

About Television Reality and Performance

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Television reality has been among us for a sufficient period of time, that we can now be serious about, It is no longer an exotic and passing fancy. And, as I shall try to show, we need to be serious about it or we will discover that a dominant convention has entered our lives and our habits so inextricably joined to our culture that there may not be any turning back.

There is still time. Television reality is not yet quite the truth. But it may be introducing a troublesome authenticity which, in time, may accurately reflect a will-less human spirit and a geography of mind empty of being.

Now -- I want to propose some assumptions:

One is that a convention is emerging which encourages us to tacitly assign authorship and authority to images and sounds; and that these, in turn, are elements being shaped by men and women who (unwittingly at best) are employing methodologies derived from previous conventions learned in theater and motion picture and business practice.

Another of my assumptions, then, is that the manipulation of these images and sounds is done so to the end of "selling" something other than themselves.

A further is this: that this newest emerging convention is more pervasive and influential than theater or motion pictures, because the experience of it occurs in the privacy of our households

And, finally, that if this be true, it is happening because none of us is sufficiently conscious of the nature of performance, its significance, and what it may mean to us.

Something like performance has invaded our privacy, and we have not taken the time to understand what this is or what it means.

A performance is something very special. It cannot take place without anticipation. It is formal.

In order for a performance to happen, both performer and performed-for need some familiarity with the form.

The form includes certain precise conditions:

A meeting place must be agreed upon.

Both performer and performed-for agree to meet there.

The performer understands what is expected of him.

The performed-for anticipate composition.

Success for both is measured by the fulfillment of this anticipation.

In short, performance formalities include common space and time, performer and performed-for, composition, and anticipation.

Each of these aspects of the form has certain formal characteristics. For instance, the meeting place provides for entrances and exits of non-performers. It also provides for specific allocation of spaces for performer and performed-for. Each of these spaces, in turn, is suitable to the nature of the composition. In performance, composition is almost always directional; therefore, space and volume is arranged so that performer may present and performed-for receive the presentation.

Respecting the agreement to meet: both performer and performed-for hope for, or expect, an appointment to be met; therefore, the performed-for is notified in advance of the meeting time. This is part of the form of performance. He is also notified as to whether or not an admission fee will be required. And assumes that this fee will cover certain amenities such as mutual comfort, performer's fee, etc. These, too, are part of the form of performance.

The performer understands what is expected of him. Expectation is very much a part of the form of performance. The performed-for are justified in expecting the performer to have made an effort to achieve proficiency in what he does. If his performance includes the employment of tools, or instruments, the performed-for have a right to expect that these

technologies will be functional and properly maintained. In the form of performance, these expectations are known by both parties.

There is another formal characteristic of the larger form of performance: The performed-for anticipate composition. This is a most sophisticated matter; perhaps the most sophisticated matter of all. Composition can be described as the mature act which confirms performance. Composition is the central content of performance form. Without it all the other formal characteristics break down and dissolve. Without it, anticipation can't occur.

Yet, fulfilling composition is elusive, for it resides only among the gifted. When we say a performance is inspired, we mean that something unique and of the order of first-things has occurred. All the performer's understanding, preparation, style, craft, and art have converged in a single, composed experience.

Composition is balance-in-form. Composition is realized intention. In performance, composition is the reality and presence of first things.

We are justified -- both performer and performed-for -- in measuring the success of performance by the degree of fulfillment of our anticipation of composition.

We all seek it. We have a right to seek it. And it is because of it that we are filled with anticipation whenever the performance appointment is made.

Now, this is quite different from the kind of experience which takes place in the private space of one's household; it is not the kind of experience which television reality terminated in private space produces.

And the convention of image and sound as performance is quite a different matter altogether.

Some of you may feel, that not only are my assumptions incorrect but that the emerging convention of which I speak is not one to question.

This is to miss the meaning, and the danger, I believe.

Images and sounds do not respond.

Images and sounds are incapable of engaging with us.

Images and sounds are unaware of our presence.

Only those responsible for the organization and presentation of images and sounds are capable of response, engagement, or awareness.

So dense and complex has our culture and television reality become that the means available for contacting these image and sound managers is extremely limited.

