



Order, Chaos and the (Cyber)Spaces Betwixt and Between: The Interconnections of Performance and Technology

Marc D. Rich

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Julia R. Johnson David S. Olsen

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We rail at technology when it gets too noisy, pollutes our air, or is about to drive a new superhighway through our living room. For the rest, we are content to consume its products unquestioningly. So long as we can negotiate the triumph of technology successfully, we are unconcerned to ask what the presuppositions of this technical world are and how they bind us to its framework. Already these presuppositions are so much the invisible medium of our actual life that we have become unconscious of them. We may eventually become so enclosed in them that we cannot even imagine any other way of thought but technical thinking. That is the point at which we shall have turned all our questions over to the think tanks as problems of human engineering. We seem already on the way there.

[Barrett](#), 1979

Technology, properly interiorized, does not degrade human life but on the contrary enhances it.

[Ong](#), 1982

Eleven years ago, a Performance Studies division panelist at a national conference challenged her audience to consider other methods of scholarship besides the written word. *Text and Performance Quarterly* (TPQ) had been a fertile site for performance theorists to showcase their work, however the "text" had primarily been "words," while the "performance" was represented by those words. What was

"lost," she wondered, by using words as the primary vehicle for scholarship, when performance typically emphasized the "body?"

Her call to dislodge traditional notions of orality and literacy has been echoed in other disciplines as scholars seek a more embodied human experience. Currently, most academic enterprises (teaching and research; classes, conferences and journals) still reflect a preference for both the written and spoken word, or the hegemony of "logos." In fact, our introduction (and much in this issue generally) reflects this same preference, for as [Gura](#) (2000) writes in a review of James Anderson Winn's book *The Pale of Words: Reflections on the Humanities and Performance*: "One of the nice ironies of contemporary theory is the way in which even those who claim not to be influenced by the tyranny of language are found to employ it in just the ways they deplore" (p. 216). While "deplore" is perhaps too strong a word for the editors of this special edition, as we recognize the performativity and multi-vocality of language, we do recognize the "tyranny" that words wield as our work, in this introduction, in our Call for Papers, and in our notes to authors, falls prey to that which we hoped to critique.

Two years ago we were invited to conceptualize, propose and edit a special issue of the *American Communication Journal* (ACJ). As a world-wide web publication, the editorial policy states:

The researcher is free to present his or her findings in an interactive multimedia environment, making use of the entire spectrum of computer-mediated data. Redefining that which has been traditionally recognized as a 'text,' the ACJ liberates publication from the physical and financial firewalls of print by placing the academic work online, complete with much material previously relegated to a footnote, endnote, or the futile 'see also.' . . . The learning opportunities are as infinite and immediate as the researcher's creativity and reader's bandwidth will allow. In short, the purpose of ACJ is to create an interactive digital canvas, upon which communication scholars may articulate their thoughts, arguments, and findings in pedagogically rich and meaningful ways.

As evinced by this editorial purpose, the opportunities offered by the ACJ were immense. Yet even with this challenge, most ACJ articles resorted to "traditional scholarship" that could be accessed on-line. Those who "wrote" on a wider and larger "interactive digital canvas," and tried to leap over the "physical and financial firewalls of print" resorted primarily to the "point and click" method of "reading" (click on the icon, see the artifact, hear the voices, see the bodies). In a sense, "on-line" simply functioned as pages, for "readers" to turn at will. [1](#)

With two major challenges before us, one offered by performance theorists, the other by the ACJ, we discussed the intersections (both real and potential) between these two fields. And we were not alone. Even "literature," traditionally a paper and print discipline, was riveted by burgeoning technology. [Mirapaul](#) (2002) cites N. Katherine Hayles, a professor of English at U.C.L.A., on this very issue: "For centuries literature has been delivered in a vehicle with a narrow sensory interface: the print book. As virtual-reality technologies become cheaper and more accessible, literature is moving into vehicles with richer sensory input" (as cited in Mirapaul, 2002, p. B2). In the same article, Robert Coover, English professor at Brown, is quoted about this move: "It may not work very well. . . . This may be a theatrical space more than a narrative or poetic space. Our use of text may be scripting more than either hearing or reading" (p. B2). Even with this disclaimer, he has spent much of his recent career undermining "the dogmatic solidity of the printed text" (B2). Could we do the same with this special issue?

