



MARGINS MARGES MARGINI

Rivista Multilingue
di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Culturali

Staging the Virtual/Virtualising the Stage: From Theory to Practice

Giuseppe Capalbo

(Università degli Studi di Roma Tor Vergata, IT)

Abstract

This paper examines the interrelated practices of virtual theatre and video art. The first part establishes the contextual and methodological framework by considering how the so-called 'virtual turn' has shaped modes of authorship in contemporary theatre and video art. In doing so, it identifies and explores two central concepts within these fields: embodiment and spatiality. The second part presents two case studies. First, *MDLSX* and *Chroma Keys*, by the theatre company Motus, demonstrate how live performance within a virtual environment can unsettle the cultural legibility of the body and expose the performer as both material presence and mediated image. Second, *Trilogia degli Infiniti Mondi*, by the cultural association AltroSguardo, opens up a discussion on genre categorisation, as it appears to introduce theatrical elements into the two-dimensional realm of video art, thereby encouraging a reshaping and shifting of categories and definitions.

Keywords: AltroSguardo; embodiment; Motus; spatiality; virtual theatre.

1. Virtual Theatre and Video Art in a Digitally-Mediated Twenty-First Century

1.1 Virtual Theatre

Theatre has long been a privileged case study for the Digital Humanities. Besides its inclusion in Roberto Busa's definition of the newly born field of study (cfr. Busa 2004, xvi), Lawrence McNamee and Edward Mullaly investigated how computers could aid theatre research in organising textual and historical data: "Edward Mullaly, for example, describes his use of an Apple IIe and the database software DB Master to reconstruct the career of a minor nineteenth-century American actor/manager from newspaper accounts" (Saltz 2004, 122). From a digital-oriented perspective, this approach is primarily functionalist: it archives dramatic texts and gathers information about the performance text and/or its author. As Antonio Pizzo notes, technology is here treated as a technical requirement rather than as an integral component of theatrical creation (cfr. Pizzo 2013, 20).

Emmanuel Alloa offers a different starting point. He observes that, "although [...] theatre seems to have served as a catalyst for thinking about the virtual" (Alloa 2014, 156), it has not always encouraged a precise account of theatrical illusion, or of what Suzanne Langer calls its status as an "intangible image" (Langer 1953, 72). This point should not be reduced to a simple opposition between theatre and reality. Rather, Alloa's formulation recalls an older debate about realism: Brecht's anti-illusionist theatre sought to estrange spectators from passive identification, whereas Lukács defended realism as a means of grasping social totality. In this context, the virtual does not simply mean 'unreal'. It names a potential or mediated relation to the real, one that may reveal the constructedness of theatrical presence instead of merely replacing the material stage with an imaginary world.

Brenda Laurel's *Computer as Theatre* (1993) shifted the discussion again by drawing attention to "the theatrical quality of human-computer interaction" (Giannachi 2004, 8). Her argument helps move the idea of theatre beyond a heterotopic space that is at once real and



unreal. The virtual turn in theatre and drama studies therefore refers not only to the spectator's suspension of disbelief, but also to the incorporation of new media into performance: film and video on stage, digital scenographies, interactive systems, and web-based dramaturgies. These are not all new phenomena in themselves; what is new is the extent to which they have become ordinary means of organising theatrical experience.

Two recurrent forms are especially relevant here: live performance within a virtual or mixed-reality environment, and the cyborg theatre. As for the former, Richard Schechner proposes, as a case study, the Builders Association's *Elements of Oz* (2016) – a multimedia production including the use of augmented reality¹ (AR) and a shared-with-the-audience app (cfr. Schechner 2020, 69). The Builders Association wanted to stage a live performance within a semi-virtual environment, thus creating a dialogue between the analogue and the virtual: indeed, whilst keeping the traditional liveness of the performance, attendees had to use their smartphones in order to truly 'activate' the show. As for the latter, Gabriella Giannachi uses the expression 'cyborg theatre' to point to "an art form that uses cybernetics as part of its method and practice" (Giannachi 2004, 43). The main difference between the two forms lies in how technology is applied: in the first case, technology is mainly applied to the theatrical stage (by means of screens, apps, and cameras); in the second case, technology is applied to the actor's body, which becomes the main locus where the performance takes place.

