

## **Hawaiian Hula 'Ōlapa – Steps towards an interart-aesthetic oriented Performance Analysis.**

The prime interest of my paper is to discuss the basic performance set-up of Hawaiian hula 'ōlapa performance practice from an interart aesthetic perspective including notions elaborated upon in studies on intermediality. My aim is to describe the structure of convergence between the pluri-medial elements elaborated upon in hula 'ōlapa performance: stylized dance-acting, percussion and chanted oral literature. A particular division between performance disciplines, the dancer-actors and the singer-percussionists, shapes the allocation of divergent performance activities in hula 'ōlapa performance. Analytically the question is how to capture coherence versus non-coherence as a two sided relational condition of convergence in pluri-medially structured performance practices such as hula 'ōlapa.

### **Interart Aesthetics: Research Outline and Analytical Considerations**

Fischer-Lichte discusses the plurimedial condition of art practices<sup>1</sup> and related theories in terms of an evolving research field called interart aesthetics. Aesthetic experience is according to Fischer-Lichte's proposition the fundamental category of any interart aesthetic<sup>2</sup>. She concedes that aesthetic experience arises "from the fact that several art forms come together"<sup>3</sup>. Methodologically the study of interart aesthetics covers several analytical steps. Fischer-Lichte differentiates:

- 1.) How do the possibilities that several art forms are combined change depending on *what* art forms converge? This question points towards an analytical specification of distinct practices of artistic articulation involved in a particular research area. Fischer-Lichte's perspective implies that various

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<sup>1</sup> The terminology to define relevant phenomena differs. Fischer-Lichte specifies respective art practices blurring given boundaries as "hybrid art formations". Irina Rajewsky, a specialist on intermediality in literature, defines "media combinations" as constellations which combine at least two phenomenologically distinct media/art forms both being present at the moment of performance. The specific materiality of each medium involved emerges and interrelates simultaneously as part of the plurimedial constellation. See Rajewsky, Irina O., *Intermedialität*, Tübingen; Basel: Francke 2002, p. 15-16.

<sup>2</sup> Fischer-Lichte's seminal article entitled *Interart-Ästhetiken*, was published in: Brosch, Renate (Ed.), *Ikono/ Ikono/Philo/Logie: Wechselspiele von Bildern und Texten*, Potsdamer Beiträge zur Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte Bd. 2, Berlin: trafo Verlag, 2004, p.25-41. I refer to an unpublished English translation circulated as part of the joint Symposium, Berlin (2009).

<sup>3</sup> See Fischer-Lichte (2004), p. 13.

combinations are possible which may lead towards totally different ways of production and respective aesthetic experiences<sup>4</sup>.

2.) Consecutively the issue arises *how* the involved art forms converge to engender interart aesthetic constellations. Fischer-Lichte distinguishes among four degrees of convergence: art forms appear side by side without any apparent coherence; art forms perceivably refer to each other; art forms mutually complement and reinforce each other; art forms fuse into one<sup>5</sup>.

3.) To research about interart aesthetic phenomena means to analyse how the condition of convergence shapes the relationship between performative and narrative and aesthetic aspects. Fischer-Lichte states that "aesthetic experience depends on each mutual conditional relationship between materiality, mediality and semioticity in the arts"<sup>6</sup>.

As part of my paper I will refer to the first and second step of analysis as proposed by Fischer-Lichte, the specification of distinct art practices and how these converge. Concerning the discussion on convergence my interest is to focus on the non-coherent aspects of performance organisation in this paper. Later in my work I will describe and analyse aspects of performance organisation that enhance coherence.

## **Staging classical hula 'olapa – definitions and principles of performance practice**

Hula is the generic term to denote an entire genre of performance practice including the sociological context of performance production and reception of hula on Hawaii and elsewhere. The notion of hula subsumes two historically different developments or strands of performance practices on Hawaii, classical hula and modern hula, called hula 'auana. I focus in my dissertation on the study

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<sup>4</sup> Fischer-Lichte's principle assumption is "that aesthetic experience is not an invention of the eighteenth century, made in the course of the proclamation of the autonomy of art, but an anthropological fact that is articulated and realized differently according to cultural and historical conditions". See Fischer-Lichte (2004), p.6. She considers as research material occasions that involve several art forms, theatre events and performances including "festivals, ceremonies, rituals, etc., which, while not considered art, do indeed fulfill an aesthetic function". See Fischer-Lichte (2004), p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> See Fischer-Lichte (2004), p. 13.

