

## Trans-Participation in the Infosphere

I recently gave a paper where I criticized those immersive performances that denude participants of their critical agency by turning them into dramaturgical content to be managed. It is my intention in this paper to address another side of the immersive story by focusing on the relationship between identity and history as it relates to audience participation in the context of the infosphere. Luciano Floridi describes the infosphere as a space of pervasive connectivity where anything can be connected to anything. The binaries between the off- and online worlds collapse to produce onlife, the merging of the digital and physical realities. In this way, the infosphere is an evolution of the cyberspace imaginary in its distillation of real and virtual realities into informational entities.

*'The cyborg [is] not...only a hybrid of organic, biological and non-organic forms, but [is] a creature able to bridge the gap between the real and representation, between social reality and fiction'*

(Giannachi, 2004, p.46)

The infosphere intersects with discourses of post humanism in its framing of the human as part of a bio-technological interactive system. Developments in cybernetics, AI and the mapping of the human genome may well presage the next stage of our evolution, but even as a potential of humanity, bio-technology represents an imaginary of interrelations between organic and machine entities that embody the contemporary experience of the postdigital world. Gabriella Giannachi tells us in the quote above that the figure of the cyborg has always represented a real entity and a narrative construction of humanity.

*'The infosphere will not be a virtual environment supported by a genuinely "material" world. Rather, it will be the world itself that will be increasingly understood informationally, as an expression of the infosphere.'*

(Floridi, 2014, p.50)

A key point of differentiation between the infosphere and conventional understandings of virtual reality – which have been significantly influenced by works of fiction, such *The Matrix* as William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* – is a bio-techno form of interactivity without the presence of a technological interface. Humans in the infosphere are informational organisms – what Floridi calls 'inforgs' – whose identity is consciously being constituted and re-constituted through pervasive connectivity.

Medial boundaries collapse in the infosphere. Sarah Bay-Cheng believes we have reached the point where terms such as hypermedia, intermedia and mixed media no longer sufficiently express the postdigital world we live in. She argues that we need a form of performance analysis which assumes 'all media are always already activated in every cultural object' (Bay-Cheng 2018).

Trans- encapsulates the bio-techno experience of the postdigital in its framing of identity as a state of hyphenations across mediums. Analysing audience participation with reference to the infosphere allows me to frame immersive performance as

communication networks where identities are constructed in collaboration with others.

My point of departure in using the prefix trans- to encapsulate this form of participation comes from Amelia Jones who argues it denotes an emergent state of connections that never settle into a fixed or immutable form (2016). Trans- also expresses a form of knowing that is contingent on participating within expansive communication networks. Trans- treats audience participation as a method of discursive communal thinking as the first step toward political action in the real world within a performative informational environment.

To illustrate this argument I will be discussing two pieces I saw in 2017: *Operation Black Antler* by Blast Theory and Hydrocracker and *One Day, Maybe* by dreamthinkspeak. Each piece represents different facets of trans-participation.

In *One Day, Maybe*, participants' experience versions of globalised democratic freedom in South Korea from the perspective of the protestors who were killed during the Gwangju uprising in May 1980. One way we participate in the infosphere is through the creation and dissemination of documents. Documents implicate us in a distributed process of knowledge production. I am interested in exploring how the presence of real historical documents in *One Day, Maybe* produces fictionalised versions of South Korean democratic freedom and intersects with discourses of post-truth reality.

*Operation Black Antler* tackles the subjects of far right extremism, identity politics, terrorism and state surveillance. Trans-participation in *Operation Black Antler* has an explicit political imperative by inviting audiences to play a police officer and go undercover to infiltrate a far right group, the National Resistance. The layered identities participants construct with actors and other participants over the course of the performance merges their real selves with fictional identities. In this way, trans-participation in *Operation Black Antler* resonates with Hannah Arendt's argument that the imagination has a vital political utility in that it allows us to think discursively, which is to say we make alternative versions of the real world present in the imagination in order to seed the potential of creating new futures through our actions in the present (1981, p.77).

dreamthinkspeak's artistic director Tristan Sharps was inspired to make *One Day, Maybe* whilst walking through the new retail complexes in Gwangju. He started to think how the ghosts of 1980 would feel about the state of democracy in South Korea if they were alive to see it now. His explicit intention was to avoid creating an historical record of the massacre by allowing the audience to reflect on our globalised world from the perspectives of the dead as a way of exploring how mass consumption constitutes an expression of democratic freedom.

