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A Sticky Subject: New Media Popular Entertainments

While internet performances may, at first glance, seem to lack the bodies together in a space that has been considered a hallmark of popular entertainments, a critical look at new media performances reveals a strong link between them and traditional popular entertainments. In addition, changing notions of the body, liveness, and space have complicated even the idea of what “live bodies interacting in real space” in fact means. These concepts have been preliminarily explored in relation to websites such as YouTube, but newer sites like Stickam challenge notions of liveness and the body more clearly. With the ability to interact with multiple viewers over webcam in the same “room” simultaneously while watching the main performer or performers, Stickam creates a live as well as mediatized space for entertainments that both does and does not contain live bodies. The short acts linked together into performances intended for the people, as found in the tradition of popular entertainments, are now frequently a component of new media performances. Danielle I. Szlawieniec-Haw is a professional actor and writer. She is also a PhD candidate in Theatre Studies at York University, Ontario, Canada where she is pursuing her studies into the effects and ethics of representing trauma.

“Rather than dismissing Myspace or YouTube [or Stickam] as functions of a younger generation or mindless distraction, we should instead harness the power that they have tapped into and make it relevant within a different paradigm.” – Catherine Colman et al., “New Architectures for Social Networking: Bridging the Gap with freeFormed.net”¹

While the internet shows may, at first glance, seem to have little or nothing in common with popular entertainments, a critical look at real-time, new media performances reveals that there is not a clear divide between the two forms. Although new media has been said to lack the liveness and performer/audience interaction of popular entertainments, I will argue that this is not true of all new media performances. Sites like Stickam feature real-time performances and immediate performer/audience interactions. By examining both the changing definitions of terms and websites that incorporate real-time

performances, it is possible to see the links that exist between popular entertainments as currently defined and what I will call new media popular entertainments.

Some of the ideas raised in this essay have been preliminarily addressed in relation to websites with pre-recorded content, with YouTube serving as the primary example. While YouTube has been a popular focus for discussions of online performances, it is not the strongest demonstration of new media performances that follow the forms of popular entertainments. After all, YouTube consists of pre-recorded videos posted by users. Although other users can respond through views, star ratings, or even comments, there is generally little or no real-time interaction that occurs. In fact, YouTube has intentionally avoided real-time performances and interactions, as the organizers felt that this would make the website safer, especially for youth.² Users have worked around this, however, by joining Stickam or similar sites that include real-time content and the use of consistent performer names.³ Thus sites, such as Stickam, that have chosen to include real-time content and interactions can be argued to have a stronger overlap with popular entertainments.

In order to discuss how real-time new media performances can fall under the umbrella of popular entertainments, some clear understanding of what defines a performance as a popular entertainment is needed. Defining popular entertainments, however, can be an arduous task.⁴ As recently as 1974, John Townsen raised the fact that many aspects of popular entertainments lacked comprehensive bibliographies, and he noted that there remained “little scholarly research” in the field.⁵ While a significant amount of research has been undertaken since that time in the field of popular entertainments, it remains relatively new by comparison with many other areas of traditional performance and theatre research. For this reason, I will begin by suggesting a definition and discussing some of the features of popular entertainments before addressing how new media performances relate to them.

Brooks McNamara has offered a definition of popular entertainments. He notes that, “[t]raditional popular entertainments consist simply of live amusements aimed at a broad, relatively ‘unsophisticated’ audience. Unlike folk forms, to which they are related, popular entertainments are created not by amateurs, but for profit by professional showmen.”⁶ McNamara then breaks down popular entertainments into three categories: variety entertainment, marked by “collections of independent acts;” popular theatre, marked by pieces that draw from traditions found in the legitimate theatre but that “possess few of the artistic and intellectual pretensions common to the regular stage;” and the entertainment environment, marked by performances that “redefine for a short time an already existing area... [or] constitute a temporary or permanent self-contained environment.”⁷ In 2008, the IFTR-FIRT Working Group on Popular Entertainments also considered a definition of the field, and discussed the importance of the framing or intentionality of popular entertainments. In order for a performance to be considered within this field, the

discussions suggested that it had to be “framed as entertainment and... intended as entertainment.”⁸ Such a perspective would eliminate events like fires, for example, which may be regarded as public spectacle, but are not intended as an entertainment.

