Crystal-image: real-time imagery in live performance as the forking of time

Meyerhold and Piscator were among the first aware of the aesthetic potential of incorporating moving images in live theatre events. Whereas in the early twentieth century these images were necessarily pre-recorded, in contemporary theatre practice we encounter all kinds of live feeds and real time manipulations of imagery. This capacity of incorporating and manipulating visual and other data in real time reveals how much contemporary theatre is not only part of, but also deeply affected by digital culture. New media have inspired and challenged theatre makers to explore new forms of making, showing and telling and to challenge established modalities of experience. (Bay-Cheng et al. 2010:16)

Trying to keep up with a theatre practice that, as a consequence of technological developments, is rapidly changing Theatre Studies attempts to come to terms with both the effect and meaning of the employment of new media in live performance. After an initial emphasis on mainly mapping the field of digital performance (Dixon 2007), more recent publications have stressed the importance of developing fresh conceptual frameworks in order to grasp the distinctive way in which digital culture shapes and transforms live performance. (Birringer 2008; Bay-Cheng et al. 2010) I believe that the quest for concepts is particularly crucial if we want to understand better the temporal dynamics between live and mediatized.

In this article I want to investigate to what extent intermedial performance analysis could benefit from the Deleuzean concept of the *crystal-image*, a concept derived from his film philosophy. I will discuss how this specific concept can be productive for the understanding of the intermedial relationship between visual live feeds, such as video projections, and theatre in the context of the live performance. I will focus mainly on the temporal aspects of this relationship. I believe that such a temporal perspective can contribute

to a discourse on live performance and mediatization that is strongly focusing on body and notions of corporeality. (Birringer 1998; Auslander 1999; Broadhurst 2006) I will not go into the reality of the physical and virtual body and their dynamics. Instead I will emphasize the *temporal* implications of the interaction between these two bodies and adopt the concept of the crystal –image to argue how time itself is revealed in this intermedial interplay.

The crystal-image as an intermedial concept

I understand intermediality as the interaction and exchanges between media. These exchanges result in a redefinition and resensibilisation of the media active in this interplay. (Kattenbelt 2008:25) In this process of redefinition medium specific conventions of perception are broken down and new modes of perception and experience investigated. In my view the essence of intermediality lies in this aspect of mutual influencing. I consider it to be important for intermedial performance analysis to employ analytical concepts that take into account and in a way embody intermedial interaction. We need concepts that specifically refer to the interplay at work and in that regard are *relational*. I feel that we are still shorthanded when it comes to these types of concepts. I believe that the concept of the crystal-image is such a relational concept that is able to shed a light on the intermedial relationship between new media and theatre in the live performance. It will help to clarify the ontological status of the simultaneous presence of the virtual and the physical world in the live performance and reveal how this co-presence by definition lies at the heart of theatre, even when it does not deploy other media.

Let me first very briefly introduce the concept of the crystal-image. In his two books on film *Cinéma 1 - L'image-mouvement* (1983) and *Cinéma 2 - L'image-temps* (1985) Deleuze distinguishes the movement-image from the time-image in film. The movement-

image Deleuze refers to as classical, the time-image as modern. In his book *Postdramatisches Theater* (1999) Lehmann has suggested that this distinction more or less coincides with that of dramatic and postdramatic theatre (329). According to Lehmann time as well in classical film as in dramatic theatre is represented only indirectly, either as subject or theme of the drama, whereas in modern film and postdramatic theatre time is not represented, but manifests itself as time as such. Time does not appear *within* the image but *as* image. This is the time-image.

It is important to realize that 'image' in Deleuze's film philosophy does not only refer to the singular film shot, but also to sequences of shots. Besides this, the image according to Deleuze does not necessarily consist of optical signs only, but of acoustic signs as well. Finally we must note that whenever Deleuze illustrates his theory with concrete references to movies, he hardly ever refers to cinematographic techniques specific for a certain type of image, but mostly to the narrative structure and the themes of that movie. Here image is referred to more as a mental construction. Deleuze's approach to the image therefore is broad and far from being consistent. This makes his work complex but at the same time offers the possibility to put his concepts to use in a different context, such as in theatre or performance studies.