<sup>6</sup> See Fischer-Lichte (2004), p. 7.

of classical hula, known as hula `ōlapa<sup>7</sup>. The generic term hula, besides denoting a performing art genre as a whole, refers to one single through-composed hula piece. Each hula composition includes a section of oral literature, called mele hula. The subject of mele hula may cover episodes drawn from traditional Hawaiian epics, or reflect upon historical personalities, locations and Hawaiian mythology. Two sets of performance specialist, the `ōlapa, the dance-actors, and the ho`opa`a, the percussionist-singers, enact the mele hula in pluri-medial terms<sup>8</sup>. During classical hula performances the `ōlapa focus primarily on body articulation being trained in a highly stylized form of dance-acting while the ho`opa`a cantilate the mele hula based on a microtonal form of vocalization. While chanting the ho`opa`a play percussion instruments. They use double gourd drums, called ipu heke, and shark skinned drums, called pahu.

Traditionally hula performances are presented outdoors. The performance space, called pā hula, resembles a rectangular piece of ground which has to be even and cleared from any disturbing matter. Any space can become a hula stage depending on the number of performers involved, and the givens of the environment. The stage-format demarcates in most cases a protruding area. The audience is placed around the stage area on three sides. Usually no scenic set design is involved. The backdrop includes naturally given situations. Plant and flower arrangements may add to the performance area. The aspect of performance space is arranged in a restrained, yet supporting and transparent way which allows to focus on the artistic activity of the `ōlapa and ho`opa`a. A general time frame specifies the beginning and ending of the hula performance event as a whole.

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<sup>7</sup> Classical hula represents a Hawaiian performance traditions originally practiced prior to Western contact being transmitted on the Hawaiian islands surviving colonial forms of discrimination throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the civil rights movement of the 60's hula practitioners started to train and present classical hula again on a larger scale. This endeavor was supported mainly by the Hawaiian community. Modern hula, hula `auana, evolved on the other hand as part of the growing tourist and film industry. Hula practitioners developed hula `auana incorporating a European musical understanding of harmony, stringed instruments, styles of costumes, movements, body posture, and song contents influence by the "West".

<sup>8</sup> In hula performances the section of ho`opa`a and `ōlapa may range from one single performer to a large group of performers. The number of performers concerning both sections is not defined. It depends on how many trained performers of each section are able to represent a hula school and its ensemble on stage



The video stills show the `ōlapa performing in the front, while the ho`opa`a are seated in the back utilizing double gourd drums. The video documents a ho`ike, meaning an annual public celebration, produced by the traditional hula school and ensemble *Hālau Hula Mele*. The performance entitled "Ho`olauna Hou" took place at McCoy Pavilion in Honolulu, Hawaii, in July, 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2001.

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An acoustic signal demarcates the beginning of the actual performance. The entire troupe of hula performers enters the stage area while the leading ho`opa`a, the hula master of the troupe chants an "oli kahea", an opening recitative. The group divides. The ho`opa`a walk to the back or to one of the rear sides of the stage and seat themselves. The `ōlapa on the other hand walk to their starting position facing the audience. The `ōlapa clearly dominate the scene being fully visible to the audience. A call, termed "kahea wehe", vocalizes the opening dedication or title of the hula composition which the ensemble is about to present. The audience is informed what hula composition they are about to see. The leading ho`opa`a executes the kahea wehe. The call is a strong appealing signal focusing the attention of the ensemble. The group of `ōlapa responds by repeating the same line in unison. A phrase of percussion follows. The dynamic of this percussive introductory phrase, executed either fast or rather calm, sets the acoustic mood or leading tone of the piece. Another call, this time done by one of the `ōlapa, signals that the entire group of `ōlapa starts to move as one. The `ōlapa perform the same set of foot and arm gesticulations jointly as a group. The effect of the `ōlapa moving in unison is tremendous. To see the same movements as a series of several performers seems to scale up and magnify the individual moves. Besides the visible kinaesthetic appearance of bodies in motion, an acoustic wave of percussion and microtonal chanting challenges and seems to uplift the performance of the `ōlapa. The air resonates due to the strong acoustic commitment of the ho`opa`a. The ho`opa`a are seated at the back or side of the stage, being visible through moving their percussion instruments.

