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Performing Arts Criticism in the Web 2.0 era: Authoritativeness in a process of human/computer interaction: some initial thoughts

Sergio Lo Gatto (Rome)

This paper deals with the role of performing arts criticism on the Web 2.0, as encountered in blogs, web magazines and social media. The development of technological tools promotes easy access to Web platforms: a new cultural identity is conveyed through and within virtual communities where the debate is non-regulated and open to anyone. Confronting the philosophical and analytical background with the communication environment that now hosts the critical discourse, my intent is to show to which extent the freedom of publishing and sharing opinions is changing the fundamental categories of critical analysis in terms of language, relevance and management of authority and authoritativeness.

The evolution of practices in the digital media environment

Social networks nowadays play the main role in the narration of private lives and the treatment of public information: in the social media environment, these two very distant types of *feed* are streamed on the same *wall*, with no separation. This process produces a controversial storytelling, mainly profiled by (and on) a group of individuals linked by virtual connections and rarely by a concrete communion of interests and views of the world. What regulates this kind of interconnection is rather a form of negotiation, a process in which the rules of inter-activity have come to function as a "handbook".

In such an inclusive media environment, where reality is a construct of collective consciousness, spectators and artists and, to the same extent, critics and readers, explore the same complex organism. This paper proposes some initial thoughts on the profound change encountered in those critical practices that use digital media as the main vehicle. The paper attempts to provide an overview of the evolution of certain basic paradigms in the processes of publishing and sharing criticism in Internet-based written journalism.

In the last fifteen years, technology has undergone some very rapid changes, keeping pace with a general tendency – in hardware production processes – to abandon the phenomenological orientation of media and instead increase attention to its technical nature; such a focus on "media technicity" promotes the decentration of humans towards production of media. The same kind of trend resonates when one observes the modes of production in the field of contemporary performing arts, in which many theatre makers and directors in the Western scene seem increasingly interested in investigating the relations between body and machine. In this article – that aims to focus on the dynamics of publication and circulation of theatre criticism – there is not enough room for a detailed analysis of artistic trends, and yet, the contemporary scene includes plenty of artists interested in re-conceptualizing some basic concepts. In particular, for renowned artists, such as Robert Lepage, Guy Cassiers, Kornél Mundruczó or Milo Rau, but also for a number of emerging theatre makers, it's no longer just about integrating multimedia

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elements into the performances, but more and more about structuring the performances as a complex net of relations between actions and virtual feeds. The mode of interaction requested by the spectators is moving closer to the one requested by the media environment they inhabit. According to Bojana Kunst, "the artificial is […] inscribed within our understanding of the physical and […] serves as a grounding of different modes of aesthetic and scientific production of physical images, strategies of bodily representation".[1]

For those who study the connections between arts and technology, such lines of work resonate in the way the software industry is developing the users' ability to appoint devices to be the major interface to interpret and narrate reality. Integrated as the mechanical filters are with human agency, the users are experimenting with an apparently total freedom of expression regarding contents and their widespread diffusion. And yet, these *contents* are being produced and shared through a software structure which – programmed by a machine – imitates, replicates and mocks human modes of agency, with a fundamental homologation of the *forms* as the inevitable result.

Between production, publication and sharing. Changing paradigms

It is a truth universally acknowledged that the transition from *print* to *digital* challenged many general conventions related to information management and production of concepts and ideas. In the specific area of arts writing and performing arts criticism, this sort of natural evolution is blurring the role of critical writing in the eyes of its readership. Given the universal access to web-platforms, the readership itself has become very mixed and heterogeneous; it basically includes both the audiences of playhouses and festivals, and theatre practitioners and professionals themselves.

Those web magazines that were born in the digital era are currently faced with a media environment and a sharing of contents that is redefining many of the paradigms of journalistic language and challenging certain fundamental principles of criticism. The first question is to what degree certain changes in terms of language and the role of criticism are linked to those that are affecting the media environment where journalism-based critical reflection is currently flourishing. All the users of digital web-based communication are apparently involved in a sort of biological mutation that influences the premises of language and of the organization of informational and critical discourse, on the basis of the processes related to production, publication and circulation of concepts, ideas and critiques.