The moving pictures of another person appearing on the surface of our television monitors and the sounds emanating

from their speaker systems -- even when delivered into our private households "live" -- are not in the relationships to us which is our common, person-to-person experience in or out of the performance form. We may respond to the picture and the voice-like sound any way we care to. These will not take notice of us. We are not, nor can we be, present among these first things, or first presences, which characterize their original environment.

A principle characteristic in the reality of image and sound is an incapacity for response. No matter how faithful and lifelike the representation may be, there is no way, for living presence to be acknowledged.

In television reality there is no he, nor is there any she. There is only it.

Images in television reality are not first things in the generally regarded sense. These images are representations of some other process or condition. The visual representation of another human conformed to a piece of glass by electrical means is not the original human. It is a picture. When these pictures exist in a series consonant with the time it takes for the series to happen, an appearance of the original human being occurs. When this sequence, in turn, is reinforced by what appears to be original sound, then a new reality, itself, appears: television reality.

For the purposes of this present conjecture, I am proposing that television reality is closer to the reality of theater and motion picture experience; and that this is linked to a marketplace tradition now centered in the American home.

The images and sounds of television reality are its. These are being manipulated by those who draw their methodology from theater, motion picture and business practices.

Our human organisms must be disconcerted, for television reality occurs in the privacy of our homes. There are he-looking and she-looking its. And there are he-sounding and she-sounding it sounds.

This sound deserves careful consideration in the context of these speculations; for, in architectural volumes sound's 360° accessibility must certainly tend to dominate the two-dimensional illusionary visual substance of television reality.

How common it has been for all of us to have mistaken recorded -- or represented -- sound for natural sound in our private space. The radio or television is on, we are not in the same room -- and suddenly we hear the phone ring, or someone seems to address us. We respond in the normal way, only to discover that there is none there to whom we may respond. Recorded, or broadcast, sound experience travels a one-way street. It does not respond to our response.

Now, here's an edge we must learn to acknowledge and appreciate:

We have accepted the convention of two dimensional visual images in public space: the experience of motion pictures. Included in the experience is the actor, the narrative, and the life-like three dimensionality of sound.

Now, it is clear that we are being taught to accept the convention of two dimensional visual images and three dimensional sound images in private space: the experience of television. But included in this experience we are asked to accept not only actors, narratives, and life-like three dimensional sound -- we are also asked to accept non-actors, non-narratives, -- and, persistent still, the life-like natural sound.

Adding to the density of this matter, commercial managers have designed their messages and experiences in such a way that we are confronted with an unusual new combination of stimuli: namely, actors and narratives designed to appear as non-actors and non-narratives. Underlying (or dominating) this is the continuous sound of natural life filling our private space.

Let's think more carefully about this sound element. Wherever we have air, we have sound. Sound is in our homes, our private household, our private spaces. Sound is all pervasive in the habitats of human beings.

Technical means discovered in relatively recent times makes it possible for sound records of reality to be made

which, in turn, can be played back. This playing back occurs in three dimensional volumes. So refined has the recording and play-back technology become that the played-back sound can mingle with non-recorded sound, and one cannot always distinguish the differences between the two. Such choice rarely exists, because we generally appreciate the context in which the played-back sound is given.

We can recall the early Mercury Theater radio broadcast which Orson Welles and his company performed when many people in the Eastern part of the United States panicked because of the sound impression they had that Martians were landing on our planet.

Radio sound and telephonic sound can be distressing when we don't understand the context in which it is employed. When we do, and the context is repeated sufficiently to become convention, we can learn to live with it.

Indeed, for many, radio sound mingles with the other sounds of private space from daylight to dark.

Some of us still strain our minds to deal with simple telephonic sound. How troublesome it is to have a clever, actor-like friend who speaks from another space the sounds and inflections of someone else. A moment of tension, sometimes fear, passes through us when, listening from our private space through the telephone earpiece, we hear the represented sound of a voice we had not thought to hear. And many of us

still stutter when calling someone whose sound we anticipate; we, indeed, hear that sound, but discover that it is a record -- and the record asks us to pause a moment, then speak for its later hearing.

Another troublesome sound moment which frequently occurs today is that which includes the sound of someone no longer living, but referred to by a radio host as still existing in time-present.

But here again we learn to identify the contexts, and these being sufficiently repeated without apparent harm, we adapt them as convention.

The sounds of two persons speaking via telephone are not the original sounds, they are a technical duplication of the original. We have learned to accept this convention.

