

Mediating Weeping Woman: A live/screen performance study

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Abstract

This paper documents my response to viewing war images of human suffering in the news media. The paper discusses my research project in performance studies consisting of a performance in April 2012, and a written thesis. My artistic intention was to explore the encounter between a viewer and mediated images using a live performer and video projection, including the projection of the performer's life-size pre-recorded double. Aims of this research fell into three categories – presence, dominance and interaction of the live and the mediated performers – and were evaluated by a survey. This paper seeks to answer the question: *What are the perceived effects when incorporating a live performer with a projected image?* One significant finding was that presence generally was heightened when the performer interacted with her projected self. Given the nature of the work's content, the paper concludes that this synergistic interaction was key to achieving artistic integrity.

Keywords

Audience perception, live performance, mediated, presence, video projection



Introduction

Overview

This paper uses my performance experiment, *Mediating Weeping Woman*, to illustrate theoretical arguments in performance studies literature, specifically in live/screen performance. The visual and movement-based performance took place at Macquarie University in April 2012 and incorporated a solo performer, video projection, a musical score and lighting design. Created in the tradition of anti-war art, the work was my response to viewing news media images of suffering in war.

The experiment sought to test current theories in live/screen performance regarding presence, dominance and interaction of live and mediated performers. Specifically, the project examined the following questions:

1. Did mediated images heighten presence of the live performer?
2. Did mediated images dominate the live performer?
3. What effects emerged from the live performer's interaction with mediated images?

An audience feedback survey was used to evaluate these questions.

Findings confirmed current theories in debates on live/screen performance; the presence of the live performer was found to be heightened when she appeared alongside mediated images; these mediated images did not dominate but rather complemented the live performer; and the interaction between the live performer and the mediated images created a synergy that was key to the concept, integrity and rigour of the artwork.

Background

Introducing screen interfaces to the stage is in fact an overt manifestation of the context in which many people in developed countries now live. [Auslander](#) argues that "mediatisation is now explicitly and implicitly embedded within the live experience" (1999, pp. 31-32). [Jensen](#) suggests that media has become "the lens through which we see the world" (2007, p. 1).

Both Jensen and Auslander are referring to the constant presence of digital information.

Rapid advancements in technology especially communications and visual technologies, have led to a screen culture in which many people experience their lives today. Screen environments, like the computer, the mobile phone and the television, have collapsed classical definitions of time and space. Marshall McLuhan wrote: "The news automatically becomes the real world for the TV user and is not a substitute for reality, but is itself an

immediate reality” (quoted in [McLuhan & Zingrone, 1997](#), p. 272). Across many disciplines, there is a surge of scholarship investigating new technologies.

General excitement for technology accompanying that in other fields has pushed research forward to the extent that live/screen performance practice in particular, is technologically-focussed rather than content-driven. In live/screen performance, much research has adopted “high-tech” approaches of which [Steve Dixon](#) is critical: “...style and medium should never subsume content and message, and computer technology should be seen merely as a means to an end, not an end in itself” (2007, p.6). Dixon’s concern reflects a larger tension regarding our increasingly technological future. [Cooper](#) perceptively states:

A certain kind of posthuman future offers to propel us into a world which offers some hope in transcending natural and biological limits, but at the cost of outstripping our ethical reference points, based in embodied presence, mutuality, and generational responsibility. Whether as a culture we are able to accommodate this cost remains a question that has to be asked on broader terms than it is at present (2005, p. 8).

Across all disciplines, our technologically driven world indeed needs careful consideration.

In performance studies, theorists believe in the value of exploring technologies on the stage, or in other theatrical scenarios. [Chapple & Kattenbelt](#) assert:

...there is a need to assess how the incorporation of digital technologies and the presence of other media within the theatrical and performance space is creating new modes of representation; new dramaturgical strategies; new ways of structuring and staging words, images and sounds; new ways of positioning bodies in time and space; new ways of creating temporal and spatial interrelations (2006, p.11).

[Gieseckam](#) identifies a similar gap in literature concerned with live/screen performance:

“...there has been little systematic exploration of the variety of ways in which the introduction of film or video into theatre may radically alter approaches to mise-en-scène, dramaturgy, performance, modes of production and spectatorship” (2007, p.7). Dixon notes

a “fuzzy logic” as well as extensive hyperbole that permeate debates in the field (2007, p.5).

This need for taxonomic investigation into live/screen performance led me to create an experiment, evaluated on the basis of audience perception, with the aim of testing contemporary theories regarding presence, dominance and interaction of a live performer and mediated images.

