Hotel Pro Forma's *The Algebra of Place*; destabilising the original and the copy in intermedial contemporary performance

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Abstract

This paper examines two questions that emerged from a viewing of Hotel Pro Forma's contemporary performance The Algebra of Place. *It questions how and why the viewer's perception altered when observing the convergence of live and mediatised performance, with particular reference to an altered perception of original and copy. It also questions the perception of space, time and the performer's identity in the performance. In an endeavour to address these questions two examples from* The Algebra of Place *are examined. Theoretically the paper applies intermediality as a conceptual framework to assist in the examination of these concerns. Then the paper reviews in more detail theories of space and time in contemporary performance, and theories of performative identity. The result of this theoretical exploration, in conjunction with the examples from* The Algebra of Place, *is a provisional concept – digital mimesis. By articulating a contemporary repositioning of mimesis beyond imitation, mimesis is proposed in an attempt to articulate the complex power relations between the original and the copy in live and mediatised performance. As such, the paper ventures to provide a lens for theorists and practitioners who examine and create intermedial contemporary performance that destabilises the original.*

Keywords

Introduction

In early 2006 I was invited to observe the creative process of Kirsten Dehlholm. Kirsten is the Artistic Director and founder of Hotel Pro Forma, an internationally renowned contemporary performance company based in Denmark. The new work that I observed from bump-in to opening night was *The Algebra of Place*. Dehlholm describes this performance work as '. . . a filmic arabesque . . . an art installation, a film, a performance, seen from above. An architecture with optical illusions. A filmic narrative that, like an arabesque, winds its way through many spaces' (Dehlholm 2005). Throughout the eighteen days that I observed her process, Kirsten deftly juggled the technical demands of three video installations, the mechanics of a revolving screen and the fusion of a DJ and live performer. The result was a one hour work viewed with a bird's eye view from the five landings above the central foyer of Axelborg Tower – Copenhagen. *The Algebra of Place* proved to

be a curious and mesmeric work which served as a site specific response to the architecture of the tower and a provocative inquiry of Arabic culture.

The dramaturgical structure of *The Algebra of Place* was created in response to the floor-plan of a hotel. In a moment of inspiration the rooms of a Canadian hotel, found on a website, formed the perfect structure for a performance/tour of the work's concerns. The performance started in the Main Lobby, which paralleled the actual lobby of Axelborg Tower. Then the space was transformed through mediatised images to other sites, the Gift Shop, the Heritage Ballroom, the Summit Ballroom, Club Room, Stage and finally the Phones, to name a few. Each room in the hotel had a different style and conveyed different content.

However, the content of the work was not the primary concern of my observation. Rather, it was the experimentation with the convergence of live and mediatised performance (Gattenhof 2004) which provided potent examples for my research. In particular, when I observed the work two questions came to mind, first *why does my perception of the original performance and the copied performance become confused?* From this question it is easy to discern that at the time I equated the original performance as being the 'live' performance, and the copied performance as being the 'mediatised' one. The second question however attempts to breakdown this somewhat simplistic binary. More specifically, I asked myself *what was the status of the space, time and the performer's identity in The Algebra of Place?* By examining these two questions I hope to draw some conclusions which might be of use to other theorists and practitioners engaged in intermedial contemporary performance.

There are two examples which I want to use to illustrate how *The Algebra of Place* provoked a change in my perception of original and copy, and provided ample opportunity to examine the status of space, time and the performer's identity. The first example is called *The Summit Ballroom*. Figure 1 below includes two photographs which illustrate this particular section of the performance. They show the performer lying on the floor with a field of red projected around her, giving the illusion that she was floating in abstract space. There was no particular narrative for this moment, or any moment throughout the whole work, rather the performance seemed to be a collage of thematic responses to Arabic culture. As I observed, the performer's animated shadow moved out from underneath her and the performer stretched out as if to retrieve it. Then, in response, the shadow stretched out as if attempting to return to the body. Understandably, in description this moment does not hold the mesmeric appeal of the event. Yet I provide this example to assist in answering my two questions, as it provides a succinct illustration.

