

Getting to a Culture of Arts Talk: A Call to Arms

Lynne Conner

University of North Carolina at Charlotte

SLIDE 1: *Getting to a Culture of Arts Talk: A Call to Arms*

- *Slide 2*

SLIDE 2: Hermes

- When Hermes, the messenger god, discovered language and writing and gave it to humans, he invited us to engage in the process of translating our experience and perception into words;
- In other words, he gave us the gift of social interpretation.
- In homage to Hermes, the Greek word for interpret focuses on how we use language to organize our sense of the world.
- But do we interpret in order to understand, or is understanding a function of a reflexive, elemental need to make sense of our worlds?
- *Slide 3*

SLIDE 3: child pointing + quote

- Developmental psychologists have long marveled at how children naturally point, wave, and grunt to draw attention to interesting things in their environment.
- As Paul Blooms puts it in his book *How Pleasure Works*, “This might seem like the simplest skill until you realize that no other species does this. By some accounts, this desire to share our thoughts is responsible for much of what makes us human, including language and our sophisticated culture.”
- *Slide 4*

SLIDE 4: meaning—the message that is intended or expressed or signified

- Analyzing and articulating the nature of meaning—the message that is intended or expressed or signified—is fundamental to the history of thinking, of course
- In the Western tradition, this work extends back to Plato’s *Dialogues* and Aristotle’s *On Interpretation* and continues to this day in a range of disciplines—from semiotics and philosophy to phenomenology, performance studies, and evolutionary anthropology.

- *Slide 5*

SLIDE 5: Art and Intimacy cover + the mind increasingly became a “making-sense organ” allowing humans to stabilize and confine the stream of life by making connections between past, present, and future, or among experiences and observations.

- In Ellen Dissanayake’s study of the relationship between art making and the “infancy of the human species,” for example, she notes that meaning was first located in “what ‘felt right’—a full stomach, a safe environment, nearness of familiar others— and that, over the course of human evolution, the mind increasingly became a “making-sense organ.”

- *Slide 6*

SLIDE 6: visitor looking at a piece of art

- Sometimes this reflexive making-sense process remains a private one. The quiet contemplation of an arts experience is a critical form of interpreting meaning, and the internal processing of meaning is of course a part of every receptor’s experience.
- But while internal, private meaning making is the reflexive starting point, it is not, for many people, the ultimate destination.

- *Slide 7*

SLIDE 7: book cover + definition

- As I argue in my research, deep pleasure in arts-going can come from what I am calling *social interpretation*: audience-produced meaning making that occurs in/through public settings and mechanisms.

- *Slide 8*

SLIDE 8: Arts Talk + definition

- Or to put it another way: Arts Talk: a new modality that reframes the critical roles that both dialogue and debate can play in the organization of a healthy and productive arts ecology.
- Arts Talk is a metaphor for a way of moving through the world with art as an intimate companion.
- Arts Talk is an *ethos* promoting a set of ideals that characterize an arts-infused community.

- And, ultimately, Arts Talk is a call to arms championing a move beyond the one-way delivery system that characterizes meaning-making in much of our discourse around the serious arts.
- Over the next 40 minutes or so I hope to address the overarching theme of our symposium—innovative methods of researching audiences—by arguing the following:
- *Slide 9*

SLIDE 9: Social interpretation = impact assessment

- If we want to know what audiences are experiencing, we can start by asking them what they think of the work. We can start by listening to them make meaning.
- Social interpretation is a kind of impact assessment, one capable of contributing to the overall evaluation of the economic and social worth of the arts because it provides a way for audience members to think and communicate freely about their arts experience.
- *Slide 10*

SLIDE 10: wheels image=engagement

- ✓ To that end, this is a presentation about the deep relationship between social interpretation and audience engagement.
- ✓ The word engagement is derived from the action of gears built into a mechanism: When the gears engage, the mechanism gets to work.
- ✓ Emotionally and intellectually, people engage when they have the sense that they, too, are an element in what makes the gears work.
- ✓ *Slide 11*

