

# The Conceptualization of Performance Art: From Theater to the Metaverse

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## Abstract:

This paper aims to explore how performing arts transition from traditional physical spaces to virtual ones, with a particular focus on the roles of conceptualization, popularization, and virtual identity in this process. Through analyzing these transformations, the paper seeks to uncover the new forms and development trends of performing arts in the era of the metaverse. The article proposes to begin by highlighting prior research in the semiotics of performing arts, briefly outlining the development of views on mimesis from Aristotle to semiotics and theories of identity performance. Subsequently, it discusses the journey of modern art through changes in its medium towards abstraction and conceptualization, tracing how shifts in media and technological innovations have propelled the development of performing arts from ancient theaters to the digital age. Examples of the abstraction and conceptualization of performing arts will be provided. Finally, the paper introduces the potential of the metaverse as a platform for conceptualized performing arts, discussing how metaverse technologies offer unprecedented immersive experiences and alter the ways in which audiences engage with performances.

**Keywords:** metaverse, performance art, media research.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Performing Arts and Media

Performing arts are an artistic form that narrates stories and conveys thoughts and emotions through means such as voice, bodily movement, and emotional expression. They simulate phenomena in nature, human experiences, and emotional states through symbolized actions and representations, thereby resonating with and evoking emotional responses from the audience.

As a long-standing art form, performing arts encompass a wide range of forms and have branched out with the development of media technology. From the advent of new media to the present day, performing arts have transitioned from classical theatrical stages to new media, acquiring novel modes of dissemination. In 1895, Auguste and Louis Lumière invented the camera, and montage theory subsequently fostered the rise and development of cinematic performing arts. After John Logie Baird's invention of television in 1925, various forms of performance, such as television series and variety show, emerged. In 1983, with the widespread adoption of the TCP/IP protocol, the internet began to transform from private communication to a global public network. This latest medium differs from previous forms in its global interconnectedness, in-

stant interactivity, open searchability, storage capabilities, community building, anonymity, privacy, and searchable content. The organizational structures and manifestations of performing arts have undergone transformations based on these characteristics. This study aims to explore the development of performing arts within the perspective of metaverse.

The concept of the metaverse was first introduced in 1992 by Neal Stephenson in his science fiction novel *Snow Crash*. Based on technologies such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), blockchain, and artificial intelligence, the metaverse can shape a more persistent, shared virtual space, creating a virtual world closely intertwined with the real world.

In the shaping of the metaverse, identity plays a role in providing a more immersive interactive experience than that found in internet games. In game space studies, role-playing is widely applied in interaction design. The metaverse will confer a more realistic virtual space and construct more authentic social interactions within virtual communities. Identity theory provides a theoretical framework for understanding how individuals express themselves through virtual characters and establish a sense of belonging and identity within virtual communities, as well as how they form and maintain their identities through social interactions. In summary, in the medium of the

metaverse, the construction of participants' identities is a form of role-playing.

In previous research, scholars have noted the insights of poststructuralism and gender studies in the field of performance. Judith Butler, in her seminal essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* [1], discussed how gender is constructed through the performance of bodily and discursive acts. In *Undoing Gender* [2], Butler shifted the focus of gender from philosophical discourse to real life and politics, concentrating the research on concrete issues of everyday life.

Xing Jie, in *Gender Performance: Cross-disciplinary Theories and Practices in a Postmodern Context* [3], employs a research paradigm that combines drama and other art forms with performance, and notes that interdisciplinary research is an important approach in fields such as identity and gender, postmodernism, poststructuralism, and feminism. This paper intends to integrate the development of performing arts across media from an art historical perspective, examining the transition from physical space to virtual space from both philosophical and art historical perspectives.

## 2. Precedents in Performance Research

Performance, as a mimetic art, originates from the human tendency to imitate. Aristotle, in his work *Poetics*[4], notes: "One of the differences between man and beast is that man has a greater capacity for imitation; he began to acquire knowledge through imitation, and he finds pleasure in the products of imitation. Experience demonstrates that while certain things may cause pain when seen directly, their faithful representations can give us pleasure, such as the sight of corpses or the most repulsive animal forms."

Mimesis encompasses four aspects: character portrayal, situational reenactment, emotional expression, and social-cultural simulation. These elements of mimesis originate from natural life. Role-playing in performing arts is a way to mimic one of the most fundamental components of the natural world—the essence of human beings. Actors simulate different characters' personality traits, emotional states, and behavioral patterns, immersing the audience in a specific story or situation.