Web-based drama (e.g. attended via personal computers) further complicates presence and audience agency. A virtual performance may be understood as a process in becoming, because the audience's interventions, platform behaviours, and technical conditions can

¹ As Oliver Bimber and Ramesh Raskar clarify, there is a difference between Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR): "Rather than immersing a person into a completely synthetic world, AR attempts to embed synthetic supplements into the real environment (or into a live video of the real environment)" (Bimber and Raskar 2005, 2).



shape the event in ways that are difficult to predict. As an example, in July 2020, the research unit *Cambridge Digital Humanities* (University of Cambridge, UK) organised a 15-minute virtual performance entitled *Dr Tulp and the Theatre of Zoom*. Via the use of a cloud-based platform (i.e. *Zoom*), three actors performed an autopsy on a corpse (diagnosed with COVID-19), whilst four participants at a time were allowed to partially take part: the users' activity was limited to wearing and/or removing the facemask at the actors' direction. The performance was followed by a workshop that reflected on what might be called, adapting Ortega y Gasset's phrase, the misery and splendour of web-based dramas:²

- the actors' agency is 'reduced to a rectangle', since the body cannot move through space as it would on a physical stage. Consequently, theatre acquires features associated with film and video production: as Claudio Vicentini points out, film actors must adjust their gestures to camera and frame (cfr. Vicentini 2013, 236; see also Eckert 2021, 85). As Paul Budra argues of *Zoom Shakespeare*, the fixed grid isolates performers in individual boxes and reduces visual theatrical meaning while giving renewed prominence to voice (cfr. Budra 2023, 359-360);
- by using *Zoom's* 'speaker view' and turning off the microphone, the performer-spectator bond grows dim, as the former cannot rely on the ordinary 'light signals' of audience response, such as sighs, shaking, or laughter (cfr. Ubersfeld 2018, 237). Yet other signals – chat, reaction buttons, camera choices, or deliberate muting and unmuting – may create a different, platform-specific feedback loop;
- technology poses many challenges. For instance, the connection's speed affects the quality of the signal, and hence the communication between performers and spectators: "During its passage along the channel, the signal is liable to disturbance by *noise*, interference which hampers its proper reception" (Elam 2002, 31).

² The details reported here were collected whilst personally attending both the performance and the workshop (16 July 2020). For more information, see: <http://cdh.cam.ac.uk/events/dr-tulp-and-theatre-zoom-workshop>.



On the whole, virtuality has changed “the ideal of unmediated artistic experience and expression (live, intimate, immediate, embodied)” (Blake 2019, 3-4). For this reason, the present study does not attempt a comprehensive survey of virtual theatre. It focuses instead on the main theoretical and practical issues that virtual and digital performance make newly visible,³ especially the body, the stage, and the audience’s mode of participation.

1.2 Staging the Screen: Video Art

As far as virtual theatre is concerned, the use of video installations is common in contemporary performances. And yet, the term ‘video installation’ can be misleading if it suggests that video is merely a decorative addition to theatre: hence, Alfonso Amendola treats video installations as part of the broader field of ‘video art’ (cfr. Amendola 2012, 76). Although the history of video art conventionally begins in the mid-1960s, Lucio Fontana’s *Manifesto del movimento spaziale per la televisione* (1952) had already anticipated the relation between art, medium, and space: “Noi spaziali trasmettiamo, per la prima volta nel mondo, attraverso la televisione, le nostre nuove forme d’arte, basate sui concetti dello spazio”⁴ (Fontana in Bordini 2000, 43). Interestingly, Fontana’s attention to television is important because it frames the medium not simply as a vehicle for transmitting images, but as a space in which the artwork can be reconfigured.

Barbara London’s account of early video formats confirms this spatial dimension. Single-channel video, presented on a television screen, offered a two-dimensional projection on one surface, whereas three-dimensional media installations used several monitors and turned the surrounding environment into part of the work (cfr. London 2020, 27). A similar

³ Recent pandemic scholarship makes this focus more urgent. COVID-19 did not invent digital theatre, but it forced artists and audiences to test what could still count as theatre when physical assembly was suspended. Cfr. Allred 2022, 84; Fuchs 2022, 5-8; Sullivan 2022, 36-37.

⁴ “We, the space-men, broadcast, for the first time worldwide, via television, our new art forms, grounded on the concepts of space” (My translation).



distinction remains useful for virtual theatre. Some productions use one virtual wall or screen; others transform the entire stage environment through projections, cameras, and interactive devices. In Keir Elam's terms, screens may reinforce sociofugal arrangements, where performers and spectators occupy well-marked areas, or help produce sociopetal spaces, which draw partakers into the performance (cfr. Elam 2002, 58).

Besides the location and the number of screens involved, videos are usually classified as pre-recorded and live: pre-recorded videos can be edited before the event and then integrated into the *mise-en-scene*; live videos are captured by cameras during the performance and relayed onto screens, creating a metatheatrical effect as spectators watch both the performer filming and the image produced by that act. The distinction is useful, but it is not absolute: contemporary performance often combines pre-recorded material and real-time capture.