SLIDE 11: kids learning

- ✓ An engaged classroom, for example, is one in which the students are authentic learners; that is, they have been charged with and accept responsibility for their own learning process.
- *Slide 12*

SLIDE 12: audience member engaged

- ✓ An engaged audience member, whether 10 years old or 80 years old, is also engaged in an authentic learning process—they are in charge of their own meaning making.
- ✓ So—just to be clear—my use of the term engagement is not to be confused with marketing usages of this word: it isn't transactional.
- What I hope to demonstrate is a way in which arts workers, including audience researchers, can use the product of social interpretation—what I call Productive Talk—to strengthen the audience experience of the arts and the overall arts ecology.
- *Slide 13*

SLIDE 13: Norman Rockwell's The Gossips (1948)

- Most people like to talk out of the urge to share their feelings, ideas, and reactions to something they've recently undergone; talking is a way of processing experience.
- *Slide 14*

SLIDE 14: Wardhaugh quote

- As linguist Ronald Wardhaugh notes, “language helps us to work out what we are feeling, what we are doing, how we are doing it, . . .
- For many of us, talking—whether through our vocal cords or . . .
- *Slide 15*

SLIDE 15: image of texting

- . . . our thumbs—is key to firing up the brain and juicing the neural pathways.
- *Slide 16*

SLIDE 16: group conversations

- Talking about something converts individual knowledge onto group knowledge.
- In that sense, talking is a **way of learning**.
- *Slide 17*

SLIDE 17: Aristotle and quote

- And learning is deeply satisfying. Even deeply pleasurable.
- To back me up on this last point I'm going to rely on Aristotle:
 - "Learning is most pleasant, not only to philosophers, but to others as well." All people delight in "learning and reasoning out what each thing is." *The Poetics*
- When I use the word pleasure here I don't mean comfort or ease, but rather the deep satisfaction that comes from working something through.
- It is satisfying to work at processing an opinion about the interesting things that surround us.
- *Slide 18*

SLIDE 18: Sports Talk examples

- Let's take sports talk as an example.
- There are a few key things to notice about how sports talk functions in most cultures.
- *Slide 19*

SLIDE 19: Sports Talk is:

- Sports Talk is:
 1. Common
 2. Democratic
 3. Supported by both the sports industry *and* our social fabric
 - 4. Facilitated by a range of paratextual activities**
 5. Productive
- The first three items are pretty obvious. But I do want to take a few minutes to explain numbers 4 and 5.
- *Slide 20*

SLIDE 20: Sports paratexts

- A paratext (a term I borrow from media scholar Jonathan Gray by way of literary theorist Gerard Genette) is cultural material and/or activity that surrounds an event. As such, paratexts are part of the meaning-making structure and thus an inseparable part of the overall experience.
- Paratexts give us the resources to talk about the subject at hand and the tools to interpret its meaning.

- In sports, for example, paratexts range from statistics like box scores to pre and post-game analysis in print, on the air and on-line . . .
- *Slide 21*

SLIDE 21:

- . . . to digital paratexts for *your* football
- *Slide 22*

SLIDE 22: Steelers' Gameday PLUS app

- . . . and *my* football
 - Steelers' Gameday PLUS app, which offers to “make your Android device a unique part of your game-day experience” with smart phone access to breaking news of the team, video-on-demand clips of press conferences and player interviews, pregame previews and postgame blogs plus “real-time statistics for every drive.”
- *Slide 23*

SLIDE 23: Sports Talk is (highlight “productive talk”)

- Returning to the characteristics of sports talk, I want to explore the idea of productive talk.
- *Slide 24*

SLIDE 24: Productive Talk . . .

