

Daria Baryshnikova
On the poetics
of immersive
multimodal
narratives:
Narration
and formal
experimentation
in Earth Diver
(2016)

About the author

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Abstract

Using Wouter van Looy's performance piece *Earth Diver* (2016) as a case study, this paper examines the way in which media-specific forms of narration are manifested in an environmental installation which is focused on the sensual experiences of its audience. The paper illustrates how the performance enables access to simultaneous experiences and contextualises problems and historical references through various perspectives about perception and the functioning of the mind. I seek to demonstrate that the narrative of *Earth Diver* is constructed not because of various models which supplement one another, but also because it emerges from intermedial relationships. I am to do this by examining the specificity of the you-narrative in the poetic text by Paul Verrept which is the narrative core of the performance. I will also argue that the mode of intermedial relationships in an artwork can offer a new way for the construction of captivating art environments. The result is a synthesised approach that is pursued in this paper, combining narratological analysis with an investigation of the artwork's musical and visual features, thus extending an understanding of the specificity of processes that create meanings in complex narratives.

Keywords

multimodal narrative, transmedial narratology, immersion, you-narrative

1 Introduction

Earth Diver is a multimedia performance piece which was commissioned in 2016 for the Ruhrtriennale Art Festival and for the vocal ensemble Chorwerk Ruhr, with Wouter van Looy as the director. From the very beginning, as the actions on stage unfold, *Earth Diver* compels the audience to delve into several narratives simultaneously and to experience the way in which they rearticulate and highlight one another. The performance can be seen as a merger of installation art and environmental theatre [1], the focus being on the sensual experience of the audience. Tracking immersive theatre traditions that have emerged during the past two decades [2], [3], [4], *Earth Diver* blends forms and principles of multimedia installation and physical and visual theatres during the 20th century. Formally, the performance involves videoart in a four-screen projection, recitation of poetic text by the vocal artist Phil Minton, early modern and contemporary live music, as well

I base this work on the definition of narrative as a discourse of human experience. In her discussion about narrative, Monika Fludernik [5] replaces the focus on plot with a focus on consciousness. This means that an experiencing mind is at the core of any narrative. Thus the specific aesthetic effect of a narrative “can also be produced by the mimetically motivated evocation of human consciousness and its (sometimes chaotic) experience in being in the world.” When it comes to the narrative mode, I base my thinking on David Herman’s argument that this is a resource of “representation formulated within a particular type of discourse” [6, p. 79]. In this, the medium is viewed as a means to produce what is being represented in each mode. I also draw upon a distinction made by Kress and van Leeuwen of modes as “semiotic resources which allow the simultaneous realization of discourse and types of (inter)action” [7, p. 21]. In *Multimodal Discourse*, Kress and van Leeuwen introduce and define four levels of communications which contribute meaning: discourse, design, production and distribution.

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as electronic soundscapes. Singers from the chorus move through the scenic space and the auditorium, often going behind the audience so that sounds and voices keep reassembling and mixing. The story draws extensively upon early modern music polyphony and rhetoric so as to formulate a narrative about hope, despair and redemption.

This study focuses on a multimodal immersive narrative and the ways in which simultaneous experiences can be presented on stage. This contextualizes issues and historical references through various perspectives about perception and the functioning of the mind. I will first outline the basic concepts and research approaches which are the basis for my analysis, and then I shall consider the general semiotics structure which underlies multimodal narrative presentation.

I sought to analyze the artwork which fits together with the contemporary trend of narrative complexity [8, pp.1-26]. The performance involves complex narrative strategies with an embedding of multilinear plots that are experienced in the multiform presentation. There is non-linearity and excessive stimulation of the audience. The complexity of the narrative is additionally constituted by symbolism, subtextual significance and rhythmical connections at the thematic level. There is no coherent chain of meaningful events in *Earth Diver*, which means that the audience must use multiple cognitive frames such as character identification, reliance on genre conventions, patterns, repetitions and intertextual connections which help to shape expectations, fill in gaps, direct attention and evaluate recognisable patterns. The result is a formulation of interpretation. Perception, cognition and imagination work together to create

a sensation of being engaged and (inter)acting with the work of art.

