Screens of intensification: on DIY concert videos of Lady Gaga and the use of media interfaces as tools of experience intensification

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Abstract

The article is based on the analysis of user-generated videos from a particular event: the Lady Gaga concert in Denmark on October 20, 2010. Within the theoretical framework of a media practice perspective, theories of a media cultural movement from sign to signal, and an affective understanding of the experience of liveness, I argue that the DIY videos do not only attest to the documentation or representation of the concert event, but rather show an urge to feel it, connect to it, and relate to others by sharing it. In that way media and screens can be understood as technologies that under certain circumstances enable intensified relations between bodies, spaces, and significant others. The experiential intensification of the event is established by using media to (1) visually enrich the real-time experience, (2) turn the collective receiver into an individualized and creative real-time auteur, and (3) deterritorialize the real-time experience by sharing it on social media platforms. Furthermore, I discuss two ways of analyzing “the signal” in my material: one focusing on the relation between body, event, and mobile media technology and the other on the formal features of the videos themselves. This distinction is nevertheless purely analytical given that the formal traces of the signal (the sensory turbulence of the videos) are so closely related to the spatially affected camera-body. The body in the space, the camera, and the audiovisual surface is in other words affecting each other, as the signaletic force of the concert-event affects all the three.

Keywords: DIY culture; experiential intensity; liveness; user-generated concert videos; Lady Gaga

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In his book *Liveness* (1999), Philip Auslander writes that it is a common, but nevertheless wrong, notion that liveness is based on a direct face-to-face perception of spectacles, or in other words on the absence of media. The experience of, for instance, a live concert is on the contrary often closely linked to the feeling and sensing of audiovisual signals created by screens, microphones, and loud speakers. In this article I investigate how the liveness of an event may be intensified through mediation. My study is based on an analysis of user-generated videos from a particular event: a Lady Gaga concert in Herning, Denmark on October 20, 2010. I am not primarily interested in Lady Gaga as an artist, but rather in the way Gaga’s entourage reveal their way of experiencing and perceiving the event through the creation of video sequences recorded with digital cameras and uploaded onto YouTube. I have chosen the concert because of the large number of user-generated mediations, which enables an analysis of how and when media are used at live events.

The documentations from the concert are interesting for several reasons. The various recordings do not only capture the performing body of Lady Gaga onstage, which is filmed extensively, but also the actual representations of Lady Gaga on the big screens that are part of the concert setting. The feeling of liveness seems to be intensified by these screens that offer visual proximity (e.g. facial close-ups) and reproduce an intimate way of watching bodies and faces known from other media (cf. photography, film, TV, etc.). Thus, the videos become mediations of mediations or— as I will argue— intensifications of real-time signals and experiences.

The empirical material was collected by searching the word combination “Lady Gaga Herning Denmark” on YouTube, which resulted in more than 100 videos. These videos are made by members of the audience—or as Jay Rosen would describe them: “the people formerly known as the audience.” The material is in other words user-generated and user-disseminated media productions that offer an impression of how media are used at events, but also of what is considered interesting and worth documenting from the perspective of the concertgoer. The videos are self-documentations, constituting a media practice that goes beyond what is represented in a singular video. They display what is valued as a remarkable moment and indicate the affective status of the viewer by showing when something fascinating occurs. In other words, the videos enable access to the affective patterns and perceptual peaks experienced by the concertgoers.

**MEDIA PRACTICE, SIGNAL, AND INTENSIFICATION**

I will focus on the interconnections and possible positive encounters between an already established media practice perspective, on the idea of a broader media cultural movement from sign to signal, and on an affective understanding of the experience of liveness or presence that is not opposed to mediation or media-saturated environments. According to Nick Couldry, a media-oriented practice perspective is not aiming for what a certain media or media text is saying on a content level, but rather for the actions and social activities that media are involved in. Following Couldry I will analyze the videos as traces of social actions and ask: Why do people document the concert in this particular way? What kind of cultural practice do the videos attest to and what is the meaning of such a practice?

