

CFP  
**Rethinking Early Modern Sites of Spectacle:  
Virtual Sources and Methods for Theatre History**

Université Bordeaux Montaigne, France • Thursday 8 December and Friday 9 December, 2022

International conference organized in conjunction with *Virtual Theatres in the French Atlantic World: Spectacle and Urbanism (18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries)*, supported by the Thomas Jefferson Fund of the French-American Cultural Exchange (FACE) Council of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs

**Organizers**

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The international conference *Rethinking Early Modern Sites of Spectacle* seeks to provide an overview of new perspectives on early modern theatre history, with a specific emphasis on the study of the spaces and locations of public entertainment, their usages, their integration into city life and their place in the collective imaginary. The study of these spaces affords a privileged view not only of the material and artistic conditions of performing arts, but also of the significance for the development of an early modern urban sociability of theatrical structures and the artistic practices they housed and fostered. While study of theatrical architecture has long played an important role in theatre history, the increased accessibility of computer-based processes and digital methods has significantly impacted this aspect of the field, adding a wide variety of modeling tools to augment traditional approaches to analysis and restitution. New techniques allow researchers to visualize and comprehend the theatrical activity hosted by these sites, while also offering a vastly expanded sensory experience of long-lost spaces.

The main theoretical focus of this conference is encapsulated in the notion of the virtual, inasmuch as this concept not only allows for an analysis of research tools based on new technologies (virtual reality, 3D printing, video games, GIS...), but also provides an opportunity to re-think underexploited sources (e.g., plans and descriptions of virtual or never constructed theatres) as well as familiar sources in need of reevaluation (imaginaries of theatrical space in fiction, archives concerning the material life of performance). As a research paradigm in theatre historiography, the technologies and methodologies of the virtual allow us to situate this work within larger

disciplinary consideration of how knowledge is mediated and transmitted, engaging questions of pedagogy, patrimonialization, and artistic creation. This in turn entails important institutional consequences, including a de-siloing of research endeavors to facilitate projects that require collaboration between scholars with vastly different competencies and sometimes divergent outcome goals. Questioning and renewing modalities of research in theatre history is thus one of the conference's goals, alongside the elaboration of new possible models for recasting the historian's work in a rapidly transforming higher education and research landscape.

This conference also serves as the conclusion of the transatlantic project *Virtual Theatres in the French Atlantic World: Spectacle and Urbanism (18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries)*, financed by the Thomas Jefferson Fund of the French-American Cultural Exchange (FACE) Council of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Our proposed research hypothesis holds that the re-creation of theatre spaces (through digital tools, amongst others), can help us better understand the ways in which cities have historically envisioned sites of spectacle as an index of cultural value. Virtuality plays an important role in this investigation, evidenced as much in our interest in unbuilt projects that remained in paper form, as in our recourse to VR to create immersive sensory models of these spaces. This project seeks to highlight several kinds of virtuality – theatrical, historical, technological – which are inherent in our understanding of the past, just as they are essential drivers of progress in contemporary humanities research.

The project *Virtual Theatres in the French Atlantic World* (and the present conference) build on numerous international collaborations which have surveyed forgotten theatres (e.g., the Agence Nationale de Recherche [ANR] project THEREPSICORE<sup>1</sup>), proposed restitutions of lost theatres (Lost Theatre Project<sup>2</sup>, Visualising Lost Theatres Project<sup>3</sup>), recovering the sounds of the past (ANR project ECHO<sup>4</sup>), attempts to rediscover utopian theatrical projects (the museum exhibit *Théâtres en utopie*<sup>5</sup>), to digitally model the space and sociability of an eighteenth-century Paris Fair theatre (the NEH-funded VESPACE project<sup>6</sup>), or to interrogate how virtual tools can foster the rediscovery of structures that were never built, on the margins of early modern theatre institutions (the LAB 18-21<sup>7</sup>, RECREATIS<sup>8</sup>). This recent work in theatre history (of which the preceding provides an indicative, but not exhaustive, list) proposes novel solutions to the difficult questions posed by the study of early modern sites of spectacle: what role for the virtual in historical discourse? What are the most effective and ethical ways to give a perceptible form to virtual

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<sup>1</sup> *Le théâtre sous la Révolution et l'Empire en province : salles et itinérance, construction des carrières, réception des répertoires*, ANR project directed by Philippe Bourdin (Université Clermont Auvergne, UR CHEC).

