Digital Performance and Its Discontents (or, Problems of Presence in Pandemic Performance)

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For at least thirty years, scholars have debated the centrality of physical and embodied presence as essential to the experience of theatre and performance. A debate that was perhaps largely academic suddenly became a shared reality when COVID-19 shuttered live venues, closed universities and moved artists of all kinds online. Suddenly, much of the theatre world began acting for the (web)camera. This article considers the changing attitudes toward notions of theatrical presence before and throughout the pandemic and what these changes might mean for the future of live arts. In particular, it posits the intersection of theatre, film and media history as key to understanding digitally enhanced contemporary experiences and expectations of post-pandemic performances.

In his essay 'The Spectator as the Object of Art', Heiner Goebbels describes an ideal performance as one in which the audience's intensity is *evoked* and *produced* even if not in the presence of human actors. This performance site, he writes, 'can even be a blank space. An observation on the side-line, something lacking coherence, because it doesn't fit or denies visibility and completion.'[1] Or, perhaps, 'on mute'. For Goebbels, the efficacy of performance is not only in what is presented onstage, but also and more crucially what is not. He observes that the concept of theatricality itself has shifted from an era of overdetermined and even 'histrionic' gestures to aesthetics marked by minimalism, gaps and an invitation for the audience to create individual meaning of their experiences in the theatre:

> An audience is eager to bridge distances, to instinctively fill in the gaps. Furthermore, it is true that if sound and image are separated, the qualities of their corresponding sense complement each other. The respective counter-spaces – the visual space for sounds and the acoustic space for images – cannot coincide anymore, but remain infinite, able to coexist in this wealth of possibilities.[2]

Goebbels's essay appears in his collection *Aesthetics of Absence* (*Ästhetik der Abwesenheit*, 2012, trans. 2015). In the wake of pandemic restrictions and lockdowns,

his notions of theatrical representation align with the proliferation of digital and online theatre performance. Read as a guide to pandemic-era performance, Goebbels's work does not so much predict the problems of presence, as rather reveal the ways in which modernism continues to haunt contemporary performance practices.

His ideas of aesthetics draw heavily – both explicitly and implicitly – from the European and US avant-gardes, beginning with experiments in the early twentieth century and including both mid- and late-century manipulations of form and conceptual art. Gertrude Stein, for example, appears several times in various essays. Such references attest both to the history of media convergence in theatre and to the innovations that theatre artists have pursued in response to changing cultural circumstances: political, cultural and economic, among others. Both his recommendations and the works he cites as exemplars may remind us of familiar, if potentially apocryphal, stories, such as the Italian futurists selling multiple tickets to a single seat, Dadaists starting fires in brawls across footlights, or 1960s happenings in which mostly nothing happened. Drawing on a century of non-narrative, non-representational performance, Goebbels returns repeatedly to the question of what exactly theatrical presence presents. Although he offers a primarily formalist analysis, epitomized best in his chapter title 'If I Want an Actor to Cry, I Give Him an Onion', Goebbels does not eschew the political entirely. For Geobbels, aesthetics can reveal underlying political assumptions. The formal choices of presence and absence become potential techniques of resistance in the face of dominant and hyper-visual media regimes. In describing his experience of Rimini Protokoll's *Call Cutta*, Goebbels writes, 'If film, opera or theatre are social forms of production which show how they have been done and how people treat each other in them, then the same applies to all the involved media and techniques.'[3] *Pace* Brecht, he approaches staging as an ethical process.

In the wake of all that the 2020 global pandemic has wrought, how might we understand the changing legacy of theatrical presence and the effects of digital theatre? What are the ethical processes of these digital stages and, as this special issue queries, what forms of resistance have been gained and lost?

This article further considers the arguments surrounding presence and absence in digital performance. In his 2007 survey, Steve Dixon described digital performance as 'performance works where computer technologies play a *key* role rather than a subsidiary one in content, techniques, aesthetics or delivery forms'.[4] Given the rapid expansion of technologies across performance platforms, we may also include more medial performance such as professional broadcasts like the series Met Live in HD, National Theatre Live or Ontheboards.tv. These may be simultaneous, as in the livestreams such as those presented by numerous theatres during the pandemic, including large venues like the International Theatre of Amsterdam, and smaller companies, like Factory Theatre, a Toronto-based theatre with a focus on Canadian plays and the development of new work. We should also include work performed in theatrical venues, but recorded for a future broadcast audience. Performances such as *Hamilton* and *What the Constitution Means to Me* were recorded in their Broadway venues and then distributed via streaming platforms, Disney+ and Amazon Prime. I

