BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY

THEATER AND FILM DOCTORAL SCHOOL

HABILITATION THESIS

SUMMARY

MEDIA AND DIGITAL INTERACTIVE ARTS

Rodica-Otilia MOCAN, Ph. D.,

Associate Professor

The first chapter of the habilitation thesis is describing my **education**.

I graduated with an engineering degree from the Politechnical Institute from Cluj in1987. Even though, due to the major changes that took place in Romanian society after 1989, I never practiced as an engineer, I am grateful to the Romanian engineering school where I was formed. I owe to this period the fascination for innovation, creativity and technology, as well as its applications in the most diverse fields of life, especially in the arts. The reprofessionalization from engineering to social sciences and arts has developed in me an openness towards interdisciplinarity that would mark my entire personal, academic and professional path.

Between 1991 and 1992, I spent a year in the United States, living on the campus of two American universities: Anderson University (Indiana) and Mississippi College (Mississippi). During this time, I had access to high-quality educational resources that have opened up many opportunities for personal development and professional reorientation. With the support of the scholarships from the Mustard Seed Foundation and Sam Gore Fund, in 1994 I graduated the Master of Arts program at Mississippi College, specializing in graphic design.

As a young assistant at the Department of Journalism, I had a special interest in the use of digital technologies in education - in general - and in Journalism - in particular. This has influenced me in choosing the eLearning research direction within the Doctoral School of Sociology, considering that this field provides me with a trans- and inter-disciplinary paradigm, and it provides me with a broad framework for addressing interactions related to technological developments and their effect on education. In 2005 I obtained the title of Doctor in Sociology with the thesis "A Sociological Perspective onver Computer Mediated Distance Education", a thesis published in volume in 2007, at the Risoprint Publishing House.

In 2005, Babeş-Bolyai University established the Faculty of Theater and Television. I have been co-opted in the Cinematography - Media field, which provided me with a personal and academic development perspective closer to my training and interest in the field of new digital technologies and their applications in media and art . In order to acquire specific formal research skills in the wider arts field and most specific that of performance and cinematic arts, in 2011 I enrolled in a new interdisciplinary doctoral program at the Doctoral School of Theater and Film at Babeş-Bolyai University.

In 2016 I obtained my second Ph.D., in Theater and Performing Arts, with the thesis "Critical Paradigms in Digital Interactive Performance". The work was published under the same title, in 2017, at the University Press in Cluj.

During the past two decades, aside from the formal education, I was involved in numerous programs – formal and non-formal, national and internaţional – aquiring competences and gaining exprience in the field of digital media and – more recently – in digital interactive arts.

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The second chapter of the thesis is describing the **professional and academic managment experience.**

As a tenured academic, I worked in two different fuculties of Babeş-Bolyai University: as assistant professor and lecturer at the Faculty of Political Science and Public Administration in the Journalism Department (1997-2005) and as a lecturer and associate professor at the Faculty of Theater and Television, Cinematography and Media Department (2006-present).

In the past two decades, I was also involved in academic management as: Director of Department (Journalism – Distance Education Program and

Cinematography and Media), as Director of Lifelong Learning Center of Babeş-Bolyai University and – currently – as vice-dean of the Faculty of Theater and Television. For many years, I was also International Relations coordinator in both faculties and Erasmus Theater and Television Faculty coordinator.

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The third chapter of the thesis is describing in detail the **research activity** and its impact on my **academic teaching.**

The content of this chapter was structured to reflect three distinct periods:

1. The first period of research, from 1997-2005, reflected the interest in the impact the technologies were having on education, with the specific focus on elearning for my doctoral research, but also with an interest in digital literacy, lifelong learning and the new educational paradigms. Even if – formally – I am not conducting research in this field anymore, I continue to have an interest on the impact the new technologies continue to have on education and the possibilities of improving learning through technology.

2. After 2006, due to the change in my academic field affiliation and the specific focus on arts and digital media of the new faculty, as well as the opportunity to collaborate with a European master program in digital media, my research focus shifted more towards observing the digital media content being developed for the new digital platforms and their impact on society. During this time I developed formal courses in eLearning and eGovernment, I coordinated the Interactive Multimedia module of the Theater, Film and Multimedia master program and I continued to research the impact that the new media had on various aspects of society.

3. Starting 2011, after observing the **new media and digital art genres** that were being developed due to the significant advances in broadband communication, digital media platforms as well as the ubiquotness of mobile technologies, I developed an interest for studying the impact of digital technologies on two major art genre: interactive/new media documentaries and digital interactive performance. As a result of the research, I developed two new courses: New Media Documentary and Multimedia in Performance.

