WHEN NEW AND OLD FORMS OF PARTICIPATION COMES TOGETHER

What happens when new forms of participation through social media shall cooperate with older forms of participation? A question which has arisen and created debate when previously non mediated cultural forms, as live concerts or live theater, now has to share room with the public own mediated participation. The public has in these kinds of scenarios transformed to a much more active player in the process of participation.

The main focus for my PhD study is to shed light on how cultural expressions, as in live theater, can be used to create meetings in the Swedish countryside and how these cultural meeting as a communicational process appears. The project can thereby be described as exploratory and empirical data driven. To study cultural meetings, I follow a theater concept which is called Theater to the village where I do observations on one of theirs performance on tour. Besides observation, supplementary interviews and observation of the theater group’s use of social media are done.

Theater as a form of communication to create increased participation and community building are today a recognized method in the development communication practice for rural development. Some of the premises today for rural development are to create an increased participation in the local community and community building. Through the residents own participation in matters concerning their own experiences, is the idea that the residents thereby can make their own decisions and action for improvement in the local community. In light of this, we can see theater for development been developed as a way to create improvement in cultural, social, political and economically questions by creating participation (Kamlonera, 2005). Some of the theaters strength is its communicative abilities to create closeness and its possibility to blurring the gap between the transmitter and the receiver. One example of that can we see in Augusto Boals Theater of the oppressed (Boal, 2006).

Theater can be seen to have a unique ability as a medium to create a feeling of a Here and Now. According to Walter Benjamin it is the meeting between individual and art in the room and the time which creates its unikum (Benjamin, 2008). The theaters capacity to a Here and Now experience seems in my study to increase the communicative participation and the ability to create interaction between people. But, this interaction and the way people is meeting each other appears to be under a change. Just as Benjamin saw that theater as a form was changing in that it became mediialized into a metamorphosis and became film in the 1930s (Benjamin, 2008), does it seem that a similar change can be seen in the meeting between theater as a communicative practice and the public’s medialization of this through social media.

We are in a constant flow of mediation where mobile devices and the access of fast Internet have made us to constant consumers and producers of media. Media and its consequences can therefore not be separated from rest of our life’s (Couldry & Hepp, 2013). Concepts of the prosumer attempts to identify the new media and cultural climate where previous imagined walls between consumers and producers are blurring (van Dijck, 2009). Walter Benjamin showed already in the 1936 how technical tools for reproduction and mediation changed our experience of cultural production in his classical essay The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. He demonstrated how the technical advent of fast reproduction through mediation devices not just changes the roles of producers and consumers but also the experience of cultural production. According to Benjamin had the arts relation to space and time changed, cultural
productions Here and Now where challenged and stretched over time and space (Benjamin, 2008, ss. 1-4).

I have in my field studies of a theater project found changes which are similar to Benjamin’s. Cultural forms to create community building and participation, as live theater or concerts, which tries to create a Here and Now experience are confronted with the audience own will to participate through mobile devices. The audience use technical tools in an attempt to mediate, share and save their individual experience. To understand this development a Media Culture perspective may be rewarding with inspiration from Benjamin and his concept of Here and Now.

THEATER TO THE VILLAGE

This paper is a part of my PhD study which has its starting point in the change in the rural Sweden and how theater can be used to create meetings for negotiation of what rural Sweden was, are and should be. The project can therefore be described as empirical and explorative where I follow a theater concept, Theater to the village, where I do observation and informal talks with the participants.

The rural place capture the idea of deeply layered subjective experience grounded in the particularity of local conditions and discourses where media can be seen both representing the rural place and changing the rural place in an intimately interconnected process (Adams & Jansson, 2012). Rural Sweden can be seen as pressed between different narrative where it both should be a place for growth and economic development, a retreat for an educated middle class, and a place that holds old values and traditions (Andersson & Jansson, 2012).

Culture and cultural production are viewed as a tool to create the desired development, a way to develop both the rural place and the rural habitants. Culture becomes a method to representing the rural place in an attractive way and as an instrument for change. The Swedish government has lift culture and its role for rural development in the program of action, Attraktionskraft Sverige (Näringsdepartementet, 2012), and as a part in the commission of future, År framtiden kulturens re-renässans (Bergquist, 2012). In this way cultural production as a development method of the rural has not only been given a prominent role in Sweden, but has also got the role for social criticism in the project I am following, as a way for another way of development.

