Reanimating Theater for a Contemporary Audience: Multimedia Projections and Visual Dramaturgy in the Postdramatic Theater

by

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Introduction

In the past decade, the use of multimedia such as film and video in live theater has become so commonplace that it often goes unnoticed in the context of the theatrical event as a whole. When projected as part of a performance, two-dimensional images contribute to the dramatic storytelling of any theatrical piece. However, such imagery plays a crucial role in postdramatic theater, i.e., performances where the dramatic text is not the central element. Christopher Baugh defines postdramatic as

a useful term that embraces a wide range of contemporary performance practice and is generally used to refer to works that have been created from the perceptual elements and materials of theatre and which serve their own artistic purposes, not primarily those of the structuring device of pre-existing dramatic texts (212).

This type of theater tends to rely upon visual dramaturgy to generate meaning.

In this essay, “visual dramaturgy” refers to the storytelling and meaning that is created primarily through the use of visuals, not through the traditional dramatic means of the text. Hans-Thies Lehmann describes visual dramaturgy in the postdramatic theater:

In place of dramaturgy regulated by the text one often finds a visual dramaturgy, which seemed to have attained absolute dominance especially in the theatre of the late 1970s and 1980s, until in the 1990s one could observe a certain ‘return to the text.’ Visual dramaturgy here does not mean an exclusively visually organized dramaturgy but rather one that is not subordinated to the text and can therefore freely develop its own logic (93).

This notion of visual dramaturgy can be likewise applied to theater in which text is the primary storyteller, but digital media alters and clarifies the text to establish a sense of cohesive dramaturgy.
Erika Fischer-Lichte writes, “meaning is generated in and through the act of perception” (141). The viewer perceives visual storytelling elements and assigns meaning to the theatrical event. Performance itself is dependent upon the behavior of the spectators.¹ The audience reactions elicited by the dramaturgy of a piece create the performance and give it meaning. Fischer-Lichte also argues “the illusion created by the technical and electronic media is often even more successful than illusionistic theatre in triggering strong physiological, affective, energetic, and motor reactions in the spectators” (100). Multimedia can play a principal role in creating the visual dramaturgy of a theatrical performance, particularly in the postdramatic theater.

For this project, I am focusing on the analysis of five specific performances that I have experienced live.² These case studies include media as a principal scenographic element and I will examine how the dramatic narrative of each production is advanced by its inclusion. Applying Erika Fischer-Lichte’s theories on the power of performance and Hans-Thies Lehmann’s theories on the postdramatic theater, the method of analysis will consist of 1) an objective description: space distribution, elements of design, and narrative or stylistic format, and 2) uses of projections including a) dramaturgical function, b) actor-image interaction, and c) overall success of visual storytelling. These performances are: Sontag: Reborn for use of the digital double as a dramatic character, Shakespeare’s Sonnets for spectacle that relies upon visuals, Tragedy

¹ “The bodily co-presence of actors and spectators enables and constitutes performance... Through their presence, perception, and response, the spectators become co-actors that generate the performance by participating in the ‘play’” (Fischer-Lichte 32).

² I attended all of these performances between November 2013 and November 2014.
of a Friendship for use of title cards and three-dimensional projection surfaces, Hedwig and the Angry Inch for narrative animation sequences, and The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time for the use of projections that create the physical and emotional space of the main character’s mind.

Following these specific analyses, I will compare and contrast the five productions with specific reference to projected images’ relation to the dramatic text and actor-image interaction. Finally, I use my own work with projections in my production component as a case study in visual dramaturgy. Specifically, I will explore how evoking the mood of Gertrude Stein’s writing style through projections creates visual dramaturgy in Ida, A Novel.

Production Descriptions & Initial Analysis

Sontag: Reborn

Sontag: Reborn is a production by The Builders Association based on the journals of Susan Sontag. In his book, Digital Performance, Steve Dixon acknowledges The Builders Association as a prominent contemporary theater company that regularly utilizes projected digital media.

The company uses media and computer technologies to “reanimate” theater for a contemporary audience, “using new tools to interpret old forms…to create a world onstage which reflects the contemporary culture which surrounds us.\textsuperscript{3} (344). This use of media coheres with Fischer-Lichte’s notion of the reenchantment of the world: “The reenchantment of the world is accomplished through this linkage of art and life, which is the aim of the aesthetics of the performative” (206). The

\textsuperscript{3} The Builders Association, “Jump Cut (Faust).”
company uses media as a frame to connect the content of a performance to a modern audience’s highly mediated world.