To answer these questions, I argue that the broader shift from a representational to a signaletic media culture—or from sign to intensity can be combined with a media-oriented practice approach. The idea of a movement from sign to signal is inspired by the increasing number of real-time or “immediacy” mediations, which should be understood as continuous electronic impulses creating connections between bodies, screens and spaces in new ways, and not as sign structures that by convention refer to certain contents. The screens and the sound waves at the concert constitute signals that connect the concertgoers to the performance of Gaga in real time; and the use of mobile technologies is a way of trying to qualify, or intensify, the bodily effects of the signals and thus to create a better and more involving experience. The concept of the signaletic is useful for explaining the more-than-representational and affective dimensions of a certain media practice in which media technologies are used to intensify the experience of events. In other words both “practice” and “signal” are concepts that move beyond the
sign structures of the media texts in order to investigate the sensory, affective, and social relations created between bodies, screens, and spaces by means of mediation.

As explained in Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen’s use of the deleuzian concept, the signaletic material is a type of real-time mediation that connects body and screen. Hence, the understanding of mediation as signaletic material enables to explain the corporeal and affective force that screens have on bodies. Mediations are not only aimed for the brain to understand and decode (as signs), but are rather forces (or signals) which social role is to affect bodily states and to connect bodies with places and other bodies through real-time mediated perception. Therefore, my theoretical interest is, quoting Knudsen and Waade, how “the phenomenological relation between body and place is intensified, vitalized and re-vitalized through performative practices and through different kinds of mediations on, and of, places.”

There are several studies on media as experience-intensifying tools. My contribution to the field is to study self-documentations, showing the attention patterns of the producers. Furthermore, I focus on media technologies as intensifiers of already existing real-time signals and media-saturated environments, linking the analysis with the concept of the signal in order to explore the relations between media, spaces, and bodies.

Other key concepts are “experience” and “intensity.” According to Albert Boswijk, Thomas Thijssen, and Ed Peelen, a meaningful experience is defined by: (1) involving all one’s senses, (2) heightening the level of concentration and focus, (3) altering one’s sense of time, (4) being emotionally touching, (5) being unique for the person and creating intrinsic value, and (6) creating contact between the individual and its environment by doing and undergoing things. The way I use the word “intensification” connects it with actions or practices involved in the increasing of these six dimensions of the experience. I focus on showing how the acts of mediation relate to the Lady Gaga concert and how these may be regarded as different ways of intensifying the concert experiences.

Accordingly, the media involved—primarily the big screens and the handheld recording devices—should not only be understood as technologies for capturing, representing or storing events, but rather as tools that allow for a certain bodily and sensory access or real-time relation. It is nevertheless important to note that my empirical material only allows me to see when and with what focus people start documenting, it does not give me direct access to the thoughts and feelings of the producers.

**THE GAGA CONCERT VIDEOS**

Couldry considers mediation as closely connected to the supposedly spectacular, interesting, and special occasions of human existence. A more general intensifying role of the medium during the Gaga concert is therefore based on the fact that mediation is a way of stressing the importance and more-than-normal character of what is being mediated. When something extraordinarily happens, you mediate, hence experiencing the event through a medium confirms that it is a significant experience (Illustration 1).

The mediations at the Lady Gaga concert do also have an experientially intensifying potential: (1) by creating a visually richer experience (through the use of big screens and mobile zoom functions) at the concert and thereby potentially enhancing the feeling of liveness and proximity in relation to the event itself, (2) by turning the spectator into an active and creative one by allowing the establishment of a personal and individualized point of view through the scanning of the event-space with a mobile phone or a digital camera, and (3) by making it possible to share, prolong, and commemorate the experience when uploading personal recordings for public circulation on different media platforms.

**Mediatizing liveness**

In opposition to the mediations analyzed later, this section does not only focus on mobile devices but also on the big screens in the concert space. It is quite characteristic for the user videos that they often—especially if the viewer is situated far away from the scene—focus on the screens because they offer a sense of visual closeness and presence in relation to Gaga.

Illustration 2 is a framegrab from a user video, which shows how the big screen and not the actual
body of Gaga becomes the center of attention.\textsuperscript{15} This is due to the fact that the sense of liveness is often closely intertwined with a feeling of perceptual proximity. Without the big screens visual closeness would not be an option for the concertgoers filming, it is via the big screens (and the ability to zoom in on the events with the camera) that closeness and liveness can be created.

Illustration 1. Gaga as the mediated center. Source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=uR8qe2OZNHI&feature=related.

