Kirby Malone and Gail Scott White continually challenge the boundaries of live performance, art and creativity by embracing and artistically employing a full spectrum of dynamic media. Live Movies is a vitally original and compelling guide to the synergistic blending of theater, film and new technologies that is characteristic of their work in the Multimedia Performance Studio and Cyberbia Productions. Intellectually challenging and intuitively clear, Live Movies is an essential read.

— Darlanne Fluegel, Actress, and Professor in the School of Film and Digital Media, University of Central Florida

Multimedia Performance Studio is where new kinds of theatre — the edge, the synergetic, the now — finds its way into what makes theatre great — is truly happening. This crucible for performance art is a beacon for the whole theatrical world.

— Richard Winkler, Lighting Designer

Malone and White, of MPS and Cyberbia, weave and integrate stunning multimedia imagery into the fabric of theatrical storytelling with boundless imagination and conceptual boldness. They are artistic and technical alchemists whose visual landscapes interact with live actors, music, sound, lighting and scenography to synthesize new languages of performance. What they do is new jack theater that packs a memorable wallop.

— Benny Sato Ambush, Director, Producer, Educator

Kirby Malone and Gail Scott White

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GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY

LIVE MOVIES
A Field Guide to New Media For the Performing Arts

edited by
Kirby Malone and Gail Scott White

Documenting Multimedia Performance Studio’s New Stage Technology Project
MULTIMEDIA PERFORMANCE STUDIO

PORTFOLIO
KOMAR & MELAMID’S NAKED REVOLUTION, AN OPERA

Charles Holley and Chris Parsons (Servants), Alex Helsabeck (General George Washington), Eric Greene (King George III).

Nick Spanos (Lenin), Peter Joshua Burroughs (Alexander Ulyanov) and Ensemble.

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KOMAR & MELAMID'S NAKED REVOLUTION, AN OPERA

Peter Joshua Burroughs (Duchamp), Alex Helsabeck (General Geo. Washington), Nick Spanos (Lenin), Eric Greene (Citizen Geo.

Alex Helsabeck (General Geo. Washington), Eric Greene (Citizen Geo. Washington), Nick Spanos (Lenin).
HANS WERNER HENZE'S THE END OF A WORLD

Wilma H. Wever (Marchesa Montezristo) and Christopher Vettel (Herr Fallersleben).

Kevin Hanek (Majordomo) and Christopher Vettel (Herr Fallersleben) in foreground, Désirée Halac, Jean Marie Miller, Pedro Porro (Servants).

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Jean Marie Miller (First Attendant), Kerry Stichweh (The Dancer; Destiny), Désirée Halac (The Queen), Pedro Porro (Second Attendant).

Désirée Halac (The Queen) and Dominic Inferrera (The Swineherd).
Dominic Inferrera (The Swineherd) and Désirée Halac (The Queen).
Amelia Winger-Bearskin (Noki) and Mike Solo (John Titor), MPS/Cyburbia’s Time Traveler Zero Zero workshop production, 2004.

Howard Brown-Santos (Moe Tech), Mike Solo (John Titor), James Murphy (Joe Tech), MPS/Cyburbia’s Time Traveler Zero Zero workshop production, 2004.
Maria Rio (Kathy), Brianna Moran (Wyatt), Chris Parsons (Billy), MPS/Cyburbia’s Time Traveler Zero Zero workshop production, 2004.

Chris Parsons (Charlie), Maria Rio (Mary), Mike Solo (John Titor), MPS/Cyburbia’s TimeTraveler Zero Zero workshop production, 2004.
Mike Solo (John Titor) and Joshua McCarthy (James Walters), MPS/Cyburbia's Time Traveler Zero Zero workshop production, 2004.

Mike Solo (John Titor), and Brianna Moran and Joshua McCarthy (Netizens), MPS/Cyburbia’s Time Traveler Zero Zero workshop production, 2004.

CYBURBIA PRODUCTIONS’ SILENCE & DARKNESS, A LIVE MOVIE FOR THE CELL PHONE AGE

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CYBURBIA PRODUCTIONS’ SILENCE & DARKNESS, A LIVE MOVIE FOR THE CELL PHONE AGE


Taylor Coffman (Patti), Kelly Wilson (Zeta), Jen Haefeli (Page), Chris Parsons (Alpha), and Sean Lovelace, Matt McGarraghy and Matt Cain, MPS, 2004.
CYBURBIA PRODUCTIONS’ SILENCE & DARKNESS, A LIVE MOVIE FOR THE CELL PHONE AGE

Chris Parsons (Alpha), Mike Solo (Beta), Grant J. Wylie (Delta), Prince Rozario (Gamma), MPS, 2004.

