Theatre Criticism on Web 2.0. Publishing, sharing, authoring critique in the light of human-computer interaction. The critical dialogue of the social media.

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La migrazione, anche dovuta alla crisi della stampa cartacea, della quasi totalità del dibattito critico sulle pagine gratuite del Web è una realtà evidente. La tesi di queste ricognizioni, che derivano da un più ampio progetto di ricerca dottorale che si muove tra mediologia, studi teatrali, teorie della critica e filosofie digitali, è che l'attuale ambiente del Web interattivo sia solo in parte regolato da parametri decisionali di matrice umana, e sempre più sottoposto al controllo di un sistema di networking basato sulla dualità hardware/software. Questo articolo indaga discipline legate alla sociologia dei media e alla filosofia digitale, cercando quei paradigmi problematici che obbligano il ragionamento sui linguaggi e sulle funzioni della critica a considerare questa pratica all'interno di un sistema di interazione tra elemento umano e organizzazione meccanica. Come caso di studio viene presentata una recensione in forma di lettera aperta pubblicata da un giornale online, che ha suscitato reazioni controverse e messo in crisi il ruolo del critico come portatore di autorevolezza, spostando l'attenzione dall'analisi dello spettacolo all'osservazione della crisi generale del sistema teatrale italiano. Questo caso di studio mette in luce i punti critici introdotti dal formarsi delle comunità virtuali dei social network, che al giorno d'oggi agiscono come massa di influenza nei confronti dello sguardo sulla scena contemporanea.

TEORIE DI CRITICA TEATRALE / GIORNALISMO / FILOSOFIA DIGITALE / MEDIOLOGIA / STUDI SUI SOCIAL MEDIA

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> *The artificial is inscribed within our understanding of the physical and … serves as a grounding of different modes of production of bodily images, forming strategies of bodily representation.*
>
> BOJANA KUNST

Also due to the general crisis of print press, the quasi totality of the critical writing moved to the free Internet. This "migration process" is causing several changes in terms of job titles and structure of the press, which heavily relies on advertising and often cannot afford to adequately pay for writers.[1] This shift significantly reduces the opportunity to empower the critics with a form of authority derived from their recognized professional experience. To deal with such a profound change, the critics who work online are challenged to keep their technical toolbox and writing techniques up to date. Therefore, criticism is getting redefined in the light of the digital age and its role challenged in the context of the theatrical system.

The interactions and contents on the Web are influenced and constrained by the structures of online publishing, only partly regulated by a coherent sum of human choices, and rather, primarily, by the inherent nature of the digital platforms. Thus, critical writing should perhaps be seen, in the very first place, as a lively storytelling and a potential document about contemporary performing arts. And yet, this action must consider the peculiarities of today's information society, characterized by technologies which increase the access to and breadth of knowledge within the economy and the community.

Conceived as a practice-led investigation from the perspective of mediology and digital philosophy, my doctoral research is investigating the impact of the online media environment on the technical and creative processes of performing arts criticism published and diffused on blogs, web magazines and social media. In particular, it analyses those paradigms that are currently affecting, and sometimes changing, the concepts of authorship and authoritativeness.

The space for reviews and criticism in mainstream print media decreased and a way is given to the critical discourse on the interactive

1 An executive overview of how the migration to the Internet affected the working conditions of journalists can be found in Santos Silva (2011). Clay Shirky observes the online publishing phenomenon from the point of view of those publishers that had seen a new earning perspective in it (Shirky, 2009).

media. Some of those methodologies and rhetorical principles which used to enforce a critic's argument on contemporary theatre are rapidly being replaced by others deriving from digital systems and the mechanisms of online discourse. The impact of human-computer interaction on theatre criticism online is visible in a wide range of issues. A comparative analysis of different writing formats (theatre news, reviews, interviews) unveils the importance of those strategies that a writer, a blogger and the editorial staff of an online magazine must use to gain visibility.

