

Social commentary through the transdisciplinary practice of audio-visual performance

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ABSTRACT

Performance is a medium through which alternate perspectives can occupy alternate spaces. Where the rendered media of advertisements, reportage and documentary appeal primarily to the intellect of the viewer, the ephemeral nature of performance tends to first engage the emotions and senses of an audience. By practicing across film, graphic design and data-visualization, audio-visual performers can document themes of social relevance and it could be said that through such transdisciplinary practice, a form of 'documentary performance' emerges. This premise has led me to harness audio-visuals toward championing social topics. Thematically, my current performances question whether industrial fishing methods are sustainable. Performing to varied audiences in varied contexts has given me insight into the impact that a documentary style of performance can have. This paper documents my process toward realizing such a performance paradigm - a transdisciplinary practice fusing film, science, technology and art.

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Art can offer the socially concerned citizen a platform from which to communicate insights and ideals. Such endeavours can be traced back millennia. The ancient Greeks championed vocal debate as an essential mechanism within their society - today we still debate ideas and seek out facts to come to justifiable conclusions. Greek Theatre dramatized social events so as to educate through epic and fable. Moving forward, the dramas of Shakespeare revealed the failings of society, using satire and allegory to great effect. In the 19th Century, developments in instrument design, architecture and lighting facilitated Wagner in his search for the 'Gesamtkunstwerk' - a total work of art fusing media to create a rich sensory experience. In the 20th century,

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the development of photography, film and sound ushered in the era of cinema and television. Documentary film became a form in which directors could control polemic and foment debate. Through televised programmes and adverts, stakeholders and governments could disseminate ideas and affect change in the masses. This brings us to the present, a time when new technologies and practice across disciplines is ushering in new forms of commentary.

Social commentary through audio-visual performance

It could be said that the first significant experimentations in modern audio-visual performance occurred at the Bauhaus School, where set-designers, dancers, musicians and lighting-engineers produced mixed-media performances (Goldberg, 1979, Chapter 5). Around the same time, theatrical practitioners such as Bertolt Brecht were championing social ideals through satirical theatre (Bial & Martin, 1999). In the 1960s, fluxus artists showed an interest in posing themes of social relevance through installation and performance. Some of artist Nam June Paik's work falls into this category, such as his early installations featuring stacked TVs - objects which usurped the function of the TV and comment on its then dominance over the mind-set of masses. In the 1970s, feminist artists, such as Vivienne Dick of the No-Wave movement, championed their concerns through avant-garde film. It was in this same decade that Pink Floyd were creating thematically driven visuals to accompany their musical concerts, introducing their aesthetic to large audiences. Then, in the 1980s, the introduction of MTV ushered in the era of the music video, bringing audio-visual entertainment into the homes of millions across the world.

In the 1990s, dance music and the club scene exploded. However, the experience needed visual embellishment as DJs exhibit less gestural expression than live bands. Lighting and visual projection became elements within this clubbing experience, requiring artists and technologists to design content and control the projection systems. These transdisciplinary designers became known as Video Jockeys (VJs). When equipment was scaled up, projections became common at live outdoor music concerts. Many will have seen the type of visuals projected on stage at nightclubs and festivals. In these scenarios, the word VJ conveys the impression of an individual who creates visuals that accompany music in an entertaining fashion. However, when the sounds and visuals are presented with a unified intent, the artist(s) can strive to impart narrative and plot. Henceforth, I will refer to those who create such a

hybrid fusion of music and visuals as audio-visual performers, something related yet apart from the practice of the VJ.

Some such audio-visual performers emerged in the 1990s with collectives such as *Emergency Broadcast Network* and *Coldcut* refining the possibilities that audio-visual performance offered the champion of social topics (Faulkner & D-Fuse, 2006). The 2000s then saw artists use newer technologies and high-resolution video to refine the aesthetic of these previous performers. *D-Fuse*, a collective of producers, composers and artists, has designed audio-visual performances that harness content and information to highlight issues they deem pressing to society. For their project entitled 'Undercurrent,' D-Fuse travelled to cities in China, working with local artists, studying the effects of mass urbanisation and combining found-footage, data and music into a live audio-visual show entitled 'Latitude' (Sonic Acts, 2010).

