

Arfara, Katia, Aneta Mancewicz, Ralf Remshardt (eds). *Intermedial Performance and Politics in the Public Sphere*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018. 267 p. (ISBN 978 3 319 75342 3)

In the age of social media and the collapse of the distinction between public and private, can we still think of a public sphere? And if so, can intermedial artistic practices intervene in the public sphere? Might it even reconstitute the political efficacy of the public sphere, in the form of protests or interruptions? For the editors and contributors to *Intermedial Performance and Politics in the Public Sphere* the answer to all these questions is a resounding 'Yes!'. Expanding Habermas's considerations of the public sphere by drawing on Chantal Mouffé's theory of agonism, this volume offers a conception of the intermedial public sphere as pluralistic and agonistic. It explores aesthetic responses to current crises in politics and media (such as the rise of populism and nationalism worldwide or the so-called 'European, migrant crisis') in order to interrogate the notions of the spectator as citizen or protest performance, ultimately reading a range of intermedial performances as counter-hegemonic projects invested in rehearsing 'radical democratic citizenship' (5).

The collection is made up of ten scholarly articles investigating a range of intermedial performance practices from Europe, Asia and the US, as well as five interviews with internationally acclaimed artists and companies, such as BERLIN, Rimini Protokoll, Dries Verhoeven, Akira Takayama and Kris Verdonck. This mix of artistic reflection and theoretical frameworks make the volume particularly appealing as a teaching resource. I assigned it as the main coursebook for a second-year BA theatre class on 'Digital Performances' at the University of Surrey, UK, and found it to be very effective. The rich case studies, international perspectives, and urgent political questions assembled here, proved fertile ground for class discussion and writing assignment. As my reading of this book is substantially shaped by my teaching practice, I will reflect on the collection's pedagogical potential throughout this review and with a particular focus on the articles and interviews I assigned for the class.

After *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance* (2006) and *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* (2010), *Intermedial Performance and Politics in the Public Sphere* is the third edited collection to be published by members of the working group on 'Intermediality' of the International Federation of Theatre Research (IFTR), demonstrating the groups long-standing commitment to the

study of intermedial practices in the performing arts. While the first collection filled a significant lacuna, defining intermediality as a necessary field of study in theatre scholarship and the second volume highlighted the networked character of contemporary intermedial practices, this volume turns towards the public sphere and examines the political potential of intermedial performances in public.

Taking their cue from the previous two volumes, the editors propose a new paradigm, the concept of 'in and out', for the understanding of digital performances. This follows from the working group's continuous investment in accurately describing the ontology and experience of intermediality. The first volume located intermediality 'in-between'; at the meeting point 'between the performers, spectators and the confluence of media involved in a performance at a particular moment in time' (Chapple and Kattenbelt 2006,12), whereas *Mapping Intermediality in Performance* situated intermediality at the nexus of a networked understanding of medial practices, which are not live or recorded, present or absent, virtual or real, global or local but indeed 'both-and' (Nelson 2010, 13-23). In addition to the 'in-between' and 'both-and' approaches of the previous collection, the editors suggest the 'perspective of being both "in and out" of the media within social and political context' as a means of understanding the agonistic potential of intermedial performances. They argue that this productive tension between being both immersed in and alienated from media in the intermedial performances discussed in the book, gives the audience the chance to shift in their perception and allows them to not only reflect on their own subjectivity and agency within the contemporary, and highly mediated, public sphere but encourages them to think of 'their commonalities and particularities in contemporary multi-ethnic societies' (10).

After the introduction by the editors, it is up to Chiel Kattenbelt – one of the pioneers of intermediality studies – to set up the collection's investment in interrogating theatre in relation to the public sphere. Reading theatre as non-mass medium against film and television, Kattenbelt investigates theatre's potential to create a sphere of political access. Kattenbelt cites Habermas's main pillars of the public sphere: access to all, freedom from propaganda and contributions made to matters of general interest and contends that it is theatre's liveness that enables its creation as a public forum. Kattenbelt only makes superficial mention of how the emergence of the Internet might challenge this version of the public sphere and his reliance on liveness might be read as somewhat romantic. Whilst this reading of theatre might hold up when

compared to film and television, it fails to note that such media forms are rarely the main reference points for experiencing intermediality in the present day. Indeed, my students were sceptical of this optimism and commented upon the counterintuitive comparison to older media, when what they felt was at stake is the development or reclaiming of a pluralistic public in the age of social media. The comparison with theatre should therefore be made in recognition of contemporary media practices.

