

Simulated Intimacies: Gob Squad's *Western Society*

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Idea

The Question

How does Gob Squad's *Western Society* use of the remote actors to dismantle the quest for an "authentic encounter" often associated with intimate interactions?

The Production

Western Society (2013) is devised around audience participation and immersive technologies. Intermedially the performers and remote-actors reenact a YouTube-video. Everything is filmed and live streamed onto a screen in front of the audience.

The Remote-Actors

Audience members wearing noise-cancelling headphones and following the live audio instructions of the company's members. This form of interaction can be described as intimate due to the close proximity to the performers, and the strange closeness of their disembodied voices in one's ear. At the same time, this remote interaction can be seen as a form of simulated intimacy, which is a form of intimacy found and practiced in contemporary social technologies.

"The 'risk' of intimacy and direct physical contact was avoided [...] The connection between proximity and mediation mirrors an alienated intimacy."

(*Gob Squad Reader*, 69)



Analysis

Becoming a Remote-Actor

The experience of intimacy that resulted from being a remote-actor was defined by both the interaction with technologies (specifically the camera and the headphones), and participant's state of constant self-adaptation. Perception was not so much guided by a lucid and rational understanding of the narratives presented. Instead it was marked by what Bruce Barton calls "overlapping, intersecting, interrupting and perpetually reconfiguring interactions, or more accurately, flows (sic) of information and experience" (74). *Western Society* overlapped one's experience of oneself with the movements of the characters from the video; it interrupted performances of the remote actors by making them swap roles; and it constantly reconfigured their relationship to the performers and to themselves through the employed techniques of mediation.

"No one is where they are.

They are talking to someone miles away.

I miss them. But they are missing out."

(Turkle, *Alone Together*, 277)

Isolating Inclusion

Mirroring Sherry Turkle's concept of the "tethered self" (171), which is marked by constant connection and perpetual absence, the affective connection between the performers and the remote-actors leads to an intimate experience of the performer's voices, while also creating a sense of absence from the performance.

A holiday from oneself?

While the performance promised a sense of "getting lost in the moment," there was also a high level of introspection reported from the participating remote-actors. In some instances this preoccupation with the self also lead to the feeling of having "missed out" on the performance. This corresponds to Illouz' analysis of social technologies promoting an introspective engagement with the self, which preconditions and sometimes hinders the interaction with others (cf. Illouz, 78).

Conclusion

Gob Squad's audience is on the hunt for "authentic fictions" (*Gob Squad Reader*, 106). This is reminiscent of Turkle's "robotic moment" (Turkle 3). Here, "real" human interaction have given way to the mimetic representation of such interactions. People at the robotic moment are, therefore, focused on the experience of intimate interactions rather than being concerned with how they are produced. Or more accurately, they are interested in living those experiences while being aware of the mechanisms at play to construct them: "The performance of connection seems connection enough" (Turkle, 9).

By making their audience experience this sense of tethered connection and hyper-rational introspection, and then challenging them to deconstruct this self-involvement and need for validation, the performance speaks to the fact that abstract yet highly emotionalized concepts like intimacy don't exist in a vacuum and are always already pre-configured by social, cultural and medial realities, ready to be (de-)constructed and exploited like other theatrical and performative effects.



Works Cited

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