At the highest level, the daily and widespread access to social media is the phenomenon that technically allows everybody to select information and encourages everybody to produce a personal storytelling of reality. Since the advent of citizen journalism, the participatory approach to collecting information and sharing comments on reality has been flourishing, often favouring considerable improvements to the accuracy of the news. Nonetheless, in the realm of cultural journalism, this process is endangering the opportunity for an authoritative comment to be distinguished in an ocean of inputs, which has no regulations. If, from the daily stream of news, one focuses one's attention on that content aimed at expressing a precise position on an equally precise subject, such as theatre, the impossibility of tracking an authoritative critique becomes a crucial issue for the sake of the performing arts themselves – and at the same time, for the sake of a functioning arts criticism, able to enrich cultural knowledge about specific fields.

An in-depth analysis of the current media environment might therefore be pi-

votal to an understanding of to which degree – and following which path – such "new" processes of production and publication of critical contents are determining their actual reception by the readership. The major methodological approach used in this research is based on a scrutinized "media ecology"[2] and technological deterministic media theory, alongside theoretical philosophy, aesthetics, digital philosophy, performance analysis, theatre and performance studies.

The dialogue in virtual communities

Especially since the advent of social media, studies on the so-called "network society"[3] are increasingly insisting on the complex role played by virtual communities in establishing what philosopher Byung-Chul Han calls a "society of opinions".[4] A molecular sociocultural and communicative order – fostered by a non-hierarchical discourse – redefines the paradigms related to the circulation of critical thinking and therefore to the value acquired by individual critical statements. Such statements, in the phase of their formulation, are driven to challenge certain criteria from traditional philosophy and aesthetics and instead to embrace others strictly attached to the morphology of digital culture.

Howard Rheingold thinks of cyberspace "as a social petri dish, the Net as the agar medium, and virtual communities, in all their diversity, as the colonies of microorganisms that grow in petri dishes".[5] Rheingold's metaphorical description of cyberspace is proven to be true when one looks at the technological and rhetorical architecture of social networks. Founded as these are on an individual selection of data to be read and written, they represent very complex instruments in charge of managing a large

amount of "information as social and cultural objects".[6]

In the specific field of theatre publicity and criticism, the readers' massive access to social networks has become problematic because, with no limitations whatsoever, it allows and encourages everybody to participate in the public discourse surrounding the performing arts. If one considers that – especially in certain countries, and Italy is one of them – a great part of the audience can be represented by actual professionals and practitioners, a social network can and perhaps should be seen also as the *agora* of the virtual community gathered around theatre. The most evident outcome of such free access to comment is that the "voice" of a critic is no longer immediately recognizable as authoritative. Thus, for anybody trying to work in theatre criticism, the first obstacle to surmount is the opinion of general readership.

Also due to the crisis of the printed press, the quasi totality of the debate migrated to the free browsing Internet, causing a lot of changes in terms of employment positions and the economic structure of the media, which have now lost their direct sales incomes, rely on advertising and often are not able to hire writers for a fixed and adequate salary.[7] This shifting scenario significantly reduces the opportunity to assign to critics a form of authority connected to their acknowledged professional position. Such a new order is certainly playing its part in the decline of the critic as a proper job, which is undergoing a fundamental blurring of its function towards the whole system of performing arts.

If, on one side, a text published in an established newspaper somehow guarantees an immediate acknowledgment of authority and authoritativeness, now anybody with the technological tools and the technical know-how is able to publish a personal reflection and share it on the Net. As the basic

rhetorical philosophy would suggest, the action of sharing an opinion might indeed be considered as *critical*. According to John Stuart Mill, it's impossible to presume the truth of one's opinion deliberately trying not to be contradicted. As a matter of fact, a total liberty to be discredited justifies the act of promoting one's opinion that was assumed truthful.[8] And yet, in a non-regulated environment, this creates a horizontal and non-hierarchical dialectical system, in which it becomes tricky to tell an authoritative comment from a casual one.