Illustration 2. Video focusing on the big screen at the concert. Source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1tTSpZf_6E&feature=related.
Philip Auslander’s concept of liveness is of use in this context. His aim in *Liveness* (1999) is to transgress the idea of a live experience as being non-mediated, or somehow based on an unmediated relation between the senses and an incidence. This concept of liveness is wrong according to Auslander. First of all, it totally overlooks the intrinsic role of media technologies in the creation of live events and feelings of liveness. Obviously media play a tremendous role in building up expectations and in spreading knowledge about Gaga, and as such the feeling of finally seeing her live—cf. the power of her live presence. This is dependent on the concertgoers having seen or heard about Gaga through previously mediated forms. Looking at the role of media at the event itself, from the commonsense ontological perspective it would still be a live event if we removed the loud speakers, microphones, and the big screens from the concert, but from an experience-oriented and affective perspective the feeling of liveness would certainly be threatened.

Auslander’s solution is to define “liveness” as a feeling of presence, of connection, and directness that can be activated both via classic liveness (physical copresence in space), live broadcasts of events, live recordings, experiences of online copresence with other users, or even with machines (e.g. chatterbots). “The emerging definition of liveness may be built primarily around the audience’s affective experience. To the extent that websites and other virtual entities respond to us in real time, they *feel* live to us, and this may be the kind of liveness we now value.”16 As such liveness becomes a mediatized concept to the extent that media are involved in the creation of feelings of liveness.17

Quite a few of the recordings from the concert focus on the beginning of the concert where a countdown to Gaga’s entrance is made on big screens filling the entire space of the scene. They show her body in slow motion, creating a relation of visual fascination between the viewer and the celebrity body (cf. Illustration 3).18 Here, the occurrence that attracts attention, and triggers the desire to document, is not a body in the room, but a body on a screen in a room, which clearly underlines Auslander’s point: feelings of liveness are not opposed to mediation. The use of a countdown slowly increases the affective

Illustration 3. A recording of Gaga in slow motion—and an ocean of mobile screens among the audience. Source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=G4p8zQ2CfO8&feature=related.
investment of the audience who begin to scream as Gaga (the body) is suddenly becoming visible as a silhouette behind the screen. Accordingly, the focus on the big screens in the user videos show how it is the mediated form (Gaga on a screen) that offers the audience a sense of “being-there” or of “presence.” Paradoxically the feeling of being co-present with Gaga is established by putting a screen (and often two) in between the audience and her body.

Creative auteurs

The user videos can be described as small “Do it yourself” (DIY) productions whereby otherwise rather passive concertgoers turn themselves into active co-creators of the event by recording and disseminating it online. “DIY media” according to Knobel and Lankshear refer to the increasing number of media productions made by non-professional citizens (e.g. film, music videos, music, animation, games), as opposed to the output from professionalized areas of production.19 Amateurs and non-professionals are increasingly able to create own media products and even to distribute them on a potentially global scale using social media networks.20

According to Jonas Larsen a digital photo should not necessarily be approached as the creation of a media text or a picture with a certain meaning, but also as a creative act—being a body that takes a photo—that carries value itself. In other words media users do not only document something via digital cameras in order to produce signs, but also because the act of documenting has an immediate effect by connecting the producer to the environment and surrounding others.21 This element of creativity is also important in relation to the concert videos, as they may also be considered as results of a creative process. An example of such an approach is a concert video where the participant starts the recording by focusing on the pulsating lights in the ceiling, which is clearly an attempt to make a personally narrated version of the concert (cf. Illustration 4).22 This media practice transforms the spectator into a contributor, an individual creating unique media versions of the Gaga concert and thus giving it personal meaning and value.23 The ability for everyone with a mobile camera to play a part in the mediation of the event makes it possible to change staged event designs into events in which the user becomes a unique produser.24

Illustration 4. The concert participant as creative auteur. Source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCWHef09g_I&feature=related.
This creative dimension is another example of how the media becomes an intensifying tool, enabling the addition of a layer of creativity or individual authenticity to the experience. Following Britta Timm Knudsen and Anne Marit Waade, this shows that feelings of authenticity and presence is something that “people can do and a feeling which is experienced.”