<sup>2</sup> *Lost-theaters Project* is a project initiated in 2011 under the direction of Hugh Denard (URL : <https://www.lost-theatres.net/>).

<sup>3</sup> Research consortium including Joanne Tompkins (University of Queensland, Australia) and Julie Holledge (Flinders University, Australia). URL : <https://ortelia.com/project/visualising-lost-theatres/>.

<sup>4</sup> *Écrire l'histoire de l'oral. L'émergence d'une oralité et d'une aurialité modernes. Mouvements du phonique dans l'image scénique (1950-2000)*, ANR project directed by M.-M. Mervant-Roux (CNRS, UMR Thalim).

<sup>5</sup> *Exhibit Théâtres en utopie – Un parcours d'architectures visionnaires*, commissariat Yann Rocher, scénographie Xavier Dousson (2014). Exhibit catalogue published by Actes Sud in 2014.

<sup>6</sup> *Interactive VR Simulation of an Eighteenth-Century Paris Fair Theatre: VESPACE* (NEH award HAA-266501-19), PI Jeffrey M. Leichman.

<sup>7</sup> *Théâtres et Lieux de Spectacles à Bordeaux : réalité et virtualité des espaces de loisirs urbains (XVIIIe-XXIe siècles)*, project supported by la Politique Scientifique de l'Université Bordeaux Montaigne (2018-2019), directed by Pauline Beaucé Sandrine Dubouilh.

<sup>8</sup> *Recréer en réalité virtuelle : architecture et théâtres inaboutis*, project supported by the MSH de Nantes under the direction of Laurent Lescop (ENSA Nantes) and Françoise Rubellin (Université de Nantes).

objects? What are the epistemological implications of the digitization of existing structures or practices? How can the audible dimension be best integrated into considerations of space? This gathering aims to provide an overview of current trends and promising new directions in performing arts historiography as well as emerging trends in transmission and teaching (such as the ARCHAS project at the Université de Lausanne, Switzerland<sup>9</sup>).

The international conference *Rethinking Early Modern Sites of Spectacle* welcomes proposals for presentations from researchers across humanities and technical disciplines (history, literature, theatre and performance studies, architecture, computer science, scenic art and technology, geography). We welcome a variety of presentation formats, from the “classic” 25-minute conference presentation (case studies, past or current projects, disciplinary theorizations), to collective communications or participatory experiences (roundtables, workshops, interactive formats).

Some possible topics include (but are not limited to):

### **The question of sources**

- How to exploit sources (plans, documents, archives) which remain in the state of “paper projects” – unfinished, impossible, or utopian spaces of spectacle?
- Spatial imaginaries and perceptions of spaces by contemporaries. How does literature (plays, narrative fictions, eyewitness accounts) serve as a source for the study, restitution, and understanding of sites of spectacle in their social, sonic, and spatial dimensions?
- What sources must be taken into account for VR restitution? What is the role of speculation or imagination? What methodological precautions are required for virtual models, and what specific advantages do they afford researchers?

### **Tools, methods, theory**

- What digital methods and techniques best serve the restitution of historical sites (“retroarchitecture”<sup>10</sup>, 3D modeling and printing, sonic restitution, video game technologies...)?
- Implications of historical-site restitution in VR: questions of presence, embodiment, and publics.
- What role can the counterfactual play in performance historiography?
- Methods and implications of virtuality as an investigative tool for retrospective and prospective modeling.
- Place of cartographic tools (including GIS) in the understanding of sites of spectacle and their mutations over time.
- Implications and practices of interdisciplinary collaboration between the humanities and computer science.

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<sup>9</sup> *Atelier de recherche créative en histoire des arts du spectacles*, directed by Estelle Doudet, Université de Lausanne. URL: <https://wp.unil.ch/archas/>.

<sup>10</sup> Paul François, *Outils de Réalité Virtuelle pour l'histoire et l'archéologie. Recherche, diffusion, médiation : le cas des théâtres de la Foire Saint-Germain*, doctoral thesis, directed by Florent Laroche and Françoise Rubellin, Ecole Centrale, Université de Nantes, April 2021.

The languages of the conference are French and English. We are open to proposals that lie outside of the early modern period (ca. 1500-1800) to the extent that they allow for a productive dialogue. Please send **proposals of no more than 600 words**, along with a title and a brief biographical statement by the **deadline of 10 April 2022** to both [pauline.beauce@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr](mailto:pauline.beauce@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr) and [jleichman@lsu.edu](mailto:jleichman@lsu.edu) .

### **Indicative bibliography**

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