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Blast Theory's *Karen*

Exploring the ontology of technotexts

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NEW TECHNOLOGIES, NEW ONTOLOGIES: TECHNOTEXTS

Blast Theory's *Karen* (2015) – an interactive virtual theatre piece – takes place through a smartphone app and is formed through the hybridization of pre-recorded film, gaming, interactive narrative and personality questionnaire. It begins as we download the app to our individual phones: the life-coach Karen (Claire Cage) interacts with each of us through the in-app messaging, tells us her story in the videos, and asks us questions about ourselves in a multiple-choice format. The app design facilitates the critique of the socio-technical phenomenon of big data, of 'how governments and large companies such as Facebook are collecting data on us secretly and using it without our consent' (Blasttheory.co.uk 2017). As we respond to Karen's questions, she collects personal information from us, 'whether freely given or obtained by monitoring' (Blasttheory.co.uk 2017) and uses it to psychologically profile us at the end of our interaction. Our interactions with Karen happen through the small screens of our personal communication device throughout the day, when we are at work in the morning or cooking at home in the evening. In our shared virtual interface, Karen and we are together; yet outside this milieu we are not breathing the same air in the same room.

Theatre as we have known it traditionally – a live performance that happens here and now and is often conventionally based on a dramatic text – has continued its revolutionary transformation, which began in the 1960s and 1970s, inventively since the digital revolution. As a result of the increasing impact of new technologies on theatre, new genres such as virtual and digital theatre have entered into our practical and theoretical vocabulary. If through this evolutionary process old content and definitions of theatre

have adapted to new environments, what has happened to one of its key (and in some theatre fashions the primary) element: the written text? The text, particularly in virtual theatre, which partly or wholly takes place online and includes its audience in both the real and the virtual environments, has evolved in various ways. For example, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC's) Twitter adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* as *Such Tweet Sorrow* (2010) generated not only a new interpretation of the canonical play, but also a new mode of play text. Likewise, David Greig's original play *The Yes/No Plays* (2014), which is written by using the short textual format of the same micro-blogging service, signalled towards a new type of dramatic writing. These shifts in dramatic writing have evidently engendered questions concerning authorship, the tradition of playwriting and so on. In addition to playtexts, authored by playwrights by using the virtual interface, the ontological evolution of theatre performance has generated another mode of text: technotexts.

Technotexts are 'braided, knotted, threaded, sewn, patched together, edited, montaged' (Furse 2011: v) separately and/or collectively by artists and audience-participants by using technologies. These texts contain elements of dramatic writing, such as characterization and dialogue, yet they differ considerably from solely authored literary text for the stage. Technotexts are partly or fully produced, structured and performed through digital-media platforms. The media technology is not a mere container or medium, but a material and cultural environment that shapes the form and formation of the text. Katherine Hayles defines technotexts as a term 'that connects the technology that produces texts to the text's verbal constructions' (2002: 25–6). Here, Hayles emphasizes the relationship between the literary work and the inscription technology that produces it, between the fictional world

(meaning) and the writing machine that enables and contains the verbal creation as physical reality (ibid.). The way I use technotext has clear connections to Hayles's approach, particularly in terms of the relationship between content and media form/digital environment, the idea that media is not merely a container but also a shaper of meaning and in terms of the materiality of digital text albeit different from materiality as physical presence. Nevertheless, Hayles's term suggests a synonymous link to hypertexts and focuses on literature, media and materiality, whereas I use the term specifically in relation to technologically composed and structured theatre texts that accommodate and remediate aesthetics of various media forms along with hypertextual structure of the web. In relation to this, the notion of technotext draws on Bonnie Marranca's 'mediaturgy' (2009), which suggests a shift from a text-centred performance dramaturgy to a media-inspired composition that 'embeds media in the performance' (2010: 16). Marranca's viewpoint focuses on performance dramaturgy, which I extend to the textual dimension to explore the impact of mediaturgical composition on the written component of theatre. I suggest that *technotexts* are *mediaturgical texts* in that their composition and formation are based on and take place through media technologies. These texts can be performed live, as in Chris Goode's *Hippo World Guest Book* (2014), which is a performance, based on edited inputs of participants on an online blog for a year. They may also take place and remain within the virtual space they are formed and presented through, as we see in *Karen*.

