



www.scenographytoday.com
ISSN 2446-211X

February, 2017

Technologized Bodies – Cyborg Scenographies
Emmanouela Vogiatzaki - Krukowski

University of Peloponnese
School of Fine Arts
Department of Theatre Studies

Technologized Bodies – Cyborg Scenographies

Emmanouela Vogiatzaki - Krukowski

University of Peloponnese
School of Fine Arts
Department of Theatre Studies

I Introduction

In a cyborg performance, the ways of creating a set, directing a body and interacting with the spectator are very much different from any ordinary performance. When the technology enters, extends or amplifies the human body, the performance space adjusts to new narrative conditions. A cyborg performer can affect the Scenography and sometimes transform the space into a cyborg environment. This article is a study about cyborg Scenographies, spaces which incorporate organic and mechanical elements, control systems with technologized human bodies. Directing such Scenographies is like programming a system, viewing such spectacles can sometimes turn the spectator into a user. This kind of transformations in performance art raise questions, such as: what kind of Art do we create nowadays and what kind of worlds do we build? Do we need to re-evaluate things, realise new situations and decide about what we want to say and how to express it?

II. Art and Scenography

In this article we claim that Art is an action closely related to an artist, a necessity, a way of communicating messages that the creator would not be able to accomplish in any other way or by any other means. Art is a deeply corporal action. We claim that if there was no medical science, Art would probably be the greatest human bodily activity or praxis. Scenography is inevitably associated with corporeality. It corresponds with great sensitivity to the needs of a contemporary performance, changes characteristics and adjusts to modern narratives. Scenography is a world created by an artist, a dreamer creator. Each artist produces work to the likeness of her/his image. It is very difficult for the creation to be different from the creator.

This is why Bachelard relates the space with our experience of the “home” and Heidegger suggests that “*the human body ... must be an active alerted body, sensitive to the qualities of space*”. It is not accidental that in the history of philosophy, scholars accept that “*space has been construed on the basis of bodies ... as either occupied or empty*”.

Our bodies and our lives are included within the spaces that we create. Our bodies are the space in which we dwell. We exist inside our scenographies and we extend ourselves through them. In many cases the narrative power of the space, closed or opened one, combined with the use of new and old means, dissolves the borderline between the body and its environment. The space can “speak” as much as our bodies can sense. Set design is the Art of the space, which surrounds us by including us.

It is in the human nature to first imagine and then to implement our imagination. We first dream, then plan and at the end we create. This is a common order of things to happen and this is the way we are used to perceive things.

IV Cyborg performance

In a Cyborg Performance the performer incorporates or adds technology to her/his body in order to extend, enhance or augment its abilities. Reconstructing the human body is like modifying the language of communication. However, body and space remain the fundamental components of the performance art. What has changed is the message and method of conveying it. Stelarc, Antunez Marcel-Li Roca and Orlan are the most representative cyborg performance artists. Each of them transforms the body in a different way, but all of them use body as an interface for creating environments and conveying messages.

Taking as an example Stelarc’s work, one of his latest projects was the “Involuntary, Improvised & Avatar Arms” (2012). In this event the performer interacted with his second life character. A muscle simulator dictated the involuntary activity to Stelarc’s right arm. Simultaneously his movements were imitated by the avatar in the background. The avatar also composed the sound, which was transferred onto objects in Second Life. The animation behind Stelarc was three dimensional and spectators had to wear 3D glasses.

In his project ‘Ping Body’ (1995), three sites were electronically linked through a performance WEB site allowing the audience to remotely access, view and actuate Stelarc's body via a computer-interfaced muscle-stimulation system. Although his body's movements were involuntary, he could respond by activating his robotic Third Hand and trigger the upload of images to a WEB site such that the performance could be monitored live on the Internet. According to Stelarc “instead of collective bodies determining the operation of the Internet, collective Internet activity moves the body”.

In both projects we witness a performance of an absent body, a wired body that executes involuntary movements. The muscles and the nervous system of the performer were stimulated by a number of physiological devices, smart sensors that were attached to him in order to activate him. The performance, in both cases, was a choreography without a dancer. Alternatively we could say that the dancer was performing his absence. The performer, while in the *‘Involuntary, Improvised & Avatar Arms’* project, very often kept an eye on his mirror image. He kept looking at the virtual self and the space behind him as if he was more inside the virtual than in the real environment. In the ‘Ping Body’ the body was extended virtually, as a graphical

self, through the Internet and “physically”, because he was activated remotely by the spectators/users (via the internet).

The plot or dramaturgy of these projects rely on our interpretations, subjective or objective ones. The title of the story, if there is any, could be: “when we live our bodies and when we leave our bodies”. When we *live* inside our bodies we permit ourselves to sense things, to exist as living organisms with physical and spiritual hypostasis. These organisms offer many pleasures to humans, but also one big disappointment: they die. On the other hand, when we leave our bodies, we expand ourselves everywhere we desire. We are able to repair every malfunction and we never die. We can replace every single part of us until there is nothing left of us. We disconnect the body from life so we can save it. We build surveillance systems in order not to feel ambivalence, anxiety and uncertainty. We offer ourselves a pre-programmed system in order to protect ourselves from something undesirable. In this case of a cyborg performance, the scenography is an electronic home with an automated mother. The narrative power of the scenography is the merger of the body with technology. In a cyborg performance the human body has been redesigned to interface with its environment. The “dramaturgy” of a cyborg performance is based on a story, which looks like a battle between the present and the future, the natural and the artificial. The body is beyond any sexual difference. People exist in a totally different dimensions by placing hopes and expectations in medical improvements in such areas as genetics, nanotechnology, stem-cell research, and all these combined with computing. It is a postmodern dream to conquer human fragility and death. It seems that in a pursuit of immortality and perfection, contemporary humans jeopardize creating something other than human. It is difficult to direct this kind of scenario. There is no protagonist or director. There is a fusion between the metal and flesh, spirit and computational systems, which blends directing, set design and user interfaces.

