

Hyperreality and Liveness in Kenyan Spoken Word Poetry Performances in Social Media

Beatrice Jane Ekesa (Corresponding author)
Literature Department, University of Nairobi, Kenya
Email: bettyekesa@yahoo.com

Alina Nikolaevna Rinkanya
Literature Department, University of Nairobi, Kenya

Kimingichi Wabende
Literature Department, University of Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract

The postmodern concept of hyperreality has gained enough relevance in contemporary society due to advancement in digital media technology. The use of social media as a performance space reintroduces the ongoing debate about what constitutes liveness in a performance. Traditionally, liveness was defined in terms of theatrical performances, but over time the term has broadened to incorporate digital media performances. Social media performances are important in helping to establish how liveness is constructed in virtual spaces, where physical co-presence between the performer and the audience is non-existent. An exploration of liveness in relation to televised drama contextualizes the discussion about liveness in mediated performances and sets the stage for the analysis of unique features that distinguish television performances with social media performances. Spoken word poetry performances in social media spaces provide the necessary framework within which to illustrate how liveness is constructed in social media spaces. The key objective in this study is to distinguish the construction of liveness in social media spaces with other mediated performances, with the aim of introducing new perspectives in the concept of hyperreality and the field of performance studies in general.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Hyperreality, Performance, Liveness, Spoken Word, Virtual Audience, Social Media

1. Introduction

The use of social media as a space for performances that were previously a preserve of theatre houses is on the rise. Platforms like Facebook and YouTube have become alternative spaces in which performance artists can reach their audience. Spoken word poetry in Kenya is one genre whose popularity can be attributed to social media performances. Initially spoken word poets presented their performances in physical spaces only, which limited the size of their audience to the capacity of the available space in theatre houses. Advancement in digital technology led to an exploration of new spaces beyond the physical, which resulted in the emergence of social media performances. Today, spoken word poetry in Kenya has gained a bigger audience both locally and internationally, occupying both the physical and virtual spaces. Most spoken word poets have social media accounts that are used for virtual live performances as well as recorded live performances. Virtual live performances are

those that are originally performed to a live audience on social media, while recorded live performances are those that are originally performed to a physical audience in a physical space then recorded and posted on social media for a virtual audience. These social media performances fall in the realm of mediated performances, which are defined by Steve Dixon as those that rely on “computer technologies” to discharge the key role of generating and conveying artistic work” (Dixon, 2007, p. 71). Digital technology in this case is not only used as a means through which these works of art reach the audience, but it also has certain features that enhance the overall performance. The debate as to whether liveness exists in mediated performances is an ongoing one. It is argued that mediatization leads to the loss of liveness in a performance since the performer and the audience are not physically present to each other. The assumption is that mediated performances do not provide avenues for interaction between the performer and the audience since communication is one way. However, social media performances exhibit significant levels of liveness that are distinct from those found in live television broadcasts. As such the key concern in this paper is to expand the body of knowledge that exists in the field of performance studies. The paper explores ways in which liveness is constructed in social media performances with the aim of decoding the concept of hyperreality as advanced by Jean Baudrillard. This study seeks to introduce new dynamics in the conception of liveness by evaluating social media performances of spoken word poetry in Kenya. The study begins by exploring the concepts of hyperreality and liveness to create the framework for the analysis of spoken word poetry in social media spaces. The concept of temporal co-presence in the performance of spoken word poetry in new media is then examined by making references to the Facebook watch party feature and YouTube Premier feature. The paper also examines types of mediated performances of spoken word poetry in new media spaces with the aim of analyzing how liveness is constructed. The key objective in this study is to distinguish the construction of liveness in social media spaces with other mediated performances, with the aim of introducing new perspectives in the concept of hyperreality and the field of performance studies in general.