In Steve Benford and Gabriella Giannachi's analysis of virtual theatre, the introduction of audiovisual material into the performance requires attention to several time scales: story time, plot time, schedule time, interaction time, and perceived time (cfr. Benford and Giannachi 2011, 96). If story and plot time are widely known in literary criticism (cfr. Tomaševskij 2015, 315), and schedule time has always mattered to theatre and cinema (e.g. plays and films are scheduled to be shown at set times), the last two categories are specifically virtual-oriented. Interaction time refers to "the times at which participants engage with the story once it has been made available" (Benford and Giannachi 2011, 97): for instance, contemporary video walls allow – via interactive kiosks – the participant to make choices once they enter the virtual environment. Perceived time, instead, describes how the virtual environment as a whole can affect the participant's awareness of clock time.⁵

⁵ Of note here is the exhibition *Leonardo da Vinci: 500 Years of Genius*, employing SENSORY4™, which is a system developed by Grande Exhibitions: during the projection of Leonardo da Vinci's masterpieces on giant screens, through multiple projectors, and with the aid of a musical score, the visitor is able to transcend the



The use of video in theatre can therefore intensify theatrical virtuality. It does so by staging a tension between bodily co-presence and mediated image, and by making spectators aware of the time-space relations through which the performance is produced. The result is not a simple substitution of the virtual for the real: “In other words, it is in its *relationship* with the real, rather than in its attempts to substitute itself for the real, that the most original use of virtual reality is found” (Giannachi 2004, 125).

2. Virtuality and/in Performance: Bodily and Spatial Paradigms

2.1 Moulding Bodies, Making Cyborgs: Rethinking the Notion of Embodiment

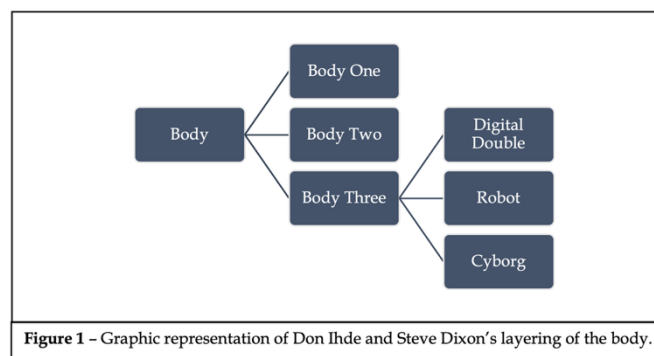
The corporeal turn in the Humanities and Social Sciences has challenged the Cartesian opposition between mind and body. It has also affected theories of the virtual body, since Donna Haraway’s cyborg is not a disembodied fantasy but an active site where power, identity, and technology are negotiated (cfr. Haraway 1991, 180). In performance studies, the body remains central because theatrical action is always carried, constrained, and made legible through bodies: indeed, as Richard Schechner points out, in Performance Studies “questions of embodiment, action, behavior, and agency are dealt with interculturally” (Schechner 2020, 26).

Technological development has fostered debate about what may be called ‘virtual corporeality’ and, more specifically, about the relation between the physically present body and the mediatised body. This relation should not be framed as a simple opposition. Philip Auslander has influentially argued that liveness and mediation exist in a historical and contingent partnership rather than as absolute alternatives (cfr. Auslander 2008, 60-61; Sullivan 2022, 33-34). Antonio Pizzo identifies two positions in the debate (cfr. Pizzo 2018,

surrounding world. For more information, see: <http://grandeexhibitions.com/leonardo-da-vinci-500-years-of-genius>.

113): on the one hand, the body as a fully interactive digital image, produced through video walls and computers (for example, an avatar); on the other, the body partially prostheticised through technological elements. Conversely, Antonio Caronia distinguishes three kinds of body: ‘replicated body’ (i.e. clone), ‘invaded body’ (i.e. the biotechnological body), and ‘scattered body’ (i.e. the dematerialized body, as a result of computational operations) (cfr. Amendola, Del Gaudio, and Tirino 2017, 4).