As studied by attention economists[2], in the so-called "information age" news and articles "arrive pre-Googled and pre-personalized" (Simon *apud* Lanham, 2006: 8). This means that a writer or a publisher need to understand how the circulation of the informations works, in order to get the reader's attention. The material ontology of digital devices, as well as hypertext, have a strong influence on the formats: as Richard A. Lanham argues: "The devices that regulate attention are stylistic devices. Attracting attention is what style is about" (Lanham, 2006: xi). Certain limitations of approaches to content optimization can thus affect the traditional act of writing and publishing a critical text.

This article also offers some considerations on another crucial issue, that every journalist and critic face when publishing online: the influence that the dialogue carried on by the "virtual communities" (Rheingold, 1993) has on building the authoritativeness of a professional critic. For this purpose, I am going to discuss other disciplines that may be peripheral to theatre studies and theories of criticism but offer a new perspective. A special attention is dedicated to some specific paradigms of digital systems in writing and publishing. A case study will be presented and discussed.

THE "CYBERNETIC AUTHOR"

Those who study the connections between arts and technology must keep pace with software development. On the interactive Web, the devices become a major interface that interprets and narrates reality on behalf of the users.

2 Attention economy, or economics of the attention, is a branch of knowledge, launched by the economist Herbert Simon in the early seventies, which applies elements of economics theory to information management.

Coining the term "cybernetics", Norbert Wiener defined "the scientific study of control and communication in the animal and the machine" (Wiener, 1948). This scheme of control and communication was based on a fundamental analogy – present in machines *and* human beings – of certain regulatory systems such as communication processes and information analysis. Therefore, in the digital environment, human intellect is now seemingly chased by an automatic counterpart, which claims its "personal" share of control.

In questioning the actual influence of criticism on the cultural discourse, one should wonder to which point the users and their ability to interact are in fact depending on the mode of operation of technical devices.

Following the studies on digital materialism, when one considers the materiality of media, human intervention becomes an effect of technological storage and information transmission: "a product of a semi-anonymous history in which technologies structure possibilities for participation, politics, and knowledge. The human is consequentially embedded in and emerges from a field of material relations; it is not a self-determined actor whose will calls the world into being" (Bollmer, 2015: 96).

Such perspectives inform about the relation between users and producers of content in the online environment, which appears to be crucial when questioning the value of highly specialized content such as critical writing, and, more specifically, the authoritativeness expressed by the critics as members of the theatrical systems.

Thus, with special regard to automation processes that are regulating human-computer interaction, digital materialism questions the position of the human factor regarding the duality hardware/software that works behind the screens of digital devices.

As the case study will demonstrate, the interactive nature of the Web, along with specific writing formats, can modify the initial intentions of an author, and foster a lively debate.

It should therefore not be taken for granted that a discourse devised and initiated by a human can maintain its qualities of authority, authoritativeness and even authorship when – in order to be produced and shared – it must pass through such a complex mechanical process.

Through a more scrutinizing analysis of the media environment, a more appropriate critical practice escapes the strict duality user/producer to find a new positioning in a sort of *cybernetic author*.

The molecularization of social-cultural and communicative order favours a non-hierarchical form of online debate and reorganizes the way through which the users attribute value to the critical statements. The publication of critical writing in the frame of print journalism (or the online version of popular newspapers) empowers the critic with an immediate authoritativeness, deriving from the fact that the people still trust (and pay for) specific news sources. On the opposite, online publication is self-managed by the users/producers; those who master the technological instruments and the specific technical know-how are able to publish a personal reflection and share it on the Net. Collaborative softwares such as social media and online forums are a powerful stimulus to interaction between users and they provide an alternative news source. Thus, a critic and his/her readers contribute to the construction of a sort of collaborative authoritativeness. As a result, it's getting more and more difficult for a critic's article to be credible and authoritative over other forms of contribution.

