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PROJECTING PRESENCE: A MEDIA DESIGN MANIFESTO

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By

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Table of Contents

List of Tables and Figures

Abstract

"Projecting Presence: A Media Design Manifesto"

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The integration of digital media into traditional theatre is at once inevitable and impossible. The convergence of film and theatre is quickly becoming commonplace in live performance; vast new possibilities are opened up by extending – through increasingly cost-efficient projections – nearly every element on stage, including scenery, costumes, props, and even performers. However, I hypothesize that the projected and performed aspects of digitally-integrated theatre are structurally incompatible. When isolated, both mediums operate similarly, using signs to represent reality without ever asserting itself as real. However, the presence of projected media in live theatre appears not as referential, like the actor's representation of a character, but as self-reflexive, like the director's statement, read before curtain is given the chance to rise. While this opens limitless possibilities of what can be delivered to the audience's perception, its reliance on photorealism can bypass the dramatic process; projected media is both gilded and gelded by the *real*. This manifesto will pull from prior research in the fields of theatre, film, and projected media, and synthesize these arguments to investigate the divergence of film and theatre on the basis of structural differences, including semiosis, deixis, and liminality. However, through the exploration of aesthetic strategies used in seven personal case studies, this manifesto will also propose five tenets of media design aimed at the successful integration of the projected and the performed in live theatre.

Section 1: The Incompatibility of Semiosis, Deixis, and Liminality between Projected Media and Live Theatre

"the one inalienable and arcane truth of theatre, that the living person performing there may die in front of your eyes, and is in fact doing so"

– Herbert Blau, *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre*

Introduction

From my perch on the catwalk, I had to stifle an audible sigh of relief as the opening projection for *A Forgotten Future*, a series of three short Ray Bradbury plays, illuminated the immersive[1] white set. Having been ejected from our previous venue due to a vermin infestation, we had only four days to remount the media spectacle, using four projectors and over eighteen hundred layers of video. The first act progressed without incident, save for a few 'hangs' during which the usually seamlessly animated video environments jittered to a brief pause before continuing. I felt as though my heartbeat were in sync with the playback; if the animations paused, so did it. However, something truly remarkable happened during the second act, which I – as both director and media designer[2] – failed to anticipate. The character of the psychologist from "The Veldt" entered the virtual reality nursery, currently displaying via projections an immersive night scene of African grassland, with

[1] In media design, "immersive" projections as those which appear to surround the actor (*user*), as
[2] Occupation title varies depending on company; as of 2007 the United Scenic Artists' Local 829 names "Projection Designers" to refer to all digital designers, regardless of the technology used.

ominous music beginning to play. He removed his flashlight, gestured at flicking the switch, and pointed. An audience member screamed. Where the beam of light should have been, instead a scene of horror was revealed in the space. As the psychologist swung the flashlight about, so did the revealed scene, illuminated through his theatrical gesture. He then ran from the room to report to the parents the macabre fantasies in which their children have been reveling. Though the significance of that moment was lost on me at the time, I had stumbled upon a brief moment of symbiosis between live performance and the mechanically reproduced image.[3] Overcoming a fundamental obstacle to the coexistence of media on stage, in that brief moment the *projected* was united with the *performed* through its "mutability and subservience to the gesture and will of the actor," a strategy which would later become the one of this manifesto's five tenets of design.

Since its explosion into the forefront of popular culture at the turn of the century, film has presented a threat, or at least the impetus for change, to more traditional forms. This crisis, in Walter Benjamin's eyes, reflected "the desire of contemporary masses to bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly," even if that meant forgoing the 'aura' or indescribable feeling of presence. His words in "The Work of Art in the Mechanical Age of Reproduction," which would define film studies, conceded to theatre that "even the most perfect (cinematic) reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space" (2). But truly, theatre is not alone in this state of chaos. The forms of film, television, and video

[3] <https://vimeo.com/murakami/aforgottenfuture2> -- 00:24:00

games as we know them are all in a state of flux, buffeted at the intersection of technology, politics, and aesthetics. Specifically with the emerging field of professional media design (or *projection design*) in naturalistic theatre, the stage has become a liminal space of uncertain boundaries between the arts; no longer the sole domain of the performance or installation artist, projections have gone 'mainstream.' Traditional practitioners like Stephen Kaplin mourn the loss of traditional forms at the forefront of culture, instead relegated as museum pieces, "preserved for their historic, spiritual or folkloric value, like endangered species on a game preserve" (Tillis 39). In *Staging the Screen*, Greg Giesekam opens his expansive historical survey of projections in theatre with contemporary critic Mark Lawson's sharp condemnation. Giesekam describes his conclusions as "apocalyptic" and "melodramatic, doom laden." Lawson writes: "recent British theatre has suggested not so much a co-existence between stage and screen as the old red velvet theatre curtains being flapped in surrender" (1). For Kaplin, Lawson, and similarly-minded theatre practitioners, the influx of projections and digital elements into the traditional space of the stage appear as the machinations of some sinister Hollywood cabal, with a Trojan horse measured not by the number of hoplites inside, but lumens ready to spew forth.

Working as I do as a media designer for opera, a medium etched from tradition, I have witnessed these attitudes first hand. Yet I have also encountered the opposite extreme, adamantly shoehorning media into every production, fetizishing apparatus over application. Much of this fervor stems from the increasing

affordability of projections as compared with practical (that is to say, 'physical') effects, but more often I have found there to be a fundamental misunderstanding of how media on stage functions. If the program is to be of any indication, the diversity (read: uncertainty) of my billing as *media designer*, *projection designer, video artist*, *projectionist*, *theatrical filmmaker*, etc. underscores an absence of formal definitions and understanding for the artistic medium in which I work. To give an example, during an initial production meeting for an opera set in a future dystopian wasteland, I was asked to project a sandstorm environment for the performers. When I offered something more abstract, *signifying* the phenomenon, I was told that an *actual* sandstorm was needed. This was an unreasonable request; the inside of a sandstorm is just a blur of darkness. Chris Salter, in his ambitious exploration of technologic influences in performance, asks the following questions in *Entangled*:

> The position of the human performer in relation to [the screen] is increasingly questioned. Who performs and where should our media saturated and accelerated gaze fall? Does the performer gradually become dematerialized by the electronic fog of our increasingly realistic digital image, having become a corpus delicti for photos and pixels, or have the architectronics of the projected image sufficiently overwhelmed the human body so that the screen itself now becomes the new site and body of performance? (164)

Salter does not answer these questions, allowing them to sit uncomfortably with the reader as he leads us through staged technologies in the twentieth and twenty-first

centuries, but they serve to highlight the problems facing the media designer: our work possesses the potential to be a *destructive* and an *incompatible* presence when placed within the semiotic matrix of live performance on stage. As Giesekam concludes, "the difference with intermedial theatre is that it draws attention to the mediation involved in performance" (250).

The fear expressed by Kaplin and Lawson, and this grim question issued by Salter, may be – in part – a reaction against the *modus operandi* of some designers and directors to view media not as an integrated element of design, but some sort of preternatural device to deliver information directly to the audience, bypassing the basic apparatus of scenography. For Allen Ginsberg's 1972 production *Kaddish*, Salter identified the project as "unstagable," yet documents its forced manifestation on stage though the extra-dramatic application of projected media (128). In a Brechtian sense, this is desirable when used to defamiliarize the audience, but such a view is problematic when approached naturalistically. Giesekam, in his conclusion, identifies critics who argue that "interactions with film and technology become merely a display of tricks, detracting from the actor's opportunities to create full-blown character with whom the audience may feel an emotional bond" (248). But for Giesekam, this is a function of the general incompatibility of intermedial performances[4] in the *naturalistic* theatre, arguing that "such critics would not expect to judge a physical theatre piece or a pantomime by the standards of naturalism, so why should they judge intermedial pieces so?" (249). Salter takes this even further,

[4] Performances which include multiple media in their creation, including digital art, projections, telematics, and film.

identifying a binarism established in the New York – based collective The Wooster Group between "technological beings for the sake of technology" and "Brechtian estrangement devices" (136). Does this mean that media *cannot* function naturalistically? Is even this oppositional binary between theatre and film legitimate, or a fallacy appealing to traditional boundaries of media? Philip Auslander, in *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, writes, "my own answer to this question is unequivocal: at the level of cultural economy,[5] theatre and the mass media are rivals" (1).

While I would like nothing better than to simply assuage these fears, I must affirm them in the course of identifying the remedial actions available to the media designer. I hypothesize that the projected and performed aspects of digitally-integrated naturalistic theatre are – when used traditionally – semiotically incompatible. Both media possess signs which are *resistant* to mutability by signifiers outside of its own medium; the physical and metaphoric framing devices of the stage and screen shield the signs contained within. While scholars such as Artemij Keidan, documenting semiosis across different world languages,[6] and Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, identifying asymmetry between poetry and music,[7] note media whose semiotic incompatibility is absolute, my thesis will instead lead toward a semiotic

[5] Auslander uses the phrase "'cultural economy' to describe a realm of inquiry that includes both the real economic relations among cultural forms, and the relative degrees of cultural prestige and power enjoyed by different forms" (1).
[6] See "Translation Techniques in the Asiatic Cultures" in *The Study of Asia: between Antiquity and Modernity* by Artemij Keidan.
[7] See *Allegory Revisited* by Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka.

reticence as a result of the deictic non-permeability of their frames.[8] Defined by their inability to be understood without spatial or temporal contextual information, such as *here*, *there*, *now*, *before*, and *later*, the restoration of deixis between media is paramount to successful designs. When located within their own frames, both stage and screen are vulnerable to the critical eye of the audience. They represent reality without ever purporting to be truly 'real' (the definition of which will be explored shortly). However, upon the transposition of the projected image to the stage, something extra-dramatic transpires. Empowered with a theatrical suspension of disbelief, the digital does not appear referential, but reflexive as *the thing itself*, sequestered away from the deictic center of the actor by the audience's charged awareness of the *potential* for the screen to show us whatever we desire; a chair on stage could be a gold throne or a porcelain one depending on the performance of the actor, but a projected chair can only be that exact chair, its existence is immune to alteration of *what it is*.[9] Though the semiotic matrix of performance can still impact *how we perceive* it (its meaning), it cannot change *what we know it to be* (its being).

I will analyze the point of semiotic intersection between film and theatre in the context of scenographic projections in naturalistic theatre and, through seven case studies selected among my professional and academic designs, identify five tenets of media design to engender the mechanically reproduced image to function as a traditional theatrical sign, cooperating in the matrix of performance that defines live theatre. This analysis will be contextualized through structuralist discourses,

[8] For an example of 'non-permeability,' see in this paper, "A Hole In Space, 47.
[9] Robert Nunn provides a similar example in "Flickering Lights and Declaiming Bodies."

including dramatic semiotics, deixis, and liminality, but will also pull from film theory as it bridges the gap between the two media. Note that my scope of "naturalistic theatre" this does not necessarily mean "naturalistic projections." As discussed my second section, abstract projections in an otherwise naturalistic setting can be very effective. Though its self-declaration as a 'manifesto' is sincere – it demands a change in the status quo of the indulgent abuse of technology for the sake of spectacle or ease – its intent is *not* to valorize or to condemn the use of projected media on stage. Rather, it serves to caution against the inherently conflicting and destructive mechanical apparatus intermedia and provide solutions employed in my own work.

