Hypertext and word of mouth interact in theatre for the transmission of cultural heritage

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ABSTRACT

Hypertext are proposed to be adopted in theatre as the "cultural" alternative to the "physical" means of interaction such as multivision or tridimensional effects. A particular class of hypertexts, oriented to multimedial shows on the cultural heritage of some peoples, has been designed and experimented in several performances. Hypertexts enrich and are enriched from the performance of the actors and musicians, themselves constituting, in this ways, a means of preservation of the cultural heritage of peoples.

KEYWORDS: Hypertext, Multimedia, Multimedia Shows, Cultural Heritage

INTRODUCTION

The culture of many peoples was for centuries handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. In time, this oral tradition gave birth to language forms that were extremely rich and expressive, as well as closely linked to the tone of voice and the gestures used, to pictures and symbols that integrated the linguistic medium. Whatever trick or device that might fix words and ideas in the memory - including rhythm and rhyme, and the intonation of the voice - were spontaneously brought into play. Now, if we compare the oral traditions of early societies with the medium of information technologies of the present day, it is immediately clear that the primary concern of both is communication: with all their differences, the cultures of both past and present societies grow up around and thanks to moments, places and environment in which communication is of the essence and to be jealously cultivated. [1]

What is more, just as the oral tradition relied on non-linguistic contributions for maximum effect, so the multi-medial potential of computers helps develop and transmit multicultural and multi-discipline themes which succeed in appealing to several senses and many different types of intelligences, thus activating processes which fix new knowledge in ever-growing cognitive networks.

At the same time, however, the kind of technology we have at our disposal nowadays is not only stimulating in its complexity and many-sided potential, it is also as easily adapted to the creation of spectacular, almost hypnotic effects, as it is to the promotion of social and cultural communication (see, for example, Imax [2], Multivision [3] and some aspects of Virtual Reality [4]). Real communication between users

requires that there exist a shared vision and acceptance of the underlying cultural message upon which interaction can develop: without such common ground, attempts at communication might easily remain isolated, unconnected to wider contexts, while open and harmonious sharing allows contributions to be made by a whole range of actors, each integrating the others.

This is the spirit with which we have been working: bringing together the oral traditions of peoples and the communicative power of the new media with a mind to spreading to a wider public the experiences and the cultural heritage of entire societies. We have tried to do this through the creation of multimedial performances where poetry, music, myth and legend are brought together in the suggestive framework and texture of images created by a hypertext and shown on screen by a projector connected to a computer.

At first sight there may seem to be substantial differences, indeed contradictions, between the flexibility of a hypertext, the essential characteristic of which lies in its adaptability to the interests of the user, and the apparently fixed structure of a theatrical performance. Yet, it is the very adaptability of a well-made hypertext that makes for variously organised performances – what is shown can be modified, in terms of content or of juxtaposition of images and sounds, depending on the context and the cultural message to be transmitted.

The context of the performance, the overall visual and theatrical impact, is created by the hypertext. There is an actor who lends his voice to chosen texts, almost reviving the oral tradition; and there are musicians who respond to verbal texts, giving a body of sound to the words and the pictures around them. Context, then, but also catalyst, shared space and communicative medium – the hypertext is all of these, extending, of course, out to the spectators, who are drawn into a world which communicates to all their senses. Not a world that is repeated as a fixed series of moments, but which changes in response to external situation and demands, and internal dynamics. Multimedial hypertexts produce, then, communicative contexts and means, and, from a different point of view, offer a valid form of technology as entertainment and interaction with spectators and users.

MULTIMEDIA SHOWS

The multimedia shows we are speaking of are the fruit of long-term research and experimentation dealing with, on the one hand, the oral and written traditions of given peoples, and, on the other, how to go about

designing a hypertext that might satisfy the kind of requirements mentioned in the introduction.