With performance as our entry point, we discussed how we could utilize the technology afforded by the ACJ, to take up the challenge of discovering "newer ways to mean." Could we combine performance with technology in some new and interesting way to expand notions of scholarship in the field of Communication Studies? Admittedly, technology [2](#) seemed like a curious confrere with performance, as "technology" is often thought of as an alienating presence in contemporary culture, [3](#) while performance, as mentioned before, is "by definition" embodied. Yet technology had always already permeated the performative place and space: from tape-recorders to video-recorders; from sound-systems to lighting boxes, performance is saturated with technology. In most of these endeavors, however, technology acted as a vehicle, a form, while performance seemed to supply the tenor, or the content. [4](#) As we discussed the relationship between technology and performance, we believed that the potential of "performance" and "technology" to mutually challenge and shape each other in practice had not come close to being exhausted. As [Ong](#) (1982) writes: "Technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness . . ." (p. 82). In other words, could there be a way of making technology and performance [5](#) simultaneously both vehicle and tenor?

Most submissions for this special edition were modeled on the point and click method of performing technology; exploring the "fourth wall" between performer and audience, but only in the text, not in relationship to the reader. In the mix, however, we received a piece by Heather [Raikes](#), "cosine," "a (re)presentation of an interdisciplinary multimedia performance event . . . inspired by and structurally based on ideas derived from math and modern physics. . ." which proved to be a technological and aesthetic venture that left us challenged, troubled, befuddled, and stimulated. In fact, only one of our computers had the "right programs" necessary to

access the complexity of the site. Furthermore, our attempts to impose linearity (and yes, we understood the irony) were left frustrated. Tenor and vehicle became one as distinctions between the "original" installation, the installation as evoked online, and the "performative/technology" tension seemed to dissolve.

We decided that since we had one "technologically" oriented piece, Mady [Schutzman](#)'s installation, "The Joker Runs Wild" provided a complementary piece as it focused primarily on performance. Well-known for her research on the techniques of performance activist Augusto Boal, Schutzman's website and text investigated "how the strategies of tricksters, jokers, jokes, and joking of all kinds might enhance the dramatic techniques and political goals of Boal's [6](#) *Theatre of the Oppressed*." Exploiting technologies to explore [Boal](#), Schutzman used the Joker as both content and form, tenor and vehicle.

With "cosine" and "Joker Runs Wild" as our two installations we invited six critics to "read/explore these installations and provide a critical rejoinder to them--not as separate entities, but as parts of a dialogue in which you as a respondent will also join" (letter to respondents). In order to actualize this conversation, we requested that their responses were less "traditional criticism" than they were a place to make theoretical connections between technology and performance, exploring key issues that these two installations raised. These six responses, combined with Raikes' and Schutzman's installations have provided us, and now we hope you [7](#) (whenever the performative "now" of experiencing this journal occurs), with a bit of bewilderment, [8](#) provocation, [9](#) and perhaps even a little jouissance. Ideally, our hope is that performance and technology might provide a transformative liminal space for the creation of more humane possibilities and meaning.

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Authors Notes

Julia R. Johnson is currently a Visiting Lecturer at California State University, Northridge. She is interested in critical approaches to the study of communication and culture, which includes the following areas: Interpersonal/Intercultural Communication, Research Methods, Performance Studies, Rhetorical Studies and Critical Pedagogy. She is the author/co-author of "Gendered and Racialized Identities and Alliances in the Classroom: Formations in Resistive Space" and "d/Deafness and the Basic Course: A Case Study of Universal Instructional Design and Students Who Are d/Deaf in the Oral (aural) Communication Classroom."

David S. Olsen is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at California State University, Los Angeles where he teaches courses in rhetoric, public address and argumentation. His research interests include the intersection of rhetoric, ethics and performance. David's recent work includes "The New Religious Right versus Media Wrongs: AFA Fights *Temptation*" in the *Journal of Film and Video* and a co-edited special edition of the *Journal of Film and Video* entitled "The X-Philes: Imaginations of Millennial Anxieties." He also serves on the editorial board of the *American Communication Journal* and *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*.

Marc D. Rich is an Assistant Professor of Performance and Cultural Studies in the Communication Studies Department at California State University, Long Beach. Since 1993, he has facilitated hundreds of interactive workshops based on the work of Augusto Boal in educational and community settings throughout the United States and Japan. interACT, a peer troupe under his direction, uses Boal's techniques on and off campus to engage audience members on a variety of sociopolitical issues. Marc's recent publications appear in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* and the *American Communication Journal*. Marc currently serves on the Advisory Board of the Los Angeles Center of Theatre of the Oppressed/Applied Theatre Arts.

