THE CHANGING POSITION OF THE THEATERGOER
IN THE CHANGING SPACE OF ONLINE PERFORMANCES

Otília Ármeán Fülöp

 orcid.org/0000-0002-5379-2326

Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania

Târgu Mureş, Romania

ABSTRACT

During the last year we all were banned to participate in our everyday life using online transmission, homework, homeschool and different digital tools. But with all this we also gained access to cultural or other practices that previously were not part in our everyday life. That resulted in a detailed spectrum of participation from the form of listening-observing to the different levels of giving feedback and taking control (for example putting questions to the other participants or to the crew, taking part in the discussion, pausing or leaving an event). This paper investigates the possibilities of agency given to the participants by the online theater. It starts from personal experiences, but ends in questions regarding the medial nature of this new transmission form: to what extent should digitally transmitted performances, shows be considered theater? And if they are not theater, what are they?

Keywords: hypermedium, theater, agency, cool media, inclusive

Starting Points

The COVID-19 epidemic created a situation similar to the appearance of a new technology: we all needed to find out whether it will bring radical change or just a moderate one, and how we can adapt to the new situations. The epidemic manifests as a medium in this sense. As a channel, as a medium of transmission it conveys a change, amplifies a message. An epidemic is never just about the virus and its spread, but also about defense, adaptation, resistance, resilience in the social dimension – just as a new medium cannot spread if it does not affect society as a whole.

I think that the epidemic only amplified those processes that already existed in the society. It was not because of the pandemic that we started spending more

and more time in front of our screens, but since the quarantine, our relationship to being on screen has changed. It was not because of the pandemic that more and more people became content providers, but with the pandemic our homes, classrooms and offices became broadcasting studios. Depending on resources and concepts, there were different responses to the possibilities of conveying cultural content displayed on the screen. The most spectacular for me were the efforts of institutions and professionals involved in the medium of theater in their search for appropriate media, from recorded performances to live broadcasted happenings (e.g. via zoom).

Walter Benjamin writes in his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility* that "Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception. The way in which human perception is organized – the medium in which it occurs – is conditioned not only by nature but by history." (Benjamin 1936) What once seemed fast may prove to be slow today, and in fact we would have no idea how the film was perceived by the very first viewers in the very first screenings, without on-site reports or individual testimonies about those experiences. Writing about the illusion-creating effect of the panorama, Oliver Grau notes that it is really impossible to imagine the perceptual, visual experience that this medium provided to the viewers at that particular time. Examining from the present, it is impossible to find data and facts. If the researcher is curious about the experiences, he must turn to the subjective genre of confessions and testimonies. (Grau 2003, p. 96–97) My point of view is therefore personal, and I experience online theater as a kind of freedom, as an expansion of possibilities. Online theater opens up new spaces of perception and action.

Theater as Cool Hypermedia

In terms of finding new solutions and possibilities for community building, theater seems to me to be the medium that not only experienced the biggest challenge, but also the one that formulated the adequate answers. Starting from a situation where physical presence is a key concept of self-definition (Benjamin 1936, "The bodily co-presence of actors and spectators enables and constitutes performance." Fischer-Lichte 2008, p. 32), we arrive at a stronger examination of the concepts of presence and liveness in mediation. The theater is a hypermedia (Deres 2015), collecting a set of other media practices, and creating a space to reflect on their interconnections. Kornélia Deres refers, on the one hand, to Peter M. Boenisch, who sees theater as a "training center" for perception (Boenisch 2003, p. 38), and, on the other hand, to the studies of Derrick De Kerckhove (1982, p. 146). De Kerckhove proved that theater was "the place to look at" and "the place from where one looks". The Greek theater taught the concentration, unification and separation that determine, or even enable the print-culture. While maintaining the role of the training center, the theater will be the field of use and a record of the new cognitive standards of "multimedia and multisensory modes of perception" (Deres 2015) and the cultural practices based on them. Deres's research shows that no matter how

much the theater's responses seem to have come from the epidemic, there are still processes behind media connections, behind the varying degrees of interdependence, that have begun in the past. All the changes can be captured in a post-dramatic model (Hans-Thies Lehmann).