David Mayer suggests that, even though popular forms of theatre cannot be fully defined, they can be described.⁹ One of the defining factors of these performances, as well as one of the possible reasons for the paucity of scholarly attention, is that they have mainly existed outside the frame or on the fringes of the so-called legitimate theatre.¹⁰ Thus, the history of popular entertainments is one of struggle to compete with other types of performance, including legitimate theatre.¹¹ Throughout their history, it has been vital that popular entertainments do in fact entertain people. Otherwise, audience members might just go elsewhere; and, without the level of funding that has often been available to the legitimate theatre through patrons or government systems, the popular entertainers might not be able to continue. Even today, funding in Canada, for example, remains slim for most popular entertainers, with the exception of large companies such as Cirque de Soleil. Thus, popular entertainers have continually been faced with the challenge of making sure their work draws and retains audience members’ interest.

In addition, popular entertainments have a specific style of performance which is non-narrative. E. T. Kirby has argued that popular entertainments “seem independent of considerations of narrative form or of the representation or enactment of another reality.”¹² Instead of having a narrative script that is followed throughout the performance, popular entertainments often incorporate short acts, or simple scenarios, as found in McNamara’s definitions of variety and popular theatre.¹³ These shorter acts or simple scenarios can then be built together or improved around to create full shows.¹⁴

Traditional popular entertainments have also revolved around live performances that include a relationship between the performers and the spectators. Kyna Hamill states that, “[a]lthough traditional popular entertainments differ in form, their necessity for an audience and a specified performance space remains constant.”¹⁵ The Popular Entertainments Working Group also raised the idea that, in popular entertainments, “[a]udience/spectators have the agency to define or construct an event.”¹⁶ The nature of spectators being able to construct the event implies a liveness in the performance; however, the definition of liveness in popular entertainments, as in other fields, is not without contention. It becomes difficult to draw clear boundaries between what is live and what is mediatized when performers now have the ability to easily mix both. Instead of existing in one of two distinct categories, live or mediatized, performances now have the option of easily existing in a liminal space between the two, partially thanks to the developments in the internet and other technologies.

New media performances have been emerging and gaining popularity as the

internet has evolved. With the development of Web 2.0, people's relationship with the internet changed.¹⁷ The defining features of Web 2.0 include it being user driven and involving high levels of information.¹⁸ Catherine McLoughlin and Mark Lee argue that, due to this, Web 2.0 has created and fostered a new type of culture, one marked by multitasking, high levels of speed, and the ability to be 'always on.'¹⁹ It also relies on the idea that communities and collectives are stronger and more knowledgeable than individuals.²⁰ The weight put on collective knowledge can be seen in sites such as Wikipedia. Here, people are able to change the content in an online encyclopedia; the idea being that, together, people will create a better, broader content base than would be possible otherwise. As with many other aspects of Web 2.0, Wikipedia is user driven; users provide the content, judge the content, respond to it, and use it.

User driven content is also common in relation to social networking and/or performance-based sites like YouTube, Myspace, Facebook, and Stickam. All of these examples provide users with the opportunity to personalise their pages and upload or produce personal content. For several years, YouTube has been seen as a primary location for user driven performance content. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green even declared that YouTube has been seen as a "patron of collective creativity."²¹ By providing a space for users to watch videos, comment on videos, upload videos, and even become Partners who are paid for the advertising revenue their videos bring in, YouTube has managed to form a community of creators and/or active watchers, together known as YouTubers.²² While this may be of interest in relation to the development of Web 2.0 and while Henry Jenkins and Kyna Hamill have argued that there is overlap between vaudeville and YouTube,²³ I would suggest that YouTube is not a prime example of new media popular entertainments as it does not include real-time reactions. Instead, audience responses are limited to comments that can be posted, some which may be written months or even years after a video was uploaded, or response videos that can be recorded, again potentially long after the release of the original video. Thus, YouTube does not include direct interaction between performers and spectators.

This is not true of all websites, however. Some, such as Stickam, include real-time interaction via webcams. In February, 2005, Stickam was launched by Hideki Kishioka and Aaron Novak.²⁴ These two creators were interested in mixing aspects of Myspace, which allows performers to upload their original content and develop a fan base, with YouTube, while incorporating a focus on live interaction.²⁵ Stickam has now developed into a space where new media performances and shows occur, while the content remains live. With over 50,000 live feeds, Stickam has become a part of the micro-cultures that individuals can create using Web 2.0.²⁶

