

The Rise of the Virtual Performance and the Transformation of the Audience-Actor Relationship

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 epidemic has accelerated the evolution of human artistic performance from the real environment to the virtual space. In this remediation process, the performance space has completed the transition from physical to virtual, and the body of both audience and performer has experienced the digital transformation. Furthermore, the development has led to a profound change in the audience-actor relationship. By multi-dimensional examination in theory and case study, this paper argues that the change of audience-actor relationship makes the audience freer to watch and participate in the performance; the traditional "fourth wall" formed by aesthetic distance also ceased to exist; simultaneously, the decentralization of power brought by digital justice makes the traditional theatre social class disintegrate.

Keywords: Virtual performance, Body, Audience-actor relationship, Aesthetic distance, Fourth wall, Social class.

1. INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 under the COVID-19 epidemic must be a historical point of significant social change worldwide. During this period, people limited their activities in physical space, which rapidly promoted the extensive development of virtual network activities based on digital technology. Among them, the virtual cultural events represented by entertainment are the most active, among which the rise of virtual performance is the most typical representative. Virtual performance refers to the performance and viewing activities in cyberspace based on computer, the Internet, virtual reality and other technologies. Among them, virtual concert is the most popular. The origins of virtual concerts began with a hologram show in Soul in 2013 by the South Korean Girl group Girl's Generation that attracted thousands of K-Pop fans.^[1] Furthermore, the rise of virtual performance in recent years due to the platform that tech startup WaveVR has launched since 2017. In August 2019, renowned violinist Lindsey Stirling premiered *Artemis*, an online performance of her new album of the same name, attracting over 400,000 views online.^[2] The following year, pop culture icons such as

Marshmallow, Travis Scott and others performed on the game platform Fortnite, including Travis Scott's *Astronomical*, which set a new online viewing record of 12 million people.^[3] Then, electronic music festival Tomorrowland has also moved its 2020 annual celebration to a virtual platform, and Post Malone, Lil Nas X, Tinashe, John Legend, and others celebrities have joined the virtual performers' group. The University of Michigan School of Music, Theatre and Dance, as a representative of the academic community, also opened a virtual environment for the performing arts within a hybrid virtual concert called *Collage*.^[4] At this point, the prologue of the virtual performance officially opened. In the process, more attention addresses the relationship between audience and actors, especially with the full liberalization of the body brought by the digital media, virtual environment lead to the collapse of the "fourth wall" in the traditional sense and digital age class eliminate. These three problems will serve as the focus of this article.

2. THE EMANCIPATED SPECTATOR

Whether based on virtual reality technology platform or online game platform, the purpose of

the virtual concert is to break the restriction of physical space and build a complete performance in the virtual cyberspace to conform to the current wave of media development under the digital trend and further liberate the audience. In the traditional theatre mode, the audience is fixed in the specific seats of the auditorium and cannot move around at will. Generally speaking, the audience is not allowed to make loud noises, and video recording or taking pictures is prohibited. In this physical environment, the audience is passive. It is just like the concept of "the paradox of the spectator" described by the famous French philosopher Jacques Rancier: "there is no theatre without a spectator. First, viewing is the opposite of knowing: the spectator is held before an appearance in a state of ignorance about the process of production of this appearance and about the reality it conceals. Second, it is the opposite of acting: the spectator remains immobile in her seat, passive. To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act." [5] Because of such constraints, people have been trying to enhance the audience's initiative by transforming technology and media.

When performing art was remediated from the stage to the video, the audience in front of the TV was relatively liberated compared to the theatre audience. People were no longer "fixed" on the seats, and their bodies were free. However, vision is still restricted. As the performance video is "prescribed" by the director, the audience loses the right of free observation in the theatre and becomes a "must watch" variant. In order to solve this problem, people begin to seek "multi-angle" mode in DVD or streaming video to provide more angles for the audience to choose and make up for the single visual choice.[6] However, even providing more perspectives, such an angle still has a huge drawback in the imaging stage, that is, it is a fixed perspective, just like the audience is provided with different positions in the theatre, but the degree of freedom of observation in a particular position cannot be solved. In other words, the audience cannot freely choose to watch any certain actor on the stage or a specific part of the scene as the actual audience in the physical world, and the content provided by "multi-camera" typically without movement in the camera. 360° virtual reality technology is a solution to this problem. In such a technical scene, the video provided by a fixed stand can provide 360° environmental information in all aspects. Its information coverage is even broader than that of the audience sitting in the actual theatre

