«Se non mi guardi non brillo» («If you don't look at me I don't shine»). The *mise-en-scene* of the body in *Chroma Keys*. Interview with Motus

Doriana Legge and Mirko Lino

Abstract

Since 1991, Motus theater company (Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Nicolò) has been moving in various hyper-contemporary directions, working with Beckett, DeLillo, Genet, Fassbinder, Rilke and Pasolini. Whether their works be theatre shows, performances or installations, the body is always at centre stage: a subversive body in revolt that demands to be seen. In *Chroma Keys* the performance centres around the body of the actress Silvia Calderoni, who, immersed in a "green screen" setting wanders through scenes from several films, transforming herself into a presence that communicates with the images. With *Chroma Keys*, Motus build-up an inter-medial operation, where the tradition of the travelling theatrical performance and the "cinema of attractions" merge and interact with each other. The show was recently held at the Auditorium del Parco - Renzo Piano, L'Aquila, within Aria Teatro Festival program; on that occasion we interviewed Daniela Nicolò.

Keywords

Motus; Chroma Keys; Intermediality; Performance Studies; Film Studies.

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The actress begins to walk briskly, against the green backdrop and an area of green flooring; on a screen positioned above her, two figures in black and white, captured from behind, are walking along a desolate road strewn with litter and rubbish tossed about by the wind; suddenly, the actress, enveloped in the green space, separates into two and invades the screen, coming up alongside the two figures in an act of apparent collusion; perhaps she is following them, aware of the fact that she will never catch up with them. Reproduced on the screen is a fragment of a scene from *Satantango* (1994), the masterpiece by Béla Tarr; the performer in *Chroma Keys*, an installation by the theatre company Motus, is the actress Silvia Calderoni. The title clearly alludes to the technique of the "chroma key", or "green screen", used in the cinema and TV studios to produce a superimposition of two images emerging from diverse sources, without generating visual disharmony. Motus then relocates this approach to "alternative spaces", such as the theatre, the auditorium or even public squares, adapting it to the circumstances in which the performance is to take place. The constitutive elements of cinematographic experience (screen, bodies, image and projection) are worn down and remodelled in an inter-medial operation, where the tradition of the travelling theatrical performance and the "cinema of

attractions" merge and interact with each other. The performance centres around the body of Silvia Calderoni, who, immersed in her green setting, breaks up and then recomposes all the illusory potential of the "green screen"; she arouses the attention of the onlooker by laying bare the mechanisms and ploys of a technique that creates illusions, represents the anomalous and offers up unusual visual combinations. On witnessing the body interweaving with the projection one has the impression that *Chroma Keys* is aiming to rekindle the sense of amazement that characterized most cinematographic experiences straddling the 19th and 20th centuries; the appeal lay in the tradition of a phenomenal body within a ghostly context, and in investigating the visual possibilities of this re-coding, in line with the results, in the newly-emerging cinema, from the very first experimenters and provocateurs, such as Méliès, Smith, Williamson, Porter and others.

Image taken from *Chroma Keys*, Aria Teatro Festival, 10/13/2020, Auditorium del Parco - Renzo Piano, L'Aquila. Photo courtesy of Luca Zenobi

Viewed from this perspective, *Chroma Keys*, despite the simplicity of its organization (body, green background, screen) becomes a complex object, subjected to an intriguing semantic richness: an installation that aims to offer up a tribute to art-house cinema; a refined and occasionally ironic sequence of scenes taken from cult films, enough to trigger the stored memories of any movie buff; a re-assessment of cinema as something powerfully interactive; also, perhaps, a post-modern operation in demystifying the illusionistic power of cinema. All these possible interpretations pulsate in this work by Motus, through gesture, movement and the live action of a body re-projected on to the screen and transformed into a troubled *avatar*. However, one of the most alluring aspects is the blossoming of a deep desire, engraved on the face of every spectator: to sacralise cinema by becoming an integral part of its actual essence, in other words, becoming one of the many spectres that inhabit the cinema. This is similar to what happens in *Sherlock Jr* (1924) by Buster Keaton: in the main scene, the projectionist falls asleep and his astral body drifts around the movie theatre and then invades the actual screen, ending up by occasionally interacting with the sudden and continual changes in the scenarios. Silvia Calderoni wanders through scenes from several films - *Into the Void*, *Grizzly Man*, *Into the Wild*, *Last Days*, *Barbarella*, etc.; she commandeers them by transforming herself into a presence that communicates with the images, often ironically and playfully, but also touchingly and intimately. For example, in the final scenes from *Lucky* (2017), she takes leave of Harry Dean Stanton, whose last look into the camera is framed in close-up, just before he disappears off-screen. This conversation between ghosts seems to transform the sorrow into a flash of immortality.

Observing Silvia Calderoni chasing after figures wandering aimlessly, such as those of Tarr, or the ones in the final scene of Bunuel's *Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie* (1972), one has the impression that one is witnessing the vivification of cinema, its affirmation as a constantly malleable material, shot through with deep desire, and sublimated in the continual intrusion of the body.

