The New Media as Technologies of Self, or 'The Sentimental Journey' of Modern Nomads

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Abstract.
The paper presents different examples of sentimental journeys starting from the legendary journey of Laurence Sterne to the Akademik Shokalskiy ship stuck in the Antarctic ice as an argument for introduction of the term 'Technologies of Self' as a useful tool to describe the ways people cope with unfamiliar circumstances. Just as Phatic communication describes non-informational exchange as a tool of contact establishment with others, the term 'Technologies of Self' helps understand audience behaviour in the interactive environment as a tool of self-mastery via reflection.

Introduction

Acoustic Images Laboratory

The main goal of our laboratory is to research diverse aspects of human – machine interaction in the arts field. For example, interactive audio-visual installation "Acoustic Images" is about interdependence of audience's movements, sound and video. Every viewer becomes a co-author, a conductor and a performer, who adds her own music part to the sounding composition. A camera captures movements of the audience and transforms them into sound. Different motions produce different pitches, timbers and volumes and panoramic position of sound. At the same time the resulting music produces video images. Thus the audience can simultaneously see and hear results of their motions.

Importantly, the resulting sound is harmonised so that it does not produce cacophony but meaningful music. It is a "concert sculpture" where a full-length 40-minute 4 parts concert can be performed solely by the audience.

Originally we expected participants to enjoy the power of being able to control the process of music production. To our surprise, instead the participants preferred to enjoy themselves, their bodies and reflections of the bodies on the screen, rather than to control the results, and were not taken aback by the cacophony produced. They did not want to eliminate the cacophony by creating harmonious sounds. Instead they enjoyed the very act of the interaction. That made us re-evaluate the very meaning, raison-d'etre of the interactive arts.

So, when dealing with audiences of our Acoustic Images installation, I ended up watching other people watching our installation and artworks in general. I've noticed how introvert people in fact seem to be while looking at objects and even while interacting with them!

The Mechanism of Catharsis

Until recently, Lev Vygotsky's theory of Catharsis was used to describe the mechanism behind the emotional response of the arts' audiences:

"Catharsis of the aesthetic response is the transformation of affects, the explosive response which culminates in the discharge of emotions….the basic aesthetic response consists of affect caused by art, affect experienced by us as if it were real, but which finds its release in the activity of imagination provoked by a work of art. This central release delays and inhibits the external motor aspect of affect, and we think we are experiencing only illusory feelings. Art is based upon the union of feeling and imagination. Another peculiarity of art is that, while it generates in us opposing affects, it delays… the motor expression of emotions and, by making opposite impulses collide, it …initiates an explosive discharge of nervous energy." [1]

In other words, Vygotsky implies that all our feelings necessarily come with bodily motor discharge. In the situation of art's consumption (at a theatre, art gallery or other cultural setting) the external motor discharge is impossible. Thus the affect caused by art finds release in our emotions. This intensification of emotions caused by absence of motor discharge results in the catharsis. [2]

Moreover, for this aesthetical catharsis to become meaningful for the audience it is necessary that the audience remain at a distance from the art work – both at a physical distance and a psychological one.

We immediately notice here that this analysis of the aesthetic response differs from our research interest - interactive arts – in three important ways: 1) it stresses the importance of distance between the audience and the art work; 2) it underscores the absence of motor discharge and 3) it describes response of the audience to the familiar. The audience dives into catharsis because it recognizes the circumstances presented in the artwork (in Vygotsky, mostly theatrical works).

In interactive environments, to the contrary, the audience 1) is physically immersed into the artwork, 2) most of the time invited to respond with bodily movements, and 3) the circumstances offered by the artists are often not familiar. The interactive arts audience often find themselves in unfamiliar circumstances.

So how do we describe emotional response of the audiences in interactive environments? Would be the term 'catharsis' still useful or shall we replace it with a more apt notion?

I suggest widening our research by including social media and interactive gadgets. They all can be described as interactive environments. Studying audience behaviour in some types of these environments can help us understand better the audience behaviour in other types.

Let us start with the emotional distance and its role in cultural studies.

Reflection

In cultural studies, emotional distance was often connected to the notion of reflection. Indeed, to be able to reflect on something one has to be detached, disconnected from it.