In particular, my performance culminated in a duet executed by the live performer and her pre-recorded projected image. Matthew Causey contends such an encounter is pivotal in live/screen performance. He states there is “a critical moment in new media performance works and digital culture in general, when the presence of the Double is presented through mediated duplication, the simple moment when a live actor confronts her mediated other through technologies of reproduction” (1999, p.385). Causey’s statement may be likened to Chapple & Kattenbelt’s description of performance that incorporates new media as “a powerful and potentially radical force” (2006, p.12). This paper argues that Causey’s “critical moment” and Chapple & Kattenbelt’s “potentially radical force” are both valid assertions given that in my performance experiment, the merging of the live with the screened proved to be powerfully effective.

Presence

Presence is a potent concept in performance studies where three predominant types inform current debates; stage presence or aura; immediate physical presence; and fictive or symbolic presence (Power, 2008, p.11-13). “Liveness”, a contested term in performance studies, is arguably the same as immediate physical presence and the two words are often used interchangeably. With the advent of new media in theatre, Auslander argues that “live performance cannot be shown to be... immune from contamination by, and ontologically

different from mediatized forms” (1999, p.7). Conversely, live/screen performance theorists argue that mediatized images enhance “liveness” in contexts of live performance. Gieseckam claims that the screen is not an invasion of “liveness” but rather often, its enhancement (2007, p.249). [Lavender](#) proposes that “[t]he actuality of the actor’s presence is heightened by the co-presence of his or her mediatized selves” (2006, p. 62). Gieseckam and Lavender’s positions on presence were affirmed in my performance experiment, as this paper will show.

Dominance

Performance scholars are contesting another issue, namely the presupposition that the technological is dominant. For Auslander, there is a “dominant experience of mediatization” (1999, p. 6). While he is referring to larger economic and social spheres, his resistant attitude towards the introduction of new media to the stage is relevant. [Merx](#) concludes that “[v]ideo, or whatever medium, does not necessarily take over the live performance when it is used, as Auslander seems to suggest...” (2006, p. 79). Merx and other performance theorists have disputed the case regarding the loss of “liveness” in live/screen performance (see [Boenisch, 2006](#); [Causey, 1999](#); Jensen, 2007; Merx, 2006). Boenisch observes further that dominance might well shift from one moment to the next within the same performance (2006, p. 109). If a digital image can dominate at one moment, a live body at another, then the dominance of any medium over another is dynamic. This paper clarifies Merx and Boenisch’s argument. In my performance experiment, audience reactions demonstrated that overall, both the live performer and mediatized images were equally dominant, indeed *interdependent*.

Audience perception

If a theatre production is to provoke discussion and lead to political, cultural or social change, audience thus plays an integral role. With regards to dominance, Boenisch believes the “hierarchic account... does not necessarily translate into an equal hierarchy for the observers when they experience it” (2006, p.109-110). In *Theatre & Audience* (2009),

[Freshwater](#) asks a timely question:

...why, when there is so much to suggest that the responses of theatre audiences are rarely unified or stable, do theatre scholars seem to be more comfortable making strong assertions about theatre’s unique influence and impact upon audiences than gathering and assessing the evidence which might support these claims? (pp. 3-4).

Interestingly, the role of the audience appears particularly pertinent in the area of live/screen performance. Chapple & Kattenbelt assert that performance that incorporates new media is distinct from other live performance subgenres, as it involves “intermediality”, an effect that includes the audience. “Intermediality”, they argue, is an effect of the interrelations, in-betweenness and self-reflexivity of all stage media and spectators (2006, p. 20). In order to better assess effects and impact on spectators, my performance experiment was evaluated on the basis of an audience feedback survey.

Interaction

Interaction should be understood as a process where two separate stage elements *complement* and *seemingly react* to one another, as opposed to *interactivity* where an audience may actually interact spontaneously with a performer. Boenisch explains that live bodies on stage become enveloped in processes of “remediation” – a process whereby meaning, subject matter or content is presented in another medium: “[A]ny body presented on a stage ultimately becomes absorbed in the working of theatrical remediation”

(2006, p. 155). When digital media remediate live bodies on stage, bodies do tend to appear deeply immersed in the media. Boenisch's view was illuminated in my performance.

