Aristotelian origins⁴, the 'unities of space, action and time'. Fiction has been stolen by the movies. There is only meta-fiction: we see people pretending. We don't see the fictional role: we see an actor playing that role. In contemporary theatre, it's morally inconceivable to believe somebody dies on stage. We just enjoy them pretending.

In its victory rage, the movies incidentally stole the whole presentation machinery of theatre - including the raised platform, the cadre and the curtain - as trophies for the battle over fiction. It is quite fascinating how long it took to get rid of these completely obsolete items in both the movies and in theatre. It took the arrival of television as a mass medium (television is just wireless theatre), to force the movies to get rid of these theatrical symbols. Incidentally, theatre itself got rid of these symbols around the same time. Television sets at first inherited the 'cadre' of theatre. But the quest for a completely borderless image has been a driving force in the design of televisions. Every separation between the fictional space and the space of reality should disappear. The image should slightly bend towards us, as if it wants to embrace us (these useless curved monitors). Even the lighting of the fictional events should reflect in the space of reality: Ambilight (a Philips trademark). It's remarkable how the same evolution took place in the architecture of the theatrical space: borders disappeared, and if possible, one would have an outside window somewhere on stage. Television is the virtual (or evil, or dead) twin brother of theatre. It fakes the Aristotelian unities of 'time, space and action', pretends to be 'live' and in direct contact with the public in its core programs. Contrary to common belief, movies have never been very popular on television. Live sports events are, and shows pretending to be live. News and weather forecasts inter punctuate the programming as a constant reminder of live reality. Television is mediated theatre. Theatre is reality, barely mediated through the construction of its architecture. In media, it definitely is the weakest link.

In this view, I consider it ludicrous to try to stage fiction in theatre. The 'Verfremdung' by Brecht was the only logical answer of theatre after being defeated by the overwhelming superiority of the movies, in the battle over 'fiction'. The amorality of a movie (no one can get hurt, it's only lights and shadows) gave it an unbeatable advantage to make fiction believable (or liveable, or bearable if you want). The new theatre - as a building, machinery or technology - unites the reality of the stage with the reality of the audience space, by forcing the public to enter the stage by almost walking over the stage. It's moral space which unites performers and spectators on an almost equal base. As such, it's always political. The only magic trick left is showing the empty stage, the blunt fact that no magic trickery is going to happen. It's just you and me in the same space and the same time, living the same action.

In an era where almost every aspect of our daily life is mediated and virtualised, the new theatre becomes a hideout from media. Not unsimilar to a church. It's a place to contemplate the slowness of unmediated reality, to embrace the impossibility of a body to escape time. In this hyper mediated society, our bodies are aesthetic ornaments or pied-de-stalle at best, disposable waste at worst. It's probably no coincidence that time consuming plays are 'en vogue'. 'Mount Olympus' by Jan Fabre takes 24 hours and was an immediate sellout. We're longing for a place where time takes time.

It took me a while to frame Opera in this analogy. I feel its power is widely (and wildly) underestimated in media theory. But what's the origin of its power? Opera has some common ground with the movies, in the synchronicity between action and sound (or music). They are both fundamentally intermedial: they combine the speeds of two media. In the movies, both media - the moving image and music - cut up time, and by doing so make it fluid to speed things up⁵.

⁴ Or at least the neoclassical Aristotelian unities of space, action and - thus - time

⁵ In quite rare occasions, music slows them down, as in the case of Morton Feldman e.o...

In opera, the slow medium (my spell corrector suggested slow food, rightfully) of live action is synchronised by the rhythmical power of music. The fluidity of the time in the music make us actually aware of the slowness of our live actions. Opera has a paradoxical power: it makes our slow existence reality tangible in a stream of music (and it's associated emotions). As such, it is a very powerful, though awkward medium. The endless love duets in Wagner's 'Tristan und Isolde' illustrate this at best: excruciatingly slow but violent passion. It is somehow a reflexion on 'la condition humaine' in an ever speedier society: we're out of control, we lost the steering wheel, we became spectators of our own life.

This idea became central in my Professorship Technology Driven Art. Who is running the show? Or better: what? In my view, it would be wise to consider technologies as species in a race for survival. Are we managing our phones or is it the other way round? In this technological race, the law seems to be: 'all that is possible, will be'. We project on stage because we can. We amplify voices because we can. We block natural light and replace it by artificial light because we can. We use deep blue and red (LED) colours because we can.

As artists we can't help to be simple human beings, mesmerised by this wonderful world of possibilities, offered by technologies we never asked for. We don't know how they work, we don't know who invented them (and why), we rarely think the consequences through of their use... we use them because we can. At worst, we use them because 'they're pretty'.