because people usually set up the camera for collecting video signals on the stage. Through the link of the picture, the audience behind the camera and the performers even form a "face to face" relationship, which is the performance treatment that the audience in the traditional physical space can not enjoy in the performance environment of the pool or VIP seats. At this point, the audience has obtained a certain degree of liberation in both the position and perspective dimensions.

More importantly, a more complete, or total, freedom seems to be taking place in the context of virtual performance. Whether it is a virtual reality platform or a game platform, the audience has completely transformed from atoms to bits and the body wholly liberated at this moment. The audience can freely roam in the virtual environment, overlook the whole picture of the performance from a distance, observe the performers' avatar closely, and jump, cheer, take photos, video, and communicate with other audience at any time. They realized almost absolute freedom this time. For the performer, the audience's behaviour does not affect his digital double, but the real body in the physical space can be more fully involved in the performance. This situation is in line with Rancier's famous opinion: "What is required is a theatre without spectators, where those in attendance learn from as opposed to being seduced by images; where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs." [7] And that happens in virtual cyberspace; spectators and actors are all free here.

3. THE COLLAPSE OF THE FOURTH WALL

People are most familiar with the audience-actor relationship described by the British director Peter Brook at the beginning of his famous *The Empty Space*: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged."^[8] It shows that text is no longer the primary issue in contemporary performance, but rather the audience-actor relationship. When discussing the relationship between audience and performance, we inevitably need to focus on the aesthetic distance. The essence of Stanislavski's view of distance is separation in physical space and assimilation in emotion and psychology. The former, bases on the traditional proscenium stage, strictly divide the performance area and the viewing area. The artworld is strictly separated from the real

world in the auditorium through the curtains, footlights, stage edge, props and other tools, and any communication between the two areas is forbidden. It makes the audience maintain a "distance" from the artistic experience as a basis for observation. The latter is an invisible barrier created by the physical separation of the former, known as the "fourth wall". ("Figure 1") Critic Vincent Canby described the wall as "that invisible scrim that forever disorders the audience from the stage.[9] From the perspective of "watching - being watched", this wall isolates the eyes of the audience

so that their behaviour is no longer a performance for the stage, but "lives" in the "real" art world on the stage. At this moment, the actor has also entered the highest state of performance and the best artistic effect pursued by the Steini system, namely, the state of "public solitude".[10] In terms of audience reception, the narrowing of the distance between art and reality makes the artistic experience more consistent with the experience of daily life. The "real" stage illusion makes the psychological distance between the audience and the characters disappear due to emotional resonance.

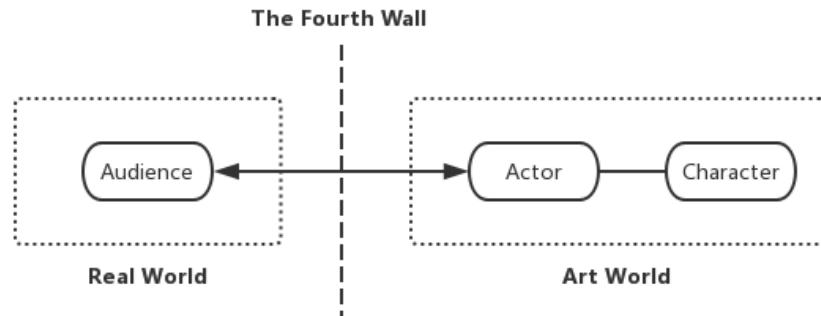


Figure 1 "The Fourth Wall" in Stanislavski's system.