The structure of this manifesto is split into two main sections, both prefaced by the five tenets which have guided my work. In the first section, which establishes the core problems facing projections on stage, I open with a brief discussion on 'reality' as it is relevant to the media designer; I provide the structural context for media design, analyzing how semiosis and deixis function differently in the postmodern binary of the projected and the performed, noting in particular the debate between intermedial scholars Christian Metz and Pepita Hesselberth; and I conclude with a comparison of liminal processes between cinema and theatre. In the second section section, I build upon the incompatibilities established in section one between the *live* and the *mechanically reproduced* to establish five tenets of media design. These tenets will then be explored through the specific strategies employed in seven case studies, hoping to provide solutions to the problems of live/mechanical integration expressed by Salter, Giesekam, and Nunn.

In scope, this work is not focused on film theory itself, nor the use of telematic presence on stage – a concept well explored by scholars such as Philip Auslander, Matthew Causey, Jane Feuer, and Edward Warburton.[10] This manifesto is also confined to the realm of naturalistic theatre, using the traditional platform of the narrative text-based play to better highlight the addition of the projected image. It also assumes a reader with a working understanding of dramatic theory and the theatrical design process. Of specific note is that this thesis is not concerned with the apparatus of projections, but of their application in the theatrical space. With the inexorable progression of technology, any analysis of the apparatus itself would be tied, like Benjamin's 'aura', to its presence in time. Instead, we as designers of the intermedial arts should assume that which will very quickly be the case: technology provides us a playground of infinite possibility. The question is not 'what can we do with media,' but 'what should we do,' and how?

In attempting answering this question in my own work, I have adopted the following five tenets of media design. This first section, on theory, will discuss their necessity as a means of reconciling incompatibilities between stage and screen. The second section, on strategies, will discuss these tenets in the context of my work and the process of their formulation and execution.

The projected image must:

I. Be incomplete in its representation of elements outside the drama

II. Be made unintelligible without its theatrical context

[10] See *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* by Philip Auslander.

III. Possess no edge, or otherwise be framed by traditional theatrical elements

IV. Conform to a unified aesthetic mirroring – or justified by – character

V. Be mutable and subservient to the gesture and will of the actor

On 'Reality'

Though the scope of this manifesto is not on 'reality' – that is to say the factuality of things which actuality exists in the world – I must touch on it briefly here. In Herbert Blau's essay "Virtually Yours," he identifies a vexing trait about intermedial presence. He writes (emphasis his): "with all the promise of digitality, there is also something poignant: *the subtext of the virtual is that it really wants to be real*" (250). To contextualize our discussion on *presence* in the space between film and theatre, let us speculate on the highest ideal for an actor in her medium. In film, the fundamental deficiency, as Benjamin would put it, is that "the presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity." According to Benjamin, and echoed by contemporary scholars such as Matthew Causey and Robert Nunn, film isn't real – that is to say really there, corporeal, or *present*. Yet others hold the opposite to be true, that "theatre deploys artifice while cinema is committed to reality, indeed an ultimate physical reality which is 'redeemed,' to use Siegfried Kracauer's striking word, by the camera" (Sontag 293). Susan Sontag takes her essential duality even further to assert that film can so accurately capture a theatrical event, that in

viewing that film, "one is seeing the event filmed" (292). Thus once immortalized by the camera, the reproduction becomes as *real*, or even *more real* than the ephemeral source. From a theatrician's perspective, we balk at this notion. Nothing about our interaction with cinema has substance. The only substantively *real* part of film is the celluloid, and even that is sequestered far out of sight behind us; only the shadow of it is revealed on the silver screen. The film actor's goal, at its most reductive, is to perform in such a way as to convince the viewer that she is *really there*, when it is clear otherwise. As Robert Nunn would say, "film is absence pretending to be presence," (6) but what of the stage? The live actor need not worry about convincing an audience she is *really there*, such goes without saying. The limitation of live theatre is, in fact, the reverse. When Hamlet enters the stage, there are two bodies present, that of Hamlet and that of the actor playing him, each vying for attention. The goal of the actor is therefore not to appear (as one does when 'breaking' character), but to disappear. Thus conversely, "theatre is presence pretending to be absence" (Nunn). This makes sense for performance aesthetics, as theatrical acting is so much 'bigger' than in film. For a film actor, they are building off of an absence, a lack, and so any emotion cuts clearly through the void, whereas theatrical performers must shout to overcome the static noise of their physical being.[11]

In writing this manifesto, one challenge I encountered was this frustrating inability to define "real" – it was late into the process of writing about the digital with the corporeal, the projected and the performed, when I realized the question that

[11] See in this paper the example of Hook & Mr. Darling, 16.

concerns me is not if it is *real*, in absolute logical knowledge or truth. After all, fiction and falsehoods are what as theatrical designers use to reveal essential truths. This is why drama is venerated above all other works in *Poetics*. In the search for truth, writes Aristotle, poetry "is a more philosophical and *higher thing* than history: for Poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular" (IX:3). In its goal of providing strategies to reconciling to media which, by their own definitions are *more real* than the other, an ascription of value to the veracity of their claims is wholly irrelevant. What part of an artist's duty lies in *real* truth? We don't paint the backs of flats – all that matters is the reality we *present* to the audience. What this thesis *is* concerned about is this "higher thing;" the verisimilitude of the *really real* – that which, regardless of corporeality, authenticity, or liveness, phenomenologically[12] feels to the viewer *present* and integrated. It participates in the immediate anxious empathy of live theatre.

The Semiotics of Presence

To that end, both media share in the semiotic process of sign-creation, which is essential to the manufacturing of this *feeling of presence*, but it is in their conflicting means of creation that is of interest to the media designer. In Ferdinand Saussure's original definition of semiotic theory, signs – including all elements of communication, spoken and visual – are broken into two inseparable parts: the signified (the ineffable concept) and the signifier (the word or image which evokes

[12] Study structures, objects, and phenomena from the perspective of first-person consciousness.

the signified). Both are combined as two sides of a single "thought moment" (67). The process of a theatrical event is a matrix of these signs that are manipulated through visual iconography, gesture, and language. By this definition, all stimuli within the stage are subsumed into the duality of *signifier* and *signified*, including those which contradict and juxtapose. Yet the relationship between the projected and the performed is not automatically all-encompassing, instead eschewing carelessly offered elements of design. In *Semiosis in the Postmodern Age*, criticizing Saussure's "endemic binarism, its slaughtering of process, its myth of presence and logocentrism" (126), Floyd Merrell points to Charles Sanders Peirce's "triad of signs" in an attempt to reconcile classical semiotic theory with the *incompatibilities* experienced in the mashed-up aesthetics of the postmodern age. Not a sign necessarily created by all juxtaposing signifier/signified pairs, Pierce's triad:

> Is never immediately present to the mind but mediated, the *interpretant's* role being that of bringing *the semiotically real object*

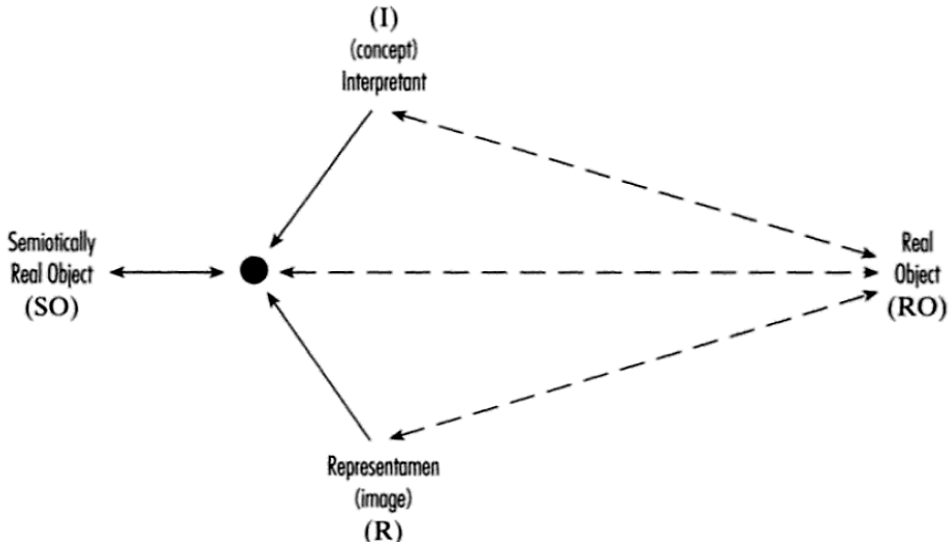

Fig. 1 - Merrell's extrapolated diagram of C.S. Pierce's Semiotic Triad

> and *image* together in such a way that relations depicted by the sign triad are two way…The 'real' object, on the other hand, is not a full-fledged partner in the semiotic dance but teasingly leads an open hand here, does a do-si-do there, and sashays a bit somewhere else, remaining all the while in its totality beyond the semiotic considerations of a finite community of sign users. (127)

Here lies the crux of the problem for which my thesis provides strategies.[13] According to Merrell, when signs "belonging to distinct and nonintersecting domains" (as in film/theater) "are conjoined through mediation by the interpretant… both a sign and its complement cannot be contextually realized in unison. This nonsimultaneity of sign processing necessarily renders distinct domains at certain points contextually incompatible" (182), as it is with the projected/performed binary on stage. Merrell dismisses the idea of "simultaneous coexistence of incompatible signs within incompatible contexts" due to its linearity. In the postmodern setting, in which the dominion of the media designer almost always falls,[14] Merrell reminds us that the creation of signs is not purely a dualistic construction (as Saussure would propose), with "signs strung out along a sequential chain ruled by linear, transitive relations. Semiological generativity is not, however, the way of semiosis, which is by its very nature nonlinear" (182). He clarifies using the following example. The flames of an ignited NaCl solution (the *semiotically real object*) will produce an *image* of a yellow-orange hue, which will depend on the *interpretant's* real-world understanding

[13] See in this paper, "Strategies for restoring deixis," 30.
[14] See Giesekam, *Staging the Screen*, 250.

of scientific theory to create the sign-image. "Of course, this entire process is not directly related to [*the real object*]…*RO* simply *is what it is*, in spite of our perception and conception of it" (128). Merrell posits that the problem of semiotic incompatibility occurs when, instead of a modern chemistry student, a phlogistonist[15] were to view the ignition, who would view the sign as "a veritable miracle" (128). It is the addition of the Pierce's *interpretant* to the creation of triadic signs that allows for semiotic incompatibility in Saussure's original work.

Building on Merrell's theories, we return to the problem of reconciling semiotically incompatible – or otherwise, *semiotically reticent* – media.[16] Keir Elam views semiosis as a necessary and constant function of performance, writing that "the stage radically transforms all objects and bodies defined within it, bestowing upon them an overriding signifying power which they lack – or which at least is less evident – in their normal social function" (6). This observation separates the unique construction of signs in theatre from the omnipresent semiosis of everyday life. Indeed, nothing on stage is intended to be itself. Actors on stage rarely play themselves, but a character; props are understood not to be a factual relic, but a facsimile; and nobody mistakes a stage for an actual place, but the *signifier* of one. Elam takes this phenomenon further: "objects on stage don't stand in for the object it represents directly, but for a 'class of objects'" (7), enlisting audience's imagination to refine it from the universal to the specific.

[15] Obsolete scientific theory based on the four classical elements.
[16] My rationale here for emphasizing "reticence" over "incompatibility" lies in my belief that their opposition is reconcilable through innovative intermedial designs.

