Educating Students in Theatre through Digital Technology

A Challenge for the School System

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Abstract : After recalling the pillars that underpin the teaching of theater and theater education within the French school system, and after examining the paradoxical relationships that institutional texts maintain with the place accorded to digital technology in this teaching, the article proposes to reflect on the contemporary stakes of digital technology, particularly in the construction of the "School of the Spectator." It considers it, notably through recordings, as an essential pedagogical lever, capable of offering students a spectatorial experience that is legitimate, authentic, and singular which, far from competing with or diminishing the experience lived in a live performance venue, may instead initiate it, prepare it, and better define it. Far from being merely virtual, the experience made possible through digital technology thus recreates the conditions of a shared and collective presence within educational institutions. It fosters knowledge and analysis of live performances. Ultimately, it is the students' own creativity that is developed, and theater classes are enriched by this new performance space that many contemporary companies are already investing.

Keywords : Spectator's school / Pedagogical use of Performance Recording / Digital spectatorial expérience / Theater experience / Pedagogy

1 Introduction

The title of this article might suggest an analysis of the benefits and limitations of digital technology in the teaching of theater. However, after a survey conducted among forty-five theater teachers in the Académie de Lille[1], it quickly became apparent that this could not be the chosen angle of reflection.

[1] This survey did not follow a strict sociological methodology. It consisted of asking forty-five theater teachers in the Académie what place they gave to digital technology in their teaching and which practices were most frequent.

It would in fact have consisted of a rather unstimulating enumeration of the already diverse practices implemented and their effects on teaching and on students. Above all, such an analysis would have echoed the broader and already well-documented conclusions regarding the uses of digital technology in the classroom. It therefore became necessary to orient the reflection more toward the intersection of the three notions or concepts that the conference *The Spectator's school : Digitizing the research in the Performing Arts* invites us to engage with : digital technology, theater education, and the spectator's school, the latter two having long been embedded in French educational policies.

My position as Academic Inspector – Regional Pedagogical Inspector for Literature, responsible for theater education, called for a perspective that was both didactic and pedagogical, while also raising questions about the governance of the discipline. Two questions therefore emerged : how does digital technology reshape the notion – central to French education – of the school of the spectator ? And, consequently, how does it modify the teaching of theater itself ?

This reflection is structured along two axes and does not claim to be either exhaustive or definitive. We will first show how digital technology maintains a paradoxical relationship with the very pillars of theater education as defined by institutional texts, before analyzing the extent to which the central place it occupies today, particularly through recordings, requires a redefinition of the very notion of spectatorial experience.

2 Prolegomena

Before beginning, and in order to fully understand the foundations of the reflection that follows, a brief preliminary clarification is necessary, particularly for those who are not fully familiar with the subtleties of teaching theater and theater education within the French school system.

The latter occupies a triple position and operates across several levels.

First, it takes place within French language and literature classes, in curricula from sixth grade through eleventh grade, sometimes in connection with anthropological and literary thematic entries (for example, theater is studied in sixth grade within the thematic entry "masking, playing, and outwitting : strategies in action") and sometimes as a genre in high school, in connection with a specific object of study ("theater from the twelfth to the twenty-first century," in tenth grade). It is then taught by French literature teachers.

It also constitutes an artistic subject taught in specific classes : Theater Timetabled Classes (CHAT) in middle school ; and theater options and specializations in high school. Theater is then considered a discipline in its own right : it counts toward examinations, follows a national curriculum, and is allocated specific instructional hours. Classes are taught by teachers – generally literature teachers – who have obtained certification in theater. They are appointed by Academic Inspectors or by General Inspectors to so-called "specific" positions.

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As part of the field of live performance, it is also one of the eight domains of Arts and Cultural Education (EAC)[2] which must form part of the student's educational pathway. Arts and Cultural Education concerns all disciplines, complements classroom instruction, and is incorporated into the institutional projects of schools. Every student must benefit from it, beyond canonical artistic instruction.

This brief overview makes it possible to understand the extent to which these different levels and modalities of teaching do not correspond exactly to the same objectives or stakes. Nevertheless, the "Spectator's school" concerns them all and ensures a certain coherence among them. It is indeed one of the pillars of Arts and Cultural Education, becomes an object of instruction in specialized theater classes, and also concerns the teaching of theater in French literature classes.