On Stickam's main page, audience members are given links to featured pre-recorded videos, to shows, and a mini-schedule of upcoming performances. When viewers enter the main schedule page, they are able to see the full schedule of upcoming shows, hold their mouse over a show that is broadcasting to preview it,

and watch any show that is live at the time. While watching a show, audience members are able to interact with the performer and with other audience members via live typed chat and/or live web cameras. In each current broadcasting room, spectators are able to watch the performer on a large screen to the left. Next to the performer is a set of smaller screens where other viewers can be seen and heard. Spectators have the option of blocking or muting other viewers if they wish. In addition, audience members without webcams are able to have real-time contact with performers and other spectators through written chat. Once again, audience members are able to use a function which is capable of excluding unwanted other people. The performer not only performs, but often directly interacts with audience members. Thus, one audience member may be watching both the performer and an audience member or audience members who are being interacted with and are interacting over web cameras. All interaction aside from the featured, pre-recorded videos on the opening page occurs live.

Although Stickam offers real-time interaction, not all the performances found on the site can necessarily be considered popular entertainments. Stickam is a location, similar to a theatre space and is, therefore, open to all kinds of performances. Yet examining the criteria that have been established in this paper regarding popular entertainments, the majority of Stickam performances can be seen to embrace many of the criteria and to have clear ties to other, traditional popular entertainments. The site's content is defined as being for entertainment. Its form lacks a narrative trajectory: performers do short skits, give political commentary, dance, juggle, and perform magic tricks. As well as performers lacking a narrative for their shows, the spectator is offered a choice of multiple shows. In this way, audience members can construct their own viewing experience, choosing to enter or leave viewing rooms as they wish in order to participate in different acts.

One Stickam performer, Jake Fogelnest promotes his show as "Professional Internet Entertainment." Although this may sound like self-promotion, there are now internet performers who earn money through the advertising revenue generated by their pages, causing internet performance to become a developing profession. During Fogelnest's January 8, 2010 Stickam performance, he put on music and directed spectators to watch the spectator/performer in the top left hand screen. This man was dressed in a bee suit and began to dance. After the completion of this short act, attention was drawn back to Fogelnest who answered a phone call and began doing impressions of Anthony Hopkins' character Hannibal Lector from *Silence of the Lambs*. At the same time, Freak.Face[BAMF!] [sic], another Stickam user, could be seen dancing to Beyonce's song *Single Ladies*. A viewer called in to ask Fogelnest to do something about Freak.Face[BAMF!]s "camel toe". To this, Fogelnest made a comment to Freak.Face[BAMF!], who ran off for a while before returning and sitting at her computer with another person. In the meantime, Fogelnest told jokes, responded to viewers, and did short impressions. As this demonstrates, Fogelnest not only performed short entertainments but also interacted with viewers, who were able to respond to the performance and to one another.

Similarly, in 2008, several of the top-rated performers on YouTube conducted an Iron Man competition using Stickam. They promoted their competition over YouTube, on their Stickam shows, and on their personal websites. Cross-promotion is not unusual as many of the 100 top-watched members of YouTube also have Stickam accounts and shows so that they can provide real-time performances and interact more directly with audience members.²⁷ The rules of the competition stated that all those involved would compete to determine who could stay awake the longest. Audience members were then invited to view a set of shows that would continue broadcasting for as long as the performers were awake. During the competition competitors interacted with each other while audience members were invited to switch rooms (from one performer to another) to increase the viewers in a performer's room if numbers were shrinking. In essence, the performance was the competition, with each performer's room adding to the whole. Performers responded to audience members' suggestions and requests, including one performer who moved to broadcast from his bathtub. Audience members also were able to respond to performers and become performers themselves at times, similar to the situations that occurred in Fogelnest's room.

As with YouTube, these interactions on Stickam are intended to create a community among its members.²⁸ Stickam has allowed performers to move into the realm of real-time new media performance and real-time interactions with audience members. Since audience members can use typed chat and webcams to hold discussions with one another during the shows, they have additional opportunities to get to know each other, creating bonds that can last outside the realm of the performance. Performances on Stickam create communities: communities of performers, temporary communities of the show's watchers, and more permanent communities of show's long-term followers. In fact, enough people have become interested in the Stickam community that there is now the StickyDrama website that is dedicated to gossip about internet celebrities.

