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Performance Studies and Citizen Media

Maria Chatzichristodoulou
London South Bank University

Though the concept of citizen media has achieved increasing visibility in its many different forms throughout this decade, its relationship to performance studies and performance art has hardly been considered. The question of 'how does performance relate to citizen media', therefore, is both a pertinent and a timely one.

Performance studies is an interdisciplinary field that draws on theatre studies and performance art, sociology, anthropology, media studies and other disciplinary frameworks. It studies performance, but it also uses performance as a lens to study the world. Indeed, since the paradigmatic shift of the 'performative turn', performance is increasingly used as a heuristic method to understand and study human behavior. The related concept of 'performativity' has also been widely explored since the 1960s; first described by philosopher J. L. Austin (1962) as the power of language to make things happen or effect change through 'speech acts', it was consequently used by Judith Butler (1990, 1993) in her explorations on the construction of gender identities.

A performance studies approach can be applied to most disciplines as, according to Richard Schechner, founder of Performance Studies, any human action either *is* performance or can be studied as performance (2006); an approach that has influenced the social sciences and humanities since the 1990s. In that context, journalism has been studied as performative by Broersma (2010), among others, who argues that features such as form and style give journalism a performative power that allows it to legitimize and impose specific representations of the world; citizenship has been discussed as performative by Iannelli and Muscarò (2017), who examine diverse forms of 'citizen participation in the representations of marginalized interests' (cover); and media, in their many manifestations, are often studied as performative – a recent example being the volume *Media Practices, Social Movements, and Performativity* by Foellmer, Lünenborg and Raetzsch (2018), which examines how 'quotidian digital media have fundamentally transformed the ways in which public protest is articulated today' (Freie Universität Berlin 2017), looking at movements such as Occupy and the Arab Spring, and protests such as the one in Gezi Park, Istanbul (2013), as performative acts.

Citizen media is defined by Oxford Living Dictionaries (2018) as '(a collective name for) blogs, podcasts, and other forms of media produced by members of the public or published outside traditional media channels, especially on the Internet.' The online Free Dictionary (2003-2018) redirects searches for Citizen Media to its entry on Citizen Journalism thus collapsing the two terms into a single practice. The term is widely understood as a manifestation of participatory culture and its impact on journalism. Baker and Blaagaard, editors of this volume and series, however, have contested those definitions as too limiting and have called for a reconceptualization of the term (2016), eloquently arguing for a much wider and more inclusive definition that encompasses 'physical artefacts, digital content, practices, performative interventions and discursive formations of affective sociality produced by unaffiliated citizens' (2016:16). Baker and Blaagaard's invitation to conceptualize citizen media as, amongst other things, 'performative interventions', suggests that, by default, citizen media and performance sometimes overlap. Understanding citizen media as performative and using performance as a lens through which to study it, places emphasis on certain aspects of the practice, such as; a grounding in –specific, and

thus political due to their gender, size, shape, colour, age, sexuality, ability and so on— bodies, and the notions of embodiment, space, place and temporality; an engagement with issues concerning presentation and representation; a questioning of notions and practices of agency in relation to power and social dynamics; and the understanding of performance and performativity as constitutive acts, that is, acts that can make things happen and which can effect change.

Baker and Blaagaard, through their expanded definition of citizen media, offer a particular sort of challenge in considering how performance relates to those practices: other than suggesting that citizen media and performance can, on occasion, overlap, they also argue that the purpose of citizen media is 'to effect aesthetic or socio-political change or express personal desires and aspirations' (2016:16). Their expanded definition does an excellent job of widening our understanding of citizen media to include a diverse range of practices that are physical and digital, community-led and individual, informative and affective, and of creating new opportunities for connections with and across disciplinary confines. However, this widening also risks rendering the definition meaningless in relation to performance; indeed, one might suggest that every performance or performative act that intervenes in the public sphere (and every performance that takes place in the public sphere intervenes in it in some way) constitutes citizen media, as performance cannot but express personal desires and aspirations. For this reason, I suggest that it is more meaningful to consider, in relation to citizen media, performance interventions which aspire to 'effect aesthetic or socio-political change' (regardless of whether they succeed in this aspiration). This offers a welcome contextual limitation though, needless to say, the distinction between the two is far from clear-cut.