However, the ho'opa'a are present as part of the performance primarily by means of their acoustic articulation. In the meanwhile the visual focus stays on the kinaesthetic action of the 'olapa. The activity between ho'opa'a and 'olapa is constantly shifting and changing during the performance. Some segments involve movements accompanied by percussion without poetic lines. Calls dissect the flow of performance directing changes concerning body gesticulation and chanted poetic lines. The performed hula piece comes to an end. The 'olapa settle down for a moment in a final position and vocalize the "kahea paha", the final dedication of the respective hula piece. Another call is set and the performance continues until the 'olapa move off stage. Now, a "hula ho'i" is performed which conventionally represents a final hula piece used to leave the stage area. The audience applauds while the ho'opa'a get off stage as well. The hula troupe is replaced by another ensemble, entering the stage to perform and so it continues.

My proposition is that the division between the two performance disciplines, between 'olapa and ho'opa'a, figures as one fundamental interart aesthetic principle concerning classical hula performance. Understood as a basic aspect of performance organisation, the above stated division between performance disciplines represents a *means of performative framing* which structures and deeply shapes the complex pluri-medial fabric of hula performance and its aesthetic appeal. Effective at the performative level, the organised competitive artistic encounter between 'olapa and ho'opa'a enables a multiplicity of sensual stimuli – the visual-kinaesthetic domain of the 'olapa versus the acoustic-verbal activity of the ho'opa'a. The interstice or hiatus between the performative, non-coherent activities is aesthetically made productive by raising an interart aesthetic tension which runs through an entire hula performance. It seems to energize everyone participating in the performance event, performers and audience alike. Of analytical interest is the challenge between integrative forces of performance organisation and non-coherent aspects of performance material.

## **Framed confrontation between sound and sight– the allocation of performance material in hula `olapa**

As follows I discuss the *allocation of performance material* as one crucial analytical notion in order to specify the divergent art practices converging in hula performance. The specific setting of artistic division in classical hula ensures a fundamental structural difference within the performance framework which again determines the complex interrelationship of sound, words, image, body, time, and space unfolding in the very process of hula performance.

I refer to the academic work of Kattenbelt and Chapple who developed a general analytical outline concerning multi-facetted constellations of theatre and pluri-medial performance productions<sup>9</sup>. The model is based on a conceptual premise defining “theatre-as-the-stage-of-intermediality”. Kattenbelt and Chapple argue that “theatre provides a space where the art forms of theatre, opera, and dance meet, interact and integrate with the media of cinema, television, video and the new technologies; creating profusions of texts, inter-texts, inter-media and spaces in-between. It is in the intersections and the spaces in-between the intersections that we locate intermediality<sup>10</sup>”(p. 24). The model of Kattenbelt and Chapple reflects upon the impact that new media had on post-dramatic theatre productions, and upon the ongoing inter-medial activities concerning the blurring of genre boundaries among the arts. My point of view is that these notions concerning intermediality are adaptable to an interart aesthetic approach and last but not least are applicable to performance practices utilizing heterogeneous forms of artistic articulation which are primarily body centred<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> See the introduction on “*Key issues in Intermediality in Theatre and performance*” written by Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt in: Chapple, Freda/Kattenbelt, Chiel (eds.) *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2006, p.11-25, and Chiel Kattenbelt’s article “*Theatre as the Art of the Performer and the Stage of Intermediality*”, published in the same book, p. 29-38.

