Rich Video, Poor Video: Intermedial Greek Tragedy

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, I propose a shift in Jerzy Grotwoski's theatrical 'new testament.' I argue not for the elimination of media on stage but instead for Poor Video, which I define as the conscious use of video and media that forces a perspective change for the audience, an intermedial effect, making them aware of the presence of technology in their art, their representation, and their lives. I use examples from my own work as a writer/director to illustrate how Poor Video can be useful in creating the kinds of presence and awareness that Grotowski thought unique to the theatrical event.

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In his early writings, Jerzy Grotowksi was concerned with the dominance of what he called 'Rich Theatre,' which he defined as a commercial and popular form that exploited the latest technologies and gadgetries, often taken from film and television, to misguidedly try to keep the theatre current and contemporary for its audience. His *via negativa,* which extends to his practice with actors breaking their own psychic and physical limitations, thus begins in his own definition of vital theatre, which he calls "poor" and defines in part as indulging all of the things that film and television cannot have: shared space and breath, touch, communion. As he states in 'The Theatre's New Testament:' 'The theatre must recognize its own limitations. If it cannot be richer than the cinema, then let it be poor. If it cannot be as lavish as television, let it be ascetic. If it cannot be a technical attraction, let it renounce all outward technique' (Grotowski, 2002:41).

However, this *via negativa* for technology fails to acknowledge the important perceptual shifts that technology has caused, shifts that are arguably more evident now than when Grotowski was theorizing his own work. As Arnold Aronson says in 'Theatre Technology and the Changing Aesthetic,'
> The relationship of technology to the theatre is neither direct nor obvious. The mere addition of video monitors or remote tilt-and-pan spotlights – the typical sort of nods toward modern technology in the theatre – does not, in and of itself, create new forms of theater. Technology, rather, alters our perceptual mechanisms; it changes the way we see and, more importantly, the way we think. (2005: 46)

Even if, as Grotowski suggests, we ignore the media saturation of television and the Internet, our theatrical choices reflect a world in which these technologies dominate culture and representation. Only by interrogating the ways these media

affect our ways of processing what we observe can theatre artists understand how to most effectively use or ignore them.

Technology has led us to a place where audiences see televisions and the moving pictures they provide as the dominant mode of representation. Philip Auslander's idea of televisual intimacy, which suggests that we recognize in the close-up film shot a deeper intimacy than we do in a live theatre situation, complicates the connections of a live theatre audience to the performance, subverting, in a sense, the idealized notion of theatrical 'presence.' This also creates a disconnect for many theatre-goers, who may watch a piece of naturalistic dialogue or action occur before them live but discount it as not as 'real' as the televised images to which they are accustomed.

This perceived artificiality of theatre, and its heavy irony, complicates the spectator-performer relationship in a live setting. As a writer and director, I use the technology of the mediated image to both exploit this televisual intimacy and to attempt to focus my spectators on their modes of perception. By juxtaposing mediated images, both live and recorded, with live action, I attempt to complicate the 'reality' of the performance event for the spectators to make them consider their own spectatorship, as viewers of an event and, in an important sense, as shapers of that event. This 'intermediality' is not just the use of other media in the theatre, but something that uses media in a live setting to encourage "the multiple semantic potential offered" in such a setting

> by communicating gaps, splits, and fissures, and broadcasting detours, inconsistencies, and contradictions. Therefore, intermedial effects ultimately inflect the attention from the real worlds of the message created by the performance, towards the very reality of mediation, and the performance itself…Thus, intermediality manages to stimulate exceptional, disturbing, and potentially radical observations, rather than merely communicating or transporting them as messages, as media would traditionally do. (Boenisch 2006, 115)

While I cannot claim that each of my attempts has made for exceptional, disturbing, or radical observations, each effort has expressly explored how spectators see and what they expect and desire from their theatrical experiences, especially through the use of video media on stage.

I am proposing a shift in Grotowski's *via negativa*: not to advocate the elimination of media on stage but instead to argue for Poor Video, which I will define as the opposite of Rich Video. Like Grotowski's Rich Theater, Rich Video is the incorporation of new technologies to create a hybrid and meaningless new form based on the idea that it is what an audience will respond to. Poor Video is the rough, the use of video that forces a perspective change for the audience, an intermedial effect, making them aware of the presence of technology in their art, in their representation, and in their lives. Instead of getting rid of it because it cannot create the illusions of film and television, as Grotowski proposes, let us recognize the value of Poor Video in the act of representation, in a world in which

live presence is less and less common and virtual presence dominates our representations, our discourses, and our basic communication.

