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Digital

A key debate in performance audience research centres around the extent to which the affective dimensions of audience experiences can be articulated or even consciously reflected upon by audiences. In this chapter I attempt to tease out some of the complexities in the relationship between affect and conscious thought in audience experiences of performance. I do so through a discussion of my own practice-research experiment, *Ernest Remains.* Through this performance installation, I aimed to explore the affective potential of interactive digital scenographies and experiment with methods that might make these affects knowable. A point of departure for this investigation was media theory   that suggests that digital technologies might amplify the body's affective capabilities. With this literature in mind, my experiment was an attempt to think through the relationship between affective and cognitive (and linguistic) processes in the context of audience experiences that defy easy articulation in language. My hope was that   that my use of technology as both a key part of the performance and part of the means of capturing data about audience experience might generate new ways of thinking about this relationship.

Digital Experimentation and Affective Methods

Ernest Remains was an interactive performance installation in the form of a twenty-minute augmented reality experience for one person at a time. It was staged in the Banham Theatre at the University of Leeds in October 2019. Utilising the entire theatre space, including the dressing room and auditorium, the installation consisted of multiple rooms that audiences explored with a handheld tablet on which an augmented reality application was installed. A computerised voice gave instructions to audience members at the beginning of the experience. They were informed that there had been a death and their task was to solve the mystery, using the device they had been given to search for clues. In actual fact, the material in the installation was part fictional and part autobiographical. Its subject was my grandfather, who had been a detective fiction author and had worked for British intelligence as a code-breaker during the S   econd W   orld W   ar. Thematically, the work probed entanglements and relations between bodies and technologies through tool use, surveillance, and the digital and material traces that remain after bodies are gone.

Physical objects in the space triggered visual and auditory digital reactions on-screen and through headphones attached to the tablet. These reactions consisted of sound and video content and three-dimensional digital objects (figure 1), as well as videos of performers moving around the space (figure 2), which periodically appeared on screen. Sound triggers included content such as recorded and computer-generated voice; atmospheric sounds of other spaces such as a loud party or a forest; and sound effects such as phones ringing, emergency bells and microwaves beeping. Video content triggered by physical objects were short fragments of found footage that related in some way (though often obliquely) to the object that triggered them. For example, a postcard of a beach triggered footage of waves washing over feet on the sand; or a photograph of nurses triggered footage of a mop on a hospital floor. In other instances the digital content overlaid more directly onto the physical object; for example, a picture of a forest scene came to life.

Each participant also wore a head camera that recorded what they saw and did within the installation. I then played back the resultant footage during post-show interviews. In my use of video methods alongside interviews, I have been influenced by researchers working in mobility studies. Though the field traditionally focuses on mobile systems, such as transport and the global movement of goods and people, it shares with performance audience research the necessity of finding methods that can contend with ephemeral experiences-in-motion. Justin Spinney (2015) and Eric Laurier (2010) both argue that video can trigger memories of past sensory experiences for participants during interviews. Laurier acknowledges that video is a largely visual medium and introduces its own materiality into the research process. Nonetheless, he maintains that through its temporality, video can provide 'a route to the other senses by stretching out the fleeting and ephemeral in order that they might be apprehended by the viewer' (2010, 139). In employing these methods, I was making an experimental intervention into debates about what it is possible to know, research and articulate about affective experiences of performance.

A number of scholars have argued that the embodied affects experienced by audiences during performances are difficult to research as they happen to audiences at a pre-conscious level, beyond the scope of language and conscious thought. This notion has been particularly cogent for researchers focusing on forms or aspects of performance where form or meaning is produced through embodied or material means, such as dance (e.g. Sheets-Johnstone 1979; Vincs 2013) and scenography (e.g. McKinney 2005, 2012, 2013). This work is often underpinned by theories of affect that differentiate it from emotion, particularly as advanced by Brian Massumi. Drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze, Massumi understands affect as bodily intensity that is felt (sometimes barely) prior to its recognition and qualification through cognitive and linguistic processes (2002). It is the *excess* of intensity, that can't be reconciled through these processes, that resonates affectively. Following this, in *Ernest Remains,* video became an attempt to capture and research the moments at which these affects were felt by participants during the experience.