The performance was staged in an anonymous office block in Hull. Upon arrival, the audience were greeted by a team of corporate figures from the Kasang Corporation. Kasang were the selling us the future, which was rendered in a virtual retail environment where we purchased products via the screens installed in the walls. The word 'kasang' derives from a Korean word meaning virtual or unreal. In *One Day, Maybe* it encapsulated the virtuality of democratic freedom and the virtual presence

the ghosts of the protestors possess in South Korea's history. The products being sold to participants were not 'real' in the sense we could actually eat the food we bought from the supermarket, but they were no more fictitious than the images we see on Amazon. We can see a similar process operating through the intense mediation of politics. The internet transforms national narratives into an immersive experience we sense but feel we cannot meaningfully participate in. Conversely, when framed as virtual entities, the ghosts of May 1980 attain a more tangible, even domestic, and real presence when contrasted with their commemoration in historical records. The ghosts acted as an imaginative lens for participants to explore how freedom is practiced in liberal free market societies.

The postdigital real was experienced most acutely during a game participants played in a maze. Each of us were given a tablet displaying our location in real time. The aim of the game was to complete the maze and avoid the guards who were represented by red dots on the screen. The tablet directed us to nodes in the maze where electronic documents became unlocked. These documents, the Cherokee files, were real communiques between the Korean Special Forces and the US government, who at that time had operational control over the Korean army. The files disprove the US government's repeated claims that they did not know the military had been instructed to crush the uprising. Indeed, the Cherokee Files indicate the US gave them tacit approval.

Accessing this history within the fictional world of *One Day, Maybe* represented the process by which we discover and access information in the infosphere. Documents scaffold social relations within communication networks. The immersive world of *One Day, Maybe* incubated this process by embedding the Cherokee files in the space for us to discover and interpret, but no explicit narrative was present to make sense of the information we received. Indeed, there was little time to read them, but the bits of information we gleaned made us aware of a hidden layer of information within the *mise en scène*. The technology enabled participants to access a past that continues to be denied by many South Korean politicians.

The Kasang Corporation began to melt away as we progressed through the maze. The maze acted as a portal into the past by leading us to the Gwangju police station of 1980. Korean Special Forces officers lined us up in a car park and marched us into cells to perform a dance for the dead. The movements of the actors were eerily slow. They spoke in quiet voices and rarely made eye contact with us. The overall effect was to render the 1980 police station a spatial echo of the real site and the Gwangju uprising. Participation became trans-ed in *One Day, Maybe* through the performative connections that were established between the spirit of contemporary South Korea and the events of May 1980. What emerged was a space where conflicting national narratives became presence as a network where participants experienced the ideas before they were able to intellectually articulate them.

This sensibility resonates with concerns around so-called post-truth politics. Much critical commentary focuses on the difficulty of establishing consensus perspectives of reality in the immersive information environment of the infosphere. In its broadest sense, post-truth describes an ultra-relativist political discourse where we are free to shape reality and be whoever we wish to be. Holocaust historian Deborah Lipstadt warns that when opinions are of considered equally valid than the documentary

record, then '[n]o fact, no event, and no aspect of history has any fixed meaning or content. Any truth can be retold. Any fact can be recast. There is no ultimate historical reality' (2016: 23). However, the importance of individual perspectives in establishing historical reality should not be disregarded out of hand. Richard J. Evans shows us in his book *In Defence of History* that cliometrics, a short-lived attempt to produce a purely objective historiography using raw data instead of the historian's narrative, were a failure because the historian's voice was absent. The historian is an agent in the formulation of national memory.

*'The language of historical documents is never transparent, and historians have long been aware they cannot simply gaze through it to the historical reality behind'*

(Evans, 2018, p.104)

When we consider this quote in the context of *One Day, Maybe*, we can see that historical reality emerges as a series of interactions between participants, documents, actors and space. The history of the Gwangju uprising is thus trans-ed by becoming actively hyphenated to present day South Korea; not just as an event to be remembered, but as an idea of democratic freedom to be challenged.

