Curating the Crowd
Social Media and the Choreography of Affective Experience

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The history of entertainment architecture is also the history of curating the crowd – creating an experience for ever larger audiences that must balance the size of the venue (and the need to fill it) with the desire to make a visceral, embodied experience and enduring memory for each attendee. The history of 20th-century crowds and spectacle is also linked to that of cinema and visual media – in which the experience of 'being there' has long been mediated by screen technologies. The German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin, witnessing the turn towards fascism within Europe in the 1930s, recognised the power of cinema to harness political charisma and channel social movements by resituating the audience from being passive spectators to becoming active participants in popular events. For Benjamin, the aura of artworks in the age of mechanical reproduction gave way to the aura of the crowd, described evocatively by Elias Canetti in his sweeping survey "*Crowds and Power*" as an irresistible shared density of human experience.[1]

The anthropologist and historian of cinema Alison Griffiths has shown how technologies of immersion and interaction have shaped the spectacular experience within entertainment architecture from the medieval cathedral through to 19th-century panoramas and eventually to IMAX cinemas.[2] Whilst Griffiths focuses on how museums attempt to balance the pleasures of immersion with the need to be educational, her broader point, is, like that of Benjamin, that screens are not 'outside of' or 'detached from' cultural production, nor do they inculcate passive viewing experiences, but rather are intrinsic tools in the active search for ever more 'real' and authentic embodied experiences. Following Griffiths' more discussion of the experience of spectacular performance this article explores the impact of social media in shifting the experience of the crowd from a singular moment into an embodied experience that is dispersed through time and space.

Jenny Lind Concert.tiff
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Designing for Social Media

Social media, even with the reorientation away from a wide-screen format towards the square boxes of Instagram, has domesticated the cinematic experience of spectacular performance, shifting the location of the image from that of a shared panorama to that of a shared and circulated digital file. Where the crowd was once understood as a mass of bodies, it is now a mass of signs: images, likes, comments, tags. But this should not mislead us to think that social media is a disembodied experience, or that it acts as a distancing device in the context of large-scale mass events. The anthropologist Paolo Gerbaudo has described social media as 'choreographic', exploring how platforms such as Twitter are used to mobilise crowds of political activists in the streets.[3] And in more intimate research,

anthropologists have explored how smartphones facilitate a new form of co-presence with studies of how, for instance, migrant women parent their children through mobile phones whilst working overseas.[4] Nick Couldry has discussed how 'liveness' as a form of 'continued connectedness' can be mediated through online platforms, which both extend live connections between people who are not physically co-located and also extend this experience beyond the initial moment of performance.[5]

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In the stadium, social media introduces new opportunities for design, in which screens increasingly become the focal point of the performance. Alongside the massification of the screen-based experience, large-scale concert design now also makes explicit use of the pocket-sized screens of smartphones and the social media platforms that they support – not just by switching from cigarette lighters to smartphone flashlights, but by designing 'Instagrammable' moments, and using audience recording as a form of choreography for the event, in which 'people not only film the screen that they are watching, they also film themselves watching the screen, and then go home and put that on Instagram because they want to be seen to have been at the event.'[6]

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Describing the process of designing the Arashi concert at the Tokyo Dome on 31 December 2020, STUFISH Design Director and CEO Ray Winkler explains the salience of social media imagery both to the studio's design thinking, and to the client's experience of the design process, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic which pretty much stopped all mass events around the world. Speaking in January 2021, he commented:

> The experience now, at least in the last year, which has been very much driven by the virtual experience … has brought in a very different way of thinking about these shows, and that is when we start thinking about the 'Instagram moment', something that is there primarily to be seen through a very particular format.[7]

As STUFISH progressed the design for the Arashi show, Winkler described how social media was not simply a fix for Covid-appropriate design, but actually became integral to the design process itself, as Stufish worked remotely with their client:

> It was all seen through the camera lens and the interesting thing is our process which starts with a conversation followed by reference images, which is then followed by sketches which is then followed by 3D models, you can absolutely see the trajectory of the idea manifesting itself into one that looks really good on camera because it has to look really good on the computer screen when you present this to your artist, who is sitting in Japan in front of a computer screen, looking at that very image, and you know that that very image is going to be replicated on millions of people's screens because it is exactly the same format that you designed this in, which is a very interesting loop.[8]