The Builder’s Association’s *Sontag: Reborn* uses shallow staging in a small playing space where the media and the body of the performer are equally important. The action of the live performer (Moe Angelos) centers on a desk slightly to the right of center stage. There is one projection screen behind the desk, and another in front of it, separating the live actor from the audience. The production utilizes four projectors: one rear projecting on the screen behind the desk, one projecting from above onto the desk itself, one projecting on the whole front screen, and another projecting just to the stage left third of the front screen. The confined space of the performance means that none of the multiple screens overpower the others or the live performer.

The live actor portrays Sontag in her younger years, though the piece spans at least a decade. Present simultaneously and continuously with the live performer is a projected video recording of Angelos playing Sontag as an older woman revisiting her journals. The projection is roughly four times the size of the live actor. Despite each Sontag occupying opposite sides of the stage, the Older Sontag (“Oldie”) overwhelms the live actor due to the difference in scale and the way in which the screen in front of the live performer makes her separate from the audience in a way that Oldie is not.

For a vast majority of the piece the Oldie is silent. She smokes and rifles through notebooks off to the side of Angelos’ live performance. However, when Oldie *does* speak, it is always a commentary on her younger self.
One of the most engaging aspects of director Marianne Weems’ clever production is that the younger Sontag, hidden behind a scrim as she putters around her desk, also periodically argues with a projection of the older Sontag. (The superb video design is by Austin Switser.) She provides bon mots of wisdom, scathing commentary, and the occasional pop quiz — in keeping with Sontag's lifelong desire to better prepare herself for the future, even when she is totally unsure of what it would hold. (Lipton)

This dynamic creates a dialogue between the Sontags that defies time and space.

The most striking instance of Oldie as commentator is when Oldie is looking through her journal for 1951, shortly after her marriage, and finds nothing of note in it. Before moving on to 1952, she looks over at her younger self with a disappointed glare and accompanying sigh. At this point, the stage is almost completely dark: the audience reads that nothing significant is happening in Sontag’s life. As Oldie announces the date of her son David’s birth, the lights come back up and Young Sontag is sporting a slightly different look. She immediately begins talking about her dissatisfaction with married life. In a way, this comment about marriage is a response to Oldie’s dissatisfaction with the notebook of this time in her life; both Sontags are critical of this time in her life: one retrospectively, the other in the moment. Digital media allows the viewer to see both of these viewpoints simultaneously with the same actor, a feat that would be impossible without the use of multimedia.

A different employment of the oversized Oldie projection is the scene near the end of the piece where both Sontags are talking about using drugs. As the Younger Sontag gets more and more disordered due to her drug use, the older version gets more and more distorted. This scene is the only time in the piece
that the framing or size of Oldie changes. She is a stationary presence until this scene in which she is almost on a flashing loop: the camera zooms in on her getting bigger and bigger before starting over again. This scene functions as a dialogue in that Older Sontag describes the effects of the drugs she was doing and how they affected her writing, while the Younger Sontag lives out these experiences by shouting and dancing.

The drug scene example is notable also in that it is the first time the Oldie projection gives the audience a view into the Younger Sontag’s mind. Previously, Oldie has just served to provide biting critiques and clarifications to the personal writings of her younger self. However, once the drugs really take hold, even Oldie begins to appear “trippy.” Young Sontag and the Oldie projection work very well together: they provide for one another a real partner on the stage. The projection allows the solo performer a non-live body with which to interact while still preserving the feel of a solo piece.

Dixon discusses the rupture of time that occurs with the use of digital media: “The live and the virtual combine to dramatize the experience of existing and functioning outside of time” (19). Oldie is a character created from media. It’s necessary for the older Sontag to be a projection because of the way in which she defies the time of the live actor’s narrative. She functions as an intermediary between Young Sontag and the viewer. Here, digital media provides a non-realist constant to live action. During the drug scene, Oldie is manipulated in a way that would be extremely difficult if she were not media. In this moment, virtual media
makes verisimilar a sequence that would look unrealistic if created with physically physical set pieces or props.

Oldie being affected by Young Sontag’s drug use is a strong example of the way in which projections let the viewer into the mind of Young Sontag. Oldie is the most engaging use of media in the piece, but there are other projections. One projector puts a digital image of Susan’s handwriting onto the desk as Angelos writes along with it. The camera focused on the desk from above captures both the handwriting projection and the actor’s movements and sends the image to the rear projector, such that the audience sees the top view of the desk projected onto the rear screen. This staging could only be done digitally and it serves to emphasize the importance of handwriting to Susan Sontag, but also has the effect of reminding the viewer that these words were never intended to be spoken.

In one scene, Young Sontag climbs onto the desk and lies down. This image is manipulated by the rear projector such that the image of her lying on the table is cycled almost like a conveyor belt. While lying on the desk, Sontag laments the monotony of her marriage. The visuals make it clear that she is feeling trapped in an unpleasant cycle.