More to the point, while Elam identifies only between theatre and life that lacks direct equivalence in semiotics, this is true across all media. My assertion that the projected and performed are – at their worst – semiotically incompatible hinges on this point; while semiosis is all around us, it is polarized by modes of creation within different media to the point where signs no longer communicate across intermedial boundaries. Consider Christian Metz' theory on the creation of signs in the cinema, in which he asserts:

> The basic characteristic of this kind of discourse, and the very principle of its effectiveness as discourse is precisely that it obliterates all traces of the enunciation, and masquerades as story. The tense of story is of course always the "past definite"; similarly, the narrative plentitude and transparency of this kind of film is based on a refusal to admit that anything is lacking, or that anything has to be sought for; it shows us only the other side of the lack. (91)

This is the antithesis of Elam's views of stage semiotics as radically transformative; the cinematic sign neither needs nor allows for completion. Rather than cooperate in a dialectic, the cinematic sign is, in Metz' view, absolute and resistant to the process of mutability through performance which defines theatre. The purpose of Tenet I is in part to combat this "refusal to admit anything is lacking," designing projected media which is "incomplete in its representation of elements outside the drama." This will be investigated more in the following section on deixis.

Another key element of the sign is that it is arbitrary, "in that it actually has no *natural* connection with the signified" (Sassure 69). Would one argue that the word 'water' is more accurate a signifier for concept it signifies than 'agua', or 'eau', or even 水? An obligatory example is the sign of modern currency. The value of a $5 bill can be measured, but only in relation to itself; there is no *natural* definition of how much $5 is worth to an individual, or for a physical item. More important to the definition of the sign is its context, without which a sign is meaningless. An example of this, given by Paul Fry, is the sign of the *red light*. When in the context of an additional green and yellow light, perhaps above a road, the red light clearly signifies *stop*, but when placed above a door in a *red light district* it means quite the opposite, and when placed upon the nose of a reindeer, we know to expect that animal to fly. As such, considering the world of the play as a semiotic matrix, within which signs of performance, scenography, and language function, the dramatic context of these signs are entirely necessary for their meaning. This can be witnessed in entering old prop storage. Outside the contexts of performance (the space, lighting, and gesture), most theatrical props appear absurd and unintelligible. An attempt at purposeful unintelligibility forms the foundation for Tenet II.

Most importantly from Saussure's original work, however, is the concept of polyfunctionality, which transcends mere mobility or dynamism. For Erika Fischer-Lichte, the essential being of theatrical signs "involves their *polyfunctionality*. For a theatrical sign can substitute for other theatrical signs only to the extent that it can take on differing semiotic functions: a chair can, for example, be utilized to signify

not only a chair, but also a mountain, a staircase, a sword…" (131). These signs not only have the potential to change, but are at all times *charged by change* – in a perpetual state of becoming. This extends to actors as well. In the traditional casting of *Peter Pan*, the father, Mr. Darling, is double cast with Captain Hook, imbuing both characters with the qualities of the other. The cause of this is even more fundamental to theatrical signs than their mobility between such signifiers: *theatrical signs are always still the thing itself*. No costume change can fully transform the actor who is forced to straddle this threshold between self and character, and it is the actor's totem-like vessel within which both Hook and Mr. Darling remain charged. According to Pierce's semiotic triad, the *semiotically real object (SO)* is the holistic performance, determined by the juxtaposing *images (R)* of Hook, Mr. Darling, *and* the image of the actor's body, itself semiotically separate from the actor *himself*, the *real object (RO)*. According to Nunn, "the object on stage is, at bottom, what it is. It has no 'already*ness*' as a sign." In this way, he defines already*ness* as Merrell would define the *Real Object (RO)*, the lack of which points instead to *Semiotically Real Object (SO)*, a sign *not bound by its material existence*. Contrast this with film, in which the signs presented *are* bound as such. That is not to say that film does not undergo semiosis, but a more significant causal link exists from the *Real Object* to the *Semiotically Real Object* within Merrell's extrapolated triad. As Susan Sontag writes, "we believe that the camera cannot lie. As the film actor and his role are identical, so the image cannot be dissociated from what is imaged. Cinema, therefore, gives us what is experienced *as* the truth of life" (296). When the location of the Oval Office

is established in film and television, the recognizable Resolute desk is projected on screen; once recognized, it cannot denote anything but that. On stage however, a desk (despite any degree of detail in its construction) can change depending on who is sitting behind it. It is, in fact, the character *(image)* who defines what kind of desk it is, it becomes the Resolute desk *only when* an actor playing the President sits behind it. Later, if a secretary should sit there, the sign of the desk will change, subservient to the actor. In theatre, the actor defines the space; in film, the space is defined by the designer. Looking ahead towards this manifesto's tenets of media design, breaking this duality is the purpose of Tenet V, making the image "mutable and subservient to the gesture and will of the actor."

The Deictic Sign and Projected Media

I continue on in the structuralist discourse to the use of deixis to combat the problematically monofunctional signs of mechanically reproduced images. I define "monofunctional" here as the state of being semiotically immutable by forces beyond its own frame, lacking "polyfunctionality" as defined by Erika Fischer-Lichte. While as discussed above, all signs require context to be understood, deictic signs are even more reliant; *here*, *there*, *now*, and *before* possess no meaning without a deictic center for context. Traditional signs can be thought of as a subtractive process of understanding; without context, signs still possess meaning (indeed, an incomprehensible abundance of meanings), which are then negated through context to isolate the particular intended. Deictic signs are additive, having no significance

whatsoever when isolated, and only in context are able to be understood as meaning anything at all.

In the specific context of theatre, Keir Elam identifies deixis as a point of departure from the epic choral dithyrambs and pragmatics modes of storytelling to 'drama' as Aristotle would have defined it. Rather than a purely didactic and presentational form, deixis, "is what allows language an 'active' and dialogic function rather than a descriptive and choric role: it is instituted at the origins of the drama as a necessary condition of a non-narrative form of world-creating discourse" (127). This action is centered on the performer, rather than chorus, making such a player the deictic center around which *here*, *there*, *then*, etc. are understood. The necessity of deixis is paramount: "the [drama] is *incomplete* until the appropriate contextual elements (speaker, addressee, time, location) are duly provided" (128).

Looking closely at the act of utterance in the medium, Christian Metz notes that "in film, when enunciation is indicated in the utterance it is not, or not essentially, by deictic imprints, but by *reflexive* constructions: the film talks to us about itself, about cinema, or about the position of the spectator" (1991, 754). According to Metz, the projected image is not grounded in the deictic context of the stage (the actor's center), but fully self-contained. Conversely, with a traditional scenic backdrop, even one painted very specifically with a fixed location in mind, there is always a complicit understanding between designer and audience that we need not *necessarily* be in the space it indicates. A simple lighting cue may alter it – for example the same location at night – or nullify it all together. It remains

deictically dependent on the other elements. In traditional scenography, "both sides in the relationship have already agreed the object can signify anything, or as many things as they wish" (Nunn), but no such agreement exists for film. In the same way the audience understands that a painted flat is but a suggestion, its understanding of the screen is charged with the knowledge that an 'infinite possibility' of images may grace it, making the image chosen its own deictic center, grounded not within the context of the stage, but self-reflexively. Rather than shifting from speaker to listener in a dialectic, actors must now compete with this constant external center, breaking the fundamental dramatic device of theatrical performance. Monofunctional *in the naturalistic theatrical context* through its photorealistic specificity, the projected image is subjugated by its freedom; it is charged with the audience's awareness that it *could*, with just the click of the mouse, become anything the designer wishes it to be. Metz identifies the problematic root: "[film] is completed before it is presented and does not give [it] to enunciation, nor to the reader-spectator any possibility for modifying it, other than – and this is a purely exterior change – to close the book or turn the television off" (1991, 741). It is precisely because of the limitations understood by the audience that paint cannot change at will – and that the backdrop is *reliant* on interaction with other elements – that its 'signification' and meaning can be altered in the audience's understanding. Because of this, the scenic backdrop could be thought of as incomplete, possessing no natural meaning despite any degree of photorealism.

Of course, Metz' indictment of film as having *no deictic relationship* is not without critics. In "The Impersonal Enunciation," he argues that "film does not contain any deictic equivalents…film is able to express space and time relationships of some kind, but only anaphorically, within the film itself, between its different parts, and not between film and someone or something else" (756). He identifies only specific elements contained within cinema which may connect outwards; the spoken word, the written quote, and the film credits, but all of which build to create a product which is "reflexive, rather than deictic, it does not give us any information about the outside of the text, but about a text that carries in itself its source and destination" (762). Ultimately, according to Metz, the possibility of creating a deictic relationship between projection and *any receiving entity* is impossible:

> In the cinema, the actor was present when the spectator was not (= shooting), and the spectator is present when the actor is no longer (= projection): a failure to meet of the voyeur and the exhibitionist whose approaches no longer coincide (they have 'missed' one another). (1982, 63)

However, one of Metz' most significant critics, Pepita Hesselberth, argues in *Cinematic Chronotopes, Here, Now, Me* that Metz' rejection of deixis is unproductive, limiting discussion of cinematic reality to the movie theater, precluding intermedia, such as the digital installation, which "now confront us in all kinds of places no longer dependent on the screen/frame paradigm of projection. Therefore the old paradigm of the mirror, of reflexivity, and the dominance of the eye no longer

seems to hold" (13). Hesselberth posits instead that outside of the classical cinema setting, a deictic relationship is not only possible, but *enforced*, saying that the act of "looking both emanates from and points back to a body." Of course, this conclusion is actually *more problematic* for the media designer than Metz' outright abandonment of deixis. Hesselberth identifies the site of deixis explicitly (emphasis mine):

> Deictics, in this sense, do not contribute to the propositional content derived from a *given context*, but rather serve to slot in an element of that context, that is, the referent, in the proposition expressed, so as to validate its being. The *act of looking*, in other words, is part of the object, or that which is looked at, so that any movement in or of the observer necessarily triggers movement in or of the world observed, and vice versa, here and now. (13)

For Hesselberth, it is not that there *cannot* be deixis extending beyond the screen as in Metz' "radical segregation of spaces" (1982, 64), but there *must be* deixis between the image and the *audience*. This conclusion is incredibly problematic for the media designer, as the "act of looking" enacted by the audience entirely bypasses the "given context," the act of performance by the actors. For Hesselberth, the collaborators in intermedial semiosis is the projected image and the audience exclusively, cutting out the elements on stage entirely; there is deixis – just not one conducive for live performance. One solution I have found, though reactionary and potentially reckless, is the logical counter to a deictic incompatibility which Metz attributes to this "radical segregation of spaces:" to design media which "possesses no edge, or is otherwise

framed by traditional theatrical elements" (Tenet III), forcing the sequestered and self-reflexive digital image out of its frame and into the light.

What also of the "monofunctional" sign as Nunn would argue exists in film? In "Flickering Lights and Declaiming Bodies," he identifies the film's site of semiotic malleability, not in the signs themselves but in "the camera; once an object or person is filmed, its signification is fixed; a filmed chair is fixed as a chair in the diegesis…it cannot suddenly be something else; a filmed actor is fixed as a single character" (Nunn). He goes on to compare this inability for the filmed sign to change with theater; "the 'intermediary signified' in theatre does not exist in film: there is a direct unmediated correspondence between the image on film and the profilmic object: the *'like this, sort of'* of theatre contrasts with the *'like this, exactly'* of film."

While I agree with Nunn's argument that the mobility or *polyfunctionality* of the sign is created through the apparatus of the "mobile camera," I do not agree that filmic signs are inherently monofunctional, or "fixed" as he argues. In asserting that the bond "between the image and original material support" is absolute, consider the example he gives: "nobody in a film audience is going to accept an original Clinton shopping cart as denoting anything but an original Clinton shopping cart--on film, it will never be a car." Yet could it not still *connote* a car? United through symmetrical aesthetics of prop design, character interaction (such as a child riding within it), and camera shots, any sign in film can be transformed figuratively and convey meaning beyond the thing itself. A counterexample which comes to mind is the seminal "bowl of soup" experiment Lev Kuleshov and Vsevolod Pudovkin conducted at the

forefront of film studies, in which the same close-up footage of Russian actor Mosjukhin was intercut with other shots (140). They chose shots which lacked emotion or significance by themselves and combined them in three different combinations. The man was intercut with a bowl of soup, a girl playing with a toy bear, and a cadaver in a coffin. When shown to the public, audiences were unaware that the footage of the actor was identical; instead they "pointed out the heavy pensiveness of his mood over the forgotten soup, were touched and moved by the deep sorrow with which we looked on the dead woman, and admired the light, happy smile with which he surveyed the girl at play" (140).