Don Ihde’s model is more useful for the present discussion because it avoids treating these forms as mutually exclusive. Ihde distinguishes ‘body one’, the body of flesh and bone; ‘body two’, the culturally constructed body; and ‘body three’, the technologically modified body (cfr. Ihde 2002). Ihde’s standpoint overcomes any attempt to categorise the body: indeed, it is described as a unique surface made of several – coexisting – strata. In *Digital Performance* (2007), Steve Dixon expands the idea of ‘body three’ to include the digital double (e.g. the body’s projection onto a video wall), the robot (i.e. machines and mechanical devices controlled by a computer), and the cyborg (i.e. a machine–organism hybrid) (cfr. Dixon 2007, 209-332). For a graphic representation, see Figure 1 below:



Regardless of the framework we adopt – Pizzo’s bipartition, Caronia’s tripartition, or Ihde and Dixon’s layered model – the digitalisation of the body depends on a process of mediamorphosis, which Roger Fidler describes as the reworking of an existing surface (cfr. Fidler 1997, 22-23). Similarly, Anna Munster uses the term ‘digital embodiment’ to describe



a condition “in which the digital is not pure code nor the body pure physical extension” (Klich and Scheer 2012, 100). In this light, the performing body becomes a living palimpsest, a corporeal form made of layers of text, intertext, and metatext. Virtuality does not make the body immaterial; it changes how the material body is read, doubled, and circulated. Moreover, as Marco De Marinis points out, virtual embodiment involves spectators as well as performers (cfr. De Marinis 2013, 63): the spectator’s agency has increased as technological devices have enabled the fourth wall to give way to a broader idea of ‘empty space’.⁶

2.2 Virtual Environments

In 2016, Judith Butler published “Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance”, where she links embodiment to the infrastructures that support or fail to support bodies: “We cannot talk about a body without knowing what supports that body and what its relation to that support – or lack of support – might be” (Butler 2016, 19). The exposure of one’s body through performance is therefore always place-based. Butler’s insight is relevant to mediamorphosis because the virtual body – be it either entirely or partially digitalised – is interconnected with its environment (cfr. Giannachi 2004, 47). Jennifer Parker-Starbuck similarly argues that the cyborg body is central to the application of technology to theatre space (cfr. Parker-Starbuck 2011, 7).

And yet, Susan Sontag’s distinction between theatre and cinema offers a useful counterpoint. In “Film and Theatre” (1966), she argues that theatre “is confined to a logical

⁶ According to Keir Elam, the expression ‘empty space’ refers to the theatrical stage “distinguished from its surroundings by visible markers (a raised platform, a curtain, or simply a conventional distance signalling the boundary between acting area and auditorium)” (Elam 2002, 50). By breaking the fourth wall, these conventions are subverted, as in Brecht’s theatre: “There was no fourth wall between actors and audience – the actor’s unique aim was to create a precise response in an audience for whom he had total respect” (Brook 1996, 87).



or *continuous* use of space”, whereas cinema, through editing, “has access to an alogical or *discontinuous* use of space” (Sontag 1966, 29). However, the virtual turn in theatre, drama, and performance studies complicated this opposition. First, video and film on stage introduce discontinuous spaces into theatrical continuity. Second, when Sontag writes that “in the theatre, people are either in the stage space or ‘off’” (Sontag 1966, 29), she underestimates the extent to which digital media can place the same body in several spatial relations at once: on stage, on screen, in the camera’s frame and in the spectator’s mediated field of vision.

Along similar lines, Ubaldo Fadini warns that virtual environments may produce ‘technological alienation’, moving people away from the “possibility of the real” (Fadini in Mancini 2020, 21), and dissociating the body from the space it inhabits. Such a warning is valuable, especially in relation to forms of Technological or Internet Addiction Disorder. Yet Bruna Mancini also recognises that technology, when integrated critically into human life, can foster the spatial relocation of subjects (cfr. Mancini 2020, 21). For performance, the issue is therefore not whether virtual space is alienating in itself, but how particular works organise the relation between physical support, digital environment, and spectator agency.

Following Mancini, we may say that the virtualisation of theatre has created embodied hybrid spaces: performers’ and spectators’ bodies inhabit sites suspended between architectural space and virtual environment. Vincenzo Del Gaudio makes this point clearly: “Put another way, digital media did not only redefine stage boundaries, but also exposed bodies to relations with their image and their digital doubles” (Del Gaudio 2016, 98). Space thus becomes an active component of the performance. It may be included in Schechner’s performance quadrilogue as the condition that allows sourcers, producers, performers, and partakers to meet.⁷ Since virtual space can be computerized and interactively managed, it

⁷ According to Richard Schechner, performance scholars study the dynamic relationship amongst four categories of players: sourcers, producers, performers, and partakers (cfr. Schechner 2020, 60).

functions as a medium among other media. This process may be described as ‘space remediation’.

Space remediation implies the switch from the passive audience model to a dynamic relational model: indeed, interactivity requires theatregoers to literally ‘navigate’ the hybrid space. According to Steve Dixon, there are four ascending levels of interactivity: from navigation – which is the basic level of engagement, as the attendees freely move in/around the scenic space – to collaboration – which entails a response-based interaction (cfr. Dixon 2007, 563). Consequently, the participant triggers reactions in the performers – in the same space they jointly inhabit – and becomes co-creator of the media content. In this sense, virtual reality can become, in Giannachi’s words, “a space where the real can be seen inside out” (Giannachi 2004, 159).