3 Teaching / Educating Theater through Digital Technology : The Stakes of a Paradoxical Collaboration

3.1 The Three "Pillars" of Theater Education and Its Instruction

The teaching of theater and theater education combines three domains :

- The acquisition of solid knowledge related to theater studies
- The development of specific skills within the framework of theatrical practice courses
- Encounters with works, cultural venues, artists, and other professionals

These three "pillars," the result of a long tradition surrounding arts and cultural education and the spectator's school, have been subject to strong institutional oversight since the 2000s. This reflects the priority accorded to them and engages all stakeholders within a shared perspective. Several texts, moreover, frame this institutionalization. The Charter of the Spectator's school, co-written by the General Inspectorate, directors of cultural institutions, artists, and Regional Directorates of Cultural Affairs (DRAC), clearly defines the stakes and the framework for implementing the School of the Spectator and presents itself as "a national reference document" with a "legitimate and operational dimension" :

> The Spectator's school is an educational process through which students learn to become active and engaged spectators and to understand theater as a living artistic practice beyond the sole experience of analyzing literary texts. It enables them to acquire, through the sharing of a common culture, aesthetic judgment and critical thinking. Seeing, reading, and practicing theater [...] constitute inseparable elements of a comprehensive approach to arts and cultural education. The expression "Spectator' school" presupposes that attending a performance involves both a sensory and emotional discovery and an active and concrete learning process, just as important

[2]The eight domains of Arts and Cultural Education (EAC) are : Visual Arts and Heritage ; Cinema and Audiovisual Arts ; Scientific, Technical, and Industrial Culture ; History and Memory ; Media and Information Literacy ; Books and Literary Culture ; Music ; and Live Performance (source : [https://edus col.education.fr/575/education-artistique-et-culturelle,

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> as, for example, learning to read a text. And, like it, this is far from innate. Students' viewing of performances is therefore integrated into a structured framework of support, both before and after the performance (ANRAT) [3]

Within these highlighted elements, we find the three pillars previously mentioned. This charter is complemented by a 2013[4] circular governing the Arts and Cultural Education pathway, as well as by the Charter of Arts and Cultural Education (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale 2013).

These three domains are also present within the curricula dedicated to theater instruction. Without entering detail, teachers must devote time to both "theory"[5] and "practice"[6] in theater courses. The teaching of theatrical practice must be conducted jointly by the teacher and an artist. Finally, the curricula recommend that students attend a certain number of performances each year in one or more partner cultural institutions[7]. It should be noted in this regard that for CHAT programs, a partnership with a Conservatory is required. In French literature curricula (therefore intended for all students, where theater is not considered a discipline but rather a literary genre), the same approach is confirmed :

> Theater is a performing art : the teacher may, for example, propose the study of the constitutive elements of staging […]. The teacher encourages encounters with artists and surrounding cultural performance institutions. […] [The teacher seeks to] clarify and enrich elements of theatrical culture and deepen the analysis and interpretation of works. (Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale. Programmes officiels de la classe de seconde)[8].

The reading of these institutional texts reveals the extent to which the approach to teaching theater in the French school system is based on a precise conception

[3] "L'école du spectateur est une démarche éducative par laquelle les élèves apprennent à devenir des spectateurs actifs et désirants et à appréhender le théâtre comme une pratique artistique vivante au-delà de la seule expérience de l'analyse des textes littéraires. Elle leur permet d'acquérir, dans le partage d'une culture commune, jugement esthétique et esprit critique. Voir, lire, pratiquer le théâtre […] constituent en effet les éléments indissociables d'une démarche globale d'Education artistique et culturelle. L'expression « Ecole du spectateur » présuppose que voir un spectacle relève en même temps d'une découverte sensible et émotionnelle et d'un apprentissage actif et concret, tout aussi important que celui, par exemple, d'apprendre à lire un texte. Et qui, comme lui, est loin d'être inné. La vision du spectacle par les élèves est donc intégrée à un dispositif d'accompagnement, en amont et en aval de la représentation (Charte nationale du spectateur) [Unless otherwise stated, all translations are done by the author of this article].