V Technologized body - Cyborg Scenography

No matter how we see the merging of the body, technology and space, it is obvious that the human body extends into the environment as much as the environment and technology extend inside the body. As Stelarc points out when he talks about his projects “the body is seeing as a sculptural medium. The body is a sculpture inserted in a space among other sculptural elements. The body is not seen as a personality. The body is seen as an evolutionary architecture” with “an internal surveillance system.” Nonetheless, evolution can be created whenever and wherever there is some kind of “movement” or energy. Energy can come from natural phenomena and exists in every living organism. Something cannot evolve only when it is dead. The exchange of energy between the living body (later cyborg) and the space results in a mixed environment, which is nothing else than a cyborg scenography, which absorbs the human organism. According to Gabriella Giannachi the cyborg body not only is interconnected with its environment but also is read within its environment.

VI Socio-political body - Socio-political stage

The fact that the cyborg performer integrates with her/his environment in a similar manner as the human incorporates technology into her/his body is a result of our modern times. The body becomes the palimpsest of society. On the other hand, a mechanical body in which there are obeying parts and commanding parts (functioning under surveillance systems), that is, a body subject to relations of power and governance. Thus, we can claim that the set design reflects the artist's world, which inevitably mirrors the society where she/he belongs, offering at the same time in the space the political values and characteristics that carries inside her/him.

The focal characteristics of the political body are regulation, surveillance and control. Therefore, the scenography, the home of a cyborg human performer, could not escape from the fate of being cyborg environment. The design of the space used to acquire socio-political characteristics since the human became a socio-political being; possibly since ever. What makes a big difference nowadays is the way in which these spaces transmit messages and the messages that contemporary societies transmit through them.

VII Conclusions

Without considering the cyborg body as the Principal Symbol of Our Era, but as a figure created by our times, we should take into account that it signifies the human ambition to freedom, while at the same time it almost suggests its termination. The way that freedom is defined at this point, as well as its end, can have multiple interpretations. One of them is that the anxiety for liberation and salvation of the body – space from its death sometimes results in its gradual extinction while at other times results in its resurrection. However, whoever is resurrected, had to die first, and the death of the body – space during the performance can sometimes be a political praxis. The wish for liberation possibly implies state of previous captivity, real or imaginary one. Freedom and Democracy, Birth and Death are concepts, which mainly live or die inside us. We first dream about them and then we carry out our dreams. The Art not only reflects social realities and expresses social needs, but also enunciates the dream of the next day. As Andrew J. Mitchell says “Just as the human does not “have” a body, so too does the world not have the human”.

The argument at this point is that a cyborg body in a cyborg scenography for sure is not the Principal Symbol of Our Times, but maybe it announces the Future Figures of our Future Times and this is a political statement. The design of the space used to acquire socio-political characteristics since the human became a socio-political being. Redesigned bodies built to perform under control and surveillance systems lose the human essence. They become Scenographies, spaces with flesh and blood, controlled emotionless environments searching for a way out, looking for their freedom.

Technologized Bodies – Cyborg Scenographies

Emmanouela Vogiatzaki Krukowski

Bibliography

“The Aesthetic Theories of Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer” by Israel Knox, Humanities Press, NY, 1958, pp. 170, ASIN: B0007DNZoW.

“Definitions of Art”, Stephen Davies, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1991, ISBN 13: 978-0801497940.

Monaghan, Paul, “Theatre and Performance Design: A Reader in Scenography”, Australasian Drama Studies journal, issue: 61, October 2012.

“Heidegger among the Sculptors: Body, Space, and the Art of Dwelling” by Andrew J. Mitchell, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2010, pp. 43, ISBN 13: 978 0804770231.

“Cyborgism: Cyborgs, Performance and Society” by David Kreps, Lulu.com, 2007, ISBN-13: 978-1847537218.

<http://moniszko.blogspot.gr/2012/10/stelarc-involuntary-and-improvised-arm.html> (accessed 20/07/2014).

<http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/ping-body/> (accessed 20/07/2014).

“Performance and Society” by David Kreps, Lulu.com, ISBN 978-1-84753-721-8.

Sutton, Agneta, “This Mortal Flesh: Incarnation and Bioethics”, Ethics & Medicine journal, volume 27, issue 2, 2011.

“Screener for Stelarc - The Body is Obsolete”, interview by Contemporary Arts Media, uploaded on 28th of August 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OKEfJRe4uys> (accessed 16/07/2014).

“Extended-Body: Interview with Stelarc, Paolo Atzori and Kirk Woolford”, Academy of Media Arts, Cologne, Germany http://web.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/stelarc/a29-extended_body.html (accessed 20/07/2014).

“Virtual Theatres: An Introduction” by Gabriella Giannachi, Routledge, NY, 2004, ISBN-13: 978-0415283793.

“The Body Social: Symbolism, Self, and Society” by Anthony Synnott, Routledge NY, 1993.

“Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power, and Corporeality” by Moira Gatens, Routledge, London, 1996.

Haraway, Donna, "Awash in Urine: DES and Premarin® in Multispecies Responsibility", *Women's Studies Quarterly journal*, volume 40, issue 1-2, 2012.

"Heidegger among the Sculptors: Body, Space, and the Art of Dwelling" by Andrew J. Mitchell, Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA), 2010.