Virtual Audience Conversations During a Performance

Léon McCarthy

Northumbria University, Newcastle, England
leon.mccarthy@northumbria.ac.uk

Abstract

Reader-response theories suggest that to learn, we interact with our surroundings. Conversing can be a form of engaged learning and can take place during live events in informal venues such as nightclubs. As a VJ, having moved away from the nightclub to the cinema-type environment, I may have lost the socially engaged learning that conversation facilitates. What would happen were I to introduce virtual conversations? What would the audience talk about and would the experience, both for the audience and I, be any the richer for it?

Keywords: Audio-visuals, Performance, Audience, Interaction, Reader-Response Theories, Twitter

Introduction

My current audio-visual performances could be described as a type of 'eco-propaganda' in which perspectives on themes of sustainability are presented. Along the lines of documentary type news-reportage, video-clips are composed with motion-graphics, text and sound. As befits such an aesthetic, I hope to encourage my audience to engage in a considered, focused manner.

There is a history within VJ culture of presenting topically-driven and even plot-driven content. Some performances from artists such as Coldcut ('Coldcut' 2013) & The Light Surgeons ('THE LIGHT SURGEONS' 2014) exhibit such themes. My own experience as a VJ performing in nightclubs has shown me that such venues often do not foster a focused audience. Hence, I have sought out an alternative context in which to place such performances. The paradigm of the cinema-space encourages an audience to be still, focused and attentive. What happens when one tries to fuse the 'liveness' of VJing with the 'stasis' of the seated, silent audience? Would 'liveness' lose its relevance within such a paradigm?

Intent

In considering a move away from the nightclub, I noted what the audience could also lose. While an audience stands in front of a stage at a live event, they can chat as well as watch & listen. These social interactions are important contributors to the live experience, creating a sense of belonging within the 'community of the moment'. However, they may create more than just a sense social of occasion. It is worth considering reader-response and reception-theory in this context. Leitch, when summarizing W. Iser's theories, states that

> Dynamic interaction comes about only because we are unable to experience how we experience one another, which in turn proves to be a propellant to interaction. (Leitch 2001, p 1675)

Reader-response theories contend that to learn, we interact with our surroundings. Through conversation we convey our impressions and learn of the impressions of others. At a live event, a certain type of learning may be taking place when audiences interrogate their experience through conversation. Can I foster a similar form of 'inter-audience' interaction during a performance? If conversations emerge, will they add to the audience's experience in a way that gives them a deeper awareness of my topic or merely act as a novel distraction?

In a typical cinema, conversations are generally frowned upon. How then could I hope to encourage conversing during a performance? Attempts to vary the stage and audience orientations have not helped. I am now testing the feasibility of facilitating the emergence of 'virtual' conversations. Within such a paradigm, the audience are encouraged to converse via their smartphones (2nd-screens). Their comments then appear on-screen alongside my visuals. Thus far, I have used twitter as a platform, harnessing the Twitter API ('Twitter Developers' 2013) to access tweets in real-time. Audience members use their smartphones to post comments via their twitter account. If they include a 'hashtag' of my choosing, their comments appear alongside the visuals.

A previous performance at Tyneside Cinema (Vimeo 2013) successfully implemented this system, with audience members watching, listening and tweeting. Analysis of the comments revealed tweets of a mainly light-hearted nature. If this is the dominant mode of engagement, are such conversations really adding to the audience experience and facilitating a useful form of engagement? At the same event, the audience were sometimes tweeting when I would rather they were focusing on the visuals? Could I direct the audience between my screen and theirs to avoid this? My performances make use of looping content. I contend that such content, whether sonic or visual, tends to require ones attention when it first appears, though after a while it demands less of our attention. Perhaps there is ebb & flow of focus & distraction as new content emerges. Would such ebb & flow manifest when I analyse recordings of a performance against when comments were being posted?

With a second implementation of this system at ICLI-2014, I hoped to get closer to answering some of these questions.

Analysis

Early analysis of my performance at ICLI-2014 has compared the audio-visual recording against:

- The times when comments appeared
- The nature of these comments
- Whether comments were part of conversations (i.e. in reaction to older comments)

Of the 56 tweets posted during the show, 77% seemed part of conversations, of which 3 conversations dominated. Regarding the nature of the comments, 73% could be said to be of a light-hearted nature. It could also be said that 75% of comments were 'seeded' in some way by the topic.

There seemed to be 2 moments during the show (during parts 1 & 5) when there was a distinct absence of tweets. During these parts, a minimal audio-visual aesthetic dominates with little new content being introduced. During the busier parts of the performance (such as parts 2 & 4) there were quite a lot of comments posted.

Deductions

Was the ebb & flow of the audience's focus influenced by the addition of new looping content? This does not manifest during this performance, although I am not ruling it out as an influence. However, it is worth considering the moments when few comments were posted such as during parts 1 & 5. Anecdotal verbal feedback after the performance noted these parts as the most powerful. This leads me to believe that it was strong audio-visual composition rather than the introduction of new content that created moments when the audience focused on the audio-visuals rather than on their smartphones.

Does commenting & conversing during a show of this nature add to the experience? This is quite difficult to answer. From my own perspective as a performer on stage, I find it less than rewarding. In fact, I found it challenging to present a serious topic to the accompaniment of sniggers from the

audience as a humorous comment appeared on screen - the perfect antidote to the serious nature of the performance? Perhaps it is human nature to post light-hearted comments when the performance is of a serious, didactic nature. However, I feel slightly uncomfortable with the aesthetic. From the audience perspective, it seemed they found it odd that I would encourage comments (and any ensuing distractions) yet do not need these comments myself – rather the comments are only to facilitate inter-audience conversation.

Future Directions

Good composition may be more powerful an attraction of focus than overloading the senses with new sonic or visual content. Such a deduction may seem common sense but it is interesting to note in practice. Perhaps less is more when it comes to both my preparation of content and my decisions on stage.

To address the aesthetic of the overall performance, I feel it would be worth presenting a performance of a completely different nature - one less didactic, open to interpretation and perhaps more tongue-in-cheek. It may also be worth structuring it in such a way that I can attempt to stimulate and respond to comments through my audio-visuals. Perhaps such a paradigm would generate more varied and interesting audience conversations and reward me with a richer experience.

As Marshall McLuhan is oft quoted - "The medium is the message". The use of twitter as the medium may be colouring the nature of the comments. Different comments and conversations may emerge were I to harness a different platform, perhaps one based on Internet Relay Chat or Open Sound Control.

I am also interested in shaping an audience-commentary system in partnership with another audio-visual performer so as to distance myself from the topic at hand. I would like to know what another performer may gain from fostering conversations and interactions amongst their audience.

References

'Coldcut'. 2013. *Ninja Tune*. Accessed July 4. http://ninjatune.net/artist/coldcut.
Leitch, Vincent B., ed. 2001. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. New York: W W Norton & Company Incorporated.
'THE LIGHT SURGEONS -'. 2014. Accessed December 5. http://www.lightsurgeons.com/.
'Twitter Developers'. 2013. Accessed December 31. https://dev.twitter.com/.
Vimeo. 2013. 'betav07'. Accessed December 31. http://vimeo.com/csisul/betav07.