Constructing Liveness: Exploring the Artificial Presentation of Live Performance on YouTube

Construyendo vivacidad: Explorando la presentación artificial de la actuación en vivo en YouTube

Taran Harris

University of Liverpool

taran.harris@liverpool.ac.uk

ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2275-3893

ABSTRACT

Online video sharing platforms are situated amidst a culture of "vernacular creativity", since YouTube's 2005 was launched as a place to "Broadcast Yourself". With this social cachet of authenticity and liveness, as well as the addition of live streaming capabilities in recent years, the incorporation of audio staging and manipulation technologies into content production has blurred the transparency and intent of online performance. This paper suggests the concept of "constructed liveness" to problematise the presentation of pre-recorded performance as live performance content on YouTube. This presentation of a pre-recorded and produced musical performance as an 'unmediated' live performance by way of language, visual set up and existing cultural assumptions, exists separately from music video research, as the aesthetic make up of such videos imitates the colloquial character of vlog culture rather than that of a produced music video. By examining the convergence of audio-visual signifiers in the context of blog culture, we can analyse how markers of liveness such as instruments and microphones suggest a demonstrable aim to portray live performance, and conversational speech help to construct the scenario as natural and genuine. When these visual markers of live performance are juxtaposed by the use of pre-recorded or post-produced sounds, the issues of transparency of production problematise the content's reception. This paper will use audio-visual case studies to highlight particular aspects of content creation that problematise the concepts of authenticity and liveness online.

Key Words: YouTube, social media, performance, technology, liveness.

TARAN HARRIS

RESUMEN

Las plataformas de compartición de vídeo en línea se encuentran en medio de una cultura de "creatividad vernácula", desde el lanzamiento de la plataforma YouTube en 2005 como un lugar para "transmitir a uno mismo". Con este prestigio social de autenticidad y *liveness*, así como la adición de capacidades de transmisión en directo en los últimos años, la incorporación de tecnologías de manipulación y puesta en escena de audio en la producción de contenido ha desdibujado la transparencia y la intención de la actuación en línea. Este trabajo sugiere el concepto de "*liveness* construido" para problematizar la presentación de una actuación pregrabada como contenido de actuación en directo en YouTube. Esta presentación de una interpretación musical pregrabada y producida como una interpretación en directo "no manipulada" por medio del lenguaje, la configuración visual y las presunciones culturales existentes, no lleva relación con la investigación de videos musicales, ya que la composición estética de dichos videos pretende proyectar un carácter informal de la cultura *vlog* en lugar de la de un video musical producido. Al examinar la convergencia de los elementos audiovisuales en el contexto de la cultura *blog*, se puede analizar cómo los marcadores de la *liveness*, como por ejemplo los instrumentos y los micrófonos, sugieren una intención evidente de reproducir una interpretación en directo, y el diálogo informal ayuda a construir un escenario natural y genuino. Cuando estos elementos visuales de la interpretación en directo se yuxtaponen mediante el uso de sonidos pregrabados o post producidos, los problemas de transparencia de la producción problematizan la recepción del contenido. Este artículo utilizará como ejemplo estudios de casos audiovisuales para resaltar aspectos particulares de la creación de contenido que problematizan los conceptos de autenticidad y *liveness* en línea.

Palabras clave: YouTube, redes sociales, rendimiento, tecnología, vivacidad

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will be presenting the concept of constructed liveness as a way to problematise issues of transparency in online audiovisual media as well as to create a basis from which I can, in my further research, analyse its impact on vocal pedagogy through imitation with a lack of awareness of external processes. In order to present constructed liveness as a meaningful term for future researchers, this paper will firstly introduce the current role of online digital content so as to summarise its cultural context as comprising both the authenticity of amateur content and the professionalism of the corporate. From

this, I shall introduce the concept of constructed liveness and give an examination of a real life example. The conclusion of this essay will aim to determine the potential impacts of the reception of *constructed live* online content on the audience, and crucially, future performers.

2. YOUTUBE AS A DISSEMINATOR OF PARTICIPATORY CULTURE AND VERNACULAR CREATIVITY

YouTube was launched in 2005 as an online platform from which to "Broadcast Yourself" to the rest of the world amidst an era of burgeoning democratisation of technology. The technologies, at this point in time, were mostly limited to that of affordable video cameras and sound capture, so through the basic capture and distribution of user-generated content, YouTube created for itself a culture of "vernacular creativity" (Burgess, 2006, p. 201). Termed by Jean Burgess, vernacular creativity describes "creative practices that emerge from highly particular and non-elite social contexts and communicative conventions," (2006, p. 206) with the meaning of vernacular being "used to distinguish 'everyday' language from institutional or official modes of expression" (2006, p. 206), and so placed YouTube into a culture of authenticity within the framework of participatory culture.