also include work developed specifically for digital platforms, such as the work of Fake Friends in *Circle Jerk* and *This American Wife* or Celine Song's adaptation of Chekhov's *The Seagull* for a performance by the simulation videogame *The Sims* and broadcast on the gaming platform Twitch.[5] And, of course, we cannot ignore the myriad and growing variations of performance – dance, theatre, art – on social media platforms. Such wide inclusions in these categories may appear too broad and yet any truly useful contemporary dramatic and performance criticism today needs to account for the expansion of these novel, dynamic and hybrid genres. Such performances across an array of media outlets have reanimated and challenged prior debates on liveness over the course of the global COVID-19 pandemic. One key feature of these earlier debates was *presence* and its intrinsic definitional value in the categorization of performance and liveness. As we continue to reflect and reckon with the effects of the pandemic and the consequences for performance cultures that suddenly and unevenly shifted online, it may be helpful to return to earlier reflections on questions of presence in ostensibly live performances to reconsider the ways in which presence – and absence – have been variously understood.

For much of the last twenty-five years, theatre and performance scholars have engaged in debates over the meaning and function of performance presence. Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye and Michael Shanks's anthology *Archaeologies of Presence: Art, Performance and the Persistence of Being* and Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield's *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, both from 2012, explore in detail the meaning and function of presence in contemporary performance. In their introduction, Giannachi, Kaye and Shanks consider contemporary performances in which 'phenomena of presence are advanced in the articulation of the performer's presence across ostensibly differing and differentiated schemes – or more recently, across differing media or representational frameworks'.[6] Treating presence as processual and connecting it to the archeological, they situate the concept of presence within

> an ecology of relationships; in the realization of an environment; in the layered experience of temporality, 'presentness' or the present moment; in the tensions and investments implied by being seen; and in the persistence of performance through its representation and archival remains.[7]

This emphasis on process and archival remains (*pace* Rebecca Schneider's work) is reiterated in Jones and Heathfield's collection. In his essay for *Perform, Repeat, Record*, Heathfield describes performance itself as 'a paradigmatic modality of postmodern aesthetics, where interdisciplinarity, mediation, and self-reflexivity were its prevalent and resilient companion tropes'.[8] As such, presence or the experience of 'being there' became 'critically slippery'.

Reading through both collections of essays, it is clear that performance presence was never exclusively about live bodies in physical proximity to one another, but, throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, presence was defined increasingly through digital online interactions. In an essay on theatre historiography from 2010, I argued that, 'in the digital sphere, presence is defined not by physical

touch but through avenues of participation. In a digitally connected and networked world, participation creates presence … people do not participate by "being there"; people are "there" by participating'.[9] The effects of the pandemic seemed to have enhanced these prior positions on both sides, with some claiming that the lack of 'live' theatre during lockdowns clearly demonstrated the inherent need of physical co-presence for theatre to exist, while others argued that the response to the global shutdown and the resurgence of performance online was evidence that theatre could exist without the physical proximity of performers and audience. Of course, others saw their perspectives shift as the shutdowns endured and the backlog of recorded professional theatre diminished. In just a few months, professional critics who began the pandemic by dismissing online performances suddenly found something to like.

Take, for instance, tweets posted by Peter Marks of the *Washington Post* in the spring and summer of 2020. On 10 April 2020, Marks wrote of newly available theatre online:

> The good news is, you can now access plays and musicals of every style online, from every part of the country and many other places around the globe, a lot of it free. The bad news is, you can access plays and musicals of every style online … That's because theater online isn't theater, really – not in the way we who thrive on it understand it.[10]

In a related tweet, he compared theatre online to margarine: 'an artificial substitute, with less flavor'.[11] In an exchange with the director, Robert Falls, Marks explained that he was 'waiting for theater makers to apply their imaginations to this challenge more evocatively'. Marks's statement ignores the many international theatre and performing artists who have been working across media since the 1960s: Nam June Paik, Roberts Blossom, George Coates, the Wooster Group (especially their 1999 collaboration with digital artist Zoe Beloff), Big Art Group, Builders Association, Adrian Piper. Experiments with live performances over the Internet are as old as the Internet itself. In 1970s San Francisco, George Coates began integrating early webcams and internationally telematic performances into his productions. In response to Marks's tweet, Falls suggested on 12 April 2020, 'Let's give it another couple of weeks, ok? Maybe a tad premature in judgement.' Marks replied, 'Nope but thanks for the advice.'[12] In response to a query from Elevator Repair Service's John Collins – creator of the six-hour-long performance reading of the novel *The Great Gatsby*, *Gatz* (2012) – Marks suggested that online performances might work best as 'very short pieces' developed exclusively for online. However, within just a few short months, Marks went from dismissing all performances online to recommending very short pieces to making very different recommendations. On 30 June 2020, he praised the filmed version of the nearly three-hour musical *Hamilton*, just released on Disney+.[13] On 1 July 2020, he was 'excited about the streaming' of the National Theatre Live at Home production of *Les Blancs* by Lorraine Hansberry, a production lasting two and a half hours.