The "fourth wall" gradually dissolves in various forms of performance with the process of mediatization. In the era of television media, actors represented by Francis Urquhart often broke the "fourth wall" in British dramas such as House of Cards (1950), To Play the King and The Final Cut. In almost every episode, he addresses the audience on screen several times, allowing the audience to comment on his actions during the episode.[11] This kind of communication breaks the strict distance limit in the traditional audience relationship and creates an interactive relationship between performance and audience. The same thing happens in the game world. According to Steven Conway, in the world of video games, many so-called break the fourth wall example can be understood as the fourth wall to reposition or extend the "magic circle" (that is, the fictitious game world) to surround players. The players themselves jump out of physical reality and immersion in a virtual environment to "experience". Normally, as a spectator, the player is also an avatar of himself in the game.[12] In this situation, "viewing" and "acting" are in one. There is no fourth wall any more. ("Figure 2") In the virtual concert, since the audience and actors exist in the form of incarnation in the same virtual platform, they can be regarded as existing on the stage in the traditional sense, so the communication and

interaction between the two become a part of the performance itself. So we see emotes, bullet screen, specific skin, dance with unique movements and a series of expressions and communication methods that belong to ACG culture and virtual media, and such dialogue completely disintegrated the existence of the fourth wall. It is regarded as a leap from passive to active media. As Peter H. Diamandis and Steven Kotler argue in their new book *The Future Is Faster Than You Think*: the significant shift in performance in entertainment will be in content production, traditional passive media (newspapers, magazines, books, TV, movies) with single information flow will be replaced by active media (Internet, games, virtual reality) with two-way information flow.[13] Because of initiative, distance disappears, and invisible wall collapse.

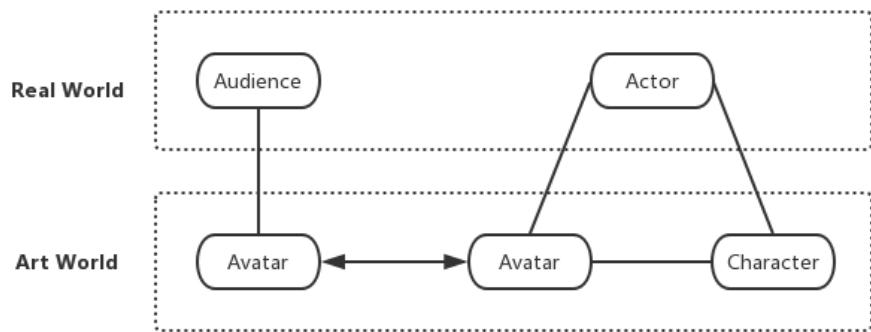


Figure 2 Audience-actor Relationship in Virtual Performance.

4. THE ELIMINATION OF CLASSES

Due to the historicization of performance, it adapts to the social structure, so theatre space in different historical periods also corresponds to different social environments. In traditional theatre, there are such invisible class relations everywhere. The abolition of aristocratic boxes and seats on the stage marked the replacement of autocratic power by economic contracts, and the different seating areas corresponding to different ticket prices were the subjection of economic status to social status. Moreover, in the traditional audience relationship, the area on the stage is sacrosanct, and this class relationship is more difficult to overcome than the class in real life. However, with the evolution of technology and media, the hierarchical relationship of this class began to disappear. In the physical space where atomic architecture is replaced by virtual space constructed by bits, there is no apparent boundary between the stage and the auditorium, or it can be called a "landscape" that is integrated into one whole. In such an immersive landscape environment, the class relationship between actors and audience becomes equal, and the "dignified distance" disappears. At the same time, thanks to the support of technology, the audience is no longer divided by the price of the economic class, but with fair access to the platform, each audience can freely occupy the heart of a perfect position to enjoy the performance. This kind of equality of power and class is the most prominent feature in the digital living environment: the decentralization of power.[14] People realize digital justice from the perspective of audience relationship.

5. CONCLUSION

By examining the changes in the three dimensions of body freedom, viewing distance and

class relationship, it can be found that the viewing relationship in the virtual performance has undergone tremendous changes compared with the relationship in the traditional physical real environment. The Internet, virtual reality, and other technologies bring about the transfer of performance space from physical space to cyberspace and the media virtualization of the bodies of both audiences and actors. The more profound reform happens in communication mode, aesthetic temperament, social relations, and other issues. This kind of change makes performing arts turn fictitious in an all-around way, and it will cause more topics worth thinking about and studying.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Bo Xu.

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