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## RASA ON SCREEN

*By asking partakers to ingest, relish, internalize, and personalize the event, engaging partakers as co-creators of the event, focusing on affect, and creating dramaturgical structures that allow partakers to savor and digest, site-based digital productions are inherently rasic. When digital performances are analyzed in terms of rasa, they emerge as genres that fundamentally shift the aesthetic goals, dramaturgical structures, and modes of engagement in contemporary theatre.*

“Feel it,” croons Paul in This Is Not A Theatre Company’s *Ferry Play*, a digital podplay (delivered via an app) for the Staten Island Ferry in New York City. “Feel it on the top of your head and below your toes. Feel the wind glide around your ears, under your nails, around your waist. You. Are. Here. Smell it. Who’s around you, what they’re eating, the perfume they wore this morning. The sea. See it. The horizon. The sky. Be outside with me now. Come on. [...] Lean against the railing. Feel that? The wind? The sun? You’re inside something now. Something enormous. So just relax and breathe it in.” In site-based productions the temperature of the air around you, the texture of the grain of wood in your chair, and the perfume of the person next to you are not outside the frame of the production, but part of the experience, and not to be ignored. Many site-based, immersive, and participatory performances include eating and drinking, as well as scent and tactile sensation, to create multi-sensory, multimodal, semi-synaesthetic, embodied engagement – to create theatre that can be tasted, smelled, and touched, as well as seen and heard. Digital theatre appears to exist on the cold, smooth hardness of our electronic screens, and therefore appears not to be multi-sensory. However, site-based digital performances such as *Ferry Play* are in fact multi-sensory. T. Nikki Cesare Schotzko argues that *Dreams of Riley’s Friends*, a smartphone play consisting of texts received daily over the course of six weeks, is “site un-specific” (2016: 160), but my undergraduate students, who identify as “digital natives”, have argued that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, iMessage, Snapchat, and Instagram are specific sites because they each operate with a specific set of rules and invite unique modes of engagement (Mee, 2016). Thus, *The 15<sup>th</sup> Line*, a twitter play by Jeremy Gable, can be thought of as a site-specific play in which the site is twitter.

Site-based digital performances, like other kinds of site-based performances, create rasic experiences in which partakers enter a world, taste it (sometimes literally, sometimes metaphorically), roll it around on the tongue, savor it, and digest it.

The Sanskrit term *rasa* has been variously translated as juice, flavor, extract, and essence. In the context of performance theory it is the “aesthetic flavor or sentiment” tasted in and through performance. *The Natyasastra*, the Sanskrit aesthetic treatise attributed to Bharata, notes that when



foods and spices are mixed together in different ways, they create different tastes; similarly, the mixing of different basic emotions arising from different situations, when expressed through the performer gives rise to an *emotional* experience or “taste” in the partaker, which is *rasa* (Bharata 55, emphasis mine). Because *rasa* is built on the metaphor of taste, which is internal, sensuous, and multi-sensory, it requires literal and metaphorical proximity. *Ferry Play* brings partakers onto the Staten Island Ferry for a ride across the New York Harbor. Partakers mix what they hear on the recording with what they see, hear, smell, and touch on the ferry. Partakers step into the play as they step onto the ferry; they feel the rumble of the engine underfoot, the temperature of the air, the glare of the sun (or the drops of rain); they are asked to walk around the ferry, to push open doors, to put their hand on the balcony rail; they smell the salt air, the diesel fuel, and occasionally the perfume or coffee (or body odor) of a fellow passenger. Part of the experience of *Ferry Play* takes place in and on the body. Similarly, the trilogy of podplays collectively known as *Subway Plays* (This Is Not A Theatre Company) ask passengers to ride the 7, N, or L train while listening to an audio recording. Partakers walk up and down subway steps, into and out of trains, touch seats and poles, feel their bodies respond to the jerks and turns of the subway cars, feel the rhythm of the wheels, and smell all the smells (pleasant and unpleasant) of the New York subway. In *The 15<sup>th</sup> Line* characters who are, in different ways, connected to a train crash and, as the play goes on, to each other, tweet once or twice daily for eight weeks. Partakers follow all four characters on twitter and read their tweets. *The 15<sup>th</sup> Line* inserts itself into our daily lives rather than asking us to go to a specific place at a specific time; it uses our everyday devices, and because tweets of fictional characters are mixed in with the tweets of real people and organizations on our feed, it penetrates the everyday and mingles – if not conflates – fiction and reality. Similarly, *The Dreams of Riley’s Friends*, which unfolds through six weeks worth of almost-daily texts, comes to us via our smartphones, so we experience texts from fictional characters that ping (or chime or whoosh) on the same screen as incoming texts from real-world friends and relatives. Digital theatre exploits the proximity of smartphones to bring theatre closer to us in order to create *rasic* experiences.