Marie-Laure Ryan examines narrative processes across a wide range of text from the printed novel to electronic games, interactive films and hypertexts [9]. She usefully defines the experience of immersion in the narrative media with three perspectives – special, temporal and emotional, stating that this is a mode of engagement with a narrative that brings an imagined world into being. This diversity is captured in some of the most engaging parts of *a*. The audience may experience immersion as blurring or blending as a sensation of being involved with a fictional world. Members of the audience are emotionally, mentally or physically absorbed into a certain kind of reflection with intertextual re-actualizing of the universal structures of human behavior.

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ating effects of immediacy in the story. How is there interplay between various semiotic modes which unfold simultaneously and affect each of the stories and consciousness experiences that are represented here? How does multimodality influence the evocation of story worlds in the process of narration? I argue that various modes lead us to multiple interconnected story worlds in the past and the present, and this results in the construction of a narrative. The audience's experiences are intermingled with multiple cultural references suggested by poetic texts, video projections or Schütz motets. My focus will be on the specificity of you-narrative in the poetic texts of Paul Verrept. I will also compare the way in which Heinrich Schütz handles the musical form in the way in which the Barentsburg mine is filmed by Wil Catrysse. Finally, I

will demonstrate how the medium-specificity and narrative strategies of *Earth Diver* contribute toward the creation of an immersive stage performance.

2 Narrative strategies in the story of loss and acceptance

An underlying dramatic situation in *Earth Diver* unfolds in parallel in two different modes. There is a poetic recitation, and there is a four-screen video projection which offers both verbal and visual elements. The plot involves mine workers who were abandoned after coal production ended at an isolated site near Spitzbergen. Director Van Looy combined video materials which represent the Barentsburg mine. He filmed these with a detached observer mode, and the images are accompanied by a highly emotional poem by Paul Verrept, which establishes the narrative core of *Earth Diver* in a very direct sense. The protagonist in this poem may be seen as someone who experiences a personal transformation from shock to

acceptance. The experience is shown in a way which mimetically evokes processes of perception, observation, reflective speculation and imagination.

The story is meant to be an allegory about an approaching apocalypse or global crisis [10]. The latter is conceptualised in the ideas of philosophers Peter Sloterdijk and Slavoj Žižek. In *Living in End Times* [11], the latter philosopher compares thinking and actions at the end of time to a grieving process which involves several stages such as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Žižek has borrowed this schema from the Swiss psychologist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross [12], who applied the concept to any form of catastrophic personal loss. Verrept's poetic text follows the stages

and mood that are suggested in Žižek's work in structural and conceptual terms, which means that this can be read as a story of shared experience in that these stages of acceptance or dealing with grief or loss are "humanly universal." Accordingly, the audience may rely on stereotypes about the patterns of human behaviour (denial, anger, etc.), as well as a relevant elements of experiential repertoire so as to scaffold the heuristics for narrative comprehension and to have an additional guide in terms of interpretation.

Initially the story seems to address the audience in an attempt to directly involve the audience members into the action which generates a complex range of perspectives, as if the suggestion was to experience an identification with the narrator. The storyteller in this case is mostly an agent of engagement, and a second-person narrator can provide greater reasons for empathy, emotion and involvement. This is built on the framework of experientiality that was proposed by Monika Fludernik [5]. In it, she identifies human (like) agents and their consciousness, but not the events themselves, as a central component of narrativity. I would argue that the narrator's experiences must be characterised, focusing on that which is most important and on the ways in which the narrator shapes meanings as a centre of the story. It is precisely the narrator's experiences which establish narrativity in *Earth Diver* and involve the audience therein. The voice that says "you" serves as the centre of consciousness in the text.

