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Through the City with Headphones

ABSTRACT. “Remote Vilnius” is a performance created by the company Rimini Protokoll (Germany) inviting audiences to ‘escape’ from the conventional theatre. Headphones with an artificial voice give you instructions, while you are exploring the city of Vilnius, whereas the musical soundtrack and noise of the city are ‘acting’ as a background. The public explores new territories, while the creators watch the audience being manipulated remotely. The author of the paper is analysing the feedback of the audience in response to the artistic material presented in the virtual tour. The qualitative research investigates the public’s responses to their new artistic experience. The period of surveying took place over two months in May and June 2015, during the course of 60 performances. The main theories being tested are the impact theories by Bennett and Belfiore, Steven Holzner, and David Throsby. Both quantitative and qualitative research were applied here to analyse the impacts of digital performances on the public.

KEYWORDS:

virtual performance,
digital marketing,
ecology and the arts,
theatre for young
audiences, new media.

Introduction

“Welcome to “Remote Vilnius”. Welcome to the cemetery. Thank you that you came all the way out here to meet me. If it is not wet, lay down on the lawn, if you like. Or sit around the lawn on the small wall. Don’t go too far away. If the signal breaks, go back towards the centre of the lawn until it gets better again. Take your time. Look at the grass, the trees. Here nature is supposed to look natural but it is created by humans. You also grew up in an artificial surrounding. You are also nature, in the end. But sometimes it’s hard to distinguish, what is nature and what man-made.”

This is the greeting text that you hear when you start your journey at the virtual show “Remote Vilnius” (text from the script by Jörg Karrenbauer, courtesy of “Rimini Protokoll”). “Remote Vilnius” is a performance inviting audiences to ‘escape’ from the conventional theatre. It premiered in 2013 with the project “Remote Berlin”. The project also had its premieres in dozens of cities in Germany, France, Brazil, India and Russia. As stated in the promo materials, the audience of the show is bound to see and learn about the city of Vilnius through different eyes, by wearing headphones and being a part of a group of 50 people. Headphones with an artificial voice (reminiscent of a GPS) give

instructions on what to do, whereas the musical soundtrack and noise of the city ‘acts’ as a background. The virtual guides bear the names of Rachel and Peter in the original version, whereas in Vilnius they turn into Aistė and Juozas. The public explores new territories, while the creators watch the audience being manipulated remotely.

Theories that support the idea of the impacts of artistic innovations on society

“Remote” – this was the command that flashed up on the screen, when I turned on my recorder to decipher the interview for this article. I spontaneously smiled at it because virtually all endeavours that we undertake these days seem to be managed remotely.

Frankly, the first impulse to write this article was my encounter with the film *Her* and the voice of Scarlet Johansson. The story of how a real man who knows how to influence people emotionally by writing nice texts to/for the others falls in love with the female ... IT apps.

The main theories are the impact theories by Bennett and Belfiore (2008: 92); also, the sense of understanding PR campaigns in Steven Holzner’s Facebook Marketing concept (Holzner 2008: 159). In addition, the paper looks into the parallels between natural and cultural capital (David Throsby 2000: 51).

Pierre Bourdieu says in his *Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*:

Whereas the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading etc.), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin (Bourdieu 1986: 1).

The idea implies that the audience will always react to artistic endeavours based on their background. We will try to check this via our research. What really matters to us is explained in another quotation by Bourdieu:

To be able to play the games of culture with the playful seriousness (...), a seriousness without the ‘spirit of seriousness’, one has to belong to the ranks of those who have been able, not necessarily to make their whole existence a sort of children’s game, as artists do, but at least to maintain for a long time, sometimes a whole lifetime, a child’s relation to the world. (All children start life as baby bourgeois, in a relation of magical power over others and, through them, over the world, but they grow out of it sooner or later) (Bourdieu 1986: 54).