What happened? It is tempting to be cynical and conclude that Marks, like other professional critics, needed something to justify his column inches, or, more likely, attract clicks. Disdain for the only theatre available only gets one so far for so long. It

may also be that these productions – professionally recorded versions of professionally produced live shows – met the expectations for a mainstream newspaper theatre critic more completely than the many different experiments circulating in the early months of the pandemic. A more generous interpretation might suggest that both the online performances and the critical perspectives improved over the course of the pandemic. Many of those who had previously ignored, resisted or dismissed digital performances were compelled to look at them anew in the absence of anything else. The world of performance was changing rapidly.

Even theatre scholars well versed in mediated performances expressed regret at the loss of live theatre venues. Trevor Boffone opened his essay for the *Theatre Times* noting the challenges of digital theatre:

> While talking to my fellow theatre writers in Houston, we all faced our own struggles with being digital audience members, which led to one important realization – what I miss most about theatre is being a captive audience member in a darkened theatre surrounded by strangers all bearing witness to the beauty of live performance. Although we may be passive audiences, something special happens when sharing space together. Moreover, I miss the interactive nature of theatre. Even if few consider theatre to be interactive, so much of live performance relies on the energy in the space. I say all of this because so much of this is lost in Zoomland. Sure, some remote theatre offerings have been able to work around this, but they are few and far between.[14]

Boffone's comment is especially significant, not only because he himself is a viral social media phenomenon (see more on this in his excellent book on digital performance, *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures from Dubsmash to TikTok*[15]), but also because his comment draws attention to many of the underlying assumptions of live performance regarding its interactivity and the effects of co-presence. Boffone is quite critical of those who would dismiss the significance of TikTok both as a social media platform and, more particularly, as one populated by young women of colour. Instead, he highlights the ways in which performance-oriented media platforms are upending historical practices of the ostensibly live theatre, which has suppressed active audience response and engagement. Considering the innovations and experiments that theatre artists explored during the pandemic and the wealth of archival video documentation that flooded the Internet, perhaps we should consider that the fullest experience of live performance is one accessible both through the experience in the theatre and subsequently through recorded media that, as Dziga Vertov explained, offered the insights of the kino-eye beyond any one individual's human perception. Such a perspective expands the very notion of presence, while also providing opportunities for more inclusive performance practices.

One possible distinction between this new hybrid digital presence of theatre and historical practices might be awareness of what the poet and actor Roberts Blossom called 'the touch element' and the varying ways in which audiences experience live and mediated performances. As detailed in his 1966 essay 'On Filmstage' for *TDR*'s special issue on film and theatre, Blossom argues that the combination of embodied

and mediated elements onstage could potentially revise what we mean by presence in performance: 'To combine a present experience (stage), which, though rehearsed, nevertheless has the touch element, with a past experience (film), presented as present, is thus to combine the unconscious (recorded) with the conscious (present).'[16] In his piece 'A Duet for One Person', Blossom explored how the combination and juxtaposition of performing media undermine the binary constructions of presence and absence. In the context of the filmstage, 'Our presence as bodies begins to be suspect, our presence as consciousness more real.'[17] Setting aside the psychological implications of Blossom's conclusions, his conceptualization aligns with the notion of presence as both a passive physical proximity and the more active agency of presence as attention. This focus on attention positions presence less as a binary effect, and more as a value, something more readily engaged by some performances than by others, rather than something experienced – or not – by physical proximity. Presence as attention is not limited to live human bodies in shared space, but can be viscerally, even dynamically, activated through any number of media, including film and digital technologies, among others.