The final projection surface is the portion of the front scrim that separates the live actor from the audience. In contrast to the other surfaces, the images projected here are inconsistent in dramaturgical function. Sometimes the space is used to indicate travel, such as the scene in which Susan travels to Europe by boat and the front screen is filled with bright blue, gently moving waves, and at
other times the screen is filled with a static image that serves a function similar to a scene change. In an early scene, this screen is transformed into a bookcase seemingly just as a scenic flourish. Dramaturgically, these two kinds of projections could be functioning in a Brechtian manner, this is, reminding the viewer that, while this piece is based on Susan Sontag’s journals, it is a theatrical event that does not take place in an actual locale. These projections could also be thought of as Oldie’s subjective remembrances of the locales in question.

Sontag: Reborn’s is a superb example of a production that would be fundamentally altered in the absence of multimedia. The importance of multimedia is especially clear with the Oldie projection, without which the piece would be unrecognizable. The Oldie projection is the most notable and dramaturgically critical digital image, however, the projected handwriting is also successful in telling the story visually.

Shakespeare’s Sonnets

Lehmann describes Robert Wilson’s role in the postdramatic theater thus: “In Wilson’s work we find a de-hierarchization of theatrical means connected to the absence of dramatic action in his theatre” (79). For Wilson, the actors and their interactions are not the most important part of a theatrical work. Lehmann continues, “the actors sharing the stage often do not even enter into the context of an interaction of any kind” (79). Wilson does not prioritize story; instead, he focuses on creating visually stunning living artwork, often involving projected images.
Wilson’s *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* is a loose interpretation of the Sonnets in an opera format. However, Zachary Stewart describes it thus: “rather than an opera with an overarching through-line, Shakespeare's Sonnets takes the form of an evening of live music videos enacted by a repertory ensemble” (Stewart). The piece is a prime example of postdramatic theater in that it is entirely dependent upon the visuals for creating meaning.

The piece takes place on a wide proscenium stage. Each scene has its own elaborate and distinct scenery. For example, one set piece is a full-sized car impaled on a tree. Another scene includes three pure white, massive gas pumps that the performers operate during the number. Between each scene, the curtain closes and there is a somewhat comic non-musical sideshow to the piece, seemingly incorporated just to allow time for and draw attention to the drastic set changes. The most successful scenographic factor in this piece is how each scene feels like a totally new space, reimagined specifically for its particular scene. Each set affirms the piece as a series of distinct vignettes that cues the audience not to expect a narrative connection between scenes.

*Shakespeare’s Sonnets* uses digital media sparingly, but when scenes do feature videos, they have no blatant connection to the text or actions of the live performers. The piece begins with looped film countdowns on two different television screens. Theses countdowns are not in real time: each “second” lasts about eight. Nothing in the music or staging indicates that the countdown is approaching anything climatic. In fact, reaching zero on the countdown is entirely
unacknowledged by everyone but the audience. Upon reaching zero, the screens turn to static.

The countdowns begin again when a new character enters with a scream of “NEIN!” This time, the countdowns go even slower but stop after the number 3, before going back to static. They start once more, this time at 7 instead of 8, but end after 6, and, instead of static, they simply go to black along with the lights. These countdowns do not serve a clear dramaturgical function. One could argue that they could be seeking to create a rupture in the viewer’s understanding of time, however, the live performers’ complete lack of acknowledgment of the screens calls this explanation into question.

The most salient use of media is near the beginning of the second act when a video is projected above and behind the performers while they are singing and dancing. The video shows a woman filling a glass with milk, slowly walking down a hallway, and giving a young boy the glass of milk. The boy drinks the milk, then gives the glass back to the woman who takes it and returns down the hallway from whence she came. After the song is over, the woman returns to the boy with a knife and slowly begins to stab him. However, she withdraws the knife and there is nothing on it. Nonetheless, the boy keels over. The woman leaves down the hallway again while the actors remain static and silent. This scene is followed by a blackout. The video effectively tells a story, though it leaves the viewer to question the connection to the live performers.

While this production uses media sparsely, it does include extensive use of a cyclorama in ways similar to the use of multimedia as scenic backdrop in
Sontag: Reborn. In certain scenes, shadows are purposefully cast onto the cyc to create almost landscape-like backdrops for the action; while in other instances, it serves as a bright backdrop, creating silhouettes that highlight the form and movements of each performer. “Wilson’s actors mostly perform their movements across the space parallel to the backdrop. This creates the effect of dissolving the actor’s corporeality in the flatness of the image” (Fischer-Lichte 85). This effect makes these live actors’ movements appear as though they are themselves digitally projected, a sharp contrast to the three-dimensional set pieces.

