

## Saints and Cyborgs: Mystical Performance Spaces (Re)visioned

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For the last four centuries Western concepts of space have been exclusive and material. As we became more and more committed to the “Them” mentality, to the knowing and analytical subject observing the contemplative object, we embraced the concept of material space limited and proven by being framed. Indeed, by the end of the 19th-century we had given up any idea of the frame as an intellectual concept and had firmly accepted a belief in the actuality of framing in the universe. Even our most popular arts have succumbed to our relentless determination that all space be framed, objectified space. In the Italian Renaissance, paintings were framed and theatres soon followed with the development of the proscenium arch. The coda was introduced as a frame for musical compositions and the sonnet with its constant of eight lines of problem and six lines of solution introduced framing to poetry. The novel, its very name suggesting a break with existing traditions, may have begun as an open ended, serial or mural-like narrative, but by the end of the 19th century, it was being discussed in terms of framing devices. The late 19<sup>th</sup>-century theatre became the possessor of a fourth wall, a frame which gave material finality to our every day lives.

The invention of such fluid entertainment media as radio, cinema and television did little to alter the trend. Material space was conceded as a reality, and radio programs, films and video productions were framed as a matter of course. In fact, fundamental reality in film is defined by the number of frames per second. Indeed, two recent and well-received studies (one of the theatre, the other of the cinema) are devoted to closure, an aspect of framing.<sup>1</sup>

Marvin Carlson in his lucid and exhaustive work, *Performance*, uses the term “frame of the theatre” as early as page four and on page five he argues that performance really is framed by and judged by its observers.<sup>2</sup> From that point the term frame becomes a *leit motif* of the book because it is a concept wholly embraced by anthropology, psychology, sociology and, by extension, performance theory over the past half-century.

But material space is only a concept, not a reality, and much wringing of hands as well as exciting new thinking in the last hundred years has taken place in the natural sciences community over the loss of material space (e.g. the 1898 experiment of Michelson and Morley, with the disproof of ether as a constant of space). Physicists have now come to accept space as one of many relative concepts

of reality and to look upon the universe as a quantum event in which the decision to measure determines the nature of reality.

In popular culture the gradual erosion of a firmly held concept of material space has been hastened of late by the introduction of cyberspace, an event that is incorporeal and entirely without frame. It is this immaterial quality of cyberspace which is most disturbing to established civil authority and has occasioned much discussion of outlawing certain content (e.g. that which is considered pornographic) from the Internet. Outlawing a thing or idea is, of course, another way of framing that phenomenon.

Because we are terrified of losing our belief in the frame, we often refer to cyberspace as virtual space, indicating that though it is unframed we could actually frame it if we wished. And in this unfounded assertion we are comforted by the fact that most of us gain access to virtual space through the frame of a television monitor on our personal computer. But the existence of that monitor is only a throw-back to the long-held commitment to framing. Cyberspace is not limited by the framed monitor as is, for example, the material space presented in a classic fourth wall play such as *Hedda Gabler* or a classic fourth wall movie such as *Sleepless in Seattle*. Hedda is limited by the very materiality of the space she occupies and can escape it only in suicide. The young husband of *Sleepless in Seattle*, even though he has visions of his dead wife, is also limited by his material space, even though that space has been greatly altered by contemporary transportation and communication devices.

Nowhere is the immateriality of virtual space better demonstrated than in interactive computer games, especially those of the adventure genre such as *Galactic Trader*, *Siege of Darkness*, or the enormously popular *Doom*. There are many ways in which interactive computer games attempt to assert cyberspace's immateriality. First, the very interactivity of the game serves to suggest that the field of the player and the field of the game are capable of interpenetration, and are therefore not dependent on a subject/object, or performance/observer paradigm. Second, the storyline has multiple plot possibilities and a complete lack of closure, both of which undermine the concept of material space.

But it is in the abandonment of any idea whatsoever of framed space that the computer game makes its clearest statement about the nature of cyberspace. Indeed, what the computer game does is to substitute for material space the ancient concept of spiritual or sacred space as found in the art of medieval Christianity and Islam. This is space without end (Amen).