- Productive talk is talk that originates in order to (1) communicate about a specific topic, (2) air publically a range of opinions and perspectives on that topic, (3) listen and consider other points of view, and (4) work toward both collective and individual meaning making.
- This definition holds regardless of whether the talk is physical or virtual.
- *Slide 25*

SLIDE 25: cover of *On Dialogue* + quote

- Productive talk can take the form of dialogue: what David Bohm, author of the widely admired *On Dialogue*, defines as:
 - a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding.”

- Bohm’s definition is extremely appealing in an arts context. If we can share in an appreciation of various meanings, we may find that the talk surrounding an arts event is both fundamentally more democratic and more interesting.

- *Slide 26*

SLIDE 26: *discutere*, “to break up” (Latin); *debatre*, “to beat down” (Old French)

- But as our sports culture tells us on a daily basis, productive talk can also take the shape of a good argument in the form of heated discussion (from the Latin *discutere*, “to break up”) and rigorous debate (from the Old French *debatre*, “to beat down”).
- Both terms imply a battle over territory as individual perspectives and opinions are presented and defended.
- That’s at least partially why we *like* sports, because we know how to debate their value and we enjoy the rush of adrenaline that comes from arguing in a democratic context.
- The majority of contemporary *audience* members do not associate attending the serious arts with this kind of adrenaline release.
- But, as we about to see, our audience forebears most certainly did.
- *Slide 27*

SLIDE 27: Surrey audience

- In the western tradition before the 20th century, most arts environments were open to public interpretation because the arts event itself was a form of community property.

- *Slide 28*

SLIDE 28: fruit thrower

- This does not imply that there was regular, or even much, consensus in the process or protocol of interpretation; the history of arts reception is full of vivid examples of the violent ways in which artists, producers, and audiences disagreed.
- But that’s just the point—up until the end of the 19th century an arts experience was defined as much by the opportunity to participate in the articulation of meaning as it was by the chance to witness an arts event or object.

- Art did not arrive with a fixed meaning. Rather, it was received by the audience as an inherently flexible commodity yielding ever-changing interpretations.
- *Slide 29*

SLIDE 29: eating in pit

- *Slide 30*

SLIDE 30: flirting in box

- *Slide 31*

SLIDE 31: tennis court theater mayhem

- *Slide 32*

SLIDE 32: moving chairs

- *Slide 33*

SLIDE 33: audience on stage

- *Slide 34*

SLIDE 34: peaking out of curtain

- *Slide 35*

SLIDE 35: Theater of Dionysus

- But this audience agency wasn't just about physical freedom.
- At the Theater of Dionysus a fifth century playwright named Agathon failed to secure a win at the annual best tragedy contest because the audience felt he had "crowded too many events into a single plot."
 - the crowd was so interactive that, according to Arthur Pickard-Cambridge, ushers with sticks had to be employed to keep the peace.
- *Slide 36*

SLIDE 36: Comédie Française

- At the Comédie Française in 1711, a spectator interrupted the actors on stage to question the classical sources for the play being performed (it was Racine's

Britannicus). When the actors refused to engage in a critique of Racine, a brawl broke out on stage.

- *Slide 37*

SLIDE 37: Pittsburgh Theater

- At the Pittsburgh Theater in the early 1830s, concerns over the level of the acting prompted the audience to hiss the theater manager off the stage during a curtain speech. He was accused of bringing in third-rate performers while saving his top-tier actors for his other theater in the more cosmopolitan Philadelphia.
- *Slide 38*

SLIDE 38: Astor Place riot

- And at the Astor Place Theatre in lower Manhattan in 1849, 31 people were killed and 150 injured as the result of an argument over who was the better actor—the American-born Edwin Forrest or the English-born William Macready.
- *Slide 39*

SLIDE 39: Audience-community exchange

- These examples of social interpretation inside the arts venue are vivid. But in terms of the history of arts engagement they're not as significant as what I term "audience–community exchange"—the manner in which social interpretation makes its way out of the playhouse, concert hall and gallery and into the fabric of everyday life.
- *Slide 40*