Matthew Reason's (2016) notion of 'affective experience making' has been particularly influential for me in thinking through the relationship between (affective) intensity and (cognitive and linguistic) qualification in the context of audience research. He proposes this as a dynamic, non-linear process in which audiences make sense of affective sensations. His argument constitutes a critique of Massumi's framing of affect, in that, for Reason, the notion of affective excess fails to take account of the 'social, emotional and interpretive' (87) aspects of affectivity. He contends that researchers need methods that can address the 'affective experience making' process in order to 'slow it down, make it concrete, make it knowable to ourselves conceptually' (90). In the examples he provides, audiences engaged in creative activities such as art-making or writing after watching a dance performance in order to make this sense-making process visible. Building on his work, I was interested in how asking the participants to watch and discuss videos of their experience of *Ernest Remains* might perform a similar function. How might video, as a time-based medium, engage with the temporality of performance events in particular ways? How might it both elucidate and complicate existing understandings of the relationship between affective and cognitive processes?

While methods such as art-making rely on what is remembered after the performance event, the temporality of video means that it has two distinct methodological advantages. The first is that it has the potential to capture the evolution of a performance experience over its duration. This means that it is possible to attend to affective encounters that might occur from moment to moment, rather than solely to the overall impression of the performance. Secondly, the affects that can be researched through video are not limited to what can be remembered, which has the potential to focus the enquiry on the most powerful affective resonances at the expense of smaller or more subtle moments. Instead, video has the ability to remind audiences of particular moments of their experience that might otherwise have been forgotten. In what follows, I will outline examples of fleeting moments that the video methods brought to the fore for participants of *Ernest Remains,* and the ways in which they attempted to make sense of these moments during the interviews.

Ernest Remains

Participant (P): And that's when things start to get really creepy. I was like, then I was anticipating, fully expecting for him to be stood behind me and I was like, I don't want to assault anyone.

Lucy Thornett (LT): From this moment here, you expected it in particular?

P: Yeah.

LT: Interesting. What do you think it was about that moment?

P: I think it was the sound.

LT: The sound of the forest at night?

P: Yeah. But also there was less in that space physically.

LT: So you thought something else might happen?

P: Potentially. Yeah, it's…because there was the breath as well.

(The audience member is seen to turn back towards to the door to the room on the video).

LT: And then you're looking behind you.

P: You've got the breath, and the speech from the photos…

In the excerpt from one interview above, the video can be seen to structure the conversation in a couple of ways. The first is the ability of the participant to locate a particular affect at a particular point in time, without necessarily being able to articulate what caused that sensation. In this case, the participant had a feeling or expectation that the performer he had seen on-screen would appear in the physical space, a feeling he

described as 'creepy.' In the video, the embodied response to this sensation is visible: the participant turns around to check that there is no-one behind him. In the discussion, the participant attempts to identify the cause of this affect. This could be understood as a process of re-constructing the conditions from which the feeling emerged: after pointing to particular aspects of the scenography – the sound and the sparse arrangement of the space – he begins listing the different sounds he could hear at the time ('you've got the breath, and the speech from the photos'). What is interesting here is the contingent manner in which he speculates about these possible causes: 'I think it was the sound … also there was less in the space physically'. Massumi argues that 'the primacy of the affective is marked by a gap between *content* and *effect:* it would appear that the strength or duration of an image's effect is not logically connected to the content in any straightforward way' (1995, 84). In other words, though the participant is able to begin to articulate possible causes of what he felt, cause and effect do not appear to map onto one another directly. That some doubt remains suggests an affective excess that can't be easily attributed to the content or form of the work at that point in time.

This affective excess can also be seen in the excerpt below, from an interview with another participant:

P: What was happening here?

LT: Some fog on the floor plan.

(In the video, some digital 'fog' is seen on the screen of the tablet, triggered by a paper floorplan in the installation – figure 3).

P: Yeah, the fog was there. I love that. I was really intrigued by that.

LT: What was it about it that intrigued you?

P: I had no idea what does it have to do with the actual story … I mean, but it was really beautiful though, so I was looking at it for quite a while.

On this occasion, the participant *is* able to point directly to a cause (the digital fog). However, she is unable to reconcile it with meaning or narrative. Though she suggests that part of the reason it interested her was that it was 'beautiful,' her response also suggests that the fog's resistance to signification formed part of its affectivity. Cognitive processes seem to have been activated, but ultimately frustrated, by the fog's presence in this instance, which in turn heightened its seductiveness   . Notably, this moment wasn't initially remembered by the participant. Rather, the memory was triggered through the act of watching and discussing the experience – indeed, the participant asks me what is happening in the video. I posit here that the video – and its use as part of the interview – not only functions as a memory aid, but as a kind of mediated access to the past experience of the event that de-familiarises it in some way. It allows different things to be noticed: small affects can surface that didn't necessarily figure as a decisive part of the overall experience, but nonetheless provide some insight about the affective qualities of these particular digital scenographies.