Theater to the village is a project that is a part of the theater collective Friteatern, which is a free theater. Friteatern was formed 1973 and currently consist of a group of 15 people. Since the theater was formed they have created approximately 850 venues around Sweden. The working method is to work without borders between the audience and the actors. The idea behind Theater to the village occurred in the 90s where the idea is that the theater are visiting the audience and travels all over Sweden, “no village is too small, no society is to big” can be seen as their motto for the method.

The foundation of Theater to the village as a method is that the performance just shall be seen as part in a big motion. The performance occurs in a close relationship between the ensemble and the habitants in the village, a process to build trust and creating network where the actual performance just is a part in a bigger development where the habitants in this way shall embark on their own local society. In this method it is the meeting and the meetings that are important with a belief that theater can create meetings which becomes something more. Friteaterns concept, Theater to the village, can be seen as a reaction to take back rurality as a symbol for those who lives there, a part in a struggle of for whom the rural is for. The rural and the rural place becomes here a subject of struggle where Theater to the village is a method to create meeting places where rural people can meet and negotiate rurality.
Culture and cultural factors are seen as a more and more important part of society. We can see this in the perspective of an increasing process of culturalization which develops alongside with the process of mediatization. Culture is strongly featured in a number of different sectors of society where the concept of culture and cultural production both may accommodate an understand as aesthetic and/or in the term of Raymond Williams ”a whole way of life” (Andersson & Fornäs, Mediekulturperspektivets möjligheter; Ett samtal i kulturaliseringens tecken, 2010). Culture is viewed as something important for businesses, economic growth, attractive regions, health and community building (Bergquist, 2012).

Culturalization can here be seen as a process which enhances the symbolic work; to ascribe things, events, and phenomena meanings without appropriate function (Andersson & Fornäs, Mediekulturperspektivets möjligheter; Ett samtal i kulturaliseringens tecken, 2010). The rural place are both material and symbolic, a mix both of the experienced and the mediated (Adams & Jansson, 2012). As the symbolic dimension becomes more important the rural place becomes more of a symbol than an actual place to visit. Marketing is an important part in this process, but it is also something that’s created of the individual with our own mediation (Andersson & Fornäs, Mediekulturperspektivets möjligheter; Ett samtal i kulturaliseringens tecken, 2010). Culture and cultural production becomes a tool for symbolic power, both to establish and maintain power but also as a way of resistance. In this perspective becomes power something fluid where mediatization and culturalization connects (Delueze, 1992; Couldry & Hepp, 2013).

Media are becoming to dominate the post-industrial society with media’s growing role in everyday lifes with normalization of fast Internet and mobile phones great expansion (Couldry & Hepp, 2013; Andersson & Fornäs, 2010). Culture and media becomes in this perspective difficult to separate from each other where the media can be seen as cultures own technology (Hannerz, 1990, s. 7). To understand this connection between mediatization and culturalization the concept of Media Culture have arisen (Andersson & Fornäs, Mediekulturperspektivets möjligheter; Ett samtal i kulturaliseringens tecken, 2010).

I suggest that Water Benjamin’s theory about the experience and the meeting with art can be used today in the light of a Media Culture perspective. In his work, The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, he is pointing on the consequence of increasing mediation for culture and cultural production. Benjamin’s focus is on the meeting with the art and our experience of cultural production and the change that occurs when it is reproduced by media (Benjamin, 2008). His two concepts of Here and Now can, according to me, be applied to understand important changes due to mobile interaction and participation in relation to cultural experiences. Previously zones which were excluded from mediations can today be seen changed due to mobile devices controlled by individuals and their ability to mediate.