Instead, let us apply Nunn's observations not *within* the frame, as in film theory, but *without*, as Hesselberth asserts in *Cinematic Chronotopes*, "no longer dependent on the screen/frame paradigm of projection" (13). My conclusion is that the projected image is monofunctional *only once displaced* from its frame onto the susceptible stage. The 'suspension of disbelief' of theatre asks the audience to give more credence to elements of design than it inherently possesses in its construction. Yet what happens when the fully realized sign of film transgresses upon it? It is so imbued by that same suspension of disbelief, but instead of rising from the fictional to the believable (as theatrical signs undergo), it rises from the believable to the apotheotic;[17] its monofunctionality stems from its *completion*, the processes of constructing the projected and the performed having "'missed' one another" (Metz 63).

[17] I use "apotheotic" here to refer to the manifestation of a divine or idealized form of the designer's intent, which is extra-dramatic, such as information gained through the director's note in the playbill.

In point of fact, it is the incomplete nature of theatrical signs which give them power at all. According to Elam (emphasis mine),

> in its 'incompleteness,' its need for physical contextualization, dramatic discourse is invariably marked by performability, and above all by a *potential gesturality* which the language of the narrative does not normally possess since its context is described rather than 'pragmatically' pointed to. (129)

The problem facing the media designer is twofold: non-deictic images are not only unable to gesture, but are unable *even to be gestured to* – at least in a manner which alters their understanding in the performer's context. They are of particular importance, as these two limitations of the projected image as it exists today are key to understanding its inability to be *automatically* incorporated into the performative semiotic matrix of theatre. In media's inability to gesture, a flat projected actor can only look toward or away from the deictic center of the camera/image. An actor looking to the left will always look to the left, regardless of your viewing angle of the screen.[18] Thus, the prototypical projected image functions as the sole deictic gate for digital/live performer interaction. This is Metz' core argument, hence his subtitle "the site of film."[19] The screen itself cannot be semiotically transparent – that is signs cannot flow freely from performers on each end, but meet at the *screen itself* as the unimpeachable site of discourse. This will be discussed more in detail in section two,

[18] Star Trek grappled with this problem for quite some time, creating a view screen through which subjects could make direct *and selective* eye contact. See pg. 49; and TNG – "The Defector" 00:43:00
[19] Hesselberth makes this observation in *Cinematic Chronotopes*, 12.

contextualized in my work on *Fortinbras* and *Peer Gynt*. In media's inability to be gestured to, consider the following: as above, when characters travel with a constant backdrop, they need only gesture at traveling, with lighting and sound assisting the mutability of the painted image. This is not so with the projected image. Since it *can* visually depict travel to a new location, it *must*, for the audience knows and expects the specificity and 'realness' of the filmic form, bound by its material existence. *Nunian alreadyness* exists not in theatre, but in film. This forms the basis for Tenet I, insisting upon media's incomplete representation of elements outside the drama. When the Resolute desk is projected on screen, it must always be that. Since "it is above all to the physical *here* represented by the stage and its vehicles that the utterance must be anchored" (Elam 131), by establishing location through media carelessly, actors and their performances will be so anchored, cement shoes, cast into a sea of pixels and light.

How then do we reconcile these differing conclusions of the existence and nature of deixis in the context of projecting film onto naturalistic performance? Clearly, if an intermedial design is to succeed in the theatrical context, it must be able to overcome these fundamental semiotic and deictic limitations identified by Metz, Hesselberth, and Nunn. It is not enough that a monofunctional projected image on stage be *semiotized*, it must be *deicticized*. Put plainly; the overwhelming *photorealism* and rigidity of filmic signs, along with the immutable structure of its framing, prevents them from cooperating in a semiotic matrix of performance with their theatrical counterparts. Only when disarmed as a deictic sign devoid of meaning

without context may both media become as one.

On the Threshold of Becoming…

How do the disparate elements of theatrical performance coalesce on stage? Victor Turner, while working as a field anthropologist investigating tribal communities in the modern world, developed the concept of *liminality*, the state of existing in the middle or 'threshold' stage of rituals, during which participants are between states of being. Stephan Bigger identifies theatre specifically as a threshold space; just as a "child crosses the threshold to adulthood…overcoming spiritual/psychic dangers through ritual" (209), so do actors in the live process of becoming their characters. Their polyfunctional and unnatural[20] nature makes all theatrical signs liminal, on the threshold of becoming the thing they indicate, but unable to fully transform. Though the ideal for any theatre actor is to fully become the character, we understand the *process* of attainment to be the true goal – success lies in the failing spectacularly at this task. Indeed, if any audience member was led to believe the *actual* character was on stage, it would cease to function as theatre.

Note that, just as a child undergoing puberty, liminality poses a necessary threat or danger, without which the ritual transformation could not be completed. On the Oregon Trail, fording Snake River is a site of both transformation and danger. The same is true in *Oedipus Rex*; the meeting at the crossroads is, for the titular character, as inevitable as it is metamorphic. Consider now the liminality of the projected

[20] As Saussure defines; dependent on context – such as the lack of "natural" definition for the "red light" without the context of the traffic light, brothel, reindeer, etc.

image, first from a technical standpoint: the camera is not an analog process. Within the lens itself, which may augment and transmit light, there is a direct relationship between reality *(RO)* and representation *(SO)*. Optics will alter the light, but the resultant image is still in a one-to-one relationship with reality. There is no such relationship with a camera's film (or modern digital sensor). Light which exposes the film is fully mediated and *interpreted* by the camera as a chemical (or digital) process. The resulting image is re-presented as a light projection which has no physical bearing on the original. No part of the original has been preserved or converted; the image created is an entirely new thing, unbound from the *real (RO)* object through the apparatus of the camera.

As such, the process of *becoming* is not as a live actor would do – with audience participation as part of the ritual of performance – but within the sterile mechanical apparatus of the camera. Herein lies the final fundamental obstacle that must be overcome in media design: the 'rite of passage' which all theatrical signs undergo as part of the liminal space of the stage is withheld on the projected image. It has already gone through its rite *as part of its construction*, and by the time it reaches the stage, it is postliminal and has already transformed. Given our modern cultural infatuation with the 'behind-the-scenes' culture of Hollywood, this makes sense, with the same fascination of live performance manifesting in featurettes, Access Hollywood specials, and tabloid articles. The real magic and transformation of cinema happens behind the camera, not on the silver screen.

But most incriminating of all is this essential observation by Levenson: "[media] lacks the possibility of mistakes – mistakes being the arbiter of good and bad performance" (3). This flies in the face of Blau's observation that "the one inalienable and arcane truth of theatre [is] that the living person performing there may die in front of your eyes, and is in fact doing so" (105). Projections of recorded performers cannot flub lines, they cannot miss cues, they cannot break character, and they *cannot die*. They are apotheotic, perfect outward manifestations of a designer's artistic intent, and for that, they are broken as theatrical devices. It is the onus of the media designer to engender the projected image to be receptive to a *second* transformation. How is this accomplished? Elam cuts straight to the site of imperfection: "[transformation] involves the speaker's body directly in the speech act. The language of drama calls for the intervention of the actor's body in the completion of its meaning. Its corporeality is essential rather than an optional extra" (130). Thus, the solution is conceptually simple: give it a body, so it may bleed. Theatrical projection must undergo two rites: birth behind the camera, and death on stage.

The Five Tenets of Media Design

This lofty goal – that of endowing the incorporeal projection with a theatrical body – is one of the five tenets of this manifesto, the totality of which has provided the foundation upon which my media designs have been implemented. Though projections present a fundamentally problematic addition to any production, they also open up an incredible wealth of possibilities. Adherence to these tenets is one possible solution to the creation of successful intermedial designs.

The projected image must:

I. Be incomplete in its representation of elements outside the drama

II. Be made unintelligible without its theatrical context

III. Possess no edge, or otherwise be framed by traditional theatrical elements

IV. Conform to a unified aesthetic mirroring – or justified by – character

V. Be mutable and subservient to the gesture and will of the actor

This design ideal is aimed at restoring the deictic center of the mechanical and the live away from the media itself and onto the performer, around which all other theatrical signs are arranged. These tenets will be explored and justified through case studies.

Section 2: Strategies for Restoring Deixis & Case Studies

In this section, I will shift from identifying the obstacles presented to the media designer to identifying six strategies as viable methods of restoring deixis. In this theory-building context, informal case studies from my personal experience will be presented as models for structural analysis. While not all adhere strictly to the tenets established above, they represent my process leading up to the establishment of this manifesto, and exemplify a personal process of discovery (both of success and failure) that spans seven years of academic and professional designs.[21] These strategies have all found prior incarnations and manifestations in intermedial projections throughout the twenty-first century:

> They have been reshaped, veiled, torn up, cut up, flipped over; they have slid in and out, up and down, to and fro; people have entered and exited through them, dived into them, or merged with the images they contain. All these ways of staging the screen, of destroying the normal cloak of invisibility that is cast over it in cinemas and on television, by the extension invite spectators to treat with a critical playfulness the place screen-based media have in their lives. (Giesekam 252)

It is my intent here to codify them to allow for further discussion in the context of naturalistic theatre, a space not readily receptive to the projected image.[22]

[21] See <https://vimeo.com/murakami/reel>
[22] For more discussion on the incompatibility of naturalism and projections, see Giesekam, 248.

The Wounded Image – Découpage and Fragmentation

With parking found, tickets purchased, concessions or libations enjoyed, and facilities utilized, the attendee enters the auditorium, stub and program in hand – proof of their status as patron of the arts, if only for a night. As they enter, one thing above all demands their gaze – not their ticket, not the seat they should be looking for rather than clogging the aisle, and not their attractive date. Their eyes are drawn to the exposed stage, tastefully lit with dim preshow light. With the knowledge of what is to come, the clear arrangement of seats surrounding it, and its isolation from the spectators by a mystic gulf, it is a space charged with unmatched expectation… or perhaps *nearly* unmatched.[23] Only one boundary in artistic interaction remains more charged with expectation: that of the silver screen. After all, live performers may leave the stage, they may enter through the aisles, fly over you, speak or point or spit on you; thus theater expands to fill the space *in toto*, but cinema is compressed onto the flat lenticular sheet of taut pearlescent material. There exists no object more electrified with potential than a screen. If you put one on stage, it will draw focus, even (read: *especially*) when nothing is projected on it. Giesekam argues that the media projection is "perhaps at its weakest when it simply substitutes three-dimensional settings or painted backdrops with film and relies on the dynamism of editing alone to interject something dynamics into the production" (246).

United perhaps under the same stigma, media design shares many structural similarities with comic theory. Of specific interest to the media designer is the

[23] From Wagner: the recessed orchestra pit

interaction of discrete panels in the creation of the seamless 'reality' of the comic page. In Scott McCloud's seminal work *Understanding Comics*, he identifies the gutter – the empty space between panels – as the limbo in which "(the reader's) imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea" (66). The spaces between panels are linked in narrative similarity, even if visually irrelative. In an example he gives, an axe-wielding maniac raises his weapon in panel one, followed by a calm silhouetted cityscape with the text "EEYAA!!" in a gruesome font (68). Between the two, the audience participates in creating a logical connection. This can exist spatially – as in this example – or temporally, something that film shares with the *cut*. Most important is that the image is vulnerable in that space due to its liminality. Each gutter presents a threshold in which it undergoes transformation at the helm of the viewer's imagination. Each constituent panel is absolute; the ink has long since dried, but the page taken as whole is an artifact in constant flux because of these empty spaces.

