

Intermedial Performance: Digital Connectivity

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Abstract

It is well recognised that performance practices and their development are intricately linked to media and technology. The intermedial in live performance is both a technological and a performative phenomenon. It points at once to the incorporation of digital processing for inter-media communications within performance; and, correlatively, to performance that occurs within this in-betweenness of mediality. The incorporation of digital technology does not just expand and alter the sensory and temporal aspects of live performance, but it affects process as well as content and form.

Systems of varying complexity are developed to enable inter-communication between different media and elements in real-time. Through feedback loops between different elements, dynamic and non-linear events could be generated real-time. Performance becomes the choreography of a relational system – playing through the field of combinatorics, patterning and the transformational. Translation between media means that the boundaries and distinctions between media becomes blurred or even fused. The implication of this is not only ontological; it affects meaning and signification as well as performativity.

Intermedial performance is a form of multi-medial staging where media are not just layered and juxtaposed with one another; instead modalities and media are being transformed and mediated through the other, producing a fabric of inter-relations where often the other is the transcoding of the one thing in another form. Representation or remediation through transcoding involves a reductive process; this materialist idea of translating quantitative qualitative values and relations from one medium to another transposes our conventional idea of meaning creation.

Intermedial performance presents an expansion of how we construct and think about meaning and performance through the process of mediation and remediation. The exploration of this paper includes a case study of “Quartet” presented by Margie Medlin.

Key Words: Intermediality, live performance, digitality, mediality, mediation, materiality, performativity, transcoding, real-time.

1. Intermediality and Digitality in Live Performance

The use of digital technology in live performance enables the manipulation of models of reality in which performativity and medial communications can be designed and implemented according to the conceptual framework employed. This paper looks specifically at the intermedial effect that occurs in live performance when medial spaces become digitally integrated; where such connectivity and interaction between media affect both the staging and the perception of performance. The intermedial effect will also be examined through the materialist approach within the 'immaterial' processing of the digital system, where everything is treated as informational; as numerical values that can be manipulated and organized through coding. This paper will trace a variety of intermedial effect in live performance and the associated changes or implications on content, performativity, perception and the space of performance.

The focus of intermediality here as a consequence of the incorporation of digitality in performance is not to expound technological determinism, nor to denounce the influence of the socio-cultural – but to isolate the examination to the effect of digitality so as to probe, in a more direct way, the implications it has on the process and content of live performances. In this paper, the term "performance" refers broadly to the whole range of contemporary performance and theatre practices, where conventional distinction between fields such as theatre, dance, music and art may overlap. The intermedial discourse highlights the manner in which "live" performance now takes place within the culture of mediation.

Intermediality in live performance operates and occurs at the in-between or the intersection of media; such that the boundaries of media elements, conventionally considered disparate and separate, are blurred or fused through a state of medial exchange or communication in which one media is transformed or informed by the other. Traditional notion of medial representation ascribed the principle that meaning or expression could be equivalently expressed between one media and another. Following developments in the creative fields and informed by new media and post-structuralist theories, practitioners begin to interfere with media seeming transparent translation and contextualization of meaning and information. In current occurrences, the intermedial is often presented through the open-ness, multiplication and/or plurality of signs and meanings reverberated and played across multiple media as a means to fracture the straightforward working of mediation. Although here the term intermedial refers the effect arising from a variety of communication between media that is driven by the incorporation of digital processing in live performance; however, the occurrence of intermediality encompasses process that can be found between media, art forms and concepts outside of the application of digital technology.

The intermedial discourse had been distinguished into four types by Jens Schröter:

1. synthetic intermediality, which refers to the fusion of different arts and media into new art or media forms.

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2. formal or trans-medial intermediality, based on the assumption that methods and modes of representation (aesthetic conventions) operate in several media.
 3. transformational intermediality, which refers to the representation of one medium through another medium.
 4. ontological intermediality, the reverse of transformational intermediality, where a medium defines its own ontology through relating itself to another medium, and raises the issue that it is not possible to define the specificity of a medium in isolation except through comparison with another.¹

The distinctions within the intermedial discourse are organized around media specificity through the explication of materiality and mediality; because studying the different forms of intermediality involves specifying the expressive structure or mode of articulation specific to the materiality of any media, as well as its communication semiotics and its relations with other media.²

However, digitality alters such clear definition of materiality in at least two ways: First, once media is being expressed numerically, it can be pulled apart and (re)organized in relations not circumscribed by its former origin in analog media. For instance moving images are now organized through motion estimation algorithm, rather than a series of still frames; therefore in spite of the visual preservation the materiality of the images differ profoundly.³ Second, the numerical representation of media implies that the same set of data can be transposed onto another media, as another kind of physical manifestation. From this view, there is a division between information and form. If information is the essence, so to speak, then materiality would become just a fleeting manifestation. Henceforth digitality changes and complicates the intermedial landscape. Digitality, underlined by numerical representation and the singular substance of the binary, alters the seemingly clear borders between media structures and form by making structures indeterminate and in flux.

