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the narrator as the threshold between informal and formal voices

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“PLAY ME:” The Narrator as the Threshold Between Informal and Formal Voices

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Abstract

Created during the COVID-19 pandemic, “PLAY ME” is a video work that discusses the difference between physical-perceptual experience and our limited understanding of the outer world. The artwork uses a first-person walking practice in combination with narration and sound as a mapping tool, and public pianos as a guide for exploring our cities and the aesthetics of digital culture.

The purpose of this short manuscript is to analyse the role of the narrator in the self-referential storytelling of my video work “PLAY ME.” I will discuss self-referentialism as a creative tool, and the role of the narrator as a portal for connecting materials with ideas. To do this, it will be helpful to divide and analyse the plot of this work into parts, so the following analysis in artist’s voice will be clearer.

Recommended Music to accompany this article

“PLAY ME”

Composed, filmed, narrated, and performed by Ioannis Panagiotou
Music performed by Plus-Minus Ensemble

<https://www.ioannispanagiotou.com/play-me>

“PLAY ME:” The Narrator as the Threshold Between Informal and Formal Voices

- Part A (the map and Glasgow’s public pianos/conspiracy theory-myth)

“PLAY ME”^[1] starts with the phrase “I’ve seen a lot of pianos, some of them were in concert halls, some others in public spaces telling me...” approaching pianos as living entities. The narrator/composer of this video work, invents a conspiracy theory or a myth, based on a map he found online. Misreading that map, it appears that there are not any instruments in the world apart from public pianos. The narrator starts following the map by filming different public pianos in Glasgow and seeing how people interact with them. Part A ends with the disappointment of the narrator when he realises that there is not a satisfactory and sufficient interaction between pianos in Glasgow and the public.

- Part B (Aarhus’ public pianos/pilgrimage)

After his disappointment, the narrator starts looking for pianos in other countries. Using the same map, he realises that there are not any pianos in Demark. The narrator decides to travel to Aarhus, making a trip that seems like a pilgrimage. Misreading and misunderstanding the same map, filming his experience from a first-person point of view and dislocating himself in another country, the narrator tries to find something that seemingly does not exist. His search for public pianos in Denmark turns out to be successful. Part B ends with the same feeling of dissatisfaction appeared in Part A.

[1] Ioannis Panagiotou, “PLAY ME,” 2020, <https://www.ioannspanagiotou.com/play-me>.

- Part C (the narrator as creator, the role of music ensemble)

Along with the above narration, the audience can listen to music being performed by a piano trio (piano, violin, bass clarinet). This instrumentation feels strange as the artwork appears to be all about public pianos. However, before the final scene of the work, once the narrator finds a piano in Denmark, he narrates that “It turns out that lonely pianos had nothing to say to me, so I decided to invent some new instruments.” This is when he starts narrating the fictional invention of every single instrument of the piano trio. The invention of the instruments starts with one of the performers finding a violin in her bed. The narrator names this instrument “The First Violin.” Another performer finds a bass clarinet in her garden, named “Clatireno.” Having created his instrumental set-up, the narrator creates different experiments and combinations of the instruments. The work finishes with an instrumental part composed by the narrator, which works like a Coda.

Self-referential Narration

Music is an abstract medium, it is often difficult to create a story with sounds unless they are associated with something non-musical, for example a tuba mimicking the sound of a whale. In “PLAY ME,” self-referential narration is a key element which gives a purpose to the existence of music, musicians and musical instruments. The compositional process, the existential reasons of the materials (video, story, music), and the relationship between them, are being explained through this type of narration. As this was a commissioned artwork, the instrumentation was given and not chosen by the artist. The instrumental limitations of the commission, hence the limited artistic palette of the composer, is being used conceptually through self-referential narration in order to enhance the narrator’s limited understanding of the world.

We can see that music interacts conceptually with the plot, and it is being approached as a character in a play,^[2] due to

[2] Ioannis Panagiotou, “Proposal for a Dance Performance,” *MUSIC. OLOGY.ECA* no. 2, 11 October 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2218/music.2021.6484>.

the existence of the narrator. This approach can be found in my previous work “Proposal for a Dance Performance,” where self-referential narration guided the play and revealed the mechanism behind the work.^[3] As the narrator is also the composer of the music of this artwork, his narrative explores his compositional process and the choice of his compositional materials.