In media and cultural studies, the issues of audience productivity and participation have been highly debated, but the logic of interactivity invokes a new set of spatial conditions. As linkage and interaction between machines and between people evolves can it lead to new intersections of space and place (Adams & Jansson, 2012). This is a development which travels between the macro and micro where it both can be a tool for symbolic control and symbolic resistance (Delueze, 1992). New mediatized power geometries are created dew to who are able to move and connect freely, and those without. The new personal technologies for symbolic recording and circulation change the ways we will perceive, appropriate, and reproduce places as rurality. Rurality as a place cannot be seen as an area defined of boundaries or only the structure of locality, it is rather a particular of texture, communication weaved together (Adams & Jansson, 2012), where the struggle over symbolic values becomes even more important.
THEATER, A TOOL FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

Theater as a tool for community building is not a new phenomenon and was used already by the missionary workers colonial attempts to improve Africans through drama. Theatre for development evolved as a method to non-formal education, to use popular theatre as the medium for encouraging participation, raising issues, fostering discussion and promoting collective action. It also developed approaches where the theatre was more directly political in its texture, the idea here was to first awaken the minds of the residents of this place to the need for knowing their rights and demanding fair attention. Theater for development is based around the idea of the importance of locality: the plays must take the part of the local people. They should reflect life from the viewpoint of the villagers themselves (Kamlongera, 2005).

Theatre as a method for community building can today be employed as a way of mobilizing communities over development activities and carry out related activities. It can also been used in evaluation of development projects. Work in community mobilization rests on the premise that the most important element in rural development and poverty reduction is community participation (Kamlongera, 2005). Participatory communication emerged in response to the failure of traditional development approaches in the 1970s and rest on an idea of a more bottom-up approach and as a way to create empowerment. To create participation the need to have a ‘tool-kit’ approach to communication has emerged. Practitioners have recognized the need for a multiplicity of communication strategies to improve the quality of life in communities (Waisbord, 2005) where theater to development is seen as a method (Kamlongera, 2005).

According to Christopher Kamlongera, the Theatre for Development in Africa involves a wide range of resources, resources much like the concept by the theater group I am following in Sweden. He describes songs, dance, puppetry and drama as usually used (Kamlongera, 2005). In the case of the project Theater to the village, three of this is consistent:

1. Songs, in the case of Theater to the village tunes performed with traditional instrumentation and with a rural theme.
2. Dances, even here with a rural theme employed with a mimetic potential, for what actually takes place here is what should properly be termed dance-drama.
3. Drama: the backbone of the performance which also has a clear rural theme and may be described in terms of a traditional Swedish narrative structure.

But the Theater of the village has a resource which Kamlongero doesn’t address which is everything that occurs around the specific performance but nevertheless is part of the actual performance, moment of building the scene, drinking coffee together and the break between the acts. It is here the actual meeting is created where the discussion of ruralty can evolve, where the performance goes from telling about the rural to talk about the rural. Oscar Hemer(2005) inspired of Paulo Freire’s work points to the difference from reading and write. Reading the word is dependent upon reading the world, to write the world is to be able to transform the world. Theater for development has same potential; Augusto Boals Theater of the Oppressed is an example where the theater goes from artistic product to artistic process. The process is here the focus point and the empowerment of be able to influence this process (Boal, 2006). Theater for development is here something more than “just” performance; it becomes an open-ended process and a meeting to exchange ideas, thoughts and to write the world.

BUILDING COLLECTIVE PARTICIPATION

Theater to the village as a method for community building is built on repetition; by doing the same movements in the different locations where they play, the actors can create a room for collective participation together with the organizing group in the local villages and with the audience. In principle the organizing group and the audience are always the same people.
These method building blocks are the foundation to create a closed room for a collective Here and Now experienced and are based on:

**The first meeting**
The arrival of the theater group is the most important stage where the different roles should be negotiated; who speaks with whom and what are the topics of today. After the actors and the organizing group has greeted each other, they all look at the building and the room for the evening’s performance. In this form small talk can be created and quite soon the local big questions appear which are highly discussed and will come back during evening.

**Building the scene**
Next step is to build the scene, the theater group brings their own stage and also a platform for audience seating. This step is often something the actors are doing together with the organizing group and it involves loading out the trailer, setting the scene, and building the seating platform. This step would go faster if the actors are doing it alone but it is seen as so important that the actors arrive additional early. The building process is used as a tool to do something together and in this way get to know each other. Here a room for small talks is created where jokes and questions about the evening’s performance can appear. From being two different groups, actors and organizers, are they in this step becoming one group, a collective.