Taste is an active, participatory sense: movements of the tongue and mouth are what make flavor palpable. Tasting is an *act of relishing*, and *rasa* is, as the tenth-century aesthetic theorist Abhinavagupta – who commented extensively on *The Natyasastra* – puts it, an “*act of relishing*” (in Deshpande, emphasis mine). For Abhinavagupta, *rasa* is not a gift bestowed upon a passive spectator, but an attainment, an accomplishment; someone who wants to experience *rasa* has to be an active participant, or to use the dining metaphor, partaker in the work. In fact, *rasa* exists neither in the artwork/food nor in the partaker, but in their *interaction*. *Rasa* is *shared*. It is a shared *experience*. *Rasa* posits the interactive audience as co-creator of the event. *Karen* is an app by Blast Theory available (ostensibly in perpetuity) for free on iTunes and Google Play: a participatory smartphone theatre production/game/film about the virtual relationships we create through over-sharing private information in virtual spaces. *Karen* is my life coach. In our first meeting *Karen* asks a number of introductory questions “drawn from psychological profiling questionnaires” (Blast Theory, 2015), such as: “Which area is most important for you right now? A. I want to take more control of my life; B. I want to change my attitude to relationships; C. I want to review my life



goals.” She asks a few questions that allow her to discover more about my personality and approach to life: “Although I’m sometimes sad, I mostly have an optimistic outlook. Totally disagree; Totally agree.” At the end of our first session, she asks me to “Take some time to think about something that you’re grateful for today. Once you’ve thought about it, write it down. It can be on a Post-it note, or a message to yourself on your phone. Then I’d like you to read it back to yourself tomorrow morning and call me when you get a chance. OK?” *Karen/Karen* uses the data I provide to tailor her conversations specifically to me. When psychological profiling is combined with the surreptitious use of personal data (for example, *Karen* tracks your location in the background unless you change this in Settings), *Karen* becomes an exploration of trust: whom do we trust, why do we trust them, and with what information? *Karen* explores – or we explore through *Karen* – the ways we personally negotiate the “public” and the “private”. It is, arguably, not only a play but also a training exercise to sharpen our awareness of how and when we constantly shift between public and private in the course of our daily lives. This is true even though – or perhaps because – *Karen* is a digital app. The questions about trust that exist in any relationship are amplified in *Karen* because we have to decide whether we trust *Karen* the character *and* whether we trust the app itself – and Blast Theory, its makers. *Karen/Karen* shows me how I respond to, react to, and behave in certain circumstances; my choices are then at the center of the play – and are analyzed and given back to me in a data report I can purchase as an app extra. I am not the audience for *Karen*’s escapades; *Karen* is the audience for my self-investigation. Or, arguably, the app itself, as it gathers data about me, is the audience – or spy. My actions have become what Gareth White calls “the work’s aesthetic material” (2013: 9-10) as well as the subject of the production. Jacques Ranciere claims that the audience–performance relationship in conventional proscenium theatre is designed to bring audiences into “our” (playwrights, directors, actors, designers, dramaturgs) superior understanding (see Ranciere, 2009). The politics of a digital rasic experience are quite different: instead of having two distinct groups – one acting and another acted upon – everyone in participatory performance has agency to co-create the event, to make their own meaning, and to have their experiences and understandings matter. Production and reception are intertwined.

Not only did the partakers’ actions and experiences become “the work’s aesthetic material” in *Subway Plays* and *Ferry Play*, but their physical and emotional responses shaped and became the event: “How can you sleep in here anyway? The lights are so bright”, asks Anna in “The International Local Trail: 7”, one of the trilogy of podplays in *Subway Plays*. “Yes, but there’s also that movement, like a boat on water” replies Vicki, focusing partakers on the movement they feel in their bodies. “What’s that smell? Someone’s eating something greasy”, complains Chandani in another moment, calling attention to the real-world smells partakers experience as they listen. “Out in Jackson Heights, find yourself Tibetan dumplings or Indian sweets”, advises Patty, calling partakers’ attention to actual foods they can eat on their journey.