The cyclorama becomes especially significant during the last 20 minutes of the show. In the penultimate song, the dark blue light on the cyc is the only source of light other than the follow spot on the main performer. In most other songs, the performers work as an ensemble, but these last two numbers highlight the individuality of the soloists and the use of the cyclorama aids in this emphasis.

Lehmann describes Robert Wilson’s work: “the phenomenon has priority over the narrative, the effect of the image precedence over the individual actor, and contemplation over interpretation” (80). Shakespeare’s Sonnets is primarily about visual and sonic impact. There is no narrative or consistent through line. Instead, Wilson’s imaginations of the sonnets come to life as a series of vignettes. Digital media is right at home in this visual world. However, Wilson uses digital scenographic elements only a select few times in this particular production. The performers become a part of the scenery. They are singing and
speaking, but their primary function in the piece is a visual one. *Sonnets* uses media less as a tool for storytelling and creating meaning, and more as an apparatus to further visually stimulate the audience. Though Sonnets hardly uses digital images, it is an accurate example of a postdramatic theater production in that it does not put Shakespeare’s text at the center of the piece, but still generates meaning by virtue of having the audience perceive the elaborate visuals.

*Tragedy of a Friendship*

Jan Fabre’s *Tragedy of a Friendship* is an epic opera, mostly in German, telling the story of Richard Wagner’s friendship with Friedrich Nietzsche. Fabre structures this story through recreations of each of Wagner’s 13 operas in the order he wrote them. George Hunka describes Fabre’s process thus:

With his collaborators composer Moritz Eggert and librettist Stefan Hertmans, Fabre traces Wagner’s career through a perspective informed by industrialism, popular culture (through projections of silent-movie title cards introducing each opera and historical photographs of earlier Wagner performances), and especially organized violence. (Hunka)

In this way, Fabre uses projections primarily for narrative clarity.

The performance takes place in an open proscenium stage with a cyc background and physical scenic elements wheeled in for each specific opera staging. Each opera is made distinct through the use of a projected title card bearing the German title of the opera about to be reimagined. These cards serve as a framing device that tells the audience that what follows is intended as an interpretation of a specific Wagner opera.
Other than the opera titles, this production primarily uses projections to provide juxtapositions with the action of the live performers. Moving images are projected to take up the whole upstage cyc. These images are oversized, stretched and out of focus. It is difficult to discern exactly what is happening in the projected image so they ultimately have the effect of creating a sharp and evocative visual contrast to the live performers.

One of the standout scenic elements is the human-sized bell jars that ascend from below the stage about halfway into the piece.

The bell jars that frame the stage on either side are reminders of Victorian scientism: dating from the mid-19th-century, these were meant to provide vacuum-sealed vessels for taxidermy and experiments requiring an airless environment. In Fabre’s scenography they become instead constantly mutating arenas for the display of bodies, light, color, and vapor: organic activity even within a vacuum which should prevent it. 4 (Hunka)

In the context of the piece, these bell jars are a container for performance that also provides a three-dimensional projection surface where body and object are projected upon simultaneously. Though the bell jars are off to the sides of center stage where there is constant action, these structures inevitably steal focus.

Video projections on the jars show extreme close-ups of flesh moving in slow motion as actors inside the jars perform self-mutilating behaviors, such as burning their skin with small candles. These violent actions elicit a visceral response from the audience, especially since it is unclear (in small part due to the distortion of the projections) to what degree, if any, the performers are actually hurting themselves. Lehmann describes the effect this uncertainty has

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4 “The bell jars were built by Heinz Fritz, and the video effects therein were designed by Luca Brinchi, Roberta Zanardo, and Santasangre” (Hunka).
on the viewer: “when it deliberately remains uncertain whether an actor is really being tortured with electric shocks in front of the audience, the audience possibly reacts to it as to a real, morally unacceptable incident” (103). The video effects create visual dramaturgy through the meaning generated by the audience’s strong reactions to the images.

**Hedwig and the Angry Inch**

Marilyn Stasio describes the set for the Broadway production of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* as follows:

A bizarrely imaginative art installation of broken brick walls, bombed-out buildings, charred automobiles and flying debris, this scene of carnage is supposedly the detritus left from “Hurt Locker: The Musical” that opened and closed at the same Broadway theater in one night — actually, during intermission (“Broadway Review: Hedwig”). The character Hedwig inhabits a space that is made to seem as if it is designed for another production entirely, but, through the use of projected images on a pre-existing set, she is able to tell her story and make the space her own.