As a teacher, I try to encourage my students to construct their own analogy or metaphor for what's happening within media. How to regain control? What metaphors provide us with useful strategies within this playing field? How to embrace technologies without losing control, or at least, to loose control gracefully? In short: how to dance with the Golem?

In this, the Golem is our attempt to recreate a technological self. A servant with all the possibilities of a human being. It is a rather recent Jewish myth⁶ becoming very popular (alongside Frankenstein and others) during the industrial revolution. In almost every of the manifold versions, the story has a bad ending, destroying its creator in the end. It's no coincidence that the word 'Robot' was invented by the Czech writer Karel Čapek for his 1920 science fiction theatre play 'R.U.R.', Rossumovi Univerzální Roboti (Rossum's Universal Robots).

We have been warned. Neil Postman should be reinstated as a visionary thinker (rather than a gloomy pessimist). We are *amusing ourselves to death* at dazzling speed, with a democratic system in disarray as collateral damage.

However apocalyptic this all may sound: I like this dance. And I'm rather convinced this dance is inevitable and becoming extremely important. Most generations for the past centuries claimed to be in the middle of an overwhelming technological revolution, and they were all right. This revolution however has an exponential speed: we now witness the rise and fall of several technologies within the span of a lifetime. The fax, the copy machine, 3D television, the wireless phone, Citizen Band, the television tube etcetera... These rise-and-falls are extremely unpredictable. We should be driving electric cars ages ago. Trains should all drive automatically ages ago. Traffic signs (and roads) should communicate digital with our cars. And so on...

The speed of this revolution is dazzling, and no one seems to be at the steering wheel. Our minds try to cope with the virtualisation of our experiences. We make a trillion of photographs on very short-lived supports, our recorded past became a fading magnetic field, we would need a second life to watch it before it turns to magnetic dust and noise.

⁶ The Golem myth claims to be much older than it actually is: the word Golem is only mentioned in the Torah once, as a lump of clay: the half fabricate of Adam.

In this field, every live performance is an ideological 'act de résistance'. It forces us to take a step back: not away from daily life, not escaping into fiction, but back into reality. With every new virtualisation technology, the act of a live performance gains importance. In this view, the story told on stage, the fiction is almost of no importance at all. The fact of organising a physical gathering of people, watching live people on a stage, creating a new, unmediated live event, is a huge accomplishment in itself.

As a video artist working in performance spaces, I like to link other media to the stage. Creating the paradox of technological speed and unmediated live slowness. The continuity of time in a live performance confronted with the deconstructive power of digital media. As such, most of my productions could be considered as opera's after all⁷. In the staging of 'Der Golem' I tried to design an almost entirely virtual space: a little house with projected walls and ceilings, and a projected panorama of the woods. With only a small plexi/copperplate hiding space behind a huge projection screen. The singers tried to make sense out of their virtualised surroundings. Singing amplified by means of good old-fashioned, wide handheld microphones. In fact, these wires dictated the staging of all their movements. How to untangle this mess of wires?

In my mind, the only medium that matters on stage will be the inter-medium. Triple jumping between media, to make these technologies tangible as such, as characters within the show.

Bad multimedia theatre reduces the live performance as a side dish at most, as a nuisance on the stage, or as blatant proof of the superior speed of the other media involved. It takes a new (mainly digital) craftsmanship to get hold of the steering wheel in this dance of speed.

In 'Hades'⁸, a well received performance by four students of the Theatre Academy of Maastricht, coached by Woody Richardson Laurens and me, the students made 3D scans of each other. The underworld was a virtual sea of floating corpses, with virtual 3D guards watching over the live action. All technology was handled by the (acting and performance) students themselves, each of them specialising - within the production period of six weeks - in one software program. Ranging from BLENDER (for the sea), over Strata Foto 3D (for the 3D scanning), Final Cut Pro (for the compositing of the corpses) to Isadora (for the playout on 9 projectors). Although it was by far the most technological performance at the ITs Festival in Amsterdam, no technicians were involved. From the outset, that seemed to be an utterly impossible task, but it turns out that today's young artists are very apt in teaching themselves very complicated software through YouTube tutorials and user forums. This digital craftsmanship gives an entirely new relation to their attitude towards technology within their own live performances. No more waiting for technicians doing something very important we don't understand. Digital technology becomes a tool, almost as a knife or a fork (okay, an electric knife...). These tools are not void of meaning or moral implications: they become subject of the performance as well as it's tools. But at least, these artists somehow got hold of the steering wheel.

In a mediated society, that's becoming a central question: 'Who (or better, what) is running the show?'

(This piece has been written mainly in the woods, with my dog running around. In time.)

⁷ Somehow, I like that idea.

⁸ Part of the first PLETA (Platform of European Theatre Academies) project 'Odysseus'. Performed at the ITs Festival Amsterdam (the Netherlands) 2016.