Notes

1. In a CRTNET posting, Robert L. [Schrag](#), the Editor-Elect of the ACJ, writes: "For decades, no, centuries, perhaps millennia, we have attempted to share our insights regarding a dynamic process, communication, in a static environment - print. I am truly intrigued by what we might discover when the medium through which we distribute our findings shares the characteristics of the phenomena we study. Those are the works we will seek to advantage in the *American Communication Journal*." His first goal, "to create a space in the journal for an ongoing dialogue between those of us who use the tools and those who define their capabilities," reflects the difficulty of this process, as he writes: "I'm not exactly sure how that should happen. I need your help figuring that out."

2. Is technology more than a set of tools that facilitate communication, or what [Heidegger](#) (1977) calls a means to an end? In fact, technology is also a set of relationships between embodied persons moving in the world and the interpretive frames people use to account for the physical realities in which they move. On a pragmatic level, technologies are those things people create. The problem with technologies--like the problem with any human creation or process--is the "things" seem to take on a life and meaning that

appear independent of us or beyond our ability to control it. Our move to control the physical/natural world is what prompted our industrial-technological development, providing us with new questions of being, newly negotiated senses of identity and notions of progress ([Heidegger](#), 1977; [Shiva](#), 1996).

3. By locating our musings within history, we can, perhaps, more readily avoid the pitfalls of losing ourselves to the universalizing modes of thought and action that emerge in a technological world. For example, any discussion of technology necessarily invokes the history of Western enlightenment and colonization. What constitutes technology and the value of technology emerged from a desire for scientific reason and economic development. The dominant engagements of scientific reason (grounded in enlightenment traditions) and its corresponding accumulation of material goods, has relied upon violence as a means of progress and development ([Shiva](#), 1996).

Although technology is not inherently oppressive, our understanding, framing and use of technology is located within complexes of power. "The conventional model of science, technology and society locates sources of violence in politic and ethics, in the application of science and technology, not in scientific knowledge itself" ([Shiva](#), p. 277). We must question, as [Gajjala](#) (2003) does elsewhere, how our performances of and through technology are simultaneously products of an enlightenment past articulating universalizing (distinctly capitalist) tendencies in the present as well as instruments and means for questioning those very structures and constructing resistive identities.

4. Research in performance studies is also technologized. Qualitative methodologies are dependent on the ability to "freeze" the subject matter in such a way as to make analysis possible. The researcher needs this time-and space-to look for emergent themes. Discourse-based analysis becomes difficult, however, when the text is constantly shifting.

5. The fusion of performance and technology, considered within a sociopolitical framework, raises issues of oppression and freedom, chaos and control and linearity and liminality. In this special issue, the two installation pieces-- "Joker Runs Wild", and "cosine" shatter normative performance spaces and modes and suggest a breaking free of the chains that bind us. If interactive performance creates spaces for liberation, does the work of the joker and technology also constrain our bodies and voices? In [Augusto Boal's](#) (1979; 1995) work, what function does the joker serve? More of a problematizer than a facilitator, this figure uses subversive tactics to highlight connections between the personal and the political, the local and the structural. In "cosine," technology itself serves as a type of joker, challenging the individual to make sense of multiple images and sounds, all rooted in physics and mathematics. When we enter the joker's liminal, chaotic world, when is the joke on us? In "cosine," are we played by technology? When are the moments when we shift from spectator to spec-actor, and how are our bodies positioned on stage and in cyberspace? Who has the power to establish the rules for these performative engagements, and what are the consequences of choosing to play or not to play?

6. Interactive performance, unlike more traditional modes of aesthetic communication, relies on the audience to complete the performance. [Boal's](#) (1979; 1995) work, which can be linked to other models such as Playback Theatre, drama therapy and psychodrama, typically begins with an audience member's

story. Rather than having trained actors and a completed script, the performance is co-created with audience members who are invested in the story. Boal ultimately believes that the performance should be in the hands of the people and used for their own liberation. Hence, the audience can replace any of the characters on stage, including the joker if they do not feel that s/he is being effective. Boal's work is dialogic rather than monologic, participatory instead of sedentary. When technology and performance are combined, as in the case of "cosine," the audience member is empowered to decide when, and how they will view the performance. An individual may choose to engage the performance over the course of days or weeks, move through the spaces in ways not anticipated by the creator or elect to only view certain components of the performance that s/he deems worthwhile. The moment a person says "freeze" in Boal's work, or clicks the mouse to move through a technology-based performance, s/he is transformed from spectator to spec-actor, from passive recipient to active participant.