Richard Schechner, in his book *Performance Studies: An Introduction* [5], proposes that performance can be defined as "show doing." His perspective emphasizes performance as a common human activity and suggests that many activities can be understood and analyzed from a performative standpoint. This expands the concept of performance beyond traditional theatrical performance into

the realm of everyday life [6].

When performance becomes a subject of study not only in isolation but also in the context of everyday life, many theories applicable to life become relevant to the study of performance. At this level, performance is a form of discourse communication achieved through bodily movements and expressions. In this communication, people achieve understanding and recognition through symbols and construct their symbolic systems.

Semiotic studies originated from linguistics. Ferdinand de Saussure, in his *Course in General Linguistics* [7], mentions that a linguistic sign is composed of two parts: the signifiant and the signifié.

Roland Bulter applied Saussure's semiotic theory to a broader range of cultural phenomena, including non-linguistic sign systems such as images, clothing, and advertisements. He emphasized the importance of semiotics as an analytical tool that extends beyond linguistics to encompass the entire cultural domain [8].

Christian Metz, building on the foundations established by scholars such as Roland Barthes, initiated an exploration of symbols in the art of cinema. He applied semiotics to film theory, proposing that film is a symbolic system and can be analyzed using methods like those used in structuralist linguistics. Iconic signs, auditory signs, and other elements combine to form larger narrative units [9].

Eero Tarasti's research explains performance behavior in the direction of musicology. He emphasizes the importance of performance as a symbolic activity, considering it a fundamental symbolic form in human life and exploring how symbols in performance convey meaning. Additionally, his work *Existential Semiotics* highlights the connection between existentialism and semiotics [10].

Existentialism has also explored drama. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote plays such as *No Exit* [11]. In Sartre's drama, existentialism asserts that a person's character is defined by choices made in given situations. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself; he is the sum, the totality, the organization and set of relationships that constitute his actions.

In the character development on the dramatic stage, a character's personality is based on choice. Within a prescribed scene composed of symbols, a person completes their self-recognition and actions. In making these choices, a person is free, yet there are various conditions. The central question here is: What identity issues does a person face when they want to make choices to become themselves?

Building on the foundations of existentialism, poststructuralism, and postmodernism, postcolonialism and gender studies began to explore questions of identity. Homi Bhabha introduced the concept of cultural hybridity, em-

phasizing the fluidity and uncertainty of identity. Building on this, Stuart Hall focused on the construction of cultural identity, particularly how factors such as race, gender, and class intertwine to form complex identities. He emphasized that identity is dynamic and fluid, rather than fixed [12-14].

Gender, of course, is also a component of identity performance. Judith Butler elaborated on the concept of gender as a socially constructed phenomenon in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [1]. In this book, she analyzes how gender is repeatedly performed and how this performance constructs our understanding of gender identity. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* [2], Butler further explores the concept of gender performativity and discusses how the body plays a central role in gender performance.

Through the concept of gender performativity, Butler emphasizes the fluidity, variability, and social construction of gender identity.

In summary, the study of performance is a multidisciplinary and comprehensive topic closely related to human daily life and production. Research on performance has evolved from a philosophical foundation of symbols to encompass multiple social dimensions such as the body, gender, and identity. This provides a solid foundation for further exploring the development of performance from physical to digital spaces in the context of the metaverse. Building on the history of performance studies, it is not difficult to conclude that identity is a socially constructed performance characterized by symbolic mimicry.

We will build upon this foundation to further examine the impact of media characteristics and the history of media development on these perceptions.

### 3. The Conceptualize Journey of Performing Arts

Performing arts have evolved from classical times to the modern era, transitioning from simple religious rituals to complex psychological explorations and achieving technological and conceptual breakthroughs. As time progresses, performing arts continually incorporate new technological means and social ideologies, maintaining a pace like that of art history. The prevailing artistic trends of each era often constitute the core expression of performing arts.