Artistic intention

My work used dance, in what may be called a "performance intervention", to make an anti-war statement. Reflecting on McLuhan's statement regarding the spectator's perception of televised news as an immediate reality, my intention was to explore processes of viewing mediated images of human suffering in war. When we view a mediated image, we are effectively posited "in-between" two realities – an immediate physical "here and now" and a distant elusive screened "there and now". In their seminal book on "intermediality", Chapple & Kattenbelt discuss

...understandings about realities and the place that creativity in theatre and performance plays in creating those realities. Reality, and inhabiting the spaces in-between realities is the proper subject for a philosophical approach to intermedial performance, which may help us also perceive who we are in the "real" world (2006, p.24).

The authors are advocating for artistic research into live/screen performance because theatre provides "a staging space for the performance of intermediality" (Chapple & Kattenbelt, 2006, p. 12). My performance highlighted these "in-between" spaces and realities of which Chapple and Kattenbelt speak. A mediated image in everyday life exists always "in-between" two realities. My performance therefore served as an anti-war statement, an instance of social theatre and perhaps an insight into human relationships with mediated images.

Performance experiment: *Mediating Weeping Woman*

Analysis

To contextualise the arguments of this essay, I will give a brief critical analysis of my performance experiment. Divided into five scenes – *Woman*, *Guernica*, *Slow Motion*, *Mirror* and *Weeping Body Parts* – the work opened with a movement sequence where the live solo female performer danced with a wooden chair.

Figure 1 – Scene 1 Woman



To long reverberating acoustic guitar notes, the character *Woman*, wakes up, warmed by the sun streaming in through square windows. Stretching, breathing in the new day, she strokes her hands (see Figure 1), rocks to and fro and strokes the chair, as if it is her baby or her

lover. This scene, *Woman*, served to introduce the character, a white, blond young woman, as a quintessential Western woman in a domestic setting.

Woman sits down centre-front and a glow begins to flicker in her face – she is apparently watching television. In the same way voiceovers in previous dance dramas like [Jamieson's Honour Bound \(2006\)](#) contextualise the on-stage action, a sophisticated American female voice reports:

Of course, in modern warfare, civilians are... are, are intentionally targeted. Ah... at the turn of the century, 90% of casualties were military, and now 90% of the casualties are civilian, and a huge number of those are women and girls, who are not, ah, killed, they are raped... It is a strategy of the war. It's cheaper than bullets ([Jackson, 2008](#)).

Unsettling music accompanying the voiceover, suddenly explodes into military drum beats and *Woman* flees the stage only to reappear seconds later spot-lit by a projected image. A black figure within the image seems to be strangling her. She is beaten, struck and thrown. In between her falls, she screams silently and desperately struggles to escape. Projected black and white images reveal staring eyes, sharp horns and dark shadows – a nightmare. This scene, *Guernica*, served to reference Picasso's work of the same name (1937) – a symbol of protest against human suffering in contexts of war. At one point, the live performer, centre-front, close to the audience, lies on the floor and squirms as if trying to push someone away. Her writhing body is directly in front of the projector creating a large silhouette on the backdrop beneath a projected looming figure (see Figure 2). As she silently screams, her face brightly lit in the throw of the projection beam, her silhouette screams also in the face of a projected screaming figure. The screams are a reaction to what has just happened – rape.