**Face and overcome challenges**
The *Theater of the village* have a concept where “no village are too small and no society are to big”, they can play everywhere in all different settings, and this is what they do. But this comes with a number of difficulties; facilities are rarely adapted for theater and small village is often equal with small audience numbers. Often are the audience’s numbers, the facilities limitations problem things that the organizing group have dread for a long time. This could be a concern, but the theater group makes these challenges a concern together with the organizing group, a challenge which they can overcome together.

**Let the show begin**
In the process of building the scene, the seating platform and counting the arriving audience the actual performance becomes a moment of relief, the challenges has been overcome and everyone can rest in the moment. The actors describe this moment as the calmest moment of the whole day. The collective is now together where the audience/organizing group and the actors can create a whole. This is what everyone have worked for, to create a Here and Now experience as a collective, to be at a place and a time together and to participate together.

**INDIVUAL MEDIATED PARTICIPATION**
In the last two years a new phenomenon has occurred, the close room of collective non-reproduced experienced have been challenged by the audiences own mediated participation. Just as Benjamin acknowledge how the film actor become to act to a technical device not an audience (Benjamin, 2008) has the theater group faced a similar change. But it is the audience themselves that are recording and reproducing the event. It is the audience own will to participate and mediate, share and save the moment, which in turn break the collective Here and Now experience.

**Mediate**
When the performance begins the mobile devices are not visible, it is first when the audience has got into the performance and they feel safe with their experience the mobile devices are picked up. Often it is just a few mobile devices visible in the same time and not everyone in the audience is using them. Those who pick up their mobile phone have always what’s usually called “smart phone” which they take pictures and create short movie clips with. Pictures is taken in
moments which are comical and movies are often recorded when the actor singing or playing instruments. In this way the audience is mediating moments in the performance.

**Share**

One of the usual way to mediate is to share the experienced with friends. The sharing is done by showing the photos in the device for friends which were not there, or by sharing the photos on social media platform as Facebook. In this way the Here and Now becomes stretched like ripples in the water and spread over room and time. Important is to notice that it is not the show which is shared; it is the experienced of the performance. Instead of a collective Here and Now experience, this behavior creates a more individual participation of the moment.

**Save**

The second way of mediate is to save the experience by taking photos or movies. This is a way of mediating which is often shared to the actors, audience members are coming after the show to the actor to show pictures or movies which they shall “save, only for me!” This behavior of mediating the experience is also an individual participation in the experience. An attempt to freeze time, freeze the Here and Now by removing it from the collective Here and Now experience.

**DISCUSSION**

The use of participation through own mediation by mobile devices in theater for development can be described both as an opportunity and as a disruption. Opportunities for the audience to individual participation where they can create own mediation of the experience. The possibility to share and save experiences are seen as a positive experience by the audience in my study, but for the actors viewed as a disruption and/or as a way to promote the event. To understand the tension between the individual and collective participation is Benjamin's concept of Here and Now a possible theoretical framework.

The audiences own mediated participation can be a way to create value both for the audience and the actors in the collective experience. In this manner the meeting which is created through theater can expand and be reproduced. Benjamin describes art as something that always has been able to reproduce (Benjamin, 2008, s. 2), in theater same play are performed many times. The uniqueness of art lays in its connection to time and space (Benjamin, 2008, s. 3). In theater it is the actors relation through performance to its audience, the meeting which occurs in a common context of time and space.

When the mobile device becomes a part of the theaters Here and Now experience it will create a disruption. The close relation between actors – audience becomes mediated through a more open-ended and nonlinear communication (Couldry & Hepp, 2013). The focus from both the audience and the actors disconnects to the localization towards a more mediated condition.

Technical devices to reproduce art are something that has developed gradually and are connected with the development of the society (Benjamin, 2008, ss. 1-2). Therefore the audience own mediation of the theater experience may be viewed in terms of Media Culture and as a part of the processes of culturalization and mediatization of the social space.

The questions then becomes if there is a choice, for methods of participation as theater for development, between mediation by mobile devices or not? Can and should we shut it out?


