The Challenges for Live Performance Arts in the Digital Era and New Digimodern Art Hybrids

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Abstract. The paper is in the frame of the proposed topic about virtual reconstructions and interactive multimedia solutions especially for performance arts in the digital era and the newly opened possibilities and challenges. Examples from the world and Bulgarian practices for the emergence of different new digimodern art hybrids are analyzed.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Live Performance Arts, Digimodernism, Art Hybrids.

1   Introduction

The year 2020 happened to be extremely challenging for the live performance arts in the world and in Bulgaria. The state of emergency because of the pandemia of coronavirus-19 has put theatres in an impossible situation. Simply to say – they were closed. In mankind history theatres closure always was a sign of dark times: of wars, diseases, or political action of the state ruling forces, who were haters of the alive arts as was the case of theatres closure in England in 1642 for eighteen years during the Civil War, when the Long Parliament with an act banned these representatives of "lascivious Mirth and Levity". The stated reason was that attending theatre was "unseemly" during such turbulent times, but in fact the Puritans, who controlled the Parliament at that time, viewed theatres as public centers of vice, where their rivals – the Royalists met for conspiracy. (Milling, J., Thomson, P., 2004, p. 439); (Brockett, 1987, pp. 321-324).

There are other examples from history, when it was impossible to give alive performances, because in theatres a lot of people get together in a live relationship of communication, which is difficult to control. Usually this bans lead to new inventions and creation of new forms in performance arts.

The theatre and opera houses, the concert halls closure in 2020 was disastrous both for the doers and the fans of live performance arts, but paradoxically in these pandemic times one of their antipodes – internet, has come to help them to survive.

For example theatre online, although it is not the same as being in the theatre hall, is some alternative and gives certain consolation, during the pandemia, while watching theatre (or concert) online, usually there were special messages.

2   Virtual vs. Live Performance Arts?

Recently we communicate "in live" via platforms such as "Zoom", "Microsoft Teams", etc. In fact the digital era already for decades has put once again in reconsideration what means "live" and "liveness" both in life and in live arts. But the pandemic situation has even deepened this problem.

With regard to performance arts, the latter is a key question, for example, when it comes to satellite broadcasting of a performance.

The National Theatre Live project in London is important in this direction. This is an innovative project of the English National Theatre for live broadcasts of the best productions from the London live stage in cinemas across the United Kingdom and around the world. Each of the performances is filmed in live in front of the audience in the theatre. At the same time the cameras are set up to provide moviegoers with a "place with the best view". They are positioned specifically for each show to create an exceptional audience experience, especially for those who see the digital copy. With the help of satellites, the productions are broadcasted in live worldwide and reach more than 1.5 million viewers in over 700 cinemas at once.

In Bulgaria, NT Live broadcasts are realized by the British Council in partnership with Cinema City, but not in pandemic times. During the pandemia the National Theatre in London has invented the initiative of broadcasting at home of its performances.

Thus during the state of emergency in 2020 the audiences have made a step further in getting accustomed to perceive digital performances as if they are alive ones. The pandemia, when many theatres all over the world started to transmit such type of "live" performances for free or paid online, has deepened the propensity, even the desire of people to watch virtual theatre. In a way the audiences of performance arts have enlarged the hybrid cooperation between live and digital, while just a year ago the absolutely oxymoronic notion of "virtual theatre" was still problematic.

The debate has started much earlier. Philip Ausländer was one of the first theatre theorists, who already in the late 1990s in his book *Liveness: Performance in Mediatized Culture* claimed that both live performance and recorded performance were doomed to extinction. (Ausländer, 1999, p. 45). One of his arguments was that "[…] liveness is not an ontologically defined condition but a historically variable effect of mediatization. It was the development of recording technologies that made it both possible and necessary to perceive existing representations as "live". Prior to the advent of these technologies (e.g., sound recording and motion pictures), there was no need for a category of "live" performance, for that category has meaning only in relation to an opposing possibility" (Ausländer, 2012, pp. 3-11).

