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Digital Archives and Audiovisual Culture: Exploring Music, Dance, Theater, and Cinema at the Age of Internet

ABSTRACT
In this paper, I examine the relationship between digital humanities, audiovisual media, performing arts practices and the preservation of intangible heritage in the contemporary globalized world. As physical data have nowadays been replaced by digital records made available online with a goal of sustaining historical objects and providing access to them via the internet for specialized researchers and the general public, there is a strong interest in supporting and advancing both basic and applied research on this subject matter. In particular, digital repositories and virtual displays of performing arts enactments (music, dance, theater, and film representations) have come to the fore of scientific and cultural policy debates. The aim of this paper is to broaden the dialogue concerning the transfer from earlier (physical) to latest (virtual) audiovisual archives, while raising certain issues of empirical, ethical, and ontological nature on digital humanities as a means to “enable a new critical lens for understanding traditional humanistic subjects of inquiry” (Parry, 2012: 431).

Keywords: Digital humanities; archives; audiovisual media; performing arts; cultural politics

INTRODUCTION
Performing arts —such as music, dance, theater, and cinema— have the distinctive feature of producing an unmediated communicative relationship between the agents and the public. This is a ritual process of a constant renegotiation, which incorporates the event into the drama and the artifact into the show, in direct conjunction with the place and the time of the performance itself.¹ Therefore, there is an evident complexity of representing, categorizing,
and disseminating performing enactments through conventional scientific (both theoretical and technical) practices. However, at the present time digital technology and multimedia interaction have expanded to such an extent that they affect not only the research subject of the contemporary humanities and their methodologies, but also the knowledge itself. In this context, art and cultural studies are now called upon to redefine their fields of academic analyses, their applications, as well as their own epistemological structure. Files, collections, repositories, databases, museums, and libraries that contain relevant audiovisual material can serve as hubs for renewing these academic disciplines by interconnecting them with contemporary information and communication technology and linking them in either a direct or indirect way with the wider social fabric. As shown in Figure 1, digital humanities have been developed through numerous facets increasing their attentiveness not only to a descriptive but also to a prescriptive – and more reflexive – understanding of data representation. But then, what about the performing arts paradigm? There are vivid discussions on how could human-experienced music, dance, theatrical, and film performances be collected, presented, and publicized in view of the computers’ “tendency to translate everything into disembodied digital data” (Saltz, 2004: 121).

Figure 1
The Digital Humanities Stack (Berry & Fagerjord, 2017: 19)

as on the relevant theoretical framework, see Turner, 1988; Auslander, 2003; Schechner, 2004.

There is a similar issue of combing performing arts with technology, usually presented by academics from the field of computer science. See Nesi & Santucci, 2013; Foster & Rafferty, 2016.
IDENTIFYING PERFORMING ARTS, DISCOVERING ARCHIVES

Music, dance, theater, and film are dominant aspects of artistic, social and cultural activity in contemporary world. Because of their performative qualities, their reception depends on the experience of the creative process as a whole as opposed to the plastic arts, which have to generate specific tangible artifacts in order to be fully perceivable (Boersema, 2018: 237–239). It is obvious, then, that the analytical term “performance” is of particular importance in the context of approaching these artistic, social, and cultural expressions, without being limited to simplistic terms but encompassing concepts such as “structure”, “agency”, and “practice” (Ortner, 1984). Schechner (1982: 43) asserts that “performance is not merely a selection from data arranged and interpreted; it is behavior itself and carries with it a kernel of originality, making it the subject for further interpretation”.

On the other hand, archives, databases, collections, museums etc. are textual corpora, i.e. sets of entities, each one based on its own structure and rationale. These accounts –in the broadest sense of the term– function as “narrators” of the past in the present times which create connotations with the future. Furthermore, as Noordegraaf (2008: 322) puts it, “the archive actively shapes the way we see ourselves and how we situate ourselves between past, present, and future”. In this way, archives are permanently connected with issues of communal memory activation in either a direct or an indirect way; they are also associated with the construction of collective identities and the historical transmission of cultural heritage from one generation to another (Schwartz & Cook, 2002; Haskins, 2007). Many specialists have argued that the archives –either official/public or private/personal– have been developed into the most notable means of compiling, storing, and retrieving human memories and knowledge, thus enclosing both practical and symbolic qualities (O’Toole, 1993). That is why they have turned out to be key topics of the scientific research in areas like anthropology, sociology, critical theory, history and the arts. Potentially, an archive –besides being a medium and a repository of inscribed human actions– could also operate as a work of art itself. Osthoff (2009: 12) suggests that “the archive as artwork challenges the notion of history as a discourse based primarily upon chronology and documentation”. Furthermore, archives are distinctive units –more or less precisely defined– which express specific ideological, political, social, national, economic, and cultural viewpoints of both the society and the historical period they have been created and used.³

³ The institutional and ontological concept of the “archive” has been described and further questioned both in Foucault’s (1969) and Derrida’s (1995) work.
PERFORMING ARTS, HUMANITIES, AND THE DILEMMA OF DIGITIZATION