Figure 2 is the second example from *The Algebra of Place*. This example is called *The Club Room*, and shows the live performer wrapped in a towel as if in a sauna. Here she floats in a space dominated by large projections of Arabic men who are in negotiation. When I encountered this example the initial conclusions I had drawn about live and mediatised performance required expansion. Later in this paper I articulate how these two examples are different yet similar, and how they provide a potential answer for my questions.
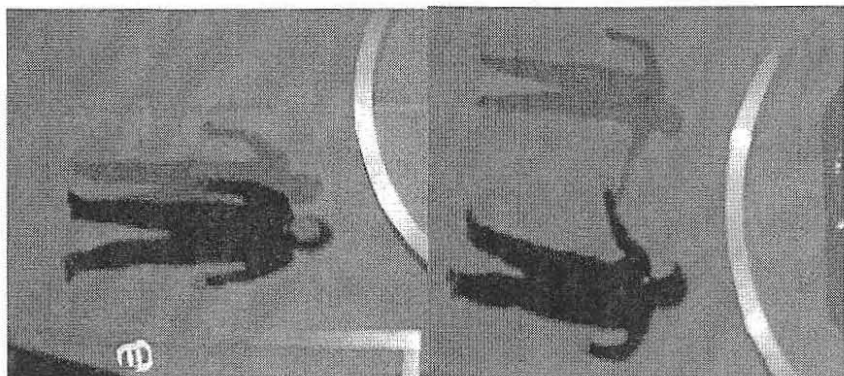
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Figure 1: The Summit Ballroom from The Algebra of Place (2006), photo by David Fenton.

An intermedial conceptual framework

First it is necessary to articulate how intermediality forms a conceptual framework for my investigation. Intermediality is a term adopted by the *Theatre and Intermediality Working Group* (Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006). The working group's task was to construct theories of media and performance primarily from performance theorists, instead of constructing a framework from theorists
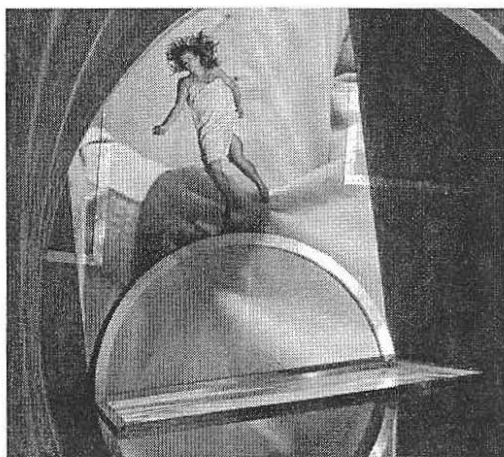

Figure 2: The Club Room in The Algebra of Place (Fortuna 2006).

outside of the field. As a result, they adopted the term intermediality because it best summed up the interrelationship of different media in performance. Accordingly, I apply intermediality as a conceptual framework to this investigation because it destabilises the binary position of media through convergence. Intermediality proposes a change in the position of the media, the performer and the audience.

> Intermediality is a powerful and potentially radical force, which operates in-between performer and audience; in-between theatre, performance and other media; and in-between realities – with theatre providing a stage space for the performance of intermediality.
>
> (Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006: 12)

With these three levels of interpretation for intermediality – between performer and audience, performance and media, and in-between realities –

this conceptual framework destabilises the fixed position of the performer, the performance and those who receive it. In particular, intermediality is not exclusively governed by the interaction of technology; instead a base interpretation is the convergence of media in performance. As such, the live performer and the audience in contemporary performance are part *of* that media. Therefore, when the performer and the audience are incorporated into the interpretive framework of intermediality, perception becomes the focus. 'Thus, intermediality is not reliant on technology but on the interaction between performance and perception' (Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006: 21).

In summary, when an intermedial framework is applied to contemporary performance it privileges the altered perceptions of reality created in-between the media, the performers and the audience. Consequently, an intermedial framework challenges the fixity of the contemporary performance form itself, which has implications for my question concerning my altered perception of original and copy when viewing *The Algebra of Place*.

Space and time in contemporary performance
Specifically, Chapple and Kattenbelt's intermedial framework challenges the fixity of the form by examining it through several well-established theoretical pathways. It's their privileging of the theoretical pathways equally and exclusively from performance theoreticians that confirms their original contribution to knowledge. At first they commence with the semiotic coding of theatre that is the concepts of body, space and time. Then, to encompass different theoretical positions on performance, they expand the model from the semiotic, to the textual and then to the performative.

> Recognition of the textual, the semiotic and the performative models in the same space, irrespective of whether or not one model or the other is dominant in a particular performance, is an important part of intermediality.
>
> (Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006: 22)

In particular the semiotic codes of space, time and 'the body' are privileged in my investigation, however and unavoidably, this initial theoretical position inevitably becomes enmeshed in theories of the performative and the textual.