Anya 17

Video Artist (Media Designer) – June 18th, 2014

Produced by Opera Parallèle at the Marines Memorial Theatre in San Francisco. Composed by Adam Gorb, Conducted by Nicole Paiement and Directed by Brian Staufenbiel.

In media design, gutter space may be utilized to great effect in wounding the image and creating spaces in which the projected image may take on a deictic

relationship to the rest of the live scene. In Opera Parallèle's 2014 production of *Anya 17*, I was tasked with a straightforward, yet challenging directive. The contemporary opera sought to raise awareness of human sex trafficking, presenting a personalist drama from the perspective of Anya – known only by her assigned number, 17. While her enslavement, abuse, and eventual escape were all established clearly in the text to be set in Eastern Europe, my task was to create a design which could be legible as belonging to any country. The director did not want to give the audience the sense of security that the crimes of human trafficking are an exoticism – dismissed as the problems of some ethnic 'other.' Our preparative research indicated quite the opposite, leading me as close to home as Oakland, just a half hour's drive away from the Marines Memorial Theatre, in which our American premiere was to be held.

The solution, reached though close collaboration with scenic designer Dave Dunning, was a fragmented and decoupaged design of media elements. Given its name by director Brian Staufenbiel of the bilingual Opera Parallèle, "découpage"[24] as a media design strategy involved the re-assembly of alternatively sourced imagery, united within the fragmented screen design. Capitalizing on an extensive use of negative gutter space, the media design for *Anya* was presented on eight oddly shaped screens, each of which presented an incomplete[25] photograph or video of an actual site of human trafficking. Additionally, for each screen of the brothel location, unique sites from differing countries were used, arranged spatially to give a sense of a whole space, all the while presenting an impossible depiction of an amalgamated world.

[24] French for "cutting," used here similarly in use to the "cut-up" Dadaist literary technique.
[25] Tenet I

The totality of the design thus could not be identified as belonging to any one specific location or place; in the process making the projected image deictic towards the dramatic center of the stage (the singer), it could be projected outwardly through the audience's imagination to apply universally.

Fig. 2 - Anya 17 screen layout

Quite literally, the deictic *here* or *there* which is normally defined *as itself* in the mechanically reproduced image was deconstructed through this fragmentation and decoupage. Even in the establishment of setting where only fragmentation was employed, lacking the decoupage of the 'brothel' location, deicticized their imagery through the incompletion of the gutter space. Such locations included as the interior of the abduction van,[26] the exterior of the church courtyard,[27] and the hospital interior,[28] each wounding the image, creating an artificial vulnerability. Just as one would not fully trust what is seen through a broken window – each shard refracting, magnifying, and offsetting light unpredictably – until one shifts perspective left or

[26] Fig. 18 - *Anya 17* Abduction Van
[27] Fig. 19 - *Anya 17* Church Courtyard Exterior
[28] Fig. 20 - *Anya 17* Hospital

right, craning the neck to better contextualize the nature of the imperfections, so too does the fragmented image beg the viewer to metaphorically shift perspective toward or away from the theatrical context below. In this way, fragmentation removes the edge of the image,[29] framing not by a cinematic artifact, but a theatrical one, its boundaries defined by dramatic incompletion, rather than filmic specificity. This strategy will echo in additional examples below.

Deixis through Diegesis

Jumping ahead chronologically to two of my more recent projects, I wish to now discuss a strategy which, though able to be leveraged in designs less often, is a veritable *coup de grâce* to the isolative semiotic barriers of the projected image, relying (perhaps ironically) on a convention of cinema, rather than theatre. From the Greek *διήγησις* for *narration*, *diegesis* is "the (fictional) world in which the situations and events narrated occurs" (Prince 20), with *diegetic* elements of the play embedded within the story itself[30] rather than at the level of storyteller – such as the director's note in the playbill.

In cinema, the manipulations of such elements are a fundamental tool to the filmmaker. When, after returning home from a successful date, the lover lowers the needle of the record player and groovy music issues forth, that music can be thought of as *diegetic*. Later, the lovers step closer to each other, building romantic tension. When, just before they kiss, orchestral music begins to swell, unmotivated by any

[29] Tenet III
[30] In theatrical terms, this is usually referred to as 'motivated' elements

narrative element within the world of the film, a *non-diegetic* device has been used. On a semiotic level, diegetic devices are inherently more dramatic as they include and rely on the characters and performance within the film for meaning. Repeated *ad nauseum* in screenwriting classes, they *show, don't tell*. They signify the corporeal existence of something which is within the reach and physical influence of the character, and as such are immediately more susceptible to being understood by the audience as being in relation to that character's deictic center. A romantic swelling of strings cannot be deictic to the character, most importantly because the character is unaware of it.[31] Achieving deixis through diegesis can be a viable – if constraining – strategy for corporealizing projections.

A Forgotten Future

Director & Media Designer – November 3rd, 2012

Three short plays by Ray Bradbury, Produced by UCSC

BarnStorm at the Digital Arts Research Center.

Co-Directed with Brooke Jennings and Luke Medina.

From my perch on the catwalk, I had to stifle my surprise at the visceral reaction the psychologist's flashlight invoked in the opening night audience. In the weeks that followed, I made attempts to try and understand why that moment from "The Veldt" stood out from the opening act "Pillar of Fire" and closing "Kaleidoscope." After all, it was with great pride that I created the first act's 'mission

[31] This is exemplified and parodied in the 2006 film *Stranger than Fiction*, when the disconcerted main character begins hearing the narrator's voice.

control' location by digitally extruding server racks in the background, continuing on to a vanishing point. Despite how effective the illusion was, the result was rather trite – simply referring outwardly to the real-world location re-presented by the media.[32] The primary location in "Kaleidoscope" within the depths of space at least was less explicitly tied to an outward location, but after the show, I had astronomy aficionados compliment me on my choice of nebula;[33] they had not been watching the performance, but the projected imagery! The difference, as I would discover from insights given to me by my cast, was that the media technology, which permeated every element of the work's scenographic design, was *diegetic* in "The Veldt" as an element within the work itself. In the story, two parents purchase for their children a virtual reality nursery which can present any location via telepathic response. Ultimately, in a manner critiquing our modern 'raised on TV' culture, the children manifest horrific scenarios which caused the room to turn, killing their parents. Contrary to the usual design-as-metaphor method, the projections in "The Veldt" were standing in for a

Fig. 3 - "The Veldt": Virtual Reality Nursery

Fig. 4 - "The Veldt": The psychologist reveal

[32] Fig. 21 - "Pillar of Fire"
[33] Fig. 22 - "Kaleidoscope"

diegetic element within the world of the play. Simply, the virtual reality room was depicted by a virtual reality set. Though tautology usually defies malleability, a unique deictic chain of relations were established here, engendering not only a corporeal body to the projected image, but a fundamental vulnerability. The projected image was not *the thing itself*, but – as in Elam's words – representative of a "class of objects" (7).

Put another way, within the context of performance, the images shown in the virtual reality nursery were not understood to be a function of *my* work – reflecting the artistic sensibilities and choices of the designer – but a function of character, directly resultant from their gestures and will.[34] Thus the projected image's formally apotheotic manifestation (a divine or perfect form of the designer's intent) became fully subservient to the character's impulse, not presenting the world as it is (or as the designer wishes it were), but as a character chooses it to be. And because that character is fallible, so then are the projections. In one particular moment, the two children Wendy and Peter are experimenting in the virtual reality room when the boy has a temper tantrum. The room, disturbed by his anger, disintegrates around him, prompting Wendy to run for safety as the floor crumbles beneath her feet. Such an

Fig. 5 - "The Veldt": Peter destroys the room

[34] Tenet V, pg. 18

event, contextualized by the gesture and will of the character, is not seen as an artistic choice of media, but a choice of character. In the context of *A Forgotten Future* as a whole, without linking this chain back to character, the self-contained deixis of the projected image could not be overcome. With the clash of character and media, illuminated and performing in a space entirely constructed by the projected image, both possess deictic centers vying for dominance. The powers of the actors to contextualize the world of the play from their deictic centers are the only foci strong enough to subdue those of media.

Peter Pan

Director & Media Designer – November 27th, 2015

Written by J.M. Barrie, Produced by UCSC BarnStorm

Little did I know when creating Bradbury's worlds in *A Forgotten Future* that Peter and Wendy would return to my immersive digital stage just three years later. *Peter Pan* represented my first attempt to coalesce all five of my tenets of media design into one production, and what better trial for the potential of media than *Peter Pan* – a production of the largest scale, to be put up in the smallest and poorest (but only in the financial sense) of venues: the Barn Theater at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Converted from an 1890's horse barn, this home of BarnStorm – the all student-run theatre company – had no fly system, no ability to house scenic changes, and given the nature of casting within the university, given

only 13 actors to fill the thirty-five speaking parts. It was, needless to say, a most exciting and unique challenge.

In truth however, I selected *Peter Pan* because of this challenge, and thus its ability to test and demonstrate the power of media at its most necessary to facilitating the functions of drama. The story of *Peter Pan*, unlike its titular character, is one that has vastly outgrown its original form. From the pop culture to psychology, the story of "the boy who would not grow up" is one most people find familiar. A common misconception, assisted in part by the popular Disney film and subsequent contemporary retellings, is that *Peter Pan*'s core theme is purely escapist; a fantasy of eternal youth. On the contrary, the original play possesses quite adult themes of developing sexuality and gender roles – the inevitability of a young girl not only growing up, but growing into a certain, strictly prescribed definition of adult femininity. Framed by the urgency of modernization during the Victorian era, Wendy's departure from Never Land to adulthood is clearly guided by a Patriarchal definition of women as being mothers and wives, complicating any modern staging of the classic. Wendy's placement in a domestic space permeates both worlds of reality and fantasy; in Never Land, Peter cries out for the lost boys to "build a house around her" when she is injured. Rather than ignore these themes, media was employed to subvert them by shifting the play's perspective to that of Wendy's, framing Never Land and "the boy who never grew up" as elements of Wendy's imagination.[35] The themes of maternal obligation were thus shifted away from a lesson taught from

[35] The casting of Hook was used to compliment this subversion, double casting Wendy's mother (rather than father) to play the part, representing the role her childhood is fighting against.

Wendy to Peter (and thus to the audience), to an internal struggle Wendy must grapple with as she is witnessed on the threshold of adulthood.

In the production, a pure white set was employed, in preparation for the projected element.[36] Rather than project upon clearly delineated screen surfaces, Wendy's bedroom was built and dressed normally, save for the lack of color and texture. As Wendy *chooses* to enter Never Land, dragging her brothers along in her flight of fantasy, the fantastic setting is projected upon her room – her bed becoming a pirate ship, floor into the mermaid's lagoon, walls into a lush forest, etc.

Fig. 6 - Peter Pan: Wendy opens her eyes and imagines Never Land

Rather than having a flight sequence, the first grand entrance into Never Land is depicted very clearly as subservient to the will and gesture of Wendy. As she steps off her bed in darkness, she clamps her hands over her eyes as a blur of colorful light begins to materialize on her body. As she throws her hands outward, phantasmagoric radial slivers of Never Land *as she imagines it to be* blossom out from her deictic –

[36] Fig. 23 - *Peter Pan*: white set during segments of reality

and literal – center. Where is Never Land? The media presents itself as Wendy's deictic *here*.