Another researcher of virtual theatre defines it as any moment in which the real, including the spectators, meets and penetrates the virtual (Giannachi, 2004, pp. 10-12). Such a definition is legitimate in relation to a recorded performance, passing from real to virtual.

Performance arts as living ones happening "here and now", *hic et nunc* before the eyes of the viewer are the antithesis of both electronic and digital media. At the same time, we should realize that the digital revolution, we are witnessing, will inevitably

change the professional, technological and market aspects of all media without exception.

3 Digimodernism and Performance Arts

What happens with traditional performative forms of art in the age of globalization and digitalization? Is the "death" of the traditional live performance arts foretold in the fight with the new technologies?

Emerging art practices are associated with the search for new concepts, such as the neologisms forged over the last half century, such as *transhumanism* as biotechnological development of human beings (Huxley, 1957); (Vita-More, 2003); (Hughes, 2002); *hybridization* as ongoing blending of cultures, arts, media and technologies ((Said, 1978); (Bhabha, 1994); (Stockhammer, 2012); *posthumanism* in the sense of existing in a state beyond human existence (Nichols, 1988); (Haraway, 1991); (Pepperell, 1995); (Halberstam, I., Halberstam, J., 1995); (Hayles, 1991); *cyborgism* as creation and addition of new senses to the body via cybernetic implants (Kreps, 2007); *digimodernism* as post-post-humanism in the digital era (Kirby, 2009) and others.

Recently, new manifestos have appeared, theories have been developed that shape a new cultural paradigm.

One of the new key concepts is *digimodernism*, developed by the British cultural critic Alan Kirby to describe the impact of the new media technology on culture and different texts. Kirby claims that *digimodernism* is the successor to postmodernism, which according to him ended around the beginning of the 21st century. It is a kind of synonym of post-post-modernism. This theory was first presented by Kirby. (Kirby, 2006, pp. 34-37). Further it was developed in his book *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (Kirby, 2009). In 2010 Kirby defines that digimodernists texts (where text is understood in its broad sense of a piece of creation) are characterized by "onwardness, haphazardness, evanescence, and anonymous, social and multiple authorship." They "include the internet as a whole, blogs, reality television shows like *American Idol*, where viewers decide the narrative progression, news programs that rely on viewer-submitted comments, etc. Replacing the uncertainty or self-conscious irony of postmodernism, the typical emotional state of digimodernism is the trance, being completely absorbed in and becoming the text". (Kirby, 2010)

Recently the digimodernist creations in performance arts become more and more popular in the form of cyborgs, avatars, AI-Human hybrids.

Fig. 1. A robot conductor leads an orchestra at the Sharjah Performing Arts Academy. United Arab Emirates. (Reuters) (2020)

4　　Hybridization in Performance Arts

The word "hybridization" is derived from the Latin *hybridae*, or "mixed blood". In the context of performance arts it refers not to its meaning in biology as crossing of species of different varieties, but is closer to Marshall McLuhan definition from 1964 as the "interpenetration of one medium by another" (McLuhan, 2003, p. 76). Hybridization is one of the important devices in arts, especially in the digital era, discussed in the book *New Literary Hybrids in the Age of Multimedia Expression* (Cornis-Pope, 2014). I might argue that with the development of the new technologies new possibilities for perfection of the living human beings were opened, as well as creation of new types of hybrids in live performance arts.

