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Video Design as the Internal World

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Theatre and Dance (Design)

by

Elizabeth Barrett

Committee in charge:

Professor Robert Brill, Chair
Professor Amy Alexander
Professor Victoria Petrovitch
Professor Vanessa Stalling

2022

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University of California San Diego

2022

DEDICATION

I dedicate this stream of conscious writing to my incredible partner for supporting me and for honest feedback and help writing every stressful email. I also dedicate it to all my roommate's pets who kept me sane and the woman who works at Taco Villa for being the most consistent part of my education.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Video Design as the Internal World

by

Elizabeth Barrett

Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance

(Design) University of California San Diego, 2022

Professor Robert Brill, Chair

In this paper I will discuss how video design can be used as a tool for expressing the mental state of a character when used in live performance. Video as a medium in American theatre has been evolving and expanding in recent years. Designers are searching for a way to integrate this discipline into their work that enriches storytelling. The medium of video can feel at odds with live performance, yet it can also be a successful tool for investigating a character's psyche. I will touch on artists whose work explores the use of video as a storytelling medium and breakdown two productions I designed during my time at UCSD. Those productions are Branden Jacobs Jenkins' *Everybody* directed by Daniel Jáquez in 2022 and Charles Mee's *Orestes 2.0* directed by Joseph Hendel in 2020.

INTRODUCTION

The method we work in says just as much about the work as the content itself. The medium is the message. What does combining recorded or live media into a production do to provide an additional tool for storytelling? What specifically about the process of integrating video into live performance heightens the work?

Video design is one of the youngest fields in theatrical design and often searches to justify itself. However, “youngest” is a relative term. Video has been an active element of the theatrical design process since the technology to record and playback media was introduced. Despite this, the ways in which video operates from both a technical and narrative perspective is still undefined. Even the name of the position has not been established as one can fall under the title of video, projection, or media designer. Since the rules for how video operates on stage are currently being drafted there continues to be debate on how it can be used successfully. I believe that video has the unique ability to represent a character’s mental state when used in tandem with live performance.

VIDEO AS MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

To deepen our understanding of how video can be used, it is beneficial to examine the work of artists who have used it in their practices regularly. Beyond the realm of theater, video is a staple of the arts world. Often the work tends to dive deeper into what video as a medium says about a piece.

One element of video is that it can also be used to mimic or capture moments in time and play them back in tandem with live performance. The work of Nam June Paik is an example of this. His work continually pursued the impact of mass media on the human psyche and art world. As one of the earliest pioneers in video installation work, he harnessed the power of developing technologies and bent them to his will. His work also occasionally accompanied live performance. His piece *TV Cello* consisted of three television sets stacked on top of each other. Each tv showed various clips of cellist performances. One of these clips was also a live broadcast feed and the other

was a film of Avant Garde cellist Charlotte Moorman playing. These three televisions were then retrofitted to become a working cello. Thus, you could play this sculpture while also watching live and recorded cellist performances. The final step in this piece was when Moorman played this instrument in front of a live audience. This provided viewers with three or more different ways to experience the act of playing music. The combination of both live artist and recorded video allows us to analyze not only what we see before us but what it means outside of our current experience.

We see this technique of tandem live and recorded events in much of the work created by the Wooster Group. *The Town Hall Affair*, a project begun in 2015, was an exploration of the documentary *Town Bloody Hall* conceived by Chris Hegedus and D. A. Pennebaker. This documentary follows the heated debate between Diane Trilling, Germaine Greer, Jill Johnston and Norman Mailer surrounding Norman's published article titled *The Prisoner of Sex*. In this production we watch the actual recordings of the 1971 debate alongside a live and dramatized reenactment of it. Surrounded by screens, the performers mouth alongside the film while also becoming caricatures of those debating. Juxtaposing a recorded event alongside a live recreation of it allows the audience to watch *Town Bloody Hall* through the lens of The Wooster Group. Specifically, their celebration of Jill Johnson as a pioneering performance artist and their commentary on the feminist movement and push back against it in the 1970's. This combination of live and recorded events allows for the overlapping of commentary. The audience can not only investigate the thoughts of those participating in the debate itself and the filmmaker's perspective but also see the Wooster Group's insight at the same time. This allows multiple lenses or views on a single moment in time to exist at once.