The projected image thus became not only an element influenced by Wendy, but Wendy herself – a peek inside the child's mind. Fallible to an extreme, its physical body became one with Wendy's, and just as children project their fantasies upon their world, declaring the bed a mountain, the closet a cave, a stick a sword, etc., so too did the act of very act of projection itself. During the final showdown between Peter and Hook, the fight begins bewilderingly sans swords (the impetus of this being an injunction against on student use of swords in the Barn Theater). As the fight begins in earnest however, the calm night scene on the pirate ship turns into a maelstrom. The ship begins rocking back and forth, projected lanterns swaying, the roiling sea buffeting actors visibly. Finally projected lightning strobes across the stage, magnificently illuminating Peter and Hook mid-fight, and revealing not only their shadows, but those of imagined swords, reinforcing the perspective of the illusion. Finally, at the conclusion of the piece, as Wendy decides she must return to

Fig. 7 - Peter Pan: Lightning illuminates imagined swords

reality, the imagined characters return to the prop chest on stage, in which their doll analogs were placed earlier, and now are restored in the act of play which stands in for the totality of their experiences in Never Land.[37]

Let us return to the five tenets established earlier. In traditional stagings of Peter Pan (as in theatre in general), scenographic representations of the various canonical locales are understood, as Elam says, to "stand in" (7) for the real[38] location, which in the context of semiotics is the *signified* thought, unique to each audience member. Consider a digitally immersive *Peter Pan* which does not engender media as a function of character, but presents imagery of Never Land in a didactic manner. This would conflict with the theatrical "class of object," enlisting the audience's imagination to refine it from the universal to the specific. Such a presentation of that fantasy world would be both destructive and dogmatic – preemptively suffocating the preconceptions the audience brings of this iconic fantasy setting, losing the potential to create collaborative signs and discourse. Put another way, your *Semiotically Real Object (SO)* of Never Land is unique; a didactic presentation of Never Land would not provide a *semiotic image (R)* that would function "two way... making a democratic trio" (Merrell 127), but the filmic *Real Object (RO)* which has the potential to appear unrecognizable to the *Interpretant (I)*. More to the point, my idea of projecting Never Land as Wendy imagines it to be is not, in fact, original in any way – it is exactly what drama is supposed to do. It was original only in that it brings media back down to the level of drama. It (Tenet I) *was*

[37] Fig. 25 - *Peter Pan*: Imagined characters and their doll doppelgangers
[38] Here, Elam's "real" refers to Never Land, rather than a factual, non-fictitious location.

incomplete in its representation of elements outside the drama. Even though each projected realm of Never Land was of course assembled from imagery taken from external sources, no image was complete enough in its presentation to be understood as itself or able to be linked to its original context.[39] The pirate ship, for example, included imagery taken from a variety of real-world sources, including wood paneling, rope, lanterns, and a skyscape rendered not as CGI, but footage obtained through public domain archives. Yet still, it (Tenet II) *was unintelligible without its theatrical context* because of its reliance on Wendy as a function of her imagination. If one were to sit and watch the flight to Never Land sequence without actors, the explosion of color out from a seemingly arbitrary point in both space and time would have seemed as much a non sequitur as a traditional *Peter Pan*'s prop rubber shadow when removed from context, rolled up for someone to find in a theatrical storage closet. It (Tenet III) *possessed no edge,* just as the theatrical sign, expanding to fill the space of the theater *en toto*. Of course, even though the technical edges of the projector's "throw" are clearly delineated, the semiotic edge of the image was boundless – constrained only by Wendy's imagination, *framed by traditional theatrical elements*. Finally, as not only a product,

Fig. 8 - *Peter Pan*: *(SO)* over *(RO)* in the pirate ship

[39] Compare this with the use of imagery in *Valley of the Heart*, 57.

but a manifestation of Wendy herself, it both conformed to a (Tenet IV) *unified aesthetic mirroring character*, and was (Tenet V) *mutable and subservient to the gesture and will of the actor*.

The Projected Gesture

It is this gesture which encompasses the thesis' next strategy. As discussed above, deictic imagery possess the "potential gesturality" (Elam 129) that defines the dramatic form.[40] The process of deicticizing projected media is essential to allowing for the gestural language of drama. In *Peter Pan*, the character's interaction with the media clearly presented a causal logic between the two. Wendy's gesture of opening her eyes *caused* Never Land to materialize, even though such a link was purely illusory for the audience's benefit; that animation was simply timed with a discrete auditory cue to let the actor know when she must enact her gesture. This was the same illusion that made Tinkerbelle possible, with timed digital spikes allowing Peter to effortlessly "catch" her in his hand.[41] As such, while the manifestation of Tenet V may not have been 'real' in the Platonic sense (pragmatically, the actor was subservient to the timing of the cues and other technologic limitations), the result *appeared* as such, subservient to the will of the *character* if not the actor. This concept was employed most significantly in reinforcing the diegetic relationship between Wendy and the media with the blocking of Peter, himself only a figment of Wendy's imagination. Obeying the diegetic convention established with projections

[40] See "The Deictic Sign" above, 13.
[41] Fig. 24 - *Peter Pan* catches Tinkerbelle

as imagination, we had Peter constrain his movements to zones illuminated with projected light. In one particularly tragic moment, when Peter and Wendy say their final goodbyes, the worlds of reality and fantasy were delineated clearly by stage light and projected light, respectively. Even though the live performance was literally constrained to projections, quite the opposite was communicated to the audience. The image was given context as a manifestation of the actor's existence (or non-existence in this case) though his gesture. When he and Wendy finally touch hands, the spell breaks and the projections finally fade, prompting Peter to flee forever.

Fig. 9 - *Peter Pan* zones

Fortinbras

Video Designer – February 1st, 2008

A farce by Lee Blessing, Produced by TPHS Players

Directed by Marinee Payne

In reaction to the semiotic limitation of the screen itself as the unimpeachable site of semiotic discourse between mechanically reproduced and live performances, I was commissioned in 2008 to design a digital performer not limited in such a way. Ultimately, I would not be successful until five years later with UCSC's production of *Peer Gynt*, yet my experience designing for Lee Blessing's *Fortinbras* proved

invaluable in demonstrating the limitations of the gestural permeability of the projected media membrane. In the comedy which takes place just after the end of *Hamlet*, the recently deceased characters return to the stage as ghostly apparitions, haunting the titular character and driving him insane. The script called for Hamlet to materialize not in ectoplasm, but in close-up, to be wheeled around on a television screen. In my design concept, the actor playing him would sit in a makeshift studio in one of the dressing rooms, with a live feed bringing his presence to the stage. A reverse feed from a camcorder hidden below the television would let the actor see the stage and the actors who would interact with him. There would be numerous farcical gags which relied on this, such as a delightful fight over use of the remote, through which any actor could gain complete power over Hamlet, muting him, or changing his 'channel.'

Immediately, we experimented with the problem of sightlines, working to see if there was a way for Hamlet to address one actor, without also addressing the others. If he looked into the lens, he would be making eye contact with anyone in the room – including the audience. If he looked off to a side, it may have appeared to a select area of seats to create the illusion of eye contact, but of course to all actors on stage, it would appear just the same to them. Our solution, rather disappointingly, was just to look into the camera. While this was not what we had hoped, the result was acceptable. Always more intelligent than we like to give credit for, the audience did not find this uncanny or feeling as if breaking the fourth wall, as one would feel if eye contact was made with a live performer, but as a byproduct of the technological

apparatus mediating the experience. This was curious, but telling. Awareness or ignorance of the apparatus makes a significant difference in our understanding of it, despite how it may interact with each person directly. This design did succeed in establishing itself within the semiotic matrix of performance, though not through the intended apparatus. It was due to the polyfunctionality bestowed upon it that allowed it to be seen as deictically centered around the interacting player, and not just itself; it was simultaneously a television set, an actor playing Hamlet, and Hamlet.

Peer Gynt

Media Installation Designer – March 1st, 2013

By Henrik Ibsen, Produced by UCSC Theater Arts/DANM

Directed by Kimberly Jannarone

It was only later during *Peer Gynt* did I come across a solution to creating a semiotically transparent boundary. Drawing inspiration from Julie Taymor's 'double

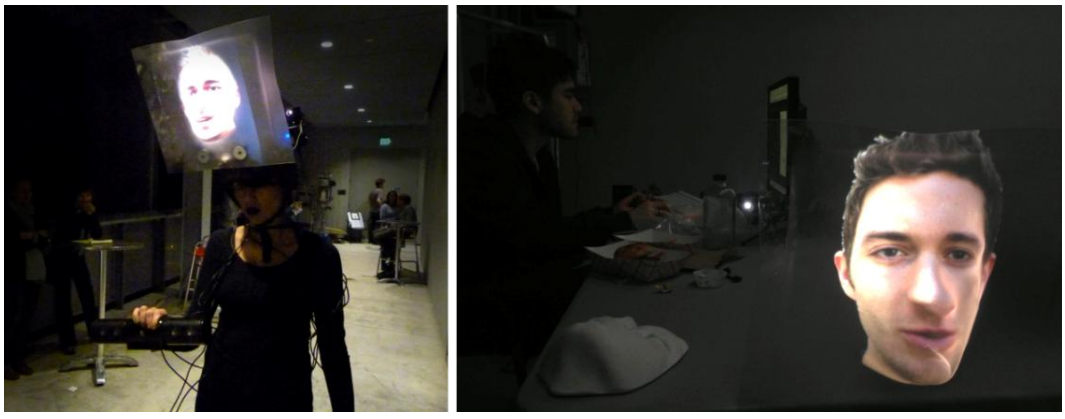

Fig. 10 - Peer Gynt: The "media mask" in development

feature' mask, the *media mask,* as it was dubbed, was designed to allow digital actors to direct their gaze and interact not strictly at the site of the media itself, but

transparently through the medial boundary. By molding rear-projection material to the performer's face, paying specific attention to the curvature of eyeballs, a projected actor's pupils could dart around and make selective eye contact with those surrounding him.

To clarify what I mean by a 'transparent medial boundary,' consider the seminal 1980 video installation "A Hole in Space" by Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz: [42] Two giant video walls are erected in Los Angeles and New York, linked via camera so that people may interact with those on the other side. However, this is a misleading description. First a few bystanders walk by and notice someone on the "other side" waving, so they wave back. Immediately, there is a performative link between the two worlds. Soon, dozens of people are present, soon hundreds. Very quickly however, something fundamentally problematic becomes obvious. Instead of people lining up along the wall, establishing individual conversations *across* the digital boundary, they must interact *through* the single focal point of the camera. The interactions

Fig. 12 - "A Hole in Space"

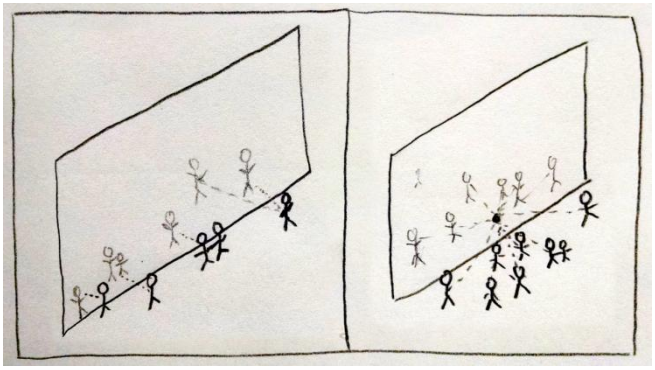
Fig. 11 - Surface interaction vs. point interaction

[42] "A Hole in Space" - https://youtu.be/SyIJJr6Ldg8

between the two realities are thusly not a *surface* of interaction, but a single point, siphoned through which semiotic codes can travel.[43] As explained above, the space of interaction between the mechanical and live is the post-liminal space, with the space of true transformation occurring in the act of mechanical reproduction itself. Should one person be able to come to the foreground, they would not be able to, for example, whisper so that only one person hears; the interaction is universalized for all recipients because of the single point of discourse, the deictic center of the camera's lens. This is clearly seen in the archival footage of the event, people had to *take turns* to address the crowd at the other end. The screen is *not semiotically transparent*; all videated[44] subjects on either side are contextualized not in relation to each other, as in drama, but in special and temporal relation to the apparatus. For somebody trying to point at a member of the opposing crowd, the only *there* able to be pointed to is the lens, and the only *who* able to be addressed is everybody, or nobody.