A more contemporary response can be found in Aneta Mancewicz's consideration of intermedial performances as a public sphere. Mancewicz, too, draws on Habermas and sees performance as last bastion of liveness and meaningful debate but her conclusion that intermedial performances 'foreground the performativity of identities and the mediatisation of social relations' (40) seems more relevant to the experience of living in a society dominated by social media today. Mancewicz's article gave my students the tools to begin grappling with the interrelations of public, private, and mediatised and alerted them to the wider political implications of generating a public platform of exchange through intermedial performance.

Two other interesting observations about the role of intermedial performance practices in the public sphere are offered by Katia Arfara and Christopher Balme. Both position particular interventionist performances as counter-hegemonic practices in otherwise limited public spheres. Balme's essay is concerned with the so-called 'toothbrush protests' staged by Romanian nationals aboard in response to a restriction of their voting rights. Focusing on 'protest performance as a genre' (62), Balme is interested in the political effect such performances might have on, and within, the democratic process. He argues that social media has made performance, public sphere and protest have a "more productive and efficacious relationship to one another" (62). Balme situates the liveness of the original protests in relation to the mechanisms of social media. He suggests that the powerful tools of dissemination offered by social media enable a more inventive aesthetic dimension of protest (like, he suggests, the toothbrush performance does) than more conventional forms of protests can afford. This is seen to reshape, and potentially revitalise, electoral processes.

Arfara, on the other hand, reads digital public sphere, itself, as counter to restricted and surveilled physical public space and assigns transformative power to digital practices that blur the boundaries between 'artists, journalist, activists, and historians' (176). By analysing Rabih Mroué's lecture performance *The*

Pixelated Revolution, a response to the violent oppression of the Syrian Revolution by the Syrian state, Arfara problematises the binaries, between analogue and digital, real and fictional, and public and private. She concludes that Mroué's practice of remediating existing YouTube material constitutes the creation of a 'hybrid public sphere forcing both the physical and the virtual the "new" and the "old" to coexist [productively] in the same aesthetic sphere' (186).

Both of these texts convincingly argue for the productive relationship between protest, performance and digital media, and offered my students a way of conceptualising their own performance practices (or potential practices) in political terms. They also offered an opportunity to have a conversation about the boundaries of art and activism and about the question what role social media can play in the genre of protest performance.

Ralf Remshardt offers the collection's counterpoint to the conception of intermedial performance practices in the public sphere. While most contributions in the volume are positive, or at least hopeful, about the possibilities intermedial performance practices offer to the notion of participation in the public sphere, Remshardt strikes a more critical tone. His essay focuses on the incorporation of refugee voices into the staging practices of subsidised European theatres – specifically Nicolas Stemann's production of Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Schutzbefohlenen* at the Thalia Theatre in Hamburg, Germany – and is sceptical of the political efficacy of such acts. Assessing that the postdramatic palimpsest of self-referentiality and the exclusionary practices of theatre as a middle-class and primarily white cultural activity, make it impossible for artists operating within these institutions to formulate a valid agonistic response to the political crisis. He isolates a moment from Nicolas Stemann's production, where the professional actors refuse the refugee performer's plea for action with the words, 'We can't help you, we're too busy playing you'. He summarises that in 'a certain type of (bourgeois) theatre, The Marxian praxis of aesthetic action will always already be subsumed by the Aristotelian praxis of aesthetic action' (77, emphasis in the original). Remshardt asserts that while Stemann's *Schutzbefohlene* successfully staged this contradiction it cannot find a way out of this contradiction itself, ultimately subsuming its critical gesture into a form of institutional absorption. This caveat is an important addition to the collection and highlights the difficulty to negotiate the tensions theatrical representation 'beholden to Western modes of reception and mediation' (85) and the necessary wish for art to carve out a critical stance within a pluralist public sphere.

