CrossMark

Jan Speckenbach and Thomas Irmer

In Interview: On the Development of Video in the Theatre

German film artist Jan Speckenbach ingeniously contributed to the development of live video on the stage, and this discussion focuses on his education, as well his as experimental collaborations with director Frank Castorf at the Volksbühne Berlin, starting in 2000. Speckenbach's background in film and media studies facilitated his explorations of uncharted territory in the theatre, going from a set of fixed cameras on the stage to the use of a camera crew with live-editing for augmented images as part of the whole directing concept and process. His first-hand insights into how actors have interacted with this new technology and how filmmaking can be an integral part of the theatre indicate clearly that filmmaking has played an invaluable role in recent theatre history. Speckenbach here also speaks of his collaborations with other directors, notably Sebastian Hartmann and René Pollesch, and about the future perspectives of this technology, which has changed the theatre altogether.

Jan Speckenbach studied art history, philosophy, and media in Karlsruhe, Munich, and Paris during the 1990s. At the beginning of the new millennium he participated in the development of video theatre with Frank Castorf and, now a successful filmmaker, he also continues to work in the theatre. His short film *Gestern in Eden* [*Yesterday in Eden*] premiered at Cannes in 2008, while the full-length feature film *Die Vermissten* [*The Missing*] was shown at the 2012 Berlinale and *Freiheit* [*Freedom*] at the 2017 film competition at Locarno. In 2020 he directed the live-stream of *Der Zauberberg* [*The Magic Mountain*, after Thomas Mann's novel] at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin (premiered online in November 2019), which was subsequently invited to the Berlin Theatertreffen. Thomas Irmer is the editor-in-chief of the Berlin-based monthly *Theater der Zeit.* He has co-edited two books on the work of Frank Castorf – *Zehn Jahre Volksbühne Intendanz Frank Castorf* (2003) and *Castorf* (2016). During the last forty years he has authored, among other significant writings, numerous analytical articles and interviews on Castorf's creative output.

Key terms: Frank Castorf, Volksbühne, live video, film technology, camera crane, living alienation effect.

Thomas Irmer *Video in the theatre – nobody was studying that; it had not been invented yet. Let's start with your educational background to describe this phenomenon.*

Jan Speckenbach I studied in Karlsruhe at the newly founded University of Design in its first cohort of 1992. This university was modelled on the University of Design in Ulm, which belonged to the Bauhaus school tradition. At that time there was also the Karlsruhe Centre for Art and Media Technology (ZKM), which was exploring similar things. This was a decisive moment in the development of the institution, which only ten years later would no longer be possible. Theory and practice were fundamentally related, which means that, when you took a theoretical major, you had also to take a practical course, and vice versa. So there was graphic design, production design, scenography, and also drawing as a minor in media art as well as film, which is what I studied alongside my majors in art and philosophy. The theoretical subjects were taught by leading professors in the field: Hans Belting in art, philosophy with Peter Sloterdijk, and later even Boris Groys. In this way, a mutual exchange between theory and practice was guaranteed. And that was really important for the inaugural cohort. Our motto was that intertexuality had to be a goal in and of itself.

Would you compare this approach to that of Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen [*University*] *founded ten years earlier?*

 © CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS doi:10.1017/S0266464X22000161

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X22000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Definitely, you could [also] say that for the beginnings in Karlsruhe. But Giessen probably had a bigger impact on practice. I wanted to become a filmmaker but my love for cinema always came from theory. I knew a lot of films only via the secondary literature and only got to see them much later, when I made a systematic effort to watch them. The educational focus for me was placed on media art, whereas theatre appeared a rather outdated art model that didn't really interest me. Groys was exciting because he came from philosophy but he moved into art history, [the history of] the avant-garde, and he thus created an immense portfolio to explore. That was also interesting for me and for my ambition to be a filmmaker.

In the middle of my studies, I went to France and enrolled in film studies there, and when I came back, not only had the cohort of students changed, but also the entire atmosphere at the school was different, and even the whole country was different, perhaps. It was no longer about intertextuality as a goal in and of itself. Now there was a clear orientation towards the market. Only a few years later, the older graduates had to recognize that the general profile of the school was no longer useful and that the world no longer needed something like that.