Cultural Reconceptualization

Such a drift is related to wider sociological aspects and provides proof of the "cultural reconceptualization" theorized by Lev Manovich back in 2002.[9] Some sociological implications can also be found in the discussion fostered by Italian philosopher Maurizio Ferraris, who highlights the concept of "documentality".[10] The theory of "documents as ontological elements of society" is particularly relevant as soon as one focuses on the kind of writing appointed to think through a specific subject – such as theatre criticism – and then synthesized as a digital document to be shared in the Internet parlour.

From a technical perspective, Internet traffic is, in the first place, regulated by search engines and social media feeds on the basis of quantitative criteria such as the abundance of articles published by this blog or the number of shares for that post. Even though the algorithm that decides on the distribution of shared content changes continuously (and opaquely), the opportunities for an article shared on Facebook to be tracked and read by other users are generally calculated by also keeping track of the number of *interactions* created by a single post and even by the time passed between

the second of the publication and that of the first sharing.[11] In such a jungle of algorithms, the user's familiarity with the software – alongside a large number of other incalculable variations – contributes to the final visibility of content, on a platform where a personal point of view shares the exact same space as that of a potentially authoritative comment. This example shows how many passages in web publishing and social media sharing are controlled by a close interaction between human and computer. This might be a perspective from which to investigate the changes in the relation between an authoritative critique and the perception of the readers. The debate on these themes has already gained enormous resonance in the media and the social networks themselves, bringing up general questions on the crisis of criticism in digital society.[12] The cuts to newspaper staff represent the deepest concern: a critic cannot make a living as a writer and is forced to find other ways to make money, most likely in the same artistic field. This downgrades critical writing from a job to a hobby, causes a decrease in quality and creates a conflict of interests. Moving from the pages of a trusted newspaper to personal blogs and social media profiles, a text reaches the readers without a recognizable path of authority.

Going back to Ferraris, a liberalized publication launched in a mixed private/ public *agora* in conditions of open sharing, the "documental value" that a digital text holds towards a specific complex of knowledge enters a process of ongoing non-regulated validation. Structuralist and post-structuralist semiotics had already dealt with the new potentialities of reading. In 1970, Roland Barthes scrutinized the "non linearity" of new technologies, foretelling the rise of many interactive networks:

> [...] without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of

signifiers, not a structure of signifiers; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one.[13]

Exerting leverage on a growing personalization of virtual experiences, and on the basic mix of private and public data, digital media reach a mass community, such as the one that has been theorized by mass media studies and critical theory, less and less. If the active audience studies used to assume a specific spectator, digital media instead addresses a complex of *users*/*producers* that shares the same interests.

Unfortunately, this process doesn't create any form of actual collaboration. Jürgen Habermas foresaw "the end of the communicative action"[14]: the mass is a sum of individuals, who do not integrate with each other or head to a common agency, but rather shape a special form of dialogue that refuses to be balanced by past models of authoritativeness. A sort of common imagery is thus created, piece by piece, by the users through an interactive kind of agency. The Net that these users are weaving makes them feel close to each other only on a virtual level, while in fact any shared paradigm of knowledge is put to the test of an ongoing negotiation of changing cultural codes that are generated by the very logics of the hosting media environment.

