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Switch On! Using Mobile Phones in Actor Training

(Maria Kapsali, University of Leeds)

As suggested by the title, this text is about a project I developed with technologist Simon East that explored two ways of using mobile phones as resources for performer training purposes:

- First, the way mobile phones could be used as cameras in order to develop a multi-viewpoint recording and real-time playback of actor training exercises.

fig. 1 Multi-Camera Application.

- Second, the ways in which they can enable the production of quadrophonic sound through the actor's movements in the space.

fig. 2 3D Sound Application in Movement Improvisation

I will concentrate here on the second application. I worked with a group of eight second-year undergraduates working toward their BA in Theater and Performance at the University of Leeds, in a series of workshops that explored these two possibilities, primarily in exercises of movement improvisation and character creation.¹

fig. 3 3D Sound Application in Character Creation

During the workshops, the students held the phones in their hands or strapped them to their legs and arms, and each student / mobile phone had a characteristic sound. As East explains, "movement data from each phone were sent back to a laptop where the dynamics and 3D location of a specific sound for each student was played back over quadraphonic speakers installed in the space."² So the movement of the specific body part as well as the movement of the whole person in the space would affect the pitch of the sound, its reverberation as well as its panning across four speakers placed in the four corners of the room. I would like to start by contextualizing the project in relation to the recent interest in the use of new technologies in the field of performer training, as well as the wider and more established field of multimedia performance, and then map out the questions that a project such as this may enable us to ask about the psychophysical and cultural aspects of performer training.

Placing the Project within a Wider Context

Neither the aims nor the technologies employed in this project were particularly original or innovative. The use of mobile phones in performance has been routinely explored by theater

¹ Workshop Credits: Workshop Leader: Maria Kapsali; Technologist: Simon East; Participants: Job Kabamba, Marcus Marsh, Harriet Meeuwissen-True, Rachel Murphy, Julien Powell, Megan Sims, Christos Charisoulis, Josh Hall-Brown (University of Leeds, School of Performance and Cultural Industries).

² East, Simon. Private correspondence.

companies such as Blast Theory and Newworld Theater. Equally, as Robert Wechsler attests, the use of “human motion in performances to control sounds and images is as old as theater itself.”³ Wechsler’s dance company Palindrome, for example, has explored a number of possibilities for using movement as a way to produce sound.

In the field of performer training the situation is somewhat different, and an interest in using new technologies has only begun to be noticeable. For example, Jon Burt utilizes head-mounted GoPro cameras in training for circus performance (2014); Susan Davis has explored the use of still cameras in the creation and embodiment of theatrical character (2012); and Marissa Zanotti has developed an application for mobile phones for the teaching of choreography. In the field of vocational dance training such innovations are much more established, in both theory and practice.⁴ In the field of actor and performer training, however, it would be fair to say that substantial outcomes of either theory or practice are yet to be produced. Indeed, Jonathan Pitches has recently noted that “whilst the backdrop for studio teaching is clearly wrapped up in [a] digital context [including] digital training resources and DVDs, documentation approaches, [and] dissemination mechanisms, the hands-on direct pedagogy of training itself has largely remained unscathed.”⁵ The project I developed then could be seen as part of a cluster of individual--and in some cases short-lived--explorations against a background of ongoing practice and theorization of existing training regimes.

The difference between these technology-driven experiments and the established training regimes of actor training is not only one of size and quantity. The relationship between them could be seen in terms of Raymond Williams’s formulation of dominant, emergent, and residual structures of feeling. Structures of feeling are the set of assumptions and beliefs that both mark any particular society and are manifested in individual behaviors. According to Williams, structures of feeling are not static, but are in constant process, in which the “dominant”

³ Wechsler, Robert. “Artistic Considerations in the Use of Motion Tracking with Live Performers: A Practical Guide” in Broadhurst, Sue and Machon, Josephine (eds), *Performance and Technology*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, 2006, p. 60-77, p. 60.

⁴ For example, see: Alaoui, Fdili Sarah, Cyrille Henry and Christian Jacquemin. “Physical Modelling for Interactive Installations and the Performing Arts,” *International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2014, p. 159-78; Schiphorst, Thecla and Philippe Pasquier. “Moving Stories,” *ACM Interactions*, <<http://interactions.acm.org/archive/view/january-february-2015/movingstories-simon-fraser-university?searchterm=movingstories%2C+Simon+Fraser+University>>, 2015, accessed 27 March 2015; Bermudez, Bertha, Scott deLahunta, Marijke Hoogenboom, *et al.* “The Double Skin / Double Mind Interactive Installation,” *Journal of Artistic Research, Research Catalogue*, 2011, <<http://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/?weave=1585>>, accessed 27 March 2015.