The merits of commentary through performance

As mentioned earlier, documentary is an established format through which a director can comment on social issues. Documentaries present scenarios, which are backed up by facts as evidence of validity. This format offers the director significant control over content: evidence and arguments can be presented in a rational, controlled manner, engaging the intellect of the viewer over the course of the film. Performance, on the other hand, is more dramatic and tends to first engage the emotions of an audience. As a format, it offers a means of communicating to those who may not engage with documentary, news reportage and other discursive media. For dramatists such as Shakespeare or Brecht, whose ultimate endeavour was often to engage the intellect of the audience, the dramatic and emotive aspects of performance offered a more subtle way of engaging the intellect of the audience than the more didactic and rational approach of debate.

Performance, ephemeral by nature, also creates connections between individual audience-members as well as between performer and the audience at large - the social ritual of gathering together for a performance marks these moments apart from the routines of life. From the Fluxus to Punk Art movements, artists have understood that the alternate space performance occupies enables audiences engage with more open minds. In such cases, it could be said that a practice of 'documentary performance' emerges.

It is also worth considering the nature of the rendered versus the live medium. Documentaries are often broadcast without variation to viewers of

varied cultural sensibilities. The performer, on the other hand, presents in real-time, perhaps preparing specific content for each occasion and varying the style of delivery to suit the context. This approach offers the performer the chance to adapt during a performance, facilitating the emergence of a form of 'conversation' between performer and audience, a point I will return to later.

Audio-visual performance as a transdisciplinary practice

Audio-visual performers have developed techniques unique to their practice, yet it is worth noting that many techniques have also come from photography, graphic design, motion graphics, film, video and computer technology. Audio-visual performers tend to either collaborate with others or practice across these fields themselves. My own approach is to practice across disciplines, consulting subject experts when necessary. I may begin a project by taking photographs, sourcing footage or shooting my own video. When I aim to portray an argument on a specific theme, I may collaborate with a specialist such as a scientist, engineer or policy-maker. Then, armed with enough information, graphics are composed and animated to become motion-graphics, with music composed to suggest an overall sound world. Software and hardware are then integrated into a performance system and to this end the programming of customized software may be required to enable content, software and hardware to communicate. Architecturally, the manner of diffusion within the venue has to be customized to suit my needs, the audience perspective and the conditions expected at the time and place of the event.

Figure 1: An example of a previous performance aesthetic



Lending credibility through data

When earlier discussing documentary filmmaking, I pointed out that information may be incorporated as a means to lend credibility to the scenarios presented. Similarly, perspectives presented through audio-visual performance will be deemed more credible if presented alongside related information. Visually, data may be rendered as text or shaped into graphs that dynamically vary over time. Such motion graphics feature animated movement that give the graphics a dynamic quality. When used to render large datasets comprehensible in an audio-visual form, motion graphics become known as data visualizations. My current performance series presents perspectives on marine ecology and the sustainability of current industrial fishing methods (CSIS University of Limerick, n.d.). To increase the plausibility of my performances, I have collaborated with a marine industry expert to inform myself of policies being implemented at national and EU level. To then inform my aesthetic with reliable information, I have gathered datasets regarding pelagic fish catches in the Mediterranean Sea. Through the creation of motion graphics, I visualize this data with the intention of supporting the perspective I present.

Figure 2: An example of data-driven motion-graphics on-screen



Combining audio & visual streams

When communicating, we harness communicative codes to enable us perceive each other's meaning. When speaking, the codes of language and culture combine to enable us understand each other. Over time, art forms such as theatre, opera and film develop their own codes. However, within an emerging art form, the artist has to (sometimes unknowingly) appropriate communicative codes from other domains, as without known communicative codes from which to begin, the receiver would struggle to perceive any meaning. In the case of audio-visuals, codes are often borrowed from fields such as photography, music and film.

Let's first consider codes that aid the understanding of the visual stream. Sergei Eisenstein's development of 'montage' or visual juxtapositions in the early 20th Century influenced the development of film editing as we know it today. Eisenstein realized that two disparate visuals, each with their own meaning, presented one after the other, could infer a new meaning in the eye of the viewer (Eisenstein, Taylor, & Institute, 1999, Chapter 12). VJs harness such codes when juxtaposing disparate video clips in their projections. It is a technique I rely on myself, having used it first as a video editor, then as a VJ and now as an audio-visual performer.

