

We need new heroes

A few years ago, while writing my thesis for a DEA at the SHADYC laboratory at the EHESS campus of La Vieille Charité, in Marseille, I discovered a series of essays on speed by Paul Virilio. I was unaware that he also had studied stained glass and the use of light, and had learned master glassmaker techniques at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Appliqués et des Métiers d'Art before committing himself to architecture and urban planning.

Reading his book *Esthétique de la Disparition* (1980, 1989) was like a revelation for me. These essays on dromology (the study of the role played by speed in modern societies), advanced technocracy, and mankind's need to be connected at all costs struck me as even more reactionary.

I nevertheless adhered to most of these theories. We are supposed to be doing everything faster: travel, productions, creations. The faster things have been done, the more transparent we have become to neoliberal power, which has kept advancing, unabated.

One good example of this: cars have been becoming increasingly powerful, and are looking more like glass balls. We were supposed to see the road better, but we were also supposed to be ever more on view. Intimate space was disappearing. An ode to transparency.

Since the start of the COVID-19 health crisis I have not been able to stop thinking about Paul Virilio, and I think he was right. (I wish I could have met him.)

Online streaming has taken us by storm. It was needed in all sorts of settings, so that the artists could be seen at all costs. More potential for travel, more actual encounters, and more and more screens, like the dashboards of our cars. We are behind glass, we face a screen, the language of the body disappears. So I wonder whether the performing arts, these encounters with humans (in this case an audience), will also become our last priority. COVID-19 has only crystallized what was already there, our excessively digital connections. We see each other without touching, but can this still be called seeing each other?

How can we re-appropriate the body and, in particular, the artistic body? Here I am not talking about the athletic body, which moves to achieve great feats or stay healthy. Rather I am talking about the social

body, the political body, the emotional body. The one that connects us to our actual lives, the one that gives meaning: artistic, social and political. The body that speaks, that steps off the beaten track, is on the margin.

It is only by finding an audience that we can give meaning back to collective communion, without the screens.

I have the feeling that we have reached a crossroads leading to two different worlds, and we have yet to decide which of these roads to take, or how to invent a new one. We understand that slowness does not keep us from achieving things. In fact, quite the contrary is true. But on the other hand, we understand that it is possible to live without leaving the house. Everything can be ordered online. We can even watch shows from home.

A renewed interest in nature is now appearing, quite tentatively. There is a nascent awareness that, without it, we will disappear. Yet at the same time there is a desire to go back to living as before.

Clearly we will not return to living as hunter-gatherers, and our modern society, based on controlling nature, will not give way to living in tribal systems.

So what should we do, what should we invent? Has the time come for Art to lead the way, or is this its death knell?

How is placing performances online any different from offering a museum experience? Will the challenge of attending a live performance at a moment in time – the emotions of which cannot be archived – disappear completely? The strength of the performing arts lies in the very fact that they cannot be hung on the wall, that their market value merges with their essentially public value. What is at stake in the performing arts, in performance, is that they have meaning when played in front of a group. This art is, above all, community-based, it is experienced collectively.

By its very nature, art can act as a countervailing force, in response to today's world. Does the desire to put it on the web (other than as a historical record) mean the same thing as wishing it away?

I therefore believe that it is essential to work hard to ensure the survival of the performing arts, not only by “re-opening” the theaters with “barrier” measures (this is the antithesis of a collective approach: why are they not called “health measures”?), but above all by rethinking how we produce and disseminate works.

- We need more collaboration among venues, for wider dissemination. A company could tour several works across a territory. This way “local” is not thought of only in terms of local companies: international, national and regional companies should be given better opportunities disseminate their work across a territory. This is “glocalization.”

- There should be more time to produce and fewer productions per year/period. But be careful: here the idea is not to receive less money from governments, but rather that the subsidy system should better reflect reality. The amounts will remain the same or even increase, in order to help establish a repertoire.

- The funding agencies and managers must help achieve mobility. Producing may require less money, but travel will require more, because we will support green mobility. In this way, our travel itself will add value to our creations.

- Bring an end to the purely commercial relationship between the dominators (the programmers) and the dominated (the companies and cultural actors). We will need to talk about collaboration contracts. The dominated will have a right to refuse, if the criteria for collaboration (request for exclusivity, no green mobility, no logical presence on a given territory) do not reflect their internal philosophy. To achieve this, the dominated will need to defend their contribution to the dominator: not in terms of its market value, but rather its social and political value.

In conclusion, I see this change as a major undertaking. It is not a question of saying “produce less and better, disseminate on the basis of shared understandings and collaboration.” No, it is almost a question of developing a new epistemology, of refusing the old system, of rejecting neoliberalism in the arts. Finding the courage to say no, to do better, to establish better ways of communicating. In this I believe that the role and position of artists will be key.

It is the artists who will need to weave a new, homogeneous cultural sector, where practices and knowledge are shared. They need to become the new heroes of the 21st century. This is not the image of the hero as we now know it, individualistic, facing the world alone, like the young people standing before the jury of America’s Got Talent, for example.

No, tomorrow’s hero will be a collective one that will create new practices based on professional ethics (which are sorely lacking in the performing arts) and financial equity (we will be paid fair value). This hero will be respectful and altruistic, and will defend social justice.

This is what the health crisis has brought us: a hope for artist-heroes, a hope for new heroes who reject the dominator-dominated system, who will fashion a new vision, a relationship with community-based audiences, who will create a new system and take the reins.

We need new heroes!

Text written from May to September 2020
Line Rousseau