The first significant projection occurs when Hedwig talks about her recent, well-publicized car accident involving Tommy Gnosis. A tabloid cover appears on the upstage wall of the stage showing Tommy’s mug shot spread across page before zooming in on Hedwig’s small mug shot in the lower corner of the page. This scene serves to plant an image in the viewer’s minds that Tommy looks mysteriously like Hedwig. This suggestion is essential for the end of the show in which the actor playing Hedwig transforms into Tommy Gnosis. Using the
projection to establish this mirror image of Hedwig brings an element of the
digital double into the piece.

Several songs use split-second changes in projected images in tandem
with lighting to create the overstimulating atmosphere typical of a rock concert,
however, the most significant use of projections occurs in the song “The Origin of
Love.” The number features a full stage scrim in front of the performers to act as
a relatively transparent projection surface. The media for this song consists of an
elaborate animation sequence projected to take up most of the space above and
around the performers. The animations follow the story of the song, itself an
adaptation of a section in Plato’s Symposium\(^5\) explaining how love came to be in
the world. These images are intricately designed to be in time with Hedwig’s
movements. For example, when there is a reference to Thor’s hammer, Hedwig
reaches into thin air and a hammer appears then follows her hand as if she is
actually wielding it.

The sequence culminates in the image of an eye split in two which lingers
on the upstage wall after the song ends and the scrim is flown out. The lingering
broken eye is a significant element of this song, as it reappears a couple of times
during the show. The next instance occurs as Hedwig describes how she
realized that Tommy was her other half. As she tells this story, the eye appears
on the upstage wall, but it remains broken. At the end of the final song, the
broken eye reappears, then merges to become whole.

\(^5\) The narrative of the song is taken almost exactly from Aristophanes’ speech in Plato’s dialogue
discussing the nature of love.
The other major musical number in which projections play a major role occurs much later in the show. “Exquisite Corpse” features rapid-fire projections of non-matching body parts split into three horizontal bands on the rear wall of the stage. The speed of projections, along with the lighting serve to disorient and startle the viewer. The images themselves are cartoonish drawings and distorted photographs mixed with portraits of celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe. These projections show the audience Hedwig’s internal thoughts about her own body as she sings about being “a collage, I’m all sewn up” (Trask 85).

Also during “Exquisite Corpse,” the car is flown out to a vertical position so it can serve as both a projection surface and a large object behind which Hedwig can disappear for her transformation into Tommy. As a projection surface, the car highlights certain images from the collage of body parts that appear during the song. For example, Marilyn Monroe’s head can clearly be seen on the car for a significant beat of the song while all images continue to race by.

*Hedwig and the Angry Inch* tells its story primarily with dramatic text supplemented by musical numbers. However, projected images also play a significant role in creating visual dramaturgy. The three main examples of narratively-crucial projections are the blown-up tabloid photo, the animation sequence in “Origin of Love,” and the distorted images in “Exquisite Corpse.” Although all three are distinct and operate in different ways, they all ultimately serve to create visual dramaturgy and facilitate visual understanding for the audience.
The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time uses digital media to create a fully transformable space that reflects the mental state of the protagonist, Christopher. Marilyn Stasio describes the space thus:

Faced with the daunting task of translating Christopher’s affinity for numbers into a stage-worthy idiom, inventive designers Bunny Christie (sets), Paule Constable (lighting), Finn Ross (video) and Ian Dickinson for Autograph (sound) have devised a three-sided black box divided by a network of white lines into smaller black boxes. It’s a mathematically perfect grid, but whenever the outside world intrudes, the grid splits into flying fragments of letters and numbers, and goes into unnerving convulsions of light and sound and visual projectiles (“Broadway Review: The Curious Incident”).

The video effects are instrumental in creating the space, and their ability to be manipulated makes them highly effective in expressing Christopher’s thoughts to the audience visually.

In one scene, Christopher describes his hopes of being an astronaut. Line drawings of stars and planets pass him by until his father interrupts his fantasy and the stars immediately rush toward Christopher before disappearing entirely. As Christopher’s internal world is disrupted, so is the world that surrounds him on the stage.

Perhaps the most important example of the projections expressing Christopher’s mental state occurs when he is attempting to navigate the public transit system on his way to his mother’s London flat. Signs begin to overtake the stage so that soon the projections become so layered that they are illegible. The multitudinous signs move around the stage such that Christopher becomes literally surrounded by the media that surrounds him figuratively in the actual
world. The video effects overwhelm the audience, putting them in the same position as the main character.