*Operation Black Antler* was inspired by the increasing powers afforded to the security services through the Investigatory Powers Act, colloquially known as the snooper's charter. Artistic director of Hydrocracker Jem Wall told me that he felt there was too much soft thinking on the left and on the right when it comes to the corrosive effect surveillance culture has on democratic freedoms.

*'Surveillance is no longer merely something external that impinges on "our lives". It is also something that everyday citizens comply with – willingly and wittingly or not – negotiate, resist, engage with and, in novel ways, even initiate and desire. From being an institutional aspect of modernity or a technologically enhanced mode of social discipline or control, surveillance is not internalized in new ways. It informs everyday reflections on how things are, and the repertoire of everyday practices'*

(Lyon, 2018, p.9)

David Lyon argues the Big Brother imaginary of surveillance is outdated in the age of pervasive information. Unlike the people of Oceania, modern surveillance is sustained by our active participation. We voluntarily produce and disseminate information online, thereby turning surveillance into a fluid form of control. The imbrication of surveillance into everyday reality allows us to monitor the activities of others whilst willingly becoming objects of surveillance. But the pervasive quality of modern communication makes it impossible to see as a phenomenon distinct from all other social activities. *Operation Black Antler* acted as an incubator of surveillance culture so participants could critically reflect on its consequences for political freedoms.

Participants enter *Operation Black Antler* when they receive a text message instructing them to go to a safe house to meet their handler. We were briefed that the security services were concerned about a new anti-Islamic group, National Resistance. Our mission was to gather intelligence on the group's activities and

decide if they warranted deep dive surveillance. We were told this allowed the security services to access the most intimate details of their lives without a police warrant. The main action occurred in a pub where the National Resistance were having a party. Over the course of an hour I played a figure who I felt would attract far right sympathies. Unemployed, lonely, despondent, a man who felt his culture was being destroyed by immigration and was eager to meet like-minded people.

*Operation Black Antler* is structured like a game in that participants must navigate certain obstacles in order to meet the leaders of the group. The actors invite participants to share their political beliefs. Only by conforming to the group's ideology will they be able to access the necessary information. Participants came together after an hour to decide if a deep dive surveillance operation should be launched.

*'By learning a new language, a person requires a new way of knowing reality and of passing that knowledge on to others...All languages complement each other in achieving the widest, most complete knowledge of what is real.'*

*'The liberated spectator, as a whole person, launches into action. No matter that the action is fictional; what matters is that it is action!'*

(Boal, 2000, pp.121-122)

The language of the National Resistance was easy to grasp, particularly at a time when ethno-nationalist politics are in the ascendancy in Europe and North America. These lines from Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* emphasizes his interest in theatre as a space of knowledge exchange. As nodes in a surveillance network, participants interact with the National Resistance in order to gain information. But this identity is always doubled with their real selves and resonates with the process of identity construction we undertake in the infosphere. This doubling effect is an important aspect of trans-participation because it allows the identities we perform in performance to become rehearsals of our identities outside the performance space. The political affiliations we perform online are not wholly fictional versions of our real selves. The micro-narratives of the selves that we construct online change our social selves and how we see each other.

*'You may no longer lie so easily about who you are, when hundreds of millions of people are watching. But you may certainly try your best to show them who you may reasonably be, or wish to become, and that will tell a different story about you that, in the long run, will affect who you are, both online and offline.'*

(Floridi, 2014, p.64)

In Boal's terms, trans-participation constitutes political action because it liberates the spectator from pure critical reflection into a subject who can effectuate change in the real world. But action must be informed by judgement, a faculty of mental reasoning that Hannah Arendt argues can only exist in the mind. Spectating is a vital part of judgement for Arendt. She states that the spectator is able to see the whole spectacle and judge it in its entirety, unlike the actor who is a component of the spectacle and is thus unable to determine its truth (Arendt, 1981, p.94). A crucial aspect of Arendtian judgement to grasp is that it is an action executed by an

enlarged mentality. Trans-participation is a public thinking event where audiences collectively imagine experience living in postdigital reality in immersive performances.

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