If real-time new media performances can create communities, can include performers and audience members interacting, and can be defined as entertainment, what would separate these new media performances from traditional popular entertainments? The question of liveness still remains to be addressed in relation to Stickam. Philip Auslander states that "liveness is first and foremost a temporal relationship, a relationship of simultaneity."²⁹ If one argues that liveness is about being able to react to a performance as it is being performed, thereby being able to have an influence on it, Stickam would seem to meet that criterion. Audience members can be seen, heard, and are able to interact in numerous ways, all in real-time. Performances occur in the moment, with the successes and mistakes being seen by audience members unedited. Certainly, the experience of a performance is different if one does or does not smell the location or if one is or is not jostled by the crowd. These elements do not define whether someone saw a live event however, they simply alter the viewer's experience of the performance. While the experience of watching a show on Stickam might not be the

same as watching a circus, for example, this does not mean that these real-time new media performances should be dismissed as being outside the umbrella of popular entertainments. It simply means that they are different forms of popular entertainment, intended to create their own range of responses from audience members. It would, therefore, be highly problematic to try to argue that Stickam is not 'live'.

In *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Philip Auslander addresses the fact that theatre and media can no longer be extracted from one another; just as media was influenced by theatre, theatre is now influenced by media. Discussing the current situation, he points out that audience members' reactions have been formed by media such that, even when they are watching "live" performances, the way they relate to and even the way they see these performances is tied to their experience of media.³⁰ Thus, it is not possible for people in Western society to stand outside mediatization.³¹ Indeed, even the concept of standing outside mediatization means the person is responding to the media and mediatization. Herbert Blau agrees that the idea of liveness has been complicated in the theatre, though he argues that it is both by the media and by the broadness of performance studies.³² Even more complicated is the idea that, "like liveness itself, the desire for live experiences is a product of mediatization".³³ Instead of trying to separate performances into the two categories of live and mediatized, Auslander encourages people to see that the "[t]heatre and mass media are not rivals".³⁴ As the field of popular entertainments has itself often been seen as a rival of the legitimate theatre, popular entertainments would seem to be an ideal framework from which to examine real-time new media performances.

As new media and Web 2.0 have developed, definitions have also begun to change. Shaun Moores discusses the fact that media can construct live experiences in "non-localized" spaces.³⁵ Although audience members may be in a variety of places around the world, an online space is created in which events can occur. This space then becomes both a specific space (a certain Stickam room, etc.) and yet remains a space without true location, as it can be created and dissolved. This ability to create a temporary space for performance is also seen in the entertainment environment,³⁶ so is not unheard of within the realm of popular entertainments. With space becoming a more complex term and the idea of non-localized spaces gaining popularity, it is difficult to state that audiences and communities can only occur when people are in immediate, physical proximity. Young people will likely continue to pursue this more complicated understanding of liveness as they are growing up with the immediacy of Web 2.0 and with information telling them that they can speak to people live or watch web feeds live on the internet.

Similarly, definitions of bodies have been altered by the increasing popularity of the internet and the creation of avatars. Sites like Second Life have allowed users to become avatars, to live as another self or an extended self within their second life. As is pointed out in *Second Life: The official guide*, participants can alter these

avatars' height, weight, body type and head size with a few mouse clicks.³⁷ While these bodies could not be said to replace an individual's body or override the concept of bodies, the idea of avatars does complicate the notion of what is a body and what is not. Stelarc argues that, due to technology, traditional notions of the body are now obsolete.³⁸ This is not an uncommon stance, with some people even stating that avatars are a more accurate portrayal of their inner selves than their quotidian bodies.³⁹ This links to Stelarc's point that, "[i]t is no longer meaningful to see the body as a site for the psyche or the social, but rather as a structure to be monitored and modified; the body not as a subject but as an object – NOT AS AN OBJECT OF DESIRE BUT AS AN OBJECT FOR DESIGNING [sic]."⁴⁰ As Stelarc has demonstrated through his performance art and theorizing, the concept of body is changing as cyber-bodies and robotic technologies become increasingly complex and prevalent.

The internet is altering the way people learn, the way they see employment, and the way they live.⁴¹ This will have an impact upon the nature of popular entertainments themselves. With the ability to interact with multiple viewers over webcam in the same "room" simultaneously while watching the main performer or performers, websites such as Stickam create complex spaces that are both live and mediatized. Short acts linked together into performances intended to appeal to a broad range of audience members are now frequent components of new media performances. Although it could not be said that these performances are an exact mirror of traditional popular entertainments, the overlaps found within these two forms would seem to indicate that one branch of contemporary popular entertainments has evolved to incorporate the internet, making it vital that new media performances are not to be ignored. This is not to say that popular entertainments have solely become the domain of the internet, neither is this an argument that all performances on the internet can be seen as popular entertainments. Instead I am suggesting that those real-time new media performances that could fall within the purview of popular entertainments need to continue to be explored within this context. Otherwise, one area of popular entertainments could remain largely unexamined, as was previously the case with other traditional popular entertainments.