As the world of participatory culture continued to grow, with the platform based and user-generated format of web 2.0 gaining more users and more ubiquity day after day, we can see that YouTube's content evolved with its usage, but did not stray culturally far from its roots in seemingly unmediated, seemingly user-generated content. Even as corporate and professionally produced media became increasingly present on the platform, markers of amateur content creation began to be adopted into their production values. As video and audio technologies continued to be more available and more affordable, the opposite effect was happening in amateur content; It was becoming a lot more professionally produced. This cross pollination of worlds has blurred the already feint line between amateur and professional online content, meaning that professional content benefits from the culture of vernacular creativity built up from the amateur world, whilst the technology has allowed amateur creators to increase production values to within reach of studio standards. I argue that this particular set of circumstances has allowed YouTube to be the home of the *Amateur-Professional,* an online creative who has developed to encompass the appropriate elements of amateur and professional content creation, thus presenting themselves to the audience as the best of both worlds: an authentic and accessible creator of high quality content.

> *Participatory culture is YouTube's core business.* The cultural logics of community, openness, and authenticity are embedded in the YouTube platform and brand at all scales of commerciality, from everyday documentation through all those star YouTubers with six-figure incomes, billions of views and millions of subscribers [emphasis in original] (Burgess and Green, 2018, p. VII).

Here, Burgess and Green indicate that the authenticity apparent from the culture that YouTube built up around its content, and indeed its purpose for being, ported itself throughout all content all the way up to the present day and encompasses everything, regardless of its quality, presentation or even corporate engagement.

3. EXAMINING THE INDICATORS OF CONSTRUCTED LIVENESS

The *Amateur-Professional's* access to technology, in recent years, has extended far beyond a high quality of sound and visual, to encompass far more digital audio technologies that can be both explicit and intrinsic in their use. These terms, from Robert Strachan's *Sonic Technologies,* relate to the two possible usages of technologies where "Explicit uses clearly work towards the othering of the voice as 'unnatural' or 'processed' … While intrinsic uses are intended to be hidden or at least unobtrusive" (Strachan, 2017, p. 153). This paper is not designed to discuss the morality or authenticity of such uses of intrinsic effects like Auto-Tune, for example, as an isolated process. Rather, I will present the concept of constructed liveness within online video. Constructed liveness presents itself within the world of the amateur-professional, presenting a far more pointed or active leaning towards the amateur aspects of the video, combined with visual markers of professional audio equipment, seemingly in order to falsify presentations of live performance. To illustrate the concept, I will now use a video by YouTuber Conor Maynard entitled *Ed Sheeran - Shape Of You (SING OFF vs. The Vamps)* (Maynard, 2017). Before describing and analysing the video, I would like to firstly focus on the visual set up of the framed space as the video begins. This is one of the key aspects of constructed liveness, and should be the first port of call for any analysis of live performance videos when analysing their construction because of the immediate assumptions that the visual element of any audio-visual media has the power to instill in the viewer before any words, music or explanation has time to be made. The increasing relative power of the image has been frequently referred to as the *pictorial turn* (see Mitchell, 1995) that Drozdova suggests is a regularly occurring development as new visual technologies become available. Drozdova suggests that in modern social media, images "provide a framework for our opinions and beliefs" (2019, p. 308), which is problematic due to the possibilities for manipulation; an aspect that feeds directly into the concept of constructed liveness.

The presentation of Maynard's video sets up several assumptions for the viewer that, unless actively re-assessed, can lead to the acceptance of the auditory element of the content based on the dominance of visual stimulus in the human brain (see Mcgurk and Macdonald, 1976; Guttman, Gilroy, and Blake, 2005).

Fig. 1: Screen capture from *Ed Sheeran - Shape Of You (SING OFF vs. The Vamps)*
(Maynard, 2017).

In this still image taken from the start of the video, we can see that the two singers, the Vamps' Bradley Simpson and Maynard himself are sat, left to right respectively, in the foreground with two dynamic vocal microphones on stands as a stereo pair at waist height. The rest of the Vamps - two electric guitarists, and a drummer, are stood in the background with their instruments ready to play as Maynard sets up the video with some talking and jokes. This is a very clear and deliberate live looking set-up, with care having been taken to include guitar and microphone leads and a deliberate, visible placement of the stands.

Looking past the initial visuals which, as briefly discussed, take a lot of the responsibility for informing audio-visual conclusions, Maynard begins to introduce the video. "You know the deal; me and Brad right here, we're gonna have a sing-off and we're gonna have James, Tristan and Connor helping us out, playing in the background" (Maynard, 2017) states Maynard as he explains the premise of the video, suggesting through both this introduction and the title of the YouTube series - 'SING-OFF' (2017) - a competition aspect to the content[1]. Once Maynard has finished his introduction and the performance begins, his former promise of the Vamps "playing in the background" (2017) is seen to be misleading, as the instrumentation consists of synthesizers and drum machines which are not visually present and does not, at any point include the electric guitars and acoustic drum-kit that we can see. I have chosen this example due to its obviously constructed nature so that by its analysis, it will be clearer to see the indicators in more meticulously constructed productions[2].