Prolonging, sharing, and deterritorializing the experience

Last but not least I will argue that the movement of the recordings from mobile devices to the social media platform of YouTube also plays a role in the intensification of the concert experience. By uploading the videos they become deterritorialized recordings of live events for others to see and enjoy if they want to get a picture of how it is to participate in such an event or if they want to remember or socialize after having participated. The videos and comments are thus examples of what Jenkins has called “participatory culture,” which designates a media cultural situation where many non-professionals can produce media material and move it between different media and media platforms (e.g. from a mobile phone to a social media platform).

When looking at the comments placed below the videos on the YouTube interface they are often used to either articulate affective outbursts, to affirm that the writer “was there,” to celebrate Gaga as a musician and performer, to assert a certain bond with the community of Gaga devotees called “little monsters,” to praise the video itself, or to gain information about how it is to attend such an event. By putting a concert video on YouTube it becomes possible to stage oneself as a Gaga fan “who have seen her,” as well as, to socialize and share memories or knowledge among fellow fans and concert participants.

The person who has produced the most socially and relationally valuable video of the concert is the YouTube user called “stefannyu.” He has uploaded a video showing Gaga talking directly to him (and the camera). The clip was taken after he presented Gaga with a t-shirt bearing a personal written statement. The recording shows her first reading the message on the t-shirt and then putting it on and wearing it while performing her megahit “Telephone” (Illustration 5).

Illustration 5. Gaga talking to the recording person and inviting him backstage. Source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=WWOWZC80HBw&feature=related.
views and 68 comments. Many of the comments ask the user how it was to meet Gaga, and how he managed to get such a good standing ticket. One writes that it is, “Cool that you recorded this epic moment,” another that it is “so freaking cool:) Congrats,” while a third asks him to share the photos that he took of Gaga, while meeting her backstage. “Stefannyu” refuses to upload any pictures, which adds to the feeling of exclusivity that surrounds him due to his encounter with the quasi-sacral figure of Gaga. A space of hyper-importance is created that goes beyond the concert arena and into the backstage area where only Gaga and a few lucky fans have interacted.

The video is clearly treated as quite a trophy that prolongs the experience of being at the concert for the people commenting on it, while adding a certain aura to the person behind the camera. The video and the discussion show that being psychically present at events still carries cultural significance and value, but as Auslander stresses it is important to remember that the prestige connected to physical co-presence is in fact dependent on the amount of mediation that the event receives before and after its actual duration. It is valuable to have seen a concert that has received a lot of media attention, which underlines that the significance of psychological presence is clearly reliant on the mediation processes.

Although being less spectacular, the other user videos also initiate interaction between YouTube users. From the position of the producer the upload of the recordings prolongs the event by turning it into a phenomenon that may be shared and discussed with others. The event thereby gains social significance, because it becomes possible to show that the uploading person was actually there, that he/she had good seats, and more or less developed conversations may emerge. Therefore, social media platforms add another layer to the intensification of the event by making it matter beyond the space and time of the concert itself. YouTube thus gives a prolonged sense of liveness for the concertgoers while also offering a taste of Gaga liveness to those who were not present.

DISCUSSION: WHAT ABOUT THE SIGNAL?

The main claim of this article is that an interface between a body and an event can create a stronger relation between them. But how do we know that people do not document because they feel they have to, or that they would experience the event in a more profound and direct way without mediating it? I certainly acknowledge that media can disturb or even block relations between people and between people and places. But, when looking at the videos they seem to function as visually enhancing, as creative and relational tools, bearing no traces of blocking the mediator’s access to the event. Or, to put it more polemically: How can the zooming in on the artist in order to improve the watching of the performer be an act of blockage? How can the creative play by making personal versions of the event also constitute a way of destroying the event? And how can sharing and creating conversations about the event be negative in terms of event appreciation? I find it hard to support the equation of “less media” with “a more authentic event,” without presupposing a kind of worn-out media skepticism that understands mediation as per definition creating barriers between people and events.

User-generated videos from the Gaga concert show that the existence of media and screens at such an event can be analyzed beyond an understanding of mediation as representation or as the encoding of semiotic structures of meaning. Media and screens can also be understood as technologies enabling intensified relations between bodies, spaces, things, and significant others. This focus on the social situation of media acts and the relation between mediator, mediation, and the event is nevertheless only one way of thinking about the signal in relation to the videos of the Gaga concert. Another would be to investigate more closely the shakings, the disturbances of optical clarity, and the visual and auditory “noise” of the videos as traces of the signaletic power of the event.