This article is an experiment in forging a vocabulary to identify technotexts and explore some of their ontological characteristics, as well as an attempt to start a conversation about the changing ontology of text in mediatized theatre practice. The new vocabulary deriving from the central concept of technotexts includes frame-text, feedback-text and report-text, which I introduce specifically in relation to Blast Theory's *Karen* and its aesthetic and thematic focus on dataveillance, incorporeity and digital liveness. Therefore, this proposed terminology may vary and be enriched in relation to other works that involve technotexts.

KAREN: REFLECTIONS ON TECHNOTEXTS

Karen's textual architecture is multi-layered: The outer layer is the frame-text that is written by the artists and combines the fictional narrative about Karen along with the profiling questions that Blast Theory pulled from British military personality exams. This text is 'tightly scripted' (Adams 2016) before the user downloads the app, and it regulates the narrative and our interaction with Karen. As the user engages with the frame-text, they answer the questions by tapping the screen. Writing in the context of touch-screen environments involves a digitized form that occurs through 'tapping keys on virtual and mechanical keyboards' (Pytash and Ferdig 2014: 102). The digitized writing is writing in codes onto a synthetic, virtual paper. This writing engenders the second textual layer: the feedback-text that combines Blast Theory's writing with that of the participant, and enables the virtual theatre to happen. Following the frame- and feedback-texts, there is the third layer, the postscript or the report-text. As the episodes end, the user is offered a report (in-app purchase £2.99) that is based on the information that they have disclosed in response to Karen's questions. This text is a personalized analysis, which reveals how each participant has behaved and what this says about their personality. This report ends *Karen* with a striking critique of surveillance culture. It is also a text-object that 'remains' after and outside *Karen* yet differs radically from a published playtext as we know it.

In Blast Theory's practice the text is hardly ever fully scripted by a single author prior to the rehearsals and performance. Rather than a firm blueprint for performance, the text is a flexible, open framework that allows plenty of space for performers and audience-participants' inputs to bring in 'their own personality and approach ... and complete the loop' (Adams 2016). Nevertheless, their works also contain scripted narrative parts. For example, in *Karen*, the frame-text is a firmly structured text, and it is produced by the artists in collaboration with researchers. On the other hand, the feedback-text situates the participants as the co-authors. Collaborative aesthetics, operating through the feedback-text in response to the frame-text, is at

the heart of *Karen*'s interactive mediaturgy. *Karen* unfolds as a collective process through interactive writing: upon receiving a message, the participant watches the recorded video through which Karen asks questions and the user responds by selecting the answer from multiple choices.

As the users tap the screen, they are no longer simply spectators from without, but they become participants, authors and performers within the world of *Karen*. Common to Blast Theory's works,

audiences are never present as witnesses – they are asked to immerse themselves in an experience, take an active part in the development of a piece by performing certain actions, making choices, playing a game, making decisions that will shape their own and others' experience of the work. (Chatzichristodoulou 2015: 238)

Likewise, in *Karen* the audience-participants become Karen's confidantes with whom she shares intimate experiences, and from whom she gathers information about their lives. As a result of the interactive architecture, the participants are not only 'inside the work of art, but they are operating it, possibly even modifying it, in real time, and being modified by it in return' (Giannachi 2004: 8).

However, politics and aesthetics of participation and multi-authorship in technotexts work in interesting ways in *Karen*. On the one hand, there is an open, kinetic textual design that renders the audience co-authors and co-performers and generates a sense of agency. It also implicates them in a familiar context that resonates with the ways in which they connect to people known and unknown through their small screens. On the other hand, there is a continual hindrance to *writing as agency* since the participant can only intervene in the writing and performance when they are allowed and within the strict boundaries of the frame-text. Even though the responses change from one person to another, Karen's storyline 'is the same for all responses you might have just given' (Adams 2016). This doubtlessly limits the degree of participation and calls agency into question. Interestingly, the narrative sometimes branches into a number of different directions in relation to the information that the user provides, which reinforces the sense of active and *authorly* engagement in the creation of meaning. However, as Adams underlines:



[T]here are no meaningful plot variations in *Karen* ... You can choose what tops she wears, you can choose the bracelet or the camera, etc. but those choices are not pertinent to the story.... Your choice is not a key story hinge, it does not affect the plot in any substantial way. (Adams 2016)