For me this was also an eye-opener because the foundation of the school had been planned even before the reunification of East and West Germany and [the school] met the wave of enthusiasm characteristic of the early 1990s. In the first years there was a true euphoria for this new model; students and lecturers were convinced that they were building something unique there. In the mid-1990s, the first crises emerged in the economy, also with consequences for the reunification process. And this atmosphere immediately questioned many of the targets for the school as they had originally been laid out. Intertexuality or interdisciplinarity were no longer skills anyone looked for. Rather, it was specialists who were suddenly in high demand.

So how did you end up at the Volksbühne years later?

I went to see Frank Castorf's *Elementarteilchen* [*Elemental Particles* (2000), after the novel by Michel Houllebecq] at the Volksbühne. I didn't know much about this theatre or Castorf – only that both were somehow famous. The fact that I didn't even know Castorf's age, or all the things he had already achieved, allowed me to be entirely naive in the way I engaged [with him]. I was fascinated by the way he worked – the musicality, the montage, and the edits, all of which reminded me a lot of film, I had never seen this in the theatre before. That same evening, Martin Wuttke slipped on the stage and bit his lower lip. But he just continued his long final monologue, unfazed, even with blood pouring out of his mouth on to his shirt, while many people in the audience were no longer able to separate fiction from reality. It was all mixed up.

The next day I wrote a letter to Castorf in which I said that I had seen his 'filmed adaptation' of *Elementarteilchen.* It wasn't intended as a job application: I wanted to express what exactly I had appreciated but, in the PS I asked whether it was possible to become an intern because I was sure I would learn a lot more there than at any other film set in all of Germany. I had an immediate call back from the dramaturg and an invitation to an interview. That way I ended up, at first, with Herbert Fritsch, who had just started directing *Hamlet X*, a multimedia adaptation of *Hamlet* for which I did the stage management, editing, and even the text version of the 111 fragments [of the work]. After three months, when I hadn't even met Castorf in person, I was offered the opportunity to produce the video for *Erniedrigte und Beleidigte* [2001, after Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Insulted and the Injured*] inside the bungalow container [designed] by Bert Neumann. In the meantime, I had seen all the other productions that Castorf had directed.

And they started with Dämonen [*1998, after Dostoevsky's* The Devils] *and* Endstation Amerika [*2000, based on Tenneesee Williams's* A Streetcar Named Desire *and staged at the Volksbühne*], *which, in many ways, were prestagings of what was to follow.*

In *Endstation Amerika* a static live-camera was used inside the bathroom that was practically

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X22000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

invisible to the audience, only the images on the TV. With *Dämonen*, the predecessor of *Erniedrigte und Beleidigte*, there was only one TV screening films throughout that, in the end, appeared to be more of a sound effect. Also, film quotations had already been projected so that these things were already there. I just appeared at the right time in the right place, when the whole undertaking achieved a new complexity. This was a coincidence, and also luck!

I knew that, for *Erniedrigte und Beleidigte*, we were going to use six static surveillance cameras. What was interesting for me about the constellation was that this set-up could be used in a filmic way. It is a process where you no longer just project images but create a montage with shot and counter-shot and narrative situations, as well as interfere with dramaturgical logic. It remains important to me, even today, that video takes on a narrative function. For projections, a big canvas was placed on top of the bungalow like a billboard. That this projection-canvas as billboard-for-advertisements came with its own set of associations was an important element for me to work with. The canvas as a medium for images had no longer to be justified, and did not remain as an alien object on stage. Advertisements could be shown, which also served its purpose, or you could undermine this logic by showing what was going on inside the house. I sat in front of a small mixing console inside a wardrobe in the house, directed the surveillance cameras with joysticks, and created live edits for all cameras.

You were invisible to the audience, but how was it for the actors, when you edited images in their midst for five hours from inside the wardrobe?