The story starts with the supposedly generalised "you-narrator" [13, p. 452] which tries to communicate the sense of participation in the scene to the audience:

1.
(shock)

inescapably, the cold grabs **you** by the ankles,
winds its tentacles,
around **your** legs and up, gripping **you** tight,
a constrictor, a snake,
searching for openings in **your** body.

the cold creeps into **you**, past **your** genitals, **your** anus, **your** ears, **your** nose, **your** mouth,
to **your** stomach, to **your** intestines, to **your** lungs.
where it will live, radiating to **your** flesh, **your** bones...
between **your** lips, **you** breathe in the chill,
which spreads so quickly,
which takes possession of **you**.
(*my emphasis*)

This "you" can be interpreted as "one," "anyone" and, therefore, "possibly me" – the spectator. This persevering and detailed elaboration of the description and assertive repetition of "you" at the beginning of the text makes the audience uneasy and awkward. It works to engage emotions from the very beginning. Written mostly in the present tense, the poem is aimed at immersing the audience into the story and the performance. As the story develops further, it defines more exactly the circumstances of "you" ("the laboratory is empty, and they left you behind"). The audience may then start to realise that it is faced with a fictional persona to whom "you" refers. The experience of this fictional character is represented by a dense interior monologue which presents the fictional narrator's mind as if he were recording the flow of thoughts. Spectators feel the transgressive quality of the second-pronoun narrative, which seems to be directed toward the real audience, as opposed to remaining within the realms of fiction.

Monika Fludernik has defined several types of you-narratives. *Earth Diver* is "a reflectoral you-narrative in which the 'you' refers exclusively to the protagonist at the story level and *not* to a possible addressee at the discourse level; in fact, such narratives have no narrator persona and, therefore, no narratee in the function of the addressee of the narrator's discourse" [14, p 107]. "You" here exists only at the plot level, which means that the homodiegetic narration with an internal focalisation toward the you-protagonist may cause more intense emotions in the audience because it feels that it may be the addressee of the textual "you" in the textual world. This induces a feeling of identification.

In addition to this, the story involves the audience not only in the narrative strategies, but also with the performer's voice, rhythms and affects. The text is recited by the vocalist, Phil Minton. He uses extended vocal techniques which explore manifold aspects of human expression by changing his pitch and timbre of his voice. These techniques include unconventional sounds such as gasping, humming, muttering, whispering, whinging, whooshing, screaming and roaring. Occasionally Minton arrives at verbal gibberish. At the same time, however, these techniques impart a musical quality to the noises.

Verrept's text is mainly in the present tense so as to give it a sense of contemporaneity in the act of narrating and the actions that are narrated. This means that it grants the audience a seemingly intimate knowledge about the protagonist's actual circumstances. The narrative culminates with maledictions in the "anger" section:

you shout: 'why me?'
 'death to the one who allowed it to come to this!'
 'death to the game of time.'
 'death to randomness.'
 'death to choice.'
 'death to war.'
 'death to peace.'
 'death to the destroyers.'
 'death to the poison in the ground, in the air, in the veins.'
 'death to the foal.'
 'death to the fox cub.'
 'death to humility.'
 'and death to light.'
 'death to the gods, the prophets...'
 'death to blood.'

Repetition of words brings an additional suggestive potential in the story, as well as a rhythmical move which grips the attention of the audience. Associative logic builds unexpected links between images and ideas which defamiliarize perception and retain a powerful emotional resonance. Associations in progress stress the present moment of thinking, register the mind in action, and present the mind's movements in the verbal form.

During the performance, this "malevolent" part of the poetic text is repeated twice, invoking a different experience each time. The first time it is read affectively in conjunction with an "industrial"-like and monotonous soundscape. Simultaneously, the screen shows a worker who handles his duties. We hear cinematic diegetic rustles and machinery clanks. Therefore, the visual and musical sequence reinforces feelings of anger and despair, as suggested by the poem. After a while, the text is repeated for a second time, and then, despite the fact that the screen is dark, the chorus sings Schütz's motet *Ich bin eine rufende Stimme* ("I am a calling voice"). The contradiction between the sacred text and the curse that is read against the background of the motet generates ambiguity in the narrative.