Through the use of Deleuze and Guattari one could describe the videos as “percepts,” in the sense that they can be understood as blocks of perception processes. Maurice Merleau-Ponty has described mediation as a way of offering “the gaze traces of vision (…),” which means that mediation can present a mode of perceiving more than when representing a certain content. Reflecting on painting as a medium Merleau-Ponty claims that it is difficult to say, “where the painting is I am looking at. For I do not look at it
as one looks at a thing, fixing it in its place. My gaze wanders within it as in the halos of Being. Rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it.”33 As percepts the videos are objects, which encapsulate the process of perception—or the perception of the signaletic force of the event. And when watching the videos we become aligned with another person’s momentary perception of and reactions to the concert, not (only) to someone’s interpretation or encoding of it. We simply borrow a perceptual position for a while and get access to this person’s past “way of seeing” via the percept-video.

There seems to be two ways of analyzing the signal in my material: one focusing on the relation between body, event, and mobile media technology and the other on the formal features of the videos themselves. This distinction is nevertheless purely analytical because the formal traces of the signal (cf. the sensory turbulence) are so closely related to the spatially affected camera-body. The body in the space, the camera, and the audiovisual surface is in other words affecting each other, because the signaletic force of the concert-event affects them all. The real-time signal travels from the body of Gaga through screens and loudspeakers to mobile media technologies, camera-bodies, and visual video surfaces—which yet again spark new affective reactions on social media platforms.

CONCLUSION

The audience at the concert and the producers of the videos all receive mediated real-time signals derived from the media technologies involved in the concert (e.g. the big screens, the microphone, and loudspeakers). These mediations produce signaletic material and allow the audience to have a feeling of real-time presence at the event. The use of mobile recording devices is part of a media practice, which attempts to intensify or strengthen the affective potential of these real-time signals. The strengthening of the power of the signal is established by (1) documenting and zooming in on the big screens to visually enrich the real-time experience, (2) turning the collective receiver into an individualized and creative real-time auteur, and (3) by deterritorializing the real-time experience through sharing it on social media platforms (cf. Figure 1).

Referring to Boswijk et al. the mediations intensify the experience by making it more meaningful to the concertgoer. But in what way is experiential meaningfulness intensified by means of DIY video productions? The big screens and zoom function on the mobile camera first of all create a higher degree of sensual stimulation and quality by making sure that people can see the real-time movements of Gaga’s face and body (cf. criterion 1 and 2), while the act of

Figure 1. Intensifying real-time signals and experiences.
mediation—following Couldry—in itself can be understood as a way of making the mediated space more unique or special than unmediated spaces (cf. criterion 5). The creative dimension of making a concert video adds meaning by allowing the concertgoer to create individual contact with his/her environment by the strictly personal choices of the recording process (cf. criterion 6). By sharing the videos the cultural value of the real-time experience is prolonged and the production of intrinsic value (cf. criterion 5) can continue through the interactions between concertgoers and peers. The process of intensification can be visualized in the following way (Figure 1).

The concept of the signal is useful when analyzing the user-generated material because it helps the analyst to focus on the material and the situation of production in a certain way, where the representational logic of coding and decoding is not at the center of attention. In that way the concept not only makes sense when analyzing certain mediated forms, but also when trying to understand why people mediate in certain situations. My main point in this paper is therefore that the analyzed DIY concert videos do not attest to an urge to represent the event, but rather show an urge to feel it, connect to it, and relate to others by sharing it.

Seeing mediation as the intensification of signaletic material implies that the user-driven production is also about connecting, feeling, and qualifying, and not only about coding, interpreting, or storing the event. The analytic potency of the concept of the signal is simply that it directs analytical attention toward the affective, bodily, and relational dimension of the act of mediating. Following this I have shown that the DIY real-time mediation of Gaga should be seen as attempts to intensify and prolong the signaletic power of the event—a power that affects both the camera-body and the audiovisual surface of the videos themselves via the creation of "sensory turbulence." Accordingly, media also work as technologies of intensification used to qualify the effects of experiencing signaletic material and to enable the creation of individually meaningful experiences.

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