This entry will go on to tackle this particular challenge, and consider what types of performances can be understood as citizen media.

Performance as Citizen Media: Rehearsing for the Revolution

Historically, forms of theatrical or performance interventions that strive to effect social change either have participatory elements built in their dramaturgy or are entirely dependent on audience participation. Applied theatre forms, such as the Theatre of the Oppressed developed by Brazilian director Augusto Boal, aspired to operate as a 'rehearsal for the revolution' (2000[1974]). The Theatre of the Oppressed is not a form of theatre to be watched by audiences but a theatre to be performed by them, as 'spectators', in a process of acting out different scenarios through which they can address real-world problems or concerns. At its core, it challenges theatre as an artform to be produced and performed by professionals, as this inevitably reinforces representations of the word as it is; instead it is a theatre 'performed by the people and for the people' as an opportunity of trying out different ways of transforming their world. In that context, citizens can rehearse behavioural change for themselves, and find ways to actively tackle issues that oppress them (Boal 2000). The fact that the theatrical process is entirely removed from the professionals and passed on to the people as a medium that can help them enact social change is a characteristic of citizen media – albeit a form of it that is enacted, embodied and analogue.

The Theatre of the Oppressed has functioned as a model for other types of community theatre, such as Chris Johnston's Citizen Theatre technique; a form of improvisatory, workshop-based theatre that aims to confront participants with their own behaviours in order to effect change. Johnston used this method to work with local communities, prisoners, and those on probation. Other forms developed by Boal himself, such as Newspaper Theatre, have direct connections to journalism and could also be considered analogue and enacted citizen media. Newspaper Theatre

was a technique used by non-professionals, which aimed to 'demystify the media, and educate people to question the notion of objectivity' (Boland and Cameron 2005). Newspaper Theatre stemmed from the practice of Living Newspaper – a very similar form of theatre that originated in Russia during the Bolshevik revolution, and which aimed to present factual information on current events to a popular audience. Living Newspapers were also known to encourage activist action, and were open to the use of multimedia in order to achieve their aim of engaging 'the people' (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2018). The most well known company developing this type of theatre was the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) operating in USA in the 1930s, during the Great Depression. Sponsored by the Works Progress Administration (part of the New Deal created by President F. Roosevelt to combat the Great Depression), FTP was developed not as a cultural activity but as a relief measure, to employ artists and cultural workers.

The theatre of the Oppressed originates from a long tradition of political theatre. It can be traced back to Erwin Piscator's 'factual theatre', Epic Theatre as created by Piscator and Brecht and further developed by Brecht himself, and the Marxist practice of Agitprop: in the 1920s and 1930s, after the Russian Revolution, the USSR's Department of Agitation and Propaganda employed theatre groups to stage performances with the aim of communicating news and current affairs in an accessible manner to a largely illiterate population (Brown 2013). At the same time, in Germany, Piscator used theatre as a means for communicating political messages, and was experimenting with incorporating primary source material such as verbatim interviews and documentary film footage into his spectacles. Influenced by Dada, he argued in favour of a more overtly political form of theatre aligned to the struggles of the proletariat. He founded the Proletarian Theatre in 1920 (Bryant-Bertail 2018), and in 1925 he wrote *In Spite of Everything! (Trotz Alledem!)*, a piece deriving entirely from political documents, which is often cited as the first 'documentary drama' (Mason 1977). An innovator in form as much as content, Piscator used media and journalism, such as film projections and newsreels, to develop a form of total theatre that we might today describe as 'immersive,' in order to convey mass events. In several of his productions he inserted verbatim political documents, news reports, or direct quotations from public figures (Encyclopaedia Britannica 2018). One might argue that Piscator used theatre as a means of performing citizen media, aiming to give voice to a range of citizens whose issues and concerns were not represented through the media.