But this disconnectedness can be of two types. The first type was invented by the Enlightenment via invention of the Public Sphere – a sphere where public affairs would be discussed outside of political action, using purely rational tools, most important of which was a disinterested reflection.

Some hundred years later Soren Kierkegaard described the Public Sphere as a new and dangerous cultural phenomenon in which the leveling produced by the Press brought out something that was deeply wrong from the start with Enlightenment idea of detached reflection.

The press leads the public to transcend their local, personal involvement and overcome their reticence about what did not directly concern them: "a public ...destroys everything that is relative, concrete and particular in life." [3]

What is lost in disengaged discussion is precisely the conditions for acquiring practical wisdom. The only alternative Kierkegaard saw to this paralyzing reflection was to plunge into some kind of activity -- any activity -- as long as one threw oneself into it with passionate involvement. [4]

Another alternative though was offered inside the Enlightenment and in the same time period, and it was the other type of detached reflection: reflection of a Sentimental poet, not a public.

Sentimentalism

Definition

Friedrich Schiller, one of the most prominent figures of the proto-romantic movement Sturm und Drang, counts reflection as the main difference between a naïve poet and a sentimental one:

'All poets belong either to the naïve or to the sentimental. …The sentimental poet reflects on the impression the objects make in him, and only on this reflection is the emotion grounded, in which he himself is moved and moves us. The object is here connected with an idea, and only in this connection does his poetical force rest. The sentimental poet is therefore always concerned with two conflicting conceptions and feelings, with reality as limit and with his idea as the infinite, and the mixed feeling he arouses will always testify to this two-fold source." [5]

Christian Scheib explains:

'According to Schiller, then, those who believe in the immediate are naïve, while those who desirously and reflectively continue to productively work on transference… are sentimental… This reflectiveness, or, to …express it more in terms of von Foerster's Cybernetics – this constant feedback, is connected to the original existence, the already-having-been-createdness of images.' [6]

The literary movement Sentimentalism has appeared as a reply to Enlightenment's over-reliance on reason (Rationalism) while demonstrating how emotions are to be constantly analysed, reflected upon in the form of sentiments. Contrary to the one just described in the previous chapter, the sort of reflection proposed by Sentimentalism seems to offer an alternative, a solution to the problem discerned by Kierkegaard in the disengaged reflection of the Public.

Laurence Sterne was the contemporary of the Enlightenment. This means that he could not envision the troubles observed by Kierkegaard. Nonetheless Sterne's ideas are valuable precisely because they cast an alternative light on the issues concerning the Self and the Public in the age of Reason.

Laurence Sterne

Sentimentalism attained its ultimate form in the works of Laurence Sterne whose unfinished novel 'The Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy' (1768) gave the sentimentalist movement its name.

Unlike prior travel accounts which stressed classical learning and objective non-personal points of view, 'The Sentimental Journey' emphasized the subjective discussions of personal taste and sentiments, of manners and morals over classical learning. Though the novel was supposed to recount a journey, like most sentimental novels it had a plot which prioritises advance of emotions over action. Thus though the hero travels from one geographical point to another, his main journey is from one emotion to another. So it is a sort of a non-journey.

A little accident described in the chapter called 'The Remise Door. Calais' seems to demonstrate the mechanics of sentimental reflection:

"Monsieur Dessein left us together, with her hand in mine, and with our faces turned towards the door of the Remise, and said he would be back in five minutes. Now a colloquy of five minutes, in such a situation, is worth one of as many ages, with your faces turned towards the street. In the latter case, 't is drawn from the objects and occurrences without—when your eyes are fixed upon a dead blank—you draw purely from yourselves." [7]

A man staring at a dull meaningless object, having to extract the meaning from himself – that is a

portrait of the modern man in front of the TV set or a computer screen!

The sentimental plot structure is even more visible in Sterne's other novel – "The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman". The development of 'Tristram Shandy' is nearly static: by the end of nearly 400 pages Tristram has hardly arrived to the age of three, and only due to the little accidents involving Tristram and his family does the story develops and retains some kind of narrative coherence.