■ Photo Blast Theory

Although the participants' text does not have much bearing on the content, it shapes how they perceive their position and affects 'their sense of how they are behaving, their sense of ethics, sense of how much trust they have put into Karen, and how much trust she is giving to them' (Adams 2016). The exercise of false impression of agency through participatory aesthetics and multi-authored textual design is inherently political. It is a strategy that Blast Theory uses to question the misconceived correlation between participation and empowerment, and the workings and politics of big data culture. Central to Blast Theory's works are the meanings, tensions, limitations and possibilities of interactivity, as Matt Adams underlines in relation to *Day of the Figurines*:

Does giving the public a voice within an artwork result in a collaborative work or merely provide pigeon holes for pre-scripted interventions? Is there any seriously democratic thread to this process or does the artist merely establish a benevolent dictatorship with him or her at its apex? (Adams et al. 2008: 227)

Karen addresses these debates by creating an impression of participation as empowerment through the feedback-text, yet, at the same time, deconstructs it through the limits of the framing text. This textual structure defamiliarizes the participants from the synthetic cosmos of *Karen*,

and draws attention to the question of agency through the writing. It raises awareness about how we live in our technologically driven environments, and how our consciousness, language and subjectivities are transformed by the mechanisms of mass surveillance. The mediaturgical composition, which is based on the user-generated content of digital communication and social media, is an ontological trait of the technotext. Moreover, the collective mode of the technotext, albeit the limitation of participatory writing, is not only an outcome of the interactive design of the media technology at the heart of the virtual theatre, but also a central element of its critical aesthetics questioning the dataveillance culture.


The shape of technotexts changes depending on the technologies it is based in and moulded through. For example, a technotext of a Twitter-based theatre consists of a short episodic structure (for example, New York Neo-Futurists' single-tweet plays), while in another one that takes place over social media such as Facebook (New Paradise Laboratories' *fatebook*), the textual structure takes the shape of the social media and its diverse elements such as wall-posts with long texts or images and videos. Therefore, there is no single, definitive architecture for such texts. Nevertheless, we can suggest that technotexts almost always present a multi-layered aesthetic design. *Karen* hybridizes drama, pre-recorded film-based storytelling, text-based computer game, interactive narrative, gaming and personality questionnaire. For example, the frame-text presents a dramatic plotline, realistic characters and everyday language. It has a linear narrative and an episodic structure through which Karen's story unfolds in a series of short scenes that are mediated to the participant in app-episodes. This naturalistic design is accompanied with the notification messages that the user receives as these messages reinforce the suspension of disbelief. For example, some of the audience-participants who gave feedback about their experience indicated that they sometimes 'read Karen's messages and interpreted that she was annoyed with them or angry at them' (Adams 2016).

This dramatic design is complemented with other forms drawn from interactive technologies, such as text-based interactive computer games, chat bots, interactive online storytelling,

smartphone intelligent personal assistant Siri and computer therapist Eliza. The combination of drama and technologically driven forms blurs the boundaries between the virtual and the real. It generates a sense of liminality between the two states that aesthetically reflects on our multi-perspective experience of reality in a culture where we position ourselves in material and virtual realities – a culture in which we define the world around us through mediated representations.

Karen's textual architecture accommodates the shape of the technologies in use and deploys them in a way that critically challenges our perceptions about the mediatized culture. For instance, the multi-layered structure that is purposely positioned within an app corresponds to how we engage with and identify the world through multiple structures, ranging from live video call, instant messaging to hypertextual navigation and verbal- and image-based social media interactions. Moreover, the frame-text consists of brief narratives – short questions and even shorter multiple-choice answers – that only give a snapshot to Karen's life, and the interactive-text comprises a quick dialogue based on a quiz-style language that enables the app to mine data from the participant. This shape resonates with the rapid and transient structures of current media technologies and our increasingly shorter attention span that is shaped through our frequent use of these technologies. Furthermore, the direct mode of *Karen's* language, which enables quick understanding of the questions and smooth revelation of information, speaks to the dataveillance structures that mine individuals' personal data through simple yet focused linguistic strategies.