Revisiting Barthes's intuitions, David Booth drags the discourse into a more contemporary context, coining the expression "multimodal texts". In this kind of text, the meaning and the signifiers are constructed by a "combination of messages from different media on the top of the users' own personal construct of the world".[15] All online media and social networks are, programmatically, open to the reader's agency. Thus, the reader, step by step, reaches the same position as the author of the text he/she

is reading. And this seems to be a breaking new wave in thinking about authoritativeness. In other terms, the adjective *multimedia* is no longer only related to the single media used for composing contents, but rather to the act of *using* and *affecting* those very contents. Following Derrick De Kerckhove, language must here be considered as a mind-expanding technology; digital media must then be seen as a physical support for the export of language.[16] In a system of interconnected and composite competences, "the more the discourse gets decentralized, the deeper is the change in the conventional definitions and relations".[17]

Connection and *relation* are the two main leads of cultural reconfiguration, since the interconnected environment changes the way the text is shared and read. From a philosophical perspective, a great part of "new rhetoric" questions the author and his/ her role, trying to keep an eye on the fundamental rhetorical categories which may still provide ground for a reasoning, even in the Internet's unmethodical authorship. The concept of "redundancy", the same dialectic *quality*/*quantity of presence* that regulates the traffic in online media, is crucial to this matter.[18] A recognizable author shapes the "style" of a contribution – that is to say the selection of the topics and the general slant – considering the potential reproducibility and the sharing opportunities of the content, in the first place. On the other hand, digital rhetoric points out the "dialogue" as the first concept to be updated to the dynamics of the current media environment, abandoning the traditional function of *mode of persuasion*, pursuant to the one of *participatory act*. Returning to J. S. Mill's early intuitions, online discourse conceives the dialogue "as a testing of one's own ideas, a contesting of others' ideas, and a collaborative creating of ideas".[19]

Nonetheless, when it comes to social networks, human-computer interaction

forces a rethink of most of the terms of this latest statement. Online publication is self-managed by the users/producers; collaborative software is a powerful stimulus to interaction between users and provides an alternative news source. A critic and his/her readers contribute to the construction of a sort of collaborative authoritativeness. If this could be seen as a step forward in shaping a kind of knowledge of the arts that is accurate and open to free debate, media technicity is driving the modes of online communication away from dissent and to a form of homophily. One example is the most recent Facebook algorithm that drastically reduced the feed displayed on a user's wall: everyone can now read posts shared by approximately 25 people. This means that any form of critical debate is brought to the attention of a very limited percentage of actual contributors. Thus, the necessary premises for free speech and a compelling critique can only apparently be found whenever one engages virtual communities that are becoming organized in increasingly closed circuits.

Cybernetics and human intervention

Coining the term "cybernetics", Norbert Wiener defined "the scientific study of control and communication in the animal and the machine".[20] This scheme of control and communication was based on a fundamental analogy – encountered in machines *and* animals (human beings included) – of certain regulatory systems such as communication processes and information analysis. A large number of new theoretical contributions inscribed in the field of digital philosophy[21] are very close to an idea of the medium in the perspective of cybernetics. The new (augmented) function of digital applications calls into question the *material ontology* of those devices one is completely used to using in everyday life. Exerting

leverage on New Materialism Studies, Grant Bollmer[22] explains why such a perspective might be useful in order to better understand the relation between users and producers of content in online environments, which is crucial for questioning the current concept of authoritativeness. With special regard to automation processes that discipline human-machine interaction, Digital Materialism questions the position of the human factor towards the duality of hardware/software working behind the digital devices.

By investigating the opportunity for something apparently *highly human* (as a critical comment on such a complex object as contemporary performing arts) to include an actual human element, the researcher gives up taking for granted the fact that a discourse initiated by a human being can keep its qualities of authority and authoritativeness when – in order to be produced and shared – it must pass through a mechanical filter. In questioning the actual influence of a cultural discourse such as criticism, one should wonder to what extent contemporary users and their agency in fact depend on technical devices used to spread any kind of word. Following digital materialism, when one considers the materiality of media, the human becomes an effect of technological storage and information transmission, a product of a semi-anonymous history in which technologies structure possibilities for participation, politics, and knowledge. The human is consequentially embedded in and emerges from a field of material relations.[23]

Newsgroups and forums used to represent a form of communal spirit and a virtual gathering place for actual communities, in which authorship in fact belonged to the group itself. The evolution from blog to social networks and the consequent fusion of the two made a case for authorship. Blogs and social media profiles are spaces for self-

expression and self-narration, they promote a proprietary and individualistic attitude. By using these tools, the author claims a form of direct ownership of the content and its quality; and yet, the rules of its distribution are set by software intelligence, which is based on quantitative factors and data mining logic.