Considering presence beyond the assumptions of any one particular platform, format or genre, we might look productively toward film studies to understand the role of attention in mediated performances. Of course, film history – too often separated from theatre history – comes with its own myths of presence by both actors and audiences. One of the founding myths is that of the screening of the Lumière brothers' short film *The Arrival of the Train at La Ciotat Station*, which in popular lore (and plenty of introductory film classes) caused the audience to run from the theatre in fear that an actual train was coming at them. This story has been widely and repeatedly challenged and is very likely false. It may be less relevant to ask whether the event happened as described, than to ask why the mythic retelling of the story emerged as it did. This foundational myth defined the film as a medium that could – like the theatre, which it sought first to imitate and then to separate from – *move* its audiences, literally. Film became an art form when it claimed the theatrical power of presence in the visceral, lived experience of the audience as a collection of bodies to be mobilized, a phenomenon made evident as an *interactive* experience for its audiences when they left the theatre. In other words, attention, expectation and sensation were significant in defining film's *presence* as an art form unto itself. Its function as media presence was evident when it made its audience *do something*. Can we not apply a similar perspective to theatrical viewing and consider presence in mediated environments not as physical proximity, but as visceral reaction?

Even accounting for the 1918 influenza pandemic, contemporaneous world war and the growth of both non-narrative performance and popular cinema, our current moment is distinct among both theatre history and film history, though deeply indebted to the last 125 years of both. Watching theatre on a variety of screens is more than simply what some critics have claimed derisively as 'merely television'. Indeed, this dismissiveness ignores the very political and social context that Goebbels alludes to when he describes the ethics of staging and the underlying critique of Rimini Protokoll. Delivered through overwhelmingly proprietary channels, digital theatre in 2020 functions as cultural

products that both respond to, and shape, audience experiences for future theatrical encounters. Whether real-time livestreams or broadcast recordings, these digital performances are not simply theatre reproduced on screens as the film critics once feared in early cinema. Rather, performance today is embedded within any number of intersecting networks, including algorithms, commercial enterprises and social media platforms, such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram TV and Reels, Facebook Live, Oculus (now Meta) events, and even Zoom. Presence on these platforms is not only interactive – that is to say, *responsive* to the attention, actions and feedback of its audiences – but also and perhaps more importantly *predicative*: what does the audience of one performance want to see next? What can a performance make the audience do (or buy – is there a difference?)? Presence in our current context has become calculable and commodified attention. Reflecting on the legacy of the Lumières' film, digital social media has returned performance to its early film origins in which presence was defined not by physical proximity, but rather by audience engagement and interaction, even if, or perhaps especially *when*, these engagements are driven toward increased consumption. If the first audience left the theatre to escape the train, today's audiences are often compelled to actions by the fear of being left behind, as evidenced in the phenomenon of FOMO (fear of missing out).

If there was a consistent complaint among the ongoing discussions of pandemic performance (besides, of course, the pandemic itself), it often seemed to be not simply a *lack* of physical presence, but also an *excess* of all the competing interactions and distractions newly available and vying for attention. To combat the erosion of work–life boundaries, increased anxiety and the inundation of screen life (merging work, socializing and entertainment), new dimensions of the wellness industry emerged with the goal of bringing us back to ourselves through physical exercise and mindfulness. These sometimes overlapped explicitly with theatre. For example, some trainers on fitness platforms such as Peloton and Apple Fitness+ have backgrounds in theatre training and channel their roles in the exercise apps toward extended celebrity on social media. Along with dance, fitness TikTok became a dominant trend as gyms closed. The change in formats was accompanied by the belief that audience attention had changed and now demanded new work to conform to these technological constraints. Critics, such as Jesse Green of the *New York Times*, described the need for shorter, 'zippier' online performances that better compete with the pace of social media, what John Muse had previously called 'microdramas'.[18]

One of the most common complaints, most especially during the pandemic's locked-down periods, was a feeling of being overwhelmed. The problem of pandemic performance thus may not be a lack of physical presence, but instead our awareness of the ubiquity of performances around all the time, twenty-four hours a day, which, like so much other media, no longer has any built-in down time. The structures of the physical theatre or concert venue no longer bounded our attention and physical experience of performance, nor provided any relief from the many other digital demands. (No one minds if you check your phone during a Zoom play.) Throughout

the early months of the pandemic, there was more theatre, dance, art and performance available to see than perhaps at any other time in human history. Yet this has exacerbated the conditions described by Jonathan Crary in his book *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (2013):

> since no moment, place, or situation exists in which one can *not* shop, consume, or exploit networked resources [attend the theatre], there is a relentless incursion of the non-time of 24/7 into every aspect of social or personal life. There are, for example, almost no circumstances now that can *not* be recorded or archived as digital imagery or information. The promotion and adoption of wireless technologies, and their annihilation of the singularity of place and event, is simply an after-effect of new institutional requirements … One inhabits a world in which long-standing notions of shared experience atrophy, and yet one never actually attains the gratifications or rewards promised by the most recent technological options.[19]

If we take Crary seriously, perhaps the problem is not the ubiquity of presence, but a lack of absence. As with Crary's examples of shopping and consumption without limit, we can now attend performances twenty-four hours a day, seven days per week, even as physical venues reopen. What do we lose when the availability of performance saturates every aspect of our experience?

