

Theatrical Characteristics behind Immersivity through the Idea of Arche-Screen

A First Case Study¹

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Introduction

Festen. Il gioco della verità (2021) by Il Mulino di Amleto is the first Italian dramatic adaptation of the early Dogma 95 movie *Festen* by Thomas Vinterberg. The Turin-based theater company reinterprets the Danish masterpiece through an original staging that puts into dialogue different media in a constant, simultaneous double storyline representation. Using a live camera, the cast shoots a part of the *pièce* constantly, in a non-stop sequence on stage, screened on a transparent canvas that frames the entire proscenium. Thus, the audience can follow both the real, live action as well as the audiovisual live streaming, a partial but autonomous representation of what is going on stage.

Beyond the artistic result, *Festen. Il gioco della verità* would be considered a case study to question issues around the idea of immersivity, as it intersects with Mauro Carbone's notion of "arche-screen." In this sense, it is interesting to reread the whole dramaturgical and performative process of the considered *pièce* as a live XR-mechanism experience and, accordingly, the show itself as an imaginative immersive trip through our way of perception via media. As I would like to suggest here, it may be possible to search for some basic theatrical and performative characteristics in the origin and historical development of immersive experiences, allowing us to better understand the continuous seeking and fascination of images and immersivity reported in some media-archaeology approaches. In this way, considering different media, human imagination and perception, and their complex inter-structure, the analysis should also allow some original

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viewpoints to arise about the dialogue between tangible and intangible heritage, their definition, and their mutual influence.

In Medias Res Mediaticas

This article seeks to illustrate a different gaze between performing arts and media studies, using a specific case study as an example to reflect on the idea of “im-mediality” as proposed by Yves Citton (2016, chapter 2). Following his analysis of current mediatized culture and society and starting from the assumption of being “*in medias res mediaticas*” (ibid.), this article suggests – relying on a media-archaeological point of view – that immersivity in its development has been influenced by theatrical elements.

For Citton, to fully understand the contemporary relationship with media, it is appropriate to focus on

another form of intermediality and interaction, in which we, the human subjects, are in the intermediary space. We are no longer faced with images to be produced or contemplated, we are no longer faced with media that mix their gender differences: we are inside, immersed in media circulations – *in medias res mediaticas* – in a state that is at the same time perfectly banal and perfectly traumatic of immediality. We are “between” the media, but in the sense that we find ourselves moving “through” a moving crowd: at the centre of it and largely merged in and from it. While inter-activity preserves the individuality of the subjects, of whose role reversal it is the cause, here we are an active part of phenomena that Karen Barad qualifies as *intra-actions*: a disposition, of which we are part, which acts on itself through us. We are one of the intermediaries of this intra-action. (Citton 2016.)²

This peculiar condition of the subject in the “intermediary space,” “‘between’ the media,” seems to be quite relatable, speaking about theater and performance theories, with what Victor Turner theorized about “liminal” and “liminoid” (Turner 1969). In the fast sociocultural transformation that digital media bring, the ritual condition of being “betwixt and between” (Turner 1979) could be associated, in some specific cases, both to the symbolic experiences of artistic contemporary productions as well as to our new relation with ever more invasive technologies. In this sense, it would not be forced to try to reread a specific case study such as the one considered as a structure of meaning influenced by media.

² The present and following quotations from Italian editions are translated by the author.

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Festen. Il gioco della verità by *Il Mulino di Amleto*

Il Mulino di Amleto is an award-winning theater company founded in Turin, Italy, in 2009 by Barbara Mazzi and Marco Lorenzi. In the last fifteen years, the company has staged contemporary and classical drama, always paying much attention to texts, sound, and scenography, trying to realize what director Lorenzi calls “the search for the Other” (*Il Mulino di Amleto* n.d. “poetics”) between performers and with the audience. As Lorenzi states:

If I think of our latest shows, I recognize a thin line that connects their diversity ... this line, in fact, is called “the search for the Other.” Starting from a non-form, from a living and sincere desire to understand how the other can change my world, enriching my point of view, modifying my story is tiring, sometimes painful, long, difficult, but that’s what that in recent times we have understood to be the heart of our poetry. Whether it is Chekhov, Victor Hugo, Molière, Shakespeare does not matter. What matters is to look for the roots of a meaning. It is understanding that forms pass, change, age, whereas human beings are always contemporary. These assumptions, of course, have changed and continue to change the way we work. (*Il Mulino di Amleto* n.d.)

