Applying participatory media literacy to theatre studies ?

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Abstract : For several decades, the contributions of digital tools to the humanities have been extensively documented. However, can the general principle of digital added value be applied to a discipline such as theatre studies? For instance, is it relevant to use digital tools to help young audiences engage with theatrical experiences and become theatre-goers? To fully grasp these questions, they must be situated within the broader context of contemporary research on digital education. Do digital technologies—particularly digital video—offer added value in terms of knowledge acquisition, motivation, and the development of positive learning habits? Or, conversely, should the informed educator actively seek to limit the presence and use of digital mediation and screens in learning environments? In exploring these educational issues, it becomes clear that one of the central underlying questions is that of learner participation. After defining what we mean by participation, we will examine a case study of a pedagogical framework designed to foster learner engagement through video, using the tools Celluloid and E-Spectator. This will allow us to propose a set of principles for the meaningful pedagogical use of digital video in the humanities, including in the specific context of theatre studies.

Keywords : literacy, participation, annotation, video, digital

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Can digital tools, when used appropriately, facilitate or enhance learning? An affirmative answer to this question constitutes one of the foundational assumptions of the digital humanities movement (Schreibman 2004; Hirsch 2012). For several decades, the contributions of digital tools to fields such as literature and history have been extensively documented (Beretta 2023; Galleron & Idmhand 2020). But can the general principle of digital added value be applied to a discipline such as theatre studies? What happens when a play is viewed in the form of a digital video, whether on DVD or streamed from an online platform? Is this an effective way to discover, appreciate, and engage with this type of work? More broadly, is it relevant to use digital tools to help new audiences engage with theatrical experiences and become theatre-goers? Live performance, after all, seems to rely fundamentally on an unmediated interaction between actors and spectators. By encouraging audiences to watch plays online,

might we risk diverting them from the "real" theatrical experience rather than drawing them toward it? These questions lie at the very heart of the integration of theatre studies into the field of digital humanities (Chantraine Braillon 2022). Within this movement, a generally positive tone is associated with the use of digital technologies, though this does not preclude a critical perspective on such technologies, as is the case in the EdTech movement (Tessier 2020).

To be properly understood, this inquiry into the contribution of digital tools to the specific field of theatre studies must be situated within the broader context of contemporary educational theories, where similar questions frequently arise: should digital technologies be integrated into the learning of a given discipline or the exploration of a particular corpus? Does digital technology offer added value in terms of knowledge acquisition, motivation, or the development of positive learning habits (Amadieu & Tricot 2020)? Or, conversely, should enlightened educators actively resist the presence and use of digital mediation in order to provide students with "meaningful experiences" in the Deweyan sense–experiences that not only foster skill development but also encourage reflection on one's relationship to the world and contribute to personal and civic growth (Dewey 1916)? One might reasonably assume, for example, that a spectator would be more deeply affected by attending a live theatrical performance—with actors on stage and a responsive audience—than by watching the same play alone on a computer screen.

In exploring these educational issues, we will see that one of the central underlying questions is that of learner participation. After defining what we mean by participation, we will examine a case study involving the use of the tools *Celluloid*[1] and *e-spect@tor*[2], which are designed to foster active engagement with video content. This will allow us to propose a set of principles for the meaningful pedagogical use of video in the humanities, including in the specific context of theatre studies.

1 Preventing Passive Video Consumption and Activating Learners

The pedagogical use of moving images is far from new. Jacques Perriault (2002) describes what he calls the history of "machines for communication" in educational contexts, tracing it back to early attempts to use the magic lantern in schools in the 18th century. Perriault documents a wide range of experiments conducted in primary, secondary, and higher education, serving various pedagogical objectives. In these projects, the use of moving images and screens (cinema, television) has supported activities such as information retrieval and analysis, image interpretation, and project-based learning.

Similar themes appear in the work of Jacquinot and Metz, who, in *Image et Pédagogie* (1977), describe the introduction of film and television into schools and the profound transformations anticipated by their advocates. Yet despite the long history and near-daily presence of these practices, having students watch a screen can still be viewed with suspicion by educators. In discussions of digital technology in education, the issue of screen time is a recurring point of contention. The belief that young people

[1] https://celluloid.huma-num.fr)
[2] https://especellu.huma-num.fr/

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spend too much time in front of screens—and that screen time should be limited—is widespread among both parents and teachers (Fisch 2008).