It should be the goal of any media designer to overcome this fundamental limitation in a metaphoric sense, but in the case of *Peer Gynt*, it was done literally through giving the digital performer a physical body with which could interact on a direct level with its surroundings.[45] Returning to Elam's work, she notes the essential truth to which the media mask appeals, "*I* and *you* are the only genuinely active roles in the dramatic exchange" (130). Only through giving media a body, may we interact

[43] See Brenda Laurel's *Computers as Theatre* for interfaces between performance and technology.
[44] Used by Matthew Causey in "The Screen Test and of the Double" to refer to the uncanny doubling of the human form when re-presented through imaging technology.
[45] Note here the metalinguistic implication of my use of "its." Once defined as a deictic entity it makes sematic sense to speak of *the masks' surroundings*, but conceptually one would not speak in the same way of a flat image. Eye contact and direct address creates personhood in the dramatic.

with it at a human level. However, this *literal corporealization* need not be the only way of achieving this relationship between the digital body and the live one; it is an example of the strategy taken to just one extreme. To take it even further to the next technologic moment, whole-body cyber puppetry could be possible, blurring lines even more between media, not in this case between film and theatre, but between the live actor and the avatar of the video game.

Shadow Casting – Complete in its Incompletion

Of all the intermedial performances staged today, one stands out among the rest for its popularity, endurance, and – from the perspective of its creators – entirely unintentional conception. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*'s timeless success, transgressing the boundary between filmic artifact and live performance, stems from a rebellion against what Michael Chemers identifies as "the bourgeois aesthetic ritual of passive cinema spectatorship" (112). The 'floor show', as it is called, occurs simultaneously with the pre-recorded film, contradicting, mocking, praising, and interacting (albeit one-directionally) with it. The goal of the media designer is to understand how this *shadow casting* of intermedial elements can be appropriated to restore deixis between the mechanical and live performer, by making each element incomplete without the context of the other.

Dead Man Walking

Media Designer – February 20th, 2015

Produced by Opera Parallèle at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Composed by Jake Heggie, Conducted by Nicole Paiement and Directed by Brian Staufenbiel.

As we settled in for our last preproduction meeting for Jake Heggie's opera *Dead Man Walking*, I was informed of a rather sudden development: the composer had vetoed my designs. As the much publicized homecoming of the opera to San Francisco after fifteen years of tours and restagings, all artists on the project felt a great deal of pressure, so I felt that an abrupt decision from a person of such high standing reflected quite poorly on me. Remaining calm, I asked what his reasoning was. *Dead Man Walking*, based on the same true events depicted in the movie of the same name starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn, opens with the brutal rape and murder of two young lovers at the hands of Joseph De Roche. Over the course of the film, we see his plight of being on death row, and are implored to empathize with De Roche *in spite* of having witnessed such an explicit murder. It was explained to me that Heggie felt that my original design, depicting the murder as a pre-recorded video flashback which is metaphorically watched by De Roche as he relives his memories in his jail cell, was not explicit enough. "We are desensitized to Hollywood violence," he noted, saying that he wrote the opening scene with the specific intent of making everyone in the audience hate him, only so then could we embark on a journey to forgiveness. He made it clear that the question should never be "did he kill those two

young lovers" but "now that he has, do *we* have a right to execute him." In doing so, Heggie pointed out something I knew to be true, but had forgotten during my conceptual work for the piece; projected performance lacks *presence* – it is distanced from reality through its state of monofunctionality, an artifact to be viewed at an objective distance. As such, it could be interpreted as just one *version* of what happened, as opposed to the staging Heggie had originally proposed; two young adults, stripped naked, raped and stabbed, with real, not projected, blood on his hands.

Needless to say, I went back to the drawing board for some time. Though Heggie wanted the traditional staging, the director of the production wanted something more. There were logistic problems, such as the blood and weaponry, as well as thematic problems, such as the presence of Anthony De Roche, his brother, whose presence, while essential to understanding the details of the murder, was quite irrelevant to the universal story. Though a rather innocuous viewing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, I came to a solution which was successfully manifested in the final product. The flashback would be *shadow cast* between the performers on stage, enacting the human element of the event, and their digital doubles on screen, shown exclusively in decontexual close-ups. On stage, details of person and act were revealed, but without any indication of setting, props such as De Roche's knife, and even characters; when the male lover is strangled by Anthony De Roche, he mimes it. On the screen however, the inverse is presented. Details of personhood are omitted (Joseph's face is never shown), but very clearly featured are the details of the lake in

which the event took place,[46] the prop knife, and Anthony's arms as they strangle the young lover. Together, both incomplete elements are united through gesture, creating a codependent performance between the digital and the real.

Fig. 13 - Dead Man Walking: Digital performer strangles live performer

Shadow casting takes on a radically different approach to the creation of deixis than those of the previous strategies. Rather than wounding the image to become subservient to the deictic center of the live performer, both image and performer were stripped of their deictic cores through unintelligible and incomplete representations, only able to be understood when choreographed through *mutual gesture*. Rather than attempt to answer the question *which one is real*, the shadow casted performance

[46] Fig. 27 - *Dead Man Walking*: Digital location augmenting a bare stage

throws out reality entirely, forcing the audience to construct one from the negative space between the intermedial elements.

Given that the projection surface towered over the performers in a menacing presentation,[47] leaning over them at a thirty degree angle, drawing a comparison with the "Jumbotron" phenomenon is inevitable. Mathew Causey writes:

> Videated subjects maintain a unique privilege in mediatized culture. Rock concerts are routinely supplemented by video projections which become evidence of a live act. The competition between live performer and mediated representation of that performer for perception of the spectator ends up as a draw at best…Does that mean that if the split video image sourcing from a live feed reestablishes the status of the real? Yes, the video image is more real than the live actor. (387)

Yet for *Dead Man Walking*, this 'competition' between the two manifestations of the performance does not exist. This is accomplished not only due to their mutual incompletion, but due to the use of *fragmentation* and *decoupage* in its physical construction,[48] not just presenting "evidence of" the live act, but acting as a culpable collaborator in the creation of live performance. Perhaps, in reaction to Causey's assertions, an adjustment can be proposed to Benjamin's definition of that which robs performance of its "aura;" there is a difference between mechanical *reproduction* and

[47] Fig. 28 - *Dead Man Walking*: Unity of scenic and media design
[48] See "The Wounded Image – Decoupage and Fragmentation" pg. 19 & Fig. 29 - *Dead Man Walking*: Fragmentation of location

mechanical *transformation* – the prior simply videating a prior performance event, liminal only in its construction, while the mechanical elements of the latter participate in the act of creation, liminal in its mutually assured destruction with the live-performed present.

Ultimately, Heggie, the director, the reviewers, and I were satisfied with the outcome. Given the incredibly explicit nature of the media, one review's acknowledgement of the projected imagery as "tasteful"[49] was gratifying to read, as was the SFGate's description of the work *as a whole* having "cinematic staging," which for me invited a whole host of associations – perhaps spurious – within the various mediums employed; the boundaries were blurred in aspects of the production even *beyond* point where the pixel met the performer.

Ghosting

While the vast majority of these strategies lie in restoring deixis, *ghosting* is a tool simply for imbuing into projections polyfunctional *significance*, in addition to other techniques or exclusively. As mentioned above, polyfunctionality is a core component to dramatic *signification*. Theatrical signs not only are able to transform based in their shifting context within the semiotic matrix of performance, but are simultaneously imbued by its potentiality; the actor playing Captain Hook and Mr. Darling is a vessel in which both personas live, mix, and *ghost* upon the other. To the end, the media designer wields incredible power to – most literally – project imagery

[49] "Opera Tattler" review – February 21, 2015

over traditionally theatrical elements, forcibly ghosting layers of meaning on top of each other. However, this strategy only works through a devout eschewal of the screen. When projected upon such a sterile surface, a space isolated in cinematic elitism to only welcome projected imagery, media designs possess the danger of rising (or perhaps falling) to the apotheotic – unimpeachable through the protection of its frame. For the media designer, the ability to project upon surfaces which already have meaning and theatrical potential is essential to creating cooperative designs.

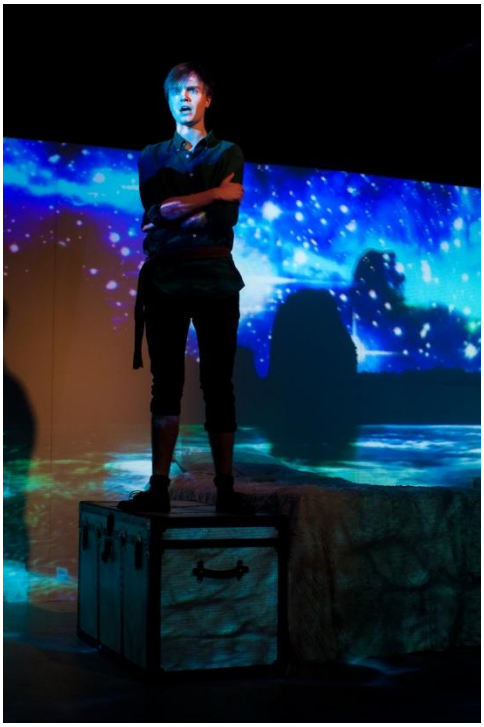

Fig. 14 - *Peter Pan*: Marooner's Rock

Peter Pan

Returning briefly to *Peter Pan*, ghosting is demonstrated here in the literal layering of codes to achieve a polyfunctional projected scenic design. The signifier of Wendy's bed and trunk, combined with the projected signifier of "Marooner's Rock," evokes an entirely new *signified* thought-image. A sign with dual signifiers, the scenic element of Wendy's bed is now ghosted *for the remainder of the play* with the image of Peter, whispering "to die would be an awfully big adventure," suddenly face-to-face with his mortality. Though morbid, at the end of the play, when Wendy returns from Never Land to live a human life, her return to bed is now charged with a deeper, more morbid *significance*, she goes

(eventually) to her death. Through ghosting, the projected image is both contextualized as belonging to its place and time on stage, and yet also made dramatically immortal, living on as charged latent associations in the theatrical space.

Valley of the Heart

Projection Designer (Media Designer) – August 21st, 2014

Produced by El Teatro Campesino. Written and Directed by Luis Valdez, Scenic Design by Jay Africa, and Production Design by Joe Aubel.

In June of 2013, I was approached by Luiz Valdez to work on his new play *Valley of the Heart*. An intercultural romance between Japanese and Mexican farmworkers at the start of World War II in what would later become Silicon Valley, Valdez was interested in using media to help set the play in a historical context. During my first reading of his work, I was surprised how much it read like a screenplay, which was not totally outlandish for the venerated 'Father of Chicano Theatre,' as much of his works created during the formative years of El Teatro Campesino were turned into Hollywood films.[50] Much of the scene changes called for effects and depictions impossible with traditional scenography. Though never having worked with projected media on stage before, he expressed a desire to experiment, and recognized that his concept would not work without at least some support from digital elements. The design went through much iteration, exploring ways to blend the

[50] For more details on ETC and Valdez' work and legacy, see *El Teatro Campesino: theater in the Chicano movement* by Yolanda Broyles-González.

projected concept in with the rest of the piece. Finally, with our collaboration with production designer Joe Aubel and scenic designer Jay Africa, we settled on a large shouji screens as our projection surface.