Deleuze puts forward the crystal-image as a special kind of time-image that is twofold, both actual and virtual:

> We can say that the actual image itself has a virtual image which corresponds to it like a double or a reflection. In Bergsonian terms, the real object is reflected in a mirror-image, in the <u>virtual</u> object which, from its side and simultaneously, envelops or reflects the real: there is coalescence between the two. The crystal-image is a formation of an image with two sides, actual and virtual. (1989:68)

Deleuze elaborates his understanding of the crystal-image with reference to the functioning of the mirror in film: "the mirror-image is virtual in relation to the actual character that the mirror catches, but it is actual in the mirror which now leaves the character with only a virtuality and pushes him back out-of-field". (1989:70) Mirror images in film are not only the result of the use of actual mirrors in film. Mirroring can occur at different levels, for example when two characters are similar to each other, or when whole parts of a film mirror each other or even when one film mirrors another. All these forms of mirroring however disrupt the linear flow of time by tying the actual and the virtual together.

The actual and virtual according to Deleuze are distinct, but indiscernible and in continual exchange. The virtual image becomes actual and visible, but in turn the actual image becomes virtual and less visible or even invisible. The real and the imaginary become inextricably bound up to each other, each changing positions all the time. In this interplay Deleuze suggests, a new reality emerges, that was not present before. Although Deleuze is not speaking of the interaction between media but between two distinct ontological realities, he does emphasize the mutual exchange that is so important in intermediality. This opens up perspectives for using this concept in intermedial performance analysis.

Real-time imagery in live performance: revealing the forking of time

With regard to the meaning of the crystal-image Deleuze explicitly refers to the ontological status of the image:

> What constitutes the crystal-image is the most fundamental operation of time: since the past is constituted not after the present that it was but at the same time, time has to

split itself in two at each moment as present and past, which differ from each other in
nature, or, what amounts to the same thing, it has to split the present in two
heterogeneous directions, one of which is launched towards the future while the other
falls into the past. It splits in two dissymmetrical jets, one of which makes all the
present pass on, while the other preserves all the past. (1989:81)

The passing present Deleuze refers to as 'the actual', the past being preserved is 'virtual'.
The actual image crystallizes with its own virtual image. In the crystal-image we experience,
or as Deleuze puts it we 'see', the forking of time itself. However, this splitting, as Deleuze
emphasizes, 'never goes right to the end'. (Idem) The two distinct images that constitute the
crystal are continuously being exchanged. In the crystal image we perceive a dividing in two
that is constantly caused to turn on itself. In other words, in the crystal-image the actual and
virtual never stop to reflect each other. In this sense the crystal image is a 'mutual image',
distinct but simultaneously indiscernible. (Idem) For Deleuze the intertwining of the real and
the imaginary, or of the present and the past, of the actual and the virtual, 'is definitely not
produced in the head or the mind, it is the objective characteristic of certain existing images
which are by nature double'. (1989:69)

     We can see how the crystal-image has to be present and past, still present and already
past, at one and the same time. The present is the actual image, and its contemporaneous past
is the virtual image, the image in a mirror, and they endlessly reflect each other. In this
process of repetition the two images reveal each other in their differences, or to be more
precise, they continuously manifest themselves as a possible actualization of the other. Now
how does all this relate to the real time incorporation of digital imagery in the live
performance? Let's take the concrete example of live video in theatre, a dramaturgical
strategy we can encounter in the work of many internationally acclaimed theatre makers such

as Robert Lepage, The Wooster Group, Guy Cassiers, Rodrigo Garcia and others. Characteristic for the employment of live video in the live performance is the fact that the virtual of the video projections and the actual of the live performers and objects meet. It is in their interaction, and not so much in their autonomous presence, their meaning resides. Both being staged they are simultaneously present and experienced by the spectator within the theatrical frame. In this case theatre, as a hypermedium with its potential to stage different media within its context without theatre or media losing their ontological specificity, produces or maybe even functions as a crystal-image in which we can see how time itself splits in two different images: the actual image and the virtual mirror-image.