In the light of the previous discussion we can say that two Shandy brothers represent two types of reflection: disengaged, knowledgeable, well-read Walter and sentimental, emotional, engaged Toby. Clearly, Sterne's sympathy is on the Toby's side. On every occasion, Walter has a quote from Classics, while Toby measures everything by his moral values.

Thus in Schiller terms, it is Toby for whom "reality is limit and his idea is the infinite", making him a perfect sentimental poet though he never wrote a line of rhymes.

In "Tristram Shandy" too Sterne narrates a kind of a non-journey (in fact, a non-journey as a narration of a voyage inside the bigger non-journey of the novel itself). With his famous sense of humour he calls it '*my plain stories'* hinting at a nearly static pace of his novel: stories are as devoid of interesting adventures as plains lack interesting geographic features.

"How far my pen has been fatigued, like those of other travellers, in this journey of it, over so barren a track—the world must judge—but the traces of it, which are now all set o' vibrating together this moment, tell me 'tis the most fruitful and busy period of my life; …by stopping and talking to every soul I met, who was not in a full trot— joining all parties before me—waiting for every soul behind—hailing all those who were coming through cross-roads—arresting all kinds of beggars, pilgrims, fiddlers, friars… In short, by seizing every handle, of what size or shape soever, which chance held out to me in this journey—I turned my *plain* into a *city*." [8]

Modern non-journeys

These non-journeys of Sterne came to my mind when I encountered accounts of two modern journeys, more precisely two expeditions. They were different in every possible way: one was undertaken by artists (narrated by the sound artist Hildegard Westercamp), the other one - by scientists (narrated mostly by the scientist Chris Turney), one was an expedition to a remote desert, the other one – to the even more remote Antarctic.

The Antarctic Expedition

The Antarctic expedition was halted when the ship Akademik Shokalskiy stranded in Antarctic ice over last Christmas.

The passengers, most of whom were climate scientists, had to interrupt their research. Stuck in the middle of nowhere, amid quite hazardous conditions what did these people do? Naturally enough, they searched for means to keep them busy. Amazingly though, one of the main such means turned out to be… blogging. They explicitly announced that they were starting a collective blog 'to keep the spirits up'. Or, as one journalist put it, they 'channeled their energies into video making'. [9]

The blogging took shape of both writing on the website and video making, apart from social media updates by Chris Turney and other leaders of the expedition. One note on the website is particularly outstanding. It is written by Ziggy Marzinelli and it starts as follows:
'Hi all. I have never written a blog before and I really don't know what they are supposed to be about, so I'm just going to write about whatever comes to mind at this very moment – the only thing I can guarantee is that most of it will make no sense'. [10]

Another entry is dedicated to a birthday celebrated on the stuck ship by another expedition member. A few entries are about the Christmas and New Year celebrations. In other words, non-sensational and quite routine occasions.

Thus, what happened and what is well documented in the blogs and numerous interviews, explorers-extroverts became introverts, exploration of outer space turned into exploration of inner space; expansion of the physical outreach turned into intensification of emotions.

The Mexican Desert Expedition

A similar occasion happened to the famous sound artist and acoustic ecologist Hildegard Westercamp in a Mexican desert. She wrote:
"I experienced 3 weeks of truly extraordinary quiet, as I camped with a group of artists in a Mexican desert called the Zone of Silence... I discovered that the sparseness of sound and music in this environment and over such a long time span created a natural desire for sound, soundmaking and listening in us. Our ears tended to reach out, searching actively for anything audible in the environment.
…Our own sounds of walking, breathing, and talking were usually the loudest in this quiet place and told us, via the feedback process, where and who we were... eventually transmitting a sense of safety and belonging to us.
Since we were without any possibilities of listening to music we eventually also felt an acute desire for musical explorations, singing, and soundmaking with whatever materials the environment provided us." [11]

A slightly different situation, and not only due to the obvious difference in circumstances of a Mexican desert versus ices of Antarctica. Westercamp describes a hunger for electric devices which they had to replace with instruments of their own making, while on Shokalsky it was the way around: the devices made up for the lack of human interaction.

What unites both expeditions though is that they both resulted in their participants being more engaged, as

well as more attuned to their relationship with the surrounding environments but also their relationship with their own feelings and emotions, "who we were", as Westercamp put it.