---

[1] There is no existing YouTube culture or social media trend that pre-dates Maynard's to suggest that the format of a 'sing-off' was in any way intentionally misleading or ironic.

[2] Whilst unnecessary for the outcome of this paper, a more in depth analysis could be done to show more and more of the indicators visually and aurally, examples being the distinct differences between the drums of the audio and the rhythms being played on the video, as well as from an audio production standpoint: the close

4. CONTEXTUALISING CONSTRUCTED LIVENESS HISTORICALLY

After defining constructed liveness as the false presentation of traditional live performance, the next question is: Where does this lead in terms of explorations of liveness in the digital space, and how does this differ from past televisual forms of the same thing? Constructed liveness is not a new or digital phenomenon, though this current research does focus on its use within the world of digital content creation. The precursor to online presentations of constructed liveness can be demonstrated through television's historical aims for quality assurance when broadcasting live performances. The staple and long-running example of this kind of faux-live broadcast would be that of *Top of the Pops'* years of mimed and semi-mimed performances, where "Over the programme's 42 year run, its producers tried every possible combination of performance options. Artists mimed to records, sang live with orchestras, did live vocals over pre-recorded backing tapes, did the whole thing live and went back to miming again." (Gittins, 2007, p. 120). This practice, which eventually began to make a mockery of the format, with many bands playing the audience for laughs, was ultimately an exercise of quality assurance. This practice of quality assurance was "standard procedure at these events" (Wurtzler, 1992, p. 87) according to the Super Bowl's sound engineer Larry Estrin, who justified the pre-recording of Whitney Houston's televised half-time show by stating that it was "'designed to provide the audience with the finest possible performance … She sang live, but the microphone was turned off," (1992, p. 87).

Although digital constructed liveness is, therefore, not a new phenomenon, there are several additions and modifications both in terms of technological advancement and the perception of authenticity that makes YouTube's presentations of live performance problematic in a way that is potentially more complex that its televisual predecessor. By taking into account the aforementioned authenticity accrued through YouTube's culture of vernacular creativity, the audience is already primed for the acceptance of modern technological processes such as Auto-Tune, compression and composite takes.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Looking to the future, the concept of constructed liveness will almost certainly play into research in the field of audience reception and post-human music making. One conclusion that could be on the horizon for the presentation of performances on YouTube is the inclusion of disclaimers such as *this performance has been edited using audio manipulation softwares* or *this is a staged 'music video' performance.* These disclaimers would have their own impacts, both positive and negative on reception and reputation and therefore further research must be done to anticipate their effectiveness.

miked and polished sound of the vocals. This kind of in depth analysis could be helpful in the future as a way of identifying a glossary of indicators for constructed liveness.

Additionally, I believe that the continuing prevalence of this type of constructed liveness across social media platforms without any kind of awareness or disclaimers will undoubtedly have a major impact on the world of vocal pedagogy for young people. As part of my current PhD research for my thesis, I will be focusing on how a lack of awareness of technological musical processes often combines with presentations of constructed liveness to create problems of expectation, achievement and vocal health problems in young singers. These young people can never be sure of the validity or percentage of technological mediation when listening to modern music, due to the widespread use of intrinsic effects, therefore, with the added input of constructed live content on Youtube, the potential for harmful copying without context or the disheartening effects of unachievable performance, will be manifested in the vocal teaching studio. This is a field that I shall be continuing to research further.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Burgess, J. (2006). Hearing Ordinary Voices: Cultural Studies, Vernacular Creativity and Digital Storytelling. *Continuum*, *20*(2), pp. 201-214.

Burgess, J. & Green, J. (2018). *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (2nd edition). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Drozdova, A.V. (2019). On Power of Visual Images in the Era of New Media. *Scientific conference of LAU,* pp. 305-312.

Gittins, I. (2007) *Top of the Pops: Mishaps, Miming and Music - True Adventures of TV's No. 1 Pop Show.* London: BBC Books.

Guttman, S. E., Gilroy, L. A. & Blake, R. (2005). Hearing What the Eyes See: Auditory Encoding of Visual Temporal Sequences. *Psychological Science*, *16*(3), pp. 228–235.

Maynard, C. [Conor Maynard]. (2017, February 6). *Ed Sheeran - Shape Of You (SING OFF vs. The Vamps),* Sing Off. [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P4oSRlQqjf8

McGurk, H. &Macdonald, J. (1976). Hearing lips and seeing voices. *Nature, 264*, pp. 746–748.

Mitchell, W. J. T. (1995). *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Strachan, R. (2017). *Sonic Technologies: Popular Music, Digital Culture and the Creative Process*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Wurtzler, S. (1992). She sang live, but the microphone was turned off: the live, the recorded, and the subject of representation. In R. Altman (Ed.), *Sound Theory Sound Practice* (pp. 87-103). New York: Routledge.