Accordingly, the boundaries or distinctions between the media (and the associated modalities) can be made blurred through manipulating varying degrees of convergence, re-mediation and/or composite arrangements. Such manipulation of media creates an expanded dimension of relationality in which live performance takes place. Intermediality is incorporated in performance through the development of systems that transcode sets of relationship between media. Transcoding quantitative and qualitative values and relations between media involve a reduction process whereby material occurrence is abstracted through the manner in which information is tapped, organized and understood. In this materialist approach, the conventional ideas of meaning translation, signification and representation are stretched, because meaning and signification depends on defined structures of relations (as that found in natural order). The ontological blurring and indeterminate state of things as a result of the malleability of relations expressed through the informational affect sign-systems and meaning.

2. Reduction as creative potential

The seeming limitation of reduction in materialist translation is also where its potential lies. In each reductive tapping of information there exist multiplicity of Other-ness and leaks. There are other way of understanding and organizing information, and other way of defining materiality. In each case the logic of information extraction and algorithmic coding employed is correlative with the conceptual framework and knowledge model used in the system design. Coding are not indifferent abstraction, it is informed by the design deliberation – the manner in which the kind of information is tapped and utilised, visualized and presented becomes a window to the understanding of the thought processes behind it. While the viewing of events and transformational movement often becomes a primary perceptual process in intermedial performances, in practice meaning is in fact not entirely handled a posteriori.

In some cases practitioners work between linguistic and non-linguistic semiotics. For instance, certain intensity of emotions may be expressed by a corresponding value change etcetera. In which case, the system is coded with the associative presumptions, conditioned ideas and/or knowledge framework. In other strategies, information is not transcoded to produce associative meaning, but as a pure driver of relations and patterns, or as the transformative of the new. The sets of algorithmic coding and rules formulate the in-betweenness of mediality through the real-time processing of translation or transcoding. The running of the codes in real-time during live performance forms relations and patterns which pushes the making of meaning to occur at the receiving end, thus audience have to become active collaborators in the negotiation of meaning or meaningfulness. In the designing of the system for live performance, the selection of wares relates to the kind of information that can be obtained and manipulated and correlatively to the kind of transposition and transcoding of information between media.

The materialist approach provides the possibility of forming rhizomatic relationships or uncommon and unconventional connections between things. Such intermedial performance reorders or shakes up our perceptual processes; instead of looking for meaning and signification, we look rather at relation between multiple forces acting on one another in a reciprocal and transformative manner. We watch for causal relations, patterns, and becomings. The primacy of signs, significations and meanings shift to made way for the observation of materialities of communications, events and intensities in live performance – there is a focus on affect and the phenomenological and a move away from reading.

3. Inter-medial causality and Performativity

The real-time digital generation of the intermedial process in live performance result in a form of causal relationship within the sequence of mediation and remediation. This dimension of relationality between media elements differs in character from machinic extensions where parts join to form an extended body. Here there is a cross-bordering of different medial realities and spaces in which performance takes place. When embodied interaction is involved between the performer and the network of media – the actions or body of the performer extends and enters the circuits of medial

causality – implicating performativity. The mediality of the performer and the mediality of other media elements form causal (inter)connections, such that there are literal expansions and overlap of mediation spheres.

The embodied interaction creates an ontological blurring of actions – in which the performer’s actions have no one definitive meaning or resultant end. It both expands and abstracts the body through the framing of interaction – mediating the performer’s gestures and movements. Embodied interaction with the system also demands the performers to act in a medial environment in which our conditioned expectation of causality or causal relation is stretched and altered. Our ideas and concept are formed from our routine experience of causal relationships or causal routes. The rhizomatic effect of producing uncommon relations suspends conventional causal anticipation.⁴ Through digital processing, intermedial performance implicates the processes of mediality and it forms a responsive environment that is prescribed with its own spatial, temporal and causal rules. The designing and implementation of such causal relations becomes a critical process of the creation of structure and content of the performance.