[4] The three pillars previously mentioned are found in this circular : "The arts and cultural education pathway brings together all acquired knowledge, experienced practices, and organized encounters in the fields of the arts and culture, in complementarity between school time, extracurricular time, and out-of-school time / Le parcours d'éducation artistique et culturelle conjugue l'ensemble des connaissances acquises, des pratiques expérimentées et des rencontres organisées dans les domaines des arts et de la culture, dans une complémentarité entre les temps scolaire, périscolaire et extrascolaire" (Ministère de l'Education nationale, Circulaire n° 2013-073 du 3 mai 2013).

[5] "Theory" occupies between one and three hours per week of theater instruction (CHAT, option, or specialization).

[6] Practice occupies between two and three hours per week of theater instruction.

[7] Students enrolled in theater instruction must attend between four and eight performances per year, depending on the program.

[8] "Le théâtre est un art du spectacle : le professeur peut, par exemple, proposer l'étude d'éléments constitutifs de mise en scène |…]. Il favorise la rencontre avec les artistes et les structures culturelles de spectacles environnantes. […] [Il cherche à] préciser et enrichir les éléments de culture théâtrale, approfondir l'analyse et l'interprétation des œuvres.

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of theater, inherited from contemporary research in theater studies, which must be transmitted and taught : opening students to live performance in its dual meaning (as both a place and a spectatorial experience), emphasizing that theater is founded on the idea of "co-presence," a direct and concrete encounter between an audience and actors, and finally recalling that it rests on the political presupposition of theatrical experience as a "site of community" and as a "theatrical event" (Biet& Triau 2025).

3.2 The Affirmation of Digital Technology as a Teaching Medium

All of these orientations therefore appear difficult to reconcile with digital technology, the virtuality it implies, the often-deferred experience it entails, and the rupture with this unique "co-presence," which is precisely what makes theater an experience. The theater group of the Académie de Créteil, echoing the issue that concerns us here, begins its *Guide for Accompanying Students to Performances* by radically opposing the spectatorial experience to digital technology :

> Urgent necessity of the spectatorial pathway in a world dominated by the overflow of images and relational virtuality […] The performing arts, and theater in particular, are distinguished by the co-presence they establish. (Groupe théâtre de l'académie de Créteil, 2010)[9]

The urgency expressed at the beginning of this statement seems to acknowledge a separation between digital technology, theater education, and above all, the spectator's school.

However, significantly, the 2019 curricula, both in French literature and in theater specialization, explicitly introduces digital technology as an essential medium for teaching theater, notably through theatrical recordings. The specialization curriculum indeed recommends reference recordings. As a very recent example, the program announced for the 2027 examination session, on "Romance Journeys," is "based on recordings of the performances *L'Autre Monde ou Les États et empires de la lune* by Benjamin Lazar and *La Rêveuse* (text by Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac, adapted and directed by Benjamin Lazar, musical conception by the ensemble La Rêveuse, 2014 [2008]) and *Gulliver* by Valérie Lesort and Christian Hecq (free adaptation of Jonathan Swift's novel by Valérie Lesort, directed by Christian Hecq and Valérie Lesort, 2023 [2022])"(Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de la Jeunesse et des Sports 2026). In French literature curricula, it is specified that the teacher "draws on the available recordings of stage productions" and "relies on heritage resources usefully supplemented by digital educational resources" (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale. Official curriculum for the tenth grade).

The lockdowns of 2020 finally anchored the use of digital technology in pedagogical practices, as teachers developed increased competencies in this area during that period.

[9] "L'organisation de parcours de spectateurs relève d'une nécessité éducative urgente dans un monde dominé par le déversement des images et la virtualité relationnelle […] Or, les arts de la scène, et le théâtre en particulier, se distinguent par la co-présence qu'ils instaurent".

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Thus, within this paradoxical relationship between digital technology and theater education, we are inevitably led to ask how digital technology transforms the very notion of spectatorial experience and enriches the approach to the genre and its teaching.