The so-called live broadcast of sound is not the original either. It, too, is a technical duplication. We've learned to live with this convention as well.

It is important for us to recognize that duplication technology is what it is and that its capacity to duplicate faithfully is of a very high order.

What we hear, be it a record or a live transmission through air or cable, will always tend to dominate its two dimensional visual counterpart in private, three dimensional space.

What is being referred to here as television reality is an experience composed of sights and sounds which are delivered

into our private households. And though we are referred to by them, the deliverers, as "viewers", the sense of the new convention resides deeply and perhaps dominantly, in its sound. A conventional television broadcast rarely makes sense without its sound. It does make sense, more often than not, without its picture.

So -- it would seem "senseless" to think about the images of television reality as they are delivered to the privacy of our households without appreciating the relationship and significance of sound to this newer convention.

All of this deserves the most careful examination if you feel there is any relevancy in my assumptions -- for, what I am asking that we attend to -- television reality -- for it may be separating us out from one another, in a most profound and (possibly) disastrous way.

We may be giving up our capacities for response to authors so distant and alien to our own personal intentions that we may never be able to make contact with them.

Author and authority are one. Citizens of a democratic republic cannot afford distant authorities. The evolutionary processes which have led to democratic culture are aligned with principles which give us in our private households the principle authority for our acts, for what we do.

We cannot afford unclarity about actors and narratives, about non-actors and non-narratives which are shaped as actors and narratives, nor about the central intent of those whose professional nourishment derives from marketplace traditions and the theater.

Yet, for a large (thus important) portion of every day all over America, millions of private households are filled with sights and sounds of actors and non-actors pseudo-performing in narrative or disguised narrative-like ways.

We sit and move in these in-presences responding, but unseen and unheard.

Let's return to the performance question.

Is there, perhaps, something in our nature which seeks the "inspired" performance?

If so, every day millions of us may be sitting before our television sets anticipating one that cannot occur.

We may be in the grip of manipulative forces familiar and sophisticated respecting this one aspect of human behavior.

And even it cannot persist outside a meaningful and trusted context.

This, somehow, the managers and producers appear to understand; therefore, meaning, trust, and context seem to dominate their conscious effort to satisfy this anticipation.

But the performance cannot occur. Thus, added to their conscious effort is the enforcement and re-enforcement of a new convention which displaces the old.

Let's step back to speculate on the steps leading to this new convention.

To do so, we might first speculate about the nature of performance itself.

Threading our way back from the television pseudo-performance in our private households, we can perceive in the distant past the rites, rituals, commemorations, and celebrations of our ancestors -- both Eastern and Western.

And we can recognize the moment when the formal performance emerged; when poet and author and narrative and actor united to perform. In the recognition we can see the magical line, be it a circle -- or a proscenium -- separating the performers and the performed-fors.

Subsequently -- yet, not so distant as to be altogether removed -- we can detect the outlines of the theater, both as architecture and as formal principle.

Not so distant -- and certainly less removed -- we "see" the beginning of the motion picture experience.

From such beginnings as we know, we can perceive one convention existing with another in public space. We have both these conventions present. And we anticipate amongst them both.

It is possible that in the distant past the first inspired performances were the result of what we have come to call "revelation." It may be this which we anticipate most.

If this be true, surely in those early hours of cultured man part of the anticipation must have been fulfilled by being in the presence of those enacting or presenting the revelation.

At any rate, our earliest memories of formal performance included performers and anticipating performed-fors sharing common space and time. That experience has had a long history. And it has been a convention of long standing significance. It is only in recent times that this convention has been modified by one which has no such requirement.

Motion picture experience does not require that performers and performed-fors share common space and time -----.

Though what we consider the most worthy of this most recent convention does draw our anticipation ---- and probably for the same reasons: the enactment and presentation of revelation.

We can anticipate inspiration, but in motion picture experience we must give up the privilege of being in the physical/psychological presence of those who have formed the inspired performance. Not only have we denied ourselves the privilege, we have denied ourselves the spiritual sustenance, as well.

Presence has been replaced by image and sound.

At this juncture, we approach a very subtle matter:

sound appears to remain the same as before; only sight has changed.

However, even so, presence has undergone a massive change: a recorded "performance" does not permit performers and performed-fors to interact; we cannot respond to one another. Thus, an important quality of inspired performance (revelation) is certainly modified and, perhaps, denied us both.