3. From Theory to Practice

3.1 The Body in Question: *MDLSX* and *Chroma Keys* by Motus

3.1.1 *MDLSX* (2015)

In 2015, theatre company Motus produced *MDLSX*, a solo performance starring Italian actress Silvia Calderoni. The title refers to Jeffrey Eugenides’s *Middlesex* (2002), a novel that narrates the life of an intersex person⁸ named Cal/llie and questions the construction of sex as a fixed category. Drawing on Eugenides’s *Middlesex*, Calderoni frames her own androgynous life: “Ero nata apollinea e un elemento dionisiaco si inserisce a 13 anni nella

⁸ According to Judith Butler, the intersexed infants are “those born with mixed genital attributes” (Butler 2004, 63).



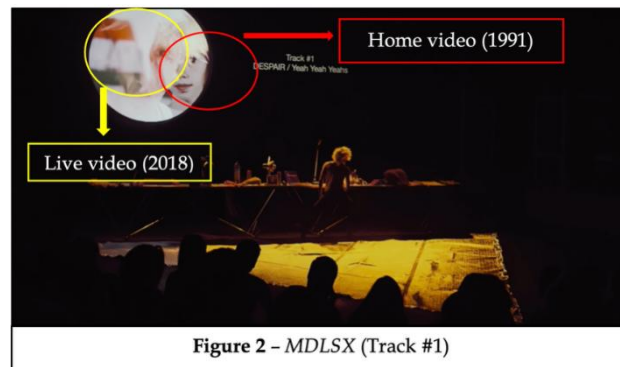
mia vita”.⁹ Calderoni recalls Nietzsche’s dichotomy in order to show how a body can be made culturally unintelligible when it exceeds the binary expectations through which sex and gender are usually read. Thus, despite the sex assignment she was given at birth, she was perceived as belonging to what Foucault would define as ‘the domain of abnormality’: specifically, Calderoni exemplifies what he terms ‘human monster’, since her “existence and form is not only a violation of the laws of society but also a violation of the laws of nature” (Foucault 2003, 55-56).

The live performance takes place in a mixed-reality environment: the traditional stage is combined with technological devices, specifically two screens (one round and one rectangular), a computer, a mixing console, and a video camera (an iPod touch 6g). Once the performance begins, Calderoni appears on stage holding the video camera, which broadcasts live on the round screen whatever she chooses to zoom in on. At the same time, she performs a DJ set via an Apple MacBook and a mixing console. Each song title appears on the rectangular screen, accompanied by an immersive graphic produced via the software *Resolume* (cfr. Gemini 2017, 162).

At the beginning, Calderoni plays Gianni Morandi’s *C’era un ragazzo che come me amava i Beatles e i Rolling Stones* [There was a boy who, just like me, loved the Beatles and the Rolling Stones] on the rectangular screen, while the round screen juxtaposes live images with a home video of herself singing the same song in 1991 (Figure 2). The audience sees the production of the live image and, at the same time, is invited to connect the fictional structure of the performance with the documentary force of Calderoni’s personal archive. In Greg Giesekam’s words, this kind of performance “employs film’s apparent capacity to show

⁹ “I was born Apollonian and a Dionysian element started to be part of my life from the age of thirteen” (My translation). Unless otherwise specified, quotations and images relating to the performance were collected whilst personally attending it at Teatro Morelli in Cosenza, Italy (24 February 2018).

‘reality’ to introduce aspects of the outside world into the ‘artificial’ world of the stage” (Gieseckam 2007, 24).



It would be excessive to say that Calderoni’s ‘actual’ body becomes a cyborg body simply because she holds and operates a camera. More precisely, the performance constructs her body as a body-medium: a physical presence that produces, selects, and transmits its own mediated image. Giannachi’s claim that “the body itself becomes both the laboratory and the theatre of the piece” (Giannachi 2004, 43) is useful here, but it must be applied carefully. Calderoni’s body is not replaced by technology; it is reframed by it. The live body, the camera, the round screen, and the projected image form an assemblage in which the performer is simultaneously operator, image, and object of spectatorship. In Pizzo’s terms, *MDLSX* connects the body as an interactive digital image with the prostheticised figure on stage; Calderoni’s body is therefore a body-medium (cfr. Gemini 2017, 161).