VIDEO AS THE HUMAN MIND

Video as a medium is uniquely suited to represent the human mind since the act of replaying a moment in time is an intrinsic element of both video and the brain. When this is paired with editing you then can create the distortion or tinting of reality through a character's

perspective. An event when filtered through the lens of an individual's point of view is now not solely documentation. This is one of the strengths of video design in theatre. The medium can invite an audience into the internal world of a character in a way no other design discipline can. It is a tool that is ephemeral and changeable. It can shift in a moment and can travel across space in a flash. It is excellent for painting fleeting thoughts, fears, deeply repressed memories, and nostalgia. It can represent the ghosts of past relationships, places, and feelings. It can function in the way a human brain does, tossing one thought to another or distorting reality.

Asking myself "why video?" over the course of my three years pursuing design at the University of California San Diego has resulted in a body work that continues to push and question when projection can be used effectively in live performance. I was able to explore using video as a means of investigating a character's mental state on two productions in my time here. These productions were Charles Mee's *Orestes 2.0* and Brandon Jacob Jenson's *Everybody*. Our directors, design teams, and the text itself created two distinct internal worlds. One is dedicated to chaos and fractured reality and the other focuses on decaying memories. In both designs, I attempted to portray the internal world of the characters using video.

VIDEO AS A VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF TRAUMA IN ORESTES 2.0

Orestes 2.0 is a Charles Mee retelling of Euripides' *Orestes* focusing on the war-torn haze of the titular character's mind. The directorial vision was to recreate the symptoms of the post-traumatic stress *Orestes* struggles with, and the destruction war has wrecked on his life. This play is the story of soldiers' shell shock and dissolution wrapped up in a Greek tragedy. It is composed with fragmented, collaged text mirroring its character's disoriented state. The production I designed in 2020 at The University of California, San Diego was directed by Joseph Hendel who referenced Dadaist art, Tadeusz Kantor, and California educational institutions throughout the process.

The entire event took place in a decrepit swimming pool in what the creative team deemed our Hotel California. The premise being that this once glamorous escape for celebrities in the 50's had been abandoned and its pool filled with decaying remnants of its former glory days. The set was designed by Miranda Friel and was a nest of chaos. Aging furniture crawled up the walls, a porta potty plastered in vintage porn acted as a hiding spot for the cast, and hole blasted into the side of the set was one of our only entrances. Lighting was designed by the Mextly Couzin who painted the pool in sickly greens and yellows that could shift to unnervingly saturated blues and lavenders on the flip of a dime. The costumes, designed by Natalie Barshow, referenced 1950's Hollywood, modern college wear, and elements of bondage. The design was a collage to mirror Mee's writing.



Figure 1: Production photo, *Orestes 2.0* by Miranda Friel, 2020

The most prominent video design choice I made was altering live and prerecorded footage. Video acted as a link to Orestes' failing mind. Through altering live feed and filmed content, the audience is invited into Orestes's mind as it eats away at his reality. A swath of wall behind the mound of decaying objects acted as my main projection surface. The trajectory I tracked throughout the piece was Orestes' mental journey as he came to terms with his assassination of Clytemnestra.

We start the piece with a prologue documenting the murder. We are greeted with a filmed autopsy of Clytemnestra. A chest piece was made to cover the actress's entire torso. During our first shot we travel up her body and we see a startling amount of gore. We are unsure what is reality as the dead Clytemnestra opens her eyes, which invites the audience into the processing of Orestes guilt ridden mind. The image is distorted and shifts between the bright lighting of a mortuary and the sickly neon we used to represent madness throughout the show. This preshow film sets the stage for Orestes internal state and the internal editing he is doing to process traumatic events.

