

## **Dramaturgy as a model for geographically displaced collaborations**

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### **Abstract**

The network currently is not only widely used for performative actions but also extensively theorised. However, the artistic strategies in networked environments and the ways in which these new performance practices and cultural contexts can give rise to new design approaches have not been equally explored. This paper therefore draws on the notion of dramaturgy as it provides a useful framework for addressing design strategies and performative relationships in networked environment. I argue that dramaturgies suggest a robust method for understanding artistic practices in the network. The paper gives a brief overview of the history and the theories of the network as well as the histories of dramaturgies. This paper was designed in conjunction with, or as an introduction, to a paper by Pedro Rebelo in the 2009 Contemporary Music Review Journal (Rebelo, 2009), which describes in detail three dramaturgical models that I developed with the author in early 2008: an extended version of this paper will be published by Contemporary Music Review (Routledge), 2009.

### **The network is alive**

Although musicians have engaged in performances involving the network for over 30 years, the last 3-5 years have seen a particular increase in networked performance practices. A very brief overview of networked music practices since the appearance of The League of Automatic Music Composers in the late 70s gives insight into basic musical activities in the network: The League of Automatic Music Composers employed computers to exchange messaging data between players in order to make music in a networked environment. The group performed between 1978 and 1983, re-forming into The Hub in 1986. These two groups are often named as the world's first computer network band (Duckworth 2005: 60). Although mostly a group that connected computers together to exchange messages rather than pure audio

bandwidth at universities and new media centres, but also due to an increased recognition of net art within the context of arts/research funding bodies. It is not surprising that in the process of increased music-making activities in the network and enhanced research funding, which sits alongside these activities, the network itself has become theorised in many ways.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the various existing network theories, it can be argued that recent writers and thinkers have been pushing for a more complex understanding of the network; for an understanding that goes beyond seeing the network as an idealized model of connectivity and communication (Schroeder, Rebelo 2009). Although from a topological point of view, artistic practices occur at the nodes and knots of the network fabric, it has been debated whether a connectivist model of the network can be sufficient to describe the relationship between artistic practices and sites. Thinkers have thus urged us to see the evolution of networks as a focal point (Munster, Lovink 2005); they have argued for an understanding by which the network flow is not solely about a process of decoding and recoding, but in which the transformation of bodily habits through information is given consideration (Terranova 2004). The network is not a static entity, but it is pulsating and alive. It carries information, and since information is always about contacts and also tactility, where the body becomes inserted into a field of action, as Terranova has convincingly argued (Terranova 2004: 19), the network needs to be understood as a dynamic entity; as a structure that is open to dynamic transformations and tactile engagements.

Looking back over the last two centuries, we find that the network was first understood simply as the connection of nodes and knots, such as found in the connecting fabric of fishermen forming their nets. A network during the 18th Century was understood as a tool for connectivity, for optimising paths, a model for complex interaction (Euler 2009). In the 1970's through the term 'global village' - a term that can be traced back to the writings of Marshall McLuhan (1962) as well as through the writings of Hiltz and Turoff (1978), the network is understood as a communicative structure allowing communication across the entire globe. Today, we often talk about network of friends and networked communities (e.g. Facebook, Myspace), the foundations for this having been laid by the writings of Manuel Castells and the development of the notion of 'network society' (Castells 1996). In this sense, a network intends to join groups of dislocated interests and expressions. The often-romanticised view of the network as one that allows for idealised connectivity and