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Extending Time and Space

Even more strikingly than the, by now common, imagery of people using phones as flashlights, or to record (and broadcast) their own version of an event, is the ways in which smartphones can extend the moment or time of an experience outwards across a prolonged temporal, and spatial, arc. Many assume that the remediation of a concert through the mobile phone of the fan is an act of distancing, shifting the sensory experience of 'being there' to one of watching a less visceral on-screen performance. It is however clear that this extendable form of remediation also creates intensely embodied and participatory experiences. In my own research into the digitisation of museum collections it is becoming clear that processes of digitisation have been used by cultural groups to create new histories and forms of profound connection to historic objects. In the case of *Te Ara Wairua*, a 2014 project to digitise a Māori cloak held in the Ethnography Collections of University College London (UCL), rather than seeing digital images of the cloak as less authentic, these digital experiences were framed as containers of the same spiritual energy and capacities for connection (*wairua*) that the original treasure (*taonga*) was imbued with. By creating a virtual environment, the project transformed the Octagon Gallery at UCL in to a sacred and ceremonial Māori space, likened to the forecourt in front of a Māori meeting house, the *marae ātea*. Within this reversal, employees of UCL and members of the London Māori Club, Ngāti Rānana, were welcomed as guests by Te Matahiapo Indigenous Research Organisation, broadcasting from the base of Mount Taranaki in the North Island, and the cloak was bathed in light and sound from Aotearoa (the Māori name for New Zealand). The project, and the subsequent discussion it sparked amongst its participants,[9] shows how digital platforms may be understood in practice not as less authentic simulacra of reality, but as important channels for social and cultural experiences. This argument is an important cornerstone of the growing field of digital anthropology.[10]

In the arena, as the singular moment of the concert is now refracted through a million user accounts, endlessly circulated through YouTube videos and Instagram clips, the opportunity for direct engagement may also be increased. For instance, in the Arashi concert, whilst the group played to an empty stadium due to the constraints of the Covid-19 pandemic, live streams of images from the Instagram feeds of millions of spectators were projected into the arena, and onto the stage, which in turn was remediated through the screens of the watching participants. This was deliberately part of the design process, as described by Ray Winkler: 'the purpose of the event in itself has changed from being a deeply personal one that you share maybe with a handful of people at most within the context of a crowd of 100,000 people to sharing it with millions of people'. He went on:

> When there were no crowds in the stadium because of social distancing … we had never received more likes to our design at that moment because everyone experienced the show through the lens through which it was designed, and that was a visually beautiful composed piece of stage architecture that people could experience on a screen.[11]

Copyright_STUFISH_ARASHI_MirrorBallRender.jpeg

This design intention was borne out by the response of the viewers, as in the case of one blogger's review of the show where they recount the intensity of their viewing experience of this final concert in some detail:

> I do remember the little moments … i was fighting back tears as i was striving to catch every single word they said and not miss any single micro-expression they showed through and through, as if i tried to burn those images onto my brain forever.[12]

The crowd, and the sense of being there, is now dispersed across time, and prolonged in an ongoing and participatory curation of both public and private memory. The scale of the smartphone paradoxically now makes live stadium performances seem small. In some ways, curating the crowd is about managing the tensions between the physical experience of 'being there' and the optics of being able to experience the event in an enduring way over time. As Walter Benjamin so presciently observed, the advent of mass media allows for the transformation of the audience into what he describes as 'the critic'.[13] Even writing in the age of analogue media, Benjamin recounted how readers were becoming writers, and audiences were becoming directors, cinematographers, photographers and actors within their own spectacles. Social media continues. and intensifies, this trajectory. Perhaps this is most viscerally encountered by the ways in which a mass event like a stadium concert, when seen through the lens of a smartphone, is as experienced as much discursively as visually – evinced by the importance of comments, likes and tags alongside images within social media platforms.

Whilst Benjamin was interested in exploring the capacity of mass media to enable (and disable) political action, today's mass entertainment events are also opening up profound questions about the form and experience of cultural memory. They expose some of the ways in which scale and value are entwined, and also pose problems for each other. The questions for post-Covid entertainment architectures are both about how to create enduring cultural experiences, and how to manage their ownership. Questions over the authority and power of the "fan", the ways in which their value is spatialized in the largest scale events, and the role of smartphone technology in mediating this are becoming vital components of the design process.

Copyright_STUFISH_ARASHI_Vortex.jpeg
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Notes
1. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' [1936], in *Illuminations*, Fontana (London), 1992, pp 211–44; Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* [originally published in German as *Masse und Macht*, 1960], Penguin (Harmondsworth), 1984.

