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Publication Date

2014

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Ritualized Performance in the Networked Era: Alternative Models for New Artistic Media

Juan David Rubio R.

In his article “Not Being There,” Miller Puckette argues that he sees “the potential of networked telepresence as an aid to rehearsal, not performance” [1]. Puckette points out that many of the qualities of networked performance reside in its “economics”—in allowing lengthy experimentation inexpensively between geographically separated performers. Puckette bases his critique in his personal experience as performer and spectator of telematic concerts, arguing that the technical complexities of the medium overshadow the artistic aim. While Puckette may have valid critiques of telematic performances, here I would like to offer a more positive, contrasting view, emphasizing that telematics is a performance medium with its own properties and potential. For me, telematics is an exciting and emerging field in which artists are still exploring ways to utilize the medium’s unique qualities.

Arguably, Puckette is referring to an approach to networked performance in which artists extrapolate preexisting performance practices of their respective fields to the telematic environment—that is, musicians performing telematic concerts, actors performing telematic plays and so on. In this approach to the telematic medium, we can see how the dynamics and practices of traditional artistic media and disciplines have been translated to the telematic field. While works and models in this vein are valuable and their contribution has been essential, they also conceptualize telematics as an extension of a preexisting field. Although telematics does provide a fertile environment for exploring traditional practices of artistic performance, in this essay I outline alternative approaches that exploit the inherent characteristics of the telematic medium itself, mainly through my project *Spatia*. Specifically, I argue that ritualized performance shares key characteristics with networked performance and therefore constitutes an ideal model from which to address and conceptualize the telematic medium.

One of the most important parallels I find between ritualized performance and networked performance is their propensity to challenge standardized performance practices, a concept I relate to anthropologist Victor Turner’s idea of *liminality* [2]; Turner, an anthropologist who conducted his studies mainly through his fieldwork with the Ndembu tribe of Zambia, used the term *liminality* to refer to a phase found in rites of passage in which its actors (“liminal entities”) are “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” [3]. Another key

characteristic of both ritualized and networked performance is the fact that both inherently incorporate different media toward a single purpose, which I relate to Franziska Schroeder’s idea of *hybridization* [4]. A third important aspect, and one that is unique to telematics, is the possibility of connecting people in a shared, virtual space across cultural and geographic borders, or what I call *telematic interculturalism*.

SPATIA: A TELEMATIC INTERACTIVE CONCERT/INSTALLATION

Spatia is a telematic concert/installation that was performed through a collaboration between the Experimental Media Performance Lab (xMPL) at the University of California, Irvine, and the Centro Ático at the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá, Colombia, in April 2014. I am the director of *Spatia*, and it was part of my thesis project for the MFA in Integrated Composition Improvisation and Technology (ICIT) at UC Irvine.

In *Spatia*, there are three local and three remote musicians in each location, spread over the performance space, with each of the remote musicians represented by a discrete screen and accompanying speaker. Hence, there are a total of six musicians participating in each location: three live and three remote. In front of each of the remote musicians’ screens there is a pair of potentiometers (custom-built faders connected to an Arduino device); these are used by audience members in the central section of the event to change the lighting in the remote locations, which in turn provides the remote musicians with cues that change the meaning of the score. In other words, the audience in Irvine guided the lighting—and therefore the musicians—in Bogotá, and vice versa (Fig. 1).

In this way, *Spatia* challenges the traditional assumption that our environment is impacted only by entities and actions contained in that particular space and, likewise, that our actions only impact our surroundings in an immediate manner. It is the interaction between participants in the two spaces that creates a single virtual space where the collective takes precedence over the individual, building an experience across distance and culture.

The layout of musicians and audience members in both locations is designed to induce a liminal phase by inviting the

ABSTRACT

The author presents a concept of ritualized performance as an ideal way to approach the telematic medium, arguing that many longstanding performance rituals share characteristics that can be exploited in networked performance. The author situates these ideas in relation to his project *Spatia*, seeking to illustrate how the model of ritualized performance can be applied to the networked medium.

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Fig. 1. *Spatia*, networked concert/installation, Irvine, CA, USA, 2014. (© Juan David Rubio R. Photo © Jaime De Jong.) Audience in Irvine interacting through the faders with the performers in Bogotá (broadcast on the screens).

audience members to circulate and interact with the faders. The performance itself centers on the musical score I composed for the event, which has four sections: In the first section, I myself control the lights in both locations from a computer offstage. The final section has no conduction and is completely notated. For the middle two sections, which take approximately 55 minutes, the audience members in each space circulate freely and play with the pair of faders located in front of each remote performer's screen. Each fader controls one colored light illuminating that particular performer, so as an audience member moves the faders in one location, they see the changes in the remote location reflected on the screen. These middle two sections of the piece, then, are more like an interactive installation, preceded by and followed by a concertlike listening experience, making the whole event a hybrid of both formats.