<sup>10</sup> Kattenbelt and Chapple define: Intermediality is an *effect* [stressed by the author] performed in-between mediality, supplying multiple perspectives and foregrounding the making of meaning by the receiver of the performance.” Intermedial procedures are understood as an anthropological given. “Between the bodies and minds of the audience, and the bodies and minds of the performers is a medial exchange that is bigger than any technologically produced media may achieve.” The medial exchange is positioned in-between the mediality of the performers and the mediality of involved art forms. Ultimately, Kattenbelt and Chapple state that “intermediality is not reliant on technology but on the inter-action between performance and reception.” See Kattenbelt and Chapple (2006), p. 20-22.

<sup>11</sup> From a media study’s point of view body centred arts are often called “old” or analogue types of media. I refer to the publication edited by Joachim Paech, Jens Schröter, *Intermedialität Analog/Digital: Theorien – Methoden – Analysen*, Wilhelm Fink, 2008.

Kattenbelt and Chapple distinguish among six domains which conceptually interact in theatre: sound, word, image, body, time, and space. They correlate these six domains according to digital and analogue circumstances of performance production<sup>12</sup>. As follows I adapt the six categories to a general outline of hula performance devising a diagram, see appendix fig. 2. Both the ho'opa'a and the 'ōlapa are body centred art disciplines. Both parties position their bodies on stage as part of the performance. However, a distinct allocation of performance domains is observable. The 'ōlapa use the capacity of the body to move through space and to gesticulate with their arms, hands and feet in a coordinated, intricate manner. To perform as a group in unison represents a performance technique to magnify the visual and kinaesthetic effect of movement performed through time and space. In reference to the basic allocation of performance domains in hula 'ōlapa, the 'ōlapa clearly use the visual-kinaesthetic appearance of the human body in action as their prime artistic means. In contrast to the 'ōlapa, the artistic discipline of the ho'opa'a covers the acoustic capacities of the human body. Raising their voices by means of techniques of microtonal chanting, they recite through-composed oral poetry and at the same time they rhythmically manipulate resonating instruments. Both the ho'opa'a and the 'ōlapa in turn make use of calls using the acoustic and resonant ability of the human voice. These calls, generally called kahea, regulate the succession of the performance. They function as cues for the ho'opa'a and the group of 'ōlapa. Due to a particular kahea being called the performers know which verse of the hula composition will follow next. The performative, aesthetic and semantic function of these cues is of significant importance in hula performance, a topic to be discussed later on.

Following the Kattenbelt/Chapple model the ho'opa'a principally elaborate on the performance elements of sound and word or language. The combination of chanting and percussion creates an acoustic and resonating sphere which envelops the activity of the 'ōlapa and the audience alike. The acoustic domain shapes both the general flow of the performance on stage and the general atmosphere of the event.

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<sup>12</sup> Kattenbelt / Chapple present their model via a diagram showing constellations of intermedial interplay relevant to theatre and performance, see Chapple, Freda/ Kattenbelt, Chiel (eds.), *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance*, Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2006, p. 24.

The divided allocation of performance domains between the `ōlapa and ho`opa`a allows to focus and to amplify the material and medial means of articulation on each side. As I state, the divided allocation entails aesthetically a structure of difference due to a specific combination of heterogeneous and non-coherent performance material interacting in a contrasting manner. The intermedial hiatus of performance activity is exhibited as part of the performance, having a strong impact on the aesthetic appeal effective at the performative level. As such, the discussed division of performance disciplines in hula `ōlapa places at first a performative frame organising a confrontation of visual/kinaesthetic and acoustic/verbal performance material as part of the basic, interart aesthetic set-up of hula `olapa performance. The question arises how this basic structure of difference effects the consecutive levels of performance organisation and composition as well as aspects of narration, presented by means of stylized embodiment and chanted oral literature.