unity has been questioned by Richard Coyne in his work 'Technoromanticism' (Coyne 2001). Coyne argues that Deleuze's rhizome metaphor, as outlined in Deleuze's and Guattari's seminal work *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988), counters such an ideal of unifying connections. More recently, the network has been theorised through an emphasis on the 'paranodal', as a way for thinking of what lies between the nodes (Mejias 2007). The theorising of the network, not only as an information structure, has been immense. Furthermore, the network's inherent behaviours, such as latency for example, have long been considered for artistic usage. Atau Tanaka has been experimenting with network music since 1994 when he commenced by performing telematic concerts utilising video-conferencing technologies. For some time now Tanaka has been exploring what he calls 'the acoustics of the network' (Tanaka 2005). Tanaka strongly argues in favour of music performances needing to explore the 'specific temporal characteristic' of each network (Tanaka 2007). More recently Alain Renaud and Juan Pablo Caceres have been revisiting certain idiosyncracies of the network and are attempting to create musical works based on the network's inherent perturbations (Renaud, Caceres 2007).

### **Dramaturgy as model**

I now want to examine strategies of how performers work the network, or work in the network. In order to do this, I look towards theatre and drama, and examine the histories of dramaturgies in order to better understand artistic strategies and social relationships in collaborative network performance environments. The term 'dramaturgy' has been used in theatre to discuss notions of authorship, collaboration, structure, content, and as an umbrella term for a number of roles that characterise performance practice (LMDA 2009). I feel that the notion of dramaturgy provides an excellent framework for addressing these relationships and suggests a robust method for understanding artistic network collaborations that always concern themselves with what I entitle views from 'within' and 'views from without'. The network urges us to continuously consider our practices from within: from our standpoint, from our physical location and also from without: from a point of view that tells us what our practices may look or sound like from an external standpoint, that is from another location and most importantly, what they look or sound like at the other location. One particular reason for examining dramaturgical approaches stems from a belief, that recent trends in networked environments are very much characterised by a hybridisation of diverse artistic practices. Indeed, increased technological potential has contributed to the fact that all sorts of cultural performance practices

become crossed and mixed in the network. Digital media performances hardly ever refer to one or two particular cultural practices anymore and artists derive their creative strategies from looking sideways, at other artistic paradigms. In terms of network performances this means that improved network technologies allow us to make music with people in disparate sites, to dance with bodies in virtual worlds or with real bodies in other parts of the world, and also allow us to map performers' data, be this physical or audio data, through the network onto another space or artefact.

Dramaturgy is a term that evidently has strong references to the theatre and the stage. Originally, dramaturgy stems from the Greek word 'dramatourgia': drama (gen. dramatos) + ergos = 'worker' (Harper 2009); hence, dramaturgy is about the composition or design of a deed or an act. The term dramaturgy often encompasses various ideas such as composition, structure or the fabric of a performance.

A general idea of 'dramaturgy' was initially laid out in the writings of Aristotle. In his *Poetics* (350 BC) Aristotle describes drama as a subsection of poetry (Aristotle 2004). Aristotle's writings place a specific emphasis on the notion of time, place and action, and the structure and inner workings of a drama as discussed in Aristotle have been highly influential in theatrical as well as literary theory (Carlson 1993: 15). In particular, Aristotle considered as essential the perspective of the spectators. He had argued that the compositional effects or dramaturgical strategies could greatly influence the audience and their experience.

A more contemporary concept of dramaturgy has its roots in 18th Century Germany. The German playwright and poet Gotthold Ephraim Lessing is often quoted as the pioneer for creating a new theatre discourse. Indeed, Lessing has been credited as shaping a distinct German theatre as well as establishing a modern understanding of the concept of dramaturgy (Turner, Behrndt 2007: 19), not only because he expanded Aristotle's ideas but also because Lessing was specifically fond of the dramaturgical models of William Shakespeare. In his publication *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1767-9), a collection of critical essays, Lessing outlines his dramaturgical ideas, presenting a 'rigorous, objective and analytical theatre discourse and practice' (ibid. 2007: 20). Specifically, Lessing re-thought the then standard rules of the three unities, the unity of action, place and time, which had been characteristic of Baroque theatre. Lessing questioned the often pompous actions of Baroque theatre with its overly romanticised drama that highlighted exaggerated virtues of the noblemen while bringing to the fore the vices of their opponents (evidently, the