The use of verbatim material in theatre has since spread exponentially as a practice. Derek Paget was amongst the first to research the practice, examining the work of practitioners such as John Cheeseman, Rony Robinson and David Thacker operating in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s in the same lineage as radio ballads and the seminal work of Joan Littlewood (Gibson 2011:3). Today, Verbatim Theatre is an almost ubiquitous technique, and plays developed by established artists such as Moisés Kaufman, Alecky Blythe, Anna Deavere Smith, Paul Brown, David Hare, and Max Stafford-Clark among others, incorporate words of real people as spoken by them into the drama. As Janet Gibson points out (2011:1), verbatim theatre aspires to tell the stories of others, 'especially those marginalised or oppressed by virtue of their race, class, gender, religion, sexual orientation, (dis)abilities and so on'. Providing 'an arena for the marginalised' (Gibson 2011:3) or giving a 'voice to the voiceless' (Hare in Heddon 2009:116), those works can be approached as citizen media, which are also often discussed as a means of 'bringing diverse voices into pluralist politics' (Pettit, Salazar and Dagron 2010:443). However there is a major difference between the two: citizen media empower citizens to take direct control of the means of distributing information and affect in order to tell their own stories – or voice their own voices – aiming to effect some form of change. Indeed, citizen media

can achieve more than just broadcasting a variety of voices: Pettit et al. argue that it can 'contribute to processes of social and cultural construction, redefining norms and power relations that exclude people' (2010:443). Verbatim theatre, on the other hand, is about people's real stories being told, most often, by a host of professional others (playwright, actors, director and so on). Unlike the Theatre of the Oppressed, which consciously and explicitly sought to remove the aesthetic, narrative and performative processes from the professionals artists' and producers' hands in order to create theatre by and for the people, Verbatim theatre is made by and for the people *through the mediation of professional theatre makers*. Though the aim is staging, and thus broadcasting, people's voices, the agents of this staging are not the people whose stories are being told. This dislocation of agency raises a number of ethical issues concerning the practice of documentary and verbatim theatre, including questions around accuracy, (mis)representation, (mis)appropriation and (dis)empowerment. Several scholars have argued that verbatim theatre is a 'problematic performance methodology' due to its claims to authenticity (Jeffers 2006:2); claims which Stuart Fisher questions, arguing that the 'truth' of a traumatic event is not, in fact, 'transparent, knowable or even communicable' (2011:112). Furthermore, Alcott (1991) and Hazou (2009) argue that many verbatim theatre practitioners speak *for* rather than *with* others, while Beck (2016) raises questions around the ethics of selecting, editing and aestheticising testimonies, particularly in relation to traumatic events.

The forms of theatre and performance I have discussed up to this point, such as Theatre of the Oppressed and Citizen Theatre, focus on facilitating interventions around issues and situations that concern specific communities. In those practices, the theatrical action, though it often takes place in a public or community space, is not an intervention in its own right; instead, it aims to function as a rehearsal for an intervention that is waiting to happen – the constitutive power of theatre making this intervention possible through enacting its potential. In that sense, Theatre of the Oppressed and the tradition of practices this has inspired, become 'communication spaces where citizens can learn to manipulate their own languages, codes, signs and symbols, empowering them to name the world in their own terms' (Rodriguez in Baker and Blaagaard 2016:11). Other forms, which are in the same historical lineage of political theatre but still rely on professional 'storytellers' mediating real people's narratives, such as Verbatim Theatre, aim to raise awareness and visibility around issues which are being sidelined or suppressed, giving 'voice to the voiceless'. Those forms can be understood as citizen media in the more narrow definition of the term, as they can be seen as early forms of embodied, enacted and analogue citizen journalism.