Calderoni also rephrases – or, one might say, translates¹⁰ – literary and philosophical excerpts, such as the incipit of *Middlesex*:¹¹ “Sono nato due volte: prima una cosa e poi l’altra. Alla nascita è stato stabilito che io ero F”.¹² The performance makes the audience read Calderoni’s body through the texts, songs, and images that pass across and around it. Her body functions as a living palimpsest. In Ihde’s terms, ‘body one’ is the material body on stage; ‘body two’ is the culturally constructed body shaped by quotation, music, and gendered perception; ‘body three’ is the technological body produced by the live camera feed, the digital double, and the surrounding screens.

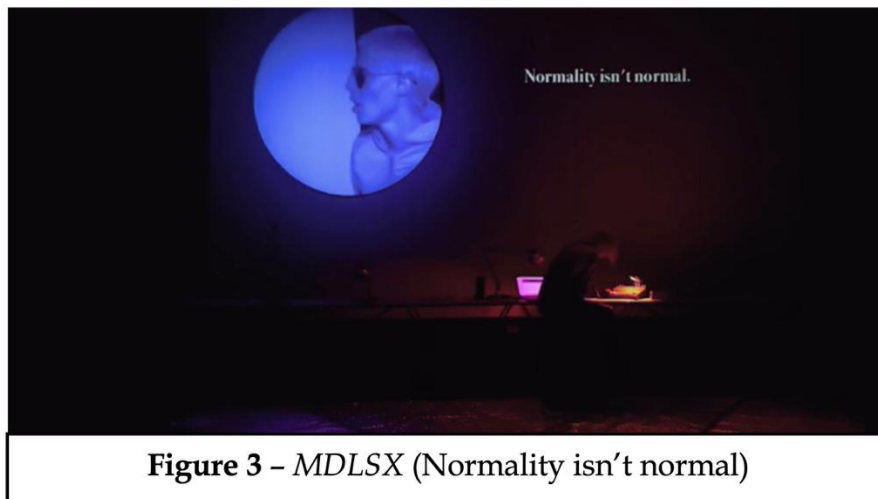
To take this further, *MDLSX* may be understood as a performance based on cut-up composition. Calderoni ties together selected quotations, songs, and videos, thereby disrupting linear temporality: the audience encounters a body that moves between childhood archive, present performance, and literary fiction. Calderoni herself describes the work as a collage rather than an autobiography: “Il lavoro non è la mia biografia, ma è un collage, una riscrittura fatta di diversi testi che vengono drammaturgicamente intrecciati l’uno all’altro e che, in qualche modo, coincidono con una mia biografia ‘emozionale’” (Calderoni 2018).¹³ The conclusion to draw is therefore that the blurring between the actual and the virtual questions the cultural procedures by which bodies are narrated, gendered, and normalised (Figure 3).

¹⁰ On the broader issue of translation for the theatre, see Soncini 2007; Bigliazzi, Kofler, and Ambrosi 2013; Guarracino 2017; Morini 2022.

¹¹ Jeffrey Eugenides’s original words are as follows: “I was born twice: first, as a baby girl, on a remarkably smogless Detroit day in January of 1960; and then again, as a teenage boy, in an emergency room near Petoskey, Michigan, in August of 1974” (Eugenides 2002, 1).

¹² “I was born twice: first, one thing, and then the other. At birth it was established that I was F” (My translation).

¹³ “*MDLSX* is not my biography, but rather it is a collage, a rewriting made up of several texts which come to be dramaturgically interwoven and that, somehow, coincide with my ‘emotional’ biography” (My translation). Silvia Calderoni has always been reluctant to accept the label of ‘auto/biography’. See also Calderoni 2023.



3.1.2 *Chroma Keys* (2018)

In 2018, Silvia Calderoni was cast by Motus in another solo performance – *Chroma Keys* – which returned to Sontag's question of "whether there is an unbridgeable division, even opposition between the two arts" (Sontag 1966, 24), film and theatre. The title refers to the post-production technique used to combine two visual elements: a green screen separates a person's image from its background so that the body can be inserted into another setting. *Chroma Keys* by Motus is moulded on the use of this technique in a live performance, which may take place either inside or outside theatres.¹⁴

Wherever it is staged, the scenic space is almost laid bare. Besides the chromakey green screen, it consists of only three video monitors. The performance begins with Calderoni sitting on a cushion outside the chromakey space while the screens project clips from several films; after a while, she stands up and walks towards the green screen. The audience witnesses the duplication of Calderoni's body as her actual body becomes a

¹⁴ For example, in March 2020 *Chroma Keys* was to be staged – before being cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic – in Verona, at *Laboratorio Gestito Paratodos*, which is a cultural centre.



composite image and enters the filmic scene.¹⁵ During this sequence, spectators are invited to attend both the making of the composite image and to the finished image on the monitors. The performance therefore includes both a localised site and a virtual screen-space: following Manuel Castells, the former can be described as a 'space of places', while the latter resembles a 'space of flows' (Castells 2010, 453-459).