We hear in the old natural way, but we do not hear one another.

We must be clear about this change.

To jump quickly forward to television performances in private space, one can appreciate the enormous self consciousness of producers who insist on "live" audiences and "life-like" laugh, or sound tracks.

In order for visual image and sound to be managed in architectural, public space ---- managers and producers of motion picture experience have had to rely upon recorded experience.

There is no such condition as a live motion picture.

Actors and narrative authors in motion picture experience may be themselves, less essential performers than those whose task it is to shape the record: namely, those who select and edit. They may have become the dominant performers.

And it is at this connection that we may fruitfully encounter television.

But to do so we must be very clear about something that seems to consistently elude us: the human auidial visual content of television reality includes both actors and narratives -- and non-actors and non-narratives. And it is the tension between these two genres and their employment by those who design, manage and produce the experience which can make television reality a threat to other experience occurring in private households.

There are no performances on television monitor surfaces nor emanating from their speaker systems. There are only records of what might have been in the first instance, an event that had such formal characteristics. This is true even if we are informed that the experience we are attending to is happening "live". It is certainly not happening in our living room, our private living space. What is occurring in that highly specialized and unique environment is a carefully shaped, selected representation of the original. And the experience is one composed of images and sounds.

And what is becoming threatening to our very nature, perhaps, is this employment as a dominate content of our lives. This can become especially severe if this content, itself, is dominated by theatrical and business practice. Our unclarity about performance makes it possible, then, for the shapers and selectors to so conform the record that it appears to be an original reality, a first thing.

If a convention can be established (and maintained) in which performance is composed of recorded images instead of non-recorded non-images then, of course, shapers (or managers) can appropriately conform experience as if it were non-performance merely by appearing to be dealing with first things.

Thus, in the private living spaces of contemporary culture (which include television monitors) unsuspecting "first thing seekers" (which include all of us) are being led away from their own capacities -- toward reliance upon others; or, in the most severe instances, toward reliance upon surrogate authorities.

In the public spaces known as motion picture theaters, performance is entirely composed of visual and aural imagery. Yet, even these experiences, formal though they may be, cannot be accurately described as performances. So, it is at this junction that the unclarity must have begun.

It is the term "public space" which needs clarification first.

Public space, as the term is being employed in connection with performance, is that place where publics meet. They do so because of a set of assumptions and expectations they have concerning what will occur there. If these assumptions and expectations (anticipations) are satisfied by the occurrence there, the public space is defined. And can be attended to within its definition and its context has been confirmed again and again by experience.

One assumption which repeated experience has confirmed is that what occurs there will always occur in the context of visual and audial imagery.

The fact that motion picture theaters are an historical extension and modification of the so-called "living theater" (where performances do, indeed, occur) has made it possible for publics to accept the term "performance" as a description of the motion picture experience.

Thus, with the advent of television, the term "performance" as a description of certain living-theater-like, motion picture-like experiences seemed to be appropriate as part of the assumptions and expectations accruing to the newer medium.

We, the attendants, may have failed to appreciate, however, the significant difference which image and sound in public space and image and sound in private space manifests.

Assumptions and expectations relevant to our private spaces differ markedly from those respecting public spaces. Or, at least, one would hope that this were true.

It is the character of form that defines the difference primarily.

When I employ the term actor and public space I do in the following sense:

A generally accepted norm for those whom we describe as actors is that they have prepared themselves to be performers in theatrical contexts, that their intention is to perform, and that this intention is widely known.

That they formally function in relationship to a prepared script, that they rehearse their role with others in this same context, and that they are skillfully managed by a director whose function it is to create a theatrical experience to be performed in a public space.

That this public space is designed, or its intention is organized, to place the actors and the narrative on one side of a mythic line and the audience on the other.

Given this definition, I must say again I believe that actors and narratives are inappropriate for our private households as a general rule, and their activities are antithetical to the kind of experience we usually regard as appropriate for these private and personal environments.

Healthy individuals do not engage or exchange as actors in private space. They are present and being as themselves. This is the form of experience in a healthy household. There are no actors and no performances. A healthy household is not a living theater or the motion picture theater. It is the home of living humans being.