This critique of screens in education is not new. It dates back to the early 20th century with the advent of cinema. As Michael Bourgatte (2020) shows, cinema was from the outset suspected of negatively influencing behaviour. Common criticisms included the supposed stupefying effects of certain images, their alienating nature, or even their potential to turn viewers into deviant or violent individuals. These concerns intensified with the rise of television. As Bourgatte notes, the social focus on the "screen" only became a societal issue with the introduction of television into homes, which was blamed for sensationalist programming and excessive advertising. These critiques have been further amplified in the digital age, with the proliferation of screens—computers, tablets, smartphones—and their invasion of public and private spaces. According to Bourgatte, the overabundance of screens and images is frequently cited as a cause of social isolation, prompting calls for regulation of screen exposure. Among the recurring criticisms of digital video use in education is the issue of passivity. Bourgatte's historical synthesis of screen-related critiques invites us to take a step back from these commonsensical arguments. Recent research suggests that contrary to recurring moral panics, screens are not inherently harmful to young people (Tessier & Saint-Martin, 2019; Cordier, 2023). However, this research also shows that simply introducing video or digital tools is not enough to automatically generate motivation or engagement among learners. In line with the digital humanities approach, assessing the added value of digital video in pedagogical practices related to theatre requires a more nuanced investigation—one that avoids both naïve techno-enthusiasm and guilt-inducing neo-Luddism.

Amadieu and Tricot's (2020) synthesis work helps to temper overly enthusiastic claims about the effects of digital technologies, while identifying certain positive contributions. The scientific studies compiled by the authors examine the issue of multimedia learning and confirm that there are indeed benefits—albeit under specific conditions. Several factors help explain why, in some contexts, videos may or may not be beneficial for learning. For instance, overly long videos risk losing students' attention and should therefore be segmented—a challenge in the case of theatrical performances, which one might prefer to preserve intact to maintain the original experience. Videos that contain a high density of information should be accompanied by explanatory commentary. More broadly, the authors emphasize the importance of active engagement with video content: if learners merely watch passively, the likelihood of a meaningful and lasting learning experience is significantly reduced.

2 From Media Literacy to Participatory Media Literacy

The issue of active engagement with video is fundamental to media education, particularly given that a substantial portion of the information we now consume is in video format. Developing learners' video literacy involves, for example, identifying fake news, AI-generated or manipulated images, misleading edits, understanding different formats, and recognizing sources and levels of discourse (Lacelle 2017). Going further, one could argue that media literacy cannot be limited to the acquisition of

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individual consumption reflexes. Learning to be well-informed also entails learning to exchange, compare, and argue—whether with peers or on social media (Burgess & Green 2018; Baumann, Lhaki & Burke 2020). In this sense, media education is inherently participatory. This is especially true on social media platforms, where users are simultaneously consumers, producers and disseminators of information.

One approach proposed by researchers to foster this participatory media literacy is collaborative video annotation (Howard 2021). Craig Howard describes technological systems that allow groups of learners to annotate, comment on, and discuss videos with the aim of collectively developing critical skills. *Celluloid*, which we will focus on here, is a digital application specifically designed to support collaboration on video content. It is a Web-based application developed within the French consortium CANEVAS (Consortium for the Annotation, Analysis, and Archiving of Video for Scientific Activities)[3] The consortium's goal is to equip humanities research involving video corpora by facilitating actions such as annotation, commentary, analysis, exploration, sharing, and archiving. To this end, more than 200 researchers contribute to the development of standards, best practices, and tools tailored to disciplines such as sociology, communication and information sciences, education, history, film studies, and theatre studies. Within this framework, *Celluloid* aims to facilitate participation and collaborative work on audiovisual materials in educational or research contexts. The application allows users to create projects based on one or more streamed videos. Once a project is created and a video selected, it can be played using a standard video player (play, pause, volume control, etc.). The project can be shared *via* a password-protected link, enabling the selection and invitation of participants to a secure space. This secure environment encourages calm and moderated collaboration, in contrast to the often-hostile exchanges found on social media. Furthermore, videos streamed through *Celluloid* are hosted on *PeerTube* instances[4] allowing for easy video hosting and sharing without relying on proprietary Big Tech platforms like *YouTube* or *Vimeo*, which are less suited to educational contexts. *e-spect@tor* is an adaptation of *Celluloid* specifically designed for collaborative work around live performances (Besson & Lavorel 2023).