Changes in communication media have directly influenced the development of art movements and styles through changes in the pathways of dissemination. In the late 17th to 18th centuries, improvements in printing technology promoted the exchange of ideas through novels and news publications, enabling Enlightenment thinkers to use the publishing industry to convey their thoughts. Classical,

Late Baroque, and Rococo art, which were popular during this period, all advocated for the pursuit of classical ideals of aesthetics, emphasizing rationality, order, harmony, and a return to the art of ancient Greece and Rome. Compared to modern performances, classical performances had a greater temporal and spatial coherence in terms of their mode of dissemination and content organization. In the realm of classical drama, the "unities" were always followed. In the 17th century, French classical dramatist Nicolas Boileau summarized the unities as "a single place, a single day, and a single action from beginning to end to maintain stage fullness," establishing them as unbreakable structural rules [15]. This means that there is a continuous coherence in time, space, and event, with each part having an indivisible integrity serving the whole. This aligns with Aristotle's statement in *Poetics*:

"In poetry, just as in other imitative arts, a work imitates only one object; since plot is the imitation of action, it imitates only a complete action, whose events are tightly organized, so that any part moved or removed would loosen the whole. If some part is dispensable and does not make a significant difference, then it is not an organic part of the whole." [16].

At the end of the 18th century, with the social structural changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution and the reflection on the Enlightenment, there arose a political pursuit of freedom and equality, leading to the rise of Romanticism. The peak of Romanticism was mainly concentrated in the 1830s and 1840s, emphasizing the expression of personal emotions, the exploration of natural wonders, and the discovery of inner-world fantasies. Romanticism was a critical inheritance of Classicism, appearing relatively freer in content and emotional expression, showcasing opposition to the strict norms and rationalism of Classicism. However, in terms of artistic form, Romanticism largely followed the framework of classical art, such as in Italian opera seria. During this period, studies on performing arts generally adhered to the views of Enlightenment thinkers: French Enlightenment thinker Denis Diderot, in his work *Essai sur le paradoxe de l'acteur*, that actors should reflect the character's personality like a mirror [17]. According to Enlightenment thinkers, the goal of dramatic characters should be to create rational and idealized personalities that uphold public morals and customs.

In 1895, with the maturation of imaging technology, cinema emerged as a new medium, providing a venue for novel artistic creations. The documentary nature, reproducibility, and representational capabilities of photography and cinematography significantly expanded the dimensions of artistic creation in terms of time and space, thereby providing a platform for personalized expression and the shaping of free discourse. Montage theory and ed-

iting techniques disrupted the static spatial expressions of classical art, allowing actions to be broken down into units of meaning. Simultaneously, film technology enabled the expression of fantastical imagination to become a reality. In multiple ways, film theory and art theory mutually propelled each other into new developmental stages.

André Bazin, in his essay *O Que é o cinema?* [18] discusses how photographic art, in contrast to classical forms such as painting, addresses issues of realism and objectivity. He posits that “from Baroque painting to photography, the most essential phenomenon is not merely the perfection of equipment but a psychological factor: it completely satisfies our desire to eliminate the artist and create illusions by purely mechanical means.”

This aligns with Walter Benjamin’s concept in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* [19]. Benjamin’s notion of the disappearance of the “aura” of classical art corresponds to the absence of the human creator in the environment of artistic creation.

The absence of the body points to the concept of the cyborg [20]. A cyborg is defined as an organism capable of self-regulation through external auxiliary devices to adapt to new environments. Zhao Yan notes that in the posthuman era, humans widely confront the abandonment and dematerialization of the body, upon which the cyborg reconfigures the body [21]. This reconfiguration encompasses not only the material body but also the body as a social symbol, such as through attire. In her study of fashion virtualization, Liao Ruhan argues that amidst the crisis of bodily nullification and the dissolution of subjectivity, only by reaffirming the significance of the body can one resolve the existential dilemmas of the digital age [22].

Hegel, in his *Aesthetics*, introduced the concept of the “end of art.” He identified three stages of art: symbolic art, classical art, and romantic art [23]. In the romantic art phase, the spiritual content becomes increasingly difficult to express adequately in material form. Art no longer fulfills human spiritual needs as it did during the classical art period, due to the separation of spiritual content from material form. In Hegel’s time, romanticism was just gaining prominence. Through dialectics and logical reasoning, he foresaw the trend of art moving from the material world towards virtual expressive spaces. This concept aligns with the transition from romanticism to modernism. Behind the mass-produced industrial products and popular art, conceptual art focuses on concepts above the replicated bodies. The conceptual artists were convinced that art originates from ideas, treating the concept or idea itself as the artwork, rejecting traditional forms of art such as painting and sculpture, and opposing the commodification of artworks. Artist Sol LeWitt declared in 1967, “The idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work; when

an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair.”