2. Decoding the Concepts of Hyperreality and Liveness

Mediated performances, like the ones performed and/or recorded in social media spaces, have long been viewed as lacking the element of liveness. The basic idea in the conceptualization of liveness is that the performer and the audience must be physically present to each other during a performance. The conventional definition of liveness in a performance privileges the staging of artistic works as opposed to the production of mediated performances. The commonly held view about mediated performances is that they lack the temporal and spatial co-presence between the actor and the audience, which are the basic ingredients of liveness (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 32). This view works on the premise that liveness can only occur in those performances where the performer and the audience converge for a theatrical event in a physical space at the same time. This conception of liveness problematizes the idea of liveness in social media performances, where the performer and the audience are not physically present to each other. While liveness, in its original form, can only be conceived where there is physical co-presence between the performer and the audience, advancement in computer technology has created ways in which liveness can be conceived without bodily co-presence between the performer and the audience, pushing us into the realm of hyperreality which subverts the metanarrative that liveness is a preserve of traditional theatrical performances.

Philip Auslander explores the postmodern theory of hyperreality by introducing the concept of liveness in relation to “televised drama” which, in his view, was invented to reproduce the “theatrical experience” to the television audience leading to the displacement of traditional theatrical performances (Auslander, 1997). Auslander argues that the inclusion of the studio audience in the recording of televised drama is a “simulation” rather than a reproduction of a staged performance. He states that recorded performances are subject to editing, which alters the original performance. Therefore, what the television audience experiences is a totally different performance from the one the studio audience experiences. As a result, the television audience ends up watching a “performance that never took place” (Auslander, 1997). Such a situation produces what Jean Baudrillard refers to as a “copy without an original” which is the basic idea behind the concept of hyperreality (Baudrillard, 1994). The mediated performances begin by simulating theatrical performances, but in the process acquire their own unique features that sets them apart from the original performances, hence creating a new version that can no longer be taken as a representation of the original performance.

Similarly, liveness in social media performances can also be viewed through the lens of hyperreality. Just like televised drama, social media performances exhibit features of liveness. In a conversation with Maren Hartmann, Philip Auslander asserts that the concept of liveness does not have a static definition, since it keeps changing with time. He asserts that as computer technology continues to advance, the concept of hyperreality becomes key in discussions about liveness in digital performances. Baudrillard explores the four stages an image goes through before acquiring the state of hyperreality. The first stage involves a pure representation of the reality as it is. The second stage presents a distorted version of reality, while the third stage represents an image that has no correlation with any form of reality. The fourth stage represents a hyperreal image, which he refers to as “pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard, p. 93, 1994). It is this state of hyperreality that presents features of liveness in social media performances, which begin by simulating a real theatrical performance, but end up with a totally new form of performance that replaces the original theatrical event by exhibiting features that cannot be traced in the real performance. As a result, there exist some features of liveness in the performance of spoken word poetry in social media spaces that eludes the traditional conception of mediated performances. These features include those identified by Auslander in the case of televised drama, but are not limited to them.

3. Liveness in Social Media Performances

According to Auslander, both theatrical performances and televised drama demonstrate “immediacy and intimacy”. This means that in both the televised drama and theatre the performer and the audience share temporal co-presence. They are both available to each other at the time of the performance. This is the case with virtual live performances of spoken word poetry in social media spaces. Both the poet and the virtual audience are present to each other at the time of the performance. Social media features like Facebook “Watch Party” and YouTube “Premier”, make it possible for a performer to share the temporal co-presence with members of the virtual audience. For the televised drama this “intimacy” assumes that there is an audience on the other side of the screen that is watching the action of the play – but the performer has no way of knowing if there is indeed an audience at all and how the audience feels about the performance. However, in social media spaces the performer has access to the reactions of the audience and even the number of people viewing the performance. All these are displayed on his computer screen in the form of comments, views, likes, loves, GIFS and emojis. This heightens the element of liveness in social media performances in ways that televised drama cannot achieve. Some poets even pause their performances midway to acknowledge their virtual audience by calling out their names and reading their comments out loud. These interactions usually begin during the virtual live performance, and stretch to a period outside the performance allowing both the performer and the virtual audience to enjoy a timeless co-presence. Mufasa Poet, in his Facebook Watch Party entitled “Mufasa Live in Concert ” performed during the Covid-19 lockdown in Kenya on 7th June 2020, offers the audience a classic example of a virtual live performance. During the performance he actively interacts with his virtual audience by talking to them directly and promising to read all their comments. Other spoken word poets like Dorphan have made use of YouTube Premier to perform live to their virtual audience and the interaction always brings the entire virtual performance to life.