A production that privileges the smell of the ocean, the wind wrapping around your waist, the temperature of the air, and the movement of your body through space, privileges the feeling body: “The feeling body,” as Erin Hurley claims, is “the vehicle for [digital] theatre’s images and execution. The feeling body is both the basis and the means of theatre” (2010: 36). The feeling body



is an affected and affecting body. Affect can be “found in those intensities that pass body to body [...] in those resonances that circulate” about and between bodies. These are also the affective interactions in which *rasa* can be found. Both affect and *rasa* “arise in the midst of in-between-ness [and] in the capacities to act and be acted upon”. If “the capacity of a body is never defined by a body alone, but by [...] the context of its force-relations,” and “affect is integral to a body’s perpetual becoming”, (Gregg and Seigworth, 2010: kindle locations 50, 51, 72) then *rasa* is a mechanism for privileging the constant becoming of the affected body. Which positions digital theatre as a force of affective change. The constant becoming of affected and affecting bodies interacting on the subway allows for a fluid subjectivity that is “assembled and re-assembled through” encounters with others (and with different situations) during the course of the performance (White, 2013: 24).

*Rasa* is about celebrating or relishing emotion. In contradistinction, *katharsis* is about purging excess emotion. Aristotle speaks of the role of music, as experienced in certain religious rites, in the treatment of overly emotional people:

For any emotional excitement that affects some souls strongly also occurs to a lesser or greater degree in everyone-pity, fear, or again religious ecstasy [*enthousiasmos*]. There are some people who are particularly susceptible to this latter form of excitement and we see them, once they have made use of the most rousing melodies, put back on their feet again as a result of the sacred melodies just as if they had obtained medical treatment and *katharsis*. People predisposed to feeling pity or fear, or to emotions generally, necessarily undergo the same experience, as do others to the extent that they share in each of these emotions, and for all a certain *katharsis* and alleviation accompanied by pleasure. (*Poetics*, 8.7.1342a4-15, Hall, 2015)

As noted classicist Edith Hall points out:

This discussion constitutes crucial evidence for the acknowledged power possessed by some special sacred melodies in helping ancient Greeks handle extreme emotions [...] Here Aristotle is certainly talking about emotional *katharsis*. Emotions pre-exist in people, but they can be stimulated by an external force in a way that makes them susceptible to *katharsis*. An externally applied ‘treatment’ (music [or theatre]) actually creates a homeopathic response within the listeners [spectators], in that the arousal of a strong emotion to which they are predisposed leads to a lessening of the grip which that emotion has on them. (Hall, 2015)

The goal of *katharsis* is effect; the goal of *rasa* is affect.

*Katharsis* demands a linear dramaturgical structure that builds to an ultimate release of tension or excess emotion in the form of a climax, followed by a denouement. A leads to B, which builds to C, which builds to D, and so on until the climax is reached. In contradistinction, *rasa* requires a nonlinear, flexible dramaturgical structure that allows the partaker to linger in/with particular moments and to “wander around” exploring numerous sensorial stimuli that give rise to emotions that can be savored. To return to the metaphor of food: an *amuse bouche* is an experience to relish in and of itself; it is not a prerequisite for the appetizer. Nor is the appetizer a prerequisite



for the main course. Although vegetables are often considered to be a prerequisite for dessert, dessert is not the “goal” of a meal. A meal has things that come before and things that come after, and certain tastes complement or interact with each other, but D does not depend on C or B or A: you can still understand and appreciate a main course if you have not had an appetizer. Digital productions consciously create nonlinear structures to give partakers opportunities to relish an environment, a scene, a character, a prop, a smell, a texture, a taste, and/or a sound, in their own way and in their own time in order to heighten the partaker’s emotions. “The International Local Trail: 7” runs on the 7 line between Times Square in Manhattan and 74<sup>th</sup> Street-Broadway in Queens: partakers can start in Queens (in which case Act 1 takes them from Queens to Manhattan and Act 2 takes them back) or in Manhattan (in which case Act 1 takes them from Manhattan to Queens, and Act 2 takes them back). The recordings match the direction, but it is designed to be heard either way. *Karen* has no plot: there is a set-up (Karen is my life coach), and there are a series of sessions that take 10 days or more to complete, but there is no story. In fact, we are very quickly sidetracked from the set-up, and only return to it a few times in the piece. What, then, moves the piece forward? In my case, my ever-changing relationship with Karen, my curiosity about what she would do next, and my desire to find out more about her – as well as my desire to find out more about my own responses. Other participants – undergraduate students from my Drama in Performance class – were drawn in by the desire to please or impress Karen: “It was my unique relationship with her that kept me invested, because I cared about what she thought of me” (Berkshire, 2015). My student Myung-In Sohn “soon realized that the information [she] was providing Karen was in turn being used to keep [her] engaged and coming back for more” (2015). Sohn noted that “social media channels engage similar mechanisms as *Karen* to collect valuable data which is used to lead us to further consumption” – in this case, of *Karen* itself. Our awareness of the reasons we engage with Karen and continue to reengage with her throughout the event adds another layer to the performance text – an internal commentary on our personalities and values that is parallel to the overt analysis provided by both Karen and *Karen*. I experienced *Karen* three times. Since I knew I would be writing about *Karen*, I was aware of answering certain questions – such as, “do you like biting or scratching during sexual intercourse?” – in a way that could be reported in a scholarly journal and read by my parents, my daughter, and the Chair of my department. The second and third times through, I followed my impulse to respond in a completely out-of-character manner just to see how Karen would react. Other participants, including my student Vera Berkshire, had a similar impulse: “It suddenly occurred to me that I was acting out of character, almost like I was taking on a different persona in the world of this app”. Berkshire was drawn in by the app’s exploration of our “perceptions of others: how much we reveal to each other, how much we don’t, and what we build upon that” (2015). Exploring the dance of perceptions drew her in.