The Narrator as Medium

In this work, the narrator/composer becomes the medium or the threshold, which connects formal with informal voices. The formal and the informal, the official and the unofficial, the true and the forged, the literal and the metaphor, the real and the surreal, are two flip sides, which could not exist without one another. In “PLAY ME,” an unreliable narrator, appears as a medium that connects the real with the surreal, creating a very blurred perception of the world. This perception involves elements of reality, imagination, exploration and fraud. The “forged” map of my video work and the myth that is being created out of it, could not make sense without our real experience of the world. The narrator as medium or threshold, connects unofficial voices/entities that (seemingly) do not exist and make them interact with the official/real ones. The narrator appears to be the only person who can interact with the pianos and understand their value. Public pianos are being approached as spirits/unofficial voices which can talk to the medium/narrator “telling him...PLAY ME.” The narrator, who is also the composer of the music, would not be able to write the music if he could not interact with the unofficial voice of the piano. The narrator transposes the unofficial (living piano/piano spirit) into the official, creating something that exists in the real world, an artwork/a music composition.

We can see this connection between the formal and the informal in the first act of *Hamlet*, scenes iii-iv.^[4] The ghost of Hamlet’s father is the main cause of all the interactions that happen in the play. Hamlet is the only person who interacts with this ghost, an entity that might be the ghost of his father, a demon or just

[3] Panagiotou, “Proposal for a Dance Performance.”

[4] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* / William Shakespeare, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, Revised edition, The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016)

something made up in his head. Although we cannot be sure about the silent ghost’s identity, Hamlet is the threshold or the portal, who transposes the unofficial and is responsible for the circulation between the official and the unofficial. In “PLAY ME,” this circulation creates a performance between official and unofficial voices, it provides an artistic palette, which involves both the real and the surreal, a situation, where both material and ideas are characters in the same play. The narrator creates two new instruments that the audience know already exist. The interaction between the audience’s perception of the real instruments and the forged creation of them, followed by their new names, creates a metaphysical and ironic situation.

Music Representing the Unofficial

The choice of musical instruments as the main characters of “PLAY ME,” which represent the unofficial is not accidental. For Nicolas Bourriaud – referring to Karl Marx – social interstices (art is one of them) are those spaces of free interaction that provide opportunities for social engagement outside of the socioeconomical norm.^[5] All representations/social interstices refer to values that can be transposed into society.^[6] Music as a form of art, as well as an “unofficial” character in “PLAY ME” interacts with the society, while at the same time, is being approached as an alien entity, placed outside the social norm. We can witness the presence and the value of the unofficial ghost of music through the objects, in this case the musical instruments. The value of the unofficial is being transposed into the society through official media (a music composition performed by a piano trio). The intention of my work and the role of music can be understood in relation to Bourriaud’s phrase: “Artistic practice is always a relationship with the other, at the same time as it represents a relationship to the world.”^[7]

[5] Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002), 16.

[6] Bourriaud, 18.

[7] Bourriaud, 39.

Pilgrimage as a Method

In the second part of my work, the narrator travels to Denmark to find a public piano. This trip seems like a pilgrimage, where pianos as unofficial voices, set the rules of the performance,

and the way the narrator will behave in the space as he follows them wherever they are. For Michael Tausig, pilgrimage is the process analogous to the translation between home and shrine, profane and sacred, official and unofficial voices.^[8] Apart from his properties as a portal, the narrator with his new pilgrim identity connects the world of imagination and metaphors with reality. The literal meaning of the Greek-root word metaphor is transportation.^[9] The narrator's pilgrimage can be understood as the transportation of his everyday body into an imaginary/metaphorical situation. Pilgrimage is a method, which circles between the profane and the sacred.^[10]

In his video work, "Albert's Way,"^[11] Francis Alÿs uses pilgrimage as a method for connecting an everyday walking practice with the myth of Albert Speer. The story says that while in prison, Albert was walking in circles, covering a distance equivalent to that of the Camino Ingles, a route walked by pilgrims from the port of El Ferrol to the Atlantic coast. In his work, Alÿs walks the same distance inside his studio, translating the profane everyday walking activity into a sacred imaginary trip. However, if "PLAY ME" narrator's identity as a medium already creates a connection between official and unofficial voices, why do we also need pilgrimage as a method in this work? The answer is that narrator's effort and the fatigue followed by the pilgrimage to Denmark are the elements that bring value to the unofficial, so he can then transpose these values to the society through his compositional practice.