The performer and the audience in social media spaces are usually in separate locations, but they have temporal co-presence through the interactions that take place in the virtual spaces. Social media performances introduce new dynamics in the field of performance studies which lean towards Baudrillard’s idea of simulacrum. The social media space allows the state of hyperreality to happen in performances by making it possible for the performer and the audience to enjoy temporal co-presence through interactions that are digitally enabled through the comment section, and the use of emojis, likes, loves, GIFS, and the recently introduced star rewards. Sinoj Antony and Ishfaq Tramboos state that the age of postmodernism is characterized by “technological sophistication” which is making it difficult for people to differentiate between the “real” and the counterfeit. Thus, the “physical reality” seamlessly mixes with the “virtual reality” (Antony & Tramboos, p. 3315, 2020). In social media performances the live and the mediated are intertwined in a way that brings forth new dimensions in the perception of liveness. Liveness becomes achievable without the spatial co-presence.

The temporal co-presence that exists in these performances is no longer a representation of what happens in theatre houses. It is a co-presence that can only be felt in the virtual spaces where the performer and the audience do not share the same physical space. This type of temporal co-presence presents a new reality that completely replaces the original theatrical experience. Baudrillard views hyperreality through the lens of simulacrum which is a state in which a representation supplants the reality. Social media performances are not just representations of theatrical performances; they are a replacement. They start off as representations, but eventually form their own features that distinguish them from the original performances.

For a performance to take place there must be an audience that converges in a specific place and time to give the performer the platform in which to perform (Barber, 1997, p. 347). In the social media spaces members of the virtual audience follow their favourite performing artists to view their performances and record their reactions. The ability to react to the mediated performance in a way that is visible to both the performer and other members of the audience, gives social media performances a sense of liveness that may not be experienced with other forms of mediated performances. The audience plays an important role in the creation of meaning in a performance (Barber, 1997, p. 356). The reactions from both the audience and the performer act as an avenue through which the meaning of a performance is elucidated.

There are two types of mediated performances in social media spaces: the virtual live performances and the recorded live performances. In the virtual live performances, the interaction begins in real time as the performance is taking place in a physical space, and extends beyond the temporal confines. The Facebook Watch Party and YouTube Premier are classic examples of virtual live performances. The recorded live performance is only presented to the virtual audience as a record of an event that took place in their absence. In both types of performances, the physical audience is part of the spectacle to be viewed by the virtual audience and can participate in the viewership of their own viewership. The physical audience can watch their own participation in a performance in social media spaces and even react to it long after the real time performance. The virtual audience, therefore, becomes a super audience that views the performance from a bird’s eye view, and reacts to it wholesomely.

The emergence of features like Facebook Watch Party and YouTube Premier allows performance artists to reach their audience in real time. While it might seem like the social media space is a representation of the physical theatrical spaces, it is a performance space that exhibits its own unique features that are distinct. Where stage performances are timed, social media performances are timeless. In the social media spaces the performance is a continuous process that involves different sets of audiences that participate in the performance endlessly. The physical audience is part of the spectacle to be viewed by the virtual audience, and the interaction between the actor and the audience, and amongst members of the audience is timeless. The virtual space also allows for a timeless interaction between members of the virtual audience.

4. Conclusion

The concept of liveness in digital performances gains its relevance in the age of social media to a large extent. Platforms like Facebook and YouTube have been transformed into performance spaces that allow the performer to interact with members of the virtual audience in real time. These interactions take place through comments, likes, loves, emojis and GIFS, that are available to the virtual audience. In the comment section both the performer and the virtual audience register their presence by leaving a comment about the performance and responding to comments from the performer and other members of the virtual audience. Liveness is hence created in social media performances through the interactions between the performer and his audience and the interactions amongst members of the virtual audience. This form of liveness is a shift from the liveness experienced in televised drama where the debate of liveness in mediated performances commenced. The concept of liveness continues to develop with every invention in technology, and this gives room for further research in this area.

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