The discussion upon the interaction between professional critics and spectators is very lively on an international scale. In a popular post on her theatre blog embedded by *The Guardian* website, theatre critic Lyn Gardner defined the process of open publishing and open commenting as a proof of a lively debate:

> ... just as we need many different kinds of theatre, so we need many different kinds of criticism. Mainstream critics and bloggers are not in competition with each other; they are all part of a widening and lively conversation in which artists frequently write like critics, and critics sometimes curate and think and write about work more like artists. The possibilities for co-creation are exciting. That's not a crisis; it's an enormous bonus that can only be of benefit to theatre. (Gardner, 2013)

However, this mixture of professions, which in many countries is a characteristic of the theatrical system, can also be seen as a potential obstacle to the credibility of critical writing. The professional critic engages in a sort of competition with other kinds of voices that are enabled to participate in a very wide *agora* of comments and opinions. This is especially true for social media, which are a model of non-regulated discourse. A blog can offer a performance review authored by a non-professional critic, or by an individual who is connected to the theatrical system by other kinds of relationship. When that review is posted on

Facebook, its visibility derives from a number of factors different than the plain recognizability of the author's style, rather depending on the number of users that shared the article on their wall. As a result, one might have two reviews of the same performance, one written by a professional and one by a non-professional critic, both equally visible to the same readers, who are free to comment and publish opinions on the performance or even on the article itself.

If human-computer interaction in the writing process invites the critics to redefine their writing style, fitting characteristics (i.e., length or tone of an article must be set considering the average reading time) a strong sociological entailment is hiding behind the act of publication and sharing.

With "convergence culture" (Jenkins, 2006), Henry Jenkins defines a radical bottom-up change in the way mass media had imagined mass culture. With growing personalization and customization of virtual experiences, come new "cultural products". These are consistent with a common knowledge, even (and most likely) when they are received *not* by a "mass" community, rather by a group of users that share more and more specialised interests. This becomes clear when one looks at the functionalities of social media; as Irving Fang underlines: "Because mass and personal media use the same tools and sometimes have the same goals, their distinctions have eroded. The inclusive term is not *mass* communication. It is *mediated* communication" (Fang, 2014: 4).

The case study here presented is a clear example of how the online discourse influences certain choices regarding style and tone of a review and it put them to the test of a very special target readership.

From a philosophical perspective, rhetorical criticism of online discourse focuses on the features that a "voice" should display in order to stand out from such a wide crowd, and a strong emphasis is put on a set of quantitative factors. The core postulate of digital rhetoric is that the term "dialogue" must be updated to digital environment dynamics: the suggestion is to leave behind the definition of "mode of persuasion", and rather to refer it to "a testing of one's own ideas, a contesting of others' ideas, and a collaborative creating of ideas" (Zappen, 2005: 321).

Such changes have a strong impact not only on the journalistic style, but also on the tone of the comments posted by the people who read the article and choose to participate in the debate. Also, due to the blurred separation between professionals and non professionals, the discussion around a play review published online is carried out by multiple voices,

"none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one"[3] (Barthes, 1974: 6).

The following text is an excerpt of a review published on *Gagarin Magazine*[4] the day after a preview of Roberto Latini's[5] *Amleto + Die Fortinbrasmaschine* (2016)[6]. The play was presented in front of a selected audience, as an outcome of a creative residency, in the Teatro Dimora in Mondaino[7]. The author chose a peculiar style and the review had a problematic reception.

> *Where is the play? Open letter to Roberto Latini*
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> Dear Roberto,
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> I write this letter as a sign of respect for you . . . I do it publicly because I would like to consider magazines, big or small, as a space for dialogue.
> . . . I think that, roughly said, this *Hamlet* of yours is in danger of receiving from Roberto Latini every single thing one might expect from Roberto Latini: several microphones, rotating props, suspensions, camouflage, key-words being highlighted, ambiguous textual dramaturgies, montage of visions, circles around the stage, whispered passages, (masterful) use of various voice resonators, stretched-out vowels, verbal gushes to translate inner turmoil, meta-theatrical and literary references, black irony about pop culture, stage props used to create synecdoche, words claimed as meaningless, vocal dynamic range, emotionally driven music, scourging and, at the same time, glorification of the actor's body, multiple endings, an abundance of signs, while the spectator is redundantly invited to discuss his/her own role.

3 Barthes used these words to refer to an ideal non-linear form of textuality, "a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds" (Barthes, 1974: 5).

4 *Gagarin Magazine* is a local (Faenza, Italy) free press cultural magazine printed five times a year which also has an online version. The readers can pitch article proposals, but the magazine doesn't pay the contributors. From the colophon: "We publish the readers' accounts, photos and reviews. We allow our readers to play the main character role."