Granted the immense cultural divide between people of the 13th-century and those of the 20th, it is still possible to argue that computer games would not seem as strange or despicable to such persons as they do to many older intellectuals of the nineties, especially those who claim to be students of the

theatre. Both the modern computer game and the productions of medieval theatre make identical use of certain fundamental performance concepts. Both use unframed, virtual space. Such space was called the *platea* (The Place) in the Middle Ages and was a virtual space without character and definition. It might acquire temporary character or definition, depending on the given story or game but that definition could easily be sloughed off without any intellectual wrenching on the part of either the spectator or the dramatic artist. The space had no special shape. Sometimes it was round, less frequently square, most frequently entirely irregular. It could be observed from any direction; since there was no frame there was no front and back view. It could be entered by any spectator, or a person could be at once spectator and participant. Indeed the concept of entry is the defining characteristic of medieval performance space. It is in movement (entering, progressing, encountering) that the performance space receives its values, its meanings and its power to draw participants. The medieval theatre is a theatre of movement and energy, not one of analysis and explanation.

Contemporary framed theatres are theatres of received and conserved logic, no matter how extreme their narratives might seem. Framed theatres and their performances remain syllogisms. The characters of such theatres must have motives based upon a received social scheme. Indeed most contemporary actors are still trained to analyze a character's motives, not his or her energies.

Medieval theatre relies on a different belief. As a Bernardine song declares:

Jesus the dancers master is  
A great skill at the dance is His,  
He turns to right, he turns to left  
All must follow His teaching deft.<sup>3</sup> (Huxley, p. 155)

While dancing as we now know it has been lost to Christianity, dancing and processions (which we still retain in a crippled, linear form) were crucial performance events in the spiritual life of medieval Christians and Moslems. The greatest procession was the pilgrimage or spiritual journey which wound its way about the earth towards the sacred space or earthly paradise. The pilgrimage was repeated frequently as a local procession. Like the great sacred journey itself the local procession did not go in a linear manner. It was labyrinthine. Many of the great cathedrals, such as the wondrous edifice at Chartres, contain images of a labyrinth which cover the entire floor of the nave of the building. This labyrinth, a trope of energy and motion without the formal logic of the frame, finds its counterpart in the mandala, or mystery of the square within the circle that is the vision of the sacred found in so many Middle Eastern and Indian images of

paradise. The medieval performance space was therefore a sacred place, a realm of free motion, unhindered by any Newtonian mechanics. Here might be encountered, though not at any predictable (framed) moment, various events indicated by independent structures or locations: the sedes. These sedes might represent material moments such as Pontius Pilate's throne, but they might also be emotional or conceptual states such as Good Deeds or Charity, or they may be immaterial existences such as Heaven or Hell.

The well-known medieval morality play, *Everyman*, is an example of a performance labyrinth in which various sedes such as Good Deeds and The Grave are encountered by Everyman in his procession or journey towards death. The characters which he encounters are motiveless. Indeed, he himself has no motive to work-out. He is told he is about to die and he dances his dance of death during which he discovers that only Good Deeds will go with him to The Grave. He begins his dance in terror as he enters the uncharted and disembodied space of the sacred. His terror is not debilitating, but energizing, exhilarating and awesome. It is true enchantment, an event brought on by singing and dancing. The kind of terror of which Aristotle speaks in terms of Greek tragedy. It is true impulse to growth and change, the original meaning of the word *physis*. Everyman moves through sacred space not knowing what event is next, and only understanding the theatrical space through his very motion in it, through his experience of his and other's energies.

This experience of disembodiment, terror and exhilaration is the mystical experience, frightening but compelling, like the great experiences of love or artistic creativity. It is what William Blake calls "unorganized innocence," Francis Huxley "a chaos of energy."<sup>4</sup> But the great experience, the unorganized innocence, is undergone not only by Everyman, but by every participant at the theatrical production. For medieval performance space did not separate spectator from performer, subject from object. Every one at the production of *Everyman* was a participant. Medieval theatrical performances were ludic and participatory (Staub, p. 132).<sup>5</sup> Just how game-like and participatory they were can be gleaned from a walk through an ancient Gothic cathedral the original staging sites of medieval theatre.