SLIDE 40: coffee house animated talk

- These early iterations of water cooler chats took shape in a variety of forms of talk.
- *Slide 41*

SLIDE 41: French salons

- They occurred in the 17th century Parisian salons (this one is supposedly a discussion of Moliere's plays)
- *Slide 42*

SLIDE 42: London coffee house

- They occurred in the coffee houses of eighteenth-century London, where patrons mingled with theatre artists and argued the merits of new and old works.
- *Slide 43*

SLIDE 43: streets of 19th century Venice

- They occurred in early nineteenth-century Venice, where a new opera was, according to musicologist Carlotta Sorba, the “constant topic of conversation, criticism, and general observation on the streets, in shops, associations, and private gatherings.”
- *Slide 44*

SLIDE 44: Drama League of Pittsburgh/*Emperor Jones*

- And they occurred in early 20th century America, where the local chapters of what were called “audience leagues” wrote and disseminated their own reviews of professional art work, thus bypassing the professional theater critics of the day.
- These stories underline the fact that historical audiences felt authorized to comment on aesthetic matters.
- Like contemporary sports talk, arts events regularly drew the attention of the public outside of the venue and fueled everyday conversation long after the performance was over.
- What is notable about these examples is the fact that regular audience members were comfortable in discussing and defending their taste and in openly formulating their opinions about a particular arts event through everyday talk.
- And while cultural gatekeepers certainly existed throughout this period, they did not have the authority to regulate community discourse.
- Why? Perhaps because this was an environment where **arts talk** was a normal commodity of daily cultural commerce, much in the same way that sports talk is a normal commodity of our daily exchanges.
- So how did audiences lose access to the public construction of meaning?
- *Slide 45*

SLIDE 45: Mathew Arnold “the best that has been said and thought”

- In the U.S., audience sovereignty over the arts-going experience began disappearing in the second half of the nineteenth century.
- Some cultural historians locate a rupture in the post–Civil War period, when discrete but complementary factions of intellectuals, artists, wealthy patrons, and religious officials initiated deliberate efforts to follow Matthew Arnold’s call to “raise up the masses.”
- The corresponding concept of culture with a capitol C was intended to help American elites compete with Europe’s assumed cultural superiority.
- *Slide 46*

SLIDE 46: Highbrow cover + “sacralization of culture”

- In his groundbreaking study, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence Levine calls this shift the “sacralization of culture,” tracing a complicated path from audience sovereignty to arts-industry sovereignty over the course of the 20th century.
- *Slide 47*

SLIDE 47: Keith-Albee Boston Opera house

- Around 1880, the Keith-Albee vaudeville “palaces” began formalizing new standards for audience behavior.
- Patrons were handed flyers advising them how to behave:
 - enforced seating
 - the elimination of eating (except easily consumed items sold at the venue’s concession stand)
 - new definition of “applause” (foot stomping was prohibited)
 - active shunning of catcalling and other loud, physicalized audience gestures
- *Slide 48*

SLIDE 48: Met museum visitors from Harper’s, 1880

- Elite venues soon joined the campaign. In the early 1890s the director of the Metropolitan Museum boasted to a newspaper reporter that he had ended the display of “offending personal habits” of the working-class visitors to the museum.
- “no more whistling, singing, or calling aloud to people from one gallery to another.”