It has become apparent that, in our times, digital archives vary significantly depending on their organization, content, accessibility, and visibility. Hence, some of them just provide a minimal online search portal while others contain actual material for analysis and further evaluation. While digital humanities traditionally bring information and communication technologies together with philology, linguistics, textual, historical, and cultural studies in general, nowadays the digital shift in academic research seem to be a solution adopted by other disciplines as well—for instance, media, art, and performance studies including music, dance, theater, and film scholarship (Clement, Hagenmaier & Levine Knies, 2013; Habert & Huc, 2010). In spite of the fact that digital humanities have become a powerful area of collaboration between different scientists, there are frequent major theoretical, methodological, and epistemological divergences between the above approaches because of their different starting points as well as their diverse goals (Bordalejo & Risam, 2019).

Performing arts scholars are mainly interested in the means, the ways, and the challenges of documenting live performances, which are regarded as inherently dynamic, emergent, and ephemeral practices. Due to this special nature of artistic and cultural performances, archives cover the immediate need for security, stability, and sustainability as a cutting-edge factor of maintaining specific elements of these performative processes and offering access to numerous components of the past through the “perpetuation” of the inscribed events. Although this dimension has been criticized by many, it is still a prevalent reality.4

The spread of internet in the 1990s made possible to develop extensive digital archiving projects. New technologies allowed remote access to primary resources and a consequent facilitation of research. Digital audiovisual material is increasingly used in analysis and teaching by academics and researchers by means of applying various computational and information technologies in different forms within the humanities and the social sciences. These days, online audiovisual multimedia are major components of contemporary mass culture and grow rapidly day by day. So, based on current experience, one inevitably ends up with a kind of digital management of diverse genres of cultural content, since cyber technologies have caused a significant change in the way in which scientific, artistic, and other types of creative information is recorded and disseminated all over the world.

Initially, the digitization of records and collections was a slow and complicated process because of the inadequacy of computer technology and the users’ demands. Moreover, the internet created a whole new set of ethical and

4 “The live performance can never be captured or transmitted through the archive” (Taylor, 2003: 20).
practical questions on various issues of information and knowledge documentation and representation, such as the problematic issues of intellectual property and copyright (Torsen & Anderson, 2010; Briston, 2019). Archives have their own history, which in most cases has come a long way from hybrid, text-centered portfolios to digital practices of visually-oriented presentation and public availability. Yet, many of the performing arts and the intangible cultural heritage online collections are, in fact, nothing more than simple assortments and descriptions of a small part of archived objects. The only thing in which they usually depend on is their public accessibility and the provision of an expanded body of material with enhanced guidance and search capabilities on how to retrieve information from these compendia. But, if truth be told, is this kind of archives what is really needed today?

Digital files, commonly established on expensive specifications and even more expensive during their implementation and maintenance procedures, reveal a hidden ambiguity of the cyber world: although they are based on the assurance of open data, unlimited content and innovative actions, they usually result in a simple repetition of the preferences, the organization and the management of traditional archival systems, since most of the time especially in an era of crisis– cultural institutions which control and supervise them do not have further substantial assets or access to additional financial resources and grants either from the public or the private sector to keep these records up-to-date.

Digitization offered different features to physical archives, allowing the virtual electronic version of the original to be displayed. This is actually a digital representation which, in turn, can be visually and aurally captured, enlarged or amplified either partially or in its entirety, edited, copied, stored, reproduced, printed, and furthermore shared by electronic means. Given the fact that researchers especially those interested in the performing arts follow their desperate need for “authenticity” in most cases, these new digital (multimedia and multimodal) capabilities raise a variety of challenges, which even today remain under discussion. It has been argued that the easiness of digitally reconstructing performances and the ability of managing extra information brings about two key questions, namely: a) which is the most appropriate way to use digital media for protecting intangible heritage; and b) what is the influence of digital media in shaping cultural content (Kalay, 2007: 2).

And further on: Are these representations adequate and to what extent? We all know that a “true” researcher wants first and foremost to see, hear, and feel the original, the “real” material or event. However, in these days of “digital representation”, why should one be in a constant quest and obsession for “originality” and “truth”? Undoubtedly, senses are vehicles of knowledge and recall memories. But can the digital environment of an archive also offer “other” senses and experiences in its own way? Institutions “seek an appro-
appropriate balance in increasing the production of digitized content while ensuring that appropriate levels of quality are met to effectively provide online access to their archives and special collections” (Sutton, 2012: 63). It is, therefore, more than clear that issues of legitimacy and quality arise, concerning the material collected, digitized, and archived as part of the establishment and the reorganization of audiovisual data (Hirtle, 2000; Adam, 2010).