Eisenstein's theories hold true within the visual domain, but what manifest's when the visual and sonic fuse? I was curious as to the effect that live sound would have on live visuals and so I first sought out studies on audio-visual interaction in film. In his book *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, Michel Chion writes of the manner in which the soundtrack influences the meaning inferred from the visuals (Chion, 1994, Chapter 2). Broadly, Chion notes that:

- The visual attracts sound towards its visible surface. This is why the location of stereo and surround-speakers in the cinema remain connected to the action on-screen.
- The visual tends to carry objective information. This is why visual content tends to define plot.
- Sound tends to dictate the emotion of a scene. This is why it influences the way in which we interpret the meaning of the visual and hence the plot.

I expected the same would be true for audio-visual interactions in performance. However, rather than make assumptions, I sought to analyse how audiences felt the sonic and visual streams influenced each other during a

performance of my own. Toward this end, I developed a form of analysis called video-cued commentary, which is detailed in another paper (McCarthy, 2013). It is an adaptation of a method used at the Creativity & Cognition Studios, Sydney, where B. Costello sought feedback on how participants engaged with an interactive installation (Costello, 2011). Analysis of the video-cued commentaries revealed that the same interactions Chion suggests occur in cinema occur in audio-visual performance. For example, Chion notes that the soundtrack tends to pass its qualities on to the screen, informing the visual stream with its qualities. Comments from the video-cued commentaries revealed that it was sound that shaped the mood through which to interpret the meaning of the visuals. To quote from audience statements:

- “The music seems a natural fit to the visuals, creating the atmosphere”
- “The music is darker, feeding atmosphere into the visuals”

In the introduction to his book *On the Sensations of Tone*, H. Helmholtz, when writing of the difference between sonic and visual stimuli, states that sounds are perceived directly “...without any intervening act of the intellect” (Helmholtz, 1954, p. 3). In other words, Helmholtz’s theory suggests that as sound impacts the individual directly it will be engaged with automatically, while it takes more time for the visual stream to be grasped and interpreted. The video-cued commentaries reveal that sound dominated perceptive engagement across the performance as the comments of a perceptive nature were predominantly on the sound rather than the visual. To quote from audience statements during the commentaries:

- “I like the sonar-type bleep sounds”
- “Those sounds really appeal to me with their textures”
- “I love the sub-bass kick and the percussion”

On a different note, an interesting insight emerged from the commentaries - participants enjoyed the ability to converse with one another about the performance. The performance that these commentaries were reflecting on took place in a lecture theatre as a formal affair - certainly not one conducive to conversing verbally. However, the conversations that emerged afterwards during the video-cued commentaries seemed to be fulfilling a facet of the audience experience that did not manifest during the event. This suggested, at least within my current aesthetic, that conversation could be an important facet of audience experience.

Conversation and spontaneity in performance

In film, narratives are generally linear in fashion with the action moving from scene to scene, with each scene portraying a new turn in the plot. Narrative in audio-visual performance develops differently. It is generally loop-based, in that content reappears over time with slight differences – a practice partly influenced by minimalist art. The same approach is dominant in contemporary popular music; those attending pop concerts find it easy to familiarize themselves with the looping structures of the songs. A further example is disco, in which repetitive rhythms continuously return. The content is not all unique and so there is what I will refer to as an element of ‘cognitive space’ or ‘redundancy’ in the music. By redundancy I mean that the audience’s focus can move from listening to dancing and on to conversing, yet they tend not to get lost. At a micro level, a loop-based approach forms the basis of my own audio-visual performances. In my audience, I expect a similar wavering of focus, yet perhaps these ‘redundant’ moments offer the audience the cognitive space to interact and converse with each other without losing their connection to the plot of the performance.

