

COMBINING VIDEO PROJECTION WITH LIVE PERFORMANCE

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The recent explorations into the use of projected moving image in the context of live performance are not always successful. As a new medium that manipulates two extremely powerful forces (moving images versus physical presence) errors are bound to happen

the most common criticism to the use of video in performance is that the video gets in the way of the performers (or vice-versa). That is in most cases true. The performers are asked to compete with a force that more often than not they don't fully comprehend as performers (due to the lack of rehearsal time and experimentation periods).

There is a tendency to use video like we see it in cinema: A large scale back projection at the back of the stage.

When an audience is confronted with a video projection and a live performance, the focus tends to fall on the projected image and not on the performer. My explanation to this phenomenon is based on the psycho-physiologic construction of our visual sense. When we project an image on a screen at the back of the stage, or an wall in a warehouse, etc. and then place a performer in the space around it, we are in fact asking the audience to focus their eye in two objects that are positioned at different distances from the viewer. Unfortunately, our eye/brain cannot perform such an operation: we can focus on a distant object (like a projection screen) and we can focus on a moving actor/dancer, but we can't focus on both at the same time. In a situation where we are asked to choose between one or the other, it's easier to choose the image. The reasons for this are not fully comprehensible to me but I suspect it may be related to the more stable two dimensions of the screen and a tendency in our eye/brain to choose the easiest, though not more natural, focusing point.

There are three obvious ways of articulating live performance with video projection so that the viewer can actually observe both things.

a) The projected image is minimal, carrying a very small amount of information, either by repeating a small fragment, thus liberating the audience's attention, or by actually having very little content. e.g a still image as a mere backdrop, or video subtleties that bring the role of the projected image closer to a decoration.

b) by completely separating performer and projected image: this can be done by projecting only when the actor is not present/active or by projecting away from the performer (e.g. on an opposite wall, on the ceiling). This amounts to not actually integrating video and performance as both elements are not co-habiting in the viewer's mind.

c) The performer(s) move to the same level as the image projected so that the audience can focus on both things at the same time. This can be done by placing the performer very close to the projection surface, or, more interesting, by projecting the image very close to the performer (on his/her body, or on small portable props that can be used as screens...)

I am interested in exploring the last option and to level the dramatic role of the video projection and the performer, so that they can work together. The video image steps out of the screen to become a *dramatis persona* and the performer becomes a blank screen that can be projected upon. A dialogue can then be attempted between both forces. They no longer oppose: they walk side by side in the audience's eye.

In a more complex set-up these solutions can be combined: a simplified video backdrop and an image that exists at the performer level in counterpoint with a parallel projection away from the main performance area (e.g. on the floor that the audience occupies)

The technological resources needed to explore these ideas are not complex but are usually out of reach from the small budgets of experimental companies. Apart from cameras, editing equipment and projectors, there is the need to have access to vision mixers of some versatility and adequate monitoring devices (a small scale Broadcasting suite broadcasting to the projectors), though recent advances in computer power mean a great deal of experimentation can happen in studio using only a laptop, a digital camera and a video projector.