The sacred space may be entered from a number of points. In an unmodified cathedral there is no front door or back door.<sup>6</sup> Upon entering the cathedral one senses an immediate invitation to motion, but not in any particular direction. Every direction yields a perspective and every direction offers many altars (sedes). The space is for penetration not absolute relationship. This quality is what the great architectural historian, Erwin Panofsky calls "transparency of space" (pp. 43-44).<sup>7</sup> All of the space of a cathedral is available for penetration just as the labyrinth invites penetration, not for seeing as a totality but for moving

through and thus apprehending in motion. The quality of such transparency is the quality of mystic adventure. When medieval theatrical productions moved out of the cathedral and into the city, the ideal of motion through transparency remained, and the city itself became the labyrinth, not an especially difficult transference to any one familiar with the involuted layout of a medieval city, whether in western Europe or the Middle East. And anyone familiar with computer games such as *Doom* can immediately see the parallels and kindred attitudes of such games to medieval theatre.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the adventure games are the only theatrical events among the available computer games and are the only users of virtual space. As those who play such games as *Doom*, or *Wolfenstein*, can attest, the spatial arrangement is identical to the medieval practice of laying out various sedes on a neutral and penetrable space the platea or place of the game. The player is also the spectator-participant: Everyplayer. Everyplayer enters the place of the game: the place of cyber, where the cyborgs of the game exist and interact with each other and with the spectator/player. Everyplayer, now also a cyborg, goes from sede to sede, accomplishing the task set by the game, and if he survives the exigencies of a given sede, he moves to the next.

While each game involves different plots or problems and while there are as many different looks as there are medieval cities, Islamic gardens and medieval churches and cathedrals, all are sustained by the same performance device: a sede/platea labyrinth in penetrable space where the only values are motion and energy. Indeed, some computer games such as *Doom* and *Diablo* actually grant the player an amount of potential energy, and it is the conservation of this energy, while at the same time executing the necessary motion, which prolongs the time of Everyplayer in his dance of death. Computer games are extremely popular and it is not unreasonable to suggest that they constitute by far the most popular form of theatre for children and young adults, chosen over films, cartoons, television shows and live stage events. The question is why? The answer lies in the mystical and sacred space utilized in the games. Fortunately for their future success, the creators of games such as *Doom* were not trained in the conventional theatres and film studios of our society.

They had no commitment to framed space, nor any tradition of performance for framed space. The one requirement was to create a game, a ludic experience to be shared by a person and a machine. Their tradition was animation: undiluted motion. Probably their experience of gaming was the playground, which is also an open, transparent and penetrable space. They brought their own unorganized (untrained) innocence to the problem. Their one, overriding need was to involve the player in the space, not as spectator nor intellectual partner, but as participant and to make for that participant what I.A. Richards says happens

with great poetry—a sense of commotion. The player was to be agitated enough to invest his or her real energies and penetrate the game space. This could only take place if the space was transparent and mystical, as is the space in Gothic cathedrals, Islamic gardens and mosques, and medieval theatre. Once the performance structure was discovered, massive exploitation followed.

Contemporary virtual space is mystical space (re)visioned. And the sense of the mystic as a lived event is recaptured in cyberspace as in no other medium. Playing *Doom* is not unlike a sacred experience, and like such experiences, there is no end to the event. One simply makes a decision to enter and then lives through *Doom* until the experience is no longer bearable. One then exits, to enter the game another day, to renew more excitement, to experience again without closure the rapture of the participant/performer, the truly entwined and entroped experience.

## Notes

1. Richard Neupert, *The End: Narration and Closure in the Film*, (Detroit: Wayne State U P, 1995) and June Schlueter, *Dramatic Closure: Reading the End*, (London: Associated U P, 1995).

2. Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction*, (London: Routledge, 1996).

3. Francis Huxley, *The Way of the Sacred*, (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1974) 155.

4. Huxley 8.

5. August Staub and Rhonda Justice-Malloy, "Gothic and Post-Gothic Theatre," *Theatre Symposium*, Paul Castagno, ed. (Tucaloosa, Alabama: The U of Alabama P, 1996).

6. I, myself, have had the experience of entering through a side portal and wondering if I were in the main portion of the cathedral or not (AS).

7. Erin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, (Cleveland: Meridian Books, The World Publishing Company, 1957) 43–44.

8. I am here, of course, speaking of the adventure genre of computer games, not those games transferred from older framed platforms such as arcade games of marksmanship or board and card games once played on the flat, framed surface of the dining table. (AS)