This ubiquity combines with an increasing homogenization of experiences caused both by the platforms used and by predictive algorithms trained to present audiences with 'new' experiences selected for their similarity to those already consumed. In such environments it becomes increasingly harder to encounter the truly unknown, the unfamiliar or the simply novel. Elsewhere in *Aesthetics of Absence* Goebbels defines absence not as a lack but as the presence of the 'other':

> Instead of offering self-affirmation to both a performing and a perceiving subject, a 'theatre of absence' might be able to offer an artistic experience that does not necessarily have to consist in direct encounter (with the actor), but in an experience through alterity. Alterity is to be understood here not as a direct connection to something, but as an indirect and triangular relationship whereby dramatic identification is being replaced by a rather precarious confrontation with a mediating third part, something we might call 'the other'.[20]

For Goebbels – whose actorless *Stifters Dinge* (*Stifter's Things*) provides one possibility for pandemic-era theatre – absence is rarely a lack of anything, but nearly always a replacement by something else. He suggests that without these anticipated performance elements – performer, story, plot – our attention concentrates elsewhere, but that we are always attentive. In other words, absence itself performs. This was the crux of Stein's *What Happened. A Play* (1913), which explored that a play could never *not* happen once invoked as such, and John Cage's observation that true human silence was impossible. This notion of the performing absence eventually worked its way into livestreamed performances as in Ivo van Hove's six-hour production *Kings of War* (2020).

Streamed by the International Theatre of Amsterdam, Van Hove's production adapts Shakespeare's *Henry V*, *Henry VI* and *Richard III* into a single long performance as a meditation on power, politics and media. One of *Henry V*'s most compelling moments comes in the approach to Henry's St Crispin Day speech. One of the most recognizable texts from Shakespeare's history plays and an anticipated highlight, the speech is usually portrayed as the epitome of inspiration and solidarity:

> This story shall the good man teach his son;
> And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
> From this day to the ending of the world,
> But we in it shall be remember'd;
> We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
> For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
> Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
> This day shall gentle his condition:
> And gentlemen in England now a-bed
> Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
> And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
> That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day. (*Henry V*, Act IV, sc. iii)[21]

Among other things, Henry's speech articulates the essence and centrality of physical co-presence in the theatre. References to shared physical sensations, including bloodshed, remind us of the corporeal context, including not only the other actors onstage, but also the physical witnesses in the audience. The image of a young Kenneth Branagh in the 1989 film version echoes this idea on-screen through skilful cinematic framing. The composition of the shots in this sequence, combined with the camera's placement among the assembled soldiers, and the music deployed to create the sweeping emotional effect, combine to create an image in which we in the audience are an extension of the gathering soldiers onstage. Echoing the experience of the Elizabethan theatres, the cinema audience imaginatively joins the actors assembled on-screen. Over the course of the speech, both groups become one, mutually mobilized to action: one to physical action within the diegesis of the drama, the other moved to emotional action.

Strikingly, Van Hove removes this speech from the stage entirely. Even if there were physical audiences present among the seating at the International Theatre of Amsterdam, we would face an empty stage with only the audio of the action offstage. Watching all six hours of the performance from my living room, I found this moment strangely compelling. Of all the parts of the livestreamed performance, this moment evoked a sense of communion with my audience members, whoever or wherever they were. Were we all watching the empty stage? What were people thinking around the world as the screen-stage emptied? Why withdraw this most critical text of community from us? As I watched the camera lazily float across the empty stage, I was struck by certain similarities between the space on-screen and my own home. Van Hove's single stage set contained elements not unlike my apartment:

living room floating in the middle of the space, office tucked over in the corner, a couple of rugs on artificial flooring. In this particular scene, I was the only one who was 'present', both at home and via the camera, in the theatre. Even if I had been sitting in the audience at that moment, the actors would have neither seen nor felt me.