In this instance, my invisibility was strength. The stamina, above all, was impressive. During the final rehearsal, I spent hours in there. But for me there was an opening through the cameras so that I was part of the overall event. The edit as well as the scenic solutions presented themselves during rehearsal, but I had to be extraordinarily attentive because the surveillance cameras moved very slowly. Therefore, it was always useful to anticipate something – for example, where the actors would move next. In addition, I'd like to clarify a prevalent misconception that arises even today. Even if the scenic solutions often appear wild and unplanned, they are still agreed, in essence, when it comes to movement and sequencing. There's always a margin for improvisation and variation, but one never starts from scratch. Often the difficulty is recreating something exactly the way it was.

Was this primarily an issue for the interior space or the close-ups?

That's difficult to separate in the context of what emerges during the process. Naturally, it was primarily focused on bringing the interior space to the outside because that was the principle – to close the fourth wall. That the close-ups then created a special effect came out of the rehearsal process. We didn't anticipate that in advance.

Castorf repeatedly commented, at that time, on the invention of the close-up for the stage.

Yes, because that was an important discovery of a new theatrical means. If you recall, this development took three to four productions to explore this [new] vocabulary fully: from the static cameras for *Erniedrigte und Beleidigte* to the interplay of hand and surveillance cameras for *Der Meister und Margarita* [2002, after Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*] and *Der Idiot* [2002, after Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*] to working with several hand cameras for *Forever Young* [2004, after Tennessee Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth*]. It became apparent, as well, that the static cameras were too heavy-handed for Castorf's directing style and had to be somewhat liberated for his dynamic approach.

The camera became another performer.

There was a moment when this became palpable. Towards the end of *Erniedrigte und Beleidigte* there was a scene where all the performers gathered in the same room again, and the camera followed all of them, like an epilogue. And, at first, one of the actors was supposed to do that. Castorf wasn't happy with the result, and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X22000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

at that point I came out of the wardrobe, without anyone noticing, and took the camera away from the actor. Castorf was happy. That was my liberation from not moving. For *Meister und Margarita* we further developed this by using a dolly-track system, which allowed for more dynamics, and yet it remained rather inflexible, moving across the stage. This way we soon discovered the flexibility of the hand camera. And that lasted, in the end.

You could perhaps compare this whole development with the theory of documentary film. For 'direct cinema' one speaks of the 'fly on the wall': the seemingly uninvolved spectator, who narrates a situation as if he wasn't there. In response to this illusion, '*cinema verité*' uses a technique where the fly somewhat ironically swims in the soup. That's to say, the fly is not only there, but changes the situation. And then the next step was the fly in the eye, to paraphrase a joke by John Marshall, as a way of making documentary so self-referential that it almost loses its subject.

Erniedrigte und Beleidigte was very clearly at the level of the fly on the wall, with the static cameras and the invisible cameraman. *Meister und Margarita* and the following [production] *The Idiot* were comparable to the fly in the soup because, at that point, the question arose as how to deal with the bodies of cameramen and -women on the stage. Whilst you wanted the live images, you did not want to see the people creating them. This has remained a problem in many productions up until now. After that, *Forever Young*, adapted from Tennessee Williams, explicitly addressed the cameramen by asking for the camera images, and Wuttke shouted during the performance, 'Jan, camera!' We had an underwater camera on the stage, filmed in artificial but realistically wet rain, and it quoted live the famous eye by [Luis] Buñel – the one that's cut through in *Un Chien Andalou* [1929]. At that stage of development, the move towards the fly-in-the-eye effect had already taken place.

Similar to Japanese Bunraku puppet theatre, then, where the puppeteers are dressed in black, and the operators behind the cameras are also supposed to disappear?

Not really. Bert dressed us in everyday clothes and also in coloured clothes. We were seen to be more like a living alienation effect.

Let's return to the performers in this hybrid of theatre and film. What did you notice about them in the beginning?