My current project, a trilogy of works based on the myths of the House of Atreus, uses mediated technology in different ways to generate an awareness of the role of media in representation through its explicit use and regular shift. In the first piece, *iph.then*, a remaking of the myth of Iphigenia amongst the Taurians, the video elements were constantly present – a television on the ground downstage left, and an image, about the same size as the television, projected onto a white drywall column about twelve feet off the ground. The projected image was a live feed of a camera on a tripod focused throughout the piece on the space where the actor playing Iphigenia spends the majority of the play. Thus for the entire performance the audience was able to watch the actor playing Iphigenia on the screen and live. The camera never moved, and the image was thus occasionally, and purposefully, truncated, showing only her body or, at times, only her face as she would approach at certain moments. The only other bodies on the camera are members of the chorus, who during a sequence before the entrance of the king of Tauris sit beside the actor playing Iphigenia and commiserate with her, and then, very briefly, the king himself, when he approaches Iphigenia for a moment before backing down.

Iphigenia alone. *iph.then*. Ontological-Hysteric Incubator. New York, NY. September 2007.
(Photo: Joshua Freiwald)

This still camera was thus primarily a close-up for the audience of Iphigenia, although the breaks I have described kept it from being only that. It was clearly, though, a frame in which Iphigenia was mostly 'kept' until the ending of the play, as she was almost never off the camera until the final scene. The only other live mediated images were of the king, who was followed by the chorus, one of whom was carrying a camera and capturing him in close-up, which the audience saw on the television. This entire sequence, taken from Goethe's re-telling of the story, in which the king woos and proposes to Iphigenia and she then rejects him, was done with the king moving frantically around the darkened space while Iphigenia remained in her corner, both visible mostly on their separate screens. The intent here was to express the separation and alienation of the media forms, while at the same time breaking their boundaries with the occasional live interaction, as when the king gets in Iphigenia's face, or the extended moment when the king, looking at the projected image of Iphigenia, begins to dance, and she, in her own space, dances 'with' him momentarily until breaking off. These moments say something about the action and also about the mediation.

The King woos Iphigenia. *iph.then*. Ontological-Hysteric Incubator. New York, NY. September 2007.
(Photo: Joshua Freiwald)

The television monitor provided a less intermedial presence through most of the piece. In several scenes, it was playing a video of an apartment window in Greece, with beautiful white shutters and greenery, in the soundscape the distant voices of children playing. While in these scenes it was nearly 'scenery,' the switch to the live feed in the scene with the king clearly makes the media itself

evident. In the final scene, the television shows a video tour led by the actor playing Iphigenia of her childhood home, shot with a shaky handheld with a barely audible narration complementing the live text of the final recognition and escape of Iphigenia and her brother Orestes. This created a ghostlike double-reality, as the voice of the live actor playing Iphigenia and the same voice leading us on a tour of an empty suburban house with only traces of a brother and father. And while I don't know the answer to the usual question of which the audience was paying more attention to, I do know that nearly everyone who mentioned the scene to me remarked on the effectiveness of the dual action. I am convinced this was a factor of the competing but complementary media at play, which activated the attention and perceptions of the audience to notice both small details of the recorded tour and their intersections with the culminating actions of the live actors.

These intermedial moments extended beyond the use of video. We also found the question of representing the chorus to be key to our engagement with the Greek tragedy. Our most important task was to find a way of representing a community of 15 women onstage, a community that, in our case, emerged out of technology. The chorus, initially part of the audience, entered the performance entirely directed by text messages on their cell phones. The entrance of the chorus was a surprisingly effective moment, as the cell phones began ringing and the audience, used to looking disapprovingly at these not-so-rare instances, again were made to see the function of the media as the chorus members read text from their phones and came together onto the stage space. The chorus always focused on their phones when speaking text, except for brief moments where they looked at the audience or Iphigenia. Text-messaging was their connection to the world, to their community; a civic community turned into a virtual one. While video is common in live performance these days, it was this interruption, with the everyday sound of cellphones, that triggered the most recognition of the use of media, and the most intermedial moments, as the audience was very focused on the media of the performance itself.