According to Motus' founders Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Francesconi Nicolò, Calderoni's body 'sabotages' the filmic frame by entering its virtual space.¹⁶ She behaves as if she belonged to the scene, so that the boundary between stage action and recorded image becomes unstable. For instance, when she appears in a deserted landscape, she screams in response to what is happening in the virtual environment. At another point, she addresses an onscreen actor and creates a dialogue that was not part of the original film. Pizzo's observation that actors must learn new acting techniques for acting in virtual spaces, such as the chromakey green screen, is especially relevant (cfr. Pizzo 2011, 95).

MDLSX and *Chroma Keys* are both mixed-reality performances that build on an already well-established tradition,¹⁷ but they organise the relation between body and virtual space differently. In *MDLSX*, Calderoni performs in a materially dense environment: the stage includes the performer, screens, a computer, a camera, and a mixing console, all employed during the performance. *Chroma Keys*, by contrast, reduced the stage almost to a chromakey apparatus and three monitors. Its innovation lies in testing the border between theatre and cinema by placing a live body within a pre-existing filmic frame, thereby rendering Calderoni's body visible in two distinct yet simultaneous forms.

3.2 Pandemic Video/Theatre: *Trilogia degli Infiniti Mondi* (2020) by AltroSguardo

¹⁵ The complete performance is available at: <http://www.e-performance.tv/2019/09/motus.html>.

¹⁶ See: <https://www.motusonline.com/chroma-keys/>.

¹⁷ From the Wooster Group's screen-based dramaturgies to Ivo van Hove's *Roman Tragedies*.



In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of cultural events across the world because mass gatherings risked fuelling the spread of the virus. Yet the need for collective experience did not disappear. As Judith Butler remarks, “these forms of embodied and plural performativity are important components of any understanding of ‘the people’” (Butler 2015, 8). When physical gathering became impossible or dangerous, performers and spectators moved towards virtual platforms and social media such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *YouTube*, *Zoom*. As Barbara Fuchs argues, the lockdown produced a large-scale remediation of theatre online and made questions of liveness and co-presence newly urgent (cfr. Fuchs 2022, 5-8). A familiar example is Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* at the Globe Theatre, made available for free on YouTube in May 2020.¹⁸

In Italy, the city of Naples (Department of Culture) issued a call for proposals in April 2020 to support cultural events inspired by Giordano Bruno. Amongst the applicants, the cultural association AltroSguardo – led by Antonello Cossia, Raffaele Di Florio, and Riccardo Venio – submitted a project that stood between virtual theatre and video art. It was selected and funded, and in May 2020 it was released on *Facebook* and *Vimeo*¹⁹ as *Trilogia degli Infiniti Mondi*²⁰ [*Trilogy of the Infinite Worlds*]. Taking its cue from Bruno’s *De l’infinito universo et mundi* [*On the Infinite Universe and Worlds*], the work reflects on the relation between the world and God during the COVID-19 pandemic, when fear, anxiety, and illness

¹⁸ For more information, see: https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/learn/secondary-schools/playing-shakespeare-with-deutsche-bank/macbeth-2020-playingshakespeare/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=paid_social&utm_campaign=%7B%7Bcampaign.name%7D%7D&utm_content=%7B%7Bbad.name%7D%7D&fbclid=IwAR0wxYeM9UvLFvptmV0mv6gcS7oV_FFPjndi7G1JAQ3g22u6uWZJXzhPbW8.

¹⁹ *Facebook* and *Vimeo* are different types of social media platforms: following José Van Dijck’s categorisation, the former is a ‘social network site’ (SNS), which promotes “interpersonal contact, whether between individuals or groups”; the latter is a site for ‘user-generated content’ (UGC), which supports “creativity, foreground cultural activity, and promote the exchange of amateur or professional content” (van Dijck 2013, 8).

²⁰ *Trilogia degli Infiniti Mondi* is still available – for free – on *Facebook*: <https://www.facebook.com/assessoratoallaculturaealturismodelcomunedinapoli/videos/1091388051240619/>.

altered people's being-in-the-world. From the authors' perspective, the idea of God as an undefined entity who stands above us and hears our prayers offered one way of responding to the crisis. At the same time, the project also considered those who reject religious consolation and place their hope in science, even while recognising the risk that scientific progress may be tied to the exploitation of worldly resources.

Trilogia degli Infiniti Mondi is a video production: AltroSguardo edited a sequence of images, quotations, and background sounds, including classical music and actors' voices²¹ as voiceovers. Its opening offers a useful example (Figure 4). The graphic repetition of the phrase "Com'è possibile che l'universo sia in/finito?"²² is rhetorically effective because the shift from 'infinite' to 'finite' introduces decay as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic; the same repetition is also sonically rendered through voiceover. The work relocates theatricality from corporeal stage presence to dramaturgical composition, where voice, rhythm, and textual arrangement become the primary performative elements.