By exploration of the project offered by “Rimini Protokoll”, we are dealing with what the researchers call ‘terraforming’ – “the creation of a liveable habitat on a new and uncharted planet” (Dennis, Larsen and Macaulay 2011).

Trying to grasp the modern values of IT driven artistic products, we need to examine the term ‘values.’ As O’Brien puts it: “The usual way of valuing culture has been through an understanding of its social and economic impact” (O’Brien 2010: 16).

Belfiore and Bennet attribute new artistic experiences to the components of the ‘personal well-being’ (Belfiore and Bennet 2008: 92) and dividing our time into two categories: the times that we ‘have’ and the time that we ‘do not have.’ Using this Gadamer’s classification, Belfiore and Bennet want to prove to us that art is a way of ‘fulfilling our time’ (Belfiore and Bennet 2008: 97).

Throsby adds:

Cultural capital exists as a source of cultural goods and services which provide benefits both now and in the future. As individuals or as a society, we can allow cultural capital to deteriorate over time, we can maintain it, or we can augment it, in short we can manage it in a way that suits our individual or collective purpose (Throsby 2000: 53).

What else can make us humans happy in this digital era? “In a word: friends. That’s what social networking is all about. And Facebook excels at connecting users with friends and keeping them in touch. That’s a vital need [...]” (Holzner 2008: 7). And the project “Remote Vilnius” can serve as proof that interaction via Facebook was a successful tool to attract new audiences.

While exploring our audiences, one notion was worrying me – why are we in Lithuania still so vague about using so-called ‘citizen journalism’ (Tremayne 2007: 240). It is rather vivid in societal issues, but seems to be dormant in the field of the arts. “Whereas newspaper, television and web media use the journalist as a gatekeeper in the process of selecting and presenting news, in the citizen journalism format the journalist is a ‘shepherd’ in the process” (Tremayne 2007: 241). In a way, our survey has been so rich in content that we would have wished the audience to take the public space for sharing their opinion on “Remote Vilnius”.

Also, while doing the research, I was thinking of the “Sirenos” festival Feedback page, because the experiences that people obtain in each year’s cultural program are not documented anywhere, whereas if you take tourism, each object of interest nowadays strives for visibility (take examples from booking.com or other portals that are public-rating sensitive) and is linked to many other sites of interest.

Content is not the real change ushered in by the Web. The Web content itself is not remarkably different from what you can read in books, magazines or newspapers. What

does differ is the ease with which surfers can move from one piece of content to the next – that’s the power of links (Moran and Hunt 2009: 338).

Probably the last aspect I wished to touch upon in the theoretical review was the immediacy (Leboff 2011: 166). The link between the theatre festival and the media agency seemed to me rather under-developed, as I felt that more attention should have been paid to PR while promoting artistic products. “The most important aspect for a company is its ability to solve issues and enhance people’s situation, ‘in the moment’” (Leboff 2011: 167).

The “Rimini Protokoll’s” creations – a new trend or just an experiment?

In this article I will quote some ideas from the interview with theatre manager Rimantas Ribačiauskas, the *Virgil* who was a physical guide at all the tours of “Remote Vilnius”. He was responsible for the physical logistics of the virtual happenings – so that audiences would see that the actions and text matched.

I asked Rimantas whether after deeper studying of the artworks by “Rimini Protokoll” he would agree that the crew are interested in the reality being deconstructed and made up again into theatrical pieces.

Rimantas disclosed that director Stephan Kaegi had a background in journalism. And this determines the way he creates. One of his friends calls this theatre a supreme example of journalism.

Rimantas thinks that Stephan’s approach is a very intimate attitude towards the issue he is analysing. And then, as a result – to theatre-making as well.

I also asked Rimantas about Kaegi’s journalism, whether it was angry (as it is in “Sabonation”). Rimantas accepts this idea: it was in a car manufacturing company where the only way of getting into the shareholders meeting was to buy some shares. So they bought a portion for each spectator, and this allowed them to get inside. Indeed, they do have a dose of hooliganism in them, and Stephan as a personality is himself rather a hooligan. However, this all hides his willingness to approach another human. And his all artworks are immersed with this passion.