It is important to note that technotexts and virtual theatre do not always adopt the shapes and contents of the media they use and inhabit. While some virtual theatre pieces and the technotexts are porous and dynamic in a similar way to the structure of digital media, which are open to be reorganized, *Karen* presents a rather fixed dramatic structure. This regulated multi-layered aesthetics, however, is purposely built. While the multi-form design accommodates the changing social and cognitive environment of our mediatized culture, the restrictions formed by the



dramatic design, which is used to mine data from the participant while revealing little to them, speak to the ways in which dataveillance operates.

Technotexts differ from plays as literary objects with materiality since these new texts can be transient and immaterial. The frame- and feedback-texts in *Karen*, for example, only have virtual presence: The former is presented in film-based storytelling and the latter is equally transient since it emerges on our screens and disappears as we respond by tapping. The participants do not have access to these technotexts apart from the momentary experience of them. These texts are fluid and intangible. The incorporeity here renders the text and performance unique in time, space and person. This resonates with the individual experience of live performance that is bound to disappear. However, it also differs from it because it does not necessarily contain a written text – be it a published playtext or an unpublished rough script for a devised work – ‘as an object for documentation and analysis, ... a living archive aiding the analyst to reengage with the lost affect of an absent body’ (Lavery 2009: 39). The ephemeral ontology and the absence of a material text may lead to the idea that there is no text in virtual performance. However, as this article has explored and emphasized, the text as a component of theatre has evolved along with the ontological shifts that theatre performance has faced in the digital age. Therefore, text can be incorporeal with a different sense of phenomenological presence, as much as performance can be virtual with a new understanding of liveness that is based on a sense of ‘continuous, technologically mediated temporal co-presence with others known and unknown’ (Auslander 2012: 6).

The individualized data-report offers an interesting sense of materiality in the digital space. Each participant can go back to this digital text after the performance and keep it in their archive as long as the app is downloaded. To elaborate, as *Karen* ends each participant receives a note on their screen: ‘What does Karen know about you? Find out here’, and the link sends the participant to the app-store where they can purchase and download a report. This document is a personalized review, offering an analysis

of the user’s personality that is generated in accordance with their responses. It is written by Blast Theory and Dr Kelly Page – a researcher and writer in social digital culture and social media literacies. The report demonstrates how each participant would ‘measure on psychological scales from openness and neuroticism to emotional guilt’ and ‘how these factors were used by Karen within [their] story’, (*Karen-app*) highlighting how our data is used for psychological profiling.

The data report is a postscript, an epilogue: it is formed *after* the episodes finish and it provides additional information about the conversation between frame- and feedback-texts, between Karen and the audience-participant. The concluding text here differs from Lavery’s use of ‘postscript’ – ‘a relic for/of an event that has passed’ (2009: 37), which is an unpublished, rough outline and archive for devised theatre. However, although the report-text in *Karen* also emerges after the audience-participant’s experience, the postscript here does not serve as a relic or an instrument for the analytical revisiting of an embodied performance event that has disappeared, or about remembering the live event retrospectively with the help of a remaining text. This is not to suggest that this text does not enliven the individual participant’s memories of the event, but it is to highlight that it is not the literal script of the performance. It is a digitally materialized textual evidence of an experience that has taken place in a liminal space between the virtual and the physical, hence, has not involved a shared corporeal experience merely in real time–space.

Importantly, the report-text is also a concluding remark and a critical tool. It foregrounds the critique of data surveillance, underlying *Karen*’s architecture, and triggers the question, as Adams put it: ‘If you can imagine that a small group of artists can do that, then what could a nation-state or a multi-national corporation do with similar approaches?’ (Adams 2016) It is important to mention that *Karen*’s entire textual content would remain in the cyberspace even when the participant deletes the app, or when Blast Theory closes its virtual doors to audiences. One wonders whether or how the database would work as a document-text on its own not simply or merely



■ Photo Blast Theory

archiving the critical outcomes of an app-based, interactive performance, but also proposing another mode of text that exists, albeit in a passive state, as a living footprint of *Karen*. Such questions regarding the changing ontology of text and theatre performance are yet to be explored.

In the process of remediation of the older medium by the new one, the latter can 'absorb [the former] entirely and make the differences between them minimal'; however, 'the older medium cannot be entirely effaced' (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 47). The old medium of writing is not obsolete in the increasingly technologized theatre practice, but existent and adaptive, and, thus, it invites further conversations and conceptualizations.

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