But what if what we experience on screens is not even theater? Should the assumption behind this it's-not-theater-because-it's-not-live be accepted? Is the mediated––live opposition still valid? It was Philip Auslander's book: *Liveness* that undertook a thorough exploration of the contradictions associated with the notions of the liveness, and clarified that the living characteristic of theater that we all think and presuppose to understand is by no means self-evident and not necessarily direct or unmediated. In his analysis, he goes back to Benjamin's theses and shows with his examples that the closeness we desire when choosing live performances ("the desire of the present-day masses to "get closer" to things" – Benjamin 1936), is often achieved by enlarging the screen (for concerts, for example), or re-staging stories known from films in a theatrical setting (Auslander 1999, p. 38). The sense of closeness often present in live events, face-to-face communication situations, offline encounters, and contact occasions is an effect that can be achieved in a technological environment using elements of mediation (Auslander 1999, p. 39).

In his thorough study, Péter Závada reviews the narrower and broader definitions of the concepts of theater and theatricality, and concludes that although the concepts in the definitions need to be expanded in some cases, they can be applied to the digital space and time of online broadcasts. "It is worth thinking of the digital space as a common space, inhabited by all of us, in which we are connected by our limitations, paradoxically, our absence brings us unusually close to each other." (Závada 2020) When it comes to the types of plays performed during quarantine, Závada acknowledges the need for a more complex taxonomy, but distinguishes three categories:

1. archival footage of traditional theatrical performances (with one or more cameras);
2. productions made for the online space, but recorded;
3. live performances in the online space (Závada 2020).

The first category refers to recordings (therefore it is not theater), the second category presents a "physical" here and now, that is not shared with the audience of the public performance, but otherwise meets the definitions of theater (it is theater), and in the case of the third category, since we have no relevant aspect to distinguish between live and recorded replays, we are actually moving back into the second category (it is theater).

So when a production is played without viewers to multiple cameras and is streamed on a specialized platform for online viewers, then it is theater, but a recording of a concrete theater-performance with the public, then that is not theater. The knowledge that what we attend is happening just for that special occasion, for that here-and-now, even if it is a stream, triggers quite different effects than something that is a recording of something that already happened in a different environment.

The special performances made for digital platforms can be referred to by names such as Zoom Theater, Virtual Theater, Broadcast Theater (distributed, streamed theater, Brantley et al. 2020). They do not want to replace theater attendance, but to reach viewers through new channels, new ways of expression, new possibilities and means. Viewers can see each other (at least through online IDs, avatars), they can communicate synchronously with each other and finally express their emotions with the emoticons available (instead of applauding). Online mediated theater is not a substitute for theater, but helps to understand it.

With the help of Marshall McLuhan's concepts, I could also say that what we are witnessing is how the hot media of theater is becoming in front of our eyes a cool media (McLuhan 1994, p. 22–23). Consumed as hot media, theater has high resolution and gives the audience relatively little room for action. In contrast, there is no complete darkness in home consumption, all kinds of background noises and movements happen in parallel, which can divert our attention, even interrupt the reception, more is left to our imagination as we have to construct the actor's presence from the actor's play. Hot media excludes, cool media includes, says McLuhan (ibid. 23), and it can be exciting to think about making content available to new audiences on digital interfaces in this regard. New accesses create new audiences by opening and engaging.

Areas for Online Agency: Doubts and Problems

Mediated theater as a new medium allows its users to attend differently and to have personal participation modes. It is a bit like the emergence of a new medium that goes ahead of certain needs, makes certain uses easier, makes others more difficult. The new, liberating possibilities for participation had been created also because of the necessary move from social space to private space. In the rewritable space of conventions and self-presentation factors, it is interesting to observe that it is good to wait and to make preparations for these "attending online theater" occasions. The consumption of theater and opera in the auditorium can still be maintained: you can dress up as if you were really going to the theater. And there are times when you need to buy a ticket. Days before, I organize my program so that I am free during the broadcast. I prepare the screen, put the notebook next to me. I also bring a glass of water there because I do not want to go out. In a quarantine-free time, I can imagine calling friends and transforming a performance from a broadcast into a shared experience.