2. Alison Griffiths, *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums, and the Immersive View*, Columbia University Press (New York), 2008.

3. Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, Pluto Press (London), 2012.

4. Mirca Madianou and Daniel Miller, 'Mobile Phone Parenting: Reconfiguring Relationships between Filipina Migrant Mothers and Their Left-Behind Children', *New Media & Society*, 13 (3), 2011, pp 457–70: https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444810393903.

5. Nick Couldry, 'Liveness, "Reality", and the Mediated Habitus from Television to the Mobile Phone', *The Communication Review*, 7 (4), 2004, pp 353–61.

6. Author interview with Ric Lipson, STUFISH, 8 January 2021.

7. Author interview with Ray Winkler, STUFISH, 8 January 2021.

8. *Ibid*.

9. See Haidy Geismar, *Museum Object Lessons for the Digital Age*, UCL Press (London), 2018, Chapter 6.

10. Daniel Miller, 'Digital Anthropology', in Felix Stein *et al.* (eds), *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, 2018: https://www.anthroencyclopedia.com/entry/digital-anthropology

11. Author interview with Ray Winkler, STUFISH, 8 January 2021.

12. 'Goodally', 'This is 嵐 LIVE: The Music Never Ends' blog, 10 January 2021: https://bean5spilled.wordpress.com/2021/01/10/this-is-嵐-live-the-music-never-ends/.

13. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' [1936], in *Illuminations*, Fontana (London), 1992, pp 221
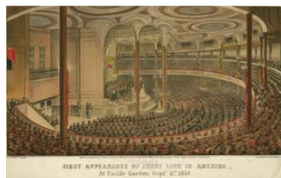
CAPTIONS

Figure 1: "First appearance of Jenny Lind in America, at Castle Garden Septr. 11th, 1850. Total receipts $26,238." (public domain image can be downloaded at NYPL: https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-ff5f-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99

Jenny Lind Concert.tiff

First appearance of Jenny Lind in America, at Castle Garden, Battery Park, New York, 11 September 1850

Jenny Lind was one of the world's most admired 19th-century singers. Her American tour during 1850–52 elicited such demand for tickets that they were sold by auction, and she provoked such enthusiasm that the phenomenon was called 'Lindmania' by the press.
First appearance of Jenny Lind in America, at Castle Garden Septr. 11th, 1850. Total receipts $26,238. Retrieved from the Digital Public Library of America, http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-ff5f-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99. (Accessed June 9, 2021.)

STUFISH, Queen + Adam Lambert 'Rhapsody' world tour, Seoul, South Korea, January 2020

The synchronised images on the crowd's phones show a heart. This was not organised by the band; the decision by the crowd to unify under this image was completely spontaneous, and is an interesting example of one of the choreographic aspects of social media.

DESIGNER – group with image below, shared caption label:

STUFISH, Beyoncé and Jay-Z 'On the Run II' tour, 2018

Model of the structure of the touring stage showing the stage from the right, with the dual parallel runways that extend outwards from the main stage into the audience.

Render showing the stage from the left. The runways extending into the audience maximised the potential for the performers to interact with the audience at a closer range, also allowing for better smartphone photographs and videos.

STUFISH, Mumford & Sons 'Delta' tour, LOCATION, 2018

The photograph shows the in-the-round stage, designed to allow the band to be close-up with more of the audience. See-through gauze projection screens show live images of both the band and the surrounding audience, further enhancing the participatory experience.

DESIGNER – group with image below, shared caption label:

STUFISH, Arashi 'This Is ARASHI LIVE 2020.12.31', Tokyo Dome, Tokyo, 31 December 2020

For live-stream only, the set was redesigned from London during lockdown and built in Japan for the New Year's concert. Conceived specifically to be viewed by an online audience while the band played in an empty stadium, this image shows The Solar Farm – a large mirror ball that descended and split apart to reveal the band inside to begin the show. An array of 72 radial LED screens on kinetic arms streamed live images of fans' faces from their Instagram feeds.

The Arashi Vortex. XR (extended reality) technology, which allows virtual and physical worlds to be blended together in live production environments, was used to create an impressive digital layer over the physical set within the Tokyo Dome.

STUFISH, U2 'eXPERIENCE + iNNOCENCE' world tour, 2018
A photo of the U2 'Experience and Innocence' tour, showing how the audience could use their phones and a custom-made U2 smartphone app to create AR (augmented reality) images and videos superimposed over the live performance in front of them. An AR avatar of Bono is shown 'looming' over the audience.