

NETWORK DRAMATURGY: BEING ON THE NODE

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses challenges and opportunities posed by the design and production of network performance from the point of view of collaborative creative work. We examine strategies that, while referring to the network as a new medium for performance, make use of concepts from dramaturgy to better understand the relationships between artists, audiences and media. We characterise three distinct models for dramaturgy, particularly from the point of view of collaboration, authorship, presence and environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

We think of a network as being the connection of nodes and knots, the connecting of strings of fabric by fishermen to form their nets. A network during the 18th century was understood as a tool for connectivity, for optimising paths, a model for complex interaction [4]. In the 1970's through the term "global village" - a term that can be traced back to the writings of Marshall McLuhan [7] as well as through the writings of Hiltz and Turoff [5] the network is understood as a communicative structure allowing information flow across the globe. Today, we often talk about a network of friends, social networking and networked communities (e.g. Facebook, Myspace), the foundations for which have been laid by Castells with the notion of "network society" [[1]]. More recently, the network has been understood by looking at the 'paranodal', that which lies between the nodes [8], [9]. The network has also been aligned with the metaphor of the rhizome, with the notion of fragmentation and disconnection [[1]].

2. CREATIVE PRACTICE ON THE NODE

Although networks might be better described through topologies that expose links and connections, artistic practices are often situated and culturally specific. It is therefore worth pausing in order to consider the possible conflict between the indeterminate cultures of emergence and expansion of the network with the rooted specificity of most artistic practice¹. From the point of view of social interaction, the artistic encounter often occurs "on site": the first rehearsal with director and performers, the layout for an improvisation session, the performer-audience placement, etc... To think that the network will do without these basic questions of artistic

practice is to romanticise the technology. It is therefore useful to superimpose these traditional types of encounters with those proposed by the network itself. The notion of dramaturgy provides a useful framework for addressing these relationships and suggests a method for understanding artistic practice in the network. This discussion refers to performance as the encounter between an artist and an audience within a cultural context understood by both.

3. DRAMATURGY

The term "dramaturgy" has been used in theatre to discuss notions of authorship, collaboration, structure, content and as an umbrella term for a number of aspects that characterise performance practice [[6], [10]. Authorship and collaboration in particular are problematised in the context of network performance through questions of involvement of multiple sites/nodes and the relation between multiple kinds of artistic input. Notions of presence and environment become central to performance that is characteristically multi-nodal.

Presence, in this context, relates to how remote participation is rendered in multiple sites/nodes. Geographically displaced collaboration raises the question of presence when multiple modalities are at play; e.g. how can a dancer's movements be rendered for a musician situated on a different node? How do her gestures afford interaction from both co-performers and audiences in different nodes?

Environment refers to actual physical and virtual spaces and their relationship to one another. Strategies of merging, segmentation or juxtaposition of spaces provide significantly different performative contexts. The network itself can be rendered as an acoustic environment in which distance and latency have directly perceptible acoustic implications. This approach is evident in works like Chris Chafe's "Ping", Atau Tanaka's "Global String" and more recently in the work of performance collective NetVsNet by Renaud and Caceres which focuses on modes that sonically render the network.

With the clear need to address authorship and collaboration as well as presence and environment, three approaches to dramaturgy have been identified. Rather than self-contained categories these are better seen as trends that can co-exist and operate with varying degrees of definition. The delineation of three distinct approaches derives from direct experience with staging network performances as well as an understanding of methods and strategies frequently employed across music, dance and drama performance practice.

¹ We are specifically referring to the way artistic practice is managed through ensembles, festivals, companies, troupes, residencies etc...

3.1. Projected Dramaturgy

This model identifies one node as author and the others as contributors. The performance is designed primarily for one node within which the remote contributions, i.e. media from the other sites, are “projected”. The Disparate Bodies performance (2007), as seen from the viewpoint of the Sonic Arts Research Centre (SARC) in Belfast, is an example of this type of dramaturgical model [3]. In this performance, three nodes with performing musicians were involved. Presence and environment was addressed in SARC’s Sonic Lab by placing a physical stage in the centre of the performance space and virtually rendering the other two sites (Hochschule für Musik und Theater, Hamburg and Insitut für Elektronische Musik and Akustik, Graz) through video and spatialised sound on either end of the space. In this case the audience was presented with a relatively conventional concert layout (e.g. stage at the front) with two added virtual stages on the sides. In this light, the final performance was laid out so as to establish the performance space at SARC as being “at the centre” while projecting the contribution of the other two nodes. In this specific performance a mix of the three sites was also streamed into SecondLife, which was projected at SARC as a fourth audience space. Within the model of projected dramaturgy, each node can address presence and environment independently as the emphasis lies in the nature of the contribution.

3.2. Directed Dramaturgy

This is a model for dramaturgy in which an artist or group is in charge of the overall performance, i.e. authorship remains with an individual or group who take on the role of director. The director establishes particular content, contribution or expertise that is specific to each node, and it becomes the responsibility of each node to support the dramaturgy as developed by the director. The director will design a presentation model that addresses presence and environment independently for each node.

3.3. Distributed Dramaturgy

In this model, each node retains authorship while contributing specific content and expertise to a shared production. This type of performance is devised according to the relationships between the nodes rather than by specific nodal content, as there is no desire to control the content provided by each node. In fact, the amount and type of nodes may not at all be pre-determined. This mode of working means that media and data are distributed to participating sites. However, it is each individual node that “filters” the data to fit their own purposes, and thus each node is in control of presence and environment. This type of dramaturgy does not imply a coherent whole but rather a rich set of connections that are reconfigured and reinterpreted depending on the nature of each node.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper briefly identifies models of dramaturgy that may operate in a network performance context. These models have precedents in traditional performance practice but gain new significance due to the complexities involved in collaborating over the network. The ideas presented in this paper are extended in a paper by Schroeder [11], as well as in an online resource [12] dedicated to the documentation and analysis of network performance projects from the point of view of the proposed dramaturgy.

5. REFERENCES

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