Figure 2 – Scene 2 Guernica



Figure 3 – Scene 3 Slow Motion

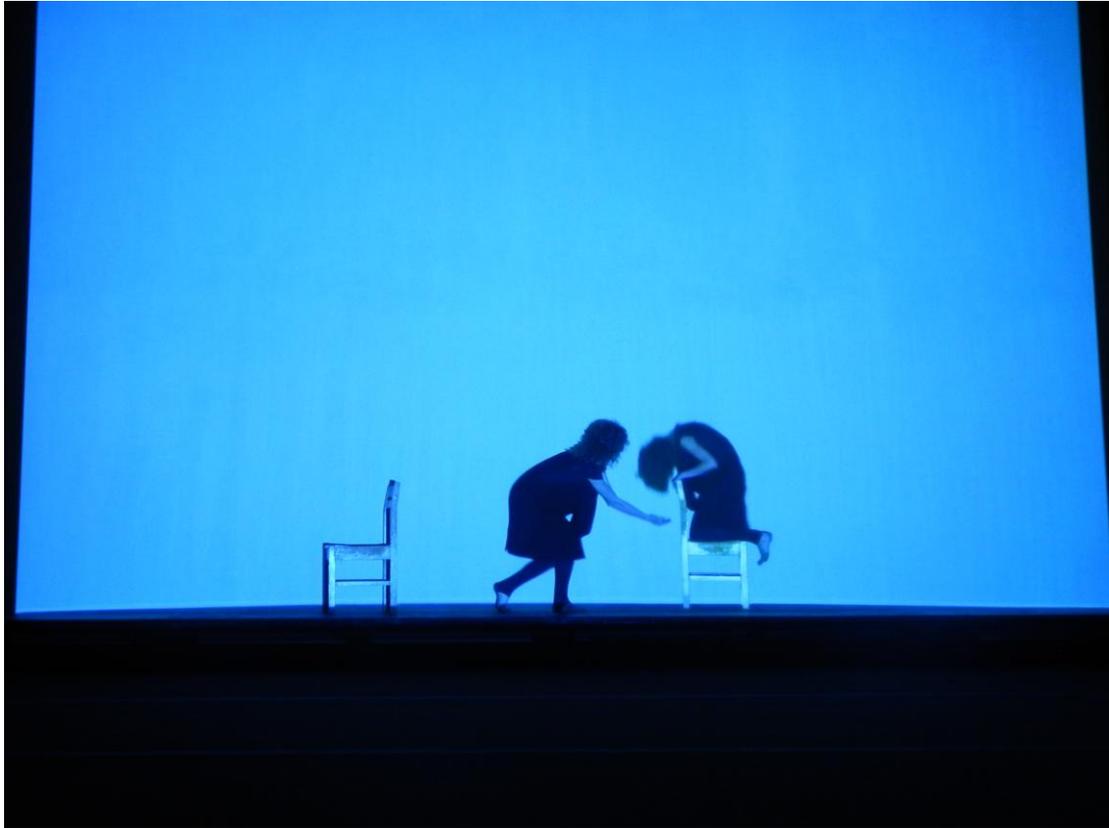


Woman walks slowly, numb and in silence through projected white noise (see Figure 3). The image seemingly absorbs the live performer recalling Boenisch's proposition that performers become immersed in media and indeed remediated. Upon reaching the wooden chair that she had dragged there earlier, a projected double of the performer flashes on screen intermittently. Unperturbed, *Woman* restores the chair to its upright position and audibly drags it along wooden floorboards. As she does this, the flickering image replicates her motions. Many spectators described this scene as "haunting" or "eerie", and one said it reminded him/her of the Japanese cult horror film, "the Ring" and a "following/hovering demon". This aligns with Freud's notion of the "uncanny" as discussed by Dixon (2007) and furthered by Causey who postulates that the uncanny experience of the double is "death made material" (1999, p.386). This effect indeed served to foreshadow the presence of the performer's double.

Eventually the live performer and her digital counterpart sit down mirror-wise on wooden chairs – one live and one virtual. A trembling Swahili female voice, chirping birds, sounds of children playing and soft piano chords accompany the visual, and a danced duet between the two "selves" ensues. Their interaction is underpinned by a sense of melancholia largely conveyed through the nostalgic melody and the distressed tone of the female voice. Swaying between frustration, curiosity, comfort, desperation and empathy (see Figure 4), the relationship between the two "selves" is dynamic and left unanswered just as one might perceive oneself in the mirror or witness oneself in a photograph. This scene, *Mirror*, served specifically to explore processes of viewing, that is the encounter with an individual's testimonial account and the empathetic act of projecting oneself in the place of that individual in order to imagine, feel their emotion and deepen understanding. In many ways, this scene exploited a ubiquitous convention in film where, after a critical event, the

protagonist scrutinises her reflection in the mirror. *Mirror* was emotionally charged in order to emphasise viewing images of suffering as a sensitive, embodied and emotional act.

Figure 4 – Scene 4 Mirror



The final scene exposed *Woman* in a state of trauma. The character of *Woman* is ambiguous. We are unsure whether she is still the woman from the Western domestic space of the first scene who suffered vicarious violence through the viewing of broadcast accounts of sexual violence or whether she is the woman in those accounts who suffered, first-hand, the militarised rape. In any case, *Woman* is visibly traumatised. Her body refuses to be whole. Instead, to low humming electronic tones, limbs move in isolation.

Reminiscent of French Dancer/Researcher Xavier Le Roy's [*Self Unfinished* \(1998\)](#) *Woman* appears as an animal, an insect and a jumble of parts. For a moment, she twists splaying her head backwards, arms outstretched in a fleeting Christ-like pose (see Figure 5) – she is a victim. Like a puppet, her elbow, attached to an imaginary string, vibrates as if being tugged

in violent bursts. Her body is no longer her own. Her inner self is absent and withdrawn. This scene, *Weeping Body Parts* served to portray the psychological struggle that war inflicts on its victims and witnesses alike. The final image recalls *Woman's* position after *Guernica*: she sits hugging herself tightly, head sunken, rocking subtly to and fro.