5 Roberto Latini (1970) is one of the most notable and appreciated actors and theatre makers in the contemporary Italian scene. His company Fortebraccio Teatro has been active since the early nineties with several award-winning productions.

6 *Amleto + Die Fortinbrasmaschine* is a very peculiar staging of Heiner Müller's *Die Hamletmaschine,* that – in accordance with Fortebraccio Teatro's style – mixes excerpts from Müller's text with other Shakespearean plays and performance art.

7 The Teatro Dimora in Mondaino is a venue located in the woods near Bologna. It is subsidized by the Ministry of Culture to select theatre and dance makers to invite for period of short and long term creative residencies. This process is currently one of the few production opportunities for independent theatre artists in Italy.

> What is the boundary between being faithful to an artistic path ... and mannerism? Perhaps is mannerism the destiny of all the arts? Of all the artists?
>
> Given the severe cuts in the Italian cultural system, ... unfortunately it's common to see artists who don't have time to carry on their so-called "research" and rest on their strong points, offering "variations on a theme" continuously presenting the same kind of performance, proposing no innovations. In this case ... the juxtaposition of the various scenes calls to mind Müller's fragmented text, and yet it is still far from a (needed) summary, resulting in a series of more or less efficient choices, that are clearly presented as "the open delivery offered after an artistic residency." I don't want to criticize your choices as a director: all too often theatre critics (wrongly) act as assistant directors. From the point of view of dramaturgy and composition, the ferocious *pars destruens* that characterizes this *Hamlet* of yours is, I think, the main element of innovation in comparison with your latest productions. This could be the key to avoid the narcissistic risk of presenting Latini over Pirandello, Ovid or Shakespeare. Or, maybe, this is the way you wanted to do all this. And so you, legitimately, did.
>
> Hugs, Michele Pascarella.[8] (Pascarella, 2016)

The particular style of this text is influenced by the chosen format. The main characteristic of an open letter is its hybrid form, in which words originally addressed to a single person are shared among a wide readership. The most evident result is that the language appears more colloquial, less faithful to those basic guidelines that are taught in journalism schools and that, however, are still visible in a great part of the reviews printed on newspapers or published online. The main difference between an open letter published on a print newspaper and one shared online is that the Internet readers can obtain an immediate right of reply. And the place for this right of reply is in the social networks.

Nested in anthropology and social studies, a theory of emergent social and interpersonal ties analyses new interaction models designed by the "network society" (Castells, 1996). These new ties can be considered as "contemporary social rituals", where the influence of "mediated interactions" is underlined, along with an updated form of "co-present

8 Michele Pascarella works mainly as a press officer for some major theatre companies in Italy. Occasionally, he contributes to *Gagarin Magazine* and *Art Tribune* with articles on theatre, dance and photography.

interaction", involved in developing a shared knowledge. According to Rich Ling, "mediated interaction can … function in its own right as a means through which members of a group can engage one another and develop a common sense of identity… [T]he directness and ubiquity of the channel can lead to the tightening of social bonds within a group" (Ling, 2008: 119). Ling discusses several case studies related to mobile telephone interaction, but the same conclusions can fit the modes of interaction proposed by social networks.

Today, the virtual communities are able to create a "para-social interaction" (Meyrowitz, 1985: 196), a kind of virtual relation between the users that replicates the co-present interaction: "the evolution of media has begun to cloud the differences between stranger and friend and to weaken the distinction between people who are 'here' and people who are 'somewhere else'" (Meyrowitz, 1985: 122). In this light, in Pascarella's letter the public dimension (a critic writes a review of a play) and the private dimension (the critic and the artist know each other very well) are exposed one next to the other. This happens also when an open letter is published in a newspaper, and yet, in this case, the readers are immediately activated, and their intervention is shaped by the non-rigid rules of social networks.