When considering of space and time in contemporary performance practice, Chapple and Kattenbelt's intermedial framework appears to be complementary to David E. R. George and Alan Read's theorising on space and time in performance. George and Read theorise on the potentiality of contemporary performance generated by its ambiguity. Provocatively, George asserts that 'To create one version of a performance is simultaneously to evoke others' (George 1996: 20). Here George is addressing the ambiguity of meaning created by multiple potentials evoked in a contemporary performance. His comment agrees with Read's understanding of impotentiality, in what he refers to as Live Art. 'It is the exposure to an equivalent state of impotentiality, shared by performer and audience within Live Art acts that mark out the experience for me as remarkable . . .' (Read 2004: 247).

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To clarify, Read and George are asserting what does *not* happen in contemporary performance is just as potent as what happens. In this way the ambiguity of contemporary performance generates possibilities which imaginatively evoke other versions of the work for the viewer.

This notion of 'potential versions', supports George's assertion that space and time in performance is doubled. 'A performance is "present" in a spatial as well as a temporal sense, it is happening here. That "here" however, is similarly doubled and ambiguous . . .' (George 1996: 21). Accordingly, both Read and George contend that space and time in contemporary performance is destabilised because of a change in the audience's perception provoked by the work's potentiality.

Similarly, Chapple and Kattenbelt contend that it is also the observer's response to the work, positioned as they are *in-between* media that manipulates the space and time of the performance.

> In post-dramatic theatre,[1] manipulation of space and time is often, but not always, accomplished through other media operating 'as performers' in the performance space . . . The arrival of the post-structuralist debate opens for intermedial analysis the gaps and fissures in-between the text, the signs, and the performance, and provides a location for intermedial discourse through the body and mind of the performer and receiver.
>
> (Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006: 22)

By applying a poststructuralist perspective Chapple and Kattenbelt's 'gaps and fissures' in the work are similar to Read and David E.R. George's potentialities of performance. Both the fissures, gaps and the potentialities of the work are in this case created by intermedial form, which is located *in-between* the media, altering a perception of space and time.

These theoretical assertions clarify my experience of Hotel Pro Forma's work. With their application a clearer picture of the status of space and time in *The Algebra of Place* emerges. I consider the ambiguity created by the many potential performances evoked by the work confused my perception of space and time. This was particularly evident when the live performance denoted one space and the mediatised performance evoked another. However, what was even more exhilarating, yet also confusing, was when these two spaces and times vibrated and converged creating yet another potential performance in-between the form.

However if we continue to apply Chapple and Kattenbelt's framework, the performer is also considered media in the work, and as such I still require clarity on what was happening to the live performer's identity when she interacted with the mediatised performance.

Performative identity
For decades performance theorists have considered contemporary work from the perspective of space, time and the body. Conversely, this investigation does not utilise 'the body' as a theoretical concept to answer my questions concerning contemporary intermedial performance. Instead of

1 Chapple and Kattenbelt are utilising Lehmann's contentious term for contemporary performance, Postdramatic Theatre (Lehmann 2006).

or beliefs about the world; or normative ideas of what the world "ought" to be...' (Halliwell 1990: 11). Therefore, considered with its traditional meaning, mimesis is imitation, or more simply '...where something stands in for something it is not' (Piem 2005: 75).

However, contemporary theorists have expanded upon these traditional understandings of mimesis and the concept is now being repositioned in consideration of contemporary performance, where fiction and imitation are not governing poetics of the work. With this in mind Egbert J. Bakker identifies the principle of mimesis as 'what people do' and explains

> ... mimesis is an action noun informed from the verb mimeisthai (to repre-
> sent or imitate) ... Mimeisthai is what people do, not what things are. Thus
> mimesis originally does not denote a relation between the text... and its ref-
> erent, but between an action (i.e. a process) and its model.
>
> (Bakker 1999: 13)

Further to Bakker's assertion that mimesis is an action, 'a process', Lehmann, while acknowledging the traditional understanding of mimesis also acknowledges that there are different interpretations: 'Adorno's idea of mimesis – which he understands as a presymbolic, affective "becoming-like-something" ... rather than with mimesis in the narrow sense of imitation' (Lehmann 2006: 39). This is an important concession, for 'becoming-like-something' is also the process to which Michael Taussig frames his theory of mimesis from a postcolonial perspective. He credits mimesis as '... the magical power of replication, the image affecting what it is an image of, wherein the representation shares in, or takes power from the represented ...' (Taussig 1993: 8). Here Taussig defines mimesis through performative replication, where power is taken and or shared. In these contemporary interpretations the process of mimesis is an exchange of power, a process where *the copy changes or comments upon the original*, creating a confusion between both.