Very quickly, it turned out that performers were not supposed to act in a more minimalistic way in front of the camera. One easily believes that acting in a filmic way in front of the camera is enough – let's say, rendering a whole situation by simply raising your eyebrows. But this only leads to weak theatre. We don't altogether want to reference cinema in theatre, but to develop something new for the performers from this particular set-up. We also realized that, in front of the camera, performers had to dig deeply into their technical repertoire because it was still theatre [that they were doing]. It's not film – it's always theatre. And yet, this new technology allowed actors to broaden their expressive repertoire, such as the eyes, for example, which you often don't see so well in a big theatre all the way to the back row – but would seem exaggerated in a close-up scene for film. They really enjoyed that.

Wuttke remarked that the camera was witnessing the actors at work. That nearly captures it, because it points out the special constellation that this technology allowed; one isn't only interested in the actor as the presenter of a character. Castorf, on the other hand, directed specifically for the camera and the canvas from the very beginning. He looked at the canvas on which we edited the live footage at the same time that the scenes were created. This played a major role in how this aesthetic unfolded. The camera and the performers were on stage together. There was no separation between them.

Did you feel like a filmmaker, first in your little box and later with the hand-camera?

Like a filmmaker – no. But I knew that I wouldn't mess up from an artistic perspective, and that was essential for the undertaking. I had that confidence, at the age of thirty.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X22000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Perhaps it was a result of my interdisciplinary training. But I also thought that video or video art had found a new outlet for presentation here, which would permit a lot of development. I would see the latter from a much more disenchanted perspective today because, in the end, you do remain dependent on the ideas of the director as well as on the script and themes. It's not much more than that, really, although, in this function, you become a co-player. In this respect I always made an effort to meet the actors with a certain kind of energy, mindful of the theatrical needs on the stage. If there isn't that commitment from the camera operators, then it is hard to believe in their images as well, even if they [the camera operators] are extraordinary.

And yet, all aspects of filmmaking were coming together in your work: you were a cameraman, editor, and even a kind of director.

The director remains the person in the director's seat. You shouldn't confound that with the image-director in the theatre because he or she will always have to subordinate their vision to the overall aesthetic. But it helped that, in so very many aspects, you were allowed a certain [degree of] dilettantism. You shouldn't forget that, as soon as we started this exploration, criticism immediately emerged: 'What's that? *Video* in the theatre?' From the very beginning, my work was seen as tainting the art form. It was anything but pure art, or art for art's sake, and that is what I like about video in the theatre – it always has something non-conceptual and murky about it. If it appears too clean, you know that it's going to be bad. Video has found its way into the theatre but as a sort of epidemic disturbance of the theatre. This discussion never ended. At the same time, I never understood the fuss, because it was just an offer. You can still go and see theatre without video everywhere.

Back then, we also wanted to explore the potential [of video] and our biggest luck was that Castorf had no fear and worked for the future energetically: that is, to get everything out of people. Therefore, there was never any discussion with him [over whether] the video was too strong and the actors too weak, for example, in the way that I had later with other directors. For him, this kind of conflict didn't exist. But the reviews of theatre critics and the press [in general] stressed that the presence of the actors was undermined, and so on – that it was too mediated, a theatre of distance. In that sense, it was, of course, also a theatre of provocation, as almost always [happened] with Castorf. And he never budged, but always pushed for the limits of the form.

When did you start to work with other directors?

Relatively early, I'd say. It all happened in parallel. At the same time, I had a project with [Claus] Peymann for the Salzburg Festival. Sebastian Hartmann directed Christa Wolf's novel *Der Geteilte Himmel* [2001, *The Divided Sky*, at the Volksbühne]. For that I proposed to create a sort of remake of Konrad Wolf's famous film adaptation. There is a bridge in the vicinity of the city of Halle, which becomes a leitmotif in the film. We drove there and filmed on location. In this respect, it was different.