“Dealing with the classics as if they were contemporary texts and with contemporary texts as if they were classical texts” (*Il Mulino di Amleto* n.d. “bio”) is the main slogan of the theater company. As an unexpected confirmation of the approach, I would like to underline here the similarity, unintended so far as I know, of this statement with the idea theorized by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, according to which the basis of media archaeology is “Discovering the Old in the New – Discovering the New in the Old” (Huhtamo and Parikka 2011). The possibility of having a gaze different from a mostly traditional representation fascinated me and stimulated me to look for a viewpoint that is not strictly performative in the works of the Turin company.

Festen. Il gioco della verità (*Festen. The Game of Truth*, in English) seemed to be the perfect fit. *Festen* is the first Dogma 95 movie, from 1998, directed by Thomas Vinterberg. The unpublished translation by Lorenzo De Iacovo and Marco Lorenzi is the first Italian theatrical adaptation of it, approved by Vinterberg himself (Marco Lorenzi, conversation with the author, May 31, 2021).

At the outset of *Festen*, the Klingensfeldt family appears to epitomize the ideal family. A reunion is held to celebrate their father Helge’s sixtieth birthday, bringing together Christian, Helene, and Michael – two brothers

Figure 1



Stage photo of *Festen. Il gioco della verità*

Source: Il Mulino di Amleto ©, photograph by G. Distefano

and a sister – who are invited by their wealthy parent to a lavish party at the family residence. A key element is that shortly before the event, Christian's twin sister Linda tragically committed suicide. As the evening progresses, a mix of affection, tension, distance, and misunderstandings emerges among the children. Christian, as the eldest son, is given the task of delivering a speech before the first toast in honor of his father, and also to commemorate his late sister. Despite his visible distress over this responsibility, Christian chooses to disclose the reason behind his sister's suicide. He and Linda were systematically abused by their father during childhood, with the complicit silence of their mother.

Through an interweaving of situations as revelations, physical clashes, and plot twists, which lead to an increasing awareness among the trio of protagonists, the representation of the bourgeois drama sees its climax in one of the final scenes, where the conflict finally explodes in all its violence. This apex is followed by the return of a balance apparently reconstructed, not necessarily abiding, but certainly new. In this final scene, the father, dismissed from his dictatorial role, is abandoned in the scenic space by the entire cast, now in the audience space, with the audience lights turned on, together with the audience itself.

It is precisely in a continuous spatial game – almost a trademark for the Turin company – that the work fully exposes its structure of meaning. The proscenium is veiled for a large part of the show, and the scene remains for the most part dark, with few light elements. This expedient allows the entire cast to use the proscenium as a screen on which to project live via a

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video camera in color, almost constantly on stage and operated in turn by a member of the non-scenic cast.

Thus, two different points of view of the same narration are simultaneously exposed: the one embodied, *behind* the veil, and the one projected *on* the veil. Due to the play of dark and light on stage, the crew is enhanced in the work by exploring the possibility of using all sides of the stage, composing different mobile sets – the cinematographic ones – into another fixed and almost empty one, seen from the audience as the set for the theatrical representation. Such a solution allows the cast to underline the differences and the strong relationship between the live video show and the embodied one. The first, being a projection, is a two-dimensional mediated show. The second is a three-dimensional real show, performed by live actors. Created by the combination of these two, the result is a cubistic and amplified *pièce*, where the two media do not interfere but rather expand each other – specifically because of any lack of delay in the live broadcasting. Indeed, even if the eye of the spectator may be first attracted by the live projection – because it is bigger, because it is in front of everyone, because it is like a screen – immediately afterwards the audience recognizes the attractiveness of the embodied performance and, finally, is captured by the combination of them both.

One of the elements that helps this original performing stratagem may be the rich soundscape. Indeed, the idea of live broadcasting and projection may not be new, perhaps something already seen. Instead, the idea of a cinematographic projection – which amplifies the effect and displays the novelty of the show – requires substitution of the editing to be as believable as possible. In this sense, the soundscape gives rhythm, a soundtrack, and coverage between one scene and another.

At the same time, the almost continuous scene movements exploit all the available space and play metaphorically inside and outside the proscenium, which is achieved through the passage behind the scenery by several characters during the play. In this way, the proscenium, until the veil-screen is down, symbolizes the moment of rethinking, of personal thoughts, of the asides of the characters. These two worlds cannot be connected until the first public accuses by Christian and the consequent loss of the face of Helge.