The originator of cybernetics Norbert Wiener divides the history of automation in four stages related to human-machine relationship: the mythological age of golems, the age of clocks (17th and 18th centuries), the age of the steam engines (18th and 19th centuries), the age of communication and control (Wiener, 1985, pp. 39-44). These ages respectively generate four models of human body: made of clay magic figure; body like clockwork, the body as a steam engine, the body as an electronic system (Wiener, 1985, pp. 39-44). The discoveries in cybernetics gave opportunities for further man-machine hybridization. The last decades different biorobotical live performances were created by Stelarc, Marcel·lí Antúnez Roca (Marcel·lí Antúnez Roca, n.d.) and others.
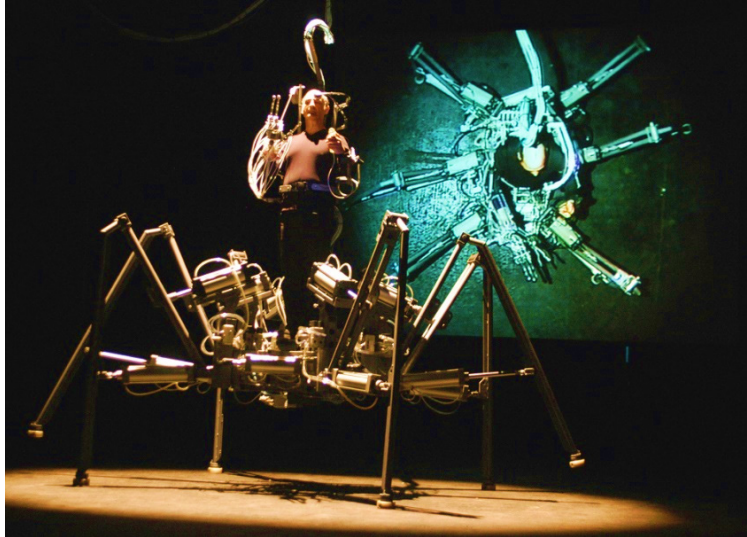
Fig. 2. Stelarc, *Exoskeleton: Event for Extended Body and Walking Machine*", (1999)

In Bulgaria the stage designer Venelin Shurelov worked on several projects such as "Fantomat" (2009), "Man ex Machina" (2011) and "Rotor" (2016), which aim was to achieve certain hybridized biorobotical man-machine creatures (Spassova-Dikova, 2014, pp. 271-289); (Spassova-Dikova, 2016, pp. 27-39).
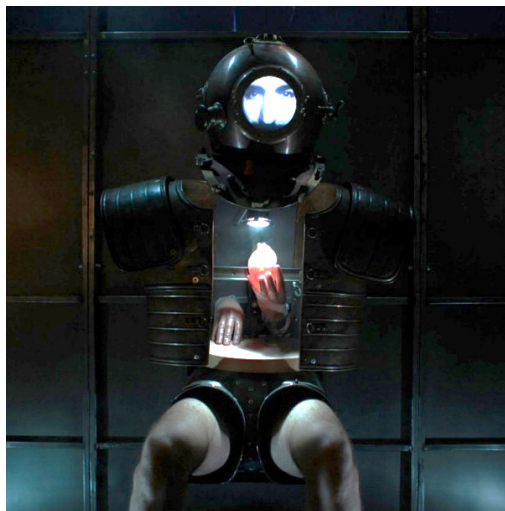
Fig. 3. Venelin Shurelov, Man Ex-Machina, (2011)

Shurelov experiments are in the field of the so called "subhuman theatre", following the ideas of Natasha Vita-More in her *Transhumanism Art Manifesto* (Vita-More, 2003) and *Primo Posthuman project* – 2004 + (Vita-More, 2018). In his first installations the machine (automat) was animated to become more human. These creatures talked and had some feelings. Shurelov's performance *Rotor* from 2016 already aims at extension of the human being with the machine in certain symbiosis and hybridization. The artist defines his work *Rotor*, as Performative Automatic System (PAS). The figure is a body of gesture partially closed by function, partially released from the fiction. (Shurelov, 2016)


Fig. 4. Venelin Shurelov, *Rotor*. DNK – National Palace of Culture, (2016)

The defined by Wiener four types of human body hybrids, according to the formulated by him four stages of automation, are still actual and are used in some experimental live performances. But the scientist did not know in 1948 that a fifth stage of the human-digital hybrid will come. We evidence it now. Recent experiments show us new digimodern hybrids, such as avatars and AI-Human hybrids.