This is most apparent in the case of live recording of physically present performers and the simultaneous playing of these recordings. The actors, being present in the actual here and now of the live performance are simultaneously being shown as virtual projections. These projections in many ways function as the double, reflection, or mirror Deleuze is talking about. Seen from a temporal perspective live projections of physically present performers demonstrate how the actual passing present in which these performers act is captured and preserved as a virtual past by the recording potential of the video camera. At the same time the projection becomes *actual* as a virtual image by the instant playing potential of video. The temporal complexity at work in the interaction between live video and theatre is captured quite convincingly in the concept of the crystal-image.

The most important difference between the crystal-image in relation to film as Deleuze describes it and the crystal-image in relation to theatre has to do with the ontological difference between the two. Images in film always originate in the past in which they were shot. The moment they are projected they are history. The simultaneous presence of the present and the past within the filmic image therefore can only be realized in the diegetic world of the film, that is to say on the level of fiction, narrative, and themes. Crystal-images

can only be located within the film and its images. Whereas in the case of theatre, theatre itself can be considered a crystal-image within which by employing live video or other forms of live feed, the coalescence of the present and the past can be experienced as such.

Becoming virtual: the crystallization of the actor

It is important to stress that live video images are not just mirror images. They are directly and inextricably bound to the presence of the body on stage. Their meaning resides precisely in the physical presence of this body they double. Actual body and virtual projection influence and reflect each other. As we have seen, for Deleuze this notion of exchange is crucial to the crystal-image.

According to Deleuze one of the crystallizing effects of the mirror-image is that it turns the actual character into a virtual image and pushes him back out of the field of vision, whereas the mirror-image of the character only becomes more actual. This interaction between the actual and the virtual Deleuze hints on is one of the important issues in theatre discourse when it comes to discussing the role of media in the live performance and what this means for presence in live performance. Whether one will go as far as Auslander (1999) to question the ontological difference between live and mediatized altogether, his account on 'liveness' has shown quite convincingly that the boundaries between binary oppositions such as real-unreal, live-mediatized, physical-virtual, natural-artificial have dissolved more and more under the influence of the mediatization of our contemporary culture.

The performer, by presenting himself to the camera in a specific way, creates a virtual image of himself and points the spectator towards that image. By inviting the audience to observe the becoming of this body the performer pushes himself back out of field, in the dark, becoming virtual. Simultaneously the live video projection becomes actual in the sense

that it reveals itself as a possible actualization of the performer's body. Camera positions and camera movement can create different perspectives on the body on stage. A close-up of for example can show us the actual performers' body in detail, making visible what was invisible for the audience, intensifying and amplifying the actual presence of the performer. These possibilities of live video allow the performer literally to appear in new ways, opening up to new possible presences. The spectator's actual experience of presence is shaped exactly in the difference between the actual and virtual body.

Let us discuss another example from contemporary practice to demonstrate both how the traditional role of the actor has been influenced by the introduction of its virtual double in the live performance and how this 'becoming virtual' can be understood as a specific temporal experience. In *U-Raging Standstill* (2006), an immersive live performance by the Belgian Company CREW, the individual spectator (or 'immersant' as CREW calls her) physically walks around in space with the aid of a headphone, a headset with a camera on top and video goggles as prostheses. The environment is made up of both live feed images and pre-recorded footage of the building in which the performance takes place. At the beginning of the show when the immersant has to test the equipment, she is tricked into believing that what she sees in the video goggles are live fed images from the camera on top of her head. Actually the images are filmed by a CREW member, walking just behind her, driving an Omni-directional camera and acting as the immersant's eyes. Very soon, without the immersant realizing, the images in her goggle switch from live feeds to pre-recorded images. These images look like the spaces the immersant has been walking through previously, but this time with slight distortions, as if one is walking through one's own memory of space. Past and present collide and create perceptual and temporal confusion in the immersant. Towards the end of the piece, the images switch back from pre-recorded to live feed. The CREW member who has been filming from behind the immersant, now approaches the

immersant from the front while filming her. It takes a while for the immersant to realize that this figure that she is approaching and eventually passes is in fact herself.