At some point, a first collapse of the screen-veil and then a second, definitive, rise of it over the proscenium – like a curtain, not by chance – allow the spectator to experience a continuous physical and psychological split, representative of the identity crisis that affects the protagonists. This conveys an idea that if the internal space were to go into crisis, the external theatrical and ritual

space, being not just an environment, can only do the same. Experiencing no curtain at the beginning or in the end of the performance, the audience realized during the show that the only curtain is the fake respectability of modern society. Only when the truth comes out can the curtain be removed. This process seems not to be an easy one – the first collapse of the curtain is not enough. Considering this mixed intermedial directing, the message that Lorenzi seems to send is neither easy nor monolithic. The complex interrelation between facts, media, truth, causes, interpretations, justifications, evidences, stories, violence, effects, decisions, and lives is as large as personal. Despite the common linearity of the development, the *pièce*, like every individual life, is not a paved road. Nor is it one way.

Therefore, as an apparent confirmation of this idea, I suggest that there is no coincidence if such a kaleidoscope of fruition exposes first the projection of bodies, leaving their live representation behind, as a filigree. On the screen-veil, the broadcasting of the bodies makes the live representation visible through the grain. The result becomes more than an explicit tribute to the “dogmatic” cinematic origin of work.

The Screen-Veil As an “Arche-Screen” and the Performative Esthetics

This veil-screen, in line with the recent development of esthetics by Mauro Carbone, may be considered an “arche-screen.” Using this term, the Italian philosopher indicates a specific surface:

I would propose to define such a surface as “arche-screen,” understood as the whole of the conditions of the possibility of “showing” (monstration), which in our culture would have been created by the rupestrian wall, the veil, the curtain, the *templum*, and the window, as well as by the pre-cinematographic and cinematographic screens, and even by today’s computer screens. This list, however, is by no means exhaustive. (Carbone 2016, 65.)

In this sense, according to Carbone, the “arche-screen” derives its existence also from Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, where

a closer reading may reveal that the *teikhion* performs the double function of concealing by offering a protection and of selecting things to be shown – which are both, actually, characteristic of an “arche-screen.” Lastly, consulting the Greek text, one might note that the comparison with the *paraphrágnata* – a term mainly intended to indicate a protective device such as a breastwork or a bulwark – undoubtedly recalls the meaning of the Old Frankish verb *skirmjan*, in which the word “screen” finds its original root. Hence, I would like to state that in his “Allegory of the Cave” Plato presents the two fundamental possibili-

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ties of the arche-screen, i.e., the screen as a concealing surface and the screen as a showing surface, neither of which can be merely opposed or separated from the other, either logically or historically. (Carbone 2019, 67-68.)

Following this idea, the proscenium of *Festen* may be considered an “arche-screen,” even if the conditions of compresence and “feedback loop” (Erika Fischer-Lichte 2008) and the theatrical setting would clearly associate the event with a mostly performative experience. These apparently distant concepts, indeed, can be connected by the idea developed by Carbone that the first arche-screen, the so-called proto-screen, is the body: “[i]n our culture such a whole has been opened and experienced through the human body itself” (Carbone 2019, 66). Thematizing the notion of arche-screen as a threshold surface that “is outlined *in the reciprocal differentiation* between the various historical-cultural configurations that have been gradually taken on by the related screen experiences [...] the ‘arche-screen’ is a theme that never ceases to form and transform itself *with and through* its prehistorical and historical variations” (Carbone and Lingua 2023, 18). Following the last original proposal of Carbone together with Graziano Lingua, the idea of screen resolves two different pairs of functions:

[They] do *not* consist *only* in *showing* and *hiding* at the same time but exceed the visual dimension to *mediate* our overall bodily relationship with the environment. [...] This involves not only the pair of functions just mentioned, with which screens are normally identified, *but also* that of *exposing* and *protecting* at the same time – a pair of functions that is equally constitutive of the nature of screens. The two pairs of functions, in short, inextricably imply each other. They do not simply overlap but instead obliquely articulate more complex chiasmic relationships. (Carbone and Lingua 2023, 18.)

This very “transformative aesthetics” (Erika Fischer-Lichte 2008) of the arche-screen could be easily understood only if we accept, as mentioned before, the human body as *the* proto-screen. Here, specifically, the feedback loop and the peculiar pair of relationships mentioned find a meeting ground, to

show how our screen experiences have always solicited not only vision but the totality of the human sensorium, involving our bodies in their entirety. Indeed, it is from our body – the *proto-screen*, as has emerged throughout the book – that we humans have progressively externalized screen functions into technical objects made to expose ourselves to, and at the same time protect ourselves from, the world. (Carbone and Lingua 2023, 162.)

In this way, the feedback loop provided by the human presence is externalized in the arche-screen, which, via its material and symbolic function, establishes a continually renewed relationship among actresses, actors, and audience.