A Bulgarian example is Javor Gardev's performance *Quartet: Dangerous Liaisons after the End of the World* after Heiner Müller from 2015, where the actors with the help of motion capture technique have their avatar projections on the stage in live time (Spassova-Dikova, 2016, pp. 36-38). *Motion capture* is the process of recording the movement of objects or people. In performing arts it refers to recording actions of human actors, and using that information to animate digital character models in 2D or 3D computer animation.
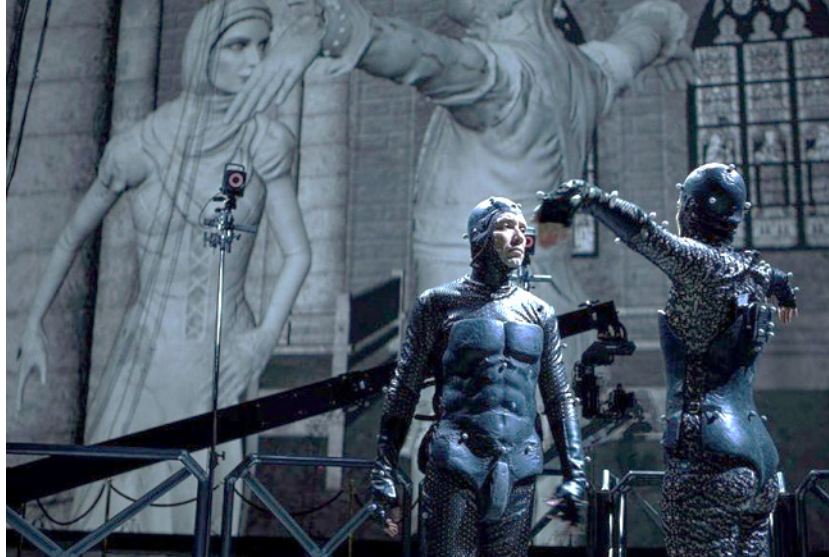
Fig. 5. Quartet: Dangerous Liaisons after the End of the World, after Heiner Müller, dir. Javor Gardev, National Palace of Culture (2015)

The director Gardev shares that "The project tries to combine three types of approach – theatrical, film and the third, including unusual technology in real time – motion capture. It provides the ability to play characters who are in a 3D virtual environment, from actors playing in space captured by 10 infrared cameras. The technology is used in cinema – the actors enter into special costumes, their movements are scanned, which then gives exceptional realism to animated and computer-generated images. The costumes are equipped with sensors that detect any movement and give a signal to the cameras around the site where the action takes place. This allows virtual characters created in a 3D environment to be placed on the actors and projected in real time on the screen. Something very important is achieved for the play – the exchange of characters and the exchange of genders during the game – a technique that allows the full development of the text of Heiner Müller. Thus, actors move their digital counterparts (avatars). The avatars are made especially for the show." (Dimitrov, 2015)

The performance of *Quartet* is indicative of the new worldwide search for hybridization between the virtual and the real in the performing arts. In this case, the main merit of the project is not so much in achieving a more perfect and realistic digital image of a person or imaginary humanoid being, but in the attempt to expand the possibilities of the theatre and in particular the performers for a kind of cloning, reproduction and more dynamic transformation and switching from one identity to another with the help of new technologies.

The motion capture demonstrates that for liveness of art still a live actor is needed. Paradoxically giving liveness s/he "dies" in his/her own virtual creation. His live art "dies" in its transformation into a virtual one, but often perceived as even more live at the eyes of the spectators.

5 Conclusions

Already in 1960 Joseph Licklider in his foreseeing text *Man-Computer Symbiosis* predicted that in not too many years, human brains and computing machines will be coupled together very tightly and that the resulting partnership will think as no human brain has ever thought and process data in a way not approached by the information-handling machines we know today (Licklider, 1960, p. 4). Whether it is scary or not, but the utopian desires for human perfection very soon could become true. The rapid development of the new technologies puts a lot of questions about the future of the mankind, when the live people might be replaced by robots, or even to become themselves bio-robotical AI hybrids. The latter pertains to the problems of live vs. digital, real vs. virtual, natural vs. artificial. (Spassova-Dikova, 2017, pp. 90-102). In this direction very useful both for specialists and for larger audiences is the website *Securing Digital Future 21* (Minchev, 2020), where discussions about our digital and AI future are provided and important topical questions: how new technologies might help people to become more perfect, more healthy, overcoming pandemic diseases (here including COVID-19), and even more human, are put in consideration.

Acknowledgements

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