Taussig's understanding of the process of power exchange through mimesis is provided by examples between pre-technological and technological cultures. However, Kathryn Rosenfeld uses gender to provide a clear example of the power process of contemporary theories of mimesis. In her discussion on drag kings she asserts they are '... socially "weak" but performatively strong operatives ...' (Rosenfeld 2002: 206). She sees drag 'kinging' as taking on the representational trappings of maleness, in order to explore alternative masculinities. 'It may be that the general culture offers more ways of being male than female. Yet drag king macho, when it appears, tends to be more layered and nuanced than macho in the mainstream' (Rosenfeld 2002: 206). Consequently, through a mimetic act, drag kings relocate the power of the centre to the margin. She argues '... in such a performance, the copy "poses as" the original, in some ways becomes it, but also not ceasing to be itself, remaining, in a case such as the present one where the margin undertakes a mimetic performance of the centre ...' (Rosenfeld 2002: 206–07).

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Digital mimesis

How does a contemporary understanding of mimesis illuminate my two questions? Especially when Taussig's contemporary understanding of mimesis is explored through culture and Rosenfeld's contemporary example of mimesis is explored through gender. What is needed is a theory of contemporary mimesis from an intermedial perspective, a theory that encompasses the destabilisation of space, time and the performer's identity, which causes the destabilisation of original and copy in contemporary performance. And to do that mimesis needs to be theorised through a technological paradigm.

Therefore I propose the concept of *digital mimesis*,[2] a contemporary interpretation of mimesis coupled with theories of digital technology, as a potential contribution to discussions on intermediality in contemporary performance. This concept incorporates both form and process, where the digital is the form, and mimesis, the process. This theoretical coupling is affirmed by Auslander's assertion that the live and mediatised are not ontologically dissimilar. Auslander attributes performativity to both and posits that their difference has been predicated on the potential of their use, which is primarily an historical and contingent one (Auslander 1997: 3–4). Ironically, Auslander notes that the digital, based upon binary technology, has the capacity to '. . . dismantle cultural binaries, including the distinction between copy and original' (Auslander 1999: 106). In this way the digital form, which as Auslander (1999) asserts has the capacity to dismantle copy and original, reinforces the process of mimesis, where there is an exchange of power that destabilises copy and original.

The concept of digital mimesis assists in explaining what was happening to my perception when witnessing Hotel Pro Forma's work – *The Algebra of Place* confused original space, original time and original identity. The performance did this through digital mimetic process that exchanged power back and forth very quickly between the live performance and the mediatised. Accordingly, I propose a provisional definition of digital mimesis as *a process where space, time and the performer's identity are simultaneously dispersed and coalesced in intermedial contemporary performance, destabilising the perception of the original and the copy.*

The words 'simultaneously dispersed and coalesced' in the definition are included to describe the destabilising vibrations created by the intermedial form – a flirtation, perceived by the viewer, concerning the fluctuating separation and unity of space, time and identity. Essentially, this provisional definition of digital mimesis is an attempt to qualify the complex power exchange between the media which alters perception. To some extent the definition answers both of my questions and brings to my attention that they are connected by causality. As such, it was the potentiality of the unfixed space, time and the performer's identity within *The Algebra of Place* which destabilised my perception of original and copy.

Examples from *The Algebra of Place*

To clarify and expand this provisional definition of digital mimesis I'd like to examine more closely the two examples provided earlier. Figure 1 illustrates

2   Digital mimesis, although a term already in publication, has not been proposed as a theoretical process between live and mediatised performance. Its current use is to describe a process photographer Dieter Huber employs in his digitally manipulated photographic works (Huber 2000). It also describes a digital archive project created by Willamette University, (Anon 2005). The term also used to describe a process in 3D printing which is theoretically closer to my interpretation. And the most recent publication using the term digital mimesis concerns how Spielberg in collaboration with *Industrial Light and Magic* have created computer animations of animals for *Jurassic Park* using motion capture of real animals. However, this article does not fully articulate a contemporary theory of the power exchange of mimesis, but rather the purely imitative, (Delliquanti 2006).

how space and time are fractured in this live and mediatised performance, for performance cannot exist without space, whether it is real or virtual, and space cannot be performed without time.[3] However, in order to understand how the performer's identity is fractured it is necessary to acknowledge Butler's theory of performative identity. In Figure 1 the performer's identity is re-cited by the live body performing in juxtaposition to its mediatised identity. In this way Figure 1 is a somewhat literal moment of praxis in accord with Butler's theory that identity is not fixed but continually reconstituted through performative citation (Salih and Butler 2004).