The Pièce As an XR Experience

To better understand what I am trying to propose as a meeting of these two aesthetics theories, I suggest that the case study can be seen under a more complex gaze, which may highlight its nature with the help of new digital media, so as to respect and underline the complex construction of the *pièce*, being structured through a robust medium like the screen and an almost traditional but still performative mode by the company.

I propose to consider *Festen* by Il Mulino di Amleto as a huge and inverted analogue mechanism of Expanded Reality, where, paradoxically, the – let’s say – “real” reality, turns out to be the one projected on the “arche-screen.” Consequently, augmented reality would be the embodied one, which takes place on stage, behind this screen, the one you can see behind the image – or rather, on its own visual level but on another physical level – that gives back a complete sense of what happens not only on stage but also in the mental, perceptual theater of the audience. In other words, the performance is supposed to represent and amplify what Pietro Montani states when he writes “imagination behaves, literally, like a ‘generator of VR’” (Montani 2022).

As an apparent proof of this, when the screen-veil is definitely removed, the environment in which performers and audience are immersed, with a final breakthrough of the fourth wall, may be considered as a real, shared, “virtual reality.” Thus, the theater becomes a redefined environment, where images and bodies have played another perceptual, political, and therefore cultural, social rite, equally and jointly lived by audience, actresses, and actors. As an apparent indirect corroboration of this process, the director’s notes about the notion of truth relate explicitly to a reflection about the perception, via a medium, of what we call reality, and its implications:

Festen also provided us with incredible material for research and experimentation with language. We pushed ourselves towards a radical dramaturgical use of the camera to exploit the possibility of constantly constructing a double plane of reality that would give back to the spectators’ gaze the condition of choosing between what is constructed on the stage and the “manipulation” that the eye of the camera reworks live and is screened. With a gigantic sequence shot

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that will be filmed by the actors themselves throughout the show and projected before the gaze of the audience, we try to amplify, ironize, desecrate, and deepen the meaning of *Festen*'s questions. What is the truth? What do we choose to watch? What do we choose to believe? All this until the thin veil that divides the truth from its image falls, disappears once and for all, leaving room for silence, emptiness, the wonder of the presence of the actors who made this "madness" possible, to the wonder of their bodies, to their subtlest vibrations and their emotions, to the irreplaceable reality of their sincerity. (Il Mulino di Amleto n.d. "festen")

Figure 2.



Stage photo of *Festen. Il gioco della verità*

Source: Il Mulino di Amleto ©, photograph by G. Distefano

An Apparent Media-Archeological Confirmation

Of course, the overlap of the terms "truth" and "reality" is not easy, perhaps not even appropriate. However, it would be interesting to underline how, without considering their dramaturgical operation as explicit media experimentation, Il Mulino di Amleto and Marco Lorenzi fully understand the transformative power of the esthetics they developed for the setup of the show. Indeed, as mentioned before, the variety of the proposed arche-screens enables to connect human bodies and media perception in a mutual relationship. The idea that bodies, performative practices, and media development are strictly connected is one of the cores of screenology as understood by Erkki Huhtamo. He recently stated the following about a specific case study – the mechanical theater – but the same discussion seems to be relevant in our case:

I will treat the mechanical theater as a *medium* – a manifestation of media culture. I will discuss it as a *dispositive*, a system of relationships between the pavilion, the exhibits, the technological infrastructure, and the human operators and the

audience. The dispositive is a model, a schematic description of how a certain media form has been arranged. (Huhtamo 2019.)

It is interesting to notice how, historically speaking, “[n]ineteenth-century audiences and commentators do not seem to have made a clear separation between things ‘optical’ and things ‘mechanical.’” In this sense, specific kinds of theater were “a ‘laboratory’ for exploring, exposing, and exhibiting forms of media culture in the making.” This aspect is particularly interesting also for the present article. Since his fundamental work *Elements of Screenology: Toward an Archaeology of the Screen*, Huhtamo presents the magic lantern shows both as performance and screen (proto-)projection (Huhtamo 2004). Returning to the 2019 article, among other recent screen developments, Huhtamo cites, not by chance, virtual reality in his conclusions. Indeed, he proposes the function according to which “[a]s media culture keeps spreading to every aspect of the everyday, the relationship between virtual and material things will become more and more symbiotic” (Huhtamo 2019).