4. The last sub-chapter of this section is describing some academic contexts that inspired the proposal and development of the new Digital Interactive Arts master program at the Faculty of Theater and Television.

The use of digital technologies as a means of expression brought a significant enrichment and a saturation of media communication, starting from the years 1960-1970, when the first experiments with video art began. With the introduction of communications technologies, ubiquitous worldwide, artistic expressions, including in the field of cinema and performance, have become more sophisticated, more complex, bringing not only new means of audio-visual expression, but especially facilitating connection and remote communication. Through technology, time and space have acquired new dimensions and the human body – indispensable in live art – was provided with new means of expression which enable a variety of extensions of its parts and functions into new spaces, continuously redefined and performed.

Artistic experimentations where digital interactive technologies occupied a central role – particularly in the late 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s – have led to the development of some innovative, fascinating productions and artefacts, that amaze even today, in spite of the fact that these technologies have been widely adopted in the mainstream. Interactive documentaries and art performances have the capacity to engage the public in an exploration of its own self and its relation to the world of digital technology and its effects on society.

The continuing develpment of digital technologies and the transition from web 2.0 towards a society dominated by artificial inteligence and virtual reality has major impacts on humanity an dis facing us – more than ever – with an unknown future. The new arts – visual, performance or audiovisual – born from the melting of traditional media into new technologies and new media, are dominated today either by a positivist, deterministic discourse, that welcomes techlogical develpment and uplifts its benefits or, increasingly, by an apocaliptic, substantivist one, highlighting the threat it poses and its potential for destruction.

We consider that the analysis of the narative discourse sorounding certain forms of digital performances and the discussions about the esthetic, philosophical or technological aspects is significantly improved by the identification of the main critical paradigms that soround them.

The sub-chapter of the thesis that is addressing the **new interactive documentaries** includes definitions and taxonomies developed by two main researchers in the field of webdcoumentaries, including the user centric perspective develped by Aranu Gifreu and the platform agnostic view of Sandra Gaudenzzi, both

authors of pioneering research in this field. In the Annex of the theses I included the analysis of a number of new media documentaries, representative for some of the genres discussed, curated from a pool of international and national projects.

The second sub-chapter of the **new media and digital art genres** in covering the area of **digital interactive performance**. This was focused on the analysis of artistic expressions incorporating digital audiovisual technologies and the identification of critical paradigms necessary for the development of definitions and taxonomies of digital interactive performance sites, in order to propose a methodical teaching of this kind of art for students of arts majors.

Taking into account the very wide range of events that define the context of performance, the breadth of field and the variety of disciplines involved in the analysis of their content, we sought to identify some critical paradigms that subscribe areas of common interest which are found in the themes tackled by the authors of reference in the field. This will allow the development of a taxonomy of the digital interactive performance and will enable a better understanding of the mechanisms that allow the construction of interdisciplinary contexts where it can be cultivated an innovative and creative mentality in this area. The relevant topics that have been chosen will be illustrated with some performances identified. For each paradigm we choose to present a performing artist or a company that is representative for the paradigms under discussion. The base for research is the very substantial literature that was accessed in the library of the Venice Biennale and the University of Utrecht and audiovisual documentary materials found in archives and websites of artists or the companies discussed.

The first paradigm subscribe the geneneral area of the social sciences that form the multi-disciplinary field constituted as performance studies. In describing the literature we focused on those authors who reference contributions to teaching performing arts, academics or practitioners, whose writings are the result of their investigation into their own performance practice. Among them were mentioned reference works made by Rosalee Goldberg, Steve Dixon, Marvin Carlson, Richard Schechner and Andre Helbo, authors who founded the performance studies as a subject open for specific approaches in philosophy, anthropology, linguistics and cultural studies. Among the many topics to be learned and addressed in this paradigm – which also includes in its entirety, performance studies – we chose to approach some topics that relate to the philosophy of technology and the mechanisms that

determine the individual response to technological developments. Post-humanism is a trend of thought and a philosophy that has great impact on art in the information society and form the basis of some coagulated and highly articulated performance interventions. The chapter describes the philosophical context, marked mainly by McLuhan's theory of technology as extension of the body and the technological developments in artificial intelligence that led to these openings. We believe that, at this time, the artist Stelarc is the most representative post-humanist performance artist, and we chose some of his works as best illustrations of the concepts discussed.