⁵ Pitches, Jonathan. *From Vertical to Horizontal: the Future of Russian Actor Training in a Digital Age*, Conference paper, Russian Theater Research Network UK, 2014, p. 2.

structures mark the official, established approaches and behaviors, while the “emergent” structures are yet to be shaped, and embody understandings or a way of doing things that differ from the dominant one.⁶ We could say that actor training experiments with technology comprise an emergent approach, which does not simply develop alongside or in the margins of the dominant languages and approaches of actor training; these experiments are envisaged and conceptualized in relation to the key assumptions, terms and concepts of the dominant approaches. In other words, we could say that experiments with new technologies are based on the fundamental assumptions of performer training practice: established notions of presence, energy, concentration, a certain understanding of theatrical character, group work, etc.

Trevor Whittock, writing about film, argues that there are “two drawbacks to any endeavor to apply traditional notions to new areas of experience: the traditional terms may become overextended and useless and their employment may lead to preconceptions that hinder the recognition of the new for what it is.”⁷ Nonetheless, he also asks: “what other resource have we but to explore the unknown with the aid of the known, in the process modifying what we thought we knew and discovering what we did not expect to find?”⁸ Whittock suggests it is permissible to venture into new areas by employing old knowledge – in fact this might be the only way possible – as long as we remain open to the possibility of discoveries that may challenge our existing knowledge.

If I were to consider this project in terms of Whittock’s distinction between established knowledge and the unknown, what I “knew” was the practice and theory of psychophysical forms of training; what I did not know was the potential for using technology in a creative way beyond its quotidian, domesticated function. My starting point therefore was the psychophysical, and the use of mobile phones was very much embedded within exercises and understandings that derive from psychophysical tradition. I combined the old and the new in the following way: I utilized the structures of well-known basic exercises, and the mobile phones were added as an extra element, as one more partner.

Mobile Phones and Actor Training Pedagogy

Simon East and I first played around with the way movement can produce sound; we then explored the way the manipulation of partner can produce sound. This was done through a basic exercise where one partner gives an impulse to another, then the person who receives the

⁶ Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977.

⁷ Whittock, Trevor. *Metaphor and Film*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*

impulse follows it through until the impulse is exhausted and the person comes to a standstill. The addition here is that the movement that will be generated by the received impulse will also generate a sound. So, we could say that the sound makes the impulse manifest in an additional way. We finally looked at group improvisation, where a group of people respond to one another and to the situation produced by the group.

fig. 4 3D Sound Application in Partner Work

My original aim was to explore how the use of technology (in this case mobile phones) reinforces or facilitates the training of those skills or resources identified by psychophysical training. For example, the attachment of the mobile phone at a particular part of the body could enhance the person's sensitivity to this body part, and expand his or her movement repertoire; the movement of the sound in the space could enhance the mover's space awareness. The production of sound in partner work could facilitate the ability to relate and respond to one's partner. In all of this is an assumption that technology is useful to the extent that it can affirm or facilitate existing understandings: the technological serves the psychophysical; the digital is at the service of the somatic. The success of the experiment is evaluated according to the extent the exercise managed to train basic skills.

My observations from the workshops suggest that mobile phones offered a tangible object in relation to which, or through which, movement and sound were co-produced. As the software became refined, they offered a very clear sense of cause and effect. Unlike other devices that have been used in the co-production of movement and sound, such as Kinect cameras, the mobile phones offered a very immediate sense of localization, while making the technology that underpinned the application invisible. To use a term from intermediality jargon, we could say that the physical presence of the medium rendered it "transparent."

The clear link between cause and effect also gives the exercises a degree of immersion. Becoming immersed, "being in the zone," "inhabiting" an exercise is an important aspect of psychophysical training. As Csikszentmihalyi has observed, it is often produced by physical activities, when a degree of competence has been achieved.⁹ The problem with beginners, however, is that they do not yet have the physical skills that would enable them to maintain their interest, and would allow them to extend their skills, and so on. So experiences of flow do work, but they rely on a degree of accomplishment. I was pleasantly surprised when students managed to sustain the exercises and to invest them with concentration a lot longer than they originally had.