The chorus enters the space, guided by text messages. *iph.then*. Ontological-Hysteric Incubator. New York, NY. September 2007.
(Photo: Joshua Freiwald)

The chorus of *Yellow Electras,* which was produced in July 2008, pushed the idea of a technology-infused community even further by being only virtually present onstage for nearly the entire performance. The piece is a mash-up of Richard Strauss' opera *Electra* and Vassily Kandinsky's performance text *The Yellow Sound.* It investigates the making of a tragic character by constructing a media-saturated montage that allows the audience to experience the story of Electra from multiple vantage points and in often-contradictory constellations. With *Yellow Electras* we turned from words to a more visual aspect of community-building via web and televised media such as youtube and the abundance of webcams with live feeds. Whether it is a traffic cam on the Brooklyn Bridge entrance or a porn cam in someone's shower, these images, and this access to 'real' images, colors our own ideas about our community and our culture. This digitization of what is real around us is also one of the most pervasive ways in which media and technology mold our lives on a day-to-day basis, which we explore through this piece.

The chorus is ever present on the grid, but never present in the space until the very end. The piece begins with the chorus breathing in rhythm to a piece of music, before any actors enter the space, and then speaking text from the chorus of Kandinsky's piece. When the three Electras finally enter, they are also projected above, although we also watch them live. The first Electra who enters, Electra1, speaks text into a laptop, which is projected onto another laptop that is

visible to the audience as well as the projection above. This creates a multiplicity of images with the same action and text, and makes the audience aware of their literal perspectives on the action. Furthermore, the Electras are controlling the technology on stage themselves, so the audience is made aware again and again of the nature and functionality of the technology.

The end of the choral prologue. *Yellow Electras.* Ontological-Hysteric Incubator. New York, NY. July 2008.
(Photo: Eve Hartmann-Crep)

The smaller screen is then used for different video later in the piece, both live and recorded. Images from a production of the opera are played as the actor singing live imitates the physicality of the video, the Electras create images from their gestures, and the Electras use the chorus projection as scenography. Each shift changes the relationship of the image to the media and also the spectator's relationship to the media.

In the final sequence, the smaller projection screen plays video from the Cacoyannis film of *Electra*, showing the opening sequence in which a young Electra watches the killing of Agamemnon. On stage, Electra2 delivers her opening monologue from the Hoffmansthal version of the play, which discusses her hatred of her mother and love for her dead father. This layering of images and media serves to create a landscape of sorts for the spectators to see, and makes them conscious of both the media and their own perceptions as they

determine what they are watching and listening to. This final scene also includes the entrance of a live chorus who begin the scene by lining up in a grid, mirroring their images on the screen. The screen image disappears as the live chorus begins to communicate with each other and Electra2. The piece ends here, with the chorus lifting Electra2 up in the air, enabling her toward her 'live' action of murder, an action which is interrupted by the ending of the piece.

Above: The Electras react to Orestes' entrance.
Below: The chorus and Electra2 after they have disappeared from the screen.
Yellow Electras. Ontological-Hysteric Incubator. New York, NY. July 2008.
(Photos: Eve Hartmann-Crep)

By highlighting the functioning of media, we are not simply expressing the common theme of alienation in an over-mediated society. Instead, we hope to suggest that our own forms of representation, in live theater and elsewhere, have taken on more and more of the elements of those media. This is not a simply negative effect, but is one that we as artists ignore at our own peril: just as the written word subverted the value and efficacy of oral communications, technological media such as video, cell phones, and the now often wireless internet, is changing how we communicate and how we perceive the world, and thus it is affecting our responses to representations, whether we like it or not. The idea of Poor Video might, I hope, make more palatable the entrance of these media into live performance, as it is more and more important to not simply ignore media technology in live theatre but to create work in which 'the usually transparent viewing conventions of observing media are made palpable, and the workings of mediation exposed.' This palpability allows for a clearer expression of what Foucault calls the 'epoch of simultaneity…the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed' (1986: 22).

Peter A. Campbell

Recent productions include *iph.then* and *Yellow Electras* at the Ontological at St. Mark's, and he will premiere a new work, *medea and medea/for medea* at the Incubator Arts Project in New York in February 2011. He has published essays and reviews in *Modern Drama*, *Contemporary Theatre Review* and *Theatre Journal*, among others. His essay on directing Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* is in the recent collection *Sarah Kane in Context* (Manchester UP). He received his MFA in Dramaturgy and PhD in Theatre from Columbia University. He is Associate Professor of Theater History and Criticism at Ramapo College of New Jersey.

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