The second paradigm is approaching performance art in terms of digital culture, understood as a set of values, beliefs, artifacts, rituals and other general characteristics of a culture that develops as a consequence of developments in digital technology in recent decades and forming context of the current information society. In this context, the digital interactive performance is viewed from an intermedial perspective and a first classification of the types of performance is presented based on organic relationships that are created between performer, space technology and performance. However, the digital culture perspective provides the opportunity to discuss issues related to the convergence between digital technologies and the development of social media communication and the promise of new platforms for artistic expression, situated in areas liminal to the known domains, in what is considered to be intermedial performance art, as defined in this paper. Works by artists such as Merce Cunningham, Adrien M and Claire B, or those of the company Troika Ranch illustrates some of the topics discussed. Klaus Obermeier is the intermedia artist whose work of varying degrees of complexity is illustrative for the intermedial approach to performance art.

The third paradigm discussed is that of the performing arts, which brings together the theories and methodologies used in the analysis of performing arts, developed especially in theater studies. Among the topics discussed, the notion of body-physicality is central, whereas live art has always [at least] a human body at the interface, which relate to the public at the scene. Other topics that are specific for performance art have to do with notions of time and space: here-now, then-there. Once mediated and resolved through digital technologies, time and space become relative concepts. A past, registered moment, can become, by staging, now. Technology causes space to expand beyond the physical performing space, the public can attend hundreds of kilometers away - or in the next room. Another topic

addressed in this paradigm has to do with the act of reception and the study of the public. The audience – which, in the context of the digital performance is often no longer passive but becomes an active user – and its process of transformation into today's user, is an umbrella theme for research into the psychology of reception in the information age.

The exploration of the limits of corporeality, within the context of the new temporal or spatial dimensions facilitated by the new technologies, have created some explorative performing experiences in immersive, non- gravitational or telematics spaces, which in turn, opened up new directions in the contemporary performance practice. All these areas become subjects available for in-depth further research, especially taking into account that there is a rich literature that reflects these experiments, some dating from the early 90s when technology first began to be available. Certainly, one of the most generous issues, barely mentioned in this context, is linked to the new audiences and spectatorship since – with the introduction of digital technologies – these area witnessed some of the most profound changes .

The fourth paradigm identified in the study of digital performance and intermediation describes the concern for theories of performativity and what is called "aesthetic interactivity" identified in human computer interaction (HCI), known in Romanian as human-machine interaction (HMI). Leaving behind the mainly functionalist approach that characterized the early development of human interaction design and digital technology, the design theorists specializing in interfaces discuss the need of turning to theories of performativity and, in this context, define some specific genres of performance. The presentation of the company Blast Theory and Spoke Riders, the mixed reality performance ends the chapter that covers aspects of interaction between the individual and digital technology in the context of digital performance and intermediation.

The paradigms discussed are incorporating many more topics than those mentioned, but circumscribe frames suitable for opening new areas of discussion and offer methodological solutions for the analysis of the digital interactive performance.

We have completed our synthetic research about the digital interactive performance by opening the discussion about cultivating an educational context appropriate for training artists in this interdisciplinary artistic direction. We made a presentation of some pedagogical approaches in this area expanded via three academic programs EU: the postgraduate program in Interactive Arts from the

University IUAV of Venice, the Master in Media, Art and Performance Studies from the University of Utrecht and the approach to the study of performing arts in an intermedial context determined by digital technologies at the Theatre Academy of Maastricht. The experience of the three programs confirms that, in order to develop a program for the training of performing artists that is relevant in the new digital age, an inter and trans disciplinary approach it is required, something difficult – if not impossible – given the current national academic landscape.

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The fourth chapter of the thesis is covering some plans for the future, describing the interest in focusing on the development of the new master program in Digital Interactive Arts that we acredited and will be launching this fall as well as highligting some areas of research that I am planning to focus on in the near future.

To this end, I express my hope that - despite an apparent difficulty in framing my academic interest in media and interactive digital arts in one of the traditional arts or sciences - I have succeeded in convincing that the pluri-disciplinary educational path, permanently supplemented by formal and non-formal continuing education in prestigious institutions in the country and abroad and supported by research results in publications, research and creative projects and developed academic programs, is recommending me as an interdisciplinary specialist in digital media - with a special focus on media and interactive digital arts - and is certifying my ability to conduct and coordinate doctoral research projects in the field of Cinema and Media.

Keywords:

Digital media, interactive digital performance, performance art, post humanism, post-human art, human computer interaction, digital culture, trans media, intermedia, multimedia.