



■ Comment from Tokyo Festival General Director Satoshi Miyagi

“To Meet or Not to Meet?” and Digital Transformation Satoshi Miyagi

As I keenly watched the course of the COVID-19 pandemic this autumn, it occurred to me that there are two main ways people meet. Here (while this might not be the most eloquent way of putting it), I will refer to them as “hunter-gatherer style” and “agrarian style.”

Hunter-gatherer style meetings involve first facing the other party head on and making physical contact, such as a handshake, to confirm that the other person is not an enemy. They then converse based on the premise that they both hold different opinions, and seek to find common ground upon which they can agree.

In agrarian-style meetings, the two parties stand next to each other and face the same direction. They then work in harmony, based on the assumption that they are both heading toward the same goal or destination. This is very similar to how work is carried out on farms.

It seems to me that a sharp spike in COVID-19 transmissions has been observed in countries where a majority of the population engages in hunter-gatherer style meetings. In agrarian-minded societies, meanwhile, the pandemic appears to have spread at a comparatively slower rate.

The ideal goal for hunter-gatherer style meetings is for both parties to elevate each other. Agrarian meetings, on the other hand, seek to form a high-power “union” of sorts.

If “analog” is taken to mean meeting in the flesh, then countries where hunter-gatherer mindsets are more common are able to observe a huge leap in productivity by going digital. (This is because unlike people, AI robots do not have their own individual opinions and therefore easily adapt to fit the needs of the other party.) In such societies there is a powerful impetus to proceed with digital transformation. In Japan, meanwhile, even when staff meet customers face-to-face, their interaction is underpinned by the premise of a common goal, without the interjection of a strong personal opinion, so the resultant service is actually not all that different from what would be provided by AI. This is why Japan was less motivated to push forward with its digital transformation. But this delay in digitization was a significant disadvantage when it came to working remotely.

On the other hand, I also believe the general populace in agrarian-minded societies tends to have a much lower level of resistance toward the rapid progress of digitization. We may well see a significant acceleration in Japan’s digital transformation moving forward.

I do, however, believe there is something we need to be careful about in this regard.

If there is a rapid digital shift in agrarian-minded societies, and AI technology creates a world where, in all kinds of situations, the “person” you’re dealing with adapts their methods to work in harmony with you, then those who don’t harmonize, those who deviate from the norm, and those who are unable to form these so-called “unions” with others may start to be seen as individuals who shouldn’t be there at all.

You often see these kinds of societies portrayed in science fiction novels, and they feel quite suffocating. I think we have already started to see this phenomenon start to take hold on a miniature scale as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

That leaves us with the question: how do we push forward with digitization in an agrarian-minded society like Japan without falling into a stifling sci-fi scenario?

I am among those who believe this is where performing arts have a part to play.

A performing arts piece cannot take shape with one performer alone. Multiple performers come together to work toward the same goal, and the entire team welcomes in the first day of the show's run together. Forming a "union" with their companions, the team delivers a truly astounding level of power. In other words, theater is very much an agrarian-style endeavor (at least in Japan). And this means that performing arts should take well to being conducted digitally. If you examine each and every one of the tasks that people used to do in person, you come to realize that they can to a very large extent be completed online.

But performing arts will never be a field that attempts to excludes those who seem out of the ordinary, no matter how far digitization goes.

This is because a sense of being ill at ease with oneself is precisely the creative force that inspires performers.

I believe that all humans have something about themselves that doesn't quite sit right with them. (To give an example, there are very few people who can accept aging for what it is.) Viewing art is a way of reconciling (even for just a brief moment) with this unmanageable sense of discomfort with ourselves, with the feelings of fear surrounding our struggle to accept ourselves for who we are.

It is those who are no longer able to ignore this feeling of discomfort toward themselves that decide to become performers. This is why no matter how much of the creative process is taken online, performing artists will never be able to erase the second soul that resides within themselves but refuses to form a union. As a result, the idea of seeking to create a place where "others" can belong constantly permeates the performing arts.

If 2020 comes to be seen as the year that the digital transformation of performing arts began, it will also become the first chapter in a grand experiment that endeavors to realize the digital shift without creating a society that stifles or silences.