Coming back to the research, I wanted to know from Rimantas what he thought about what the spectator feels being equipped with all those theatrical gadgets.

Rimantas shares that in his mind, people wearing those headsets during the show feel a certain scent of conspiracy. Firstly, because nobody can hear what you hear in the headphones; secondly, you belong to a certain team. Then you are teasing the environment to some extent. Besides, nobody from the outside has a clear understanding what

is going on. That is why they enjoy the show. For the joy of discovering something new, Rimantas feels that all good artworks help to discover yourself. To him, this project is not about self-discovery. It is about a human and technology. Rimantas recalls the case in the US when a man slid down into a ditch because, instead of watching the road, he was studying his GPS, which did not know that part of the road was under construction. Other people conceive the show differently – as one of our literary authors Ilzė Butkutė called it, a ‘pilgrimage into yourself’.

Subsequently, I asked Rimantas, whether he thought IT was being employed really well in Kaegi’s works.

Rimantas answers ambiguously that while being a supporter of the symbiosis of performativity and technology, he still finds seeing a performance by Krystian Lupa a real treat. Because technology can both impress and devastate. Besides, the whole stream of technology (Rimantas wrote about it in his Master thesis) will lose against theatre because these days, theatre is becoming a place of relaxation and escapism from speed and stream.

Another concern that I wanted to touch upon was the feeling of leading this group of people to the Zone as if you were Stalker, as in Tarkovsky’s movie of the same name, *Stalker*.

Rimantas admits that he is keeping a record. He recalls the time when the company performed the show during the theatre festival “Sirenos 2014”. They had 20 sessions. Rimantas confesses that he was alone, while the other 60 times he had a substitute with whom they switched. This time the substitute had 40 times and Rimantas had 20. Including the rehearsals. How does it feel? Rimantas agrees that it is very exciting to watch the groups, although he gets a bit tired of the constant surveillance, when people are not having any problems (like a broken receiver). It’s a special kind of tension to be constantly on the alert, but Rimantas is enjoying it.

I was wondering whether there were any unexpected incidents, and Rimantas explains that many things happen. Sometimes a show gets certain ‘separatists’ who are walking aside from the group and not following the voice orders. It is difficult to guess whether they are doing this consciously or not. There were people who disconnected all the equipment and returned it before the show was over. This often happens in the Cathedral Square. However, many positive reactions happen, too. People are clapping or shouting during the ‘rally’, when you realise that they are totally into it.

I asked Rimantas his opinion on the future of this project, and he acknowledges having been interested in this activity back when he was doing his Masters. It was an audio-tour *When Trinity Talks* (it was a tour over the Trinity campus). Rimantas studied

Digital Media at Dublin University. There were four of them and they did the campus tour telling various fictional stories. Rimantas' Masters went by the title "The future of the theatre in the face of digital technologies". At the moment of speaking, he admitted he was working on a project about the Vilna ghetto, arranging an audio-tour in the Vilna Jewish ghetto. But this was supposed to be designed for individual visitors. Audio-tours are not a novelty nowadays. Berlin has its B-tours. The success of the Lithuanian project has shown that there is potential and a target audience to continue with projects like this. However, Rimantas thinks that there are more inventions to discover, including hologram views, virtual reality, etc.

Subsequently, I enquired how they rehearse this kind of a show. Rimantas explained that first they just walk through the list of the locations. There is him and the three guides, and they have Mp3 recorders. Each scene is divided into tracks. When they approach a certain point, they push a button, then the 'fade' function switches on so that the text would keep its integrity, which is not the case in reality. And the guides switch between the files of the scenes.