Kelly Wilson (Zeta), Grant J. Wylie (Delta), Chris Parsons (Alpha), Jen Haefeli (Page), Taylor Coffman (Patti), Prince Rozario (Gamma), MPS, 2004.
Kelly Wilson (Zeta), and Chris Parsons (Alpha), with Radiation Workers Joshua McCarthy, Mike Solo, Grant J. Wylie and Prince Rozario, MPS, 2004.

Kelly Wilson (Zeta), with Grant J. Wylie (Delta) and Mike Solo (Beta), MPS, 2004.
CYBURBIA PRODUCTIONS’ SILENCE & DARKNESS, A LIVE MOVIE FOR THE CELL PHONE AGE

Joshua McCarthy (animatronic Edison) and Kelly Wilson (Zeta), MPS, 2004.

Live Movies and the Alternative Theatre Movement

In this segment, I wish to set forth what I perceive are some of the influences upon the work of MPS that have not been acknowledged or addressed at length previously by Kirby Malone. I wish to frame the multimedia work of MPS in terms of what is often termed the “alternative” theatre movement(s) that gained momentum and notoriety beginning in the 1960s.

Kirby Malone has stated that the interdisciplinary, experimental, educational approach of MPS is modeled upon the Bauhaus and Black Mountain College. He also has cited a range of influences, historic and contemporary, upon the multimedia performance work of MPS. In particular, he cites the theatre of Meyerhold, Vakhtangov, Piscator, the Federal Theater Project’s Living Newspaper, and others that utilized a stylized aesthetic to create performance pieces that contained social messages. From my perspective, the creative approach, the performance aesthetic, and the subject matter undertaken by MPS also bear a relationship to other work that has been placed under the rubric of “alternative theatre” (Shank 1982) or “communitarian radical theatre” (Auslander 1992).

Shank (1982) wrote that the alternative theatre movement of the 1960s and 1970s expressed themes aligned with the social movements of the 1960s, and provided an alternative to using traditional aesthetic conventions, working methods, and techniques. Alternative theatre performances were more perceptual than verbal, and were autonomous (and often collective) works of art. In the tradition of alternative theatre, on the first point, MPS productions combine oral/aural (words, songs/music), and visual content (animation, graphics, live performers on stage). In alternative theatre, the visual focus was a reaction against society’s reliance upon words which were believed to distance humans from experience (Shank 1982). While I am not certain that Malone or White intend to privilege one sensory system over the others (although Malone has stated that he does not trust language and turns more and more to images), from the perspective of an audience member, I found the visual element to be particularly strong in the performances. The visual elements (the mingling of live performers...
with projected images), were to me, the most experimental and innovative parts of the productions. Speaking as an audience member and critic, I believe that the power of the MPS pieces lies in the perceptual (particularly visual) aspect.

On the second point, Shank (1982) wrote that alternative theatre did not rely upon a linear cause and effect plot. While MPS’s staging of *Naked Revolution* was not completely autonomous given that the script was conceived by Komar and Melamid and staged two times prior to 2001, it was an original piece. The MPS productions of *Silence & Darkness* and *Time Traveler Zero Zero* were novel, collaborative creations that brought together a unique blend of artists and technicians from inception through performance. Malone scripted the productions and served as director. White supervised the team of digital artists and the creation of the digital media. While the shows were in development, the artists sometimes worked independently, sometimes as teams, but also came together as a full ensemble to share and to inspire each other.

Other characteristics of alternative theatre of the 1960s and 1970s according to Shank (1982) included: creating art that improved the quality of life of the artists and audiences, and using styles of performance that kept the audience conscious of the performance aesthetics, rather than which tried to seduce them into a fictional illusion. According to Shank (1982), the autonomous method of creation of alternative theatre groups arose as a reaction against that fragmentation artists experienced in a technocratic society that assumed that human needs could be satisfied through the specialization of labor. MPS productions have been interdisciplinary in nature, bringing together faculty, students, alumni community members, and guest artists from around the world. The works have contained social messages that were designed to encourage the audience to take action. In this sense, perhaps another influence upon MPS is the Living Theatre. The Living Theatre is an often cited historical referent for many alternative theatre companies of the 1970s and onwards. Their work extended the theatrical approach of Meyerhold, Piscator, Artaud, and Brecht (all of which are also cited by Malone as artistic references). The Living Theatre attempted to shock the audience into action. While the MPS shows did not allow for audience interaction (i.e., performer to audience member) in the same way as the Living Theatre performances did, the goal of promoting social action, although perhaps at an individual, rather than at a collective level, was resonant in the MPS productions.