And then it took almost twenty years before you worked together again, recently, on Der Zauberberg [2020] *at the Deutsches Theater, discovering a whole new form of working with images and graphic effects, especially using cross-fading as a stylistic means.*

Yes, but these are also all live images from the stage – for the first time. It was really important for me that Sebastian was looking for something more from a live stream; [it was more than] just making do in the context of the coronavirus pandemic [which many others did] by simply documenting live performance for an audience that wasn't physically present. I attended the final rehearsals for a week, and then we had five days to prepare with the camera team. Sebastian asked us to think digitally, with all that that entails, and no longer adapt to the analogue logic of the stage and the auditorium. He confronted that challenge, including the empty auditorium and the overall situation we were all in. There wasn't any pretending any more that we were filming

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X22000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

theatre, as had been the case before. Instead, we were asked to emphasize that we were all pushed aesthetically to respond to the [Covid] crisis itself and the void it had created.

We had two camera operators on stage and one in the auditorium, including the total perspective from the back and a top shot from above. I was behind two mixing consoles, which was exhausting at times because of the cross-fading of so many images, and sometimes I lost a view of the whole. In addition, we had drawing-based videos by Tilo Baumgärtel, who was also in charge of creating digital masks that were projected in a sort of Snapchat mode on to the faces of the performers. In those instances, one had a bizarre mix of archaic and modern forms. The excessive cross-fades were a discovery during rehearsals, when Sebastian became very enthusiastic about them, and the mixing of images led to phases of momentary ecstasy. Two faces fading into each other, one in profile and the other in frontal perspective.

These intense close-ups reminded me of [Ingmar] Bergman's [film] *Persona* [1966]. Sebastian, on the other hand, thought of [Jean-Luc] Godard, and built in the encounter of two camera operators filming each other. This was also the rediscovery of video not as a weakness but as a strength. [Here was] the old question: what can emerge when we are in the theatre and make video? A hybrid, precisely, a third entity, that neither video nor theatre on its own could create. It's not film, not a documentation of performance – it is created live in the theatre with its unique access to time and the present moment.

That [*Irmer's preceding question*] *was jumping ahead twenty years. What were you doing in the years in between?*

After the Castorf years, I studied film directing at the DFFB [German Film and Television Academy] in Berlin in 2005 and received an immediate invitation to Cannes with the thirty-minute film *Gestern in Eden* [*Yesterday in Eden*], which was, of course, great. Since then, I have filmed two movies and I hope there will be more. I've also worked part-time for several theatres in video to earn a living. These were very different collaborations: with Susanne Øglænd for the contemporary opera company Aura, which was important for me in the way I used completely pre-produced material that crossed over into everything.

I worked with Jan Bosse and Amélie Niermeyer on several projects over the years but, even with them, I predominantly created pre-produced videos – for example, for *Hexenjagd* [2016, *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, performed at the Zurich Schauspielhaus] – almost exclusively videos from drawings in crayon, which then changed to something similar to animation videos. For *Frankenstein/Homo Deus* [2019, by Frederik Neyrinck, performed at the Thalia Theater, Hamburg], I made a veritable twenty-minute science-fiction film, written, filmed, and edited during the rehearsal period. These were opportunities to enhance the technical means of expression. And then there was Milan Peschel, whom I had already known at the Volksbühne, and I created two works at Neuhardenberg with Martin Wuttke.

A former military airport covering wide area, where the camera travels huge distances between the audience and the staging.

The Persians in 2003 was really a live film on a huge canvas in front of a hangar using TV technology. Satellite antennae were carried behind us, the camera team. Since we had to cover long distances from time to time, this sometimes ended up as a competitive race: who was faster, the camera operator or the carrier of the antenna? One time the carrier fell over and pulled me down, as well, so I appeared to be walking along the horizon, as seen from the hangar. The image swapped, facing the sky, and then it disappeared. That must have looked very funny.

Effects you discovered for the theatre were now taken outdoors. It was no longer about hidden interior spaces. Now it became a filmed theatre of wide spatial distances.

And reality – with real trees, real grass, real concrete, and so on. There was no theatre

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X22000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

imitation, but only the clash of fiction and reality.

When you studied at the renowned DFFB after these experiences in live-film theatre, was your approach towards film directing enriched, or was it, rather, an obstacle to the expectations of your course?