3 Learning Ecosystems for Collaborative Engagement

Participants in a *Celluloid* or *e-spect@tor* project can collaboratively annotate the selected video(s) in two ways. A participant may create a sequential annotation, selecting a video segment by defining a start and end point, and adding a comment, question, or any text of their choice. This annotation becomes visible to others during playback at the corresponding segment. Alternatively, a contextual annotation allows the user to mark a specific element within the image—such as a face or object—and attach a comment to it. The collaborative dimension is further enhanced by the fact that each annotation generates a discussion thread, enabling all participants to respond. For example, a teacher might annotate a video with questions and ask students to respond, or students might ask questions themselves, with the

[3] https://canevas.hypotheses.org/.
[4] https://joinpeertube.org/en_US,

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teacher replying later—or students might interact with one another while the teacher moderates.

In February 2025, we tested *Celluloid* with undergraduate students in education sciences. As part of a second-year course, students were asked to watch a 20-minute video on educational issues. They were given time to annotate the video—adding comments, asking questions, and responding to peers. Within the allotted 30 minutes, the 58 students produced 73 annotations. In a third phase, these annotations were discussed orally in class, allowing for clarification and comparison of viewpoints. In a similar spirit but in a different discipline, Anatole Grimaldi (2025) tested *Celluloid* with literature students. His objective was to have them create video-based projects on the work of writer Georges Perec and to use the annotation tool to foster dynamic exchanges around this canonical literary work.

As these examples clearly show, a tool like *Celluloid* alone cannot generate participatory media literacy among users. Rather, it constitutes one component within a broader ecosystem of pedagogical tools and practices, interconnected with other applications that vary depending on the intended objectives, learners' levels, group size, and disciplinary context. From this perspective, it is worth noting that the *Celluloid* instance hosted by *Huma-Num* infrastructure[5] functions as an open and free sandbox environment that educators and researchers can freely explore and experiment with. Since *Celluloid*'s source code is available as open source on *GitHub*[6] it can be forked and adapted to suit specific projects by creating new instances. *e-spect@tor* was the first project to follow this path, developing a version of *Celluloid* tailored to the specific needs of theatre studies. Another example is the *DEEC*[7] research project, in which mathematics educators and researchers analyse a large corpus of classroom videos to improve teaching practices in mathematics education.

Across all these tools and projects, a common objective emerges, enable and support the development of collaborative practices on video content. In the case of *e-spect@tor* and the "school of the spectator" project, the broader question of participatory digital literacy is applied to theatre, with its own specific stakes. The underlying intuition is that engaging with theatre—developing an appreciation, taste, and cultural literacy—does not rely solely on the personal experience of watching and listening to a performance. Becoming a theatre spectator also involves learning how to participate, exchange, argue, express, and share one's emotions and reflections. This is precisely the approach explored by Juliette Bristault Canova (2025). In collaboration with primary school teachers, she has students watch filmed theatre performances and respond using *e-spect@tor*. The tool was specifically designed to address the pedagogical needs arising from such experiences. For instance, emojis allow students to quickly and easily record their emotional reactions during different scenes without interrupting the viewing experience. These reactions can then be revisited collectively to share and elaborate on initial impressions.

[5] https://www.huma-num.fr/

[6] https://github.com/celluloid-camp,

[7] https://www.inspe-bretagne.fr/anr-determination-d-efficacite-des-experimentations-controlees-en-enseignement-apprentissage\\

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The particular complexity of theatrical works—compared to the previously discussed examples of educational or informational videos—lies in the risk that digital tools may interfere with the theatrical experience itself by introducing a technological superstructure. When the goal is, as Jacques Rancière puts it, to "transform spectators into active participants rather than passive voyeurs" (Rancière 2008, 10), one encounters a paradox that Rancière explores in his influential work *The Emancipated Spectator*. By assuming the spectator's ignorance and need for education, and by multiplying devices intended to clarify and make the work accessible, one may in fact reinforce the distance between the spectator and the work. To use Rancière's terminology, in trying too hard to make the spectator "active," we risk instead rendering them "stupefied." Without necessarily adopting Rancière's radical stance, if we are to embrace the challenge of a "school of the theatre spectator" that relies on a digital tool—one that inherently carries the risk of stupefaction—then the tool must be sufficiently subtle and lightweight to allow each individual to interpret what they perceive in their own way and to connect it to their "singular intellectual adventure" (*ibid.*, 23). Only under such conditions can a digital tool genuinely contribute to the development of digital theatrical literacy.

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