Rimantas says many things are in real time. There are three guides, and at a certain point they divide the audience into three groups. This is the essence of the rehearsals. It was also in part due to the logistical set-up, when someone would have to reach the locations first by car and unlock all the gates, and then lock them again, after they saw what the situation was at the tennis courts, and when there was no control over the transport. These people are called scouts. Later, arrangements were made with the City Transit office that public transport controllers would not inspect the trolley buses when they saw that the project was running.

The guide names are Rachel and Peter in the English version, and Aiste and Juozas in the Lithuanian version. I expressed my curiosity about how Rimantas would compare the English and the Lithuanian guides. How about Rachel and Peter?

Rimantas conveys that with Rachel and Peter it is a bit different. "Remote" uses the "Text to Speech" program which is designed for the blind. It works in the following way: you enter text, and a computer generated voice animates it. Just like in Google. When "Rimini Protokoll" came to Lithuania, the crew failed to find a proper "Text to Speech" program, but luckily they contacted Vilnius University scientists and by that time their program "Liepa" was developed. Four people gave their voices to this project. The scientist created a successful algorithm that transfers text into sound and back. It happily coincided that the program was nearly finished when the project started, so they shared the program with the company. Rimantas had the script on his PC, and was just manipulating it with the help of the program. The most exciting moment for him was when

a Lithuanian actress came to him and listened to her own voice. She was absolutely out of control over her own voice and could only gasp in surprise and shock listening to herself, because all the powers of the text were in Rimantas' hands.

I then requested Rimantas to put the technology aside. The marketing technique needs to be as innovative as the show.

Rimantas responded that the National Drama theatre has a special person for PR, and that the virtual media campaigns were among her responsibilities. For "Sirenos", it was the specificity of the festival that determined the means of communication. The crew is absolutely amazed by the impact of Google Adwords and Facebook, if we take their general experience. Rimantas agrees that marketing issues need separate attention. Media agencies exist for this particular purpose. The "Inspired" agency, which supports "Sirenos" is rather efficient.

I heard that the show became a unique financial success. A championing sales campaign. I posed a question to Rimantas about it.

Rimantas would also add the play *Expulsion* by Koršunovas to this list. He admits that it also sells very well. However, he agrees that this project generated great financial assets. Both to "Sirenos" and the National Drama Theatre. Rimantas thinks that a lot of success was due to the good preparation in the autumn during the trial shows.

When asking whether "Rimini Protokoll" was happy with "Remote Vilnius", Rimantas opens up that when you have done over 20 productions, naturally some of them are more successful and the others are not so much fun. An upcoming project is "Remote Abu Dhabi". "Remote" owes its success to the unity of the content and the format. They become inseparable.

At the end of our conversation, I was wondering about the plans to expand the audience, for instance, one author complained (during TEDex talks) that he wasn't able to round up their kids who were all in the same house to come and have lunch. And once, he realised the solution – he simply texted them. They gathered for lunch immediately! Maybe the format also matters, I asked Rimantas. He told me that they have won a grant for theatre tours called "Mondays in the Theatre". Probably those would be the most appealing for children.

I shared my experience about theatrical tours. One of them was magic to me, too. The theatre stage manager asked the kids whether they knew where the titles of all of the stage equipment came from? And when the kids replied that they didn't, he said "from ships". It was disclosed to us that marine navigation is where the theatre stage props and places got their names from, because initially, theatre stage hands had to come from other crafts than the theatre. Rimantas acknowledges that this is why he would not say

that virtual interaction will dominate the future exclusively. He would not like to turn it into a fetish. He still believes in ‘real’ theatre.

The feedback from the public after the show

“You came to understand me. I will try to understand you. You weigh between 25 and 120 kilos. You are between 1.2 and 2 metres tall. You are between 8 and 100 years old. Your I.Q. is between 70 and 160. Close your eyes now and imagine who I am. My name is Rachel...”
(text from the script by Jörg Karrenbauer, courtesy of “Rimini Protokoll”).