In this case, the special form of interaction is created between the artist presenting a play (Roberto Latini), the critic discussing the play (Michele Pascarella) and the people that reacted to this confrontation. The interaction between artist and critic and the intervention of the spectators are both mediated by the specific characteristic of online discourse. Most of the subscription forms, that provide access to online forums and comment sections of the newspapers, allow the users to keep their nicknames as a signature. Every user is thus protected by anonymity or, in any case, by a form of mediated interaction. Personal identity is mediated by social media profiles, which are, at the same time, a tool to interact with other users and a place where the users create a personal and professional image of the self. Such image doesn't necessarily match the job title or the role that the users actually have in their community. These roles are collaboratively created and made visible by "cultural software … directly used by millions of people and that carries 'atoms' of culture" (Manovich, 2014: 3).

In the Pascarella-Latini case, the open letter format and the kind of debate that it fosters have the power to move the focus of attention from critical analysis to a wider discussion about the current theatrical system.

As the next excerpt will underline, the kind of reaction to Pascarella's open letter is not focused on the content, rather on the form, that is replicated using an ironic tone.

Given the colloquial tone, Pascarella's letter reduces the critical analysis of the play to a long list of notes which, in fact, are not discussed in depth. The thesis statement, indicating the writer's main reaction to the work, is limited to the confrontation between the director's notes and the actual outcome of the performance. This gives the impression of a sterile remark of dissatisfaction made by a spectator, rather than an authoritative comment made by a critic. Especially in the closing sentence, the critic pushes back his whole analysis to the artist's intentions, which – by the readers who reacted – is seen as a clever way to soften a harsh critique.

The first reply was posted by Massimiliano Civica[9] on his personal Facebook profile.

> *Open letter to Michele Pascarella: Where is the review?*
>
> Dear Michele,
>
> I write this letter as a sign of respect to you, immediately after reading your open letter to Roberto Latini, and after spending a whole afternoon at that "Festival of the Backstage" that is Facebook.
> I do it publicly because I would like to consider a Facebook profile, big or small, as a space for dialogue. I think that what you did is unfair from the perspective of professional ethics and moral...
> If you wrote the exact same notes on Roberto Latini's art and work in a review, I wouldn't dare criticize you. Because I profoundly respect the separation and the independence of professional roles. A theatre director has the right/duty to produce a work of art in which he/she believes, and a critic has the right/duty to be honest and harsh in his/her judgment. Personally, I would never comment or criticize a review of one of my works. A theatre director should remain silent on the matter of a review, be it good or bad, using only his/her work as a response... [E]very one should take responsibility, without violating the other's personal space. In your letter, you express very harsh and almost conclusive judgment about Roberto's work, failing in fulfill your professional responsibility. A letter to

9 Massimiliano Civica is one of the most appreciated theatre directors in Italy.

> a friend, an invitation to dialogue, is not a review! You turned his play to shreds, and yet you wanted to be a good friend, you accused Roberto to be a mannerist, but you wrote this "as a sign of respect" ... Thus, ensuring respect and friendship, and hesitantly wondering about the value of your own judgment, you gently let the axe fall. If I wasn't your friend, I would say that choosing the "open letter" format was a crafty and cowardly behaviour, because you didn't want to suffer the consequences and take your responsibilities. How can Roberto Latini correspond to such a sweet act of friendship of yours? If he reacted to your statement, he would be seen as an irritable artist ... Your friendly and caring letter gives Latini only two choices: to remain silent or to reply with a grateful: "Thanks, Michele, you are a true friend!"
>
> From the point of view of dramaturgy and composition, the ferocious *pars destruens* of this "open letter" of yours is, I think, the main element of innovation in comparison with your latest reviews. This could be the perfect way for you to express your narcissistic hunger for being an artist ... If you can't help giving advice and instructing an artistic view, why don't you take the ultimate responsibility and start working as a stage director?
>
> Massimiliano Civica

Civica chooses the same format. His post – which appeared immediately after the publication of the article – mocks Pascarella's open letter, using the same style and tone to stand up for Latini, who had initially decided not to respond to the provocation. Civica seems to underline a basic problem which is caused by the blurred separation between critics and artists (the same pointed out by Lyn Gardner) and, in a less evident way, by the total freedom to comment guaranteed by social media. The "tightening of social bond within a group", highlighted by Ling, is here clearly eroded by the fellow stage director with an ironic tone and invites other voices to stand up for the same cause.