Another example is that at the end of the performance, there is the "acceptance" section. There is no hope, no thoughts and no feelings to communicate: "Your thoughts disappear before they become words." The accompanying screen images are doubled. We see a train of wagons on two screens moving slowly in the falling snow. After the train leaves, we see a man who stands alone on the abandoned road of the coal mine. The same image is projected on the second pair of screens, but now the man is no longer there. We hear the poetic text simultaneously with Schütz's *Herr, nun lässest du dienen Diener in Friede fahren* ("Lord, now you let your servant go in peace," which is a piece from the burial service music). The performer reads:

'the end is the end
 no one will come.'

you are standing face to face with your
 loneliness.
 there is no despair, no...

your thoughts disappear before they be-
 come words.
 you smile.

You stand up.
 you gather your few belongings.
 you leave when it's still dark.

In summary, the text applies second-person narrative perspective in which the pronoun

‘you’ is used to recount individual actions replete with general or typical implications. The mixture of ‘you’ modes brings additional complexity: being not a coherent story of successive events it is represented more like nonlinear, dream-like associative sequence. Leaving an open end, it offers both a disturbing representation of the experience of a loss and a powerful model of immersive engagement as a narrative strategy.

3 Video and music rhetoric: a pervasive model of variations and amplification

The following discussion focuses on the musical and visual components of the performance so as to examine correspondence between Schütz’s handling of sacred motets that are performed by the chorus and the way in which the Barentsburg mine is represented in Wim Catrysse’s film. To illustrate this process, I rely on the typology that was suggested by Bence Nanay in his investigation of the multimodality of perception [15]. Nanay emphasizes the role of visual stimuli which influence the experience of the audience and vice versa. He distinguishes between several forms of how these modes interact with our art experience, in which the visual modes highlight, counterpoint or obscure

outer space. Then the camera starts to move dynamically toward the ocean and the surface of the water. This visual sequence is rhythmically supported by the soundtrack, which involves howling wind and roaring thunder which is reminiscent of industrial sounds. I must mention the fact that the performance was staged at a salt warehouse, which had a Kokerei Zollverein coke oven. This created an additional semantic load of environmental and cultural references for the artwork. We hear Phil Minton first murmuring and then howling. His vocal activities are accompanied by the increasing rumble of electronic sounds which are together with the lute and the violone. When the camera falls into the waters of the sea, the sounds fade away, and the choir begins to sing Schütz’s motet *Enhöre mich, wenn ich rufe*:

Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness: thou hast set me at liberty when I was in trouble; have mercy upon me, and hearken unto my prayer.

O hearken thou unto the voice of my calling, my King, and my God.

The music fades, and the screen is black. There is a silent pause before which Phil Minton starts to howl. This howl is overlaid with vocalization

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musical form or expressive content [15, pp. 355-356]. Like Nanay, I consider the interrelation between various modes in *Earth Diver* to show how various prospective perceptions and mind functions can recontextualize major problems such as global crises throughout historical references such as early modern music. This also takes full advantage of narrative conventions in literary and visual artworks.

The beginning of the performance involves four video screens, and the audience is presented with an almost static view of Earth from

in the context of the soundscape. The poetic narrative begins. This presentation has no dominant narrative mode, and each expression emphasizes the others. As a result, we can read the whole story as a complex reflection which involves multiple explorations of tis thematic and representative properties. These evoke emotional resonance in the audience.

At the end of the first part of the performance (the “shock” section), the audience sees a snowy and rocky winter landscape with an abandoned building at a distance. Nothing is

happening in this bleak and freezing scene, except that snow is swirling around. It is a static image, as there is no movement on the screen except for the snow. At first glance, the narrative that is presented by these visuals may seem monotonous, because the concurrent and slow vocalization is all but frozen. At the same time, however, we hear this recitation:

Time stands still
Nothing moves now, even swirling snow
freezes in the icy air.

The visual logic thus reinforces the narrative and establishes connections with links that are implied by the poetic text. Constellations of

unwrapped, it not just becomes fascinated by the craftsmanship of the composer, but is also emotionally engaged.