So, who is the audience and how would they react to the show? Both quantitative and qualitative research were applied in the paper to reach this information. A total of number of 100 on-line respondents gave their insights to open-ended questions concerning the content and popularity of the show.

In addition, a series of in-depth interviews were conducted analysing the impact of digital performances.

The author of the paper analysed the feedback from the audience to the artistic material presented in the virtual tour. The questionnaire was established and spread through the audience mainly via the portal ‘*apklausa.lt*’. The period of surveying took place over two months in May and June 2015, based on 60 performances.

The response that caught the author’s attention the most was as follows: “I learned a lot of new things about Vilnius, but they were rather my own thoughts and psychological state than anything else.”

Just to comment on what was done, the author of the paper has been interested in how the show was reaching its artistic goals and later – visibility, and what the outcomes of this new trend might be.

Interpretation of the on-line research results

An interesting fact is that the performance, otherwise owned by the “Sirenos” Theatre Festival, had rather limited media promotion, which included the event ticket sales portal “Tiketa” and the Facebook account.

The main tool for gathering audience feedback was the online survey. One hundred answers were examined, 95 of which were valid. The results turned out to be rather optimistic. The artistic content of the show was mainly accepted by the audience. Seventy-nine out of 100 respondents stated that they would recommend a similar production to others. Also, the technological side (the tour being guided with the help of the virtual

voice) was in general welcomed and, if confusion did ever arise, it only was the case in the very beginning of the show. What is also important is the fact that thematically, the content identified special target groups of attendees. Some of them – hypothetically, the younger ones – avoided gloomy topics like death or hospital; whereas the rest of the spectators – also hypothetically – more mature, welcomed the existential challenges of the script, provoking the discussion of more “uncomfortable” issues.

The technological side of the show was the least uncomfortable for the spectators – a very small number of them complained of the headset being a drag. In general, the show was welcomed by the Lithuanian public and had great potential for growth.

The title page of the survey¹ is shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The front page of the on-line questionnaire at the survey portal 'apklausa.lt' Retrieved on 20 09 2015

1 <http://apklausa.lt/f/anketa-tiems-kas-apsilanke-remote-vilnius-spektaklyje-9q69xrr.fullpage>

Now, when the new theatre season is over and “Sirenos 2015” have finished, our experiences can be summarised.

While writing these notes, I have visited the Pere Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. I was really astounded to see groups of people with their smartphones exploring celebrity tombstones. I was a bit upset that I didn't have mine because the Information Office was closed on that day, and I didn't have a paper map to find my favourite ones. It was only thanks to a friendly group of American ladies that I discovered the tomb of Chopin I wanted to visit. However, I missed Proust in section 90 (see the picture below) and then I kept contemplating the idea of being lost in time and virtually turned myself off from the location (Figure 2).