Yes and no. The things that you create for the theatre can work really well in the theatre, but not necessarily in film, and vice versa. In fact, film and theatre share very little. Surprisingly, there are only very few convergences; there is almost no connection. For the people at the film school my experience at the Volksbühne wasn't relevant at all, nor was where I came from. They were not interested.

That seems rather ignorant on their part.

Yes, but you also have to say that the ignorance was on both sides. Although theatre people are very interested in film, they are not [interested] in German filmmakers, except when you are talking about Fassbinder. I didn't just want to continue with hand-camera filming. By studying film, I also thought to liberate myself from the aesthetics of the Volksbühne.

As well as to create a loving documentary portrait of this theatre.

Well, that was still during my time at the Volksbühne, most of it filmed between 2002 and 2004. The film only officially premiered thirteen years after it was first finished – in 2017 at the NET Festival in Moscow. In the meantime, you can watch it for free on Vimeo, and 12,000 people have already watched it. Probably more than would have ever have seen it in the cinema. Castorf and Neumann didn't really like the film, although the Volksbühne had commissioned it at the time; also, I'm not sure that Frank [Castorf] has ever seen it. The film was then simply ignored and ended up forgotten in a drawer, except for a few fans amongst whom it secretly circulated. Now it has become a historical document, and the jury in Moscow invited it, when it became clear that Chris Dercon would end the Castorf era. [Dercon, former director of Tate Modern in London, was appointed director of the Volksbühne in 1917, after Castorf was sacked (a government decision), only to resign after great controversy and discontent one year later.] Looking back gained new currency for it.

We now have René Pollesch returning to the Volksbühne, with whom you have just worked for the Vienna Festwochen [2021] *on a new production of* Die Gewehre der Frau Kathrin Angerer [The Guns of Mrs Kathrin Angerer] *commissioned by the Volksbühne.*

Yes, we've come full circle in a certain way, or the spiral turns again. Nina von Mechow created a space for the stage that revolves vertically as well as horizontally, in addition to a camera crane, which was to be at the centre of the action – all of that to make a dance film. The crane as a suspended eye was a new and surprising discovery for me. (Figure 1)

So the fly found her way out of the soup, and she is flying again?

Exactly. In film production, cranes are disappearing and being replaced by new technologies. I find it interesting that the theatre carries the memory of these technical dinosaurs. If you have ridden one, you will be forever sad to see it go, replaced by drones or unmanned cranes, even though they can do so much more, of course, and are also far more dangerous. But it still feels a little like the death of a cameraman whom we once knew. A crane somehow takes the authorial narrative position, suspended above the material world. When this experience is no longer mediated by a human body, it unfortunately becomes very abstract – or superficial.

What kind of future, then, do you see for these two siblings, film and theatre?

I can only construct this from the example of my own coterminous progression. If Pollesch's metatheatre references the history of the cinema, for instance, it could become interesting again, because video in the theatre has become ordinary. There is an expansive vision

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X22000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Figure 1. *Die Gewehre der Frau Kathrin Angerer* (*The Guns of Mrs Kathrin Angerer*), written and directed by René Pollesch (2021). Jan Speckenbach is on top of the camera crane. Photo: Luna Zscharnt. Courtesy of the Volksbühne.

through improved technology. Even with *The Idiot*, we had to carry cables and watch out for them on the stage all the time. Today we use radio links, which allow far more freedom in image production. Or resolution in 4K, which until recently was only available for the cinema. For a long time, we also questioned the use and functionality of beamers for image production on the stage.

But all of these are details of technology. Perhaps we can expect big changes for programmed images? Basically, the corpus of narratives is there and, with that, the potential is endless. If you were to factor in the development of the last twenty to thirty years, you would have to say that it would be rather strange to find that the theatre was not engaging with these media at all. They have become part of our reality. You don't have to love it, this reality, but you do have to confront it.

Editorial Note

This interview was first published in the Norwegian theatre journal *Shakespeare* in 2021. It was translated from the original German by Sabine Sorgel for *New Theatre Quarterly*, and was edited and annotated by Maria Shevtsova.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X22000161 Published online by Cambridge University Press