Such revelations call into question certainties regarding what is 'theatre' and its presumed need for co-presence. In a conversation about another digitally enabled performance, German theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte argued:

> Something like digital theatre does not exist. But first of all, I have to say that I am grateful to theatres for granting us the possibility to see some old productions again. This, more or less, gives you an idea of what has happened. But, of course, this is not theatre. As you said, for me, there must be an audience. Without spectators there is no theatre. I am not talking about spectators who sit somewhere else, at home, watching it on television. The audience has to be in the same space as the performers; this is what I mean by bodily co-presence. It is this flow, back-and-forth, between performers and actors that is important. That is what counts because, in my opinion, it is what distinguishes theatre art from all the other art forms.[22]

Fischer-Lichte situates the location of theatre in the spectatorial presence and the presumed real-time exchange with performers and each other. Of course, had I been watching *Kings of War* in the audience, would this moment have ceased to become theatre? Does its inclusion in a play mitigate its medial distancing? Framed differently, is theatre a building, bodies, or perhaps, in the post-pandemic era, something closer to the notion of theatricality as a value that Martin Puchner articulated in his *Stage Fright?* There, he argued that theatricality as a value 'stands behind a larger shift within the field of late-nineteenth-century theater that is marked, as Pierre Bourdieu has argued, by an extraordinary differentiation among theaters based not so much on their dramatic repertoire or actors as on their *mise en scène*'.[23] Contemporary performance and theatre artists have both staged the absence of human bodies in physical spaces and deployed theatricality in the digital presence of performances online. What we have experienced over the course of the pandemic and its effect on the performing arts is a shift in the theatrical *mise en scène* as Puchner describes by way of Bourdieu. Whereas Bourdieu juxtaposed theatricality against 'literariness', we might productively hold the value of theatrical co-presence in juxtaposition with our new scene's *digitality*.[24]

Fischer-Lichte's argument began in her earlier book *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008), in which she responded directly to Philip Auslander's claims in *Liveness* (1999, rev. 2008). There she wrote, 'no matter whether and how a performance told a story, it is the bodily presence of the actors that affects them and sets the autopoetic feedback loop in motion. Therein lies the constitutive moment of performance.'[25] She supports this analysis with experiences attending various performances, including work by Frank Castorf, among others. In response to Auslander's argument that contemporary audiences are acclimated to and prefer mediatized culture, she describes a Castorf performance in which

[e]very minute of the video increased the desire for the actors' 'real' bodies; a desire that was repeatedly frustrated … Although the recordings were not amateurish but highly professional and captivated the 'mediatized' audience in the upper container until the very end, the 'live' audience found them dull, lengthy, and frustrating.[26]

The source of frustration for Fischer-Lichte appears to be, at least in part, the lack of agency among the in-person audience members and her sensation that something is being withheld. This may well be true in a traditional theatre setting, including the experience attending Van Hove's *Kings of War* at the International Theatre of Amsterdam. Sitting in the audience with nothing to see but the empty stage, perhaps one does experience the loss of the physical actors' presence. Watching it from home, however, the digital *mise en scène* was sufficient to focus our attention. Further, Van Hove's repeated shifts to the character movements offstage with video cameras, reminds us that we, as contemporary subjects, are always moving in and out of surveillance regimes – physical, video, and digital. To suggest that there is no 'autopoetic loop' in the digital domains is to overlook the ways in which contemporary relations are deeply imbricated within virtual networks, whether or not they are actively engaged at any particular moment. As social theorists Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp point out:

> We cannot analyse the social world via a simple division between 'pure' face-to-face communication and a separate presentation of the world to us 'through' media. Many of the communicative practices by which we construct our social world are media-related ones … Our face-to-face interaction is continuously *inter*woven with media-related practices.[27]

In their analysis, they propose a 'higher dimension of complexity than is possible by concentrating on the "face to face" and "here and now"'.[28] Van Hove's staging in *Kings of War* embraces this contemporary reality: that all social relations, most especially those engaged in power, are activated across complex networks of in-person and mediated communications. If we agree with Couldry and Hepp, and considering the effects of the pandemic, the distinctions that animated Auslander's original argument in 1999 and to which Fischer-Lichte responded in 2004 may no longer be as relevant as they once appeared. It further re-enforces the interrelated connections among digitally conditioned performances and their political contexts as connected regimes of control. The avenues of resistance may not be as clear as the binary of live and mediated might suggest.

But what of the 'autopoetic feedback loop'? In a culture of the quantified, consuming self, might not the inefficiency of live performance and physical, non-quantifiable entanglements of the co-present theatre provide a necessary site of resistance to the ease of data production and circulation? It is a mistake to conflate the media platform with only one political position. If the exchange, the flow, the back-and-forth between audience and actors is what is important, then this is explicitly what recent performances like Fake Friends' livestream production of *Circle Jerk* or their *This American Wife* (both produced during the pandemic in 2020 and