Ever since 1991, when Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Nicolò founded the company in Rimini, Motus has been moving in various

hyper-contemporary directions, working with Beckett, DeLillo, Genet, Fassbinder, Rilke and Pasolini, reinterpreting the myth of Antigone and ending up tackling Dryden's baroque *King Arthur*, with music by Purcell. Whether these be theatre shows, performances or installations, the body is always at centre stage, with its foretelling and forewarning, a subversive body in revolt that demands to be seen; it is, is fact, in *Nella Tempesta* (2013), that Motus declares through the voice of one of its actors: "If you don't look at me I don't shine".

The spectacle is often illuminated by an interplay with machines/devices that boast a certain distinction by virtue of their brush with the actor's living body; one is thus invited to reflect on how we redefine the restrictions we place on the bodies we inhabit. The considerable effort made by Motus, both political and aesthetic, just as with theatre, is always linked to performance and insistently aims to deflate power in all its forms.

Image taken from *Chroma Keys*, Aria Teatro Festival, 10/13/2020, Auditorium del Parco - Renzo Piano, L'Aquila. Photo courtesy of Luca Zenobi

The theme of explosion of identity returns in the very recent *Panorama*, staged at the MaMa Theatre of New York, together with a multi-ethnic group of actors from the Great Jones Repertory Company. One of the actors interviewed on set maintains that "Whatever character you are playing, whoever it might seem to be, it is still you", and it is in this short-circuit that human possibilities multiply, assisted by a voyeuristic look that is pointed, above all, at oneself. For example, we might mention here *Mdlsx* (2015), from the novel *Middlesex* (2002) by Jeffrey Eugenides, which tells the story of Calliope Stephanides, who is determined to become Cal and take on a male identity. In the staging we see a series of clips from home movies (belonging to Silvia Calderoni), which alternate with the deeds of the character Calliope/Cal; it is a strange form of auto-fiction that does however possess an earthbound force, triggering an effusion in the onlooker.

It is recounted that glorious transfigurations took place on Mount Tabor. Aghast was the onlooker as he felt his own perception blurring; he could not surrender to the simple vision. Here, on the other hand, we have this precious lasciviousness, in all its ferocious immanence, requesting an ulterior reason for living, which can only be accomplished through the breath of the onlooker.

1. *Chroma Keys* **could bring to mind the phenomenon of a Dj set. Both performances are, in fact, executed live and are backed by a selection of "songs", cuts and juxta-positioning, alluding to the logic of the mash-up (bits of music, or scenes from different sources that, when combined, create a new content). Did you follow any particular criteria when choosing the film-clips to be projected?**

It was certainly a very complicated selection process; on the one hand we privileged the thematic aspect working on films from different historical periods, but which included the apocalyptic aspect and a distortion of reality. In fact, there is this dimension of irreality or phase shifts with regard to realism. These are anything but neo-realistic films; it's all imagination and, in part, the work of radical *auteurs*. It's true that there are easily recognisable scenes, but there just as many from

independent cinema. We preferred a remote dimension, where time has been altered and irreal things take place, which led us to choose science-fiction or other very abstract movies. The viewer might well enjoy tracking down the various films; it's a very eclectic mash-up.

On the other hand, there was the necessity for a more technical choice, because with "chroma key" we needed specific framing, widefield and, above all, fixed cameras; we had to find a way of enabling a figure to enter the frame, and so we couldn't use scenes with close-ups or a moving camera. This excluded the whole sector of neo-realism and documentaries. There are many evocative and abstract images, wide fields where Silvia Calderoni bursts on the screen and which break up the film's linearity, creating another narrative in her passing from one film to another. Although it is true that Silvia has a continuity of movement, at the same time she too is being continually transformed. *Chroma Keys* originated as a site-specific project in Piazza di Santarcangelo, at the 2017 Festival. We thought of it as kind of sabotaging the cinema screen that stood in the square; the audience was already comfortably seated expecting a film by Motus. Then they gradually caught on to the shenanigans and the fact that there was an actual set. Just imagine a free open-air cinema, where the elderly have already taken their places much earlier and are sitting and waiting, and then gradually they realize that the image of Silvia is appearing in real time and her actual body is passing by close to them.

2. **How are we to watch *Chroma Keys*? In all its simplicity (a green backdrop, one or two screens and a performer) it leads the spectator along an intriguing, dual visual path, imbued with tension; this is due to the bodily presence of Silvia Calderoni, enveloped in green and her digital re-coding on the actual screen.**

In the version we produce for closed environments, where the screen is not as decentralized as it was at Santarcangelo, the view is mostly front-on; with a single glance one can see Silvia's movements. The high-speed choreography makes it look like a dance exercise with

an immediate rendering on-screen, thanks to the work of our technician Simona Gallo. Clearly there are those who are concentrating more on the film, whilst others prefer to observe Silvia, but one can easily embrace both narratives at the same time.