In order to understand human intervention in contemporary cultural – and certainly critical – reflection, one might then need to go back to the essence of the machine. By analysis of the media environment and its technical operations, a more aware critical practice might escape the duality of user/producer and find a new location for a sort of *cybernetic authorship*. According to the basic assumptions of critical theory, a critic should be able to track all the passages followed by a critical statement, mapping the ground for a transparent discourse. Which is the first step in defining the freedom, accuracy and authoritativeness of an idea. And a critique.

Notes

1   Bojana Kunst, *The Presence of Body Between the Organic and the Artificial*, http://archeologia.women.it/user/quarta/workshops/epistemological4/bkunst.htm [accessed 15 February 2018].

2   The definition of "media ecology" was introduced by Neil Postman in 1968. http://www.media-ecology.org/media_ecology [accessed 28 July 2017].

3   Cf. Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, Malden, MA 1996.

4   Cf. Byung-Chul Han, *Razionalità digitale. La fine dell'agire comunicativo*, Milano 2014, ebook.

5   Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Reading, MA, 1993, Introduction, p XX.

6   Maurizio Ferraris, *Mobilitazione totale*, Roma-Bari 2015, ebook.

7   Cf. Dora Santos Silva, "The Future of Digital Magazine Publishing," in: *Information Services and Use*, vol. 31, no. 3–4, pp. 301–310, 2011; cf. Clay Shirky, "Newspapers and Thinking the Unthinkable", in: *Shirky.com* (2009) http://www.shirky.com/weblog/2009/03/newspapers-and-thinking-the-unthinkable [accessed 12 July 2017].

8   Cf. John Stuart Mill, Charles W. Elliott, Patrick Hayden, *On liberty*, New York 2004.

9   Cf. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, Cambridge, MA 2010.

10 Cf. Maurizio Ferraris, Richard Davies, *Documentality: Why It Is Necessary to Leave Traces*. New York 2013.

11 Cf. Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web is changing what we read and how we think*, London 2012.

12 Cf. Ismene Brown, "Only the artists can save the arts critics", in: *The Guardian*, 02.08.2013; Lyn Gardner, "Is theatre criticism in crisis?", in: *The Guardian*, 08-Oct-2013; Anthony O. Scott, *Better living through criticism: how to think about art, pleasure, beauty, and truth*, London 2016; Mark Shenton, "Critics are an endangered species", in: *The Stage*, 07.08.2013.

13 Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, New York 1974, p.5.

14 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Cambridge 2004, p. xx.

15 David Wallace Booth, *Reading Doesn't Matter Anymore: Shattering the Myths of Literacy*, Markham 2006, p. 33.

16 Cf. Derrick De Kerckhove, *The Augmented Mind*, 2010. ebook.

17 Ibid.

18 Cf. Brandon Jones, *Rhetorical Criticism on Online Discourse*, Tampa, FL 2011.

19 James P. Zappen, "Digital Rhetoric: Toward an Integrated Theory", in: *Technical Communication Quarterly* 14 (2011), pp. 319–325, here p. 321.

20 Cf. Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, Cambridge, MA 1948.

21 Cf. Edward Fredkin, "An Introduction to Digital Philosophy", in: *International Journal of Theoretical Physics* 42 (2003), pp. 189–247.

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22 Cf. Grant Bollmer, "Technological Materiality and Assumptions About 'Active' Human Agency", in: Ramón Reichert, Annika Richterich, Pablo Abend, Mathias Fuchs, Karin Wenz (Edd.), "Digital Material/ism", *Digital Culture & Society* (1), 2015, pp. 95 – 110.

23 Ibid., p. 96.