When Christopher finally figures out how to get to London, he must learn where his mother’s flat is and how to get there. A giant map of London envelopes Christopher and moves along with him until he reaches his destination. Having the map move along with him literally puts the center of the action on Christopher. Without these projections, the audience would not understand where Christopher is geographically, nor would they be able to determine his perception of his surroundings.

Though the projections show a subjective but accurate representation of Christopher’s internal world, it is not until the post-curtain call epilogue that Christopher is truly able to be the master of his mind and space. During this monologue, he directly addresses the audience to explain how he arrived at an answer to a question on his math examination. He is alone in the space and in full control of it for the first time.

Comparative Analysis

In *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann writes about the role of text in contemporary theatre:

“The focus is no longer on the questions whether and how the theater ‘corresponds to’ the text that eclipses everything else, rather the questions are whether and how the texts are suitable material for the realization of a theatrical project” (56).

Contemporary theater does not necessitate the elevation of the dramatic text over all elements of the theatrical event. One of the most notable differences
between these five performances is the way in which they use a dramatic text with regards to the projected images. *Sontag: Reborn, Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* are performances in which the text is the central element, where as *Shakespeare’s Sonnets* and *Tragedy of a Friendship* prioritize striking visuals. *Sontag, Hedwig, and Curious Incident* effectively utilize projections for visual dramaturgy, but they enhance the text rather than extend beyond it.

*Sontag* is based upon Susan Sontag’s journals and the projections are limited to the information present in the journals. Oldie’s text comes entirely from middle-aged Sontag’s comments on the entries from her earlier years. The co-presence of the projection and the live performer has significant dramaturgical value due to the way that the older Sontag’s comments on her younger self’s actions have an emotional effect upon the audience that would not be as strong if these things were not happening at the same time. This projection is a critical device in making this non-dramatic text dramatic, but it is just that, a dramatic representation of the text.

*Hedwig and the Angry Inch* uses digital, projected images to quite literally illustrate the narrative. The projections do not add new narrative material, but enhance the viewer’s experience of the existing narrative set forth by the performer’s text. The visceral juxtaposition of images in “Exquisite Corpse” elicit audience reactions and clarify the meaning of the song, but are fully within the constraints of the libretto.
The digital images in *Curious Incident* are similar to those in *Sontag* in that they are rooted in a non-dramatic text (the novel upon which the stage production is based), yet still provide visual dramaturgy in the context of the theatrical piece. *Curious Incident* uses projectors to create spaces essential to the story, but these spaces are dictated both by the dramatic text and the novel. In this way, these projections do not create their own story, but instead make the dramatic text visual.

*Shakespeare’s Sonnets* and *Tragedy of a Friendship* approach multimedia and the dramatic text quite differently. Fabre and Wilson do not use digital media as a means to advance a narrative, but instead employ manipulated digital images to create a narrative of dynamics with which the dramatic text is juxtaposed. Chiel Kattenbelt expands on this idea: “Directors like Robert Wilson and Jan Fabre used techniques of deceleration and repetition in order to intensify the experience of the passing of time, and to dispose the action of its functionality for the sake of its own dynamics” (35). These images are just as important, if not more so, than the dramatic text in terms of dramaturgy.

*Sonnets* is a non-narrative piece, but it is still rooted in the text of Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Rufus Wainwright’s operatic orchestrations of said sonnets. Wilson’s digital images are loosely (if at all) connected to the text of the performers. *Tragedy* uses Wagner’s operas as the basis for the dramatic text, but what happens on stage would be better described as *inspired* by the operas. The projected images are unrelated to both the operas and the actual performance text. They are included mostly for shock value.
Sontag, Hedwig, and Curious Incident employ projections that are illustrative of the existing text, while Wilson and Fabre use projections as a separate piece to be used in conjunction with the text and/or action of the live performer. Not entirely unrelated is the way in which Hedwig, Curious Incident, and Sontag, being primarily character stories, feature a significant amount of actor-media interaction, whereas the live performers and the projected media are, for the most part, kept separate in Sonnets and Tragedy.

Sonnets’ opening sequence featuring the television countdowns involves no actor-image interaction. The countdowns and the live performers exist independently of one another. Later, the video of the woman and the boy is placed behind the performers and has no definite connection to what is happening on the stage. This relationship has a distinct dramaturgical effect in the way that it forces the viewer to interpret the connection and ultimately assign her own meanings to the juxtaposition of these images.

In Tragedy of a Friendship, the fullscreen projections on the upstage wall serve only as a backdrop to the performers. It is questionable whether the actors even know that the projections are there, let alone what they are showing at any given moment. The flesh sequences projected onto the bell jars are an exception, but only in that the actor and image are sharing a confined space. Even this section of the piece lacks actor-image interaction with dramaturgical intention or significance.

