Digital space: Performing Arts and the Digital Shift

Part II

Report from the working group of the same name as part of the

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Discussion Summary

The discussion followed on conversations previously started in the frame of IETM meetings, which focus on the relation between performing arts and digital technologies. Starting from the extensive experience of the key speakers – Maude Bonenfant and Venelin Shurelov, a discussion was initiated on the topics of how performance artists and organizations work with audiences for which gaming, internet and digital technologies play a significant role in their lives and cultural habits: the audiences of **the digital natives**.

Introduction and background

The virtual world: not a parallel universe but rather an extension of life

Maude Bonenfant (MB), digital media specialist who researches new technologies: games, social media, etc. from a social point of view, shared her findings on what the virtual world means for *the digital natives[1]* (gamers, advanced tech and social media users) especially and for us, the regular users as well. Contrary to the common belief, her key point is that *the virtual world is not a parallel one and what we call the virtual reality is an extension of the offline one: as real as the real world is.* She has reached this conclusion through interviewing members of various digital communities, interviews through which several conclusions can be drawn, for example the fact that online harassment and bullying hurts one's feelings for real, or, on the positive side, that friendships that gamers have established online are regarded as real friendships no matter if they've never met each other personally offline. "The virtual world is only an extension of life", MB says.

Anonymous no more

A common misunderstanding towards the Internet today is that we are anonymous on the web. It has become a standard practice now to use one and the same ID account for various Internet services (for ex. to log on a website with a Facebook profile) so *our virtual self is being gradually consolidated in an extension of our real world personality*. *We are not anonymous anymore.* We create our digital identity the way we create our real life social image. It takes a lot of efforts to stay anonymous on the web and furthermore, due to a certain transparency injunction, if you are trying not to share something you are assumed to hide something bad/ you tend to seem suspicious.

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[1] MB qualifies those advanced and extensive technology users who are completely immersed in the new digital technologies and to young people born in the digital era as the digital natives. The term was adopted in the discussion (even the opposite one, digital immigrants, was coined).

For digital natives, it is not an intrusion in one's personal life to let others know where they have been today or when was the last time they have logged in on a certain website. The borders between private and public activities are shifting and the definition of private life changes. A new way of living together has evolved from the way we choose what to share with others online.

The everlasting digital traces of us

Another key characteristics of the new digital technologies is they are *constantly storing traces of our activities in the virtual world* (via Facebook, GPS, Google searches, web history, emails, photos, online shopping, etc.) which are linked with our real world experiences, interests, etc. These digital traces of us are kept in huge data farms (like Google or Facebook data farms) for indefinite periods of time and can be accessed and used by the companies owning the data farms, by third parties, by governments and so on (for example, Amazon uses not just our data generated on the Amazon web portal but our IMDB searches as well. In new iPhones one cannot switch the GPS off). The more data-holders know about you: what books you like, what topics you are interested in, what movies you watch, the more of the same stuff they will offer you with eventually bigger chances that you buy.

According to MB, this is the real threat of the digital era: we are becoming more and more visible, predictable, traceable. Another issue is that technologies affect our choices and interests in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: "If we propose you only things that we think that you love at the end maybe you don't know anymore what you really love."

Digital technologies are not neutral

We usually assume technologies are passive instruments for accomplishing our goals. We have to be fully aware of the fact that *digital technologies are not neutral: they interact with us, they change us[2].* "We are building the technologies but they are also building us and we have to know how they are constructed in order to know how they affect us and what messages they are sending to us." The cybernetics and neoliberalism are two ways of constructing the messages of technology but what is interesting today is to understand how arts are constructing technologies and how arts can change the messages and how this interaction changes the way we live together.

Key points, main questions

The key topic of the discussion was **how to work with the digital native audience(s).** Should we make them put their phones down before the show or let them stream and share,

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[2] In fact none of the technologies are neutral: space technologies serve us in exploring the Universe but they have substantially changed the way we understand time, space, etc. Even insignificant everyday technology products like the fridge or the microwave oven are affecting our eating habits and furthermore, our views on food, family life, work, etc.

separate them from the "traditional offline" type of audiences or let them mingle? Topics in this discussion area were also how to respond to **changing attention spans** in the new digital era and **how to market performing arts** to digital native audiences.

Participants in the discussion touched several fundamental topics concerning **core aspects of contemporary performing arts in liaison with the digital era**: changes in values and purpose, interaction with the audience; themes; aesthetics, concepts.

Changes in audience's attention focus and span

Q: New technologies *change the way our attention works*. This is important for anyone from the performing arts. Is the audience changing? Are performing arts fit to the way people are used to have their attention focused on something?

A (MB): There are scientific researches proving how our brain is changing. We tend to prefer shorter messages but *we develop multitasking*. The digital natives have their attention fragmented not because they are not able to understand but because they are grasping several messages at a time.

A (Venelin Shurelov (VS): We have many media channels for information transmission but just one brain to perceive it. A possible solution is to implement some kind of information diversification: to store information in different storages and to retrieve this information subsequently one storage after another. Art – as a message – does not work this way. It affects us not only intellectually but through empathy, emotionally as well. Our senses perceive the artwork in a multichannel way – for example*, in performing arts the audience is completely submerged in the totality of the artwork:* vision, sound, information, feelings, etc.

Performing arts marketing tools in the digital era

Q: How to market performing arts production to the digital native audiences: through mainstream channels (advertisements, social media) or innovative 'augmented reality' solutions; or by involving them in some kind of participation like crowd funding (or similar)?

A (MB): The classic advertising strategies don't work with the digital natives at all: they just skip ads on Youtube and ignore or block them on websites and blogs. Therefore the marketers have elaborated new ways of bringing the digital natives to the product. For example, they have developed product branded games that the digital natives willingly play. Similar approaches could be applied in performing arts.