2021 respectively) and its real-time Twitter audience created. Moreover, the sheer excess of the Fake Friends productions, both queer critiques of dominant media culture, demonstrates the power of political performance within and against media domains simultaneously. Indeed, their practices make little sense outside the domains of social media. The actor answering live questions on Twitter during a screen performance is no less engaged than the actor onstage performing behind a mutually imagined fourth wall, and for many of the intended audience, perhaps all the more real for the social media response. If material exchange is key to presence, we might also consider *Ratatouille, the Tik Tok Musical.* This collaborative production, loosely co-created through the musical's TikTok social media fan base and prominent creatives, revised the Disney animated film into a short musical performed online. It was seen by over 1.2 million people and raised over US$2 million for the Actors Fund. Or consider the New Year's Eve performance by the Korean pop group BTS's digital streaming concert *Map of the Soul ON:E* that received 993 million views and featured virtual fans and interactions from 191 different regions around the world. Considering these and other prominent examples from the pandemic, we must ask ourselves, what is the advantage of restricting the definition of 'theatre' exclusively to live, simultaneous co-presence? Certainly, it preserves and elevates certain practices and kinds of expertise, but it also has the danger of diminishing and ignoring the potential to be found in other modes. In the post-pandemic theatrical landscape, the distinctions appreciated among both live and mediated audiences no longer hold to the same delineations as they did before the pandemic, and certainly not universally for all audiences.

For all the many challenges and griefs, COVID-19 ushered in a new awareness of digital performance and the recognition that it might facilitate a kind of collective and global engagement with theatre across regions, genres and audiences. The pandemic outbreak of 2020 and its aftermath was a moment of profound technological shifts that brought possibilities in performance to the fore, while also drawing much-needed attention to the inequities that have long enabled them. In 2022 and on the cusp of further social saturation by artificial intelligence and augmented reality, it is also a moment that requires us to better integrate live performance and media studies with explicit attention to digital activism. As Safiya Umoja Noble wrote explicitly in 2018, 'I believe that artificial intelligence will become a major human rights issue in the twenty-first century. We are only beginning to understand the long-term consequences of these decision-making tools in both masking and deepening social inequality.'[29] If digital presence is about quantified engagement, then what computers know how to read will be what gets seen and recorded for the future and is likely to shape radically how we create, understand, experience and document a wide range of theatrical and performance events. Reflecting on the conditions of living in quantified cultures, Lev Manovich wrote, 'to be literate in such a society, you need to know the core ideas and principles that make such operations possible'.[30] The study of contemporary performance now requires a thorough and robust understanding, not only of drama and theatre history, but also of media history, and a more thorough technological understanding, most especially of data and quantified analysis, than is

still – even in 2022 – infrequently included within theatre and performance scholarship and even more rarely taught. Nevertheless, performance studies, theatre history and contemporary intermediality studies have the opportunity to combine digital awareness and advocacy alongside critical theories and analytical techniques. By engaging more thoroughly with media theory and digital methodologies, performance and theatre studies is perhaps uniquely positioned to take hold of this current moment, not only to understand it, but also to communicate that understanding in ways that will create more equitable and sustainable futures.

At the same time, we cannot ignore that this transformation has emerged as a direct consequence of so much suffering, grief and instability – biological, ecological, social, cultural and political. There is a profound trade-off at the core of our current experience – at least in the digitally connected, wifi-enabled, zoomified world – that the very technologies that helped the most privileged people cope with the crises and ushered in its eventual solution, i.e. the vaccines, are directly related to its fundamental causes, not only today but also potentially in the future of what Anthony Fauci has warned may be an era of pandemics. In this, we may be reminded of Sigmund Freud's passage in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, 'unease within culture'). Writing in 1929 and 1930, Freud had lived and experienced loss in the wake of the influenza pandemic of 1918, most notably the death of his daughter Sophie in 1920, and her youngest son Heinerle in 1923. Reflecting on the question of happiness and culture, Freud notes with ambivalence that although domination over the natural environment has not increased humanity's sense of pleasure or satisfaction, 'we ought not to infer from it that technical progress is without value for the economics of our happiness … One would like to ask,' he wrote,

> is there, then, no positive gain in pleasure, no unequivocal increase in my feelings of happiness, if I can, as often as I please, hear the voice of a child of mine who is living hundreds of miles away …? And there is a long list that might be added to benefits of this kind which we owe to the much-despised era of scientific and technical advances. But here the voice of pessimistic criticism makes itself heard and warns us that most of these satisfactions follow the model of the 'cheap enjoyment' extolled in the anecdote … If there had been no railway to conquer distances, my child would never have left his native town and I should need no telephone to hear his voice.[31]

After long months of lockdown, many of us might be sympathetic to Freud's ambivalence. The pandemic that closed borders and shut down much of the world's travel was enabled by those very same technological advances in global travel (the plane rather than the train), and simultaneously mitigated by technical innovations in communication (mobile-video chats and text expanding Freud's telephone). The promises of greater democratization through social media extolled in the early years of the twenty-first century have been warped to the promotion of powerful conspiracy theories and widespread political divisions. As Harold Innis observed, 'it should be clear that improvements in communication tend to divide mankind'.[32] And so they have.