4 Digital Technology in the Service of the Spectatorial Experience

4.1 Digital Resources and Their Theoretical, Cultural, and Conceptual Contribution

The survey mentioned in the introduction, conducted among teachers, immediately highlights the central role played by digital resources, both in the phase of designing and developing lessons and in classroom use. Major Websites thus occupy a prominent place and provide free access to resources. In terms of the governance of the discipline, this implies the construction of close collaboration with digital stakeholders and also requires reflection on the notions of archives, libraries (particularly of recordings), and even editorial policy. The Institution itself is therefore called upon to address these questions, since the recommendation of recordings that are not freely accessible could, for example, raise issues of equity. National and academic governance, as well as the structuring of available resources, are thus becoming increasingly necessary. This is an ongoing project, still in progress, and one in which all stakeholders are involved.

From the perspective of the pillars of theater education and its teaching, digital resources also make it possible to establish an almost immediate dialogue between theory, practice, and spectatorial experience. The tools and stakes of theatrical analysis are thus more easily transmitted to students. Opening teaching to experimentation, such as the use of e-spectator software[10] within theater classes, offers promising perspectives for understanding the didactic and pedagogical contributions that this type of tool may represent for both teachers and students. An experiment is currently underway in the Académie de Lille, and its conclusions, still uncertain, will be presented at the end of the year[11].

The use of excerpts from recordings also invites a genuine enrichment of the analysis of dramatic texts and, consequently, of theater pedagogy in French literature classes. Work on this issue is currently being carried out within the Commission for the Monitoring of Theater Teaching and Activities (CASEAT) of the Académie de Lille. We seek to provide literature teachers in high school with tools enabling them to use recordings to construct linear analyses of texts, as required for the French baccalaureate. In essence, the aim is to create a dialogue between the approach of theater studies and the perspective of literary studies, and to enrich the pedagogy of literature through the pedagogy of theater. Recordings thus appear to be an essential medium for definitively moving beyond the well-known opposition—now certainly

[10] e-spect@tor (https://especellu.huma-num.fr) is an open-source Web-based application dedicated to the annotation and analysis of performing arts video recordings.

[11] This experiment is conducted within the framework of the THEATRALAB research program, funded by the ANR (Agence Nationale de la Recherche – LabCom programme), with the support of the Centre de recherches en histoire internationale et atlantique (CRHIA UR 1163), the French Ministry of Education (Inspection pédagogique régionale, Académie de Lille), and the research federation Sciences et Cultures du Visuel (CNRS, FR 2052 SCV).

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outdated—between text and performance, yet still too often perpetuated by certain practices or concerns.

4.2 Full-Length Recordings : A New Space for the Spectatorial Experience

The existence of these recordings appears above all to represent a genuine opportunity for the Spectator's School, paradoxical though this may seem. They indeed require us to think about the spectatorial experience—and perhaps even the spectatorial pathway—outside the theater as a physical venue and beyond theater understood solely as "co-presence." We are touching here on a nodal point, difficult to grasp and yet essential to consider. It requires that the viewing of a full-length recording be definitively taken "seriously," no longer experienced merely as a substitute, but as a real moment in the transmission and the full and complete education of the spectator. This issue is particularly central for rural areas, distant from cultural institutions, where many schools cannot realistically envisage taking their students to see a live performance "in person."

In essence, this means considering the viewing of a full-length recording as a singular, collective experience, consciously constructed as such—an experience in which emotion is lived, in which one might imagine establishing a ritual, and in which the very notion of the "spectator" is ultimately questioned. The spectator of a theatrical recording is not exactly the same as the spectator of a cinematic work : why ? What differences exist ? What occurs in a theatrical recording that does not occur in cinema ? These are rich questions to explore with students, and their implications do not diminish the specificity of the theatrical spectatorial experience but instead help define it, ultimately enabling the construction of the notion of theatrical reception. The delayed nature of the experience may also be questioned : what does it mean to live an experience after the official performance, when for a student it may be (indeed, certainly is) the first time ? One can see how these questions enrich and expand reflection on the contemporary stakes of the School of the Spectator. They also, in a certain sense, call into question the notion of "aura," as theorized by Walter Benjamin : does a theatrical recording radically annihilate the aura of the original performance, or does it preserve traces of that unique quality, linked to the authenticity and singularity of the work performed in a particular context ? To what extent might organizing a "theater-like screening," collective and ritualized, in a dedicated space within the school or even in the classroom (somewhat like film clubs), recreate a space in which the theatrical spectatorial experience is legitimate, full, and complete ?