CONTEMPORARY ONLINE DIGITAL ARCHIVES

A fundamental element that distinguishes online electronic archives from the traditional ones is the framing and the development of digital collections, in which different types of content and themes are gathered, combined and/or contrasted to support interdisciplinary analyses in a particular field of research. In this way, based on primary material and the metadata associated with it, it becomes possible for different (and, at first glance, distant) categories of resources to connect each other, slowly building more extensive, complete, and penetrating repository formats. One of the most interesting features encountered in digital thematic collections is the ability to add new material by users, specialized or not, who come in direct contact and interact with them. The prospect of constant renewal and never-ending enrichment gives special liveliness and dynamics to online virtual archives. As a result, in today’s postmodern world, the shift from analog to digital formation leads to the construction of potentially global compilations of material, the usefulness of which is based on the plurality of texts, contexts, and metatexts as well as on their “competitive” narratives that often emerge, matching the archival records and their interconnections.

An example of such a transnational project is the Europeana Collections. “Europeana is a large-scale search engine for digitized cultural heritage material. It aggregates metadata from various European institutions such as libraries, archives, museums, and galleries. The heterogeneous data and the enormous scale [...] pose specific challenges for search and exploration” (Petras, Hill, Stiller, & Gäde, 2017: 41). In recent years, Europeana has realigned its strategy to focus on collections rather than cultural objects/items (Figure 2).
And, still, the question remains: How can a researcher evaluate and make use of a digital archive for his study into the performing arts and the intangible cultural heritage? Critical discourse analysis could be the answer to this demand as it is considered to be a vital tool for any systematic approach in humanities, social sciences, and the arts. As mentioned above, an archive, a collection, or a repository can be identified as distinct textual sets of items with specific structure and rationale. Moreover, due to the fact that each text implies a vibrant interaction between its content and context, what should—eventually—be of interest is not only the informative side of archival knowledge but also the management and the utilization of digital documents. Emphasis should be placed not on the “objective” but on the “performative” textual realities which—as a matter of fact—are intersubjective occurrences bringing together textual, contextual, and metatextual references. As regards this critical approach, the term “discourse” is of high importance, conceived—in this case—as an interpretation of multiple experiences that contains both the notion of knowledge and the power to impose that particular knowledge. It refers to the poetic (constructing) and rhetorical (legitimizing) dynamics of a text, its sociopolitical and ethical dimensions, as well as to the relations between different texts (intertextuality).5

5 For the usage of critical discourse analysis in the humanities, see Huckin, Andrus, & Clary-Lemon, 2012.
In the case of performing arts (like music, dance, theater, and cinema), digital audiovisual archives operate as channels of retaining specific impressions –i.e. moments or units– of intangible cultural and historical heritage through tangible records. Thus, the digitization process could be defined as a “new materiality” paradigm for the humanities that allows moving from practice-based, embodied performances to digitally reconstructed, virtual ones. Today, performing arts archives provide access to multimedia collections related to these ever-changing cultural forms by allocating and deallocating memory, helping both artists and scholars to work with fresh ideas, and giving visitors the opportunity to retrieve descriptive material for inspiration, learning, and entertainment. Considering the fact that these records underline various aspects of history and culture over the years, they need to be placed within exact space-time settings aiming at their deeper understanding and more effective operation. As Paul Connerton (1989: 2) has noted, “our experience of the present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past”. That is why the concept of archival memory acquires a dual orientation by restoring accounts from the past while, at the same time, moving forward and building bridges for future contacts and explorations.

CONCLUSION

As it is generally known, cultural heritage and the arts still remain two areas in which the ideological hegemony of sociopolitical elites continues to dominate causing a persistent attachment to a traditionalist conception and a decontextualized treatment of culture. This has created a metaphysical and historically abstract vision of a so-called “national cultural storage”, which is frequently associated with a “mythical” origin of its component digital objects, leading to a corresponding manipulation of the material and the formation of a predetermined cultural policy based on it. On the other hand, the inclusion of archives in the digital environment of the online audiovisual sphere has opened new and innovative opportunities for organizing, managing, and disseminating data which go beyond simple collection, recording, and documentation of cultural and artistic material of conventional archives. Finally, their correlation (on a theoretical, methodological, and epistemological level) with the performative nature of music, dance, theater, and cinema, although at first appearing as a link between two parts that express diametrically opposite tendencies (the physical and the digital), it may clearly contribute to a novel approach in which archives are treated as vehicles of memory and knowledge renewal (Jones, Abbott, & Ross, 2009; Borggreen & Gade, 2013).

The current state of the pandemic has raised many problems concerning the digital use of audiovisual media, since modern citizens –especially in times of crisis– feel the need for direct and uncomplicated access to online resources
in their effort to maintain an (even virtual) human communication during the period of social isolation. In particular, courses at all levels of formal and informal education, cultural and artistic events, entertainment shows, scientific research projects, and so on, were adapted from one day to the next to online digital platforms and environments. Limited relevant material, inaccessibility, poor documentation, low digital quality, difficulties of handling the electronic tools were just some of the challenges that have been later identified. By overcoming all the mechanistic ways of producing and recalling digital records as well as the instrumental exploitation of new technologies and methodologies, modern types of online audiovisual archives can—without a doubt—be transformed into ground-breaking networks of artistic performance, scientific research, education, and lifelong learning, towards a dynamic reconnection of local communities, an essential feedback in relation to their own cultures, and a gateway to their global engagement.

REFERENCES