The performances by MPS relied on the audience being psychologically present. Nevertheless, the performance aesthetic promoted a state of consciousness that made the audience receptive to the social message. The entire multimedia experience did not allow the audience to escape, to be lured into a fictional world, and to forget that they were experiencing a performance piece. As Malone has stated, the performances were designed for younger adult audiences who have been socialized on rapid-changing images on television, movies, and video games. The live movie experience speaks to
young adults. Naked Revolution and Silence & Darkness did not rely upon plots that created dramatic suspense. Although Time Traveler Zero Zero did have a strong story, the staging did not foster the dramatic tension that is normally experienced by an audience asked to suspend disbelief. Just as environmental performance pieces created by Richard Schechner’s Performance Group in the 1970s offered audiences several points of focus, allowing individuals to shift their attention from one part to another, so the often layered multimedia projections, dialogue spoken or sung by live or recorded performers, set pieces, and live action that comprised MPS multimedia productions allowed for the same manner of customized experience. Similarly, the work by Richard Foreman and The Ontological-Hysteric Theatre in the mid-1970s, which consisted of a series of rapid changing images designed to heighten audience awareness, may be a distant influence on the MPS productions.

The work of “new formalist” Robert Wilson, who in the 1970s, created collage-style works that included repetition, slow motion, and visual stage pictures, and who has more recently experimented with more advanced multimedia techniques, may also be thought to be a relative of the live movie. In contrast to Wilson’s performance aesthetic that relied upon the audience entering into a reduced state of consciousness (Shank 1982), as discussed previously, MPS audiences experienced these techniques in a heightened state of awareness.

Live Movies and Postmodernism

The work of Foreman and Wilson has often been labeled “postmodern” (Auslander 1992) in the sense that it deconstructed its own representational means by means of representation. While some performance theorists considered the 1980s new formalist performance pieces to have been apolitical, others believed it was political but in a different sense of the term. Artists during this period sought to work within a media-saturated culture by creating performance that played with surface (images), and that sought to break the distinction between live and mediated performance. In this sense, the performances “mimed” hegemonic structures from within, seeking to open a critical space for resistance. In a similar vein, the work of MPS has used live and technologically generated representations of ideas, persons, and environments on stage and yet has taken a critical, skeptical view of technology. Working with technology and within a somewhat traditional, commercialized theatrical structure (using a theatre space, selling tickets, etc.) while commenting on the excess of technology and on commercialization and consumerism, has simultaneously exposed the system and also allowed MPS to profit from it. In this sense, the approach to production by MPS has illustrated the undecidability of postmodern performance, its contradictory nature.

One thinker associated with postmodern thought whose ideas have been incorporated directly in the work of MPS is Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard wrote that the world is now constructed through simulacra and simulations — a hyper-reality
or a world of self-referential signs. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993 /1976), Baudrillard historicized the evolutionary concept of hyper-reality, discussing three orders of simulacra— the counterfeit, the production, and the simulation. In the third order of simulacra, reproduction has replaced production in its entirety. Under infinite reproduction, the myth of origin disappears as do all referential values; internal contradictions no longer exist because the real or referential which opposes the contradictions no longer exist; and the myth of the end of reproduction or revolution also disappears (Baudrillard 1995). Unintentional parody, tactile simulation, and aesthetic enjoyment become attached to the indefinable play of reproduction (Jameson 1983). MPS productions play with the third order of simulacra, both in terms of the performance elements and the content of the shows.

The MPS live movie format has relied on the reproduction of performance elements. Images, sounds, music, verbal content are recycled over and over. Also, rather than portraying characters in a realistic manner, actors/singers mimic or parody characters. It is through reproduction and parody that the show takes on a structure that the audience can follow. Without the use of world leaders and well-known artistic figures in *Naked Revolution* who function as symbolic representations for ideas, the audience would have had no reference point or anchor, and the show perhaps would have been alienating for them. Without the images of Cyburbia and reoccurring characters in *Silence & Darkness*, the fragmentary nature of the performance may have confused audiences. Audience members, such as myself, enjoyed anticipating the repetition of images in *Time Traveler Zero Zero*, such as the Chevy truck as it time traveled from 2036 to 1975 to 2000 to 2036, and its road trip to/from Florida and Minnesota in both 1975 and 2000. The audience could look forward to reoccurring images, characters, sounds/music within an aesthetic that allowed them to choose the performance elements upon which to focus throughout the piece.

