

The Human Voice project – using AI to engage the “voice” of the theatre audience by Dr Bogdan Mihai Florea

The Human Voice is a mono-drama by Jacques Cocteau. The story involves one woman on stage speaking on the telephone with her (invisible and inaudible) lover of the last five years, who is leaving her, to marry another woman the next day. The monologue triggers the woman's crippling depression. A text that remains acutely relevant, it contains themes such as the human being's desperate fight for love but also how technology can disrupt our most intimate relationships; how we are in desperate need for human contact and how the machine may alter, hinder or enable that contact.

As a theatre-maker and researcher, I am now working on The Human Voice alongside another artist-collaborator. The aim is to make this work (which mainly inspires a staging where the audience passively listens to an actor's hour-long monologue) as interactive and engaging as possible. We want to enable the audience – with the support of AI – to actively participate in the piece: to integrate the “voice” of the audience in the performance. The initial idea is to afford willing members of the audience the opportunity to work with voice generating AI (such as Speechling, Resemble AI, etc.) and take the role of the unheard/unseen character at the other end of the line. Under the guise of an AI generated voice/alter ego, audience members would be able to project their own responses to the woman's despair, depression, sense of rejection. These diverse voices would then be fed into the live performance of the actor, who'd have to incorporate and respond.

In my presentation, I would like to discuss a few issues that arise from these initial creative ideas, situating my arguments in the wider AI and theatre conversation. Currently, there is increased focus on AI and playwriting or set design, visual design and less attention paid to utilizing AI for audience engagement and participation. I will talk about how – in the context of The Human Voice project - guidance and/or prompts for the voice-generating task can be designed so that AI can assist, track and channel the needs of the audience. Furthermore, how would we define those needs in response to the main themes of the text? Also, beyond the participatory/aesthetic experience of the audience, what new things could we learn about the core text? How can our audience engagement/participatory AI-technique be applied to other canonical/existing texts, such as Chekhov, Shakespeare, Ancient Greek tragedy, etc.?

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