- *Slide 49*

SLIDE 49: Met opera house box on opening night

- In 1891, the management of the Metropolitan Opera House placed notices in the opera boxes (owned by some of the city's richest families) "requesting" that talking during performances be discontinued.
- *Slide 50*

SLIDE 50: New York Philharmonic, 1880

- A similar storyline comes from the evolution of the symphony orchestra industry.
- Led by conductors defending both their artistic rights and the "sacred" nature of orchestral music, American symphony orchestras began insisting on greater and greater control over the performance environment, culminating in the wholesale invention of etiquette "standards,"
 - holding applause until the end of a multi-movement work.
 - ending the long-standing practice of mixed programming in which popular music was played along with orchestral scores because, as Levine states, "The urge to deprecate popular musical genres was an important element in the process of sacralization."
- *Slide 51*

SLIDE 51: Monster concerts (Drury Lane 1850)

- Here's some fascinating evidence that it wasn't always like that. A cartoon depicting one of Louis Antoine Jullien's "Monster Concerts for the Masses" held in 1850 at Drury Lane.
- It's easy to understand why artists and presenters would promote sacralization and all its behavioral accommodations.
- But why would late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century audiences go along with the sacralization campaign?
- *Slide 52*

SLIDE 52: Self Knowledge cover

- One theory points to the rise of the professional class in large US cities, which brought with it calls for "self-cultivation," an aspect of progressive era social reform centered on the ideal of reason over emotion.

- The self-cultivation movement eventually came to encompass many aspects of middle-class life, including personal hygiene, dress reform, even sex education (euphemistically referred to as “self-knowledge”).
- The ideal of self-control over personal emotions also extended to the realm of the arts and to audience behavior. As cultural sociologist Richard Butsch puts it: “One had to learn to respond with studious thought rather than spontaneous feeling to music, art, and ideas.”
- *Slide 53*

SLIDE 53: Savoy plaque

- Other factors played a role in the sacralization process. These include the invention of the incandescent lamp, which beginning in 1881 put the audience in the dark for the first time in history.
- They also include the post-war institutionalization of the charitable tax-exempt status, which promoted a demarcation between the “serious arts”—theater, concert dance, opera, symphonic music, gallery visual art—and “entertainment.”
- *Slide 54*

SLIDE 54: mid-century audience

- With each of these changes, the audience moved a step further away from the kind of interpretive agency that had fueled over 2000 years of **arts talk** in Western culture.
- Instead of being invited into an active and robust hermeneutic environment, 20th century audiences were trained in how best to contribute to the perfect environment for the presentation of the arts event or object. This usually meant being quiet, still and reverent.
- *Slide 55*

SLIDE 55: art museum lecture

- And, importantly, instead of being encouraged to form and voice an opinion about the meaning and value of the arts they attended, 20th century audiences were encouraged to yield to the experts.
- Gradually, the idea that arts appreciation might also include discussion and debate about the meaning and value of the arts event faded away.
- *Slide 56*

SLIDE 56: Tweeting at music concert

- But we all know that the digital transformation has delivered us into a world where we expect to be able to participate in a wide range of activities that analog generations received passively.
- Powered by a multi-cultural, postmodern, postanalog ethos that challenges twentieth-century notions of hierarchical gatekeeping, many of today's cultural industries are defined by the sheer pleasure of making meaning and ascribing value.
- *Slide 57*

SLIDE 57: Wattpad

- In Chapter 3 of my book I explore the role that live and digital interpretive talk play in defining the pleasure of participating in various new media practices like social reading . . .
- *Slide 58*

SLIDE 58: Talking Bad

- And social television.
- In terms of social interpretation, these digital platforms play a significant role, largely due to two factors:
- *Slide 59*

SLIDE 59: 1) The face-to-facelessness of the digital channel, (2) the stop-time effect of the digital channel

- ✓ The face-to-facelessness of the digital channel, which offers a 2.0 version of anonymity and with it a new kind of liquid courage when it comes to stating an opinion;
- ✓ And the stop-time effect of the digital channel, offering the ability to participate in and out of real time and thus allowing the user to step out long enough to formulate and refine opinions.
- In 2017 nearly every aspect of our culture has incorporated structural support for social interpretation **except** the serious arts. Why isn't arts talk as public, as common and as democratic as tv talk or book talk or sports talk or movie talk or food talk?