Juxtaposition of these two expeditions is also illustrative of the role which the new media play in our daily goings: these media were used as tools for emotional survival via reflection. With the help of recording devices and/or social media people produced a kind of counter-narrative to screen the unfamiliar uncomfortable circumstances.

We can see also that, just like in Sentimental novels of the 18th century, when people stop traveling, i.e. moving physically, they immediately start moving along their sentiments. Discovery turns into self-discovery, or rather self-mastery. Awareness of the surroundings (originally searched for by Westercamp) turned into increased and more attuned self-awareness.

Making as a Feedback Tool

What we see in both expeditions is that people have found themselves in extreme circumstances. Quite unconsciously to themselves they started producing some sort of manipulations in order to resist these circumstances. Note how in the first expedition people turned to video-making while in the second expedition - to sound-making. In both cases it is a making of one sort or another.

Presumably, in extreme circumstances (when they are not a matter of life and death) people naturally turn to the manipulations they grew to be most comfortable with. So what do we see in both of these expeditions? – People turn to the new media. Interestingly, they do not expect the media to entertain them (not in a direct straightforward way) but rather they use them as instruments for dealing with their own sentiments. Perhaps we can call them reflection, 'feedback' tools.

These 'tools' are very similar to what the French philosopher Michel Foucault described as "Technologies of Self".

"Technologies of Self"

The notion of "Technologies of Self" was introduced by the French philosopher Michel Foucault to describe a process of subjectivation, "thought-through and intentional acts, with the help of which people not only establish particular rules of conduct, but also intend to transform themselves, to become different in their singular being, to make their life their own artwork" as a part of a more widely understood 'Care of the Self'. [12]

[Note: "Technologies of Self", "Technologies of the Self" and even "Techniques of the Self" all co-exist in the philosophical literature. "Technologies of Self" was recently proved to have the closest meaning to what Michael Foucault himself implied in the notion.]

Feedback as a Skill

In The Care of the Self, Foucault describes these practices of self-mastery by means of which the Greek individual sought to transform himself.

The goal of such care was to work upon oneself so as to produce one's life as a work of art, not to find a deep inner truth:

"A self that is work of art will not be a lucid subject, an autonomous agent, nor a locus of deep self-analysis, but it presumably will have its own kind of relative unity and stability. And it will be based on taking over these old Socratic-Stoic practices." [13]

The aim of these exercises is to internalize the learned 'true speeches' so that to develop useful skills. Skills are considered similar to the arms for future battles, as a 'shield' – Paraskeue.

The same aim is served by Hupomnemata – collections of bits and pieces of learned knowledge, quotes etc. They too are supposed to serve as weapons, useful tools, as long as they are always ready for use.

All these skills, Technologies of Self, should serve for the development of a form of behaviour rather than a volume of learned knowledge. The knowledge must transform into particular standard of behaviour.

The aim of Technologies of Self is to free oneself, to get oneself towards one's own relevant nature, which never had a chance to reveal itself before. [14] Ideally, the person is expected to reach a high degree of self-control. To be stronger than oneself means to be always vigilant, to keep oneself always under suspicion. The flux of representations and ideas also needs to be controlled and mastered.

Kierkegaard insists that the self requires not "variableness and brilliancy" but "firmness, balance, and steadiness". [15] Without some way of telling the relevant from the irrelevant and the significance from the insignificant everything becomes equally interesting and equally boring. [4] Technologies of Self teach how to do exactly that: to tell the relevant from the irrelevant because the Self is expected to constantly filter all incoming representations in order to block those which are irrelevant or out of control of the person.

The Other in the Exercises

The care of self in its core presumes existence of the Other. Foucault represents it, in fact, as a social practice, inscribed into institutional frames. Care of the self thus is permeated with the presence of the Other: the other as a mentor of life, as a mail correspondent, by whom you measure yourself, the other as a friend who is ready to help, a friendly relative. It is not a requirement of 'loneliness, to the contrary, it is a truly communal practice', 'reinforcement of societal ties'. [12], [14]

The real care of the self consists of stepping aside at a distance from one's pursuits and keeping that distance which allows one to observe oneself and events – but not to detach oneself from the world, rather to change the scale of the observation. When one is seen as a little point at a

single moment in time, inserted in a bigger picture of the enormous world, the self acquires the necessary attitude.