Image taken from *Chroma Keys*, Aria Teatro Festival, 10/13/2020, Auditorium del Parco - Renzo Piano, L'Aquila. Photo courtesy of Luca Zenobi

3. **One of the cornerstones of your spectacle lies in displaying, often ironically, the technique of the "green screen" (or "chroma key"), revealing its most intimate mechanisms, one might say, playing around with its foibles until it is laid bare. This approach brings to mind the work of Méliès back in the early days of cinema, when he demonstrated the irreal nature of cinema by showing off the substance of his tricks. Might one consider Silvia Calderoni's unpredictable interventions in the film-clips as something similar? Cinema's capacity to muddle the boundaries between optical illusion and reality?**

The show, in fact, actually originated from this idea. The "chroma key" is one of the oldest techniques in cinema, exploited in a variety of ways, until it finally arrived on the TV screen; you need only to think of banal weather forecasts. This age-old technique epitomizes the actual nature of cinema itself, even more than cinema in its early days, when it tended more towards the idea of simultaneous illusion and magic. With regard to our productions, many people have told us that they are very ironic; you smile, even laugh. There is an across-the-board target audience, not only those working in the field; in fact, we started out in the squares, in the open-air, before a wider audience including children and the elderly. People who never go to the theatre or performances get a lot out of it, specifically because we play around with the dream element, the actual idea that you can fly.

Image taken from *Chroma Keys*, Aria Teatro Festival, 10/13/2020, Auditorium del Parco - Renzo Piano, L'Aquila. Photo courtesy of Luca Zenobi

4. **As regards the relationship between a phenomenal live body and a body that, at the theatre, in a situation of representation, is always, however, a body with a sign, a semiotic body; what direction does it take in this kind of work?**

Silvia's body itself has this hybrid potential for transformation; it is an ambiguous, androgynous body. It wasn't by chance that this work emerged after *MDSLX* (2017) and there is certainly a connection in thinking about the fluidity, the idea of transformation, being able to be so many different things all at the same time, without being fixed in any precise category. Silvia's body incorporates all this in its actual essence, but, of course, extensive scenic intelligence is demanded and this definitely represent added value. Naturally there is basically Silvia's body, but together with a great compositional capacity and ability to handle scenic space in a clever and ingenious manner. For example, in *MDLSX,* we take care of the lighting and sound; Silvia has the task of not only governing her expressive capacity, but, at the same time, relating to cameras and computers, mastering all of a certain kind of technology. Not all performers can manage it; there are several good performers who cannot handle the scenic composition or deal with the technology. Consequently, *Chroma Keys* is a little machine in which a single error may lead to disaster; much lies in the hands of Silvia and her rhythmic capacity.

5. **When one watches *Chroma keys* one has the sensation that one wants to know more, to discover in what other ways and with what other "ploys", apart from those that you have already cleverly presented, it might be possible to intervene in cinematographic images.**

Chroma Keys has ended, but it could continue *ad infinitum*, except that to do so would demand a meticulous operation. Silvia, too, presents a work of great precision; she marks out all her positions because the smallest error in a scene might well throw her out of sync. I myself

(Daniela Nicolò) have to continually adjust the zoom on my camera in collaboration with Simona; we then pick out Silvia and move her into the frame. It's a very complicated operation; it looks like a game but it isn't. If time permits we would like to add a few fragments, because it really could become a spectacle without end, although at the moment there is in fact an ending: this explosion of the body, the idea of infinite fragmentation, an entity shattering into so many things all at the same time.

Image taken from *Chroma Keys*, Aria Teatro Festival, 10/13/2020, Auditorium del Parco - Renzo Piano, L'Aquila. Photo courtesy of Luca Zenobi

6. **Several years ago you published a neat little volume titled *Hello Stranger. Motus 1991-2016* (Damiani, 2017), a sort of open-handed confrontation between word and image, a "spectacle in the form of a book", but with a Motus approach. As is the case with a spectacle, the reader/spectator's experience does not merely comprise observing, but a liberating, floating, and even voyeuristic**

experience is triggered, which leads one to reflect on one's own identity and reconstruct it in other scenarios emerging from the bio-dimensionality of the page.

The volume originated as a work in itself; it isn't a historiographical book or a documentation of 25 years of history of Motus (which will be 30 in 2021). It was conceived as something with its own autonomy. The initial idea was to avoid a chronological criterion, but to expostulate through themes and invite others to respond. We already had a narrative with images, but we wanted to hand on the written works to others, to those who knew us and had painstakingly followed our work. The task was to try to single out the focal points that characterise our work transversally. We realized that over the years several themes had re-emerged, even though there had been great changes in form and symbols from one spectacle to another. So we tried to focus on these pivotal points and demand written work that encompassed them. There emerged a book, which, when all is said and done, is a compendium of diverse and transversal inspection.

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The Article

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