Oral and written traditions

We decided to develop our research into the historical and cultural roots of peoples by exploring two different dimensions: first of all, what might be called the "vertical" dimension in that we were looking down history to the origins of the Afro-American people, and secondly a "crosswise" dimension that helped connect the different cultures of peoples distant from each other in time and space but who shared ideals of freedom in addition to a sense of harmony in relation to the world of creation.

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These traits and qualities are what give the hypertext and the consequent theatrical performance their essential substance. Performance is interpretation, never the same and always in a process of being created anew; the hypertext enables the culture of a people to be passed on in a more genuine form because that culture is represented multi-dimensionally and not, for example, just on paper.

"Poetry and music of Black America: spirituals blues jazz" [5-6-7], in collecting and collating the poetical works of Afro-American writers, attempts to tell the cultural history of a people whose music, originating in the rhythms of Africa, inspires the music of all the world. The narration of their history and the sights encountered in the hypertext (Figure 1, Figure 2) recreates the lives of the American black people who, even in the midst of a hostile environment, managed to retain such a creative energy and a firm hold on the preciousness of life that these features of their culture stand out even in the spirituals, blues and jazz of today.
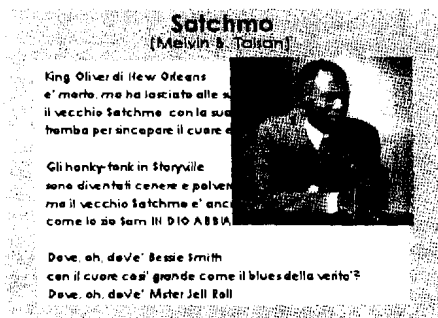

Figure 1: Poet's photo and poem

Figure 2: Musician's full screen photo

This cultural journey starts off from the melancholy notes of the blues, which tell of the hardships of the slaves working in the cotton plantations, arrives at the emergence of be-bop, when young musicians began to feel they were true artists and not simply performers of another's music; the journey passes through the period of cool jazz, which marks the arrival of jazz in California, and then meets the beat generation, before arriving at the free jazz of the sixties. The poetical works we chose have been translated in such a way as to present sound patterns similar to those of blues and jazz, and also to respect the spirit with which the originals were composed. These works are accompanied in the hypertext by photographs, documents of the period, and newspaper articles.

"Myths Poetry Legends and Music of the World" [8] tries to reveal the secret kinship of myths and legends belonging to peoples from all over the world (Figure 3, Figure 4).
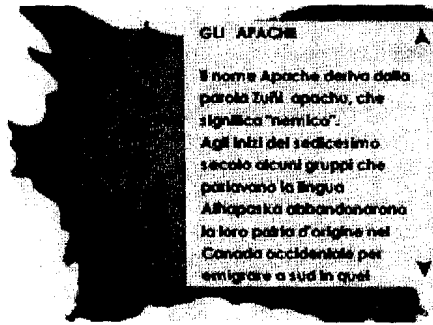
Figure 3: Map of the American Indians tribes (description of the Apache tribe)

Figure 4: Apache woman's full screen photo

There are, for example, legends of the American Indians that express the ideal of harmony between man and nature; Afro-American poems that take their inspiration from spirituals and Gospel song; African fables rich in simplicity and wisdom; poems of the Kurdish people that speak of freedom and humanity.

In this performance, the reciting voice is accompanied by music composed for the show and performed by musicians specialised in ethnic music. The hope is that such shows will be able to bring out the humanity shared by all peoples, the common forms of tradition, the universal feelings that unite us all.

Design of hypertexts for the theatre

The hypertexts for the theatre were conceived in such a way as to contain a vast range and variety of texts, sounds and pictures that can be grouped together and set in different sequences according to the reading one wants to make of the material - clearly this provides the basis for numerous potential performances. The shows become more dynamic, evolve through time, are never repeated in exactly the same form - a single performance takes shape as on the spot decisions are made as to what is to be shown and seen. Nothing is automatic, rather it is the presence and the interaction of the "actors" - the narrator, the musicians and the hypertext navigator/operator - that is crucial for the development of a show. This does not mean that there is always a perfect synchronism of the various media: at times, relatively extraneous elements are introduced - the projection of scenes regarding with general themes, history or art rather than the specific cultural item being dealt with - so as to create a degree of counterpoint that sets the particular into relief.