Hedwig and Curious Incident both involve extensive actor-image interaction. Hedwig directly addresses and reacts to the projections as a means
to tell her story. For example, she references the projected newspaper at the beginning of the show as an impetus to talk about Tommy Gnosis. Having Hedwig interact with this image is instrumental in our realizing that it is the actor playing Hedwig, a critical development for the end of the show when the actor transforms from Hedwig into Tommy.

While *Hedwig*'s actor-image interactions are mostly actor responses to the illustrative storytelling, the projections in *Curious Incident* seek to make literal the inner workings of Christopher’s mind. For this reason, the projections are strictly under the control of the actor playing Christopher. When he leaves his house, the other houses on the block appear only as he talks about them. As he draws his thoughts, they become projected. The projections would mean very little without the involvement of the lead actor.

*Sontag: Reborn* is a rare case in that the image interacts more with the actor, as opposed to the other way around. In keeping with the organization of Sontag’s journals, the Younger Sontag never directly addresses her projected older self, but Oldie talks at the live actor throughout the piece. Moe Angelos does not specifically acknowledge the other projections; she follows along with the projected handwriting and she occasionally looks at the projections in front of her desk, but her actions do not cause the projections to change as in *Curious Incident*. 
For the production component of my thesis, I designed animations to be projected as part of Kate Malczewski's solo performance based on Gertrude Stein’s novel *Ida*. I sought to incorporate these with the hope that Kate could interact with them and they could provide visual dramaturgy for the piece. Using Stein’s distinctive writing style as the main source of inspiration, I created videos to advance the storytelling of the theatrical performance.

In *Postdramatic Theater*, Hans-Thies Lehmann writes about Gertrude Stein’s style of writing with relation to theater:

> Since Gertrude Stein’s theatre texts — if not earlier — we have the example of a language that loses its immanent teleological temporarily and orientation towards meaning and becomes like an *exhibited object*. Stein achieves this through techniques of repeating variations, through the uncoupling of immediately obvious semantic connections, and through the privileging of formal arrangements according to syntactic or musical principles (similarities in sound, alliterations, or rhythmic analogies) (147).

All of these techniques can be applied in designing digital media for the stage, especially in the postdramatic theater. Using these techniques to create the media in *Ida, A Novel* provided me a formal basis upon which I could expand with the intention of generating effective visual dramaturgy.

The most obvious influence of Stein’s language on the video projections in *Ida, A Novel* is the repetition and variation of certain images throughout the piece. Kate’s physical scores for the performance included countless instances of repetition and variation that I emphasized with an accompanying repeatable yet variable animation. The three central visual motifs of the performance are music notes, handwritten letters, and the word IDA.
Going along with Stein’s application of musical organization principles to her writing, the performance text of *Ida, A Novel* included many sung words or phrases. Each repetition of “I=Love” when Ida calls her dog is accompanied by the appearance of two musical notes which dance around at varying angles and speeds before fading or running off the edge of the screen. Ida sings a full song to her dog, the notes of which appear as she sings them and jiggle back and forth until the end of the song. In the following scene, she sings the song again, this time much faster than in the previous scene, so the music notes rush to match.

Ida writes several letters in the performance, so I created projections of handwriting to be projected in time with her recitation of the words in the letter. I used it in a way similar to the projected handwriting in *Sontag: Reborn*, but I projected only the significant words that are repeated across the letters and the performance as a whole, such as “dear,” “Ida,” and “twin.” At the very end of the piece, as Ida writes another letter, I brought back the “Dear” projection to fade out slowly as a lingering finale to the animations.

Much of Kate’s interpretation and adaptation of this novel for performance was centered on Ida as a celebrity or someone who “is known.” For this reason, I projected the name Ida, sometimes in the style of marquee, many times throughout the piece. The first instance of this projection is the sequence of IDAs that appear while Ida is writing her first letter to her twin which culminates in the flickering IDA marquee. This pattern is repeated and varied when Ida wins a

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6 This idea of celebrity prompted the large eye projections when the narrator tells the story of two people going to look at Winnie.
beauty pageant, when she is mistaken for Winnie by an army officer, and, one last time when she is “beginning to be known.”

As with most Stein works, the *Ida* text is non-linear. Both the novel and the staging feel like a series of vignettes, not unlike *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*. An example is the repetition of the song Ida sings to her dog Love which is illustrated to emphasize not only the repetition, but also the non-linearity of time. Merx describes the effects of video on time:

> When video is employed within the theatrical frame, there is a potential for the static space of theatre to become more dynamic. Video can represent spaces, which enlarge, double, transform the theatrical space, as well as, in the case of live video the performance space. Similarly, the closed continuum of time can be broken, as video can introduce a different dimension of time in the performance (71).