Without realizing it we seem to have applied these public space assumptions and expectations to the television medium. Since the television set occupies a portion of our private space, the assumptions and expectations accruing to public space may have been accepted as new convention. It would not be surprising if we have done this.

At any rate, it is apparent that the managers and shapers of television experience have assumed some such likelihood as this. They produce theater-like, motion-picture-like experience in our private spaces.

What we and they together have failed to appreciate is the enormity of this act as new convention.

Let us return to the junction where misunderstanding may have begun: the motion picture theater. For it is in this place where both theater and image meet. And reflection will reveal why images presented in this place are thought of as performance. This will be quite relevant, because surely it is obvious how related, on one sense, is the television monitor's visual surface and the motion picture screen.

We must step back in history one step behind motion picture experience, however; for its parent, the theater, presented it with two important gifts: the narrative and the actor. And it is because of these two remarkable inheritances that the experience which occurs in motion picture theaters is almost always described as performance. If we can capture the relevancy of this connection to contemporary conventional television distribution, we will move forward much more clearly.

Narrative and actor: The principal link between theater and motion pictures. Image and sound as performance in motion

picture theater subsequently links itself to television.

Unfortunately, the popular misconception arises from the lack of distinction between public space and private space. And is further advanced by lack of understanding of the formal character of performance.

Narrative is story telling.

Actors are the personification of characters in the story.

When the two occur in performance, publics are witnessing live theater.

When the two occur in motion picture theater, publics are witnessing images and sounds of actors and their narrative environments as recorded phenomena. The former embodies the performance form. The latter does not.

Both occur in public space.

In only the rarest kind of circumstances does either occur in private (or household) space without significant psychological and architectural modification.

Actors and their formal ways are not appropriate to private space.

Non-actors performing as images are even more inappropriate, particularly when those occupying private (household) space are unclear about whether the human images are participating in a narrative-like environment. Or whether or not it is a shaped experience.

This is unfortunate; for, until we pointedly and precisely mark the difference between reality and a record of managed or shaped reality, we may ultimately suffer a more severe dislocation than we now do concerning image and that significance it represents.

Many feel that this is not something about which to be seriously concerned. I believe we are simply not paying attention. And, continuing this way, we may be forced to discover one day that all experience for us has become a metaphor, a symbol, a surrogate for something else. First things will have seemed to disappear. Only authors as managers of images and sounds will carry the seeds of reality. We will have become utterly dependent upon their authorizations of reality.

We may be close to this condition at the present moment -- particularly with respect to television; indeed, so close that we often are unable to know the difference between news and theatrics, between the dead and the living, between what is being sold to us and what we genuinely need.

The new convention of television reality is ubiquitously present. It satisfies many, troubles others. But, it is present and real. Whether the assumptions and speculations herein expressed can be validated by others is something only others can know.

There are those who might argue that were it to change, our economy might suffer. There are many who feel that flow of information has been increased. Thus, our personal knowledge enhanced. Others have found its programs satisfying entertainment. Many feel that without its record of cultural events, they would never have experienced such beauty. It is claimed that many Americans are better off because of it.

One's view of the truth is less often one's own than we care to acknowledge. Be that as it may.

Television does exist in our private spaces. That means that its reality is present there, also. We live with its images and sounds of authorities, and pitch men; of men and women of careful judgement, of statesmen and truth seekers and manipulators, of show men and women, of actors, and theatrics. We coexist with images and sounds of fantasies of whatever realities bestir us. Whatever its passing program may be, it is rare that such is not employed to sell us something else --- perhaps a car, perhaps a mouthwash, perhaps an idea someone feels it is important for us to have. Its presence is accepted, sometimes grumbled about, sometimes chided, sometimes cheered.

Images and sounds of men and women we shall never meet pervade the environment of our private household with more regularity, with more frequency, with more invitation than the very friends we say we cherish but whom we rarely see and hear. Our newest invitation is the snapping of a switch, the turning of a dial.

All over America as the sun sets and the lights of night appear, a blue rectangle begins to glow. It lights our living rooms, our play rooms, our kitchens, and our bedrooms. And night after night we sit amongst surrogate acts of performers and psuedo-performers. We anticipate performance which will never take place. The images of men and women cannot see us, they cannot hear us. Someone knows we are there because a statistical system has applied meaning to our household. We are not even images and sounds. We are a number which has no end; the same its as they:

Anticipating and unfulfilled.