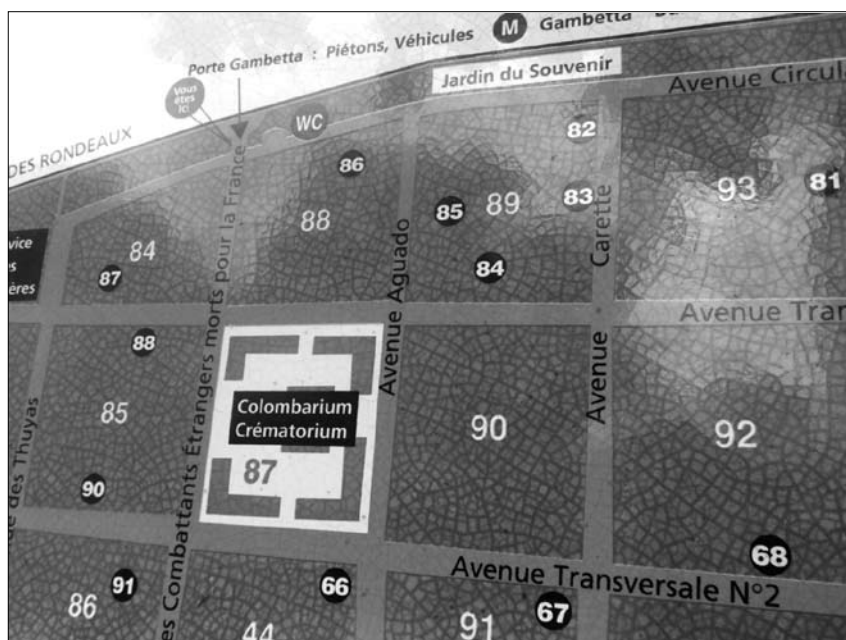


Figure 2. An excerpt from the view of the Information Desk Panel at Pere Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. 05 09 2015. Photograph by the author

Then I remembered the words from “Remote Vilnius”:

“You and your horde, you were a system. You were in the same state together. You were running the same software. You have worked together like a perfect machine. The 50 of you together, you were the horde. I was the shepherd without a face. I hope you will miss me. The first level is complete” (text from the script by Jörg Karrenbauer, courtesy of “Rimini Protokoll”).

I was stepping over real ground but I was not able to navigate. It was a weird moment of reality. I am not criticising the Parisian Cemetery Information Office or nagging myself for not being online. I was just stuck in the middle – between reality and the virtual space. Very Proust-like. And if that weren't enough, the cemetery was closing.

“Welcome to ‘Remote Vilnius’. Welcome to the cemetery. Thank you that you came all the way out here to meet me” (text from the script by Jörg Karrenbaeur, courtesy of “Rimini Protokoll”).

Conclusions

The conclusions embrace the following statements:

- ◆ The artistic content of the innovative virtual show was mainly accepted by the audience;
- ◆ The experimental idea of the creators to monitor the public's response to manipulative acts proved to be very fruitful and gave a lot of material for further research;
- ◆ However, the research did reveal that diverse segments of the audience held different values;
- ◆ Due to different values of the audience, different approaches towards technological factors could be observed;
- ◆ Due to different values of the audience, different approaches towards the content of the virtual show could be noticed among spectators (when mentioning gloomy or depressive topics);
- ◆ Due to the specificity of the show, the production team should be aware of the same level of technological advancement in their marketing means;
- ◆ Because of the uniqueness of the artistic event, the balance between the artistic value and adequate communication should be considered when launching digital art onto the market;
- ◆ Having analysed the feedback of the audience and the opinion of experts, it would be necessary to assess how far the theatre should go in applying IT methods in their artistic practice.

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Po miestą su ausinėmis

REIKŠMINIAI

ŽODŽIAI:

virtualus spektaklis,
skaitmeninis marketingas,
ekologija ir menai, teatras
jauniesiems žiūrovams,
naujosios medijos.

SANTRAUKA. „Nuotolinis Vilnius“ – tai trupės „Rimini Protokoll“ (Vokietija) sukurtas spektaklis, kviečiantis žiūrovus „pabėgti“ nuo tradicinio teatro. Ausinėse įrašytas balsas diktuoja nurodymus, kuriomis kryptimis tyrinėti Vilniaus miestą, o muzikinis garso takelis ir miesto triukšmas „veikia“ kaip fonas. Žiūrovas žvalgosi po naujas teritorijas, o kūrėjai stebi jų valdymą nuotoliniu būdu. Darbo autorė analizuoja auditorijos grįžtamąjį ryšį kaip atsaką į meninį kūrėjų eksperimentą – virtualią ekskursiją. Kokybiniai tyrimai patvirtina visuomenės reakcijas į naują meninę patirtį. Straipsnyje analizuojamas inovatyvių, technologijomis grįstų skaitmeninių spektaklių poveikis visuomenei, aptariami tyrimų rezultatai.