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# PROJECTION DESIGN FOR THEATRE AND LIVE PERFORMANCE

## PRINCIPLES OF MEDIA DESIGN

**ALISON C. DOBBINS**

# PROJECTION DESIGN FOR THEATRE AND LIVE PERFORMANCE

*Projection Design for Theatre and Live Performance* explores the design and creation process of projections from a non-technical perspective, examining the principles of media for the stage in a manner that is accessible for both beginning designers and advanced designers dabbling in projections for the first time.

This introductory text covers concepts and tools for designing, techniques to help readers tap into their creativity, and the core skills required of this field: problem solving, project management, and effective communication. Focusing exclusively on design and creativity, this book encourages individuals to leap into the creative design process before facing any perceived hurdles of learning everything technical about media delivery systems, cueing systems, projectors, cables, computer graphics, animation, and video production. *Projection Design for Theatre and Live Performance* is a reminder that, from the invention of photography to the enormous variety of electronic media that exist today, the ways projection designers can enhance a theatrical production are limitless.

Written in an accessible style, this book is a valuable resource for students of Projection Design as well as emerging professionals. Its focus on design and creativity will restore the confidence of individuals who may have been daunted by technical hurdles and will encourage the creativity of those who may have been disappointed with their efforts in this field of design in the past.

**Alison C. Dobbins** is an Associate Professor of Integrated Performance Media Design at Michigan State University. She is a media designer focused on integrating elements of dance, media, music, theatre, medicine, and computer science in performance.



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Principles of Media Design

*Alison C. Dobbins*

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To Sara Holliday, Janneane F. Gent, and Emily Cornelius  
For their advice, encouragement, and brilliance which made  
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# INTRODUCTION

*Projection Design for Theatre and Live Performance: Principles of Media Design* is centered on the creative process that invites you to identify yourself as a designer and explore your voice through media for theatre. This book is not meant to be a technical manual on software or hardware used to create and display projection designs. It is meant to help you develop the skills needed as a projection designer to effectively communicate with everyone involved in a theatrical production: with directors, designers, and ultimately, the audience.

This book addresses specific challenges, frustrations, and insecurities that beginners face when designing for the first time. Projection design is a combination of film, motion graphics, computer programming, and theatre. Each of those disciplines has a rich artistic and creative history and a long list of technical concepts and skills that practitioners develop. It is not necessary or advisable to try to master all of these disciplines before investigating media for theatre. This book will provide you with techniques to tap into your creativity, embark on this interdisciplinary journey, and succeed as a projection designer.

The material in these chapters was generated from years of teaching projection and media design. Students in my courses may have had the same assumptions or concerns that you do now: Am I creative enough

to be a designer? Do I have what it takes to thrive in such a technical field? How is this even theatre? The technical aspects of projection design mask the core skills required of this field: problem solving, project management, and effective communication. Storytelling through theatre has always been a reflection of society and use of media has always helped enhance the telling of the story. From the invention of photography to the enormous variety of electronic media that exist today, the ways a theatrical production can be enhanced through the creative use of projection design are limitless. My goal in writing this book was to help you recognize then build upon your existing strengths so that you can successfully engage in the creative practice of projection design.

# 1

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## DISCOVERY

The goal of the discovery process is *discovery*. The path through this process depends on the nature of the project. Are you working on projections for a dance piece? Will you be working to devise a performance? Are you working off of a script? If so, what is there to unearth in this script? What interests you about this project? For many productions, projection design may seem optional. But it's the element that can bring the unifying magic to the theatre experience.

As a projection designer you will need to grapple with the following questions:

1. Why projections for this project?
2. How might projections be used in this production?

Projection design begins with the script, the concept, or the central idea of the production. Some scripts are written with projections in mind and have specific projection suggestions. Some scripts have an obvious

need for projections to solve problems or clarify points for the audience. Some scripts need projections because of a new vision or approach by a director. Not all scripts or all shows need projections and not all performances start with a text. If you are working on devised, dance, or art performances, treat the central idea, concept and choreographer as the script. Ask the same questions of your collaborators that you would ask of a written play text. This chapter focuses on the ways and reasons projections might bring the needed magic to a specific production.

### Mining the Script

It is vital for the projection designer to explore the script and find their own uses and ideas for projections in a production. The brainstorming process is iterative, aimed at digging up small ideas and seeing where they lead. The visual metaphor that I use for this process is similar to exploring a cave or creating a maze. The materials are there in the script and in your lived experience. You are connecting the two as you bring your artistic intuition to this production. To fully engage in this process, you will need to set aside any preconceived notions or requirements about quickly finding the *big idea*. This process is about seeing what is there and what your mind does with that information.

In Mina Loy's futurist script *Cittàbapini*, the stage directions specify a city that eats and spits out the main character while twisting in on itself. There is an obvious possible use of projections as a method to create this sequence.

The designer can use these descriptions as inspiration and a starting point for testing assumptions and investigating questions. In the *Cittàbapini* example: Who is the city? What is the city in relation to the man? Are the projections the city? These questions start a cycle of unfolding metaphor and meaning.

During the discovery process, the designer is attempting to identify as many possible avenues of exploration as possible, not to hone in on one design idea. You will end up reading the script many times. In each reading, get a feel for the characters, the story, the metaphors, and the emotional context of the scenes while jotting down your ideas or doodling any images that spring to mind. Highlight any of the following that you notice.