Digital natives are willing to pay for a production beforehand: crowd funding is working quite well for the cinema industry and the production of independent movies. It is a way of marketing your production and getting audience in the theatre.

Digital natives' audience traits

Q: A new peculiar practice among the younger audiences in the theatre is spreading: they put their cell phones up and *watch the entire show on the screen of their phone*. It is not about being distracted, since they react, they laugh, they respond to the show. The strange and new thing is that they prefer (if permitted to do so) to watch the show via digital mediation and not live on the stage in front. It surely poses new questions to performing arts, which is primary meant to be perceived here and now without any mediation or a digital shell.

A (VS): This practice is called digital mediation and is part of the digital culture.

A (MB): – The screen is not a shell between the person and the world; it does not separate online from offline reality. In regards with the digital natives, it is an extension of reality and *a way to share what one is experiencing*.

Some theatres do allow people to tweet on shows and they use it for marketing purposes.

Still, there are audiences who get disturbed by the screen lights so maybe a separate digital sector in the audience hall, some kind of a *digital ghetto*, could be a possible solution for bringing the "old" and the "new" types of audiences together at one place. (Actually, the way the audience interacts with the performing arts is by no means typical issue of the digital era. In the 18th century there were prescriptions for how to behave in the theatre, for example not to try to communicate with the actors onstage, etc.)

The shifting foundations of contemporary performing arts in the digital era

Q: One of the great values of performing arts is that the people get together for the experience and form a special community. *Are performing arts totally useless in today's digital era of sharing online experiences and sharing experiences online?*

A: *Online communities are not a replacement; they are just another way of being together.* Humans need to be together. The body has to be there (for example, online gaming technologies are changing in order to assure physical presence). The performing arts on stage are a really important way of being together in a community. The real time experience is something unique and it is not substituted by anything else. Sharing the experience of the

show online is another way of forming a community around the performance. We cannot tell positively that people who see the show online in their friends' feeds would definitely go to the show themselves. Therefore performing arts have to be aware of this new media for spreading their work. *Re-thinking the performing arts is essential especially if we need to talk with, talk about and talk to the digital natives.*

Live performances are valued for what is not possible to be shared via technologies

Smartphone technologies are relatively new and we are still learning how to use it. Maybe this opportunity to tweet and to share everything *makes live performances even more valuable because of what is not scalable and is not sharable. "We have to consider what we are offering to the audience and to take account of how our brains change"*, Willie White (WW), President of IETM. We have to be aware of the new information dynamics and to bear in mind that people are constantly being distracted by their work or the news feeds etc., they function with a constant partial attention.

A (VS) There is a project called Telesymphony where the performance relies on cell phones in the audience so there might be a productive way to incorporate "the cell phone on" culture in the artwork itself – by sending images or SMS with parts of the text, etc.

Q: *When we make the theatre popular by using technologies are we at a risk of making a kind of "popular theatre"?* How can we use technologies without being commercialized and without drowning our message in all this information? Who at the end will decide what to put on stage: performing artists or the audience?

A (MB): The question is really controversial. The neoliberal ideology tends to turn everyone – students, patients, audiences – into clients, into product consumers. It has become a way of representing the world and it is quite a problem with arts and education and so on. *There are no easy solutions.* The audiences have to be attracted to the theatre but not to be regarded as clients of a product. Maybe a way of neutralizing this major neoliberal consumerist trend is *to educate audiences* because if one doesn't know and doesn't understand this art, how could one love it and appreciate it?

Q: A new EU research project focused on the performing arts starts in 2015: BeSpectACTive! The main idea is to study the influence of involving the audience in the process of programming.

Here's an example of a new form of artist-audience interaction due to usage of digital technologies. A performance involving certain nudity and exposure was held and the audience was requested not to film it or to take photos. The female artist was filmed against her will and the performance was posted online. It became widespread and viral. The artist received a lot of comments and emails as a result of this unwanted publicity. Instead of

keeping it to herself she continued the circle of exposure and she continued the performance with the emails she received. This example illustrates *some matters of ethics that new technologies launch in the field of performing arts*. Is filming and streaming a performance act breaking the convention between the artist and the audience? Then of course there is the general concern whether 'real world' ethics apply to the 'virtual world' just because a lot of people still refer to virtual as not real.

A (MB): It is a false assumption to say there is no ethics in the virtual world but since the social discourse is still positioning virtual and real in dichotomy there will be problems in applying laws online. As for the copyright and the filming of artworks, it is a typical manifestation of online-offline inconsistency of the law, which leads to change the practices of artwork distribution. Instead of prosecuting unauthorized distribution of their music, some musicians are sharing it for free because the more people love their music, the more they will come to their concerts. This may be a valid opportunity for performing arts as well.

A (WW): The web has no ethics, people have ethics. What the web does is to accelerate both the good and the bad. We have to work on the human level because the web is rather the tool. *We have to focus not on the technology but on values and content.* Digital technology is just a delivery mechanism.

A (MB): The technology is not to be put before the art and its message. But we have to be constantly aware of the fact that new technologies are not neutral. *Technology bears ideology in it.* If we don't see it we are on the wrong path.

 "IETM has decided to build knowledge on the topic of digital technologies and performing arts interaction so several discussions will be held from now on", Hermann Lugan, IETM, announced.

At the IETM Spring plenary meeting at Bergamo (Italy, 23 - 26 April 2015) such a session will be held. Another working session is envisaged for the IETM meeting at Valenciennes, Northern France, on 11 March 2015. Maude Bonenfant will be there. Everyone interested is invited to join.

Disclosure

Most likely the live performance is not that endangered by digital technologies. They are affecting the process of making art and the way performing arts communicate with their changing audiences.

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