It is worth considering here the way in which the particular affects that emerge from interactive, digital scenographies might differ from, for instance, the equally inarticulable experience of watching bodily movement in dance. The work of media theorist Mark Hansen is helpful for thinking this through. While Massumi argues that affect always generates a kind of excess that is felt in the body, Hansen contends that aesthetic experiences generated through digital technologies amplify this. For him, affectivity is 'an interface between the domain of information (the digital) and embodied human experience' (2004, 134). He posits that affective bodily processes are set in motion through disjunctive experiences of digital phenomena:

> As the viewer tries to negotiate these odd perceptual objects that, it becomes increasingly clear, are not continuous with the space she occupies, she becomes ever more disoriented and disturbed; and as her disorientation mounts, it gradually gives rise to an internal, affective reaction that will ultimately take the place of perception entirely. (Hansen 2004, 14)

This might – in part – account for the affective excess that emerged for participants of *Ernest Remains* in trying to negotiate the experience of augmented reality stimuli. These stimuli were simultaneously co-present with the audience and immaterial – both there and not-there in the space of the installation.

The interactivity of the performance is also important for understanding how affect was accessed and experienced in *Ernest Remains*. Most obviously, the effectiveness of video as a method hinged on active and mobile participants engaged in individualised encounters with the work. However, it is also important in the sense outlined by Hansen – that the affective excess emerged through the disjunction of participants actively attempting to engage or make contact with a realm of digital information. The excerpt below provides one example of this:

LT: … we've got things happening on the screen, but you're looking over here. Did you see that?

P: Yeah.

LT: You did? So you're looking at both at the same time?

P: Yeah.

LT: So your attention was going back and forth, you think?

P: Yeah. And like with this picture and the sound … I was trying to, I suppose I was experimenting with, what does the sound do without the image and what does the image to without the sound and how does that …*(participant trails off at this point).*

Here the participant describes moving back and forth with the tablet in the space, while simultaneously shifting their gaze back and forth in order to test how the sound that

accompanied a particular on-screen video might work with other visual material in the space. In this, they are negotiating multiple simultaneous demands on their attention, and multiple possibilities for interaction offered by the space and digital device. I suggest that this negotiation constitutes a process of active, embodied experimentation with the affective affordances of the work – an attempt to creatively intervene in the production of disjunctive relations of sound and image. Though there is undoubtedly a sense in which this experimentation is conscious and deliberate, there is also a sense in which this is a kind of intuitive grasping at something ('I was trying to, I suppose I was experimenting …'). This not only points to the particular affects that might emerge through interactive scenographies, but also to the possibility that these affects might then play some role in the way in which audiences interact. Put another way, it suggests a complexity in the relations between affect, agency, and conscious thought in interactive digital scenographies. Moreover, it illustrates the ways in which video methods might begin to render these complex relations knowable.

Concluding thoughts: Mediated Affects

The examples above demonstrate how the use of video in the interviews allowed audience members to enter into a process akin to Reason's 'affective experience making' (2016), while also facilitating attention to specific momentary events within the larger duration of the performance. What these excerpts also illustrate is that audiences weren't always able to precisely locate the source of affects, or, where they identified a particular form or material as a source, couldn't fully reconcile content and effect. In attempting to draw out some conclusions from this, it is worth acknowledging that the speculation audiences entered into about their own feelings and experiences had a number of possible causes. One possibility is that they simply couldn't remember when asked about particular moments during the interview. Another is that watching their experience on video was sufficiently different to their first-hand experience as to render it partially unrecognisable. This could be understood as a potential limitation of the method. However, it could equally be seen as an advantage, in that the mediation that video introduces serves to de-familiarise the experience and allow previously overlooked fragments of the encounter to rise to the fore. This points to video's value in attending to forgotten, perhaps even less-conscious temporal moments within durational experiences.

I contend that affective experience in Ernest Remains was underscored   at   precisely the points at which the link between cause and effect broke down – in the failure to assimilate feeling with meaning. Moreover, I propose that the particular affects that emerge in encounters with digital technologies such as augmented reality foreground a complex set of agencies at play in interactive scenographies: the ways in which disjunctive experiences of the digital *move* us; and the capacities of our bodies to make contact with digital phenomena through affectivity.

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