#### Bibliography

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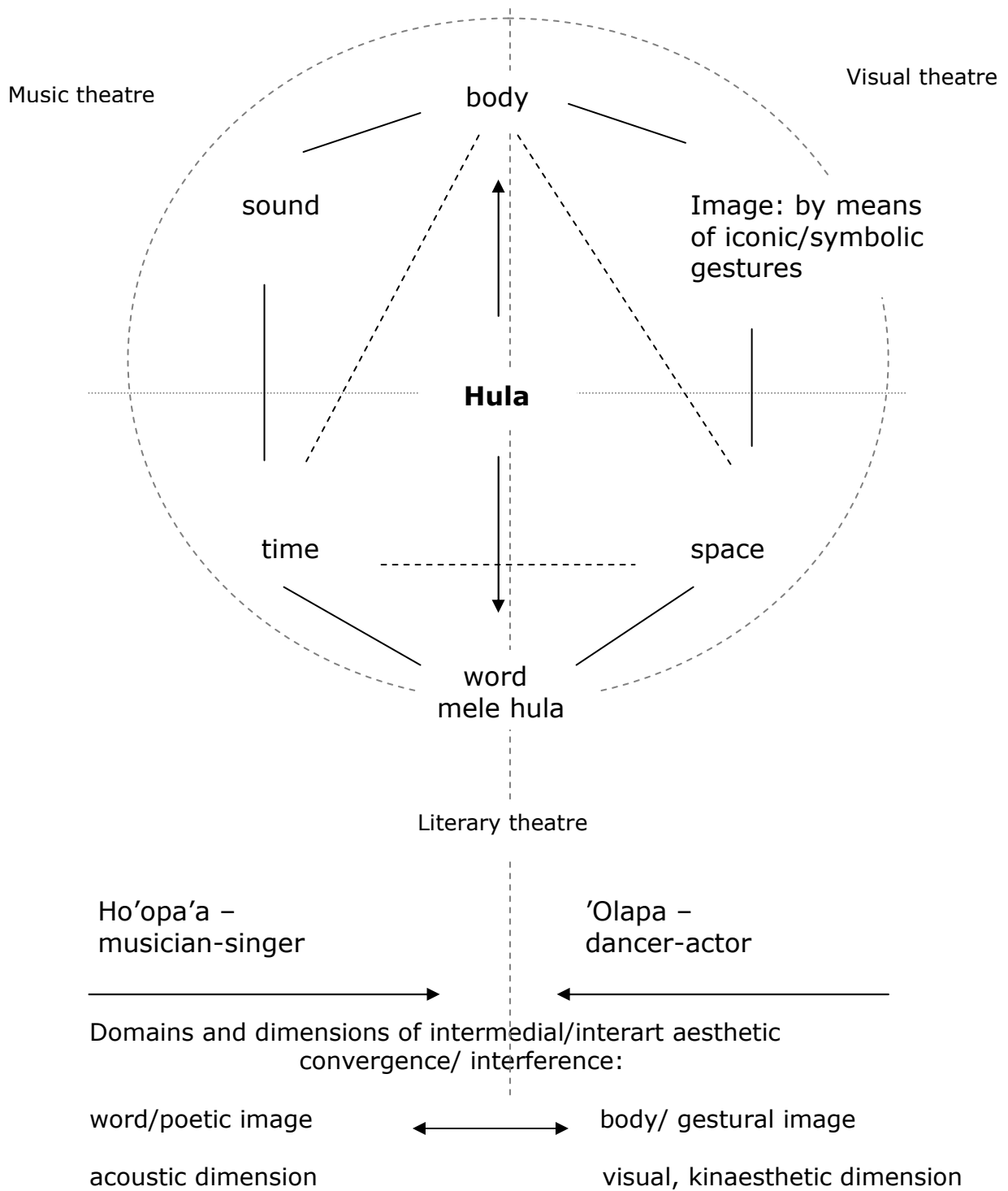
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Appendix: Figure 2



The deviation between performance disciplines in Hawaiin hula `olapa

Monika Lilleike, Hawaiian Hula 'Olapa – Steps towards an interart aesthetic oriented Performance Analysis. Joint Symposium - Laboratory: Methods of Interart Studies, Berlin, November 16.-18, 2009