Each colored light is linked in the score to particular parameters of the composition such as volume, intensity, pitch and texture. The way that colors affect these parameters changes over time, as notated in the score through a technique I call "lighting signatures"—each of these acts similarly to a time signature in the sense that a new set of relationships is active until indicated otherwise. Audience members are never told how the faders will affect the music, nor told explicitly how to behave within the system; their role develops in a more intuitive manner, and they may return to move a particular color fader 10 minutes later to discover that it now affects the music differently. The program notes introduce the audience to the general idea, and a set of Christmas tree lights wrapped around the stands of the faders turn on and off to indicate the start and end of the middle sections, at which points the audience is invited to interact and move the faders themselves.

We exchanged three channels of un-

compressed, high-quality audio, one for each of the instruments, using the Jacktrip software developed by the SoundWire research group at the Center for Computer Research in Music and Acoustics (CCRMA) at Stanford University. The video connection was made through commercial platforms, with the remote video feed shown on flat screen television sets, one for each performer.

The composition uses time indications throughout, and although those indications left room for decision making on the performers' part, the clock controls the transition between sections and the change of material (and the lighting signatures) within each section, therefore shaping the structure of the performance. Likewise, each video feed is processed by sounds coming from a different performer. Several types of video processing were synchronized to the structure of the composition, creating an additional layer of (tele)presence and shaping the performance.

The communal spirit among audience members and performers during the performance of *Spatia* was also reflected in its production process, which was a yearlong multimedia collaboration among musicians, visual artists, sound engineers, lighting designers and technologists across two countries [5]. *Spatia* is an effort to generate ritualized performance environments in the telematic medium. Audio, video and lighting are not discrete elements but indivisible, integrated parts of the experience. The interaction between audiences and musicians across distance constitutes a live intercultural exchange, in which remote entities not only share an experience but also impact one another's environments. These interactions shape the outcome of a scenario that I have created in order to stimulate a liminal phase, where traditional conventions are temporarily challenged and hierarchies become ambiguous, leading to a state of communal construction, or *communitas* [6].

CONCLUSIONS

The potential of telepresence environments to induce liminality and the intrinsic hybridization of media in networked performance both have parallels in ritualized practices that have ancient histories in human cultures. A fuller discussion of ritual is beyond the scope of this essay, but broadly speaking, I am suggesting that ritualized performance is focused less on theatrical or ceremonial artifice and more on interactive, social modes of transformation. I believe that ritualized models and Turner's concept of *communitas* are approaches that can bring telematics to a further stage of development, while simultaneously enabling telematics to shed new light on ancient artistic practices. This irony can only be described as beautiful, for it is through cutting-edge technology that we might reconnect in new ways with ancient forms of human performance.

Acknowledgment

I want to thank Michael Dessen for his invaluable input and help in the process of writing this essay.

References and Notes

1. Miller Puckette, "Not Being There," *Contemporary Music Review* 28, Nos. 4–5, 409–412 (2009): <dx.doi.org/10.1080/07494460903422354> p. 412. See also David Kim-Boyle, "Network Musics: Play, Engagement and the Democratization of Performance," *Contemporary Music Review* 28, Nos. 4–5, 363–375 (2009): <dx.doi.org/10.1080/07494460903422198>.
2. According to Turner, this *liminal* phase is followed by a state of *communitas*, in which society is "an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders." See Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969) p. 96. Also see Graham St. John, ed., *Victor Turner and Contemporary Cultural Performance* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008).
3. Turner [2] p. 95.
4. Schroeder points out how digital media performance, and networked environments in particular, "are very much characterized by a hybridisation of diverse artistic practices." Franziska Schroeder, "Dramaturgy as a Model for Geographically Dis-

placed Collaborations: Views from Within and Views from Without,” *Contemporary Music Review* 28, Nos. 4–5, 377–385 (2009) p. 381: <dx.doi.org/10.1080/07494460903422263>.

5. The entire crew was: in Bogotá, Angélica Piedrahita (video/lighting/networking), Juan [David] Sierra (audio/networking), Nicolás Botero (video/lighting assistant), Eduardo Caicedo (percussion), Daniel Leguizamón (guitar) and Santiago Botero (double bass); in Irvine, Elizabeth Erickson (audio/networking), Hassan Estakhrian (video/networking), Naomie Winch (lighting design), Michael Matthews (interface design/construction), Anna Okunev (violin), Paul Sinclair (bass clarinet) and Richard Savery (flute).

6. See Turner [2]. For further information on *comunitas* and liminality see also Edith Turner, *Comunitas: The Anthropology of Collective Joy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

Manuscript received 2 January 2014.

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