

**Digital Scenography: 30 years of experimentation and innovation in performance and interactive media** by Néill O'Dwyer, London: Methuen Drama, 2021, 210 pp. ISBN: 978-1-3501-0731-1 (HB,)

Drawing on a number of performance case studies from the last thirty years, this book charts what O'Dwyer terms a "genealogy" (p.1) of digital scenography. The theoretical framework is drawn largely from Continental philosophy and avant-garde theory, and Dwyer, following Bernard Stiegler, posits that innovation in digital technologies in performance constitutes a "second scenographic turn" (p.1) in which new modes of expression have developed in a rapidly evolving field (what McKinney and Palmer (2017) term "expanded scenography"). One of O'Dwyer's aims in mapping this territory is to "produce a nascent grammar of digital scenography, which is epistemically and pedagogically useful for practitioners in articulating aesthetic endeavours and for scholars in reflecting on work and engaging related critical discourse" (p.169).

O'Dwyer guides the reader through six chapters of case studies, detailing the work of Troika Ranch, Stelarc, Klaus Obermaier, Chunky Move, OnionLab and Blast Theory. He does this with amazing dexterity, in each chapter introducing the company (or artist) and their key works, then delving into an in-depth analysis of both. In the introduction, O'Dwyer sets up his positionality and his reasoning for adopting an "avant-garde methodology" (p.5), which, alongside his carefully articulated selection criteria (pp.9–17), leads him to these six case studies. Although these are separated into discrete chapters, there is certainly crossover between them, and shared lineages are clearly observable throughout. The selected artists/works provide a broad overview of digital scenography over the last thirty years and have been chosen according to specific criteria, in order to "cogitate on working processes, methodologies and practices in digital performance and scenography" (p.10). This is not merely a descriptive exercise but a critical analysis of the artists/works that considers the economic and socio-political environment and impact. Ideas of the relationship between human and non-human, the commodification of culture (and of the labour by which it is produced), and technological agency are interwoven with often first-hand accounts of rehearsal, devising and performance processes from the practitioners themselves.

For theatre and performance researchers interested in scenography and contemporary performance practice, this book will be of clear significance. However, through O'Dwyer's analysis, which he situates "between performance analysis, technological philosophy and critical theory" (p.23), the potential scholarly interest extends far beyond this. Collaboration and creativity, in particular, are explored through O'Dwyer's focused investigation of the impact of technology on artistic processes. For instance, in a section subtitled "The pharmacology of the second 'scenographic turn'" in the

chapter concerned with the work of Chunky Move, O'Dwyer introduces the concept of remediation in relation to AV design, which he claims "can lead to a stagnation of performances employing screen-based enhancements and occasions a situation where the devices are employed simply to signal the contemporaneity of the work" (p.123). However, by making digital technology intrinsic to the work and by pushing its capabilities, director and choreographer Gideon Obarzanek counteracts this potential criticism. O'Dwyer relates the nature of Obarzanek's collaboration with technology to the creative process by observing how Chunky Move's use of interactive projection in *Mortal Engine*, and in particular the *way in which it is used*, threatens to transfer technical knowledge from an active human agent (e.g. the designer/operator) to a machine, potentially marginalising the former. However, even in this case, where "the machine is afforded performativity" (p.124), it is the collaboration between performer and machine, through Frieder Weiss' digital media scenography, which helps to expand the epistemic boundaries of digital performance models. The computer came to be seen as another performer as the system evolved throughout rehearsals, which had a clear impact on the company's working processes. O'Dwyer also notes how the technology altered, and at times derailed or redirected, the rehearsal process, despite the opportunities it also afforded.

This theme reappears throughout the volume: for instance, through responsive scenography in the work of Troika Ranch, in which dancers work to kinaesthetically affect the performance environment using MIDI technology alongside "video-conferencing, decentralized broadcasting and real-time global dissemination" (p.29). Stelarc's "cyborg scenography" in *Extra Ear/Ear on Arm* stands out as an extraordinary but important case study in this collection, due in part to the way in which the scenography is embodied by, in and with the performer. Indeed, all of the case studies are shown to be paradigm changing and/or defining in some way, but it is O'Dwyer's adept and careful analysis of each of the artists/works that makes this volume so compelling.

The conclusion brings together the contributions of each chapter into a "nascent digital scenographic grammar" (p.169) to help define and describe this rapidly changing field in which "innovative fusions of digital technologies with performance design bring forth increasingly autonomous, naturalistic and quasi-organic scenographic frameworks" (p.179). This book will be of particular interest to scenographers, performance researchers, and anyone wanting to understand the development and potential of the creative tensions afforded by the relationships between human and technological agents in performance.

**Kelli Zezulka**

University of Salford

School of Arts, Media and Creative Technology

k.l.zezulka@salford.ac.uk

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Orcid ID: 0000-0003-2978-9204