Fig. 15 - *Valley of the Heart*: Shouji screen set & media design

The result was a polyfunctional set which (while possessing framed screens) maintained both Elam's theatrical incompletion and Nunn's observation that "the object on stage is, at bottom, what it is;" in the cultural context of the piece, the shouji screen walls were just that – the wall of their houses, upon which additional layers of meaning could be ghosted via the apparatus of projections. As the places of the Japanese and Mexican families were reversed as a consequence of the internment camps, their respective sides switched, but the latent codes of their prior living conditions, sometime reinforced explicitly in the media, remained. One moment of particular interest occurred during Act II, when Calvin Sakamoto was arrested while

in detention at the Heart Mountain internment camp for resisting the draft. Entirely unintentional, I had warned Luis that the center screen (due to the mechanical apparatus to raise and lower it) could not be rear-projected on, thus actors could be hit by the projections and cast shadows should they wander too close. To his joy, he purposefully blocked Calvin to stand directly in the way as I projected on not only the actual newspaper article documenting the arrests, but also a photograph of his real-world counterpart, slowly zooming into clarity over his torso. The result was a breathtaking accident on my part, though it was clear this was no accident for Valdez. By ghosting the literal newspaper as a function of that character's experience, the "particular" historical truth became engendered through deixis as a universal one.

Fig. 16 - *Valley of the Heart*: Historical ghosting

Media as Deictic Center

Interestingly, *Valley of the Heart* serves not only as support for my five tenets, but also as an example of an exception. While the media was framed by theatrical elements, it was also quite complete in its self-reference; anyone viewing just the media alone would have been able to understand it in a larger extra-dramatic context. The historical imagery was thoroughly complete, resistant to the will and gesture of

the actor, and was in possession of its own aesthetic, not unified by plot or character, but unified by the time and place of its own artistic genesis.[51] That is not to say that my design was lacking in aesthetic manipulations of the imagery; responding to the script calling for the video of an "atomic bomb" to play near the show's climax, I decided that too literal an interpretation would be distasteful, and filmed a red ink drop in an aquarium, flipped upside-down to signify the iconic mushroom cloud.[52] Nevertheless, this aesthetic choice was still grounded semiotically in the world outside the play. On his discussion on "Stage as Screen" within *Entangled*, Salter writes:

> It appears that some artists set out specifically to exploit the inherent tension between the quasi-cinematic-televisional aspect ratio of the frame within a frame – the screen set within the larger frame of the stage proscenium – and its abilituy to be greater in scale, scope, and resolution than human performers. (160)

Indeed, the scope of *Valley* necessarily had to be larger than that of the stage itself. Salter's observations, along with my work on *Valley* serves as a counterpoint to the ideals I hold for media design, identifying one such instance where media can and should serve as its own deictic center – when the play's purpose depends on its grounding in what Aristotle would dismiss as "the particular truths of history," as opposed to the dramatic ones. The *Romeo and Juliet* archetypal story in which *Valley*

[51] Fig. 30 - *Valley of the Heart*: Juxtaposition of the dramatic and the historical
[52] Fig. 32 - *Valley of the Heart*: Atomic Bomb/Ink Drop

falls would not be intelligible without this context, framed by the atrocities of the second world war.

Heart of Darkness

Media Designer – May 1st, 2015

Based on the novella by Joseph Conrad. Produced by Opera Parallèle at the Z-Space Theater in San Francisco. Composed by Tarik O'Regan, Conducted by Nicole Paiement and Directed by Brian Staufenbiel. Light design by Matthew Antaky.

I encountered a similar departure from my tenets during my designing of Tarik O'Regan's opera *Heart of Darkness*, based closely on Joseph Conrad's 1899 novella. One of the difficulties encountered during the conceptual phase of designing the show was overcoming the unequivocal presence of the original text. Like the distracting presence of star power, any adaptation of a work as authoritative as *Heart of Darkness* is going to be competing against the presence of the 'real' original text. My usual task of *dramatizing* the media – thus making it more receptive to influence by the performers – took a back seat to the more urgent concern: how do we portray Conrad's Africa in a way which allows the color and cultural breadth of the original to remain present, but also divorce itself enough from the original to stand as its own unique work of art. Just like the theatre actor's 'big' performance, attempting to drown out her body for the total transformation to character, the design needed to

eschew its textual body through something equally big – "presence pretending to be absence" (Nunn 6).

The solution, reached in collaboration with director Brian Staufenbiel, was a complete reversal of my usual ideology; instead of creating imagery related to character,[53] we pulled from a source which could provide a consistent counterpoint to the *ur text*. Pulling upon a complete illustrated version of *Heart of Darkness* by Matt Kish, I meticulously dissected and animated his pleasingly disturbing and abstract interpretations of the text to serve as a dramatic bridge between the original and the opera. The immersive screen was employed to do exactly as a screen naturally does – serve as single point of semiotic discourse between two discrete sources. It was on this encompassing projection – layered over actors, orchestra, and even the first row of audience members – that Kish's artwork was presented as a media element possessing a clear deictic center, upon which the other elements of production were represented in context of. While unorthodox, this was a pragmatic solution to a reality we had to face: given the magnitude and *presence* of the adapted source, there was no hope in creating deixis to the actor. Instead, to fight the monster, we created our own.[54]

Fig. 17 – *Heart of Darkness*: Immersive Artwork

[53] Tenet IV
[54] See Fig. 34 - Fig. 37, in the Appendix

Conclusion

Five minutes into Act II of *Valley of the Heart*, something akin to my revelation in the catwalk during *A Forgotten Future* took place – two epiphanies separated by years of design work. As the lights rose on the stage, an actor walked behind the center screen. A moment later his shadow appeared, obscuring the projected image. As he chopped wood, each swing of the axe eliciting an audible response for the wood block, I slowly came to realize I had accomplished something I had not intended to do; I had used media to create an illusion which, to the audience, appeared *real*. His shadow was, of course, just an animation, but the juxtaposition with a real body just seconds earlier had created an inductive association, and the illusion, assisted by the lack of detail inherent in shadow puppetry, was complete. However, unlike my reaction with the psychologists' flashlight, this revelation troubled me greatly, and poses a question I have yet to answer. What happens when technology becomes indistinguishable from reality? We arrive at a similar anxiety that Richard Schechner instigated through the *avant garde* blurring of the line between the theatrical and the everyday: if theatre exists in everything, then doesn't it become anything, or nothing? The dualism exists today between our perception of the artificial and the real, but for how long? If film and the mechanically-reproduced become indistinguishable from the *liveness* of theatre, will theatre live on, or will it by definition simply become one possible manifestation of film, framed not by the silver screen, but the proscenium arch? And when this event horizon is reached, will

film subsume theatre, or will theatre subsume theatre, or will the distinction itself simply become unrecognizable? Like an English word or phrase repeated over and over until it becomes semantically satiated into absurdity, if one looks closely enough at the boundaries between media, they begin to make less and less sense. Their resolution lies in distance. Hold 21st century theatre at arm's length, and it becomes legible. Up close, and the lines become blurred.

Returning to my troublingly emergent shadow, Mark Levenson, chair of the *Union Internationale de la Marionnette*, posits that digital puppets "must be at all times under the control of a live, *human* puppeteer, performing in what computer folks call 'real time'…resulting in a synchronicity between the puppeteer's control and that of the puppet's resultant movement" (Tillis 174). This is a definition I can support; in my experience, inherently stilted performances arise when live actors are asked to participate in dialog with pre-recorded partners, an exercise in ADR (after dialog recording) or lip syncing. Yet this test that Levenson proposes is itself anchored in "real time." Should puppetry, or indeed the theatrical form taken as a whole, be compelled to respect factuality, or genuineness? Is not everything we do as practitioners of drama illusory? In essence, fake? Moving beyond digital shadow puppetry, what happens to our theories when media appears as *real* in time and space as our *live* performers? Through such a chilling question is assuaged by the knowledge that a technologic feat today is impossible, *today* never lasts for very long.

And so what of these boundaries between media? Are they themselves grounded in something *real*, or are they no different than the anxieties expressed

when art as we know is threatened, the cliché manifesting quintessentially in the prototypical American's visit to the MOMA, throwing up his hands and lamenting "my child could have done this!" This is obviously true in theatre and opera, but they exist even in film, which is less reasonable given that the medium has only been around for the past century, a mere *moment* in comparison. The battle of aspect ratios, spurred on in the 50's by invention and proliferation of television completely redefined the shape of the silver screen, manifesting in a similar battle today between "traditional" modes of distribution and its new threat: Netflix and digital delivery. Another battle is being waged to change the established frame rate of the feature film, with Peter Jackson releasing *The Hobbit* at double speed, 48 frames per second. To the layperson, the polemic which has issued forth at this is absurd, but to some filmmakers, this represents a catastrophe; a threat to the very fabric of their profession and form of art. Is our anxiety to grasp at preserving artistic media indicative of our failures, or its own?

That question I cannot answer. Though I can contextualize my work in the larger discourse of intermedial performance, given my position as an active creator of work in this field, I know I cannot gain sufficient distance to understand it in its totality. Turning back to Pepita Hesselberth's *Cinematic Chronotopes*, she identifies one common thread shared by contemporary discourse on this growing field of study:

> They all, in one way or another, confront the question of how to analyze the cinematic within a world that is increasingly made up of technologically mediated sounds and images, even as they

> acknowledge that there no longer is (and perhaps never was) a place outside of it from which it can be analyzed. (4)

Will projections ever *feel* as commonplace and incorporated into traditional naturalistic theatre as the stage light? Perhaps the inevitable march of technologic progress will dissolve the audience's ability to perceive incorporeal projections as anything but *real*, or perhaps that same inevitable progress will only serve to heighten the difference between the digital and the human, unable to fool our innate ability to empathically connect with human bodies who are, by *both* emotional and logical reasoning – *really real*. We can but continue to strive towards projecting presence, exploring and unpacking the threshold space between the two.

Appendix of Images

Fig. 18 - *Anya 17* Abduction Van

Fig. 19 - *Anya 17* Church Courtyard Exterior

Fig. 20 - *Anya 17* Hospital

Fig. 21 - "Pillar of Fire" control room

Fig. 22 - "Kaleidoscope" nebula

Fig. 23 - *Peter Pan*: white set during segments of reality

Fig. 24 - *Peter Pan* catches Tinkerbelle

Fig. 25 - *Peter Pan*: Imagined characters and their doll doppelgangers

Fig. 26 - *Peter Pan*: The kite carries Wendy to safety

Fig. 27 - *Dead Man Walking*: Digital location augmenting a bare stage

Fig. 28 - *Dead Man Walking*: Unity of scenic and media design

Fig. 29 - *Dead Man Walking*: Fragmentation of location

Fig. 30 - *Valley of the Heart*: Juxtaposition of the dramatic and the historical

Fig. 31 - *Valley of the Heart*: Broccoli Dance

Fig. 32 - *Valley of the Heart*: Atomic Bomb/Ink Drop

Fig. 33 - *Valley of the Heart*: Benjamin chopping wood

Fig. 34 - *Heart of Darkness*: The Riverwoman

Fig. 35 - *Heart of Darkness*: Projected map of Africa

Fig. 36 - *Heart of Darkness*: Kurtz bathed in a spinning projected tusk

Fig. 37 - *Heart of Darkness*: Juxtaposition of actor and animation

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