Returning to the question of presence, proximity and algorithmic media, we may conclude that presence is as presence does. Algorithmically, you are what you watch and what you watch is increasingly what the algorithms predict you want to see and so on, ad infinitum. It is an autopoetic feedback loop of a different sort. The technologies and processes that bring us together also separate us and bring us together again. The tools that facilitate mass demonstrations on the right and the left are often connected to those that elsewhere undermine and expose those political and social efforts. In such a context, the traditional binaries of theatrical presence and absence based on physical co-presence seem rather quaint, but are perhaps no longer meaningful to either creating or understanding post-pandemic performance. The problem of digital presence is that it threatens to disrupt an entire epistemology of theatre and performance studies. What had been at the fringes of theatre conferences and a relatively niche subfield in March 2020 suddenly became the only theatre available. Now we are gripped in the tension between both pre- and post-pandemic methodologies, and among complex medial frameworks that (re)mediate our sense of reality and each other. What comes next for theatre and post-pandemic performance broadly will be recognition and thoughtful engagement with the multiplicity of audiences and perspectives and media that continually revise our sense of presence and absence, both onstage and on-screen. Theatre and performance scholars will ignore these shifts at their peril. Whole swaths of the field are being upended. How will we as theatre and performance scholars, historians and teachers respond?

NOTES

1   Heiner Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence: Texts on Theatre* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), p. 43.
2   Ibid.
3   Ibid., p. 58.
4   Steve Dixon with Barry Smith, *Digital Performance: A History of New Media in Theater, Dance, Performance Art, and Installation* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), p. 3 (emphasis added).
5   *NPR*, at www.npr.org/2020/10/27/928346844/is-it-theater-chekhovs-the-seagull-adaptation-for-the-sims-4-to-stream-on-twitch (accessed 27 October 2020).
6   Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye and Michael Shanks, *Archaeologies of Presence* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 9.
7   Ibid., p. 11.
8   Adrian Heathfield, 'Then Again', in Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield, eds., *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (Bristol and Chicago: Intellect, 2012), pp. 27–35, here p. 31.
9   Sarah Bay-Cheng, 'Theatre History and Digital Historiography', in Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen, eds., *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), pp. 125–36, here p. 130.
10   *Washington Post*, at www.washingtonpost.com/coronavirus/in-the-midst-of-the-virus-theater-migrates-to-the-web-the-results-are-spotty/2020/04/09/fdf81004-78d1-11ea-a130-df573469f094_story.html (accessed 21 July 2020).
11   Peter Marks, at https://twitter.com/petermarksdrama (accessed 10 April 2020).
12   Ibid.
13   *Washington Post*, at www.washingtonpost.com/goingoutguide/movies/hamilton-movie-review/2020/06/30/c7a2ab4a-ba17-11ea-bdaf-a129f921026f_story.html (accessed 21 July 2020).
14   *Theatre Times*, at https://thetheatretimes.com/zoom-theatre-but-make-it-immersive-strange-birds-the-strange-secret-of-mr-adrian-rook (accessed 4 September 2020).

15   Trevor Boffone, *Renegades: Digital Dance Cultures from Dubsmash to TikTok* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

16   Roberts Blossom, 'On Filmstage', *Tulane Drama Review*, 11, 1 (1966), pp. 68–73, here p. 70.

17   Ibid., p. 72.

18   John Muse, *Microdramas: Crucibles for Theater and Time* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017).

19   Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Terminal Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 31.

20   Goebbels, *Aesthetics of Absence*, p. 6.

21   William Shakespeare, *Henry V* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), p. 48.

22   *IATC Journal/Revue de l'AICT*, at www.critical-stages.org/22/a-digital-talk-about-an-analogue-art-interview-with-erika-fischer-lichte (accessed 19 March 2022).

23   Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), p. 55.

24   Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 138; quoted in Puchner, *Stage Fright*, p. 189, n. 54.

25   Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 74.

26   Ibid., p. 73.

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28   Ibid., p. 17.

29   Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018), p. 1.

30   Lev Manovich, *Cultural Analytics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020), p. 2.

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32   Harold Adams Innis, *Changing Concepts of Time* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), p. 95.

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