Performance as Citizen Media: Gesturing the Revolution

Some of the most powerful performance interventions that take place in the public sphere aspiring to generate social change are activist performances/ performative actions that aim to raise awareness around issues not through communicating factual information but through a gesture¹ that can generate affect. Those are often, as Shalson puts it, 'public expressions of dissent against prevailing systems' which 'demand change' (2017:8). The use of theatricality and performance in protest situations is, of course, nothing new. According to ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel (1967:11) all 'expressions and other practical actions' are 'contingent ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life'. Saward argues that the same applies to the 'structures and actions of political life' (2015:217) and proposes the term 'performative politics' to describe the phenomenon within which political grammars are enacted and performed (ibid). 'Performative politics',

Saward suggests, is 'rehearsed or repeated citational action' that is designed to draw attention to 'both the theatrical and productive (or constitutive) elements of performance in and of politics' (ibid). Those actions do not necessarily follow in the same lineage of political performance as the practices discussed above. Their lineage is not to be found in theatrical traditions of political theatre but is best sought in visual art and performance practices such as the Events and Happenings of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Live Art and Performance Art traditions. In keeping with those traditions, protest actions use bodies rather than text as their primary means of communication. Following Agamben's (2000) characterization of gesture as 'pure means' – refusing the separation of action into means and ends – Hughes and Parry (2016:80) use the term 'protest gesture' so as 'to focus on the relationship between bodies and politics'. Indeed, protest actions or protest gestures are characterized by the imaginative and disruptive-of-social-norms use of bodies in public space.

Hughes and Parry propose three 'gestural grammars of protest': 'gestures of exception, gestures of domesticity and the ecological gesture' (2016:79). They argue that our times are characterized by 'an extraordinary proliferation of protest movements' (ibid), and those movements 'draw on theatre and performance to enhance their potency' (2016:80). They give as examples the occupation of Seattle (1999), the series of uprisings known as the Arab Spring (2010-12) and demonstrations in USA (2014) following the shooting of Michael Brown, a young black man, by a white police officer in Ferguson. The latter demonstrations are characteristic of how gesture is used in protest to generate affect: following the shooting, protesters from St Louis to Times Square, New York City, marched with their arms in the air chanting 'hands up, don't shoot' – Michael Brown's last words before he was shot down by the police officer (2016:82). This theatrical gesture that embodied, again and again, in mass scale, Brown's last actions and words, served as a powerful and emotive way of raising awareness about the incident, using theatre's 'ghosting' technique to haunt America's streets. 'Ghosting', a term coined by Marvin Carlson, suggests that every theatrical performance incorporates elements of a previous one, a 'déjà vu', as the 'repository of cultural memory' (2003:2). Hughes and Parry 'focus on moments of protest that contest the framing of some bodies as outside of the normative political order and its modes of citizenship' (2016:79) to theorize those protest gestures as citizen media. I understand this as aligned to Rodriguez's (2011:24) definition of citizen media as 'communication spaces' empowering citizens to 'name the world in their own terms'. However, when it comes to the theatrical protest gesture or performance action as protest, this process of empowerment takes place through bodies: bodies enact the world in their own terms, using the constitutive power of performance to embody practical alternatives to oppression.

In May 2013 a wave of demonstrations spread across Turkey. Initially this was to contest the urban development plans for Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park. When a peaceful sit-in at the park in protest to those plans was violently evicted, this sparked protests across Turkey around issues of freedom of the press, freedom of expression and the right to assemble in peaceful protest. Three and a half million people are thought to have taken part in the demonstrations across Turkey, in which eleven people were killed and more than 8,000 were injured (Özdemir 2017). During the weekend of 15 and 16 June in particular, Turkish police brutally attacked demonstrators, including medics and staff who were treating the wounded in Taksim Square (Seymour 2013). On Monday the 17th June, performance artist Erdem Gündüz caused international sensation for responding to the brutality of the police by standing still. Gündüz just stood, on his own, facing the Atatürk cultural centre, from 6pm until 2am local time. As people began to notice what he was doing, some started to join him in Taksim, but also across the country, in cities like Ankara and

Izmir (ibid). Like with the 'hands up' protests, Gündüz's simple gesture of standing still over a prolonged period of time went viral on social media, with the handle #duranadam (the standing man) trending on Twitter. Suddenly, a lone, quiet gesture of defiance became larger than life, spreading through social media and manifesting itself in public space through bodies standing still. The protest gesture of the Standing Man enacted an alternative response to the violence inflicted upon protesting bodies by the state apparatus. As a 'gesture of exception' (Hughes and Parry 2016), it excluded the bodies that stood still from the political grammar of protest as understood by the government, causing confusion and succeeding not only in raising awareness of the demonstrations internationally, but also in moving international publics through affect.