As such, video effects are right at home in Stein as a means to rupture the perception of chronological time.

Time and projections meet again in the animations that indicate travel. The novel is very unclear about time period and location up until Ida arrives in Connecticut. Prior to Ida ending up in Connecticut, she is described as living “just outside the city” (Stein 9), so, for the adaptation, the early projection of the streets is non-specific, while the later projections such as the maps, the White House, and Buckingham Palace, are highly recognizable.

One of the main ways in which projected images can create visual dramaturgy for a live theatrical event is by showing the audience the inner thoughts and feelings of a character. The location indicators strive to reflect Ida’s feelings about traveling to each place. For instance, when Ida turns up in Connecticut, the projection zooms in on the state from a wider view of New
England. This movement is fast and disorients the viewer to go along with the idea expressed in the text that Ida more or less ends up in Connecticut without reason or explanation.

Similarly, the transition from the image of Ohio to an image of a tree was intentionally slow and rough in keeping with Ida’s negative feelings about her life in Ohio, while Ida feels positively about her time in Washington, so the transition from the map of Washington to the static image of the White House is quick and smooth. We chose to make it abundantly clear that when Ida and Gerald Seaton move away to “another country,” that the other country in question is Great Britain, as the novel itself is loosely based on Wallis Simpson, the American wife of Edward VIII. This distinction is not made in the performance text, so the visual is especially significant in this scene.

In Logan Esdale’s Introduction to the novel, Susan Sontag is credited with placing Ida in the context of silent film. In adapting Ida for the stage, we decided to play with silent film style of storytelling with projections. The performance opens with a title slide, not dissimilar to those used in Tragedy of a Friendship. The style of silent film storytelling continues with the juxtaposition of silent actions by the live performer with classical Hollywood inter titles proclaiming Stein’s text about Ida’s birth. These inter titles replace the performer’s text, so they are crucial for the audience’s understanding of what is happening narratively on

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7 “And as Susan Sontag argues in an essay titled ‘Performance Art,’ Ida’s silence also makes her funny. Sontag compares Ida to three heroes of the silent-film era, Buster Keaton, Harry Langdon, and Charlie Chaplin” (Esdale xxii)
stage, but, more importantly, they establish a kind of visual storytelling that carries through the rest of the piece.

The peak of the animations comes in the scene in which the entire stage is in blackout and the performer's text is illustrated purely by animations. The animations are not exact, literal interpretations of the text. While the performer is describing Ida in a field leaning against a wall, the animations show a barn being erected and later a road being paved up to the barn. This is intended to have a similar effect to the video in Wilson's *Sonnets*. The video tells a story and the performer tells a story, but they are not necessarily the same story.

I employed Gertrude Stein's writing techniques as organizing principles for creating animated sequences for *Ida* with the intention of eliciting audience reactions by generating visual dramaturgy based in the stylistic connection between the dramatic text and the projected images. I focused on using digital images to preserve the style of the novel so as not to lose Stein's distinctive way of storytelling in the staging of the piece.

V. Conclusion

As a design element, multimedia projections can play a key role in creating meaning for a theatrical piece. This is especially true in theatrical productions wherein the dramatic text is not the principal organizing element. Hans-Thies Lehmann calls this postdramatic theater “a theatre of states and of scenically dynamic formations” (68). Not elevating the dramatic text above other elements of the theatrical event allows for scenographic storytelling.
Multimedia can be easily manipulated in countless ways in real time, making it an ideal way to tell a story in concert with live performers. *Sontag: Reborn, Shakespeare’s Sonnets, Tragedy of a Friendship, Hedwig and the Angry Inch,* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* are recent performances that use digital media as a means to advance narrative and/or elicit a strong response from the spectator. These five productions are drastically different performances, but they all effectively utilize multimedia to generate meaning through spectator reactions to visual storytelling.

In the shift toward the postdramatic theater, Gertrude Stein anticipated “a defocalization and equal status for all parts, a renunciation of teleological time, and the dominance of an ‘atmosphere’ above dramatic and narrative forms of progression” (Lehmann 63). Stein’s texts exemplify the subordination of the narrative to the atmosphere of a piece. This quality, along with her distinctive text-as-object writing style, makes her texts ideal for theatrical adaptations with digital media. For the production component of my thesis, I used such techniques to create animations to be projected in bringing Stein’s novel, *Ida,* to the stage. Repetition and subversion of time in the style of Stein can be accomplished with multimedia in the live theatrical event in such a way that spectators will generate meaning and visual dramaturgical by virtue of perception and reaction.
Works Cited