The experience of simultaneously being *here* physically, but seeing yourself *there* can be understood as a 'becoming virtual'; although obviously distinct, the physical and virtual become indiscernible at the same time. I believe that this experience is not only physical, but also quintessentially temporal. The body splits itself in an actual and virtual image, each, in this case literally, moving into another direction, 'one of which is launched towards the future while the other falls into the past'. (Deleuze 1989:81) For the immersant however it is impossible to distinguish which body is moving what way. Is she confronted with her past passing by or with the future coming her way? Either way, one could say that by encountering her body the immersant in a way faces her own death.

Presence is revealed as a forking of time. Therefore we could say that at the heart of theatre, which is the art of being present and of a present becoming past, we find the experience of the crystallization of time. Although Deleuze does not refer explicitly to theatre as a crystal of time there are some implicit references in his work from which we can tell that he does in a way connect the crystal image to the theatrical.

The theatricality of the crystal-image

Bergson, whose philosophy of time has greatly influenced Deleuzes work, states that whoever becomes conscious of the continual duplicating of his present into perception and recollection can be compared to an actor playing his part automatically, at the same time listening to himself and beholding himself playing (1959:920). According to Deleuze the subject in the crystal-image is not to be compared *to* an actor, but should be understood *as* an actor. He considers the crystal to be a stage on which the actor actualizes the virtual image of

the role, so that the role becomes visible (1989:71). The world in the crystal-image manifests itself as a palace of mirrors, or as a theatre where a play of reflections is being performed. When a film director systematically plays with the tension between acting and being, representation and presentation, fiction and truth, reality, Deleuze argues, is represented as a continuous multiplication of *reflections*. In this regard film as a whole can function as a crystal. Deleuze distinguishes different strategies that film uses to tease art-life, acting-being relationships, such as the use of film in film, showing the film crew in the actual film or an actor addressing the camera and the public directly (1989:75-77).

In a similar line of thinking we could say that theatre can be considered a crystal when it is self-reflexive and exposes itself as theatre, demonstrating the simultaneous presence of the actual and the virtual and as a consequence the crystallization of time (Lehmann 1999, 329-331). The means by which this can be accomplished are multifold in contemporary postdramatic theatre. None however, according to my view, express the coalescence of the actual and the virtual so accurately as using live feeds in theatre. Employing live imagery, such as video projections, in the live performance brings to attention the ontological characteristics of the live performance and because of its doubling nature reminds us of the fact that we are in the theatre. Video can help to demonstrate, make visible, and therefore make us aware (again) of the forking of time in present and past, actual and virtual as it takes place in the here and now of the live performance. Other than in film this double nature of time can not only be represented on the level of fiction but also manifest itself in the act of the performance and be experienced by the spectator. And the concept of the crystal-image as I hope to have shown seems to be most suitable to express this complex temporal dynamics at play.

Works Cited

AUSLANDER P., *Liveness. Performance in a Mediatized Culture,* London and New York, Routledge, 1999.

BAY-CHENG, S., KATTENBELT, C., LAVENDER, A. and R.NELSON (eds.), *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2010.

BERGSON H., *Oeuvres,* Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1959.

BROADHURST, S. and MACHON, J. (eds.), *Performance and Technology: Practices of Virtual Embodiment and Interactivity*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

BIRRINGER, J., *Media and Performance: Along the Border*, Baltimore, JHU Press, 1998.

DELEUZE, G., *Cinema 2. The Time-Image,* Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

DIXON, S., *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theatre, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2007.

KATTENBELT, C., << Intermediality in Theatre and Performance: Definitions, Perceptions and Medial Relationships >>, CHAPPLE F. (ed.), *Culture, Language and Representation,* Vol. 6: Intermediality, 19-29.

LEHMANN H-Thies*., Postdramatisches Theater,* Frankfurt am Main, Verlag der Autoren, 1999.

SALTER, C. *Entangled: Technology and the Transformation of Performance,* Cambridge, MIT Press, 2010.