The implementation of system is only one stage in the production of the intermedial performance. The selection of media elements followed by the configuration of the digital media environment generates a field of potentiality, from which the creation and actualization of the performance piece can take place. Through the different layers of authorships, practitioners have to creatively exploit the possibilities within the implemented system. The system could in term produce unexpected combinations and occurrence from which the practitioners can tap into.

4. Case Study

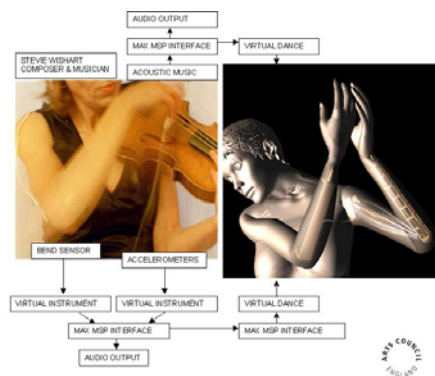


Figure 1
Image from www.quartetproject.net



Figure 2
Image from www.quartetproject.net

QUARTET PRESENTED BY MARGIE MEDLIN⁵

Quartet is a live performance performed by a dancer, a musician, a virtual dancer projected onto a screen and a 3-axial robotic arm that is affixed with a camera at the top and attached to the ground at the bottom. Communication lines are set up through the translation of information

between the human and virtual/robotic performers. First, data of the relationship of movement within a dancer's skeletal frame is captured. This data from the dancer translate and drive the 3-axial movement of the robot-camera. This set of data is also being used to translate to the body of the virtual dancer projected onto a screen. A second set of data is captured from the gesture of the musician arm which is used to translate into the arms movement of the virtual dancer.

During performance these four entities form different sets of combinatorial relationships. The system is also designed to draw information from the body to produce movement other than, yet in relation to, itself. The data set captured are processed with different translation algorithms from which variability of movement can be derived. Collectively the movement of the bodies translate into a multiplication of forms and possibilities for choreography. The perception of relationship is critical to the set-up and the resultant choreography. In *Quartet* different translation scheme are implementing such that the other (virtual/robotic dancer) is programmed to create an extra dimension of choreographic or movement difference through a combination of information from the dancer and the musician. Choreographic difference and otherness is generated through algorithmic coding. From the Livingness of the body to the liveliness of the virtual body, exploiting the alterity and "unexpectedness" of movement and choreography within the possibility of combinations inherent within the transcoding; and working through the potentiality within the system. On one hand the transcoding form inter-actions between the virtual and the actual bodies, on the other hand, it present the leaks within any presentness; the virtuality within the potentiality of the actual. This is reverberated in the use of the moving live camera, which shows the dancer from another perceptual framing, in another possibility of relation.

The intermedial relations between them create an ontological tension between the connected and the disconnected; between the same and the different; and between augmentation and the individuation of parts. Different qualities of intermediality arise from the heterogeneous connections within the system:

First, the dance forms a new relationship between music and the body. The gestures of the violinist are captured to operate a set of virtual instruments, in addition to the acoustic instrument. The music produced in turn generates the gestural movement of the virtual dancer through algorithmic transcoding. This manner of relating music to dance corporealizes music by highlighting the material link music has with the human gestures and the act of playing a (virtual or actual) musical instrument. In conventional setting, the musician's gesture is a consequence of the embodied interaction with the external instrument and the intentionality of playing music; whilst the dancer's gesture and movement is the result of a response to stimulation from without filtered through experience (and subjectivity). But here the musician gesture is re-coded (and re-embodied), to response to the parameters of the sensors on the body – picking up the nuances in movement. The multiplication of form is further driven by information feed from the musician to the virtual dancer. This multiple translations present a derailing of the mediation process by altering

their conventional route. It highlights the intermediality between dance and music, opening up and dissolving the ontology of music and the body. The operation of creating “another kind” of relations between dance and music also raises the veil that there are no autonomous phenomena (or substance). In this sonic intermediality, sound is seen and dance is to be heard.

Second, with the varying degrees of abstraction or forms of remediation of the dancer’s corporeal form, the translated forms (of the virtual dancer and the robot camera) not only disrupt representation of the body - it creates a to and fro mirroring with the body between the three entities, dispersing it as a whole/unified entity. On one hand, the translation act as a hypermediacy of the body, dispersing it in various forms; on the other hand, the otherness of the translation acts as the trigger for difference – we thus see and relate the body in comparison and variation with the other. This occurs in two ways: in terms of the choreographic movement and in terms of visual and existential difference between the robot, the virtual dancer and the human body.

