

Book Review

New Media Dramaturgy: Performance, Media, and New Materialism

by Peter Eckersall, Helena Grehan, and Edward Scheer
(London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017)

YUJI SONE

New Media Dramaturgy is a collaborative work by three of Australia's leading scholars in theatre and performance studies, Peter Eckersall, Helena Grehan, and Edward Scheer. This book presents their vision of a new paradigm for theatre and performance scholarship. The authors examine notable contemporary artists working in performance, installation, theatre, and sound art that utilise video, projection, advanced sound systems, and robotics in order to articulate the coordinates and concerns of the important shifts of the last three decades. They position theatre maker and visual artist Kris Verdonck and his A Two Dogs Company and Japanese artist collective dumb type at the centre of their proposed notion of "new media dramaturgy" (NMD). In their works, and those of others they discuss in this groundbreaking text, technical and technological elements that are not merely scenographic, but central dramaturgical components, synergise with new approaches to dramaturgy to create new forms of bodies, movement, and spaces. The authors assert the value of the concept of NMD, contrasting it with the notion of the postmedial, which suggests that mediation has already infiltrated every aspect of aesthetic experience. For the authors, who propose an alternative model for understanding contemporary media culture, the NMD works they examine are not reducible to the postmedial state, as their elements refuse an absorption into spectacle.

In the introduction, the authors discuss their key concept of NMD, arising from perspectives on performance emerging in debates across disciplines that engage with the notion of "new materialism". For the authors, theatre and art can be an ideal controlled environment where theoretical notions such as the relationality of Jane Bennett's "thingly" agency can be explored. The art works that embody NMD brings forward the "non-signifying but still significant and communicative capacity in the object" (10). The authors stress the necessity of a new view of dramaturgy as a variable process between active visual observation and passive immersion. *New Media Dramaturgy* skilfully captures this process of openness and enfolding in the highly sensory art works they discuss.

The first two chapters discuss artworks utilising forms of light, especially video projection, examining how video and projection technologies facilitate interaction and participation through a deft imbrication of space and audience/spectator. Chapter 2 discusses aesthetic reconfigurations of virtuality that treat human embodiment and involve the audiences' and performers' responses. The chapter analyses a range of performance works using video projection in stage settings, such as dumb type's *pH* (1989), *S/N* (1994) and *OR* (1997), Ong Keng Sen's *Desdemona* (2000), Verdonck's *HUMINID* (2010), Hotel Modern's *KAMP* (2010), and Chunky Move's *Glow* (2007). The authors argue that these works call attention to the varied materialities that are composed to create the performances. Chapter 3 first looks into the material power of intense light through dumb type's *OR* and its installation version, and Verdonck's *Box* (2005). The authors then examine the ways that outdoor video projection works such as Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's *Body Movies* (2001), *Under Scan* (2005), and Verdonck's *Stills* (2006) can trigger spectatorial interaction with the works by disrupting the established ordering of public space.

The discussion of the dramatising of open-air spaces continues in Chapter 4 through an examination of outdoor installation works that deploy fog/cloud, focusing on Nakaya Fujiko's *Fog Sculpture* series since 1970 and architects Elizabeth Diller and Ricardo Scofidio's *Blur Building*, a temporary pavilion built for the Swiss EXPO 2002. They also discuss the indoor deployments of fog or cloud, which directs the spectators' focus to the nature of sensory perception itself. Examples of such indoor installations include: Verdonck's *Mass* (2010), Berndnaut Smilde *Nimbus* series (since 2010), *Cloudscapes ZKM* (2015), a collaborative project between architect Tetsuo Kondo and the climate engineering firm Transsolar, Antony Gormley's *Blind Light* (2007), and Olafur Eliasson's *Your Blind Passenger* (2010) and *The Weather Project* (2002). The fluid property of the vaporous indoor fog or cloud, its continual disappearance and regeneration, and its ability to "invisiblise" the environment evidence what the authors term the dynamics of a "theatre of atmosphere", which is also the name of the chapter. The NMD here surfaces ecological concerns through direct exposure of "the materiality of the experience" (101).

In Chapter 5, the authors turn to contemporary works at the crossroads of theatre, performance, installation, and robotics, such as Mari Velonaki's *The Woman and the Snowman* (2013) and *Fish-Bird* series (since 2004); the robot and android theatre of Oriza Hirata and Hiroshi Ishiguro, since 2008; Verdonck's *ACTOR #1* (2010) and *DANCER #3* (2010); and Louis-Philippe Demers' *Tiller Girls* (2001). For the authors, these experimental works present, in material terms, evidence of how NMD can contribute to the rethinking of empathetic connection for the 21st century, suggesting an affinity between humans and non-humans.

The nature of NMD that involves sound is discussed in Chapter 6. The authors examine contemporary sound artists Ryoji Ikeda and Scott Gibbons to consider how the materialities of sound are accentuated by their particular dramaturgies of attentiveness, amplification, and intensification in their sonic compositions in relation to Artaudian ideals for embodied sound. In the second half of the chapter, they establish a thematic link between Janet Cardiff's immersive soundscape installation *Forty Part Motet* (2001) and David Pledger's training method for performers, "body listening" (154). The authors argue that the embodied listening of both examples facilitates an accommodation of a "dramaturgical flow of sound" that posits "the body as site for the sound system of theatre" (156).

The theme of Chapter 7 is experience design (XD), a contemporary design philosophy that is concerned with affective behaviour around a commercial product. The authors discuss dumb type's work *OR* (1997) and Blast Theory's *Karen* (2015) as NMD's critique of XD. According to the authors, *OR* uses a highly developed technical and technological approach to entice the audience to recognise "the technological experience as a human experience" (168), while it explores the theme of death, not the sort of thematic material that orthodox XD might deal with. *Karen* is a mobile app piece. The character Karen is a life coach who asks questions about its interactants in a very friendly, personal manner. The work comments satirically on data mining and profiling, disrupting the objectives of mainstream XD.

Chapter 8 provides a meta-disciplinary discussion of film and theatre through an examination of Tacita Dean's *Event for Stage* (2014), Atom Egoyan's *Steenbeckett* (2002), and Gob Squad's *Super Night Shot* (since 2003). The transdisciplinary NMD of these works, in which film and theatre cross-reference the terms of each others' mediums, raises fundamental questions regarding temporality, the circularity of memory, and liveness. Verdonck's *END* (2008) is also discussed, highlighting its deliberately non-dramatic structure of continuity and endlessness, a somehow-filmic quality similar to the workings of "slow cinema". Despite its hypnotic register, *END* portrays apocalyptic themes of environmental catastrophe and human extinction.

New Media Dramaturgy is an ambitious project in terms of the breadth and depth of its disciplinary coverage and scope, and its aim to navigate such varied forms and styles of works is complex. The authors succeed in presenting a new template that is appropriate to the level of complexity of contemporary performance, and that can recognise and nuance both the use of technology and its "new materialism". This text's meta-disciplinary framework of openness and adaptability will be inspiring and formative for younger artists and students (who are arguably "new media natives"), especially those working in Australia, where conservative views on arts categories and practices are increasingly pervasive.

YUJI SONE is a senior lecturer in in the Department of Media, Music, Communication, and Cultural Studies at Macquarie University in Australia. His research has focused on the cross-disciplinary conditions of technologised performance. He is the author of *Japanese Robot Culture: Performance, Imagination, and Modernity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

© 2018 Yuji Sone



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).