At the theater we all sit and watch the narrative unfold on the stage. "Theatregoers watch the plot unfold on stage, possibly with strong feelings of empathy, but refrain from interfering." (Fisher-Lichte 2008, p. 12) In the theater we do not join the dance of the actors, even if we feel like dancing. At home, however, we are allowed to participate, to repeat movements, to respond physically. From this perspective, the online theater offers a solution for those who want to be a participant, not only an observer. Online theater opens an active, participatory mode of presence that enables immersion. Moreover, in the experimental situation created by mediated

theater, agency is not some endowed ability that the author's side would empower the participant with, but something that the participant chooses for himself. In her study, Astrid Breel complains that we are talking about action, and there are more and more productions that relax positions, allow the attendant to go in and out, choose or change the point of view, but we are still haunted by the spirit of someone approving or allowing this freedom to the viewer-experiencer. In this way, hierarchies of power continue to prevail. The agency means the possibility of making decisions and choices, the freedom to act in a given environment. Breel proposes a new framework for contextual agency to understand the complex relations between participant and performance up to the point where the participant is part of the performance. She distinguishes four different types of agency. In her typology reactive agency (direct multiple choice response), interactive agency (direct open response), creative agency (contribution to the affordances of the situation) and proactive agency (self-initiated contribution outside of the affordances of the situation) form the agency-spectrum. (Breel 2016)

Janet H. Murray in her famous book *Hamlet on the Holodeck* defines agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices." (Murray 1997, p. 123)

Case Study: Theatertreffen – Berliner Festspiele

Between 13 and 24 May 2021, as a part of the Berliner Festspiele, the two-week long theatre festival streamed live or in broadcast all ten of the Theatertreffen selected productions. The stream took place on a dedicated interface, where the participating spectators could get to know each other, write questions and comments in parallel with the performance. The digital edition was available on the website under Digitale Bühne in the menu structure. As part of the Berliner Festspiele Digital, the stage visuals of two of Theatertreffen's performances could also be viewed and explored during a 3D virtual tour, and the festival experience could be enhanced by entering an application called *The Garden*. The participants could communicate interest and attention simply with their presence, their being-there in the same way as by buying a theater ticket and appearing in the auditorium.

The parental home (*Das Elternhaus*) is a 3D virtual walk, and is very exciting because the performance *Einfach das Ende der Welt* starts with the protagonist introducing us to the scene where he grew up, showing us with the help of the camera the scenery, but then, in fact, even at the beginning of the performance, they unbuild the scenery. On the screen, looking behind the insert with capital letters PAUSE, we can admire how well organized the stage workers are, as they take apart the setting led by a certain choreography. What we see is not representation, but the dismantling itself. The performance will continue to take place behind the scenes, in the white, simplified space. But the web application preserves the scenery and even expands it because it also introduces the spectator to the history of certain key objects (these turn golden as we approach them). We can walk around the scene

in our own rhythm, following the path dictated by our own curiosity, while probably recalling our own memories, the corners of our own family house.

Closing Remarks

In light of the special accessories of the Digitale Bühne, it is clear now that online was no longer a limit, but an opportunity for this second online edition of Theatertreffen, and it has transformed a media of transmission into a media of presence, of participation. The attendants-viewers-experiencers are there exchanging ideas, raising questions and looking for answers, and they use the interface both interactively and creatively. The new platforms work for empowering theater, and they are inclusive because they address an audience otherwise excluded from the experience. Theater experienced online, on platforms like Digitale Bühne and Berliner Festspiele Digital, makes performances available, actual, engaging and transformative.

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STRESZCZENIE

Sprawczość i poczucie sprawczości w internetowych praktykach kulturowych

W ciągu ostatniego roku wszyscy otrzymaliśmy nakaz uczestniczenia w naszych dotych-czasowych aktywnościach w codziennym życiu za pomocą transmisji online, pracy zdalnej i nauki z domu. W czasie pandemii wykorzystywane były różne narzędzia cyfrowe. Dzięki temu uzyskaliśmy również dostęp do kulturowych lub innych praktyk, które wcześniej nie były częścią naszego codziennego życia. Zaowocowało to szerokim spektrum uczestnictwa w różnych wymiarach kultury, a to uczestnictwo miało różne formy: od słuchania-obserwa-cji do różnych poziomów udzielania informacji zwrotnej i przejmowania kontroli (np. przez zadawanie pytań innym uczestnikom lub prowadzącym, udział w dyskusji, przerwę lub opuszczenie wydarzenia). Ten artykuł bada możliwości sprawczości, jakie daje uczestnikom teatr online. Zaczyna się od osobistych doświadczeń, a kończy na pytaniach o medialny charakter tej nowej formy przekazu: na ile cyfrowo transmitowane spektakle należy uznać za teatr? A jeśli nie są teatrem, to czym są?

Słowa kluczowe: hypermedium, teatr, sprawczośc, zimne media, inkluzywność