From a more material and historical standpoint, but still applicable to the discourse as developed in this article, Nele Wynants seems to confirm: “theater has always embraced ‘new’ media because theater history reflects the history of science, technology, and media” (Wynants 2019). Again, following this line of argument, in a more recent article specifically on the magic lantern, Wynants states:

The history of the western theater reflects the interplay between scientific and technological evolutions and its influence on theatrical practices. Since classical antiquity, scenographic worlds have been created with the help of technical aids, whether painted, built, or later, projected. [...] Moreover, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Huhtamo already detects intermedial theater, a tension between spectacular theater sets and the human presence of the actors. The performers’ role was challenged by the effects brought to the stage, which foreshadowed later debates on the relation between live performance and mediation. (Wynants 2020.)

It is interesting to notice that Wynant’s aim may be understood as very close to the one in this article: “The aim is not only to unearth untold stories of the theatrical past, but also to develop models and approaches for how theater and performance studies can contribute to and participate in media archaeological excavations, and to integrate performance into the cultural histories of technology.” (Wynants 2020.)

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An Open Conclusion For a New Approach in Cultural Heritage

Accepting a new and more complex gaze in the study of contemporary performing arts, as influenced by digital media not only by intermedial tools chosen for the representation, but also in the more or less (in)voluntary design process of the theatrical experience, could at the same time help to invert the paradigm about digital media research, their history, and their development. In other words, it might be possible to look at the history of performing arts and the history of digital media as a complex but interlaced history, allowing us to approach the study of a particular medium, for instance, expanded reality, from a more performative perspective and vice versa, as I suggest in this article.

Focusing on XR, and drawing on the media archaeology approach, for instance, brings up the question: Can we consider it as a mixed, constitutive evolution of screen experiences *and* performative practices? Based on the approach I followed and the media I considered, the necessity of developing new analytical tools, as well as a new terminology, emerged. As an open conclusion, I would like to propose as examples of this need two new terms, from my point of view equally applicable and quite suitable both for XR experiences and for many theatrical performances influenced by digital media, such as the one considered: the concepts of *experigraphy* and/or *experienscreen*.

Blending the noun *experience* and the suffix *-graphy* in the first case, and the term *screen* – as described above – in the second, these two words are intended to overcome the duality in the division between live and mediated experiences. In fact, doing so seems to fit with what Philip Auslander theorized about liveness when he wrote how it “does not inhere in a technological artifact or its operations – it results from our engagement with it and our willingness to bring it into full presence for ourselves” (Auslander 2012). Moreover, an interesting point of view that seems to confirm this line of thought can be found in the recent declarations of Luciano Floridi, who, in talking about the future of the metaverse, states, “from theater or other performing arts we know that aesthetics deals with the whole experience, in all its richness” (Monteverdi and Pizzo 2023), strongly underlining that the revolution these new media propose is not in the environment so much as in the experience we can live through them, exactly as in a performance.

An experigraphy necessarily needs or mainly relies on an experienscreen to take place. An experienscreen always creates and makes possible an experigraphy. The two terms are related but not bound to the idea of

arche-screen, because the latter can be understood both from a broad and abstract, as well as material, concrete point of view.

Proposing two new terms as such could be considered excessive and/or redundant. However, doing so, the aim is to give food for thought in research and practice about all the novelties that are arising in performing arts and digital media, as well as the intersection of them. Hence, the point is not (only) about tracking the amount and typology of digital-media presence in contemporary performing arts, but rather to spark original reflection about the mutual influence they exercise on the theoretical and practical level.

Scenography may give a more complex sense to every specific *pièce* for which is designed, being not merely an artificial environment but constituting one of the fundamental symbolic elements that creates every moment of the show, that is, a re-mediation of social and individual, conscious and unconscious, past and present meanings, in a specific ritual that we call theater. In some specific conditions, such as the one in the case study, the presence of an experienscreen gives birth to an intense experigraphy, a repeatable but never identically replicable experience that goes beyond the screen experience, as neither a live projection nor an important but inanimate scenographic element. Thus, the most important aspect of the concepts here proposed would be to give the same relevance both to the artifactual *and* to the cultural-anthropological sides of the live and the lived bodily experiences.

Finally, as a logical consequence of the theories I tried to develop, and to consider in a proper way these new so-called experienscreens, a redesign of the idea of heritage seems to be necessary. Specifically, the distinction in categories that characterize cultural heritage won't be helpful anymore, at least not in its current central role. Instead of continuing to distinguish between digital and physical, tangible and intangible heritage, the analysis of different media, human imagination and perception, and their complex inter-structure, may open to something new, finally understood as a real and authentic approach to performing cultural heritage.

In this sense, performing cultural heritage would create new performative, curatorial, and methodological approaches constantly in dialogue with each other. New approaches for new terminologies, and vice versa, would be more suited to the challenges we may face, to better understand new media and old rituals, as well as their constant, reciprocal influence and our relationship with both.

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