Analyzing the style of Pascarella's letter and Civica's reply, the question of the critic's authoritativeness is challenged by the interference of a sarcastic attitude. This is very visible in Civica's text, which, on the other hand, takes the occasion to reflect on the role of the artist and the critic. Nonetheless – better than any other analysis would – the same text explains why Pascarella's strategy (a lack of responsibility) is detrimental to a critic's credibility.

Roberto Latini's reply, published as a Facebook status on the day after, had a rather interesting consequence. Entitled "Open letter to

myself: you appreciate my appreciation", the post – again using an ironic tone – tells about the very complicated creative process of the play.

Without any direct state support or art commission, Fortebraccio Teatro managed to produce the play with help from various residency programs: this means that the creative process had to adapt the initial artistic ideas to venues and technical equipment that can be very different from place to place. This is a very common solution adopted by independent artists in Italy and it's a sign of a generally problematic situation that shows how marginal the theatre community is.

After this latest reaction (that, again, chose the open letter as a format), several comments were posted on Facebook by a wide range of different figures belonging to the same theatrical system. By reacting to the letter, they found their way to share opinions and complain about the situation of theatre artists in Italy.

Civica's and Latini's posts favoured a crowded discussion that drifted away from the original critical intentions of the open letter. One user comments about "the impossibility to do this job in this country".

> ... If it's hard for an established artist as Roberto, think about the rest of us, that float in a forced oblivion ... Mediocrity is so much appreciated by spectators and critics, the time to study and work seriously are a luxury ... it pisses me off.

Gaetano Ventriglia[10] argues:

> In theatre, everybody "thinks" about theatre. It's a paradox: everything circles around an actor's idea. If you take this off, you only have an empty space for intellectuals, politicians and *vol au vent*. The theatre of seated butts. You shut up and act.

Again, Isabella Di Cola[11]:

> The artists have the right to fail and those who write about theatre have the right to pose thought-provoking questions. I haven't seen the play ...

10 Gaetano Ventriglia is an independent actor, playwright and theatre director, far away from any institutional recognition. Nonetheless, he is considered by the critics an outstanding figure in experimental theatre.

11 Isabella Di Cola is a programmer, curator and arts manager based in Rome. She works for the regional network of theatres.

> but I respect the quality and the authenticity of Roberto's work . . . I really don't understand how the polemics about the rehearsal time is a nourishment for the readers. I agree with Massimiliano Civica: everyone should go back to take care of their own job, rigorously.

The virtual communities – which are one of the main features of interactive Web – have now the instruments to build a collaborative form of social constructs. Here, the basic purpose of a review made way for wider considerations. The fact that the letter was shared on a non-regulated platform such as Facebook invited the users to participate in a process of change that challenged the programmatic intentions of the text.

Integrated as the mechanical processes are with human agency, the users are experimenting a total freedom of expression regarding the content and its widespread diffusion. And yet, that *content* (an article, a letter, a comment) is produced and shared through a software structure which is programmed by humans but operated by the machine. According to digital materialism, the materiality of hardware and software is responsible for the split between *individual* and *user*, two entities that, in a context of open access to opinions and informations, are no longer recognized as one specific social figure.

The algorithm of software tends to imitate human types of agency, is programmed to replicate a form of co-present interaction, but creates standardized *forms*, that influence the content.

The critical analysis of the play (published on an online magazine) was here clouded by a mistaken format that, in Civica's opinion, let Pascarella to avoid the necessary responsibility of a clear judgment. Civica's letter (published on Facebook) put the critic's authority in crisis; with his letter (published on Facebook) Latini defended his own work in the "presence" of his spectators.

Paolo Granata defines the social media as "a place for extended sensibility and common feeling, reflection of a process of knowledge of the world that integrates *technè* and *bios*, the common ground for technological and social processes which is consistent with a form of collective sensoriality" (Granata, 2009: 67). Although these kinds of mediated interaction are too often dangerous for the circulation of authoritative opinions, in this case the collaborative action of the users gathered a group of individuals around a common urgency. The process of re-creating a co-present interaction contrasted the uncertain authority of a critical analysis, standing up for the difficult condition of the artists.

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12 The quotations from Italian books in the text are translated into English by the author of the article.