⁹ Csikszentmihalyi, Mihály. *Flow*, Harper Collins, New York, 1991.

As I watched the videos of the workshop, I noticed that all movement explorations sooner or later ended in some sort of twirling motion. This was something that neither the participants nor I had noticed at the time. I can't help wondering whether the link between cause and effect, movement and sound was a lot more insidious than I first realized. One of the most clearly felt aspects of the application has been the panning of the sound across the four speakers. This, I think, has generated a predisposition to rotating, circling, and twirling, which people explored individually, in partners or as whole groups. Much like Pavlov's salivating dogs, we engaged with the aspect of the sound that was most obvious, and that made our sense of agency most gratifying. What I did not expect was that the technological effect could not only enhance, but actually structure the movement. The possibilities for further exploration based on this very simple link are easy to discern: effective changes in pitch may lead to explorations of levels; extent of reverberations may control the speed of movement and the transition between starting and stopping. Most important, if my hypothesis is correct, then the theme of the exploration could be suggested by the person's response to the sound, rather than given in advance in the form of verbal instruction.

Mobile Phones and Actor Training Culture

I would like to conclude with a few words on the cultural dimension of the project, and to consider the implications of using a device that is so highly domesticated. Andy Lavender has pointed out that mobile phones are no longer "just a means to speak or listen, but sets of cultural activities, cultures of use and constructions of personal identity."¹⁰ In specific relation to young people, Paul Mihailidis talks about a "population tethered to their mobile devices [...] to the extent that they find it increasingly difficult to distinguish relationships that exist in their pockets from those that exist in their physical surroundings."¹¹ Despite their function as an extension of one's private life, mobile phones are shunned in training situations. Their presence brings an ominous possibility of disruption that signals a lack of engagement and consideration on the part of the trainee.

The use of mobile phones in training could be then interpreted both as a sign of resignation to the ubiquity of mobile phones and their capacity for disruption, as well as a tactic

¹⁰ Lavender, Andy. "Digital Culture" in Bay-Cheng Sarah, Chiel Kattenbelt, Andy Lavender and Robin Nelson (eds.), *Mapping Intermediality in Performance*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2010. p. 125-134, p. 129.

¹¹ Mihailidis, Paul. "A Tethered Generation: Exploring the Role of Mobile Phones in the Daily Life of Young People," *Mobile Media and Communication*, no. 2, 2014, p. 58-72, p. 59.

for re-appropriation.¹² In a presentation on a mobile application that she has developed for choreography, Marissa Zanotti somewhat resignedly remarked that “at least now they [the students] can take them [the mobile phones] in the studio.” And despite the resigned tone of Zanotti’s statement, it could be observed that the use of mobile phones both in my project and in hers not only becomes a strategy to “disarm” mobile phones as sources of disruption, but marks an effort to engage in the training process an important part of the student’s extended body / self. If we view these projects from a cultural point of view, what is important is not so much how the mobile app may facilitate the aims of the training; rather, it is that the aims of the training are facilitated by a mobile phone. As already mentioned, there are a number of technologies that can facilitate interactions between movement and sound, such as Kinect cameras and motion tracking. Neither of these, however, are part and parcel of the participants’ immediate cultural landscape. Neither of these would have allowed the participants to involve in the training process a part of their life and culture that is often seen as inimical to the creative process.

To conclude, I would argue that our engagement with new technologies as performer training resources should not only explore creative and artistic possibilities; our engagement needs to appreciate the way in which the “embeddedness” of new technologies in our daily lives brings forth new kinds of subjectivities to be trained. Indeed, by virtue of its long-term, in-depth nature, performer training may offer a space that allows us to explore not only the potential of new technologies as useful tools, but our relationships to them. Performer training may well serve as a site of experimentation where we can envisage and constitute anew our position in a technologically mediated world, and our lives as post-human subjects.

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¹² A similar strategy is noted by Bill Blake in his discussion of Newworld Theater’s *PodPlays*, a series of performances delivered acoustically through the participant’s mobile device while engaging participants in a perambulation of public spaces. In light of a participant’s account that “personal media use in public spaces was making her less publicly aware” Blake argues that “instead of critiquing the problem of personal media use, [Newworld Theater] engages the problem directly, changing the nature of use through creative reorientation” (Blake, Bill. *Theater and the Digital*, Palgrave MacMillan, Hampshire, 2014, p. 53).

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