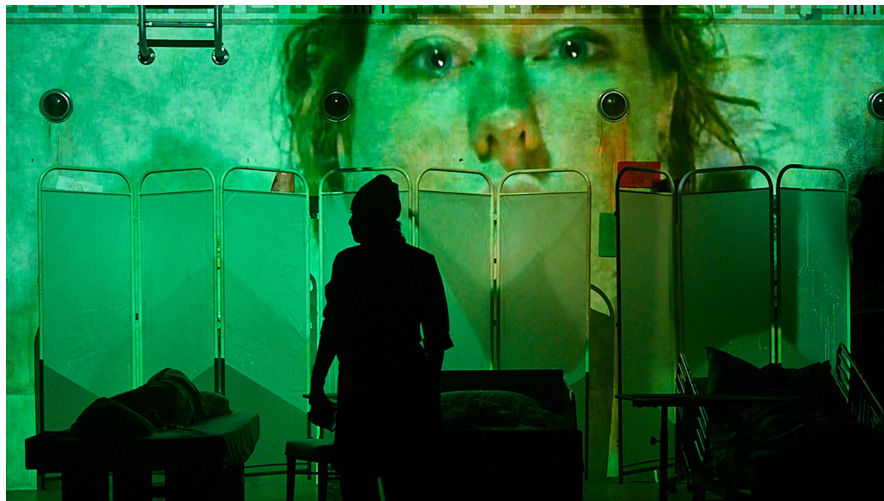


Figure 2: Production photo, *Orestes 2.0* by Jim Carmody, 2020.



Figure 3: Production photo, *Orestes 2.0* by Jim Carmody, 2020.

The next time we see video take over the backwall is as Orestes prepares for trial. His guilt is now partnered with fear as we are bathed in live feed. This footage was captured by a Go-Pro strapped to the oracle's head. A delay effect was applied to create a sense of fragmentation in how he processes these events. Just as earlier we had slipped between the autopsy and Orestes recollection of his murder, here we see multiple realities side by side. His mind is unable to keep events in order and his sense of time is distorted.



Figure 4: Production photo, *Orestes 2.0* by Miranda Friel, 2020.

The use of recorded and live video in *Orestes 2.0* allowed me to present the audience with a visualization of Orestes's confusion and guilt and how that has fractured his reality. We use video as a tool for documenting experiences such as an autopsy or a court case. But what does it mean when those things become distorted? By creating two different realities the audience can experience the filtered truth of a character's perception.

VIDEO AS A REPRESENTATION OF MEMORY IN EVERYBODY

Brandon Jacob Jenkin's *Everybody* cleverly discusses how we face death and what follows us on our way out the door. Based on the 15th century morality play, this piece follows Everyman as they struggle to find a companion to take with them to the next stage of life. Throughout this process we take a glimpse at both their past and the possible future. In this production, directed by

Daniel Jáquez, we created a liminal space in which Everybody is trapped reliving memories of their past experiences. Video became a tool for rendering these memories and provides a glimpse at the possibilities beyond.



Figure 5: Process photo, *Everybody* by Harrison Foster, 2022.

The set was a vast white waiting room with fifteen chairs lined up along the back wall. An industrial door with an exit sign is the only way out. The only other objects on stage were a potted plant, a microphone, and a clock. It was the internal, dying world of *Everybody* and a storage unit for memories alongside being a waiting space. Lighting, designed by Shelby Thach, varied from stark to vibrant and back again taking us throughout the journey. Specific costume pieces and props colorfully represented small textures from the exterior world. Within this liminal space, video becomes the way we transported *Everybody* between their past experiences.

Since edited content has the capabilities of representing distorted reality, it becomes a perfect medium for memories. Moments representing memory in this production were conjured in silhouette with ephemeral borders. The idea is that these represent the thoughts that slip through *Everybody*'s mind as they near the end of their life. All in greyscale, these sequences were filmed behind a translucent piece of visqueen. Light was bounced off the back wall to create soft shadows of our cast. These memories were distorted and faded in contrast to the bright characters that

would arrive following these sequences. In this production, video answered how to visually represent the way the human brain stores events and replays them.



Figure 6: Process photo, *Everybody* by Harrison Foster, 2022.



Figure 7: Production photo, *Everybody* by Harrison Foster, 2022.

Video design has allowed me to explore the most exciting aspect of theatre, a character's internal life. Its very nature as a form of documentation makes it invaluable for emphasizing an individual's perspective. This is heightened when we watch live performances and edited content in relationship to each other. The combination of a physically tangible performer alongside video opens the opportunity for multiple points of view of an event or experience. Using video in this

manner allows footage or live feed to take on the impactful role of a character's perspective on their own experiences.

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