Therefore Figure 1 affirms my concept of digital mimesis, where space, time and the performer's identity are dispersed and yet simultaneously flirt with potential coalescence. This is not a traditional performance of mimesis, one based upon imitation. Rather, it is an example of a contemporary theory of mimesis, a process where '. . . the image affecting what it is an image of, wherein the representation shares in, or takes power from the represented . . .' (Taussig 1993: 8). In this example the live and mediatised forms create an intermedial in-betweeness of perception for the audience. The performance literally confuses the space, the time and the performer's identity, provoking the question, 'which is the original and which the copy?'

So far Figure 1 limits the interaction of a live performer to a scale avatar, but not all examples in *The Algebra of Place* were this clear. For instance, in Figure 2 the live performer was placed in a digital field which did not produce a mimetic imitation of her. Rather, a man was represented, whose scale varied significantly. Could this be considered an example of digital mimesis?

Figure 2 includes live and the mediatised forms, and as a consequence space and time are fractured, yet once again with regard to the performer's identity this example is complex. The digital image in this example is mimetic because it represents one or a combination of these three things, 'actual reality, past or the present, (popular) conceptions of, or beliefs about the world; or normative ideas of what the world "ought" to be . . .' (Halliwell 1990: 11). Yet if the digital field is not mimetically specific to the live performer how then does her identity fracture? Equally, how can a contemporary definition of mimesis, the power exchange between copy and original, be applied in this example?

I propose that the key *is* the fracturing of space and time, that when a live performer interacts with a clearly representational digital image a translocation of identity occurs. This translocation of identity simply means that the identity seems to be in several places at once (Giannachi 2004). One place is the live performer in the corporeal world, the other is the performer located in the virtual, where her scale, proportions and even her interaction with gravity can vary. This is of course an optical illusion. Nevertheless, what it provides is a fracturing of the performer's identity *because* of the fracturing of space and time. Accordingly, the notion of translocal identity in performance engages our contemporary understanding of mimesis. A confusion of perception is created in the viewer through

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the mimetic exchange of power, where the copy changes or comments upon the original. As such, I propose that space, time and identity can fracture even if the digital representations are devoid of scale avatars, because the identity continues to be translocal.

In conclusion

What then is similar and or different about these two examples? Figures 1 and 2 are similar in as much as they both provide an example of the fracturing of space and time *because* of the convergence of live and mediatised performance. However, this is the minimum of my criteria for digital mimesis.

Figure 1 advances the illustration of digital mimesis through its content, which demonstrates a literal split of identity. Nevertheless, Figure 1 is limited with regard to the destabilisation of the performer's identity as it does not provide a convincing translocation of identity by *mimetically* representing another space and time. Instead it provides an abstracted field of light, rather than a representational one. The only mimetic quality we can attribute to Figure 1 is the content, the performer's literal split through the mediatised image.

Whereas in contrast to Figure 1, Figure 2 demonstrates the fracturing of space and time through other locations. And as such, it is the translocation of the identity, appearing as it were in different space-times, which offers a more convincing illustration of the concept of digital mimesis.

If digital mimesis can be succinctly defined as a process *where space, time and the performer's identity are simultaneously dispersed and coalesced in intermedial contemporary performance, destabilising the perception of the original and the copy,* how then do these examples collectively contribute to a better understanding of the concept? Together they illustrate that once a performer's live performance converges with a mediatised performance, their identity fractures because of their translocation in different space and times. However, and more importantly, the examples affirm that both aspects of the performance must be representational, that they must have a mimetic relationship, but not strictly one governed by imitation. Rather, in this case the mimetic replication must supersede a traditional imitative understanding of mimesis, to embrace a contemporary understanding which creates an altered perception of original and copy.

With this regard the concept of digital mimesis answers both of my initial questions concerning the confusion of original and copy, and the perception of time, space and the performer's identity in *The Algebra of Place*. I contend that there is a causal relationship between the two questions. And that space, time and identity were in flux when I observed *The Algebra of Place*, which led to my altered perception of copy and original. Consequently, the concept of digital mimesis answers both questions, it is chiefly concerned with unpacking what appears to be an ontological destabilisation of original and copy between live and mediatised performance, where the fixity of the original is challenged through intermediality. As such, I propose that since the intermedial practice of Hotel Pro Forma is not uncommon in contemporary

performance practice world wide, that digital mimesis may be a concept of use for the analysis of other intermedial works which deliberately, or inadvertently, destabilise the ontology of the original.

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