Marcel Duchamp believed that the value of an artwork lies in the concept or idea behind it, rather than in its craftsmanship or materials. This perspective resonates with Hegel’s argument in the “end of art” thesis, where the spiritual content becomes more significant than its material form.

Conceptual art posits that it is the artist’s choice and intention that imbues an ordinary object with artistic significance, creating a form of art that breaks free from physical media. Often, these works require the participation or interpretation of the audience to complete their meaning, emphasizing the role of the viewer in constructing the meaning of the artwork, making the audience’s engagement an integral part of the work. In the field of theater, this shift was immediate and resonant: Peter Handke’s *Publikumbeschimpfung* is a critique that challenges the role of the audience and their participation in the creation of meaning [24].

Conceptual art challenges the boundaries of traditional art, prompting a reevaluation of what constitutes art. Marcel Duchamp believed that any object could become art if the artist intentionally selected it and imbued it with artistic meaning. This approach has democratized art, making it possible for anyone to become an artist. In today’s age of internet development, the digital media industry is shaping a prototype of the metaverse. Short video platforms have significantly lowered the threshold for performance, while the integration of audiovisual, video products, and multimedia streaming technologies has broadened the channels for the dissemination of art. Have we achieved the democratization of art that Duchamp spoke of? The answer is likely affirmative. This is an era in which anyone can become an artist, and any expression of meaning and ideas can be seen. Everyone can mimic and perform any phenomenon on social media sites. Digital media technology has created a space akin to Plato’s ideal world [25]. This idealized world is presented through a spectacular mode. The distinction lies in the fact that, in the present day, this spectacle has evolved from Debord’s visually-oriented spectacle to a more comprehensive, all-encompassing form of spectacle [26]. Metaverse is a world that is seemingly all-encompassing and capable of realizing any possibility, resembling a utopian realm. However, numerous issues have emerged, indicating the presence of heterogeneity within digital space culture. Copyright issues are a critical aspect of the development of AI-generated art. Wei Xixiao notes that the digital cultural space exhibits fundamental differences from the real physical space, characterized by relational reconstruction, com-

pensatory juxtaposition, and fluid demarcation, typical of heterotopias [27]. Beyond recognizing the sources of heterogeneity in the digital cultural space, it is also necessary to critically reflect on the heterotopic crises it engenders, including aesthetic imbalance and technological misalignment.

The biggest question that arises is: How do we determine what is art when everything exists within the concept of a virtual state? This brings us to the issue of aesthetic standards. Ye Lang has noted that there was a major debate on aesthetics in China during the 1950s, which significantly shaped the direction of contemporary mainstream aesthetics in China. Indeed, beauty is not monolithic across different cultures and contexts; however, for the aesthetic environment of new media, it is imperative that we develop a nuanced understanding and engage in dialogues to foster communication and exchange [28].

In addition to the evolution of performance art alongside media developments, performers themselves possess the characteristics of media. In the act of performance, performers embody ideas through their own actions, which is not identical to the existentialist notion of phenomena and essence being one and the same, but rather akin to Hegel's idea that phenomena are a means of recognizing essence. In performance art, performers need only enact the actions of their mimetic objects and interpret the actions of others within these performances. Although the experience of performance is related to the performer, they serve as a bridge between the character and the audience. At this level, the performer acts as a medium that communicates between phenomena and essence.

#### 4. Conclusion

The first part of the article traces the journey of performance from ontology to semiotics and identity studies, highlighting how identity in performance is constructed through symbols as a social act. The second part explores the historical development of performance art and media technology, emphasizing the transition from physical spaces to virtual spaces, particularly in the context of the metaverse. The metaverse, supported by advanced technologies like VR, offers new forms of expression and enhances the conceptual nature of art. In virtual theaters created with VR technology, the experience of performing and viewing can be reimagined, breaking traditional time and space constraints much like human dreams. The need for a physical stage becomes obsolete as virtual environments allow for the complete representation of intended messages. Performance transforms into a narrative of ideas, communicated through symbolic representations. The progression of communication media, from oral tra-

ditions to two-dimensional mediums such as writing and film, is nearing a three-dimensional virtual reality era. This advancement brings us closer to the metaphorical Babel Tower, symbolizing the unity and diversity of human communication. The overarching theme is the evolving role of performance in the context of technological advancements, culminating in the potential for immersive, three-dimensional experiences in the metaverse.

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