

imitating the dog:
Video Design and Projection Mapping

Simon Wainwright on video design for imitating the dog

introduction

Simon Wainwright designs video and projection for imitating the dog. His work with the company includes *Night of the Living Dead*™ – *Remix*, *Heart of Darkness*, *War of the Worlds* and installation pieces such as *Dear Joan…*. Here he explains how the video design serves the ideas of a show, what happens when a design fails, and what he would want a student to notice about the relationship between the stage and the screen.

This document is based on a written interview. Simon's answers have been edited into continuous prose; the words are his own. A short glossary at the end explains the technical terms.

› Read this alongside the companion document: Video Design and Projection Mapping – Technical Plan



Simon Wainwright in the *War of the Worlds* (2026) rehearsal room

the design process

Serving the idea

The shows have a strong formal idea from the very start, and so the first problem to solve is often the same: how do we achieve the ambitions of this idea using the tools at our disposal? However, the way we approach that problem can differ from show to show. For instance, something like *Night of the Living Dead™ – Remix* demanded that we work out technological solutions from the very beginning, to get even close to achieving 1,800 live camera shots between seven performers. Whereas something like *Dear Joan...* started with a storyboarding process, to work out how best to use an existing building to tell our story. They seem very different, but they're both the same problem: how do we serve the idea with the tools we want to use?

When the design fails: Heart of Darkness

The best example of a video design not working as intended is probably *Heart of Darkness*. We had built the whole show around the idea of a group of performers describing a pre-made film that plays in the background, and which changes as they rethink their ideas and approach. We started the staging process, and within a day it was clear it wasn't working. So we very quickly chose to put those performers into the film in real time, using live green screen. We had some cameras with us and some software (Isadora) that allowed us to test things quickly, and away we went. It's frightening to see the ideas you've been working on completely fail at the first attempt, but one of the joys of working the way we do is that we can adapt very quickly.



The power relationship between stage and screen

Getting the power relationship between the screen(s) and the live stage is the hardest part. Screens are mesmerising, and have the power to completely hold an audience's gaze if you're not careful. The way we balance this is by making each one depend on the other. Neither stage action nor screen action makes sense, or is fulfilling, on its own; you need the two elements to make sense of the whole picture. If at any time one or the other is doing all of the work on its own, then we've failed.



Dracula: The Untold Story (2021)

technology and technique

What projection mapping is

Simply put, projection mapping allows you to mould an image (video) so that it fits the surface of an object. Quite often that image will be designed to change the look or nature of the object onto which it's being projected. So, for example, a video of a house on fire will be mapped onto the original house, and it appears that the house is burning in real life.

The minimum equipment you need is a computer and a projector! Small objects in dark rooms can be mapped with the smallest and cheapest of projectors and some free software. A programme called Isadora, which we use for a lot of our shows, allows you to play and learn (without saving) for free, so it's easy to get started.

Not Live Cinema

Our work is sometimes compared to that of other practitioners using creative technology, such as Katie Mitchell's Live Cinema productions, but for a start, I don't think we make Live Cinema. I think we're interested in the language of cinema as an element of our work, but our interests are much more diverse than that and betray the team behind the shows. Mitchell's work is driven by one creative lead, whereas we have three co-artistic or associate directors before you even start on the creative team who bring the shows to life. Our shows are just as influenced by literature or graphic novels as they are by filmmaking. We tend to dislike focusing on one pure form and are much more engaged when we're flitting around concepts and influences, so conversations in the making process can very quickly move from history to video games to fine art to B-movies to trash novels. We're a mixed bag!

meaning and intention

Designing for meaning: All Blood Runs Red

Video design decisions are almost always made for meaning rather than technical effect. A good example would be *All Blood Runs Red*. After a lot of floundering, we landed on the idea of the main protagonist picking images out of the air. The performer had pieces of card on stage, and he would appear to catch images as they hung in space, projected very precisely from the front of the stage. For me, it completely transformed the show. It made you acutely aware that this was a storytelling show: a performance that was as much about the act of creating your own story, your own history, as it was about a series of narrative events.



All Blood Runs Red (2025)

What to pay attention to

The thing that really makes a show work for me, and that most audiences won't consciously notice, is the detail in combining all elements of the technology and performance. Video in live performance very rarely works on its own. It needs lighting and sound to be hitting the same beats, marking the same changes, for it to really come to life, and of course it needs to be wrapped around and moving with the performers. It's this synchronicity and organic programming that we spend hundreds of hours on. The tech must move as one with the show, and if you don't notice it as a standalone element, then we've done our job!

A favourite moment

The opening of War of the Worlds

The opening 20 minutes of *War of the Worlds* is pretty special for me. It feels like all departments – sound, video, lighting, stage, design, performance – are working as one, to deliver some pretty dense storytelling in a stylish, thrilling and effortless way. There are maybe 300 camera shots in that first section before a single word is spoken. Our motto has become 'we entertain the audience so that they entertain our ideas' – and, for a show that has some important things to say about the dangers of the far right, it is an incredibly entertaining piece of theatre delivering a vital message.

glossary

Projection mapping — Shaping a projected video so it fits precisely onto the surface of an object or building, often to appear to transform it.

Isadora — Media software used to play, mix and manipulate video live, including camera feeds, with a free 'play and learn' mode. Used extensively by ITD since *The Zero Hour* (2012).

Green screen — Filming performers against a green background so they can be placed, live or in editing, into another image.

Live Cinema — A form of theatre, associated with director Katie Mitchell, in which a film is shot, edited and screened live during the performance. ITD's work is often compared to Live Cinema but draws on a wider range of influences.

Storyboard — A shot-by-shot drawn plan of a film or video sequence, made before any content is created.

› Try it yourself: the Live Cinema Workshop (Exercise 2) and Miniature World Building (Exercise 7) in Adaptation and imitating the dog: Practical Exercises (Section 4). DigiLab, ITD's free annual projection mapping workshop, is listed in Useful Links (Section 1).

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