As figural, the robot’s reference to the humanoid axes and the virtual dancer’s simulation of the human body disrupts representation rather than approaches it; it does not represent the human body and set it in stone but they act as difference to the figure (the human body), such that they are involved in the ‘becoming’ of the figure by throwing it into a zone of indiscernibility or undecidability between states of being. The figural is a deterritorialisation of the figure and function as a middle way; such framing of the figure operates as a point of departure for deterritorialisation, for a moving beyond the figure.⁶

In movement, this ontological blurring translates to the shifting of the centre; the body disrupted groundedness or centredness. Through embodied interaction, the extension of the body is also the increase in its limitation – body moving in accordance with, and in control, of an outside body/entity; body moving to affect a distance cause. Phenomenologically this engages the reversibility and extension of the body proprioception; the body relating to the outside through the flipping of consciousness. Causal actions and movement between the three also forms an assemblage in which the different elements can be heterogeneously combined to form different ‘co-functioning’ unities. During performance they slip into different pairings and trios. The corporeal intermediality is performed at this hovering of the virtual other as an extension of the body and as an ontological difference. Here corporeal identity is provisional much like the reconstituted virtual body, which is without a single coherent identity but is composed of integrated information from different sources.

Third, the camera view and the virtual space both operate as spatial folds. The movement of body is also the creation of spatiality. The moving view point of the camera films the movement of the dancer from without, while at the same time making new choreography with its own movement and moving frame of the dancer; and in the process flipping the audience’s and dancer’s point of views. In this manner of being amid media space, the human dancer is performing, simultaneously, for the filmic, as well as the virtual space – such that there is a spatial intermediality and a dialogue between the mixes of realities.

The choreography of the various elements is set up to achieve a sort of threaded, combinant movement, contiguous through the different realities presented on stage: body moving other bodies, moving other point of views, existing in a state of perpetual flux and pluralism. Space, movement and bodies cannot be, and is treated as not being, separated entities but existing as a resultant whole in its heterogeneous manifestations; it is abet a whole that leaks and re-associate. In production terms, the employment of 3d motion capture, as opposed to 2d video capture, enables this play of multiplicity of form, folding of space and moving point of view. The real-time embodied performative interaction, allows dancer to dance not so much from the memory (of recorded images) but to dance in response to the camera in real-time.

Collectively, like the Deleuzian notion of body without organs: the performance has no centre but slips into different material and spatial connecting and extending possibilities. The body is presented in-between and through multiple forms of remediation; fracturing its identity.

5. From the Intermedial to models of reality

The intermedial effect alters according to the variability of system implementation. The specific design solution virtualizes a certain possible events. The interactivity frames the actions that takes place within the system and determines the route and consequence of each occurrence. In this responsive space the character of form (or anti-form), space and time emerged through the way information is organized and mediated. Perception of ontology and materialities of media and performers are shaped by this (inter)communications and dimension of relationality during performance. Phenomenological perception of the intermedial performance operates through the inter-subjectivity and interplay of the different and the same. All presences in the performance space (“real”, mediatized or mediated) contribute and affect the experience of one another and the performance in collective. On the semiotic level, the intermedial effect crosscuts straightforward representation by interfering and fracturing media coherency and causality – such that there are no origin, but all elements (the media and performers) operate in an referential loop, and in this process opening up meaning and activating observations of presence and materiality.

More often than not, the design of an intermedial system is based on the threshold of our corporeal functioning and our conditioned ways of being. Digital intermediality offers the opportunity to test our limits – how far can we go with augmentation before we stretch the borders of intelligibility and actions that can be meaningful to us.

Notes

¹ These distinctions of the intermedial discourse formulated by Jens Schröter in his essay ‘Intermedialität’ is cited in *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, F.Chapple & C. Kattenbelt (eds), Rodopi, New York, 2006, p. 13

² I. O. Rajewsky, 'Intermediality, Intertextuality, and Remediation: A Literary Perspective on Intermediality', *Intermédialités*, No. 6 Automne, 2005, p. 46

³ A. Mackenzie, 'Codes' in *Software Studies*, M. Fuller (eds), MIT Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 54

⁴ The 'rhizomatic' is a term used by Deleuze and Guattari to describe connections that are random and decentred as opposed to traditional orders that are hierarchical and directional.

⁵ I attended a showing of 'Quartet' at Dancehouse, Melbourne, Australia in October 2008.

⁶ Quoted from Simon O'Sullivan's explanation of how the figural disrupt representation in his book: S. O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2006, p. 59

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www.quartetproject.net

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