If seeing “requires distance (objectivity) to reach understanding (to gain insight and to become a seer)” then an aesthetic founded on the notion of ingesting, tasting, and relishing – *rasa* – is fundamentally different [...] than one founded on the ‘*theatron*,’ the rationally ordered, analytically distanced panoptic” (Schechner, 2015: 116). Highly Impractical Theatre’s *Three Sisters* (A House in Brooklyn, 2014) offered several ways to experience Irina’s birthday party. I went once



as a serf, helping Anfisa pour “vodka” for the guests and serve food to the aristocrats at table. I went a second time as an aristocrat and, because I was allowed to wander around upstairs, saw scenes I had literally not seen the first time; sat in places I did not sit the first time (I never sat as a serf); actually ate the birthday dinner; and had a very different experience of Irina’s party – I felt I had actually been invited. I have seen many productions of *Three Sisters*, but this is the first one that asked me to think so deeply about the class divisions in Chekhov’s plays, because I had to embody them. My role dictated my status, which in turn dictated my behavior, the spaces I inhabited, the information I was privy to, what I ate and drank (or didn’t), whom I spoke to, and how I viewed the action around me. Admittedly, I had to re-read the play before I went – I would have been lost without brushing up on the plot and characters because I did not see “the whole play”, I saw the parts of it my character had access to. I was not an “objective observer”. I entered the world of the play. One of my students described his experience with the character Masha:

She signaled that I should follow her after we locked eyes. Sirens sounded, and I [...] trailed her through a maze of hallways and staircases that seemed to muffle her troubled life. Up a final staircase, and we were safe, alone. I bent my knees and slid next to a small collection of curios that sat on the landing. She gazed at these love notes, pictures, and candles; I felt as if I had access to her memories. She was silent. The sounds of the house had faded away, and after a few long moments, my guide held out her hand. “Masha,” she said. “Sam,” I said. “Look,” and she pointed to the open skylight that I hadn’t noticed above my head. A breeze blew through, and it seemed as if the turmoil going on below us had dematerialized. Masha was quiet as she looked at the sky, and I sensed her deep sadness as voices called out her name from below, and she led me back downstairs [...] In my time with Masha, I was allowed to live with her in a private moment of fear and confusion. I empathized with her. I understood her [...] I was implicated in her personal drama, and lost my ability to remain [critically] removed from the play. (Silbiger, 2014)

My student was bothered by the fact that he lost what he referred to as his “objectivity” and his “ability to remain [critically] removed from the play”. But losing one’s objectivity is in fact the point. This is true, too, of *Karen*: the partaker is always aware of the “roads not taken.” Although partakers of *Ferry Play* hear all the lines in the podplay, they are well aware that they have a partial view of the other characters on the set (the ferry), and in the play (all the other passengers). The same is true of the three *Subway Plays*. Digital theatre reveals the falseness in the very idea of objectivity (which is always already subjective), and revels in partial perceptions: unlike the proscenium where the spectator believes she can see everything, digital theatre is set up in such a way that the partaker cannot possibly see everything – and is aware of that fact. The partial view is celebrated. Objectivity is not the point. Subjectivity, in all aspects, is.

By asking partakers to ingest, relish, internalize, and personalize the event, engaging partakers as co-creators of the event, focusing on affect, and creating dramaturgical structures that allow partakers to savor and digest, site-based digital productions are inherently rasic. When digital



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