audience consisted mainly of aristocrats). Instead, Lessing wanted to focus the action upon its naturalness and plausibility. His new interpretation of Aristotelian drama theory brought about a change in the types of works that were being staged; thus, works that addressed issues of the common people and through which the viewer would identify more easily, superseded the Baroque Drama. Lessing was therefore not only an innovator with regards to theatre discourse, but he was also highly interested in educating the public. It is worth noting that Lessing's writings, which describe dramatic composition as a kind of 'transitory painting' (ibid. 2007: 23) with visual and literary components, had a strong impact on subsequent artists such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich von Schiller. Both Goethe and Schiller embraced visual elements such as lighting and movement for instance and this new dramaturgy could be seen in their creative outputs at the Weimarer Hoftheater from 1781 (ibid. 2007: 23). Lessing's merging of visual and literary elements re-emerged the following century in the form of German composer Richard Wagner's (1813 -1883) idea of the 'Gesamtkunstwerk', his all embracing, total artwork, in which he attempted to combine poetic, visual, musical and dramatic aspects of a work, as exemplified by his 1876 epic four-opera cycle *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

Several contemporary directors have been highly influential in re-thinking dramaturgical models. Grotowski for example is remembered for his 'Paratheatrical Phase' in the early 1970s, where he questioned the separation between the performer and the spectator (Grotowski 2009). Augusto Boal is now often quoted for successfully having broken down this barrier between the performer and the spectator in his 'Forum Theatre', a form of political theatre, in which the viewer becomes part of the action. Boal coined the term 'spect-actor', referring to the dual role of those involved as a spectator and as an actor, as being able to be both observers and creators of the dramatic action. This development has of course strong roots in the work of German playwright Bertold Brecht, who in the mid-20th Century had developed the concept of Epic Theatre (also referred to as dialectical theatre or Brechtian acting). The main purpose of Brecht's plays was to stage ideas for the spectators who would be urged to pass judgments on the issues presented. Brecht's model of dramaturgy is understood to be central to a 'world-wide revolution in theatre-making practices' (Brecht 2009).

## Summary

This brief overview shows that dramaturgical models have constantly been re-visited, changed and shaped and were often questioned and adapted to reflect the political flavours of the time. The term dramaturgy is indeed a broadly understood and flexible concept that has been referred to as the 'weaving of the performance's different elements' by the Italian author and theatre director Eugenio Barba (Turner, Behrndt 2007: 12) as well as to 'a performance's compositional, ideological and aesthetic mechanisms' (ibid. 2007: 12).

Currently, there is a rising interest in the idea of dramaturgy as a critical concept and as a way of re-thinking artistic practices as confirmed by recent publications on dramaturgy and performance (Luckhurst 2006 and Turner, Behrndt 2007). In particular, dramaturgical models can equip us with a useful framework for understanding different artistic practices that we tend to encounter when collaborating in networked performance environments. Dramaturgies highlight the need for very specific design concepts of a performance environment, particularly in the initial stages of a work's development. The types of network collaborations that contain a diverse range of artistic inputs and practices, which are most commonly situated at dispersed locations and thus carry with them various viewpoints and differing understandings, benefit most obviously from a strong dramaturgical model. The three unities, that of action, place and time, characteristics and standards of Baroque theatre during Lessing's time, are once again becoming re-examined, questioned and re-designed in networked performance environments of today. The above-mentioned paper by Pedro Rebelo (2009) discusses in detail three distinct models for dramaturgy that aid in better understanding the relationships between artists, audiences and media. The three models discussed are that of 'Projected Dramaturgy', 'Directed Dramaturgy' and 'Distributed Dramaturgy'. In Rebelo's discussion it becomes transparent that the notion of dramaturgy provides a clear framework for addressing the relationships between artists, audiences and media and that dramaturgical models can provide an excellent method for understanding network collaborations.

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