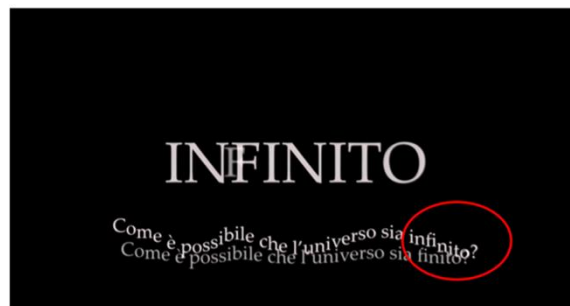


Figure 4 – *Trilogia degli Infiniti Mondi* (I Movimento)

The piece also needs to be read in relation to the pandemic rethinking of community. Fuchs notes that the digital became, during lockdown, the only feasible means of theatrical production and delivery for many artists (Fuchs 2022, 6-7). *Trilogia* emerges from this condition: its release through *Facebook* and *Vimeo* replaces the theatre venue with a

²¹ Antonello Cossia, Paolo Cresta, Raffaele Di Florio, and Riccardo Venio.

²² "How is it possible for the universe to be in/finite?" (My translation).

platformed public sphere, while its use of voiceover preserves a trace of embodied address. In this respect, it differs from *MDLSX* and *Chroma Keys*, where the technological apparatus remains visible on stage; here, the apparatus is the platform itself.

Trilogia degli Infiniti Mondi raises a question of genre categorisation: does it belong to video art, or should it be considered virtual theatre, in the form of web-based drama? In September 2020, I interviewed one of the project's creators, Raffaele Di Florio, who described the work as video art because, if performance is defined "as a live event – with or without props and media" (London 2020, 19), an edited video follows codes that differ from those of theatrical performance (cfr. Capalbo 2024). Nevertheless, the work also demonstrates what Seda Ilter calls mediatized dramaturgy: media do not appear as content, they shape the form, temporality, and mode of address of the work itself (cfr. Ilter 2021, 3-4). In this sense, *Trilogia* is theatre-adjacent because it organises voice, text, image, and audience reception through a dramaturgy of mediation.

This point also requires a more careful use – and an expansion – of the idea of liveness as a competitive opposition between the live and the mediated (cfr. Auslander 2008, 11). Allred argues that lockdown performance can create a 'contract of liveness' through temporal proximity and the agreement to be together, even without physical proximity (cfr. Allred 2022, 84). Sullivan similarly describes social media as a 'third place' in which spectators may gather as a communal audience and experience liveness as meaningful connection or 'aliveness' (cfr. Sullivan 2022, 36-37). *Trilogia* does not offer the same immediacy as a *Zoom* performance, because it is edited and asynchronous. Yet its release on *Facebook* and *Vimeo* allows responses, comments, shares, and re-circulation to become part of its social life. In this light, the audience's interactivity is responsive (e.g. the act of commenting and/or sharing the media content) rather than creative (i.e. the act of being directly involved in the performance).



For this reason, *Trilogia* is best understood as pandemic video/theatre: a video artwork that borrows theatrical procedures and circulates through the digital infrastructures that sustained cultural community during lockdown. It does not dissolve the difference between video art and theatre. Instead, it makes that difference analytically productive. Compared with *Motus*, *AltroSguardo* shifts attention from the live body on a mixed-reality stage to the absent or displaced body of the viewer, who encounters the work through a platform and participates only by commenting, sharing, or watching at a chosen time. The questions it raises – about fake identities and trolls, copyright, and platform ownership, and the cultural work of art during a public health crisis – are therefore not peripheral. They show how digital performance is shaped by the political economy of platforms (cfr. Taylor 2014, 39) and by the fragile forms of community that can emerge when physical assembly is suspended.²³

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²³ As Jeffrey Alexander points out: "Cultural performance is the social process by which actors, individually or in concert, display for others the meaning of their social situation" (Alexander 2006, 32).



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Bio-bibliographical note

Giuseppe Capalbo holds a Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of Rome Tor Vergata (Italy). In June 2022 he received a fellowship from the Warburg Institute (University of London, UK) to attend the course *Decoding the Renaissance*. He has conducted research on corporeality in modern and contemporary Anglophone fiction at the Bodleian Library (University of Oxford, UK) and presented at national and international conferences. His research interests include representations of the body, *fin-de-siècle* literature and culture, gender, queer, and disability studies.

E-mail address: capalbo@lettere.uniroma2.it