Writers such as Rheingold (1991), have commented on the opportunities for audience members to discover (and rediscover) experiences in postmodern, multimedia performance. Quoting from Walser (1990) “Elements of a Cyberspace Playhouse,” Rheingold states:

> Whereas film is used to show a reality to an audience, cyberspace is used to give a virtual body, and a role, to everyone in the audience. Print and radio tell; stage and film show; cyberspace embodies...Whereas the playwright and the filmmaker both try to communicate the idea of an experience, the spacemaker sets up a world for an audience to act directly within, and not just so the audience can imagine they are experiencing an interesting reality, but so they can experience it directly...Thus the spacemaker can never hope to communicate a particular reality, but only to set up opportunities for certain kinds of realities to emerge. The filmmaker says, “Look, I’ll show you.” The spacemaker says, “Here, I’ll help you discover” (p. 286).
In addition to a performance structure predicated on repetition, the multimedia MPS productions have, as subject matter, attended to topics concurrent with the age of simulation. Technological devices — computers, Internet, cell phones, virtual reality headsets, etc., became the focus of both *Silence & Darkness* and *Time Traveler Zero Zero*. These devices are presented as tools of a consumer culture controlled by large corporations and the government.

In MPS productions, cyberculture was presented as a site of oppositions. On the one hand, individuals, such as Alpha and Zeta, the couple in *Silence & Darkness*, were shown having individual (albeit mediated) experiences with each other through technology, but the authenticity and meaningfulness of their interactions were ultimately illusory. In *Time Traveler Zero Zero* a conversation between John Titor and his father on branded clothing highlighted the dichotomy between consumer choice and marketing control. John Titor asked his father if a company was paying him for advertising the logo on his shirt. Audience members, like John Titor’s father may have felt in control of their clothing choices, and did not realize that they were being left with fewer and fewer unbranded clothing options. As noted in Venkatesh et al. (1997) the present heralds a consumer space that may allow for contributions from consumers under the guise of freedom, but that ultimate power rests in the hands of the marketers (and the government).

In the current age, consumers’ identities are increasingly becoming public information that can be co-opted by marketers (Venkatesh et al. 1997), another theme of the MPS shows. Simulation is the social reality of consumer culture, and it is evident in the marketing and the recycling of images, and signs in advertising and in the consumptionscapes that constitute our lives. We also live in an age of technology that can physically change our relationships to our bodies. As Turkle (1995) argues, our bodies are no longer confined to one physical space, but can be said to be fragmented, dispersed throughout the web of cyberspace. Katherine Hayles (1999) and Donna Haraway (1991) write on the junction of the mind and machine (cyborg). Featherstone and Burrows (1995) write on technological embodiment. Each of these writers suggest that we are reconceptualizing humanness when, on the one hand, machines can think logically and become linguistic, and on the other hand, humans insert into our bodies or replace biological tissue with machine parts. These developments and discussions raise questions for society such as what is the nature of the body? What is the purpose of the body? These are questions that MPS have raised in both *Silence & Darkness* and *Time Traveler Zero Zero*. Whether it is Alpha and Zeta having cybersex or John Titor warning of polluting our bodies by consuming animals who have fed on their own species, the shows allowed the audience members to reflect on their bodies and their future interactions with humans and machines. As an important symbol or metaphor, the body acts as the interface between corporeality, and individual, social, and cultural
meaning in an age marked by experimentation with previously held notions of physical and social determinism (Meamber and Venkatesh 1999; Venkatesh and Meamber forthcoming). MPS shows have commented on the relationship between people and machines by using both live and simulated performers interacting with technology. The performances juxtaposed the immaterial with the material. The live movie format allowed the audience to question the relationship between the following categories: body/mind, human/machine, live performer/simulated performer.

In postmodern terms, fragmentation refers to the breaking up or detachment from what was conceptualized as whole under the beliefs and conditions of modernity. Juxtaposition of opposites refers to the refashioning of these fragments into a new configuration (although not a whole in the modern sense). Decentering of the subject signifies the lack of centrality of the individual. Performance artists in the 1980s and 1990s such as Laurie Anderson and Spalding Gray played with narrative and character, breaking up and reconfiguring stories, events and the notion of an autonomous character (Auslander 1992). The live movies presented by MPS have played with fragmentation and the decentering of the subject. In particular, Silence & Darkness, as described previously, was composed of fragments — texts, music, ideas, images, sounds that operated independently and in tandem. The effect was disorienting and destabilizing for the audience, because although there were elements that repeated and provided a foundation for the performance experience, the lack of a plot structure made the experience feel less than “whole” in the modernist sense. The audience was not drawn into a story, but instead was called to focus on the messages contained in the fragments or quotes. The fragments were combined into a pastiche so that the performance retained the outward conventions of traditional performance pieces, but also played with modern theatrical conventions. In all three pieces, characters were not fully developed nor played by the performers as such. Instead the performers “mimicked” the figures rather than embodying them on stage.