Figure 5 – Scene 5 Weeping Body Parts



Results

Presence

Real presence

Interestingly, at least for some spectators, the projected image indeed appeared “live” or “real”. One spectator described the projected image as “so realistic”, while another forgot that the projection was not real. For one participant, “[m]any times it appeared that the projection was a live being”. For another, his/her reaction to the initial appearance of the

projected performer was one of incredulity: “[n]ot to believe my eyes. I wasn’t sure if I’d seen what I’d seen until it came back”. In reference to *Mirror*, another spectator asserted: “[i]t felt like a relationship which was real between [the] dancer and projection”. These comments echo McLuhan’s assertion that televised realities are immediate for spectators.

Surreal presence

Not surprisingly, notions of the surreal, and the spiritual emerged in many audience responses. One spectator wrote that the first projected imagery in *Guernica* “[r]eminded [him/her] of subliminal images”. Another stated that he/she “felt a darkness and horror” while another wrote that the images “represented a crazy beast in a state of anger or rage”. In the same scene, another audience member described a silhouette as “tormented”. In *Slow Motion*, one audience member detected “a feeling of surrealness [sic]”, another, an “out of body experience” and another a “subconscious shadow”. These ideas reflect Dixon’s “digital double as a soul or spiritual emanation” (2007, p. 258).

Dominance

In response to the question, “Did you feel the projected image was more powerful than the live performer?” the overwhelming majority of participants – out of 23 respondents, 14 answered “No”, two answered “Yes”, one replied, “At times...” and six did not respond. This clarifies significantly the contention that mediated content did not *dominate* my live performance. Rather, the experiment revealed that mediated images and the live performer were in fact *interdependent*. This finding affirms Chapple & Kattenbelt’s proposition that live/screen performance is “non-hierarchical” (2006, p. 23).

Interaction

One spectator offered a slightly different perspective: “[a]t times [the projected image was more powerful] when it flashed up unexpectedly”. This comment hints at my suspicion at the outset that, as Boenisch states, dominance of a live over a projected performer *shifts* from one moment to the next in a live performance. If dominance shifts, then a *dynamic exchange* must be taking place. Where the live performer walks against a large projection of white noise, one participant wrote about “...the feeling of [the] dancer being lost in or part of the projection”. Another reflected that “[s]he seemed like she was in the white noise” while one response stated “[i]t captured... a sense of a woman being lost”. These figurative commentaries – “being lost”, “part of” and “like she was in” – suggest that the projection seemingly *absorbed* the live performer. This resonates, as noted earlier, with Boenisch’s proposition that a performer “ultimately becomes absorbed in the working of theatrical remediation” (2006, p. 155). As one spectator aptly observed, the live performer and the projection “...were both required to achieve the effect”. This effect was the result of the synergy created by the dynamic integration of the live performer with the projected image.

Heightened presence

Wide-ranging audience responses revealed a proliferation of types of presence evoked by the live and projected performers. There was general consensus that mediated images complemented the live performer and that they did not dominate her. In response to the question regarding *Mirror*, “In this scene, what links did you make between the live performer and the projection?”, various responses emerged. One spectator observed, “one was comforting the other”. Another wrote the “[l]ive performer was afraid of illusion”. Another was unsure stating that she was “curious – but that’s not the right word – wary,

suspicious, sympathetic". These different perspectives could build a case for a rich, multi-layered interrelationship between the live and projected performers. However, I would highlight that these responses indicate strongly that the presence of the live performer was, in effect, as postulated by Giesekam (2007, p.249) and Lavender (2006, p.62), enhanced and, I would add, enriched by the presence of her projected double.

Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined an argument for a synthesis of the live and the screened to create a performance that is more effective than either medium on its own. Results from audience surveys conducted in relation to my performance experiment confirmed current theories in performance studies, specifically in live/screen performance. Mediatized images were not found to be dominant over the live performer, but rather augmented her presence. Further, interaction between the live performer and mediatized images was complementary and integral to effectively conveying my artwork's statement and power. There is scope to explore the fusion of the live with the screened in performance genres other than anti-war art. The application of live/screen interaction is really only limited by the imagination.

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