Here, in Foucault's analysis these manipulations are viewed as exercises and practices designed to train people for 'future battles' of life – battles in metaphorical sense, perhaps something not too different from the expeditions we discussed in the previous chapter.

Phatic communication

As Dreyfus noted, "around the care of the self, described by Foucault there developed an entire activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself on oneself and communication with others were linked together." [13]

In fact, the Communication theory has described such link long before Foucault through the term 'Phatic communication'.

Phatic communication is communication "that serves to establish or maintain social relationships rather than to impart information, communicate ideas, etc." [16]. The most obvious example is a small talk about weather: "- It is a nice day today. – Oh yes, the weather is great!". See also the blog entry by Ziggy Marzinelli cited above.

However trivial such exchange may seem, there is a strong argument to be made that phatic functions influence all social interaction, and are fundamental to human communication generally.

As Zeynep Tufekci argues, "We are a deeply social species and we engage in "social grooming" all the time, i.e. acts that have no particular informational importance but are about connecting, forming, displaying and strengthening bonds, affirming and challenging status, creating alliances, gossiping, exchanging tidbits about rhythms of life. I personally doubt that there is substantially more social grooming going on today, on average, compared to the pre-Internet era. The only difference is that the Internet makes it visible." [17]

Phatic linguistic behaviour belongs to the Technologies of Self because participants use language for contact establishment rather than information transmission. Thus they can be said to use conversations as 'tools at hand', as Paraskeue.

The Other in the Communication

The Other – who is important for the phatic communication and for Technologies of Self in general – is already built in the social media as well as interactive gadgets and interactive arts by design, due to the 'built-in cooperation' of the web 2.0 and the new media. [18]

The way the new media designed (i.e. their built-in cooperation) turn them into a perfect tool for the phatic communication.

What is important for our argument is that as in the phatic communication people use words and bits of information as tools for the contact establishment, similarly people use interactive settings (gadgets, environments, social media etc.) as tools for the self-

reassurance, in other words, establishment of contact with themselves, a self-mastery.

The flux of personal information people daily publish via interactive websites of Web 2.0 is not information, nor communication in the strict sense. And that is when the term "Technologies of Self" comes useful.

New Media as Technologies of Self

To view new media as Technologies of Self means:

1) to center analysis on the human side of the 'human – machine' interaction;

2) to get rid of the Cartesian worldview and to view users of the new media as intentionally interacting with the environment and/or themselves (rather than as passive spectators);

3) to start viewing manipulations, which users produce with the new media, as a sort of activity interesting in itself, irrelevant of the content.

Today we are exposed to a constant flow of information mediated by all possible types of devices. To preserve oneself in this flux one has to work hard to constantly reproduce ones own integrity. [19]

Kierkegaard asserts that only in the higher form of existence - 'the ethical sphere' - one has a stable identity and one is committed to involved action. Stability of the identity is attained through connection to an 'idea' as in Schiller's definition of the sentimental poet.

In our times people have no other resistance tools than creating their own counter-flux in response to the flow attacking them from the outside world. Naturally, the easiest available 'Paraskeue' they have at hand is themselves. For the outside observer they may behave like Narcissus. [c.f. 20] But as we noted above, interactive environments created by the new media have in-built cooperation by which they have the necessary Other already incorporated in the setting. Thus the user is not necessarily a Narcissus. A better way to describe him is him being engaged in 'Care of the Self' activities.

Modern Audiences: Narcissus, Nomads, Makers?

Dreyfus thus concluded the practical outcome of Kierkegaard's critique of disengaged disinterested Public:

'Since expertise can only be acquired through involved engagement with actual situations, what is lost in disengaged discussion is precisely the conditions for acquiring practical wisdom.' [4]

In our modern age, could this 'practical wisdom' come from the skills we all acquire in our everyday use of the modern interactive media? Can the phatic function of our actions – what Heidegger calls 'the saving power of insignificant things' - be considered as a possible resource of such practical wisdom?