7. In certain productions the audience assumes a primary role in the unfolding of the performance. In an article that describes the popularity of wrestling, [Mazer](#) (1990) contends that this cultural performance is heavily based upon audience response. Mazer notes that the wrestling event is contingent upon audience response: "...WWF [World Wrestling Federation] spectators are fully involved and apparently influential, ready to roar 'BORING' if the action slows or they feel ignored for too long. Thus, the audience is not only made to feel a part of their heroes' victories and defeats, [...] they are [. . .] active participants whose approval is essential to the action onstage" (114).

In his discussion of hip-hop and rap, [Dimitriadis](#) (1999) argues that early rap music can only be understood within the context of the performer-audience relationship. Before rap became commercialized, the songs could be 10-15 minutes in length, with lyrics directed at the assembled audience. He notes, "Understanding the roles of the audience as active agents becomes increasingly important for understanding the music-making activity, as realized beyond the scope of the text alone. We are thus pushed towards an interrogation of contexts of use" (359).

There is a quality of co-creation that goes into interacting with technology. Our interaction with technology is constitutive of the meanings made with/in a cyber text. Like spec-actors in Boalian theatre, our technological interaction is also constrained. What the technology of the Internet does is create the possibility of multiple landing sites. Within a context of considering sociopolitical relations and their influence on performance and technology, we are better positioned to begin to ask questions about who we are as users and audiences of technological performances. What about performance changes when performers and audience are located in different time and space? Here, we do not solely mean to suggest differences in time by virtue of consuming/reading an account of a post-hoc construction of a performance or workshop, but also the ways technology frames both the performers-in-performance and the reader of the technological and technologized representation. Audiencing is an integral component of the performance process. Performer-audience is a relationship, mediated by texts and relationships of power.

8. Interactive performance models foster a liminal space in which transformations become possible for performers and spec-actors. For [Turner](#) (1977), liminal means "being on a threshold, [...] a state or

process which is betwixt and between the normal, day to day cultural and social states. [...] [S]ince liminal time is not controlled by the clock it is a time of enchantment when anything might, even should, happen" (p. 33). Whereas structure can be equated with "finiteness and security" liminality is "the acme of insecurity" (p. 47). When performance and technology intersect, liminal spaces are created that are ongoing and transitory. These spaces contradict currently held notions of liminality that dominate the literature. In Schutzman's installation, the joker is a liminal figure. Not quite actor, not quite spectator, the joker occupies an ongoing "in between" location. Although the joker creates a transformative space, s/he is not expected to be transformed by the performance. In this way, the joker is similar to the shaman, another liminal character who participates in cultural performances. For [Schechner](#) (1977), "...at the end of [the] performance the shaman must return to her/his ordinary existence. It is this ability to 'get into' and 'get back from' that makes the shaman a continually useful person, not one who can be used once only" (p. 125). By using techniques that subvert the status quo, the joker may create a carnival-like atmosphere and use subversive comedy to uncover hidden power structures. This strategy, according to [Conquergood](#) (1986), was advocated by Bakhtin: "Part of his legacy has been to foster appreciation for the de-stabilizing powers of the 'carnavalesque', the liberalizing release of the 'carnival laughter that can unsettle the foundations of authority" (p. 48). An invitation to engage in interactive performance is an invitation to enter chaotic, liminal spaces that can potentially shape the performer/audience relationship in profound ways.

9. [Boal](#) (1979) believes that performance provides a space for liberation. Although the theater in and of itself may not be revolutionary, it does indeed provide a "rehearsal for revolution." In the liminal space of Boal's theatre, performances are created that allow spec-actors to try on roles that may prove beneficial in real-life scenarios. The critical moment in Boal's work is when the passive spectator is transformed into an active spec-actor. When an audience member identifies with the protagonist on stage and is compelled to stop the scene and attempt to overcome the oppression, s/he must leave the safe confines of the audience and enter the scene. It is in this moment-the physical shift from viewer to agent-when the individual first crosses the limen. The liminal period, however, may not end when the audience member returns to her/his seat. It may persist for the duration of the show or for an extended time following the performance. Boal's work is designed to create a state of disequilibrium, a type of "anti-catharsis" in which spec-actors may struggle with personal and political issues raised during the performance well after the show has concluded.

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