The incentive value of this type of experience should not be underestimated. A report by the Inspectorate General of Cultural Affairs is particularly illuminating on this subject :

> In a statistical survey published in 2021, based on a significant sample of Pass Culture beneficiaries, it appears that recordings of performances constitute a means for young respondents to "initiate themselves virtually" in order to physically engage with cultural venues. Among young people who reserved a live performance through the Pass Culture, 93 percent stated that "this digital practice made them want to attend performances

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> in person," 62 percent watched a recording in its entirety, and 58 percent watched an excerpt from a performance in digital format. These data attest to the promotional nature of recordings and their incentive effect. (Clément-Cuzin & Hurard 2022 : 41)[12]

The authors of the report go even further, asserting that recordings "make it possible to partially recreate the conditions of an encounter that would occur in a cultural venue, by overcoming the economic, geographic, and symbolic barriers that such an experience may entail" (Clément-Cuzin & Hurard 2022, 41). In essence, recordings must no longer be conceived as merely limiting experiences. In many respects, they make it possible to establish an encounter with live performance, awaken the desire to go further, and stimulate the wish to experience the event fully, promising a more intense and sensory moment. What better means, ultimately, than recordings to help construct the "emancipated spectator" to which all theater education aspires ?

More broadly, within French language and literature classes, beyond the sole question of the spectator, the use of recordings also contributes to the development of students' reading comprehension skills, particularly for those who experience difficulties with reading. Their impact should therefore not be underestimated : as an essential lever for accessing the meaning of theatrical texts, often difficult to grasp through reading alone, they constitute a major pedagogical support for the teacher.

We would like to conclude this discussion by outlining two further avenues for exploration.

Digital technology in the classroom, and notably the use of recordings, invite us to question the very notion of community. How should the notion of a "digital audience" be understood ? Many cultural institutions are investing in this field and proposing purely digital theatrical events, hoping to expand their audiences and offer new types of performances that remain live, even though virtual. The "digital community" thus represents a major field of research to be explored, and school audiences are part of this field. Can the institution, the school, and the classroom become a new "digital audience" that accesses theater, initiates or prolongs the theatrical experience, and also encourages the creation of new types of performances ?

This leads to the second area of inquiry : pedagogically, digital technology also becomes a central space in which students' creativity can be expressed. As the black box of the screen, a site of a "limit" theatrical experience, digital technology also offers a unique space of freedom for students and their teachers within theater teaching and practice. After all, there are worse situations than following in Beckett's footsteps…

[12] "Dans une enquête statistique publiée en 2021 portant sur un échantillon significatif de bénéficiaires du Pass Culture, il apparaît que les captations de spectacles sont un moyen pour les jeunes interrogés de « s'initier virtuellement » pour investir physiquement les lieux culturels. Parmi les jeunes qui ont réservé à l'aide du Pass culture une proposition de spectacle vivant, 93% déclarent que « cette pratique numérique leur a donné envie d'aller voir des spectacles physiquement », 62% d'entre eux ont regardé une captation dans son intégralité et 58% ont regardé un extrait de spectacle au format numérique. Ces données attestent du caractère promotionnel de la captation et de son effet incitatif."

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5 Conclusion

This brief reflection on the still paradoxical relationship between digital technology and theater teaching and education has shown that deep and stimulating reflection is necessary in order to rethink the place of digital technology at the heart of theater classes and within the educational institution. Far from closing off possibilities, digital technology opens them : it makes possible what is sometimes simply impossible for multifactorial and pragmatic reasons that cannot be ignored. Even more, it makes it possible to construct a renewed and truly contemporary Spectator's school that in no way diminishes the singularity of the "co-presence" that theater calls for. It stimulates the desire for it and offers students an experience that is equally authentic, legitimate, and emancipatory, if it too is taken "seriously." The goal, in essence, is not to replace one spectatorial experience with another, but to think of them together, in their complementarity, so that the notion of the "digital audience" enriches the performing arts and ultimately stimulates students' creativity within the classroom.

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