As the results of our research suggest, in the human – machine interaction in the artistic setting people put the interaction first, above the content. Audiences of the social media also provide examples of such phatic acts.

For example, Alex Stockburger thus describes file-sharing communities like Warez:
'Tightly knit mediated communities of individuals to connect and share an event that does not necessarily have to do with the consumption of the music that is shared. It is the speed of the transfers and the fame that can be gained with being the first to "release" a particular title that motivates their actions. Here… music is not heard and not even necessarily collected'. [21]

Mash-ups (also known as vidding) provide another prominent example. Politically charged mash-ups (informational) co-exist along fan vidding (phatic). Fan vidding is a production of mash-ups through re-editing excerpts of one's favourite film. Johnathan Macintosh exemplifies both types: politically charged mash-ups and fan vidding, both with a pinch of social criticism. [22]

Similarly, blogging represents informational blogs as well as purely phatic blogs.

Army blogs are typical phatic blogs. Upon joining the army (on the obligatory basis), young guys start producing tweets several times more often then when they did while at home. Not because they are in shock of the new, but to the contrary, because they fight the dullness of the army routine. Just as participants of the expeditions to the Silent Zone and the Antarctic described above they do not use social media to entertain themselves, neither to produce knowledge. All they want is to engage in a phatic communication, phatic activity which in their circumstances plays a role of a Paraskeue – a Technology of Self.

This seems to be a solution how the new media can help us in creation of a sort of 'ethics of the Self' which Foucault considered "a vital, politically necessary task, if indeed there is nothing else to rely on when resisting the political power than the relationship with self". [12]

Dreyfus thus describes how one can learn to develop such a relationship with oneself, via 'art of life' or 'care of the self':

"a sensitivity to one's current style as a style enables one to collect now-marginal practices from the past which in turn allows one to engage in a loosely ordered multiplicity of activities that give life meaning or beauty, while at the same time contributing to slowly changing the totalizing background practices that endanger human freedom." [13]

I believe that thanks to the habitual quality of the new media manipulations, modern young people unconsciously learn 'technologies of self' – i.e. how to 'read one's life like a book', 'build one's life like an artwork', 'develop attitudes towards circumstances which do not depend on one', 'see one's life as a chain of lessons, which make one stronger'.[12]

Some Practical Implications

When these youngsters come to visit our interactive installation they approach it the way they got used to – i.e. via familiar scripts of new media manipulations.

Some artistic and even commercial projects try to incorporate these scripts. See for example Walt Disney's experiment with introduction of iPads into movie-going:

"Disney's latest re-release of the 1989 classic The Little Mermaid came with a twist: the company encouraged children to bring and use their iPads during the screening. Using The Little Mermaid App. audience members can play games, compete with other participants in the theater and sing along with the music as the story unfolds." [23]

In our artistic laboratory "Acoustic Images" we too look for the ways to incorporate our findings in our art works. The unconscious reaction of the audience has become more important to us than a straightforward interaction script of 'action – reaction'.

Conclusion

Interactive environments in the arts often offer unfamiliar circumstances with built-in cooperation. Thus the only reasonable way to respond to them is to copy behavioural scripts proved to be successful in familiar interactive settings. Most often these are the settings of the social media and electronic gadgets.

In unfamiliar circumstances of immersive interactive settings a paradox occurs: the public artificially recreates distance by using their interactive devices. This behavioural script has been noticed before, but previously it was taken for psychological screening, protection from the setting. Now, in the light of the above argument, we can suggest that the public – yes, creates the distance – but the aim it seeks is to reflect on the setting (artwork etc.), rather than to withdraw. Vygotsky shows that distance is needed for aesthetic response; Sentimentalists proved that distance is necessary for a proper reflection.

In the unfamiliar settings the distance is particularly needed. People turn to their gadgets both to create that distance in the immersive setting and make it familiar and comfortable.

Further research is needed in order to study these behavioural scripts for their subsequent incorporation into our artistic, social and technological projects. The term which we propose - 'Technologies of Self'- can help in the further research because it seems to describe more accurately the aesthetic response of the interactive arts' audiences.

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