It is worth now referring to reader-response theory, as some of the writings of Stanley E. Fish and Wolfgang Iser point toward the importance that conversation has in enabling us to learn about the world around us (Leitch, 2010). Wolfgang Iser points out that we learn through interaction – be that interaction with objects or people. Conversation is the verbal basis by which we interact with others. In conversing, we use the established codes of verbal communication particular to the language, culture and context at hand. Leitch quotes Iser discussing human interaction, saying,

We continuously form views of their views, and then act as if our views of their views were reality... 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. (2010, p. 1675)

In this vein, it seems individuals adapt the communicative codes they use to better interpret the meaning of others and through which to better represent their own meaning. This interaction through conversation should then reduce the interpretive distance between individuals as they come to a better understanding of one another. If we define performance as the presentation by a performer of a plot to an audience, one can call the to-and-fro that may manifest between audience members and performer as a form of

conversation. I will proceed to follow the logic of this premise.

Early in any performance, each audience member will perceive the performance in their own way, informed by their state of mind and past experience. Over the course of the performance, individuals will become more familiar with the communicative codes being used by the performer and so will come to a better understanding of the performance. However, by commenting amongst one another, the audience can share insights and come to a collective understanding. In this case, the performance is facilitating a form of social commentary - a commentary formed, not only by the performer but also by those engaged in conversation. Let's take the premise a step further and consider a performer engaging with the audience's conversations.

It may help to consider the nature of jazz performance. Spontaneity and deviation are the hallmarks of jazz - one sometimes even hears of a performer 'playing' the audience. Could the audio-visual performer similarly introduce variation and spontaneity to 'play' or rather 'converse' with the audience? Could such spontaneity be led by a reaction to the audience conversations? If the performer can react thus, then Iser's theories on human interaction suggest that through conversation, the audience and performer are narrowing the interpretive distance between them.

Developing a conversational paradigm

To test the above hypothesis would require the performer to pay attention to the audience and any sentiment that can be detected. However, as a solo performer, I have thus far struggled to find a performance system that offers me the cognitive space to perceive audience sentiment, let alone act spontaneously. Reducing my task load is an imperative but I have yet to find the right balance between offering the visual spectacle of the busy performer and maintaining the quality I demand of the visuals and music.

I have also yet to settle on the most suitable performance context. From the deductions gleaned after running video-cued commentaries with an audience (McCarthy, 2013), I have noted that the context can determine how the audience engage with each other and how they perceive the performance. For example, the video-cued commentaries refer to a performance that took place in a dark hall with individuals seated in silence. To take a quote from one of these commentaries - "This is less a live performance, more a mixed presentation." Would the same perception arise if the performance were in a club, gallery or cinema? The layout of the venue further influences whether the

audience can converse with one another. Thus far, audiences have been left unsure as to the aesthetic and how they should bear themselves accordingly. A recent performance in a cinema suggests that the cinema-space is the venue most suited to my aesthetic. Yet naturally, that audience acted as any cinema audience would – they were seated in silence and in isolation. In such a context, how can conversations take place?

Figure 3: Different stage arrangements (in-the-round & frontal)



I am currently developing a system that enables the audience converse via their personal smart devices in the following manner:

1. During the performance, audience members access twitter on their personal handheld device. They are encouraged to post comments that include a hashtag of my choosing.
2. By scanning Twitter in real-time for this hashtag, I can then print these comments to one of the main projection screens, where they become part of the show.

This manner of multi-tasking, known as ‘second-screening’, is becoming common in the home as people watch TV and engage with their devices simultaneously. The above system may also enable me note audience sentiment in real-time. If this proves feasible, then with practice, I may be able to react in response to the audience - facilitating conversations with the audience as part of the performance.

Figure 4: Audience tweets on screen during a performance at Tyneside Cinema, Newcastle, UK



Conclusion

An aesthetic for my hybrid medium of audio-visual performance is emerging through exploring different technologies, varied spaces and numerous performer-audience arrangements. For instance, introducing the engagement system detailed above will require audiences to multi-task on their 'second-screen'. This will require a certain form of audience behaviour and will shape the nature of their experience. Most performances have so far taken place in formal venues, leading to little interaction. The above system may create a hybrid, somewhere between the living room and performance space. Whether that manifests in a satisfying experience for performer and audience remains to be seen.

Ultimately, it is my wish to engage other performers, asking them to take to the stage using my approaches with their own content and audience. Only then can I disengage and become a member of the audience. This is vital in the context of reflexive research and would test the validity of my insights. Involving other artists in my efforts to establish a hybrid audio-visual aesthetic will also widen my endeavours, perhaps leading to findings applicable to a broader set of artists, performers, practitioners and activists.

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