One technique is to project different pictures onto two separate screens (Figure 5): one projector, connected to a video-recorder, shows a collage of video-clips of scenes related to the cultural aspect in question. These clips are not in fact synchronised with the running order of the performance but in a sense provide a backdrop against which chosen elements and the narration itself interact. On the other hand, the pictures reproduced from the hypertext, projected on the other screen, are shown in close correlation with the narration as it unfolds and the music as it is played (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Otranto castle, 06/09/00 – Otranto, Italy
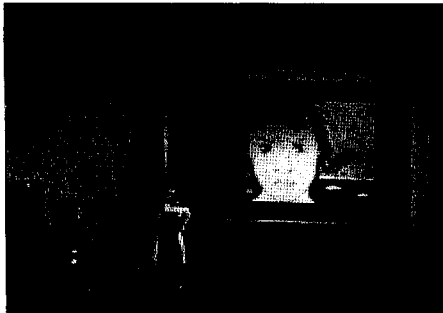
Figure 6: Carlo V castle, 25/11/99 – Lecce, Italy

The hypertext contains the texts of the poems and the tales, as well as the biographies of the writers together with photographs of these and also pictures of locations and of whatever else might better illustrate the central concern of a given text. Now, as pictures play a role of great importance in the shows, great care was taken both with their size and with their resolution when the hypertext was being put together. The resolution is, indeed, very high, and often the pictures which the audience sees are the result of a meticulous work of processing and retouching with appropriate software which, together with an effective play of colours, succeeds in giving the impression of the moment.

In traditional multivision shows, the fade-out effect of images is achieved by control panels or through projector-control computer software; in these multimedia performances, however, the same effects of fade-out or fade-in are already programmed inside the hypertext.

In addition to this, there are instances of visual transformation, when animation is used to transform one picture into another. In this case, a morphing program was utilised to create the transitional photograms between the initial and the successive picture. During the second phase, all the pictures thus created were then edited for the definitive animation.

Video films of people and places alternate with computer-created sequences assembled using video editing software, such as Adobe Premiere.

The fact that the editing procedure of a film sequence in Adobe Premiere is not linear has made it possible to insert, substitute, copy, transform and eliminate clips whenever necessary.

Through the assembly window we have been able to organise, separate or insert clips and arrange them on different levels, to join clips together and carry out the mixing of the clips' audio. The filters for film sequences, still pictures and audio make it possible to achieve effects of distortion, and of blurring; they also can be used to apply textures and colours to pictures, as well as bring about modifications to the sound.

CONCLUSIONS

There have been many experiments in the theatre with multimedia technologies; most often people have tried to use these technologies to create particular staging effects which would integrate and bring out aspects of a given work. Sometimes micro-telecameras follow the actors, these pictures are then mixed by the director and projected onto a number of screens: this effect is obtained through the use of interactive software, and at the same time acoustic effects are created all around the spectators so that they feel immersed in the sound texture of the show.

The effect is without doubt extremely suggestive, yet how much of the work's cultural message is really being communicated to the audience? To what extent can technologies used in this way, almost overpowering the presence of human actors, truly be seen as providing channels for cultural communication?

The crucial factors are the harmony and the inter-relations that come into being between all the component parts of a theatrical experience: - pictures, sounds, the speaking voice, the direction of the show, and the technical expertise involved - by means of well-made hypertext. In addition to these, the various technological instruments help intensify and bring as close as possible to the spectators the message that the cultural creations end up transmitting, acting at the same time at the levels of intellect, senses and emotions.

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