Raspeani Skopjani is a self-organised choir that also emerged from the context of urban developments, albeit in this case in Skopje, the capital of the Republic of Macedonia. The choir responded to a project that aimed to transform Skopje's city centre 'into an area of concentrated development', and which was planned by the Government with a lack of transparency (Marchevska 2017). The plan provoked a considerable amount of protest activity; amongst others, Raspeani Skopjani, an inclusive and open-to-all choir that protests by singing. The choir members democratically choose songs for each situation, 'then sing *in situ* in a guerilla action, which is recorded and then posted on YouTube' (Jakimovska in Marchevska 2017). Though their singing interventions are neither advertised nor framed as performance events, and the only people who attend those are the people who happen to be at the particular place and time a guerilla intervention takes place, the performances reach a much larger audience through social media; the choir members document their interventions, edit them, and post them on YouTube, where they maintain an archive under the YouTube channel named Plostad Sloboda (City Square Freedom). As Marchevska (2017:397) puts it, 'Raspeani Skopjani stage a form of tactical media protest animated by an implicit agenda to reclaim public space (both physical and virtual) from state control'. Their protest gestures are not confrontational or literal, and they cannot be easily read – and dealt with – by the regime as disobedience. I see Raspeani Skopjani's interventions as political 'gestures of domesticity' (Hughes and Parry 2016), though they take place in public space; the singers appear in various spaces in the city of Skopje, which have been rendered familiar through public debates concerning their redevelopment. The choir treats Skopje as its home, and indeed, the home of all its citizens, reminding publics that this is their city and they should have agency on how it develops. The imaginative use of bodies in space has the power, in those mundane acts of singing, to speak out and to speak up in a language (and a tune) that authorities find difficult to decode and respond to; its performance a gesture that baffles, confuses and unsettles what Boal calls the 'oppressors'. This is an instance where guerilla performance, public intervention and citizen media collide to raise awareness about an issue of public interest, disrupt daily 'business as usual', confront accepted practices and demand (both social and aesthetic) change. Through their protest gestures, both the Standing Man and Raspeani Skopjani succeed in bringing international attention to a specific localized context that would had not, otherwise, received much attention through international mainstream media.

Conclusion

In 2012, Rabih Mroué performed his piece *The Pixelated Revolution* at Documenta 13. The piece, which is about the Syrian revolution and ensuing civil war, was a lecture performed in front of a collage of images and videos taken from the Internet, which had been posted by civilians in an attempt to document the state's acts of

violence towards them. While analyzing the (inevitable) stylistic conventions of documenting violence within the context of a revolution, Mroué presented, among other documents of war, a short video of a sniper shot from the rooftop of the building. As audiences, we see the sniper looking up, clocking the film-maker, aiming towards him, and shooting. The video goes all blurry as, apparently, the camera phone drops to the ground. We hear shouting, and the video abruptly ends. This is the document of an activist documenting what is, likely, his own violent death. As a performance of citizen media this is both a protest gesture – a defiant gesture of documenting and broadcasting the atrocities of war even when the violence is directed towards the ‘documenter’ with what we assume to be fatal consequences – and a rehearsal for a revolution, in the context of Mroué’s performance-lecture itself, which has reframed and re-circulated those documents to international audiences, drily breaking down their aesthetic conventions as a new activist grammar. The repercussions of this particular activist – one might say, heroic – act of citizen-media-turned-performance being, perhaps, that if we, citizens, take it upon us to document and make public acts of violence, we might be able to bring the perpetrators to justice. If we, collectively, hold them accountable for the atrocities they perpetrate against us, perhaps those acts of violence will no longer happen. In that respect, both Mroué and the activist documenting his own shooting embody, in different ways, the world as we want it to be, and as the performance of citizen media can contribute to making it – a space that is open, transparent and free of intimidation. Amen to that.

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