Another central focus of the collection is the role intermediality plays in shaping perception of politics in the 21st century. Both Olga Danylyuk's and Zheyu Wei's essays discuss intermedial spectatorship and the affective dimensions of mediated culture. Danylyuk focuses on the spectacular character the mediated representations of the Ukrainian Maidan Revolution took on in the context of real-time reporting on the uprising. Labelling this the 'politics of passion' (167), Danylyuk traces the dramaturgies of immediacy and presence employed in (online) media coverage and describes the passionate identification and also the violent backlash these media strategies engendered. The struggle over perception and affective response is political. Danylyuk does well to point out the often unreflected strategies of representation these highly mediated and affectively potent protests are subjected to.

Zheyu Wei's discusses the way in which the Chinese production *World Factory* by Grass Stage – a site-specific performance that stages the distressing living conditions of migrant workers in the Chinese economy – employs intermedial practices to 'complicate the act of watching theatre' (224) and turns it into a public platform, in the spirit of Boal's Forum theatre or Brecht's 'rehearsal for revolution'. Commenting on the diverse venues the production is performed in and the various audiences it encounters, Wei comments on the in-betweenness of the audience, caught between the conventions of theatrical spectatorship (as a communal act) and the modes of potential political action, to again highlight the struggle over perception.

In both essays, the idea of theatre as a hypermedium, a medium that incorporates other media without changing their inherent nature (8), offers the possibility of a perceptual shift, where intense experiences (of state injustice in the case of migrant workers, for example) and affective responses might lead to a heightened awareness of a particular political situation.

Lastly, I want to mention the interviews included in the collection, which I have found to be a particularly useful teaching resource. More accessible than some of the articles, students eagerly engaged with them and interesting class discussions would often ensue the reading of these texts. Not only do they offer a compact introduction to a particular artistic practice – which is always welcome when teaching at undergraduate level – they also offer a way of thinking through very current political dilemmas posed by an increasingly mediated society. They touch on topics of surveillance, the politics of intimacy and privacy in the digital world,

and new biopolitical questions that arise from issues of data mapping and quantification.

In their interview, Kris Verdonck and Kristof van Baarle, for example, take up the discussion of the collapse between public and private by touching on the idea of an intimate public sphere. The shared intimacy of looking at art in the public space and the imposition of art into a 'public' space, Verdonck argues, leads to an interaction between different spaces: 'Inside and outside, public and private are flowing into each other like a Möbius strip. The boundary between inside and outside seems to have dissolved' (149). This dissolution is what creates the intimacy of public space.

Florian Malzacher's interview with Daniel Wetzel from Rimini Protokoll is a helpful reminder of the fraught lines of theatre and political representation. By referencing Chantal Mouffe's 'agonistic pluralism' they point to the problem of applying political theory directly to theatre (cf. 199). Theatre and politics, however connected by notions of the public sphere, do not share the same modes of representation and through highlighting this, Malzacher and Wetzel hit the collection's central concern: 'the classical Mayakowsky/Brecht question: is art the mirror of society or is it the hammer to change society?' (200). For the purpose of this volume, one may rephrase this and instead ask: Does intermedial performance practice mirror the use of social media in the public sphere or does it change it? Does it change something aesthetical, perceptually, politically? The answers the individual articles give are manifold but the collection taken as a whole answers unisono. In classical intermedial fashion it is a resounding: 'Both-and'. Malzacher and Wetzel best articulate this when they tease out the idea of theatre as a 'play tank' (206). In contrast to the think tank, which observes and advises, the idea of the play tank is to highlight the creative potential of theatre to collapse binaries. Distancing theatre from politics' pragmatism, Malzacher articulates the other forms of representation that can be imagined in the theatre:

[Theatre is] a place where things are real and also not. Or true and also not. Where I can watch from outside while I'm in the midst of it. It's this paradox: [...] I'm distanced and immersed all at once. It's enables the analysis you've (Wetzel) referred to on the one hand, but it also enables you to try out other steps that are not just fictional but that don't have to be implemented in actuality (206).

Intermedial Performance and Politics in the Public Sphere offers a wide range of vivid and well-written case studies and interviews on the possibilities of reading intermedial theatre practices as agonistic articulations in the public sphere. I found the collection well-researched and stimulating and would recommend it to scholars interested in the political efficacy of intermedial performance, as well as to lecturers looking for challenging, yet engaging, materials for teaching, which are invested in contemporary politics at the intersections of digital media and theatre.

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