Because the performers in the MPS live movies retained some level of distance from the characters they played, the audience was confronted with the ways in which they, as individuals, have become imitative assemblages of others. Gergen (1991) posits that the process of social saturation (i.e., the multitude of information, persons, lifestyles, etc., we encounter on an everyday basis) is producing a profound change in the way the self is understood and conceptualized. The self is no longer conceived of as a product of real and identifiable characteristics, such as rationality, emotion, inspiration, will, etc., because we are becoming aware of our construction, and the role that language and culture have played in our construction. As social saturation proceeds we become pastiches of what we encounter. In a postmodern
world, there is no essence to which one remains true or committed. Identity is continuously emergent, re-formed and re-directed through our relationships and interaction with the social world. While the individual may be free to choose from cultural narratives and identities to become somebody in the moment (of consumption) (Firat and Venkatesh 1995; Turkle 1995), the notion of free will has come into question. Maffesoli (1996) contends that mass culture is splintering into fragmented tribal groupings, organized around language, brand names and bits of consumer culture, changing our view of social collectivities and established models of social life and politics. These are temporary identifications and identity is subject to play, especially in the realm of cyberspace (Turkle 1995). However, identity play in cyberspace does not neutralize oppression, as the implications of power are always present.

In *Silence & Darkness*, the character of Alpha visited a physician to heal his fractured identity. The doctor prescribed a course of treatment that alternated between passivity, allowing for the absorption of media messages, to that of a schizophrenic-like state resulting from too much stimulation. In this scene, Alpha succumbed to the power of the corporation and government-controlled messages and became a true citizen of Cyburbia, a man whose identity became a combination of all of the influences and people that he encountered in his life. In *Time Traveler Zero Zero*, John Titor spoke of community in 2036, but this sense of community was based on familial relationships, and with small groups of others, who relied upon each other for production of food and other survival needs, as contrasted with Maffesoli’s (1996) “tribal-like” brand or consumption or Internet communities that exist today.

**Live Movies and Social Action**

The live movies presented by MPS shed light on a multitude of social issues. As Turkle (1995) discusses, technology has created new social spaces, which are changing the way we, as humans, think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, and our identities. We are exploring and eroding previously held boundaries of real and virtual, animate and inanimate, and the unitary and multiple self. These changes have profound implications for our experience of everyday life. Live movies comment upon and critique the role of technology in consumer culture.

More importantly, if we understand theatre as but one determined form of a more generalized human performance, then ritual, speech acts, everyday life, and performance art, in short the entire spectrum of performance studies, all become creative and critical avenues for addressing the human experience of computers.

*(McKenzie 1994: 90).*
Implicit in the work of MPS thus far is the assumption that performance has tremendous capacity to impel response by audiences as a community of individuals. Following from Artaud (1958), live movies as theatre pieces shake people out of their slumber or so-called rational and routinized lives. For Artaud, theatre (of cruelty) does have an important place in society, a role that cannot be assumed by other forms of entertainment (especially those made possible by film and other forms of mechanical reproduction). According to Artaud the role of theatre is to respond to the “needs” of individuals — “choosing subjects and themes corresponding to the agitation and unrest characteristic of our epoch... by resisting the economic, utilitarian, and technical streamlining of the world, it will again bring into fashion the great preoccupations and great essential passions which the modern theatre has hidden under the patina of the pseudocivilized man” (p. 123).

In Artaud’s (1958) concept of theatre, individuals come face to face with “cruelty” in witnessing a multi-dimensional spectacle taking place all around them, feeling the depth of an (or many) emotional responses taking place within themselves and realizing consciously that at their core they are base and animalistic in nature. In contrast, the live movies that have been presented by MPS allowed audiences to experience a multi-dimensional spectacle, to feel and think about social issues, and to imagine a critical position of their own. Through engaging in performance activities, audience members were made aware of their place in this world and from a position of knowledge, could subvert and challenge hegemonic relationships as individuals.

Conclusion

In this essay I have written on the live movie experience. The work of MPS to date has explored the use of new media in the performing arts while commenting upon the growth of new communication technologies upon the lives of audience members. In utilizing multiple forms of technology to cast light on the extent and influence of technology in society, live movies constitute a new form of performance that can be said to be truly postmodern. “The postmodern cannot be identified with particular figures or forms precisely because the ‘postmodern’ occurs as a displacement and subversion of the very terms of which it would seem to consist” (Kaye 1994: 17).
Bibliography