¹ Paper delivered at the I-Media Conference in 2007. See http://www.catmindeye/media/2007/04/imedia_first_international.html. freeFormed.net is a social networking platform founded as part of the NYU Interactive Telecommunications Program conducted at the Tisch School of the Arts.

² Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, "Agency and Controversy in the YouTube Community," 4, paper presented at *Rethinking Communities, Rethinking Place, Association of Internet Researchers Conference*, Copenhagen, Denmark, October 15-18, 2008.

³ Ibid, 4.

⁴ Brooks McNamara, "Popular Entertainments Issue: An Introduction," *The Drama Review*, 18.1 (March 1974), 3.

⁵ John Townsen, "Sources in Popular Entertainment," *The Drama Review*, 18.1 (March 1974), 118.

⁶ McNamara, "Popular Entertainments," 3.

- ⁷ Ibid, 3-4.
- ⁸ Discussion notes, Popular Entertainments Working Group, IFTR Conference, Seoul, Korea, July 14-19, 2008.
- ⁹ David Mayer, "Towards a Definition of Popular Theatre," in *Western Popular Theatre*, David Mayer and Kenneth Richards, eds. (London: Methuen, 1977), 260.
- ¹⁰ Kyna Hamill, "'275,986 views on YouTube': Reconsidering Popular Entertainment," unpublished paper presented for the Popular Entertainments Working Group, IFTR Conference, Lisbon, Portugal, July 12-18, 2009, 2-3.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 2-3.
- ¹² E. T Kirby, "The Shamanistic Origins of Popular Entertainments," *The Drama Review*, 18.1 (March 1974), 5.
- ¹³ McNamara, "Popular Entertainments," 3-4.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 4.
- ¹⁵ Hamill, "'275,986 views on YouTube'", 1.
- ¹⁶ See note 8.
- ¹⁷ Catherine McLoughlin and Mark J. W. Lee, "The Three P's of Pedagogy for the Networked Society: Personalization, Participation, and Productivity," *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 20.1 (2008), 10.
- ¹⁸ Paul Anderson, "What is Web 2.0? Ideas, technologies and implications for education," *JISC Technology and Standards Watch*, (2007), 15-16.
- ¹⁹ McLoughlin and Lee, "The Three P's," 10.
- ²⁰ Ibid, 10.
- ²¹ Burgess and Green, "Agency and Controversy," 1.
- ²² Ibid, 3.
- ²³ Jenkins quoted in Hamill: 7.
- ²⁴ *Interview with Hideki Kishioka and Aaron Novak, Stickam*, Southern California Technology News and Venture Capital, <http://www.socaltech.com/fullstory/0006947.html>.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ David Ramsay, "A Discussion on Social Software and its Inclusion in Culture and Education," (MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2009), 12.
- ²⁷ *Interview with Hideki*.
- ²⁸ Burgess and Green, "Agency and Controversy," 4.
- ²⁹ Philip Auslander, "Live from Cyberspace," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach, eds. (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 531.
- ³⁰ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 25.
- ³¹ Ibid, 40.
- ³² Herbert Blau, "Virtually Yours: Presence, Liveness, Lessness," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach, eds. (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 533
- ³³ Auslander, *Liveness*, 54-55.
- ³⁴ Ibid, 1.
- ³⁵ Shaun Moores, "The Doubling of Place: Electronic media, time-space arrangements and social relationships," in *MediaSpace: place, scale, and culture in a media age*, Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 22.
- ³⁶ McNamara, "Popular Entertainments," 4.
- ³⁷ Michael Rymaszewski et al., *Second Life: The official guide* (New Jersey: Wiley Publishing, 2007), 24-25.
- ³⁸ Stelarc, "Psycho-Body to Cyber-Systems," in *The Cybercultures Reader*, David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy, eds. (London: Routledge, 2000), 562.
- ³⁹ Barry Wellman and Caroline A. Haythornthwaite, *The Internet in Daily Life* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 5.
- ⁴⁰ Stelarc, "Psycho-Body," 562.
- ⁴¹ McLoughlin and Lee, "The Three P's," 11.