I support the arguments of Bettina Varwig [16], who has investigated Schütz's music within the framework of rhetoric, stating the pervasive presence of rhetoric in 16th and 17th-century European culture. Varwig does not directly link Schütz's musical practices to specific rhetorical principles. Instead, she demonstrates how he used compositional patterns that are similar to the rhetorical methods of variation and amplification. Varwig convincingly demonstrates the way in which Schütz's text function through the rhetorical elaboration of musical

This means that rhythmical and thematic connections establish a fundamental continuity between heterogeneous texts and their variations in different expressive modes.

textual and semantic elements (cold, stillness, fear) and the way in which they can be projected onto the patterns of the film (the abandoned and frozen factory building, the snowstorm, darkness inside the mine) form multiple diegetic levels that are connected thematically and intertwined discursively. Visual details such as the abandoned factory building, the frozen landscape, the whirling snow, the dark tunnels, etc. supplement the verbal cues and activate each other's contexts and cultural backgrounds. This means that rhythmical and thematic connections establish a fundamental continuity between heterogeneous texts and their variations in different expressive modes.

Similarly, early commentators about Heinrich Schütz's music have viewed *form* in his music as either non-existent or entirely generated by text [16, p. 233]. At the same time, however, Schütz's music handles the charge of being "formless" only if the form is viewed in 19th-century terms as static and bound to abstract large-scale repertoires. As soon as the audience gains an awareness of how the initially seemingly plain statement is being

elements in the composition – through manipulations and gradual changes in rhythmical and motivic elements.

Varwig's approach to Schütz's compositional principles allows me to focus on strategies that are prefigured by the semantic and syntactic aspects of the verbal text that is being amplified in concurrent musical and visual models. What is important here is what has been used in the Earth Driver performance at several levels which highlight each other. This very conscious playing with the audience's expectations is directed onto the configurations of recognisable functional units of a musical piece from any other part of the whole work (verbal narrative or visual imagery in the film). Such elements were configured, repeated, modified, amplified and varied, thus generating a complex texture of temporally unfolding experiences. Thus the whole effect is governed by a large-scale and variative development which uses basic motifs of grief, desolation, hope and despair as a departure point for various routes which expand and exceed the initial message that is conveyed by the poetic text.

4 Conclusion: Blending Spaces, Engaging Minds

In this paper, I have sought to illuminate the issue of how various elements in the case study artwork come together and affect the audience. As I hope I have demonstrated, intersections among various expressive modes – the video narrative in multi-screen images, vocal recitation, vocal music by Heinrich Schütz and Nikolaus Brass, as well as electronic soundscapes – transform the narrative of the global crisis into a multimodal representation which merges several permanently changing perspectives of consciousness. Sensory perceptions of the film, the recitation and the music at the scene extend and intensify the generally fragmented reflections of the verbal text about the experience of being left behind or, perhaps, dying.

What is significant here is the fact that the second-person narrator in the poetic text intensely involves the audience and, therefore, emphasises the immersive potential of the multi-perspective contemplation. Challenging the process of perception with multi-perspectivity means that the performance integrates

non-linear temporality into the polyphony of voices. Various media contribute to the recontextualization of earlier modern compositions within the actual cultural situation and with affordances that are provided by the multimodal configurations.

The result is the emergence of an ambivalent attitude. Highly emotional involvement is suggested by the text's narrative strategies, and it is blended with the accentuated detachment at the point of view of the film. Schütz's sacred motets which appeal to God are intertwined with despair and the desolation of the poetic text. This means that the artistic event emerges here and now with the interaction of various media and groups of people (the chorus, the actor, the musicians and the audience. Texts, images and music simultaneously interact to produce a new reality at the moment when they are performed. Every constitutive element and mode of the work refers not only to its already existing and previously constituted meanings, but instead creates something new that is being recontextualized within new relationships. This serves to contribute toward its complex of musical, visual, verbal and dramatic meanings.

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