- As already noted, we do not have the kind of societal infrastructure that could readily facilitate opinion sharing on the serious arts and we don't have the kind of arts industry infrastructure necessary to make up for it.
- Perhaps another critical factor is that we arts workers are still very much engaged in the twentieth-century sacralization business of delivering meaning, ascribing value and quieting audiences.
- I have several theories on why this remains an industry truth, but I'll just take the time to quickly look at one of them this afternoon.
- *Slide 60*

SLIDE 60: the Authority Effect

- The Authority Effect—a term I appropriate from a general concept in social psychology acknowledging the effect of authority on the way in which people formulate opinions.
- The Authority Effect uses the “standards” of “taste” to inhibit publically acknowledged discursive activities centered on the audience's right to determine both meaning and value.
- I think that no matter how much we talk about democratizing the arts, we won't achieve that ideal until we acknowledge the Authority Effect that continues to dominate our cultural life and the way in which our cultural institutions operate.
- *Slide 61*

SLIDE 61: What's the solution?

- That's the problem. So, what is the solution?
- *Slide 62*

SLIDE 62: Arts Talk: a spirit of active inquiry

- In the second part of my book I devote considerable space to describing what a culture of Arts Talk could do for the contemporary arts ecology.
- *Slide 63*

SLIDE 63: goal twofold . . .

- My goal is twofold:

- 1) to encourage arts workers to see public meaning making as part of the art-making and the art-delivery systems;
- and 2) to help arts workers build a culture of **productive talk** into their organizations and communities by training *Arts Talk* facilitators.
- In my observation, the best audience-centered interpretive experiences are rooted in good facilitation. But here's the key—the facilitator *does not make the meaning and give it to an audience*. The facilitator establishes the environment and the tools for audience members to make the meaning together.
- Like all professional skill sets, facilitation must be studied and deliberately practiced.
- *Slide 64*

SLIDE 64: Ten Actions for Effective Facilitation

- In my book, I distil ten key actions for facilitating productive talk gleaned from a wide range of modalities (including, among others, conflict resolution, business communications, and various therapeutic and religious practices).
- I do want to emphasize three key actions I encountered in the most effective talk environments.
- The **first is hospitality**, because for adults the ability to position, define and create meaning is dependent on a welcoming learning environment.
- In an arts context, this means that audience members must feel that their prior experience and their taste portfolios are welcome, as a starting point, for the new, often difficult learning that is about to occur.
- The **second is employing powerful questions**. Good facilitators enable productive talk by framing and asking powerful questions that stimulate response but don't tell people what they are supposed to be thinking and feeling.
- And the **third is to listen actively and authentically**.
- This is by far the most difficult aspect of good facilitation. It is demanding to be in the position of needing to think one step ahead of the room (in order to run the meeting) while still being focused enough to stop and listen, authentically and attentively, to what is being said.
- Good facilitators err on the side of listening, trusting that they can rely on the structure of the talk session as a means of maintaining forward momentum.

- *Slide 65*

SLIDE 65: conversari and convertere

- To be clear, productive audience-centered talk is *not* about over-sharing or spotlighting ME! It is about authentic conversation (from the Latin *conversari*, to associate with, and *convertere*, to turn around).
- Authentically productive talk brings us together and it can turn us around; that is, it can lead us to new information, new insights, and new opinions.
- People who participate in social interpretation of the arts through productive talk gain opportunities for critical and imaginative thinking and learn how to exercise and defend their own aesthetic judgments.
- And I would argue that productive talk builds audience spectator skills by pushing us past our ingrained habits of viewing and of perception. In my experience, when audiences are included in transparent and democratic social interpretation, they are more likely to respond well to adventurous programming because they have better tools for making sense of that (sometimes) challenging experience.
- I'll close by returning to my prior claim—productive talk is itself the very data on the impact of the arts on society that we are seeking. When an audience member exercises and defends her own aesthetic judgments, she has just told the world—loudly and clearly—how she has been impacted by the arts.
- *Slide 66*

SLIDE 66: Arts Talk examples