Narration and Values

- Self-referentialism and the value of the artwork

Self-referentialism has been used widely in philosophy and the arts in order to discuss different values. These include the verbal paradox of Epimenides the Cretan, who said: "All Cretans are liars"^[12] or the phrase from *Midsummer Night's Dream* "If we shadows have offended, / think but this, and all is mended."^[13] This phrase in Shakespeare's work reminds the audience that these "shadows" are actors and the magic they experience is a

[8] Michael T. Tausig, *The Magic of the State / Michael Tausig* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 197.

[9] WordReference.com, "μεταφορά," <https://www.wordreference.com/gren/%CE%BC%CE%B5%CF%84%CE%B1%CF%86%CE%BF%CF%81%CE%AC> (Accessed 25 March 2022).

[10] Tausig, *The Magic of the State / Michael Tausig*, 198.

[11] Francis Alÿs, "Albert's Way," n.d., <https://francisalys.com/alberts-way/>.

[12] Winfried Nöth and Nina Bishara, *Self-Reference in the Media* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 75.

[13] "Midsummer Night's Dream: Entire Play," <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/midsummer/full.html> (Accessed 25 March 2022).

theatrical play. In "PLAY ME," self-referentialism gives value to objects, approaching them as living entities, and describing narrator's personal experience of them. This is clear in the very beginning of the work, where the narrator informs us that pianos talk to him. However, the narrator also undervalues the whole artwork, making it feel unfinished, as the narration ends with the phrase "or not..." The work always balances between narrators' effort to approach the unofficial and create an artwork, and his continues dissatisfaction during the compositional process. In addition to this, a performance of elements of value is being created, where the audience is called evaluate the work.

- Value of the unofficial

We can think of the unofficial voices of my work in the same way Karl Marx describes the first chief function of money. Money supplies commodities with the material for the expression of their values.^[14] For the sake of metaphor, we can think of commodities as the official voices and money as the unofficial voices of "PLAY ME." The unofficial elements in my work, might not exist or have an obvious value, but they are able to circulate and express the values of the official voices, in the same way money expresses material values. In practice, approaching pianos as living entities (unofficial), expresses the pleasure/value of poetry, metaphor and failure excising during the music composition process (official). The piano spirit gives energy to the narrative to begin and unfold. Things might not exist; however, they can have a value and be part a performance.

- Value of the official and the mundane

Through this fictional scenario, I created instruments, which behave as actants. Actant, as a semiotics term, refers both to human and nonhumans; an actor/actant is any entity that modifies an entity in a trial.^[15] The instruments of the piano trio are actants as they are the evidence for a story which will be co-created by the audience. These instruments work as debris, which reveal hidden stories behind them and animate all actions. There must be a story of someone putting a violin on

[14] Karl Marx, *Marx's Capital* (London: Electric Book Company, 2000), 96.

[15] Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 237.

the bed and the bass clarinet in the garden, or a story where the narrator created the instruments, and they went there be themselves as if they were living organisations. Objects, in this case musical instruments, gain value through their transformation into actants and contribute to the story telling.

Conclusion

To conclude, "PLAY ME," because of its self-referential nature, creates an environment where different media and materials interact as if they were characters in a play. In this type of narration, the narrator becomes the portal between official and unofficial voices, between ideas and their artistic implementation. The unofficial voices enhance their value through the tiring pilgrimage of the narrator. Self-referential narration creates a game and an exchange of values between the everyday, the ideal, the audience, the artwork itself and the process of its creation. This circulation of values can be used to widen an artist's palette, including both material and non-material elements.

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